

I, Justine

An Analog Memoir



Justine Ezarik

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I, Justine

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Justine Ezarik

with C. L. Hargrave

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INTRODUCTION



SO, YOU COULD SAY IT all started with a visit from the mailman.

It was a Saturday in August, uneventful except that I had received a package in the post: a white box with perforated sides, roughly the size of a legal pad and an inch or so thick. The package was clearly postmarked from AT&T; based on the bright blue Priority Mail sticker, it had cost the company more than seven dollars to ship.

I was new to AT&T, but the box threw me. As I unglued the flap, I contemplated briefly that this might be a warranty for my brand-new iPhone? Or maybe some kind of complimentary Apple accessory? Inside, however, was a thick set of pages. I thumbed through them quickly, not really understanding why I was suddenly holding in my hand a detailed record of every text message, data transfer, and file download I'd made since switching service providers. *Why in the world would they send me this?* I wondered. And then it hit me: This wasn't some welcome-to-the-family paperwork or a summary of AT&T member benefits. This was a phone bill.

It was three hundred double-sided pages.

It actually weighed a couple of pounds.

After the initial shock wore off—I mean, really, since when does a phone bill come in a box?!—I did what I had done nearly every day for the previous six months: I drove to my local coffee shop, Crazy Mocha, which had become my unofficial office (and virtually my only contact with people in the outside world). Then I set up my camera and filmed myself flipping through the bill incredulously—page by page. I downloaded “Perfect Timing (This Morning)” by Orba Squara, the cheery acoustic-guitar-and-toy-piano melody made famous by its use in the first-ever iPhone ad campaign, and gave my minute-long video the (rather obvious) title “IPHONE BILL.” Finally, I uploaded the finished product to several sites: my personal blog, the now-defunct video-sharing site Revver, YouTube, Myspace, and Yahoo. It wasn't the first video I'd ever posted online, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. I just didn't know then that *this* video would be the one to change the entire course of my life.

These days, going from obscurity to celebrity via the Internet isn't exactly unheard of, nor is it particularly slow process. Justin Halpern of *Sh*t My Dad Says* fame snagged himself a book deal just two months after signing up for Twitter. #AlexfromTarget became a guest on *Ellen* inside of forty-eight hours. But the summer of 2007 was a different world, technologically (and culturally) speaking. Myspace was still the dominant social media site. (Facebook wouldn't surpass it for another twenty-one months; Instagram wouldn't launch for another three years.) “Viral” videos were still a relatively new, little-understood phenomenon. And the iPhone, now the most iconic smartphone in the world, had been on the market for only forty-three days. I'd had mine, purchased for me by a company called Technology Evangelist (because I had only two hundred dollars in my checking account and couldn't actually afford one—more on that later), for a little over a month.

Of course, the iPhone was immediately hailed as revolutionary. What became clear rather quickly, however, was that AT&T—the exclusive carrier of the newest, most advanced mobile device on the planet—was not: these guys had some seriously outdated billing policies. By early August, I heard about one or two unusually large statements; AT&T’s decision to make (painstaking) itemization their default billing option was already getting play on some minor blogs and in the tech press. But I hadn’t seen anything even approaching the colossal size of my bill, which—spread out on the little Formica table at the coffee shop—looked less like a phone bill and more like a Russian novel.

In the tech world, I’ve always been what you would call an *early adopter*, someone who signs up for new services and social media platforms as soon as they become available, long before they’re actually popular. Such was the case with Twitter, which in those days was still very much a fledgling company. (Depending on which source you cite, there were only something like fifty thousand active users back then, compared to nearly 300 million today.) Since my account was linked to my phone, every tweet I sent (and received) was recorded by AT&T as a text message—in one month, with Twitter factored in, I’d racked up a log of texts in excess of thirty-five thousand.

So the length of the bill really wasn’t surprising—what was surprising was that they printed the whole thing out and mailed it to me. I was upset about the obvious environmental implications. Which is why, at the end of the iPhone bill video, over a black screen, I had typed the words: *Use less billing. Save a forest.*

To say it struck a nerve is perhaps a bit of an understatement.

Within twenty-four hours, the video had more than a hundred thousand views and I’d been interviewed for an article in *USA Today*: “How Many Trees Did Your iPhone Bill Kill?” Within two days I was at two hundred thousand views and granting interviews to a handful of local Pittsburgh news stations. (I was such a n00b that I insisted on meeting this batch of reporters at Starbucks; I didn’t want anyone to know where I actually lived. Also, during one on-camera interview, a bug flew directly into my eye. Take *two*.)

