



**DEAR  
RACHEL  
MADDOW**

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RACHEL  
MADDOW**

*A NOVEL*

**ADRIENNE KISNER**



**FEIWEL AND FRIENDS**

**NEW YORK**

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK  
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*TO NA, AMANDA, AND AMY—  
WITH ALL MY HEART*

Folder: Sent  
To: Egrimm@westing.pa.edu  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 10  
Subject: School Assignment

Dear Rachel Maddow,

I am writing to you because of a school assignment. It's a totally lame reason to be writing, but I don't think you'll actually read it anyway. This kind of thing is so sixth grade. I am a junior in high school and I've been forced to write to a "celebrity hero" by the Applied Language Arts teacher. (Hey, Mr. Grimm! How's it hanging, buddy?) I wasn't going to do it, because my ex-girlfriend worships you and, hello, school assignment. But I turned on your show and Mom totally freaked out to see me watching you. Apparently your *liberal* and *leftist* views don't sit well with her. Mom spat out the words like she was talking about my dad, so I knew she meant it. That made you my celebrity hero.

You were talking about some guys running for Congress. But then you said one of them was "freaking amazing." I don't think newspeople are supposed to say things like that. And isn't that biased? Newspeople aren't supposed to be biased. I know this because Mr. Grimm made us watch this video about newswriting. Though no one else knows this about me, Rachel Maddow, I have a near photographic memory for stuff people say. Their words just stick in my brain. So I remember what a reporter is *supposed* to do.

Anyway, thanks for pissing off my mom.

Sincerely,  
Brynn Harper

Folder: Inbox  
To: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
From: Egrimm@westing.pa.edu  
Date: September 11  
Subject: RE: School Assignment

Dear Rachel Maddow,

I am writing to you because of a school assignment. ~~It's a totally lame reason to be writing, but I don't think you actually read it anyway. This kind of thing is so sixth grade.~~ [Brynn, this is good, honest writing. Can you try to put a positive spin on it?] I am a junior in high school and I've been **forced** asked to write to a "celebrity hero" by the Applied Language Arts teacher. ~~(Hey, Mr. Grimm! How's it hanging, buddy?)~~ [I'm doing well, thanks. But you can take this out.] ~~I wasn't going to do it, because my ex-girlfriend worships you and, hello, school assignment.~~ But I turned on your show and Mom totally freaked out to see me watching you. Apparently your *liberal* and *leftist* views still don't sit well with her. Mom spat out the words like she was talking about my dad, so I knew she meant it. That made you my celebrity hero. [Again, great personal touch. But maybe too intimate for this correspondence?]

You were talking about some guys running for Congress. But then you said one of them was "freaking amazing." And I don't think newspeople are supposed to say things like that. And isn't that biased? Newspeople aren't supposed to be biased. I know this because Mr. Grimm, my English teacher, made us watch this video about newswriting. Though no one else knows this about me, Rachel Maddow, I have a photographic memory for stuff people say. Their words just stick in my brain. So I remember what a reporter is *supposed* to do. [You are right, Brynn! I didn't know that about you. Shouldn't you remember your assignments, then?]

~~Anyway, thanks for pissing off my mom.~~ [There is a list of questions I asked you to include. Maybe you could end with that instead.]

Sincerely,  
Brynn Harper

Folder: Sent  
To: Egrimm@westing.pa.edu  
Cc: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 12  
Subject: School Assignment Again

Dear Rachel Maddow,

I learned an important lesson about rough drafts. If you really want to send someone a letter, you should just send it. Do *not* turn it in to your English teacher first. But Mr. Grimm (said English teacher) is the only person I know who doesn't think I'm hopeless, so I am trying this again for his sake. Though I'm sending it to you, too, to *avoid further editing*.

My name is Brynn Harper and I am sixteen years old. I live with my mother and stepfather in Westing, Pennsylvania. I have a brother, too. Or, I had one, anyway.

I first watched your show a couple of times freshman year because my best friend (well, okay, my girlfriend) loved you, so she kind of dragged me along with her. She's not my girlfriend anymore. And she said she didn't have time to watch television anymore, either, even for you. So she dumped us both. That gives us something in common.

I had a list of questions that I was supposed to ask you, but I got most of the answers online already. Mr. Grimm suggested I think of new ones. So here you go:

1. When you look at the papers on your desk and circle something, are you really reading from them? Don't you read from a teleprompter? When you go to commercial, you shuffle those papers, too. Seriously, is there anything even written on them?
2. How much does a person have to know to be considered a "wonn"?

3. At least one person laughs in the background while you are talking. Is this on purpose? Who is that?

4. Why don't you run for political office?

5. Is there ever a staff meeting when you think to yourself, "Huh, there really *isn't* a lot going on in the news today"?

6. How many pairs of shoes do you actually own?

Sincerely,  
Brynn Harper



Folder: Sent  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 14  
Subject: Jumping for joy

Dear Rachel Maddow,

I am embarrassed to say that I literally squealed in the library when I got your e-mail. I scared the hell out of one of the librarians. She came over to yell at me, and I just sort of jabbed at the computer screen and jumped up and down in my seat. When she figured out that you had written back to me, she just grinned and gave me a thumbs-up.

I made the mistake of forwarding your e-mail to Mr. Grimm. He said I had to answer back *again*. I was so disgusted with the idea that a good thing would lead to *more work* that I complained about it at home. Mom went nuts. I sort of lied and told her I was *assigned* to write to you (which, technically, was true). She and my stepdad (aka the Fart Weasel, a name I gave him years ago that stuck in my head because even his whiskers smell like fart) then went on an angry rant about bombast and lies and liberals and blah blah blah. The Fart Weasel said he'd even talk to Mr. Grimm on my behalf, which I knew would never happen, because that would require him to make an actual effort in this life. But their reaction sealed my fate. Obviously I would write back to you.

