

# #justsaying

by

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Novel. YA social media drama

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## #JUSTSAYING

It was only a prank. A childish act of revenge. Nothing more than a stupid throwaway comment I contributed to the social media universe in the heat of the moment. I didn't mean to cause so much trouble.

Or harm.

The situation, it just... spiralled out of control.

Sixty-nine characters (including spaces), that's all it took to ruin the lives of so many...  
...and cause the death of one.

If only they'd taken note of the hashtag at the end of my sentence.

#justsaying

It told the entire social networking world that my post was nothing more than a casual remark, a matter of opinion, and definitely not a proven fact.

If only they'd opened their eyes.

If only they'd stopped to think.

If only they'd stepped back and realised I was JUST SAYING...

...then nobody would have taken the post so seriously.

And Aimee Taylor would still be alive.

☹

It was Aimee's mother who made the shocking (no, actually, make it totally gut-wrenching) discovery that particular morning. Poor woman. I'm guessing it played out something like this...

## #DISCOVERY

Aimee Taylor's mother posted a family of impatient knocks upon the parent side of her teenage daughter's bedroom door. 'Aimee!' she hollered through the wooden barrier. 'Just because you're off school at the moment, it doesn't mean you can doss in bed all day.'

Mrs Taylor waited for a response. Any response. A grunt, an mmm, a whatever, anything. None of the usual suspects turned up to the party. Instead, she was met by the cold, stark nothingness of silence.

A second round of knocks followed, harder this time, those of the cross and irritated variety. 'Aimee! Ignoring my words won't make me go away.'

Again, zero response.

That's it, no more Mrs Nice Mother. She barged into Aimee's domain and marched over to the motionless human shape which resided beneath its duvet cocoon. 'Get out of that bed right now! You can help me with the housework.'

Witnessing further defiance from her daughter, Mrs Taylor tore the duvet free of the bed. Aimee lay in silence, eyes closed, body inactive, out for the count. Typical lazy teenager.

Cue the employment of rough nudges. 'Aimee.' Followed by a series of sharp prods. 'Aimee!' Prod, nudge, prod. 'I'm not telling you again, young lady.' More nudging, more prodding. 'Don't you dare pretend you're asleep. I've had quite enough of—'

Her sudden pause heavied the air, the ice-cold, foreboding halt owed to the bottle of pills taking pride of place on the bedside cabinet. The very same bottle of pills that Mrs Taylor had been prescribed by her doctor for her current bout of insomnia. What the hell was her medication doing in her daughter's bedroom? Then oh, God, fearing the worst, but hoping her grave prediction was so very wrong, she grabbed the bottle and gave it a shake.

Almost empty.

Argh, wearing the contorted face of bulge-eyed horror, Mrs Taylor snatched the girl by both shoulders, shake, shake, shake! ‘You stupid girl! How many pills have you taken?’ Upon each rigorous shudder, Aimee’s head flopped forwards and backwards, the proverbial rag doll. ‘Aimee, can you hear me? How many have you swallowed?’

Reaching the point of irrepressible hysterics, the mother switched to and fro between shaking her daughter’s limp frame and tapping her pallid cheeks, struggling to free the cataleptic teen from the bottomless abyss of pitch-black unconsciousness.

Still, there came no response.

‘Speak to me! Please! Oh, God, no!’

The hurried, heavy footsteps of a man signalled the arrival of Aimee’s father into the room. ‘What the hell’s going on?’

‘Call an ambulance!’

‘Why, what’s happened?’

‘Just do it! Now!’

As Aimee’s father thundered down the stairs on a mission to locate his elusive mobile phone, the sobbing, whimpering, snivelling Mrs Taylor cradled her daughter within a cage of arms and refused to let go. This parent was adamant, if the Grim Reaper turned up right now to collect the soul of her only child, he’d have a bloody good fight on his hands.

However, little did she know, it was far too late to save Aimee Taylor.

Death had already been and gone.

#NOW (The present day)

I've finally been granted my wish. I'm famous.

Sort of.

But not in a good way.

Notoriety on an inflated scale doesn't always come hand in hand with mass adoration, as I've now discovered... the hard way. In the fame game sense, I lean closer towards known and recognised than infamous and celebrated. You see, I recently played the starring role in a news story. A big news story. In fact, totally humungous, featured all over the internet, in newspapers, on the radio, on national TV, the works. Oh, yes, my sole claim to fame doubles up as the worst blunder of my life. Like, totally ever.

\*Insert facepalm here.\*

No, actually, make that a double facepalm.

It's true. I (the just-turned-sixteen-year-old known as Mallory Finch) have screwed up everything. In the crippling wake of Hurricane Mallory, way too many people around me have been left emotionally gasping and flapping like landed fish. This is the very reason why I now find myself with a rucksack hooked over my shoulder, creeping out of the front door of my parents' house at idiot o'clock, roughly translated as either 3.00AM in the absolute dead of night or 3.00AM in the very genesis of morning, delete as appropriate.

Under cover of the shadowy gloom of this moonless night (or morning), I sneak out of the front garden and along the pavement towards a red car parked a short distance down the street. The driver, Ian Jenkins, is all set to take me to the remote and faraway destination of Anywherebuthereville.

Yes, you've guessed it. I'm running away from home.

Hah, this plan is mad, so mad. I hardly know the guy, yet here I am, sneaking away with him like some kind of desperate lovesick freak. Ah, but before you go thinking I'm a slutty skank or something, there's no romance or seediness involved. There wouldn't be. Ian is in his early thirties. By schoolgirl standards, this guy is bordering on ancient. And besides, my recent online posting of a spiteful untruth concerning a fellow pupil and somebody much older got me into this mess in the first place. Allowing history to repeat itself is not part of my immediate agenda.

In my heart, I don't want to run away. This is my home. It's where I belong. But recent events have left me with no choice. Disappearing without a trace is the only viable solution. With the idiot called Mallory Finch out of the picture, all the poor souls who have fallen victim to the crushing aftershock of my terrible, terrible lie will be free to heal their wounds and steer their fractured lives back on track again.

Then oh, I suddenly stop dead in my tracks. Something is holding me back. No, no, no, aborting my plan can't happen. I won't allow it. I close my eyes as tight as I can manage in a desperate attempt to relegate all guilt, fears and doubts concerning exactly what I'm leaving behind (my family, my home, my way of life) to the darkest recess of my mind. This is a difficult situation. My toughest decision ever. I must be strong. I must keep moving forward.

I. Must. Keep. Moving. Forward.

And then I'm on the move again, practically tip-toeing down the street, careful not to invite the threat of unwanted eyes behind twitching curtains. Nobody must see me leave. Nobody must know until after the event. Nobody.

At last, after what seems like a zillion years of soundless trekking, I reach my waiting method of escape. I open the passenger door, but pause once more, the annoying voice of reason attempting to quash my plans.

Ian picks up on my sudden hesitation. ‘Mallory, are you sure you want to do this? If you’ve changed your mind, you can always turn around and go home. Nobody will ever know.’

‘No,’ I respond, resolute, determined, climbing inside the vehicle and landing my rucksack in the footwell. And as I buckle up, I look at Ian and say, ‘We stick to the plan.’

Ian tips a nod. He sparks up the engine and slides the car into gear, gently pulling away so as not to wake the sleeping.

‘Ian, will you promise me one thing?’

He throws me a curious glance. ‘Sure.’

‘Promise me you won’t bring up what happened. What I did.’ I shudder at the thought of my recent sin. ‘This is a clean slate for me. A fresh new start. Please tell me you understand.’

He thinks about it, then replies, ‘I understand. And yes. I promise.’

My smile has gratitude written all over it.

As the vehicle gradually gathers pace, I peer over my shoulder, offering the street where I’ve lived my entire life one final farewell glance. Oh, God, this is so heartbreaking. I am truly remorseful for all the trouble I’ve caused. But even so, I doubt anybody in this town will be sorry to see me disappear into the night, into the unknown, into the deepest, darkest abyss of oblivion.

‘Good riddance to bad rubbish,’ that’s what they’ll all chant tomorrow morning, even my parents, yes, my own flesh and blood, regarding the mysterious disappearance of Mallory Finch, public enemy number one.

#goodbyeforever

## #THEN (Before the lie)

Before I was famous (sort of), before certain events prompted an idiot like me to even consider posting such a vicious comment online (facepalm time), and before the damning media reports about the remark in question and its devastating aftershock had been force-fed to the hungry masses, my appointed role in the great scheme of things was fuzzy-grey background girl. That is, just another blurred face in a very large crowd, blending unseen and unloved into the blandest of backdrops, a colourless individual far removed from any true standing or significance, and definitely unworthy of the precious gift of popularity.

Prior to the incident (my terrible, terrible lie), nobody took any notice of fuzzy-grey background girls. Why? Simple. Not interesting enough. Not one single fuzzy-grey background girl in the long history of female background fuzziness had ever been big news.

Well, at least not until the day which changed everything. Forever.

Ah, but the day in question hadn't arrived yet, leaving me blissfully ignorant amid my fifteen-year-old fuzzy-grey background girl status.

'Hey, Malls, are you going to Aimee Taylor's party tonight?'

The question had fallen out of the permanently grinning mouth of Veronica Braithwaite, the thoroughly deserving winner of this year's Most Scatty Schoolfriend of Mallory Finch award. Of course, Veronica knew nothing about both her nomination and subsequent win of the coveted yet totally fictitious prize. The glittering annual red carpet ceremony existed exclusively in my head.

