# #justsaying

by

Mikey Jackson

Novel. YA social media drama

www.mikeyjackson.com

# #JUSTSAYING

It was only a prank. A childish act of revenge. Nothing more than a stupid throwaway comment that 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 online socials scene 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, 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 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.

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

Again, zero response.

Warning shots spent, she barged into Aimee's domain and marched over to the motionless human shape residing beneath its duvet cocoon. 'Get out of that bed right now! You can help me with the housework.'

Still nothing.

Unwilling to swallow further defiance from her wayward 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.' Further nudging, further 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 carton of pills taking pride of place on the bedside cabinet. The very same pills prescribed to Mrs Taylor 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 carton. Upon inspection, open, empty. Spotting the three former resident blister packs on the carpet, she plucked them from their resting place. All compartments, foil seals broken, zero pills remaining.

Fuelled by bulge-eyed horror, Mrs Taylor snatched the girl by both shoulders, shake, shake, shake. ‘You stupid girl! How many pills have you taken?’ Shake, shake, shake. ‘Aimee, can you hear me? How many have you swallowed?’ She switched from shaking her daughter’s limp frame to tapping her pallid cheeks, struggling to free the cataleptic teen from the bottomless abyss of pitch-black unconsciousness. ‘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.

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

Death had already been and gone.

# #NOW (The present day)

So 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. In the fame game sense, I lean closer towards known and recognised than infamous and celebrated.

Explanation time: I recently played the starring role in a news story. A massive news story. In fact, totally humungous, spreading all over the internet, in newspapers, on the radio, on national TV, everywhere. My sole claim to fame, the worst mistake of my life. Like, totally ever.

*Insert facepalm here.*

No, no, actually, make it a double facepalm.

Extended version.

Yes. It's that mortifying.

Introducing the just-turned-sixteen-year-old female of the species known as Mallory Finch. That's me. Obviously. The very same Mallory Finch who has screwed up everything. Oh, yes, 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, the absolute dead of night or 3.00AM, the very genesis of morning. You decide.

Under cover of the shadowy gloom of this moonless night (or morning), I sneak out of the front garden and along the street towards a red car parked a short distance away. The driver, Ian Jenkins, is all set to take me to the remote and faraway destination of... sorry, for now, that's classified information.

It's official. Mallory Finch is running away from home.

My plan is #bonkers. 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 prehistoric.

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, leaving all the poor souls who have fallen victim to the crushing aftershock of my terrible, terrible lie free to heal their wounds and steer their fractured lives back on track again.

Oh, I find myself stopping dead in my tracks, my conscience trying its best to hold me back. Nice try, brain, but you can jog on. Aborting my plan can't happen, I won't allow it. And so, I close my eyes as tight as I can manage in a desperate attempt to relegate all guilt, fear and doubt concerning exactly what I'm leaving behind (my family, my home, my whole 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.

So then I'm on the move again, literally tip-toeing down the street, careful not to invite the threat of unwanted eyes behind the twitching curtains of insomniac neighbours. 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. But oh, upon opening the passenger door, I find myself once again hitting my pause button, the voice of reason attempting to quash my plans.

Ian picks up on my hesitation. 'Mallory, are you sure you want to do this? If you've changed your mind, you can always turn around and go home.'

‘No,’ I respond, resolute, determined, jabbing a virtual extended middle finger at that annoying voice of reason as I climb inside the vehicle, land my rucksack in the footwell and buckle up. ‘We stick to the plan.’

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

‘Ian, will you promise me one thing?’

He throws me a curious glance. ‘Sure.’

‘No questions about 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.’

‘Consider your wish granted.’

My resulting smile has gratitude written all over it.

And as the vehicle 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 have 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.

# #THEN (Before the lie)

Before I was (sort of) famous, before certain events prompted a numpty like me to even consider posting such a vicious comment online and before the damning media reports were 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. Never big news. Well, at least not until the day that changed everything. Ah, but the day in question hadn't yet arrived, leaving me blissfully ignorant of what was to come.