Your fan,  
Brynn Harper

Folder: Inbox  
To: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
From: Egrimm@westing.pa.edu  
Date: September 17  
Subject: RE: The Blues

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Mr. Grimm has used the fact that you wrote back to me after our hero assignment to discuss “cause and effect.” ~~This might seem pretty basic for a junior English class, but because I gave up on being Brynn the Scholar a while ago, the effect is that I am in the basement of the school, where the rooms don’t have numbers, only colors.~~ [Brynn—I don’t mind if you retain the epistolary format for assignments, if this is what inspires you to do your work. However, keep in mind that if you intend to send this, you might want to be a little less confessional and a little more formal.] Us “Applied” juniors are in the blue room (as opposed to the Honors/AP or Academic students allowed to walk in the sun aboveground). I started freshman year on the Honors track, but was shuffled into Academic shortly into my sophomore year. By the end of it, my mom said I was going to end up like my brother and I had better get my act together. My journalism teacher referred me for a shit ton of assessments, which got me into Applied, where I could get “more attention.” I thought all I needed was to give more of a shit, but it turns out speech-to-text technology makes me a writing fiend. (Note: I still actually need to give more of a shit.) We have three teachers who teach us in shifts along with the ninth, tenth, and twelfth graders. They always look tired, even with near constant caffeination. [Good use of imagery, but let us both agree never to share this with the rest of your faculty.] Passing junior and senior year in the Applied Color Room Kingdom is Brynnie’s Last Chance at graduating, because the numbered rooms of tiny Westing High gave up on the Brynnster for good last May.

The blue room crew is cool. The best of us is Lacey, who chills in her wheelchair using her voice board to communicate. She is quick with that

thing, and her brain works about a thousand times faster than mine. She is actually an Honors/AP senior, though I don't hold that against her. Since she's the smartest person ever, the school lets her do basically whatever she wants. She gets bored with high school classes and even the extra community college classes she takes. Thus she spends a lot of time with us as a "resident peer tutor." This works out for me because she's super nice and has kind of taken me on as a special project. Greg, Lance, Riley, Bianca, and I (the Applied junior crew) basically see Lacey as another teacher.

Do you get lost effects from lost causes? I'll have to ask Mr. Grimm. I think he'd be happy to learn I was paying attention to the lesson. [You know . . . I actually am. Though none of you are lost causes. Please consider adding a few more paragraphs addressing the specifics of this assignment, "Cause and Effect in My Daily Life."]

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 18  
Subject: Got the blues

Dear Rachel Maddow,

I had a pen pal once in fifth grade. I loved writing to her, even if I hated the physical act of writing. It felt good to put all my words some place. So, I'll keep writing to you. Don't tell Mr. Grimm. If he knew I was doing it so much on my own, it might go to his head.

Today, to suck as much as humanly possible out of something interesting, Mr. Grimm put us in pairs to talk about our hero assignments. Peer Mentor Lacey was stuck with me. She did the assignment just for fun even though she didn't have to.

"So, that's the lady with the one eyebrow?" I said of her hero.

"Yes." Lacey sighed. She did that a lot with me. "But she painted herself as she was, see. . . ."

"But she's dead. You wrote to a dead person?"

"I interpreted the assignment. She is famous. She is my hero. Like Grimm would argue with me. I'm not even a student in this class."

"Well played." I whistled. I was mostly annoyed that I didn't think of something like that.

"And you like a pundit. Fascinating."

"She is a scholar and a storyteller," I said, bowing my head reverently and putting my hand on my heart. "Politics are her canvas."

Lacey chuckled. "Well. We both like artists, then."

"Yes."

"Did you know that Frida Kahlo was also in a wheelchair?" Lacey said.

"No. I don't think I did. Did you know that Rachel was the first out Rhodes Scholar?"

"Yes."

"Of course you did," I said. "You know everything."

"Not everything."

"Seems like it." I crossed my arms. "Are you sure you don't want to go out with me?"

"I had to agree not to date my mentees. You and I have had this discussion. Also, I'm still into guys."

"Fine. Nobody's perfect, I guess."

Lacey laughed. Her laugh sounds a little like wind chimes.

Sincerely,

Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 19  
Subject: Journalism

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Confession: I used to be on the school paper. That's actually how I really got to know my ex-girlfriend Sarah. One day in ninth grade I was pulled out of study hall and taken to the basement. It was way sketch but when I got there I wasn't bound and gagged. Instead I met Mr. McCloud, journalism teacher extraordinaire.

"Ms. Harper. I'm told you have a way with words," he said.

"I do? By who?"

Mr. McCloud smirked. "By whom. But that wouldn't have rhymed."

I shrugged.

As it turned out, that was the start of Brynn the Investigative Beat Reporter. I didn't investigate so much as write little articles about the sports ball players or about the 4-H kids' winning rabbits or about the events at the War Memorial downtown. But I loved it, especially my War Memorial beat. Every stupid little slice of life piece I wrote. It's fitting that the War Memorial practically burned down in August. The causes are still under investigation and have been deemed suspicious. You can still overhear kids talking about it in the halls at least once a week.

If I had the grades I'd be reporting the fuck out of that.

Especially because firecrackers had been found at the scene.

And because the story seemed to die out on television and print and even online. That had to mean something, didn't it?

*And* because people are still interested. The War Memorial was a big deal in town.

Is someone trying to cover up something? Who? What?

First I had to crack the case of a 2.3 GPA to get back on the paper. Then I could run wild with my conspiracy theories for fun and credit.

You used to be on the radio. You said you loved it, too. I get it. There's something so satisfying about telling people stories.

About telling people's *stories*.

But at the end of last year, my grades weren't high enough to stay with the paper. I don't know why that matters. I can still write, you know? But the guidance counselor said I had to "focus on academics." Maybe losing the paper would "motivate" me to "improve" and "rejoin later."

I miss the fucking school paper with all the shards of my shattered heart. I miss its online edition with the hideous layout. I miss all twenty of our bimonthly subscribers (not counting the staff) and their inane comments on every article. I loved every stupid word anyone wrote. I loved it and then I lost it.

This has not motivated me. Loss isn't motivating. It's debilitating.

I don't have Sarah anymore. I don't have the paper.