Just like me, Veronica had walked this earth for fifteen, almost sixteen years, although the Braithwaite girl appeared to harbour a mental age of circa twelve or thirteen. Upbringing, I guessed. No doubt all down to a long list of bad decisions made by the girl's parents. Especially their debut mutual decision made fifteen, almost sixteen years ago, that is, what to

call their newborn child. Surely they'd known, by giving their brand spanking new bundle of joy the unusual (and well past its best-before date) moniker of Veronica, they'd end up fifteen, almost sixteen years later with an equally unusual daughter. Then again, who was I to cast aspersions? My own upbringing wasn't exactly a major success story. I'd ended up a total nobody. Therefore, my own parents were just as bad.

#epicparentsfail

Thinking about it, this was probably why we got along so well. We were both hopeless misfits within the complex society of modern youth, brought together not by personal choice but by the morbid reality that nobody else in the school expressed any genuine desire to hang around with us, at least not on a permanent basis.

Granted, I had a minor scattering of casual acquaintances connected to me on various social media websites, but Veronica was currently my only proper realworld friend. Huh, it was weird how said acquaintances didn't mind virtually associating with me online, populating my posts now and then with corresponding comments alongside members of the emoji family, but then chose to keep their distance in reality. Why? Was I totally obnoxious in true life? Was I boring? Or worse still, did I smell?

'Well?' prompted Veronica. 'Are you going or what?'

I shook my head. 'I'm giving it a miss.'

'Malls, this party will be totally mental,' Veronica chirped in her usual over-excited way, picking up the second trophy of the day of Most Annoyingly Gushing Schoolfriend of Mallory Finch. 'Aimee will have the entire house to herself. Her parents are jetting off for the weekend to their villa in Spain. How mad is that?'

'The truth is, Veronica, I don't think Aimee has any intention of inviting me.'

'Why not?' my only realworld friend asked.

'I'm not important enough. I'm a fuzzy-grey background girl.'

‘What’s with all this fuzzy-grey backing girl stuff?’

‘Background girl,’ I made a firm point of correcting. ‘My job is to be fuzzy and grey and blend into the background, not bag the golden ticket to a wild party.’

I also saw Veronica Braithwaite as a fuzzy-grey background girl, but she only seemed to serve her role on a part-time basis. The rest of the time, she earned her right to certain privileges by constantly gushing about Aimee, bigging her up, telling the world how truly wonderful she was. Huh, no wonder she’d bagged the Most Annoyingly Gushing Schoolfriend of Mallory Finch award every year since the very beginning of time.

It was no surprise that we didn’t share the same viewpoints on how to get ahead in life. In Veronica’s eyes, gushing, creeping and blatant bumhole licking (figuratively, not literally) were the only workable methods of climbing the tall and slippery ladder of social acceptance. I, on the other hand, had no plans to join the brown tongue brigade. Hmm, maybe this was why I was one of the school’s official nobodies, teetering lonely and disregarded upon the cold, deserted bottom rung.

Then oh, the shrill of the school bell signalled the end of the lunchtime break. The two of us fell into a dutiful line as a snail’s pace exodus of pupils ambled despondent and zombie-like across the school yard towards the main building.

‘Why are you always so hard on yourself?’ asked Veronica, unable to get her head around my downcast attitude.

‘Call it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nobody seems to like me, so I guess that’s why I don’t think much of myself either.’

‘Oh, Malls, don’t be silly. Lots of people like you.’

‘No, they don’t. Not in the same way they like Aimee Taylor.’

‘What is your problem with that girl? You two used to be such good mates.’

‘We were more than mates. Aimee was my total bestie.’

A wistful smile appeared on my face as I remembered the good times all those years ago; vivid recollections of birds chirping for the love of summer while two young children giggled with glee, one named Mallory, one named Aimee, charging through grassy meadows dotted with floral vibrancy.

‘We were inseparable,’ I murmured, waving goodbye to my short-lived honey-glazed nostalgia. ‘But not anymore. We haven’t been friends for a long time.’

The two of us entered our designated classroom and claimed unoccupied seating.

Veronica said, ‘Maybe you should stop worrying about what people think of you and start working out what it is you want out of life.’

I rolled my eyes, hammy actor mode, all exaggerated and theatrical. ‘Veronica, I know exactly what I want. The priceless commodity I desire more than anything else in the entire universe.’

‘What, chocolate?’

‘No.’

‘The latest mobile phone?’

‘Not even close.’

Miss Braithwaite shrugged, clearly out of ideas. ‘Then what?’

‘Popularity.’

‘Popularity?’

‘In other words, I want to be...’ I wrestled for the most apt word. And then I found it. ‘...noticed.’

Veronica smirked. ‘Oh, that’s easy. Strip naked and run across the school sports field during the boys’ rugby lesson. You’re sure to get yourself noticed then.’

‘Oh, please be serious.’

‘I am being serious.’

Knowing Veronica, she probably was.

It was then when the love of my life sauntered into the classroom. Nathan Edwards. Well fit. Buff body. Totally drop dead of the gorgeous variety. Mmm, my eyes feasted upon his boyish good looks, his dark eyes, his gel-shaped brown hair and ooh, yes, a killer smile to die for. Every girl in the school wanted to go out with him. And every boy in the school hated the fact that every girl in the school wanted to go out with him. This guy was popular with a capital P. And he was mine. All mine.

Hmm, well, okay, massive exaggeration. We weren't a couple. We never had been. Not in reality. No, the wild and reckless romance between the two of us raged purely in the deepest depths of my frustrated imagination, and so thus held neither weight nor authenticity in the real world.

Just for the record, this was no dumb schoolgirl crush. I was way too mature to allow infantile infatuation to take the helm. No, this was love. Real love. I'd even go so far as to say it was true love. Oh, how I wished Nathan felt exactly the same way about me. But he didn't. And why would he? More to the point, how could he? As yet, the guy barely even knew I existed.

'If I was popular,' I declared to my accomplice, pointing towards the handsome lad who had now made a pitstop at the front tables to chat to a couple of his mates, 'he'd stroll on over and take me in his manly arms.'

#ifonly

#wishfulthinking

#inedamiracle

Veronica snorted the loudest of as ifs. 'Who, Nathan Edwards? In your dreams.'

‘You may scoff, Veronica, but popularity brings all the best opportunities. Take Aimee Taylor for example. She’s nowhere near the prettiest girl in the school. But that doesn’t stop all the boys rallying around her like she’s some kind of heavenly goddess.’

‘You’ve really got a hang-up about that girl, haven’t you?’

Too right, I thought to myself. I harboured the biggest hang-up about Aimee Taylor known to mankind. Actually, make that womankind. Or rather schoolgirlkind. Ah, but admitting the problem was not an option I wished to pursue.

‘Social acceptance is an important part of growing up,’ I made a point of stating. ‘It determines who we are, who we become and how we turn out in life.’

Veronica clasped her chin in mock deliberation. ‘So you’re saying, if you were popular, Nathan would definitely want to snog you. Am I right?’

‘Yes. And not just snog me. He’d want to be my boyfriend and everything.’

A sceptical Veronica didn’t buy it. ‘Surely he’d have to be interested in you as a person, regardless of any popularity. You know, chemistry and stuff. Has he ever shown any signs of fancying you?’

‘Last week, he opened a door for me.’ Even before I’d uttered the final word of this particular sentence, I knew it would rocket to the very top of the Most Stupid Lines Ever chart.

‘Wow, a door, eh?’ teased my friend, fat grin included. ‘It must be love.’

‘All relationships have to start somewhere.’ Stupid line number two. Oh, where the hell was I digging up these twattish statements?

‘If you’re that confident in your beliefs, Malls, ask him out.’

‘No way.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I can’t.’

‘There’s no such word as can’t.’

‘Oh, shut up, yes, there is. That’s just a dumb line that parents use to try and act clever, but instead look like total morons.’

‘Yeah, whatever. But you still haven’t told me why you can’t ask Nathan out?’

‘I’m an official nobody. Therefore, I don’t have the right credentials. Only popular girls can date popular boys. It’s one of the main unwritten rules of pupilkind.’

‘Aren’t rules made to be broken?’

‘I suppose, yes. But you know me, I lack any form of confidence. Can you truthfully picture me flirting with somebody like that?’

Veronica spotted Nathan approaching. ‘In that case, I’ll ask him out for you.’

‘Don’t you dare.’

Just as the handsome boy that I fancied floated past our table, Veronica stopped him and said, ‘Hey, Nathan. My friend here wants to know –’

Lightning fast, I smothered Veronica’s mouth with the palm of my right hand and spouted my own edited/censored version of the remainder of the question. ‘– if you’re going to Aimee Taylor’s party tonight.’

‘Yeah, course,’ Nathan replied. ‘Are you heading there, Veronica?’

The recipient of the query unpeeled my hand from her mouth. ‘Too right, I am.’

Nathan then looked straight at me. Yes. Me! ‘What about you? Mallory, isn’t it?’

#OMG

Breaking news, hold the front page, Nathan was making actual conversation. With me. Ooh, I opened my mouth to cast a suitable reply, but shock, horror, zero legitimate sounds emerged, save for a frail and feeble croak. Disaster!

‘Yes, of course Mallory will be there,’ cut in Veronica on my behalf. Thankfully.

The boy of my dreams then continued his journey to a table at the rear of the classroom.

‘He spoke to me,’ I wheezed, overwhelmed with delight. ‘He actually spoke to me.’

Veronica smirked. ‘Yeah. At least six words. That boy has got it bad.’

