

Friends and “Friends”

It all began on a crisp November Saturday night. It was a friend’s 20th birthday, and a few of my roommates and I made our way to her apartment for a little party. We arrived, wished our friend happy birthday, and mingled with the other guests. After a bit, I left to the small second story balcony for some fresh air and noticed a girl that I didn’t think I’d met before.

She seemed quiet by nature but happy to talk. I’m in the biomedical engineering program, so she mentioned that she had applied unsuccessfully to engineering once already and was hoping for a different outcome with her second application. She said her grades hadn’t been great when she applied last, but that she’d had some “personal problems” and hoped that they would be taken into consideration. I was curious what she meant, but she didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t feel it was right to ask. Soon, it was late, and my roommates were ready to leave. The girl and I exchanged numbers and parted ways.

Before long, exam week was upon us. The girl (we’ll call her “Jane” from this point on) and I had hardly spoken since the birthday party, but as I sat at Memorial Library one day, hours into a study session with hours more to go, I thought I’d send her a text to see how she felt for the physics exam. We wound up talking periodically over the rest of exam week, and next thing I knew, exam week was over and I was home for break, but we were still talking.

On Christmas Day, I was in northern Wisconsin with my family. We spent the day outside, tromping around in the snowy woods. When I came in, I checked my phone and saw that among other Snapchat stories from the day, Jane had posted a long string of videos – family gathered around the Christmas tree, mounds of torn up wrapping paper, and her grandparents tinkering with their new “White Elephant” gifts. I was kind of disappointed in her – didn’t she know that not everyone was so

fortunate to have piles of presents and a big, loving family all together for Christmas? I set my phone aside and sat down with my brother for a game of chess.

A few hours later, I retreated to my room for bed. It had been a good Christmas – a beautiful winter day, a hearty dinner, and great times with family. I checked my phone and saw that I had a new Snapchat from Jane from an hour before.

“My dad relapsed, and my parents won’t stop screaming at each other.” Her eyes were red and puffy, and she looked absolutely crushed.

I’d had no idea she had any real problems in her life, absolutely none, and I felt terrible. I quickly composed the most sincere, sympathetic reply I could come up with and laid down for bed, too shaken to fall asleep.

As Jane explained it the next day, for her entire childhood, her family had been essentially perfect. Her parents were peaceful and loving, everyone was happy, and there was no indication that things would ever be any different.

In the fall of 2014, when I left for freshman year, she, too, was leaving, excited about her new life in Madison. As the semester got underway, she was happy, enjoying her classes and the new friends she was making on campus. Like many people, she’d historically taken some medications for her mental health, but it had never been that much of a problem. However, her second semester, she started to struggle with depression, the doctors changed her medications, and the transition period was awful, worse than it had ever been before. Many days, she could barely summon the will to get out of bed and face the day.

Soon enough though, exam week came and passed, and Jane left for home, just happy to be done with freshman year and to have some time to recover from the toll the last couple months had taken on her emotional well-being. Upon arriving home, though, all was not as it'd been when she left.

Unbeknownst to Jane, her father had been a controlled alcoholic for her entire life. She'd never had any idea, but while she was gone at school, his drinking had spiraled out of control to the point where he could no longer hide it. Now, her dad was sneaking out to get drunk every night, leaving his phone behind to eliminate any means of tracking him down. Her parents had never fought, but now she would wake up to them screaming at each other in the early morning hours. Her dad became suicidal and would disappear for extended periods of time. She'd leave voicemail after voicemail on his phone, begging him not to kill himself, going days without hearing anything back. Meanwhile, she, too, began to have vivid nightmares about committing suicide, and started taking strong sleeping medications to ward them off.

Eventually, summer came to an end and Jane returned to Madison. However, at home, things weren't any better. Her dad was drinking more than ever, her parents were fighting, and her younger brother was threatening to move out of the house to escape it all. She was also still taking medications for her mental health and going to therapy, all while trying to keep her grades up in her difficult classes so she could get into the engineering school.