I guess I only have you.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 20  
Subject: Justin Time

Dear Rachel Maddow,

I stand corrected. I have you and a kid named Justin.

One of the chief characteristics of a good reporter, you may agree, is persistence. Justin Mitchell, ace investigator for the *Westing High Gazette*, is the freckled embodiment of persistence.

Today I walked to my classroom, wondering if I should take the long route past Sarah's locker, when Justin stopped me.

"Well, hello," he said.

"Hey," I said.

"How are you? Are you coming back to the paper? We need you. Things are getting weird. I can't even tell you how weird, because it's kind of a secret? But if you were there you would know and then we could talk about it. How are your grades? Are they up yet? I guess not because we've only had a few weeks of school, but maybe I could help you and, oh man, maybe you could just do a column or something with a pen name."

This is how Justin talks.

"I can't, in fact, come back to the paper. Summer school didn't go so great."

"Maybe I could talk to someone."

"Good luck with that," I said.

"Listen, Brynn. This sucks. It all sucks. But don't be a stranger? Okay? I'm around."

"Okay, sure, Justin."

"I'm serious." Justin seemed to be staring at something over my shoulder. His freckles were kind of melting together.



“Are you blushing?” I asked. I turned and saw Lacey was in the elevator. I looked back at Justin and raised my eyebrows.

“Shut up. I’ll talk to you later.” He turned and abruptly walked away.

“Lacey, my friend,” I said sticking myself in between the closing elevator doors. “I don’t suppose you want to take my quiz for me. I have one for Ms. Yee in about five minutes.”

“Sure, Brynn. I’m positive no one will notice me doing that and of course I don’t care if your teachers can tell whether you learned the material or not.”

“You and your stupid ethics,” I said. The elevator door slid open.

I emerged unto my basement kingdom, away from the one that used to be mine. Lacey made me go in the classroom first just to be sure I didn’t try to make a break for it away from the quiz at the last second.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 21  
Subject: Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?

Dear Rachel Maddow,  
You have a brother. Is he nice?

My brother was nice. When I was twelve, he got me a pair of ice skates for my birthday. I resented it because I felt too old for that sort of thing, but they were from Nick so I pretended to love them. The War Memorial used to host ice-skating every other weekend. It still would have, probably, if half of it wasn't charred rubble from the fire. Earlier today Justin had showed me a clipping from the *Tribune* that investigators still weren't releasing further information. That was still weird as fuck.

Mostly people went there to get stoned in the bushes, but I didn't know what that was back then. Nick had just gotten his license and drove us to the rink. It was filled with hockey dudes and their girlfriends. Nick was cool with everyone then, just this big guy with a too-big laugh and too-big sense of humor. He held me up and dragged me around and around the rink until I finally started to be able to balance on my own. When I finally made it around without falling, Nick bought me a slice of pizza. We sat at the long counter, and I watched couples skate—the girls backward, the boys guiding them around while trying to sneak their hands places they probably shouldn't in public. Nick laughed, and we goofed on all of them.

That was the last time Nick and I really did anything together. He started hanging with sketchier and sketchier people, and Mom wouldn't let me go anywhere with him alone. Nick had always seemed like he was too large, too much for his own life. But then everything about Nick started to shrink. Now with Nick gone I'm just a girl skating backward, only I don't have a partner.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 22  
Subject: Mommy and Me

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Today is Mom and Fart Weasel's anniversary. They have actually only been bound on a federal and cosmic level for two years. But Fart took a shower, and Mom folded a nice dress into a duffel bag to change into after her shift, so shit's getting swanky up in here.

My dad used to make a big deal out of their anniversary. He would wear a tie, and Mom would put on makeup and twist her hair into a perfect, shiny bun. I would raise my arms like I wanted to be picked up and when Mom hugged me I would shove my nose into her hair. The soft, sweet oil that smoothed down her chocolate-brown wisps smelled like Easter candy. My chubby little fingers messed it up. She didn't yell, though. I think she liked me snuggling into her head. She'd laugh and push me off on Nick and pop into the bathroom to redo it.

That's how it was with Mom and me, up until Nick started to go downhill. Mom went down with him. My grandma, her mom, was really mean. Like, beat you and call you fat and leave all the money to her church and none to her only daughter kind of mean. She bounced back from that, a little, when she married my dad. She was pretty good at being a wife, and a mom to little Nicky and then to surprise but much-hoped-for baby Brynn. Mom went to night school to become a registered nurse and worked part-time when I started kindergarten. But Mom was tethered to us, to Nick in particular. Babies are supposed to be cut off from the mom and then both of them get to be separate people. That didn't happen with Mom and Nick. His blood was her blood, his grades were her grades, his wrestling injuries were bullets to her brain.

Maybe there are guys who could understand this. Dad wasn't one of

them. He got angrier and angrier with Nick, which Mom took personally. She felt like when Dad was mad at Nick, Dad was mad at *her*. There was nothing pretty, nothing soft about the last few months before Dad peeled out of our driveway. With these pieces of her ripped away, she bled and bled until there was little of the mom I knew left. Maybe Mom found Fart Weasel because he had already settled at rock bottom; at least she knew where he stood from the beginning, so there were no new failures to slice her apart. Maybe she ignores me because I am the last thing that can really ruin her.

Sometimes I wish I could just bury my face in her hair and I'd look up and be ten again and the last few years would all be a horrible, sucky dream. But Mom won't let me close enough to even try.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 24  
Subject: Lost and found or just lost maybe

Dear Rachel Maddow,

I finally worked up the nerve to take the long route past Sarah's locker today. It's the particularly scenic way because her homeroom is on the second floor of the building and mine is two floors below.

In a different wing.

She was there. I stopped a few feet away, trying to look engrossed in a hygiene poster. But of course I stared at her. Her blond hair brushed her shoulders. She had a pencil stuck behind her ear. She was biting the eraser of another pencil looking up at the sky, lost in thought. I traced her body with my eyes. I missed her narrow shoulders and her narrow waist and at this moment even her narrow little way of seeing the world. What would it take to go over there and just ask her what she thought of the growing size of the Republican districts in Pennsylvania?