But it didn’t stop there. I watched in disbelief as my inbox filled with hundreds of emails from literary agents, talent managers, publicists, and reporters and news producers from every major media company in the world. The video—and therefore my face—was splashed across the Yahoo! Myspace, and AOL home pages. The story, which had already evolved from a piece about the size of my phone bill to a piece about the popularity of the video I’d made in response to the size of my phone bill, was being covered in every important paper in the country, from the *New York Times* to the *Washington Post*, as well as a slew of international outfits, from India to Australia.



Within three days, I started a round of satellite interviews. I showed up at a small studio somewhere in Pittsburgh—and by “studio” I mean an empty room the size of a closet—where I was handed an earpiece and instructed to look into the camera while a chatty production assistant explained that this whole setup was a “live feed to New York.”

“Oh, is that what’s going on here?” I asked, completely without sarcasm. Amid the avalanche of media attention, I wasn’t even sure what I was agreeing to; it wasn’t until I was placing the earpiece in my ear that I started to realize just how crazy this whole thing was. A kind of mild panic began to set in.

Eight months earlier, I’d been at Macworld, the annual Apple trade show in San Francisco, to watch Steve Jobs unveil the iPhone to the public. Afterward, I was wandering around the floor of the Moscone Center, starry-eyed, when a reporter approached and asked to interview my friend Karen Nguyen and me. I guess I didn’t hear her when she said she was with ABC. Also, I may have been *tad* overexcited. Because when the reporter asked how long I’d been an Apple user, I responded rather inelegantly: “Since I came out of my mom.”

Pieces of that interview later aired on *Nightline*.

And *Good Morning America*.

As I recalled this from my chair in the little studio in Pittsburgh, I shuddered. Maybe I wasn’t quite ready for a prime-time live feed.

Within ten days, I hit 3 million views, and the “300-page iPhone bill” had become a bona fide Internet meme. It would later spawn spoof videos and copycats; eventually, it earned its own Wikipedia entry. But if you go back and watch some of that early press coverage now, what jumps out, I think, is the comical disbelief on the part of some of those reporters. Because once we got past the size of the bill, none of them seemed quite able to understand how—or perhaps more to the point, *why*—anyone in their right mind would amass thirty-five thousand text messages. “Oh my goodness. That’s a lot. . . . Do you have unlimited text messages?” asked one journalist from a local ABC affiliate, WTAE-TV. Glenn Beck, after wondering aloud if I “had legs” and asking the camera to pan backward to prove I wasn’t “confined to a bed,” asked me—on CNN prime time—if I had a life. When the interview ended, he politely told me I could “go back to tweetering.”

I probably shouldn’t have been surprised; it’s easy to be dismissive—suspicious, even—in the face of new technology. Remember when no one—and by “no one” I mean *your parents*—could figure out the appeal of AOL Instant Messenger? Likewise, Twitter’s 2006 launch was largely met with ambivalence. That’s probably why so many of the interviews I gave had a flippant those-kids-and-their-rock-’n’-roll kind of tone. It’s probably why, amid all that press attention, what virtually every one of those reporters missed was this: “IPHONE BILL” wasn’t a random one-off. In fact, I’d long since quit my “real” job to focus on the Internet thing full-time. I’d been “iJustine” for five years already. And aside from blogging and vlogging and doing freelance graphic-design work to make ends meet, I was two and a half months into live-streaming my life—that is, broadcasting my every waking (and sleeping!) moment, 24/7, to the web, like a real-life *Truman Show* or an episode of *EDT*.



Justine Ezarik @ijustine · 15 Aug 2007
On yahoo.com main page right now.. Kinda crazy.



Jason DeRusha 
@DeRushaJ

 Follow

@ijustine WCCO ran a story about you today. They said you were a man in Philly. I told them you were a woman. And on our air for iPhone launch



9:30 PM - 15 Aug 2007

Becoming “Internet famous” was never my goal, but it also wasn’t something that happened me. I’d been cultivating an online following—without really understanding what I would eventually do with that following—for the better part of my adult life.

So, you could say it all started with a visit from the mailman, but you’d be wrong. That’s only part of the story.

• • •

In the years since the “300-page iPhone bill” went viral, I’ve somehow managed to carve out an entire career blogging and making videos about technology, gadgets, and gaming. For my efforts I’ve been called “the most influential person online.” A few years ago, I ranked number six on *The Daily Beast*’s Digital Power Index. I’ve built a following of nearly 4 million subscribers across multiple YouTube channels, with total views approaching half a billion.

