

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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### The Mountain

When Samantha was halfway through high school, her family moved to a featureless cul-de-sac in a drab Florida suburb: Orange Julius, Cracker Barrel, highway, strip mall. As soon as she got there, she wanted to leave. Her parents were fighting all the time; it seemed to her that she was expected to fix their relationship, but she had no idea where to start. She had a younger brother, and they were extremely close—“codependent” was the word she used, half ironically, although it was a precocious word for her to know, much less to know how to use half ironically. She was like that, though. She would surprise her teachers by remembering some offhand comment, verbatim, months later; then, on other days, she’d skip school and drive around aimlessly, smoking weed and listening to Joy Division. She sometimes tried to justify her behavior by referring to that old Mark Twain line about how you shouldn’t let your schooling get in the way of your education, but maybe a more honest explanation would have been good old teenage nihilism.

Somehow, the two books that made the most sense to her were *Fight Club* and *The Sayings of the Buddha*. The first step toward true liberation was recognizing that the world you saw around you was actually an illusion, a thin veneer over a vast, howling void. (*Fight Club*: “I am so ZEN. This is BLOOD. This is NOTHING.”) There was an old Buddhist parable about a man walking down a long path. At first, he looks up and sees a mountain in the distance. Then, when he’s farther along on the path, he looks up again and sees a void where the mountain used to be. Only much later, near the end of his journey, does he fully understand the truth—

that all is emptiness, including the mountain—at which point he is suddenly able to see the mountain again. This was the kind of thing that Samantha liked to think about while the rest of her classmates were hanging out at the mall, smoking cloves, and debating whether the Rays were going to win the pennant. No wonder she hated high school.

Before her family moved to Florida, she'd spent her entire childhood in a rural town in central New Jersey, a few miles inland from the Shore. She'd always been too passive, too pliable about defining herself; instead, she let other people define her. They called her Stargirl, a reference to a young-adult novel about a quirky kid who gets kicked off the cross-country team because she refuses to follow the marked path. Samantha was fine with that reputation. She leaned into being Stargirl, wearing flowy skirts and quoting weird indie movies. Now, in Florida, she was nothing. “sometimes i think about disappearing,” she wrote on her Tumblr. “it feels like nothing to wake up. there is no home to return to.” At every summer job, on every family vacation, she would meet some guy who claimed to love her, but it never turned out to be the kind of love that involved paying attention to what she actually said or who she actually was.

She was a senior in high school when Obama ran for president, and she volunteered to canvass for him on the weekends. Politics didn't generally appeal to her, but everyone seemed to agree that the Bush era had been a total disaster, and Obama seemed like a smart guy with a good heart. Still, although she didn't mention it to anyone, she was a bit jealous that he got to be so many things at once—Hawaiian, Kansan, Kenyan, Indonesian—while she was still nothing. In New Jersey, she'd spent weekends hanging out with her friend Rowena, whose mom served ackee and saltfish and told stories about growing up in Jamaica, or with her friend Son, who taught her the occasional funny phrase in Vietnamese. What did Samantha have to offer her friends? “Come over this weekend, we can help my grandma cook spaetzle.” “Cool, where'd she learn that?” “Oh, you know, when she was growing up in Germany in the thirties.” That was not a conversation anyone wanted to get into. Instead, Samantha stuck to the occasional self-deprecating joke on behalf of all white people: we have no rhythm, our food has no flavor, we ruin everything we touch.

On one level, it was legitimately true that white people had fucked over the rest of the world for centuries; if it made her friends feel better to hear

her acknowledge this fact, then she was down to do her part. On another level—a more mystical, beneath-the-veneer-of-illusion level—wasn't race ultimately just a distraction? Every few days, it seemed, one of her friends, white or nonwhite, would post a link to some *BuzzFeed* listicle about the 12 Worst Things White People Did This Month. Samantha sometimes felt like sticking up for herself, but she worried that if she did, even in a quippy way, she would get called out for her white fragility. One of Samantha's black friends posted an article on Facebook about some jackass at a college in Maryland who had recently formed a White Student Union. The post racked up comments:

Ugh.

Fuck this dude and his privilege.

White people gonna white people.

Samantha was the only white person her friend had tagged in the post, so she tried to do her part: she typed a comment about how, as an unelected representative of Caucasians everywhere, she condemned the actions of this garbage human. Again, fair enough. Either the guy was being a dumb troll or he was an actual racist; either way, he did sound like an asshole. Still, though, what did it mean that her friend had tagged her in the post at all?

After high school, she started working at a Chipotle in town, dating anyone who seemed interesting, trying to figure out what might come next. For some reason, she was fixated on the idea of applying to mortuary school, which seemed like something that Margot Tenenbaum, her favorite movie character, would do. But then Chipotle offered her a job managing a new location in another state. It was an opportunity to get away, and she took it.

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The job was about halfway between Florida and New Jersey, in one of those small Southern cities that was always showing up on Top-10 lists of the most underrated places to visit for a weekend. She knew no one there, which suited her fine. There were a few colleges nearby, and some microbreweries, and a walkable Main Street with brick buildings that were about half a century less old than they looked. A few weeks after moving,

she quit the Chipotle job to work at a café and bar downtown—morning shifts as a barista, night shifts as a bartender. She was good at service, not only because she knew a lot about coffee and beer and wine but because she knew how to connect with people. You could call it flirting, and sure, sometimes it was flirting. Other times, though, it was more about being who the customer wanted you to be—coming across as quick and witty, or intuiting that the customer wanted to be slightly quicker and wittier than you and toning it down accordingly. It was just a sense. Some people had it, and she was one of those people. At first there was nothing, the usual emptiness, two lonely strangers in a bar. Then: a spark, a fleeting mutual secret, a wisp of intimacy. She'd tried all the drugs, or most of them, and intimacy was her favorite one.