She looked up at me suddenly, as if psychically called by the thought of another GOP win come midterms. Our eyes locked. But she frowned and shook her head a little. We both knew I was far afield of where I belonged. Or at least she did. She turned away and went into a classroom, and I slunk down to mine. Where we both knew I mattered more than up there.

Or at least I did.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 25  
Subject: Friends

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Is it hard to be famous? Like, does that net you more or fewer friends? You aren't an actress or whatever. You're *you* on TV. Well, you're *you* with makeup and no glasses and perfect hair, but still. It's not like people think they are meeting a character when they see you on the street who are then shocked and come away thinking, "Actually, she's kind of a dumb-ass who isn't that into politics."

At least, I don't think they do. Maybe they are just like, "Huh, I thought she'd be wearing a blazer."

Does fame bring you a better quality of friends? Nick's friends all kind of sucked. Tip from me to you: being well known for scoring a high does not gain you a lot of quality associations. Most of the assholes didn't even come to his funeral. Granted, Nick's parole officer was there and a lot of them probably had stuff to hide, but still. Only two of them, Leigh and Erin, bothered to speak to me.

"Hey, kid," I think Leigh had said first.

"Hi, honey," said Erin.

I could count on one hand the number of times we'd spoken before this. "Hi?" I tried.

"Listen, this sucks donkey dicks," said Leigh.

Erin elbowed him in his side. "What Leigh means is that we're sorry. Nick really was a great guy. Even lately . . ."

This was one hot mess of a nice gesture. He hadn't been great for a long time. We all knew that. And yet, here were two people who had also lost Nick trying to be nice to me, so I wanted them to keep talking forever.

“No really, Brynn. Really. We saw him, what? A month or two ago? And he talked about you. He was proud you were still in school and on the honor roll. He was real proud of that.” Erin had shaken her head.

“Okay” was all I could think of.

“Here, kid. Take this.” Leigh shoved a folded piece of paper into my hand. “These are our numbers. Text us yours and we’ll keep an eye on you. It’s only right.”

“Okay,” I said again.

They nodded and went to pay their respects to Nick’s closed casket.

Not long after that Mom had fainted. Honest to God I think she was faking. But Fart Weasel made a big show over her and growled at me that I had to come home with them. How messed up is that? Though at least they both came to the funeral.

Unlike Dad.

Sitting here, two years later, dictating this to my laptop, really brings it home. Nick is not coming back. That’s why it’s nice to know you, Rachel. You’ll be there to talk to me for an hour, give or take commercials. Being famous makes you a friend to people you don’t even know about! A friend to shitty, lame-ass people like me, maybe, but that’s what a lot of regular people have anyway. So. Thanks for that.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 26  
Subject: Dead air

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Mr. Grimm is still on my case about writing back to you. He said it would be polite to send you a brief follow-up e-mail. I will answer you, but it might take me a while. My brother died two years ago today. September 26 always sneaks up on me and jumps me in the bathroom. I need to hide out someplace for a while.

Sincerely,  
Brynn



Folder:           Inbox  
To:                Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
From:             **Mail Delivery Subsystem** <mailer-daemon@googlemail.com>  
Date:             September 27  
Subject:          Hi Dad

Delivery to the following recipient failed permanently  
RaymondHarper4509@gmail.com

Technical details of permanent failure:

Google tried to deliver your message, but it was  
rejected by the server for the recipient domain  
gmail.com

by gmail-smtp-in.1.google.com. [2a00:1490:400c:c0b::1b].

The error that the other server returned was:

550-5.1.1 The e-mail account that you tried to reach  
does not exist. Please try

550-5.1.1 double-checking the recipient's e-mail  
address for typos or

550-5.1.1 unnecessary spaces. Learn more at

550 5.1.1 [https://support.google.com/mail/answer/6596  
c67si9004821wma.125-gsmtp](https://support.google.com/mail/answer/6596c67si9004821wma.125-gsmtp)

--Original message--

Dear Dad,

It's been a few years. I don't know if this is still your e-mail address. I found it on a card in the desk. I'm a junior in high school now. You've missed a few birthdays. And Christmases. And Easters. And school plays, awards banquets, softball games, and debate competitions. Oh, and Nick's funeral. Don't worry—I don't really celebrate any of those things anymore, so you don't have to feel guilty about not contacting me.

And Nick's already dead, so he isn't going to have another funeral.

I hope you are happy with your new family. Your wife is damn pretty.

And your little girl and baby boy, too. I liked looking at their pictures until you blocked me or deleted your account online or whatever.

Did you know I was looking at the public photos?

Were you afraid I'd show up one day and want to play happy family?

Don't worry. I'll stay in the one you helped destroy.

Fuck you, Dad.

Sincerely,

Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: September 29  
Subject: Family Ties

Dear Rachel Maddow,  
Stepparents get a bad rap. Stepmothers, actually. But let me tell you, in my experience, *stepfathers* deserve all the shade thrown at them from every direction. Or at least mine does.

I mean, I never liked the guy. I never even tried—this is true. But he never tried, either. And he never cared about me or Nick and who knows about Mom. And he's the grown-ass adult and I am a kid and grown-ass adults are supposed to be better.

Today's interaction with the Failed (Grown) Ass (Adult):

Me: Do we have any bread?

Him: Did you buy any?

Me: No.

Him: Do you have money to buy any?

Me: How could I?

Him: Quit fucking loafing and maybe then you'd have some goddamn bread.

Me: \*snort\*

Him: You think that's funny? Get a job.

Rachel, he failed to realize his lame pun. This kind of stupid pissed me off as much as not being able to make even a fucking PB&J. PB&J should be a human right. Or whatever the cultural equivalent of a PB&J is all over the world.

