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English Honors Thesis

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Swipe Right: College, Dating, and the Digital World

About this project:

This thesis is about the modern process of “dating” or hooking up, the way technology is at the center of it, the exhaustion it creates, and the sadness for a loss of innocence/loss of simpler times/ loss of a better way to go about all of this. It needs to be written because it represents the experience of thousands of college kids around the country who are trying to figure out how to navigate this strange new environment. I hope it serves as a warning to younger, high-school-aged kids so that they can choose to do things differently, and I hope it opens the eyes of older readers who may not be aware of the pressures and disappointment hook-up culture inflicts on young people like me. Please note that this project focuses on heterosexual relationships. This is not an attempt to exclude marginalized communities, but rather to contain the scope of this piece, and to focus on representing the people and practices I am most familiar with, which happen to be heterosexual.

Swipe Right: College, Dating, and the Digital World

There's no shortage of people declaring the death of dating. *Vanity Fair*'s Nancy Jo Sales revealed the "Dawn of the 'Dating Apocalypse;'" *CNN* announced "Traditional dating is dead;" and *The New York Times* wondered "Is this the end of courtship?" Not to be morbid, but I tend to agree: dating is dead. I'm not a coroner, so I can't tell you the cause of death — some say it's technology, others blame the sexual revolution, still more blame second-wave feminism. Though I can't tell you what killed dating, I can examine it as it is now — perhaps perished, perhaps vitals barely hanging on with life support. In this paper, I will focus on three people who have recently written about modern love and whose work has garnered a lot of attention: David Brooks, Moira Weigel, and Joanna Coles. Each of these authors plays the role of cultural commentator; Brooks as journalist, Weigel as historian, Coles as self-help guru. But the cultural analysis they offer can only go so far, especially because of the authors' own detachment from the world of digital dating. There's a clear generational gap present in the works of Brooks and Coles who are both in their late 50s and offer advice to and about young people that they're decades removed from. Weigel, who's in her early 30s, is closest to the young people who use digital dating services, but her work focuses more on history than on attempting to provide a road map. I will respond to the work of each author to show why the creative writing that follows — my "ground zero" examination of dating among college students — is necessary and previously missing from the discussion on modern dating. What I have to offer isn't a cultural analysis. Rather, it is a first-hand account of seeking romance through apps, driven by a desire to find meaning from inside the chaos of constant swiping, hookups, and disappointments.

David Brooks first took on America's digital dating in a 2009 column for *The New York Times* titled "Cellphones, Texts and Lovers." In it, he looks at the role that technology plays in modern online relationships — the fact that everyone has the internet in their pocket and thus has a myriad of potential dates in their pocket, too. He talks about how online daters have multiple people on their "backburner" — what we would now affectionately refer to as a "roster" — that allows them to constantly have a backup should a plan to hookup fall through.

I'm struck by the fact that Brooks uses the phrase "it seems to encourage" three times in this short piece. As he postulates what technology means to a younger generation of daters, I find that his wishy-washy "seems to" shows his uncertainty and how removed he is from the whole thing. Brooks never specifies who exactly he's talking about other than "young" people. Are the young people my peers or all the people younger than Brooks? Are they people who are veterans of the hookup scene or the ones who are newly divorced or widowed and back on the market? His lack of focus on a specific group pushes him to make generalizations and guesses that definitely don't apply to all those involved in digital dating. The young people I am writing about, college-aged daters, are not experiencing the phenomena Brooks imagines they are.

Brooks states that young people today "get less help" than young people of the past. I would argue it's not that we get less help — everyone's still got a bubbe who offers unsolicited wisdom and a best friend who talks his ear off about the wonders of finding love. Rather, it's that the help that's offered is anachronistic and can't be applied to the world we live in. Moreover, when we are offered help — as we are by Joanna Coles whose book is discussed later in this piece — it comes from outsiders who paint an overly simplified view of the situation. One thing Brooks' column gets right, though, is that there's a "coat of ironic detachment" that's necessary

to survive this new terrain, though I suppose by 2018 the detachment has eroded into its close cousin: cynicism.

Brooks took a second look at modern dating six years later in 2015 in a piece called “The Devotion Leap,” also written for *The New York Times*. He describes a study that asked dating app users to rank people based on attractiveness. Men ranked women in a bell curve, with three being the median score, while women gave men lower rankings, with the median score between one and two. From this data, Brooks concludes, “Either the guys who go to places like OkCupid, Tinder and other sites are disproportionately homely, or women have unforgiving eyes” (Brooks). I’d like to think that Brooks wrote this in jest, though the context of his column proves otherwise. What I think Brooks and this study don’t take into account is an overall negativity that many women experience in dating apps. Perhaps the women did find the men just as attractive as the men found them, but in the context of knowing that these are the same men who text them a barrage of “wanna fuck”s and dick pics, their ratings went down. There’s also no clear evidence that this lower rating of men has any correlation with the number of women who talk to them, the number of dates they go on, or whether those dates are successful.

Similar problems with online dating existed back in the 1980s with video dating. In her book, which I discuss later, Moira Weigel quotes a *Chicago Tribune* article that said, “Video dating services are great... just as long as you’re either (a) A gorgeous woman, under 35, with a glamorous career, or (b) An average-looking man, under 65, with an ordinary job,” (Weigel 176). It seems being average (or even below average) doesn’t hinder men in dating regardless of the technology being used. Brooks even supports this point (despite the fact that he’s just chided women) with data from OkCupid co-founder and president Christian Rudder’s book *Dataclysm* writing, “There’s a gigantic superstar effect. Women who are rated in the top 5 percent of

attractiveness get a vast majority of the approaches. The bottom 95 percent get much less. For men, looks barely matter at all unless you are in the top 3 percent or so” (Brooks). Essentially, if you’re a woman, and you’re not Angelina Jolie, you’re likely to get fewer approaches, but if you’re a man who doesn’t look like David Beckham, it doesn’t really impact whether a woman will start a conversation. But Brooks is quick to reassure us about online daters, saying “People who date online are not shallower or vainer than those who don’t,” which harkens back to his 2009 column in which he wrote, “This does not mean that young people today are worse or shallower than young people in the past” (Brooks). Clearly he thinks we need a reminder that we’re not all *that* bad. And while I appreciate the sentiment, I don’t think online daters are overly concerned with being perceived as shallow.

Brooks goes on to worry about the transition that must be made as daters take their relationship from app to real world. “Basically, they have to take the enchantment leap. This is when something dry and utilitarian erupts into something passionate, inescapable and devotional” (Brooks). It sounds beautiful, doesn’t it? But what Brooks is missing is that most online “matches” never escape from the cell walls of the screen. A relationship is born, developed, and dies in these apps before it never has the chance to become “something passionate” in the real world. According to the Pew Research Center, one-third of the people who use online dating sites have never actually gone on a date with someone they met on the site (Smith). The notion that Brooks doesn’t acknowledge that a good portion of these interactions never even make it to the real world shows his disconnection from the world of online dating. Even Sean Rad, the cofounder of Tinder, says “Nothing replicates real life. There is no substitute” (Coles 33). Yet anyone who’s experienced online dating knows that the simple path from app to face-to-face is one that often doesn’t exist. The data from the Pew Research Center

above looks at whether dating app users have ever transitioned from the digital to the real world, but it doesn't take into account every individual match that fizzles into nothing, which is a much more frequent occurrence than the matches that turn into dates, let alone relationships. Brooks thinks what's missing is a romanticized mindset: "The people involved move from selfishness to service, from prudent thinking to poetic thinking, from a state of selection to a state of need, from relying on conscious thinking to relying on their own brilliant emotions" (Brooks). Yet, what's often missing is more utilitarian. It's not about thought; it's about action. To make this leap that Brooks speaks of, dating app users have to first make the physical leap of meeting in person.

