

Slamming the Screen Door: Dispatches From a Summer Unplugged, Part II
By Whitney Collins

(To recap, on June 1st, my two sons and I went screen-free for the summer. No smartphones, tablets, computers, Internet, or television for 70 days. I've been keeping a daily journal about our low-tech experiment. Here are a few excerpts. Any photos that may appear with this article were sent ahead in May. These excerpts were typed on an old Smith-Corona, then scanned as a PDF by my not-unplugged husband and sent along to The Weeklings.)

JUNE 9

Today we did the unthinkable. We bought a goldfinch feeder, a songbird feeder, a hummingbird feeder, and The Young Birder's Guide to Birds of North America. All of this plays into my plan of ensuring my sons are unable to impregnate anyone before the age of 47.

After a quick perusal of the guidebook, I find I'm desperate to attract both an Indigo Bunting and a Scarlet Tanager. However, with the boisterous murder of neighborhood crows, who descend on our yard every morning like bankers in black suits released from a commuter train, I'm fairly certain we best set our sights on a few lowly sparrows. The boys, like me, are instantly impatient.

"How long will it take for them to see our feeders?" "How will they know we have seed?" "Will we be here ALL DAY waiting for them?" "Where are they?" "THIS IS TAKING FOREVER I HATE BIRDS THEY ARE THE WORST ANIMAL EVER INVENTED!!"

I assure the kids that a new birdfeeder is like a new Chipotle--in high demand. Once word gets out that we've opened for business, the birds will, quite literally, flock to us. "They'll camp out here," I promise. "Every day at 10:50 a.m. there will be a line in that dogwood tree." The boys huff and puff. I try to busy them with bird calls.

Our book says the goldfinch emits a twittering "potato-chip, potato-chip!" The Carolina wren's common call is the quaint "teakettle, teakettle, teakettle!" The white-throated sparrow and the white-eyed vireo are hard to confuse; the former is known for its "Old Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody!" While the latter demands: "Quick! Get the beer check!" Lastly, the grassland-breeding dickcissel sings "dick dick dick dick ciss-cissel!" It is important not to mistake the dickcissel with Dan Issel--the greatest Kentucky basketball player to ever live. Neither should he be mixed up with Larry Bird.

We sit and listen very hard, as if someone is reading IKEA directions to us. All I can make out is a distant "shitpickle-shitpickle-shitpickle." George says he hears "chee-chee-cheese pizza!" Mark has filled his underpants with suet. I call it a day, but not before I hear what sounds like "keeth, keeth, keeth ri-CHARDS ri-CHARDS!"

I look up to the treetops. Somewhere up there is a bird who looks like he should have died 30 years ago, if not 40.

JUNE 11

This summer, it seems only fitting that I've invested in a potholder loom--that kitschy craft of the 1970s that prepared young hippies for the soul-crushing tedium of housework. So far, I've only made six potholders. My original plan was to weave enough to eventually stitch together and make a rug. However, the labor is proving more difficult than I anticipated, not to mention, the resulting potholders are extremely tiny once removed from the loom.

Let's be honest: what I actually have before me are a half dozen Amish maxi pads.

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Lately, I've been singing that LL Cool J song, "Going Back to Cali." But, since I've come to love writing, with a PEN, in my daily planner so much, I've had to change the lyrics:

I'm going back to iCal, iCal, iCal
I'm going back to iCal
Hmmm
I don't think so

JUNE 13

I'm noticing more things at stoplights, now that I don't have a phone to distract me. In those 60 seconds, that add up as the days and drives continue, I've seen bright violet thistles, as thick and sturdy as toilet brushes, thriving in the thin soil of bypass exits. I've seen cigarette butts, poured out by the hundreds near medians, their filters multiplying like synthetic maggots. I've seen children in vans watching movies. Parents texting while they drive. Teenagers riding bikes with phones pressed up to their ears.

I've noticed when starlings fly in synchronized clouds of black, it's as though a giant has sneezed a handful of pepper into the wind. I've noticed that when you stare at a red light for its entire duration, you'll see its ghost flash for miles afterward--green dot, green dot, green dot--like a subconscious command to keep on going. And I've noticed that when a creekbed cuts deep and meandering through the countryside, it's like God has dragged a lazy finger through the earth, doodling in the mud, while lost in a day-dream.

