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Wash That Blog Out With Soap

By **PENELOPE GREEN**

GLEN RIDGE, N.J.

AT 24, Emma Koenig has amassed all the accouterments of her generation: an expensive college degree; a string of low-paying (and no-paying) jobs, including coat-check girl, cashier at a sandwich shop and intern at a production company, the drudgery of which was punctuated by a series of degrading pseudo-romantic encounters; and the lease on an overpriced, undersize apartment in the East Village stuffed with a rotating cast of Craigslist roommates, which she eventually gave up to move back in with her parents. She also has a [viral blog](#), a book out next month and a deal pending with a production company to develop a television series.

Oh, to be 20-something and female in the third millennium. Granted, the job market does stink. And the sex is truly demeaning, though not unfamiliar. (What Nora Ephron described in a 1972 review of a grim piece of nonfiction called “The Girls in the Office” as the “rampant masochism” of modern young women is a plotline that runs from Mary McCarthy to Rona Jaffe, Helen Fielding to Lena Dunham. Why that has not evolved is beyond confounding.)

And so, to introduce Ms. Koenig, who, like her sisters before her, has been channeling her anomie into a contemporary literary form — in her case, a Tumblr blog. While its title begins with a common vulgar interjection, it is nonetheless a sweetly dark look at a life stage, something resembling the HBO series “Girls,” but defanged a bit. Like the scribbles on a ninth grader’s spiral notebook, it is hand drawn, Ms. Koenig’s curly feminine printing in speech bubbles and checklists, flow charts and pictograms.

“So, you’ve moved back in with your parents, huh? How’s that going?” reads a typical entry.

“Well, I’ve been watching a lot of ‘Breaking Bad’ in my underwear in my childhood bedroom. I only started two weeks ago and I’m already halfway through season four! So I’m actually being super productive!”

Ms. Koenig was back in that bedroom last week, an attic space with sloping ceilings and wall-to-wall carpeting that displays decorative flourishes from her high school days — the first 50

pages of “An American Tragedy” pinned to the wall above her bed, Hello Kitty stickers, a worn gray Uglydoll — along with her mother’s yoga and meditation gear, as graphic a depiction of a house’s transition toward an empty nest as you could hope to find.

But Ms. Koenig was in town only temporarily. She moved out to Los Angeles in January, first subletting a room in a friend’s apartment, then moving in with a new boyfriend. Now she was back for an acting job on an MTV pilot.

That’s a step up, she noted, from the Web series auditions she used to doggedly attend in the year after she graduated from the drama department at the New York University Tisch School of the Arts. (While in many ways emblematic of her generation, Ms. Koenig is anomalous in one respect: she has very little college debt, having received three scholarships along with a loan.)

Her book, which goes by the same name as the blog and concludes with the words “I’m in My Twenties,” will be out next month from Chronicle Books, and will be sold at Urban Outfitters, the 20-something’s go-to lifestyle emporium. (Chronicle is the largest publisher of books sold through Urban Outfitters, said Emily Haynes, a senior editor there, and its entertainment division, which is responsible for Ms. Koenig’s book, is focused solely on her demographic. Its catalog includes what Ms. Haynes called “bro publishing,” meaning books on things like beer pong and farts, and less-gendered offerings, like the “Pride and Prejudice and Zombies” calendar, “The Indie Rock Coloring Book” and “How High Am I? A Journal.”)

Chronicle offered Ms. Koenig a book deal and a \$10,000 advance last summer after some of the younger editors there became enamored of her blog. It had been enjoying a certain kind of Internet renown for a couple of months, in part because The Huffington Post had included it in one of its regular roundups, “[7 Sites You Should Be Wasting Time On Right Now](#),” a procrastinator’s guide to blogs like “Is Ryan Gosling Cuter Than a Puppy?”

In such a culture, Ms. Koenig said, you wonder what it means to be successful. “Is it making money?” she asked. “Is it tons of hits and fans? Is it making work I like or surviving for that week?”

She recalled the confusion on the face of the manager at the East Village sandwich shop where she was working at the time when she told him that she needed a book leave and that she was moving back to her parents’ house in New Jersey. “He was like, ‘O.K., whatever,’ ” she said.

Ms. Koenig had been pondering the haplessness of her life for some months when she conceived the blog. Her first thought was to make it a zine, but the cost of photocopying was beyond her means, she said, which at the time were exactly zero, as she was working as an

unpaid intern and her parents were paying her rent. By May 2011, she had an income of sorts (\$9 an hour from the sandwich shop) and she put the blog together, posting a link on her Facebook page, along with the words, "It begins. ..."

"I didn't want to tell people it was me," she said. "I didn't want to say, 'I started this blog,' which is the lamest thing in the world."

ON a recent Sunday, Ms. Koenig's parents were home with her. Bobby Bass, her mother, is a psychotherapist. Robin Koenig is a television and film set dresser. Ms. Bass and her daughter are close enough that the hangovers and hookups described in Ms. Koenig's oeuvre came as no surprise.

