

# The Circle



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVE EGGERS

Dave Eggers grew up in Chicago and he attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. However, shortly before graduating, both of his parents died suddenly and Eggers, aged 21, was forced to leave school to take care of his eight-year-old brother. In the early 90s, Eggers founded the satirical magazine *Might*; later, he worked as an editor for *Salon.com*. Eggers published his first book, [A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius](#), a chronicle of the years he spent raising his younger brother, in 2000—the book was a bestseller and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. For the rest of the decade, Eggers published a series of successful novels and nonfiction works, including *What is the What* and *Zeitoun*, which won praise for confronting serious, present-day issues, such as gentrification, the Internet, globalization, and immigration. Eggers is also the founder of *McSweeney's*, an independent publishing house, a literary magazine called *The Believer*, and a network of writing and tutoring centers called 826. He lives in San Francisco.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most important historical trend to which *The Circle* responds is the rise of the tech industry in California in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. During this period, computer programmers and engineers settled in California, particularly in Northern California, and created an astonishing number of the devices and websites that Americans now take for granted: the personal computer, the iPhone, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are all products of Northern Californian tech startups. Perhaps the most successful California tech startup, Google, was obviously a model for the Circle: like the Circle, Google is widely seen as a fantastic place to work and a benevolent, forward-thinking company. And, like the Circle, Google has come under fire in recent years, both for monopolizing the world's access to information and for using its customers' personal information in unethical ways.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like many science fiction novels of the last twenty years, *The Circle* criticizes the rise of social networking and argues that the Internet has destroyed interpersonal connection. Other recent works of literature that explore similar themes include M. Anderson's [Feed](#) (2002) and Ernest Cline's [Ready Player One](#) (2011). A much earlier science fiction short story, "The Machine Stops" by E. M. Forster, also explores the sense of alienation that arises when one monopolistic entity provides for all human

needs. Another piece of writing that influenced *The Circle* is Michel Foucault's 1975 work of critical theory, *Discipline and Punish*. In this book, Foucault discusses the writings of the late-18th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who proposed a utopian solution to all human problems: allow all people to watch each other at all times. Bentham's "solution" (which, Foucault points out, is utterly dehumanizing) sounds remarkably similar to the one offered by Eamon Bailey.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Circle
- **When Written:** 2012
- **Where Written:** San Francisco, USA
- **When Published:** October 2013
- **Literary Period:** post-Internet science fiction
- **Genre:** Science fiction / speculative fiction / dystopian fiction
- **Setting:** The San Francisco Bay Area, Northern California, USA
- **Climax:** Kalden begs Mae Holland to denounce the Circle
- **Antagonist:** Tom Stenton, Eamon Bailey, the Circle itself, and the philosophy of Internet transparency
- **Point of View:** Third person limited (Mae Holland's point of view)

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Famous classmates.** During high school, Eggers was a classmate of the famous actor Vince Vaughn.

**Movie man.** In addition to his literary projects, Eggers has been involved in making several films. He wrote the screenplays for *Away We Go*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *Promised Land*. Furthermore, his novel *A Hologram for the King* was made into a film starring Tom Hanks, and a film based on *The Circle*, also starring Hanks along with Emma Watson and John Boyega, was released in 2017.



## PLOT SUMMARY

A young woman named Mae Holland arrives at the campus of a company called the Circle, one of the most highly praised and innovative tech companies in the world. Mae has been recruited to work at the company, thanks to the help of her close friend and college roommate, Annie Allerton, who is one of the Circle's highest-ranking employees. Annie welcomes Mae warmly and gives her a tour of the facilities, which are beautiful and cutting-edge. Everyone Mae meets is extremely

gracious and enthusiastic about Mae joining the company.

During the course of the tour, Annie tells Mae about the Circle. It's run by three people who are known as the Three Wise Men. Ty Gospodinov, the founder and most tech-savvy of the Wise Men, is a recluse and he almost never appears in public anymore. Tom Stenton, the most aggressive and money-hungry of the Wise Men, is in charge of the company's "dirty work." Finally, Eamon Bailey, the most charismatic and beloved of the Wise Men, is responsible for realizing the company's vision of global interconnectedness.

Mae begins working for the Circle in the Customer Experience department. There, she spends her time interacting with customers who have questions about Circle products. Her job seems to be generally superficial and it's not clear how it fits in with the company's mission overall. Mae quickly finds that the Circle throws parties and social events near-constantly. At one party, she meets a quirky employee named Francis Garaventa. Mae quickly learns that Francis is an orphan, and several of his siblings were kidnapped and killed when he was a small child. As a result, Francis is working on a project for the Circle designed to track abducted children. Mae also attends presentations led by Eamon Bailey. At one, Eamon introduces a program called SeeChange—a system of cameras that allow Circle users to watch any point on Earth at any time.

Although Mae is impressed with the utopian spirit of the Circle, she doesn't spend as much time on campus as her coworkers do because she likes to visit her parents. Her father is suffering from MS and he needs constant care; unfortunately, his healthcare doesn't provide him with the painkillers that he needs to feel comfortable. At work, Mae is encouraged to spend much more time participating in social life at the Circle. She is supposed to attend parties and gatherings, and, much more importantly, she is urged to post online about her activity. Sensing that this is important to her job, Mae throws herself into the task of building an online presence: she stays up late at night posting statuses, liking other people's videos, etc.

Around the same time, Mae meets a mysterious man named Kalden. Kalden asks Mae questions about herself and about her work, but he refuses to answer many questions about his own life—he doesn't even give Mae his last name. Mae tries to find Kalden online, but she can't find anyone with his name. Later, Mae goes on a date with Francis, and they kiss.

The day after their date, Francis helps give a presentation about a new dating website called LuvLuv; during the presentation, he demonstrates the website by displaying Mae's personal information. Mae is furious with Francis and she refuses to talk to him. Soon afterwards, she learns that her father's health is declining rapidly. She goes home to visit her father, and, during her visit, she argues with her old boyfriend, Mercer Medeiros. Mercer expresses his skepticism about Mae's new employer and he suggests that constant texting and social networking are destroying Mae's relationships with her

friends and family. Around the same time, Mae meets Kalden at a Circle party, and they have sex in a secret room.

At work, Mae learns that she can put her parents on her company's health insurance plan; with Annie's help, she does so. Meanwhile, the Circle begins to push the idea of becoming totally transparent (requiring its users to share all their personal information and experiences with other users). The Circle installs cameras almost everywhere on its campus. In secret, Kalden and Mae meet up in the bathroom (one of the only places without cameras) and have sex.

One night after seeing Mercer and her parents for dinner, Mae goes out to the beach and sees an unreturned **kayak** near her favorite kayak shop. She decides to take it out and then return it, planning to leave it just as she found it. When she returns to land, however, she's surprised to find police officers waiting to arrest her. Mae is forced to call the owner of the kayak store, a woman named Marion. Although she's ultimately not arrested, the experience frightens Mae. The next day, Mae learns that Circle users reported Mae after they saw her "stealing" the kayak on a hidden camera installed near the beach. Mae goes to meet with Eamon Bailey, who persuades her that "secrets are lies" and that human beings have a moral obligation to share their experiences with other people. Afterwards, Mae posts online near-constantly, sharing every detail of her life with other people.

The novel jumps forward almost a year. The Circle has grown to handle virtually all of the world's information flow, and Mae has gone transparent and has been promoted to being a virtual tour guide for the company. As part of being transparent (which is inextricably linked to her job as a guide), Mae wears a lens around her chest at all times that allows anyone in the world to see what she sees and hear her voice. Mae savors her transparency, noting that it keeps her honest and energetic at all times: she always has to be "on" for her millions of watchers. Mae revives her relationship with Francis, but is unable to have sex with him, since he suffers from premature ejaculation. Mae also finds herself growing increasingly distant from Annie, who seems overworked and envious of Mae's burgeoning popularity at the company and with its users.

Mae learns that her family has been "disrespecting the Circle." After her parents accepted the company's health insurance, the Circle installed cameras in their home, which Mae's parents then covered with cloth to block their view. Furious, Mae begs her parents to uncover the cameras. Mercer tells Mae that her parents deserve privacy—a suggestion that Mae dismisses as absurd.

At work, Mae proposes a new idea: to require all Circle users to vote online through an interface controlled by the Circle. Eamon Bailey and Tom Stenton like this idea, and they further propose that the company require all Circle users to pay their taxes through the Circle, test their children through the Circle, etc. The resulting program, called "Demoxie" allows anyone in

the world to vote on any topic. Mae gets several phone calls from Kalden, in which he urges Mae to speak out against the Circle because it is becoming dangerous and totalitarian. Mae ignores Kalden. She stays up late at night posting online, and she becomes paranoid and anxious about the smallest problems.

The Circle proposes projects that would allow police officers to target people who might become criminals, though they have not yet committed any crimes. Meanwhile, Mae realizes that Annie is suffering from crippling anxiety. Annie has signed up as a guinea pig for a new Circle program that tracks people's ancestry and family history. Through this program, Annie has discovered that some of her ancestors were slave owners, and as a result, her online followers are sending her cruel messages. Mae tries to help Annie by telling her own watchers—millions of them—to be supportive of Annie and overlook her family's crimes.

Mae gets a letter from Mercer explaining that he's going to become a hermit in order to escape the surveillance of the Circle. Shortly afterwards, Mae demonstrates a new Circle program that is designed to track down fugitives. She chooses to demonstrate the program on Mercer, and she sends a team of drones flying after him. In the middle of her demonstration, Mercer drives his car into a gorge in order to escape the drones (and, perhaps, to escape the surveillance culture that the Circle has enshrined more generally). He dies—it's an apparent suicide. Mae is distraught, but Eamon Bailey convinces her that Mercer was a disturbed young man and that she played no role in his death.

Mae is finally introduced to Ty Gospodinov, the third and most reclusive of the Wise Men. She's amazed to see that Ty is actually Kalden. In private, Ty explains that he's been trying to destroy his own company for years: he never wanted the Circle to destroy peoples' privacy, and believes that Tom Stenton is going to turn the Circle into a tyrannical monopoly. He begs Mae to use her influence to denounce the company.

In the brief, final part of the novel, Mae has chosen not to denounce the company, but rather to inform Eamon Bailey and Tom Stenton of Ty's subversive plans. Stenton and Bailey then placed Ty under arrest (or potentially murdered him), and Mae hasn't seen Ty since. Mae visits Annie, who had a nervous breakdown following her participation in the genealogy project and is now in a coma. She looks at the screens showing Annie's brain waves, and resolves to propose a project for listening to other people's thoughts. The novel concludes, "The world deserved nothing less and would not wait."

bright young woman whose friend, Annie Allerton, gets her a job at the Circle. Over the course of the novel, Mae goes from being politely skeptical of the Circle's policies (especially its insistence on active social networking) to becoming an enthusiastic advocate for these policies. Little by little, Mae comes to accept that privacy is immoral, that human beings have an obligation to socialize with millions of other human beings via the Internet, and that the Circle is building a global utopia. She becomes distant from her family and old friends, effectively trading a couple dozen "real people" for millions of virtual friends worldwide. As Mae becomes increasingly loyal to the Circle, it becomes increasingly obvious to readers that Mae is a pawn: the Circle's executives are using her as a poster child for their company and a tool with which to manipulate the world's population into accepting the Circle. In the novel's final pages, Mae betrays Ty Gospodinov—the founder of the Circle, who has come to question his company's ethics—which signifies that she has surrendered to the Circle's corrupt agenda.

**Annie Allerton** – Annie Allerton is a high-ranking member of the Circle (one of the so-called "Gang of 40"), but it's never made clear what, precisely, she does. Annie is an old friend of Mae Holland's, and she pulls strings to ensure that the Circle hires her. For the first half of the book, Annie seems to be an enthusiastic advocate of the Circle's culture and beliefs: Annie encourages Mae to post online about her experiences, and she expresses shock and anxiety when Mae ignores her messages for even fifteen minutes. However, in the second half of the novel, as Mae becomes increasingly enamored with the Circle and its philosophy of transparency, Annie becomes increasingly uneasy and stressed out. Seemingly jealous of Mae's new success, Annie begins ignoring her old friend and eventually has a nervous breakdown, which places her in a coma. The breakdown in Annie's friendship with Mae is one of the most tragic aspects of *The Circle*, and the arc of their relationship is an argument that social networking pushes people further apart instead of bringing them closer together.

**Ty Gospodinov / Kalden** – Ty Gospodinov, an introverted computer genius, is the founder of the Circle and the creator of TruYou, the online identity system at the core of the Circle's success. In creating TruYou, Ty thought that he was creating a digital utopia, but he becomes uneasy with the Circle's rapidly growing power. Although he's one of the three "Wise Men" who run the company, he is sidelined by the others after he calls for privacy protections. Throughout *The Circle*, Ty is a mysterious character, seen only via webcam at the occasional company meeting (although it's hinted that those webcasts are not what they appear and Ty may have suffered a sinister fate). At the end of the novel, it's revealed that Ty is actually Kalden—the mysterious Circle employee who has been having an occasional affair with Mae Holland. Kalden, trying to act on his ethical qualms with the Circle, enlists Mae to help him undermine the Circle's plans, but Mae betrays Ty to the other two Wise Men,



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Mae Holland** – The protagonist of *The Circle*, Mae Holland is a

who seemingly place Ty under arrest (or, it's implied, have him murdered).

**Tom Stenton** – Tom Stenton is one of the Three Wise Men who run the Circle. Of the three, he's the most stereotypically corporate—aggressive, dangerously charismatic, and ethically lax. Throughout the novel, Stenton seems to play a minor role in the company, at least from the perspective of Mae Holland and her fellow Circle employees. Only toward the end of the book does it become clear that Stenton is the most powerful of the Wise Men, and the one whose vision of ruthless, totalitarian control will prove most influential. As Eggers implies, Stenton is a “**shark**”: he devours everything in his presence and always gets his way.

**Eamon Bailey** – Eamon Bailey is one of the Three Wise Men who run the Circle. Of the three, he is the most charismatic and—at least according to Ty Gospodinov—sincere. Bailey is a folksy speaker, a pious Christian, and the father of a child, Gunner, who has cerebral palsy. He is passionately devoted to the notion that human beings should share their experiences with one another, and every Friday he makes speeches to his adoring employees about the Circle's utopian mission to eliminate secrecy and unite the world electronically. In a way, Eamon is the most dangerous of the Three Wise Men, since he seems to be the only one to sincerely believe in the ethics of total transparency (Ty rejects transparency as totalitarian, while Tom Stenton welcomes it *because* it's totalitarian). As we see, Eamon is instrumental in persuading the employees of the Circle, including Mae Holland, to surrender their privacy to the company, which bolsters an ideological program that threatens to engulf the entire planet.

**Francis Garaventa** – Francis Garaventa is a Circle employee who dates Mae Holland on and off for most of the book. Francis could also be considered Eggers's portrait of (or, if you prefer, his nasty caricature of) the typical Bay Area “tech nerd”—even his first name suggests his symbolic connection with San Francisco. Francis is a shy, awkward man. He suffers from premature ejaculations, which means that he and Mae have many erotic encounters but they never have sex. In spite of Francis's awkwardness and sexual difficulties, Mae finds him to be adorable and deeply sympathetic. In part, his allure has to do with his difficult childhood: more than one of Francis's siblings were killed while he was still a child, and, as a result, he is passionately working to design a program for tracking down kidnapped children. Francis is, one could argue, the archetypal “shy boy” who some people find sexy—he's quiet and awkward, but his awkwardness makes him strangely alluring.

**Mercer Medeiros** – Mercer Medeiros, Mae Holland's old boyfriend, embodies the analog way of living and the last gasp of resistance to the Circle's unethical philosophy of transparency. He's everything that Circle employees aren't: confident, outspoken, good with his hands, overweight, poorly dressed, unkempt, and committed to the importance of face-to-

face contact. Mercer is the only character in the novel who offers an eloquent response to the Circle's worldview: he insists that the Circle has reduced human connection to a shadow of what it once was, trading rich and nuanced relationships (which, he maintains, can only exist when people interact face-to-face) for shallow, meaningless social networking “friendships.” Toward the end of the novel, as the Circle prepares to flood the entire industrialized world with cameras, Mercer writes Mae a letter insisting that he's going to live as a hermit. When Mae sends a fleet of drones after Mercer to harass him, he commits suicide by driving his car into a gorge. He'd rather die, it's suggested, than live in under the Circle's totalitarian regime.

**Vinnie Holland (Mae's father)** – Vinnie Holland, Mae's father, is a loving parent who suffers from MS and is unable to get good healthcare. To help her father, Mae arranges for him to receive high-end healthcare from the Circle. However, Vinnie quickly becomes exasperated with the constant surveillance that the Circle demands in exchange for healthcare. As the novel goes on, Vinnie becomes an increasingly minor character, reflecting Mae's alienation from her family and friends, and her growing commitment to the Circle's mission.

**Mae's mother** – Mae's mother is proud of Mae when she gets a job at the Circle; she's even prouder when Mae arranges for the Circle to provide healthcare for Vinnie Holland (her husband). However, Mae's mother quickly becomes skeptical of the Circle's commitment to creating total transparency. When the Circle installs cameras in her house, she covers the cameras with cloth to protect her privacy. This rebellion against the Circle leads to a rift between Mae and her mother, which eventually causes them not to speak anymore at all.

**Dr. Villalobos** – Dr. Villalobos is Mae's doctor at the Circle. She is beautiful and she loves being on camera, but her medical knowledge and ethics become suspect as she treats Mae based on comments from Mae's watchers and she constantly violates doctor-patient confidentiality by offering up Mae's medical information while livestreaming to Mae's viewers.

**Julian Assange** – Controversial, real-life Internet activist and founder of Wikileaks, a website that leaks government secrets. In *The Circle*, Eamon Bailey offers Julian Assange as an example of a great man who is committed to the idea that secrets are immoral. (Notably, Bailey claims that Assange's leaks haven't resulted in any deaths—a statement that has been hotly debated in real life.)

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Renata** – A Circle employee who greets Mae on her first day.

**Josiah** – An HR employee at the Circle.

**Denise** – An HR employee at the Circle.

**Rob** – A payroll employee at the Circle.

**Tasha** – A notary at the Circle.

**Jon** – A payroll employee at the Circle.

**Brandon** – A Circle employee who gives Mae Holland her communication devices.

**Dan** – Mae’s boss in the Customer Experience department.

**Sabine** – A Circle employee who is working on implanting tracking devices in human bone.

**Josef** – A Circle employee.

**Alistair** – A Circle employee who invites Mae Holland to brunch and, when she misses his online invitation, becomes extremely upset.

**Gus Khazeni** – A Circle employee who develops a dating tool called LuvLuv.

**Marion** – The owner of a **kayak** rental shop that Mae Holland frequents.

**Walt** – The son of Marion.

**Senator Williamson** – Senator Williams tries to sue the Circle for being a monopoly, and she is immediately disgraced by a leak that suggests that her computer contains “immoral” content. Later, it’s revealed that the Circle deliberately embarrassed Williamson in order to avoid a lawsuit.

**Olivia Santos** – A Congresswoman who volunteers to “go clear”—i.e., to be surveilled at all times in order to prove that she has nothing to hide.

**Stewart** – A Circle employee who “goes clear.”

**Tania Schwartz** – A college friend of Mae Holland who reaches out to Mae to build support for an Internet campaign designed to “raise awareness” of social injustices in Guatemala.

**Gunner Bailey** – The son of Eamon Bailey, who suffers from cerebral palsy.

**Georgia** – A marine biologist who was hired by Tom Stenton to feed the sea creatures living in captivity at the Circle, Georgia resigns because she refuses to feed the sea creatures unusual foods at Stenton’s request.

**Terry** – A Circle employee who works on a program to test students.

**Jackie** – A Circle employee who works on a program to rank students.

**Pete Ramirez** – A Circle employee who gives Mae Holland a headset.

**Sharma** – A Circle employee who works on Demoxie.

**Jared** – Mae Holland’s supervisor in Customer Experience.

**Gina** A no-nonsense employee at The Circle who sets Mae up with her various social networking accounts and explains the company's expectations of Mae. She's jealous of Mae's constant communication with Annie.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### SOCIAL NETWORKING AND THE INTERNET

In *The Circle*, Dave Eggers satirizes the cultures and values that have emerged in the age of the Internet.

In particular, he criticizes the culture of social networking, in which the vast majority of personal interactions don’t occur face-to-face, and often occur between people who have never met in person. Written at a time when more and more people communicate predominately through social networking sites, *The Circle* shows some of the frightening moral and psychological implications of online life.

As Eggers sees it, there are many problems with the shallow and disposable human relationships that are mediated by social networking. Because it’s so easy to accumulate thousands, or even millions, of online friends, social networking encourages people to value their online friendships—taken together—more highly than their older, firmer friendships. Over the course of the novel, we see Mae becoming more loyal to her millions of Internet followers, or “watchers,” than to her longtime close friend Annie Allerton. Even though Mae has never met any of her watchers and she knows almost nothing about them, the aggregate weight of their friendship outweighs her feelings of closeness and intimacy with Annie. As a result, she increasingly neglects Annie and they drift apart.

Moreover, because social networking relationships are shallow, they train human beings to think of *all* relationships—virtual or face-to-face—in shallow, superficial terms. *The Circle* exposes the shallowness of interpersonal connection via the romance between Mae and Francis Garaventa. After one date with Francis, Mae senses that she’s halfway in love with him. Over the course of the novel, Mae learns astonishingly little about the man she claims to care for, and the book implies that this is due to the fact that social networking has trained her not to probe too deeply into her relationships.

Finally, social networking trains people to feel an irrational need for constant attention. By providing an endless stream of virtual friends, social networking enables people with Internet access to communicate with someone at literally any time. As a result, Mae and her friends cannot stand even the shortest moments of loneliness; when Mae is alone, for instance, she feels a deep “tear” in her soul, a sign of the feelings of alienation that social networking has created within her.

Some readers have attacked Eggers for being too hysterical in

his denunciation of the Internet and social networking, but Eggers isn't striving for social realism. Rather, his goal is to use satire and hyperbole to draw attention to the serious problems that social networking is creating in modern society.



## SURVEILLANCE AND TRANSPARENCY

Surveillance is another important aspect of contemporary culture that *The Circle* explores.

Over the course of the novel, the Circle rolls out a series of programs that cause virtually the entire industrialized world to be placed under surveillance. At the same time that the Circle places the world under surveillance, the Circle's executives, especially Eamon Bailey, promote the philosophy that surveillance is an inherent good, and that allowing oneself to be watched at all times (or "going transparent") leads to enlightenment. In reality, Bailey's doctrine of transparency is just a thinly-veiled version of the familiar totalitarian mantra, "if you have nothing to hide, then you have nothing to fear." In sharp contrast to Bailey's ideas, *The Circle* shows how surveillance and the culture of transparency interfere with human freedom and human nature.

The premise of *The Circle's* critique of surveillance culture is simple: the book shows how surveillance destroys the nuance and beauty of human interaction. Surveillance damages human behavior by encouraging (and later forcing) people to perform for their watchers rather than allowing them to live without worrying what other people will think. In addition, Eggers suggests that the beauty of face-to-face interaction is that it's spontaneous, instinctive, and meant specifically for the other person. However, when two people "go transparent" (i.e., when they speak face-to-face, but with millions of people watching), they tailor their behavior to fit with the expectations of their audience. The novel shows, for example, how Mae Holland loses her connection to Annie Allerton, one of her oldest friends, after she goes transparent. The friendship between the two women becomes strained and distant, since it is mediated by Mae's watchers at all times.

In addition to showing how surveillance homogenizes human behavior, the novel shows how surveillance, despite seeming harmless to begin with, ultimately violates human freedom. Perhaps the greatest danger of surveillance is that it's pleasurable. By glamorizing the culture of transparency, the Circle tricks its users and employees into surrendering their old ways of life voluntarily and embracing a shallow, unsatisfying replacement. In a sense, Mae is like a drug addict—at first, she freely chooses to try surveillance, but she quickly becomes a slave to her own desire. The analogy isn't as inappropriate as it might sound: when Mae is deprived of her watchers for even a minute, she goes through clear symptoms of withdrawal. The novel shows how the Circle uses Mae's addiction to manipulate her into carrying out the company's unethical agenda. In other words, what began as Mae's

voluntary decision to be watched at all times devolves into her complete loss of freedom—even the ability to think for herself. This is all the more frightening because Mae believes that she's acting voluntarily, even though she's being manipulated into doing what the Circle wants.

It's never entirely clear what the Circle intends to do with its surveillance power, but Eggers hints that the Circle will become a tyrannical and dangerous organization, since it can watch anyone in the world. Even without knowing the Circle's endgame, though, the danger becomes clear by the end of the book. For instance, a Circle-sponsored surveillance program sends a bloodthirsty mob after a suspected murderer, and another Circle-sponsored program promises to blacklist all people with a high likelihood of committing a crime. Perhaps most tellingly, Eggers makes it clear that, for all their emphasis on transparency and surveillance, the Circle's executives refuse to reveal anything about their own intentions for the company's future, and are therefore—according to their own arguments—lying and evil. In the end, however, *The Circle's* most important insight about surveillance is that it's a slippery slope: at first it seems harmless and even pleasurable; later on, when it's too late to fight back, it becomes clear how dangerous surveillance really is.



## PRIVACY

The counterpoint to *The Circle's* satire of surveillance is its celebration of privacy. At various points, the Circle's leaders tell Mae Holland that privacy is dangerous and selfish: as Eamon Bailey says, "Secrets are lies." In refuting Bailey's statement, *The Circle* not only connects surveillance with totalitarianism and abuse, but it also shows that privacy is an important part of the human experience. Private moments are necessary because they can be meaningful and restorative. Without privacy, human beings are reduced to anxious, insecure wrecks.

