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POWER | MAR. 31, 2020

# I Am Caroline Calloway. During quarantine I am relying more than ever on media to transport me.

By Caroline Calloway



The author (left) with Natalie Beach. Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway



I took three photos together with Natalie in the park that day, all polaroids. I'm always taking photos of myself because I'm a vapid bitch. I don't know how

Let's pretend it is *Before Times*. Your biggest problem is the sapphic plight of two white girls you'll never meet. Taylor Swift remains unvindicated by the release of the unedited phone call with Kanye West, and you still really hate me.

I am—*actually*—Caroline Calloway. But I wasn't always. Like lots of artists, I changed my name.

Like Katheryn Hudson (Katy Perry) or Reginald Dwight (Elton John) or John Stephens (John Legend) or Jennifer Anastassakis (Jennifer Anniston) or Thomas Williams (Tennessee Williams) or Elizabeth Grant (Lana del Rey) or Jonathan Leibowitz (Jon Stewart) or Ralph Lifshitz (Ralph Lauren) or Frances Gumm (Judy Garland) or Rachel Markle (Meghan Markle) or Eric Bishop (Jamie Foxx) or Natalie Hershlag (Natalie Portman) or Onika Miraj (Nicki Minaj) or William Pitt (Brad Pitt) or Elizabeth Fey (Tina Fey) or Edda von Heemstra (Audrey Hepburn) or Peter Gene Hernandez (Bruno Mars) or Destiny Hope Cyrus (Miley Cyrus) or Olivia Cockburn (Olivia Wilde) or David Henry Thoreau (Henry David Thoreau).

I changed my name from Caroline Calloway Gotschall to Caroline *Gotschall Calloway*. I thought that *Caroline Calloway* would look better on the covers of books. If you build a life around an identity that springs from your own imagination, is it ever inauthentic?

I don't know what, as a child, made me believe that being a famous memoirist was going to solve all my problems since all anyone ever told me was to pick a different goal. But I latched onto a vision of myself in a ball gown, with flowers in my hair, inside a castle, inside a story, inside a true story. I wanted that, or a little room at the top of a steep staircase where I could sleep until my death. Being awake was painful for me. Depression dropped like a mist around me when I was ten. It all seems so misguided now, but I came to believe that if I made it out of the mossy parking lots of my DC suburb, where only pets and grandparents died, and wrote a best-selling book about my life, and delighted others, I might have a few minutes of happiness, someday, at some point.

I hate the paragraph about childhood when a narrator does a subtle flex on what they read as a kid. It's like, *Okay. We get it. You were a precocious ten-year-old who loved Dostoyevsky with a pure heart!* I liked delicious trash. Adventure pulp! Fantasy books about royal witches who left their cozy kingdoms on QUESTS and formed unlikely friendships with animals that could talk. I thumbed through the high-brow stuff, too, but only to keep up appearances with my parents. It impressed them. I had no friends my own age.





The author's father with a random baby. Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

People can be born into material wealth and emotional poverty. I was. I may have attended private schools, but I inherited a brain from my father that skewed towards suicide. He was an insane and sullen genius—like Rain Man but bipolar—and I inherited only a sliver of his smarts and sicknesses. I wouldn't take a helix more.

My Dad got into to Phillips Exeter Academy when he was in eighth grade *as a sophomore*—the first in his family to go. Then he got into Harvard, early decision, *again as a sophomore*—again the first in his family to go. He was 20 when he applied to law school. My grandparents were farmers from Nebraska and North Carolina whose genes swirled together to produce a generation of three shockingly luminous and unstable children. My aunt: One of the first girls at Exeter, then Harvard, then one of the first girls at Columbia Business School. My uncle: First in the family at Andover, then first in the family Yale. At which point he had to drop out because he decided the FBI had implanted a radio chip in his molar. Full-blown schizophrenia. My uncle works the register at Home Depot now.

My Dad was a hoarder who loved cleaning supplies and a recluse unless something random flipped the light switch of his anger, like *lint*, in which case he tore through the house in a black terror. When he was “in one of his moods,” my Mom would tell me to go to my room and I would listen to her

muffled screams. For the rest of the day, my pet rabbit would be skittish and difficult to catch. Stuff he liked: expensive German vacuum cleaners, the art of every civilization, and elite institutions including the ones he did not attend. In the end it wasn't the physical mess, but the emotional chaos that caused the divorce.

I am torn between two ways of looking at the world. On one hand, my life could have been worse. On the other, growing up with my Dad's instability was frightening. And I think we should take people seriously when they are host to a brain that wants to kill them.



From left to right: The author's father gifting her a turquoise Miele vacuum cleaner; The author's father with her at Phillips Andover Academy (which neither of them attended); And the author's father at Yale University (which neither of them attended) photographed by—you guessed it—the random baby. Photos: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

**“I am torn between two ways of looking at the world. On one hand, my life could have been worse. On the other, growing up with my Dad's mental illness was frightening. And I think we should take people seriously when they are host to a brain that wants to kill them.”**

My first claim to fame was being the youngest person in the history of humankind to have both knee-caps removed. My second claim to fame was saying one line to Daniel Craig in the Hollywood flop *The Invasion* with Nicole Kidman: “Here, sir. I found this on the roof.” Somebody fetch my Oscar for best supporting role! On the five-hour drives from our suburb in Virginia to auditions in New York, I'd ask my Mom: “What do you think I'll be famous for?” I hated acting. But I loved fame? Instagram had not been invented yet. Going online sounded like a telephone fucking a fax machine.

Boarding school is where I finally began to live the kind of story I wanted to tell.

Phillips Exeter Academy is a prep school in New England where they let you do everything (Astronomy! Bird-watching! Woodblock print-making!) except: have sex, do drugs, or leave.

Exeter is where I first squinted at details like the Downtown-Abbey call-buttons in the infirmary where students could ring for a bedside nurse and thought: *Why isn't this whole fucking world on TV?*

Shows about rich teens, like *The OC* and *Gossip Girl*, were already established hits, but East Coast boarding school through the prism of my imagination seemed like it could ignite a market that had never been tapped. It would be Old World splendor and tweedy academia and text messages. Ghanaian princes and South Korean heiresses and Boston Brahmins. In their spare time these kids illustrated children's books and founded non-profits and lobbied successfully to change laws and got invited to try-out for Olympic teams for obscure sports and solved passages of Ancient Greek that had stumped college professors for centuries. And yeah. Okay. *Sure*. All of it was pageantry for college applications! But still.

Something about these privileged, oddball overachievers spoke to the deepest part of me. The aesthetics set me on fucking fire creatively speaking. Traditions in secret societies and school ties with navy blazers and empty classrooms awash in bars of afternoon light filtered through stained glass windows? All of it made me feel whatever Monet felt at the gardens of Giverny and whatever Gauguin felt on the islands of Tahiti that made them say: *The way I see this world is what I must make the world see.*

I know it's deeply uncool. I wish I could be interested in something else. But I like what I like.

In the winter the campus crystalized with lilac frost and I became best friends with the most popular girl in school, Kelsey, who was a dead ringer for Blake Lively. When grass burst through the lawns in a time-lapse and everyone graduated, I stumbled upon the financial model that would become the foundation for my Instagram. I found it on Martha's Vineyard, surrounded by hydrangea bushes and shingled cottages and bros. My boyfriend had invited me and all his friends from the squash team to spend the summer at his family home. The boys were obsessed with Tucker Max's fratty sexcapades and I was obsessed with Tucker Max's business plan: Give away humorous stories about your life for free on the internet *and then leverage that audience to get a book deal!*

Sitting on pale Atlantic beaches, I thumbed to the Acknowledgements section of Tucker's books to see who his literary agent was. I wrote down the name *Byrd Leavell* in the margins of my sandy diary as I made to-do lists for my gap year. The next summer, these pages were replaced with to-do lists for NYU freshman year, but I still thought about the name Byrd Leavell from time to time.





The author (right) with her father at her high school graduation at Phillips Exeter Academy. Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

Still do. Although now I think about my memories with him and not just his name. I think about Natalie even more. My therapist's office is right next to the NYU Creative Writing House, so I walk past the brownstone where we met three times a week. I used to weave through the students chatting on the sidewalk, holding books, throwing their heads back in laughter on the stoop, and think about how Natalie and I must have looked at so many moments there. But ever since her article came out I have to walk on the opposite side of the street because sometimes the students stop me for selfies and I'm usually running late. Just like I was that first day of class.

Our writing workshop was at the top of a creaky staircase, down the hall and to the right. The space had been a sunny bedroom at one point, with built-in shelving and pre-war molding, but when I burst in ten minutes late all I clocked was a dry-erase board already covered with writing, a single empty plastic conference chair, and a college seminar that had begun ten minutes ago. I had no idea who the professor was. I had applied to this "Creative Nonfiction Masterclass" on a lark. I needed a break from all the Romanesque and Rococo PowerPoints I was staring at in dim lecture halls for no reason other than Art History seemed like kind of subject the *character* of Caroline Calloway would major in.