She wore ballet flats to hide how tall she was. She could never tell if she was wearing too much or too little makeup. Was she pretty? Pretty was the opposite of how she felt, but then again self-esteem had never been one of her specialties. Still, it was an observable fact that she did not have trouble attracting men's attention. People were drawn to her. It wasn't good or bad; it just was. Except, if you wanted to overthink it—and overthinking was quite high on her list of specialties—people weren't really drawn to *her*, per se, because she was just anticipating what they were likely to want and then mirroring it back to them. Laid out coldly like that, it could sound manipulative, but she wasn't interested in manipulation. She was interested in connection.

People were always telling you to follow your bliss, which sounded nice in theory, but in practice they only seemed to respect one particular kind of bliss-following. In books and movies, the Serious Man who wanted to discover his true identity was always going on a solitary quest, or hiding away in a cabin to write the Great American Novel. Well, she had tried being alone with her own brain, and it never went smoothly. It wasn't as if she wanted to be a conformist shill—whatever the establishment consensus was, she'd always positioned herself as far from it as possible. Still, when she tried to consider what her true identity might be, or what having a true identity even meant, she could only approximate the concept by imagining herself from the outside in, through the eyes of other people.

She didn't follow political news very closely, but as far as she could tell Obama's presidency was turning out to be a dud. The grand changes he'd

promised were not materializing—or, if they were, she wasn't seeing it. The Republicans were in charge for a few years, then the Democrats took over for a few years; either way, the world kept on looking basically the same. At least, that was the sense she got whenever she turned on CNN or the *Today* show. Could everything really be as monotonous and predictable as it seemed, or was that also part of the illusion? Late one night, she called her brother, who'd been spending a lot of time watching YouTube videos. He told her about a theory he'd been learning about: that there was a maze of secret underground bunkers below Denver International Airport, and that it might be the global headquarters of the Illuminati. Samantha didn't even know what that meant, exactly, but the idea freaked her out so much that she kept thinking about it for days afterward. It almost certainly wasn't true. If anything remotely like that was actually real, she would have heard about it. Right? Unless of course the elites really were powerful enough to keep the whole thing a secret. In which case—well, whatever. What impact did it have on her life? She wasn't in Denver. She had no way to judge any of these assertions for herself. Lies, damned lies, and statistics: you could comfort yourself by finding articles claiming the bunkers didn't exist, or you could freak yourself out by looking for evidence that they did. Ultimately it just came down to which sources you chose to reject and which ones you chose to believe.

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Her original plan was to stay in the small Southern city for a few months before going back to school. But she was often too passive when it came to big life decisions, and a few months ended up turning into a few years. The café where she worked was a social hub; local activists and poets would spread their stuff across tables and hang around all day, shooting the shit, working on their laptops or pretending to work.

She got to know the master roaster at the café, and they started dating. At night, he'd take her out drinking with the other baristas and line cooks: girls with half-shaved heads and piercings, vegan punks, guys who played in noise-rock bands. Everybody had a thing. Samantha cycled in and out of phases, perennially unsure of what her thing should be. In middle school, her favorite movie had been *Empire Records*, about a bunch of bighearted misfit kids trying to save their local independent record store. ("Damn the

Man! Save the Empire!”) She’d identified so strongly with Lucas, a brooding clerk at the store, that she wore his signature outfit—black sweater, jeans, Pumas—every day for six months. During another phase, which lasted several weeks, she’d refused all sustenance except for saltines, baby carrots, and cranberry juice. Her friends in New Jersey liked to joke that Samantha was always getting into something new and weird, and that she never got in halfway. Samantha thought of her phases as experiments in ascetic discipline, sort of like Steve Jobs’s signature black turtleneck—by paring down your wardrobe and other trivial decisions, you could free up mental space for something more meaningful. She just had to figure out what that something else would be.

In the summer of 2014, when she was twenty-four, she met Richie. She forgot about the master roaster right away. Richie could cook and dance and play the guitar; he was assertive and nurturing and humble all at once. She was always falling for some new guy—that was another of her friends’ running jokes about her—but the connection with Richie was stronger than anything she’d felt before. When he walked into a house party, the room tilted slightly on its axis, everyone unconsciously orbiting a bit closer to him. The first time she went to his place, they stayed up and talked all night. She started to imagine that as long as they kept talking, as long as they didn’t fall asleep, the sun would never have to rise.

There was no way to refer to her feelings, or even to think about them, without resorting to cliché. This only made her appreciate, whenever a pop song came on in the coffee shop (*love is a battlefield; love is like a flame*) why those radio clichés were so popular in the first place: as trite as they were, they described something irreducibly real. When you were reading Jane Austen in your bedroom, if you came across a description of the heath or the seaside, you just had to take Jane’s word for it. Once you’d seen the south of England for yourself, you could verify: Yes, the hills really are that green. The sea really does roar. Can confirm.

Socrates was a man; men are mortal; therefore Socrates was mortal. Richie was an American male below the age of thirty; it was the twenty-first century; therefore Richie derived much of his sense of humor—much of his understanding of the world—from the internet. Whenever he or Samantha did something stereotypically American, he would say, “We’re such fucking burgers.” This was a 4chan thing: Americans were burgers, Canadians were

leafs. He showed 4chan to Samantha a few times, but she could never get through more than a page or two before wrinkling up her nose and closing the tab. Burger and leaf were the least of it—every other post was faggot this or kike that or kill yourself, slut. She had no problem with dark humor when it served a purpose, but this seemed gratuitous and exhausting.

“Not for me,” she told Richie.

“Fine, but you’re not gonna get half my jokes,” he said.

