

Losing Streak

by Joshua David Lane

“It happens sometimes. Friends come in and out of your life, like busboys in a restaurant” – the Writer, *Stand by Me*

I have spent the past 1,545 days communicating with a woman I barely know.

She sends me a picture of herself every day at a random time. Her phone is held at an angle, obscuring the specifics of her surroundings. I do not recognize the room, and her choice of a sepia filter makes the environment even more indistinguishable. She wears a blank face—an expression on the border of disinterest and indifference. A slightly wrinkled UMass crewneck adorns her torso, and I struggle to recall if she attends that institution. Hell, I struggle to recall anything about her.

Regardless, I respond like clockwork; without a moment’s hesitation, I send her a blurry, low-effort selfie without a word of accompanying text. No pleasantries or small talk. I won’t communicate again with this stranger for another twenty-four hours.

Okay, perhaps "stranger" is a misrepresentation. The woman in question, Kristin, is an ex-girlfriend of an old friend (to whom I hardly speak anymore). I reckon they were still dating 1,545 days ago, but the exact chain of events grows hazier with each passing year. Yet, our streak remains. It's an odd, superfluous ritual, one with no apparent value or justification, but I stay committed to it, nevertheless. Four years' worth of commitment. Hell, come to think of it, that's the longest I've ever been reliable for anything.

For those of you unfamiliar with this bizarre process, I implore you to research a little messenger app known as Snapchat. Should you be unacquainted with the concept of a Snapchat “streak,” allow me to briefly explain. When two users “snap” each other

for multiple days in a row, they develop a streak; a streak records how many consecutive days they have spent in correspondence.

Throughout my teenage years, I managed to develop, maintain, and inevitably lose more streaks than I can remember. It's difficult to recall all of the people I communicated with, and perhaps this demonstrates the triviality of many of these "connections." I shared streaks with classmates and groupmates and teammates and team captains; friends of mine and friends of friends and friend's friend's friends and friend's girlfriends and girl friend's boyfriends; girls who I liked and girls who liked me and girls who liked no one except for themselves; boys in my grade and boys with failing grades and boys who skipped a grade and boys who skipped school altogether.

I felt, at the time, that I had a bond with all of these people—a weak, superficial, quasi-bond to be sure, but it was enough to make me feel less alone. High school tends to be a period of quantity over quality; I desired as many friends as possible, regardless of how often I talked to them. Lonely, angsty nights of puberty were momentarily quelled by a quick scroll through my Snapchat account. Witnessing all of those names idling before me, each one representative of a person who deemed me worthy of their time, quieted the insecurities that occasionally grew too loud.

Although, perhaps the accumulation of all these streaks served as an overcorrection of sorts. Rather than feeling insecure, I too often felt like *the man*. I wanted to be popular, to be liked and admired and envied, and Snapchat enabled this silly delusion. I could juggle a dozen different conversations at once, trading small talk, gossip, and comedic observations. Most of this back-and-forth seems superficial in hindsight, but that mattered little to me at the time. Having a lot of streaks meant I had a lot of connections. Having a lot of connections meant I had a lot of friends. How "real" these friendships were never seemed relevant.

Nobody on Snapchat was particularly real anyway. Looking back, I reckon we were all moonlighting as imposters, playing the role of the person we wished we were. We hid behind filters and manipulated camera angles, positioning half our face out of frame—all in this vain attempt to present a falsified version of ourselves. Messages (when there even were messages) could be written, proofread, and rewritten before they ever saw the light of day, ensuring that we always said the right thing at the right

time. Sure, it lacked authenticity, but what teenager gives a damn about being authentic?

I even recall weekend hangouts that were derailed by Snapchat difficulties. There was nothing more obstructive to one's mental well-being than the inability to take a half decent selfie, especially if a particularly attractive girl was on the other end of the phone. My buddy Dylan, well-versed in the art of persuasion (deception), would advise us in the subtle art of angles, lighting, and photograph manipulation.

"Damn, why does my nose look fucked?" I'd ask, preparing for a fifth selfie attempt.

"Your nose always looks fucked," Dylan would say. "We just need to find the right angle to hide that from her. Try it without the flash."

