THE
BOY KINGS

A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART

OF THE SOCIAL NETWORK

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A t the sputtering beginning of this new century we were all, perpetually, waiting for something to happen. After the sudden, unexpectedly fiery morning of 9/11, we developed a new, nonspecific vigilance: a demand to know that some critical event, somewhere, was occurring, however distant. Most things that the cable news reported on after 9/11 seemed irrelevant: a toothless bomb scare here, a prop-plane crash there. We clung to televised surveillance because it was the one thing we could count on: distant wars and threats. To assist our indiscriminate monitoring, cable news created a news ticker that ran underneath the newscast to assure us hourly that yes, somewhere, something terrible had occurred. And, perhaps, because war, unlike understanding and diplomacy, seemed clear and defined, our president started a war, but that didn't work; so he started another war, and that didn't work either. Suddenly, nothing was really working.

I spent the early 2000s nursing a nervous anxiety that reflected the nation's, fed by a general sense of foreboding and by outsized ambition and aimless anticipation—the impulse to do something or be someone at all cost that characterizes one's early twenties. Having graduated from Wesleyan with a degree in English, I found myself in a graduate program at Johns Hopkins that was, I soon discovered, as spectacularly failure-ridden as the new century. My Ph.D. program began golden and full of promise, with the assurance that we would enter easily into the ranks of the elite and tenured professors produced by the top-rated English department. However, constant and sundry department shakeups and scandals left us uneasy and uncertain, and my bright future seemed doomed. Jobs in English departments were dwindling and most Ph.D. students were finding themselves in decade-long holding patterns, waiting for jobs that would never come.

To add to my sense of anxiety, Johns Hopkins was perched atop a hill in Baltimore, which is a bizarre and barren city, especially for someone from Arizona, unfamiliar with the advanced state of America's postindustrial urban decay. Hopkins, we were told proudly in orientation, was the largest employer in the city. The unacknowledged second was the drug trade, supported by the steady stream of heroin flowing through the port. The streets just beyond the campus were full of mayhem, opaque and unreal to the outsider, with men on street corners wearing long white T-shirts whose daily work I would only come to grasp after *The Wire* began airing. As the show's Omar explained, capturing Baltimore city's prescient, postapocalyptic logic perfectly: "It's all in the game." He was

right: If we went to Hopkins hoping to indulge in the endless play of academic discourse, what we got instead was a cold education in the hard facts of twenty-first-century American life: wealthy institutions pitted against students, individuals against one another, rampant poverty and violence. No one—not the Hopkins students who were occasionally murdered, nor the grad students whose promised jobs didn't actually exist—was safe anymore.

In response, students I knew at Hopkins developed a streetwise approach to life. "You have to fight crazy with crazy," we told each other before we ventured out on the empty, dangerous streets at night. It was this mode of watchfulness, alert to the sinister and absurd, rather than the lessons of literary theory, that I would end up taking from Baltimore when I left. Literary theory, after all, had begun to seem not so much like a profession as a luxury. As my thesis advisor often said, "I am rich, millions are not," quoting *American Psycho*, but he could just as well have been describing Johns Hopkins, an island of money in the midst of an alternately warring and desolate city that wasn't so much a twenty-first-century relic as a window onto the twenty-first century.

As if to occupy us while we all waited for news that something had happened somewhere, in 2004, Mark Zuckerberg released a technology that hit Hopkins and spread quickly across campus like iPods had the year before. It was called The Facebook then and I discovered it while sipping coffee at the campus cafe above the underground library. A couple of students sitting at the table next to me, who sported the Hopkins uniform of North Face jacket and sweatpants,

spoke excitedly of the new network and what they were able to see on the site. "Everyone's on it," they said, "you can see where they're from, where they live, and who their friends are. I don't know if it's creepy or cool."

I opened my clunky white iBook, typed www.thefacebook.com in the browser address bar, and created an account with my university email address. (This was required to log into Facebook then; one had to be a student at an Ivy or near-Ivy League school to use it.) It was true, you could see everything: all the students on campus, their pictures, their interests, their friends. And, in being able to see everything, I saw that The Facebook had miraculously solved the biggest social problem that plagued Hopkins and had led to its low rankings in student satisfaction. The campus had no public space aside from the library, which is why that afternoon, like most, I was sitting in the sunlit cafe with my laptop, taking a break from the dungeonlike stacks below. In an instant, Facebook had created a public space, albeit a virtual one, that was accessible at any time, from anywhere.

In 2004, other online social networks, like Friendster, already existed. However, most college students had spent their high school years on AOL, and knew that having a public, guileless, and unprotected Internet presence was little more than an invitation to be spammed by sexual solicitations from faraway men. Before social networks, AOL Instant Messenger and similar chat services were the only truly interactive, in-real-time forms of communication on the Web. In those days, I was always somewhat dismissive of boys who asked me if I had AIM, because it was obvious that they wanted to communicate

in instant message form to avoid all the social challenges and filters of real life and, say, ask me out without having to look me in the eye, or look at me at all. So, the idea of creating a profile on an open, national social network felt like an unnecessary risk, another way of making yourself available to millions of distant strangers for the benefit of only a few friends. Who needed that? The lonely, maybe, or the exhibitionist, but most people weren't enough of either to make a public online profile listing all your private details that compelling. However, by building a virtual agora made up only of people you might actually know in real life, Facebook had suddenly created a good reason for everyone, not just the Internet-obsessed boy in his bedroom, to be identifiably on the Internet.

As one such boy who attended a class for which I served as a teaching assistant protested, pre-Facebook, and after Googling me without success, "You're not on the Internet!" (Because for the boy in his bedroom, and eventually for everyone else on the Internet, gathering data about people using Google felt like a god-given right). "Good," I replied, with satisfaction.