Okay, so the Braithwaite girl was jesting. Or at least I hoped she was. But she’d also hit the proverbial nail right on the head. Out of his mouth, six tiny words. Uttered in a matter of seconds. Nowhere near enough airtime or verbiage to establish the raw foundations of a loving relationship.

‘You’re right,’ I murmured to my mate, elbows upon table, my disenchanted chin supported by both hands. ‘I’ve had longer conversations with strangers at bus stops.’

\*Insert unhurried exhale of despair here.\*

Oh, how I wished I held the power to get noticed. To become a fully paid-up member of the school’s it-crowd, that’s all it would take for events to play out a whole lot differently. Oh, yes, I had it all worked out. Without a doubt, if I was cool and popular and trendy and totally worshipped, Nathan Edwards would come a’running straight into my waiting open arms. We’d get along, we’d kiss, we’d hit it off, we’d kiss again, we’d become an item, boyfriend and girlfriend, the king and queen of the entire school and beyond.

Ah, but alas, I was nowhere near the mountain-high level of prominence required to become the aforementioned cool and popular and trendy and totally worshipped. Therefore, my raging ambition to date the fittest boy who had ever existed in the history of everything was nothing more than a sugary reverie born out of sheer blinkered delusion. As such, I had to face facts. I was nobody special, an invisible human being, a worthless entity, undeserving of any true attention; cold, hungry and all alone at the base of that long, long, long, long ladder. In other words, a fuzzy-grey background girl. ☹

## #NOW

I sit in silence, staring out through the windscreen of Ian's car. An indigo blanket of stars gracefully steps aside to allow a lighter sheet of grey-blue to take to the stage. As if by magic, off-white clouds begin to appear. And on the distant horizon, a pale orange sun peers shyly over a dense thicket of trees. Ah, the eternal daily theatre of a breaking morning sky. I'd enjoy this stunning performance of Mother Nature if I didn't feel like crap inside.

My body is numb, save for a dull, niggling ache in my gut. This is so bizarre, so surreal, like it isn't me, like it's all happening to somebody else, like I'm reading a novel or watching a drama unfold on TV. Oh, God, I can't believe I've left everything behind. But I have. This is real. I've given it all up. It's all gone. I'm... empty. Is this how every despised loser feels when they run away from home? Will I always feel this way? Will I forever carry this weighty burden?

I glance at the clock on the dashboard. 6.02AM. We've been travelling now for just over three hours. It seems longer. I am bored of this monotonous motorway, an endless grey expanse of concrete and tarmac, flanked on both sides by scurrying smudges of green. Are we there yet? No, we are most certainly not.

'Why did you do it?' Ian asks out of the blue, his first spoken words since we made our escape from a slumbering street a trio of hours beforehand. 'Why post that particular comment online?'

Oh, here we go. I blow out a jaded sigh, unwilling to play the role of consenting interviewee. 'I thought we'd agreed not to mention anything about what happened.'

'Yes, I know, but...' And that's where he chooses to park his mouth.

His curious hiatus prompts me to cast intrigued eyes. 'But what?'

'Just wondering why you felt the need to involve him.'

My response is not formed of words. I simply offer an impassive shrug of the shoulders.

‘Had he done something to hurt you?’ comes his next question.

‘He didn’t have anything to do with it.’

‘Then why include him in the comment?’

‘Can you please turn on the radio?’ I request, abrupt and curt, eager to terminate this unwelcome inquisition.

And now it’s his turn to blow out a sigh. ‘All I’m asking is –’

‘Stop it! I’m fed up with having to justify myself.’

‘Yes, but if you –’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ My simmering glare says it all. Time to give up.

Surrendering, Ian fires up the car stereo. A radio DJ, way too boisterous for this ungodly hour introduces the brand new track from the latest flavour of the month female pop star.

Beats, bass and irritating warbles pour into the vehicle. For a while, nothing is said. Until –

‘Mallory, you still haven’t told me where we’re actually heading. I can’t just follow your vague directions all day without knowing our final destination. It’s ridiculous.’

‘I’m not telling you. Not yet anyway. I can’t risk it. I mean, what if we stop off somewhere and you call somebody, letting them know where to find me?’

‘You’ve got to believe me, I won’t do that. I told you, I’m on your side.’

His sincere face does a pretty good job of backing up his claim. However, I offer zero response. Instead, behind a wall of silence, I face forward, eyes fixed on the road ahead.

Then comes Ian’s last-ditch attempt at extracting information. ‘At least give me a clue.’

I enter a brief phase of deliberation, after which I reply, ‘Let’s just say, we’re going to the last place I was truly happy in my life.’

## #THEN

Ruth to her friends, Mrs Finch in official circles and plain Mum to me looked up from her quick and easy (can't be bothered to cook anything exotic) meal of fish fingers, crinkle cut chips and supermarket basic baked beans. She asked across the kitchen table, 'Mallory, are you going to Aimee Taylor's birthday bash tonight?'

Inside, I dealt a virtual groan. Why did people keep asking me that? Was Queen Aimee the centre of the universe, the sole topic of conversation, the be all and end all of everything? It certainly looked that way.

'Mum, you're not supposed to have insider knowledge of teenage parties,' came my sardonic response. 'You're a grown-up.'

The grown-up in question threw me a har-de-har forced smile. 'Us oldies have grapevines too, you know.'

It was official. Even my mother of "previous generation" fame was better connected than me with regards to the current youth social scene.

'Mum, if you must know, I've decided to give it a miss.' Sure, my statement hardly reflected the realms of actuality, but bending the truth seemed far less hassle than admitting the saddy-esque unbended variety.

Steve to his friends, Mr Finch in official circles and plain Dad to me munched on a mouthful of chips whilst mumbling a string of words to the effect of, 'You are allowed to go, Mallory. It's Friday. There's no school in the morning.'

'I'm well aware of where we are in the week, Dad. It's just...' Did I really wish to admit the fact that I hadn't received a formal invite? '...I'm not in the mood.' No. I didn't.

Bemused, Mum said, 'I thought you two were friends.'

‘We’ve...’ Did I really wish to admit the fact that Aimee had practically disowned me the very minute she found fame and glory at the top of the school’s pecking order? ‘...kind of drifted apart.’ No. I didn’t. At least not in so many words.

‘Even so,’ said Mum, ‘you can’t miss her sixteenth birthday party. It’s a milestone event.’

‘Agreed,’ came Dad’s contribution. ‘I’m sure her parents would love to see you there. They always did speak very highly of you.’

‘Her parents...’ Did I really wish to reveal the escape plan of Aimee’s folks soaring off to sunnier climes? ‘...will be too busy with the party to notice me.’ Again, no. I didn’t. And now I’d vacated bending the truth territory in favour of telling outright fibs. Too busy with the party? Hah, yeah, right. They wouldn’t even be in the same country.

Mum then asked, ‘Is Aimee coming to your birthday bash tomorrow afternoon?’

Ah, yes. My birthday bash. Owing to so much hype placed on Aimee’s sixteenth, I’d almost forgotten about my own big day. You see, early in our friendship, we’d hit upon the discovery that the two of us had been born a mere twenty-four hours apart. Therefore, back in the day, fun times were had on the closest Saturday to our birthdates where we’d attend each other’s gatherings in turn, splitting the day across two venues, one party in the morning, one in the afternoon, every child’s dream, a double celebration. But alas, not anymore. Not for several years now.

‘Well?’ prompted Mum, half a fish finger pricked upon fork. ‘Is she coming or what?’

‘I...’ Did I really wish to reveal the fact that I hadn’t even bothered to invite Aimee because I knew what the answer would be? Namely, a firm no. ‘...don’t think so. She reckons she’s busy all weekend.’ Yes, you’ve guessed it. No. I didn’t. ‘She did apologise though.’ Oh, look. More fibs. ‘Maybe next year, eh?’ Stop it, girl.

‘Shame,’ said Mum. ‘I haven’t laid eyes on the lass for years. It would have been nice to catch up.’

Nice to catch up? Hah, I don't think so. My mother obviously still saw Aimee Taylor as yesteryear's preteen porcelain doll with quirky pigtails and a cute smile, and not her current incarnation of a teenage bossy bitch.

In all honesty, did I truly want Aimee to break her strict snobbish protocol and actually make a guest appearance tomorrow afternoon? No way. The two of us hadn't just drifted apart, we'd sailed off in totally opposite directions. The sad fact was, we no longer had anything in common. Maybe we never did. For example, take the differences in this year's birthday parties. Sweet Sixteen Aimee would be surrounded tonight by plenty of booze, fit boys, no parents, trendy music and fun and frolics. Whereas Sad Sixteen Myself would be surrounded tomorrow afternoon by plenty of soft drinks, no fit boys, parents standing guard, cheesy music, jelly and ice cream (Yes! Jelly and ice cream) and no doubt a sparse scattering of people masquerading as party guests who would rather be somewhere else. Anywhere else. Oh, and then there was the strict finishing time of 5:00PM. Yes, that's right. In the afternoon! Embarrassing or what? It was hardly a wonder that Aimee and myself now found ourselves on opposing sides of the spectrum regarding self-confidence, personality, lifestyle and everything related. Oh, and of course popularity.

Huh, Aimee was so lucky. I could imagine the exchange between that girl and her way too trusting parents prior to departing for their weekend trip to Spain, both perfectly happy to leave their darling daughter home alone to fend for herself.

MRS TAYLOR: 'Now, remember, Aimee. Two ground rules for tonight. One: Don't wreck the house. And two: Don't forget to feed the cat.'