Dylan seemed to accumulate streaks at an unmatched rate. His Snapchat resembled a spam folder, cluttered with messages from people he scarcely knew. He took photo after photo of his grinning face, showcasing the pearlescent teeth that won him a "Best Smile" superlative. I envied him, wishing that I, too, could engage in as many wordless, vapid conversations. Dylan must've held at least twice as many streaks as me, and this disparity sparked a bizarre sense of competition. Friendships at the time were a numbers game, and I was losing.

Dylan even maintained a streak with Greta, my high school's German exchange student. She spoke broken English, whereas he spoke nonexistent German. I cannot imagine what their conversations were like. They may have resembled the spiritless photo exchanges shared between Katherine and I. Perhaps they just helped pass the time.

Even my in-person communications—y'know, the ones where you use the app to talk to a person in real time—felt more palpable as soon as a screen separated us. This isn't to say that the relationships were better thanks to Snapchat, but they certainly felt more official. The little streak counter beside a person's name created a propped-up air of credibility. Our friendship officially had weight, and the streak counter proved as much. It proved that I was known and that I knew people, regardless of how well I really knew them at all.

“Oh yeah, I know them. We have a streak together,” is a phrase that frequently left my lips over the course of high school. I now recognize the lack of logic that accompanied my line of reasoning.

Even romantic prospects could be tracked through Snapchat; how could you expect to get a girl in your bed if you couldn't even get her on your best friend list?

Speaking of romance, there's a unique experience on Snapchat, one that has undoubtedly traumatized many of my generation. It occurs in the hours after a breakup when all is said and done. Tears have been shed, varsity sweatshirts have been returned, and family members have been informed. Everything connecting you and the ex has been dismantled, deleted, and destroyed. Well, everything except the Snapchat streak. You probably sit alone in your room, in a self-appointed bout of solitary confinement, staring soggy eyed at a dying streak. An hourglass emoji flashes next to their name, signifying the inevitable. Tick. Tick. Tick.

I know it sounds trivial. It's difficult to explain why the loss of a tiny three-digit number evokes a somber sensation. Perhaps it's just a product of dramatization, something at which teenagers excel. That's a valid theory but not my preferred one. I argue that the streak represents something greater, something much less superficial.

My thesis: the disappearing streak signifies two unbearable truths. *One*: something has been lost. Something that was consistent for weeks or months or years on end. A slate wiped clean. A period of your life erased. *Two*: that something, the thing you felt slip from your grasp, will likely never return. You will never set eyes on that growing number again.

Sorta sad, ain't it?

Breakups aside, I managed to lose the majority of my streaks without waxing philosophical. I lost most of them by accident and many of them without even noticing. However, I must admit that there remains a melancholy aftertaste to every lost streak. It's a bittersweet feeling, one that accompanies an even more bittersweet realization: *dang, I guess I'll never talk to that person again.*

Classmates and groupmates and teammates and team captains; friends of mine and friends of friends and friend's friend's friends. I'll never remember all of them, but I reckon I enjoyed their company for as long as it lasted. I've been privileged to meet

many great people over the course of my life—charming, talented, entertaining people who knew me for a spell before moving on. They continued down their path, and I continued down my own. I like to think we both share fond memories of one another. Memories of a fleeting period in which we occupied each other's company, ever so briefly, before embarking towards the next stages of our respective lives. Fond, bittersweet memories of something lost. Your circle shrinks as your nostalgia grows. *C'est la vie*, or so I've been told.

It's certainly a pretty thought, though I'm not sure I believe it. Reflection tends to unravel rose-tinted notions. I can't help but think that maybe my circle was never that large to begin with. Maybe the "connections" were hardly connections at all. Maybe I foolishly became preoccupied with a three-digit number over meaningful conversations. On Snapchat, I specialized in photography and small talk rather than friendship and discussion. I could have asked about hopes or dreams or passions or interests or fears or traumas. I could have listened. Maybe that would have built something worth maintaining.

And what did my "friends" on Snapchat truly "lose" when our streak fizzled out? A daily low-effort selfie from yours truly.

I reckon that loss doesn't keep many of them up at night.

Maybe I should ask Kristin. After all, she's been in my life for the past 1,545 days. Four years of blurry, wordless pictures. Four years of impulsively outrunning the hourglass emoji.

Hell, I wonder if she even remembers me.



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