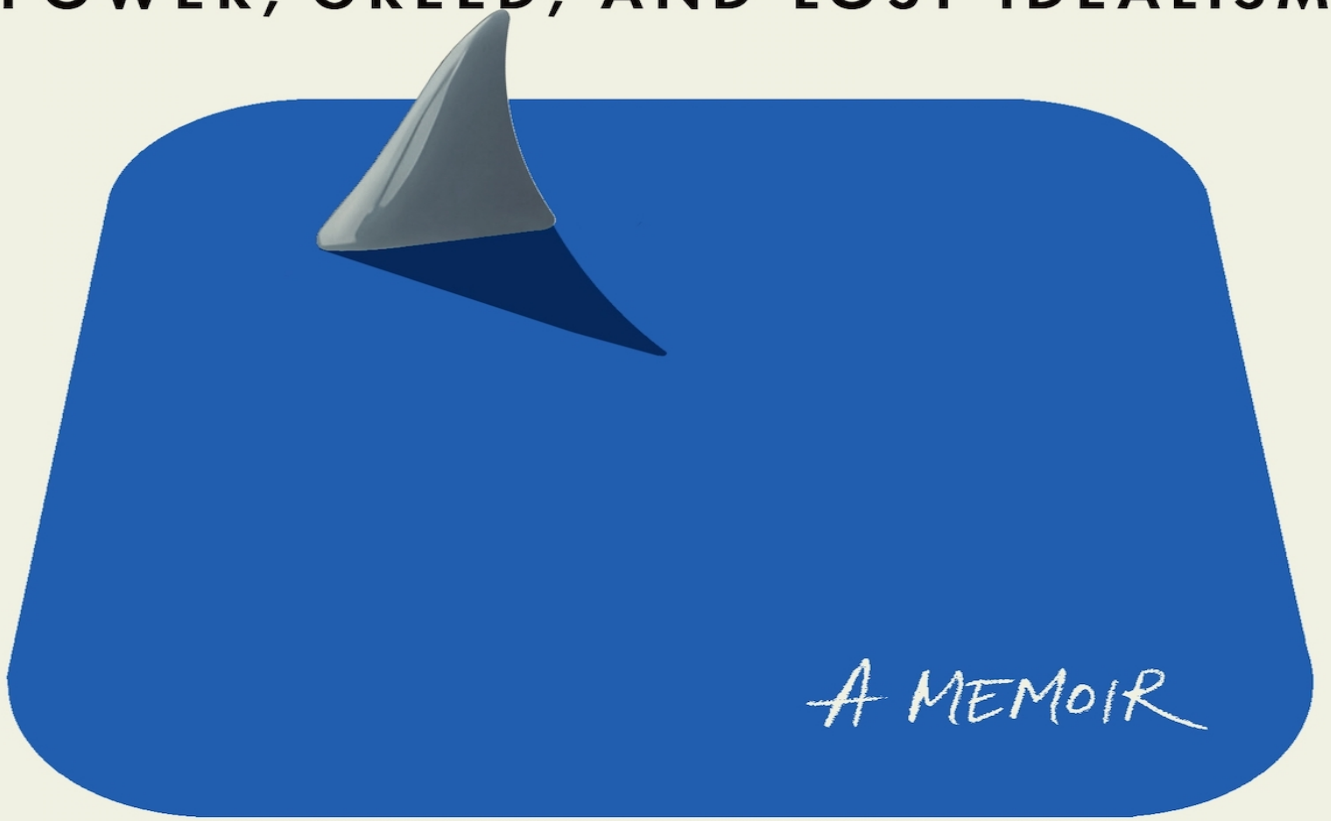
Careless People

A CAUTIONARY TALE OF POWER, GREED, AND LOST IDEALISM



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For Tom
I'm sorry I dragged you into all this.
&
For my grandmother Eileen
Who regularly reminds us to "live an ordinary life" and "enjoy the good times."

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *THE GREAT GATSBY*

Prologue

We're in the middle of an archeological ruin somewhere on the Panamanian coast. It's me, two guys I work with, clusters of people who are basically naked, and Mark Zuckerberg. Mark is not happy. This is the 2015 Summit of the Americas, an international meeting of world leaders. This particular event is a state dinner that—other than Mark—is supposed to be exclusively heads of state of various countries: Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Canada, the US, over thirty other nations. I wrangled Mark an invitation because I've been trying to convince him that he needs to have relationships with these people.

But somehow we are the only ones at this party.