*The Circle* argues that privacy—understood as the ability to have information, experiences, or emotions that are not shared with other people—has an intangible and unquantifiable power. Privacy is restorative: being alone with one's thoughts and feelings builds strength and self-reliance. When Mae **kayaks** alone, for instance, it is the only time that she is allowed to be physically isolated from the rest of the world, and it helps her to relax, clear her head, and build her confidence. After Circle employees find out about Mae's "rogue kayaking," they pressure her to post videos and statuses about kayaking, which effectively ends her private, individual relationship with the activity. Not coincidentally, Mae becomes increasingly insecure and unstable after she surrenders her private time to the Circle. Without the benefit of private time, she's forced to be "on" at all times, and, since this makes her completely reliant on other people for validation and support, she becomes weaker and more emotionally needy.

The novel further suggests that, contrary to Bailey's extravagant claims, two people can only engage in mature, stable relationships when they have some privacy from each other. Conversely, when two people have total information about one another, it's very difficult for them to have a mature relationship of any kind. For example, Annie Allerton volunteers for a program that publicizes her complete family history, and, to her horror, the program reveals difficult information about her parents (for example, that years ago, they witnessed a man drown and did nothing to help him). Afterwards, it becomes almost impossible for Annie to think of her parents as parents: cursed with perfect information, she begins to think of them more distantly, and, after a time, she seems not to think about them at all. Annie's experience suggests that it is difficult, if not impossible, to see the beauty and dignity in other people when one is bombarded with information about them. Perhaps, then, there are some aspects of the human experience that can only be savored with the benefit of privacy. Total information, *The Circle* suggests, is overrated: in order to remain sane, humans also need illusions, dreams, and moments alone with their own thoughts.



## TOTALITARIANISM AND INDOCTRINATION

The French writer Luc Moullet once wrote, “On fascism, only the point of view of someone who has been tempted is of any interest.” These wise words apply to totalitarianism in general, and, in the spirit of Moullet, *The Circle* depicts a totalitarian organization from the point of view of someone who is slowly being pulled into its orbit. Because *The Circle* is told from Mae's perspective, we learn relatively little about how, exactly, the Circle is going to take over the world—as is so often the case in totalitarianism, Mae (a mere foot soldier) is kept in the dark. However, by focusing so exclusively on Mae, the novel explores one of the key aspects of any totalitarian organization: how powerful people indoctrinate their underlings into obedience, using a mixture of peer pressure, persuasion, and outright brainwashing.

Perhaps the novel's key insight into indoctrination is that it has to be gradual. Like the proverbial frog in a pot of water, Mae is slowly pulled into the radical ideology of the Circle. As the novel begins, she is enthusiastic about the basic premise of the Circle—accountability on the Internet—but skeptical of some of the company's more ambitious ideas. Instead of live-blogging her life and posting online at all times, she spends time with her parents and **kayaks** alone. As the novel moves along, however, Mae's colleagues and superiors cajole her into spending less time with her family, posting online more frequently, and cutting her ties to the world outside the Circle.

At first, the arguments Mae hears in favor of transparency seem to be somewhat justifiable. For example, Mae learns about the Circle's plan to implant tracking chips into human

bone, but she doesn't question it because it's intended to protect young children from kidnapping. Much later, when it becomes clear that the Circle is going to use the chips to track all human beings in order to control them, Mae still does not object—the moral groundwork for this totalitarian project has been laid already, and Mae has invested too much in her life at the company to change her mind once she begins to understand the truth. It has been argued that, had Adolf Hitler proposed the murder of the Jews in the early days of his regime, the German population would have opposed or ignored him. However, by gradually proposing increasingly extreme measures, Hitler was able to seduce his people into supporting his genocidal plan. Much the same is true of the totalitarian Circle: if Mae had heard on her first day that the Circle wanted to track all aspects of human life, she might have quit. But because the Circle slowly nudges her into obedience, she comes to support all of its endeavors.

Another important point about indoctrination is that it's often a collective process in which the psychology of the group can convince individuals to conform. Central to this is the Circle's emphasis on isolating employees: the Circle campus is a self-contained world that employees are encouraged never to leave, which means that they spend very little time with non-employees. This isolation amplifies the effectiveness of indoctrination in several ways. First, it minimizes the number of dissenting voices who might dissuade Mae and her friends from embracing the Circle's ideology. Second, it pressures Mae and other new employees to fit in with the group at all costs, since this is their only community. Third, it creates a spirit of competitiveness, in which Mae and the other employees all want the same things (the same romantic partners, the same accolades from their superiors, and the same promotions). This instills loyalty to the company over loyalty to one another.

The Circle's indoctrination techniques are, in sum, taken straight out of the totalitarian playbook. By examining the psychology of a lower-level employee who gradually comes to believe the company's twisted ideology, the novel provides valuable insight into how even independent and intelligent people can be seduced into supporting practices that, when viewed objectively, are clearly immoral.



## UTOPIANISM AND PERFECTION

From the beginning of *The Circle*, it's clear that the Circle's operations stretch far beyond those of the typical tech company: it's working on plans to map the entire world, end corruption in politics, fight crime, increase political awareness, and more. The Circle professes to be, and is widely regarded as, a utopian company, committed to making the world perfect in every way: both by wiping out societal problems like crime and, on a personal level, by pressuring people to be honest, pleasant, and respectful at all times. However, as the novel goes on, we gradually realize that the

Circle is nothing of the kind: while many people at the company sincerely believe that they're making the world perfect, the CEO, Tom Stenton, is a ruthless businessman who uses claims of utopianism as a smokescreen for his own greed. In this way, *The Circle* suggests that utopianism is a kind of alibi that tech companies like the Circle use to hide their unethical behavior. Furthermore, the novel suggests that the very notion of utopianism—total, around-the-clock perfection—is inherently flawed.

Throughout the novel, there are glimpses of how the Circle uses glib, facile claims of utopianism to hide the fact that it's a dangerous company. For one thing, the company's lofty rhetoric of honesty, openness, and transparency helps convince people to surrender their privacy and personal information to the company. For instance, Mae Holland gradually gives up more and more privacy to the company, eventually wearing a camera on her body. Mae does so for two distinct reasons: first, because she sincerely comes to believe that surrendering privacy is the morally right thing to do; second, because she's certain that the Circle is a benevolent company that would never do anything to hurt her. Similarly, the Circle flaunts its utopian ambitions in order to distract people from the fact that it's slowly becoming a police state. For example, the Circle warms its employees and users up to the idea of human tracking devices by framing their surveillance program (that is intended ultimately to track all people at all times) as an attempt to protect children from kidnapping by microchipping their bones. While some Circle executives, such as Eamon Bailey, seem sincere in their utopianism, it is clear by the end of the book that the real power-holders in the company are corrupt, greedy people like Tom Stenton, who are now poised to control the entire world. In effect, the Circle—perhaps like any powerful institution that claims to be building a perfect world—has used utopianism to trick people into trusting its authority. Without these utopian claims, people might be more skeptical of placing so much power in a few people's hands.

While Stenton is clearly corrupt, it's crucial to realize that, even before he consolidates power, the Circle has *already* created a nightmarish world: though the characters have deluded themselves into thinking that their lives are perfect, they've become neurotic, depressed, and cruel. The Circle has destroyed human happiness by pushing people to adopt the same utopian standard of sociability and morality. In one sense, the Circle's utopian worldview (enforced by constant surveillance) compels ordinary human beings to try to be perfect at all times. The Circle's social networking websites, phones, and other electronic gadgets connect Circle users to other users around the world. This creates a de facto surveillance system, in which everyone is always being watched by everyone else. Circle executives celebrate themselves for creating a system in which nobody can get away with being anything less than nice. In doing so, however, they take the

vivacity and sincerity out of human relationships. The Circle's commitment to perfection—understood in the sense of constant human happiness—results in a bland, dull society, in which no one is ever entirely sad or happy.

Similarly, the Circle pressures its user to be honest and law-abiding at all times. While obeying the law may sound like an unqualified good, the novel suggests that, sometimes, human beings need the freedom to break the law and bend a few rules. For example, when Mae “steals” a **kayak** after dark and takes it out on the water—a totally victimless crime that brings her peace and happiness—the police come to arrest her, thanks to Circle surveillance. The Circle helps enforce the rules, but, it's suggested, it also limits human freedom and happiness. In general, the novel suggests that true happiness is only possible when people also experience natural amounts of sadness, uncertainty, frustration, and even illegality in their lives. Thus, because the Circle tries to bring about total happiness, perfection, and legality, it ends up creating exactly the opposite world: an unethical police state in which everyone *pretends* to be happy, but, in fact, is miserable. In the end, then, *The Circle's* attack on utopianism is two-pronged. Utopianism can be a convincing alibi for unethical forms of control and domination, as it is for Tom Stenton. But even when utopianism is meant sincerely—for example, by Eamon Bailey—it can take all the joy, surprise, and humanity out of life in favor of bland perfection.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE OCTOPUS

Toward the end of the novel, Mae Holland sees that the Circle has installed a huge aquarium in one of its buildings. In the tank, there is an octopus, which swims around, grasping onto everything it can touch. At various points, Eggers emphasizes the connection between the octopus and Eamon Bailey, the Wise Man who advocates most enthusiastically for total transparency and digital interconnectedness. The octopus, then, symbolizes both Bailey in particular and the culture of social networking in general. In the end, the octopus is eaten by a shark: this symbolically suggests that the idealism of Bailey's philosophy of transparency is not strong enough to preserve itself in the face of ruthless power.



### THE SEAHORSE

Another animal in the aquarium is a seahorse, which is accompanied by its “vast progeny.” In spite of giving birth to thousands of baby seahorses, the “father

seahorse” is shy and unwilling to show itself to the public—instead of swimming around the tank, it hides in the corner. Eggers suggests that the seahorse symbolizes Ty Gospodinov, the “father” of the Circle. Like the seahorse, Ty is shy and he despises publicity of any kind. Also like the seahorse, Ty doesn’t seem to have much control of the company he spawned.



## THE SHARK

The final animal in the aquarium is the shark, which devours everything in its sight. Eggers explicitly states that the shark symbolizes Tom Stenton, the third and most dangerous Wise Man. Throughout the novel, it seems that Stenton, in spite of his greed and his desire for power, is willing to cooperate with his partners, Ty Gospodinov and Eamon Bailey. However, at the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Stenton, just like the shark, won’t stop until he’s gained power over the entire world.



## THE VOICE

At work, Mae Holland is required to wear a headset, which prompts her to answer survey questions all day long. When she doesn’t answer a question, Mae hears a voice in her headset: it’s her own voice, saying her own name, in order to remind her to continue her task. At first, Mae finds the headset to be uncanny, but she gradually comes to find it soothing. The voice in Mae’s headset symbolizes the way that the Circle, and social networking in general, transforms people into docile, obedient servants.



## KAYAKING

At various points in the novel, Mae Holland goes kayaking. She loves to kayak because it provides her with some alone time in which she doesn’t have to think about her friends, her job, or her family. Kayaking symbolizes the power of solitude and privacy: thus, it’s no surprise that, for the second half of the book, Mae doesn’t go kayaking at all.



## THE ELDERLY COUPLE

During one **kayaking** trip, Mae Holland passes by an elderly couple who are sitting in a boat, drinking wine, and reminiscing about the past. The elderly couple seems to symbolize the “old way of life,” which the Circle is slowly killing: a life characterized by ordinariness, simplicity, and person-to-person connection. As such, the elderly couple is a kind of Rorschach test for how one feels about life lived outside of social networking: envy of the couple’s life reflects skepticism of the Circle, and disdain for their life indicates an alignment with the Circle’s goals.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Circle* published in 2014.

### Book One, part 1 Quotes

●● Their first month living together Mae had broken her jaw one twilight, after fainting, flu-ridden and underfed, during finals. Annie had told her to stay in bed, but Mae had gone to the 7-Eleven for caffeine and woke up on the sidewalk, under a tree. Annie took her to the hospital, and waited as they wired her jaw, and then stayed with Mae, sleeping next to her, in a wooden chair, all night, and then at home, for days, had fed Mae through a straw. It was a fierce level of commitment and competence that Mae had never seen from someone her age or near her age, and Mae was thereafter loyal in a way she’d never known she could be.

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland, Annie Allerton

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 2-3

### Explanation and Analysis

As the novel begins, Mae Holland is about to begin her career at an elite tech company, the Circle. She’s gotten the job thanks to the help of her former roommate and close friend, Annie Allerton. During the period when they were living together in college, Annie proved herself to be a good friend by taking care of Mae after Mae broke her jaw.

The passage establishes the close friendship between Mae and Annie, and—in light of what happens later in the novel—it’s important to notice that this friendship arises out of close, physical, face-to-face contact. The novel implies that the best and most fulfilling friendships are rooted in spending actual time together—not talking over the phone or text messaging. Over the course of the book, Mae begins to gravitate away from “traditional” friendships—i.e., friendships based on face-to-face interaction—and toward virtual friendships, mediated by the Circle’s social networking apps. In the process, Mae becomes lonelier and emotionally needier—no number of virtual “friends” can substitute for the close, intimate friendship that Mae has with Annie.

●● The more she looked at it, the stranger it became. The artist had arranged it such that each of the Wise Men had placed a hand on another's shoulder. It made no sense and defied the way arms could bend or stretch.

**Related Characters:** Tom Stenton, Ty Gospodinov / Kalden, Mae Holland, Eamon Bailey

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 25

### Explanation and Analysis

On her first day at the Circle, Mae Holland encounters a mysterious painting that depicts the three “Wise Men” who run the company together. While it may seem odd for three people to run the same company (wouldn’t one of them rise above the other two?), Mae believes that the three Wise Men balance one another out: one of the Wise Men is aggressive and materialistic, one is shy, and the third is charismatic and generous. As Mae approaches the painting, however, she notices that it’s not a very realistic depiction of how three human beings would actually stand together. The painting tries to give the sense that each man has a hand on another’s shoulder—a sign of equality and respect—but the logistics of this are possible only in a fictionalized depiction. The equality and cooperation that the hands on the shoulders represent, in other words, are possible in art, but not in life.

The painting functions as a symbol for the naiveté of Mae’s view of the Wise Men. She and most of the other Circle employees believe that three powerful people can get along and run a company as equals, but, in reality, only one—the aggressive, dangerous Tom Stenton—will rise above the other two and seize power.

## Book One, part 2 Quotes

☝☝ "It's the worst story," Annie said. "His parents were such fuckups. I think there were like four or five kids in the family, and Francis was youngest or second-youngest, and anyway the dad was in jail, and the mom was on drugs, so the kids were sent all over the place. I think one went to his aunt and uncle, and his two sisters were sent to some foster home, and then they were abducted from there. I guess there was some doubt if they were, you know, given or sold to the murderers."

"The what?" Mae had gone limp.

"Oh god, they were raped and kept in closets and their bodies were dropped down some kind of abandoned missile silo. I mean, it was the worst story ever."

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland, Annie Allerton (speaker), Francis Garaventa

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mae asks Annie about a young man she’s met at the Circle, Francis Garaventa. Without hesitation, Annie tells Mae some shocking things about Francis’s early life: his parents didn’t raise him, and his sisters were raped and killed. Annie concludes her story with the unnecessary words, “It was the worst story ever.” Oddly enough, her words seem to minimize the horror of Francis’s early life. (“Worst story ever” sounds like something you’d say to describe a bad day of high school—not an actual tragedy).

The passage is an early sign of the superficiality and insensitivity of the Circle culture. Because the Circle celebrates openness and information transparency, people like Annie often hear genuinely tragic stories from their colleagues. Instead of expressing real sympathy, they offer only the most superficial reactions and then move on with their lives. Since Annie is someone who is capable of great kindness and friendship (shown by her devotion to Mae after Mae broke her jaw), her flippant comment about Francis shows a troubling change in Annie since she has begun working at the Circle.

The passage is also important because, as we’ll see, Francis uses his tragic personal history with child abduction to urge people to support his child tracking program without considering the ethical implications of such surveillance.

☝☝ Now Bailey cleared the screen again, and stepped toward the audience. "You know what I say, right? In situations like this, I agree with the Hague, with human rights activists the world over. There needs to be accountability. Tyrants can no longer hide. There needs to be, and will be, documentation and accountability, and we need to bear witness. And to this end, I insist that all that happens should be known."

**Related Characters:** Eamon Bailey (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 67-68

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eamon Bailey—the charismatic and likeable Wise Man—gives a presentation to a packed theater of Circle employees. Bailey demonstrates a new technology called SeeChange, the purpose of which is to film a location and post the footage online. Bailey argues that SeeChange will revolutionize the world by preventing tyrants from

hiding: their atrocities will be broadcast online for the world to see. Bailey's unspoken assumption is that, once the world sees tyrants' atrocities, everyone will work together to fight these tyrants.

The problem with Bailey's philosophy, as we see during the novel, is that people can be very passive. Just because they see evil doesn't mean they'll do anything about it. Thus, Bailey's confidence in the power of information and transparency seems overstated. Furthermore, as we can already tell, there's an irony in Bailey's claim that tyrants will be unable to hide from SeeChange cameras: by installing surveillance cameras around the world, the Circle will *become* a tyrannical corporation. In effect, then, the Circle is shielding itself from accusations of tyranny by using the rhetoric of ending tyranny.

## Book One, part 4 Quotes

☝☝ So what had so mortified her during Gus's presentation? She couldn't put her finger on it. Was it only the surprise of it? Was it the pinpoint accuracy of the algorithms? Maybe. But then again, it wasn't entirely accurate, so was that the problem? Having a matrix of preferences presented as your essence, as the whole you? Maybe that was it. It was some kind of mirror, but it was incomplete, distorted.

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland, Gus Khazeni

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 126

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mae has just sat through an agonizing presentation, in which Francis Garaventa (her sometimes-boyfriend) has demonstrated a dating website called LuvLuv. In front of an auditorium of Mae's coworkers, Francis explored Mae's personal interests in order to have an algorithm determine what might be a perfect date for her. Mae is furious, and, as she tries to determine why she's so upset, she realizes that she doesn't like the idea of being reduced to a set of data.

The implication of this passage is that there are some human traits that cannot be digitized or quantified. The premise of LuvLuv is that Mae is the composite of her likes and dislikes (as understood by an algorithm), which makes Mae feel objectified. This passage begins to get at what it lost by online life. While computers can try to paint a whole picture of a person, they will always come up short in

comparison to the nuanced and dynamic understanding that two people can have of one another. To see a computer attempt to understand her makes Mae feel sad and even slightly dehumanized. While Mae's complaints seem highly reasonable, the Circle fervently believes that it is possible to capture the essence of a person online, and that there's nothing humiliating or objectifying about trying to do so.

☝☝ "It's not that I'm not social. I'm social enough. But the tools you guys create actually manufacture unnaturally extreme social needs. No one needs the level of contact you're purveying. It improves nothing. It's not nourishing. It's like snack food. You know how they engineer this food? They scientifically determine precisely how much salt and fat they need to include to keep you eating. You're not hungry, you don't need the food, it does nothing for you, but you keep eating these empty calories. This is what you're pushing. Same thing. Endless empty calories, but the digital-social equivalent. And you calibrate it so it's equally addictive."

**Related Characters:** Mercer Medeiros (speaker), Mae Holland

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 134

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mae gets into an argument with her old boyfriend, Mercer Madeiros. Mercer is upset with Mae because he notices that she's becoming shallower and less interesting. As a result of working at the Circle, Mae is spending less time in person with her friends and more time online and on her phone with the people she's connected to through social networking. Mercer's criticism of Mae's behavior is simple: online friends are no substitute for real, actual, person-to-person relationships. Indeed, he argues that online friendships are *designed* to be unsatisfying and habit-forming.

For the time being, Mercer's complaints may seem a little hysterical, but by the time the novel is over, we see how prescient his fears are. The comparison of social networking to junk food is particularly apt because social networking comes to seem more like a damaging addiction than a natural part of human relationships. Eating junk food causes health problems, and social networking leads to a decline in Mae's emotional health (she becomes much more anxious and much less self-reliant) and even a decline in Annie's physical health, as her anxiety leads her to a breakdown that leaves her in a coma. The notion, too, that the Circle has

engineered its social networks in order to deliberately entrap people initially seems hyperbolic and cynical, but, as the dangerous ambition of the Circle becomes clear, Mercer's warning begins to seem not severe enough. This is one of the few moments in the book in which a character has relative clarity about the dangers of the Circle. Prophetically, though, Mercer's warning is ignored.

## Book One, part 5 Quotes

☝ "Were you here when that burned?" the man asked, pointing to a large uninhabited island in the middle of the bay. It rose, mute and black, behind them. Mae shook her head. 'It burned for two days. We had just gotten here' At night, the heat—you could feel it even here. We swam every night in this godforsaken water, just to stay cool. We thought the world was ending."

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 144

### Explanation and Analysis

In this mysterious passage, Mae kayaks out to sea and encounters an elderly couple sitting in a boat watching the sunset. The couple invites Mae aboard the boat, and she spends a few minutes talking to them.

While Mae's encounter with the elderly couple has no direct bearing on the plot of the novel, it's thematically important insofar as it shows how pre-internet generations lived. The elderly couple seems perfectly content to simply talk to one another and look at the sky, even though, by Mae's Internet-age standards, the couple is slow-paced and a little boring.

One important thing to notice about the passage is the description of the burning island. It's possible that Eggers intends this image to symbolize the decline of privacy in the age of social networking (burning is a symbol of destruction and an island is a symbol of solitude, so, together, a burning island could represent the end of solitude). Because of social networking and Internet access, it's almost impossible to ever be truly alone. In a way, the central question of the novel is, does the "burning of the island" represent the end of the world, or the beginning of a utopian age?

☝ "Okay. Can you drink this?" The doctor handed Mae the dense green liquid she'd been preparing. "It's a smoothie." Mae drank it down. It was viscous and cold. "Okay, you just ingested the sensor that will connect to your wrist monitor. It was in that glass." The doctor punched Mae's shoulder playfully. "I love doing that."

**Related Characters:** Dr. Villalobos (speaker), Mae Holland

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 155

### Explanation and Analysis

In this disturbing scene, Mae goes to visit the Circle's resident doctor, Dr. Villalobos. Villalobos gives Mae various medical treatments, as well as a wrist monitor that tracks her heart rate and other vital signs at all times. She also gives Mae a smoothie to drink; after Mae does so, Villalobos explains that Mae has just ingested a tracking device, which Villalobos calls a "sensor" for Mae's wrist monitor.

Although Villalobos plays off her deception as a joke, it's a very serious violation of her duties as a doctor. Medical professionals aren't supposed to lie to their patients—that's why they take the Hippocratic Oath. It's ironic that, in the pro-transparency atmosphere of the Circle, Villalobos has to resort to deception in order to violate Mae's right to privacy and force her to ingest a tracking device. In other words, in order to insure that every part of Mae's private life is available to the Circle, the doctor has to shroud her own intentions and violate the fundamental oath of her profession. Little by little, it's becoming clear that the Circle is a police state—however, Villalobos is so charming and playful that Mae doesn't realize she's having her rights stolen from her.

## Book One, part 6 Quotes

☝ "That's very understandable. To spend time with your parents, believe me, I think that is very, very cool. I just want to emphasize the community aspect of this job. We see this workplace as a community, and every person who works here is part of that community. And to make it all work it requires a certain level of participation. It's like, if we were a kindergarten class, and one girl has a party, and only half the class shows up, how does the birthday girl feel?"

**Related Characters:** Dan (speaker), Mae Holland

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 179

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes in the course of a conversation that Mae has with Dan, her supervisor at the Circle. After Dan chastises Mae for spending too little time socializing online and with coworkers, Mae explains that her father has been sick, and Dan is superficially sympathetic. However, it's clear from his response that he regards spending time with one's family as being no more intrinsically valuable than spending time with one's friends or coworkers. For Mae, though, spending time with family is fundamentally different than spending time with friends: she's close with her family and her father is sick, so it's something like a sacred duty to go see them. This is, perhaps, the clearest illustration in the book of the disconnect between Mae's values and the values of her company.

Dan's analogy about the kindergarten class is revealing for several reasons. First, it's pretty clear by now that he's a condescending and belittling person—just the opposite of what Mae took him to be at first. Even more fundamentally, though, it's interesting that Dan implies that Mae is doing something morally wrong by not participating in work social life—his analogy suggests that Mae is hurting the feelings of her fellow Circle employees. Other Circle employees will make a similar point to Mae, until, overcome by peer pressure, she begins to cave and spend less time with her family and more time participating in the Circle community.

☝ "You're enjoying this?" she asked.

"Mm-hm," he managed.

Mae thrilled at her power over him. Watching Francis, his hands on the bed, his penis straining against his pants, she thought of something she could say. It was corny, and she would never say it if she thought anyone would ever know she'd said it, but it made her smile, and she knew it would send Francis, this shy boy, over the edge.

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland (speaker), Francis Garaventa

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 203-204

### Explanation and Analysis

In this darkly comic passage, Mae gently masturbates her sometimes-boyfriend, Francis Garaventa. As she does so, readers get a sense for what Mae finds so attractive about

Francis. On the surface, he is a rather nerdy and plain-looking young man, but the passage implies that Mae is attracted to Francis precisely because he's so weak and immature-looking: he is, as Mae notes here, the archetypal "shy boy."

Some critics take Francis Garaventa to be Eggers' caricature of the California tech nerd—Francis is awkward, uncomfortable around women, and very sexually immature. It's crucial to notice that, at his most attractive to Mae, Francis is totally passive: he's just sitting back and enjoying Mae's actions, rather than reciprocating in any way. Thus, even though the passage depicts a sexual encounter between Mae and Francis, it gives a sense of a deep disconnect between them. As the novel suggests, this disconnect is typical of all kinds of relationships—romantic and otherwise—in the era of social networking.