Trying to explain what exactly I do for a living, though, hasn’t gotten a *whole* lot easier.

Granted, the third most popular video I’ve ever uploaded to the web—which has been viewed more than 7 million times—was a rant about a restaurant server who kept insisting on telling me about the daily specials when all I wanted was a cheeseburger. (It’s called—wait for it—“I WANT CHEESEBURGER!!!!!!”) The most popular video I’ve ever created—viewed more than 15 million times—was a spoof on the Black Eyed Peas hit “I Gotta Feeling.” (Just so you know, I felt the need to apologize to will.i.am for this when I met him several years later.) A cursory glance at my main YouTube channel would reveal a slew of videos of me dancing (like a crazy person) in Apple Stores and on an airplane!—across the country, a peek at the apps on my iPhone 6, and a series of ill-advised cooking demonstrations. Navigate on over and I’ll show you how to make eggs, homemade pizza, even a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich . . . *in a blender*. I guess what I’m saying is, if you’ve never heard of me (or you’re over the age of twenty-five), you’d be forgiven for wondering, *Why does anyone watch this?!*—let alone an audience of 15 million.

There’s been a lot of ink spilled in an attempt to explain the sudden rise of YouTube “stars,” so I’m used to hearing people say things like “she just came out of nowhere.” But the truth is that’s a bit like calling a band that’s been touring for ten years an “overnight success” because one of the

songs finally managed to hit the charts—I’ve been blogging, often with nary a follower, since the late nineties; I was twelve when I built my first website. Likewise, some people have suggested that I stumbled across a kind of magic formula for creating “viral” content, but the heavy traffic many of my videos receive isn’t *viral*, it’s the result of building a loyal audience over the course of many many years. (“IPHONE BILL” is one of the only truly viral videos I’ve ever created.) There’s a small but vocal contingent of bloggers who are convinced that, based on my love of Apple products and what was once a stalker-like obsession with Steve Jobs, I’m some kind of covertly paid Palo Alto employee. (For the record: I have never received any kind of endorsement or compensation from Apple. Ever.) And in any conversation about social media, there are those inevitable references to “Generation Overshare,” which is a polite euphemism for the idea that YouTubers are all sociopathic narcissists, that we’re all deluded enough to believe the public genuinely cares about every little thing we do or say.

I can’t speak for everyone on the Internet (and I have *absolutely* met one or two sociopathic narcissists in my time), but here’s the thing about what I do for a living: it’s really not about *me*.

You see, putting the bulk of your life online is a sometimes exciting, sometimes terrifying, borderline insane thing to do, and deep into my live-streaming experiment I started to bounce between two extremes: either I was so blasé about the whole thing that I’d ignore the webcam (and therefore the viewers) for hours on end, or so anxiety-ridden that I eschewed wearing tank tops for fear of having an on-camera nip slip. Slowly, however, I began to realize that it didn’t matter what I was doing, people went right along having their own independent conversations in the chat room on topics ranging from popular music to global politics to the minutiae of their daily lives. And really, isn’t that kind of the point of the Internet? To bring people together? I just created a bunch of content about things *I* love, and posted it all in a place where like-minded individuals could meet up and connect *with each other*.

Running a YouTube channel is a bit like having a conversation—one that gets added to in installments, bit by bit, day after day. I’ve been having a conversation with my followers for at least seven years—some of my online friends have been with me since the early 2000s. Even before “IPHONE BILL” went viral, there was a group of people watching idly as I lived my life on the web. They were there on those morning drives to the coffee shop, watching as I tried to earn enough money to survive and learned the ins and outs of running a business. They were there when I received a three-hundred-page phone bill in a box, watching as I filmed and edited the experience in real time. They were there when I uploaded the video, watching as it exploded into a worldwide phenomenon. They’ve been there since the beginning, and they are a huge part of the reason I wanted to write this book.

If you’ve followed or friended me on any one of a dozen social media platforms, you already know that I wanted this to be a collaborative experience. I asked for your input about what anecdotes and inside information you wanted to read; you’ll find those stories sprinkled throughout, every time you see one of these:



Some of you might even see your questions in the following pages!