Moira Weigel chronicles the history of dating in the United States in her book *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating* (2017). From the late 1800s to modern times, Weigel describes common dating practices such as calling and going steady, and the way that society responded to changes in courtship norms.

To understand the world of online dating, it helps to understand how it came about. In *Labor of Love*, Weigel charts the way dating technology has evolved over the decades. The "first primitive forms" of computer-assisted dating came about during the 1960s, she explains, and these services relied on users submitting information about themselves to a database that was cross-referenced to find other singles whose information was compatible. Often, these dating technologies were only able to focus on a small subset of people, for example Project TACT ("Technical Automated Compatibility Testing") was only available for daters on the Upper East Side of Manhattan (Weigel 171). Tough luck if a New Yorker was hoping to connect with someone from, say, Iowa. These early databases were slow-going, and limited in scope; they never really took off.

In the 1980s, video dating began gaining traction. Individuals would pay a service that would record a video of them answering questions about their dating preferences and personal history, and then allow other clients to view the videos and contact those they were interested in. Sure, a catalog of VHS tapes seems a far cry from the endless swiping of the 2010s, but the two have a lot in common. For instance, just as there seems to be an app or site for every type of person these days, so too was there a specific video-dating service for every type of person. “There was a Soul Mates Unlimited (for Jews in California) and Soul Date a Mate (for African Americans in or around Framingham, Massachusetts). In Boston there was Partners (for gays and lesbians) and Mazel Dating (for Jewish singles). Washington, D.C., had Today For Singles Inc., which served daters with herpes” (Weigel 172). And the kinds of personalities that one encountered on dating videos may not have been all that different from what dating app users encounter these days. “In a video-dating tape that is still floating around on YouTube, a thin man with a mullet describes what he is hoping for: ‘a figure that is sexy...slim, tight, excellent legs.’ He pauses to look up into the camera and literally smacks his lips. ‘Mmmm.’ His was a problem that still confronts daters on many apps and services: The specter of infinite possibility and choice creates hopes that only can be dashed, again and again, in a search that never ends” (Weigel 175).

What Weigel concludes from this video clip is a parallel between video dating and dating apps in that there’s an endless quest for the next best thing, the next best person. I agree with this observation, yet I think she misses the parallels of misogyny then and now that are present in this clip as we see the man’s focus on the body of the woman he’s looking for and the licking of his lips. In both cases, the man is using a platform designed to create lasting relationships, yet he’s creating a space that’s purely based on the superficial and on sex. In doing so, he’s influencing

the experience that women users of the technology (whether it's VHS tapes or smartphone apps) are able to have.

In the evolution of dating technologies, after video dating came websites. As people became more comfortable using the World Wide Web, dating sites began to pop up in the 1990s. Match.com, still one of the biggest online dating sources, was founded in 1995, followed by JDate in 1997, and eHarmony in 2000. Just as previous matchmaking services found niche markets, so too did websites continue to find specialized target users. For example, Ashley Madison launched in 2002 with the aim to help married people find a suitable person to cheat with (their motto is "Life is short. Have an affair"), and Seeking Arrangement, founded in 2006, helps connect sugar daddies (generally older men with cash to spare who are looking for younger women) and sugar babies connect. As smartphones became the norm, transitioning from desktop to mobile led to the creation of dating apps. Grindr debuted in 2009, Tinder in 2012, and Bumble in 2014 (Safronova).

Along with a change in technology, there was a change in mindset that is crucial to understanding the prevalence of online dating in modern times. An important societal change that Weigel points out in her book has to do with the culture that "yuppies," or young urban professionals, created in the 1980s. Because of economic hardships, yuppies created a culture of work, work, work. "Yuppies had made work itself glamorous. In doing so, they had made it admirable (rather than pitiful) to be too busy to have a social or romantic life" (Weigel 174). This glamorization of work has persisted into the 2000s. Especially in a university environment where cultures of constant competition are pervasive, there's a pressure to prove that you're working harder and are busier than your peers. Though Weigel doesn't make the connection in her book, I

would posit that this work-is-life culture has contributed to the widespread use and acceptance of dating apps among the collegiate crowd.

As with any new and confusing terrain, it would help to have a map to show dating app users how to navigate this world. Recently, Joanna Coles, the current Chief Content Officer for Hearst Magazines, former editor in chief of *Marie Claire* and *Cosmopolitan*, and a woman whose career I greatly admire and respect, wrote a manual of sorts meant to address dating in the digital age titled *Love Rules: How to Find a Real Relationship in a Digital World*. As Coles was featured in an avalanche of interviews and press events to promote the book, I couldn't help but feel excited in my anticipation of a great read: finally, someone was writing about the world I encountered daily, and she had a plan to help us young people navigate it. But what I found when I cracked open the book was far from what I'd expected.

The copy on the book jacket pointed out the first problem: that Coles, a 56-year-old woman who's been married for over a decade and hasn't had personal experience with digital dating, perhaps isn't the right person to be writing this book. "Sheryl Sandberg empowered women to *lean in*. Arianna Huffington encouraged them to *thrive*. Now Joanna Coles guides them on their most important journey: *finding love*" (Coles). Women are waiting longer than ever before to get married, and many — especially young women — are more interested in pursuing career than romantic partners. The Pew Research Center reported that the median age for first-time marriage is at an all-time high with women at 26.5 years old and men at 28.7 years old, based on their analysis of the U.S. Census data (Cohn). The tension between the content of this book, dating in a digital age, and the ideals behind it, that a woman's "most important journey" is "finding love," are at odds. Part of the reason digital dating is widely used is because young men and women are so career-driven and busy with work — think back to the yuppie

ideals discussed earlier. This was the first indication that Coles misses the mark with this book as she frames finding love as the 21st century woman's ultimate quest.

This “love as the greatest achievement” ideal could be a symptom of the generational gap between Coles and the women she claims to be writing about and for. This tension could also been seen in a panel that Coles recently participated in at the 2018 Women in the World Summit, run by another magazine maven, Tina Brown. Coles was on a panel with *Teen Vogue* writer Lauren Duca and actor/former-athlete Terry Crews. Duca described a personal situation in which she agreed to go back to a guy's place but wasn't interested in having sex after feeling a lack of attraction when they kissed. She explained the contortionist-like calculus a woman has to go through in her head to navigate these situations safely, and that she ultimately concluded that her safest way to leave the apartment unharmed was to put on a performance of drunkenness. Coles replied to Duca's story by immediately questioning how much contact she'd had with the man prior to this date as if to ascertain what this man's expectation of sex was. Duca replied, “Joanna, you can't seriously ask me that” (Women in the World). It was basically the equivalent of asking a victim of assault what she was wearing.