## Book One, part 7 Quotes

☝ The extra layer of the CircleSurveys helped distract Mae from thinking about Kalden, who had yet to contact her, and who had not once answered his phone. She'd stopped calling after two days, and had chosen not to mention him at all to Annie or anyone else. Her thoughts about him followed a similar path as they had after their first encounter, at the circus. First, she found his unavailability intriguing, even novel. But after three days, it seemed willful and adolescent. By the fourth day, she was tired of the game. Anyone who disappeared like that was not a serious person. He wasn't serious about her or how she felt.

**Related Characters:** Ty Gospodinov / Kalden, Mae Holland

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 235

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Mae begins to exhibit the brainwashing and indoctrination that, by the end of the novel, will turn her into an obedient servant of the Circle. Recognizing that she's not participating enough in the company's social scene, Mae's superiors have given her a special headset; all day long, the headset prompts her with survey questions about her likes, dislikes, etc. Instead of finding this to be intrusive and bizarre, though, Mae thinks it's a comforting distraction. The Circle's survey questions (which seem to be designed to help businesses sell products to her and her

coworkers) keep her from thinking about Kalden, the mysterious man with whom she's had passionate sex a few nights ago.

In short, the passage conveys the antagonistic relationship between online socializing and real, person-to-person socializing. During her time at the Circle, Mae spends more and more time interacting with her electronic devices—taking surveys, posting comments, etc.—and less and less time around actual flesh-and-blood human beings. As the passage shows, Mae's interactions with the Internet and electronic devices brainwash her into slowly forgetting about her personal relationships. Instead of pursuing a relationship that could be interesting and important, Mae prefers to drown herself in shallow technological experiences. Put another way, technology is making Mae more loyal to the Internet, and to the Circle itself, than to any single human being.

☛ She thought of the foxes that might be underneath her, the crabs that might be hiding under the stones on the shore, the people in the cars that might be passing overhead, the men and women in the tugs and tankers, arriving to port or leaving, sighing, everyone having seen everything. She guessed at it all, what might live, moving purposefully or drifting aimlessly, in the deep water around her, but she didn't think too much about any of it. It was enough to be aware of the million permutations possible around her, and take comfort in knowing she would not, and really could not, know much at all.

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 272

### Explanation and Analysis

In this dreamy passage, Mae goes out kayaking. The kayaking scenes in the novel are very important, because they convey the ineffable power of solitude and privacy. All alone on the water, Mae is able to forget about her stress and enjoy the beauty of the natural world. She becomes meditative—indeed, in the passage, she reaches an almost Zen conclusion about the world: that there's only so much she's capable of knowing. Mae's conclusion brings her a deep inner peace.

The passage is important, because, for the next 300 pages, the Circle will try to force Mae to un-learn the lesson she

learns here. The guiding message of the Circle is that humans *must* learn everything about the world—indeed, they have a moral imperative to try to do so. Eggers seems to disagree with such a notion: as he sees it, human beings need to accept their own limitations and make peace with the uncertainty of the universe.

## Book One, part 8 Quotes

☛ "And I would argue that any place in the world where gays are still persecuted, you could instantly achieve great progress if all the gays and lesbians came out publicly at once. Then whoever is persecuting them, and all those who tacitly support this persecution, would realize that to persecute them would mean persecuting at least 10 percent of the population—including their sons, daughters, neighbors and friends—even their own parents. It would be instantly untenable. But the persecution of gays or any minority group is made uniquely possible through secrecy."

"Okay. I hadn't thought of it that way."

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland, Eamon Bailey (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 286

### Explanation and Analysis

In this long scene, Mae has a conversation with Eamon Bailey. During the course of their conversation, Bailey convinces Mae that privacy is a sign of guilt and deception, and, therefore, that people have a moral duty to be open and honest with one another about their own lives. Bailey uses spurious logic to make his point.

Bailey's arguments are logically confused because they jump from an abstract premise (that, in theory, people could combat homophobia by coming out of the closet together) to the concrete and dangerous conclusion that people have a moral duty to be totally transparent with one another. Coming out of the closet cannot be a duty for any gay person—people have the right to choose if and when they make their sexual orientation public, and to suggest otherwise disrespects the rights of LGBT people to govern their own lives. Besides, the suggestion that, if only homophobes knew who all the gay people in their lives were then they would cease to persecute gay people, is absurd. In general, Bailey's arguments often fall short because his lofty moral statements have little connection to what happens in reality. Despite this, Bailey's charisma gives him the ability

to use bad logic to place an imperative on individuals to broadcast their personal lives to the public.

☞ "Was the information he presented incorrect? There were factual mistakes?"

"Well, it wasn't that. It was just . . . piecemeal. And maybe that made it seem incorrect. It was taking a few slivers of me and presenting that as the whole me—"

"It seemed incomplete." "Right."

"Mae, I'm very glad you put it that way. As you know, the Circle is itself trying to become complete. We're trying to close the circle at the Circle." He smiled at his own wordplay. "But you know the overall goals of completion, I assume."

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland, Eamon Bailey (speaker), Gus Khazeni, Francis Garaventa

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 289

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eamon Bailey continues his conversation with Mae Holland; they discuss Mae's uncomfortable episode with Francis Garaventa, during which Francis volunteered personal information about Mae to an audience of thousands of people. Bailey alludes to the concept of "completion"—a concept that reappears later in the book (where the word is capitalized), and seems to allude to a world in which human beings are perfectly integrated with their virtual reality lives.

There are many subtle things to notice here. First, notice that Mae shouldn't *have* to say why Francis's actions made her uncomfortable, and just because Francis doesn't do Mae any harm doesn't mean he hasn't violated her right to privacy. Furthermore, notice that Bailey clearly believes that it is possible to represent human beings in their totality online—one day, he implies, websites will be sophisticated enough to give a complete picture of Mae and her friends. However, *The Circle* often suggests that there are some aspects of the human experience that cannot be quantified, and, therefore, that there are some aspects of the human experience that cannot be displayed online. Freedom, solitude, peace, dignity and strength have no digital counterparts, which indicates that the view of human nature that the Circle espouses is shallow and even dehumanizing. Last, notice Bailey's pivot from Mae's legitimate complaints about Francis' invasive behavior and

the Circle's dehumanizing algorithm to a discussion of the Circle's overall goals. Instead of addressing and resolving Mae's problems, Bailey uses the conversation to advance his own agenda.

☞ Somewhere in the stampeding applause, Bailey managed to announce the capper to it all—that Mae, in the interest of sharing all she saw and could offer the world, would be going transparent immediately.

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland, Eamon Bailey

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 306

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Book One, Mae has finished giving a presentation with Eamon Bailey to a packed theater of Circle employees. At the end of their demonstration, Mae and Eamon have "concluded" that secrets are lies, and that privacy is a form of theft. As the audience cheers, Eamon shouts out that Mae will be volunteering for a program, during which she'll be required to wear a camera on her body at all times so that anyone in the world will be able to watch her at any time of the day.

One interesting thing about this passage is that it's not abundantly clear if Eamon is only now informing Mae that she'll be going transparent, or if the two of them discussed such a possibility beforehand. This ambiguity is surely intentional: Mae slowly loses her free will as she becomes more indoctrinated in Circle propaganda. Thus, it's eerily appropriate that we not know whether Mae freely chooses to go transparent or whether she's forced to do so—in a way, both possibilities are correct.

## Book Two, part 1 Quotes

☞ Later that day, a headache appeared—caused, she thought, by eating less chocolate than usual. She reached into her bag, where she kept a few

single-serving aspirin packets, but again, on her screen, she saw what everyone was seeing. She saw a hand searching her bag, clawing, and instantly she felt desperate and wretched, like some kind of pill-popping addict.

She did without.

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 331

### Explanation and Analysis

In Book Two, Mae has gone transparent, meaning that people from all over the world can watch her at any time of day. Mae relishes the feeling of being watched, because being watched encourages her to be on her best behavior at all times. Instead of eating fattening foods or taking lots of aspirins and other painkillers, Mae makes an effort to be as dignified and presentable as possible. In short, going transparent forces Mae to be “on” at all times.

Strange as it may sound, this passage suggests the distance growing between Mae and her own self. Instead of being herself—following her own instincts, habits, and desires—Mae is forced to reshape her personality in various subtle ways. She’s always trying to conform to the person she knows she’s “supposed” to be. In this sense, the passage is about how transparency deprives Mae of her freedom and individualism. At no time does anyone *force* Mae to do anything against her will; instead, the experience of being filmed at all times causes Mae to police her own behavior.

“Mae.”  
She wanted to hear it again, so she said nothing. “Mae.”  
It was a young woman’s voice, a young woman’s voice that sounded bright and fierce and capable of anything.  
“Mae.”  
It was a better, more indomitable version of herself. “Mae.”  
She felt stronger every time she heard it.

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 333

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we see Mae giving in to the ideology of the Circle. In Book One, Mae is given a headset that prompts her with survey questions all day long. When Mae hesitates to answer a question, the headset prompts her with a version of her own voice saying her own name. At first, Mae finds this voice uncanny, but gradually, she gets used to it. In the passage, Mae seems to regard her virtual voice as an improvement on her actual self and a standard for which

she should strive.

On a symbolic level, Mae’s virtual voice represents the artificial and superficially perfect presence that she displays to the world after going transparent. Mae wants to “be perfect”—thus, she’s always reshaping her behavior to fit with her idea of what other people want her to do: eat healthily, smile, etc. The fact that Mae can hear her own voice over her headset and, instead of being reminded of who she is and what she wants for herself, have the feeling that she should be doing better shows how ingrained her self-policing has become. Mae is so committed to re-shaping herself in the image of what others expect that even her own voice has become a tool that the Circle can use to manipulate her.

## Book Two, part 2 Quotes

“Mae caught her breath. She knew this was a demonstration only, but the power felt real. And it felt right. Why wouldn’t the wisdom of three hundred million Americans be taken into account when making a decision that affected them all? Mae paused, thinking, weighing the pros and cons. The Circlers in the room seemed to be taking the responsibility as seriously as Mae: How many lives would be saved by killing al-Hamed? It could be thousands, and the world would be rid of an evil man. The risk seemed worth it. She voted yes. The full tally arrived after one minute, eleven seconds: 71 percent of Circlers favored a drone strike.”

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 407

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Circle demonstrates a new program called Demoxie, which would allow anyone with a Circle account to vote, in real time, on important political decisions of all kinds. In a sample vote, the Circle asks its employees if they should send a drone to kill a dangerous terrorist, considering the strong possibilities of collateral damage.

Even though Mae is confident in Demoxie, it’s painfully obvious that Demoxie is a poorly thought-out program that encourages people to make complex, intricate decisions without giving them enough thought. Here, for example, people choose to end a man’s life and risk other innocent lives after about a minute of “careful” thought. The voters’ behavior in this passage is characteristic of the behavior the

Circle tries to promote in general: shallow, narrow-minded, and unethical. Furthermore, the fact that the Circle would ask its users a question about a terrorist drone strike suggests that the Circle is becoming increasingly powerful: it is becoming, in effect, its own government.

Why were they sabotaging everything Mae was working for? But what was she working for, anyway, if 368 Circlers didn't approve of her? Three hundred and sixty-eight people who apparently actively hated her, enough to push a button at her—to send their loathing directly to her, knowing she would know, immediately, their sentiments.

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 413

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Circle prompts its users with a “funny question”—is Mae Holland awesome? Mae is initially pleased when she sees that the vast majority of Circle users voted that she is, indeed, awesome. However, she’s deeply troubled when she realizes that 368 people voted that she wasn’t awesome. She becomes deeply anxious because of these 368 people—she can’t stop thinking about them.

The passage is highly satirical, because it shows how emotionally needy social networking can make us. By spending so much time online every day (and because she’s watched by millions of people from around the world), Mae has trained herself to depend upon the validation of other people, the vast majority of whom she’s never met in her life. The result is that even a relatively tiny number of people—368 people out of her many followers—can have a massive influence on her mood. It’s also notable that Mae is far more affected by this than the strain on her real-life relationships: she is no longer close with Annie or her parents, but she never shows nearly as much concern about this growing estrangement as she does about strangers flippantly declaring that they don’t think she is awesome.

"Mae, they just got up and left. They never called 911 or anything. There's no record of it. They never reported it. But the body was found the next day. The guy wasn't even homeless. He was maybe a little mentally disabled but he lived with his parents and worked at a deli, washing dishes. My parents just watched him drown." Now Annie was choking on her tears. "Have you told them about this?" "No. I can't talk to them. They're really disgusting to me right now"

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland, Annie Allerton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 443

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Annie has volunteered as a guinea pig for a new Circle program that tracks its users’ family history, stretching back hundreds of years. To Annie’s horror, however, this reveals some disturbing truths: some of her ancestors were Southern slave owners, and her own parents once witnessed the death of a man and did nothing about it.

The passage is important for a few reasons. First, it shows the way that the Circle uses information and total transparency to drive people away from their families and loved ones. Annie is horrified by the information about her family, but she never asks her parents for their side of the story. Even after the Circle embarrasses her and her family, it doesn’t occur to Annie to be angry with the Circle itself or to distrust its version of events—she’s already too slavishly loyal to her company to question its actions. Furthermore, the passage is an important example of how total transparency isn’t an inherent good. A few pieces of information wreck Annie’s relationship with her parents, possibly forever. Contrary to what Eamon Bailey has always claimed, the information doesn’t enlighten anyone or make anyone’s life better. It just causes problems.

"Let's cut the video feed," Stenton said to Mae, "in the interest of allowing her some dignity."

**Related Characters:** Tom Stenton (speaker), Mae Holland

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 456

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mae is making a presentation to an audience of Circle employees and she demonstrates a new program designed to track down anyone on the planet. For her first example, Mae chooses to track down a woman who is a convicted murder and who has escaped from prison. Mae succeeds in mobilizing a huge, angry mob of Circle users to chase after the woman, and the mob corners the woman in front of a wall and calls the police. Interestingly, and crucially, Tom Stenton—the “Wise Man” who’s secretly guiding Mae’s presentation—tells Mae to cut away from the woman after she’s arrested.

It’s worth thinking about why Stenton gives such an order. Stenton seems not to want to show any of the potentially negative consequences of his programs. He doesn’t want people to develop sympathy for this woman as she goes through the prison system, or—in the event that the police have arrested the *wrong* woman—become skeptical of the Circle’s tracking program. So even though Stenton claims that he’s cutting the video feed for the sake of the woman’s “dignity,” he’s clearly being disingenuous. For one, the company’s commitment to complete transparency, were it consistently applied, should categorically reject the notion that it would be necessary to cut the feed for any reason. More important, Stenton has already deprived this woman of whatever dignity she has left—in all likelihood, he’s cutting the video feed to preserve the illusion that the Circle is a just, ethical, and “fun” company.

Although some, such as Bailey, believe that the three animals will be able to get along just fine, it quickly becomes clear that they won’t: the shark devours the octopus, the seahorse, and everything else alive in the tank.

The shark tank is a metaphor for the Circle itself: Stenton is the shark, Bailey is the octopus, and Gospodinov is the seahorse. In theory, it seems that Gospodinov and Bailey could balance out Stenton’s boundless greed—but in fact, Gospodinov and Bailey, too, will be “devoured” sooner or later. Stenton seems eerily calm as the shark devours the other animals—it’s as if he’s using the footage of the shark tank, which is being broadcast around the world, to send the message that he, like the shark, is a dangerous creature and he’s not to be trifled with. Stenton has been a minor character in the novel thus far, but now that the Circle is about to become a global monopoly, it’s implied that Stenton is going to seize power and turn the Circle into a totalitarian dictatorship.

Notice, also, that some of the people who are watching the shark tank from around the world seem to enjoy the savage spectacle: disturbingly, this could symbolize their desire for a deadly, powerful, and charismatic dictator to tell them what to do.

“But there are a thousand protections to prevent all of this. It’s just not possible. I mean, governments will make sure—”

“Governments who are transparent? Legislators who owe their reputations to the Circle? Who could be ruined the moment they speak out? What do you think happened to Williamson? Remember her? She threatens the Circle monopoly and, surprise, the feds find incriminating stuff on her computer. You think that’s a coincidence? That’s about the hundredth person Stenton’s done that to. Mae, once the Circle’s complete, that’s it. And you helped complete it. This democracy thing, or Demoxie, whatever it is, good god. Under the guise of having every voice heard, you create mob rule, a filterless society where secrets are crimes.”

## Book Two, part 3 Quotes

“He couldn’t get enough of the shark, its anxious circling. “Until next time,” Stenton said finally. He nodded to Mae, and then to her watchers, who were now one hundred million, many of them terrified, many more in awe and wanting more of the same.”

**Related Characters:** Tom Stenton (speaker), Mae Holland

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**   

**Page Number:** 482

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eggers offers a complex metaphor for the Circle itself. Stenton places an octopus and a seahorse—both of which he’s captured during his exploration of the Marianas Trench—in a tank with a shark.

**Related Characters:** Mae Holland, Ty Gospodinov / Kalden (speaker), Eamon Bailey, Tom Stenton

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 488

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mae has learned the truth about Ty

Gospodinov: the person she's known as "Kalden" is Ty. Ty was one of the original founders of the Circle, but now he has become disillusioned with the concept of information transparency. He believes that the Circle is going to become so powerful that it will rule the world and become a totalitarian dictatorship. Now, Ty is trying to convince Mae to use her global influence to speak out against the Circle and prevent it from seizing power.

When Mae hears Ty name all the potential dangers of the Circle, she's highly skeptical. She's so accustomed to thinking of the Circle as a benevolent and even utopian organization that she can't process the notion that the company is tyrannical. It's striking that she can think of no better counterargument to Ty's claims than the idea that the government will be able to keep the Circle from enacting an unethical agenda—it has been clear for a long time that the Circle treats politicians like pawns. Evidently, Mae has spent very little time thinking about the ethics or actions of the Circle. She's become so swept up in its lofty goals of transparency that she hasn't stopped to ask herself if transparency is a good idea.

☛ Mae pictured all this. She pictured the Circle being taken apart, sold off amid scandal, thirteen thousand people out of jobs, the campus overtaken, broken up, turned into a college or mall or something worse. And finally she pictured life on a boat with this man, sailing the world, untethered, but when she tried to, she saw, instead, the couple on the barge she'd met months ago on the bay. Out there, alone, living under a tarp, drinking wine from paper cups, naming seals, reminiscing about island fires.

At that moment, Mae knew what she needed to do.

**Related Characters:** Ty Gospodinov / Kalden, Mae Holland (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 491

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, at the climax of the book, Mae has a decision to make: she can either partner with Ty Gospodinov and speak out against the Circle, denouncing the company for its human rights violations, or she can betray Ty and continue serving the Circle.

The book does not explicitly explain why Mae thinks about

the elderly couple from the boat during such a tense moment, but it's suggested that the elderly couple represents a certain way of life: the private, old-fashioned way of life that Ty is trying to preserve and the Circle is trying to destroy forever. The reader is left to guess whether Mae is thinking about the couple and imagining that she and Ty could have a similarly rewarding life together on a boat, or whether she dreads the notion of turning out like the couple. The fate of the company—and even of the country and world overall—depends on how Mae thinks of the couple. Eggers does leave this as a cliffhanger, but the ending nonetheless seems to be embedded in Eggers' language in this passage. Mae's imagining the Circle being dismantled seems far more emotional than her thoughts of the elderly couple. She seems distressed by the idea of the company falling apart, but she describes the couple dispassionately and even with disappointment (which implied in the phrase "but when she tried to, she saw, instead..."). It seems clear that Mae's emotional investment in her company, produced by sophisticated manipulation and outright brainwashing, will win out.

## Book Three Quotes

☛ What was going on in that head of hers? It was exasperating, really, Mae thought, not knowing. It was an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world. She would bring this up with Stenton and Bailey, with the Gang of 40, at the earliest opportunity. They needed to talk about Annie, the thoughts she was thinking. Why shouldn't they know them? The world deserved nothing less and would not wait.

**Related Characters:** Annie Allerton, Mae Holland

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 497

### Explanation and Analysis

In the brief, final book of *The Circle*, we learn that Mae has betrayed Ty Gospodinov to the other two Wise Men, who, it's implied have put Ty under arrest (or, perhaps, murdered him). In the final scene of the novel, Mae, now slavishly loyal to the Circle, looks at Annie laying comatose.

The way Mae treats Annie is indicative of how deeply the Circle has warped her understanding of human relationships. When the novel began, Mae was Annie's close, loving friend—now, Mae doesn't seem to think of Annie as a particularly important person at all. Indeed, the predominant emotion in this passage isn't affection or

concern, but annoyance. Mae feels a boundless desire to know everything about the world, even what other people are thinking and dreaming about. She decides that she'll propose a project to read thoughts at her next Circle meeting.

Thus, the novel ends on a terrifying note: if Mae succeeds in

her project to decode thoughts, then human beings will have lost their final form of privacy, their own minds. In general, the novel's ending shows how the Circle has turned Mae from a sensible, compassionate young woman into a cold, unfeeling pawn. Here, more than ever, it's clear that the Circle is no utopia: it's a totalitarian regime.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## BOOK ONE, PART 1

On a bright, sunny day in June, a young woman named Mae arrives at a beautiful, colorful corporate campus. She walks down a road made of cobblestones, some of which are labeled with words like “Innovate,” “Dream,” and “Imagine,” and then she arrives at the main building of the campus. The company that owns the campus is called “the Circle.” Although it’s less than six years old, it’s one of the most famous and powerful companies in the world.

Mae has been hired to work for the Circle, thanks in large part to the help of her friend and former college roommate, Annie. Mae feels exceptionally close to Annie, who once took care of Mae after she broke her jaw. After graduating from college, Annie got a business degree from Stanford University and was hired to work for the Circle. Afterwards, Mae applied to work there. She is sure that she got the job because Annie “pulled some strings” on her behalf.

Mae enters the main company building. Inside, a young woman named Renata greets her, and explains that Annie will be with her in an hour. Renata shows Mae to her new desk. As she walks with Renata, Mae thinks of how proud her father was when he found out she was going to work for the Circle. Mae is proud not to be a financial burden on her parents, “who had plenty else to worry about.” As Mae walks, she sees “Welcome Mae Holland” flash electronically on the walls, accompanied by her high school yearbook picture.

Renata and Mae walk across an elevated steel grating through which Mae can see the ground below. Mae is afraid of heights, and she tries to make a joke about it. Instantly, Renata becomes very serious, and begs Mae to tell her “if anything’s not right.” They arrive at Mae’s cubicle, and Mae is disappointed to see that the cubicle, lined with burlap, is virtually identical to the one she worked in at her old job: it’s “the first thing she’d seen at the Circle that hadn’t been rethought.” The computer on her desk is an “ancient model,” and her chair seems half-broken.

*Like many books and movies about large, complex organizations, The Circle is told from the perspective of a new recruit to the organization. Readers might notice that the Circle campus bears a great resemblance to the Google campus in Northern California: in many ways, the Circle is a caricature of Google, with its emphasis on utopian innovation. However, Eggers has made it clear that the Circle could stand in for any number of contemporary tech companies.*



*Annie and Mae are very close friends, and it’s important to notice that their closeness is founded on direct, face-to-face interaction—Annie cared for Mae during her period of recovery.*



*So far, all the Circle employees we’ve discussed have been very young. Perhaps this emphasizes the Circle’s youthful, enterprising spirit. Also, notice that the Circle has gone out of its way to welcome Mae, though it may seem a little odd that the company would look up Mae’s old yearbook photograph in order to do so. One could even interpret the gesture as an invasion of her privacy.*



*Renata seems extremely invested in Mae’s happiness—thus, she takes Mae’s joke very, very seriously. Renata’s behavior suggests that the Circle emphasizes its employees’ health and happiness. However, Mae doesn’t know what to think about her cubicle. It doesn’t fit with the cutting-edge feel of the rest of the company.*



Mae thinks back to her time in her hometown of Longfield, California, which is located just outside of Fresno. Longfield is a working-class town, and Mae was one of the few people from her high school to attend a four-year college. Afterwards, she returned to Longfield and worked at a utility company. It filled Mae with shame to take such a menial job, especially since she was deeply in debt. Mae found her job easy, but her coworkers, most of whom were much older, were impressed with her computer skills. Mae resented her boss, her 9 to 5 schedule, and her coworkers.

As Mae surveys her ugly cubicle and thinks about her previous job, she hears Annie say, “Now I’m thinking this wasn’t such a good idea.” She turns, and sees that Annie is laughing. Mae says, “I can’t believe you went to that much trouble to upset me,” but Annie laughs off Mae’s protestations and takes her on a quick tour of the Circle.

As Annie leads Mae around the building, Mae thinks about Annie’s college days. In college, Annie was something of a “doofus.” She came from “generations of money,” had strange obsessions, and was physically awkward. She was also exceptionally friendly and loved parties. Mae still wonders how Annie, a “scattershot and ridiculous person,” rose so quickly through the Circle. Annie is one of the “Gang of 40”—one of the forty most influential people in the company.

Annie explains that Mae will be working in the Customer Experience department, but she assures Mae that about half of the company’s senior executives started in that department. She tells Mae that every time Mae does something great, Annie will tell the whole company about it—as a result, Mae should rise fast. Annie shows Mae the different buildings on the Circle campus. There’s a kennel, where employees can spend time with the Circle’s collection of dogs; a nightclub, where employees are encouraged to dance during the day; and a theater, where the company’s many improv groups perform. Annie introduces Mae to dozens of people, each of whom, Annie claims, is working on something “world-rocking.”

Annie takes Mae to the “Ochre Library,” a large, private reading room with an aesthetic that seems uncharacteristically old-fashioned. In the middle of the library, there’s a portrait of the “Three Wise Men,” the three visionaries who run the Circle. There is Ty Gospodinov, the young computer genius who founded the company and who’s rumored to have Asperger’s Syndrome. Because of his social awkwardness, Ty plays an invisible role in the Circle. In fact, some say that he’s no longer involved in its projects at all.