• • •

After uploading nearly five thousand videos to the web, crisscrossing the country to speak at trade shows and tech conferences, and even dipping my toe into “acting” (I scored a cameo on *Law Order: SVU* by tweeting the casting director—thanks, Jonathan!), I continue to be amazed and inspired by the limitless opportunities available to us all, online. For an antisocial kid from western Pennsylvania, the Internet became a magical place where I could connect with people who liked the same things I liked. After wandering into my first online chat room, I thought, *Finally, I have found my people*. On the Internet, I could actually enjoy just being me: a goofy, nerdy, Nintendo-playing, Pog-card-swapping girl who liked tech and games.

That’s the great thing about the Internet: no matter what strange or atypical thing you’re into, eventually you will find *your people*.

What’s that you say? That sounds naive and silly? Well, have you ever heard of wikiFeet? For those of you who don’t know, wikiFeet is the Internet’s “collaborative celebrity feet website,” otherwise known as the place for a bunch of lovable weirdos to celebrate and share their foot fetishes with the world. (Inexplicably, there are 612 photos of me—er, my feet—on this site.)

By the way, there are also people out there with sneeze fetishes. Did you know about this? Let me tell you, stumbling upon a compilation video featuring every on-camera sneeze you’ve ever, well, sneezed . . . it’s a pretty weird feeling.

Beyond just finding a group of like-minded friends, though, the Internet has been, for me, a place of companionship (in virtual *and* in real life) and inspiration. Over the years, I’ve watched some of my online friends start their own blogs and YouTube channels; some have even catapulted to more “traditional” entertainment careers, launching successful comedy tours or writing and starring in their own TV shows. The Internet has allowed me to connect with people I would’ve had no hope of meeting from the confines of my rural hometown—people like Leo Laporte of *TechTV*, Justin Kan of Justin.tv, and Alex Lindsay of Pixel Corps—who were gracious (or crazy) enough to share some of their success with me.

There’s a growing concern that social media platforms are only making us more antisocial, that technology is actually an impediment to honest human connection. But the Internet brought me out of my shell. It has put me in touch with some of the most influential and important people in my life. It has brought me solace and comfort in times of distress. And based on the remarkable amount of tweets and private messages I’ve received over the years, the Internet has allowed my experiences to bring comfort and solace to other people, too.

That’s not to say it’s always been a virtual bed of roses. I’ve been accused, frequently, of not being a “real” gamer. I’ve been described—in a reputable tech publication—as someone who “compensates” for her “unfunny” with “bug-eyed, squealing enthusiasm.” Like far too many people who choose to share pieces of their life online, I’ve received a colorful array of profanity-laced death threats.

The good has far outweighed the bad, though. It’s possible that living my life online has even made me a better person—it’s reminded me that what you see on the web is only a sliver of any one

person's real life. In fact, I seriously considered titling this book *Tweets I Never Sent*, just as a reminder that no matter how much access you seemingly have to any one person online, you will never really know his or her whole story. Even when I was live-streaming, there were times when I said the camera battery had died, just so I could turn the thing off and catch a bit of a break from being iJustine. Even though I tweet anywhere from ten to fifty times a day, there have been moments when I chose not to share a particularly devastating piece of news I received at Christmastime, or to publicize that the tires were once stolen from my car while it was parked in my very own driveway, or to admit that a prank call led to a middle-of-the-night visit from the SWA team, or to reveal that I once traveled to Hawaii with a boyfriend who didn't want to be on camera, leaving the Internet to believe that I was either (a) traveling, for some strange reason, entirely alone or (b) a closet lesbian.

Telling the whole story, for once, is the other reason I decided to write this book.

My life online has been a crazy, strange, amazing, and unpredictable journey—I have no idea where it will lead next; I'm still figuring this whole thing out a day at a time. But if there's anything I've learned so far, it's that there are worse things than being called a "bug-eyed, squealing enthusiast."

I have been lucky enough to earn a living doing exactly what I love. I hope that, whatever it is that you love, you never let anyone make you feel weird about it. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there, to write or sing or draw or play video games or dance like a crazy person in an Apple Store. Do what makes you happy.

It's always worked for me.

And who knows? You might even build a career out of it.



THE GOLDEN RULE



THE DETAILS ARE FUZZY NOW, but I can tell you that I was in the sixth grade, I was sitting in home ec class and for some reason our teacher had decided to rearrange our seats—I ended up in a chair next to Steve, the class troublemaker. I don't know what started the fight. What I do know is that he kicked me. Hard. Under the desk. In the shin.