'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 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. Bad parenting, I guessed, or at least a tad on the iffy side. But who was I to cast aspersions? My own upbringing was hardly a major success story. I'd ended up a total nobody. Which meant my parents were just as bad.

#epicparentsfail

Thinking about it, this was probably why the two of us 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.

Sure, I had a minor scattering of casual acquaintances connected to me on all the usual social media platforms, but Veronica was currently my only proper real-world friend. Which was kind of strange. These so-called acquaintances didn't mind virtually associating with me online, populating my posts every now and then with corresponding comments alongside members of the emoji family, but in reality chose to keep their distance. 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?'

Of course I wasn't going to Aimee Taylor's birthday party. But not by choice. So embarrassing. To save face, I figured I'd try my hand at spouting something nonchalant, detached, couldn't-care-less-able. What came out of my mouth instead at such short notice was a somewhat pants, 'My to-do list says I'm busy washing my hair.'

'Malls, you can't possibly miss the event of the year,' Veronica chirped in her usual over-excited way, picking up the second trophy 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?'

I considered a second attempt at acting all nonchalant, detached, couldn't-care-less. But what was the point? Veronica would discover the truth eventually. So I admitted, 'I don't think Aimee has any intention of inviting me.'

'Why not?'

‘As a fuzzy-grey background girl, I’m not important enough. My job is to be fuzzy and grey and blend into the background, not bag the golden ticket to an evening of wild celebration, parents not included.’

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 rights to certain privileges by constantly gushing about Aimee Taylor, 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. In total contrast, I 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.

#sodepressing

The shrill of the school bell signalled the end of the lunchtime break. As such, we 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?’ Veronica needed to learn.

‘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.’

‘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. The two of us, inseparable.’

I felt a wistful smile stretching across my face as I recalled 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.

‘Or so I thought,’ I sighed, waving goodbye to my short-lived honey-glazed nostalgia. ‘The friendship I thought would last forever ended way too abruptly.’

‘Maybe you should quit worrying about the past,’ Veronica sought to advise me as the two of us entered our designated classroom and claimed unoccupied seating, ‘and start working out what you want for your future.’

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.’

‘Chocolate?’

‘No.’

‘The latest mobile phone?’

‘Not even close.’

My friend shrugged her shoulders, already 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.’

‘Malls, I am totally, totally serious.’

Knowing Veronica, she probably was.

It was then when the love of my life sauntered into the classroom. Nathan Edwards. So fit. Like, totally drop dead of the gorgeous variety. Mmm, my eyes feasted upon his boyish good looks, his mahogany eyes, his ruffled oak-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 well popular. And he was mine. All mine.

Okay, hands up, massive exaggeration. We weren't a couple. Not in reality. Instead, our wild and reckless romance raged in the deepest depths of my frustrated imagination.

Look, just for the record, this was no dumb schoolgirl crush, okay? 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. I just wish 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 currently taking a pit-stop at the front tables to chat to his mates, 'he'd stroll on over and take me in his manly arms.'

#wishfulthinking

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 problem that girl.'

Too right I had a problem. I harboured the biggest problem with 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. Instead, I continued to soapbox my views.

‘Social acceptance is an important part of growing up. It determines who we are 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.’

‘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 popularity. You know, like, 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 Line Ever chart.

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

‘All relationships start somewhere.’

‘If you’re that confident in your beliefs, 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 parents use to try and act clever, but instead look like total morons.’

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

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

‘Aren’t unwritten rules made to be broken?’

‘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.’

Before the fit boy I fancied could float past our table, Veronica blocked his path. ‘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. ‘Oh, definitely.’

Nathan turned to face 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 zero legitimate sounds emerged, apart from the most feeble of croaks.

#fail

‘Of course Mallory will be there,’ Veronica cut in on my behalf.

‘Cool.’ And then the boy of my dreams continued his journey to a table at the rear of the classroom.

‘He spoke to me,’ I wheezed, dizzy 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.