It wasn't like I didn't use the Internet, to the contrary. In the 1990s, when the Internet was in its infancy, I had an email account that I could only access using a no frills program that had no buttons like those currently seen on the Web; to send an email, I had to type a command like "send." Teenage hacker friends that I met at punk rock shows in Arizona used the Internet primarily to trade information about what were then high-tech hacks: a tone dialer cobbled together from Radio Shack gadgets that allowed you to make free phone calls from pay phones, or a breakdown of how credit-card

numbers are generated that allowed you to crack credit cards. It almost seemed, then, that this was what the Internet was for: an anarchistic sphere devoted to wielding technology against corporations. I thought it was cool, but in the absence of sites targeted to more general interests there wasn't much for me to do online except write emails and visit bulletin boards, all green text on black screens.

A hacker once taught me that, in Pine, the email software used before AOL came along, you could type commands like "finger" to see when someone had last checked their email. This was when I realized that, online, there was always a way to get more data: You just had to know how to go deeper into the code and know more than the average user about its obscure loopholes and commands.

After the boom of the late 1990s ushered in the consumer Internet, I became a regular on forums devoted to fashion and style, such as Makeup Alley, where women traded beauty and fashion information. Under pseudonyms, we discussed our lives, always protecting our personal details from prying eyes or search-engine crawlers. The overriding rule of the Internet was simple then: You could say whatever you wanted as long as you didn't say who you were. I also took care to avoid all the cheap-seeming websites, like the fledgling MySpace, which appeared to be founded on the idea of empty exhibitionism and populated by predatory men looking for pictures of women to devour and discard. I was on the Internet enough to know that in the few short years that broadband had been available, it had become easy for men to find images of women to use as a shallow substitute for sex or love. For women, there was

no value—there was even potential harm—in putting yourself online and offering yourself up to strangers, to have your image distributed infinitely across the Web. As the boys of the Internet often said on the troll-filled message board called the Daily Jolt, the only community discussion forum at Hopkins before Facebook landed, "There are no girls on the Internet." It was true; there weren't. If we were there, we were as protected by pseudonyms and secrecy as the guys who were searching for us.

Now, in the fall of 2004, with my newly created Facebook account, here I was: on the Internet under my real name. Visiting Facebook's rudimentary privacy page, which had just a few drop-downs that offered options to make your profile visible either only to your school or only to your friends, I realized that it was possible, for the first time on the Internet, to protect my profile from being visible to anyone outside of my immediate group of acquaintances. I breathed an elated sigh of relief. *Now, we can all finally use the Internet!* I thought. No more dealing with creepy guys assuming that just because I was on the Internet, I was available to be virtually stalked and harassed with pictures of penises, followed by a barrage of insults if I didn't respond. The privacy protections of the restricted network (people outside of Hopkins couldn't see my profile or even that I had one) made it feel, surprisingly, okay.

Facebook made it easy for the Internet-wary to be comfortable, because, in addition to the privacy protections, the initial layout of the site was minimalist to the extreme. It was strikingly clean, and novel in its simplicity, lacking the gaudy advertisements and spammy content that were inevitable elsewhere on the Internet. The profile consisted only

of a modestly sized photo and a set of profile fields that the user could fill out or not, according to their own comfort level. It seemed fun, literary almost, like a newly published, frequently updating book that was more interesting to peruse than the dry, archaic texts I studied in the library. The first interest I listed on my profile was the *gold standard*, because I had always been interested in the idea of things that don't change form, that hold value, that aren't subject entirely to the whims of an economy in which nearly everything is disposable, temporary. The other interests I listed on my profile were flirtier and less abstract: *praias* ("beaches," in Portuguese), braiding my hair. This was the trick with Facebook, like the way you present yourself at a party: to say something without saying too much, to appear interesting without trying too hard, to be true to yourself without telling everyone everything. "Never apologize, never explain," Roland Barthes wrote in *The Pleasure of the Text*, which we studied in class. This seemed like the right way to approach a prying technology that, I could already sense, would never be satisfied by just a few bits of data. Much later, Facebook would seem to whisper, "Tell us everything." Even though in the beginning it was less inquisitive and shared your information less far afield, I already sensed that I had to remain its boss: I had to be able to tell it *no*.

Facebook was entertaining and engaging precisely because, unlike most technical applications at the time, it didn't seem like a sterile bunch of lines of code. Just as at the other prestigious universities that had Facebook networks, the Johns Hopkins University Facebook network was a delightful web of in-jokes about campus culture—such as the "I Check

Myself Out In The Martin Center Windows" group devoted to the vanity-provoking windows of the Arts Center, or the "Hopkins 500," devoted to the approximately five hundred students who could be seen at parties interspersed with profile photos of artificially tanned sorority girls, intense medical students, and Hopkins' requisite lacrosse players. It was the first Internet site I had ever used that mirrored a real-life community. The cliques on Facebook were the same ones I ran into at the library and campus bar, and the things people said to each other on their walls—water polo team slang, hints at the past weekend's conquests, jabs at Hopkins' lacrosse archrival Duke—were similar to what you heard them saying at study tables or around pitchers of beer. The virtual space mapped the human space, and it had all happened virally in weeks.

Logging on to Facebook that first day, in retrospect, was the second, and to date the last, time that any technology has captured my imagination. The first was when Apple advertised the first laptop, the PowerBook, in the 1990s—with the words, "What's on your PowerBook?"

"World domination," my teenaged self answered instinctively. That's what these devices were made for, I thought: so small and yet so powerful, so capable of linking quickly to and between everything else in the world. I had a sudden fantasy of me, in ponytail and sweatshirt, remotely manipulating the world from a laptop, armed with ideas about how the world should

be and the new ability to distribute them. From the laptop, I could write and distribute information faster than ever before. It was intoxicating to imagine, and Facebook's sudden, faithful rendering in 2004 of the physical world into the virtual felt the same. What could you do, now that you could see and connect to everyone and everything, instantly?

