

Note: I decided that the best way to get material was to ask my friends who struggled with their parents using technology for monitoring them in addition to drawing from my own experiences. My goal is to either publish this as a short story or expand it into a novella, with the target audience being parents, which is why I decided to make the story a bit more "real" than I initially planned for it to be when giving my presentation. I'm always happy to take constructive criticism.

COMA BLACK

by Lexi Cepak

She laid in bed, her body motionless, paralyzed by fear. She couldn't feel her legs. All she felt was the massive weight resting on her chest. It was suffocating. Her heart fought to break free from the body that refused to go with it. Spinning—everything was spinning. Although she was unable to move, the small room couldn't sit still. Her mind felt like it was racing, but it was completely blank.

“How did I get here?” she wondered quietly, as though someone would overhear her thoughts. She didn't dare let her brain process the situation or the events that had unfolded that afternoon. It wasn't the first time, but she was reluctant to hope it would be the last. Because the event was so unspeakably dark, because of her paranoia about someone reading her thoughts, she forced all of the mental images, all of the pain, all of the suffering into two words: coma black.

Although she gave it a name, no one would ever hear her call it that. No one could ever know. What would they think of her if they found out? No, no one could ever know. It would be her own secret from here on out. Maybe she'd live a hundred years with this secret, maybe she'd find a way to end her suffering for good tomorrow—she wasn't certain about anything other than that she would be taking this particular secret to the grave.

Some amount of time passed. It felt like a year, but it could have been less than an hour. The weight she felt shifted, initially causing her distress, but after it settled, she realized that she could wiggle free if she was careful enough. After an hour of slowly shifting herself out of bed, she was able to crawl to the bathroom, where she curled up into a ball on the cold vinyl floor, her legs clenched together as tightly as possible. At least here, she was allowed to have a razor. At least here, there were no cameras watching her every move. At least here, she had a mother who made her feel wanted—cherished, even. She owed everything to this woman—her car, the food she ate every night, everything—yet the pain was still near unbearable. Tears rolled down her face, eventually making their way into the grooves in the simulated stone texture on the floor. She was able fight herself enough to make her way to the shower. Feeling the hot water on her skin after a moment like this had become a necessity. She had become obsessed with scrubbing away all of her self-disgust. Something was different this time, though...she couldn't seem to get it off. It was all-consuming. She grabbed her razor and...watched as the red water flowed down the drain, bringing with it a numbing effect. As she stood there, she considered everything that led up to this—this situation, this feeling, coma black.

She remembered being a relatively unhappy child. Perhaps that should have been some indication of what was in store for her, but no one seemed to notice. Back then, things were much more normal. No one thought about why her parents didn't let her go to certain events—after all, she was small, and the world was big and dangerous. No one wondered why her parents were hard on her sometimes—they must have wanted her to succeed; after all, academics are important. Every good parent is afraid of their child becoming a delinquent. No one worried when her parents didn't want her around boys in middle school—most parents are protective of their 'darling' little girls. It was “reasonable,” “sensible” even “necessary” to be a little protective of a child growing up in this day and age. Yes, the world wasn't as innocent and wholesome as it used to be—people didn't leave their houses unlocked or let their children roam the streets

anymore—everything was protected, controlled by technology. In this day and age, everyone was obsessed with their own, twisted definitions of how to protect their children. It was all about “safety”.

She didn't remember things being so bad before her classmates started getting cell phones. Even when she got her first flip phone, life was pretty good. She could text and call her friends, and her parents could tell her when they were going to be late picking her up from school. It seemed like a positive thing, which is why when smartphones became an option, she was all for it. She remembered the excitement of going to the Apple Store, deciding on a brand-new iPhone and spending hours picking out the perfect case for it. Little did she know, that smartphone would ultimately mark the death of what little relationship she had with her parents. It started with reading her texts, and with each additional measure they took to keep her safe, they pushed her that much further away, until there was no relationship left to save.