*This passage establishes some of Mae’s motivation for working at the Circle—she’s ambitious, she wants to make her parents proud, she doesn’t want to be a financial burden, and she seems to have something to prove. Mae, like many young people in America, hungers for a challenging, original job that allows her to put her computer skills to good use. (However, Eggers never specifies the skills that qualify Mae to work at a place like the Circle, which leaves open the possibility that Mae’s ambition exceeds her talent.)*



*Annie has brought out the cubicle as a prank. However, like many of the behaviors we’ve witnessed at the Circle so far, this prank comes off as slightly creepy, rather than funny. One wonders why Annie spent so much time planning something that would torture Mae.*



*Notice that it’s still not clear exactly which skills qualify people to work for a company as elite as the Circle. If Annie and Mae have any skills as computer programmers, engineers, or leaders, Eggers doesn’t mention them here. Annie’s primary qualification for working at the Circle, at least as Mae sees it, would seem to be that she’s social and friendly.*



*This passage paints a quick picture of the structure of the Circle. Unlike at many successful companies, it’s possible to rise quickly to the top (as evidenced by Annie’s rapid ascent into the Gang of 40). Employees have exciting projects—indeed, by Annie’s estimation, almost every one of them will change the world. Finally, employees are treated extremely well, and get lots of perks. The Circle is, in short, perfect—maybe a little too perfect for comfort.*



*In this section, Eggers gives readers some important expository information about the Circle. Immediately, Ty seems like a mysterious character: he’s a brilliant man, but it’s not clear how much of a role he plays in running the company now. The suggestion that Ty is being pushed out because of his social awkwardness hints at the importance of socializing to the company.*



Annie tells Mae more about Ty's role in the company. Ty's great idea—the one on which the Circle was founded—was that people's different online identities (their social media profiles, payment systems, email accounts, etc.) should be combined into one system, known as "TruYou." Ty's innovations have made Internet use highly convenient and have essentially ended identity theft. In the first year of the Circle, almost all Internet users and websites adopted the Circle's system. Online markets were particularly supportive of the Circle's success, since TruYou made it much easier to advertise to individual customers.

Standing next to Ty in the portrait is Tom Stenton, the Circle's CEO. Stenton seems to be in the "mold of the eighties Wall Street traders"—proud, aggressive, and flashy. As a result, he's unpopular among many of the "utopian young Circlers." Stenton's style of conspicuous consumption clashes markedly with the lifestyles of Ty and Eamon Bailey, the third Wise Man.

The third figure in the painting, Eamon Bailey, seems happy, earnest, and "merry." He's universally beloved for his folksy way of talking, his close relationship with his son who suffers from cerebral palsy, and his enthusiastic relationship with the company's young employees. Somehow, Ty, Bailey, and Stenton balance each other out and keep the company successful. As Mae looks at the painting carefully, she realizes how poorly painted it is. Somehow, the three Wise Men each have a hand on another's shoulder, which seems impossible in real life.

Annie shows Mae the rest of the library. It contains tens of thousands of leather-bound books, a testament to Bailey's love for preserving the past. Annie asks Mae to give her "a verbal non-disclosure agreement," and when Mae does so, Annie shows Mae a secret room in the center of the library. In the middle of the room, there's a hole with a pole that extends down into the darkness. Annie admits that she's not sure where the pole leads, but she guesses that it leads to Bailey's parking spot.

Annie tells Mae that she needs to go back to work. She leads Mae down to the cafeteria and introduces her to two coworkers, Josiah and Denise, who both say that they're delighted to meet Mae. Annie says that she'll meet Mae at the solstice party later in the evening and she leaves. Mae spends the rest of the day getting the full newcomer tour from Josiah and Denise. The tour is a blur to Mae: she sees hundreds of happy, energetic people who all say that they're overjoyed to meet Mae and that they love Annie. Mae is dazzled by her tour, and she finds herself thinking of everything outside the walls of the Circle as a "chaotic mess" by comparison. She thinks, "Who else but utopians could make utopia?"

*Ty's innovation was to merge different online identities into one. The advantages of such a system are considerable: there are fewer identity thieves (since the Circle's security is excellent), and it's easier for businesses to tailor their advertisements to individual customers. However, the passage is somewhat sinister, because it suggests that, thanks to the Circle, there is no more anonymity on the Internet: businesses and strangers know exactly who you are at all times.*



*Stenton is the most overtly dangerous of the three Wise Men, because he seems greedy and crudely ambitious. However, the fact that he's only one of the Wise Men suggests that he could be balanced out by his two partners.*



*In many ways, Bailey is the face of the company: the charismatic advocate of openness and transparency. In all, the painting of the three Wise Men seems to be trying to give the impression that the Wise Men get along perfectly. However, if one looks closely at the painting, it becomes clear how crude and poorly conceived the painting—and, by extension, the Circle's triumvirate—really is.*



*It is a sign of Annie's influence at the company that she knows about the secret room inside the library. However, the fact that she has no idea where the hole goes (and can only come up with the most banal theory) symbolizes her ignorance, and lack of curiosity, about the Circle's secret operations. Annie may be powerful, but she has no more idea what the Wise Men's long-term vision for the company is than Mae does.*



*In many ways, the central theme of the novel is utopianism: the ways in which human beings are trying to use science and technology to build a perfect world. Although Mae's initial tour of the Circle campus reveals a dazzling world, this world is not without a vague sense of menace. Everybody seems so cheerful, and the company's Three Wise Men seem to work so well together, that one can't help but suspect that there's more to the Circle than meets the eye.*



## BOOK ONE, PART 2

In the evening, Mae meets up with Annie at the Circle's solstice party. They load their plates with delicious food, sit in the stone amphitheater on the Circle campus, and watch the other employees dancing and playing games.

As Mae socializes with her new coworkers, she hears a male voice saying, "Look at this one. She looks so peaceful." Mae can't find the person who says this. As she wanders off to find some more wine, a man wearing a t-shirt and a vest tells her that he's hidden some wine in a nearby pool. Mae follows the man, who introduces himself as Francis Garaventa. She notices that he has an older man's eyes, but young, soft skin. Francis gives Mae some wine and tells her about himself: he's been working as developer for the company for two years. He compliments Mae's voice, saying, "So far, it's the best thing about you." Mae finds this comment odd. She tells him, "You're strange," and he replies, "I don't have parents. Does that buy me some forgiveness?"

Annie sees Mae and Francis talking and she comes to greet them. Francis seems oddly intimidated by Annie, and he walks away to give Annie and Mae some time alone. Annie teases Mae about flirting with Francis, and Mae insists that she wasn't. Mae goes home via the Circle shuttle. Back in her apartment, she thinks about how sad and ordinary her home is, and how lucky she is to be working at the Circle.

The next day, Mae arrives at work early and Renata shows Mae to her real office. She's taken to a beautifully carved wooden desk, from which she'll be conducting business. Mae notices that her desk is "divided" from the other desks with transparent glass dividers. That morning, Mae speaks with Rob, a payroll employee, and Tasha, a notary. She also meets with Jon, another payroll employee, who makes a copy of her birth certificate. Finally, Mae meets an employee named Brandon, who gives her a new tablet and phone, the electronic devices she'll be using from now on. Brandon asks to see Mae's old laptop and phone, and he quickly transfers the data from both devices to her new machines. Brandon asks Mae if she wants him to throw away her laptop now that she has no further need for it. Mae replies, "Maybe tomorrow. I want to say goodbye."

*The Circle hosts constant parties and get-togethers, during which the employees are encouraged to meet one another. These parties build a strong sense of community and group solidarity.*



*Francis is one of the novel's key characters, and Mae's initial impression of him is that he seems both mature and immature: simultaneously old and young. Some critics have argued that Francis is the embodiment of the Silicon Valley ethos—in other words, he's the kind of person tech companies attract. Francis is clearly a smart, savvy Circle employee, but he's also awkward, and he seems to be uncomfortable around the opposite sex. He strains to say the right things to Mae, but he often comes up short.*



*In the evening, after Mae says goodbye to Francis and Annie, she's left with the sense that the Circle is just better than the outside world—it's so happy, exciting, and innovative that it makes the rest of California seem uninteresting by comparison.*



*On Mae's second day of work, she begins to get down to brass tacks, getting set up at her desk, figuring out payment information, etc. Notice that Mae's desk, while very pretty, is still, at the end of the day, a desk—a subtle metaphor for the fact that the Circle, beneath all the utopian rhetoric, is just a greedy company. Also, the fact that the dividers around Mae's desk are transparent reflects the Circle's total commitment to information transparency. For the time being, Mae isn't asked to surrender any particularly personal information—a birth certificate is normal information for employers. Furthermore, there's no indication that Jon, Brandon, or Tasha will share Mae's personal information with other people. Everything seems confidential, at least for the time being. Brandon gives Mae beautiful communication devices, and he seems eager to throw out everything tied to Mae's old way of life. This, once again, emphasizes the company's commitment to innovation.*



Annie greets Mae, and Mae is so overwhelmed with gratitude that she embraces Annie and whispers, “Thank you.” Annie introduces Mae to her team leader, a handsome, peaceful-looking man named Dan, and then Annie departs. Dan earnestly explains to Mae that, as an employee of the Circle, she’ll be honoring the company’s principles, the most important of which is its commitment to community. Mae is overjoyed to be working with a boss who is sincere and principled. Dan seems to be exactly the opposite of her previous boss.

Dan shows Mae to her desk and introduces her to her trainer, Jared. Jared explains that Mae will be in charge of customer satisfaction for smaller advertisers. She’ll respond when customers ask questions, and, in return, the customers will give her a rating from 1 to 100. If Mae’s ratings dip below 95, Jared cautions, she might need to meet with him to go over best practices. Jared runs through some practice questions with Mae, and then he gives her an actual live user question to answer. Mae answers the question, and she receives a rating of 99. Jared encourages Mae to follow up about her rating and ask why the user didn’t give her a 100. Mae does so, and the user changes the rating to a 100.

Jared leaves Mae with some user questions. Mae spends the rest of the morning answer questions and following up with anyone who didn’t give her a 100. After a few hours, her aggregate rating is 98. Jared checks up on Mae’s work frequently, and compliments her for her success. As Mae works, she sees on her tablet that Annie has sent a company-wide message that Mae is “kicking ass” on her first day.

By the end of her first week, Mae has memorized boilerplate responses to give to customers. She already feels comfortable with Customer Experience, and she is accumulating customer contacts around the world. Customers are always very polite in their questions: one legacy of TruYou is that Internet users aren’t anonymous, and therefore they can’t be rude without other people finding out about it. Her aggregate rating is a 97, and everyone seems pleased with her work.

*Clearly, Mae is impressed with the Circle so far. She is proud to be working for such a prestigious company, and she must be grateful to have a lucrative job that’ll help her pay off her expensive student loans. While a company showing its commitment to community seems healthy to a certain degree, it’s odd that Mae’s team leader emphasizes community above all else. This suggests that community will be a primary focus of Mae’s work.*



*First, notice that Jared doesn’t really tell Mae anything about how advertising fits in with the company overall—apparently, Mae’s job is to answer customer questions, and not to think too much about the company as a whole. Second, notice that Mae’s work is mostly meaningless: she’s supposed to solicit ratings from her customers, but, if they don’t give her a high enough rating, she’s supposed to nudge them to give her one. The Circle seems overly concerned with improving ratings that are already high—it’s not clear why a 99 is much better than a 95 (or what these numbers mean to different customers).*



*Mae may be “kicking ass,” but neither she nor the readers have much of a sense of what role she plays in the company as a whole, or why differences of a single point matter (i.e., why it’s important to bump up a 99 to a 100). Once again, the passage calls into question what, exactly, qualifies Mae (or anyone else) to work at the Circle.*



*Mae’s job is fun and easy—perhaps too easy. She learns everything she has to know about Customer Experience within a few days, and she gets a very high aggregate rating (although why a 97 is better than a 95 in any non-trivial sense remains a mystery). Notice that the Circle likes to rank its employees in very precise (but still somewhat confusing) ways.*



On Friday, Mae gets lunch with Annie, and Annie praises Mae for her excellent work. Annie notes that when she worked in Customer Experience, she didn't even crack a 95 in her first week. Annie introduces Mae to two coworkers, Sabine and Josef. Josef asks Mae about her Customer Experience work, and mentions that he—and many others at the Circle—started there. Sabine says that she's a biochemist for the Circle, but when Mae asks her what she's working on, Sabine insists that she's unable to talk about it. Josef works in the Education Access department, and he says that he's friends with Francis Garaventa—Francis had told him that he met someone “very nice” named Mae. Josef and Annie explain to Mae that Francis is working on a program designed to prevent all baby abductions. Francis's parents were “fuckups,” Annie says, and several of his siblings were abducted from a foster home and murdered. “It was the worst story ever,” she adds.

After lunch, Annie, Mae, and the other Circle employees congregate in the Great Hall, which is a cavernous space modeled off of an Italian church. Inside, a middle-aged man wearing a sweater and jeans walks onto the stage and introduces himself as Eamon Bailey. People shout out, “We love you, Bailey!” and Bailey replies, “I love you as the grass loves the dew.” Mae is transfixed by Bailey's casual eloquence. Bailey proceeds to talk, as he does every Friday, about some of the projects that he's been working on. He shows the employees a clear live video of Stinson Beach that's coming from a thumb-size camera. Affordably priced live streaming, he argues, will allow people around the world to get in touch with other people and places.

Bailey goes on to talk about the human rights implications of live streaming. Protesters around the world will be able to capture human rights violations and murders and send the footage around the world. Anyone who commits a crime will be caught in the act. As a result, Bailey insists, crimes, human rights violations, and even everyday acts of unkindness will recede from society. Bailey shouts, “Tyrants can no longer hide,” and the audience applauds.

Bailey finishes his speech by talking about his mother. He explains that he'd wanted to install a camera system in his mother's house so that he could check in on her. After his mother refused to allow cameras in her home, Bailey snuck into her home—the audience laughs at this information—and installed a few Circle cameras himself. Now, Bailey can check up on his mother at any time. Mae whispers to Annie, “This is incredible.” Bailey concludes, “All that happens will be known.”

*In this strange passage, Mae gets to know Sabine and Josef, who tell her a little more about the Circle and about Francis. Sabine's secret biochemistry work suggests that the Circle's goals for the future extend far beyond the Internet. Notice, also, that Francis has told his friends about Mae already. Strangely, the fact that Annie characterizes Francis's family tragedy as the “worst story ever” minimizes the tragedy (you'd be more likely to use such a phrase to talk about a bad day at school than to discuss anything that's actually tragic). Annie's brisk, superficial manner, we'll quickly see, is characteristic of the Circle in general.*



*In this symbolically loaded passage, we're introduced to Eamon Bailey, the charismatic Wise Man who celebrates transparency. The fact that Bailey is speaking in a church-like space is no coincidence: he's proselytizing on behalf of the “religion” of social networking (and, as we'll learn, he's very religious). Mae finds Bailey to be highly eloquent and charismatic, but on paper his words seem clichéd and unremarkable. (The passage pays homage to Steve Jobs's legendary Apple presentations, during which he, too, wore casual-seeming jeans and addressed a rapturous crowd.)*



*At this point in the novel, the idea that the Circle should use its technology to monitor people might seem reasonable, especially because Bailey says that the Circle will use its cameras to protect human rights. However, it's important to note Bailey's claims that tyrants will no longer be able to hide: later, we will learn that the Circle is concealing its own tyranny through its rhetoric of protecting human rights.*



*For the time being, Bailey evades accusations of unethical behavior—he actually gets a big laugh when he claims that he snuck into his mother's home. Nobody in the audience seems to understand how invasive, unethical, and downright creepy Bailey's ideas are: Mae, Annie, and their peers are seduced by his utopian vision.*



## BOOK ONE, PART 3

It's Saturday, and Mae is eating dinner with her parents to celebrate her first week at the Circle. Mae's father used to be a building manager in Fresno, and her mother used to work at a hotel restaurant. Later, they bought a parking lot. In high school, it was always humiliating for Mae to hear her classmates talking about running into her parents at the lot. In recent years, Mae's parents have become gentler—a "sweet older couple."

At dinner, Mae's mother tells Mae that she's bragged about Mae's salary and health insurance to her friends back home. She gives Mae advice, like, "Don't take lunch your first week. Sends the wrong message." She also mentions that she saw Mercer, Mae's old boyfriend—someone Mae doesn't feel like talking about. Together, Mae's mother and father say that they're exceptionally proud of her.

Mae asks her parents about their insurance, and they tell her that things aren't going well. Her father was diagnosed with MS while she was still in high school. Recently, he's been in near-constant pain, but his health insurance no longer covers his painkillers. Mae is horrified—she knows how badly her father needs his medicine. Before she can express sympathy, her parents give her a gift: a heavy silver pen, which they think will look good on her desk.

Mae sleeps late at her parents' house and they go to a diner for lunch. Mae's father—whom her mother calls Vinnie—says that he's feeling stiff, and he goes to recline in the car. Mae and her mother finish their meal quickly and then go out to join Vinnie. From the car, Vinnie says, "Well, this has been wonderful."

After saying goodbye to her parents, Mae drives out to the beach. As she drives, she remembers Mercer (her old boyfriend) teaching her how to kayak. At the beach, she rents a kayak from a woman named Marion, whom Mae has known for years. She goes **kayaking**, savoring the feeling of being alone. Suddenly, she begins to sob. The sight of her father in so much pain is almost impossible for her to bear. She spends nearly an hour drifting on the ocean. She sees seals swimming near her boat, and she wonders if they know "how good this was, how lucky they were to have all this to themselves." Back at home that evening, Mae eats a light dinner and then falls into a deep sleep.

*We already know that Mae is highly ambitious, but in this section, we get a better sense of why she's so ambitious: she has something to prove to her old community, and she wants to distinguish herself by having a good job. Mae is clearly close with her parents. Their relationship isn't perfect, but she loves them.*



*Like a lot of adults, Mae has a love-hate relationship with her parents. She doesn't enjoy everything about them (here, she seems not to appreciate her mother's unsolicited advice or her discussions of her ex-boyfriend), but she loves them nonetheless.*



*Mae is understandably upset when she learns that her father isn't getting the healthcare he desperately needs. In light of their obvious financial problems, Mae's parent's gift comes across as especially poignant. In spite of their own problems, they're sincerely proud of their daughter, and they buy her an old-fashioned but sincere gift to show their pride.*



*In this chapter, Eggers paints a picture of an imperfect but happy family. It's clear, though, that Vinnie's health is a serious problem.*



*Throughout the book, there are long scenes of Mae kayaking. These moments are very important for Mae because they give her the privacy and solitude she, and all human beings, need. Privacy here is shown to be restorative. Out on the sea, Mae clears her head and finds peace—it's no coincidence that she falls into a deep sleep afterwards.*



On Monday morning, Mae throws herself into her work. Mondays are always busy, because the user requests from the weekend have piled up. Mae finds it harder to concentrate on her work, and she dips down to a 91. She sends follow-ups about her low scores, but her clients are grumpy and irritable. She receives a message from Francis inviting her to lunch.

At lunch, Mae sees Francis, and she notes that he seems unusually delicate—almost as if he’s shrunk since she last saw him. Mae apologizes for the abrupt end to their conversation last week, and Francis apologizes for talking about his childhood so frankly. He adds, “I assume Annie filled in the gory stuff. She likes to tell that story.” Francis proceeds to tell Annie about ChildTrack, the program that Annie was describing the previous Friday. Not too long ago, the Danish government implanted chips in children’s wrists so that parents would know where their children are at all times. The problem with the implants was that they could be cut out of the children’s wrists fairly easily. Francis and Sabine are working on implanting chips in bone so that they’re virtually impossible to remove from the body. These chips will surely reduce child abductions by a massive amount. Mae realizes that she’s late and she needs to rush back to work.

For the rest of the afternoon, Mae’s aggregate score is barely a 93. Dan messages Mae to ask her to meet a Circle worker named Gina later. While she’s walking to the restroom, Mae sees a man walking through the halls; he introduces himself as Kalden. He explains that he’s worked at the Circle for a while, and he asks to see Mae’s workplace. Mae takes Kalden back to her workplace, where she lets him watch her as she works through customer requests. Kalden watches for a few minutes, asking Mae some basic questions about her job. Then, he excuses himself and says he’ll see her around. As Kalden departs, Mae thinks, “he was not a normal kind of person.”

As Kalden leaves, a cold-looking woman walks into the room, greets Mae, and introduces herself as Gina. She asks Mae if now would be a good time to set up her “socials.” Mae apologizes for having not done so earlier—she claims that she didn’t have any time for “extracurricular stuff.” Gina frowns and lectures Mae about how social networking isn’t extracurricular at all; it’s a vital part of working at the Circle. Mae apologizes to Gina, and Gina nods and proceeds to set up Mae’s social networking accounts. She’ll use her accounts to stay in touch with the rest of her team, and also for social participation. Gina also sets up a program called CircleSearch, which allows Mae to search for the location of anyone on the Circle campus.

*It’s amusing that, even on a “bad day,” Mae gets a 91 out of 100—an A in most classrooms. The stakes of Mae’s Customer Experience work seem oddly low—even if Mae doesn’t perform her job well, she still, in effect, gets an A. Perhaps it’s a sign of the Circle’s commitment to likability and good public relations that it places so much emphasis on tiny differences in customer satisfaction.*



*Mae seems to find Francis highly sympathetic because he’s been through a horrible family tragedy. Oddly, however, Francis seems comfortable with the fact that Annie tells people about his tragedy. Notice, too, that Francis describes a practice that could be called unethical: forcing children to wear tracking devices (and, in fact, imbedding these devices so deep in their bodies that they have no choice but to wear them at all times). However, it doesn’t occur to Mae to think of the child-tracking project as unethical, in part because she’s so sympathetic to Francis’s personal history of child abduction. (In retrospect, it’s possible that the Circle gave Francis the tracking project for precisely this reason—Francis’s sympathetic status acts as a smokescreen for the project’s immorality.)*



*Kalden is another mysterious character in the novel—it’s not until the final pages that we understand his purpose in the story. Kalden exemplifies a funny rule that the film critic Roger Ebert termed the “law of economy of characters.” The rule states that, in books and movies, there are no unnecessary characters—whenever there’s a character who seems to be unnecessary to the plot (like Kalden), a plot twist will reveal that character to be very important.*



*This passage is an early sign that not everything is perfect at the Circle: Gina seems to be the first unpleasant Circle employee Mae has met. As Gina’s speech might suggest, the Circle places enormous emphasis on social networking participation—in fact, considering that Mae has now received a talk about her networking and no talks about her job performance, the Circle would seem to place more emphasis on social networking than on actual job performance. Also, notice that technology allows Mae to track anyone on campus—another program that seems highly unethical.*



Gina sets up a Zing account for Mae, and tells Mae that the Circle expects her to “zing” at least ten times a day. Gina explains that Mae will be receiving hundreds of online messages every day. Her Circle network will categorize these messages according to their importance. Most important will be 1) her customers, followed by 2) her coworkers, followed by 3) her online friends, broken up into her “Inner Circle” and “Outer Circle” friends. Gina claims that, although online social networking is prioritized third, it is still “just as important as other messages.” She concludes, “I hope that’s clear. Is it?” Mae nods.

Before leaving, Gina shows Mae one more thing: the Participation Rank, or “PartiRank.” All Circle employees are ranked on their number of zings, the number of people who correspond with them, the number of people who “like” their posts, etc. Gina insists that ranking isn’t important, but that “some Circles take it very seriously.” With these words, she leaves.

In the evening, Mae stays late to look through the messages she’s receiving from her Outer and Inner Circles. She receives messages about the menus in the Circle cafeteria, about upcoming speakers, and more. Mae gets a message from an old friend who has the flu, and Mae responds by posting a song about the flu. Her post prompts a series of new threads about the band that wrote the song, which leads to further posts and threads about a city, war veterans from that city, the war in Afghanistan, medical marijuana, etc. Mae finds herself getting tired and she heads home.

On Tuesday, Mae’s workload is lighter, but she spends three hours looking through her Outer and Inner Circle messages. She feels lucky to be in contact with so many amazing people. Just before lunch, Mae gets a message from Dan asking her to stop by. Dan introduces Mae to Alistair, someone she’s never seen before. Without any further comments, Dan asks Mae if she’d like to start. Mae is utterly confused—suddenly, Alistair begins to cry. Dan hints, “It’s about Alistair’s Portugal brunch.” Mae has no memory of being invited to a brunch, but, wanting to end the conversation on a good note, she apologizes for not attending. Immediately, Dan smiles and says, “Let’s hug it out.” Mae and Alistair do so, “forming a tight scrum of newfound communion.” Immediately afterwards, Dan sends Mae a summary of her “glitch” with Alistair. The summary explains that Alistair held a Circle-wide brunch for all Circle employees who’d “liked” Portugal online. Mae didn’t respond to the invite, which upset Alistair greatly. The summary concludes, “Now Alistair and Mae are great friends and feel rejuvenated.”