What the boys seem to notice the most is graffiti. "What's that?" they ask, rapt. "What does it mean?" The words are as bright and loud as cartoon sound effects, coming at us off the train trestles and overpasses like 3-D interjections. "It's like an art museum," I offer. "Only outside."

George uses our time in the car to brush up on his reading comprehension. "Tobacco Zone," he states proudly. "Beer. Phone Cards. Lottery Tickets. Snacks. Check Cashing. Adult Novel...Adult Novel Ties? What are Novel Ties?"

"Novelties," I correct. "They're like..." I pause, searching. "They're like shoehorns and stuff." George frowns and gives Tobacco Zone a skeptical stare as we drive by. "When you need a shoehorn," I say. "You need a shoehorn."

Another thing the boys have taken up observing is, or are, testicles. More specifically, whether or not the dogs we pass still have them. Rusty, our Boston Terrier, is getting neutered in August, so, understandably, we spend about 18 hours a day talking about the removal of testicles. "MOM!" George routinely yells. "I just saw a dog who still had them. There's another one!! And another one!!" Panic is an everyday component of our car rides. "MOM!! ALL THESE DOGS STILL HAVE THEIR INTESTINES!!" "Testicles," I correct.

It's like a demented game of I Spy. I see something you don't see and the color is balls.

At all these traffic stops, I've seen all these things. Cyclists almost crushed by delivery trucks. Raccoons rigid with rigor mortis. Queen Anne's Lace growing as tall as Dr. Seuss's truffula trees. I've seen the same man on the same porch in the same chair, wearing the same flannel shirt and napping in the same position for nearly a week. (Really. Someone should call someone.) But today, I noticed one of the more fascinating things to date. Today, I saw an elderly woman pushing an old wheeled walker down the side of the road. In its front basket was a large box of Depends. And she pushed those adult diapers as proudly as you'd stroll the Royal Baby. "Look!" was the expression on her face. "Look at my disposable undergarments! Aren't they precious? Aren't they getting big?"

For the rest of the day, all I could think about was that woman. That woman at the checkout counter. That woman, saying to the cashier. "No. No, thank you. I won't be needing a bag."

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The landline has been a valuable resource for lessons in etiquette. I'm trying to teach the kids to answer the phone and say, "Hello. This is the Collins house. George speaking." Turns out, telemarketers are so terrified by this that they hang up immediately, thinking they've stumbled into a scene from The Exorcist. I've had to teach the boys what a dial tone is, and that when someone is in the bathroom, you don't say "She can't come to the phone because she's in the bathroom." Instead, you say: "She's busy." "So, I lie?" George asks. "Yes," I say. "Exactly."

The other day, George took his first phone message. "Mom!" he said excitedly. "Someone called when you were outside. I told them you would call them back. Her name was Mrs...Mrs. Somebody."

JUNE 14

The first few days of technology withdrawal aren't pretty. They look something like a carp, flopping on a canoe dock, gasping. There's pacing and panic, boredom and belligerence. What do we do with our hands? What do we put in our back pocket? What are we supposed to look at? But, by the end of the second week, by the fourteenth day, something magical begins to occur. The carp, now dead, rises off the dock and into the air like a bright Chinese kite and takes flight. All at once, you can't quite recall what all the fuss was about. What was technology for again?

You look around and see that you still have your loved ones and a grand view of a sycamore from your bed and Trader Joe's black figs are in season and that suspicious-smelling minivan of yours still leaves a trail of bread-crumbs wherever it goes. And you've got your clumsy old phone the color of pantyhose and a newspaper on the kitchen table that tells you plenty of news you didn't even want to know. And you've got your embarrassing high school mixtapes with too much Bad Company on them. And you've got your coffee and your \$2.99 wine that tastes like it's at least \$4.75.