It turned out our professor was well-known. Not in the Hollywood way I wanted to be famous, but David Lipsky was famous in a niche, downtown-literary-scene way that nonetheless impressed me. He had taken a road-trip with David Foster Wallace in the American mid-West and published a popular book about it, which then became a popular movie, *The End of the Tour*, starring Jesse Eisenberg as our professor. Elizabeth Wurtzel (who had also dated David Foster Wallace) had lived with David Lipsky while she wrote *More, Now, Again: A Memoir of Addiction*, a book about the Cambridge-educated *enfant terrible's* addiction to prescription amphetamines. In the Acknowledgements she thanks Lipsky for room and board during her twin processes of writing and recovery. You can find out a lot about an author's interior world if you read the oft overlooked Acknowledgements.

If Lipsky had ever tried to touch me, *which he didn't*, I would have been horrified. But I spent months discussing my crush on him with Natalie. In her essay for *The Cut*, she chose—out of all our Lipsky conversations—to describe a moment in which she fantasized about him with me. However the memories that stand out most to me when she showed me how to be disgusted with him and with myself. Once, our professor told me that I would grow up to be a beautiful woman if I didn't "plump up." His advice struck me as grim, but avuncular and well-intentioned and above all else: true. The world is nicer to thin women. I was shocked when I told Natalie what seemed like praise (Lipsky thinks I'm beautiful!) and she spat-out, livid: "*Caroline, never let anyone, ESPECIALLY A MAN, tell you that your worth is connected to your weight.*"

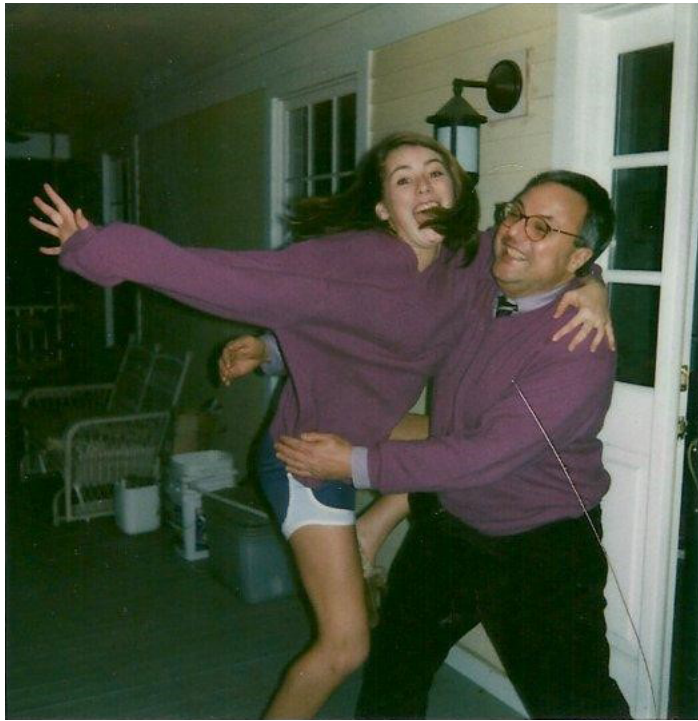
On the last day of class, Natalie pointed out that Lipsky's pinky finger on his left hand was so deformed it was almost missing, and she choked with laughter when I admitted that I'd never noticed before because I'd been too busy idealizing him.

On the first day of class, the professor whose name I did not know and whose fingers I assumed numbered ten, asked us to go around the room and name our favorite creative nonfiction authors as an icebreaker.

A girl with freckles and pale green eyes smirked shyly that she had a "love-hate" relationship with "DFW." The classroom chuckled. I didn't get it. I realized in a flash of panic that the only books I had ever loved were not only lowbrow, but fiction. I mumbled that I liked the *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius and the autobiographical *nugae* of Catullus. At no point did I think: *Someday I will be on the phone with a fact checker from New York Magazine confirming that I was ten minutes late today.*

A few weeks into term Natalie submitted an essay for class that mentioned she was from New Haven and that her mother worked for Yale. Hoping for an in at—really—any college more prestigious than NYU, I invited her back to my apartment after class.

I didn't live in student housing like the other freshman, because over the summer I had read a tabloid that reported that Dakota Fanning—also part of the incoming NYU Class of 2015—would be renting her own place separate from the dorms. But even as my father spent extravagantly on me I still felt like he owed me. What I wanted was for him to meet my emotional needs and what I got was a studio downtown and a bunch of cashmere hand-me-downs.



The author with her father in one of his hand-me-down cashmere sweaters.  
Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

My turquoise home in the West Village made it look like I was a girl who didn't spend every hour rifling through to-do lists scrawled on Ivy League brochures. My turquoise home in the West Village was a trap! I curated a girly bohemian chaos because it made me seem more self-actualized than I was. Externally, I was president of the NYU CAS freshman class, interning at the Met, and taking a course and a half over the normal course-load like Hermione Granger without the Time-Turner. Inside I was hollowed out with pain.

That first afternoon we hung out after class I showed Natalie my Yale Box, which is what I called my vagina then. Really, my Yale Box was a self-motivational shoebox stuffed with trinkets I had collected, magpie-like, from fancy places. I understood that owning such a box automatically distanced me from the kind of heroine I wanted to be. Real ingenues are either born fluent in extreme wealth or arrived at such a fluency from abject poverty *by means that were unplanned*. Like marrying rich by accident or being model-scouted at the local mall. Middle-class and upper-middle class girls like myself were supposed to be grateful we didn't have it worse.

**“But even as my father spent extravagantly on me I still felt like he owed me. What I wanted was for him to meet my emotional needs and what I got was a studio downtown and a bunch of cashmere hand-me-downs.”**

I had a lot of internalized shame around the fact that I was a woman and I wanted to be part of the one-percent. I felt like a gold-digger even though I didn't want to marry rich. I felt conniving for desiring money even though I wanted to earn it myself. I felt shallow for coveting elite degrees even though the advantages of elite degrees are real. But for a moment, handing Natalie matchboxes from Mory's and vintage postcards of Handsome Dan, I felt the warmth of sharing the jagged edges of my soul with someone who didn't recoil at my needs. Unprompted, Natalie told me stories about sex that I'm not going to repeat, but she made it clear that she couldn't see how beautiful she was. Wanting to unburden her of a little shame in the same way she had just unburdened me, I said, “You're beautiful.” And I meant it. It wasn't a lie.

But most of the other things I told her were! I was kind of a liar then.

There's no other way to put this: *In my early twenties I was a shitty friend*. I was unreliable, unreachable; pre-occupied. I lied! Even more than I cared to realize, since so often I was lying not on purpose, but by omission. I was good in an emergency because my life was one long emergency and I saw other people's as a chance to pick up the slack on the workaday friend-duties I sucked at. When Natalie told me to my face that I was “the sort of friend who would forget your birthday, but would find a kidney for you on the black market,” I took it as a compliment. I thought she was accepting that I was not the right friend to meet some of her needs, but that I would do anything, drop anything, to help her in pinch.

Seven years later Natalie explained in her essay for *The Cut* that she meant I was someone she could write about. There are lots of people whose birthdays I forget, but I still remember hers. Every year on December 11th I think about texting her and don't.





The author (left) with David Lipsky (middle) and Natalie (right). Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

Going back to my apartment after class to smoke and “shoot the shit” as Natalie called it, like an upbeat cowboy, became our routine. I always paid for our weed and maybe it was because of this that Natalie offered me my first Adderall. When I asked for more she helped me begin buying them from her roommate’s sketchy boyfriend. I don’t blame her for the addiction that this unspooled. There was no way either of us could have known. And when I blew through Natalie’s roommate’s sketchy boyfriend’s supply, THIS is how easy it was finding Adderall in downtown Manhattan without her.

I opened the Yelp app.

I typed in Adderall.

I organized results by least stars first.

I tapped on a review that went like, This guy is a terrible doctor! He doesn’t care about your problems! He just prescribes pills!

And I was like, *Bingo*.

Hey Yelp, sponsor me?

Two years zoomed by silver-quick on an increasing amount of amphetamine salts. Cambridge rejected me twice. Yale: Twice. Did you know there is a maximum amount of times you can apply to Yale before they reject your application for life? I did and that number is four. And then, finally, I got into Cambridge on the third time around. If Natalie were editing this essay, she would cut the detail I’m about to tell you next because it’s just too unbelievable. The night I tore open my acceptance letter, I saw a shooting star.

That spring I dropped out of NYU, created an Instagram account, and bought forty thousand fake followers. To buy Instagram followers today—in 2020—is to make a morally bankrupt choice. But to buy Instagram followers in 2013 was a different kind of decision.

Nowadays the value of Instagram followers has appreciated into a social currency that can be cashed in for luxury trips or designer clothes or cooler friends. But in the spring and then summer of 2013 the app was a thing only hip, coastal teens used to share photos with each other. Few real celebrities even had accounts. That the *New York Times* would one day break news on the platform in tandem with the paper itself and their official website was unthinkable. Buying Instagram followers then would be like buying TikTok views today—without the existing framework of sponsored content. In 2013 FTC laws about disclosing hashtag ads didn’t exist. In 2013 FTC laws about disclosing hashtag ads wouldn’t exist for **ANOTHER THREE YEARS!**

Sure, you could buy Tik Tok views, but how would you leverage that into any type of long-term career or monetary value?

