

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

How this 70-day, screen-free summer came to pass had a lot to do with how this previous winter refused to. Around Columbus Day of 2013, these hydrangea-blue Kentucky skies took it upon themselves to darken to a shade of gray somewhere between that of Hanes sweatshirt and mausoleum, only to stay unchanged till Memorial Day of 2014.

Meteorologically jammed between the Midwest and South, our ill-fated border state saw the wrath of both lake-effect snow and Dixie ice storms for close to half a year. While winter storms Atlas through Zephyr pounded down our doors like tenacious salesmen selling lifetime supplies of arctic blasts and new-and-improved polar vortices, my kids and I became experts at eBay searches, Facebook updates, Minecraft survival mode, and YouTube channel surfing. What else was there to do? The snow that fell was repeatedly the consistency of desert sand, making snowmen nothing more than a corncob pipe dream.

By Presidents' Day, our side street was a permanently encrusted luge track, an orthopedic surgeon's cash cow. By Valentine's, our county had seen enough school closings to give Mother Teresa a prescription drug problem. And by St. Patrick's Day, most of us looked and communicated like walruses--moving across the packed snow by launching our blubber forward and grunting our hellos. When weather reporters start considering the name "Dick" for every passing squall, and when pouring salt onto the driveway feels like pouring salt into a wound, your only chance for survival is to plug in something screened. A T.V. A laptop. A desktop. A VCR. An iPad. A Kindle. An old Atari or even an overhead projector will suffice. Because, as all shut-ins know, that while the addictive blue glow of a screen may drain you of your hemoglobin, it will ultimately keep you from homicide.

That was how we kept on keepin' on during Persephone's longest banishment to date: with True Detective and Pinterest and SpongeBob and Disney Junior. And sadly--terrifyingly, even--after six straight months as such, my sallow children took to clutching their devices the way shipwreck survivors cling to fiberglass wreckage. I swore aloud that at the sign of the last pitiful mayfly there'd be no screens in this house. That come June 1st, not a creature comfort would stir. Not even a mousepad.

* * * * *

To be fair, The Great Unplugging wasn't just inspired by ice-glazed roadways and glazed-eyed children. It also had a lot to do with me. I'm a junkie, a user, an addict. I suffer from "phantom phone vibrate." When a push notification says "Jump!" I ask "How high?" I'm overconnected for work and kids and diversions and to-dos. I've made myself ever-available, like a hothouse tomato, and the result is a way of communicating that's far from organic and closer to cheap and mass-produced, pink and mealy.

Any season for any reason, there I am. On, online, on call. I'm not a surgeon, but I can be reached like one. I'm not an anchorwoman, but I can tell you the world news forward and back. I don't particularly like cats, but I have seen ALL their videos. And to what end? What's the point? Of all this Internet? Of all these apps? Of all this television and 24-hour news? And especially: what is the point of all this godforsaken phone? This bar of soap-shaped, 21st-century pager that's washing my brain? Is it to be easily reached should one of my kids fall ill? Or is it to take and retake all of the Buzzfeed quizzes?

To illustrate this technological predicament more completely, I give you a day in the life:

It begins around 6:00 a.m., not with the sun, but with my smartphone-- which lives under my pillow like a wish or a love letter and stirs more than a newborn throughout the night. Its electronic xylophone alarm lets me know it's time to rise and shine. A status doesn't update itself, you know. The early tweet gets the worm.

By the time I've walked to the bathroom, I've checked the forecast and the Doppler radar. By the time I've washed my face, I've checked the kids' cafeteria menu and my email and my texts and my voicemail and my iCalendar. Should my toothpaste happen to land in the sink in the shape of Richard Nixon's profile, rest assured I will Twitter and Facebook that.

All this before waking my sons.

At breakfast, we have television with our toast. Is it a non-uniform day? Let me text another mother. What time is baseball? Let me check my deleted messages. Did you get tickets for the school play? Let me download the newsletter and upload the order form. Can I buy this app on iTunes? Well, only if you buy your brother one, too. I need him occupied while I print out this PDF and change the printer ink and send the link to your immunization record and the yearbook order and confirm these dental appointments online and send in my articles that are due, and OH LOOK!! Someone just sent me a link to NATURE'S FUNNIEST PHOTO BOMBS EVER PART III!!!