*In this darkly comic passage, Gina gives Mae contradictory, borderline-incomprehensible demands, and then asks if everything is clear. For example, she tells Mae to prioritize her Outer Circle third, but also to think of it as “just as important.” It’s slowly becoming apparent that the Circle is going to pressure Mae to participate in social networking, whether she likes it or not.*



*Gina gives more contradictory demands. The unspoken message here seems to be that PartiRank is actually very important to one’s success at the Circle. As the book goes on, it’s becoming clearer that, in spite of its utopian ideals, the Circle uses manipulation and subtle coercion to control its employees.*



*This passage satirizes the chaotic jumble of the Internet in general and social networking in particular. Online, one topic always leads to another, and so on, until you’ve strayed far from your original search. Here, for example, Mae moves from showing sympathy for her friend to looking up medical marijuana. The Internet, the passage suggests, makes it difficult to focus on any single topic or to express any single emotion.*



*In spite of small signs of menace, Mae continues to count herself lucky to be working at the Circle. However, it becomes clear here that Mae’s new workplace is no less belittling or coercive than her previous one. Dan’s manner is very condescending, especially the way that he tells his superiors that Mae made a “glitch.” It’s significant, too, that Dan takes Alistair’s side: instead of telling Alistair that it’s silly to be hurt that someone he has never met missed his event invite, Dan asks Mae to apologize. The Circle’s commitment to networking is so enormous that the company expects its employees to spend an absurd amount of time online, responding to invites and commenting on photos.*



Mae meets Annie for lunch. Annie tells Mae that she's been following Mae's "conflict resolution" with Alistair. At first, Mae is uneasy that Annie has been listening to her, but then Mae feels relieved that Mae has been with her "even if remotely." Annie adds that she's brought in for conflict resolutions about once a month. She explains that Mae must have been invited to the brunch automatically because Mae went to Portugal five years ago, and took pictures—pictures that are posted on her accounts online. Annie assures Mae that Alistair is a "nut" and that Mae shouldn't worry about her conflict resolution with him. After they finish eating, Annie shows Mae the "sample room," which is full of designer shoes, jeans, etc. Because Circle employees are style leaders, companies send products to the Circle campus every day.

Mae returns to her desk, where she's left her phone, she and sees that Annie has already left her eleven messages. Each message is more urgent than the one before: Annie asks Mae not to repeat her comments about Alistair to Dan, asks again, then asks Mae if she's giving her the silent treatment, etc. As soon as she sees the messages, Mae calls Annie to ask what's wrong. Annie apologizes for being paranoid, and Mae suggests that she's overstressed.

After work, Mae asks Francis if he wants to hang out. They get dinner in San Francisco and afterwards Mae kisses Francis. Francis thanks Mae, which she finds odd. They wander through the city, kissing and exploring the streets. As they kiss, a homeless man watches them "as an anthropologist would."

## BOOK ONE, PART 4

In the days following her kiss with Francis, Mae wonders if she's falling in love. Although she decides that she's only "halfway" to love, she savors every moment with Francis and finds that she takes more pleasure in her work because she knows that she'll be meeting up with Francis soon.

*The fact that Mae is initially disturbed that Annie would listen in on her conversation shows that she hasn't been fully indoctrinated by the Circle. However, the fact that Mae later feels relieved that Annie is watching her suggests that the Circle's employees are slowly converting her to their anti-privacy ideology. The existence of the sample room suggests the clout that Circle employees carry in the world. The prestige and perks associated with working at the Circle seem to incentivize overlooking the more bizarre and invasive aspects of company.*



*Though Annie previously claimed that Alistair was overly sensitive, it's clear that Annie, too, is overly sensitive and paranoid: she can't go more than a couple minutes without thinking that Mae is deliberately ignoring her messages.*



*The romance between Francis and Mae is interesting because Eggers never makes it clear what exactly Mae likes about Francis.. Also, the homeless man in this scene might symbolize the obliviousness of the tech world to the harsh realities of the "real world." In San Francisco, for example, companies like Google have been criticized for contributing to gentrification and pushing working-class families into homelessness.*



*Notice that Mae falls "halfway in love" rather quickly. While it's not wrong for a young person to feel passion, it could be a sign of the shallowness of 21st century relationships that Mae is infatuated with Francis, and yet knows little about him.*



One Friday, Mae and Francis sit in the Great Hall for the weekly presentation of new information. The speaker, Gus Khazeni, used to work on Francis's child safety project he and will be presenting on his new research. Eamon Bailey comes out, welcomes the Circle employees to their weekly meeting, and introduces Gus. Gus greets the audience warmly, jokes about his parents pressuring him to marry, and asks if anyone in the audience is interested in "finding a mate." Gus shows the audience the Circle's dating website, which is called LuvLuv. He asks for a volunteer from the audience, and Mae is surprised to see Francis putting his hand up. Francis comes to the front of the stage, and Gus asks him if there's someone he'd like to date; Francis replies that he'd like to date "someone named Mae Holland." Mae feels extremely uncomfortable. Gus shows Francis how to use LuvLuv to search for Mae's interests and hobbies. As Francis and Gus crack jokes, Mae thinks that she'd like to kill "this version of Francis."

Later that day, Mae is still furious with Francis and Francis tries to apologize to her to no avail. Francis leaves Mae to work at her desk, but he continues sending her apology messages. As she works, Mae tries to pinpoint what made her so angry about Francis's behavior. Although none of the information that Gus found about Mae was particularly private, Mae didn't like the feeling of being reduced to a set of likes and dislikes.

Mae is so wrapped up in her anger that she doesn't notice her mother messaging her; when she looks, she sees that her mother wants her to come home. Mae drives home as fast as she can, and she is surprised to find her mother, her father, and her old boyfriend Mercer sitting in the living room. Mercer explains that, "they wanted me to help out." Mae's mother tells her that Mae's father may have had a seizure—the doctors aren't sure. Mae's father is feeling fine now, and he insists that Mercer saved his life by driving him to the hospital.

*Just a few pages after claiming to be halfway in love with Francis, Mae feels like she'd like to kill him—surely this is a sign that she didn't know Francis very well to begin with. Francis and Gus are talking as if Mae isn't really present in the room at all—or, put another way, as if she's a prize to be won by strategically planning the perfect date. Gus and Francis's presentation is dehumanizing and disrespectful. Some California tech companies have been criticized for being sexist and even misogynistic, and this passage suggests why: they hire young, somewhat emotionally immature men who haven't learned how to treat women with respect.*



*Surprisingly, Mae finds it difficult to pinpoint what she finds so offensive about Gus and Francis's presentation (from the reader's perspective, it's perfectly obvious: Francis's violated her privacy and objectified her). But it's a sign of how indoctrinated Mae has already become that she finds it hard to express the idea that there are some aspects of a human being that cannot be quantified or digitized.*



*It's may be a sign of the distance growing between Mae and her family that she doesn't get her mother's message about her father until many hours have passed. The passage also introduces us to Mercer—one of the only characters in the novel to offer an intelligent critique of the Circle.*



At dinner, Mae learns that her father had been experiencing blurred vision all day and he collapsed later in the afternoon. After dinner, Mae's parents go to bed, and Mae and Mercer stay up talking. Mercer tells Mae that he's been running his own store, which sells chandeliers made from deer antlers. Mae tells Mercer that she's been working in Customer Experience at the Circle, and she mentions that she's seen a few customers' comments about Mercer's business—some comments are very negative. Mae takes out her phone and reads through some of the negative comments, even after Mercer asks her to stop. Mercer sighs and tells Mae, "Every time I see you, there's a hundred other people in the room." Mae protests that Mercer is a businessman and he should care more about his customers' happiness. Mercer shoots back that "the world has dorkified itself": people only care about simplistic judgments ("like" and "dislike") and they spend all their time alone, looking at their electronic devices. He also argues that Mae's company manufactures "unnaturally extreme social needs."

Mae thanks Mercer for helping her dad and she walks to her room. A few minutes later, she hears Mercer leave. She spends the rest of her night handling customer queries on her tablet so that, "by midnight she felt reborn."

## BOOK ONE, PART 5

Mae wakes up on Saturday and spends the day with her father. On Sunday, she wakes up to find him sitting on the couch watching sports. As he sits on the couch, he calls for Mae to get her mother. Mae smells something bad and realizes that he's soiled himself. Mae's mother tells her she should probably head back since her father won't want her to see him like this. Mae says that she can stay and help, but Mae's mother insists that she give her father some privacy.

Furious with her mother, Mae drives out to her favorite **kayaking** spot and finds that Marion's son, Walt, is running the kayaking station that afternoon. He asks Mae to come back by 5:22 so that he can pick up his daughter. Walt explains that he's just digitized the kayaking system, but then he sees that his Wi-Fi isn't working well. Mae asks Walt if she can check in after kayaking, and then she takes her kayak out on the water.

*Mercer represents the opposite of everything the Circle celebrates: he's humble, active, good with his hands, old-fashioned, and dislikes social networking. It is a sign of the growing disconnect between Mae and her old life that she and Mercer cannot understand each other's position regarding Mercer's furniture store: Mercer is baffled when Mae reads customer comments out loud, and Mae is equally baffled when Mercer gets offended. Although Mae finds Mercer's complaints silly, Mercer's point is dead-on: social networking has reduced human interaction to a shadow of its former self. As we've already seen, the Circle nudges its employees into constant social networking, forcing them to become addicted to an unnatural level of social contact.*



*Mae is beginning to go to the dark side—she feels more comfortable and at ease when she's interacting with strangers via an electronic device than she does in person with Mercer or her family.*



*This passage is a powerful example of why people deserve the right to privacy. Mae wants to spend as much time with her father as possible, and she can't quite understand why he might want some time alone (rather than humiliating himself in front of his own daughter). All people should have privacy when they want it—they shouldn't have to beg for it.*



*The fact that the kayaking system is now digitized is a subtle sign of how the Circle is destroying the right to privacy. Kayaking was a sanctuary for Mae, but now the Circle's technology is encroaching on that sanctuary. It's also significant that the digitized system relies on Wi-Fi: the business was more reliable before it upgraded its technology, it seems.*



Mae kayaks out to a distant fishing boat, where she finds an **elderly couple** sitting down to have a cocktail. A woman invites Mae to join them for a drink, but Mae can see that her husband is a little uncomfortable with bringing Mae aboard. Nevertheless, she climbs onto the boat and accepts a glass of wine. The woman says, “I think she’s a nice girl,” and guesses that Mae is about eleven years old. The woman’s husband points out a large uninhabited island in the distance and tells Mae that it burned not too long ago.

Suddenly, Mae realizes that she needs to return her kayak in eight minutes. She says her goodbyes to the **elderly couple** and paddles back to Walt. During her trip back, she realizes that she’s been blissfully free of thoughts of her parents, Mercer, or work.

On Monday, Mae comes into work and realizes that she’s missed several Circle parties and mixers over the weekend. Dan brings her into his office and asks her to help him train the new recruits in the afternoon. Around eleven, Jared brings in a group of new recruits. Quickly, he tells them that today will be a very busy first day, so lunch will be cut short, and Mae will be helping them with their workload. Mae proceeds to field the new recruits’ questions for the rest of the morning, and the office gets an aggregate rating of 93. Afterwards, Dan tells Mae that she’ll need to visit the Circle clinic soon, and that next week he’ll “hook her up” with a new aspect of the Customer Experience job.

In the later afternoon, Mae leaves her desk, per Dan’s request, and goes to the Circle clinic. There, a strikingly beautiful woman, who introduces herself as Dr. Villalobos, informs Mae that the Circle values healthy bodies and minds. As such, Circle employees are asked to check in with the clinic every two weeks. Dr. Villalobos adds that the Circle has access to Mae’s complete medical records, and she offers to take care of Mae’s knee, which Mae opted not to have ACL surgery on years before because her insurance didn’t cover it. Villalobos offers Mae a wrist monitor, which measures her heart rate, and a green smoothie. After Mae drinks the smoothie, Villalobos laughs playfully and informs her that she’s just swallowed the sensor that will connect to her wrist monitor. Mae nods and says that her wrist monitor is “pretty.”

*In this surreal scene, Mae encounters an elderly couple who are never named. The couple represents the old, pre-Internet way of life. The couple isn’t glamorous or creepily upbeat like the Circle’s employees, but they exemplify a stoic confidence and compassion that, as we’ll see, the Circle is on the verge of annihilating. The image of an island burning is, itself, a fascinating symbol: perhaps it gestures towards the way that modern technology has ruined individuality and privacy.*



*Solitude is important for Mae because it represents an escape from the stresses of her life. However, the Circle is on the verge of ending that solitude for good.*



*Even though Mae has only been working at the company for two weeks, she’s already being treated like an old pro. It’s perplexing that Mae could master her job after only two weeks—surely a company as prestigious and sought-after as the Circle would demand that its employees be savvy, intelligent people who can handle difficult assignments. Instead, Mae’s assignments seem remarkably easy and straightforward—even on a bad day the office nets a 93 out of 100.*



*Dr. Villalobos is a rather sinister character. She violates her Hippocratic oath within a few minutes of meeting Mae by conning her into ingesting a tracking device that Mae has every right to turn down. Notice that Dr. Villalobos laughs off the ethical implications of her action, much as Eamon Bailey did while introducing SeeChange. Mae seems unperturbed by the ethics of Dr. Villalobos’s behavior—she’s so dazzled by the beauty of her wrist monitor that she doesn’t realize it might as well be a handcuff.*



Dr. Villalobos asks Mae a series of medical questions. When she asks if Mae's parents' health is good, Mae, in spite of herself, begins to cry. She tells Dr. Villalobos about her father's MS and his recent accident. Villalobos nods and suggests that Mae add her parents to her insurance plan. That evening, Mae asks Annie about adding her parents to her insurance plan, explaining that her father's current health insurance isn't covering his MS. Annie is surprised that Mae didn't tell her sooner, and she assures Mae that the Circle will be able to take care of her parents. Then she tells Mae that she needs to run to a meeting, "dealing with some juicy Russian tax stuff." She adds that she'll be working very late, probably all night.

As Mae is standing alone in Annie's office, Annie calls her and explains that she's "twisted a few arms" and arranged for both of Mae's parents to get Circle health insurance. Mae is stunned—it has been about four minutes since Annie left the room. Mae calls her parents and tearfully tells them the good news.

Later in the evening, Mae checks her tablet for a list of potential activities: she could go to lectures, poetry slams, cooking classes, and more. She decides to go to a circus performance, where she sees Alistair. Alistair makes eye contact with her, and immediately sends out an invite for an event for all "Portugal enthusiasts"—Mae immediately responds that she'll attend. One of the circus performers rushes toward Mae, his arms full of swords. Mae is intimidated—she's sure that the performer is really going to hit her with his swords. Someone pulls Mae to her knees to protect her from the swordsman—Mae looks up and realizes that it's Kalden. He asks if she's okay, and then walks her away from the circus.

*In this disturbing section, Mae prepares to add her parents to her health insurance plan. While such an action will provide Mae's father with the healthcare he needs, it will also give the Circle a lot of leverage over Mae, allowing them to pressure her into doing their bidding. Also, notice that Annie has to deal with "juicy Russian tax stuff," which suggests that the Circle's reach is becoming truly global.*



*As with so much at the Circle, putting Mae's parents on Mae's healthcare plan is a little too easy. Considering what we know already about the Circle's unethical practices, we might wonder what the Circle will do with Mae's parents—perhaps monitor them in the way it monitors its employees.*



*Mae responds to Alistair's invite, symbolizing the fact that she's becoming more and more deeply ingrained in her Circle community. The swordsman's performance could symbolize the escalating sense of danger in the novel—although Mae doesn't realize it yet, she is at the mercy of a tyrannical company.*



Mae walks with Kalden and abruptly tells him, “You don’t remember my name.” Kalden admits he doesn’t. He gets her name, and then proceeds to ask her questions about her coworkers. Mae asks him, “What do you do here, anyway?” but he doesn’t answer. Kalden walks by a lemon tree and offers her one. Then he shakes the lemon tree so that many lemons fall down—one of them hits Mae in the head. Kalden says, “You always hurt the ones you love ... That’s what my parents said. And they loved me very much.”

*Kalden continues to play an unclear role in the plot of the book—it’s not clear what he does for the Circle, if anything, and he doesn’t seem to have any relationship to the other characters. (The fact that Kalden offers Mae sour lemons might symbolize the fact that he’s the only person at the Circle who doesn’t offer Mae a rosy, naïve view of the world.) Kalden’s remark about his parents “loving him a lot” is a strange non sequitur, since it implies that Kalden’s parents hurt him; even later in the book, it’s not entirely clear what he’s talking about (Eggers never gives us information about Kalden’s literal parents). One possible interpretation of the passage, in light of what we later find out about Kalden, is that Kalden’s “parents” are his older partners and mentors, Eamon Bailey and Tom Stenton, who at first collaborate with him, but slowly begin to suppress his ideas. Another possible interpretation is that Kalden’s remarks are meant to emphasize the close relationship between love and destructiveness—an eerily appropriate observation, since the Circle is a dangerous, destructive company that nonetheless professes to love its users.*



## BOOK ONE, PART 6

The morning after she reunites with Kalden, Mae calls Annie and tells her that she’s met someone—someone with grey hair. Annie is perplexed, since she doesn’t know any Circle employees who fit that description. She asks for his last name, but Mae doesn’t know it. Annie says that she’s at the airport, headed to Peru, and has to hang up.

*It’s telling that Annie can’t think of anyone at the Circle with grey hair—almost everyone who works there is young and healthy. Annie continues to travel the world on behalf of the Circle (which is clearly expanding around the globe).*



Alone, Mae thinks about meeting Kalden the previous evening. She thinks about how they walked around the campus, and how, at the end of the night, he pulled her close to him, as if he’d wanted to kiss her. Suddenly, Annie calls back. Mae remembers what Annie’s told her: the Circle is in “some moderately hot water” over their plan to use drones to count every tree in the Amazon. Annie asks Mae if she has any pictures of Kalden, but Mae admits that she doesn’t. Privately, she feels certain that Kalden will find a way to contact her again.

*Instead of kissing Kalden immediately, Mae and Kalden hesitate, taking things more slowly—again, distinguishing Kalden from Francis, for whom Mae has immediate, but volatile, feelings. Annie’s mention of “hot water” suggests that the Circle is, becoming a dangerous company and threatening the rest of the world. Kalden is unique in the story because Mae knows almost nothing about him—a rarity in the social networking age.*



At work, Mae focuses on her customers, and ignores Francis's endless stream of messages and apology videos. Annie returns from Peru on Friday and meets up with Mae to watch the news about the Circle's latest venture: replacing all paper currency with "CircleMoney." They watch a news story about how Senator Williamson is leading a task force to investigate the Circle for acting as a monopoly. Mae isn't sure what to think. She knows that the Circle owns a huge chunk of the Internet, but she isn't sure why this should be a problem. Annie scoffs and assures Mae that Senator Williamson won't be able to do anything to harm the Circle. She asks Mae to keep an eye out for Kalden—she's worried about having "some shadowy guy skulking around campus."

One afternoon, Dan asks to speak with Mae; in his office, he tells her that she's been getting great aggregate ratings. Then, he apologizes for not "communicating everything about this job properly." He explains that Mae isn't being social enough—she's not going to enough parties, and her "participation rank" is very low. Condescendingly, he asks Mae if he's "driving her away" somehow. Mae reluctantly explains that her father had a stroke recently—she's been spending time with her family. Dan tells Mae that it's "very cool" to spend time with family—but he repeats that the Circle is a community-based company.

Dan takes Mae to meet with Josiah and Denise from HR. Denise greets Mae by saying, "You're such an enigma." She explains that Mae hasn't been participating in many Circle-wide parties or other social events. She's concerned about Mae's recent "situation" with Alistair. Denise suggests that Mae reach out to the Circle's groups for "staffers dealing with MS." She asks Mae why, in the last three weeks, she hasn't posted about her father's MS. Posting about her experience could have put her in touch with other Circle employees who might be able to provide her with advice or emotional support. Josiah asks Mae about her Sunday, and Mae explains that she went **kayaking** alone. Josiah, seeming personally offended, mutters, "I kayak." Mae apologizes, half jokingly, for being "selfish." She begins to feel very uncomfortable.

*Mae continues to turn a blind eye to the ethical implications of the Circle—she's been so seduced by the Circle's, optimistic worldview that she can only scoff when Senator Williamson claims that the Circle is a monopoly. Also, the fact that the Circle is about to replace all currency with its own forms of payment suggests that the Circle is becoming even more monopolistic. Mae is so confident that the Circle has the best interests of its customers at heart that she doesn't think it's a problem that it controls the Internet.*



*Dan's advice confirms what readers may have suspected already: at the Circle, social networking participation is more important than job performance. Dan turns out to be just as condescending as Mae's previous boss, which suggests that, beneath the glamor and hype, the Circle is just an old-fashioned, self-interested company. In spite of what he says, Dan seems to have little respect for Mae's family—as far as he's concerned, spending time with family is just another form of social interaction, no more important than going to a party or a potluck.*



*At the Circle, it would seem, an enigma is anyone who doesn't go to parties every day or participate in social networking 24/7. Josiah and Denise, despite working in the HR department, seem unable to understand why Mae wouldn't post online about her father's medical condition—the privacy of Mae or her father seems entirely irrelevant to them. At the Circle, privacy is considered selfishness—as evidenced by Josiah's comment, "I kayak." Although Mae jokes about having been selfish, Josiah and Denise seem to take her comment seriously.*



Denise and Josiah explain that they're afraid that Mae's is becoming "sub-social." They suggest that she meet up with a man named Pete Ramirez, and Mae agrees to do so. After her meeting, Mae feels guilty for letting down her company—the same company that's taking such good care of her parents. Annie messages her, "Goddamnit, Mae, give a shit!" For the rest of the evening, Mae "zings," posts pictures online, and comments on other people's pictures. Over the next few hours, her PartiRank rises from the 10,000s to the 3,000s. That night, rather than drive all the way home, Mae sleeps in a dorm room on the Circle campus, where she stays up until 3 am, trying to increase her PartiRank.

The next morning, Mae goes to her desk and finds her screens covered with messages of congratulations from her Circle friends. For the next few days, Mae tries to break into the top 2,000. Her aggregate rating for customers remains high, around a 97. Over the weekend, Mae immerses herself in numbers—her ratings, the number of "likes" she accumulates, the number of people who follow her online, etc. She begins sleeping in the Circle dorm rooms.

One evening, Mae finds herself thinking about Kalden. She texts Annie and tells her that she hasn't heard from him in a while. Privately, she thinks about the way his hands felt against her back, and finds it bizarre that she's been unable to find him anywhere at the Circle. Suddenly, Mae feels a sudden wave of despair. She's full of doubt, and feels like a failure for being unable to find Kalden.

Later that night, Francis comes to Mae's dorm and asks her to come to his own dorm. There, Francis plays delicate piano music for her, and shows her a photo album with pictures of Francis as a younger man. Mae notices pictures of Francis with his two sisters, both of whom were murdered. She begins to cry, and she realizes that Francis is the gentlest, saddest person she knows, and she thinks she can change that about him. Suddenly, she unzips his pants and grabs his penis, wondering what she could do to send this "shy boy over the edge." Before she can pull his pants down past his thighs, Francis ejaculates, and says, "Sorry."

*Even though Mae has seemed like a perfectly ordinary, perfectly social human being, she's considered to be sub-social by the standards of the Circle. This passage proves Mercer's earlier point: the Circle is forcing people to adjust to an unnatural level of online interaction. Mae, fiercely loyal to her company, loses sleep trying to improve her PartiRank. We know now that, contrary to what Gina claimed, PartiRank is an important part of one's performance as a Circle employee.*



*As Mae becomes more and more invested in her social life at the Circle, she begins to see the world in terms of numbers, and, as a result, she begins to lose sight of the spiritual, intangible aspects of being a human being, like privacy, solitude, and freedom. As Mae becomes more ingrained in Circle life, she finds herself sleeping in Circle dorms more often, reflecting her vanishing ties to the outside world.*



*As Mae becomes more accustomed to constant social networking, she finds that she's unable to tolerate even a second of uncertainty or isolation from another human being. It's not that unusual that Mae wouldn't be able to find Kalden, but because she's used to knowing everything about everyone, she has a minor anxiety attack when she can't find him.*



*Mae has a romantic evening with Francis—she looks through old photos and listens to piano music. But, considering that Francis knows about LuvLuv, it's entirely possible that he planned the entire evening based on what he could learn of Mae's taste (which would make the night creepy, not romantic). Mae is attracted to Francis because he's so shy, sympathetic, and adorable. As Eggers says here, Francis is the epitome of the "shy boy" type that some people find sexy. Francis suffers from premature ejaculation problems, perhaps symbolizing his immaturity and the distant, unfulfilled nature of his romantic relationship with Mae.*



Mae says that she should go, and Francis says “Okay” dispassionately. Mae is vaguely offended—she wants Francis to ask her to stay. She notices him retrieving his phone, and she realizes that Francis was filming the two of them. Furious, Mae tells Francis to delete the video, but Francis insists that the video belongs to him as much as it belongs to Mae. He begs to keep a “memento of the experience.”

On Friday, Annie and Mae are sitting in the Great Hall, where Tom Stenton is about to give a talk. Mae has told Annie about the video Francis took, and Annie points out that, as long as Francis doesn’t show it to people, he should be able to keep it; deleting a video is like killing a baby.

Stenton emerges on the stage and begins his lecture. He talks about the importance of transparency at the Circle, and he introduces a “Transparent Man” named Stewart. Stewart wears a small photo lens around his neck. Stenton explains that Congressional approval ratings are at an all-time low—indeed, Senator Williamson was just put under investigation for various ethical violations (Mae hasn’t heard this before). To restore people’s trust in their elected leaders, Stenton proposes that government officials “go clear.” He introduces Congresswoman Olivia Santos, who has agreed to wear a photo lens at all times, allowing anyone in the world to see what she’s doing at any time.

That night, the Circle holds a reception party for Congresswoman Santos. Ty appears via webcam, congratulating the Circle for its “awesome new step” toward transparency. Mae notices that Ty seems tired, with bags under his eyes, and doesn’t seem to want to say very much.

While walking around the party, Mae encounters Kalden. Immediately, she asks him why she’s been unable to find him, and he asks her if she’s spelled his name correctly. She asks if he even works for the Circle, and Kalden doesn’t explain how to spell his name, but he insists that he works for the Circle—how else could he get past security? While Mae is talking to Kalden, two of her coworkers greet her by name and tell her about Stenton’s plan to dive to the bottom of the Marianas Trench.