But what, also, could be diminished by such quick access? In the realm of ideas, it seemed easy: Who wouldn't want to distribute and discuss ideas widely? However, in the realm of the personal, it seemed more complicated. What was the benefit of doing everything in public? Were there types of information that made sense to distribute person to person and mouth to mouth, rather than digital page to digital page? Is information itself neutral, or do different types of information have different values, different levels of expectation of privacy, different implications for distribution and consumption? Did I *want* or *need* to know, passively and without asking or being told, who went out and what they wore and who hooked up the weekend before? Should all information be shared equally quickly and without regard to my relationship to it? And, finally, and most important, as we ask whenever we begin a new relationship with anything, would this be good for me?

Whether Facebook would be good for me in the long term was an open question, but in the immediate term it was, and rather quickly, to my surprise. It happened while I was perusing Facebook Groups, which I loved for their wealth of humorously delivered anthropological data. Reading them was much like being anthropologist Margaret Mead, but online, sitting on the couch in the comfort of pajamas and slippers. You could skip

from the world of the lacrosse team to that of the small set of black Hopkins students, each with their own concerns and jokes and slang, in a span of seconds.

In this, Facebook Groups seemed more fun and less creepy than reading people's personal walls, which from the start had a slight, unseemly quality of eavesdropping on semiprivate, out-of-context, easy-to-misinterpret, conversations. The interjection of distant voices on friends' walls was always vaguely unreadable, unpredictable, illicit. "Let's play this weekend," a girl would post on the wall of a guy I knew, suggestively, and it felt weird to read, not because I didn't think girls liked him but because the utterance didn't actually reveal anything that was particularly relevant or useful. A girl wants him, I now knew, but I already knew that. Lots of girls did. The technology invited me to speculate about whether he wanted this girl back and whether they would go out and what would happen next, offline, all of which was really, in the end, irrelevant to be speculating on in advance. If two people like each other, they'll hook up, if not, they won't. All this noise was just noise, but a very present noise, a noise that we all, now, needed to consume, whether we cared to or not. In those cold November days, with the winter quickly coming on, there wasn't much else to do but watch and attend, curiously, to this new system that was just beginning, with a vengeance, to bring us online and publish the slightest social vicissitudes of our lives—the fact that someone likes us, the fact that we may be attending an event—to the world, for everyone to wonder about.

One such November day I discovered a group called "We're going to Brazil and you're not, bitches," referring to

a Hopkins-led trip to Brazil that was happening a few weeks later. The group, like most Facebook statements that are about trumpeting some aspect of a person or group's identity, had no other purpose than to state that this group of students was going to Brazil and everyone else was not, bitches. My first thought was "Why didn't I know about this trip?" and then I recalled that without a public space outside of classrooms and the stacks, it was nearly impossible for Hopkins to distribute information about extracurricular activities. My second thought was, "I, too, am going on this trip, bitches." I mean, why not? I had nothing else to do.

I went straight to the campus study abroad office and asked them to put me on the Brazil trip, though it was only weeks away and they'd already processed everyone's visas and itineraries. Miraculously they did, and two weeks later I was on a flight to Rio de Janeiro, away from the academic dramas of the English department and into another, more vivacious society.

"You two are so California," our trip leader said one night in an outdoor bar in Brazil about me and a boy from Malibu wearing fluorescent sunglasses. He was a true California kid, with a permanent tan and ocean-colored green eyes, and, in conversation, we discovered that we both dreamed idly of revolutions we wanted to play a part in someday. While the students from the East Coast gossiped about who had hooked up the night before, we talked about South American revolutionary movements that no one else on the trip had even heard of. This

prompted them to perk up and listen. In the status hierarchy of the trip, we were California, and California was cool, and therefore revolutions were cool. "American culture starts in southern California and moves east," I always told people on the East Coast who wanted to know why I knew about something they didn't. This was before culture moved at lightning speed through the Internet, spreading from one coast to the other in minutes. I'm not sure now how anyone lays claim to cool anymore.

I wasn't actually from California, but people often made that mistake. I dressed with a casual beachiness and spoke with a slight Valley girl lilt that I never tried to lose. It was a hallmark that said (I hoped) that I didn't take myself too seriously. It took too much time to explain to people that before the real estate boom of the 2000s and its influx of midwesterners looking for a warm-weather McMansion, my home state of Arizona was like a bedroom community of San Diego, like southern California without the beach.

Being so close, and yet still a half-day's drive away from us, California was exciting, exotic, a dream of American perfection that we could actually touch. When school was out, my best friend Dana and I would drive the long desert highway to San Diego, entertaining ourselves by searching for the Hotel California, which legend said existed somewhere on the highway. "Is that it?" one of us would ask, upon seeing a white building silhouetted against the sky. "I don't know," the other would say, and we would drive on, searching. I think that we almost prayed that we would never find it, so that we could keep searching, forever.

When I returned to Hopkins I began the semester-long transition from my life as a graduate student to whatever would come next, which I didn't know yet. All I knew was that I had to leave the decaying east and find my way back west, to the place I belonged and where I had to believe, if only to ward off depression at my failed grad school career, that dreams still came true.

To this day, when I say "California," I usually mean the beach cities of the south, replete with surfers and sunshine, not the quasi-cosmopolitan north. Northern California is somewhere else, a California that was familiar to me in 2005 only from the Joan Didion essays that I devoured in my late teens, in search of life advice. "Q: In what way does the Holy Land resemble the Sacramento Valley? A: In the type and diversity of its agricultural products." Didion repeats, like her own accidental childhood mantra, and this always stuck in my head, a perfectly meaningless set of lines to someone who had never been to Sacramento, but suggestive of abundant riches tucked away somewhere north of Santa Barbara. It is perhaps because of this quote, and that I was broke, that I decided to move to northern California.