I wouldn't buy Instagram followers today and don't.

But I would do it again, then, in a heartbeat.

No one knew where this app was going. I took a chance. I made a guess. I got it right. I don't think I should be punished for that.

The summer before my freshman year at Cambridge (I had to start all over again as a freshman because Cambridge is so snobby that they only accept transfer credits from Oxford; *love that for them*) Natalie and I took a trip to Sicily.

Over the last 8 years Natalie and I have worked together twice. For periods of 3 months each time; 6 months total. The second time we wrote together was after I had already become famous when we put together my book proposal, and the first time we wrote together was before I was famous—in Sicily.

On this trip we co-wrote Instagram captions for an audience of no one.

Natalie said she only "edited" these captions. But I think she deserves credit for co-writing them. And who consumed these sentences we collaborated on?

Forty thousand bots!

In *I Was Caroline Calloway*, Natalie cites all the pictures I took on our trip as a subtle implication that I'm the shallow, ditzy, annoying Insta-stereotype. But when I apologized to her in dusty Sicilian streets for asking her to take so many photos of me so we could get 'the shot' for 'the gram,' Natalie brushed off my self-loathing with pep-talks. "Does a fratty investment banker apologize for checking his email on vacation? *NO!* This is your work. You're working." Even today when I duck away from fun in my real life so I can document it for my job, I re-use Natalie's analogy. "Sorry, guys, but pretend I'm a finance bro and the markets just opened in Hong Kong!"

Perhaps the only dignity Natalie paid me in her whole essay—the only moment that my character is not just redeemable but likable—is when she attributes to me the statement that: "Women shouldn't have to apologize." Natalie taught me that.

As Natalie would later write: "The trip had bigger problems, though."

After buying all the fake followers, I had to pay about \$40 per post in order to buy fake likes to keep up appearances. I could do this for maybe another month or two, but not indefinitely. The current iteration of my business model was unsustainable.

My solution? I took all the cash I had ever received for birthdays or Christmases or working at the Falls Church farmer's market and invested about \$750 into buying a new account with just over 150,000 real followers. Like all non-celebrity accounts on Instagram in 2013, it was a fashion account that was a gallery of curated images. Basically a Pinterest board in Instagram format. I don't remember what the original name of the account was, but I rebranded as @briteandbeautiful because I figured I might as well do things my own way if I was going to have to spend so much time on this account in order to support my real creative passion: @carolinecalloway. I tried to migrate real followers from @briteandbeautiful to @carolinecalloway, but the ads I ran for my quirky memoir account on my fashion account rarely stuck the landing. It seemed like the overlap between people who wanted to fill their timelines with rhinestone covered prom dresses and experimental autobiography was slim. But by selling ads on my fashion account @briteandbeautiful to other fashion accounts I could use that income to buy fake likes for @carolinecalloway and maintain the account until I could figure out how to grow organically.

I just searched for @briteandbeautiful on Instagram to see what's become of it and it's a teeth whitening mobile clinic in the U.K. with 490 followers. In 2015 Instagram changed the terms of the app to allow for abandoned usernames to be re-used after they went inactive for over a year. I suppose whoever eventually bought @briteandbeautiful from me rebranded just as I once had, and someone else snapped up the username after they let it go. It doesn't matter anyways, since I'm a fanatic for receipts.

When 'strong winds' stranded us on a volcanic island in the Mediterranean, I told Natalie I charged her flight home to New York and mine on to Venice with my Dad's credit card because I knew she would feel less guilty this way. And because I didn't trust her. I felt like if she knew about the fake followers, she would tell someone, someday.

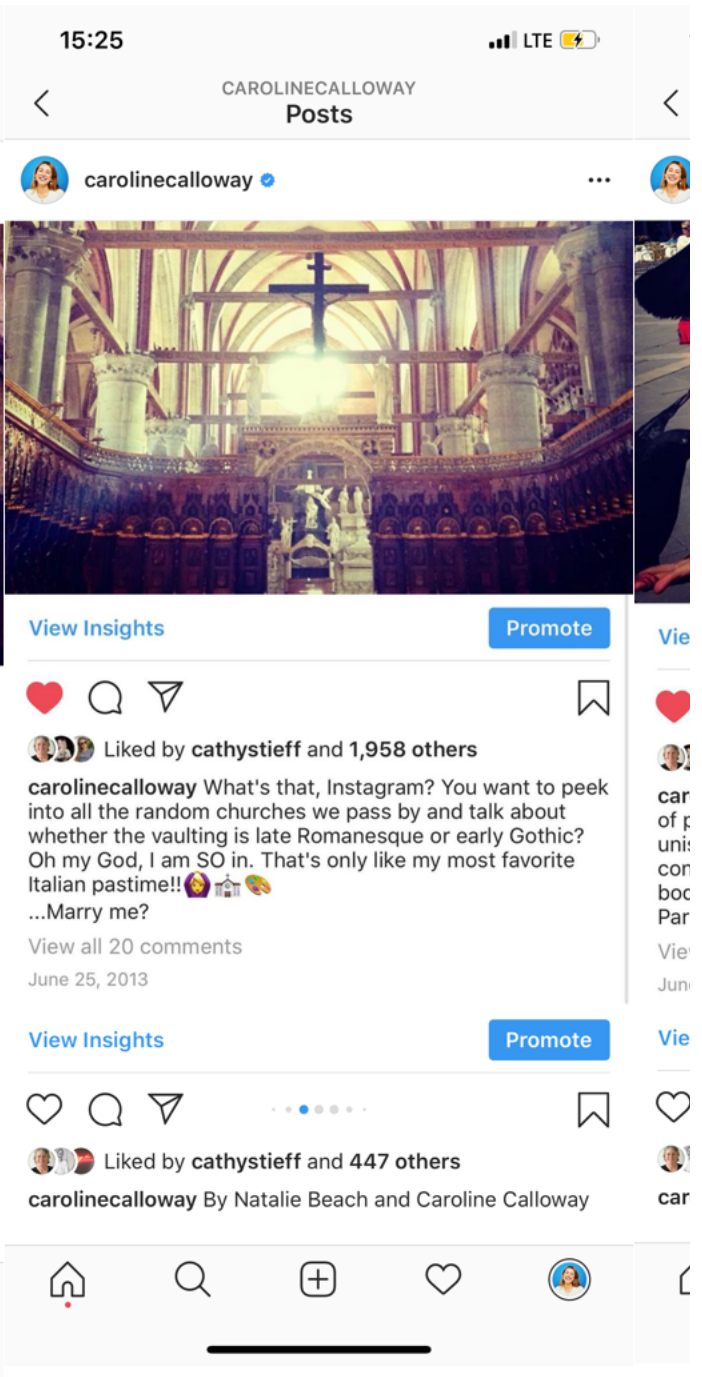
After a month in Venice bouncing between the palaces of Italian princes—a story you'll have to buy *AND WE WERE LIKE* to read!—I flew to California to visit my best friend from boarding school, Kelsey. And what's absolutely fucking priceless is that if you look at the trajectory of my Instagram that summer, you can see that the style of digital storytelling that I developed with Natalie only took off when I started writing with Kelsey.

A normal Instagram post in 2013 was aerial shot of cappuccino art, heavily filtered, bordered in white, and paired with a caption like *I kid you fucking not: "#Valencia."* HASHTAG VALENCIA. With Natalie we wrote culturally informative jokes addressed to the reader, on average about one or two sentences long. With Kelsey I began posting captions that were five paragraphs long, introducing narrative devices to my social media posts such as reoccurring characters, dialogue, and cliff-hangers. I didn't pay Kelsey because she didn't think of writing as a career, but Natalie did and so I tried to honor that.