Granted, we have threatened hunger strikes in the past two weeks and also to bend back our toes until they snap. And, of course, we have already spent all of our birthday money at Hobby Town U.S.A. on an aircraft carrier model that we hastily glued together incorrectly and irreversibly. And, yes, we have tried to start kale from seed only to have it instantly shrivel into what appears to be chewing tobacco. And that goal we made to memorize all the Presidents' names by Independence Day has gone by the wayside once we confused all the Adamases and Bushes. And we do realize that this kite-flying sensation may only be temporary, like a recovering addict's pink cloud.

But maybe, just maybe, something remarkable is occurring. Maybe my children will learn to play WITH EACH OTHER and IN THE SUNSHINE for hours on end. Maybe we can actually begin to enjoy antiquated pursuits, such as applying for library cards and looking family members in the eye. Maybe I will introduce my children to the concept of postage stamps. Maybe doing nothing will start to be considered doing something.

I don't want to get ahead of myself, but it seems we are settling into the journey the way mountain climbers eventually stop noticing the pain of ascent and instead start taking in the view. Right now, from my new elevation, I see two brothers, shirtless in the grass, holding out their palms full of birdseed.

This seems nothing short of ridiculous and miraculous.

JUNE 16

We never leave the pool at the right time. Usually we wait until at least two of us are on the verge of sun blindness or leprosy or the sort of dehydration that hospitalizes rock stars. Only then do we limp home--our stomachs full of toxic blue popsicles and chlorinated water, our eyes as crimson as a bloodhound's, our hair dried up in mounds of shredded wheat like the sad, parched grass left behind by the lawnmower. "Well," we whisper through lips indistinguishable from slugs left to scald on an Alabama highway. "That sure was fun."

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I've decided to cheat a little. When it's raining or oppressively hot, I let the boys rent a commercial-free classic movie. I keep trying to suggest something monumental, like Citizen Kane or Ice Castles, but so far, every time this opportunity has presented itself, the boys pick The AristoCats.

In short, it's a Disney-animated tutorial on how an unemployed man should best go about marrying into money. Told by cats. The boys can't get enough of it. Which isn't a bad thing, I guess. It actually bodes very well for my assisted-living situation someday. At this rate, I'll be getting a private room and my own nurse.

Let's call him Antonio.

JUNE 17

I went to a vintage vinyl sale where all the records were going for two and three dollars a pop. I bought the kids a big stack: The Jungle Book, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass: The Brass Are Comin', Stereophonic's Sound Effects Volume 2, Stories and Songs About the Calendar, The Best of Bread, something called Tell Us a Story which features two insolent German children on its cover who are dressed in stiff, lace collars and appear capable of strangling the average governess. Selections from this album include: "Pop Goes the Weasel," "Lazy Mary," and "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie." Much to my delight, I was also able to get my hands on a copy of Duran Duran's Rio and Donovan's Greatest Hits. But the crowning glory? The Story of Star Wars. On a record. With a faded cover showcasing C-3PO and R2-D2.

"Look at what I brought you!!!" I run into the house, screaming. "COME AND SEE!!!" The kids rush into the kitchen, expecting LeBron James or a llama. "Records!" I shout. "OLD RECORDS!!!" The boys look at me the same way Dick Cheney looks at his daughter, Mary. Jesus Harrison Ford Christ, their faces say, How is it again that we are related? "I also brought you this!" I hold out a 99-cent pickling cucumber plant from Kmart. The boys slink back to their Legos. I feel a little bad, so I call out to them, trying to brighten the mood. "Hey! Maybe later we can clean some grout!"

JUNE 18

Sooner or later, an unplugged summer brain recalls unplugged summers past. Once off the Information Superhighway, away from the exhaust and exhaustion of traffic, the mind seeks out the old wheel ruts of Memory Lane. "I know!" your brain suggests. "I have an idea! Why don't you revisit all that you did, and all that was done to you, in all of the Junes-through-Augusts of yore!" "What?" you protest. "Why would I do that?" Your brain presses on. "What else are you doing? You know, besides weaving those godawful oven mitts."

Eventually, without tech to distract you, you'll surrender.

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In the summer of 2005, we lost a baby on our second anniversary while vacationing in Florida. The doctor in the urgent treatment clinic let me know by clapping my knees back together like he'd just finished an easy beach read.