Things started off relatively normal. She excitedly texted her friends and they texted her back. They talked about life, feelings, crushes, everything. But then, her parents ripped her phone away and read all of her messages. They learned every thought she had shared with her friends for the past month—everything from which boy her friend liked to how she wanted to get a tattoo when she was older. Everything was judged and criticized—every little detail that was meant to be private. She felt betrayed, and her desire to share things with her parents hit an all-time low. “Why should I tell them anything? They're just going to read it all for themselves anyway. Might as well not waste the effort,” she had thought begrudgingly. Her first instinct was to start deleting messages. She was angry. Those secrets weren't for her parents to see. They were secrets between she and her friends. Allowing someone else to read them was like breaking a promise. Now, all the parents would know that Cynthia had a crush on Jamal! It just wasn't right. Infuriated by the situation, she trashed all of her messages. To a thirteen-year-old, this was only the most logical conclusion. Her parents couldn't read what wasn't there. No more feeling as though her mind was being strip-searched. Unfortunately, what seemed like a simple fix turned out to be even more of a disaster, as her friend sent her a message while they were searching her phone—

and it was a response to something she had deleted! “Ana, have you been deleting your messages?! What else have you been hiding?” they asked accusingly. Just like that, everything got a whole lot harder. The music she listened to that helped her get through the fact that she was being bullied at school? Explicit, gone. The app she used to post her art online? Unsafe, gone. A dress-up game she played, in which she gave her doll tattoos and piercings? Highly inappropriate, a terrible influence, gone. That's when everything started to unravel, when everything she held dear, everything that helped her cope was ripped away in one go. Even the note-taking app she had started writing stories in was unsafe...how dare she portray parental figures in such a way? Outrageous! If anyone read this, they'd surely think her parents were horrible. They couldn't have that, could they? They'd be keeping an eye on *that* hobby from now on.

It could only get worse from there. She tried calling her friends, but now that her parents knew she was hiding something, she felt they were listening in on her phone calls. When she tried to text, she'd catch them constantly peering over her shoulder. She felt increasingly trapped and increasingly lonely, so she turned to the online world to find friends by making accounts they didn't know about and hiding even more from them. The only problem was that most of the people who wanted to talk to a teenage girl on unpopular chat sites...probably weren't people she should be talking to, and she knew it, but what choice did she have? She couldn't talk to anyone from school anymore. She couldn't listen to the music she liked. Her favorite YouTubers were blocked. Every time she tried to find an outlet or an escape, they ripped it away, and in turn, she was increasingly disliked in school. She was “uncool”. She didn't get to use technology like everyone else. How can you be popular when you're forbidden from going to all the fun social events unless you take a tracking device along with you? Turning her location off only got her in more trouble. Her parents didn't like her going *anywhere* without telling them *every* little detail, and it drove her crazy.

She began to feel as though the internet was her lifeline. Maybe people on the internet wanted things from her that she felt uncomfortable giving, but at least they listened to her. It was a means of self-expression

to be able to talk about all of the drama between she and her parents. Everything felt so crazy! By contrast, even when she went to therapy, it felt like the therapist wasn't on her side. Everything was eventually relayed back to her parents, and it felt like yet another interrogation.

Phone checks were random, which taught her to constantly keep her guard up around her parents, never knowing when they might choose to punish her next. Once, she recalled texting someone her parents didn't want her to talk to. Her mother leaned in to read her messages, so she turned to the side slightly. The next thing she knew, her mother was demanding to see her phone. She panicked. She shoved the phone into her pants and made a run for the bathroom, where she slammed the door on her mother's face. Her mom was stronger than her, though, and she tried to pry the door open. It reminded Ana of the infamous scene from *The Shining*; *Here's Mommy!*

After what felt like hours of being chased around the house, her father came home, tired and ready to relax...only he couldn't, because his daughter had messed that up for him. Infuriated and ready to be done with the situation, he grabbed her by the legs and shook her upside down until her phone clattered to the floor. She broke free and made a lunge for it, but her mom got there first. She would never forget how scared and betrayed she had felt. This was the first instant where she recalled feeling as though they had been, undeniably, in the wrong. She could never look at her father the same way after knowing how fragile she was in comparison.

