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I can think of a couple of possible reasons why Richard and I might have started leaving letters in that coffee can in the woods. I just don't remember which one was the deciding factor.

I met Richard F. Keyes III when I was about thirteen years old, in the phase of my life between my mother's discovery of the Society of Saint Pius X and my father's death four years later in 1991. I had been homeschooled and completely isolated for three or four years. During those lonely times, my mother was driving me and my siblings an hour from Clinton, Maryland to Vienna, Virginia at least once per week to attend Mass and other Traditional Catholic practices. These services were held in a ranch-style brick house, the basement of which had been converted into a chapel. I've mentioned before that since the long trips to the chapel in Virginia were my only human contact outside of my home, I learned to manipulate my perception of time so that my life felt [like a string of endless Sundays](#).

In the cold reality that existed unaltered outside of my deliberately warped perception, time really was dragging on quite slowly for a child with nothing to do but read and study. Being homeschooled, living without television and popular culture, and being almost completely isolated from the rest of the world was a lonely existence when I had seen just enough to know that there was indeed a world outside that appeared to have more to offer.

It's hard to fathom now that such a period existed in recent history, but this was a world before computers, internet, smartphones, and tablets. My mother bought a subscription to a Traditional Catholic magazine for children, which would come in the mail each month. It included a section for "pen pals", where a child could post their name, address, and interests, hoping that others like them would send hand-written letters. Children like me in fringe conservative households all over the country connected via mail to ease their loneliness.

I had many female pen pals, but I preferred exchanging letters with boys. Because I was at an age where dreams of future romantic involvement were breaking into my awareness for the first time, I was very receptive to my mother's jokes about meeting my future husband via mail. Those thoughts brought me a sense of excitement and hope for a future beyond my current isolation.

After my father's death, my entire extended family moved [from Prince Georges County Maryland to the tiny town of Saint Marys, Kansas](#). This was to be a Promised Land, where we could live exclusively with people who shared our ultra-conservative views.

When we arrived, we found there was a large influx of others arriving at the same time. Conservative families were converging on this small town from all over the country. Several of the people I had met as pen pals were already there, including Richard F. Keyes III.

I had to visit him. I hadn't been allowed to even explore the neighborhoods around my home in Clinton, but now we were in The Promised Land and--as my mother believed--safe. So, just a couple of days after arriving at my new home in Kansas, I went looking for Richard.

The house that my mother had purchased was in a sparse new development. Developers and real estate agents in this rural area had been quick to seize on the large influx of conservative families. Behind my new house was a large undeveloped area of up dirt roads, farm fields, and woods. I walked out my back door, crossed my backyard, walked down to the dirt road that ran behind it, and started walking up the hill to Richard's house.

As I walked the first mile or so, there was nothing but fields stretching out to the left and woods to my right. After a while, the woods gave way to fields as well. In the distance, I could see the cemetery where parishioners of the SSPX center in

Saint Marys were buried. Just beyond was a large brown house shaped like a barn, just as Richard had told me there would be.

I remember being in the living room of that house. I remember Richard's mother, Judy. I remember brown walls, brown carpet, brown furniture, and the dull brown clothing Richard and his mother wore. To this day I can't remember Richard wearing any color pants other than brown, outside of the blue uniform pants required by Saint Mary's Academy.

And that is all I remember about my first in-person meeting with Richard F. Keyes III. The overwhelming brown, just like the brown of the Scapular I always wore, which had occasionally escaped from under my clothing to invite derision from the other children at my elementary school in Clinton. Just like the brown of the homemade corduroy [pants that went zwip-flop](#) as my would-be peers pointed and laughed at me walking down the hall.

I was soon disappointed to find that in Saint Marys, the school for boys and the school for girls were completely separated. Boys and girls had separate designated areas of campus, plus separate times and routes for coming and going to common areas like cafeterias and the main chapel. This ensured that the sexes did not meet or pass near one another. "Fraternization", which could be anything from speaking to the opposite sex, to passing notes, to making eye contact, was strictly forbidden and could result in expulsion from the school. Students could also be punished for fraternization off campus if word should reach priests, nuns, or teachers.

Father Ramon Angles, the rector at that time, told us girls that he did not have to keep the school for girls open. We just weren't that important. He was only obligated to provide education for boys, and if there was too much fraternization, it was the girls' school that would be shut down.

I wasn't happy about this policy. If my role was to be a true woman, how was I to fulfil it if I couldn't interact with potential future mates? I had a lot to learn about the endless labyrinth of rules that was to govern my life for the next ten years..

I don't know if Richard and I became more secretive because of the fraternization policy, or because within a year after my arrival, Richard's family sided with a smaller group that wanted to break from the main SSPX parish in Saint Marys*. Those of us that remained were advised to have no contact with members of this unfaithful splinter group, who would continue to live in Saint Marys and attend

Mass in a vacant office space in town. We called them scornfully “The Dissenters”.