At least I could hide in my room with the peanut butter and eat it straight out of the jar with a spoon. It could be worse.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Inbox  
To: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
From: **Mail Delivery Subsystem** <mailer-daemon@googlemail.com>  
Date: October 3  
Subject: Making contact

Delivery to the following recipient failed permanently  
RayNHarp0945@gmail.com

Technical details of permanent failure:

Google tried to deliver your message, but it was rejected by the server for the recipient domain gmail.com

by gmail-smtp-in.l.google.com. [2a00:0973:400c:c0b::1b].

The error that the other server returned was:

550-5.1.1 The e-mail account that you tried to reach does not exist. Please try

550-5.1.1 double-checking the recipient's e-mail address for typos or

550-5.1.1 unnecessary spaces. Learn more at

550 5.1.1 <https://support.google.com/mail/answer/6596c43si9004801wma.125-gsmtp>

--Original message--

Hi Dad,

I got this e-mail from an old permission slip. I have tried to contact you at another old e-mail, but I guess you don't have that address anymore? How does an e-mail address go away? Physical mail you can forward, I know. And phone numbers are reassigned. But, do you close an e-mail account? To avoid that? Or maybe you block certain people?

Anyway, I thought you might want to know how I'm doing. That I'm still alive and kicking. And maybe you'd like to see me again? I'm not so

bad, am I? Unlike Nick, I neither drink nor do drugs. I don't have the stomach for either. And I write a lot of letters.

Do you remember that about me? That I liked to write? Do you remember the newspapers I'd made for you and Mom and Nicholas? I could teach your kids to do that. I could be a good influence. If you'd let me.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Inbox  
To: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
From: Egrimm@westing.pa.edu  
Date: October 5  
Subject: RE: Questions

Dear Rachel Maddow,

I took a few days off from la escuela because Nick is still dead and Sarah hates me and what's the point? But unfortunately Mom forced me to go back. She doesn't want me around on her day off so she can be loud with Fart Weasel. She actually said that to me. I don't know if she intended to disgust me out of bed, but that's what she succeeded in doing. [Brynn— have you considered availing yourself of the guidance counselor? Please stop and see me after class.]

Within the first fifteen minutes of class, Mr. Grimm gently but repeatedly noted how thoughtful it was for you to have written back to me, and that the “courtesy of my reply” to you might be “therapeutic.” When I told him I couldn't think of what to write (that was fit to send), Mr. Grimm gave me a list of questions to answer about myself for you. As if you don't have better things to do than read this.

1. Are you who you want to be?

I don't know who I want to be, but if I think about it—no. How could I want to be . . . what I am now? I can tell you who I used to be. That might be more interesting. In ninth grade I was still an Honors student. I was on the debate team. The newspaper and debate people were pretty much the same, and they liked to sit around talking about politics and world leaders and how the world was going to hell. I didn't like doing that. My mom and dad had gotten divorced, Nick died, and we had to move to a crappy house in East Bumblefuck, Pennsylvania. [What is another way you could describe our rural, economically depressed region?] I couldn't deal with the world's problems. I had too many of my own.

What kept me going for a while was the fact that I was also totally falling in love with the queen of the ninth-grade nerds, Sarah Livingston. I told Sarah I loved her on Halloween of freshman year. We were at a school dance. I pulled her over to the coatroom (the closet . . . I know, right?) and said it just like that. "I love you, Sarah." I do that. Tell people how I feel. It's like a nervous tick.

She looked kind of shocked at first, but then *she* pulled *me* behind a rack of parkas and we made out until her dad came to give us a ride home. She was my girlfriend ever since then. I think she came out to her parents right after that, and they seemed cool with it. I never told Mom, because then I'd have been killed or rehomed with weirdos from the Internet or something.

We were together from that day freshman year until this past summer, when she dumped me. I was "too much drama," for her. She had to focus on graduating in the top ten of our class and shoving her nose up whoever's ass was most useful at the time. I gave up on that kind of thing not long after I started dating Sarah. Even though I gradually slipped away from the Honors/AP crowd and even the Academic crowd, it was still enough for almost two years that I could make Sarah laugh, that I was the chill one while she was the one bent on Making the World a Better Place. But then it wasn't.

Who I am now? I don't even know. My ability to care started to erode the day Nick died and washed away completely after I was kicked off the paper. Since I hate being home, I mostly go hide in the library at school or the nice, big one downtown. I like listening to books about faraway worlds that exist only in the imagination. Or I watch or listen to you. You are a debate and newspaper kid all grown up, and you know what you are talking about. It freaks me out, all the shit going on in the world. But you are so cheerful when you talk about it. Like maybe there is something to be hopeful about. If I could be anything, maybe I would be that. Hopeful. Someone who could give hope to someone else.

My computer time is up and thank God, because if I ever sent this, I

have driven well past the borders of overshare city a million times by now. Hello, Rachel Maddow intern! I hope you like the melodrama! [Brynn, your candor is powerful, and I appreciate your attempt at answering these questions. But keep in mind your audience might benefit from more exposition and different language to appreciate your points? I'm just spitballing here. Please see me either before the school day begins or after class.]

Sincerely,  
Brynn



Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: October 9  
Subject: Breaking news

Dear Rachel Maddow,

I usually don't have news that is late breaking, so much as old news that breaks things. Like my heart, for instance.

Today Sarah wore a pink cardigan over a black tank top. It was warm, so she also wore a skirt. Girls in skirts kill me.

She was talking to another friend I had when I was in newspaper, Nancy. They were kind of whispering and giggling and Nancy slipped her arm around Sarah's waist.

Girls who move on to other girls also kill me.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: October 10  
Subject: Questions

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Question two that Mr. Grimm suggested I answer for you: Do you like school? No. Not even a little.

Even if I thought about trying to learn something at school on purpose, the blue room curriculum isn't exactly enthralling. Lacey makes it *almost* bearable, but she is busy helping other people most of the time. And of course school sucks mostly because Sarah is there and she won't even look at me. Ace reporter Justin told me that Sarah left the paper to devote her time to Student Government. I knew that she was going to do that, as she never stopped talking about it over the summer. She thought conquering important issues like the environmental impact of cafeteria trays and serving locally sourced foods at the school dance would lead to Bigger Things.