Once my work day finally begins, freelance assignments are interrupted with Wiki inquiries and Google searches and, primarily, Facebook--that black hole of "so blessed"-ness and humble bragging and political bickering and baby pics, both human and sloth. Here is where I spend most of my time between word processing and Web research: at Mark Zuckerberg's neverending rave, with all the other 24-hour party people. That mosh pit where snark and smarm go toe to toe and hand in hand. Where irresistible little red notifications pop up like roses and make me blush, stroking an ego I didn't know I had. A decade ago, I had no idea how much I liked to be "liked." I had no idea how friendless I was. Now, here I am, and it's all pink champagne and ice. I'm just a prisoner of my own handheld device. I can log out any time I like, but can I ever really leave?

I'd continue with this day-in-the-life summary, but I've only gotten to about 10:45 a.m. I think you get the picture. If not, I'll Instagram it.

* * * * *

But there's a final deciding factor to do all of this. Amid the ceaseless dings of texts and bings of emails and zings of tags and brrrings of voicemails, my children are growing, stretching out into these lanky beings the same way dandelions unfurl after a good rain, like bean sprouts captured on time-lapse video. Their curls are getting coarser, their voices hoarser. Their cheeks, both above and below, are less padded. Now, they show less interest in being held, and more in being heard. Amid the infinite stream of messages that I can never, ever, keep up with (I shovel while it snows and it snows while I shovel), amid that, I look up to stare at these beautiful children and wonder aloud in time-worn cliché at least ten times a day: "Where does the time go?"

Where?

Well. You know your wireless bill? Where it has an accumulated minutes section? That's where the time goes. To Verizon. Or, if you made a shitty contract decision like I did, AT&T.

That's where it goes. To those assholes. You knew they were capable of highway robbery, but did you also know kidnapping?

* * * * *

You have to prepare for The Great Unplugging in the same way you dreadfully anticipate life support or a trip to Disney World. There are bases to cover, goodbyes to be said, paperwork to fill out, liquor to hoard. You must also prepare to be called a variety of things: "brave," "bold," "an idealist," "a realist," "a horrible mother," "a great mother," "a cold-hearted bitch," "an insane Luddite," "completely fucking nuts," "Charlize Theron," and "Abe Froman, Sausage King of Chicago."

(I may have lied about one of those.)

You must work ahead and turn in assignments early, or, if possible, take a leave from things you can take a leave from. Maybe not work, but committees and Deadliest Catch. You will have to tell folks over and over again that you are going off the grid; they won't believe you the twelfth and thirteenth times you tell them. And you will need to replace.

I replaced my cell phone with a landline, my voicemail with an answering machine. The flashlight and calculator and weather and clock and Contacts apps were replaced with actual flashlights and calculators and weather radios and clocks and address books. (Do not rely on your memory for your friends' phone numbers; you must write them down.) I set up autoreplies for my emails and texts and voicemails, alerting people to call me on my home phone if they needed me. And then I bought an electric typewriter. And then I bought a lot of typewriter ribbon. (It's amazing what you can find online. Before you go offline, that is.) And then, prepared in the ways I best knew how, I had several massive panic attacks before shutting off the television at 11:59 p.m. on May 31st during Saturday Night Live. Ooh. That smarts.

And then everything was dark. And silent. The plug had been pulled.

* * * * *

JUNE 1

12:16 a.m. It's only been sixteen minutes since I went dark, and I already miss Guy Fieri. His woodpecker hair, his elbows splayed out, his knees bent in slalom stance to cram one Monte Cristo after another into his shepherd's piehole the same way cartoon elephants are crammed into elevators. I'm not ashamed to admit that Guy has been my lullaby for a long time now. Every night, I fall asleep to mustard dripping from his goatee, and I sleep better, knowing I am cardiovascularly superior.

I wake to take the dog out. The sky is the faintest blue with the palest pink clouds, as if the heavens are throwing a baby shower for twins. Over in the neighbor's majestic, 80-foot bur oak, the neighborhood crows are harassing the neighborhood hawk. Interestingly, a hawk's distress call sounds like that wooden instrument you were never called on to play during the holiday program in elementary school.

I have hung an old painting of a cow on the wall where the kitchen television used to be. I try to turn on the cow at least six times before making coffee. Typical Kentuckian. When the kids come downstairs, they take their places at the table and stare at the cow, as if Satan has joined us for breakfast. "There's no more technology," George, eight, finally announces smugly. George has been preparing for months. Mark, three, stares at the cow painting as if it has now changed from Satan and into a pile of mulch. His expression is unmoving, though his mind is working overtime. "Oh," he says. "Oh." I try to change the subject by using a shrill, sing-song voice. The same tone likely used by Hitler's housekeeper. "WHO WANTS YUMMY PANCAKES?"