"I was more concerned about the drinking than the sex," Ms. Bass said. "I hoped there was some poetic license there. I hoped she was exaggerating."

Ms. Koenig grinned. "It's all real," she said, "but it goes through a filter. It's not like every day I'm drinking and having sex with strangers."

The blog's title caused less discomfort, though Mr. Koenig said it used a word he did not use much. "Bobby is more comfortable with it," he said.

"It is a very versatile word," Ms. Bass said, adding that she and her husband had been warmed up to it by their son, Ezra Koenig, 28. His band, Vampire Weekend, is an indie favorite, and one of its hits, "Oxford Comma," contains the word in its lyrics.

It was Ezra's success, and his ability to support himself right out of college, that made Ms. Koenig's parents "almost comfortable," as Ms. Bass put it, offering their daughter assistance when she graduated. "Yes, I would have loved to renovate our kitchen," she added. But the rent on Ms. Koenig's apartment was \$1,200, and her meager income, when she finally had an income, in no way approached that figure.

Mr. Koenig, 61, and Ms. Bass, 62, remembered their own \$100 rents after college in the 1970s, when she lived in a raw loft space in TriBeCa and he rented a room on the Upper West Side.

What has happened since then is no surprise, but the numbers still shock. Consider data compiled by Max Weselcouch, a research analyst at the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, at this reporter's request. In New York City, from 1970 to 2010 (the most recent year for which data are available), the median rent rose by 75 percent, while the median income remained stagnant (after adjusting for inflation). Further, in 2010, 54 percent of New Yorkers spent over 30 percent of their income on rent, compared with only 28.5 percent of New Yorkers in 1970.

To aid in their decision-making on how much to help their daughter, Ms. Bass made a spreadsheet of all her daughter's friends who were in the performing arts. "I wanted to see who was making a living, who was making a living in their art and who was being supported by their parents," she said. In a graph of 45 young adults, only 3 were getting no help whatsoever, and those 3, Ms. Bass said, were working full time either in a restaurant or baby-sitting, and had limited energy left over to pursue what they had studied.

"It made me see that Emma's social context was such that our helping with her rent was legitimate," Ms. Bass said. "I didn't feel like we were indulging her. I felt like it was a necessary fifth year of college where she had to stabilize herself without the structure and positive feedback of school."

And Ms. Bass was familiar with the data points surrounding her daughter's generation, otherwise known as "[Generation Screwed](#)," as a Newsweek headline announced recently. According to [a Pew Study published early this year](#), employment for 18-to-24-year-olds is at 54 percent, the lowest rate for this age group since 1948, when the government started keeping track. The Pew Study also noted that one in four of all 18-to-34-year-olds said they had moved back in with their parents after having been on their own.

While these are trends that have been brewing for two decades, they are now at their peak, said Meg Jay, a psychologist who treats 20-somethings. Her new book, "The Defining Decade: Why Your Twenties Matter — and How to Make the Most of Them Now," preaches tough love in a series of cautionary tales against career and relationship drift.

"What's specific to this generation is that these are the most uncertain years they live, and that did not used to be true for that age group," Dr. Jay said. "What's a the new technologies. It's a lot for the 20-something brain to manage all of this all of the comparisons in terms of how everybody's life looks on Facebook compared to how their life looks, hanging out on the couch in their sweat pants. 'Why do I only have 314 friends and so-and-so has 1,500?' It's 2 in the morning, and they are not at their emotional best, and maybe three drinks into a Saturday night looking up their ex-boyfriend."

If depression was the hallmark of the Gen-Xers, she added, "anxiety belongs to the Millennials."

"They are worried life isn't going to work," she said. "They have trouble sleeping."

No wonder Ms. Koenig and her peers are jumpy. Yet Ms. Koenig is sleeping a bit better these days, she said, describing a plot twist in her story that would delight Ms. Ephron. As her blog chugged along last year, she kept track of who was following it. Mostly it was bloggers with

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names like angelkittylove, she said, but she noticed one proper name, [David Seger](#).

When she posted a podcast late last year, he began following her on Twitter as well. Intrigued, she followed him back. She “liked” a video he had made. (Mr. Seger, as it happens, is a Los Angeles-based director and editor.) He direct-messaged her on Twitter, thanking her for following him. He wrote that he liked her blog. She wrote him back. And when she arrived in Los Angeles in January, she invited him to a friend’s performance.

“At that point we had exchanged phone numbers and were actually texting,” she said. “But the question was, were we networking? Beginning a friendship? An actual relationship?”

Within weeks, Ms. Koenig and Mr. Seger were living together, and even collaborating. [Their video, Speed Dating](#) (another Huff Post pick), is a wanly comedic tale of a relationship’s near misses. They have been hired to animate Ms. Koenig’s drawings for an MTV pilot. He has met her parents.

Ms. Koenig said she is still bemused by the way her career frustration and love-life frustration “actually helped my career and my love life.” Now that she has steady work, and her housing is taken care of (her new rent is \$500 and she can pay it on her own), she should be feeling less anxious, right?

Wrong. What’s terrifying her these days, she said, is driving on the freeway.