

On Saturdays the Girls Go into the Woods and Blow Things Up

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Novel

ecco

5: The Spring Before Last

Turtle Doves

On Saturdays the girls go into the woods and blow things up. Paper cups, tin cans, plastic bottles. The air is warm. The forest is piny. You can see the dirt on their white soles. They're wearing the latest sneakers. There are dark clothes over their mouths. They have long brown hair and pixellate their eyes. One is tall, as tall as I am, maybe. One is short, really short, but she's the one who lights the fuses. No one speaks. The tall one takes the lead. Always, by way of greeting, they look into the camera and nod. Then they dig a hole, chuck something in it, fill it up, light the fuse and run away—but only just out of frame—then BOOM! And back they come, laughing, looking around to see what happened to the objects that exploded. The tall one has aura. I remember my confusion in the beginning, until it had been sitting there so long I had to figure out what it really was. A crush. A craving. Even when the streams are all I have to go on, there it is. A whirring of the organs. I know her real name is Maja. The short one's Merle. The channel is called FOAMO, the name a portmanteau of the acronym *fomo* and the word *foam*. I've been watching the stream for a while now, but at the beginning of the story I can't quite pinpoint why.

Around this time I'm mostly to be found in my childhood bedroom, sitting in my desk chair, the kind made out of mesh fabric that extends above my neck and sticks to

my back. The cabin where I live with my mum is full of this mesh-based furniture, chairs and beds, the firmness of which can be adjusted with the use of screws. Aside from the tech, they are the only items Mum has bought new. Her back is already a little stooped. It bothers her. I minimise the livestream to watch, in the other tabs of the desktop app, hydraulic presses destroying stuff, e.g. soap or rubber ducks. Up pops a notification: what's believed to be the last turtle dove in captivity died yesterday. Well, it was about time. Going to my cupboard, I fetch the notebook where I save extinct animals. Stick them, glue them. Each one a double-page spread, using whatever I can get my hands on, placeholder images, little profiles:

The turtle dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) was a bird of medium size native to the central Palaearctic. All its life it was pushed as a symbol of normative relational models and inappropriate anthropomorphism. There wasn't much it could do about that. Rest in power.

BOOM! In one of the tabs, a hydraulic press squashes a full spindle of CDs. I close the animal notebook.

The childhood bedroom: small, big screen, blinds down, dark wood (what the cabin's made of), plus the desk, which is still very kids-room, i.e. messy: a clutter of washi tape, of diverse pens and inks and bottles of glue; that's what the smell is. Rising from the clutter is the screen, at its base a microfibre cloth I use to wipe the dust from the noses that pass across my display.

On Saturdays the girls go into the woods and blow things up. That's what they do on their channel. On a second channel, a photo album has been left out in the

elements somewhere, and you can watch it on the stream as it gets a bit tattier day by day, as it erodes layer by layer. The private streams aren't popular, or at least, they don't get that many views. They're sort of vestigial. Mum sometimes says the private streams remind her of the old internet, which she just about remembers, the one before the corporations came along and made its' denizens their blissful little promises. Before public expression was just an excuse for self-promotion, and people still took anarchic delight in non-commercial networks. That was before the trolls. She says we've got a piece of this anarchy back, now that the world of media is so fragmented. We just have to be alert to it, she says. The residue of late-capitalist influencer culture is still gumming up the pathways.

On the roof of the cabin where Mum and I live is a rainwater-treatment system that is our primary water supply, which is why Mum dispenses it carefully. Sometimes I'll stand for ages at the full washbasin, watching minute bubbles of soap as they burst, while the stream plays on a screen near by. FOAMO. I dunk my head to wash my hair, leaving my ears covered in foam. It crackles. It pops. It pops in the tiniest possible manner. In the background, the FOAMO sisters rustle as they set up another huge explosion.

When I first started watching the stream, the last kakapo, a ground-dweller, had just died. It had been endangered for a while. It couldn't fly, and had such a terrible sense of direction that when it left to find food, more often than not it couldn't find its way back to the nest; its eggs would freeze.