I ended up in Berkeley, which, with its large student population, was all I could afford. It was close enough to Silicon Valley, where I knew the money was, and was a much cheaper place to live than Palo Alto, where a one-bedroom apartment couldn't be had for less than $2000 a month. Through Craigslist, I found an apartment near the university and a temporary job as a copywriter at a design firm in San Francisco. My job was to write copy for a line of skin-care products that were being manufactured as a house brand for Target. My initial enthusiasm quickly submerged by tedium, I wrote descriptions of cucumber-scented lotions and cleansers that I had never actually used. There were only so many ways to describe a face wash—invigorating, refreshing, cooling—and by the end of the month I felt like I had written all of them.

I was relieved at lunchtime when I could walk out of the office to San Francisco's long piers, enveloped by a perpetual fog that felt more like Oregon than California. Lunches at the aggressively artisanal cafes in the Ferry Building were too expensive for me, so I bought tacos from the Mexican food trucks that served the downtown's working class who commuted in, like me, from the East Bay.

Back in the design office, bored with the endless lines of copy that had all begun to sound the same, I would take to surfing Facebook. With very few features beyond profiles and messaging, Facebook was like a richer, more playful form of email, with the option to post public messages on people's walls. Since there weren't many fields, friends' posts occasionally had a deliberation and clarity that were entrancing, like you were reading little glimpses into the soul of the person—the thing they wanted most deeply to communicate to the world. Facebook was also a quick if not particularly satisfying salve for loneliness: In the Bay I knew no one, but online there were faces I knew, updating their pictures and profiles regularly, making familiar jokes.

In late July 2005, I had been working as a copywriter for a month when my boss, a micromanaging type with bleached teeth that glowed fluorescent, caught me looking at Facebook

and chastised me. I felt indignant, given that in my view she was getting the most compelling descriptions of moisturizing cream that she could ask for from a random Craigslist hire. I even paid attention to alliteration and redundancy in my writing and fact-checked my work to make sure I wasn't making any overtly untrue claims about the ability of the products to make you more beautiful (and after doing this job I learned never to take any claims on a beauty product label seriously). But, as with many contract jobs, my work went largely unappreciated.

While I was illicitly perusing Facebook at work a few weeks later I noticed a bulletin on the normally blank homepage that said, "Do you want to work at Facebook? Send us your resume." That night I emailed my resume to the address listed, not knowing what they were looking for or what a job at Facebook might entail. I felt intrigued by the prospect, though. As new and strange a product as Facebook was, I sensed in it a power, the allure of a new social institution that had no limits and that might never end.

CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO THE FACEBOOK

I don't know why Phil Rochester, who was engineering royalty in the valley and had been installed by venture capitalists to help with scaling up the tiny Facebook team, selected my resume from what must have been many that appeared in his inbox. I suspect that his choosing me had to do with the fact that Johns Hopkins featured prominently on my resume. He was a Vanderbilt alum, and I had learned in Baltimore that upper-crust southern elitism, conscious or not, runs deep. When I left Johns Hopkins, despite all its academic drama, my matriculation there faded immediately into a simple signifier of the elite. This is what an American private university is, not an education so much as a pedigree, a mark of distinction. When Rochester called me he was at Costco buying tires,

multitasking with his BlackBerry in typical Silicon Valley fashion. He couldn't be bothered to conduct a proper interview. He assumed, efficiently, that as an English major from an elite school I was capable of answering user-support emails. "Come in Tuesday," he said. "You can try it for a few days. If you don't like it, you can leave. It pays twenty dollars an hour. That's pretty good, right?" he asked. "Uh, okay," I said. Neither the job nor the pay being offered was very good, but short of learning how to program, I knew couldn't compete for a real job in Silicon Valley. My only choice, if I was going to try to make my fortune there with all the others, was to find a way to make my lack of technical skill my strength.

Driving my scuffed white 1994 Camry into Palo Alto for the first time in early September 2005, I noticed instantly how perfectly bland and ordered the town was. The sidewalks off the main street were nearly as clean and prim as at Disneyland, or maybe, more aptly, *The Truman Show.* I had trouble finding the Facebook office at first ("It's up the stairs, at Emerson and University," Rochester had told me) and walked up the wrong set of stairs into a halfway house that operated in an old motel left over from the city's preboom days. That encounter with seediness would be my last in Palo Alto (the halfway house closed soon after and is now most likely a startup office).

"I don't even know what a quail looks like. . . . Facebook is hiring" was scrawled in chalk on a sandwich board at the foot of the stairs of the building next door, as if this was someone's boardwalk pizza parlor hiring for summer employees. I didn't know why they were talking about quails (I never did quite understand the reverence for quails or the fact that they showed

up everywhere, on custom Facebook T-shirts and office whiteboards, except that this was a private club and like any club it needed in-jokes), but the sign's irreverence was a relief: I might fit in here, I thought, in a way that I never had done in the humorless atmosphere of graduate school, which regarded all jokes as a suspect diversion from criticism.

As I entered through the office's glass doors I looked around for Mark Zuckerberg, whose name I knew only from the bottom of Facebook's pages, all of which read "A Mark Zuckerberg production." I imagined someone ghostly, dark haired, not unlike the half-blurry figure with mussed hair in the first Facebook logo (which turned out, disappointingly, to be a slightly modified piece of Microsoft clip art). He had to be dark to make something like this, I assumed. Facebook had too much gravitas already as a useful but slightly unnerving social experiment not to be created by someone with a streak of darkness.