When Kalden and Mae are alone again, she asks where the “stuff from Stewart’s camera” goes. Kalden says that it’s stored in “the cloud,” but that it must be stored in a physical space, too. He takes Mae down a long hallway. As they walk, he explains that his job is to “go to meetings, listen, and provide feedback.”

*Disturbingly, Francis filmed Mae without telling her—a major violation of her privacy. Francis’s defense for his actions is nonsensical. He has no right to film Mae without her permission.*



*Annie seems oddly unperturbed by Francis’s actions—indeed, she makes a bizarre, hyperbolic analogy to explain why it would be wrong to delete Francis’s video.*



*Tom Stenton is more overtly villainous than Eamon Bailey. When he hints that Senator Williamson has been put under investigation, for example, it’s easy for readers to assume that the Circle has done something to ensure the Senator’s fall. The notion of “going clear”—wearing a camera that allows anyone to watch at any time—seems like a 21st century version of the old totalitarian principle: “If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear.” The fact that Congresswoman Santos is cooperating with Stenton suggests that the Circle is becoming politically influential.*



*Ty seems to be congratulating Stenton for introducing the “going clear” system—but his speech doesn’t mention anything specific to “going clear,” which raises the possibility that this speech was recorded a long time ago.*



*Kalden continues to deny Mae the information she wants. Indeed, the way he denies Mae information is almost flirtatious. Stenton’s dive to the bottom of the Marianas Trench symbolizes his boundless ambition, and his desire to explore (and, perhaps, dominate) the entire world.*



*Kalden continues to be vague about his job at the Circle, although, actually, he’s told Mae more about his job now than Annie has told Mae about hers.*



Kalden leads Mae to a large room, in which there's a huge red box. Kalden explains that the box contains all the information being collected about Stewart. She shows her another room, with another red box; this one collects information about Santos. As Kalden explains the boxes, Mae kisses him. Kalden hesitates and then kisses her back. He leads Mae to a narrow corridor, where the "future Stewarts" will go. He tells Mae, "You can't tell anyone I took you here." Kalden kisses Mae with more confidence than she's sensed in him before. He leads her to a strange alcove near the corridor; to Mae's surprise, Kalden explains that this is where he sleeps. There, Kalden and Mae have sex.

*Kalden's metonymic observation about "future Stewarts" is sinister, seeming to imply that the Circle defines people as the sum of their quantitative, digital identities. Furthermore, it implies that going transparent is an imprisoning, dehumanizing experience. On the other hand, Kalden and Mae's sexual encounter is liberating and invigorating—where Francis is shy and inexperienced, Kalden is strong, confident, and magnetic.*



## BOOK ONE, PART 7

The morning after having sex with Kalden, Mae wakes up in her dorm room. She calls Annie and tells her that she had sex with Kalden, but still doesn't know his last name. She assures Annie that Kalden does, indeed, work at the Circle—he has access to lots of places, and he left her with a phone number. She lies and tells Annie that they had sex in her dorm room. To her surprise, Annie becomes very serious; she asks Mae to figure out "who this guy is" as soon as possible. Mae calls the phone number Kalden left her, but doesn't get an answer or a voicemail. She remembers how the night ended—Kalden walked her back to her dorm and then disappeared into the night.

*It's not clear why Annie is suddenly so serious about finding Kalden: is she merely insecure, as Mae was, about not being able to identify another Circle employee? Or does she have orders to investigate anyone on the Circle campus whose identity is unknown? In either case, the Circle's commitment to total information transparency is becoming increasingly sinister.*



After lunch, Mae meets with Pete Ramirez, per Josiah and Denise's requests. Ramirez explains that he doesn't have a lot of time. He puts a headset over Mae's head and explains that, throughout the day, she'll hear questions in her headset. Whenever this happens, the Circle wants her to answer the questions with a verbal answer or, at times, a smile or frown. Ramirez stresses that the "CircleSurveys" program wants Mae to answer about five hundred questions a day. When Mae doesn't answer a question promptly, she'll hear her **own voice** in her headset—which Mae finds very disorienting.

*In this disturbing section, Ramirez gives Mae a device that, for all intents and purposes, brainwashes her into immersing herself in social networking and online activity. In a manner consistent with what we've seen from Circle managers so far, Ramirez never explains why, precisely, Mae needs to wear the headset. It's possible that the headset's primary purpose is to train Mae to become an obedient social networker.*



Back at her desk, Mae hears a voice in her headset asking her questions about her ideal vacation, including how much she'd be willing to pay for such a vacation. She answers well over five hundred questions a day, and she finds that CircleSurveys distract her from thinking about Kalden, "the only man for whom she'd ever had real lust."

*While the novel never says, it seems likely that Mae's headset questions are designed to help marketers and businesses sell more products to Mae and her colleagues at the Circle. If this is true, then forcing Mae to answer questions is an absurd invasion of her privacy. Notice, also, that the passage draws a clear dichotomy between Mae's relationship with Kalden—a real, flesh-and-blood human being—and her relationship with her virtual customers and questioners. She's losing all contact with the real world.*



One day, Mae sees Kalden walking into her office. Just as she's about to greet him, she hears her **voice** in her headset, asking her to answer a question. She hesitates, and Kalden walks out of the office. Mae tries to follow Kalden, but doesn't see him. When she returns to her desk, she finds Francis waiting for her. Seeing Francis in person, Mae realizes that she finds him "disgusting"—weak and needy. She asks him if he's deleted the video, and he says that he hasn't. He adds that Las Vegas has approved his ChildTrack program. Mae congratulates Francis, and feels a sudden wave of sympathy for him, but then tells him that she'll talk to him later.

In the following days, there's a lot of news about the Circle taking over the administration of San Vincenzo, a nearby town whose main industries are hotels and housing for Circle employees and campus visitors. There's also a rumor that Circle engineers have found a way to replace chaotic dreams with "organized thinking." The main development at the Circle is that many elected leaders, both in the U.S. and around the world, are "going clear"—i.e., becoming totally transparent. To increase the availability of cameras for "going clear," the Circle's manufacturing plant in China adds another factory. Pundits begin to criticize politicians who *don't* go transparent—clearly, they must be hiding something.

Meanwhile, the Circle itself becomes a transparent campus—cameras are installed everywhere. People Mae hasn't talked to in years see her working and message her. She begins to put more thought into her appearance, knowing that people are watching her around the world. She hears from a college friend named Tania Schwartz, who's begun an activist campaign to raise awareness about a renegade paramilitary group in Guatemala. Tania asks Mae for her help building a campaign to denounce the paramilitaries. Mae decides that she "needs to make a stand," and posts online about her hatred for the paramilitary groups. She learns that she's one of tens of thousands of people who've "frowned" online about these groups.

On the same day that she "frowns" about the Guatemalan paramilitaries, Mae gets a call from a blocked number while she's in the bathroom. It's Kalden. He says that he needs to see her, and that he knows where she is. He kisses her and has sex with her in the bathroom stall. As Kalden walks out, Mae manages to photograph his arm and fingertips, "the rest of him already gone." Afterwards, Mae texts Annie about having had sex with Kalden.

*Mae's relationship with Francis is characteristic of the kinds of relationships fostered by aggressive social networking: unstable, volatile, and deeply unsatisfying. Mae is well aware that she doesn't really like Francis. But she's so overwhelmed by sympathy for Francis that she's willing to overlook her strong dislike. Meanwhile, entire cities are using child-tracking programs, which reflects the Circle's growing power.*



*The Circle isn't just introducing programs in other cities—it's actually taking over entire towns for its own purposes. The Circle has long-since ceased to be a mere company: for all intents and purposes, it's now a society, run by a powerful, even tyrannical, government. Furthermore, the Circle seems to be wielding a lot of power over the American government—it's already been suggested that the Circle "took down" Senator Williamson, and now it seems possible that the Circle is using its information access to manipulate other politicians.*



*In this passage, Eggers satirizes Facebook politics. In recent years, there have been many online campaigns to raise money and awareness surrounding unjust regimes in other countries—"Kony 2012" was one of the most famous of these campaigns. Many people, Eggers included, have criticized Internet campaigns for being superficial and for doing nothing concrete to solve problems. In the case of Tania's Guatemala campaign, Mae's support doesn't seem to do anything to get rid of the human rights problems in Guatemala. A digital frown is just a digital frown.*



*As the novel goes on, Kalden and Mae's relationship becomes increasingly discrete, and one is left with the suspicion that Kalden is hiding from something or someone. In contrast to her relationship with Francis—many parts of which were either public or surreptitiously recorded—Mae's relationship with Kalden is secretive and she can't even record it when she tries to.*



Back at her desk, Mae finds Gina. Gina explains to Mae that the Circle needs to generate revenue by advertising for other businesses. As Gina speaks, Mae openly messages Annie about Kalden—Gina seems intensely jealous that Mae talks to Annie “all day.” Annie asks Mae for Kalden’s last name and photo, Mae doesn’t give either to her. However, she lies and claims that she knows his last name and that she has confirmed that he’s an employee of the company. Gina explains to Mae that Circle employees can encourage other people to buy certain products by posting about them online. From now on, Mae’s “Retail Raw”—the total number of dollars that Mae convinces her online friends to spend—will be listed with her PartiRank. She adds that the minimum expectation for Circle employees is a weekly Retail Raw of 45,000 dollars.

A few nights after her meeting with Gina, Mae drives out to see her father, who’s now using Circle insurance. When she greets her father, she notices that he seems stronger and more confident, and that he’s wearing a wrist monitor. Her parents say that they have a lot of extra time now that the Circle is handling their healthcare needs and “cutting out the middleman.” Mae notices a chandelier made of out antlers, which she recognizes from Mercer’s store. To Mae’s surprise, her parents tell her that Mercer is coming for dinner. Mercer arrives, and Mae immediately compliments his chandelier. She takes a picture of the chandelier and posts it online, thinking that she’ll give him new business.

At dinner, Mae’s mother raises a toast to Mae, thanking her for providing her father with health insurance. Mae checks her phone and sees that, in mere minutes, she’s built a lot of international support for Mercer’s chandeliers. Mercer seems irritated, and he says that he didn’t give Mae permission to post a photograph of his work. He accuses Mae of being “batshit crazy,” and he asks her if she thinks it’s a coincidence that whenever politicians criticize the Circle for being a monopoly, they’re ensnared in a scandal. Mae fires back that she’s proud of working for the Circle, a good company, and she calls Mercer paranoid. Mercer tells Mae that she’s become incredibly boring since working for the Circle.

*Several things to notice here. First, the Circle is becoming more aggressive in its pursuit of capital: it’s now requiring its employees to generate revenue (a major conflict of interest, since the Circle also handles information flow!). Second, and similarly, the Circle is becoming more demanding in its relationships with its employees. The Circle is requiring them to generate money for the company via social networking (confirming Gina’s earlier claim that social networking is a part of Mae’s job). Third, notice that Mae is “protecting” Kalden from Annie’s questioning. She seems to enjoy keeping a secret and giving Kalden some privacy from the company. Fourth, Mae finds it hard to complete a face-to-face conversation without checking her messages; however, she wields power over Gina because of her friendship with Annie. This is a sign that connections are more important than talent at a place like the Circle.*



*The Circle’s healthcare is providing Mae’s parents with a higher quality of life. However, the wrist monitor that her father is wearing is an ominous detail. Furthermore, Mae believes that she can combine her work assignment (generate revenue for the company) with her personal life: thus, she takes a picture of Mercer’s chandelier with the goal of generating business for his company.*



*Here, Mae and Mercer come to an impasse: neither one can understand the other’s position. Mae can’t understand Mercer’s philosophy of individuality and personal property—as far as she’s concerned, Mercer’s property is hers to advertise and post about however she sees fit. Mercer continues to be a mouthpiece for traditional ideas of privacy and rationality—he’s the only person in the novel sensible enough to see the obvious truth that the Circle is a dangerous monopoly that takes out anyone who stands in its way.*



Driving away from her parents' house, Mae thinks about how much she dislikes Mercer; he's fat and anti-social. She vows never to help him again. Mae drives to the beach, even though it's very late at night. To her surprise, she sees a **kayak** leaned against a fence. Mae assumes that someone has been late in returning a kayak from Marion's rental shop. She decides to take the kayak out to sea. She does so, but finds that, even while she's on the water, she can't stop thinking about how much Mercer irritates her.

Mae hears a sound and turns to see a harbor seal swimming behind her. The seal stares at her intently. Then, she sees a boat coming toward her—presumably the Coast Guard. Mae crouches down so that the Coast Guard won't see her silhouette, and the boat passes by. Then, she rows out to the abandoned island that the **elderly couple** told her about. On the island, she imagines the animals that must live there and watches the tankers sailing by in the distance. Staring back at the San Francisco bay, it occurs to her that the entire area had been underwater millions of years ago. She wonders what's drifting in the dark water all around her—somehow, it comforts her to accept that she “doesn't know much at all.”

Afterwards, Mae kayaks back to the beach and drops off her **kayak**. Suddenly, a voice yells, “Stay there.” Two police officers handcuff her. Mae explains that she's one of Marion's customers; the officers call Marion, and Marion corroborates Mae's story. Marion drives down to the beach and explains that Mae's not a thief. The officers explain that they've received two separate phone calls about a possible theft—one from one of Marion's cameras, the other from a “citizen who doesn't wish to be identified.” Mae is highly embarrassed—if she'd been arrested for stealing the kayak, she could have been fired, and then her parents would lose their health insurance.

The next day, Mae goes into work as usual and gets a message from Dan. Mae enters Dan's office, and Dan immediately tells her, “this is very serious stuff.” He tells Mae that by stealing the **kayak**, she's committed a crime. She should have known that Circle employees installed a SeeChange camera at the beach, and she should have posted about visiting her parents that evening. He says that Mae's actions make him feel sick to his stomach and he adds, “felons don't work here.” Sighing theatrically, Dan tells Mae that her irresponsible actions inspired Eamon Bailey himself to meet with her—Mae will meet with Bailey that evening.

*In the traditional sense, Mercer isn't particularly anti-social at all. However, from the twisted perspective of the Circle's employees, who are required to “socialize” electronically at all hours of the day, he's exceptionally anti-social. Notice that, as the novel goes on, Mae's kayaking trips become less and less effective for clearing her head. This is a sign that she's becoming increasingly tied to the Circle and social networking.*



*In this pensive scene, Mae gains a measure of control over her life by contemplating the natural world. It's crucial to notice that Mae meditates on the fact that it's impossible to know everything about the world, and that's okay. Eggers suggests that there is something both humbling and relaxing about accepting one's own limitations and allowing some things to remain mysteries. However, such a feeling of humility doesn't mesh with the ideals of the Circle.*



*Mae committed a silly, victimless crime—she took a kayak out after dark because it had already been left out. She would have gotten away with it, had it not been for the Circle's surveillance cameras. Perhaps people need a certain amount of flexibility to break and bend the rules—however, in the era of mass surveillance, such flexibility is no longer possible. Notice that the police don't reveal who it was that tattled on Mae—we're left to wonder whether it was another employee who called the police to make Mae more loyal to the Circle.*



*By this point in the novel, it's clear that Dan is every bit as condescending and belittling as Mae's previous boss, contrary to what she'd hoped. It's important to see that Dan is disappointed with Mae not just because she broke a law (albeit in a victimless, harmless way), but also because she didn't post about her experiences in the evening.*



## BOOK ONE, PART 8

The afternoon after her conversation with Dan, Mae finds it impossible to focus on anything. She feels guilty for having taken the **kayak** without telling anyone. Just before six pm, Eamon Bailey's assistant leads Mae—who's feeling intensely nervous—to Bailey's library. Mae pretends that she's never been to the library before.

Inside the library, Mae meets Eamon Bailey. Immediately, he asks her if she's ever been here before; Mae denies that she has, and Bailey's face twitches oddly. He asks Mae about her friendship with Annie, and he offers her tea. Then, without warning, he asks Mae about the events of last night. He wonders if Mae would have behaved differently if she'd known about the SeeChange cameras. Mae admits that if she'd known about the cameras, she wouldn't have taken the **kayak**. Noticing that Mae is nervous, Bailey laughs merrily and assures her that she's not being fired.

Bailey asks Mae, "Are you ever happy when a friend keeps a secret from you?" Mae is forced to admit, "No." Bailey proceeds to argue that secrets are never acceptable—secrets are always signs that a "guilty party" is trying to hiding something from others. He talks about the pain that his brother had to endure in the days before it was common to come out of the closet. Then, when his brother came out, he was amazed to find that his parents barely cared. He argues that secrets are also unacceptable in the case of politics, and that heroic figures like Julian Assange have changed the world by leaking secrets to the press. Everyone, he argues, "has the right to know everything."

Bailey reminds Mae of her role in Gus's LuvLuv demonstration, and he asks why she felt uncomfortable. Mae explains that she didn't like being surprised on the day of the demonstration. Nevertheless, Bailey argues that none of the information that Gus and Francis talked about was incorrect or even particularly offensive. Mae argues that the information they presented was "incomplete"—it didn't encompass her total being. Bailey smiles and thanks Mae for making such a point. The goal of the Circle, he insists, is to make people's online personalities complete. When everyone in the world has gone "transparent," he argues, humanity will no longer be tempted by "darkness." Bailey laughs and says, "That's the Midwestern church-goer in me."

*Instead of standing up for herself (e.g., telling Dan that stealing the kayak wasn't a big deal at all, and that he should mind his own business), Mae caves in and feels intensely guilty for her "horrible crime." In the library, she's forced to keep another secret—that Mae has taken her there before.*



*Bailey seems to know that Mae has been into his library before—it seems reasonable to guess that he installed some SeeChange cameras there, and that he's testing Mae. In many ways, Bailey is the most dangerous person in the novel: he's committed to a totalitarian ideology, but he's also charming and likeable. In short, he seduces the Circle employees into giving up their human right to privacy.*



*Bailey's sophistry is convincing to Mae, but it shouldn't be convincing to readers. Notice how Bailey uses a bait and switch argument, combined with excessive emotional appeals, to conclude that everyone has the right to know everything. It's not clear how such a conclusion follows from the idea that secrets sometimes make Mae unhappy. Bailey's point seems to be that revealing a secret never causes any damage—an argument that many (including many real-life critics of Julian Assange) would dispute.*



*Bailey continues to trick Mae into surrendering her right to privacy, offering half-baked arguments about the digitalization of human nature. Mae's argument about her information being incomplete suggests a profound point: human nature can never be entirely represented in quantitative form. There will always be intangible concepts and values that mere numbers fail to represent. Bizarrely, Bailey, who is apparently a Christian, thinks that human nature can be represented online in its entirety. Furthermore, Bailey's arguments don't address the dehumanizing, objectifying experience of being reduced to mere numbers on a screen.*



Mae awkwardly blurts out that “some things” about people should be kept private—their sex lives, for example. Bailey argues that nobody will spy on other people if they themselves are being watched, too. Indeed, once everybody is being watched at all times, people will behave more politely and morally. Gently, Bailey asks Mae if she has anything to tell him. Shyly, she admits that she’s been to his library before. Bailey smiles and says that he already knew this. Instantly, Mae feels very relieved.

In the days following her conversation with Bailey, Mae feels dizzy and exhilarated. Her work remains excellent, and her PartiRank is very respectable. On Friday, she shows up early to the Great Hall for the weekly lecture, in which she’ll be playing a special part. Bailey greets her and thanks her for coming down—the two of them will be “recreating the conversation we had last week.”

The presentation begins. Bailey invites Mae to the stage, where he asks Mae about the “awakening” she had in the previous week. Following the script she and Bailey have discussed already, Mae tells Bailey about how she felt guilty for stealing a **kayak** from a beach, and for refusing to “share” her experience with anyone via photos or posts. She proceeds to argue that “secrets are lies.” Bailey nods and asks for this message to be displayed on the wall.

Bailey asks Mae about her **kayaking**. He wonders why Mae hasn’t posted any videos or pictures from her time spent kayaking. He brings up his son, Gunner, who has cerebral palsy, and he points out that Gunner will never be able to go kayaking himself. If Mae doesn’t post about her experiences, she’ll deprive Gunner and millions of other disabled people of the experience. Mae nods and says, “Equal access to all possible human experiences is a basic human right.” Following her script, she talks about the need to share experiences with other people. Bailey nods and projects two new phrases onto the wall: “Sharing is caring,” and “Privacy is theft.” Bailey thanks Mae for her honesty, and the crowd bursts into thunderous applause. Over the applause, Bailey announces that Mae will be “going transparent immediately.”

*Bailey’s arguments parallel those of the famous 18th century thinker Jeremy Bentham, who proposed a “Panopticon”—a device that allows all people to see one another. Even if total transparency makes people behave more politely, it will also make them more frightened and anxious: they’ll behave well, but only because they’re afraid of reprisal.*



*In this important passage, we see Mae transitioning from a reluctant employee of the Circle to an enthusiastic collaborator. She’s not just talking with Bailey anymore— she’s trying to convince other Circle employees to surrender their right to privacy, too, by staging a conversation with Bailey in front of an audience.*



*Notice that Bailey uses the word “awakening,” a sign of his religious faith. Also, notice that Mae and Bailey believe that her real crime wasn’t stealing the kayak—her crime was refusing to post online about it. Because Bailey has convinced her already, Mae is more than happy to help him trick Circle employees with his bogus arguments.*



*Again and again in the novel, we see Circle employees using emotional appeals to justify their unethical behavior—whether it’s putting tracking devices in all children or surrendering privacy. Here, Bailey uses an emotional description of his son’s disabilities to argue, illogically, that people have a moral duty to give up their privacy. As we’ve already seen via Mae’s kayak journeys, privacy isn’t necessarily theft—in fact, privacy can be very empowering and rewarding. Book One concludes with the announcement that Mae is going transparent. We’re not sure if Mae is hearing this news for the first time, or if she and Bailey talked about it beforehand—and that’s the point. Mae’s freedom to make her own decisions gets swept up in Bailey’s fanatical utopianism.*



## BOOK TWO, PART 1

At Book Two opens, Stenton has returned from his expedition to the Marianas Trench, and he brought with him a hitherto undiscovered species of **shark**, which he displays in a tank at the Circle campus. Mae's new job at the Circle is to show her watchers the shark, along with the other attractions on the campus, and talk about her experience of "going clear." A voice in her headset tells her where to go. Anyone on the planet can watch her, whenever they want.

Mae has been at the Circle for nearly a year, and during this time, there have been some major changes in the company. People talk about the concept of Completion—the idea of everyone on the planet having a Circle account. 90 percent of the government is transparent, and most of the Circle's employees are either transparent or in process of becoming so. Mae loves the experience of being watched by millions of people every day—as a result, she's always ranked in the top ten for company popularity.

Mae walks back to the **shark** tank, where she greets a marine biologist named Georgia who has come to feed the shark. Georgia throws various sea creatures—including many creatures the shark has never experienced before—into the tank. At one point, the shark leaps out of the water and snatches a lobster from Georgia's hand, nearly biting her. Georgia holds out a sea turtle for the shark—it occurs to Mae that sharks might not be able to digest turtles' shells. But a voice in her headset says that she should allow Georgia to proceed with the feeding. The shark unhooks its jaw and swallows the turtle.

As Mae watches the **shark**, she sees a figure standing by the aquarium—it's Kalden. Mae hasn't heard from Kalden since she went transparent. Mae tries to follow Kalden—she walks by the aquarium tank, outside to the lawn, and she sees Kalden heading to a building. The voice in her headset asks where she's going, and Mae says she's just wandering. Suddenly, her phone rings—it's Kalden, who says, "we have to meet." He explains that her watchers can hear her, but not him. He says "The Circle is almost complete, and Mae, you have to believe that this will be bad for you, for me, for humanity." He hangs up. When the voice in her headset comes in, Mae says the call was from "some lunatic babbling about the end of the world." Mae realizes that she wants to see Kalden. She wonders if Kalden's call is some kind of test, to see if she'd do anything to prevent the Circle's "Completion."

*In the time since the end of Book One, Mae has become a tour guide for the Circle. However, her real job is to be a mascot for the Circle's anti-privacy ideology. The fact that Stenton has captured a shark further symbolizes the growing omnipresence of the Circle in general—its power reaches all the way to the bottom of the ocean. Last, the term "going clear" seems to be a reference to the Church of Scientology, an opaque and cultlike religious organization that indoctrinates members through promises of ultimately "going clear."*



*Completion is a mysterious concept—no one in the novel seems to know what, if anything, will happen when everyone on the Earth has a Circle account. But nobody (or at least not Mae) seems to find it disturbing that one company controls the world's information flow. Constant social networking has indoctrinated Mae. She seems not to miss privacy.*



*The shark is one of the key symbols of the novel. In a simple sense, it represents Tom Stenton and the Circle's boundless ambition. Like the shark, the company devours anything that stands in its way: human freedom, privacy, Senator Williamson, etc. In a more abstract sense, the shark could be said to represent human greed. Although Mae is certain that the Circle will use its vast power for good, the novel seems to suggest that the Circle's executives will use their power for their own benefit.*



*As the novel goes on, it becomes harder and harder for Mae to communicate with Kalden without attracting attention. At first, Kalden seemed like a fairly ordinary employee of the Circle, but now it's becoming clear that he's opposed to the company's basic agenda and he is trying to enlist Mae's help to stave off Completion. It's a sign of Mae's indoctrination that she seems not to take Kalden's warning seriously. She is so used to being watched at all times that she's not worried about what will happen when the Circle can watch everyone in the world.*



Later in the afternoon, Mae goes to her Customer Experience office. After going clear, Bailey asked her to remain working in Customer Experience for a few hours a week, to prove to her watchers that she's "humble." In Customer Experience, Mae feels totally relaxed—her office is the only place where there are "no unknowns." She works there for a few hours, and one of the people who messages her with questions about using the Circle adds, "I'm watching you!" This Circle user proceeds to message Mae other questions—she asks Mae to join her professional network, professes to feel "devalued" when Mae doesn't respond to her message immediately, and then—when Mae joins her professional network—writes a message on Mae's professional profile. Mae thinks, "the customers made her better"—she feels happier and more generous because she knows that people are watching.