Sadly, she was the only one I would ever talk to about Nick. She was the one who knew everything. I desperately wanted to text her to freak out about his two-year absence. How it had been so long and not long at all.

But I knew she wouldn't want my current "drama" popping her bubble of Important Life Work.

To make matters even better today at school, Nancy, the woman possibly vying for the position of Brynn 4.0 in Sarah's heart (less drama, more GPA points), stopped me in the hallway to sign a petition about the stupid trays.

"Don't bother with her," said Adam, current SGA vice president and unbearable human being. "She won't care."

"Issues affect us all, Adam," she said. I looked at her for a second, and

then at him, to see if they'd acknowledge that I was a person they used to hang out with. That maybe I was a thinking, feeling human being even if I wasn't in Honors classes anymore.

They did not.

"I like trays. They can be used as weapons," I said, and kept walking.

"See? What'd I tell you?" said Adam.

I spun around to face him. Adam was thin, so thin. Part of me wondered if he wasn't such an ass because he was hungry all of the time. He was tall compared to the rest of his wrestler dude bros. His dark, wavy hair was piss-me-off perfect. "Does it bother you that presidential authority goes unchecked these days, and that we are basically fighting a third world war and barely even a peep, a *peep* I tell you, is heard from Congress? No? I doubt it. Because you are too busy worrying about trays."

Nancy's eyes went all wide, and Adam just rolled his. I had been listening to your audiobook, Rachel, to keep me company the last few nights. It all kind of came to me in that moment.

"Maybe you should tell your dealer to stop giving you the cheap stuff. 'Cause you're going mental."

I strode back to him and stood there, eye to eye now. Whether he was a wrestling god or not, I was angry and didn't care. I could take him. "Take it back," I said.

He had gotten to me and we both knew it, but he had fired the first shot before I could dodge.

"What?" He smirked. "Going to run home and cry to your big brother? Oh, wait. That won't work." He laughed then. It sounded choked, like he was trying to be a hard-ass but couldn't quite pull it off.

I stepped back, shocked. Westing was a small town where everyone knew everyone. That was a low blow. Nick had been a friend of Adam's older brother, so Adam knew him, too.

"Adam!" snapped Nancy. "What are you doing?" I felt her put her hand on my shoulder. "Brynn, just go. I'm sorry."

Nick told me once that Adam's dad terrorized Adam and his brothers. That I should steer clear of all of them because they couldn't help but be

mean assholes bent on winning whatever prize was put in front of them. I knew something about Fathers Who Suck, but this was not winning any sympathy from me at the moment.

Just then, a teacher rounded the corner and looked at us.

“Is there a problem here?” he said.

I didn’t bother to argue. I just shook my head and got the hell out of there.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: October 11  
Subject: No frills

Dear Rachel Maddow,

I had scheduled a lot of sulking for most of my peer mentor time today.

“Is it the work, Brynn? Because honestly Mr. Grimm would be happy if you wrote a paragraph or two for this essay,” Lacey said. “I see you dictating to your laptop all the time. I see you *typing*. Why are you refusing to do this? Do you have something against”—she glanced at my binder—“the Free Exercise Clause?”

“Of course not,” I said.

“Then why are there no sentences for me to edit? You could lead with that. ‘I have nothing against the Free Exercise Clause.’ Thesis statement. Boom.”

I sighed. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Is it about the First Amendment?”

“No.”

“I will answer one question of your choosing for every sentence you write,” she said.

I typed, “The Free Exercise Clause is a good idea because you can worship Satan if you want to.”

Lacey sighed. “Well, it’s not inaccurate.”

“Does it bug you if people think you are . . .” I searched for words. What did Adam think I was? Stupid? Worthless? “Not worth their respect?”

Lacey sat quietly for a minute. “Is this about Sarah?” she said.

“No. I mean . . . no. Something else.”

“I guess I quit caring what other people thought a long time ago.”

“Yeah. But what if they get in your face?”

Lacey pointed to my laptop.

“It’s not that Satanism is the best religion; it’s the idea that a person should not be stopped from observing their beliefs by the government,” I read aloud as I typed.

“People generally don’t get in my face. Sometimes they stare. Sometimes they pretend I’m not there. It can be annoying, but mostly I have my own thing going on.” Lacey shrugged.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Ignore the jerks, Brynn,” said Lacey. “They aren’t worth your time.”

“Okay, peer mentor,” I said.

“Now write your essay. I *will* care if you make me look bad. You *should* worry about that.”

“All right, all right.”

I wrote enough to make Lacey happy.

Who cared what stupid Adam thought?

I did. At least a little.

Because I knew Sarah thought like Adam a lot of the time.

I shouldn’t care about her, either.

But I did.

At least a little.

Or a lot.

Sincerely,

Brynn

Folder: Inbox  
To: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
From: Egrimm@westing.pa.edu  
Date: October 11  
Subject: RE: Questions

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Mr. Grimm asked me, “What are you passionate about?” Not to sound too pathetic again but, currently, nothing. Before, I’d say I was passionate about my family. [Good.] I had it pretty good for about a decade. I loved those stupid people. Mom was an amazing nurse, and Dad worked the Bar, Rod, and Wire division at the steel plant. Mom quit when Nick was first caught with Oxy, and that actually went okay. Dad still made good money. Nick went to some wilderness place that made him see that Selling Was Bad. But then Dad lost his job and thought Mom was being too easy on Nick. He tried his own version of “tough love,” but Nick hated that and went back to making fast money. He could buy his Xbox games or whatever without Dad yelling at him to get a real job. So Nick kept getting kicked out of the house. Mom freaked, Dad left, Dad came back, Mom slept with the Fart Weasel . . . or something like that. My grandparents are all dead, and I’d never heard good things about them anyway. Now it’s just a big heaping pile of shit, my family. [You know what, Brynn? I’m not going to delete text anymore. You have a lot of difficult things to express and expletives help you do that clearly. *However*, you do realize you are turning this in to a teacher and (in theory) a public news figure, yes?]