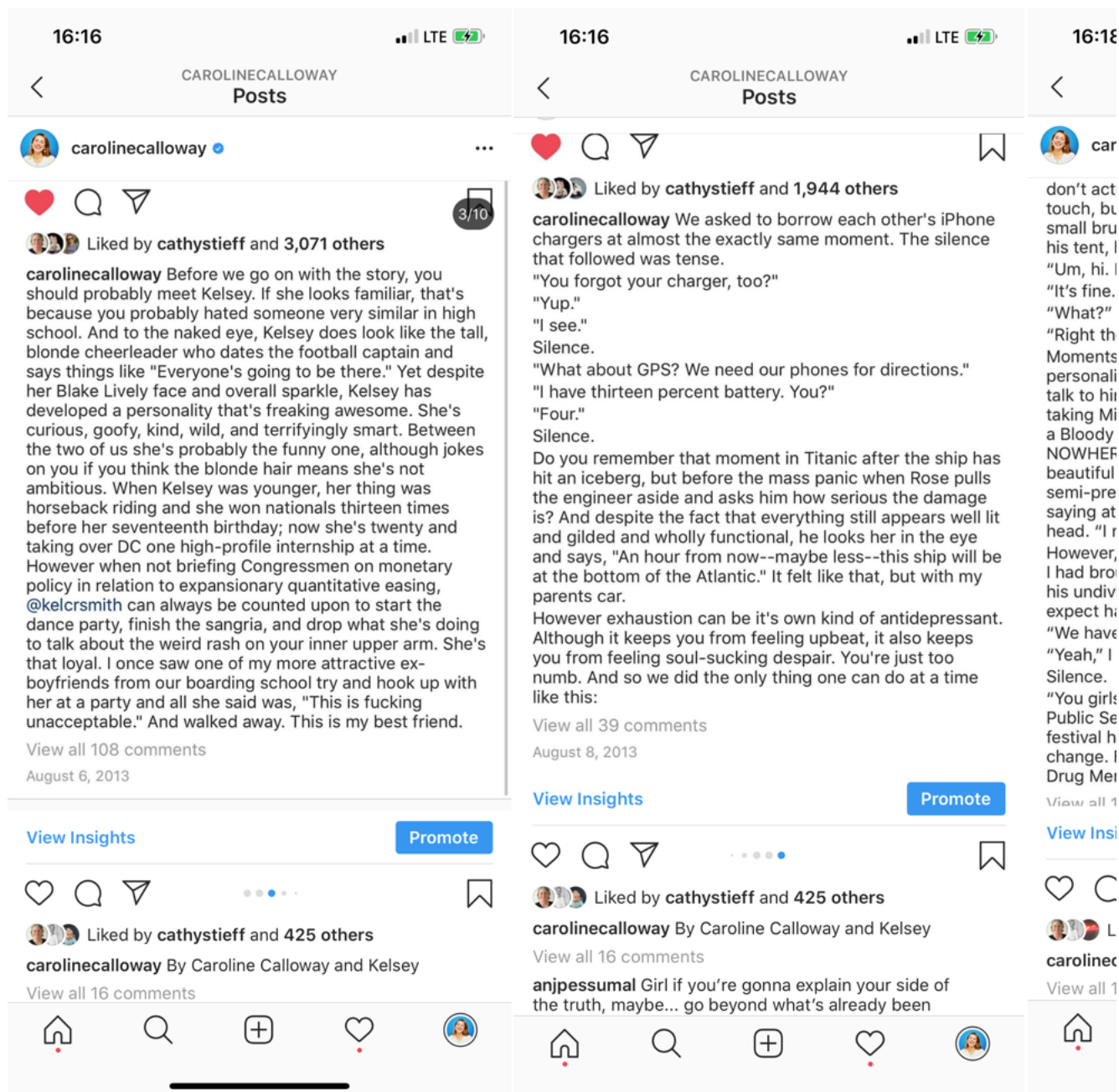
When Natalie suggested counting the transatlantic flight I paid for as her first pay check I was secretly relieved since I had dipped into revenue from @briteandbeautiful to pay for it in the first place and I was barely breaking a profit big enough to keep @carolinecalloway populated with likes until I came up with a long-term plan.

Fact: I hired two of my closest friends as I scaled my small business, but I only paid one of them. And the world is more outraged over the one I paid than the one with whom I made even more progress and didn't compensate at all.





Three captions by Caroline Calloway and Natalie Beach written during the summer of 2013. Photos: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway



Three captions by Caroline Calloway and Kelsey, whose last name the author is withholding because she wants to shield Kelsey from all this fucking online summer of 2013. Photos: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

What hit me like a chair over the head as I read Natalie's Cut essay for the first time was how much the way she described me reminded me of how I would have described Kelsey during those years. I think a lot of us have friendships in our early twenties, when our self-esteem is low, that result in idolizing and catering to the friends we perceive as having it all. *And then silently resenting them for it.* Kelsey was tan, thin, beautiful, KIND, and so rich that at her family's California house we jogged from the stables to the kitchen for Diet Cokes because it would take too long if we only walked.

Summer ended. Fall began. I left for Cambridge. My Dad agreed to pay my rent in New York until one day, out of the blue, he changed his mind. The problem was I had already promised Natalie she could live there while I was in England.

I would later find out that paying for my education put my Dad into hundreds of thousands of dollars of credit card debt. All I knew at the time was that he was going crazy. Our phone conversations were grounded in reality less and less. His claims: My Mom was watching him. Her new husband was watching him. He was broke. The price of gold had dropped. I couldn't tell what was true and what was not. And my biggest concern was that my name was on the lease and rent was due in two weeks.

**"My Dad agreed to pay my rent in New York until one day, out of the blue, he changed his mind. The problem was I had already promised Natalie she could live there while I was in England."**

I delivered the bad news to Natalie over Skype in my new dorm room, mumbling something about the price of gold and declining family finances. Six years later I would read about this Skype conversation first in Natalie's essay and then later that week in the *New York Times*:

#### *How Do You Know If A Friend Needs Help?*

*When someone says things like, "she called with a change of plans, something about the value of gold having dropped and her family being low on money," as Ms. Beach describes an interaction with Ms. Calloway, that's the unusual language of a person in some kind of trouble.*

I was in trouble because of the ever-escalating amount of prescription speed I was popping on the dl. And my Dad was in trouble, too, for reasons I don't fully understand. It's hard to understand someone else's mental illness looking from the outside in.



So I found a sub-letter. A friend of a friend. And then that girl bailed last minute as friends of friends often do. Squeezing my new boyfriend's hand off camera as he rubbed my back, I Skyped Natalie *again* to ask if she could help me get my apartment turned around ASAP for Airbnb guests.

If you are a freshman girl reading this in your college dorm room, some advice: *Don't let the fact that you are a freshman girl reading this in your college dorm room stop you from hiring the employees you need because you're not "important" or "successful" enough yet.* What I needed was the confidence to retain a personal assistant like I do now and what I had was access to a limited quantity of best friends, only one of whom worked odd jobs: Natalie.

I had two friends in New York and she was the only one who needed the money. Lauren Singer was already on her path to being named one of *Forbes 30 Under 30*, busy building the zero-waste personal brand [@trashisfortossers](#) that would become her environment-saving multimillion-dollar retail-shop [@packagefreeshop](#). Kelsey was at college in North Carolina. I had no idea that Natalie had been sexually assaulted the night before. Natalie had no idea that my Dad was getting worse. To a large extent I had no idea that my Dad was getting worse. I just knew I had a financial emergency in front of me that needed to be solved. And so Natalie and I sat there on different sides of a Skype in little puffs of our own tragedies, looking at one another's pixelated faces.

On a different Skype call Natalie would later tell me in detail about her sexual assault and—even on amphetamines—I knew it was not the right time to burden her with my feelings. I waited until my computer made that little boop-de-boop goodbye-sound to burst into tears. There are parts about her assault that she left out and had every right to. I want to write that I later confided in her about my Dad as she confided in me, but I don't want to imply that she knew about his situation and left that out of her essay on purpose. I want to protect her from the kind of public shaming and character assassination to which she made me so vulnerable.

Natalie cleaned my apartment. I began charging an exorbitant nightly rate on Airbnb for my well-decorated turquoise West Village studio. I made rent on time.

Some secrets I understand why Natalie kept to herself. But one detail in particular that she withheld as a narrator still puzzles me. I know she didn't forget because, over the years, she brought it up again and again during our fights to humiliate me—no matter how many times I apologized. That day she chewed her egg salad on one side of her mouth because her other cheek was bruised from being punched without her consent during sex by an older man, there was period blood on my sheets. I paid her to clean it up. This vanished in her essay.

She included so many other moments where I seem abusive and she seems abused by me. Why not this one?

I didn't realize my sheets were stained with period blood when I asked her to change them. By the time I re-started my freshman year at Cambridge I had been taking Adderall for so many years and had grown so thin that I only got my period a couple times a year. It was a rare. And I packed for England in such a rush. That fall I simply woke up one day and realized, *Oh fuck it's time to move to England now!*

My ambition was as thick as ever, but all the speed was making the execution of it grow increasingly sloppy and helter-skelter. That summer in Italy and California was the first summer I didn't make to-do lists. I spent the last weeks of September lying naked in my bed, listening to lush tree branches slap gently against my downtown windows, staring at the ceiling, high.

The thing about addiction, like falling asleep or in love, is that you can never pinpoint the moment when you slide from one state of being into the next. It just happens. It just does. And then you're gone.

When I arrived in Cambridge in October I was dependent pills—maybe not addicted yet, but so close. As I rode my bike over cobble stones to class and smiled at the spires whizzing by, I thought that everything about my life was about to change forever for the better.

My life was about to change forever, but in sinister ways interlaced with fame, money, and death that I didn't even know enough about to fear.

The story of every online creator is the story of their online persona—and the person who built it. During my freshman fall at Cambridge I bought another ten thousand Instagram followers. No reason this time. I was just bored in the library one night.

I excelled at the aspect of Art History that asked students to look at a work of art and dismantle with verbal precision the emotional and creative engines that made it tick. I was bad at handing in essays on time and, uh, everything else.

