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**The Cabin in the Woods** [chapter heading/new page]

If sleep does come, what then? Of what does a four-dimensional human dream? For sleep, like everything else, is being digitised. A study has recently suggested that our sleep hormones are being blanced from the light of our various night-time screens. As a result we may sleep less well, and wake up more tired. Our phones are black on the bedside table, sleeping the sleep of the just, but their light swirls on behind our closed eyes, so the survey says. We resolve, in the dark, to get an old-school alarm clock, and to keep the phones and laptops on the other side of the bedroom door. Everything must go. Except there's no landline now, sitting venerably on that little table by the stairs. What if someone needs to call us in the middle of the night? That is a call we should take. And so the phone stays resting on the nightstand, undisturbed.

Oh, those studies. Despite them being everywhere, most of us, most of the time, see them out of the corners of our eyes; we catch them fluttering down the pavements, we hear snatches of them on the wind. Most of us have little inclination to spend much time at the coal face of raw findings. But we get the gist, and the gist is not good. As well as stunning our melatonin like a deer in the headlights, our screens are, it seems, less easy to learn from. While there is still much debate, there have been enough proclamations for these headlines to bypass our brains and go straight into our nervous systems. We worry for our concentrations, our ability to absorb information and to memorise. It is easy and understandable to feel that we are running our own

labs, producing reams of intuition, if not data. A friend's mother warned him not to keep his phone in his pocket – 'you're microwaving your testicles'. No body part, or faculty, is safe. Meanwhile, studies about the health benefits of pet-ownership glow with good tidings, year on year.

Fearing the toxicity of our gadgets is not a new pastime. On Christmas Day in 1991, my aunt, then in her late fifties, sat in her dressing gown with the electronic memory game, Simon, in her lap. On my request she was giving this new present a reluctant go, tapping at its four big, coloured buttons as they lit up in sequence. I remember Simon flashing and beeping with the ponderous, patronising lethargy of its easiest setting. When it eventually caught her out she passed the plump little flying saucer back to me and straightened the skirts of her dressing gown. 'They say all this electrical stuff will give us cancer,' she remarked. Similarly, like every post-1950s generation, when I was young I was told not to sit too closely to the television. But while the pastime isn't new, the stakes have been raised by our latter-day habit of fondling such gadgets from the moment we wake to the clunk of the power cord and the click of the light. Simon, by contrast, knew his place. Now I take the television into bed with me, and it lies warmly, companionably against my stomach. A degree of lassitude usually accompanies this pose, but nevertheless I entertain an occasional thought for my organs beneath that spreading warmth, and I wonder how they're taking to all of this, what grudge is accumulating night by night, and what they have in store.

The studies, alas, don't stop with toxicity. Another narrative running alongside digital progress is one of emotional fragility, of depression and addiction. Science is regularly finding new ways that social media is making people sadder, though whether it is generating rather than displacing sadness is difficult to judge. Regardless, the effect of this pervasive suspicion can be

as enfeebling as someone repeatedly telling you how tired you look. Anecdotally, this discontent seems apparent enough. You know that the party is definitely over when conversation becomes a healing circle for Facebook sufferers. In the last year, my students have begun to mention the guilt of what they call ‘Netflix binges’, suggesting that, with their mouths ever open to a menu of online ‘feeds’, they’re imagining themselves as gluttonous beings. Unsurprisingly, then, a Lenten spirit is emerging as a counterbalance. Internet usage (the social-media wing in particular) is now a staple denial on Lent’s annual blacklist. The restaurant game ‘Phone Stack’ acknowledges our compulsions: in the game the diners pile their phones in the middle of the table and the first person to make a grab during the meal picks up the bill.

But from where does this feeling of taint arise, and how does it come to run in perfect parallel with our online enthusiasms and pleasures? When social media works, it feels so like the everyday conviviality and friendship of physical interactions that one could nearly forget to give it any credit. ‘Social media’ as a formal topic is generally a troubled one. At such times it is characterised as an addictive substance, a depressant that needs to be managed and curbed. Everyone knows someone perpetually on the brink of quitting Facebook. One hypothesis for this malaise suggests that the gloss people give to their crafted online personae creates an epidemic of inferiority among those of us watching them, as well as an ongoing amnesia towards our own canny uploads. This gulf widens when you consider where we do this watching: from the unglamorous heap of our insomnia, on the choked bus to work, the windows so fogged with kettled breath that you can’t even dream out of them. If this hypothesis is true, then when people log on to social media, they are apt to feel as though entering a joust, with their friends’ successes and wit, their general robustness for life, coming at them like lances. The overt and

odious phrase ‘You win the internet’ – deployed to congratulate an exemplary piece of digital behaviour – does nothing to soothe suspicions of tacit competitiveness.