Under dark skies and low clouds, a red carpet stretches into the distance in the ruins, dimly lit by the open fires. It's flanked by guards in ancient costumes with frilly collars and colorful silk pants, wielding swords and ax-type things. Plus the naked people, who—on closer inspection—are seminaked, wearing abbreviated, ancient, flesh-toned costumes. On one side, a group of people wearing only tiny loincloths and holding crops. Farther down, people who appear to be dressed as members of a kind of primeval Ku Klux Klan. All in front of these ancient fortifications, the site of the oldest European settlement on the Pacific coast of the Americas.

"Why are there naked people at a state dinner?" Mark whispers.

"Honestly," I say, searching for a reasonable response, "I couldn't say. This is my first state dinner with naked people."

We trudge down the endless red carpet past weird scenes of ritual, trading, fighting, and who knows what else, the Facebook men I'm with

mostly averting their eyes because of the nakedness. And because any time you look directly at one of the noncostumed extras, they meet your eyes and stare back at you. It's unnerving.

When we get to the empty dining area, I see who's sitting where and it's dreadful. Because he isn't a head of state, Mark is assigned a table between two people who seem to be random relatives of the president of Panama. I mean, they might also have been ministers, and I'm trying to google them and simultaneously pretend that everything about the evening is okay and normal, and of course I have no internet signal because we're in archeological ruins on the coast of Panama.

Seeing few other options, I casually switch out Mark's name card with that of a minor president on a better table. I ferry the name cards inconspicuously in my handbag so the staff who have emerged and are milling around don't notice, and then breathe a sigh of relief and let the team know what I've done.

"He wants to sit next to Castro," Javi says.

"Not happening," I respond.

Javi's my favorite of the coworkers here tonight—Javier Olivan, in charge of "growth" at Facebook, which means he's the person responsible for getting the billions who still aren't on the platform to sign up. Javi's a laid-back Spaniard and one of the few people in top management with a sense of humor.

When the heads of state finally start arriving, my job is to manage "pull-asides." I used to work at an embassy, and "pull-asides" is diplomatic jargon for exactly what you'd think: pulling to one side the person you want to talk to. Mark waits on the edge of the crowd, not convinced about any of this. It's my job at Facebook to run international policy, and to make this matter I need to get Mark engaged in the issues and politics Facebook encounters and creates in the world. Some things that a company needs done on the international stage, only the CEO can do. It's just that this CEO doesn't want to. Mark is deeply skeptical of all this. And he plainly does not enjoy it.

My first target is the prime minister of Canada, Stephen Harper. I take a breath, steel myself, and approach.

"Hello, Prime Minister Harper," I say. "I'm Sarah Wynn-Williams from Facebook. You'll remember me from all the data center and privacy stuff." Look, it's not a great start but it's all I've got, and yes, "remember me" is definitely a stretch. We've never met personally, and if he does remember our data center negotiations, he might feel we screwed his government over. Facebook got them to agree to a bunch of concessions and then we built the data center in Iowa.

He just stares blankly at me like I'm a wart on his foot. Out of the periphery of my eye I see Javi looking relieved that I'm sourcing heads of state for Mark.

"Anyway, I'm here with Mark Zuckerberg." I pause. His expression is inscrutable. "I was wondering whether you wanted to meet him?"

"No," Prime Minister Harper says firmly. "I wouldn't."

I hear the deflating sound of "Oooooh" beside me, and realize that Javi has brought Mark over with him, and he is standing right next to me for this exchange. Prime Minister Harper moves off to mingle with other heads of state. Mark and I just stand there, looking at each other. I turn to Javi, who declares, "I'm getting mojitos for all of us," and strides off to the bar, leaving me and Mark in an uncomfortable silence. "Make sure they're doubles," I call after him.

For the rest of the cocktail hour, the political leaders avoid us. No one approaches Mark. He's not used to this, to being ignored. Usually, he's hounded by people who think he's the most interesting person in the room. Now he stands awkwardly in the middle of this fancy party, a fish out of water. The three of us down the mojitos Javi has gotten, and I send him back for more.

I go to double-check that Mark's table seating is secure and realize I've been rumbled and the seats switched back. I try swapping the name cards again with an even lesser-known president's and stand by and watch as they get switched back within minutes. The lights start to dim, signaling the end

of the drinks and the beginning of the dinner, and I quickly lay out the situation to Mark.

"Do I have to stay?" he asks earnestly.

"No," I answer, conscious that his night has been rather peculiar already.

"Then let's leave."