As such, I blew out a sigh, elbows upon table, my disenchanted chin supported by my upward duo-palm scaffolding. ‘I’ve held longer conversations with strangers at bus stops.’

Oh, how I wished I could harness 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 different. 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 definitely be interested. We’d kiss, we’d cuddle, we’d become an item, boyfriend and girlfriend, the king and queen of the entire school and beyond.

Ah, but I was nowhere near the mountain-high level of prominence required to become the aforementioned cool and popular and trendy and totally worshipped. My raging ambition to date the fittest boy who had ever existed was nothing more than a sugary reverie born out of sheer blinkered delusion. Oh, God, I had to face facts. I was nobody special, an invisible human being, undeserving of the attention I so greatly desired. In other words, a fuzzy-grey background girl.

☹

#coldhardtruth

# #NOW

I sit in silence, staring out through the windscreen of Ian's car, my eyes focussed on an indigo blanket of stars gracefully stepping 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.

Aside from a dull, niggling ache in my gut, my body is numb. This is so bizarre, so surreal, 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. It's all gone, it's all over, and now I'm running on empty.

Is this what every despised loser goes through 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 for just over three hours. I am so bored of this monotonous motorway, an endless grey expanse of concrete and tarmac, flanked on both sides by scurrying smudges of green.

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

'I thought we agreed not to mention anything about what happened.'

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

'But what?'

'Just wondering why you felt the need to involve <u>him</u>.'

Unwilling to play the role of consenting interviewee, I offer nothing more than an impassive shrug of the shoulders.

‘Did he hurt you in any way?’ comes his next question.

‘He had nothing 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.

‘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 surrender.

Giving in, Ian fires up the car stereo. A radio DJ, way too boisterous for this ungodly hour introduces the brand new track from the latest trendy pop star who sounds exactly like the previous trendy pop star. Beats, bass, plinky-plonky keyboards and irritating vocal warbles sewage-sludge 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. But this changes nothing. Behind a wall of stubborn silence, I face forward, my 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. Across the kitchen table, she enquired, '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 absolute centre of the universe, the sole topic of conversation, the be all and end all of everything? It certainly looked that way.

'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 saddo 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 <u>are</u> 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.

Mum fired me a bemused glance. '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 classroom fame and glory? '...kind of drifted apart.' No. I didn't. At least not in so many words.

'Even so, 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 even 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. Because of so much hype placed upon Aimee’s sixteenth, I’d almost forgotten about my own big day. You see, early on in our friendship, we’d hit upon the discovery that the two of us were born a mere twenty-four hours apart. 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. But that was then, this was now. The double celebration hadn’t happened for a long time, not for several years.

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

‘She...’ 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? ‘...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.’ 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 saw Aimee Taylor as yesteryear’s preteen porcelain doll with quirky pigtails and a cute smile, not her current incarnation of a teenage bossy bitch.

#madbuttrue

Thinking about it, 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 only 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 fit boys, alcohol, trendy music and no parents. Whereas Sad Sixteen Mallory would be surrounded tomorrow afternoon by no fit boys, soft drinks, cheesy music and parents standing guard. Oh, and then there was the strict finishing time of 5:00PM. Yes, that's right. In the afternoon! No wonder Aimee and myself now found ourselves on opposing sides of the spectrum regarding self-confidence, personality, lifestyle 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. Bye, Mum, bye, Dad. See you both when you get back.'

Cue the triumphant air punch.

#sojealous

Meanwhile, back in the real world, my mother remarked, 'A girl your age shouldn't be stuck indoors every night. It's not natural.'

'Agreed.' My father seemed to like that particular A-word. 'Go and say hello to Aimee tonight. All right, so the two of you have drifted apart. But that doesn't mean you can't drift closer again.'

'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, moping around with your bottom lip dragging along the carpet. There’s good telly on tonight.’

‘Okay, fine, you win!’ I blurted out, raising both palms, a visual verification of my 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.

