

Hannah Kingsley-Ma: Some days I think text messages are my art. I'm texting all day long. Constantly. Just kind of dancing like no one is watching. And one of my most active text threads is my family group chat.

Kathryn Ma: Like, I haven't looked at the family text thread all day long, I read the forty-five texts that have come through and, you know, heart emoji, heart emoji, heart emoji, ha ha, exclamation point.

Kingsley-Ma: Say who you are to me.

Ma: Kathryn Ma.

Kingsley-Ma: No, say who you are to *me*.

Ma: I'm your mom!

Kingsley-Ma: My mom. I come from a family of five. I have two sisters. One older, Emily, and one younger, Ping. They live in San Francisco, along with everyone else in my family except for me. I'm in New York.

We're all prone to chatter. Everyone chimes in on the thread. Except for maybe my sister Ping. She mostly just sort of hearts things like the legend she is.

Ma: Yeah, well, I didn't want to mention her name, but that's exactly right.

Kingsley-Ma: Well, she's also, she's the busiest out of all of us.

Ma: She's the only one who works hard in our whole family.

Kingsley-Ma: Sometimes my family group chat feels less like a means of communication and more like a noisy room where someone shouts something aloud. Lots of echoes. But still, I'm attached to it. Since I've moved away it's the main way I talk to my family. Or at least the most frequent way.

I've been thinking a lot about this new way we talk to our families in this new place where we all live now: our phones. What is this form? What are we really doing here?

Kingsley-Ma: Read me a couple texts from the family thread.

Abby: Okay.

Kingsley-Ma: This is my friend Abby. She's an only child.

Abby: From my dad. "At 6:45 a.m. I got up," dot dot dot, "made coffee and went to the front door to pick up the paper. As I leaned down to get the paper, I leaned too far and the door closed behind me. I was wearing t-shirt and boxers and had glasses. Mommy was asleep. No one answered the bell. I read the paper. Finally at 7:30 to 7:40, Jonathan at 6B opened his door. He let me in, what an idiot." Then my mom said, "LOL." Six exclamation points. Then the next thing on the thread is some photos of when we got married at City Hall. And my dad just responds, "Great."

Kingsley-Ma: Dads came up a lot in these conversations. Dads and their quirky dad quirks. I had one friend whose dad was running a longitudinal science experiment on their family thread involving their small white dog, Milu. RIP.

Camille: There was this study that was trying to determine whether or not dogs poop on the north-south or east-west axis, like, whether they orient themselves like a compass. And so he would send, like, a bird's eye view photo of Milu pooping. He would use the compass app to measure, like, whether or not Milu was oriented—

Kingsley-Ma: Stop!

Camille: —to the compass. And this was kind of, like, a frequent routine.

Kingsley-Ma: How long did this go on?

Camille: I'd say, like, months.

Kingsley-Ma: From my very cursory research, I've observed that there's not a lot of pressure on good or efficient storytelling in the family text thread. It's kind of like a stoner's paradise, or just the free-floating associative thinking of a collective mind.

Camille: One time there was, like, an article about this photo of, like, some Japanese dude in the '60s who stabbed a politician with a katana. Um, so I posted that.

Hannah: Why?

Sandro: It's almost like we're, we're kind of like babies on the thread.

Kingsley-Ma: This is my friend Sandro.

Sandro: Just sending updates of things that cross our minds. Like, everyone's kind of talking in baby voice on the thread.

Kingsley-Ma: Sometimes the information is limited to what's right in front of us, the most urgent of concerns.

Sandro: We're obsessed with the cat.

Kingsley-Ma: Why?

Kingsley-Ma: Um—

Kingsley-Ma: A proof of life thing?

Sandro: Yeah, it's, it's kind of like, how's the cat doing? We need to know.

Kingsley-Ma: If you remove the cat content from the family group text, what's left?

Sandro: Well, our front yard is getting attacked by rats. A lot of the content has been about me going over there and giving them updates on things I'm doing to get rid of the rats.

Kingsley-Ma: So your family text thread is all cats and rats?

Sandro: Yeah. Lots of cats and lots of rats.

Kingsley-Ma: Another observation: family thread as the goo goo gaga psychobabble of our first selves. The goo from which we arrived.

Kingsley-Ma: What are you going to text your dad today?

Abby: Okay, so he texted me, "Heart, two sunglasses," like, "smileys, heart, heart." I said "Night night, welcome home." And he said, "Goodnight, thanks, heart, heart." And I said, "I'm so happy you're home." And he said, "Me too. Long time." And then he said, "Oy, woe is me." Okay, Judaism. And then he called me by accident and wrote, "Tush call."