There was a strange echo. There's the same strange echo every Saturday. A bang. A reverberation: I hear a second, smaller bang. At first I thought it was a glitch in the audio. A doubling of the track.

In those early days they were still doing Coke and Mentos. Digging holes, pouring in vast quantities of chewy sweets. Then they'd rig up the rest of it. Suspended above each hole was a balloon full of Coca Cola, and above each balloon was a nail, and when they pulled a string the nail would drop and the balloons would burst and the Coke would run into the Mentos, and they'd foam. The short one laughing—Merle, she's called, I've watched her grow older in the streams. When they started out she was maybe eleven, by now about thirteen. Then the tall one puts her arm around her. Maja is a year older than me. I only know their names are Merle and Maja because of the echo. Because, one sunny Saturday, Mum says, *Come on, why don't you go outside*, and I try not to hold it against her—she'd like to get out more herself, probably, but she's doing this research project on the early internet that involves sifting through the archived forums, and she's easily distracted: if she's not hunkered down in a darkened room with her blinders on, she has an attention span of about five minutes, which is partly why we live in the middle of nowhere, neighbourless, on the edge of this wood. Partly that, and partly because Mum says life in the cities is about to get a lot worse. On summer's days—which we get now even in the spring and autumn, if you're going by the calendar—there are directives about staying away from large areas of tarmac. To reach tarmac from our cabin, you have

to walk quite a way, down to the main road, where almost no one drives these days. So I put on a sunhat and pull on my hiking boots and go outside and hear the echo / the bang, which today is not / cannot be an echo, because I haven't opened the stream yet, although I double check, just to be sure, to see if maybe it's playing on my phone, if I'm hearing a bang through my headphones, but no: they're actually muffling it a little. I take off the headphones and walk on, treading on a snail shell, by accident. I stop, and notice a skylarks' nest. Everything is falling from the trees. It's quiet. BOOM! It's getting louder.

Standing behind a tree, I can see them now. They're tossing hard drives into the holes. It's this moment, on one of those sunny Saturdays, that I realise the person I've been watching all this time on the stream is a digitally anonymised Maja, the older of the two sisters, Maja and Merle, M&M. Maja I know, but only from afar, because the schoolyard is a pretty big patch of asphalt. Even from afar I thought she was beautiful, I still remember that, and maybe there were times I stared at her a bit too long. From close up I recognise her because of her mums, from the early videos. I stand behind the tree, breathing shallowly. At school, Maja does not draw attention to herself. She's not notable for setting shit on fire, or whatever. All I know of her comes second-hand from school and from a distance and also from the echo, the one I follow until I reach the clearing and see the face in real life, no longer rendered digitally unrecognisable, and it dawns on me who the figure from the streams really is. Her mums are famous: when they were just kids themselves

they started out doing viral video challenges, until one day they'd got enough financing together from brand deals and ad revenue to move into a big house with their colleagues, all of whom did the same thing: exactly what they did. When the year-long creators' residency arranged by their management was over, the others moved out. Maja's mums bought the house and stayed. They then documented both their pregnancies and their children's upbringing. Maja has been absent from the videos for a couple of years now. But her first steps are still googleable.

At the time, I assume that's the reason why both girls blur their faces / wear face covers and or masks. So that nobody knows who they are. By now, though, I have it straight from the horse's mouth: the point is to avoid any kind of branding, to hover, interpretatively speaking, somewhere between balaclava and winking emoji, which Mum tells me has developed through repeated use in forum discussions into a symbol of the patriarchy. Later, I will learn: they wear the masks but also use a filter that prevents facial recognition. They're so focused: I venture forward a little, inadvertently knocking over the camera. The short one turns: briefly we make eye contact. BOOM! I remember flinching as they run away, hurtling back past the skylarks. The short one saw me.

At home, on the screen, which is in the middle of my wall, a hard drive explodes. I go into the bathroom, foam bursts. I go to sleep in my mesh bed, the tension adjusted to medium-firm.

