

A Tangled Web of Likes

by Todd Maupin

“OMG. Traffic is crawling again this morning. On days like today, I am so grateful for the autopilot in my Tesla Model S. [photo of dashboard] [starry eyes emoji]”

Eugene Jones shared this status update and then leaned forward as much he could to glare at the highway. The reflecting sun glared back at him from the the throng of motionless cars ahead of him. Someone nearby started to blare their horn. Lovely. Outpatient surgery. Impatience everywhere. Eugene turned back to his smartphone and deleted the Tesla dashboard photo he had found while on Safari. If only he could be on actual safari in some exotic tundra. He gazed over his shoulder at the filthy car seats behind him in the ancient Ford Explorer. Wishing he truly had that Tesla, he wrinkled his nose; the musky scent was definitely emanating from the seat on the left side.

Scrolling through his news feed, Travis Benson felt a twinge of envy when he glimpsed Eugene's sleek and magnificent dashboard taunting him. Sixty-two likes and counting. Travis rolled his eyes as he saw the love reaction appear in real time. He continued munching his mediocre bacon, egg and cheese sandwich, carefully peeling away the Dunkin' wrapper from the congealed cheese. He hoped it was the cheese not the waxy wrapper he was partitioning towards consumption. Collateral swallowing of that toxicity was not the whole bowl of wax he needed that morning. A few quick taps on his smartphone and he found an image that would suffice; he shamelessly but not surreptitiously made it the centerpiece of his own new status.

“Poached eggs. Rustic sage toast. Freshly squeezed orange juice. Marcie always sends me off to work with the most loving breakfasts.

Thank you, sweetie! Xoxoxoxo. [heartsy eyes emoji]" I will show them real time love, Travis thought, as he posted his status.

She had to place her phone on the counter but Megan Willoughby was finally able to suppress her fit of coughing. The best part of waking up was Folgers in your lung. Apparently, her esophagus was not quite awake yet. That, and a tough pill to swallow in the form of yet another reminder of Travis and Marcie's perfect life. She scanned her kitchen for something to vindicate her irritation, that was not confined to her throat. Megan found one of her daughter's progress reports and snapped a photo. She was careful to crop out the "Middlewood Juvenile Detention Center" heading before incorporating the image into her post.

"Amber has made the honor roll yet again. I am so proud of my baby girl. Ivy League here we come! [blushing happy emoji]"

Great, another Generation Y, Z, Zima - or whatever they were calling kids now - to bust in like a bulldozer and dilute and delude an already crowded workforce. Amanda Stevens was mildly seething as she made one final glance at her phone before slumping into her desk. It promised to be another dreadful day in the doldrums that comprised her working life. However, auspicious news fell at the top of her email queue. Her period of probation had expired overnight. She was fortunate that the inconclusive findings of the internal investigation into her alleged misappropriation of corporate funds had exonerated her by default. Going forward, she pledged to be more discreet about her discretionary spending. That fog of stigma finally having dissipated promised a fresh start for Amanda, a new beginning, almost a...

"Another promotion at work. I continue to climb the corporate ladder here at the office and will be running this place soon, at this rate. If I decide to stay... [pensive emoji] but what would my company do without me? [smug emoji]"

Ugh, life continued to offer its silver platter to Amanda, just as it always had in high school, Renata Cunningham thought wincing. The high school reunion was coming up later that year and Amanda's latest certainly glamorous advancement at her flashy job would contribute to even more of her flaunty prancing and rubbing everyone's face with her privileged prosperity. Renata took advantage of the momentary lull at the toll booth to accentuate her own status.

"Being a successful access coordinator may take its toll on my sleep, but knowing that I am enabling the best and brightest in my area to achieve progress is its own reward. [standard smiling emoji]" She had barely completed the post when a haggard man in a beleaguered Ford Explorer handed her a disgusting wad of bills. At least Renata would be sparing some stripper from having this filthy currency befoul her skin. When she handed "Merle Haggard" his change, the shabby car seats in the backseat caught her eye, accompanied by a pungently dank scent wafting from the vehicle. Anything that Renata could perceive over the pervading exhaust must have been excruciatingly overwhelming for him within the confines of that miserable SUV.

At the next traffic signal after paying the toll, Eugene was able to check his phone again. The number of likes on his Tesla post seemed to have settled at 98. Likely, it had been dwarfed by the subsequent bragging of his friend Megan about her perfect genius daughter's grades again. Would he be so lucky. His older son had taken to eating paste, and his younger, crayons. As the traffic signal presented him with the green light to continue his commute, Eugene mused on how he could boast to his friends about his little budding avant garde artists...

From his ivory tower in Palo Alto, Mark distractedly scanned his news feed while the faint sounds of Priscilla arguing with their

daughters became gradually more prominent. Cringing, he knew it was only a matter of time before she would call him to change a diaper or even worse, two diapers. And then he saw it. Overnight, Bill and Melinda had awarded yet another billion-dollar grant to some organization that Mark had never heard of in some country whose name sounded made up. He opened another tab and started typing frantically in search of an altruistic contribution he could make that would make a big splash. And maybe even benefit someone in need...

Priscilla's call to arms put Mark's magnanimous plan on hold. The self-liking ice cream cone would churn along without him as it had for years. He scampered to the other room, while the post featuring that pearly Gates smile continued to amass likes.

Copyright 2021 by Todd Maupin