Kingsley-Ma: That's also Judaism!

Abby: Yeah, exactly.

Kingsley-Ma: Did you grow up in a family where you say I love you?

Sandro: We're not like "I looove you." It's more like, "Love you!" That, kinda like, "Love youuu!" Not like, "I love you." More like "Love you!" And I'm like "Love yooouuu!!!!"

Kingsley-Ma: Would you ever rip an "I love you" in the Ramani text thread?

Sandro: The most "I love you"s come before flights are taking off.

Kingsley-Ma: It's only in the case that they plummet to their death from the sky?

Sandro: I definitely will be like, "Taking off, love you!" And my sister will be like, "About to take off, sending love!" And even if the flight is like, from Boston to New York.

Kingsley-Ma: This was the third thing that kept coming up: the text thread as a talisman, warding off disaster. Managing the fear of all of us venturing out into the big bad world, where we cede control and fly on planes.

Ma: Yeah, I do have an early, early detection system, and I think that's because I don't believe that you guys read the, the traditional news.

Kingsley-Ma: My mom again. She uses the group chat in this third way, like a state-run automated emergency warning system, like for a tsunami or earthquake. Except it's her, telling us what's been recalled from Trader Joes.

Ma: Since I'm obsessed with reading the newspaper, you know, what do they call it? Uh, legacy media, who are always reporting on the latest listeria outbreak, I feel it's my, it's my obligation to let you all know, "Don't buy this brand of lettuce!"

Kingsley-Ma: My mom, like me, is a middle child of sorts, the second youngest.

Kingsley-Ma: What do you think it would have been like if your family, when you were growing up, had a family text thread? Do you think people would use it?

Ma: My father was a brilliant and silent man. He would not use it. My mother was a very smart, social, voluble person and full of instruction for her four children. So, for sure she would use it. In my earlier years, in college or even later, she would write me letters and tell me a little bit about what was going on during her day, but then also reminders to do this or do that. And it was good. It was comforting to know she was thinking about me.

Kingsley-Ma: Maybe you're noticing the people in this story seem to have a nice relationship with their family. Maybe it's not surprising that's the kind of person who wanted to talk to me for this story. I had a small sample size.

Still. You can be awash in familial love—the kind that can sustain a person for a lifetime—and still not know fully how to negotiate its abundance.

I've begun to believe the text thread is a part of that negotiation. It signals the effort we all have to make inside a family structure to keep it afloat. Like a beach ball bopping around at a concert. You stick out your hand instinctively when it comes your way because it's just too sad to watch it drift to the ground.

There was one person in this story I talked to who I hadn't met before, a friend of a friend. Her name is Kathy. Most of her family lives in Taiwan. She lives in the States. And she has a brother.

Kathy: He's three years older than me. Why we don't talk, it's just because we've kind of, like, not lived together for a very long time because we were living in different places when we were growing up, like from my high school onwards basically.

Kingsley-Ma: A little while back Kathy got into a bad bike accident. And her brother wrote her a very unexpected, very sweet text message wishing her a speedy recovery.

Kathy: Very, like, concerned and nice, like kind of a paragraph, and I was like, "Oh, that's nice." And then I think two days later I was like, "Oh, wait, he wrote it on ChatGPT."

Kingsley-Ma: ChatGPT. She confirmed her suspicions on the phone with her mom.

Kathy: She was like, "Oh, you know, Talma was really sad that you didn't, like, really write that much back to him." And I was like, "He wrote it using ChatGPT!" And she was like, "Yeah, but it's because he felt like ChatGPT could help him say things better than he could."

Kingsley-Ma: He felt something about the response. Like, it was meaningful to him that he had sent it.

Kathy: Yeah.

Kingsley-Ma: Do you guys have a family thread?

Kathy: Yeah, we do actually have a family group chat. I think for short things it's in English, but then when they really want to express themselves it's in, like, traditional Chinese. Which I can read, kind of. My ability to read Chinese now is at this very weird, primal level where, like, I can't pronounce all the words but I recognize the words and I recognize the feeling that those words elicit. I know that my brother is a lot closer with my parents than he is with me or I am with my parents because they all speak Chinese. And they're closer, he's in Taiwan.

Kingsley-Ma: Do you think they have a text group without you?