With no mind for the potential consequences—prompted only by sheer outrage—I kicked him back. He kicked me again. I kicked back. This continued on a little longer than perhaps was necessary, but there we were, surreptitiously kicking each other under the table, trying to avoid the watchful eye of our teacher. (Eventually, she did notice, of course, and ended up rearranging the seats yet again—we were on the verge of disrupting the entire class now, and there was also a huge likelihood that, allowed to keep going like that, we would have wound up seriously injuring each other.)

After school I was so upset about the fight that I immediately related the whole sordid story to my friend Natalie. As we sat at home, me rubbing my sore shin and Natalie listening to the gory details in wide-eyed disbelief, I suddenly had a wonderful idea. I fished out the school yearbook and flipped until I'd found Steve's photo. I scanned and printed a copy of it, drew devil horns, an evil-looking mustache, and scribbles all over his face, and sat down in front of my computer. Back then I was still using trial versions of programs like Photoshop and Dreamweaver—it's expensive software now, but it was exorbitantly priced then, so every thirty days I'd reformat my entire hard drive so I could re-use the thirty-day trial. With my newly acquired coding skills—and the semi-pirated software—I set about creating what can only be described as a masterpiece: my very first website, about how much I disliked Steve (the actual name was "I Hate Steve," much to my current chagrin). I was still seething, and building a website seemed like the only way to get back at him.

Once I got over the initial flush of anger, though, something interesting happened: I was actually impressed—inspired, even—by what I had made. I had been teaching myself HTML for months—I had a TextEdit file filled with lines of code, which I'd copy and paste into some of those early web editors, experimenting on the basis of trial and error—but I'd never actually built an entire site before. As I marveled at my handiwork, I actually felt motivated. That initial hate-driven burst of inspiration turned out to be just what I had needed, and it paved the way for other early and—let's just say it—*amazing* and tech-savvy sites: sites like IHateCows, in honor of the crazed heifers who frequently escaped from the neighbor's field to chase my sisters and me while we stood outside waiting for the school bus.

I grew up in a very small town in rural Pennsylvania, the kind of place where it was common to see someone riding a horse down the middle of the street, where goats and sheep and, yes, the occasional cow often wandered into my parents' yard. Shouts of "Call the neighbors!" would ring out through the house, and my dad would end up chasing the animals back to their rightful owners.

with his tractor. (My father has always taken excellent care of his grass, and I'm convinced the area farm animals were working collaboratively to get out and get at it. I believe this strange sort of upbringing also explains my enduring love of camouflage clothing.)

We did not live on a farm, per se, but we did raise chickens. It was generally my job, either as a chore or as an out-and-out punishment, to collect the eggs in the morning. If you've never collected chicken eggs before, a piece of advice: they're usually nestled deep within steaming piles of sawdust, wood shavings, and chicken poo. 🐣👤 You've got to get in there and really *dig*. Suffice to say, collecting eggs in the morning was disgusting. On the plus side, however, our chickens were both tame and well trained. Once you stepped out of the house and into the backyard, they would waddle right over and bow their heads, beckoning for you to pet them. They were a lot like dogs that way. We had a dog, too—an actual one—but the chickens didn't seem to know any better.

Aside from the petting and the egg laying, our chickens were also often the stars of the earliest Ezarik home movies. With the boxy camcorder resting atop my shoulder, I'd put pieces of feed on the keys of a little toy piano and encourage the chickens to pluck out a tune. My sister's pet guinea pig also featured prominently in some of these videos. (The poor thing ended up with a cancerous tumor the size of a tennis ball—but he was a trooper!) When I grew bored with my budding film career, I'd spend some time taking apart the VCR and trying, usually in vain, to put the thing back together again.



My love of pigs started at an early age . . . a trip to the zoo with my dad (old-school VHS camera in hand!) and sister Breanne, circa 1985 in southwestern Pennsylvania.

As is perhaps becoming obvious, I was kind of a weird kid.

I just knew, as far back as I can remember, that I was different. Making friends was always a bit of a challenge. I liked trading Pog and baseball cards, but none of the other girls my age were into that.

sort of thing. In lieu of going out, I spent hours and hours with my butt wedged into a too-small child-sized rocking chair in front of the television, playing Super Mario Bros. and chomping on homemade venison salami (made from the spoils of my father's frequent hunting expeditions which I called, affectionately, "Nintendo snacks." As with so many other shy, analytical, and technically minded children, it's probably not surprising, then, that I fell in love, immediately, with my family's first home computer.

