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## Peace Throughout Stress #9

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# Disconnect

michael jorgensen

She wasn't like the others, all hypnotized by the screens before their faces—the blinking, multi-colored lights bouncing off their pupils, reflecting in their irises. She wasn't with the others, all connected—always connected—by an application in the palms of their hands.

He thought of the “zombies,” the ones who found the need to bury their faces into a device amidst a crowded room, or the ones with the pods inside their ears—all of them passing potential friends, lovers, colleagues without a single glance or nod or smile. All isolated. All addicted. All slowly dying.

He hadn't realized the immensity of the problem until just recently. He had always considered himself an old soul, seeking the truth in nature and in literature and in people. He knew that the culture had been suffocated in mindless entertainment—reality television, a thousand different channels, websites of all imagination, applications of any interest or desire—but he had somehow always managed to escape these so-called “traps.” He saw it all as a massive disconnection; what could it possibly lead to aside from depression and obsession? None of the lives that they presented to their followers were actually their

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own; faces drowned in filters, candid photographs, the same basic quotes from the same basic movie or television show. All seeking attention. All disconnected. All the same.

The early-autumn sun was now hidden behind the peaks of the forest of buildings. He missed his home with the never-ending prairie, the late-setting sun, the peeking holes of Heaven. The constant choir of crickets and the gentle breeze of summer were now replaced by a free-form jazz piece featuring the voices of businessmen, the horns of taxicabs, and the continuous beat of a rap song playing at a party two doors down. Like every Friday night, the beat would bounce against the dormitory walls until the wee hours of the morning. All of them together. All of them falling willfully in line with the masses while drowning their brains in liquid toxicity. He pitied them.

The incoming darkness crept into the room, causing the nearby hanging traffic light to intensify in brightness and color. The mint-green lamp shone partially into his second-story window, painting half of his resting face in its hue. He sat up in his bed, still fully dressed from head to toe; his sandy hair stuck up in back from the brief afternoon nap. He stepped towards the window and closed the blinds to shut out the rest of the world. Just the two of them.

As he crawled back into bed, he looked intently at her prominent features. Her small, slightly tilted nose. Her long, dark, full eyelashes. Her freckle-spotted cheeks. Her bright blue eyes. Her thin upper lip. Her flowing golden hair. She sat there like a film on pause; like a portrait being painted before his eyes. He was certainly attracted to her, but it went far beyond her outward appearance. He saw true life in her—in her smile, in her laugh, in her personality. She legitimately cared. She legitimately listened. She wasn't like the others. They connected.

"Dr. Bickle told me I should talk more today," he said looking up at the water stained ceiling. "I think he really gets it. He understands."

She awoke from her rest and looked up at him fondly.

He continued. "Even these other kids, they just don't get it. They're all just here to punch in and punch out. They don't care about education. They don't care about anything."

She smiled curiously, her tilted head softly nodding. "Hmm. Tell me more about that."

"I mean I could go on all day, Samantha. They all just want to get back to their so-called 'reality' as fast as they can. Hell...half of them just listen to music throughout the entire day. They sneak those stupid wireless headphones under their hats and hoods and hair. Just constant hip-hop pounding through their skulls. I don't get it. Most of the profs don't even care, though. Most of them are just here to punch in and punch out too."

Samantha laughed, dropped her eyes towards the floor, and then leaned in towards his right ear. "I like the way you said that," she softly whispered.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood straight. A wave of calming ease shot down his spine. "Thanks baby. I'm so glad you get it too."

She blew softly into the other ear. "I just want you to be happy."

He thought of his mother. She had said the exact same thing over the summer: I just want you to be happy. How could he be completely happy? The fuzzy sound of a theremin buzzed through his ears as he thought of the Beach Boys song "I Just Wasn't Made for These Times." He didn't feel at home in 2019. He would rather live in the 50s or the 60s. Hell, even the 30s and 40s would do. War would be better than this era of lazy isolation. At least life was real back then. People loved others...not just their belongings...not just themselves.

"Maybe I'll go out tonight," he said, rubbing the scruff on his chin. "I'll go out and see the world! I'll put in my

headphones...maybe play some, umm, some Nick Drake or some Bill Evans or even some Bernard Herrmann, and just watch the people. The neon lights always look so pretty in the puddles on the streets. Maybe I'll sneak into a jazz club and try and convince the bartender that I'm 21. Or maybe I could go to a night club. Not some trashy club with grinding and twerking and trap music, but like a real dance club. With people doing the salsa or maybe even just slow dancing. I don't know. I just...I just am so tired of this whole thing. I read these books and I see these films and I talk to scholars...and life just seemed so much better before our lives were lived on screens. I mean, Flannery O'Connor said that a writer should have enough experiences by the time he or she is 20 to last a creative lifetime! Nothing happens now. If I wrote a book based on my life experiences...it would just be about me complaining. I could talk about my hopes and my goals, but at the end of the day...nothing has really happened. We're all so connected by all this technology, that none of us really know anything about each other. We'd rather look at a screen than look in each other's eyes! We're covered in bubble-wrap..."