Turns out expecting to be good at Art History because you are deeply moved by art is like becoming a butcher because you get a kick out of pets! That part in Natalie's essay when she writes that I "wept through *Cyrano de Bergerac* as if it were a religious experience?" We were the last ones to leave the Broadway theatre that night. I was shaking, sobbing. What I didn't want to do was talk about how similar the play we just watched was to the plot playing out between us in real time. But I also didn't want to be alone with my hot, syrupy feelings and so I asked her if she wanted to grab some Shake Shack, my treat? In silence I watched her watching me—first against the backdrop of gilded theatre boxes and chandeliers, and then the neon darkness of Times Square, and then a fluorescent burger joint. "You look like you've been shot out of a cannon," she smiled wryly, reaching for a fry. I turned to look at myself in the black glass, clocking the nearest mirror intuitively the way a spy cases exit routes. I stared at my streaked mascara. She laughed. I laughed. Suddenly, it was giggle fit! New York City was full of urban spires soaring vertically into the night, but we were a happy pin-prick of two best friends belly-laughing over cheeseburgers in midtown! It wasn't until I was going through photos for this essay that I realized the only time Natalie ever laughed her hardest around me was when I was experiencing some degree of public embarrassment, however minor. At the time I thought her pattern of behavior held as much significance as a baby laughing at funny faces. I didn't think it was deeper.

████████████████████



The author (right) with Natalie. The author (left) with Natalie. Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

Stars, balls, river bridges! Stonewalls, scarves, black tie! Fumbling with bike locks, library books, brass doorknobs in mittens! The way red leaves and then snowbanks and then apple-blossoms tumble from wet black branches in walled gardens in British seasons. I have to tread lightly and lyrically in this paragraph because Flatiron Books owns everything that happened to me at Cambridge. And one of the biggest misconceptions about my life is that I'm not still under contract for that fucking memoir.



Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

When school ended for the summer I moved to Sweden with my boyfriend. And it was there in the fern-filled, fjord-filled forests primordial of rural Scandinavia that I began building an organic audience on Instagram to finally balance out all my bots.

First, I fattened up my following on [@briteandbeautiful](#) by organizing a bunch of *free* shout-outs with other fashion accounts. "Follow xyz," I would post. And then *that* fashion account would tell *their* followers to follow *me*. All at an arranged time. Do you get it? Moving on!

Then I posted in-feed on [@briteandbeautiful](#) that I was selling the account, stoked a bidding war, and made several thousand dollars via PayPal from a stranger I was still certain would scam me. They did not.

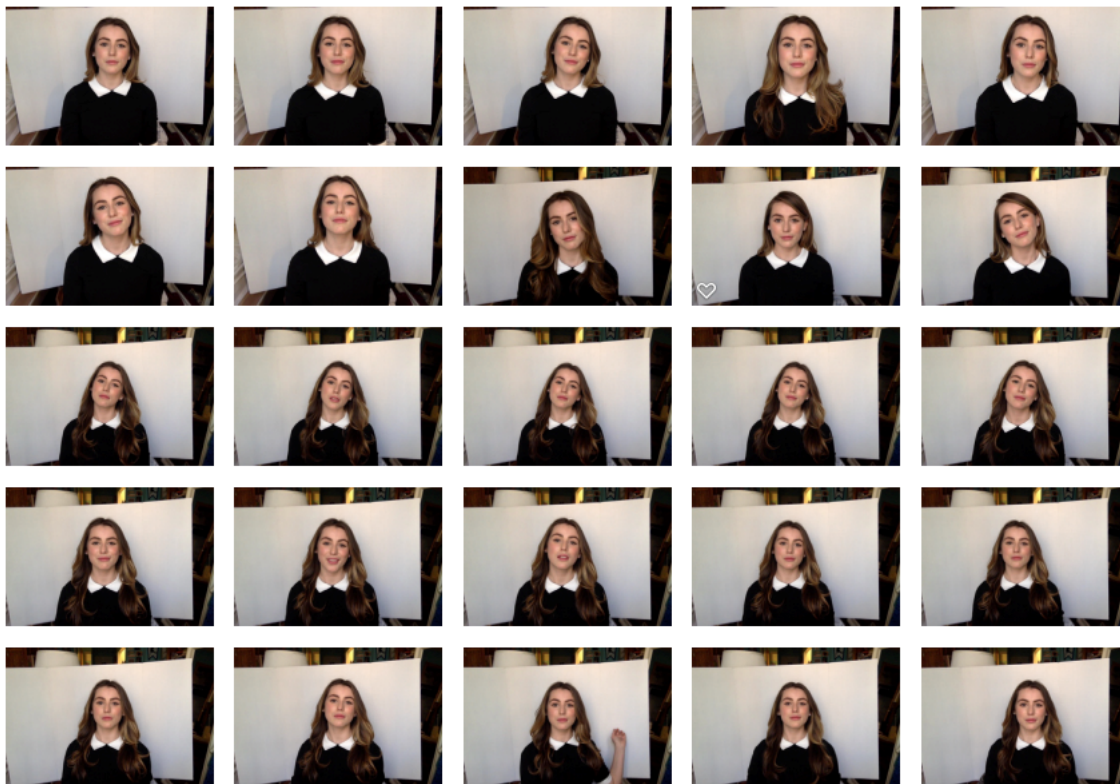


Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

With that profit of a couple grand I began buying ads for [@carolinecalloway](#). I knew I wanted not just followers, but *readers*. And I knew I wanted not just readers, but *readers that were predisposed to become obsessed with what they read*. So I had the idea to buy ads from book-fandoms.

*Harry Potter, The Hunger Games, The Fault in Our Stars*—anything popular during the summer of 2014 that had a strong female lead and a culty teenage fanbase was my fucking wheelhouse.

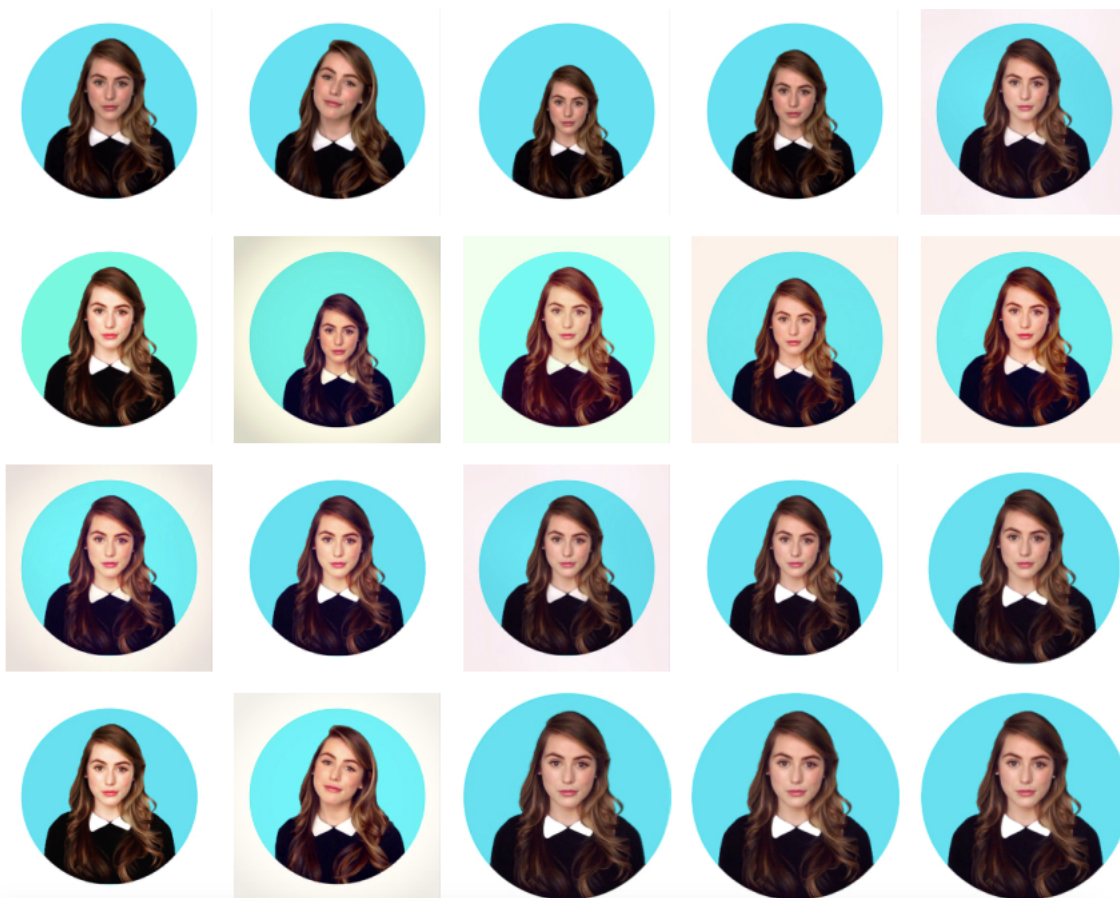


Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

**“I knew I wanted not just followers, but *readers*. And I knew I wanted not just readers, but *readers who were pre-disposed to become obsessed with what they read.*”**

I’m most well known in terms of Instagram trends for anticipating the shift towards long, confessional captions. But, privately, when I look back over my use of Instagram, I am most impressed with the way I anticipated targeted sponsored content. In 2014, major *couture maisons*, like Dior and Gucci



wouldn't even *deign* to buy posts from bloggers yet! Gucci didn't even have an Instagram!