“Brynnie, as soon as you turn eighteen, you will come live with me,” Nick said the last time I saw him. “You and me against the world.” He smiled. Even with his weird pointy teeth, he still had a great smile.

“Sure,” I said. “We’ll have our own place with the best parties. I’ll make buffalo chicken dip for the games, and we will witness the Steelers crush the Patriots’ football dynasty once and for all.”

“Damn right, kid,” he said. He slung his black leather jacket over his

shoulder and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. He was like a short, fat, stoned James Dean. He died a week later. I can't even think about buffalo anything now without wanting to puke.

I know, Rachel, you're a Patriots fan. But don't worry. No one's perfect. [Truth.]

Sincerely,  
Brynn



Folder: Inbox  
To: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
From: Egrimm@westing.pa.edu  
Date: October 12  
Subject: RE: Questions

Dear Rachel Maddow,

“What bothers you?” Mr. Grimm asked me. I think this is meant to be an inspiring political question for your sake. [Yes.] But. [Sigh.] Everything around me bothers me. I live amidst trees. Not pretty trees, but ugly evergreens that would really benefit from shedding their needles and getting new ones in the spring. The people here in Westing bother me, too, because they are kinda like the trees. We’d all be better off if we burst into flames like a phoenix and got up stark naked out of the ashes with soft, fluffy feathers. Instead, the cold gets to you and then the heat gets to you, and pretty soon you forget the blue sky goes up forever, and your gaze doesn’t lift above the billboard for the dairy that closed a decade ago. Even the crowd I used to run with is a lot like that. Sarah swore she’d get out of this town and go to an Ivy League and Save Us All. But will she? She probably will. Her dad worked steel like mine. Now he’s a greeter at the Walmart. That will probably make good admissions essay fodder. [Honestly? You are probably right.]

Today I passed Sarah as she was asking people to sign yet another petition.

“Brynn,” she said warmly. I’d say she sounded like a newscaster, but I wouldn’t want to insult you.

“Oh, we’re talking now, are we?” I said.

She flinched a little. Crimson crept from her ears to color her face the same shade as her skirt. She had her hair up in a perfect blond power bun. Wisps of golden yellow framed her face. The sight of her engaging in civic involvement was so enticing I wanted her to grab me and kiss me and

swear she'd never leave me again. [Evocative. Please, Brynn, let's spare the evocative in assignments turned in and save it for your obviously colorful memoir.]

"Brynn," she said instead again. "There is something incredibly important happening. The school board has decided to let a student join the committee to choose a new school superintendent. Do you know what that *means*?"

"I assume it means that the school board is going to let a student help choose the new school superintendent, Sarah," I said.

"Yes. So, obviously this individual should represent the entire student body. We have to make sure the right person is chosen."

I didn't care in the least, but I nodded anyway.

"So will you sign?" She thrust her clipboard at me.

A long paragraph at the top of the page was typed in, I swear, five-point font. I squinted at it. "What does this say?" I bent down, trying to read the words. "We the student body recognize the importance for a thoughtful, nuanced voice to represent us . . ."

"Just sign it, Brynn. I told you what it said." She sighed. "Pretty please?" she said in her you'll-do-this-if-you-love-me voice. Now I was the one who flinched.

"Wait a minute," I said, still reading. "This basically says you want only an *Honors* student on this committee?"

"Well, yes, of course," she said.

God, she was also cute when she was about to get pissy.

She was cute a lot around me these days.

"But I know all of you, and let me tell you, you don't represent anybody but yourselves," I said. It was true. The last time Sarah and the Honors kids were in charge of anything, homecoming and school spirit week planning devolved into a lot of shouting about funding for the public good. It annoyed the hell out of me even though I was the biggest fan Sarah and public services ever had. And I *hate* pep rallies with the fiery heat of a thousand toasters. Rachel, you and I know that if someone is elected to serve a constituency, she should represent the will of the people who elected her. And the Westing High people love themselves

the shit out of football and cheerleaders. SGA thus had an obligation to provide pointless dress-down days and wig contests, but they failed to do so.

Not cool, school elected representatives. Not cool.

And word on the street (and by “street” I mean “a really freckled kid named Justin”) had it that the Honors cohort was gunning for a new Honors lounge and funding for exclusive field trips, among other perks not available to the masses.

“But, Brynn”—back was Sarah’s if-you-loved-me voice—“we are Honors students for a reason.”

“Luck,” I said.

“No, dear,” she said. “Or everybody would be here.”

Yeah, because that’s how luck works.

I rolled my eyes and gave her back the clipboard. “Have Nancy sign it. I’m sure she supports your cause.”

Sarah frowned but said nothing.

This bothers me, Rachel. All of it. And it bothers me more that I have no idea how to change it. [This is great! Not only did you answer one of the questions, you have also pulled in your critical thinking skills on civic engagement! Also, it’s probably best if you speak with some of those resource people to whom I referred you about your romantic relationships and keep them out of your work.]

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: October 15  
Subject: Home on the range

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Last year on this date, at this time, I would have been at Sarah's house. But since there is no more Sarah, I am stuck at home. On the plus side, Fart Weasel was out buying a new hose (probably to use in strangling someone's dreams). On the minus side, Mom stayed behind.

"Get up, Brynn. It's past ten," she said from the doorway.

I just mumbled into my pillow. There was no reason I should get up. I had no one to call, nowhere to go, nothing I wanted to do.

"Brynn. Get your lazy ass out of bed." She came over and batted at my blanketed feet.

I squirmed away from her, but I only had a twin bed, so there wasn't much room for escape. "Mph, sleep. I wanna sleep forever."

"I haven't slept in since you were born. Get. Up." She didn't leave until I sat up. I got dressed and trudged into the kitchen. Mom eyed me.

"So, any big plans for today?" I asked. I thought maybe a friendly approach would make her ignore me quicker.

"Brynn . . ." she started. She sighed. Then she sighed again. Then she triple sighed and I knew I was in for it. "What are you doing? You should have a job. You should have plans for your future. You should have any kind of ambition at all. Nicky didn't . . ."