It turned out that Mark preferred to work at night, I was told, when he had a home-court advantage over VCs and other businesspeople used to keeping regular daytime hours. I was surprised and not a little disappointed to find out when Mark finally came into the office later that day, preoccupied as always with taking calls and holding meetings behind the glass door of the video game room, that he was sandy blond, and not particularly tall. I imagined someone reedier, wilder looking, more dark genius in the basement than light-haired goofball in shorts and a Harvard hoodie, shuffling around in athletic shorts and Adidas sandals. We didn't actually meet on my first day: He reserved his hearty welcomes for the engineers, prodigal sons prized for their

ability to convert life into lines of code. Customer support was barely on Mark's radar.

When I was finally introduced to Mark the following week, he smiled, seeming to like me well enough, although he soon moved brusquely to something else. He always seemed to be on a different plane when talking to nontechnical employees, distant and detached, reserving his attention for those who were directly important to him: VCs or his fellow founders, and then, gradually, the engineers that he took a liking to. It would take years for one of those people to be me. By then, people assumed that we were friends and had known each other forever. And I guess whether or not we were in fact lifelong friends was irrelevant, because, in the world we were making, all it took to establish a friendship was a few lines of code and a click of the friend button. I received a friend request from Mark a few days after our first meeting, and I clicked accept, though nothing particularly friendly had thus far transpired between us. But I was starting to see that, here, it didn't matter: The world of relationships, as far as Facebook is concerned, is simple.

At eleven in the morning on my first day at Facebook, the office was an empty warren of desks, about forty feet by forty, cluttered with open drink bottles, half-unwrapped snacks, and video games. A few desks were occupied by young, plain-looking guys in T-shirts, gazing at their screens. They looked barely awake, having not yet consumed their daily quota of bottled Starbucks coffee drinks and Red Bull and seemed startled, if not displeased, to see a strange new woman in the office. The only other woman in the office—an administrative assistant—was more animated, smiling toothily as she welcomed me in. She sat in front of a

large piece of graffiti art featuring a cartoonish, heavy-breasted woman with green hair floating above an ominous cityscape, like an adolescent version of the eyeglasses over Gatsby's East Egg. Many of the pieces of graffiti in the room featured stylized women with large breasts bursting from small tops that tapered down to tiny waists, mimicking the proportions of female video game characters. It seemed juvenile, but I wasn't very bothered—it just seemed like the kind of thing suburban boys from Harvard would think was urban and cool.

"We had to move the really graphic painting to the men's bathroom because someone complained," an engineer told me as he gave me a tour of the tiny office. He said this with the slight mocking disapproval that was my new colleagues' default tone in response to anything that resisted their power. I got it: Just because a few women might be let into their Palo Alto clubhouse, we weren't supposed to complain about things like sexy images of women on the walls. This was their kingdom and their idea of cool, and we shouldn't mess with it. I could see that it was, in a sense, a test: If you couldn't handle the graffiti, or the unrepentantly boyish company culture it represented, the job wasn't going to work out. Easy, I thought, and anyway, given the absence of women around, I figured they would need me for something. You can't run a successful company with boys alone. The office was small but the stakes, I could tell, were already high. The cold, outsized confidence in the air—a sense of grim determination that accompanied the graffiti and the graphs and the scrawled in-jokes about quails on the whiteboards—said that they wanted to win it all.

Rochester eventually emerged from taking a phone call in

the kitchen. He was an august man with gray hair and an un-tucked faded polo, whose gaze would only ever seem to fully focus when he was talking animatedly to other engineers in the office about *scaling*, or keeping the site up in the face of increas-ing users and page views. Scaling, I would soon find out, was the fetish of the valley, something that engineers could and did talk about for hours. Things were either *scalable*, which meant they could help the site grow fast indefinitely, or *unscalable*, which meant that the offending feature had to be quickly excised or cancelled, because it would not lead to great, automated speed and size. Unscalable usually meant something, like personal contact with customers, that couldn't be automated, a dim re-minder of the pre-industrial era, of human labor that couldn't be programmed away.

Though I didn't quite realize it on this first day at Facebook, I was in possession of a skill set—that of the English major—that was woefully unscalable as far as Facebook was concerned, more of a liability than an asset. When I perused Mark's pro-file on Facebook after we had become virtual friends, I noticed that in the Favorite Books field he wrote, "I don't read." Okay, I thought, gearing up for a long battle to be appreciated in my new role, this job *might* work out in the end but it is not going to be as easy as I had first thought.

Rochester's mature appearance made me think that perhaps this wasn't just the nerdiest fraternity house in Silicon Valley and that there might be some adults at the helm who under-stood the importance of having employees with different skill sets. He gathered me and Oliver, a blond Stanford poly-sci grad, into the conference room to give us a polite but rushed descrip-

tion of our new position. "You'll basically be answering emails from users. Jake will teach you how to do everything," he said, handing us off to Jake, another Stanford grad who had started as the first customer-support rep three weeks before. Now that we were here, he was our de facto manager, at least until the official customer support manager could be hired. I sensed from the glowing, familiar way that Rochester said Jake's name that they already considered him an old hand. When Jake walked into the room a few minutes later wearing a Stanford T-shirt and cargo shorts over a wiry, athletic frame, I guessed that their acceptance of him had to do with his classically preppy looks, like an Ab-ercrombie model come to life. Facebook, it seemed, wanted to have it all: to be the new and scrappy kid on the block and also have the feel of an old boys' club that had been around forever.

"What email address do you want?" said a blond IT guy with a goofy smile that put me at ease, as he set me up on my new, work-supplied iBook. "Kate@facebook.com," I said imme-diately. He pushed the laptop over me so I could set my pass-word. "It has to be strong," he said with a French accent, "that means it can't be an obvious word, and it needs special charac-ters." I typed in a strong version of the word "Salvador," after my favorite city in Brazil, with a dollar sign instead of an "S." Maybe this technology will save us from something (loneliness, alienation, boredom—I wasn't sure), I thought, and if it doesn't, maybe it will at least save me, by making me some money and relieving me from the fate of having to start over from scratch, somewhere else, again. I was tired of starting over.