"Yep. That's a miss," he said, putting his hands on his hips and delivering the news the same way a waiter lets you know they're out of the special. "That's what you call a miss."

I remember trying to get my breath while I dressed myself, but it kept escaping me, like the name of someone I'd only heard of but had never met. I remember leaving the insurance card with Robbie, then pushing my way out of the clinic the way someone swims to the surface when they've underestimated how much air it will take to get to the top. I know, once outside, I'll cry the sort of cry that happens when love is pulled from your body. I go and sit in our closed car in the parking lot, in the sweltering summer heat, and wonder how quickly I can suffocate. A dark part of me wants to be found by the horrible doctor when it's too late for him to help me. A punishment for his easy way of telling the truth.

When we get back to the condominium, there, in broad daylight by the dumpster, is a bobcat, loping around the landscaping like it's the most natural thing ever. I go upstairs and wait for what is ending to end. After the sun sets, Robbie and I go sit on the boardwalk. Out over the Atlantic, the moon rises like a communion host, casting a path of light as bright as the sun. "What's that?" Robbie asks. "Where?" I squint. At the water's edge, we see a giant black form. In the windless night, I hear the soft push of sand. It's a sea turtle, the size of a table for two, heading back into the ocean. She has just laid her eggs.

Back inside, I curl on the couch while what ends, ends. I take Advil after Advil, which do nothing to dull the pain of what feels like guilt. As soon as I'd found out I was pregnant, I'd wished for a son. I feel certain this was a girl, made to feel unwelcome.

Ina Garten is on the Food Network. Her hands fold a pie crust the way you tuck in a child. She speaks as softly as a prayer. I cry myself to sleep before the meal is completed.

The next day, Robbie takes me on a boat ride. The motor is too loud to make conversation, but I can't remember the words anyway. At lunch, I force myself to eat. It feels like throwing bread into a well.

I don't know it yet, but exactly one year later, we will have George. When he is born, I'll clap my hands together like I've just finished the most wonderful book ever written. I'll cry the sort of cry that happens when love is pulled from your body and handed back to you. I will pull up the pail from the well and it will overflow.

JUNE 21

Today was the summer solstice--the longest day of the year. It lived up to its name. The boys woke up with dog, who is up with his bladder, which is astronomically aligned with the Alaskan sunrise. Some might call this fuckme o' clock. Pancakes were demanded at an hour when most college students are ordering last call. While I'm cleaning the kitchen, Mark asks if I'll go outside and push him on the swing. Pushing a child on a swing tends to be one of the more interminable parenting tasks. Children can be pushed on a swing for hours on end. Which means, thank goodness for that trusty cell phone! Unless you don't have a cell phone. Then it's just push, wait, push, wait, push, wait, push, wait, push, wait, push, wait, push, wait.

It's a lot like giving birth. Or constipation. Or so I hear.

After swinging, the boys want a snack. Which I make, then I clean the kitchen, then Mark wants to go back on the swing. Lather, rinse, repeat for the day. Snack, kitchen, swing, snack, kitchen, swing, snack, kitchen, swing.

Remember, this is the longest day of the year, so when it actually ends, Mark has armpit hair and his G.E.D. But something starts to happen on the 72nd installment of this triptych; I START TO LIKE IT. Pushing Mark on the swing starts to become a sort of meditation-- the push, wait, push, wait, push, wait has a rhythm I begin to resonate with. The same way I eventually get into running or rocking a baby or driving 900 miles or snapping beans or power-washing a driveway. It becomes a song. It becomes like breathing. When I push Mark away, it's an inhalation. When he returns to me, I exhale.

JUNE 22

GOOOOOOOOLLLLLLLDDDDDDFFFIIIIIIIIIINNNNCCHHHHHH!!!!!! Goldfinchgoldfinch-goldfinchgoldfinchgoldfinch!!!!!! We have a GOLDFINCH!!! Right there!! On the birdfeeder! As vibrant as a Meyer lemon, eating upside-down just as the guidebook promised. MY GOD!!!! I haven't read Donna Tartt's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name, but I feel sure as shit this is its exact plot.