They broke up a few times, unprepared to handle the intensity of their feelings, but they always got back together. It went on like that for months. When the Academy Award nominations were announced in early 2016, there were, for the second year in a row, no people of color among the twenty acting nominees. The hashtag #OscarsSoWhite trended on Twitter, or at least on woke Twitter.

“If they were truly woke, their hashtag would be #HollywoodSoJewish,” Richie said.

“Well,” Samantha said, “Jewish people *are* white, so . . .”

He gave her a Meaningful Look whose meaning she could not begin to fathom. “Yeah,” he said. “Sure they are.”

In November of that year, Samantha told her friends that she was planning to vote for Hillary, but she didn’t end up voting at all. Richie voted for Trump. He drove around town on Election Night, elated, a victory party of one. He’d never been overtly political before, but when he talked about Trump—the God-Emperor, as 4channers called him—Richie sounded like an ardent nativist. This made him an outlier in Samantha’s circle of friends, but she was in no mood to pick a fight with him, at least not about politics. He was entitled to his opinion.

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Everyone began to notice that Richie was changing somehow. It was as if his personality was a faint pencil sketch that was now being traced over in charcoal. He grew a beard. He started powerlifting. Instead of playing the guitar at house parties, he stayed home and played chess online. The first few times she asked what was going on with him, he stared at her and said nothing. When he did finally answer, all he would say was that he’d been reading a lot of new blogs and subreddits, and that they were teaching him how to become a better man.

She became a manager at an upscale bar in town. Some mornings, when she was hungover, she would vow never to drink again. Then she would drink again, and Richie would give her shit for it. “If you keep acting like such a degenerate,” he’d say, “then I won’t be able to defend you on the Day of the Rope.” She didn’t get the joke. It must have been another 4chan thing. She asked what it meant, but he just laughed and changed the subject.

One night, standing outside the bar on a cigarette break, she googled “day of the rope” on her phone. She opened a thread on a subreddit called r/OutOfThe Loop, and she felt queasy and lightheaded as soon as she saw the words, even before their meaning reached her brain.

“What is the ‘day of the rope’?” the original post read.

“It is pure unfiltered hate,” the top answer read. “As I understand it, the original concept of the day of the rope was aimed purely towards racial purification.” The phrase came from *The Turner Diaries*, a 1978 novel that was found in Timothy McVeigh’s car after the Oklahoma City bombing. In the book, an underground syndicate of white Americans starts stockpiling weapons, scheming to take their country back. When the uprising happens, the syndicate’s first move is to execute all nonwhites, including Jews. This sparks a civil war that culminates in a mass public hanging of all white “race traitors”—judges, journalists, anyone with mixed-race children. That’s the Day of the Rope.

Samantha drove to Richie’s house and barged into the living room. “What the fuck is this about?” she asked, showing him her phone, her hand trembling. He sat silently on the couch. She paced around the room, terrified, alternately yelling and going silent.

After a while, he looked up at her and started talking in an eerily calm voice. “I’m a fascist,” he said. “I’ve been reading a lot about this, and I’ve come to the conclusion that the white race will not survive unless we stand up for our interests.”

*The Turner Diaries* was fiction, he explained. The revolution wouldn’t have to be violent, necessarily; that part was just an edgy meme. Still, edgy memes served an important purpose—they shocked white people out of their complacency. That was what had happened to him. From there, he had moved on to the more academically rigorous alt-right sites: *Radix Journal*, *VDARE*, *American Renaissance*, *The Right Stuff*. Of course he was put off by the arguments at first—everyone was—but that was just a vestige of



social conditioning, an irrational fear response that kicked in whenever you started to look too closely at the evidence. The mainstream media elites had trained everyone to be uncomfortable with any information that hadn't been prevetted. But the media elites were just trying to sell you their own narrative, and there were some questions that they never seemed to raise. Why, for example, had the United States suddenly been flooded with nonwhite immigrants—59 million of them since 1965—after being a majority-white nation for centuries? Were the immigration statistics and the crime statistics and the IQ statistics all just a coincidence, or were they part of some larger scheme?

She didn't have the data to rebut his talking points, and he knew it. She stood there in silence, letting him say whatever he was going to say. "You might hate me after this," he concluded, "but at least I respect you enough to tell you the truth."

She gathered her things to leave. There was no point in responding. He didn't try to stop her; he just walked out to the front porch, lit a cigarette, and watched her car pull away.

On the drive home, she was crying so hard that she could barely see the road. She would never talk to Richie again, that much was clear. The only real question was what this indicated about herself. They'd been together, off and on, for more than two years. How had she missed the warning signs? Was she just a gullible idiot? Or was she, deep down, a monster like him?

She walked inside and opened her laptop on the kitchen counter. Before ending this chapter in her life, she decided, she owed it to herself to understand, if only in an anthropological way, how Richie had gone so horribly wrong. She decided to look at some of the sites he'd mentioned, the ones he'd called "academically rigorous." She was a curious person, and she liked to think that she had enough integrity not to flinch in the face of any idea, no matter how unpalatable it seemed.

Five days later, after reading every alt-right article and watching every alt-right video she could find, she called Richie. She had looked into it, she said. He was right. She wanted to become an advocate for the white race, too.

It actually did feel a bit like watching the Matrix dissolve into a green curtain of digits. Or like stepping through a looking glass, or emerging from Plato's cave, or staring up at a mountain and seeing only emptiness. She finally understood why those allegorical tropes were so enduring across centuries. Just like the love songs on the radio, the clichés were cliché for a good reason, but you could only appreciate it by experiencing it for yourself. She still saw her coworkers every day, and they still saw her; but in a way they couldn't really see her, because she had been transformed.