Launching my email program and seeing that "kate@face book.com" was my address was a heady feeling, like starting a

new country in which I was the only Kate there, queen of a world in which every other Kate would be derived from my archetype. Facebook still had fewer than 5 million users, but I was sitting at the top of what would become a very large virtual land mass. Facebook's name alone gave me gut confidence in the site: It was a real-life term that represented the website's function exactly. In choosing this name, Mark had announced his intention not to create some type of Internet fad but to replicate a real world need for a basic human directory. Internet fads come and go, but directories—like phone books before everyone went mobile—satisfy the basic human need to find and stay in contact with people.

Jake, Oliver, and I huddled around the conference table with our laptops and some Cokes from the fridge, which Rochester had showed us proudly was stacked full with every caffeinated soda we could desire. The lights in the conference room were turned off, as Rochester assumed that, like the engineers, we would want the room to be as dark as possible. I always liked working in darkness; it made things feel more exciting, less like an office and more like we were peering out at the world on our screens from inside a cave. Jake introduced us to the janky application through which users' emails to Facebook flowed. Once we learned how the software worked, Jake taught us, without batting an eyelid, the master password by which we could log in as any Facebook user and access all their messages and data. "You can't write it down," he said, and so we committed it to memory, just the first of many secrets and customs we would learn as we became indoctrinated into our new lives as Internet social administrators.

I experienced a brief moment of stunned disbelief: They just hand over the password with no background check to make sure I am not a crazed stalker? I kept checking Jake's face to see if he would test or caution me in any way about how and how not to use the password, but he didn't. I worried I would be like a bull stepping into the proverbial china shop: What if I accidentally perform the data equivalent of knocking something over, accidentally changing someone's password or forgetting to log out of their account, posting on their profile when I meant to post on mine? As surprising as it was, in a way, it was also reassuring, a vote of confidence in me as I stepped into a vast sea of personal data.

Security measures would later be implemented that made it impossible for anyone to use the master password without authenticating themselves as an employee, and a year after that, the password would disappear entirely in favor of other, more secure forms of logging in to repair accounts. But, at the beginning, there was only one password, and like all the boys in the office, I now had the keys to the kingdom. The dummy account we logged into to administer each school network, equipped with a pixelated photo of Mark wearing an Oxford button-down and a slight smirk, was called "The Creator," and it did feel a bit like being a kind of omnipotent, all-seeing god.

After an hour's instruction from Jake, we were set loose on the emails flowing in from colleges across the United States. They ranged from the briefest request for a password to long expositions on the social phenomenon that was Facebook and the way it had already changed social interaction on campuses for better or for worse, depending on the author's viewpoint.

The most glowing fan letters to Facebook betrayed the author's new sense of power while using this technology: even the shyest person could now glean information and participate virtually in social worlds that formerly seemed restricted or off limits.

There were also complaints about the usual stalker types familiar from the rest of the Internet, voraciously devouring images of women, seeking the most flesh-baring photographs, and spamming women with requests for sex. Jake, Oliver, and I played the police of the virtual college campus, issuing warnings and adjudicating arguments, and were also its tour guides, explaining how poking and tagging and blocking worked to people who were just learning to conceive their social lives in virtual terms.

"What does poking mean?" was a question asked hundreds of times a day, sometimes by people who really didn't know and other times by people who relished the sexual frisson of writing to Facebook to ask about "poking" and its many interpretations. We always responded innocently, "It's just a way to get someone's attention," knowing full well the range of childish and sexual connotations in play. Being coy, not admitting the libidinal urges driving so much of the site's usage, was professionally necessary, a way to differentiate Facebook from the cheap and overtly sexual vibes of MySpace. Being coy was also part of the fun, part of the illusion we as a company were constructing that life on Facebook, unlike in reality, was always safe, easy, playful, free, void of cost or obligation. As Dustin Moskovitz, Mark's Harvard roommate and Facebook co-founder, said over lunch in the office that fall, with his dry, practical intelligence, "Everything on Facebook is flirty." He was right. Facebook, like

flirting, was a fun way to present yourself lightly and attractively to the world, with no downside, and no commitment.

A few weeks later, just as I was beginning to worry that I would be one of the only women working at Facebook, Maryann and Emma joined the customer support team. They were close friends of Jake and Oliver's from Stanford, pleasant in appearance, also nontechnical in major, and we got along as well as needed to perform our duties. At night they disappeared to parties full of former Stanford students and the requisite ping-pong balls and beer-laden Beirut (beer pong) tables that were their university's preferred nighttime sport.

This particular social clique preferred to discuss parties to more personal or intellectual topics, so we didn't go beyond casual pleasantries, but that was fitting for our mission of superficially connecting everyone in the world. We had Facebook as a topic of conversation. If we wanted to know more about each other we could visit each other's profiles and read the details we put there, and if we wanted to get closer than that, we could IM each other privately. From my first day onward, it was like my coworkers and I were connected always, virtually at least, chatting and emailing and posting on each other's Facebook walls. The first thing Dustin said to me after I had been taught my initial Facebook duties was to get on AIM. "We are on it all the time," he said, and it was true, for better or worse, we were.

Since a formal coolness was how our team interacted—smiling nods followed by fast descent into our screens and the

emails and Facebook pages contained therein—users were my most emotionally expressive correspondents that fall. Thousands of emails flooded our system each day asking us for everything from just letting them in because they didn't have a college email address to solving their messiest social problems, asking if we could delete a regretted message before someone read it or let them see the account of someone who had blocked them. The angst that flowed through onto my screen was overwhelming, sometimes. I felt a bit like the advice columnist Dear Abby for a digital age, counseling people on various online social minefields and talking them down from ledges. Facebook made it so easy to say things that people said things they regretted, and as I read the distraught emails I started to feel an apprehension. What happens to society when you promise people they can have whatever they want: instant contact, hundreds of photographs of people you barely know, endless digital validation? Real life has limits, but the Internet, where everything seems free for the taking, has none. What will this do to our relationships, I wondered, or even more intimately, our souls?