And right at that moment the lights go out, except for one lone spotlight, pointed at a tunnel near us. A stream of horses adorned with colorful silks rushes out, ridden by performers in elaborate costumes.

How do we get out of here?

We can't go back down the endless red carpet. At the end of the carpet there's a large media contingent, and we can't have the international press capturing Mark Zuckerberg fleeing from a state dinner. But there's no other discernible exit. It's ruins and fortifications in all directions except for the red carpet and the tunnel the horses are streaming out of.

The president of Panama stands up and urges people to take their seats. I take one last look around and make a terrible choice, urging Mark and the Facebook team, "Run! Follow me!"

I sprint straight into where the horses are emerging from. I figure wherever the horses are galloping in from, there has to be an exit. But it's only as I see the looks of terror from Javi and Mark as they race past me sprinting in my heels that I realize my mistake. Horses take evasive action around us, looking equally terrified, and probably not expecting a young tech CEO to charge at them through the tunnel of a ruined castle or church or fort or whatever it is we're running through. This is madness. There's a whooshing of hooves and tails and silks, warm mammals, fear, hot breath, and expressions of surprise in Spanish. And then, abruptly, miraculously, the tunnel ends. We pop out the other side into darkness.

I double over, partly to catch my breath, partly because I can't bear to look at Mark and partly because I have no idea what the security arrangements are for that many world leaders and I'm afraid that at any second we're all going to be taken out by snipers.

When I force my head up, I can see that we're standing in the middle of a ginormous field next to some ancient wall, near some straggling horses in silk that shimmers in the moonlight. Mark gives me a wan smile. Not sure what else to do, we set off into the darkness, across the fields, dressed in our formal state dinner outfits, with no cell reception or any sense at all of where we are other than Panama. We trudge through the black wilderness for what feels like miles, hoping to come to a road. Eventually, I get one bar on my phone and call for a car. When they ask me where to send it, I tell them, "Honestly, I have no idea." Mark hears this and starts to laugh, and the others cautiously join in.

That's pretty much what my early years at Facebook were like. It was a lot of launching ourselves at various things that did not quite work out like we expected. I was there for seven years, and if I had to sum it up in a sentence, I'd say that it started as a hopeful comedy and ended in darkness and regret. I was one of the people advising the company's top leaders, Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg, as they were inventing how the company would deal with governments around the world. By the end, I watched hopelessly as they sucked up to authoritarian regimes like China's and casually misled the public. I was on a private jet with Mark the day he finally understood that Facebook probably did put Donald Trump in the White House, and came to his own dark conclusions from that. But most days, working on policy at Facebook was way less like enacting a chapter from Machiavelli and way more like watching a bunch of fourteen-year-olds who've been given superpowers and an ungodly amount of money, as they jet around the world to figure out what power has bought and brought them.

That's the story I'm here to tell.

1

Simpleminded Hope

It was idealism that originally led me to Facebook. Looking back, I'm a little ashamed to admit that. This was in 2009, back when it still was possible to be optimistic about Facebook, in those innocent days when it still was possible to be hopeful about the internet.

It's hard to admit you wanted to "save the world" without putting it in quotation marks, but that's what I thought I'd been doing since my midtwenties. During those years, I was a diplomat for New Zealand at the United Nations.

I grew up in Christchurch, which is an agricultural services town, the biggest city in the South Island and about the size of Lincoln, Nebraska. To give you a sense of what it's like, every November there's a holiday everyone calls Show Day, where the whole city comes out to see sheep and vegetables and there's a dog show and horse racing and a lot of drinking. I loved Show Day.

I grew up in a family of four kids. The eldest. The responsible one. My childhood was pretty normal, I guess, except for the time I was attacked by a shark.

I was thirteen when this happened. We were on vacation at a beach where my family camped every year. I'm standing in the water with a friend.

I don't see it. I feel it. A force so powerful and unexpected. A shark attack is like being hit by a knife attached to a freight train. I've never been on the receiving end of such searing pain as its teeth go deeper and deeper.

It locks its mouth around my torso, just above my waist on my right side. It feels like it's trying to get inside me, pushing deeper, trying to rip my stomach, that chunk of me, away. I'm trapped. It starts shaking me the way a dog shakes a toy, back and forth, trying to force me under the water. I go under once and struggle to my feet, then a second time and a third. This third time I start to take in ocean water and the thought occurs to me, "Oh, it's trying to drown me. I could drown." Like, I thought in a shark attack you die from the attack, but now there's a whole new way to die I hadn't realized. I'm in its mouth, clenched between its teeth, under the water. I need air desperately.