When you looked at the alt-right's actual posts and videos—not at how they were portrayed on CNN or Wikipedia or *BuzzFeed*, but at the content itself—it was often fairly polished, even cerebral. The caustic LARP-y memes, like the ones on 4chan, still rubbed Samantha the wrong way; but those were just a small part of the movement. Jared Taylor was a Yale graduate with a gentle Southern baritone and the demeanor of a sweater-wearing dad. Richard Spencer was supposed to be some super-Nazi boogeyman, but when she looked at his YouTube channel she didn't see a sputtering maniac; she saw hour-long lectures about politics and race and opera and Romantic poetry. All day, in her car or through her earbuds, she listened to alt-right podcasts and videos and livestreams. At first she found them shocking; then she found them engrossing; eventually, the dialogue started to merge with her internal monologue, until she could hardly tell the difference between what they said and what she thought.

Becoming a member of the alt-right, it turned out, wasn't exactly a process of logical persuasion. It was more like a gradual shift in your mental vocabulary. Before, she had spent her morning commute listening to NPR, or to Dan Savage's sex-advice podcast. It suddenly seemed bizarre that nobody had had a problem with her spending her mornings learning all the details of fisting and "water sports," but that, if any of her coworkers ever heard the words "survival of the white race" playing over her car stereo, she would probably have to flee the state. Why the hostility? Were white people really so problematic that they weren't even allowed to survive?

She kept watching alt-right videos, waiting for the mask to slip—for some leader of the movement to reveal overt hatred or obvious hypocrisy—but she couldn't honestly say that she ever saw it. "Look at Japan," Nathan Damigo, an alt-right activist, said in one YouTube video. He mentioned that

the country was 99 percent ethnically Japanese, which seemed impossible. Samantha paused the video to look it up. Accurate. “Is anyone demonizing them, saying that they want to do horrible things to other people?” Damigo continued. His point was that racially homogenous societies were not inherently hateful—that, in fact, they led to higher trust, lower crime, and more social stability.

He wore a fitted gray suit, slicked-back hair, and a teal-and-white lapel pin in the shape of a triangle. He didn’t sneer or use ethnic slurs. He was patient, almost academic. The way Damigo told it, he just wanted white people to be able to thrive without having to apologize constantly for their own existence. Listening to him, Samantha remembered something her grandmother had told her when she was younger: “Never, ever apologize for who you are.”

The normal world kept running its tired old script, but she wasn’t buying it anymore. Once, for a second, she turned on a comedy game show on NPR; the announcer made some awkward joke about how Trump was a dimwit, and she turned it right back off. NPR was supposed to be neutral, objective journalism, yet they couldn’t even hide their contempt for the man half the country had just entrusted with the presidency. Her normie friends on social media, instead of making arguments against the alt-right, mostly resorted to dismissive jokes, or conjectures about what the alt-right’s words might secretly be implying. Samantha couldn’t believe how easy it was to tune it all out.

She moved in with Richie, and the alt-right internet became their world. “Let’s do an experiment,” he said one night, opening a bottle of wine and sitting next to her on the living-room couch. She listed all the people she’d been learning about—Damigo, Spencer, Kevin MacDonald—and they looked them up, one by one, on the normie internet. She knew what they’d find, of course: Nazi this, white supremacist that. But she had *just* heard Damigo explain, in his own words, why he was *not* a supremacist, merely a separatist. “This is what I tried to warn you about,” Richie said. “The media’s always trying to sell you something.”

He introduced her to *The Daily Shoah*, and they played a drinking game: chug whenever Sven can’t keep up with the conversation, or whenever Enoch starts one of his rants with “Here’s the thing.” The podcast was about politics, sort of, but it was also about instilling a sense of community. The

cohosts could turn any banal phrase into an inside joke or a non-sequitur riff. The memes about dindus and ovens and helicopters were still too much for Samantha's taste, but ultimately Mike and Sven seemed like smart guys who had thought hard about the underlying philosophical arguments. If they needed to be edgy to prove their shitlord bona fides, she could live with that.

The symbol from Nathan Damigo's lapel pin, the teal-and-white triangle, popped up again and again on the internet. She started to recognize it as the logo of Identity Evropa. "We are a generation of awakened Europeans who have discovered that we are part of the great peoples, history, and civilization that flower from the European Continent," their website read. "We oppose those who would defame our history and rich cultural heritage." She examined the whole site and couldn't find a single word she objected to. Every other ethnic group was allowed to express its identity and advocate for its beliefs. Why shouldn't European-Americans have a seat at the table? "Join us," the site read. "Become part of something bigger than yourself."

The application took about thirty seconds.

"Are you of European, non-Semitic heritage?" Yes.

"Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" No.

"Do you have any visible tattoos?" Um . . . define visible.

One of IE's leaders interviewed Samantha over Skype. He assured her that her tattoos wouldn't be disqualifying—the main purpose of the question was to rule out anyone with tattoos of SS bolts or swastikas, and also to keep track of members' identifying markings in case they ever got doxed. She and the interviewer developed an instant rapport. She knew enough about the alt-right, at this point, to intuit how he'd want her to come across: a strong woman, but still feminine; confident enough to keep up with the guys, but subservient enough to know her place. Within a few minutes, she could tell that it was working—that this was a game she would be able to win. The conversation went for much longer than the scheduled half-hour, and he accepted her into IE on the spot.

They gave her the passwords to IE's private servers on Discord. There were about two hundred people in IE at the time, and only a handful of them were women. Samantha gave out her phone number and told people in the movement, especially women, to text her if they ever needed anything.