Coles' focus on women's roles in dating situations that are born online and move into the real-world sphere often seems to discount the physical danger that women are up against and the overbearing rules of our patriarchal society. In this panel, as in her book, Coles puts the responsibility on women, not only to be proactive in finding love but also in maintaining their safety — there's a whole chapter on drinking and how women should be wary of getting drunk in the presence of strangers. “Another rule is by all means have a drink, but don't get drunk with strangers, no matter how many secrets you shared online. Approximately one half of all sexual assaults involve alcohol, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism”

(Coles). While I understand why Coles would want to bring up drinking and encourage readers to address their own drinking habits, the way that she goes about it, which excludes men from the conversation and tasks women with regulating their behavior so as not to be assaulted, came across as a clear manifestation of our society's victim-blaming mentality.

Another issue with this digital-dating guide is the way it's structured. The premise of Coles' book is comparing relationships to dieting, food calories to emotional calories. I can't help but feel that this tactic is so obviously gendered. Leave it to women to obsess about their weights, trying constantly to fit society's ideals about how they should look — ideals put forth in the magazines Coles has spent her career editing. It also implies that there's something wrong with you, that there's something you have to change, to fix, if you want results. Sure, I agree that everyone has room to grow, but this feels too much like encouraging people to change themselves to find a relationship. Chapter titles such as "Rule #1: Establish your ideal love weight" and "You won't get skinny eating the same old sh*t" feel so out of touch in this current moment of body positivity. It feels like the book builds off of women's insecurities, which isn't an empowering way to get people's attention.

Coles' book sells itself as a manual for dating in the digital age, and while it does act as a sort of step-by-step guide (how to choose an app, how to set up your profile, how to prepare for a date, etc.) it doesn't get to the heart of what young women are dealing with when using these dating apps. It doesn't discuss the sexual harassment and objectification, the exhaustion of using the apps, the real and legitimate fears for personal safety when meeting up with a stranger. Everything is wrapped up in this gross, and frankly sexist, idea that online dating is just like dieting, and that by following a few rules and being diligent, you can become skinny/ find someone. It altogether ignores the roles of men on these apps and the way that men influence the

experience that women have while using them. Overall, I found it to be a sterile, over-simplified “manual” of advice from a woman who clearly doesn’t understand the realities of being a young woman immersed in the world of digital dating. It’s the book equivalent of that one coupled-up friend you have who’s always telling you that you’ll find the one when you least expect it, and it is devoid of the grittiness and cynicism that are overwhelmingly present in online dating.

In her book, Moira Weigel argues that “dating is an ever-changing landscape that can’t be judged by the previous generation’s standards” (Weigel). To that, I say: Why not? Sure, things are always changing, but comparison implies evaluation, and I think we could use more of that these days. Perhaps each generation’s standards are uniquely their own, but our generation seems to be completely lacking standards. We mock the formality and heteronormative, old-school gender roles of 1950’s dating rituals under the guise that our modern “promiscuity for everyone” model is more “equal,” more feminist even, because with action comes the illusion of choice. Yet true choice is often absent as women are forced to conform to these new rituals, and meanwhile men still have the upper hand in many of these sex-first situations. Not to mention that the double standard of sexual promiscuity that labels women sluts and men studs still persists. What we’re left with is a culture of conflicting ideals: the freedom and ability to “hookup,” the desire for monogamy, the appetite for independence and low-maintenance relationships, the nostalgia for going steady and the white-picket fence.

We’re promised a lot when we sign up for college. Other than continued education and a piece of paper we hope will raise our lifetime earnings, we’re offered an arena filled with more young, single, generally attractive people than we can expect to find anywhere else in our lives. There’s an ethos that for these four years we’re allowed to be selfish, to take risks, to act a little crazy. We’re the recipients of the constant message: “Maybe you’ll meet someone.” And even if

we roll our eyes when we're told this, we harbor a simmering excitement that perhaps we will. We feel giddy, almost, when we enter university with the knowledge that despite the losers we were in high school, we now had the chance to be whoever we wanted, and to find someone who wanted exactly what we were. But the rules of engagement have changed, and people are no longer meeting in the ways they did when our parents were in college (in class, club meetings, study groups, etc.) Instead, to participate in the dating scene, you have to go digital.

Though there have been attempts to create a guide to shepherd us through the world of dating apps, there's been no success in truly understanding the current climate and addressing the rules of the game. Brooks, Weigel, and Coles each contribute commentary, whether historical or instructional, yet none seems to truly grasp the culture they're writing about. A few interviews with 20-somethings doesn't make you an expert on the lived realities of young daters. That's where I come in. My goal is to paint an accurate and complete picture of digital dating for college-aged adults. And though no "solution" is offered and no rule book written, I hope that this will somehow help older adults understand the realities that young adults face in their romantic lives, that young adults will feel represented and understood, and that teens will have a better frame of reference for what's to come and can make informed decisions knowing that just because this is the game, doesn't mean you have to play.

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Intro

Over a pint of Guinness and a plate of half-price happy-hour nachos, my best friend, a guy I'd met on the first day of college orientation, turned to me and said, "Sorry, Kels. You're just not made for the college game." My thumbs tired of swiping, I had been complaining about the tediousness of dating apps and my utter frustration with *The College Male*. The narrative of anonymous hookups over old-school romance was constantly being pushed into the minds of everyone I knew, but I couldn't get on board. Call me old-fashioned, but I have a strict Must-Know-Your-Middle-Name-Before-Sex rule. It was a blow to the ego though, when he told me that I wasn't "made" for this. I had downloaded the apps (the ones for hookups — Tinder— and the ones for "relationships" — Bumble, Hinge); I had danced at bars; I had eyed the groups of guys who seemed more interested in encouraging their friends' binge drinking than meeting women; I had spent hours at tin-ceilinged coffee shops reading my favorite books and fantasizing about the day when a handsome, intelligent man would approach me and say, "Is that Joan Didion? *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is the best. What's your name?" All the swiping felt shallow, and instead of the instant gratification and glee that my friends reported feeling when they got the dinging message "It's a Match!" I felt nothing but guilt and disappointment. Guilty that I had judged this potential mate on nothing more than a few photos of his dimpled cheeks and a casual shirtless ab shot. Disappointed that he was interested in me based solely on a good hair day and a well-painted red lip. The whole thing felt gross. I constantly feared that I was left-swiping on my soul mate simply because he posted an unflattering picture or a careless, sub-par bio. To the guy whose bio said "I've never eaten a pickle and I never will," I detested his closed-mindedness and his disgust for my favorite snack. To the guy whose bio said "Italian girls inquire within," I wondered if my French-British ancestry was really a deal breaker. To the guy

whose bio said “If I had a clitoris I would never leave the house,” I figured he had a point and thought perhaps it was time to give up my search for a man and practice some self-love instead. Gatherings with friends consisted of sitting in a circle, noses pressed to phones, saying things like “This one’s too chubby,” “This one’s too fit,” “This one’s face looks too nice.” Alone in my apartment, old *Gilmore Girls* reruns playing in the background, I found myself thinking similar thoughts as I swiped. I could find any excuse to say no. So when my best friend says I’m not made for the college game, I know he’s right. But how can you win if you don’t play the game?