Our 1986-era Macintosh Plus was actually a gift from my mother's sister, Aunt Vicki. Between breeding sheepdogs and selling goat milk, my aunt had somehow managed to acquire a computer, teach herself how to use it, and hand it down to us within a remarkably short period of time. Vicki is the kind of wonderfully free spirit who can flit from odd job to odd job. She was always picking up and traveling to some exotic destination, and I like to think I get some of my antiestablishment tendencies from her. It was Vicki who taught me a number of important life lessons, like "don't open the floppy drive when this little light is on" and "don't forget to save your game before shutting off the computer."

Though I have warm memories of printing out beautiful and elaborate banners celebrating just about anything I could think of to celebrate (using up reams and reams of that perforated, hole-punched paper in the process), of making elementary pixel art, and of teaching myself how to type on our Macintosh Plus was replaced pretty quickly by the much more advanced Apple Power Macintosh 6100/60. (A quick Google search tells me this model is currently selling for a scant hundred dollars on eBay.) You see, my Apple loyalty started early, for no reason other than the fact that my mother was a teacher, and grade schools back then seemed to be stocked almost exclusively with Apples—I bought this second computer with my mother's educator discount.

And therein lay the trouble: *all* of my friends—or at least my friends who had computers—had PCs. I didn't get why I couldn't use the same software or play the same games. At some point, several years later, I requested something called SoftWindows, which was supposed to emulate Windows for Mac, as my one and only birthday gift. Let me spare you the suspense by coming right out and saying: It did not work. At all. This ongoing problem with compatibility, however, would become a tidy little metaphor for my entire life.

Things started to change a little with the introduction of our first dial-up Internet connection. Once the earsplitting sound of the modem subsided, I navigated right on over to—where else?—Nintendo.com. Let me tell you, *this* was a revelation. Here were cheat codes and chat rooms and features about my favorite games! I could read all about what was coming next without having to wait by the mailbox for the next issue of *Nintendo Power* to be delivered! For the mid-nineties, Nintendo had some pretty awesome and heavily trafficked online forums, too. I remember they were modeled in the shape of a little house; you could ride a virtual elevator up and down to different floors, or catch some rays at the virtual swimming pool. I vividly remember my mother encouraging me to play outside more, to get some fresh air.

"But I'm outside right now, Mom!" I would tell her. "I'm in the swimming pool at Nintendo.com!"

When I found the Internet, I realized I didn't have to go anywhere to travel the world—I had everything I needed at my fingertips. I didn't have to be Justine from the middle of nowhere—I could be whoever and whatever I wanted. I chatted with strangers and invented elaborate backstories for

more interesting than my own, and started to feel, for the first time, like I was part of some kind of community. And then, when I started to run out of things to do on Nintendo.com, I discovered a little button that revealed the HTML source code that powered the site. A strange and blinding array of angle brackets, tags, and commands popped up on my screen. I didn't know what it all meant, but I knew that somewhere in that tangle of words and numbers that looked like ancient hieroglyphs was the *thing* that made it all happen. I wanted to learn that language. I needed to understand how it all worked.

I frequented free web-hosting sites like GeoCities and Tripod and Angelfire; I copied lines of code from Nintendo.com, plugged them in via TextEdit, and saw what happened. I wrote my own garbled lines of invented code; when they failed to produce glittering graphics or sleek animation, I started over and tried something else. I discovered how to make a GIF in Fireworks. I hoarded those free trial CDs for AOL and Photoshop and Dreamweaver. I figured out how to reprogram Kid Works, an intro-to-animation suite, so that if I typed the word *po* the computer would read—aloud, in that sort of post-apocalyptic, inflectionless monotone—the word *shit*. I cackled at my own cleverness. I demonstrated, to my slightly suspicious (and profanity-opposed) parents, all the reasons why this was both brilliant and *hilarious*.

I spent weeks typing out silly stories and creating accompanying animations, which I would unveil in elaborate show-and-tell format, as some kind of warped holiday entertainment. For Christmas I asked only for RAM. I pushed both of those early computers to the limit of their capabilities; over time, I became my family's resident tech expert. And eventually, whenever someone in the neighborhood needed a website or an animation or help with their email account, someone would say—casually, without reverence—*Oh, Justine can do it*. In a town where (and at a time when) lots of people didn't even have web access, being able to actually build things on the Internet became part of my identity, the thing that made me *me*.

Somewhere in the middle of all that, though, somewhere between discovering Nintendo.com and learning the ins and outs of HTML and figuring out that GIF is really pronounced “jif” (with a soft *j*) and adopting the moniker iJustine, was Steve, and that first website I built out of anger.