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It's like the goddam Ed Sullivan show in 1964--the beetles have arrived. We have fireflies; junebugs; Japanese beetles; giant, black, shiny pincer-ed terrors the size of a boy's polished wingtip; and small brown beetles by the hundreds that collect by the porch light like a spilled bag of pinto beans. The boys capture them, all sorts, and ask to put them in jars. I can't help but think of all the photographs I've taken of the kids. Thousands of them. Orchestrated, candid, filtered, unfiltered, posted to Facebook, used as profile pictures, uploaded, downloaded, emailed, and mailed out by the hundreds in December on holiday cards. All these captured moments, preciousness trapped in jar.

This summer, despite the Poloroid we bought and that the boys momentarily delighted in (It's so fast!!!), I have yet to say "Say cheese!" I've just given up and opened the jar. Our only visual memories of this summer will be a few over-exposed, matchbook-size crappy mini Poloroids. They feature objects that look not unlike the blinding orbs of ghost hunters. Other than that, the only proof this summer really happened will be what we recall in our heads. An urban--er, SUB-urban--legend.

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Sometimes, I run into folks I haven't seen all summer. "OH CRAP!!!" they say. "It's YOU. How are you surviving? Screen free and all?!" I'm never sure if their concern comes from a place of empathy ("I would have such a hard time going unplugged!") or sympathy ("You poor, poor addict. How have you not been committed yet?").

I always assure them that things are going much better than we expected. "Amazingly," I say, "We are still alive! It's actually been pretty good!" Then they usually stare at me for a while, performing a visual lie-detector test, before asking what we have been doing with our time without technology. "Ohhh, you know," I say. "Playing outside a lot. Building Legos. Driving around town and looking for dogs that still have their balls." Here, I like to pull up my butter churn and place a piece of buckwheat between my teeth before sliding a lazy thumb under the strap of my dungarees. "That sort of stuff."

JUNE 25

Summer flings aren't always the stuff movies are made of. Sometimes, the devastatingly handsome one you've fallen for in May of 199? will end up being, under the sad, white sky of August of that same year, just devastated. Sometimes, the one you've fallen for will, himself, fall to his knees one night in your closet, sobbing into your dirty laundry and stuffing a terrycloth washcloth into his mouth so he can scream. Sometimes, that will happen, while you stand there petrified that he might not tell you what is wrong. Or, worse yet, what is.

Has he robbed a bank? Has he seen his mother thrown against a wall? Has he drowned something? A sack of cats? A baby? You will stand there, watching him rage, buried in towels, until you find enough sense to bend down and touch his shoulder as if it's a land mine. "What is it?" you will ask in a voice you didn't know you possessed. "Tell me." Eventually, he will look up from the laundry, his face mottled and furious, his eyes like spilled ink. "I'm a woman," he will say. "Inside, at least. I want to be a woman."

You will stand there, silent, braiding your responses together in your mind, over and over again, as if you're braiding a rope to escape. "It's okay." "You can be one." "You mean like fashionably or anatomically?" "Sorry. Come again?" "Ohhhhh shiiiiittt." "I love you."

You will still be braiding these responses together when he will lunge, up from the closet floor, and press you through the hanging clothes and up against the closet wall, the hangers dancing in your face, and tell you that if you say a word to anyone, he will kill himself. That if you leave him, he will kill himself.

Then, when his tears have vanished as quickly as desert dew, and when the ink in his eyes has dried like signatures on a contract, and when his face has changed back from devastated to devastating, he will act as if nothing has occurred. He will continue on for the rest of the summer as if his nightmare was your dream. Something you just made up to scare yourself. That is when the panic attacks will start. At first, just in crowded places, but eventually, everywhere: restaurants, on long highways, when you're getting your hair cut, safe in your own bed. Because, come to think of it, you're not sure if he's going to kill himself if you do all the things he said not to do. Or if he's going to kill you.