Hey, 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 asked their guests to each bring a bottle. The invitees would then arrive, bargain-basement wine in hand, with zero intention of actually consuming the cheap yuck-stuff they'd brought along. Instead, they'd tuck into the far more agreeable beers, wine and spirits laid on by their genial hosts. The following morning, my folks would discover the unopened bottles of abandoned and pretty much undrinkable wine, groan, grumble, not more bloody vinegar, and promptly store them right at the back of the drinks cabinet, ready and waiting for whenever they could in turn fly-trip the second-rate booze at somebody else's party.

Just to be clear, when I say my parents hosted parties, I'm talking relaxed and subdued gatherings with handpicked friends and acquaintances engaging in mundane conversations while 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.

Oh, by the way, I'd like to point out, I didn't actually plan to drink this bottle of wine. Aside from the annual solitary flute of cheap bubbly on New Year's Eve, I'd never properly

sampled booze. Why? Simple. 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. But not Mallory Finch. Oh, no, I was practically tee-total. In the eyes of my peers, this made me dull, boring and invisible.

Even though it was barely eight in the evening, 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 human beings, all participants losing themselves in various degrees of drunkenness. Oh, how I yearned to play my part within that exciting crowd, a true somebody, a VIP member of the elite. But no, I couldn't see myself building up adequate courage to waltz in without an invitation. 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 welcomed and accepted by this jovial community. Until then, I'd simply wait and see what happened.

And so I waited. 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.

#soembarrassing

It looked as though I was destined to spend the rest of the evening standing by myself in this very spot. But what if a pervy kerb-crawler pulled up, mistaking me for a sex worker? Could I take the shame, especially in front of all those partygoers? No way.

Oh, a thought popped into my head. Somewhere inside that merry household, gorgeous Nathan Edwards was chatting, laughing and drinking. This very thought prompted me to hope and pray that the boy of my dreams 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, a second thought begged to share headspace with the first. Veronica Braithwaite had been invited, the girl in question no doubt standing 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 the bitch force-feeding me brown tonguing duties in return, then maybe, just maybe I could get up close and personal to the boy I fancied. Yes. Good plan.

As Veronica's phone number was easy-peasy to remember, containing two sixes, two fives and two fours clustered together, I found it faster to jabby-jab the memorable numerical sequence into the keypad than select it from my contacts list. Anyway, it rang. And rang. And rang some more. Then it switched to voicemail. Bloody hell. 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. But it definitely wasn't Veronica. Nor was it Nathan. The mystery gatekeeper was... oh, my God. The most popular girl in the entire school herself.

Aimee Taylor.

Draped in a dress that 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? ‘I came to wish you a happy birthday.’

‘Likewise, happy birthday for tomorrow.’

Wow. Eye-opener or what? I was surprised the girl even remembered.

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

Wasn’t it obvious? Here stood Miss Desperado, seriously wanting in. Ah, but admitting this very fact would render me guilty of begging. And so, 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 demeanour, my way too sensible dress-sense. ‘You’re hardly life of the party material.’

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 naïve. 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 actually.’

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 my 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. ‘You were the first girl in our primary school to develop boobs.’

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

‘Errrr, hello? Like, everything. 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. As such, everybody (except me, of course) laid down their arms, eager to be led by their newly crowned queen. Herd mentality at its most absurd.

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 yesteryear acquaintances. 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.

The very same Queen Aimee who didn’t look at all convinced by my puberty spurt theory. ‘So... if my “turning point” hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t be popular. Is that what you’re saying?’

‘That’s exactly what I’m saying.’

‘Look. Mallory.’ The monarch clearly wished to conclude this conversation at the earliest possible convenience. ‘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. ‘Maybe if you lived a little once in a while, things would be different. But you don’t. Ever.’

Aimee was right. I was certainly no friend magnet, nor was I the type to party all night. 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 yearned to get as close as possible to Nathan’s kissable lips and fit body, could I truthfully see myself making any effort to pursue the guy? 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 cold-call play for a boy, 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.

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

‘A bottle of wine.’

I watched as 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 shook my head, a pitiful no.