Miracle of miracles. The oversized children I bore in this undersized womb are playing together. Outside. I realize the novelty of this, like a Daughtry or Eeyore tattoo, should wear off in about 18 minutes.

Ope. Make that 12.

Since we now subscribe to the paper, the kids are fascinated with the Sunday comics. I explain to them that when their father and I were kids, Saturday mornings were for television cartoons and Sunday mornings were for full-color newspaper cartoons. They look at me, blinkless, as if to say: "Tell us, Mother. Tell us more about the mastodons."

For what it's worth, Garfield is still encouraging Jon to find some railroad tracks for his afternoon nap.

Day One of screen-free goes well. Muscles aren't sore yet. Reality hasn't set in. The next two days will likely be horrific. The good news is that I'm getting to spend lots of time with the family. Today was 63 hours long.

JUNE 2

At breakfast on the second day, after once again repeatedly trying to turn on that frigid cow, I suggest some radio. The kids listen to Queen while they stare down at their Rice Krispies, still unsure of what has befallen them. I call this "The Breakfast of We Are the Champions."

After Robbie is off to work, and Mark is off to a preschool that is still making up snow days, George stares at me forlornly while I do the Jumble. "Can we go to a movie today?" I look outside. "Isn't that only for rainy days?" I remind him. George shrugs. "Well. It sure looks like rain to me."

I search the newspaper for movie times. Apparently, newspapers no longer publish these. I try our phone book, which is on the Kate Moss diet. The only cinema number listed connects me to a regional corporate office in the Greater Ohio Valley. "Don't most early movies just start around 11:00-ish?" I ask George. He nods, just to get us out of the house.

We get lucky. It seems the Amish gods are smiling down on us. The first movie starts at 11:20, giving us time for lunch. Normally, across from my son at a fast food lunch, I'd alternate between glancing at him and glancing at my phone in the name of what-ifs. What if somebody has tried to contact me? What if I've forgotten something and someone has reminded me of it via text? What if someone has emailed me an offer I can't refuse?

But today I do nothing but get lost in George's eyes. They're the color of Caribbean snorkeling waters, and every time a bright idea enters his mind, it's reflected in his irises like the flash of a sand shark. How many bright ideas have I missed in the name of what-ifs? I feel a sudden, visceral hatred for Steve Jobs. "George?" I ask. "Have you noticed I haven't been on my phone? Does it seem different?" George lifts his shoulders. "Eh. Not really." I don't know if this is excellent or horrible news. Sensing a moment of weakness he asks, "Can I have your pickle?" "Of course," I say, while a whole school of sand sharks go by.

The crows end up injuring one of their own today. We see him limping, dragging a wing behind the crepe myrtle that died from exposure this winter. Our non-native mimosa tree is also near death--only a handful of its branches sport feathery, new green fronds, most are stripped of their bark and buds as if struck by lightning. The February windchill has left the uppermost part of the tree brittle and hollow. This is how the winter left all of us who survived: permanently scarred. Should you ask the mimosa, he will say, "Yes. I, too, am addicted to House Hunters International."

After the kids are asleep, Robbie retreats to the den, where the only screen in the house remains, to watch something like Pawn Stars or his 435th viewing of The Big Lebowski. Robbie is exempt from our summer experiment--and for good reason. He doesn't have a Twitter account or a Facebook profile, he's never darkened the door of Instagram or Pinterest, he doesn't recklessly Google. On his phone, he has one recreational app; it's called "Dictionary." For him, technology holds absolutely no entertainment value--it's solely a work tool. Like a stapler or plow or pick axe. I would no more suggest he give up his evening television than I would deny a sled dog a caribou knuckle. "Are you watching Finding Bigfoot?" I ask, crouched behind the door. "Please don't watch one episode of Finding Bigfoot until August." I pause, thinking this seems extreme. "Unless they find him," I add. "Then by all means."

JUNE 3

Sleep has been sublime since The Great Unplugging. The bedroom is without its television and cable box. There's no laptop charging under the bed. No iPhone under the pillow. The entire upstairs is silent, as if someone has cut the switch to an overhead fluorescent, one you didn't realize was making such a horrendous hum until it was gone. I have my first flying dream since seventh grade. I'm high above a party, almost in the clouds, and I'm having a grand time despite the fact that I can't figure out how to get down.