I was able to buy posts at outrageous prices. My go-to pitch when I contacted via Kik the strangers who ran book-fandom accounts was to propose buying a "package" of 10 shout-outs for \$50. That's \$5 a post! The account owners thought I was throwing my money away.

And, to be honest, I was concerned about the same thing. Buying an Instagram ad for \$5 a post may sound today like my grandma explaining that soda pop once cost a nickel. But at the time there was risk. I didn't know if these people would actually post on behalf once I sent them \$50 via Paypal. I didn't know what the future of Instagram would be. I still wanted to hedge my investment. Or at least increase my return on each ad.

So that summer I also bought *another 60,000 fake followers* to get myself over the 100k mark, bringing my total number of followers, all bots, to 110k. After that purchase six years ago during the summer of 2014 I never bought Instagram followers again. I didn't need to! I started getting about triple the return on followers from each ad I ran for myself. Real followers started pouring in by the tens—and, then hundreds—of thousands.

In tandem with the ad campaigns I was running for [@carolinecalloway](#), I also had to be constantly updating [@carolinecalloway](#) with original content. An ad didn't work as well if the last time I had posted was a week ago. To make the spon-con I was purchasing for myself as sticky and retentive and effective as possible I needed to be posting twice, thrice, *even quintuple daily*. And so under this absolutely bonkers deadline for cranking out short stories every goddamn waking hour of the day, I finished my self-education on being an author of creative nonfiction.



Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

Alone, I made the Cambridge captions and the advertising campaign that became the foundation of my personal brand and online community, respectively.

Alone, I finally gave myself permission to imitate the YA series I loved as a child (adventure pulp!) and to shake that style up in a stainless steel martini mixer with ice, coyness, and quirky yet cerebral jokes!

Alone, I opened, clicked out of, and didn't reply to Natalie's emails.

She was begging me to go back to co-writing captions with her. But I knew that if I remained dependent on her writing voice I would never find my own.

People who say that this is a story of two white girls vying for authorship over a handful of Instagram captions that read like bad fan fiction of bad fan fiction are missing the point. Although you're right that the stuff I wrote in college is cringey. Give me a break! I was a freshman! An old freshman. But still! What if the world judged *your* short stories from college? *Yikes*, right? Mine just happen to have been posted online in service of building an audience on Instagram.

I'm not super proud of the writing quality in the Cambridge Captions, but FUCK was the girl who wrote them was putting herself out there and trying her best. And one literary device still impresses me all these years later: I froze time without anyone noticing. All those stories about Cambridge take span in a time of only about ten days, but I kept it so high energy that readers never caught on! I knew I needed to save the bulk of my best stories for publishers.

**"People who say that this is a story of two white girls vying for authorship over a handful of Instagram captions that read like bad fan fiction of bad fan fiction are missing the point."**

That summer after my first year at Cambridge my account grew by a quarter million real followers due to the ad campaigns for [@carolinecalloway](#) I bought with the profits from selling [@briteandbeautiful](#) combined with the original content I was generating about my life in England. Are you still tracking me? I know this must be a lot for anyone without a background in social media or older than forty.

Anyways. A quarter of a million new, *real* followers! I had reached the goal I had set myself for contacting a literary agent in good faith. It was time, after all these years, to call up Byrd Leavell.

Tucker Max was no longer a hero of mine, but Byrd now repped a different memoirist I adored: Cat Marnell. Nowadays, when people ask me now how bad my Adderall addiction was I joke: *Well, it was so bad my literary agent dropped me, but he still reps Cat Marnell.*

However getting Byrd to sign me in the first place was much harder than I thought it would be. When I finally found a number for his office in the dregs of Google, his secretary politely rebuffed me. I spent the last weeks of summer break in Sweden waiting for a follow-up email from Byrd that never arrived.

With one week until I needed to be back in Cambridge for school, I called up his office a second time and this time I *lied*.

“Hi Jennifer.” (I remembered his secretary’s name.) “It’s Caroline Calloway,” I continued confidently in my best grown-up ‘phone-voice.’ “I’m going to have to move my meeting from 11 AM on the 23<sup>rd</sup> to 2 PM.”

Jennifer told me she couldn’t find my original meeting. I told her, crossly, that I didn’t have time for this. “2 PM on the 23<sup>rd</sup> is the only time I can make it.” After I hung up, I created a Gmail account, emailed Jennifer pretending to be my own assistant, and got the address of their agency because that information wasn’t available on Google.

When the elevator doors opened in midtown, I inhaled sharply. I was 22, and I had decided Byrd would be my agent when I was 18. Byrd had no idea who I was or why I was in his office.

For a moment I started to panic, and then I reached very down deep inside of myself for the clarity and calm to handle this situation in a way that would result in the best outcome for me possible.

Icily, almost innocently, I asked him, “Are you this unprepared for all your meetings, Byrd? Or just mine?”

He apologized, flustered. Apologized again. He asked Jennifer to get me a cappuccino while he pulled my Instagram up on his desktop. Byrd didn’t offer me a contract on the spot because, to be honest, he wasn’t all that impressed with my 350,000 Instagram followers. Instead, he gently broke the news to me that an audience on a random app meant nothing to publishers compared to coverage in the news.

All of this business-building and I still needed to get covered in the news? He continued to explain. The publishing world didn’t care about Instagram followers in 2014. A big social media following was a plus, sure, but not enough of a reason to buy a memoir. I needed press.

“If you can translate your Instagram into articles about you and get them printed by big name platforms, you can come back in the spring and I’ll sign you,” Byrd said.

The next day I flew back to Cambridge to begin my sophomore year. It was humiliating contacting reporters and pitching myself cold over email. It took hours scouring Twitter for freelancers who wrote anything even remotely related to online culture, which was still a budding beat in 2014. It was the spring of 2015 by the time I found anyone willing to do an interview with me. It was for the *Daily Mail*.

They presented me not as an artist or writer, but as a ditzzy over-sharer at Cambridge trying to find a husband. Could you imagine the *Daily Mail* ever printing an article a young man *at Cambridge to find a wife*? Also worth noting: Just like there is no male equivalent for the *spinster*, *oversharing* is very gendered verb. When was the last time you heard it applied to a man? When John Mayer writes about the girls he dates, he’s sensitive, but Taylor Swift is violative?

After Natalie’s article came out, a similarly sexist thing happened all over again. Do you know how many articles in the wake of *I Was Caroline Calloway* described me as the “blonde” friend? All of them. For the record, throughout my whole time at Cambridge I was still a natural brunette. And when was the last time hair-color connoted personality and intelligence in a story about male friendship?

But once I put aside my pride and let the Daily Mail have their way with me, other news outlets followed suit and picked up the story. ABC, NBC before it was MSNBC, The Ellen Show—even VICE was nice to me in those days! Over spring break during my sophomore year I flew back to New York and signed, triumphantly, with Byrd Leavell.

As final exams drew closer, I ducked out of raucous dorm-room pre-games and then ornate, tense study halls to field phone calls from US reporters who were six hours behind. My account [@carolinecalloway](#) had reached an organic tipping point where it now grew whether I posted new content or not. I can’t remember what I did that summer after my second year at Cambridge. Was I in New York? Europe? Wherever I was I spent a lot of long nights clipping my toenails and tweezing my bikini line until it bled. My career had never been better and my addiction had never been so all-consuming.

Addiction, at its essence, is wanting to stop and not being able to. *I’ll only have one glass. I’ll only drink after five. I’ll only do it on the weekends.* My rule with Adderall that I constantly found myself breaking was: *On the third day I have sleep.*

My normal unit of waking time had one long period of darkness called night. One day was 48 hours. A long day was 72. On the afternoon of the fourth day my legs would buckle until I slept the sleep of the dead. I didn’t even want to keep being awake after a certain point. I just couldn’t stop taking the pills.

In the poem *The Addict*, Anne Sexton writes, “My supply of tablets has got to last for years and years. I like them more than I like me. It’s a kind of marriage.”

By the time I got back to Cambridge in the fall a strange phenomenon started happening. Usually during the night, the tip of my ring finger would begin to hurt. Then it would turn white, starting at the tip, spreading downwards, like a vampire-zombie infection. Then another finger. Then my hand.

The first time I had this problem with my circulation I worried my own terror would push my heart over the edge. But then the “white finger thing” started happening so often it just became annoying. The way to stop was to run my fingers under hot water, or—if it had already spread to my palm—plunge my entire body into a scalding bath.



Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

Time! Time canter and then gallops on amphetamines. You blink, and it's morning. Blink again, and: 3 PM. Blink once more—It's October and you're getting emails from the Cambridge bursars office about an outstanding tuition balance of forty thousand dollars.

Like the apartment situation with Natalie, my Dad had offered to pay for something he didn't have to. Except this time he didn't tell me he had changed his mind out of the blue. He just didn't mail Cambridge their check in September and I started getting emails from the university like, *Either pay to be here to live in campus housing and attend classes like everyone else, or leave.* Reasonable!

My Mom didn't have the money. It was too late to apply for low-interest government student loans. What began over the summer as doing huge amounts of Adderall with Natalie in my turquoise apartment as we brainstormed a book proposal with no deadline became, overnight, writing a book proposal overnight.