For us, as administrators, everything on Facebook really was there for the seeing, as we were not subjected to the privacy barriers that existed for regular users. Our tools displayed everything that happened on the network: last logins, location of login, and deleted posts. We even had an internal tool, called appropriately, Facebook Stalker, that showed who had looked at our profile, which revealed fascinating insights. For one, my female friends studied my profile more often and for longer periods of time than my male friends, which suggests a digital version of the

old dictum that women dress for each other, not for men. With access to every piece of data that existed on the system, working at Facebook was like playing the game from the hacker's side, despite the fact that I wasn't a hacker: The users gave us data freely and we consumed it, delighting in the new facts that came in by the hour.

As exhausting as answering emails for eight hours a day could get, there was something rich and fertile about Facebook as both company and product that was seductive, enticing. This is something that could go on forever, I thought, not like a business but like a family, like royalty, like the Dallas oil scene of Silicon Valley, crowning its own kings and queens and generating its own society. Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?

On Friday afternoons we got together for All Hands meetings. I looked forward to them because they were the one time we discussed things as a company, and the only meetings when everyone at the company was included. Mark would stand somewhere in the office, his posture unusually straight for someone dressed casually in a joke T-shirt (around this time he preferred one that said "I love Sloths") and sandals. Everyone would gather round, sitting on desks with flip-flops dangling or on the floor with legs crossed, watching and listening while Mark discussed the week's business: deals made, products launched, technical issues experienced and resolved. Occasionally, Matt Cohler, a Yale guy with a VC background, would chime in on financial things or Dustin would comment on site growth and health and any major down time that week. Everyone watched in rapt attention, smiling, as there was much to smile about: We had so

much to do, together, and the All Hands were where we got our motivation for the next week and months.

As we worked steadily in October 2005 to prepare for the launch of the Facebook Photos feature, where users would finally be able to upload photo albums to their profiles (prior to the launch of Photos, the only photo a user could post was their profile photo), Mark referred to all of us in an All Hands meeting as a "Facebook family," and even though most of us had just met, the kinship was palpable. It also would be profitable for us to get along; if we liked and cared for each other, it would be easier to accomplish the high goals Mark was setting out for us: more Facebook networks, more Facebook features, an ever-faster flow of information.

I liked to listen to Mark's discussion of the product philosophy and goals at these meetings, which were to me the most fascinating part of the job: what were we trying to do, with this fledgling Internet identity registration system? "I just want to create information flow," he said in his still nearly adolescent voice, lips pursed forward as if jumping to the next word, and everyone would nod, all cogitating in their own way about what this meant. Mark's idea of information flow, though vague, was also too vague to be disagreed with, and even if we came up with counter-instances to a model of pure information efficiency (for example, I wondered, do I want my Social Security number to flow freely?), we knew that we weren't supposed to disagree. Mark was our leader, for better or worse. When the meetings ended he would say either "domination" or "revolution," with a joking flourish of a fist, and everyone would laugh, nervously, but with a warm and almost chilling excitement. It was like we

were being given a charter, by a boy younger than most of us, to take over the world and get paid to do it.

Aside from the general questions that I started to ponder, questions such as what were we doing, and what did it all mean, and that I kept to myself, there was one area of our work in Customer Support that required us to have philosophical discussion and debate. Facebook, like the Internet in general, made it so easy for people to post and gain visibility for content that people with extreme and often unpopular views went wild on the new platform, creating groups devoted to whatever cause they espoused. Most of these groups were devoted to bullying of some kind, from petty harassment of a classmate to hatred of a marginalized group.

In the Customer Support Team's daily discussions of what behavior would be permitted on Facebook, we decided that any attack on an individual person would be against our Terms of Service, since we had no interest in or ability to track down the validity of any bullying claims. How were we to know why some woman on campus was being called "a slut" or "whore"—the common bullying claims made against female Facebook users—and why would we care to investigate such invidious claims? Further, individuals were the core users of the service, so to allow for the bullying of individuals would hurt the product's growth, and for us, growth was paramount. People had to have a basic sense of safety while using Facebook if they were going to use it at all. Attacks on groups of people were harder to interpret and

police, since it was difficult to tell when something was hate speech, free speech, a political disagreement or some combination thereof. (Was the group "I hate people who wear Crocs" hate speech? We had to consider it, along with the more serious hate groups aimed at blacks and gays.) Many Facebook groups made it easy for us to decide: They posted pictures of dead and gored bodies and were covered in swastikas and death threats. In the odd logic of our work, it was almost a relief to see blatant death threats because they meant that we didn't have to comb the group looking for indications of the creator's intent (people on the Internet are rarely subtle in their hatred). Thus, after long discussion we decided that if a group contained any threat of violence against a person or persons, it would be removed. One aspect of our jobs, then, became scanning group descriptions for evidence of death threats, and searching for pictures of dead people. This was the dark side of the social network, the opposite of the party photos with smiling college kids and their plastic cups of beer, and we saw it every day.

One afternoon, as I sat on the couch in the office reading emails, a user at a school in the Midwest wrote in to report a group that was devoted to gay bashing. Upon investigating the group I found that it indeed violated the Facebook terms of "no death threats," as the words "kill gays" were all over the page. With a click of a button in my administrative tool, the group was deleted. I also wrote an email to let the offending group creator know that his hate speech wouldn't be tolerated. This commenced a long correspondence between me and this unfortunate soul in the heartland who insisted, virulently, upon his right to say anything he chose about gays. He also baited

me by creating new groups with increasingly violent slogans and images of beheaded bodies, which I continued to delete, responding as calmly as I could. Finally, just as I was fearing that this stalemate would go on forever, I happened to glance at his password, which in the early days was displayed next to a user's name in our admin tool. "Ilovejason," it said. Pitying him more than feeling angry, I wrote back and told him that this case was closed and if he created one more hate group I would disable his Facebook account forever. He stopped writing after that.