My animal instincts kick in. I'm scratching, kicking, punching, pulling, doing whatever I physically can to escape. It's like hand-to-hand combat. I fight with everything I have to try to get my head above the surface.

Whatever I did, it is enough to give the shark a fright. It lets go and swims away.

I struggle toward the shore and send my friend for help. My swimsuit is tattered. I look down and see two big puncture wounds and a chunk of skin missing. Gone. There's blood pouring out. I'm worried that's going to bring the shark back or maybe some other sharks so I stumble through the water as fast as I can. But once I get to shallow water, I collapse and lie there alone, feeling the blood oozing out of me, the sting of the salt water, the hole in my body.

I don't know how long I've been there when some fishermen come along.

"Are you all right?"

I'm patently not all right. But the other issue is that I'm exposed; the shark has ripped off enough of my swimsuit that I'm quite naked. I'm also thirteen. So I try to tell them I'm fine, just hoping they'll go away. They're like, "Um, you don't look fine." And I'm all, "I'm okay. I'll figure it out, you carry on." Maybe it's the blood, or the shreds of swimsuit but they don't buy

it. “We’ll get you out of the water.” And I’m still telling them I’m fine when at a certain point they just stop negotiating, pick up my seminaked body and carry me up to the shoreline. I am dying of shame. Absolutely dying of shame. On the beach a small crowd starts to form, to my horror. My parents arrive and lift me into the back of our family car. The beach is in a remote part of New Zealand and there’s no hospital nearby. We set off to the closest town, a twenty-minute drive away.

There’s no hospital in the town, so we have to call the local doctor to open up his medical office, which is a small, single-story building. Once we get there everyone seems relieved, like the crisis has passed. It’s almost jovial as my dad and the doctor discuss the cricket and plans for the weekend. My dad cheerfully explains that yesterday we’d tried to refloat whales that had stranded on a beach nearby, that I had been in charge of two small whales we’d nicknamed Moby and Maybe, not knowing if the smaller one would make it. No one is in a hurry. No one asks me what happened. The doctor cleans the wound, pulls the skin around the jaw marks together, and stitches it up so there’s no longer a chunk missing. He gives me a tetanus shot and warns my parents that I might be a little dramatic that night because I might be in shock but I’d be fine. I obviously was a fighter. Everyone laughs.

We return to the campground. I’m allowed to stay in the camper rather than head under the attached awning with my three siblings because I’m in pain, which the doctor had told me and my parents to expect, some mild pain from the stitches. Very quickly I realize this pain is not mild. It’s searing. I start vomiting up blood and these thick, dark, sticky clots that look like coffee grounds, which I assume is stomach lining but I know nothing about the human body. I pull out a large red plastic cup to collect it so I don’t get the camper dirty.

Everyone else goes to bed but I can’t sleep. It keeps getting worse and worse. I feel like I’m on fire. I wait, quiet as possible so I don’t wake anyone. After a while, the red cup is full and I’m onto another. The pain is excruciating.

Eventually I wake my parents.

“I’m on fire. I’m burning up inside.”

“Go back to sleep. You’ll be fine.”

This continues throughout the night: I wake my parents, they tell me that the doctor said I’d be fine. We’ll all learn later what actually is happening. The shark had bitten through my bowel in several places, so it’s like I’ve been stabbed multiple times. The blood and the contents of my bowel are leaking into my gut, basically poisoning me. I have sepsis, acute peritonitis. Eventually there is so much of this toxic blood liquid that it floods through my body and flows into my lungs, making it increasingly difficult to breathe. Like I’m suffocating.

I wake my parents again.

“I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t get the air in.”

My mother—tired of being woken—responds in an authoritative voice, “Mind over matter. Stop that hyperventilating.” This has become a family joke. Now anytime one of us mentions anything, a cold or a cut or appendicitis, we respond, “Mind over matter. Stop that hyperventilating.”

We later learn that my left lung has collapsed from a pulmonary edema. And my right lung is damaged.

By morning, I realize I’m losing my ability to keep going.

I wake my parents one more time and say:

“I’m dying.”

But I cannot convince them. And my life depends on convincing them. I have no Plan B. I can’t drive. I don’t have my own phone. This is 1993.

The next morning, after my family wakes and starts getting breakfast, I’m barely getting in enough air to breathe. Then my eyes roll into the back of my head. My mother told me later that when she saw the whites of my eyes, she felt like she was falling through the surface of the earth. Now she believes me. And wants to rush me to the doctor.