Online Dating Dictionary

You might think you've mastered texting lingo (yes, Mom, lol is "laugh out loud" not "lots of love") but digital dating has a language all its own. So before you get too deep into this paper, I wanted to offer you definitions for some terms you may encounter. The following is a list of some of the most common terms to help you navigate through the world of online dating.

- **Bae:** Used to refer to your significant other. Some say it's a shortened version of "Baby," some say it's an acronym standing for Before All Else. It can also be used in a less romantic way to indicate things you like. For example, "Ben & Jerry's is bae."
- **Breadcrumbing:** When you send flirty messages to a person you're not totally interested in because you don't have the guts to end things. Essentially stringing someone along through text message. Arguably worse than ghosting. For example, "I'm not into Julia, but she'll freak if I end things, so I'm just gonna keep breadcrumbing her."
- **Catfishing:** Creating a fake online profile in order to lure someone in. For example, "I finally met up with the guy I was talking to on Tinder. It turns out he's five-foot-two instead of six-foot-six, and his name is Jerry not Chad. A total catfish."
- **Cuffing:** A short-term relationship during fall and winter that's meant to help people evade loneliness during the cold months. Comes from the term "handcuffing" because you're linking yourself to someone else. These will definitely thaw by summer. For example, "Looking for someone to snuggle for cuffing season."
- **DTR:** Define the relationship. A conversation that usually starts with "Sooooooo, what are we?" and often ends with the guy freaking out and avoiding commitment of any kind. For example, "Zach and I have been hooking up for months; I think it's time we DTR."

- Friends with benefits or FWB: Engaging in sexual activities with a friend without the confines of a relationship. For example, “Dude, are you going out with Tina?” “Nah, man. We’re just FWB.”
- Fuckbuddies: See friends with benefits.
- Ghosting: After consistent messaging or dates, one completely disappears, stops replying to messages, etc. Sorry, dude, you’ve been ghosted. For example, “John and I have been Snapchatting for weeks, but now he won’t reply to me.” “Uh-oh, sounds like you got ghosted.”
- IRL: In real life. For example, “I think it’s time we meet up IRL.”
- Netflix and chill: Meeting up under the guise of watching Netflix when both parties know you’re actually just meeting to hookup. For example, “Tinderella asked me to Netflix and chill; look’s like we’re finally gonna hook up!”
- Situationship: You’ve got a situation on your hands. You’re not friends, you’re not in a relationship. It’s complicated. It’s a situationship. For example, “Urg! I can’t figure out what’s going on with Tony. I’ve got a situationship on my hands.”
- Slide into someone’s DMs: When you use social media to direct message someone as a means of flirting with them. For example, “Shawn always looks so great on Insta. I need to meet him. I’m gonna slide into his DMs.”
- Thirst trap: Posting a provocative photo on your social media to ensnare viewers and get likes. Usually with a deep, philosophical caption in an effort to give your topless photo some meaning. For example, “Did you see Adam’s abs on Insta? So hot. And I loved the Kafka quote he used in the caption.”

Who are you?

You have five photos and a few sentences to tell potential suitors everything there is to know about you. What do you want to say? Better yet, how do you want to look? It is, after all, more about how you look. The boys swiping on your page probably won't bother to tap on your photo, scroll down, and read your bio. They'll probably decide after seeing one or two of the photos you select to display on your page — though I've heard more than a few instances in which boys don't even bother to look at the photos; they just ferociously swipe right until their thumb muscles ache from the constant repetitive notion. Imagine: a whole generation of individuals plagued with Tinder-inflicted carpal tunnel. How tragic.

Back to the photos. For women, the goal is to find five photos that communicate that you're hot, skinny, sexy, funny, and cute all in one. For men, the goal is to look tall, muscular, and attractive. Don't post the photo of you with your ex-girlfriend. Or the photo of you blacked out in the middle of a field somewhere. But do post those shirtless beach-vacation photos.

Now for the bio, what should you write? If you write nothing it means you're there for a hookup. No need to divulge any information about yourself if you're just trying to get naked, right? So there's that option. Some people offer a fun fact, since the space is too short to try to sum up an entire personality. Maybe "Call me Mr. Flintstone, I can make your bed rock," or "I once befriended two ducks at Loch Ness while searching for Nessie." Some people post reviews of their sexual prowess: "9/10 women say they'd sleep with me again." Some people use the opportunity to outline exactly what they're doing here: "Looking for a relationship," or "Looking for a hookup," or "Looking for woman to participate in a threesome with me and my wife — please be discrete."

I wonder if people who are looking for hookups tend to be more honest about it. It seems easier to say “Just want a fuckbuddy” than “Searching for that one person who fully understands me, who I can talk to about anything, who I can grow old with.” Maybe it’s not easier, but I definitely see more bios about hooking up.

Hello, My Name Is...

As with any game, before you play, you have to create a persona. Maybe in the online gaming world you're an elf or a wizard. With online dating the altering of persona isn't as extreme, but it's important nonetheless. Perhaps you include a cluster of photos in a soccer uniform to show that you're fit, never mind that you haven't played soccer since high school and your skills on the field disappeared along with your shin-guard tan. Perhaps you only post photos of you in bars to show you like to have fun, even though you spend most of your time cooped up in the library. Comprised of a handful of photos and a sentence or two, your profile is your opportunity to tell potential mates who you are, so you better choose wisely. After swiping through hundreds, possibly even thousands of profiles, I've read a lot of bios. Some have been cute, some ridiculous, many disgusting or at the very least worthy of an eye-roll. Sometimes when I read them I want to grab the guy by his shoulders, shake him, and ask, "Why did you say that?" but since that's not possible to do through the internet, I've decided to do some virtual shoulder-shaking here by responding to some real bios.

*Note: These bios are reprinted exactly as they appeared. All of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors should be blamed on the guys, not me ☺

I dig hippies, weirdos, road trips, camping, Russian stuff, guitars, guns, wine, my dog, etc.
On a list that goes from hippies to guns, I really wonder what is included in the etc.

Italian girls inquire within
When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore!

For some reason I can't show teeth when I smile
Everybody's got their something.

I create things
Can't tell if this is supposed to be artistic or should be followed by the phrase "like babies" ...

Video gamer. Computer nerd
So, basically my father.

Ugly. Very tall. Memes. Packers.
Who leads with “ugly”?

Ask me what the worst pun I can think of is, it’s a win win, I make a pun, I laugh at it, and we never speak again because you ghost me
At least he’s thinking ahead.

My dog and I are besties
Possibly cute, possibly concerning.

If I had a clitoris I would never leave the house
Honestly, maybe this guy has a point...

Looking for that special someone to catfish me through these lonely nights
Ha! Same dude, same.

Alum. Living alone for the first time. Kayaking, craft beer, good books, good music, everything else.
Everything else?

I like talking about all the things you’re not supposed to discuss in polite company
Ooooooh, we got a bad boy over here!

I’ll make tacos
Thank god. It’s about time someone made me tacos.

In need of ideas for post grad vacations
Finally, someone using this app for the greater good.