"That sounds so interesting. So fun."

"I wouldn't say that it's fun. I mean, I love that I can get immediate directions to anywhere on my phone. I love that I can look up anything about anything whenever I want to. I can literally listen to any song ever recorded with just one simple click. I just hate what it's doing to me...to everyone. If I didn't love old stuff and books and art...I'd be...I'd be just like all of them...all the zombies. What goes through their heads? How do they like the stuff that they like? Don't they have emotions and ideas? Don't they have dreams? I don't know Sam...maybe I will go out tonight and—"

A knock on the door interrupted his train of thought.

"Shit...shit shit shit," he murmured under his breath. "Maybe they'll just go away if I keep real quiet."

"Oh...you are so smart—"

"Shut up," he said, turning back towards Sam.

Knock. Knock. Knock. "Yo Ted!" Knock. "Teddy!" Knock. Knock. "T-Bear...it's Jermaine! Open up!" yelled the voice behind the door.

"Alright fine," he said with a loud groan. "Hold up I'm coming."

He rolled out of bed, still wearing his jacket and boots. He flipped on the dorm room's solitary light and proceeded to unlock the door handle while keeping the chain lock attached to the frame. The bright hallway lights caused his pupils to dilate. In the doorway stood a young man wearing a dark hoodie over a purple polo. He was a large man, probably close to six and a half feet tall with caramel skin. He peered into the crack of Ted's room, catching only the bright green eyes of his classmate.

"Teddy!" he said in excitement. "My guy! What you up to in there?"

"Ah you know...just writing. I might get that assignment for Benson's class out of the way."

"On a Friday? Come on man. There's a ton going on tonight. That poet who Bickle was talking about today is gonna be at the bookshop on 66th. Plus, the film club is showing *The Shining* at the rec at 10. A little early in October for Halloween movies, if ya ask me...but it'll still be dope."

"I don't know man...I've got a lot to take care of. It sounds fun, but...I don't know. I'll let you know."

"Well dang dude...you wanna at least hang out for a bit? Maybe work on our film project?"

"I uhh...I can't Jermaine," said Teddy nervously. "I'm kind of in the middle of something."



A suspicious smile slowly grew towards the corners of Jermaine's face. "You got a girl in there or something?"

Teddy awkwardly returned a toothless smile towards his classmate and then quickly dropped his head to the carpeted floor. "Maybe."

"Okay!" Jermaine yelled, covering his smile with a closed fist. "My boy Teddy Leonard got himself a female lover! Yo Leo," he yelled across the hall. "Big Ted over here got himself a lady friend—"

"Hey," Ted said, unhooking the door's chain and stepping partially into the hall. "Don't make it into a big deal. It's really nothing."

"Alright Mr. Bigshot," said Jermaine, extending a high-five towards Ted. "Hey, I also wanted to say," he whispered quietly, leaning in towards Teddy's right ear. "Thank you for those pills the other day. They mellowed me out, man. You always taking those?"

"Occasionally. It was no big deal, though. I don't really need them. I've got a whole container of 'em."

"Alright man. I might have to hit you up again in Benson's 8 AM on Monday. Oh that class is a killer." He went in for another high-five. "I'll catch you later tonight. Make sure to hit me up. A bunch of us are leaving at 8 for the poetry talk."

"I'll let you know. See you."

Teddy closed the door and walked slowly back towards the bed—scattered red light from the traffic lamp poured through the cracks of the blinds and onto his sheets. He rolled into the covers and placed his arms behind his head.

"You're so special. I just wanted you to know that," Samantha said softly in his ear.

"Maybe I could go with Jermaine. Maybe I could make some real friends. Understand some people better. Stop judging everyone...but...it is possibly supposed to rain tonight, and I've

heard this guy speak before on YouTube, and I've seen The Shining fifty times... maybe I'll just watch it here on DVD. Make some popcorn—"

"Oh yeah? You had a long day, huh? Well I'm here to make it all better. Shh, just be quiet now. I'll help you get to sleep. I'll—"

Teddy looked down into his cracked laptop screen. Samantha stood there in the video's frozen window, overtaken by a buffering image in the middle of the monitor. He read the video's title once more, "Samantha Comforts You After a Long Day // ASMR," before the battery died, turning the screen into a black mirror.

Two lonely green eyes reflected on the glass. He was alone. Always alone.

He considered calling home, or going to the library to read, or walking around the city, or even going to the poetry reading. As the images bounced around the inside of his mind, he helplessly inserted the DVD, returned to his bed, and disconnected from the world.