Steve never saw the site I created in his honor, but he would continue to be a pain in the ass throughout middle school and right on into high school. In ninth grade Spanish, he was once again moved to a nearby desk (because he'd been mercilessly teasing the girl who had been sitting in front of him). I held my breath and waited for him to say something awful to me, but he didn't. It occurred to me that perhaps I didn't need to hate him anymore. Perhaps he had matured a little. But before long the subject of dirt bikes came up, and he started rambling on and on about his irrational love for them.

“Oh, you're one of *those* people,” I said, coldly. “I don't associate with people like that. You guys are *always* in trouble.”

It was kind of a weird thing to say, and I didn't really mean it. I think I was probably just jealous; my mother never let my sisters and me ride dirt bikes, or do anything all that adventurous, frankly, for fear that we'd get hurt. But I knew by the stricken look on his face that I had cut Steve to the core.

A few years later, Steve's younger brother, Eddie, began dating my little sister Breanne. (For the

record: Bre denies that they ever actually dated, despite the fact that they went to prom together. And though I didn't find this out until much later, Steve spent the bulk of his junior year stranded at home because Eddie would take the truck they shared and drive it to my house to hang out with Bre. Can you imagine? Not being able to go anywhere because your younger brother, your flesh and blood, was hanging out at the Ezariks'? What a traitor.

A few years after that, long after I had started to build a web-based following, I got a late-night (probably alcohol-induced) Facebook friend request from my old nemesis Steve. That led to a conversation about our string of fights and what I'd always assumed was a mutual hatred of each other. But whereas the sixth-grade incident had always been foremost in my mind, it was the dirtbike comment that had lodged in Steve's memory. In fact, he'd been so insulted that he wrote a college paper about how mean I'd once been to him.

I'm not kidding. You can read part of it on the next page.

You might be pleased to know that Steve and I have since become good friends. He's a proud member of the United States Navy, as well as the safety and explosives expert for Pennsylvania's own Squatch Watch—a group of devoted Sasquatch hunters from our very own hometown. (Total members numbering four: me; my sisters, Breanne and Jenna; and Steve.) He's been in a number of my videos over the years, and he's an incredibly supportive friend, game for just about anything I can throw at him.

I was lucky: my "I Hate Steve" website went live in 1996, lasted about a day before I dismantled it, and was only ever viewed by two whole people—my friend Natalie and me. It's true that Steve gave me the motivation I needed—I'll always be thankful for that. But he also taught me, whether he intended to or not, one of the most important lessons of my life: be kind—even (perhaps *especially*) on the Internet.

Besides, you just never know when you're going to need a safety instructor for your Sasquatch hunting squad.

Steve Moyer
Mr. Watkins
College Composition
5 April 2002

This is How We Role, Fool

Riding a dirtbike is great fun and I have had fun doing it for a couple years now. I never saw a down side to it until one day. That day was the day I told Justine that I am a rider. Sure, before this people had made comments about it, but nothing quite gripped me the way that Justine, among others, viewed me now. Due to the fact that I ride, people hate me.

Let's go back a ways. Justine and I have been best friends since as long as I can remember. We never fought, or argued, or even disagreed on anything, no matter what the subject. But that was all about to come to a very abrupt halt.

The two of us were in Mr. Fields' eighth period class talking. This is when it started. I don't remember how I got started on the topic or why for that matter, but it forever changed the friendship between Justine and me. All I said was, "I can't wait to get home, so I can ride." Justine cast a quizzical glance in my direction. "Ride what?" she inquired. "My dirtbike," I responded. This is when things took a turn for the worse.

"Oh, you're one of 'them,'" Justine said as she looked in the other direction. With a puzzled look on my face I asked, "Jigga what?" As she turned back, she explained that some so-called "dirtballs" on her bus sit by her and dirtbikes are the only thing that they talk about. These people annoyed Justine to the point where she could not bring herself to associate with anyone like them. With that she walked away and out of my life for good.