A slightly less dramatic—but, equally traumatic—memory came to mind next. After going to a Christian concert with Cynthia and taking photos all night, she noticed that her phone battery was low. She decided to take the risk and turn off her phone. Cynthia's parents ended up taking them to get McDonald's after. She turned her phone on briefly to tell her parents that they were getting food and that she'd be a little late, then powered it off again. Big mistake. She came home to an angry family that night. Since she was late, she couldn't be trusted. She shouldn't have been taking so many pictures. She should have monitored

her phone's battery level better. Fun? They don't want her to have fun. They want her to be safe, safe amongst all of those concert *freaks*. They were extremely upset, and they had to call her friend's parents up just to verify where she was that night. Absolutely absurd. They could no longer trust or believe their own daughter, and they had whipped themselves up into a state of perpetual paranoid frenzy. "What else is she hiding? What would they find out their delinquent daughter had been doing next? Would it be drugs? Sex? Stealing? Murder?" Were they protecting her from the world, or the world from her? It all started to blend together. They checked her internet history, and... oops, she forgot to delete the visits to that chat site she had cherished, the one she had been desperately talking to older boys on, not because she wanted anything from them, but because she was lonely. They found the messages she had sent them, some she wasn't too proud of. She was overwhelmed by shame, embarrassment, and anger. With everything taken from her, she fell into depression. She couldn't be who she wanted to be anymore, everything was controlled. She felt as though her parents had sliced her open, ripped every bit of soul she had left in her, and sewn her up, leaving only an empty husk that could barely support its own weight.

Next, she recalled asking to help with an after-school recycling program. Even though she stayed in the building the entire time, her tracking app malfunctioned. It showed that she had been at Cynthia's house without permission! She did everything she could to prove that it wasn't true, including getting her friend on the phone to verify that she was indeed at school, but alas, she was still punished. How dare Ana embarrass her mother like that? Making her look like a crazy person in front of her classmates, how disrespectful!

It was after that day that she started cutting. Even though she thought they were being unfair—since she really hadn't done anything wrong, for once—she still blamed herself for being a "problem child." At the time, their arguments seemed sound. If she hadn't hidden her texts from them, this never would have happened. If she hadn't written such controversial stories, they wouldn't have to check her journal. If she hadn't been such a slut for attention, they wouldn't have taken all of her social media accounts. It was all

her fault. She was a deviant and a monster, and her parents hated her for it, and she hated herself for it, as well. Her self-esteem had fallen through the floor. She could only think poorly of herself for the way she felt drawn to the internet. She desperately wanted to feel close to someone, and that someone could not be one of the people who constantly judged and punished her every step of the way. She wanted praise, to be appreciated, to be loved.

By contrast, Cynthia's parents seemed so perfect, and how she longed for them to adopt her, but as she grew more depressed, her emotions drove a wedge between she and her former best friend. It wasn't Cynthia's fault or her own fault, they just couldn't relate anymore. How could someone so trapped in darkness relate to someone who had everything in the world going for her? Cynthia's parents loved her, they cherished her, they really cared. They didn't track her location or read her texts...they trusted her, and as a result, she was close to them. She told them everything. Whenever she wanted advice, she'd go to her mom, even if it was about something seemingly awkward like how to impress the boy she liked. Ana couldn't imagine having a relationship with her parents like that. She couldn't imagine having a conversation about crushes with them without them defensively asking her when she was going to get pregnant and telling her they couldn't handle raising her child for her, or that they wouldn't be able to cope with the reality TV show that would inevitably become their life, as she was clearly destined to be the star of the next rendition of *16 And Pregnant*. Never mind that she didn't really know how she felt about boys...that was an equally dangerous thing to admit in a conservative southern household.

Her parents were too obsessed with monitoring her technology to notice the cuts on her wrist. They were preoccupied by their location tracking apps, reading her texts, and monitoring her activity online, so it's no surprise that they didn't notice how she stopped taking off her hoodie, even when spring came and made it a warm 80 degrees outside. They didn't even notice that she started stuffing her food in the cushions of her couch for her dog to find and eat later in an attempt to punish herself through the feeling of starvation. Since her own parents were so involved in controlling her virtual self, it was only natural

that Cynthia's less technologically-invasive parents noticed the cuts first. She begged them not to tell her parents, but this was something they had to report, they said. They didn't consider that her parents might have contributed to the pain that led her to self-harm, and neither would her parents.