Between the alternately dull and dramatic emails from users, the highlight of the work week was Friday afternoon happy hour, when at around five o'clock, our caterer would wheel a table laden with snacks, wine, and beer directly into the grid of desks where we sat. Engineers would emerge from behind their screens for a few minutes to grab a beer and return as quickly as possible to their screens. Customer support employees, who were hourly rather than salaried workers, would continue to dash off emails to users, sometimes with a beer in hand, before clocking out and grabbing another beer and gathering on the gray, modern massmarket couches in an alcove near the office entrance to talk.

By six or seven o'clock, after a few beers, people grew chattier, engineers and admins and customer support reps mingled, and we began to get to know one another in person. It felt like that early moment in any social circle when you're not sure what will happen: Who will be friends with whom, what cliques will form, who will be most popular? It all still felt protean, unformed, like the first months of freshman year. All that was clear was that Mark was in charge, supported by a small group of deputies from Harvard and Yale—Dustin, Matt—and it was up

to the rest of us to figure out what our roles would be and where we would fit.

Mark rarely drank or socialized at the happy hours with the rest of us. Occasionally I heard stories, sometimes from Mark himself, about parties and high jinks at the house in Palo Alto that he had lived in with Dustin and a few other engineers the year before—something about a drunken flight on a zip line and another story about blown circuitry in the middle of a beer-fueled coding session. There were whispers that they used Facebook to stalk Stanford girls and invite them to parties, but that made them no different than most guys on the network. But, by fall 2005, when I started working there, Mark's demeanor in the office, if it had ever been particularly relaxed, was already developing into that of the intent executive preoccupied with larger things than company happy hours, despite the fact that he wore shorts and T-shirts and often padded around the office barefoot.

The most relaxed I ever saw Mark was when my dad, a math professor, came to visit the office one happy hour that fall. Suddenly every engineer in the office, including a suddenly smiling and talkative Mark, gathered around my dad to talk about calculus and graphs. I hadn't even told anyone that my dad taught math; it was like they sensed a kindred, elder spirit, someone who understood with them that graphs were the most beautiful and inspiring things in the world. Mark was so at ease and unassuming in that conversation that when I asked my dad as we left the office, "What did you think of Mark?" he answered, "Which one was Mark?" I had the thought then, as we walked to dinner at the Italian place down the street, that it was my dad, and not me, who should be working at Facebook: Unlike me,

he would instantly fit in, and everyone could talk about graphs happily ever after. But my dad didn't need a job, and I did, so my dad flew back to Phoenix and I stayed in Silicon Valley with the engineers and the graphs.

In the small office of twenty engineers and a smattering of support reps and admins who were rapidly becoming friends, Mark's presence tended to be more aloof than the others. He walked with his chest puffed out, Napoleon-style, his curly hair jumping forward from his forehead as if to announce him in advance. My general sense of camaraderie with most of the engineers, with whom I had exchanged at least a few words around the kitchen fridge or over a beer at happy hour, felt cooler in relation to Mark. Someone has to be the boss, and no one likes the boss (do they?) and so it seemed natural that I felt nothing more than a slight wariness around him, born of his Silicon Valley status as an anointed boy wonder. He seemed more of a necessary evil. I was almost relieved that he was so distant, so preoccupied—like a father you know won't be overly concerned about what you were up to.

Three weeks after I started working there, Facebook celebrated its five-millionth user by throwing a party in a dimly lit space below a swank new restaurant in San Francisco. It was the first and last company party I attended that was made up mostly of people—adults—who didn't work there. (As we grew bigger, we turned inward, populating parties mainly with Facebook employees, until it felt like we were our own island.) The five-millionth-

user party was attended mostly by venture capitalists, curious or invested in this new, already buzzing upstart of a company. The name Peter Thiel, PayPal's infamous founder and billionaire, was on everyone's lips, but I couldn't identify him because all the men at the party looked like a version of him: dirty blond, excessively fit, with drinks held casually against their unbuttoned blazers as they discussed investment business and tried hard to impress one another. My customer support teammates and I stuck mostly to ourselves in the corner, having nothing to offer the investors, watching while they swarmed over the mussy-haired engineers standing around clutching barely touched drinks.

As I sat on a couch watching all this in my cocktail dress, holding a melting gin and tonic, I wondered at the VCs' obvious predilection for boys who looked like younger versions of themselves. I could see that as a woman I would automatically appear alien in this context. An engineer came by to take photographs and I posed, smiling, with my female teammates. One always had to smile and appear happy for Facebook. The photographer moved on to another group and I went back to musing.

It often felt like this at Facebook, like I was the only one who was watching, seeing what was happening not as a privileged participant but as an observer. Dustin, the most critically astute of the Facebook founders, did not fail to notice. A year after I started working there, we were talking at a smoke-filled party somewhere in the Stanford hills when he said to me, matter-of-factly, "You're going to write a book about us," as we descended the stairs into a crowded den to watch a band that had just begun to play.

That first winter, to go along with the perks of meals, laundry, and gym memberships that Facebook provided, the company rented a house in Tahoe for employees to use on the weekends. Mark is serious about wanting us to have fun, I thought. The prospect of escaping my queue of Facebook user emails to frolic for a couple of days in the woods sounded ideal, but the three-hour drive to Tahoe and sixty-dollar-per-day ski resort tickets were more than I could afford on my customer support salary. I felt lucky and relieved every month just to make my thousand-dollar rent and my four-hundred-dollar student loan payment. Anything else was a rare, luxurious extra.

But Facebook, maybe more than any other company, was a social scene, and I knew that it would be important to take