Mae also finds that being watched changes her behavior on a second-by-second level. She doesn't eat as many fattening foods or take as many aspirins because she can see that she'd look like an unhealthy person to her watchers. Going transparent, she thinks, liberates her from "bad behavior." As she works, Mae's headset asks her survey questions. When she doesn't answer them immediately, she hears her **own voice**, saying her name as a reminder. Mae no longer finds hearing her own voice to be weird: on the contrary, she finds this voice to represent "a better, more indomitable version of herself."

In the evening, Mae attends an improv show and participates in a fundraiser for schools in Pakistan, which amasses millions of "smiles" for the school. Afterwards, she goes to her dorm where she's been living for more than a month—it no longer makes sense to drive to and from work every day. After ten pm, transparency is optional, so that night, Mae turns off her camera and says goodnight to her watchers. As soon as the camera is off, Mae feels a deep "tear" inside her. She messages Annie, but gets no response, so she tries to entertain herself by watching footage from SeeChange cameras around the world. She also tries to find Kalden online, but, as usual, she can't, since she doesn't know his name.

The next day, Mae wakes up and greets her watchers. She sees a news notification about how the world's foremost health agencies and companies will now be sharing all data with each other, and with the Circle. She recalls that today is the day that Annie returns from her months in Europe and Asia where she was "ironing out some regulatory wrinkles." Mae notes that, since becoming transparent, Annie has become less communicative with her—she claims to be busy at all times.

*The fact that Mae is at her most comfortable in an environment where there are no unknowns symbolizes the way that Mae has rewired her brain to fit with the Circle paradigm. No longer does Mae accept that there are some things she doesn't need to know, or that uncertainty can be a liberating feeling. Like the company itself, Mae hungers for information and certainty. Even after her customers—total strangers—harass her to respond to their messages, Mae continues to believe that it's acceptable for them to behave in such a way. Mae has, in short, become a slave to her own audience—she always has to be perfectly poised and polite.*



*Mae's transparency limits her personal freedom in tiny ways: she finds herself reshaping her behavior to fit with what she knows is expected of her. This process of reshaping is symbolized by the voice in Mae's head: one could say that the voice symbolizes the "better self" that Mae is trying to become: a polite, poised, eerily perfect person whom Mae impersonates while she's on camera.*



*As Mae becomes more invested in the success of the Circle, she begins cutting off all ties with the external world. At the same time, the passage makes it clear that Mae has become addicted to transparency: she can't tolerate being alone (i.e., deprived of watchers). As a result, even after 10 pm, she continues to message friends and watch videos.*



*One tragedy of the novel is that, as Mae becomes superficially happier and gains more online friends, she sacrifices her more traditional and profound friendships, spending less and less time with Annie. (Also, notice that the Circle will now have access to everyone's medical records—an alarming violation of privacy that Mae finds totally uncontroversial).*



Mae proceeds with her touring of the campus. She greets a man named Terry who is working on the Circle's upcoming educational program—he explains that the Circle will be responsible for developing a new testing system for all students. The Circle has also developed a program that counts the number of words a child hears every day in order to predict children's success in the classroom. Mae also speaks with a Circle employee named Jackie who demonstrates a new program for ranking students across the country to determine their chances of getting into a good college. The voice in Mae's headset instructs her to ask Jackie about how the program "intersects with TruYou," so Mae asks and Jackie leads her to speak with Francis. Francis, whom Mae hasn't seen in weeks, greets Jackie and Mae and explains that he's been working on a program to track children. By combining his program with Jackie's, parents will be able to measure their children's total knowledge: every fact, word, and date they've ever learned. As Mae watches Francis and Jackie talking flirtatiously, Mae realizes that Francis and Jackie have been rehearsing their conversation—suddenly, she feels sick.

Later in the afternoon, Mae thinks about Francis. He's unattractive, and she knows that he has problems with premature ejaculations. However, Mae suddenly finds him attractive again because she senses that Jackie is attracted to him. As she thinks about Francis, Mae continues leading tours: she shows her watchers a sculpture by a Chinese dissident. Mae thanks watchers who have sent frowns to the Chinese government and she adds, "You can bet that has an effect on the regime." The sculpture, commissioned by Eamon Bailey, is uncharacteristically earnest, optimistic, and monumental—it's altogether unlike the artist's early, sardonic work. It seems to resemble a human hand reaching for a computer screen.

Mae remembers that she has to see Dr. Villalobos in ten minutes. Suddenly, she sees Annie walking by in the distance and calls after her. Annie turns and smiles a "practiced, exhausted smile." Mae asks Annie about her trip and Annie (who, Mae can tell, isn't enjoying talking to Mae's watchers) says that it was great. She adds that she's working on a program to digitize every photograph and newsreel in history. Annie asks Mae to go to the bathroom with her.

*Terry and Jackie's educational programs represent horrible violations of children's freedom to develop at their own pace. Even though some children are late bloomers, the Circle's education programs operate under the assumption that, once a child is behind in mental development, it will remain behind for the rest of its life. Francis's program for tracking children seemed more understandable (since it was done for the greater good of protecting children from kidnapping), but now it's being combined with other, less ethical programs. Mae doesn't seem to find anything unethical about the Circle's violations of children's freedom; instead, she's more interested in the chemistry between Francis and Jackie.*



*It's a sign of Mae's indoctrination that she finds Francis attractive simply because other people seem to find him attractive: by spending so much time online, Mae has allowed herself to be swayed by the herd mentality. Also, this passage satirizes Internet politics. Mae's sanguine claim that sending frowns to China will affect the regime makes it seem likely that, in fact, the Internet campaign will do nothing to make things better in China. Also, it's implied that the Circle is twisting artists' aesthetic principles to reflect their own agenda—one of the hallmarks of a dictatorship.*



*In this poignant section, we see the toll that social networking has taken on Mae's friendships. She has millions of online "friends," but her actual, flesh-and-blood friends are becoming an increasingly marginal part of her life.*



In the bathroom, Mae is allowed to turn off her microphone, though she leaves her camera on—the “rules” give her up to three minutes of silence. In the bathroom, Annie compliments Mae for “killing it,” but Mae detects a note of envy in her voice. Annie explains that she’s jetlagged, and that she needs a few nights to herself before she spends time with Mae. She mentions that the Circle is nearing Completion, and that the Wise Men are trying to find a guinea pig for a secret program, preferably someone whose family has been in the U.S. for hundreds of years (since the Circle will need historical records dating back a long time). With these words, she walks out of the bathroom without saying goodbye. Mae walks out, then walks back into the bathroom, turns off her audio, and cries.

Mae walks to Dr. Villalobos. Because she’s so beautiful, Dr. Villalobos has become popular with Mae’s watchers, and Villalobos seems to enjoy her popularity. Mae notices that she’s wearing a blouse that displays her ample cleavage. Villalobos begins by talking about a program called CHAD, designed to measure the health of its users so that the Circle can isolate people who have the flu in order to prevent outbreaks. Villalobos tells Mae that, based on comments a user has sent in, Mae should stop eating so many nitrates.

Dr. Villalobos next tells Mae that there’s a problem with her parents. The Circle has installed cameras in Mae’s parents’ home, but her parents have placed covers over most of these cameras. Mae is appalled by her parents’ rudeness, and she promises to speak to them personally. Dr. Villalobos points out that Mae hasn’t seen her parents in over a week and she advises Mae to visit them as soon as possible.

At five, Mae drives to visit her parents, furious that they’ve disrespected the Circle. She begins to wonder what Annie—who, she’s convinced, is jealous of Mae—will do to use Mae’s embarrassment about her family to her advantage. She remembers that Annie’s family has been in the U.S. for a very long time. She also remembers an unpleasant dinner at Annie’s house, during which Annie’s aunt taunted Mae for living near Fresno and derided Annie’s freshman year roommates for being Pakistani.

*Surveillance has become such a basic part of the Circle employees’ lives that their only opportunities for privacy come in the bathroom. Annie seems to be growing jealous of Mae’s popularity with the company. Where previously she was warm and kind to Mae, she’s now cold and distant, bragging about her insider knowledge of the Company’s programs. (It’s worth noticing that, in spite of the Company’s supposed commitment to transparency, it keeps its own operations secret). The Circle has driven Mae and Annie apart, and Mae feels terrible about it.*



*Instead of focusing on her patient—as one would expect a good doctor to do—Dr. Villalobos is clearly performing for Mae’s watchers. Mae seems not to care that Villalobos is violating her Hippocratic Oath by sharing details about Mae’s personal life and health with thousands of strangers. And, outrageously, Villalobos doesn’t use her training as a doctor—instead, she just responds to users’ comments about Mae’s health.*



*Instead of standing up for her parents, Mae trusts Dr. Villalobos’s advice and promises to talk to them. It’s disturbing that Villalobos knows so much about Mae’s personal life. Furthermore, the fact that Mae hasn’t seen her parents in a week suggests that she’s distancing herself from her pre-Circle life.*



*Mae is becoming more loyal to the Circle than to her own family or friends. Instead of thinking fondly about Annie, Mae focuses on her most negative memories of Annie and Annie’s family. Similarly, she doesn’t even give her own parents the benefit of the doubt; she immediately assumes that they’ve done something horribly wrong by going against the Circle.*



Mae thinks back on her first days of living transparently. Her watchers sent her thousands of messages providing advice for how to interact with loved ones suffering from MS. Tonight, as she greets her parents in their home, she notices that they're adjusting their behavior to reflect the fact that people are watching them from around the world. She asks her parents if there's been a problem with their cameras; they laugh and say, stiffly, "we'll get them fixed right away." Mae's mother notes that she has received thousands of messages since Mae went transparent—far too many for her to answer. Mae's father points out that some "neurotic" watchers have begun complaining that he and his wife aren't responding to their messages.

After dinner, Mae's parents request that Mae watch a movie with them. They do, and afterwards Mae says that she should get back to the Circle. Mae's mother gives her an odd look, which Mae interprets to mean, "finally." She also gives Mae a letter from Mercer. In her car, Mae opens the letter, in which Mercer explains that he wants Mae to read his letter on camera. From now on, Mercer explains, he can't see Mae. He says that the Circle has exhausted Mae's parents and harassed them with constant messages. He helped Mae's parents cover the cameras with fabric because "They want to be alone. And not watched." Mercer predicts that, "if things continue this way," the world will split into a society of people who live under constant surveillance and a society that refuses to play along. Mae refuses to read any more of the letter. Her watchers send thousands of messages about Mercer being a "zero."

Mae decides to drive back to her parents' house to talk to them. She walks inside, but she doesn't see her parents. Upstairs, she walks into their bedroom, where she sees her mother holding her father's penis in her hand. Mae turns away, but it's too late—people around the world have seen her father naked. Horrified, Mae calls Bailey and begs him to erase the footage from the Circle's cloud. On the phone, Bailey casually tells Mae that it's impossible to delete the footage. He assures Mae that everybody will forget about the footage within a few days.

Mae drives back to the Circle, thinking, "home was madness." She finds it difficult to be off-campus—there are homeless people, smelly people, ugly machines, ugly buildings, etc. The outside world seems more and more like the Third World every time she sets foot there. Mae checks her desk and finds a message from her parents: "Please, no more." Mae ignores the message and proceeds with customer questions. Her customers recognize her as "THE Mae," and seem very excited. One customer begs Mae to recommend his daughter for work at the Circle: "No pressure, but we're counting on you."

*From Mae's perspective, her parents are uncooperative and old-fashioned; from her parents' perspective, the Circle's demands for total transparency are unreasonable, unethical, and unwarranted. Where Mae welcomes messages from total strangers, her parents recognize these messages as what they are: the babbling of people with too much time on their hands. Notice that Mae doesn't seem to feel warmth or love for her parents anymore, only a strong sense of exasperation.*



*Mae's interactions with her parents become increasingly distant and unfriendly. She even gets the sense that her mother wants her to leave as soon as possible (although Mae could be projecting her own exasperation). Mercer's letter is one of the only times in the novel when a character voices a strong, eloquent opposition to the Circle's program of transparency. He claims, very reasonably, that some people, such as Mae's parents, have no interest in being seen by millions, and, more importantly, have no obligation to be seen. Mercer's point of view is clearly unpopular, though—it seems as if he's the only one who's worried about the Circle.*



*Mae's parents have every right to live in private—they don't need millions of people watching them at all hours of the day. When Mae accidentally broadcasts her father's nakedness to millions of people online, it becomes clear why the right to privacy is so important: all human beings have the right to feel protected, secure, and unembarrassed. However, as Bailey makes clear, the Circle doesn't care about its users' embarrassment or security.*



*Instead of being furious with Bailey for denying her pleas for help, Mae directs her rage at her family, her home, and the non-Circle world in general. Even though she spends all day receiving adoring messages from people around the world (including an invasive, inappropriate request that Mae recommend someone's daughter for a job), she clearly has no compassion for people who aren't like her. The Circle has trained Mae to embrace the utopian ideal of perfection—anything that doesn't meet that ideal is abhorrent to her.*



Mae feels a tear deep within her. She can't stop thinking about Mercer—his sanctimonious letter, and his “disgusting” fat body. She tries to distract herself by answering survey questions and responding to customers, but she continues to feel the tear. When she pauses, she hears her **own voice** in her headset, prompting her to answer the questions. The voice sounds calming—indeed, “it felt like home.”

After leaving her office, Mae “found herself” in Francis’s room. She goes to Francis because everyone else in her life has abandoned her. Francis listens to Mae’s complaints about her family and friends and tells her he’s sorry. He explains that he has scanned all of his old photographs and used Circle technology to track down everyone who appears in the photographs. Mae and Francis act out a sexual fantasy, in which Francis pretends to be a lost teenager and Mae pretends to be a lonely housewife. Francis become so excited during the course of the fantasy that he throws Mae to the bed and, a few seconds later, ejaculates in his pants, “emitting a brief squeal.”

Afterwards, Francis asks Mae for a second fantasy: he wants her to rate him from 1 to 100. Impatient, Mae says that he’s “fine,” and Francis finds this offensive. Mae corrects herself: Francis is “great,” a perfect 100. Francis smiles, kisses Mae, and goes to sleep.

The next day, Mae goes to a large glass building, where she greets the Gang of 40, the group that approves new Circle projects. Eamon Bailey greets her warmly, but Annie does not greet her at all. Previously, Mae has been told that the meeting must seem natural and unrehearsed to Mae’s watchers, so she tries to act casual. Bailey calls the meeting to order and announces that thousands of leaders around the world have gone transparent. He admits that there have been some problems with the political transparency project: instead of making the political world more ethical, transparently elected leaders have become mere “figureheads,” shielding the backroom from view”. However, Bailey insists that this problem will change soon.

Bailey announces his next major project: automatically registering all Circle users to vote. Mae raises her hand and suggests that Bailey take this idea one step further: require every voting-age citizen to have a Circle account. A few people at the meeting seem to find this a bad idea, but Mae insists that it’s not so different from requiring adults to send their children to school. As Mae speaks, other members of the Gang of 40 murmur their agreement. Encouraged, Mae suggests that Circle users be required to pay their taxes online, too.

*Mae is clearly upset about growing apart from her family, Mercer, and Annie, and she tries to fill the void within herself with online friendships and customer queries. The voice in Mae’s headset, which she finds soothing, urges her to continue trying to be perfect, which essentially means to ignore her old friends and family and bury herself in the Circle.*



*Robbed of any real human connections, Mae turns to the one person she has left: Francis. Francis is as shallow as ever (he has nothing of substance to say to Mae, only “I’m so sorry”), but he provides Mae with the minimum amount of human contact that she wants. Francis’s inability to have sex with Mae could symbolize the decline of intimacy and human contact in the Internet age: Francis is more interested in simulations of romance—i.e., the sexual fantasy he acts out here—than in actual intimacy.*



*Absurdly, Mae gives Francis a perfect rating of 100 for his premature ejaculation—obviously, she’s just trying to placate him. But the exchange is a sign of how quantified human relationships have become, thanks to the Circle.*



*In this passage, we’re reminded that Annie and Mae are growing apart—they’ve become jealous of one another, thanks to the Circle. Also, it’s important to notice the irony in Bailey’s remarks about imperfect transparency: he laments that politicians have become mere figureheads, while corrupt, non-transparent figures continue to influence politics from behind the scene. However, it’s heavily implied that the Circle is the backroom that transparent politicians are shielding—the Circle is becoming an all-powerful, monopolistic corporation that controls the world.*



*Bailey seems to be manipulating Mae into proposing an idea that Bailey and the other Wise Men already support—forcing voters to register through the Circle—in order to make the meeting seem more improvisational and open-ended than it really is. Mae doesn’t seem to consider the strong possibility that the Circle will be unable to maintain political neutrality if it controls the voting process.*



Annie disagrees with Mae's point: why bother building a "wraparound service" when the government could do so? The Gang of 40 snickers; condescendingly, Stenton explains that the Circle is in a much better position to build a good, user-friendly online voting service. Annie nods, her expression a mixture of anger and fear. Mae continues: using an online voting system would allow politicians to know how their constituents feel about their political positions at all times. Stenton agrees—if the Circle makes voting online, Congress could become irrelevant.

*That Annie has some reservations about Mae's proposal (which are met with snickers) is a sign that Mae is "in" and Annie is "out." The Circle's executives are so accustomed to thinking of themselves as more powerful and better than the government that they're comfortable with the idea of making American government altogether irrelevant. The Circle is no longer a company—it's becoming an all-powerful, totalitarian government.*



## BOOK TWO, PART 2

It's the night after Mae's meeting with the Gang of 40, and Mae feels wonderful: she's been praised and validated by the Gang, and her proposal to allow people to vote online has been widely celebrated. She meets up with Francis, who congratulates her on her "poise" during the meeting—"you were a 100," he says. Francis takes Mae to a local brewery, and as they walk there, people point and wave at Mae. After having a drink, Mae and Francis wander to another bar, where they encounter a man in his fifties who tells Mae that she's going to "save all souls." The man, who claims to have been a divinity student, predicts that soon there will be "one morality, one set of rules."

*Mae is happy with the praise she receives from the Gang of 40—it doesn't seem to occur to her that she's been manipulated into proposing a project that the Circle's executives were already planning. Francis continues to rate Mae on a numerical scale, symbolizing how the Circle has reduced all human emotion to facile metrics. Finally, the ex-divinity student's talk of one morality reflects the utopian ideals of the Circle. Like every totalitarian government, the Circle is committed to the idea of making the world perfect. In effect, they want to make transparency the new religion.*



The next morning, Mae wakes up in her dorm room lying next to Francis and her phone rings. She sees that the caller ID is blocked, and knows that it must be Kalden. She doesn't answer, and Kalden calls a dozen more times. For the rest of the morning, Mae receives messages explaining that her proposal will be instituted very soon—it'll be called "Demoxie," and it will be required for Circle users everywhere.

*Mae doesn't want to talk to Kalden because she strongly disagrees with his reservations about the Circle. Meanwhile, the fact that the Circle is already preparing an online voting program further suggests that the company was working on such a project before Mae proposed it.*



Mae goes into work and she gets an invitation to the development room where she meets a man named Sharma who is working on Demoxie. He shows Mae a screen with a question about serving more vegetables at school lunches. Mae answers the question and the screen informs her, "more veggie options will be provided." The "will of the people," Sharma gushes, will be clear worldwide. As Mae walks out of the development room, a group of Circle employees walk up to her and tell her that, before Mae, they'd had no interest in politics. Now, they're excited to be part of a fully engaged populace. Kalden continues calling Mae, and she continues ignoring him.

*It's altogether unclear how the Circle's voting program is going to work: when users vote for certain options, does the Circle have any way of instituting their choices? What if users overwhelmingly vote for something that's illegal or unethical—does the Circle (or what remains of the government) have any obligation to act on such a vote? Instead of exploring such questions, Mae and Sharma gush about the "will of the people," demonstrating their naïve trust for the Circle.*



Around 12:30, Mae works up the confidence to answer Kalden. Kalden tells Mae that he's rigged things so that nobody will be able to hear his voice over the phone. She hangs up and rushes to the bathroom; in the bathroom, Kalden calls her again and she answers. Kalden explains that Demoxie is the last step in closing the Circle—when it's instituted, the Circle will become “the world's first tyrannical monopoly.” One company will control the flow of all information. Mae protests by quoting something that Ty said: the Circle is totally democratic and free. Kalden responds, “the Circle has to be reined in or broken up.” Mae accuses Kalden of being a spy for another company. Kalden asks Mae to think of the last time she was able to have a meaningful conversation with her friends or parents. He encourages her to speak out against the Circle at the next meeting of the Wise Men—the whole world will be watching. He adds, “They'll write songs about you.”

Mae hangs up and makes her way to the Great Hall, disgusted with Kalden. In the Great Hall, there's a demonstration of Demoxie on the screen, and the audience is cheering. The Demoxie app sends out questions for the audience to vote on: some are political, others are about the audience's taste in music, but all are “yes” or “no” questions. Then, a longer question pops up on the screen: should intelligence agencies send a drone to kill a terrorist in a rural area of Pakistan, considering the likelihood of “moderate collateral damage?” Mae appreciates the gravity of this question, and she senses that the Circle employees in the room do, too. After one minute, the results of the vote appear onscreen: 71 percent favor the strike. The next question onscreen is, “Is Mae Holland awesome or what?” The results come in: 97 percent of voters think Mae is awesome. Mae immediately becomes very uneasy—the survey results suggest that approximately 368 people think she's *not* awesome.

*Kalden and Mercer are the only characters in the novel who criticize the Circle articulately. Much as Mercer attacks social networking for creating vacuous, one-dimensional relationships, Kalden implies that the Circle has destroyed Mae's relationship with her parents and her friends. Furthermore, Kalden argues that, when the Circle has total power over people's information, it will use its power for its own benefit, instead of remaining impartial and neutral. Kalden insists that Mae has the power to change the Circle—she has millions of watchers around the world, and if she says anything to criticize the company, then her loyal watchers will hear about it right away.*



*The Circle encourages its users to vote on thousands of complex, nuanced questions. Although Mae is convinced that Circle users will answer these questions thoughtfully and carefully, it's obvious that they won't—it only takes a minute for people to vote on the death of a terrorist (a decision that should require careful, informed deliberation). The passage also reiterates another problem with social networking: it makes people insecure and addicted to the validation of their peers. Mae is so used to receiving praise from her watchers that the idea of 368 people not liking her is almost physically revolting to her.*



Suddenly, Mae sees Annie and embraces her. Annie immediately informs Mae that she's been working on PastPerfect, a new Circle project. Sensing that Annie is speaking to Mae's watchers instead of Mae, Mae asks Annie about PastPerfect, and Annie says that she's become the Circle's first volunteer for the program, which will document a person's entire genealogy. Mae detects that Annie is bragging. Annie asks Mae about her parents, even though she knows perfectly well that Mae hasn't been in touch with them in weeks (indeed, the last contact Mae had with her parents was a message in which her parents told her that they were "fleeing"). Mae claims that her parents are "fine" and then wraps up her conversation. Walking through campus, it occurs to her that Annie must have begged Bailey for the privilege of volunteering for PastPerfect. Mae begins to feel jealous of Annie. She suspects that the Wise Men would have offered Mae the privilege had her parents not "slipped off the path"—or, perhaps, if 368 people hadn't said that they didn't approve of her. She wonders if the 368 people "preferred her dead."

Back in her Customer Experience office, Mae proceeds with her work. She zings about her customers, creating a huge Retail Raw. Some of her customers ask Mae about getting a job at the Circle, but Mae directs them to the HR department. Other customers beg Mae to attend their relatives' parties, like their photos, and express support for their projects. Suddenly, Mae realizes that it's 10:32—she's been working for six hours.

Mae goes back to her dorm, where Francis is waiting. He kisses Mae, and Mae wonders if, this time, they'll have "a real sexual experience." But instead, Francis ejaculates in his pants. Afterwards, he asks Mae to rate him, and she gives him a 100. Mae wakes up early in the morning, thinking of the 368 people who want her "dead." She explains her frustrations to Francis, who is surprised. He tells her to look up which people "frowned" her, which she can do because the Circle is totally transparent now. Mae feels happy with this news—surely democracy will be "purer" when people aren't afraid to be held accountable for their votes.

Later in the morning, Mae attends the startup meeting, in which young startup managers present their research to the Circle in the hopes that the Circle will buy them out. Bailey and Stenton attend the meeting in person, while Ty appears via video feed. Mae remembers what Kalden has told her: speak out against the Circle while she has a young and influential audience watching her. Instead of saying something, Mae messages her 2 million watchers that she's "excited" to be there.

*Mae and Annie can no longer talk to each other—instead, they're forced to talk to the thousands of watchers witnessing their conversation. Annie seems to be trying to hurt Mae's feelings, perhaps because she's envious of Mae's status as a transparent mascot for the company. Mae and Annie's jealousy reflects a common strategy that authoritarian governments use to consolidate power: they dangle rewards and honors in front of their subjects, encouraging them to become less loyal to one another and more loyal to the state. The passage also reiterates a point Eggers has already made: social networking makes people insecure by making them addicted to the praise and encouragement of their peers.*



*Mae has become so addicted to Internet communication that she loses all concept of time: she craves likes and shallow friendship from her millions of watchers, followers, and customers.*



*Mae continues her unsatisfying relationship with Francis. With Francis, Mae's happiness and gratification are always deferred, perhaps reflecting the false closeness she feels with her online friends. Meanwhile, Mae doesn't bat an eye when she hears that the Circle has made voting transparent. Private voting is one of the hallmarks of a thriving democracy—when voting is public, people can be pressured and even bullied into choosing certain candidates.*



*Mae seems to be going along with her Circle directives rather than listening to Kalden's advice. She has a huge platform from which she could denounce the Circle for its unethical behavior, but instead, she chooses to throw her support to tyrants.*



The startup managers present to Mae and the Gang of 40. One presenter has an idea for a program that will allow police officers to see who is most likely to commit a crime based on past criminal records. This program, the presenter insists, will cut down on unethical “stop and search” procedures. The presenter suggests using Francis’s child tracking program to identify suspects. Stenton approves of the idea, saying, “It’s the community’s right to know who’s committed crimes.” The next presenter discusses an idea for eliminating crime: SeeChange cameras will identify anyone in a neighborhood who “doesn’t belong.” Stenton likes this presenter’s idea, too; he insists that there will be no legal problems.