I was racing against the clock of when Cambridge would evict me. For the past five years I had been high on amphetamines—euphoric, vertiginous, panicky. If there was a more logical way out of my predicament, I couldn't see it.

Even sources as reputable as the New York Times later reported that Natalie "[helped her college friend Caroline Calloway create a healthy Instagram by telling \[sic\] stories.](#)" but that's not true. Natalie never helped me accrue fame. She didn't understand how fame was accrued. She helped me write captions that no one read. Then she helped me write a book proposal that only book editors saw after my fame had been accrued.

She never spoke to my real audience, nor did she make the business decisions that built it. The press ran wild with this idea that Natalie was the brains behind the operation because "a pretty face is nothing without someone to mind its algorithms," (NBC News) but I handled *ALL* of the outward-facing publicity stuff. And, for two periods of three months over the past nine years, we split the writing between us fifty-fifty. Half her words. Half mine. The legal documents Natalie and I signed were not even a ghostwriter's contract, but a "Collaborator's Agreement," because we were... Collaborating.

AND FUCK THE WORD DOCUMENT WE MADE TOGETHER WAS SO GOOD!!!!!!!!!!!!!! LIKE HOLY FUCKING *FUCKING SHIT*. It wasn't so much that we each had talents the other lacked. It was more that our particular strengths as writers just *FUCKING VIBED SO FUCKING HARD*. For the pretentious reader, a translation: our narrative voices paired nicely. Natalie's roaring theatricality plus my coy intimacy????! Natalie's glib humor plus my



goofy exuberance????????!!!!!!????? Natalie's cinematic command of traditional storytelling plus my wild risk-tolerance for experimental prose????????????????? Every sentence in the book proposal we wrote together twinkled and pirouetted and gestured graciously to the orchestra conductor as it bowed.

I hope we publish that document on its own someday, under its original title, *SCHOOL GIRL*, and under its original genre, fiction, with both our names on the cover. Because I'm proud of it. And because I want the world to notice something fascinating.

When we were writing the proposal I kept approaching chapters with the same aspirational tone that performed so well on Instagram. I will never forget what Natalie told me about the importance of appearing more relatable in memoir: People hate the rich in long-form prose. "Make yourself the plucky underdog," she explained.

In *SCHOOL GIRL*, the character of Caroline Calloway plays a bumbling second fiddle to all the rich and graceful swans who glide around her. Was it strange to see Natalie take the literary device she had once taught me to apply to myself and weaponize it against me in *I Was Caroline Calloway? Yes*.

**"I will never forget what Natalie told me about the importance of appearing more relatable in memoir" People hate the rich in long-form prose. "Make yourself the plucky underdog," she explained."**

I hope someday in Creative Writing workshops at NYU or journalism classes at Columbia or rooms with plates at Yale, students can break down and analyse this phenomenon even further.

When Byrd finally sent our book proposal out to editors in New York, I told my Gothic professors in Cambridge that I had the flu so I could skip class and use the same sly charms I had once used on Byrd on every publisher in New York. "Thank you again so much for seeing me, but we do have to make this quick," I'd say innocently, absent-mindedly, staring at the skyscrapers out the windows. "I have so much homework to finish and my degree is so important to me." The idea was to emphasize that I was a young prodigy and not a drug addict.

What I remember most about selling the book in the fall of 2015 was that editors kept asking me about newsletters and listservs and how I expected to get people to buy my book if I didn't have emails. EMAILS! I know a lot of people give me shit for selling an account that had 450,000 real followers and 100,000 fake followers, but I can't emphasize this enough: In 2015 Instagram followers weren't *that great* of a selling point. They helped, but their value has increased since then.

Back at school, I waited anxiously as Byrd "took the proposal out to auction." Lit world vocab! When I got the call saying that the US deal had closed at \$375,000 and that foreign deals would bring this number to just a hair over half a mill, I slid down the wall in a spiral stone stairwell and wept. First from happiness—then from a sadness I could not place.

Whatever hope I had been clinging to since childhood that I might be happy once my improbable dreams were achieved had just shattered. Nothing about the texture of my day-to-day experience of the world had changed. I was still in so much pain.

Sleeping pills. First melatonin from the "hippie store" in Cambridge. Then a variety of off-the-shelf pharmaceuticals from Boots. Then the medical kind. Remember that shady Yelp doctor in the Village who had been prescribing me Adderall all these years?

I was like, "Can I have some sleeping pills?"

And he was like: *Yes*.

I had the money to fly back to New York whenever I wanted.

I had money to buy as much extra Adderall from drug dealers as I wanted.

I had so much money to buy so much extra Adderall from drug dealers that my problem became *not knowing enough drug dealers*.

I no longer noticed what season it was. It was dark a lot because I was always awake. Natalie moved to Cambridge to "help me write the book," but more than anything I just wanted to be around a friend who didn't judge me. I thought Natalie didn't judge me. My grasp on reality was poor.

And spring 2016 wasn't even rock bottom! I would be addicted to amphetamines for another year, roughly May of 2017, until things got bad enough to get better.

Of all the stinging insults and intimate secrets Natalie published about me one hurts more than anything else: She made my suicidal ideation part of the public record.



Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

I talk about suicide openly now that everyone knows, and it turns out it's not even as bad as I thought it would be. But I wish I had been able to make the choice of when to share that part of me with the world. And I really wish Natalie hadn't made it the punchline of a joke: "[Caroline] hated the chapters I wrote so much, she threatened to kill herself."

When I'm ready to write more about this time of my life, I will. From May of 2017 it took roughly a year to quit Adderall, go through withdrawal, and get back on my feet psychologically. During this time I all but disappeared from Instagram. I call this chapter "when I was internationally depressed," which is different from traveling. Traveling is when you show up in a city to see the sights. Being internationally depressed is when you're like, *Maybe Scotland will solve my problems*. And then Scotland does not.

During this time I did, however, break my online hiatus at least once to reveal on Instagram that Natalie wrote half my book proposal. I tagged her account in the posts. I explained her involvement in 2013 with my captions. I went through our proposal and marked it up with red pen, *page by page, line by line*, to show my followers which sentences she wrote and which ones were mine, and I sold the scans of these PDF files on Etsy for \$4.99 and I offered Natalie her same 35% cut that she was getting from the book deal

Instead she asked me to remove everything with her name on it. She said credit didn't matter to her. It did not occur to me her story would be more valuable to sell to an editor of a major publication someday if it looked like I had hidden her.

But hey! Listen! I want to try something. I can go on and on about Natalie and she can go on and on about me and we can both go on and on about our friendship, forever, but nothing will ever be as unbiased or honest as letting us speak to you in our own words before we knew the world was watching.

I went back and forth on whether sharing these private emails was ethical. I decided this: If Natalie had shared something intimate during this correspondence under the premise of best-friendship—you know, *like the type of secrets she revealed about me*—I would have held back. But there's nothing fact-wise in here that isn't already on the record. The only behaviour that will shock a *Cut* reader is mine. It's hard to imagine the aloof, reckless, unaccountable Caroline Calloway in *I Was Caroline Calloway* sending these emails and I don't think I should have to withhold the receipts that discredit the reality of a tell-all exposé I never wanted to be part of in the first place.

**March 21, 2018**

**12:22 PM EST**

**To: Natalie**

**From: Caroline**

**Subject:** 🌱

Natalie! I am so very terrified about sending this message because I believe there's a real chance you will respond, "I have found my life to be much more rich and calm and rewarding without the train wreck that is you, Caroline Calloway, in it. No thank you for the friendship!!!!" And I think that response would cut straight to my deepest shame about the person I have been. But I am trying to be brave and let me self be seen and show up exactly as I am for the things that I care about. You know—all the stuff that is good and holy in this world!!

I believe in my heart that I'm capable of being a good friend—and a better friend than I have been—if our friendship is something you would like to revisit.

I am sorry for any moment I have caused you pain. I am so sorry. I am SO SORRY. I'm so sorry!

If you still want me to remove your name from the Etsy chapters, I will. I'm embarrassed I threw such a tantrum about that. I understand that adult friendship involves agreeing to honor another person's needs and not taking everything so personally. I don't know if this needs clarifying, but: At the time I took the fact that you wanted distance from me very, very personally. And I took a stand where I shouldn't have because I didn't know how to express that hurt.

I hope that thirty years from now we might look back at this time that we didn't talk with fondness because it helped us start a new chapter in our friendship, one with a more open communication of needs and a better overall emotional toolkit on board (on my end, especially!) and way, way, WAY less Adderall. I've been off it since last spring. I'm honestly a little tender mentioning it and almost deleted this line, but quitting it has made a huge difference in my life.

I feel like I could spend the rest of my life trying to make this email funnier and warmer and more comprehensive and authentic, but I'm feeling very raw and squishy and exhausted at this point. Maybe I should have ended on a breezier "wish you all the best" note of confidence, but that's not how I am or feel. I miss you. I care about you! I am flawed and growing and full of regret about how we left things and full of hope that we can try to show up and be seen for exactly the humans that we are and make something beautiful out of the mess.