If a woman was having relationship problems, Samantha would give advice; if a woman got doxed and needed to lie low for a while, Samantha would offer her a couch to crash on. When people were preparing to break the news to their normie relatives that they were alt-right, Samantha would coach them through it: *Make sure they know that you don't hate anyone else, you're just pro-yourself.* One minute, she'd be at work, mixing a drink, listening to the locals talk about the latest boneheaded Trump tweet; the next minute she'd be outside, on her break, scrolling through a hundred notifications on her phone, typing in ten Discord chats at once, helping to build the underground movement that would restore her people to honor and dignity. If she went an hour without checking her phone, hundreds of people noticed. Before, what was the most important decision she'd made in a given day? What to wear? What music to play? Now she typed things and it actually changed what people did in the world.

It took only about two months for Samantha to become the women's coordinator of IE. Her new friends told her how impressive it was that she'd reached the upper echelons so quickly, but it seemed as if all you had to do to distinguish yourself was have a modicum of competence and actually do what you said you were going to do. The organization was full of guys who would make ambitious plans and then drop the ball. Samantha underpromised and overdelivered. The guys still took most of the credit, but she tried not to worry about that.

She used a pseudonym—everyone in the movement did, except for those who'd already been doxed and had no choice but to use their real names. If the normie world ever figured out how to match her online persona to her real-life identity, she'd surely get fired; her family might disown her; angry mobs could even show up at her house. Everyone in the movement lived with the constant threat of doxing. This was why, even though the movement was full of fleeting alliances and fake signs of intimacy, the best way to tell if someone really trusted you was to see whether they were willing to tell you their real name. Once you knew that, you held their life in your hands.

Richie had joined IE, too, on her recommendation, but he wasn't advancing as quickly as she was. He would never admit it, of course, but he seemed resentful. The alt-right had been his thing, and now she was taking it over. They started to grow apart. Eventually, he moved out. She still felt

that cliché fluttery-stomach feeling whenever she thought about the guy who used to play the guitar at house parties; but, for better or worse, that guy didn't exist anymore.

She still kept in touch with her brother. They talked on the phone several times a week. She didn't tell him everything, but she revealed enough— allusions to memes, or to her new “political” friends—that he started to piece it together. Whenever she dropped similar hints around her coworkers, they tended to ignore them or treat them as jokes. But her brother spent a lot of time on the internet; he knew how deep the rabbit hole could go. He started calling her by a new nickname, which he meant both ironically and unironically: Vanilla ISIS. “I know you have a good heart,” he told her. “Just don't forget who you are.”

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She moved to another Southern city, near where several other alt-right leaders lived. She got another bartending job, and she also spent hours every week, sometimes hours a day, doing volunteer work for IE. She used Google Maps to scout locations for future marches and protests. She moderated various Discord and Slack channels, trying to keep the conversation within bounds. One time, in a Discord chat, a guy posted a meme of a fried chicken leg hanging from a noose. Samantha, the moderator, put the guy in Discord “jail,” meaning that he could read posts but couldn't like or comment on them. He went over her head, complaining to the top leadership that she had stifled his free speech. But the leaders backed Samantha: even though she was a girl, she was still above him in the hierarchy, and in this case she was right. You might think you were just posting an edgy meme, but you never knew when Antifa or the feds might be watching.

Her favorite task was interviewing new applicants to IE, sometimes two or three dozen of them a week. A few times, in the background of a Skype call, she'd see a Gestapo helmet on a bedroom shelf, or the person would mention wanting to fight in the imminent Racial Holy War. Those were automatic rejections. But most people seemed pretty down to earth. She would start by asking them about how they first got red-pilled, or about their favorite movies—anything to put them at ease. “What do you like to cook?” she asked one woman. The answer was pad thai, but the woman was

hesitant to say so because she thought it wouldn't sound European enough. "Oh, please, you do not have to worry about that," Samantha said.

In truth, though, sometimes a face would pop up on Skype, and within seconds Samantha would know that the person was too dark to qualify. One woman was half Indian, half white, but she swore that she only felt a connection to her European side. Another guy was Latino, but he said, "I'm American. My kids are American. I want to fight for the survival of this country." In those moments, Samantha felt a mix of pity and distress. Couldn't the guy just join La Raza or something? Why was he applying to IE, anyway?

She sent him a form rejection email.

"Is it because I'm not white enough?" he wrote back. "Do you think I should join the Proud Boys instead?"

She didn't respond.

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In the spring of 2017, a leader within IE started a new invite-only Discord channel. He was organizing a rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in mid-May, to protest the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue. Samantha decided that this would be a good time to meet her new community in real life. She rented an Airbnb, bought a new white swing dress, and drove for most of a day to get there.

Before the march, everyone gathered in a nearby park to go over the route. The guest list was small—about a hundred people, mostly IE members, all fully vetted. She was prepared to stand inconspicuously on the sidelines, but people kept approaching her and treating her like a celebrity: "Oh, my gosh, you were my interviewer!" "Thank you so much for bringing me into this thing." Some asked for selfies. A lot of the younger guys tried to hit on her—incompetently, but still, it was kind of sweet. The movement felt real and robust, and she was at the center of it.

After the rally, there was a big banquet under a frame tent. The leaders stood at the front, where there was a PA system, giving speeches—Nathan Damigo; Mike Enoch from *The Right Stuff*; Jason Kessler, who'd helped organize the event; even the Based Emperor himself, Richard Spencer. All the people she'd spent hours watching on screens or listening to through earbuds, suddenly come to life. Sam Dickson, a seventy-year-old "racial

communitarian activist” and the man Richard Spencer called “my greatest influence,” recalled his childhood in Jim Crow South Carolina, and his ancestors’ experience in post-Reconstruction South Carolina. “I asked my grandmother, ‘How were the whites able to take the state back when the blacks were the majority of the population?’” Dickson recalled. “She said, ‘We had to get all the white people in line.’” Since then, Dickson said, getting white people in line had been his life’s work. In an avuncular tone—acknowledging that it was cheesy to do the back-in-my-day shtick, but doing it anyway—he said, “I urge you to be happy and joyous warriors, because the setup today is so much better than it was back then. It’s a hackneyed cliché that the internet has opened up sources of information that weren’t available, but I don’t think those of you who are young have any idea how difficult it was . . . to make contact with other people. Now you have all these social networks.”