Her parents couldn't trust her to be alone anymore. They took away her razors, making her feel even more insecure and out of place as the only girl in school with hairy legs, but that was just the beginning. The following week, they had cameras installed around the house so that they could monitor her every move. She learned to sleep on the floor next to her bed because she couldn't sleep with the overwhelming feeling that someone was watching, that someone could count her every breath. She was yelled at and punished for sleeping this way, but she didn't care. It was worth the punishment.

Ana's perception of reality had been skewed. Often, she didn't even understand how her parents figured out what she was doing behind their backs. It felt like magic, like they could read her thoughts. She didn't feel free to feel sad when she was sad or angry when she was angry. She became unable to discuss and process her problems, even with herself. It was exhausting.

This ever-escalating chain of events went on for years, even when she wasn't a child anymore. Despite all of the pain she carried with her, what kept her going was the thought of getting out. Eventually, she got smart with the way she handled the situation: she made a decision to pretend to be the person her parents had “wanted” her to be all along. She stopped creating the art she loved, she stopped listening to the music that helped her stay strong, and slowly pieced together the facade that she knew would regain her parents' trust, and for those first three years of high school, things actually started to settle down with her parents. They deactivated the home alarm system that was meant to keep her inside, rather than keep bad guys out, and they initiated “phone checks” far less frequently. She learned to be their definition of perfect while they were awake, and it was only when she was sure they were sound asleep that her true self came out. She obtained a spare phone from a friend at school and would spend all night in the

bathroom—where there weren't cameras—texting. She always came to dinner on time, she made small-talk with her parents about anything mundane that might have happened in her day, she never asked to go out with friends. She had finally divorced the delinquent behavior her parents so hated...or so they thought.

During her high school years, she stayed up until 5 a.m. talking to a guy she met on the internet while doing her homework. He was manipulative and controlling, just like her parents. Perhaps that's why they never noticed the situation that was unfolding: he wanted the same things from her. He wanted her to spend less time with her friends and more time at home.

When she stayed after school to help with one of the student organizations she participated in, she received angry calls from both her parents and him. They were one in the same, but she couldn't see that the behavior wasn't okay, because it was all that she had known. He always shared her views on her parents' tactics, allowing her to vent and telling her that they were in the wrong, but he was careful to not object to the way they treated her. He sold her on the idea of having a real family—a mom that loved her, a boyfriend who cared. She mostly thought of the idea as a fantasy. She never really intended to betray her parents in that way. She didn't want them to hate her. In fact, her whole high school career was built on the idea of impressing them and attempting to regain the love and acceptance she had lost years ago. She learned graphic design as the less expressive, less controversial alternative to art and chose to write essays over short stories. She volunteered regularly and graduated in the top of her class. Unfortunately, it was too late. Their image of her had been permanently tainted by their obsessive behavior, and the way she blatantly sought out their praise made her an easy target for manipulative people like her online boyfriend.

The months leading up to college were filled with more monitoring than usual, as her parents tried to reign her in before reluctantly allowing her to venture into a place free of their control. It was extremely devastating since she had grown used to their ever-so-slightly more lax behavior. Things definitely hadn't

been good before, but taking what little she had gained without explanation was extremely upsetting. She began to feel as though her parents' behavior might not have been a product of her own actions, but rather their obsessive tendencies—as though the effort was futile, because even if there had been nothing for them to get upset over, they would have found something to pick at.

The second she left for college, they lost it. They monitored her GPS location constantly, and they noticed that she either wasn't going to class or wasn't taking her phone with her when she left her dorm. Even though they told her she couldn't use her car without asking for permission, they watched in horror as her location blip traveled from campus to the local grocery store and back. Delinquent behavior, yet again! They knew it was all a facade. She was a bad apple after all. They hacked the PC she left at home and searched through all of her emails and accounts just like old times. They found messages between she and the older guy she had been talking to, her online boyfriend, and decided to take a road trip to confront her on campus.