Sent from my iPhone, which means I still have it.

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**April 19, 2018**

**1:29 AM EST**

**To: Caroline**

**From: Natalie**

**Re:** 🌱

Caroline,

This is a hard email, and I've been struggling to find the right way to say it all, or say enough. I really appreciate you reaching out to me, that couldn't have been easy. But I should just come out and say that I think our relationship is over.

I know the fight over selling the proposal on Etsy was when I snapped. I repeatedly told you it was important to me professionally and emotionally to not have my name attached to it, and you ignored that. But the truth is things had been tough for me in our friendship for a long time. I think you sensed me pulling away. Remember at your apartment when you remarked that I looked really sad and asked if there was something you could do to be a better friend? I was surprised and embarrassed that I'd let my care-free, happy mask slip like that, but touched that you noticed. At that point I was working a full-time manual labor job, writing freelance, and commuting out to your place to keep working, so I told you that it would be really meaningful to me if you came out to my apartment in Brooklyn. You said that the reason you hadn't come was because when you visited my first place in Gowanus it made you so sad and you didn't know how a person could live like that—which made me feel like shit—but you said you would come out to my new place. You never did though, and now I don't live there. That moment seems small in the grand scheme of things, but it made me realize how lopsided things were. Then there was the time I was going to sublet your room, and then a couple days before the first of the month you told me you needed to put it on Airbnb and asked me to be the maid and clean up your comforter stained with period blood. I ended up having to move back to New Haven because of that. Or the night I spent on the street in Amsterdam, which was one of the worst nights of my life.

There were just so many times where I felt hurt and diminished, like our relationship was organized around me being a supporting character in your fabulous life. A lot of this is my fault. I should I stood up for myself in the moment, and not expected you to be a mind reader. Part of it is that I'm a coward and I hate confrontation. But I also didn't want to jeopardize all the great times we had. When things were working between us, when we were writing, conspiring, planning the future, traveling, trolling Lipsky, just hanging out in your apartment smoking and talking about our work. Those were the best, and I look back on that time with such fondness. I didn't want to lose what we had.

Part of me still wants things just to go back to the way they were. But working on your book for over a year and having it all fall apart the way it did was a maddening experience. I've spent the last year broke, owing the IRS and my parents money, working shit jobs. While it was happening I spent hours in therapy agonizing over you, the lying, the drugs, your threat of suicide and the impossible position I was stuck in. It caused me so much pain. I know this is hard to read. I put off sending it because that last thing I ever wanted was to hurt you. Because I really care about you so much. I want you to thrive, and write amazing books, and keep having impossibly beautiful adventures. Just without me. On my end, I'll always cherish those wild, formative years we spent together.

-Natalie

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**April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

**2:44 AM EST**

**To: Natalie**

**From: Caroline**

**Re:** 🌱

Dear Natalie,

Everything you've said is so true. Not just the facts of it, but the emotional tenor of it. I DID used to relate to you in a sidekick-y way that I am so ashamed of now. I had such a narrow vision of what a full life looked like (popularity, end of list) that it made me constantly have to justify anything outside of it with an equally narrow script. Something closer to a 90s rom-com set in high school than anything resembling real life.

I also had a terrible ability for valuing other people's needs. An ability so terrible it falls much nearer to narcissism and addiction than just dumb youth. I'm so sorry.

I'm so sorry I didn't ask you what I could do better as a friend sooner or more often.

I'm so sorry that I cancelled on letting you stay in my apartment just to make a little money.

I'm sorry about what I said about your apartment in Gowanus and for never coming. I'm sorry for forgetting that I said it.

I'm so sorry about Amsterdam. I think about it all the time.



I was on so much Adderall that night I didn't even form any long-term memories about it. I can't even remember what I did instead of making sure you were safe. I feel like a monster when I think about it.

And I'm so sorry for all the other small things that I can't even begin to name.

I care about you so much. I love you so much. I think I always will.

Caroline

In drug-addiction recovery programs based on the AA system there is a step where you make amends with the people you have wronged. I had hoped that I would get the chance to apologize to Natalie face-to-face, but when she made it clear that she did not want to continue our friendship I catalogued every way I had ever hurt her. Hit send.

In *I Was Caroline Calloway* Natalie cites the last time we ever "saw" each other without mentioning these emails, which were the last time we ever spoke. One would assume the last time we saw each other would be the last time we spoke, but no, and she takes full advantage of this linguistic loophole. I can almost hear her defending that artistic choice: *It was too long! Too nuanced! Something had to be cut so I cut the moments when you gave me credit or apologized!*

I don't think an apology changes the past. But I also don't understand how you can write an essay in which a primary thesis is a certain character's lack of self-awareness and accountability and remorse and credit-sharing *while also changing the past*. Seems... What's the word? *Unethical*.

Everything in her essay is true. But at what point does leaving something out change the narrative you leave in? At what point is telling a truth quilted together from certain moments become lying by omission?

After the two years I spent more or less away from Instagram, getting clean, I returned to the Internet feeling pretty confident that I had been through some wild shit and had emerged with at least a few lessons to offer the world. I didn't think I had the answers to everything in life, but I was excited to talk about my own journey mental health. Most of all I wanted to finally meet in-person the community I had been building for seven years instead of leveraging our para-social relationship to sell overpriced hoodies no one needed. So I made a niche event for a niche community! My Creativity Workshop tour! It went great! Don't Google it!

A Twitter thread calling the tour a scam went viral and the whole thing blew up in my fucking face. Turns out that even though I had brought my messy, joyful, chaotic brand to life in a way my fans appreciated (and found monetary value in), people who were never going to buy a ticket in the first place were ENRAGED.

I would later find out that it was in February when my reputation was at its lowest that Natalie went in for the kill. She reached out to *The Cut* (they didn't reach out to her) and she pitched a tell-all about me. I don't know what she emailed them, but in August of 2019 she emailed me this:

**September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

**2:59 PM EST**

**To: Caroline**

**From: Natalie**

**Subject: reaching out and a heads up**

Hi Caroline,

So it's been a long time since we've spoken, and I really hope things are going well back in the West Village. I'm writing you to give you a heads up that I've written a personal essay about my experience working with you, and as such someone from *The Cut* might reach out to you with fact checking questions.

This must be a jarring email to receive, and I'm sorry. I was really conflicted about whether or not to ever write about our time together, and I wouldn't have done it if you weren't already living publicly. I just want to say that while some of what I write about might be painful, I steered away from gossip and salaciousness, and there were several secrets of yours I decided to keep.

What it came down to was, I just have my own story to tell. I still feel so many conflicting emotions about everything we did together, the highs and lows, my regrets and mistakes, my hurt, and writing about it was important to me. In the essay I focus mainly on my experience, my insecurities, hubris, and how I changed over the seven years since we met. But of course you're in it, and I understand if that makes you upset. Again, I wouldn't have touched on things like your Adderall use if you hadn't been so outspoken about it already. And a note about that, I can't imagine how hard it must have been to overcome that addiction, and I'm so happy you're healthy now. But when you were using it sometimes led to me getting hurt, from that night in Amsterdam to the months of stress and worry and wasted work. I spent a long time in therapy working through it. And I guess part of me hopes that you can understand that I was really effected by your drug use, and that maybe part of recovery is accepting that.

But how you respond is up to you, and I understand that. I meant what I said in that email two years ago — I believe you're an immensely talented writer with a whole literary career ahead of you. This essay is my limited perspective, and I look forward to reading yours.

-Natalie

In her email talks about my "addiction" and "recovery."

Her email is four paragraphs.

Her essay was over 6,000 words.

She doesn't use the words "addiction" or "recovery" once.

By expunging my mental illness from the record Natalie presents my behavior when I was sick as the core of my identity and fundamentally mischaracterizes who I am. If I wrote an essay about the year my Mom had cancer before it was diagnosed and offered up the symptoms of her undiscovered tumor (fatigue) as character flaws—like laziness or lack of motivation—that would be unconscionable. No reader would consider an account of her life during that time complete without the word "cancer."

But mental illness is stigmatized and invisible in ways that physical disease is not. I'm not saying my addiction or depression discounts the pain I caused Natalie. Her pain is real and I take full responsibility for that. But the sicknesses that almost killed me are real, too, and they deserve to live side-by-side her hurt in any recounting of reality.

A couple days after I found out about her essay *The Cut*, my Dad called. He told me he was proud of me. I told him that I had to go, that I was actually really busy dealing with a crazy thing that was happening with my life in New York.



The author (right) with her father at her college graduation. Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway



It was the last time I ever spoke to him. Two days later he killed himself. Nine days after that, Natalie's essay was released to the world and my life changed forever, again.



The author (left) with Natalie Beach. Photo: Courtesy of Caroline Calloway

**Part Three of "I Am Caroline Calloway" will be coming soon!**

In the meantime, you can follow me on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#), where I write in two VERY different ways. Or let yourself be scammed by the best in the biz by pre-ordering my first book, [SCAMMER](#).

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**There are people alive today who don't know they won't make it through this. I could be one of them. You could be one of them. We need all the generosity possible right now. Consider donating more towards [Direct Relief](#):**

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