When Spencer took the microphone, he said, “I was going to talk about mind-set.” The crowd giggled—everyone associated that word with Mike Cernovich, whom they considered a preposterous alt-light huckster. Lipping, Spencer pretended to hawk “my ebooks and nutritional supplements.” Then, in his real voice, he gave an expansive speech about the thing that made him feel most hopeful about the future: the indomitable red-pilled fervor of Generation Z. “I feel like a cynic among fanatics when I meet young people,” he said.

That night, there was a big house party at a local Airbnb where some of the rally’s organizers were staying. The basement, the kitchen, the hallways, the living room—every space was crammed with guys in white polos, jacked up on adrenaline. They had showed up in force and exercised their First Amendment right to protest. Nobody had dared stand in their way. They had nothing to apologize for. Who knew what else this movement could achieve?

In the backyard, Samantha struck up a conversation with Richard Spencer, the man of the hour. He touched her arm and offered her a drag of his cigarette. Everyone else was focused intently on him—the young guys were practically forming rope lines to ask him about Žižek, or memetics, or the categorical imperative—but he kept ignoring them and talking to Samantha instead. She willed her facial muscles to stay neutral, trying not to seem like a fangirl.



“Do you get off on the fact that these kids treat you like a god?” she asked.

“I gave a speech today, and it changed the way you view the world,” he responded. “Isn’t that a bit godlike?”

She went inside to get another drink. A few minutes later, Spencer walked into the room. As soon as he entered, a skinny kid—couldn’t have been much older than eighteen—raised a glass in Richard’s direction. “Sieg!” the kid shouted.

A few other boys snapped to attention and shouted, “Heil!”

They did the call-and-response a few times, more and more energetically, until everyone in the room was either watching or joining in with stiff-armed salutes. She’d heard stories about this, she knew about the memes, but it was different to see it all around her—to feel the hot breath of the boys, to see their eyes go wide with a kind of ferocious ecstasy.

Richard drank it in. He smiled as wide as she’d ever seen a person smile. The saluting went on and on; the kids were high on the pure energy of it, sloshing their beer onto the floor, rocking onto the balls of their feet. Richard, from across the room, looked straight at Samantha and raised one eyebrow. He didn’t have to do more than that. His meaning was unambiguous: *So? You’re too good to do it, too?*

She had already told everyone that the Nazi stuff was not for her. She knew in her heart that it was wrong. This whole thing was supposed to be about pride and self-love, not about hate, not about violence. He kept looking her dead in the eye, unflinching, the internationally famous super-Nazi, calling her bluff. Her arm went up. She did it. God help her, she did it.

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Another guy she’d met in Charlottesville was an emerging leader in the movement—not one of the speakers at the banquet, but someone who was starting to ascend to that top tier. There were rumors that he might be the next leader of IE. Not long after the rally, he got doxed. The dox included his home address, and he announced on Discord that he needed to get out of town for a while. He and Samantha talked over Skype, and although she’d only intended to comfort him, she found herself offering him a place to crash for a little while. This was what you were expected to do within the movement: when one of your people was in need, you offered help.

He showed up at her apartment a few days later and came on strong. He was very convinced that they should be together. She wasn't, but he wore her down, and she decided to give it a shot. The guy was obviously in a fragile state. She tried to have compassion. But it was never a good fit, and, after a few weeks, she asked him to start sleeping on the couch.

Things went downhill quickly after that. He agreed to move out of her bedroom, but he wouldn't look for a new place or help with the rent. He didn't cook or do dishes. He barely even went outside. If she tried to ask when he was planning to move out, he would get angry, the conversation would escalate, and he'd end up calling her a whore, or warning her that, when he was in charge of the ethnostate, she would be sent to a breeding camp. Later he would apologize and say that it was just a joke. But he would also mention that he knew her real name and where she lived, and that he could release that information whenever he wanted.

He didn't hit her, and he didn't rape her. But she didn't feel like she was in control of the situation, either. What was she supposed to do, call the cops on one of the leaders of her own underground movement? When the cops came, what would she tell them—"This creep won't leave my apartment"? Was that even a crime? Besides, as soon as he found out that she'd betrayed him, he would dox her and ruin her life—or, at the very least, no one in the movement would ever trust her again, and the movement was all she had. No, it was impossible. She'd always prided herself on being an easygoing person, socially astute enough to adapt to any situation. So she adapted.

They could be platonic roommates in private, he told her, but in public she was to keep up the ruse that they were a couple. He was going to be a power player in the alt-right, and as far as "movement optics" were concerned, Samantha was going to be his First Lady. He introduced her to everyone as his girlfriend—the new IE power couple. He kept climbing through the ranks of the organization, taking on more projects and then blowing his deadlines. Sometimes he would guilt Samantha into doing his work for him; then she'd hear him on a conference call in the other room, accepting praise for a spreadsheet he'd barely glanced at.

At one point, they spent a weekend in New York City hanging out with a bunch of inner-circle movement leaders, drinking bourbon and joking about the impending race war. They took a train upstate, to Sven's house,

for one of *TRS*'s famous book burnings. She stayed quiet most of the time; she was a girl, so it was easy to disguise sulking as submissiveness. Then Monday came, and they went home and took a break from the ruse. She went back to work, and he went back to calling in to alt-right podcasts over Skype, or playing video games on the couch.