I’m too old for this shit
And to think you’re only 21...

I got Dad jokes for days
Because that’s what the world needs: more dad jokes.

Trying to elevate small talk to medium talk
I admire your ambition.

Taller than you in heels
Am I the one wearing heels, or are you?

Pls tech me Italian

When you accidentally download Tinder instead of Duolingo.

I have a fluffy cat named Darwin who weighs 25 lbs.

How are you gonna take care of a girlfriend when you can't even take care of your cat?

I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good.

Harry Potter enthusiast or just committed to being bad?

6'2', 6'3' in dress shoes

And that extra inch made all the difference.

Strictly here for anal

How romantic.

I binge Netflix a very unhealthy amount. However, I make up for it by never sleeping and making poor life decisions.

What a catch! Where do I sign up?

Lively

Outgoing

Variable

Entertaining

Ridiculous

LOVER. I see what you did there.

Hi my name is Matt message me to get to know me

When I read this all I could picture was one of those dorky nametags — Hello my name is:

I run on alcohol

**Alcohol*

Casual dates include dressing up for a candlelight dinner at Taco Bell

You know you expect nothing out of men when you read this and think "aww, that's kinda romantic."

Medium tier person

The Goldilocks of men.

Mizzou 2018 journalism douchebag

And this makes you different from other journalism majors how?

If you need a guy for cuffing season... I'm here

Thank you for volunteering your services.

I dream of releasing a rap album called Punbelievable that has all my bad jokes set to a beat
Where can I pre-order? Will you be streaming on Spotify?

Looking for a girl who ain't afraid to eat the booty.
No fear.

Majored in Bio, Business, and big booty hoes.
Is it bad that the thing I find most annoying about this bio is that he spelled hoes like the gardening equipment rather than the crude term for a woman who engages in sexual activities? If you're gonna be a tool, the least you can do is learn how to spell.

I'm willing to be the man who makes you realize all those guys stringing you along are actually full of shit.
I love when men offer to illuminate the status of my love life. Tell me more about how you're "not like those other guys."

I'm about to delete this app... so please give me a reason not to
I love indecisive men.

People call me Dad
People call me Mom!

Film Major, Tarantino, All Types of music, animals, these things I enjoy
OMG y'all — Yoda's on Tinder!

To be honest, I'm just searching for book suggestions. I'll also take beer suggestions and dog treat suggestions.
How many times can you use the word "suggestions" in two sentences: A case study.

Swipe right: If you want to get coffee and are open-minded. Swipe left: if you are religious.
I like how open-mindedness and religion can't coexist for this guy. A little closed-minded, no?

Just tryna have the best lawn in the neighborhood and pregame my future son's youth soccer games
#SuburbanDad

Currently on a quest to find more hippies
MORE hippies?

I have a size 18 shoe.
You know what they say about big feet...

I love Finding Nemo, my mother, and the USA.
In that order?

Not an aspiring rapper, but definitely an aspiring napper.
Where there's a will, there's a way.

I am exceptionally good at getting parking tickets and losing my wallet.
I think I'm in love.

Down to hang
DTH?

I think it'd be really hot if you got down on your knees... and prayed with me before bed.
Cue the eye roll.

If you have an E*TRADE account, let's compare portfolios.
Not a guy I'd invest in.

Ex-guitarist, but I'll still occasionally wrap my hand around a neck and finger a G string
Really?

I run a small Woodworking business in my free time
What's the name of your Etsy shop?

Not a fuck boy. Southern gentleman.
That's what they all say.

So in the several years that I have had this app I have met a total of zero people from it
Does this say more about you or the app?

SAM, THE FIRST NIGHT AT BED WHEN YOU LEFT, RON MADE OUT WITH 2 GIRLS AND PUT HIS HEAD INBETWEEN A COCKTAIL WAITRESSESS BREASTS. ALSO WAS GRINDING WITH MULTIPLE FAT WOMEN. WHEN YOU LEFT CRYING AT KLUTCH, RON WAS HOLDING HANDS AND DANCING WITH A FEMALE AND TOOK DOWN HER NUMBER. MULTIPLE PEOPLE IN THE HOUSE KNOW, THEREFORE YOU SHOULD KNOW THE TRUTH.

I guess it makes sense that Tinder is a good place for an SOS message. Sorry, Sam, whoever you are.

420 approved
Stoners inquire within

6/8 exes said "Would bang again"
Did I miss the memo on bringing back the word "bang"?

Playing basketball, working, buying shoes.
There's only room for one shoe collector in a relationship, and I already have dibs.

Look I'm going to be honest, I'm looking for someone who can make me laugh. If I can talk to you and you can put up with my occasional history rants and goofy/sarcastic sense of humor then your golden.

Also read as: I'm not that funny, but I expect you to laugh at my lame jokes.

We all know why we're on (three up-to-no-good sideways smiley face emojis)
#fuckboy

Obama in the streets, Osama in the sheets.
I don't even know where to begin with this one...

Huntin' fishin' lovin' every day
Both a song lyric and a lifestyle.

Tell me your favorite conspiracy theory.
Global Warming, for sure.

I understand my bio has terrible grammar so please don't be a grammar nazi
Nothing turns me on quite like a Nazi reference.

I'm 6'4 so if you're not into tall guys you should probs swipe left
Humble brag.

I like long walks on the beach with my girl, until the acid wears off and i realize im dragging a stolen mannequin around a taco bell parking lot
Been there, done that.

I live for adrenaline; I buy cellphones without insurance and I don't put cases on them
You're basically James Bond.

If you need help with your car, I can fix it
Finally, this app is useful!

It keeps you agile

I once matched with John Mayer on Tinder. Yes, *that* John Mayer, the singer-songwriter, bad boy, American heartthrob and creator of one of the most strangely sexy songs of all time: “Your Body Is a Wonderland.” True story. It was a day like any other, and as I swiped away I found myself face-to-face with a photo of a handsome, clean-shaven man wearing circular, hipster-Harry Potter spectacles. His name was John. He had a nice jawline. No bio. No other photos. Just this one picture of good old John reclining on a couch, wearing a purple button-up and those charming glasses.

I never swipe right on someone who only has one photo. I’ve watched the MTV series *Catfish: the TV show* since season one back in 2012, so I’d like to think I know a thing or two about meeting people online. For those of you who haven’t seen the show — which you should definitely change ASAP; it’s a cultural phenomenon and is hosted by two of the cutest, dorkiest, well-intentioned men on TV — the basic premise is this: Person A met Person B online, but they’ve never met in person. Odds are they’ve never even video-chatted, but they’ve probably exchanged “I love you”s and in some instances have sent money or gifts to the other person. In many instances they’re contemplating making major life changes for the other person — moving, getting engaged, getting married. This is high-stakes stuff. Person A decides they’ve had enough; it’s time they meet Person B IRL. So they email Nev Shulman and Max Joseph to come investigate. Nev and Max track down Person B and take Person A to go meet them. I’ve seen it end in happiness a few times. But more often than not we find that Person B is a catfish — they’ve been lying about their identity online, they’re not who Person A fell in love with. It’s tragic and brilliant and heartfelt and just great TV. After six years of watching people screw over other people online, I’ve picked up a few tips for spotting catfish:

- They only have one photo. Think about it: It's 2018, practically everyone and their six-year-old has a smartphone with a camera. It's next to impossible to only have one photo of yourself, so if someone's profile is lacking in photographic evidence, it's probably because they stole the image from an online source.
- They refuse to talk on the phone. No one's phoneaphobia is that strong. If they won't talk to you it's because their voice would betray the image you have in your mind of them. AKA the woman you're talking to is actually a man.
- They refuse to video chat or meet in person. See above. In person it's hard to hide the fact that you're not the person you're pretending to be.