AIMEE: (Practically pushing the couple out through the front door) 'Yeah, yeah, got that. You'd better get going or you'll miss your flight. Bye, Mum, bye, Dad. See you both when you get back.'

Front door closed, parents out of the way, house to herself, cue the triumphant air punch.

AIMEE: 'Yes!'

Then oh, the play-acting in my mind was unexpectedly knocked aside by my mother's latest addition to the conversation.

'A girl your age shouldn't be stuck indoors every night. It's not right. Or natural.'

'Agreed.' My father seemed to like that particular A-word. 'Go and say hello to Aimee tonight. I'm sure the reason why you've drifted apart can be easily rectified.'

'I doubt it, Dad.'

'You'll never know unless you try.'

'You're going, Mallory, and that's that,' barked Mum, waving around a fork laden with a part-bitten chip, 'We don't want you under our feet, thank you very much, moping around with your bottom lip dragging along the carpet. There's good telly on tonight.'

Dad nodded. 'Agreed.'

If I had a pound coin for every time my father said that bloody A-word, I'd be mega-loaded.

'Okay, fine, you win!' I blurted out, raising both palms as a visual verification of utmost surrender. 'I'll go to her party. Happy now?'

Judging by my parents' prominent smiles, yes, they were.

## #STILLTHEN

It seemed a good idea at the time. But now it didn't. I stood alone on the opposite side of the street, staring at Aimee Taylor's house, grasping a supermarket carrier bag which hid the fact that a fifteen, almost sixteen-year-old girl was in possession of a bottle of wine.

Oh, before you go thinking I'd illegally purchased alcohol, you're wrong. I was a day less than sixteen. I also looked a day less than sixteen. Getting served with booze was a no-hope no-chancer. Therefore, the only viable method was to steal (borrow) a bottle of wine from the back of my parents' drinks cabinet. You see, on the rare occasion that Mum and Dad actually hosted a house party, they always requested their guests to each bring a bottle. People would then arrive, bargain-basement wine in hand, with no intention of actually consuming the cheap yuck-stuff they'd brought along. Instead, said guests would tuck into the far more agreeable beers, wine and spirits laid on by their genial hosts. The unopened bottles of abandoned and pretty much undrinkable wine would then be discovered by my folks the following morning, groan, grumble, oh, no, not more bloody vinegar, and promptly stored right at the back of the drinks cabinet, ready and waiting for whenever they could in turn palm them off at somebody else's party.

Just to be clear, when I say my parents hosted parties, they were unassuming gatherings with handpicked friends and acquaintances, far more relaxed and subdued affairs with (mostly) sensible adults partaking in (mostly) mundane conversations, all (mostly) drinking sensibly amid subtle background music, as opposed to rowdy hormone-charged adolescents chatting up the opposite sex, eating each other's faces and drinking to excess amid deafening dance floor numbers. Hah, if my parents (and Aimee's folks) knew the real score about tonight, they'd blow a gasket.

Of course, I didn't plan to actually drink this bottle of wine. Aside from the annual solitary flute of cheap bubbly to see in New Year's Eve, I'd never properly sampled booze. What if I couldn't handle my drink? What if I embarrassed myself by playing the drunken newbie? And what if I threw up all over Aimee Taylor's shoes? Or worse still, straight into the fit face of Nathan Edwards. Double facepalm nightmares or what?

Sure, most people my age regularly enjoyed alcohol. Many to excess. Illegal, yes, but it was the done thing. A sign of the times. But not Mallory Finch. Oh, no, I was practically tee-total. In the eyes of my peers, this made me dull, boring and see-through.

#invisible

Aimee's party was already in full swing. Through the open-curtained windows, I spied a hectic chaos of mostly underage revellers, interspersed with a sprinkling of late teenage and early twenties beings, all experiencing various degrees of drunkenness. Oh, how I yearned to be a part of that exciting crowd, a true somebody, a member of the elite. But no. I couldn't see myself building up enough courage to waltz in without an invitation. A professional gatecrasher, I was not. Ah, but maybe if I lingered in full view for long enough, a kindly soul would spot my lonesome form and usher me in through the golden door of paradise. Only then would I feel welcome and accepted by this jovial community. Until such a time, I'd simply wait and see what happened.

I waited. And I waited some more. Time ticked by.

No joy. The only people who gave me any form of attention were two ridiculously inebriated lads, both pointing and sniggering like kindergarten season ticket holders through the lounge window at the sad loner in the street. Oh. Great. Was I destined to spend the rest of the evening standing by myself in this very spot? What if a pervy kerb-crawler drove past, mistaking me for a prostitute? Could I take the shame, especially in front of all those partygoers? No way.

A sigh of longing leapt free from my mouth. Somewhere inside that merry household, the gorgeous Nathan Edwards was chatting, laughing and drinking. Oh, how I wished the Adonis in question would take a peek out of the nearest available window where he could clock me in my damsel in distress guise and save me from the biting chill of loneliness and desolation. Ah, but in reality, it was hardly likely to happen. Nathan was Mr Popular, I was a fuzzy-grey background girl, and never the twain shall meet.

Then oh, I encountered a thought. Veronica Braithwaite. She'd been invited to this shindig. The girl in question no doubt stood within those hallowed four walls. Aha. My way in. If I could persuade Veronica to put a good word in for me with Aimee, even if it meant being allocated brown tonguing duties, then maybe, just maybe I could get close to the boy of my dreams. Yes. Good plan.

I found it faster to jab in her number via the keypad, rather than select it from my contacts list. Why? Because it was such a memorable numerical sequence, containing four sixes and three twos clustered together. Easy-peasy to remember off by heart. Anyway, it rang. And rang. And rang some more. Then it switched to voicemail. Argh! Either the music was too loud for Veronica to hear her ringtone or she'd set her phone to silent.

#fail

What now? I was already out of ideas.

It was then when the front door swung open. Aha, could this be my saviour? Oh. No, it definitely wasn't Veronica. Nor was it hottie Nathan. The mystery gatekeeper was... OMG! The most popular girl in the entire school herself.

Aimee Taylor.

Draped in a dress which could only be described as dangerously next to nothing and boasting a face painted in the likeness of a much older female, Aimee strolled carefree and confident across the road over to a certain ex-bestie.

‘Mallory, what are you doing here?’ she asked, her tone laced with aloof indifference.

Good question. What was I doing here? What did I hope to achieve?

‘For what it’s worth, Aimee, I came to wish you a happy birthday.’

‘Likewise, happy birthday for tomorrow,’ was Aimee’s almost human reply.

Wow. Eye-opener or what? I was surprised the girl even remembered. Of course, her greeting hadn’t exactly been delivered with sincerity or conviction. She was more than likely going through the motions, all for the sake of politeness.

‘Are you hinting for an invitation?’ Aimee then asked. ‘Is that why you’re here?’

Yes, of course I was. Wasn’t it obvious? Here stood Miss Desperado, seriously wanting in. Ah, but admitting this very fact would be akin to begging. Therefore, as a (sort of) reply, I shrugged my shoulders, a vague and unspoken maybe, maybe not, whatever, not fussed.

‘Only, I don’t think it’s your scene,’ added my nemesis with a smirk. ‘I mean, look at you.’ She indicated to my face, my body, my demeanour, my way too sensible dress-sense. ‘You’re hardly life of the party material.’

Ouch. Mega-hurt by the comment, I sank into myself. ‘You never used to be like this.’

‘Like what?’

‘All mean and conceited and totally up your own arse.’

Aimee snorted, amused by my colourful description of her manner, especially the unexpected A-word. ‘It’s only you who sees me like that. Everybody else thinks I’m amazing.’

‘Aimee, you are so naive. Do you seriously believe you achieved this level of... of...’ I struggled for an apt word. ‘...eminence...’ Ooh, good one. ‘...through likeability?’

‘Yes, I do, as a matter of fact.’

She truly believed it, I could see it in her eyes. In response, I couldn’t help myself, I blurted out a contemptuous laugh.

The recipient of said contemptuous laugh was not best pleased. ‘So what’s your theory, Mrs Expert?’

‘You mean you don’t know?’

‘Mallory, would I be asking you if I did?’

To me, it was obvious. Evidently not so on Aimee’s glittery side of the fence. Therefore, it was spell it out time. ‘You were the first girl in our primary school to develop boobs.’

Now it was Aimee’s turn to laugh, although she was neither amused nor impressed by my frown-inducing revelation. ‘What’s developing boobs got to do with it?’

‘Everything. Don’t you see? It was the turning point in your life when girls started looking up to you and boys started looking you up and down.’

Oh, yes, this was indeed how it played out. A premature spurt of puberty propelled the girl to the enviable status of inspirational almost-adult figure amongst goggle-eyed prepubescent wannabes. And as such, everybody (except me, of course, so almost everybody) laid down their arms to become her wall-to-wall entourage, eager to be led by their newly crowned queen. Hah! Herd mentality at its most absurd.

Furthermore, not only did the aforementioned puberty spurt give Aimee a humungous head start in life, it also signalled the tragic break-up of our friendship. By the time the two of us reached secondary school, Aimee was long gone from my life. The girl with the earliest appearance of breasts had no time for insignificant friends of yesteryear. Oh, no, she was far too busy enjoying the plum role of most popular girl in our year, and later the entire school.

It was strange. Nobody dared to challenge her throne, not even when their own bodies reached blossomhood and they all became biologically equal. Everybody seemed to sit back and accept their appointed monarch and her continued reign. Long live Queen Aimee.