Then, one weekend, she went to a birthday party and talked to me. We talked on and off during the month leading up to Christmas, but if it hadn't been for her particularly tumultuous Christmas eve, I might never have learned there was anything more to her life than met the eye.

There's an old saying not to judge someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes – the concept of forming early opinions of others over outward appearances isn't new. However, in years

past, people didn't have detailed online documentation for their entire lives. Today, many people have Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and more to broadcast their lives to those around them. I don't even consider myself a heavy social media user, and I still often feel that I know everything about people around me that I've only talked to once or twice, simply from seeing their Facebook pages or Snapchat stories.

Additionally, it's easy for anyone to forget that social media accounts typically present glorified, if not completely inaccurate representations of the realities of life. People post pictures of vacations and good times with friends and family. They often don't talk about struggles with work or school, problems with family, or depression or anxiety that they might struggle with. Day by day, most college kids are exposed to a constant barrage of pictures and videos portraying the lives of the hundreds and hundreds of "friends" they've accumulated on social media as essentially perfect and carefree. Over time, it's easy to gain the sense that these posts are reality, and that the struggles and sorrows in your life are setting you further and further back from your friends.

I have more than 1000 "friends" on Facebook. While I'm close with some of them, I feel like I know almost all of them from seeing the things they post. There's no doubt in my mind that I've formed opinions, both positive and negative, on hundreds of people from their Facebook profiles, long before I ever really get to know them. Before Christmas day, I didn't view Jane as really being much different than most of my other "friends" – she might have had different interests and different friends, but as far as I could tell, she was basically just another college student. Had she not had a particularly rough Christmas and been looking for someone to talk to, she'd probably never have said anything about the struggles she was going through, and I probably never would have asked, already convinced by her social media posts that I'd seen all there was to see.

Obviously, Jane's struggles over the past year represent an extremely unfortunate combination of a variety of problems – her father's alcoholism and mental health issues, the conflicts within her family that have resulted, and her own mental health struggles, which have no doubt been compounded by everything else in her life. However, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, almost 1 in 5 adults in the US experience some form of mental illness every year ^[1], and up to ten percent of children grow up in families with a parent with alcohol problems ^[2]. Her struggles, while tragic and unfortunate, aren't that unique.

To me though, as unfortunate as Jane's situation is, the fact that most of her hundreds of friends on social media had no idea of the struggles she was facing is almost even worse. Jane was looking for people to talk to, but felt guilty saying anything about the issues in her life, thinking she'd just make her friends miserable, too. In all likelihood, many of her friends on social media had problems of their own that she was unaware of, and would have been happy to have someone that sympathized with them. However, they didn't ask, and Jane didn't say anything. To me, it often seems that for many people, broadcasting happiness and convincing Facebook "friends" that all is well leaves no room for actually getting to know anyone, and can even discourage those in need from reaching out for help and ruining the false images of perfection that they've created.

I met Jane because we happened to be in the same place, at the same time, and started to talk, as people have met for years and years – not because of social media. I thought she seemed funny, intelligent, and down to earth, and she is. However, after seeing how she broadcast her family's heaps of Christmas gifts to all her friends, I thought she seemed a little too insensitive to the fact that not everyone's Christmases were as picture perfect as hers. Little did I know that she was dealing with problems tougher than any I've faced in my life, and that everything I was seeing was barely representative of her real life at all. Because of social media, I was pretty sure I knew all about her

before I knew anything about her at all, and might have easily never learned any different if she hadn't finally spoken up.

I still use my social media accounts. However, moving forward, I want to spend more time actually getting to know people, and less time on Facebook, Snapchat, or Twitter, jumping to conclusions about people I barely even know based on some pictures and 160 character posts.

Works Cited

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[2] "Alcohol Facts and Statistics." *Alcohol Facts and Statistics*. National Institute of Health, Mar. 2015.

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