Along with Jason Kessler and a few other people, he started planning another Charlottesville rally, in August. It would be a bigger one this time, a triumphant return—Charlottesville 2.0, they called it. She could hear him through the walls, screaming over his headset about supply routes into town and escape plans in case things turned ugly. The demonstrators would march through the University of Virginia with torches and then gather in Robert E. Lee Park, demanding that their European American heritage be treated with respect. White people around the country, seeing this valiant display, would be roused from their apathy and join the movement. Samantha helped with the logistics here and there—when David Duke had trouble getting a hotel room under his name, she booked one for him, posing as his granddaughter—but mostly she tried to stay out of it.

She didn't dare tell anyone, not even her brother, but she was starting to wonder whether joining the alt-right had been a terrible mistake all along. The more helpless and angry she felt about her domestic situation, the less she felt like making excuses for the rest of the movement. If this was how one of the alt-right's most exalted leaders behaved behind closed doors, then what other blatant hypocrisies were being overlooked? She'd spent months convincing her friends, and herself, that the movement was more innocuous than it seemed, that their fears were misplaced. But what if the ironic racism really was just racism? What if white separatism and white nationalism and racial realism were all epithets for the same old-fashioned violent impulse? What if the alt-right was basically what the normies said it was?

Once she saw this possibility, she couldn't unsee it. On the Discord channels, the grisly memes kept coming: helicopter rides, gas chambers, "John Deere's new multi-lane protester digester." When she was first starting to get red-pilled, she'd told herself that she was waiting for the mask to slip and reveal actual hatred; by the time the hatred was there in plain sight, she'd been so turned around by movement propaganda that she somehow made herself look past it, or convinced herself that it was all just

harmless shitposting. Now, as quickly as she'd tumbled down the rabbit hole, she could feel herself drifting back up toward the surface. It felt a little bit ridiculous that, after coming this far, all it took to make her reconsider everything was a world-class nightmare of a roommate. Then again, maybe it was no more ridiculous than all the other circumstances that had led her into this mess.

She had requested a day off from work to attend the second Charlottesville rally, but she canceled the request at the last minute and went to work instead. All day, she tried to avoid looking at the TVs hanging above the bar. When she heard that someone had been killed in a car crash, her reaction was a mixture of panic and a kind of immediate, disembodied clarity. *There's no way to justify any of this*, she thought. *I need to find a way out.*

It wasn't easy to quit the alt-right, but it was possible. She remembered a few people who had seemed totally ensconced in the movement until one day they went dark and you never heard from them again. Instead, you heard rumors: This guy moved to a new state. That guy got a new phone number, met a new woman, started a new life as a normie. Samantha was still in her twenties. It wasn't too late to get a college degree. Maybe she could even have a family one day, after she figured out how to deal with her own issues.

Had she really been so goddamn weak that all they had to do was charm her, make her feel pretty and popular and needed, and she would drop everything else in her life to chase that feeling? All the warning signs came back to her in a sickening montage. That drive home from Richie's house, blinking to see the road through tears; setting up her laptop on the kitchen counter. *Am I an idiot?* she'd asked herself then. *Or am I a monster like him?* Both, apparently. On some level she'd always known the truth, but it was almost too obvious. Instead of letting herself see it for what it was, she had tried to embellish it into some profound, complicated mystery. First you see the mountain. Then you see that there is no mountain. Then, finally, you start to see the mountain again.

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The following August, the one-year anniversary of the infamous Charlottesville rally fell on a Sunday. She was scheduled to work an all-day

shift. That was for the best, she decided: it was better to be around people, even people she couldn't really open up to, than to be alone. She had moved to a suburb in the northeast, staying with her aunt and working at a café that served homemade quiches and jams. Jason Kessler was marking the anniversary by holding a rally in D.C., but nobody in the movement trusted Kessler anymore. Any alt-right group that still had a shred of self-respect, including IE, ordered its members to stay away; Kessler invited Richard Spencer, Chris Cantwell, and David Duke to join him, but they all declined. In the end, Kessler marched with about two dozen misfits and literal Nazis, including a guy with the number 14 tattooed on his face. Samantha checked her phone anxiously throughout the day, but her normie friends were posting about Omarosa and the Space Force and a guy who'd stolen a plane and crashed it off the coast of Seattle. It was as if the anniversary rally wasn't even happening.

She'd been dating someone for a month and a half, and he seemed to like her so far. "I was mixed up in some pretty extreme political stuff," she'd told him on their second date.

"Well, whatever it was, it couldn't have been so bad," he'd replied. "I know you now, and you're clearly a good person."

Was she, though? What about her was good? Some days, she thought, *I went through a terrible phase, I made some really inexplicable choices, but I'm still the person I always was*. Other days, she thought, *Anyone who was smart enough to understand what Richie was saying that night but too spineless to leave him is not a person who will ever deserve forgiveness*. She watched *Sharp Objects*, a show on HBO, and thought about cutting herself; but if she bled enough to make a mess then someone would call an ambulance, and it would turn into a whole thing, and she already had enough reasons to feel ashamed.

She got back in touch with some of her closest childhood friends from New Jersey, people she hadn't talked to in a long time. She tried to explain where she'd been and what she'd seen, but she could never strike the right tone. When one of them asked her a question, she responded with a self-deprecating joke about her lost year as a secret hipster Nazi, and her friend accused her of making light of the situation: "Why are you always deflecting responsibility?" Samantha rewatched the Nathan Damigo interview on YouTube, the one that had struck her as so polished and

eloquent. Now she could only react with rueful laughter and a full-body cringe. But maybe cringing was also a deflection of responsibility? Fuck, man. She couldn't even do shame right.