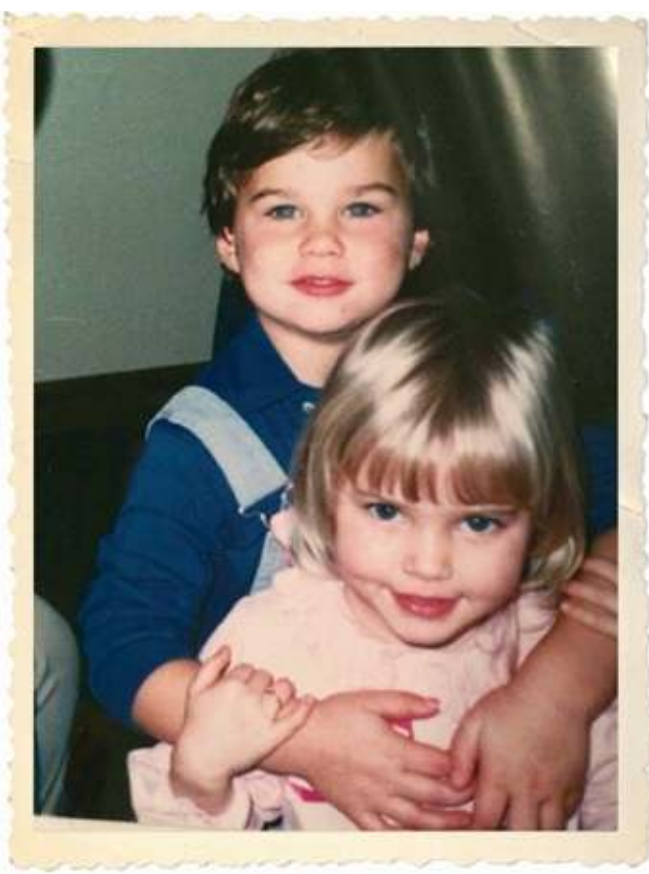
BLOND (LACK OF) AMBITION



WE WERE IN KINDERGARTEN, CELEBRATING some kind of early-childhood version of career day, and our teacher was going around the room, asking each student that age-old question: What do you want to be when you grow up? The answers, up to that point, had all been fairly typical: a firefighter, a cowboy, a princess, the president. When the teacher got to my friend CJ—whose mom was best friends with my mom (his family had three boys, mine had three girls; it was all very *Brady Bunch*)—he stood up and announced proudly that he wanted to be a cop. When the teacher got to me, I stood up and announced proudly: “I want to be a chef at Bob Evans.”

There was a fair amount of subtle head shaking and a fleeting look of concern from the teacher. “I want to be a chef at Bob Evans? That was . . . well, let’s just say it was a pretty random thing to want to be.”

It was an especially ironic answer because I cannot now, nor have I ever been able to, cook. (Do you forget about the part where I said I once made a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich in the blender?) In my defense, though, I had to say *something*. And I really liked the food at Bob Evans (it’s a chain of down-home, country-style restaurants, if you’re not familiar); we usually went there on Sundays after church. Mostly, I just didn’t have a better answer. Whenever anyone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I usually froze. Or shrugged. Figuring out what I was going to do with my life—or worse, how I was going to make money at it—just wasn’t something I was ever thinking (or, evidently, worried) about.



Here's CJ, probably practicing some kind of police takedown maneuver on me.

My lack of career ambition might have been fine if I had been a more conscientious student—but sometime in the middle of third grade, my mother discovered that I was basically BSing my way through school. We had these workbooks filled with simple exercises and wide-rule spaces for writing in the answers, and it was nothing more than a bunch of busywork. I'd been *doing* the work. I was perfectly caught up in all of my classes—it's just that the handwriting I'd been employing was somewhere between out-and-out nonsense and a kind of invented shorthand. I mean, I could read back what I had written, sort of, so long as I squinted one eye closed and strained really hard. When my mother finally clamped her eyes on one of those scribble-filled workbooks, however, she decided it was probably time to go in and speak with my teacher.

My teacher explained to my mother, delicately and slowly, that she thought the scribbles were perhaps all I was capable of, that they were representative of the best I could do.

“THIS IS NOT THE BEST SHE CAN DO!” my mother practically screamed at her, waving the workbook around for emphasis. “She is pulling one over on you. Believe me, this is *not* her best work.”

And to prove it, my mother carted that same workbook right back home and sat me down for what amounted to two or three hours a night, five or six days a week, until I had painstakingly rewritten what I had previously chicken-scratched my way through. We're talking months and months of work here, the equivalent of an entire half year of school.

Standardized testing did not go much better. Somewhere along the way, I determined that I was “great at guessing,” and usually Christmas-tree'd my way through all those Scantron answer sheets. It's not that the lessons were ever over my head or that I couldn't handle the workload, mind you—I just had difficulty paying attention (something I still struggle with). I'd get bored easily. To avoid

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