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

Ever the undying submissive, I handed over the goods, so thus keeping up the family tradition of passing the unwanted, undrinkable wine over to the next mug. Good riddance to cheap and yucky vinegar-esque slosh.

‘Time for you to head home, Mallory,’ Aimee said as she headed back across the street. ‘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 out, both fists clenching, unclenching, clenching, unclenching with the frustration of it all. ‘You won’t always be the most popular girl in the school.’

The girl in the scant dress stopped beside her front door and turned around. ‘Is that a fact?’

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

‘Are you threatening me?’

‘Call it a friendly warning.’ I couldn’t help but deliver a fake 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?’

‘No, it’s a burglar.’

It was a sarcastic remark, not an attempt at light-hearted humour. Even though, Dad still laughed. ‘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, 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 manage to make peace with the girl? Blah, 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. 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 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 in a cloudless blue sky and two young girls at play, the best of friends, both immersed in the purest of innocence, and so far untainted by the wicked 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.'

Very soon, we will reach my secret happy place.

Nobody will think of looking for me there.

Nobody at all.

# #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 breakfast, nothing new there, followed by the opening of two (yes, only two) birthday cards, one from my parents, the other from Great Auntie Whatever 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 four guests in attendance. Yes, that’s right. Four. At a milestone occasion.

#partyfail

Breaking down the statistics, my parents were present by default. So 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, no cards or presents from either, the two of them no doubt only turning up out of family loyalty. Oh, and as for myself, it felt as though my very presence here was merely to make up the numbers. Hah! At my own birthday party.

Predicting a low turn-out, 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!

That’s my phone’s text notification sound, if you were wondering.

APOLOGETIC (SORT OF) MATE #1: “Yo, Mallory. Soz. Can’t make it. 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 rather 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.”

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 I’d classed as a dead-cert. Hah, yeah, right. Worse still, my scatty schoolmate had failed to text me a reason why.

#storyofmylife

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

Trying to make it look as though I was an active participant, I aimed my face towards the birthday cake and blew hard. Sixteen flickering flames surrendered to my sharp gust of breath, making way for delicate swirls of after-smoke. Candles vanquished, I 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,' groaned Mum. 'Her wish will only come true if she keeps it a secret.'

'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 birthday cake into equal portions. 'Who wants a wedge?'

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 number of 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 have to remind everybody about the minuscule amount of bodies in the room? It was bad enough having to accept that I was unloved and unadmired as an individual. And so, as a way of distracting myself from the embarrassment, I wondered if my secret wish for the golden prize of popularity would be heard. Oh, to bathe in 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 catch a glimpse of the star of the show. Oh, yes, if I was popular, this party would be the main event, a trending topic, the number one place to be.

#pleasemakemywishcometrue

'Mmm, this cake is bloody gorgeous,' mumbled my mother, courtesy of a gob full of E numbers. 'Would you like a slice, birthday girl?'

'No thanks, Mum.'

Mum swallowed the moist mess of sponge and icing. 'Are you sure? 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.'

'Yes, thank you, Steve,' a rumbled Mum hissed. '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. ‘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,’ he said. ‘Hurry up and open it.’

As requested, 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.

I opened the flap and released a curious (and so far unidentified) electronic object from its cardboard prison. ‘Okaaaaaaay.’ The truth is, this year, I’d expected the shoes I’d endlessly hinted for. Or failing that, a gift card, the type of purchase made by people who don’t have a clue what to buy as a present. Not this... 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 that 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 taking a stroll through the shopping centre. You spotted that man in a suit reciting a memo into a voice recorder and you said, “Hey, that’s cool. I’d like one of those.”’

In turn, 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, 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 possibly recall a remark I’d made six months ago. Parents weren’t supposed to listen to their children... and vice versa. It was an unwritten parent/child law. Never to be broken. Ever.

‘Oh, Mallory, who would have thought it?’ Mum gushed, smiling at me in that rare doting fashion strictly reserved for milestone occasions. ‘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 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. Like... smoke.’