Mr. and Mrs. Keyes took Richard out of the school. I would no longer be able to catch fleeting glimpses of him on campus.

The coffee can was Richard’s idea. If we wanted to keep communicating, he told me, he could place the can about 500 feet into the woods on the other side of the dirt road behind my house and leave a letter in it. I could later venture into the woods as I walked to or from school, retrieve his letter, and leave one of my own. I agreed.

I can remember seeing Richard every day, walking up and down the dirt road behind my house, with his distinctive lanky but lumbering gait. Occasionally he would use his index finger to awkwardly push the bridge of his glasses higher up on his nose. He would never even so much as glance up at my house. But I would know when he had been by, and when to check for a letter.

If I hadn’t been so completely naive, I would have realized that Richard had very little concern for his future as a conservative father of eighteen anyway. His mind was always far, far away, lost in some complicated high-stakes game playing out in another universe.

Early one cold winter day, I was in the woods near the coffee can and Richard came tearing through the naked trees and tangled gray brush as if in fear for his life. He was wearing a dark ski mask, as I had often seen him do, but this close I could see the frozen droplets of his breath accumulating thick clumps on the outside of it.

“I was here last night,” he panted. “And someone else was here. They might be here now. Someone is hunting me.”

“Who? Who is hunting you? Why do you think that?” I asked, alarmed but incredulous.

Richard disappeared into the woods as quickly as he had appeared. I grabbed the coffee can and heaved it as hard as I could out into the tangles of underbrush.

I never spoke to him again.

I can remember walking from my house into those woods many times. I remember the coffee can. I remember opening it and pulling out the folded paper from inside. I remember looking at the hand-written words. But I can't see what they say. I have no idea what Richard and I would have been corresponding about, or why we continued exchanging letters in the first place.

On April 27th, 1997, I was again isolated, this time in a tiny rural Kansas house with a three-day old first-born fathered by a controlling and abusive husband I could not love. [This date saw the beginning of the armed standoff](#) for which Richard F. Keyes III, who had joined The Republic of Texas, would be captured, convicted, and sentenced to 90 years in prison.

Looking back at my years in a town of people gathered together around the same world view, I see a perfect example of what we call an echo chamber--an environment in which people encounter only the constant repetition and reinforcement of their own belief systems, and in which those beliefs will inevitably be amplified and expanded. The ultra-conservative echo chamber of Saint Marys was deliberately created, and deliberately sought out by people like my mother, who lived in terror of other world views and saw it as her sacred duty to isolate her children in just such a controlled environment.

Saint Marys was--and is--a haven for people with extremist religious beliefs, but I also saw a lot of mixing of radical Christian extremism with a uniquely American brand of political extremism that apparently grows out of it as the echo chamber does its job. I knew many families in Saint Marys who subscribed to the likes of [John Birch](#), The Republic of Texas, and [The Freeman](#) as a logical extension of their religious beliefs. We were, after all, the Church Militant, charged with fighting for Christ the King.

By the time I fled Saint Marys in 2001, the internet was already available to many households in America. I rented a computer and didn't have to leave my home to reach out into the world, or to have the world reach out to me. I discovered that there were internet message boards for just about any interest. There were Yahoo Groups, chat clients, and--soon enough—My Space.

The gratification of this new internet communication was instant. I didn't have to painstakingly hand write letters with pen and paper or wait for the mail. I could have communicated with just about any person or any group in relative secrecy without having to leave letters in a coffee can in the woods. With this easy access to people and information, I was able to urgently explore possible new belief

systems and build a new personal identity for myself. Soon, I could pass for normal and function in mainstream society.

The long slow process my mother had to go through in the days before the internet to find people like herself, and to find that perfect echo chamber in which to isolate her children, took years. She had searched for nearly a decade before finally learning of the basement chapel in Virginia sometime around 1987, and it was only through that group of people that she learned of the Promised Land. It was four more years before she could physically seal herself and her children inside the echo chamber of Saint Marys. All of the other families that were converging upon Saint Marys at the time that we arrived likely had similar slow journeys.

Today, services like Facebook, YouTube, and Google use algorithms to keep you engaged by showing you more and more content that plays to and expands upon the world view you already have. My family searched for years, then sold their homes and possessions, drove for three days across the country and joined a cult to get that in 1991.

The extremely dangerous echo chamber I experienced in the cult at Saint Marys, the one that produced a domestic terrorist like Richard F. Keyes III, is no longer limited by physical space. Any internet community could easily be a virtual equivalent. The [right-wing mob that descended on the United States Capitol](#) on January 6th, 2021 is a grim reminder of what happens when authorities fail to keep an eye on the conversations brewing inside the virtual coffee can, or fail to take action when they do.

*At that time I did not know that "The Dissenters" had broken with the main body of SSPX in Saint Marys because the rector, Father Ramon Angles, as well as at least one teacher at the school had been [accused of sexual misconduct with under-aged students.](#)