(mostly) true notes on gossip

you didn't hear this from me

kelsey mckinney

host of normal gossip

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(Mostly) True Notes on Gossip

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For Dana Murphy

Talk is cheap but the price is high when it's true.

—Reba McEntire, "Rumor Has It," 1990

A Note on Gossip

I used to think that gossip was something I could hold in the palm of my hand and swallow whole. Gossip was a pill you were handed before a concert, an easy, if clandestine, decision to spend your evening a little happier, a little stranger, a little more open to the world than before. It was the fizzing excitement that rose in my body after two espresso martinis in a dark bar. Gossip could make or break a person, and even if that person was me, I loved it the way any good gossiper does: wholeheartedly, with abandon, and to my own detriment.

I have always been obsessed with stories about my friends' friends—those off-screen recurring characters who might have broken up with a girlfriend, yelled at their boss, or realized they had a secret half sister. What I crave is a phone call that starts with "You're never going to believe this," or a four-minute-long voice memo sent with no context, or the electric current that seems to appear in the air when the person across from you at the table leans in and lowers their voice.

Many people say that they do not like gossip, but gossip is not as small as I once thought it was. Each day, my concept of it expands outward a little more.

At its most basic, gossip is just one person talking to another about someone who isn't present. That means, definitionally, that prayer requests are gossip. Speculation in the media about which baseball team Shohei Ohtani is going to sign with is gossip. A doctor conferring with a colleague over an X-ray is gossiping about their patient just like two friends sending each other Taylor Swift's posts on IG are gossiping. In modern parlance, we also say "gossip" when we mean slander, libel, or hate speech. We call celebrity news, calls

from our mom, and whisper networks gossip. Even in scientific research, there is no consensus on what "gossip" means. We say we love to gossip, and in the same breath we say that gossip is dangerous.

"Some form of gossip is to be found in every society," the philosophy professor Aaron Ben-Ze'ev wrote in his essay "The Vindication of Gossip." "Children (who are supposed to be less influenced by cultures) gossip practically from the time they learn to talk and to recognize other people." Maybe we're born with that desire, and always have been.

In his book *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*, the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar argued that conversation serves the same function as grooming in the animal kingdom. Just as one chimpanzee might pick bugs out of the hair of another to signify closeness and allyship to others in their community, so might a teenage girl lean over to tell her friend a secret or a colleague bring you a piece of important information. "If the main function of grooming for monkeys and apes is to build up trust and personal knowledge of allies, then language has an added advantage," Dunbar wrote. "It allows you to say a great deal about yourself, your likes and dislikes, the kind of person you are; it also allows you to convey in numerous subtle ways something about your reliability as an ally or a friend."

The form of information sharing that we do as individuals today is how humans have done it basically forever. In order to survive as a species, you need to share what you know: to explain to one another where the berries are, where the deer are, and what time of year the river gets too high. This kind of information sharing is explicitly not gossip in that it is talk about objects, animals, and problems and not about other people. But we can assume that early humans would have needed to gossip to survive also: to decide, for example, who should go on a hunt, a group would need to discuss who was most skilled.

Erik Hoel—an American neuroscientist—argues in his article "The Gossip Trap" that gossip is more important in the development of humanity than just keeping us safe and fed: "50,000 BC might be a

little more like a high school than anything else," Hoel writes. "It's more like everything is organized by a constant and ever-shifting reputational management, all against all." Until we as a species began to create civilizations with governments, and cities, and money, and writing (somewhere between 12,000 and 5000 BCE), our people were governed by gossip, and there are only so many people you can remember to gossip about.

According to Dunbar, the size of the human neocortex only allows us to monitor around 150 distinct social relationships. If you know only 150 people, it is easy to keep track of how you feel about all of them. You don't need a formal hierarchy like a government with laws and enforcers, because you know who everyone in your community is and how they have been behaving. All civilization is, Hoel argues, "a superstructure that levels leveling mechanisms, freeing us from the gossip trap. For what are the hallmarks of civilization? I'd venture to say: immunity to gossip."