Dad chipped in, ‘I think you’ll find they upped the minimum age for buying cigarettes yonks ago.’

‘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.’

‘That’s all I need,’ Mum grumbled. ‘Now all the roses will reek of tobacco.’ And then she revisited the “sixteen laws” conversation. ‘What else can Mallory legally do?’

‘She’s old enough to buy a lottery ticket,’ came Dad’s suggestion.

‘Ooh, no, Steve. The minimum age is now eighteen. Which is such a shame, Mallory. You could have won the jackpot.’

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

What my parents had failed to mention 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.

#fail

And so it came to pass, the party came, the party went. Nothing exciting or even remotely interesting happened in-between.

Grandma Ethel booked a taxi 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, just to make sure.

The fate of the birthday girl? 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 all 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? Here's 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 <u>are</u> 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. Your stupid wish will never come true.’

Pause.

ACTUAL ME: ‘Why not?’

Play.

PRE-RECORDED VOICE: ‘Because you’re a fuzzy-grey background girl.’

I pressed stop, terminating the bizarre confab. Sure, talking to myself was the first sign of madness, but conversing with Pre-recorded Me took my madness level to the point of no return.

There then came a gentle knock on the bedroom door.

‘Who is it?’ I called, flat and dispassionate, not in the mood for company.

The door opened. Veronica Braithwaite sauntered into the room, somewhat pale in the face, not her usual over-excited self. ‘Happy birthday.’

‘What’s so happy about it?’

She didn’t answer my question. Instead, she asked one of her own. ‘Who were you talking to just now?’

Self-conscious, I hastily placed the device upon my bedside cabinet. ‘Nobody.’

‘I thought I heard voices.’

I chose not to go into detail 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 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?’

Cue her trademark over-excited squeal, back with a vengeance. ‘Oh, wow, it was, like, totally amazing. 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.’

‘Malls, 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 massive smile on her face.’

Okay, so it looked as though Aimee Taylor had lost her virginity. Hardly a surprise. It was bound to happen sooner or later. Knowing how many boys openly lusted after the girl, she had a massive waiting list of hopeful sexual partners.

#whore

Veronica 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.’

‘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 a gut-twisting afterthought reared its ugly head. Trying my hardest not to sound desperate and needy, 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 literally overnight. So I’ve made a decision. I don’t care what it takes or what I have to do to get there. I’m 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, click-click of the indicator fills the metal chariot in which we ride. We leave the motorway and approach a roundabout.

‘Second exit,’ comes my next command.

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. 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, awaiting 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 mobile phone signal tower 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.

Oh, my God, 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. Hello again, rustic nineteenth century cottage. Hello again, chaotic veins of dense ivy clinging to the weather-worn orange-brown brickwork. Hello again, 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, a breathtaking display of antiquarian rural architecture. Unspoilt by modern hands. Forever frozen in time.

Right on cue, welcome waterfalls of colourful past recollections cascade into my mind. Blue skies. Golden fields. Floral meadows. And multi-coloured snowstorms of fluttering, dancing butterflies. A time of sweet innocence, filled with the never-ending laughter of childkind. Oh, yes, once again, I am that giggling, skipping, dancing youngster of yesteryear.

#happythoughts

Nobody will find me here. Nobody will even think to look. As such, I am 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.

As 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?’

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

‘I hope you checked and double-checked that 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, of course I’m sure.’

‘Good.’

‘From the age of seven until I was ten, I spent two weeks of each August here. So many wonderful memories.’

Ian studies the exterior of the building. ‘It’s a bit on the small side.’ His eyes widen. ‘How many bedrooms?’

Heh, 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 space with a barely legal teenager.

‘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, hearty and unbridled, had this been a different time, a different place, an altogether different situation.