It takes more work to catfish someone on Tinder than on other social media platforms.

The way Tinder works is that it has to be linked through a user's Facebook account. So to make a fake Tinder, you'd have to make a fake Facebook. That's too much effort to put in to mess with people, if you ask me, but I suppose some people are less concerned with how they waste their time.

Anyway, back to that time I matched with John Mayer on Tinder. I knew it was John Mayer. Who wouldn't know the face of the man who gave us the gift of the heart-wrenching guitar intro to "Slow Dancing in a Burning Room." Plus, they named the profile John, which probably wasn't the best move if they were looking to steal his identity. Just to be sure, I googled "John Mayer wearing glasses" and sure enough I found the exact same photo on the first page of image results. Max and Nev aren't the only ones who can catch a catfish!

It seems like a strange business to be in, catching catfish, doesn't it? The whole thing started by accident. Nev's brother and his friends were making a documentary about a young girl in another state who had been corresponding by email with Nev and sending him the paintings

that she worked on. They'd never met in person, so Nev's brother planned to make a documentary of their meeting — a story of an unlikely friendship between a young painter in a rural town and a big-city young man. Things became complicated, though. Through talking to the young girl, Nev had begun talking to her whole family, including her older sister who was around Nev's age and with whom Nev began an online relationship. The closer they got to meeting up the stranger things became, until finally Nev and the documentary crew found themselves at the young girl's house in the middle of nowhere, and the truth came out that it was her mother (her *mother!*) who was the artist, and who had been talking to Nev as herself and both of her daughters. She was middle-aged, married with children. In one scene, Nev talked to her husband, Vince Pierce, who said:

“They used to tank cod from Alaska all the way to China. They'd keep them in vats in the ship. By the time the codfish reached China, the flesh was mush and tasteless. So this guy came up with the idea that if you put these cod in these big vats, put some catfish in with them, and the catfish will keep the cod agile. And there are those people who are catfish in life. And they keep you on your toes. They keep you guessing, they keep you thinking, they keep you fresh. And I thank god for the catfish because we could be droll, boring, and dull if we didn't have somebody nipping at our fin.”

They called the film *Catfish*, and then MTV picked up the idea for a reality show, *Catfish: the TV show* (as Nev famously says in the opening credits “*Catfish: the Movie* was my story, *Catfish: the TV show* is yours”), thus the term “catfishing” was born. People had been catfishing other people on the internet since the early days of message boards and chat rooms, but thanks to Nev Schulman and Vince Pierce, it finally had a name.

Say anything

As it became easier to message people on the internet, it didn't take long for cyberbullies to emerge. It makes sense, since humans always seem to have the need to take inventions intended for good and use them for destructive purposes. Another problem arose, though, when humans tried to use this same technology for love, not hate. People had grown comfortable with using their screens as shields and their keyboards as swords, and though the pursuits may have been noble in their efforts to find love, they couldn't help but use the tools in the way they'd become accustomed.

There's a level of vulnerability that exists solely in communicating with another human face-to-face. There are more data points, more factors that come into play — body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, social customs, the personal nature of it all. Approaching a woman to tell her to her face that you think she's beautiful is a rare sight because the amount of courage it takes to do this is a level that most college-aged men don't possess or don't see the purpose for. It's so much easier to type into their phones "hey beautiful" without the genuineness or bravery that delivering the same message in person would require. And because it's so much easier to say anything over a text, one loses incentive to say it in person, and one can become more outlandish in the things they say. You lose sight of the fact that there's a real human at the other end of your message. You don't see a human, smell them, touch them, hear them. You see a screen, with its ever-present blue light, its hard glass exterior. It doesn't feel real.

Niki

“I deleted Bumble again,” my best friend, Niki, tells me during a FaceTime call. We FaceTime at least once a week, despite the fact that she’s in California and I’m in Missouri. We’re each other’s life line. I believe in my heart that we are each other’s soul mate, and that we’re so lucky to have found someone that we want to spend our life with at such a young age. I thank my lucky stars that I’ll have her for the next 70 years.

When she tells me this, “I deleted Bumble again,” I burst out laughing. I can’t help it. She screws up her mouth and makes a face, indicating her displeasure at my reaction.

“Sorry,” I say, snorting from my laughter. “Sorry, it’s just that every time we talk you either tell me ‘I deleted Bumble again’ or ‘I downloaded Bumble again.’ It’s just funny.” At this she smiles and shrugs her shoulders, conceding my point.

“I know,” she says. “You’re right. It’s just, I can’t take it anymore. It’s exhausting.” I nod. This is a feeling I understand very well.

Niki is 21 years old. She’s a neurobiology major at UC Berkeley, a gym rat, a compulsive shopper. She’s intense in her pursuits, whether it’s her studies, the latest show she’s bingeing, or her gym routine. She’s a certified yoga instructor and a good cook. One day at a coffee shop her laptop was stolen out from under her fingers while she typed a lab report on it, and she literally chased after the man who robbed her, only giving up when he jumped into a getaway car. She’s fearless, sometimes stupidly so, but fearless nonetheless. And above all, she is the most loving, open-hearted person I’ve ever met who didn’t give birth to me. The intensity she brings to the pursuits in her life she also brings to her relationships, and if you let her love you there is nothing she won’t do for you. She’s the kind of friend who will bring you flowers because you’re sick or chocolates just because or spontaneously shows up at your house just so you can drive around

some back roads and scream-sing Christina Aguilera with the windows down. And dating apps are killing her.

Like me, Niki was raised on a steady diet of romantic comedies and fairy tales. She's spent many a night curled up in a blanket on my couch watching sappy Hallmark movies and our other favorites like *You've Got Mail*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *When Harry Met Sally*. She's a self-identified hopeless romantic, and while she excels in all other aspects of her life, she can't seem to figure things out in the romance department. She knows her worth, and she's proud of her accomplishments, but she's forced to admit that what's missing is someone to love her. And trust me, she is so loveable.

She prefers Bumble to Tinder because it's marketed as a dating app, not a hookup app. She's convinced it has more attractive guys, and that the likelihood they're in it for an actual relationship is higher. Plus, she finds the app's premise that women have to message men first to be empowering. It puts the task of starting a conversation in her hands — and on a clock as you only have 24 hours to send a message after the match is made — and it makes her feel like she has control over her interaction with the app and with the men. But a good portion of the time, the guys don't message her back, and it leaves her feeling rejected and demoralized. She's constantly perplexed: Why would he swipe right to match with me if he doesn't want to talk to me? When she asks me this, which she often does, I have no answer for her. I, too, don't understand. And when the men do message her back, they often say something superficial and boring like “hi,” or “nice pics” that ends the conversation before it starts and leaves her doing brain cartwheels trying to figure out how to reopen a dialogue.