Kathy: Oh my God, that's so interesting. Probably? Come to think of it. It's probably in Chinese. I should ask them. That's a good question.

Kingsley-Ma: Look at me starting shit in a family I don't even know.

Kathy: The idea that you're always part of a family is kind of a myth or a fantasy, right? And I think the group chat is a kind of instantiation of that fantasy, or it helps keep that fantasy alive.

Emily: You're calling because you want something.

Kingsley-Ma: Yeah, I do. I want to annoy you, and it's especially funny because, of course, what is the thing you're doing while I'm bothering you?

Emily: I'm taking care of my newborn son.

Kingsley-Ma: This is my older sister, Emily.

Kingsley-Ma: Who do you think is the MVP of the family text thread?

Emily: I think the MVP is either you—

Kingsley-Ma: Me?

Emily: Yeah, because you give the most critique and commentary which makes it fun.

Kingsley-Ma: Critique and commentary.

Emily: Right, but mom and I are the ones who are generating more of the content.

Kingsley-Ma: I think it's kind of you.

Emily: I think it's me, too, but I didn't want to necessarily come out and say that up front. Yeah.

Kingsley-Ma: Okay, can I read you a text that you sent to the family text message that I saved?

Emily: Ugh, yes.

Kingsley-Ma: It's from April 18th, 2023. You said, "Today's the anniversary of the 1906 earthquake. I don't know why, but it feels like an important historical point of reflection for S.F. residents. In one day, the whole city changed." And then mom wrote, "It's good to remember and reflect." And then four hours later you just wrote, "Ethan just peed in the potty for the first time."

Emily: Well, that's also a milestone worthy of reflection for me. It felt like something exciting happened and I wanted to share it with the people that I love.

Kingsley-Ma: My older sister and I are very close. I would say that this closeness is also sometimes a contact sport.

Kingsley-Ma: Okay, here's a text you sent us, the whole family. "I had a dream that we were fighting so much that Hany and I were physically fighting and I bit her. I was so mad. It was so intense. I woke up so mad. I was trying to drain flooding from the house and you weren't helping. LOL, even in my dreams."

Emily: I mean that feels pretty personal. If I had maybe taken a breath I maybe wouldn't have shared that one.

Kingsley-Ma: So it goes with sisters. Even in our thirties, I make her so mad when she's awake she bites me in her dreams. This is ancient stuff, the kind of thing rock formations are made out of. But talking to her revealed something to me I had long suspected.

Emily: Hannah, you know this, but there is another family text thread without you on it.

Kingsley-Ma: Well that is what I know and that is what I wanted to talk about because it just dawned on me, like, a year ago, that there is a separate thread with the four of you on it that I'm not on. Is it only logistical?

Emily: Yes.

Kingsley-Ma: Is it actually, though?

Emily: Here is the last text that was sent. "Please be mindful when leaving my house at night." That's a text that I sent to the San Francisco only.

Kingsley-Ma: What? Why?

Emily: Um, there have been some really active coyotes in our neighborhood.

Kingsley-Ma: I asked my mom about the second text thread. She claimed she was against it.

Ma: I just did not like the idea of, like, whoa, how could we have in our family of five, how could we have a family text thread of four?

Emily: Maybe part of the reason why you love the family text thread is, it's a really important point of connection for you because you're getting updates from us about what's happening in San Francisco.

Kingsley-Ma: Fine. Sure. These are the facts: I love my family. I also love the life I've made for myself in New York. As I get older and more settled, I get further away from moving back home. It's something I think about a lot.

Ma: One of my good friends, he and his wife had a child before Dad and I had our first child. And when our first child started to crawl, I remember this friend said to me, "Okay, that's it, that's what she's going to be doing for the rest of your life. Leaving you." That's your job. Your job is to leave home. My job is to let you go. It's very hard.

Kingsley-Ma: And we're talking in person. Why?

Ma: Oh, you are home for a visit. You came to meet the new baby, your nephew.

Kingsley-Ma: Yeah.

Ma: And it was a wonderful visit. And in a few minutes, we have to say goodbye. So I'm sad about that.

Kingsley-Ma: Yeah, but I always come back.

Ma: You always come back. You always come back.

Kingsley-Ma: A couple of months ago, I was at a karaoke bar. I asked the people I was with what their family text threads were like. One man told me his mother had sent him a picture of a gnarled tree, with the accompanying caption, "Twisted and deformed." He told me he texted back, "Is this a metaphor?" To which she responded, "Yes."

I understand why he asked. Sometimes you just have to double check.