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. In a way, 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. But I am so 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 that 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 posts 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 towards 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 prepares to raise the flowerpot. ‘Nobody in their right mind puts their front door key under a...’ Introducing the correctly predicted front door key. ‘...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 oak cabinets of a bygone age. The only clues telling us we’re not back in nineteenth century England are the two-seater sofa and matching armchair dominating the centre of the room, plus a 32 inch 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,’ grumbles Ian, dumping his holdall on the patterned carpet, a tad frayed and threadbare in places, displaying the toils of serving all who have enjoyed residence in this place over countless decades. ‘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.’

Releasing a not too convinced grunt, Ian walks over to the TV and gives it life, flicking through a myriad of channels via rapid stabs of the remote control.

In response, I remark, ‘Why is checking to see if the TV works the first thing people do 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.’

As I'm sure you've gathered from my just-uttered statement, my mobile phone 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 all kinds of tasks. 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, making use of my default search engine if I desperately sought answers and playing games if I was totally bored out of my skull. The device was kind 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, I wouldn't let you use it.'

'Wouldn't let me?' My face falls from a great height, rebellious teenager mode kicking 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.'

‘Five minutes online at the most, 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.

‘No,’ Ian repeats, firmer this time.

‘Why are you doing this? Why are you being so unfair, so... parent-ish?’ Now I’m sounding like a spoilt brat denied sweets.

‘Rant and rave all you like, Mallory. Going online is not happening.’

‘You can’t just ban me from the internet.’

‘Oh, yes, I can, and I have. That goes for both of us.’

‘But –’

‘Mallory, think about it. Using the internet, especially social media, leaves all kinds of digital footprints. Logs, timestamps, geo-tags. Not only that, going online activates God knows how many apps that record your location. With data like that, the authorities can track your movements and calculate your exact whereabouts.’

‘What makes you so sure they’ll even bother looking for me?’

‘Oh, believe me, girl, they will. And it won’t only be the police. The tabloids in search of another meaty story will also be trying their hardest to track you down. Now do you understand?’

I do understand. Fully. The last headache I need is making myself traceable. Even so, it doesn’t make such a groanable curfew any easier to digest.

You must think I’m such a dickhead, so naïve to suddenly pack my things and leave with a total stranger. I know I would if this was happening to another stupid teenage girl. Despite this, I agree with Ian about not missing any news bulletins. With the internet out of the

picture, the continuing TV news story of Mallory Finch is our only true window to the outside world. In order to survive, in order for my plan to work, we must stay one step ahead of everybody else.

Conversation over, Ian heads into the adjoining kitchen with its pastoral bygone feel. Copper pots and pans hang from hooks screwed into the mustard-painted brickwork. A burly, domineering square enamel sink argues supremacy of the room against a competing farmhouse table and four matching chairs. Beside the back door which leads out into a green and pleasant world, an old-fashioned free-standing wall unit proudly displays its personal collection of vintage crockery. Yet despite their many loyal years of service, all listed items stand oblivious to the presence of their far more modern cousins, a fridge-freezer, an oven, a washing machine and an electric kettle.

‘I so need a coffee,’ Ian utters, lifting the kettle from its cradle and filling it with water from the sink’s cold tap.

I throw open the doors of the wall cupboard above the main worksurface. ‘Looks like you’re out of luck with your caffeine fix. This cupboard is bare.’

Ian flicks on the kettle. ‘You reckon?’ He pops back into the lounge and over to his holdall of many objects, from which he magics a jar of coffee, a bag of sugar and a tub of powdered milk. Making his return to the kitchen, smug grin in tow, he quips, ‘I never leave home without it.’

While Ian prepares two mugs of coffee, I imagine Mum back home, one half of the woman purple with anger, the other half sick with worry, scatter-gunning a flurry of questions, why did she run away, how could she do this to us, is she okay, is she safe, is she hungry, is she missing us, is she coming home? Well, sorry, Mum, but only I hold the answers you so dearly crave, and I’m not prepared to give away any spoilers.

I also picture Dad floating in circles, shrugging his shoulders, both palms upturned, not exactly sure what to do or how to respond, the proverbial spare prick in a brothel. Oh, yes, I am certain that this is an accurate portrayal of what is going on right now in the Finch household.