A third presenter announces a surveillance program that identifies anyone who’s moving in an unorthodox or violent way. While demonstrating the program, the presenter plays a loud alarm. Stenton is furious that the presenter would play the alarm, to the degree that he nearly sends the presenter out of the building. However, Bailey encourages the presenter to continue and, a few moments later, Stenton is calmer. He says he likes the idea of being able to pinpoint potential troublemakers. Mae’s viewers send her messages saying, “If only this had been around ten years ago.”

When Mae returns to her desk, she sees a message, written on paper, from Annie. The message asks her to come to the bathroom as soon as possible. Mae does so, and Annie enters a few moments later. They sit in adjoining stalls, so that the cameras don’t capture one another’s faces. Annie tells Mae that PastPerfect is going public soon, and that it’s gotten some “pretty disturbing” results. Apparently, Annie’s ancestors from the Middle Ages were “blackhearted people” who kept slaves. Annie is extremely embarrassed with her genealogy. Mae tells Annie that their time without audio is almost up. She encourages Annie not to worry about her distant ancestors. Annie hesitates and replies, “Sure.”

The next day, the Circle releases Annie’s ancestry. Some people find it disturbing that Annie’s distant ancestors owned slaves, but most don’t care. Annie seems to be “taking it all in stride.” On Friday, however, Mae receives a long letter from Mercer. In the letter, Mercer tells Mae that Annie is “on the verge of ruin.” He goes on to explain that the Circle’s mission is fundamentally wrong—it’s nonsensical to try to fill “one human head” with “everything the world has ever seen.” He compares Mae’s startup meeting to a viewing of *Triumph of Will* (a Nazi propaganda film), and tells Mae that he’s going to travel north to escape the Circle’s growing number of surveillance cameras. He concludes, “I’m scared to death for us all.” Mae rolls her eyes, and her watchers send her derisive messages.

*It’s frightening that the Circle’s presenters frame their proposals as solutions to unethical police procedures, even though the solutions they’re proposing are even more unethical than the policies they aim to replace. Nobody questions Stenton’s claim that communities have the right to know who has committed crimes, even though it’s future crime that’s at stake. Stenton’s confidence that there will be no legal problems whatsoever suggests the growing power of the Circle over the government and the court system.*



*Each presenter offers an idea that controls and monitors human behavior on a more intimate and invasive level—the third presenter’s proposal, for example, would force people to rethink the way they move their bodies. It’s telling that Stenton is furious when the alarm goes off. Perhaps he’s furious because he wants to preserve the illusion that the Circle’s surveillance programs are gentle, calming, and peaceful. The alarm disrupts this illusion and reminds the Circle’s employees that the Circle’s surveillance programs are frightening and dangerous.*



*Annie’s problem (that she doesn’t want people knowing about her slave-owning ancestors) illustrates a further hole in the Circle’s celebration of transparency. In her time of need, Annie turns to Mae for comfort and support, but Mae (both because of her growing alienation from Annie and because the Circle’s surveillance systems make it almost impossible for her to express sympathy) can only give Annie shallow advice that echoes Francis’s failed attempts at comforting Mae.*



*In much the same way that Mae couldn’t do anything after she accidentally broadcast footage of her father’s penis, Annie can’t do anything after the Circle publicizes her ancestry. In both cases, Mae and Annie have no choice but to wait and see what happens. Mercer has become so fed-up with the Circle’s totalitarian ambitions that he’s going to move away from the country in an effort to escape the Circle’s cameras. Mercer seems to be the only person left with legitimate fears about surveillance—surveillance has become an accepted part of modern life.*



The next day, Mae goes to the bathroom and sees the tip of Annie's shoe in the next stall; immediately, she turns off her audio. Annie, her voice very rough, tells Mae that her genealogy has become even more embarrassing: apparently, some of her more recent ancestors owned African slaves and fought on the Confederate side in the Civil War. Annie's mother refuses to leave the house. Annie wails that she's getting hate mail from around the world accusing her of being a racist.

The next day, Annie zings, "We shouldn't know everything." Mae and Annie meet in the bathroom again and turn off their audio so that they can talk privately. Mae is appalled that Annie, a poster child for the Circle, is criticizing the idea of total transparency. Annie, breathing heavily, tells Mae that she hasn't slept in two days. She's learned that her parents were in an open marriage they and had sex with other people in the nineties. Furthermore, the Circle is about to reveal that, when Annie was six years old, her parents witnessed a man falling off a pier and drowning to death, and did nothing. Annie has begged Bailey to delete this information, but Bailey has told her there's nothing he can do. Weeping, Annie tells Mae that her parents disgust her now.

Mae returns to her office, where she sees her coworkers working furiously. She feels a sudden rush of pride that her coworkers are so committed to transparency. Suddenly, she realizes the "solution" to Annie's problem: enlist the millions of Circle users to express their support for Annie. Speaking to her millions of watchers, Mae explains that she just had a secret conversation with Annie about her family history. She begs her watchers to send Annie their sympathy and support. Some of Mae's watchers send "smiles" and supportive messages, while others write messages about how "there is evil in DNA," meaning that Annie will need to prove that she's not a racist. She zings the positive messages to Annie, but gets no reply.

Later in the day, Mae meets with Bailey in the Great Hall, where she's about to give a solo presentation. Mae explains what she did for Annie, and Bailey smiles and compliments Mae on her foresight. Then, Mae walks out onto the stage and greets the audience of Circle employees. Mae explains that she's introducing a new program called SoulSearch; in her ear, she hears Stenton's voice, directing her on what to say next. It is unjust, Mae explains, for criminals to hide from the law—therefore, the Circle has a moral responsibility to track down criminals and fugitives.

*Annie's genealogy continues to reveal embarrassing facts. Thanks to the Circle, Annie has to deal with harassment and bullying for the crimes of people who lived hundreds of years ago. This is a clear example of the dangers of surveillance and information transparency, and also of the way that the Internet can magnify bullying.*



*Notice that Mae doesn't express any genuine sympathy for Annie—on the contrary, she's horrified that Annie would dare to suggest that people shouldn't know everything. (Mae seems to have forgotten about accidentally posting footage of her naked father online.) Moreover, Annie's discovery that her parents witnessed a man drowning is a perfect example of why human beings shouldn't know everything about each other. Annie knows everything about her parents now, but the knowledge hasn't made her any happier or wiser—it has just torn her away from her family.*



*Even when Mae tries to express sympathy and support for Annie, she does so through social networking. The idea of providing Annie with face-to-face emotional support seems not to occur to her. Mae's plan backfires (of course), because not all of her watchers express their support for Annie—indeed, some of them continue to harass Annie and spout lies about how racism is genetic. Mae has tried to comfort Annie, but because she's turned to social networking to do so, her plan has partly failed.*



*Over the course of the novel, Mae goes from an audience member to a participant to an enthusiastic presenter in the Great Hall. Indeed, readers can track Mae's moral decline based entirely on her role in successive Great Hall presentations. Here, Mae is actively involved in selling Circle employees on the ethics of a program that, as we've seen, targets suspects before they've committed a crime.*



A picture of a woman appears on the screen, Mae explains that the woman is a wanted murderer and a fugitive from justice. Mae challenges the billions of people who use the Circle to find this woman in twenty minutes, and the audience cheers. Immediately, Circle users begin sending in possible photographs of the woman, and other users vote on each photo's likelihood of being real. Within a minute, a Circle user has identified someone in Wales who looks a lot like the woman; Circle users vote that this woman must be the fugitive.

A Circle user in Wales posts a live video of the fugitive. When the fugitive realizes that she's being filmed, she turns and runs away. Mae screams, "follow her!" and the Circle user follows. A few minutes later, the fugitive is standing against a wall, surrounded by at least twelve Circle users. One of the Circle users yells, "Lynch her!" but Stenton whispers to Mae, "She must be kept safe." Mae tells her watchers to call the police, and a few moments later the police arrive and arrest the woman. Stenton whispers, "Let's cut the video feed in the interest of allowing her some dignity." The entire process of arresting the woman has taken ten minutes.

The audience shouts, "Another!" This time, Stenton suggests that Mae try a regular civilian. Mae posts a photograph of Mercer, and hundreds of additional photos of Mercer appear on the screen. Mae smiles and says that Mercer is a "fugitive from friendship." Within a few seconds, a Circle user has posted about seeing Mercer near his grocery. Mae urges Circle users to check real estate records and credit card accounts in order to figure out exactly where Mercer is living. Two minutes later, Circle users are gathered around a house, yelling, "Is Mercer Madeiros here?" An unfamiliar man steps out of the house, and Mae realizes that the Circle has led people to the wrong house.

Moments later, other Circle users post about finding the right house. A crowd gathers around a house in the woods yelling, "Mercer, you in there? You in there making some chandeliers?" A car pulls out of the garage, and someone attaches a SeeChange camera to the window. Mae can see that it is, in fact, Mercer inside. Mercer begins driving away, looking furious and frightened. He sees the camera attached to his window and he rolls down the window so that no one can see him.

*The Circle's tracking program is, in theory, a great tool for tracking down criminals. However, it seems entirely possible that the Circle will use such a program to track down people who aren't criminals at all—perhaps, people whose only crime is speaking out against the company. Furthermore, notice that there's no certainty about whether the woman is, in fact, the criminal—Circle users simply vote on whether or not they think she is.*



*The Circle's tracking program brings out the worst in its users—it encourages people form an angry mob and threaten to lynch others. However, Stenton and the other Circle executives are trying to conceal the true brutality of the tracking program. Absurdly, Stenton claims to be cutting the video feed to provide the woman with some dignity. It's clear, though, that he just doesn't want his audience to develop any sympathy or compassion for the victims of Circle surveillance.*



*Mae is so indoctrinated in the ways of the company that she doesn't realize that she's harassing Mercer, and (as evidenced by the fact that Circle users go to the wrong house) endangering other people in the process. She's so accustomed to communicating with strangers via social networking that it doesn't seem to occur to her that she's sending an angry lynch mob after her ex-boyfriend.*



*Even after she sees that Mercer is frightened, Mae continues sending a lynch mob after him. She seems to believe that she's doing the right thing by bringing Mercer back into the world of surveillance and social networking.*



Mae shouts, “Release the drones!” and, in three minutes, every private drone in the area is flying after Mercer. The drones send audio from Mae’s presentation to Mercer. Mae says, “Mercer, it’s me!” and her audience roars with laughter. Other drones send audio from other Circle users, screaming for Mercer to stop driving. The audience laughs and cheers. Suddenly, Mercer, his face looking serene and determined, swerves off the road, and his car plummets into a gorge. Mae senses that, “there could be no survivors of such a fall.”

*Mae’s efforts to track Mercer lead to his death, apparently by suicide. He seems to crack under the pressure of being watched all the time. However, it’s not entirely clear why Mercer drives off the road: perhaps Mercer is frightened and not thinking clearly, thanks to the angry mob Mae has sent to track him down. It’s also possible, in light of his calm appearance, that he intends his suicide to be an act of protest against the Circle and the unethical surveillance system it uses.*



## BOOK TWO, PART 3

One week has passed since Mercer’s death. Since that time, Mae’s number of watchers has held steady—around 28 million. In the past week, Annie has “collapsed.” Mae meets with Bailey in his library, thinking that she needs to be strong and calm for the benefit of her watchers.

*One week after Mercer’s death, it’s clear that nothing has changed: people have gotten over whatever feelings of guilt they may have had and they have returned to watching everything all the time. Meanwhile, Annie has collapsed—it’s a sign of how distant she and Mae have become that Mae barely thinks about her. Instead of expressing her emotions in a psychologically healthy way, Mae represses them for the edification of her watchers.*



In the library, Bailey explains that Mae was trying to help “a very disturbed, antisocial young man.” He compares Mae to a doctor trying to help a sick patient who jumps out the window anyway. Bailey concludes that Mae “can hardly be blamed.” Mae thinks back to the funeral service for Mercer, during which she barely spoke to her parents. Bailey points out that Mercer wouldn’t have died if he’d been “in a self-driving vehicle.” Furthermore, Mercer must have been depressed because he was living in an isolated cabin in the woods. He concludes, “we’ve lost one of the world’s many, many people, which reminds us of both life’s preciousness and its abundance.” Mae nods. She remembers feeling a “tear” deep inside her after Mercer’s death—the tear of “not knowing.” She smiles: Bailey’s advice has calmed her.

*Bailey offers more sophistry to explain why Mercer’s death isn’t Mae’s fault (even though it seems clear that she harassed Mercer into suicide). The passage also mentions, almost parenthetically, that Mae is barely talking to her parents. For all intents and purposes, Bailey and the other executives have become her parents. Bailey’s speech—hinging on the insight that life is precious but abundant—illustrates the contradiction at the heart of the Circle: the company professes to value human connections, but because there are so many such connections, each one is disposable.*



Bailey asks Mae how Annie is doing, and Mae replies, “the same.” Then, Bailey walks Mae out of the library, saying that she and her watchers “could use some distraction.” They walk to the aquarium, where Stenton has combined all the animals he took from the Marianas trench into one tank (he’s fired Georgia due to “philosophical differences” and replaced her with a marine biologist who’s willing to feed unusual foods to Stenton’s sea creatures). By the tank, Bailey and Mae see Stenton surveying his work.

*Here, we return to the aquarium, one of the key symbols of the novel. Notice that Stenton has fired Georgia, even though she’s an expert at feeding sharks and other marine life, and replaced her with a more obedient assistant. Stenton’s ambition is boundless—and he won’t listen to anyone who disagrees with him.*



Stenton greets Mae and says, “I don’t think you’ve met Ty yet, have you, Mae?” Mae turns and gasps: Kalden is standing in front of her. Bailey and Stenton smile, thinking that Mae is star-struck. Mae pieces together what’s been happening: Ty has aged greatly in the past few years. The videos he sends in must have been recorded a long time ago. The other two Wise Men must not realize that Ty is pretending to be a nobody named Kalden. Kalden says nothing to Mae, but looks at her intently.

*Here, Roger Ebert’s law of unnecessary characters comes back into play: we learn that Kalden, who seemed largely superfluous to the plot of the novel, is actually Ty Gospodinov, a very important character. The implication would seem to be that Ty, as Kalden, has become disillusioned with the Circle, and is trying to dismantle it with Mae’s help.*



With the Three Wise Men assembled together, Mae’s watchers grow to 51 million. Following script, Mae explains that Stenton has assembled three majestic animals together in the aquarium: a **shark**, an **octopus**, and a **seahorse**. This is the first time, she continues, that the three animals are sharing the same space. Although Mae proceeds with her script, she feels almost nauseous—she can’t believe that Kalden is Ty.

*At the beginning of the novel, we learned that the Three Wise Men—Ty (symbolize by the seahorse), Stenton (symbolized by the shark), and Bailey (symbolized by the octopus)—were supposed to balance each other out. Here, in symbolic terms, Eggers “tests” such a proposition: what happens when you put an octopus and a seahorse in a tank with a hungry shark?*



Bailey points to the **octopus**, which is about to be introduced to the tank, and he notes that the octopus is “malleable and infinitely adaptable.” Before the octopus, however, the marine biologist introduces a group of **seahorses** into the tank. Mae notices that the “father” of the other seahorses doesn’t swim around the tank—instead, he hides himself away in the corner. Bailey laughs and says, “That is one shy fish.”

*The passage clarifies the symbolic connection between Bailey and octopus. Like the octopus, Bailey is smooth and charismatic—he can use his persuasive powers to weather any PR setback. Ty, on the other hand, resembles the seahorse: ironically, even though he fathered an entire generation of social networkers, he’s very shy.*



Next, the marine biologist introduces the **octopus** into the tank. The octopus floats around the tank, touching the seaweed and coral, wanting to know all, touch all.” Finally, the marine biologist prepares to introduce the **shark** into the tank. First, the biologist throws tuna fish into the water, “in case the shark is still hungry.” Bailey beams and says, “A peaceable kingdom.” He nods to the marine biologist, and the marine biologist lowers the shark into the tank. Mae has a suspicion that something horrible is going to happen. The shark swims around the tank, gobbling up tuna. Bailey says that he’d be worried, except that he trusts Stenton, “a man who knows what he’s doing.”

*The passage is darkly comical: even though it’s obvious to readers that the shark is going to eat everything in its path, Bailey naively continues to believe that the shark will be able to get along with the seahorse and octopus. Bailey’s naiveté reflects his naiveté about the Circle itself: he seems to sincerely believe that when the Circle connects everyone on the planet, the world will become a utopia. However, he’s placed his trust in a dangerous man: the greedy, deceitful Tom Stenton.*



The **shark** swims toward the **octopus** and tears it apart. Bailey whimpers in sadness, but Stenton looks at the shark with “a mixture of fascination and pride.” Next, the shark eats the **seahorse**, followed by its thousands of babies. Then it eats the seaweed, the coral, and the anemones, until it’s the only thing left in the tank. Ty says, “that was about what I imagined would happen.” Quickly, while nobody is looking, he grabs Mae’s hand and places something in it; then, he walks away. Stenton nods and says, both to Mae and to her hundred million watchers, “until next time.” Some of the watchers are terrified—others are “in awe and wanting more of the same.”

In the bathroom, Mae turns her lens toward the door and carefully looks down at the note Ty slipped her. Ty insists on meeting Mae soon: all she has to do is say, “I’m going back,” at which time Ty will kill her visual and audio feed for a full half-hour. The note further explains that Mae’s life is “teetering on the precipice.” Mae is reluctant to turn off her feed, but she decides that she needs to understand how Ty has “pulled this off.” She says, “I’m going back,” and immediately, her camera turns off. Following Ty’s directions, she walks downstairs, to the red sculpture where she and Ty had sex for the first time.

Mae finds Ty by the red sculpture, and when she sees him she feels repulsed. She accuses him of lying about his identity. Ty tries to explain: he’s always been an “average-looking guy,” and after his hair went grey, all he had to do was lose his glasses in order to become Kalden. Mae asks Ty why his hair went grey, and he replies, “The fucking **shark** that eats the world.” He says that Bailey and Stenton know he goes by another name, and adds, “I’m not technically allowed to leave campus. As long as I’m here, they’re happy.”

*Like the shark, Stenton is ruthless, and doesn’t care how many people he has to hurt to get his way. In symbolic terms, the passage suggests that Stenton won’t stop until he uses the Circle’s vast power to benefit himself, at everyone else’s expense. Stenton seems unsurprised that the shark eats everything in the tank. Just like a ruthless dictator, he seems to be using the shark tank to communicate a message to the world: that he’s dangerous. Now that the Circle’s power is almost complete, he doesn’t have to hide in the shadows—he’s ready to claim the throne. Even more disturbingly, the passage suggests that some of Mae’s watchers enjoy Stenton’s ruthlessness and want more of it. This is a reminder that totalitarian regimes sometimes come about because of popular support.*



*Mae’s motivations are unclear. She tells herself that she’ll turn off her feed purely for the sake of understanding how Ty pulled this off. However, it’s possible that, on some level, Mae senses that Ty is right about the Circle. This is the climax of the novel, and it hinges on one question: will Mae join with Ty against the Circle, or not?*



*This passage clarifies how Ty managed to disguise himself as Kalden without anyone noticing (he’s average looking and has grey hair). It also makes the symbolic connection between Tom Stenton and shark overwhelmingly clear. Stenton is the shark: brutal, amoral, and relentless. Ty recognizes that Stenton needs to be stopped before it’s too late.*



Ty begs Mae to use her influence to fight against Completion. He created the idea of the Circle, but he never intended for it to become so powerful, or for Circle membership to be mandatory. Mae shoots back, “If you don’t believe in all this ... go to the woods.” Ty points out that there will be no way to escape the Circle—parents will install chips in their children when they’re born, and when the children turn 18, the chips won’t be removed. People will be tracked and monitored from cradle to grave. The Circle will control the world’s information, meaning that they’ll have virtually unlimited power. Mae protests that governments will be able to keep the Circle from abusing its power, but Ty point out that transparent politicians won’t be able to do anything—if they do, the Circle will ruin their reputations. He asks, “What do you think happened to Williamson?”

Ty explains that Eamon Bailey genuinely believes that life will be “perfect” when the Circle is closed and “every soul is connected.” But Stenton has no such illusions—his only goal is to monetize the Circle and use it for his own “ruthless capitalistic ambition.” Mae argues that life *will* be perfect when there’s no more crime or deception, but Ty shakes his head and gives Mae a piece of paper. The paper contains a speech about “The Rights of Humans in the Digital Age” that argues that not all human activities can be measured, that humans must have the right to privacy, and that humans must have the right to disappear.” Ty begs Mae to read the speech to her watchers. Afterwards, Ty will begin to take apart the Circle. As Ty explains this, Mae imagines thousands of Circle employees losing their jobs.

Ty promises Mae that once he has taken down the Circle the two of them can sail around the world, hike mountains, and “vanish.” Mae thinks about sailing in a boat with Ty, and, for some reason, all she can think about is the **elderly couple** she met while **kayaking**. She thinks of how they spent their time drinking wine and “reminiscing about island fires.” Suddenly, Mae realizes what she has to do. She tells Ty, “I see everything clearly now.”

## BOOK THREE

As Book Three begins, months have passed since Kalden reached out to Mae, and Mae is sure that she has prevented an “apocalypse.” She shudders to think what would have happened if Kalden hadn’t approached someone with her “loyalty” and “integrity.”

*Ty paints a terrifying picture of life under the Circle. Children will be watched and monitored from the day they’re born until the day they die. The Circle will use its monopoly on information to manipulate people into obeying them, and destroy the career of anyone who tries to oppose it. It’s telling that, even after Ty has sketched out his dystopian vision, Mae has no rejoinder except that the government will keep people safe. She’s become so accustomed to thinking of the Circle as a benevolent, utopian organization that she can barely wrap her head around the idea that the Circle might be dangerous.*



*Throughout the novel, Eamon Bailey has been an ambiguous character—it was never clear if he believed his own nonsense or not. However, Ty’s explanations (and, symbolically speaking, the fact that Bailey expected that the shark would be able to get along with the seahorse and the octopus) suggest that Bailey sincerely believes that the Circle will create a utopia. Stenton, however, has no such illusions: he wants to use the Circle for his own benefit and nothing else. Mae has one chance to tell the world about the dangers of the Circle: here, she has to make the choice to support Ty or support the Circle.*



*The passage ends with a cliffhanger: will Mae denounce the Circle, or will she rat out Ty to the other two Wise Men? As the book has already suggested, the elderly couple that Mae encountered earlier is a kind of Rorschach Test for a person’s views on surveillance. (If the elderly couple’s life seems idyllic, you probably value the right to privacy and anonymity; if the elderly couple’s life seems dull, you probably have no interest in life before social networking, and are likely to support the Circle’s plans.) It’s not clear what Mae thinks about the elderly couple, and thus, it’s not clear what she’s going to do next.*



*The suspense builds: is the “apocalypse” Mae’s talking about Completion, or the end of the Circle? Does Mae act out of loyalty to Ty, or to the Circle?*



Mae is sitting in a clinic, staring down at Annie. Annie, Mae remembers, collapsed at her desk and fell into a coma. Afterwards, Dr. Villalobos concluded that Annie's coma was probably caused by exhaustion or stress. Doctors are confident that Annie will emerge from her coma someday. Mae wonders what Annie is dreaming about and she feels annoyed that she cannot know. Meanwhile, ten million people worldwide have gone clear, which suggests that "the movement is irreversible." Suddenly, Francis walks into the room and waves to her; Mae waves back.

Mae remembers what happened after Kalden approached her: she promised to read the letter, and then immediately went to talk to Bailey and Stenton. Afterwards, Ty was allowed to stay on campus in an "advisory role, with a secluded office." Mae hasn't seen him since their meeting, "and did not care to." She also hasn't talked to her parents in months.

Still standing over Annie's comatose body, Mae looks at the screen monitoring Annie's brain waves. Mae feels angry that she's unable to know what Annie is dreaming about, and she resolves to bring the matter up at the next meeting of the Gang of 40. People deserve to know what other people are thinking about and dreaming about. Mae concludes, "The world deserved nothing less and would not wait."

*Little by little, it becomes clear that nothing has changed since the end of Book Two: Mae is still dating Francis, still going to Dr. Villalobos, and more desperate for information than ever (she even wants to know what Annie is dreaming about). All of this suggests that Mae chose to obey the Circle, rather than joining forces with Ty.*



*Mae has finally gone to the dark side: she betrays Ty to the other two Wise Men (who have placed Ty under what seems like arrest, though they may have killed him) and cuts herself off from her parents. She's abandoned her old life and surrendered herself to the Circle.*



*The novel ends on a terrifying note: it's implied that the Circle's next project will be to figure out a way to read minds. In other words, very soon the Circle will have eliminated the last sanctuary of human privacy. When this happens, human beings will be slaves to the power of the Circle—they won't be able to think a single anti-Circle thought without the Circle knowing about it. With the Circle's totalitarian regime almost in place, the novel comes to a dark ending. But perhaps Eggers intends his novel to be a cautionary tale: it may be too late for Mae, but it's not too late for readers to push back against the values of the social networking era and celebrate privacy, freedom, and face-to-face interaction.*





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