Only three days in, and I have no idea how I'll get back on Facebook.

This morning, the hawk is high on a branch, his feathered thighs like bunched colonial knickers, his scrawny legs like yellow tights. The crows are far in the distance, several streets over. It appears we have a cease fire on our hands. Up in the battered mimosa, a squirrel is clucking like mad hen at the cat; the dog is squinting into the sun, happier than a Florida retiree. We have a male and female cardinal couple who live in our honeysuckle hedge. Female cardinals aren't particularly flamboyant feather-wise, but from observation, appear to be quite vocal and bossy. I'd be, too, if my husband was driving around town in the cherry-red sportscar like he was the state bird or something. Over in the massive crack in our concrete pad, the ants are swarming around a dead earthworm; they're trying to drag it into their underworld. "I'm bored," George says. I go inside and get the sugar bowl and hand it to him, then I point to the ants. "Go nuts," I say.

I don't miss technology too much so far, other than the inability to Google. I like knowing the answers to questions immediately. Part of this stems from a traumatic childhood experience. When I was about 13, my family spent the better part of one Christmas vacation trying to recall the name of a movie we'd seen a couple of months prior at a hotel. "You know, the one where the guy wore that thingy," I'd say. "Yeah," my brother would add. "With that actress that was in that other movie we saw one time." "I think I know which movie you mean," my mom would nod. "The one where they all got crazy in the middle part," my dad would contribute. Even my little sister got caught up in the infuriating game of trying to recall the movie's

title. "The one with the one?" she'd chime in. "YES!!!!" we'd all scream in unison, on the verge of being institutionalized. "THAT ONE!!! THAT ONE!!!" This went on for weeks. We began to look like zombies. Our hands shook as we passed the butter. Life had very little meaning any more. If something didn't give soon, who knew what would happen. My mother, always the thinker, hid the knives. I curled into the fetal position in my closet and mumbled every movie I'd ever seen. Finally, early one winter morning at 3:00 a.m., I shot from bed the way Martha Stewart does when she remembers it's Brass Polishing Day. "JOHNNY DANGEROUSLY!!!!!!!!!" I ran screaming into my parents' bedroom, throwing off their covers and shaking them as though the house was burning to the ground. "JOHNNY DANGEROUSLY!!!!!" I paraded through the house as if I'd discovered the cure for Alzheimer's. "JOHHHHNNNNYYYYY DANGEROOOUUUUSSSSLLYYYYYYY!!!!!!!!!"

In brief, I don't like having something on the tip of my tongue. You never know if or when it may come to you. Like that man who had the hiccups for 87 years, you may DIE having spent your entire life playing the waiting game. So, really: THANK GOD FOR GOOGLE.

That said, here are some things I am currently dying to Google but can't:

- ferns poisonous to dogs?
- Justin Timberlake shoe size?
- who dey?
- Fran Drescher real voice?
- more Aquarians alcoholics?
- Name of guy who Don Henley banged in Boys of Summer?
- How big of an actual shithole Holiday World?
- Phil Collins divorce settlement?
- Phil Collins hair transplant?
- Phil Collins dead?
- where buy kitty cat bank with sneaky paw reaches coin off fish platter?
- symptoms monkey pox
- varieties roadside clover
- what fuck nutritional yeast?
- brown recluse eggs (Google image)
- electrolysis just one hair/whisker?
- cast Johnny Dangerously

JUNE 4

What haunts you? The things you said? The things you didn't say? The barbecue you wolfed down for dinner? Because, alone in a dark bedroom, with no TV to distract you, these are the uninvited guests that will show up to your pity party. You can turn them away, but they'll just come around back back, with their cups extended, thirsty. Will you remember the time you were five, alone at the apartment complex playground and your dog went limp and you had to drag him home? Will you regret never writing down all your grandmother's recipes? Will you recall all the times, in startling clarity, that you said "yes" when what you meant was "hell no"? Will you realize you are sorry for reaching out to your birth father or for taking 33 years to do so? Should you have minored in Modern Dance? I don't know. These are the questions only you can answer.

(More dispatches to come in late July and August. These notes were typed on a tempermental Smith Corona and then sent to The Weeklings. The accompanying photographs were sent prior to unplugging. Thanks for reading! Go turn on a cow!)