Or... what if I'm wrong? What if Mum and Dad are celebrating my sharp exit with a massive party, everybody invited? It's certainly a possibility.

Hot drinks made, Ian nudges a steaming mug in my direction. Adding a burst of cold water to his own beverage, he necks the majority in one go. Wow, he was right, he did need a coffee. I watch as he opens the fridge-freezer, offering both compartments a quick search inside. Empty and empty. Next, he scrutinises the bare cupboard, making sure that no food has miraculously appeared since I last checked.

'You're right,' he says, returning the cupboard doors to their former closed state. 'This place is very Old Mother Hubbard.'

Of course there is no food here. This is a holiday home, only occupied at certain times of the year. Grocery supplies are purchased as and when required by the people staying here on a self-catering basis. After all, there is no sense in stocking a kitchen when there is nobody present who requires feeding. You see, bona fide paying tenants, we are not. The two of us are essentially the squatters Ian mentioned earlier. Sure, we might have twisted a key to gain access to the premises, but in a technical sense, we still broke in. Hmm, why didn't I think about bringing supplies? What else have I forgotten to think about?

Never mind, we won't go hungry. Ian boasts adequate cash. And I have my own money. Just over eighty pounds to my name. It's not a lot, but enough to get by for now. Before waving a final goodbye to my hometown, I emptied my bloated piggy bank. I'm not really sure what I was saving up for. Normal teenagers would have totally blown all their pocket money. But I'm not exactly normal, am I?

‘Do you know if there’s a shop nearby?’ asks Ian.

‘I recall a small convenience store in the village up the road.’

‘Right. I’ll take a quick trip in the car and grab some provisions.’

‘I’ll come with you.’

He stops me in my tracks. ‘No chance. I can’t risk you being recognised.’

‘We’re right out in the sticks.’

Ian isn’t having any of it. ‘Do people around here own TVs? Do they listen to the radio? Do they read newspapers? Has the internet been invented yet in this neck of the woods?’

This man is mocking me. Where this is leading is blatantly obvious. Even so, I still feel the need to mutter, ‘Yes to all four questions.’

‘In that case, the locals will know exactly who you are.’

‘Not everybody watches TV or listens to the radio or –’

‘Mallory. Under no circumstances can you step foot outside this cottage.’

‘Are you telling me I can’t go out at all?’

‘Exactly that, yes.’

‘You can’t hold me prisoner. It was bad enough trapped in my Mum and Dad’s house, surrounded by all those bloody reporters.’

‘It has to be this way.’

‘Ian, if I don’t get any fresh air, I’ll explode.’

‘It’s too dangerous. If somebody clocks you, we’ll both be in the shit. You must realise that.’

All of a sudden, my newfound freedom away from all who despise me doesn’t smell so rosy. Likewise, I’m guessing Ian has only just realised how much of a humungous risk he is taking in getting involved in my affairs.

The man in question glances across at me in the same way a maths teacher narrows his eyes at a dumb pupil who fails to understand a simple equation. ‘Something tells me you haven’t quite thought through this running away lark.’

#ouch

He’s wrong. Actually, correction, he’s half-wrong and half-right. I have indeed thought long and hard about the concept of running away from home. But I haven’t taken into account all the necessary logistics after the fact. I keep telling myself I have this grand plan, but when I take a step back, it doesn’t look as though I have a plan at all. At least not anything concrete or workable. If I’m honest, my calculations never extended beyond getting the hell out of A as quickly as possible. I kind of figured I’d consider the implications of my hasty departure once I’d safely arrived at B... which in hindsight doesn’t sound too clever.

Even so, I refuse to admit my lack of preparation. ‘Oh, believe me, Ian,’ I stress with the utmost conviction. ‘I’ve thought about very little else.’

‘Good,’ he replies, opening the front door. ‘Then you’ll know you need to stay put.’

And then he makes his departure, leaving a certain runaway teenager under house arrest, all alone with nothing but her uncertain thoughts for company.

#bummer