Anyway... there, I’d said it. The harsh truth. Right to her face.

However, Aimee didn't look at all convinced by my puberty spurt theory. 'So let me get this straight. Had I been a late starter, I'd instead find myself a member of your Sad Nobody club? Is that what you're saying?'

I tipped my head from side to side, weighing things up. 'Possibly, yes.'

'Look. Mallory.' The monarch clearly wished to conclude this conversation at the earliest possible convenience in order to get back to her fun and games. 'I would invite you in. But what's the point?' She gestured to the house, the noise, the revelry. 'This isn't you.' For a moment, she allowed the damning statement to hang in the air. Then she added, 'Maybe if you lived a little once in a while, things would be different. But you don't. Ever.'

I remained mute. Aimee was right. I was certainly no friend magnet, nor was I the type to party all night. Hmm, I needed to be honest with myself. Even if I was fortunate enough to find myself accepted into this vibrant and happening community, I'd only prop my back against the nearest lonely wall, not speaking, not drinking, not dancing, not joining in at all. Oh, and no matter how much I fancied the pants off Nathan Edwards and yearned to get as close as possible to his kissable lips and fit body, could I truthfully see myself making any effort to woo the guy? Like, seriously? Hah, no chance.

You see, I'd always sworn by my own personal Theory of Keen. If a boy was interested in going out with me, he'd raise a hand, make himself known and do all the hard work. This meant I'd be totally certain that he was genuine in his quest. Whereas, on the other hand, if I made a play for a boy, with a distinct lack of viewable input on his part, there would be no telling if the subject of my desires was equally keen on me. Conclusion: Don't do the chasing, let them chase you. Ah, but how many times had anybody made the first move with me? Hah, I could count the times with the fingers of one hand. Actually, correction, I could count the times with zero fingers extended. That is, not once. Ever.

I was a loner. I always had been. Like I mentioned earlier, it was definitely all down to my upbringing. My earliest memory (aged five, during my first term at tiny-titchy school) featured my teacher Mrs Wotsit. I've long since forgotten the tutor's actual name, but I can clearly recall the groanable incident which took place that day after school hours. Mrs Wotsit had called my mother in to discuss what she referred to as a niggling little problem. Younger Me was told to wait outside in the corridor, but the thinnest of walls meant I could easily catch every agonising word.

MRS WOTSIT: 'Mrs Finch, I'm gravely concerned about young Mallory. We're now a month into the term and she still hasn't made any friends. The child sits by herself every day and refuses to join in.'

MUM: 'Yes, well, she's never really been the sociable sort. Best just to let her be.'

MRS WOTSIT: 'I'm afraid your laid-back attitude could be the problem here.'

MUM: 'Is that right?'

MRS WOTSIT: 'A failure to encourage your child's development may have serious implications later on in life. As a responsible parent, you should be nurturing her social skills.'

MUM: 'Oh, yeah? Well, as a responsible teacher, you should be nurturing your keep out of my business skills.'

Sure, agreed, I'd never been the sociable sort. But on the same grounds, my mother had never been the diplomatic type.

Nevertheless, even without parental encouragement, I did eventually manage to find myself a friend. Yes, you've guessed it. Aimee Taylor. At times, young Aimee could be a right bossy cow. But in complete contrast, I was a submissive soul. Heh, looking back, I guess that's why we clicked so perfectly.

For the next few years, we were the best of friends. Virtually inseparable. Ah, but the old adage proved very true. All good things must come to an end. Aimee's infamous early case of puberty ruined everything.

\*Insert sinister dah, dah, daaaahhhhhh here.\*

And so, fast-forward, here I stood, carrier bag in hand, locked in a face-off with Aimee Taylor, still as inept societal-wise as that faraway five-year-old.

'What's in the bag?' Aimee asked, interrupting my dismal thoughts.

'A bottle of wine.'

Aimee's eyebrows arched. It was obvious what the girl was thinking. Mallory Finch in possession of alcohol? No way. This couldn't possibly be real life. Could it?

'Are you planning on drinking it?' she enquired.

I looked down at the bag and back at Aimee, then shook my head, a pitiful no.

Aimee smirked. 'In that case, mind if I take it off your hands?'

Not putting up a fight, ever the undying submissive, I handed it over. Ah, well, my parents would have eventually got shot of the bottle at somebody else's party anyway. Therefore, it seemed a fitting gesture to keep up the family tradition and pass it over to the next mug. Good riddance to cheap and yucky vinegar-esque slosh.

'Thanks.' Aimee turned around and headed back across the street. 'You'd best be getting home, Mallory,' she said, looking over her shoulder. 'It's way past your bedtime.'

My eyes burned, scorn overload. I couldn't believe how much the girl had changed. These past few years of power had transformed a one-time wonderful bestie into a total superbitch. Oh, why had I even bothered to turn up here tonight?

'Hey. Aimee,' I called across the street, eyes narrowed, both fists scrunching and unscrunching. 'You won't always be the most popular girl in the school.'

The lass in the scant dress stopped beside her front door and turned around. 'Oh, really?'

‘Nothing stays the same forever,’ I declared, head held up high.

Aimee dealt the mother of all sneers. ‘Is that supposed to be some kind of threat?’

I shook my head. ‘Call it a friendly warning.’ Next, I delivered a forced smile. ‘Enjoy your party.’ And then I marched into the night, not once looking back.

Arriving home, I decided to head straight upstairs to the sanctuary of my bedroom. Hitting the sack seemed like the perfect end to a crap evening.

Dad called from the sofa in the lounge, ‘Is that you, Mallory?’

‘Yes.’ Who else did he think it would be?

‘You’re back early.’

I offered no further input. I couldn’t be bothered. This was reason number two for scaling the wooden hill with the haste of a typhoon. Namely, to avoid my parents and the quick-fire series of dumb follow-up questions they were bound to throw my way. What was the party like? How was Aimee? Did you make peace with the girl? Blah, blah and several more blahs. Instead, I figured it best to shut myself away from the world.

Tomorrow, yes, tomorrow, I’d turn sixteen. The big one six. Was I excited? No, not really. It was only a birthday. Another year older.

#FML

## #NOW

The time is 7:54AM. A broad beam stretches across my face as I spot familiar names of towns and villages located close to where we are heading. I watch in silence as each dutiful road sign we pass counts down the remaining distance one mile at a time. Warm memories of a happier season in my life begin to blossom, the sun ablaze amid a cloudless blue sky and two young girls at play, the best of pals, both immersed in the purest of innocence, and so far untainted by the curse of our imminent adolescence.

The last time I travelled this route was during the summer holidays of my tenth year of life. Although I am barely sixteen, my childhood seems so long ago now. Ah, but I will soon be reliving the good times.

## #perfect

It's weird. I thought I'd never be able to smile again. But I'm glad I still can.

Ian glances over and reads my elation. 'I take it this means we're getting warmer.'

'We're practically scolding.'

This plan is brilliant. And our destination is even brillianter. That is, if brillianter is an actual word. Well, it is now in the world according to Mallory Finch. I don't care if the brainbods who compile the Oxford English Dictionary disagree with me.

Very soon, we will reach my secret happy place.

Nobody will think of looking for me there.

Nobody.

## #THEN

‘Look lively, Mallory,’ prompted Mum, waving both hands to further accentuate her impatience. ‘Blow out the candles.’

‘Don’t forget to make a wish,’ contributed Dad with an eager smile.

It was (allegedly) my big day. Sweet sixteen. Ho-hum.

The morning proved a somewhat unremarkable affair, consisting of a typical Saturday breaking of fast, followed by the opening of two (yes, only two) birthday cards, one from my parents, the other from Great Auntie Wotzername from miles and miles away who has religiously sent me birthday greetings along with an enclosed five pound note every year since the dawn of my creation, even though the two of us have never actually met in person.

The time was now 2:02PM and my birthday party had officially begun. There were only five people in attendance. That’s right. Five. At a milestone occasion. A pathetic facepalm guestcount which could be calculated using the fingers and thumb of one hand. And what’s more, this microscopic number included my humble self.

## #partyfail

Breaking down the statistics, my parents were present by default. Therefore, they didn’t count as bona fide party invitees. This left two proper guests, Grandma Ethel from my mother’s side of the family and Uncle Tom from my father’s. Huh, and what’s the betting they’d only turned up out of family loyalty? Oh, and as for myself, it felt like my presence here was merely to make up the numbers. Hah! At my own birthday party.

Of course, I’d predicted a low turn-out. After all, it was my party. Hardly the must-attend occasion of the year. With this in mind, I’d taken it upon myself to invite a handful of (sort of) mates from school, if only to save myself from the banal waffle of adultkind. However, one by one, the apologetic excuse texts accumulated on my phone.

Plinkety, plonkety, ping, ping, ping!

By the way, that's my phone's text notification sound, if you were wondering.

APOLOGETIC (SORT OF) MATE 1: "Yo, Mallory. Soz. Can't make it 2day. Folks found out I stole their vodka 4 Aimee's party. Grounded. ☹"

Plinkety, plonkety, ping, ping, ping!

APOLOGETIC (SORT OF) MATE 2: "Sorry, Mallory. Whole family struck down with the lurgy. Have a great b-day."

Okay, so I figured those two texts sounded like genuine reasons for no-shows, but the third message really took the wet yellow stuff.

Plinkety, plonkety, ping, ping, ping!

APOLOGETIC (SORT OF) MATE 3: "Sorry, Finchy. Something has come up."