The inferiority theory is too easy to be the whole story, but nevertheless there is a strong and widespread feeling that our relationship with digital technologies has to be managed as a sort of chronic problem. Simultaneously we are rightly enamoured with all the ease and enrichment they provide. The four-dimensional human thus regularly experiences two types of breathlessness. The first is due to the thrill of roving over the world, of dropping in on a sibling and their baby on another continent, of staying for five minutes and laughing the whole time, then swooping back into your skin. The second breathlessness is not cheerful, and arises in the moments when all this liberty seems to come at the price of its opposite, when the sum of digital life feels more like a cage than a flying carpet. The ongoing narrative of toxicity and depression that shadows digital progress, in conjunction with a sense that this progress is both for the best and inevitable, creates a pervasive atmosphere of claustrophobia. The weather is often close in the fourth dimension. A small signal of this confinement is how the phrase ‘surfing the internet’ is used much less frequently now than in the old days. Rather than coursing the waves, we are simply, immovably, *online*. When multiple aspects of digital life are consistently figured as sources, suspected or confirmed, of bodily and psychological pollution, then our irreversible journey deeper and deeper into the network can, in one’s less hardy moments, feel like an imprisonment. As a result, when sleep does come, the four-dimensional human begins to dream of escape.

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Claustrophobia descends swiftly in moments of thwarted movement, which digital life provides in abundance. Much of online ennui arises from this sense of being on the wrong side of a locked door. We can spend hours rattling the handle. Sometimes the craving for motion, almost as an abstract idea, movement for its own sake, leads to a temporary, claustrophobic madness. For instance, have you ever scrolled the drop-down menu of your favourite URLs and selected a website (mentally licking your lips and settling yourself more comfortably), only to realise that you're already on the site itself? Here our destination has become our beginning. When the website helplessly judders and copies itself, it seems to ask: What do you want from me? Where are you trying to get to?

The ironic, unsparing conclusion to Aaron Sorkin's Facebook biopic, *The Social Network*, shows a classic aspect of this confining online behaviour. A fictional Mark Zuckerberg sits in a deserted conference room, as rich as a king but lonesome. With an expression that blends fatigue with fear, he repeatedly, fanatically, clicks refresh on his browser, to see if the pretty woman has accepted the Friend Request that he has sent her just seconds before. This is dramatically a full circle of sorts, since this woman dumps him in the film's opening scene. And yet, the ending is purposefully a non-ending, and instead Zuckerberg experiences, not romantic 'closure', but the breathlessness of a closed loop of his own design, in which he alone is trapped. Here, the conclusive move of 'boy gets girl back' is perpetually delayed, and each cycle of refreshment leads to the same place. You don't have to be lovelorn to experience this parching type of refreshment (but it helps).

There are many varieties of the Zuckerberg Loop or, if abbreviated like a weblog, the gloop. Running laps around one's track of message-bearing websites, from most to least exciting – work email, personal email, social media – is a classic gloop, as is the insistent return to

ongoing news stories or sports scores. Our weakness for these motions without progress feeds the argument of digital life's addictive properties. It is as though the early internet's dream of freedom, in its most distilled form, is now parcelled to us as the habit-forming gaps between loaded pages. This gap is a kind of bodiless free fall, a rush of pure potential in which life feels up for grabs. As internet speeds increase, it becomes less evident how hooked we are on this infinitesimal pause, a moment of wild possibility, which can so consistently resemble that false plunge at the verge of sleep. My long-serving, virus-riddled computer is annoyingly sluggish, but its dilatory transitions exaggerate and reveal the enclosed end to this jittery feeling of suspense and optimism, like the looped, slow-motion footage of a Venus flytrap snapping shut. A major source of digital claustrophobia is the culmination of a thousand of these tiny failed escapes.

Speaking for myself, these gaps contain a beguiling pastoral romance. They seem to be the place where the peace of the countryside, the freedom of a steam train winding through a valley, can be achieved, except that it can only be experienced as a series of bursts, like glorious puffs of a cigarette. This is a journey made in interrupted inches. And much like smoking, this practice involves two ends of a spectrum brought together in a paradoxical loop, creating the confining release, the heart-pounding relaxation. Especially when I get trapped in that airless circuit of websites, a journey to where I began, with nothing changing, no message, no sign from beyond, no betterment, it is easy to feel the little neurological paradox of a motion that goes nowhere, more familiarly known as the shudder.

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