“I'm tired of being some guy's ego boost,” she tells me. “I feel like they're only on this app to get the satisfaction of knowing that women find them attractive, but they don't want

anything more than that.” Maybe she’s right. After all, that would explain the lack of responses she receives. Maybe it’s enough for guys to know that they’re wanted.

When men do reply to her messages, it’s often with content that makes her wish they hadn’t replied at all. She’s used to guys saying crude things like “wanna fuck?” as a substitute for “hello.” Her personal favorite, though, was when a guy simply messaged her “10 inches” and although she didn’t reply, he followed up a month of silence later with “I know you like big dick, don’t you?”

So she deletes Bumble. Again. But as she continues her day to day life without meeting anyone in the places she would prefer to meet men — at the coffee shop, the gym, in class, at the movies — she feels forced to go back to the only thing she knows that works, so she downloads Bumble again.

And every time she deletes it, and every time she downloads it, she only gets increasingly discouraged. *This is it?* She wonders. *This is how dating works these days? This is where true love comes from? This is all we have?*

Another day, another download.

Another day, another swipe.

Another day, another disappointment.

Another day, another delete.

And what does she have to show for it? How many online matches before she finds one in-person? How long before this woman who is filled to the brim with love to give finds a worthy outlet? How long until my soul mate finds her life partner? What if life partners just don’t exist anymore?

Mr. Tinder

Have you seen Frozen? Because you're something Elsa.

That is it. The go-to opening line of the most successful Tinder user I've ever met.

Mr. Tinder is six-foot-one. He has sandy blonde hair and cheeks that are constantly rosy from the cold or playing basketball at the rec. He has twinkly eyes, a crooked smile, and zero fashion sense. He once asked me why a woman had a bruise on her cheek; I had to explain to him that it was contouring. He's from a Midwestern town with a population of 601, and he's got a lazy way of speaking, shortening the pronunciation of "because" to a laughable "puz." He's constantly spouting groan-worthy puns, and he has an encyclopedic knowledge of the minor details of major American sports. He is the kind of guy who never brings a notebook to class and wears Hawaiian shirts to nightclubs. He once gave a girl his email when he couldn't remember his own phone number. He isn't the kind of guy you'd expect to break your heart. Yet through some random series of events, he's become a Tinder God. I've never met someone as adept at convincing strangers to sleep with him through a series of text messages and emojis.

Somehow through pun usage and Disney references he manages to secure so many first dates that he often double books them back to back. Not that the events that occur during these meet-ups constitute a "date." His usual routine involves arranging to go to someone's house under the pretext that they are going to watch an animated film — *Finding Dory* and *The Lion King* are his go-tos. First they press play on the film. Then they scoot closer to each other on the couch or bed where they are sitting. That's when he makes a move to test the waters: He tickles her. Usually on the side of her ribcage, sometimes on her neck. The tickling is essential to the process, he assures me. It's a low-key, non-aggressive way to introduce physical touch. From here, all of his dates seem to go one of two ways: 1) She is, understandably, weirded out by the

tickling — maybe she is under the impression they had actually met up to watch a movie? — and the furthest he gets that night is some cuddling on the couch. As he tells me this, he is sure to note that a sexless date isn't a complete waste of time, though it's easy to see the annoyance on his face. 2) She giggles, perhaps flirtatiously tickles him back or lightly hits his arm away. Somehow this leads to their bodies moving closer to each other, their faces slightly angled to the right, followed by kissing, followed by something more. I am amazed by Mr. Tinder's fear of emotional intimacy but the complete ease with which he takes off his pants in the presence of strangers. And then he goes home. Maybe they see each other again, maybe not. They've served their purpose. The only question now is whether to pursue a second date or ghost them. It is as easy to disappear as it is to hookup; both come out of nowhere and mean little. After all, nothing is personal. When it comes down to it, it isn't about you, it is about impulse and needs and some sort of attempt to find human connection no matter how superficial and meaningless that connection is. Don't think he gets lucky 100 percent of the time. He's told me just as many stories of rejection as he has success, so I know his stories aren't fabricated tales of male bravado. Plus, he knows the mild judgment and head shaking he can expect when he tells me of his conquests, yet he tells me anyway. It seems each time I see him he has a new story to tell me about a girl he's hooked up with. There are tales of borrowing his friend's school ID card to get into the rec and then losing it at a Tinder girl's apartment and having to awkwardly go back in search of it, of going with a girl to Waffle House and then realizing he'd forgotten his wallet, and once there was a girl named Sincere which led to weeks of jokes at her expense.

These hookups aren't always so carefree, though. A few weeks ago, Mr. Tinder found himself out 30 bucks after having to buy Plan B for a Tinder date with whom he'd had unprotected sex. Though he's usually one to brag that his "pullout game is strong," this instance

was too close a call for his liking, so he agreed to purchase the morning-after pregnancy prevention pill for his date as a parting gift. He seemed more distraught about how expensive the morning-after contraceptive was than the thought of his one-night-stand's potential pregnancy. He'd planned on going to the movies that weekend, and now he couldn't afford popcorn. He said the possible pregnancy worried him too, though he blamed the woman he was with for the close call. He boasted as usual that he was an expert at the pullout method — this was not his first foray into the world of unprotected sex. He always pulled out before anything happened, he said, *always*. He said after he did she grabbed his penis and caused him to ejaculate on the lower part of her torso, the upper part of her legs. He couldn't even say the word *vagina*. He was annoyed that her act of impulsivity could mess with his pullout success rate. He swore off Tinder, said he was too spooked. A week and a half later he had unprotected sex with a six-foot-tall blonde. I asked why he didn't use a condom. He said he didn't expect to have sex, so he didn't have any. He said condoms were too expensive. "You know what's expensive?" I said. "A baby." He rolled his eyes at me. "She was six feet tall," he said. I knew he dreamed of having enough kids to make a basketball team. He wanted them to be tall enough to make it in the NBA. "So what if she's pregnant?" I asked. "It would be the best mistake of my life," he said.

So how does a guy who wears boat shoes with socks and can't dance to a beat to save his life constantly convince women to let him into their bed? For starters, the pool of women he's talking to is pretty large. He tends to swipe first, ask questions later. He's the guy who will only swipe left if he finds a woman to be truly and utterly repulsive. Anything above that gets a right swipe. From there he sends messages to everyone he matches with, and then it becomes a numbers game. The number of women he meets in person is relatively small compared to the number he swipes right on or even the number he matches with. But because he's talking to so

many women at a time he ends up meeting up with quite a few of them. “I hate when girls bring up something you talked about in your conversation on Tinder,” he told me the other day.

“Why?” I asked. “I can never remember what I talked about with whom,” he said.

I ask Mr. Tinder if he is really satisfied with his emotionally-devoid but sex-filled existence. He isn't too concerned about it. He admits that he should probably be looking for something more serious, that he knows no real relationships will form if he keeps going through women like tissues during allergy season, that his mother would be appalled if she knew. But college graduation is on the horizon, and he's convinced himself that relationships are on the other side. There's no point, he says, of having a relationship before graduation. He's sure after he gets a job and moves somewhere he'll start dating seriously. I ask him if he thinks Steph Curry shoots three-pointers at practice. He looks at me as if I am crazy. Of course Steph shoots threes at practice; how could he make those shots at game time if he doesn't do it in practice? Exactly, I say. Shouldn't you practice like you play? He shrugs. That's basketball; this is love. No rules apply.