Problem is, my dad’s MIA. Utterly unworried about how badly I’m doing, he’s taken the car to show fishermen the scraps of my swimsuit, hoping they can identify the type of shark and, I suspect, secretly hoping that they’ll go hunting for it.

When he returns, we get in the car. By now, with one collapsed lung and fluid rapidly accumulating in the other, it's taking all my concentration to keep enough air going in and out. I'm lying prone in the back seat of the car, and as we make our way toward town, for the first time I start to doubt whether I can keep doing what I've been doing to keep myself alive.

My dad, meanwhile, seems not to be rushing at all. He's a keen fisherman. I swear that when we cross any bridge, I can feel the car slow down while he scans the river for fish, like he always does. From the back seat my mother tells him to hurry.

Eventually we get stuck behind a farmer who's moving his sheep across a short bridge, which is a regular New Zealand thing. I hadn't factored this into my estimate of "this is how long I have to keep myself going until I reach help" and now I completely lose it. I start to lose consciousness. It's like lifting off in an airplane. It feels good, weightless and painless. Floating into unconsciousness where there's no suffering. But I fight it. I think, "I've got to get back."

We finally get to town. Back at the same medical office with the doctor who told my parents I'd be fine. By now I can't speak, can't move, and I'm drifting in and out of consciousness. My dad carries me inside and the doctor from the day before approaches us. Not this guy, I think, as I'm hoisted onto a table. He and two other doctors crowd around to examine me, poking me this way and that, and then they leave abruptly to talk to my parents off in the corner. I hear one of them say something that I can't quite make out but sounds like "she's dying" or "she's dead."

My dad howls, "She was my favorite daughter." I enjoy that for a moment. I have two sisters. I can't wait to tell them. I'd always suspected it. Then my mother wails, "Just like the cat!" Because our cat Winkels had recently met an untimely end. Just like the cat. Brutal.

After this my dad gets very angry, yelling at the doctors to do something, to find out what had gone wrong.

Next thing I know, the doctor comes back. Gets out a very large blade like a mini ax and starts thwacking it down, carving into my left arm. Then my

right arm. It's like I'm a piece of meat being hacked open. No anesthesia. No warning. And I'm beyond the point where I have any control over my own body. I can't move or speak. I can't raise any alarm.

I'd thought the shark attack was more pain than a person can bear, the worst that could happen. I was wrong.

The doctor repositions himself near my ankle and brings the blade down with force, splitting the skin and plunging the blade to the bone. Why is the doctor hacking open my ankles? The only explanation I can muster is that he thinks I'm already dead. I'm experiencing my own autopsy. The mortal terror I felt during the shark attack returns, that feeling like, I could die right this second. Painfully. Hacked to death. Is it weirder to die from a shark attack or an autopsy? Will they even know they killed me? The fear chokes me as I anticipate the next ax strike across my neck or skull or some other vulnerable part of me, delivering the final blow.

Instead the next blow lands on the bone in my left ankle. It's agonizing enough that my body spasms. This sparks a change in the room, like they see me as a person again. Not some inanimate object. They realize I'm alive. Someone calls for a helicopter to take me to a hospital.

I later learned it wasn't an autopsy. They knew I was alive. I'd lost so much blood that the doctors believed if they didn't get intravenous blood into me immediately, I would die. In severe trauma cases where it's impossible to find a vein, because blood pressure is so low, it's standard ER procedure to slice into the arms or ankles. That's why I have one-inch scars on my arms and legs. (They're positively delicate compared with the scars on my stomach from the jaw marks.) There wasn't time to give me anesthetic or explain. I don't think the doctors expected me to live. By the time they loaded me up into the helicopter, I don't think anyone did. And later, after hours of surgery, the doctors at the hospital tell my parents I'm unlikely to make it. They started to plan my funeral.

Days later I wake up from a coma in an intensive care unit. I can hear a nurse calling my mother as I slowly take in my surroundings.

My mother leans over me, looks into my eyes, and says, “Aren’t you lucky the doctors saved you?”

I can’t talk because I’m on life support and a ventilator is helping me breathe. So I gesture for a pen and paper. I make eye contact with her to be sure she’s watching, and write slowly and deliberately, drawing a thick black line under each word for emphasis:

I SAVED MYSELF

I’m not sure I can name all the ways this experience changed me, but I think at the very least it probably made me bolder. Any time I glimpse a possible adventure and have to decide, do I go for this? I do.