Huh, talk about short and sweet. Or unsweet. This text basically translated as:

APOLOGETIC (SORT OF) MATE 3: "Not sorry at all, Finchy. Had no intention of celebrating your birthday with you. Can't be bothered to think up a suitable excuse."

\*Insert childish blowing of raspberry here.\*

Of all people, Veronica Braithwaite hadn't shown her face either, even though she'd crossed her heart and hoped to die; a childish version of devout promise, yes, but one such

guarantee that I had classed as a dead-cert. Hah, yeah, right. Worse still, my scatty schoolmate had failed to text me a reason why. Case rested, story of my life.

\*Insert vintage style tragic wah, wah, wahhhhhhhhhhhhh here.\*

Then oh, after a further prompt from an impatient mother –

‘Mallory! Candles.’

– my preoccupied, sombre and daydreaming self navigated my face in the direction of the birthday cake and blew hard. Sixteen flickering flames surrendered all arms to my sharp gust of breath, making way for delicate swirls of dancing after-smoke. I then closed my eyes and made the mother of all wishes.

Yes, you’ve guessed it. I wished for popularity. The chance to get myself noticed.

‘Aren’t you going to tell us what you wished for?’ asked Dad, acting far more excited than a certain fresh sixteen-year-old.

‘Of course she can’t, you idiot,’ groaned Mum. ‘Her wish will only come true if she keeps it a secret.’

Dad scoffed, grinning like an imbecile. ‘Yeah, only if you believe in all that superstitious codswallop.’

‘Oh, Steve. Stop being so cynical.’ Mum grabbed the knife and began to dissect the cake into equal portions. ‘Now, who wants a wedge of birthday cake?’

Dad licked his lips. ‘Ooh, yes please, love.’

Displaying an equal amount of zeal for the sweet taste of an amalgamation of icing, sponge and E numbers, Grandma Ethel and Uncle Tom waved goodbye to the comfort of the sofa and leapt into action on a daring mission to beat Dad to the goodies. I, however, stepped back a few paces to where I belonged. In the background. Just like I always did.

‘Queue up in an orderly fashion please,’ ordered Mum as three embarrassing grown-ups wrestled for first place in the line. ‘There’s enough cake to go round. After all, there are only five of us here.’

I sighed. Loudly. Why did my mother keep reminding everybody of the minuscule amount of bodies in the room? Okay, so I was forced to accept that I was unloved and unadmired as an individual, a heartbreaking and tragic truth, but did the parent in question really have to go on and on about it?

#embarrassing

I then wondered if my secret wish for the golden prize of popularity would be heard. Oh, to experience the joyous limelight of school fame would be a dream come true. If I was popular, I’d have zillions of party guests in attendance, all eager to celebrate my coming of age in style. If I was popular, the house would be crammed to bursting point, with further jostling queues of excited hopefuls forming outside, keen to earn their right to admission, dying to catch a glimpse of the b-day girl, mega-desperate for a piece of the action. If I was popular, this party would be the main event, a trending topic, the number one place to be. Oh, yes, if I was popular, things would be a whole lot different.

#pleasemakemywishcometrue

Meanwhile, with a gob full of E numbers, Mum mumbled something that sounded like, ‘Mmm, this cake is bloody gorgeous. Would you like a slice, birthday girl?’

‘No thanks, Mum.’

Mum swallowed the moist mess of sponge and icing. ‘Are you sure, love? It’s very good.’

‘Dead sure.’

‘Mallory, you’re not one of those anorexics you hear about on the telly, are you?’

‘No, Mum. I just don’t fancy any at the moment.’

‘Typical. You could have at least told me you didn’t care much for cake.’

‘I never said I didn’t like it.’

‘And there was me, slaving over a hot oven, baking all day and night, decorating it with icing until the early hours.’

Dad frowned. ‘I thought you said you bought it from the supermarket.’

Mum. Totally rumbled. ‘Yes, thank you, Steve. That may well be true. But it’s hardly the point, is it?’

I decided to jump in. ‘Mum, if it makes you happy, I’ll grab a slice later.’

‘Make sure you do, young lady.’

‘I promise.’

‘I’ll be watching you.’

‘I know you will.’

Cake incident over, Dad returned to “excited little boy” mode and gestured to Mum. ‘Let me give her the present, let me give her the present.’

Mum offered across a small gift-wrapped package to Dad who in turn passed it to me.

‘There you go, love.’ Once again, he grinned like an imbecile. ‘Hurry up and open it.’

Mum rolled her eyes. ‘Give her a chance, Mr Impatient.’

I tore the gift-wrap free of the mystery item. Once all ripped fragments of paper and binding had found a new home scattered on the carpet, I examined the blank white box with puzzled eyes. My folks had clearly swapped the real box with an unbranded retanguloid carton to add to the mystery. Okaaaaaaay, so I went about opening the flap and released a curious electronic object from its cardboard prison. Again, okaaaaaaay. The truth is, this year, I’d expected an item of clothing. Or perhaps the shoes I’d been endlessly hinting for. Or maybe even a gift voucher. Not this... um... whatever it was. Black. Compact. A few buttons, play, record, stop. Similar to an MP3 player, but without the accompanying headphones. In other words, something which didn’t look very cool and trendy.

‘Well?’ uttered an expectant Mum. ‘What do you think?’

‘Do you like it?’ asked an equally hopeful Dad.

‘Um. Thanks, Mum. Thanks, Dad. What exactly is it?’

My parents exchanged blank glances, as if the object’s purpose was that of the blatant and obvious variety.

‘It’s a digital voice recorder,’ responded my father.

‘A digital voice recorder?’

‘Yes,’ joined in Mum. ‘You know, one of those electronic thingies you can record your thoughts and ideas on. Well, not your actual thoughts and ideas. You can’t record thoughts and ideas. That would be silly. But what you can do is speak your thoughts and ideas. And record them. On that.’

I blinked. And blinked again. ‘Oh. Right.’ I wasn’t sure what else to say or how to react.

Once again, my parents traded strange looks, leaving me wondering if I’d missed a vital episode of this ongoing soap opera of life itself.

Dad explained, ‘Don’t you remember? Must be... oohhhh... six months ago now. The three of us were walking through the shopping centre. You spotted that man in a suit reciting a memo into one and you said, “Ooh, that’s cool. I’d like one of those.”’

Mum contributed, ‘So we thought we’d buy you one for your birthday. Isn’t that great?’

‘Um.’ To save face, I dealt a fake yet hopefully convincing smile. ‘Oh, yes, that’s right. It’s... something I’ve always wanted. Well, for six months at least.’

‘That’s a relief,’ said Dad, mock wiping his brow to signify a silent movie phew. ‘For a moment there, I thought we’d made an embarrassing blunder.’

Okay, hands up, yes, I could just about remember spotting somebody using a digital voice recorder. And yes, at the time, I probably did say it was pretty cool. But for my mother and father to claim that I told them I wanted one of my own could only be described as a slight

parental exaggeration. Furthermore, I failed to understand how they could recall a remark I'd made six months ago. Parents weren't supposed to listen to their children. Oh, and vice versa. It was an unwritten parent/child law. Never to be broken. Ever.

And so, present giving over, Dad began to rifle through his CD collection. 'What this party needs is music.'

Uh-oh, bad omen. Songs from my father's CD collection consisted of the very worst songs from the 1980s, his favourite musical decade, the majority of which carried the death penalty if caught playing them. Sure, several superior tracks from that particular era were back in vogue, with many enjoying repeated chart success, all thanks to digital downloads. But not Dad's brain-freeze taste in music. Everything in his collected works had been buried a million feet deep under the rigid concrete of time for a very good reason. That is, never to darken a CD tray again.

'Oh, Mallory,' Mum said, smiling at me in that rare doting fashion strictly reserved for milestone occasions. 'Who would have thought it, eh? You. Sixteen years of age. Already. Doesn't time fly?'

I couldn't help but wince. My mother was about to seize an ideal opportunity to spew the usual burble about how it felt like only five minutes since she first held her little bundle of joy in her arms, and how it seemed like only yesterday since she'd waved off her precious little girl at the gates on her very first day at school. But no. I was mistaken. Instead, shock of horrors, Mum took an entirely new route.

'There are so many things you can legally do now,' she said. 'Like... smoke.'

Dad looked up from his CD rifling. 'I think you'll find they upped the minimum age for buying cigarettes a while back.'

'Did they?'

Mum didn't smoke, and nor did my father, so the woman could be forgiven for not knowing the ins and outs of tobacco retail laws.

'It doesn't bother me anyway,' I declared, unperturbed. 'Smoking is a disgusting habit.'

To which Mum remarked, 'Hah, you try telling that to your Uncle Tom. He puffs away 24/7 like an old chimney. Where is he, by the way?'

Dad glanced out of the window. 'Front garden, sparking up yet another crafty cigarette.'

'Oh, that's all I need. Now the roses will reek of tobacco.'

Dad plucked his chosen CD from its case, a homemade compilation a mate of his had created for him a number of years back by converting his old vinyl singles into digital format and burning the tracks onto a CDR. Huh, it was a shame his mate hadn't instead burned his singles by actually setting them on fire.

Oh, by the way, if you're too young to know what a CDR is, here's a simple description: A blank shiny compact disc onto which people in the early 2000s recorded (technical term: burned) digital music tracks to listen to on a CD player. Yeah, yeah, I know. Prehistoric or what? Similarly, if you're too young to know what vinyl singles were, ask the nearest available ancient person.