I wonder what will become of his love life in the post-college world. Will women bend to his every whim? Will Disney references be enough to woo? Will he be capable of a relationship that's more than casual sex? I don't know.

I had one other concern about Mr. Tinder's methods.

“Aren't you worried Disney movies will become...” I begin.

“What?” he asks.

“An aphrodisiac?”

“A what?”

“What if you’re only able to associate Disney movies with sex?” I ask, rephrasing what I want to know.

“Yeah,” he says. “It’s actually kind of ruined them. I always connect them with hookups now.”

Funny how the films that once brought him fantasies of true love, destiny, romance, adventure, and magic are now jumbled up in memories of that one girl that one time. His childhood memories and associations are overridden by his latest hookup. A loss of innocence in more ways than one.

The Mythical Hookup

“Yeah, we hooked up,” he says.

I smile and nod like I know what that means.

Ah, the hookup, I think. It’s like a song that you don’t know the lyrics to but that constantly gets stuck in your head, familiar and foreign simultaneously. People use the term so often that we think we’re supposed to understand it, yet when you actually try to break down what it means, no two people will give you the same answer. Even Urban Dictionary, which tends to be an authority on all terms sexual, has no idea. Its definition states: “To have any form of intimacy (sic) with a member of the preferred (sic) sex that you don’t consider a significant other. Usually, when said by modern youth it means to make out, and when said by people between the ages of 20 and 35 it generally means to have sex, and if an elderly person says it, it probably(sic) means to simply spend time with somebody.” So basically it’s anywhere from a peck on the cheek to a threesome? Plus, its definition brings up the notion of whether you can hookup with someone you’re in a relationship with. Apparently not.

For the good of humanity, Amanda Holman, a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska- Lincoln, and Dr. Alan Sillars of the University of Montana conducted a scientific study to find out: what the hell is hooking up anyway? The results: No one knows. Of their pool of 274 students, they found 94 percent were familiar with the term, but there was no consensus about what the term actually meant. Everybody says it, but no one knows what it means. BuzzFeed had similar, though probably less scientific results, when it posted a poll hoping to find the answer. 37 percent said “Um, you had sex, obviously,” 27 percent said, “Tbh, it means something different for every situation,” 21 percent said, “You made out with someone and

swapped that saliva,” nine percent said “You did everything BUT have sex.” So it’s either definitely sex or definitely not sex.

On season one of the TV show *Grown-ish* a group of college women discussing the term had equally conflicting opinions. One declared that “Hooking up is always sexual” while one thought it meant “Making out and stuff” and a third thought it could be as simple as “meeting up with someone.” Basically, hooking up is the modern-day version of “inconceivable!” to which *The Princess Bride*’s Inigo Montoya says, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” Preach, Inigo.

What have we learned from all of this? Well, for starters, that as a group we use a term that each of us understands in a different way. But beyond that, I think it means we should be on the lookout for a new term. Or, we should decide, for once and for all, what the hell does hooking up mean? Can we just agree that it means making out and call it a day? Do we really need another term for sex anyway? Maybe we should put it on the ballots and let the people decide. Whatever the results, we need to solve the ambiguity. I don’t think I can sit through one more conversation where someone tells me that they “hooked up” with someone.

TTYL

If *The Notebook* took place in 2018, Noah wouldn't have written Allie 365 letters, he would've hooked up with her in that abandoned plantation home and then never talked to her again. And she would've been pissed, but she would've known exactly what was happening — no wondering, no guessing, no confusion — she'd know: she was being ghosted.

Ghosting someone is when you suddenly cease all communication with them. It's radio silence. No texting, Snapchatting, Tindering. No hanging out, no saying hi, no hooking up. It's a line drawn in the sand that clearly marks the end of a "relationship."

It feels like ghosting became a phenomenon overnight. You used to have to tell someone you were done seeing them, now it's acceptable to just take your leave. A couple months ago, I went on one bad date with a guy. To be fair, the date wasn't even bad. It was almost worse than that: it was perfectly, completely neutral and pleasant. He didn't say anything that irked me or anything that inspired me, he was physically attractive but had a grating voice, he was perfectly polite and perhaps even kind. We went to a local independent movie theatre and saw *Call Me By Your Name*. We watched as two people fell totally, completely, madly in love and had so much chemistry that I swear they could've started an actual fire with the heat between them. It was magical. And here I was with Average Joe, with no chemistry and no heat. He was a "Nice Guy" if you believe in "Nice Guys," but he was nothing more. And now I had to decide what to do about him. I cursed myself for having asked him out in the first place, mad that I had created a problem for myself. I considered going out with him again to give the thing another chance — maybe chemistry isn't instant? I knew better. When I asked my friends for advice, they all told me the same thing: Ghost him. They said it would be easier, cleaner, clearer. No need to get all emotional and serious, they said. No need to explain yourself. I thought about it. It felt so

juvenile and cruel. It also left a lot of room for the future discomfort of running into him. I spent a few days thinking about how I was going to tell him I wasn't into it. And then I realized something was happening on his end: He was ghosting me. I wondered if I should be offended, but really I felt relieved. Thankful that I didn't have to do the dirty work, that he understood that things weren't right between us, that he was comfortable with ending our communication by ignoring me.

It's not usually a mutual ghosting, though. Earlier this year I was talking to a guy I used to hang out with freshman year. We'd liked each other back then, but it hadn't amounted to anything, it seemed like maybe it would this time. We texted and Snapchatted for weeks. And then he stopped replying to my texts. He opened my Snaps but didn't Snap back. He ghosted me. I was pissed. I expected more from him. I decided I wasn't okay with him disappearing quietly. "If you were just gonna ghost me, you shouldn't have started messaging me in the first place," I texted him, calling him out on his cowardly move, and angry that he'd decided to pop into my life just to leave it shortly thereafter. "You're right. I'm sorry," he replied. And that was it.

To ghost or not to ghost: that is the question. It's a question I had to ask myself after that movie date, a question Mr. Tinder asks himself after hooking up with another random girl. At this point, it feels more normal than actually dating someone. As a way to end a relationship, sure, it's heartless and cowardly. But we're not having relationships. Whatever it is you want to call the "relationships" we're participating in, they're not genuine or deep or personal. So maybe ghosting is the polite way out, a tip of the hat to say, or not say, goodbye. An exit that's as meaningful as the interaction.

Ghosting thrives in this environment because of everything that dating has become. It's as impersonal as talking to someone through a screen, as easy as swiping through potential

suitors, as heartless as the things that people say to each other within the confines of an app, as quick as the interactions that take place online, as deliberate as not messaging someone back, and every bit as meaningful as the interaction that preceded it. Ghosting is everything that online dating has become, and that's why it's so widely used and accepted. We're ending meaningless relationships with meaningless actions. Because as easily as technology allows us to connect, it also allows us to disappear, until we're nothing more than ghosts.