I forced myself back in the water, same beach, same time of day, one year later. I didn’t want to give up swimming in the ocean for the rest of my life. I liked it too much. Which is to say, I bounced back.

I spent my teenage years having a good time, singing in bands, hanging out with other kids who liked music, but there was always a sense of, why did this happen to me? If I survived against the odds, surely there had to be a reason? Every time someone told me I was lucky to survive, I thought, Shouldn’t I be doing something with this life? Devoting myself to changing the world in some way? How do you do that?

In law school, the stuff I was drawn to was human rights and international environmental treaties, thinking maybe this was the way to make a difference? In New Zealand, it’s easy to feel like you’re on the edge of the world. A time zone ahead of everyone else but somehow always behind. Everything is shaped by other countries. It’s easy to feel adrift in a sea that others make. After becoming an attorney, I ended up in the foreign service because it seemed like a way to change the world, and I wanted an adventure. I ended up at the UN because I genuinely believed it was the seat of global power. The place you go when you want to change the world. Which is to say I was young, a New Zealander, and very naive.

My issues at the UN? A lot of protecting. Protecting biodiversity, protecting oceans, protecting whales, protecting endangered species. Climate change.

At first, I loved every minute of it, digging into the kinds of big, global problems that cross borders, stuff you can only make a dent in with international cooperation. But after years of endless negotiations and discussion that didn't seem to result in much change in the world, I found myself in the bowels of the United Nations' New York headquarters, a charmless warren of cramped meeting rooms with cheap furniture and dated décor, enduring another grueling late-night session on conserving ocean life. We were drafting the annual report on the "law of the sea," dozens of lawyers sitting in a circle, and the delegates were literally arguing over punctuation. I know it's a cliché, but it's a cliché for a reason. Norwegian, Russian, and Chinese lawyers tussled over whether to insert a semicolon or a comma after some word in a paragraph deep in a document no one would ever read.

I'd struck up an unlikely friendship with the aging Argentinian diplomat I was seated next to. During a pause in the proceedings, he leaned over and casually asked, "Do you know what the single most impactful thing to actually protect the oceans over the last decade is?"

"That's a hard one. You mean a United Nations meeting?" I guessed.

He laughed.

"No. Nemo."

Thinking "Nemo" might be a Spanish word that I was unfamiliar with, I laughed too, playing along, not exactly comprehending.

"The fish," he added. "That little fishy they have to find."

"Ah." I finally got it. "*Finding Nemo*."

I had to concede that he was right. The system was broken. I was wasting my twenties toiling long hours with a collection of bureaucrats in their fifties in the twilights of their careers, arguing about punctuation but telling ourselves we were saving the environment. When you realize a cartoon fish can achieve more than the United Nations, it's time to go.

I moved to a job at the New Zealand embassy in Washington, DC, hoping I could get closer to where important decisions about the world were actually made. DC seemed like the center of the world. The funniest thing about that job was the number of times state officials would comment, "Wow, your English is really good." I never had the heart to admit that it's my mother tongue. I'd just take the compliment.

The embassy was a tiny operation—just eight diplomats—and I was responsible for anything Congress or any US government agency might do that would affect New Zealand, except military or intelligence stuff. I quickly discovered that the American politicians and officials regarded New Zealand as a harmless place they might like to visit on vacation but not relevant to world affairs in any way. That's how everyone saw us. In 2008, after Zimbabwe's president Robert Mugabe refused to leave office following an electoral defeat, the State Department called in diplomats from many countries to its headquarters in Foggy Bottom to coordinate a response. On my way into the meeting, I read my instructions out loud to my South African counterpart; this was a cable I'd gotten from my bosses telling me that New Zealand should take a leadership position in opposing Mugabe. She laughed so hard she could barely catch her breath. "Oooh! I'm sure after decades of despotic rule Mugabe will be quaking in his boots! New Zealand's taking a leadership position in opposing Mugabe!"

Then in early 2009, I was overcome by what I can only describe as a Facebook epiphany. It started small enough. Facebook was a lifeline for me, a way to connect to the things that were important to me. Washington, DC, still felt foreign, and I was a bit lost in it. Logging on to Facebook was like going to a new but familiar place where my friends, my family, and scraps of my old life continued. Facebook had been around since 2004, and by this point in 2009, around four hundred million people were using it globally. It was still a pretty scrappy outfit, and still seen by lots of people as a place for college kids to waste time—that's what made this crazy. I urged my sisters, my brother, my friends who weren't on Facebook to join. I spent an increasing amount of time on Facebook, and followed friends' new babies,