Mum, meanwhile, was back on the original subject. 'What else can Mallory legally do?'

'She's old enough to buy a lottery ticket,' came Dad's suggestion as he went about setting up his CD in the stereo unit.

'Ooh, no, the minimum age is eighteen now. Which is such a shame. You could have won the jackpot.'

'Yes, Mum. Pity the odds of that happening are a zillion to one.'

Mum produced her phone, actively fingered her screen, then said, 'According to the internet, Mallory, you can get married, ride a moped and join a trade union.'

Hmm, what Mum had failed to include in her list was, at sixteen years of age, I could also legally consent to sex. Ah, but with no boyfriend on the scene and zero popularity, the odds of that happening were also a zillion to one.

Argh, the room suddenly found itself invaded by the audio cheese of 80s novelty track The Birdie Song by The Tweets, a tune Dad constantly played to me as a child. No points for guessing that the parent in question was the only human in the room excited by the song's current resurrection. He even went about attempting the official dance. Badly.

DISCLAIMER: For those of you thinking about searching online for The Birdie Song, please don't. For the sake of humanity, forget I even mentioned it.

Anyway... I shook my head, disillusion overload. This was no party. This was Hell itself. Aimee Taylor's glittery gathering last night, now that had definitely been a party in the true sense of the word. Well, from what I saw of it... from the outside. However, there was no way that my parents would allow such a crazy shindig. Even if miracles did happen and Mum and Dad actually consented to a proper birthday party for me, they would insist on supervising. This would result in the calamity and embarrassment of two unstreetwise adults getting in the way, unlike Aimee's far more liberal parents who had decided to bugger off for the weekend and leave the girl to her own devices.

Ah, but there was no point in hoping and praying for better celebrations. Within these four walls, I'd never enjoy a party like Aimee's. Until such a time I moved into my own property, I'd be forced to accept the type of gathering where they played The Birdie Song.

DISCLAIMER UPDATE: Like, OMG, I can't believe you ignored my dire warning and found The Birdie Song online. Equally, I can't believe you dared to play the bloody song. Well, it's your own fault. You will never get that tune out of your head. Ever.

Anyway... there then came good news. Dad's CD skipped like a rabid lunatic, da, da, da, da, da!

‘No!’ shrieked Dad.

I couldn’t help but LOL. Things were looking up at this party after all.

Actually, no, I was wrong. Looking up proved short-lived. The party came, the party went. Nothing else exciting or even remotely interesting happened in-between.

Grandma Ethel booked a taxi to take her home. Uncle Tom left not long after, lighting yet another cigarette the very second he left the house. Mum exorcised the lingering demons of tobacco stench with a liberal broadcast of air freshener. She even sprayed her beloved roses outside in the front garden for good measure.

The fate of the birthday girl? Well, I retired to my bedroom. As per usual.

For a short while, half an hour at the most, I browsed social media on my laptop. However, as none of my very few online connections had posted anything interesting, apart from annoying mentions of Queen Aimee’s “wow” of a party last night, my enthusiasm for the online social scene soon melted away to nothing.

Another half an hour later saw me sitting on my bed, digital voice recorder in hand. Sure, it was an unwanted present (I only said it was cool, I didn’t actually feel the need to own one), but I figured I’d make use of the device at least once before losing it to a drawer and forgetting about it. Oh, and get this. I was so bored and disillusioned, I decided to record half a conversation on my new toy. Why half a conversation? Well, this was why:

‘Hello, Mallory,’ I said to myself. ‘How are you this evening?’

I hit the Play button on the device. My pre-recorded voice replied, ‘Oh, hello, Mallory. I’m fine, thank you. How are you?’

I paused the recording and said, ‘Not that you’re the least bit interested in what I have to say... even though, technically, you are me... I’m feeling very depressed tonight.’

Play.

PRE-RECORDED VOICE: ‘Why are you feeling depressed?’

Pause.

ACTUAL ME: 'I want to be popular, but I don't know how to turn my wish into a reality.'

Play.

PRE-RECORDED VOICE: 'Oh, don't be such a melon, Mallory. Your stupid wish will never be realised.'

Pause.

ACTUAL ME: 'Why not?'

Play.

PRE-RECORDED VOICE: 'Why do you think, you idiot? Because you're a fuzzy-grey background girl.'

I pressed stop, terminating the bizarre confab. It was official. I'd gone bonkers. Talking to myself may well have been the first sign of madness, but conversing with Pre-recorded Me took my madness level to the point of no return. Goodbye sanity, it was nice knowing you.

There then came a gentle knock on the bedroom door.

'Who is it?' I called, flat and dispassionate, not in the mood for the hassle of company.

The door opened. Veronica Braithwaite sauntered into the room, somewhat pale in the face, not quite her usual over-excited self. 'It's me. Happy birthday.' She then frowned. 'Who were you talking to just now?'

Self-conscious, I hastily placed the device on the top of my bedside cabinet. 'Nobody.'

'Oh. That's strange. I thought I heard voices.'

I chose not to go into detail about said voices. Best to keep quiet about my newfound hobby of self-conversation. Nobody would understand. And besides, I had something far more important to ask.

'Why didn't you come to my party?'

‘Malls, I’m really sorry.’ A repentant Veronica shuffled over to the bed and parked her bum. ‘I’ve been hanging badly all day. At one point, I thought I was going to die.’

‘What did your parents have to say about you getting drunk at a wild party?’

‘They don’t know anything about it. They think I stayed the night at a friend’s house. When I got home, I gave them the old must have eaten something dodgy excuse.’

Hmm, maybe it was best that I hadn’t attended Aimee’s booze-fest after all, otherwise I would also no doubt feel like death warmed up. It just went to prove that fifteen/sixteen-year-old bodies weren’t designed to take such a beating. After all, the minimum legal age of alcohol consumption was there for a very good reason.

‘You could have at least sent a text to let me know you weren’t coming,’ I made a point of stressing, if only to drum it in, to make sure the girl knew she’d let me down.

‘I’m here now, aren’t I?’ came Veronica’s rather flimsy defence.

I could see she was waiting for me to ask THE question. So I did. ‘Apart from getting off your face on booze, what was Aimee’s party like?’

‘Oh, wow, Malls, it was, like, totally amazing.’ Her trademark over-excited squeal was back with a vengeance. ‘Everybody from school was there. And loads of older boys. Hey, allegedly, Aimee lost her virginity. To a twenty-three-year-old. Twenty-three!’

‘What do you mean allegedly? Surely you know whether she had sex or not.’

‘Mallory, it’s not like I was standing in her bedroom at the time. All I know is, she went upstairs with this guy and she came down fifteen minutes later with a big smile on her face.’

Okay, so it looked as though Aimee Taylor’s cherry had been popped. Well, it was hardly a surprise. Bound to happen sooner or later. Oh, and it was the first sex session of many, I surmised. Knowing how many boys openly lusted after the girl, she had a massive waiting list of hopeful sexual partners. Whore.

Veronica then asked, ‘Why didn’t you make an appearance?’

‘I did. But Aimee wouldn’t let me in. She thought it wouldn’t be my scene. It probably wasn’t, but it would have been nice to find that out for myself.’

‘Oh, Malls, I had no idea. She never mentioned you turning up.’

‘Really? I thought the bitch would mega-gloat about it.’ Oh, and then an afterthought of the gut-twisting variety reared its minging head. Trying my hardest not to sound desperate and need (but no doubt failing miserably), I asked, ‘Did Nathan Edwards get off with anybody?’

Veronica shook her head. ‘He chatted to his mates all evening.’

My subsequent sigh of relief was so loud, it could probably be heard from the moon.

‘But he wasn’t short of offers,’ the girl hastened to add. ‘Malls, if you want a piece of Nathan Edwards, you’d better be prepared to stand at the end of a very long queue.’

‘No chance, I’m tired of waiting. The way I see it, the only method of winning Nathan’s affection is to become popular. Like, literally overnight. So I’ve made a decision. I don’t care what it takes or what I have to do to get there. Mallory Finch is determined to climb right to the very top of the ladder of notoriety.’

Little did I know, I’d set the wheels in motion for an impending flash-flood of disaster. It wouldn’t be long before my life (as well as the lives of many others) would be totally trashed...

...and Aimee Taylor’s life would be totally over.

## #NOW

I instruct Ian to exit via the next slip road. He gives a nod. The clock-like click-click, click-click of the indicator fills the metal chariot in which we ride. We leave the motorway and approach a roundabout, its signage pointing Here, There and Everywhere.

‘Second exit,’ comes my next command.

As you can see, I don’t need a satnav or a map to navigate the locality. Sure, it’s been a while, way too long, so many years have passed, so much proverbial water has flowed under that equally proverbial bridge, but I know exactly where I’m going.

We follow a picturesque B road flanked on both sides by the deep green of forestry, a welcome break from the dull monotony of several torturous hours of grey.

Five minutes later, ooh, I spot it. The country lane which will lead us to our destination.

‘Ian, take this left.’

We make the turning, click-click, click-click, click-click, then sail an unhurried cruise along the narrow lane. We are blessed with the tranquillity of the countryside, but all Ian can grumble about is the hope that we don’t encounter another vehicle coming the other way, grumble, grumble, grumble, this country lane isn’t very wide, grumble, grumble, grumble, should be more lay-bys, grumble, grumble, grumble, better not meet a bloody oncoming tractor. In response, I shut off my ears to such banal droning. Moan, moan, bloody moan. Please don’t let Ian turn out to be a serial moaner. I don’t think I could stand it.