She wasn't expecting a confrontation. She had just come back from her psychology class, which had become her favorite since she was still searching for answers. “Was I really in the wrong?” she wondered, “Were they wrong?” This train of thought was derailed when she noticed them standing outside of her dorm. She panicked and tried to escape, just as she had as a child when she couldn't handle it anymore and ran away from home. They grabbed her in public and wrestled with her as she tried to break free. She cried out for help. They noticed her secret spare phone in her bag and grabbed it. They threatened to take away her dorm, her education, her phone, her laptop, her car...anything they could get their hands on was about to be ripped away. She was going to be sent back home where they could monitor her yet again. The thought of this is what kept her fighting to get away. All she had ever wanted was to break free from them, and they were about to take her only chance away. If you asked her what they said to her that day, she could give you the general gist of the situation, that they were angry about her relationship, that she was a slut and a deviant, and that they only wanted to protect her, but what really stuck in her mind was

how her heart broke when she was desperately clawing at their skin to get away. She could recall most clearly the fear she felt as she pulled her mother's hair and the hopelessness she felt when she was certain that she couldn't get away, that no one would come for her, that she would be dragged back home and locked in a cell for the rest of her life.

Her despair didn't last long. The police arrived and settled the situation. They banned her parents from campus to keep them from causing on-campus disturbances, but she lost her car and a few of her belongings. She was heartbroken. How could they have done that to her? She didn't feel safe anymore, so she no longer answered their calls. They thought if they only paid for one semester of housing, she'd be forced to come back when it was over. They were wrong. She took out loans to cover the rest of college. Debt was a thousand times less terrifying than her parents. It didn't quite cover rent, though, and it was the end of the semester...she spent all semester planning for her future and trying to make the best of it, so she missed out on making friends or getting the grades she wanted, and as the semester came to a close, she realized that there was nowhere to go for the break.

Her boyfriend convinced her to stay with him. He was right about how much his mother loved her—this woman was the mother she never had. They did everything together, and for a while, it was great...until he started to become overly controlling. She might have noticed the warning signs if her parents hadn't acted in a similar manner, but they had, and she didn't notice where things were going until it was too late. She chose to put up with the abuse because of how much she loved his mother, proving just how desperate she was for decent parenting. If her parents were wrong about one thing, it was about how she didn't want a relationship with them. She yearned for their guidance and mourned the relationship they never had. As a result, she allowed her new situation to worsen. If there was anything they had taught her in life, it was to allow herself to be controlled, how to not fight back, how to pretend that everything was okay when it wasn't.

So, when he pinned her down (no, she wouldn't think about that incident, it was just "coma black" and nothing more) ...she couldn't yet handle how much pain it caused her—she couldn't think about it, so she decided not to give it power. It was nothing but two words strung together and filled with all of the pain and suffering she had experienced since middle school. No one could know. No one would know. It was her little secret to bare, hers and hers alone. She would continue to be perfect on the outside and suppress her feelings, just how Mom and Dad had taught her.

As her mind returned to the present, the water in the shower ran pink, then orange, then back to clear. Even though she left them behind, she felt as though they still had their fingers wrapped tightly around her wrists. She looked down and touched her arm, remembering the photos the police had taken of her bruises. By staying here with someone like them, it felt like they were winning, like they still had control. Fear of losing her new mother and fear of the punishment of her boyfriend morphed into a rebellious anger. She couldn't let it happen again. No, she wasn't going to let them win. She had to do something.

She called up her university and asked them if she could stay in one of the safe rooms on campus. She was familiar with them, having stayed in one after the incident with her parents. They approved her request, and after writing a brief note, she was off. She had reached her limit. She saw her parents in him, and staying felt like being controlled. Even though he was the one doing the hurting, she saw them instead. If only they had been close—if only they had tried to get to know her the old-fashioned way. Then, maybe it never would have happened. She felt angry and deprived—angry when she questioned whose fault it really was, deprived when she thought of the life her friends had been given in comparison to her own. She had spent all of her time fighting her parents, trying to be herself, trying to get away from everything they had taught her. She hated it all. Everything associated with them was wrong...but in a way, through all of her rebellion, they had, in fact, shaped her. It was their actions that transformed her into the monster she was. She had become everything they didn't want her to be...or maybe she was who

they wanted her to be from the beginning. If they had wanted a child that wasn't a monster, then why had they treated her like one?