Maja's mothers were both making videos before they met. In those days they had side-swept bangs and dark eye make-up. Subculture: emo. Even so they looked nothing alike. They made vlogs about their days, gazing down the lens. My mum, who is a bit older than Maja's mums, watches these videos sometimes on the Archive, a vast storehouse managed by persons unknown. 'Archive' here refers not to the general concept, of course, but to the platform. It used to have a longer name—'Archive of the Forgotten Internet', or something—but these days you just say 'the Archive', and people know what you mean. Mum groups the topics according to how much space they take up: make-up, family, sports. Who's talking about what, whose gender is performed and how. Who's marrying whom, who's having kids and by what method. She is interested in the retraditionalisation of gender roles in the information age. Maja's mums are an interesting case, in this regard: they conform to many of those gender-specific stereotypes, but they're a lesbian couple, and at the time there weren't a lot of those in the mommy-influencer space. Although by all appearances their lives adhere to social norms, which are openly displayed and promoted, they get a lot of hate, first in the comments then by post, advising that the hate might show up in the analogue space, in the form of physical violence. That they have it coming. In interviews years later they will confirm how important it was that they had each other.

Just to be on the safe side, my mum sent me to a therapist, because she was worried that being brought up by a single parent might cause problems. It didn't, though, and I said so to the therapist, who smiled gently and sent

me on my way. He said to write stuff down, and to get back in touch if I ever feel the need. When I relayed this to Mum, we jointly questioned his professional competence as we made pancakes out of water and a flavoured powder mix. Then Mum talked about the old days, when she was a kid. Like the time she forgot what she was supposed to be confessing, although this wasn't at therapy but in an actual confessional. When Mum was a child it was still normal to send kids to confession, and there was still banana in the pancakes.

At school, in the days following my walk, I spot the FOAMO sisters. I'm not in the same class as Maja, but sometimes we hold eye contact so long that I'm afraid someone will see and maybe want to beat me up, although that's not really a thing here. My only knowledge of physical violence is from the media.

Later, when I ask Maja how she remembers it, she can't help laughing. She was never scared of getting beaten up. She says her teen angst was a lot more diffuse, a fear of losing control, which she and her sister plumbed together.

Foam was Maja's first hobby. She talks about being allowed to drink the foam off her mothers' beers when she was little. She was allowed to drop Mentos into Coke and hated Ariel, the seashell bra, the singing voice, until she read the book version, but the foam was the passive kind, not like Mentos and Coke. She was better at chemistry than biology, but better still at P.E.

It was around that time she nicked her first camera from her mothers. Although 'nicked' is maybe putting it a little strongly: she borrowed it from a storeroom. She

makes herself and her sister unidentifiable when they go into the woods, gouge deep holes, throw in A and pour in B and BAM! Foam, just with a bit of oomph to it, not dulled like the head on a beer.

Maja is a bit touchy about data, constantly switching to new messaging apps, of which there seem to be as many as there are people, refusing to access the Cloud. Social media? Absolutely not. Apart from the anonymous streams, of course, but she never reveals her face, never uses real names. Some people do, though. Maja always says she got burned as a child, because of all the stuff her mothers uploaded without asking.

A young woman with long hair gazes into the camera. 'Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to our vlog.' Another young woman with shorter hair enters the background, holding the hand of a child who is visibly nervous, placing one foot carefully in front of the other. 'Well done, Maja!' The women beam at each other and kiss.

Eight million views, nothing compared to the big proposal two years earlier, but what can you do? At any rate, it's more than the first steps of Maja's little sister, born after the hype, who was given a ring light for her fifth birthday.

Later, Maja gives me glimpses of the material. But only in private. She can never find out that I'm sitting here, trying to put the story into words, going back to the spring before last. I write in secret, digitalising old documents on a device that I then hide. I only write when she's out on one of her bike rides. Our flat isn't very

big: just one room, a kettle on the floor, a big net for sleeping. And me, piecing this thing together shred by shred. To make sure I remember. To create a document, in case it's ever needed. A document of our history, shared and then not. But how does it go? First, the coming together. Then the falling apart.