Oh, good. He has shut up now.

I peer out through the glass at the very heart of nature. Leafy hedgerows greet us on both sides. Beyond these living perimeters stand crops of juvenile green, dancing gently in the breeze, waiting patiently for the inevitable gold of maturity. As a girl far more accustomed to concrete, tarmac and petrol fumes, I find it a breathtaking sight. Well, apart from the glaring

ugliness of a pylon-esque mobile phone signal tower in the near-distance, rising up through the treetops, scratching the sky. A metal monstrosity, yes, but at least we will enjoy a half-decent phone signal. Not that I actually want to call anybody. Because I don't. This fresh new start means I've cut everybody out of my life. All the people I have ever known since my creation are now a part of my past. You could say I've packed them away in a virtual box, closed and sealed, never to be re-opened. I must keep it that way. I must look to the future.

I. Must. Keep. Moving. Forward.

OMG, that's when it comes into view. My secret happy place.

'There it is,' I squeal, brimming with elation.

Nothing about our destination has changed. Same old nineteenth century (at least I think it's nineteenth century) cottage. Same old dense ivy clinging on for dear life to the weather-worn orange-brown brickwork. Same old gravel-smothered driveway semi-circling its way around a front garden bursting with vivid explosions of colour. Oh, wow, this place is exactly how I remember it. It still remains, in my own eyes at least, the most beautiful display of antiquarian rural architecture ever. Unspoilt by modern hands. Forever frozen in time.

Welcome waterfalls of colourful past recollections cascade into my mind. A time of sweet innocence. Blue skies. Golden fields. Floral meadows. Multi-coloured snowstorms of fluttering, dancing butterflies. Oh, and the never-ending laughter of childkind. Once again I am that giggling, running, skipping youngster of yesteryear.

#happythoughts

Nobody will find me here. Nobody will even think to look. As such, I am safe. Very safe. Protected by the four strong walls of my happy place, nobody will judge me, nobody will taunt me, nobody will despise me. My new life. Zero haters.

We pull into the driveway. The gravel cricks, cracks and crunks under-tyre, signalling our arrival in no uncertain terms. The car slows to a halt. Handbrake pulled, engine killed, Ian throws the building a curious glance.

‘What is this place?’

‘My parents’ holiday home.’

A flame of concern flickers in Ian’s eyes. ‘Do they rent it out to people?’

This is one question I hoped I’d be able to avoid. ‘Sometimes, yes.’

‘Have you made sure it’s not booked up for the foreseeable future? The last headache we need is the arrival of paying guests.’

‘Nobody is coming. It isn’t quite summer yet.’

‘Are you sure? I once rented a country cottage out of season.’

‘Yes, I’m sure.’ The fresh shoots of a wistful smile bud upon my face. ‘From the age of seven until I was ten, I spent two weeks of each August here. Good times. So many wonderful memories.’

It’s strange. Ian looks a tad bemused as he sits in silence, deep in thought, studying the exterior of the building, as if... I don’t know... sizing it up perhaps?

‘What’s the matter?’ I decide to enquire, needing to know what this guy is thinking.

‘It’s a bit on the small side.’ His eyes then widen. ‘How many bedrooms?’

Ah, I get it now. The man is clearly dreading the fact that this could turn out to be a single bedroom property, meaning he’ll be forced to share slumber with a barely legal schoolgirl.

‘Relax,’ I assure him. ‘There are two bedrooms. One for me and one for you.’

Relief washes across his face like a fresh wave over pebbles. In a way, the sight is rather amusing. I would have laughed, loud and unbridled, had this been a different time, a different place, an altogether different situation.

‘Does this place come equipped with a kettle?’ comes his recovery query.

‘Believe me, this cottage has everything we need.’

‘Good. I’m dying for a coffee.’

Hmm, well, at least I hope it boasts everything we require. As I recall, during my stays here, I never wanted for anything, I never went without, I never missed any home comforts.

We both alight from the vehicle. While I pluck my rucksack from the footwell, Ian strolls over to the rear of the car. He flips open the boot and produces a large holdall bulging with his necessities, God knows what, all his worldly possessions by the look of it. Mind you, I guess I should applaud the guy for his shrewd forward-thinking. After all, the two of us aren’t exactly sure how long we will be staying here. I for one haven’t yet contemplated that far ahead. Nevertheless, I am mega-relieved to find myself five hours away from the horrible nightmare I created. Away from the aftermath, away from the consequences, away from the fatal fall-out of my terrible, terrible lie.

#freshnewstart

Crunch, crunch, crunch shouts the gravel below our feet as we make our way over to the entrance. Once there, I stop and stare at the weathered wooden front door which has greeted visitors for generations. Beyond this door lies both the familiarity of my childhood past and the uncertainty of my adult future.

Here marks the official end of my old existence...

...and the official beginning of the new.

Ian offers me an expectant glance. ‘Letting us in might be a good idea.’

‘You can do the honours.’

‘And how do you suggest I do that?’

I point downwards to an upside-down clay flowerpot minding its own business next to the hessian doormat. ‘You’ll find the key under there.’

‘As if.’ Ian squats low and proceeds to raise the flowerpot. ‘Nobody in their right mind puts their front door key under a –’ Introducing the aforementioned front door key in all its glory. ‘Oh.’

‘Told you.’

Shrugging it off, Ian rises to his feet. He slots the key into the lock and gives it a twist. The ageing door creaks open, inviting the two of us into a wondrous realm of times past. The tiny yet refreshingly cosy lounge boasts rustic brickwork decor, a majestic stone fireplace and mahogany cabinets of a bygone age. The only clues telling us we’re not back in nineteenth century England are the (almost modern, probably a decade old) two-seater sofa and armchair which seek to rule the roost, plus a flatscreen TV and accompanying remote control sitting upon a cabinet in the far corner. Just as I discovered with the exterior of this building, nothing has changed. Everything is exactly how I remember it.

‘Keys under flowerpots,’ mumbles Ian, dumping his holdall on the patterned carpet, a tad frayed and threadbare in places, displaying the toils of serving all who have stayed here for decades. ‘I’ve seen it all now. Don’t your parents worry about this place getting burgled? Or squatters moving in?’

‘Ian, we’re practically in the middle of nowhere. You won’t find any burglars or squatters out here. You won’t find anybody. Why do you think I chose this cottage? It’s perfect as a hiding place.’

Ian releases a grunt which I assume means, ‘Right, okay.’ He then walks over to the TV and gives it life, flicking through channels via rapid stabs of the remote control.

In response, I remark, ‘Why is checking to see if the TV works the first task people perform when they arrive at their holiday destination? All around us grows the beauty of Mother Nature, yet here you are, making sure you won’t miss EastEnders.’

‘Mallory, I’d hardly call this a holiday.’ He fires the remote at the TV one last time, killing picture and sound. ‘If you must know, I’m making sure we can pick up all the main channels. Remember, you’re still big news. And now you’ve run away from home. Which means, as soon as the media gets wind of your disappearance, you’ll be hitting the headlines.’

‘Yet again.’

‘Exactly.’

As you can no doubt tell, I’m not too thrilled about the prospect of a second wave of seeing my face on the news, hearing my name dragged through the clammiest of mud, watching in helpless silence as my proverbial dirty laundry is aired in public. As such, I can’t help blowing out a long-trailing sigh, regretting everything I once said about wanting to get noticed. Oh, why did I have to make such a wish when I blew out those sixteen birthday candles? We all know what they say. Be careful what you wish for, for it may well come true. And it has. Big-time. And so, here I stand, miles from home, cut off from my former life, wondering whether things would have turned out differently for me if I hadn’t made that wish.

‘It’s best we don’t miss any news bulletins,’ Ian continues, bringing me out of thought city and back to the real world. ‘We need to be kept in the loop about what’s going on.’

I regard his last sentence and stare into space. ‘I always knew what was going on before my phone died a horrible death.’

Yes, that’s right. My mobile phone has sadly passed away. To say I was devastated by its recent demise is the understatement of the century. Up until its final day of electronic living, I used my phone for everything. As well as my routine trawl through various social media platforms, my daily phone usage included browsing bus or train times if I needed to be somewhere, checking my weather app if the sky above didn’t give me enough clues, playing games if I was bored out of my skull, and so on, and so on. It was sort of like a good friend to

me. Poor phone. I'm sure it knew how much I cared. And I hope it didn't suffer too much during its final seconds of life.

'It's weird,' I continue. 'I didn't realise how much I actually depended on it.'

'You've got a new phone now. The one I gave you.'

My face crumples. 'What, that crappy thing? All I can do with it is text and make calls.'

'It's a standard Pay As You Go handset I bought online for peanuts,' comes his response which sounds way too much like he's defending it.

'Exactly. A starter phone. The type parents buy for young kids. You could have at least got me one with internet on it.'

Ian dons a serious face. 'Even if that phone did have online access, you wouldn't be able to use it.'

'Why not?'

'Because I wouldn't let you.'

My face drops. 'What do you mean you wouldn't let me?' Rebellious teenager mode kicks in. 'You can't tell me what to do, you're not my dad.'

'I'm not trying to be. I'm just –'

'Has your phone got internet?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Can I borrow it? To check something.'

'I'm sorry, but that's totally out of the question.'

'I'll only be a couple of minutes, I promise.'

'No.'

'Ian, please. I need to see if people are still slagging me off on social media.' God, I can't believe I'm sounding like an addict desperate for a fresh fix. Although, thinking about it, maybe I am addicted to the internet. Maybe we all are. Every last one of us.