About six years later, when the panic attacks have mellowed into a manageable form of general apprehension--six years after you broke up with him the same way a zookeeper backs out of the lion's cage, you will run into him. He'll be with his wife and kids. He'll smile like a seasoned meteorologist; he'll look through you like you're a two-way mirror. "How are you?" he'll ask. And again, you'll start braiding together responses in your mind, as if you're braiding a rope to escape. "Fine," you'll say, and then everyone will go their separate ways, as you realize he did kill something. Himself. Or rather: her.

Some summer flings end up being like that. And they're the ones you remember in the blank slate of a summer gone dark.

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Tonight, as I was reading, I turned over my book to look at the author photo, and I instinctively touched it with two fingers, then spread my fingers apart in an attempt to zoom in on the author's face. Twenty-five days in, and it's still there. A drug in my bloodstream.

JULY 2

At the grocery today, I bought the boys a giant pack of fireworks, five of which are huge cylinders, the size of economy cans of Comet. I'm well aware that these will ultimately prove disappointing, despite packaging that suggests otherwise, but I'll let this be a lesson in false advertising.

"Rose Blossom. Pyro Tower. Silver Streak." George reads aloud. "Ooohh! Golden Shower! I love Golden Showers!" Mark joins in. "Yay! Golden Shower! Me too! Me too! I love Golden Showers!"

George reads the packaging more closely. "Made. In. China. Geez! Is everything made in China?"

"It seems that way," I say. "You know, in some factories in the world, children have to work. It's called child labor."

"REALLY?!" George asks fascinated. "Did kids make these fireworks?"

"I dunno," I say. "Maybe."

"Aw, man," George pouts. "I never get to do anything fun." He sits quiet in the backseat for a while, envying the child laborers. Their days at the firework factory must be so awesome, without the pesky interference of parents or extremities.

"But not everything is made in China," I say. "Like our maple syrup. That was made in Canada."

George perks up. "Oh yeah! I remember something else made in Canada! That blue shampoo! That shampoo that you bought me when I had ringworm! That's made there!"

George settles into a reverie, his mind no doubt drawing a revised map of the world, consisting only of Canada and China and icons of pancakes and fungal infections and gunpowder-dusted toddlers. Our social studies lesson complete, we drive home in silence in great anticipation of our Golden Shower.

JULY 5

Without screens, by 8:00 every evening it looks as though the gestapo have ransacked our house, as though we've been forced to evacuate mid-meal. The dishwasher is splayed open, food has been left in various stages of consumption on the table and the houseflies have staked a claim. The kitchen faucet has been left on, toilets are in need of flushing. The counter displays onion skins and junk mail and sunscreen and toys impatiently awaiting battery insertion. One child plays the piano with both palms, as if beating dust from a bison's back. The other child has built a blanket maze for the dog, also known as a trap. A maze so unnerving it causes dogs to defecate on pillows. How was your day? Robbie asks upon returning home. I point to an entire tortilla chip embedded in my toenail, the drawing of a saddle, in black Sharpie, on my thigh. Had we three been allowed screen time today, maybe we'd all look more presentable, but we'd also be glazed and cranky, unable to express our love, our hunger. We'd have no projects of the loom or Lego variety to flaunt. Instead, we'd be curt and crass, ready to peel our skins off from hours of hypnotism. We'd be limp and mad as electric eels, unenticed by sunshine or toys or the printed word. Instead, the house is wrecked in lieu of us. I go out into the backyard to lie flat on the concrete pad, which is still as hot as an Arizona mesa. The dog, finally free from his maze, comes out to entertain, galloping about the lawn in mad figure eights, like a miniature chestnut barrel racer. He's smiling, rounding each turn at a 45-degree angle, his hind legs almost faster than his front, until he flips like a NASCAR driver--two, three, four, five times, coming to a panting heap in the grass, delighted, eyes closed. Then he gets his breath and flips over on his back, his spotted brown and white and pink belly facing what's left of the sun, like a Neopolitan popsicle left to melt. He falls fast into a dog dream, his paws flipping and flitting as if on marionette strings. I forgive him for shitting on my pillow. And the universe rewards my mercy by nodding to the orchestra and tapping on the podium. On cue, the cicadas start in with their song. A thousand shiny nickels scraped across a screen door.