This is a compelling and complicated idea. Hoel views gossip as the trap that weighed us down as a species and kept us from bigger, greater things, and he thinks that we are currently in danger of being dragged back into that model because of social media. He writes, "Most people *like* the trap. Oh, it's terrible for the accused, the exiled, the uncool. But the gossip trap is comfortable. Homey… all social media does is allow us to overcome Dunbar's number, which dismantled a barrier erected at the beginning of civilization. Of course, we gravitate to cancel culture—*it's our innate evolved form of government*."

A civilization imbues some people with power—judges, politicians, billionaires—and then supports that power through its existence. The reason that people are afraid of the Gossip Trap, in which social pressure holds more power than courts of law, isn't because they are afraid of a regression of the human race. The people who are afraid of the Gossip Trap (or Cancel Culture, Woke Mobs, the Media, or whatever you want to call the kind of social pressure that can create change) are the ones who have reason to be: they have outsized power in our society, and they want to hold on to it.

The disdain for gossip and talking about other people almost

always leads to someone bringing up an Eleanor Roosevelt quote (which is often attributed to Socrates as well). Hoel mentions it in his article. I've heard pastors repeat it. A man once quoted it to me at a bar as a way to question my work. "Great minds," the quote goes, "discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people." But we learn to talk about ideas by talking about people. There's a reason that the moral philosophical "Trolley Problem" involves imagining yourself as a train track operator deciding whether to do nothing and let five people die or take action and kill one person. The ideas are always connected to people because we are people.

But in some ways, Hoel is right: gossip today *is* different than it was centuries ago. Information spreads at lightning speed, and so does misinformation. We know more people than perhaps ever before in history and follow complete strangers on social media whom we will never meet. Our ethics and morals are enforced across state and country borders by people we will never know. We do live in a society, after all. So what exactly is gossip in a world with governments, legal systems, and Nextdoor neighborhood watchers? We haven't evolved out of gossip as a regulatory system. We gossip about one another to maintain our communal values and keep one another safe. But we also use it for so much more.

Gossip is a morphing chameleon of a word whose meaning shifts in every conversation the way a kaleidoscope changes with every twist. In the world of secondhand, thirdhand, fourthhand stories, there is no veracity, no certainty. Everything must be taken with an entire box of salt.

In the beginning, I thought that I wanted to write this book because I wanted people to think critically and carefully about gossip: about how we demonize and vilify it, about how we demean it as "women's talk" and package it as dangerous. And that's still important to me, but I am no longer certain that truth is a concept we are capable of holding between our hands, and I know that gossiping—be it for fun or for information sharing—is at its very core all about truth. These essays are a way of navigating myself through the messy world of gossip because I'm not sure that I have an

answer for the questions at the core of all of this: Why does it matter which parts are true? What does truth even mean?

The title itself begins this work. *You Didn't Hear This from Me* is, of course, a lie. You are hearing it from me. I am right here telling it to you. But that is the truth about gossip: We want to separate ourselves from it at the same time we want to drown in it. We want the truth, all of it, not told slant, until suddenly we don't.

While getting ready for my wedding, we had a lull during the hair and makeup routine and someone asked if I had any tea to spill about a wedding guest. I had to wrack my brain for a story that didn't involve anyone in the room and that I knew would entertain my besties for a short time. I quickly pulled up a perfect, killer gossip bite involving the groom's friend who was notoriously weird and the possibly-not-platonic friend who drove him out to the wedding but was not invited to the wedding, and the roller coaster of events surrounding this plan unfolding over the week leading up to the wedding. My ladies were riveted—the collective gasp that emerged when I dropped the plot twist was immensely satisfying. It was the perfect little compact story and I felt like the bond between this disparate group of friends became a little more solidified around the shared experience of the goss.