Most days, on her way to work, she tried to listen to podcasts that were informative but not at all political. One was an interview with a philosopher named Martha Nussbaum, who talked about moral stigma and the social value of regret. Another was a series about the complex personal lives of the worst people in history, people like King Leopold II and Muammar Qaddafi. Apparently, even if you'd ruined an entire country for generations, or forced multiple young girls to "marry" you, or done other unimaginably heinous things, there were still plenty of people who would be willing to say, after you were gone, "You know, his ideas about health care weren't all bad" or "Actually, he was always sweet to me." Did that mean that irredeemable monsters were just effective brainwashers? Or did it mean that even monsters could still have redeemable qualities?

Her friends kept asking her about the alt-right, claiming that they wanted to understand everything, but ultimately they seemed to be looking for reassurance, not understanding. They wanted to know that they were immune—that it had happened to Samantha, but that it could never happen to them, or their husbands, or their brothers, or anyone else they knew. *Well, Samantha thought, maybe some of you are immune, but not all of you. Maybe not even most of you.*

People acted as if her descent into the alt-right had been caused by something discrete and tangible—that some magic switch had been flipped in her, causing racist propaganda to resonate with her soul in a sinister and specific way. Or maybe they imagined that the magic switch inside her had always been flipped on, that her innate bigotry had always been waiting to rise to the surface. The scarier and more mundane fact was that there was no magic switch. Whenever she tried to examine her most fundamental beliefs and desires—before the movement, during, and after—she didn't find rage or self-love or a death wish or a lust for power. She found nothing solid at all.



When I got an email from a woman saying that she had just left Identity Evropa and wanted to talk to a journalist about it, I was in the conference room on the thirty-eighth floor of the World Trade Center. It was late, and the building was nearly empty, so I had exchanged my cramped office for a room with a view. I called her on Skype. She hadn't yet told her story to anyone, and saying it out loud made her anxious, so she paced up and down a flight of stairs while she talked, burning off some of her anxiety. Our conversation lasted more than three hours. Every so often, as I took notes, I glanced across the river at the glowing red dial of the Colgate Clock.

It all seemed a bit too pat to be true: damsel in distress climbs to the upper echelons of the organized white supremacy movement, then absconds and tells a Jewish journalist how the whole thing operates. I wondered if she was a plant sent by Project Veritas, or a troll trying to send me on a wild goose chase. Or maybe her story was true but she was telling a sanitized version of it, portraying herself as a hapless victim.

Over the next year and a half, we talked for hundreds of hours, both on the phone and in person. I talked to her relatives and friends. She showed me screenshots and photographs and played me audio recordings. She wasn't a plant. At first, though, she did try to sanitize her story. It took her a long time to tell me about the Nazi salutes, for example, and then a long time after that to admit that she'd joined in. She kept insisting that she'd never wanted violence to befall anyone for any reason, that she'd never had hate in her heart. I had no way of knowing whether that was true.

Again and again, she asked different versions of the same question: "Do you think I'm a bad person?" I tried answering in several ways, but in truth I thought that the question missed the point. She had obviously made tragically, pathologically bad decisions; and yet I also believe that it's possible for people who have made terrible decisions to work toward redemption. In the end, it didn't seem useful to worry about whether she was Bad or Good. Those are permanent metaphysical attributes, and I didn't think metaphysics had much to do with it.

Sometimes, in the course of my alt-right reporting, I would find myself in the company of someone gleefully, unrepentantly Bad—Milo Yiannopoulos, say, or Richard Spencer—and a familiar feeling would come over me. Around the twentieth time I felt it, I realized what it was: a longing for the same cheap catharsis that I'd experienced when I was nine

years old, on my couch, watching Ricki Lake. Where are the bad people? They are on the stage, under the bright lights. Racism does not reside among us, the audience; you can tell because they are the ones being pointed at, and we are the ones doing the pointing.

I don't mean to imply that there is no moral distance between me and Richard Spencer. What I mean is that white supremacy is not so superficial a problem that it can be solved by getting rid of a few bad apples. You can't eradicate crime by sending people to jail. You can't fix the opiate crisis by bombing poppy fields. It's tempting, but far too facile, to imagine that the way to end racism is to identify the racists, to shame them on Twitter, to punch them in the streets. That may, in some cases, be clarifying; it may produce a temporary victory, or a moment of catharsis; but it doesn't address the roots of the affliction. What we need, and urgently, is a new moral vocabulary.

In the meantime, what should social networks do about the surfeit of hazardous memes floating around the internet? Let's say you're hosting a party in a warehouse. You can't eradicate all pathogens from the air. You don't know how many of your guests are sick, and you don't want to stand outside the front door holding a thermometer and a stethoscope. The best you can do is plan for contingencies. You can ventilate the room, and put Purell on the tables, and install a carbon monoxide detector. If some idiot is going around sneezing in people's faces, you can ask him to stop, or you can kick him out of the party. You won't eradicate all disease, but you can keep it from reaching an epidemic threshold.

Some types of people seem to be particularly susceptible to extremist online propaganda: people with weak real-world social ties; people with unstable senses of self; people with too much verbal intelligence and not enough emotional intelligence; people who prize idiosyncrasy over logical consistency, or flashy contrarianism over humble moral dignity. Still, there is no formula that can predict exactly who will succumb to fascism and who will not.\* People act the way they do for a million contingent reasons. Nature matters and nurture matters. Some people seem strong but turn out to be weak; some people bear opaque trauma, invisible even to themselves; some people are desperately lonely; some people just want to watch the world burn. We would like to imagine that, in the current year, the United States has developed a moral vocabulary that is robust and widespread



enough to inoculate almost all of us against raw bigotry and malign propaganda. We would like to imagine that, but it would be wishful thinking.