As she drove off into the distance, she swore to herself that she would never treat her children the way she had been treated. What started off as monitoring led to obsession, and obsession led to abuse, and abuse led to...coma black, an endless cycle of pain and the dark aftermath of never having experienced a healthy relationship. You know, maybe she should share her story. Maybe it would serve as an act of retribution—no, rebellion—no, it would provide her with a sense of justice by taking all of the pain and making it into something else. This kind of justice was what she needed to finally get closure. After all, no one could think worse of her than what her parents already thought, and no one could say things and make them hurt quite like they did. What's the harm in letting people know that she's not perfect? The love she had so desperately yearned for and sought after couldn't be regained. She already lost everything she cared about, what was left to lose? She couldn't turn back time. Her relationship with her parents was over, but she knew that technology would continue to advance. Soon, parents would be microchipping their children...if she could prevent that from happening...if she could keep the situation from getting out of hand, maybe, just maybe, that would be enough—enough for her to expose that she wasn't as perfect as she left people think, that she made mistakes and had a past full of darkness, despite how embarrassing it would be—enough to show the world how her parents' “safety” precautions not only annihilated any possibility of a relationship with her, but drove her to become someone she was ashamed to be. All she could hope to do now is put an end to coma black.

It took her years to undo all the damage her parents had done. Her prior motivation had always been escaping the darkness, but now she was out. Coma black was a phrase, a memory, something that had since ceased to exist, and yet there it was, following her everywhere. What do you do when you've spent your whole life in darkness running towards the light and you finally get there, only to feel nothing? The emptiness was inescapable. Even in broad daylight, the earth is scattered with shadows, small yet unignorable details her brain had been taught to perceive as threats. She had spent her whole life running,

and although there was no longer anything to chase her, she couldn't stop moving her feet. Yet through all the additional pain and suffering, she did not give up. She reminded herself that it was too late to call it quits. She couldn't kill herself now, not because of a true desire to live, but because she should have done it years ago; the thought of all that extra suffering going to waste was unbearable. Eventually, she found new motivation: helping those around her.

Ana constantly made note of the extent to which people liked to separate the world into black and white: how there were "good" parents and "evil" parents, and no "good" parent could ever do wrong. Being an "abuser" wasn't a state of being, it was an unchangeable characteristic. No decent parent could ever abuse their child, because they weren't abusers, and thus, they were nothing like Ana's. Most people like to think that the "darkness" in the world is far away--that their neighbor doesn't hit his wife, that the child across the street isn't being neglected, that because someone has a well-off family or lives in a suburban town where the sun always shines, they are somehow exempt from the harsh reality that is the rest of the world. But in Ana's experience, there were many, many more parents who existed in one of the many shades of gray: maybe they weren't as bad as her own, or maybe they were worse, but in her world, at least, it was an undeniable fact that parents did, in fact, make mistakes--that even "good" parents could be abusive, and that technology encouraged this behavior. In college and in her early adult life, Ana met many victims of this kind of technology abuse. Sure, some of it was accompanied by physical abuse and neglect and all the awful things people partition into the "dark" side of existence, but there were plenty of cases in which otherwise normal families fell into the same dangerous habits. There were equally as many overprotective suburban moms with misguided good-intentions that became sick and twisted over time as there poor, drug-addicted parents beating their children, and both forms of abuse had a lasting impact on their children into adulthood.

As Ana graduated, she swore to speak out against all kinds of abuse, whether physical or technology-based, and to change the public's perception of it. No thanks to her parents and very much unlike several

of her friends, she had managed to survive. She had seen those close to her who shared her experiences get sucked back into depression and multiple abusive relationships. She knew she was lucky. Their stories fueled the passion inside of her to carry on her mission, and she refused to let the cycle continue. She would personally insure that there would be no more coma black.

THE END