It was as if he entered the room, then. The temperature dropped twenty degrees, his icy corpse floating just outside our peripheral vision. The fact was that I never cared about what Mom or Dad and certainly not Fart Weasel thought of me. But I wanted to make Nick proud. He always saw the best in me, so I wanted to be the best. I thought if I tried hard for the both of us, then maybe he'd want to make *me* proud of *him* again.

Before I could do enough, he gave up. Or couldn't fight the drugs, or whatever. I still wondered that if I'd been a better sister, maybe he'd still be here.

Maybe Mom wondered that. Maybe she felt responsible for Nick's death, just like me.

"Do you ever feel like Nick would still be alive if you were a better mom?" I asked. Maybe we could have a Hallmark moment of shared grief or some shit that would bring us together as mother and daughter.

Mom's eyes grew huge and round. She raised her hand to her chest and stepped away from me, like my words punched her. "I did everything. Everything for him. For you. How . . ."

Definitely no Hallmark moment here.

"No, I didn't mean it like *that*," I said. "I just mean, I don't know, that I think I could have . . ."

"Stop. Just stop."

"Listen! I'm not saying I think Nick died because you screwed up! I'm saying—"

"Brynn!" Mom shouted. She wouldn't let me explain.

"Mom," I shouted back, but Fart Weasel banged in the back door. Mom conveniently burst into tears as soon as she saw him.

"What'd you do now?" he said, looking at me.

"Just go," Mom said, through muffled sobs.

I grabbed my jacket and backpack off the shelf in the hall and ran off the porch before they changed their minds and made me stay.

I don't know if it was my fault Nick died. Or Mom's, or Dad's. It probably was at least a little Fart Weasel's. But the giant hole he left was big enough for me to slip through. I could hide behind and in his memory. Mom couldn't see me there, nor could I see myself. There was only the empty Nick-shaped void where he should have been.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: October 16  
Subject: Good times

Dear Rachel Maddow,

October used to be my favorite month. The wind whips bloodred and sunset orange and lemon yellow leaves through the air and hides all the gray. It's some picturesque-ass shit if you ask me.

Sarah was my October year-round. She is picturesque as fuck, true. And God knows she can stir chills in me. But it was more that she was a crisp sense of possibility. She was a fresh lined sheet of loose-leaf and a perfectly sharpened pencil.

Back in the early days, we had a routine. I'd go over to her house. We'd read each other passages from *It Takes a Village* and vow that we'd be the women leaders of the next generation. She'd try to talk me into doing my homework, and I'd try to talk her out of doing hers. She'd let me talk about Nick. She seemed to understand that reading and writing and math took me five times as long as it did anyone else in my class. That letters turned in funny ways and numbers looked like a foreign alphabet. She got that all of my energy for school died with Nick. So we'd end up in a tickle fight, and then we'd start kissing and then. Well. Let's just say the sky was blue over every perfect autumn day right there in her room.

Sarah was . . . is . . . generous. If she considers you to be hers, then she hates your enemies and loves your friends. She loathed Dad and Fart Weasel. She remembered Nick's birthday and even went to the cemetery twice when I went to stomp on the flowers I'd put on his grave.

But when one is *not* Sarah's, one simply is not. One ceases to exist. It meant so much to me to *matter* to her. She knew that. And to then not matter? God. How can you do that to a person? I wasn't exactly the best girlfriend, but I loved her. And she left.

Typical of people, isn't it? Typical of life.

Fuck people. Fuck life.

This makes me know that we can't go back. I started not mattering even when we were together. That was worse than being alone.

I think.

Sincerely,

Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: October 16  
Subject: I might believe

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Are you religious? I'm not. Mom and the Fart Weasel are, so that's enough to make me run from any church. Sarah used to say (maybe she still does, actually) that she's "spiritual." I don't know what that means. I don't think she really does, either. I think she just wanted to be able to hang with the kids who talked about Zen and finding yourself on a work trip over the summer or something.

I bring this up because something happened that made me think that maybe, just maybe, God is a thing. A real thing or idea or bearded guy in space just outside the Earth's atmosphere that today looked down and thought, "Brynn, you ridiculous little shit, maybe you should get a life." I know that people are starving or suffering, and the woes of a failing seventeen-year-old junior really aren't high on the priority list. But maybe God sneezed and accidentally gave me the side-eye and since he's God or whatever, he thought he'd throw something good my way for funsies.

Space God gave unto Brynn in study hall today. Lacey had just finished rattling off a fifteen-minute explanation of an algebra problem to us. It took her four tries until she found a way to explain it that we all understood.

"Honestly, why do you bother?" I asked her afterward. "When are we ever going to use this stuff in real life?"

"It's fun to explain things. You can practically see a light bulb flicker Riley's head once he gets something."

"Isn't it boring as balls talking about the same thing over and over and over again?"

Lacey chuckled. "Nothing is ever boring with you, Brynn."



I opened my mouth to argue with her again, but stopped short when the door opened and in walked the most beautiful creature Space God had ever created.

“Um, hi?” the beautiful creature said. “Is this room zero-zero-five?”

I wondered at the notion that the blue room did, in fact, have a number.

“Yes.” Ms. Yee, Applied math, science, and study hall enthusiast, smiled and got up from her chair. “Are you Michaela Jordan? Welcome!”

Michaela nodded. I watched her walk up to Ms. Yee and shake her hand. She was perfect. She had these light gray eyes that *pierced*. Damn.

“That’s me,” she said. She looked around the room. She smiled at Lacey and then glanced around, her gaze stopping on me. She smiled wider. I couldn’t help but stare.

“Class, Michaela has joined us at Westing High after moving from . . .” Ms. Yee paused. “Michigan?”

Michaela nodded.

“She has been assigned to the blue room as a peer tutor. She’s joining us for her free period, which happens to also be study hall for all of you. Let’s be friendly. Michaela, feel free to have a seat wherever you want!” And Ms. Yee went back to her desk.

And Lacey went back to knowing everything.

And Michaela went to the back of the room to sit right in front of me.

I did not go back. For the first time in years, my brain moved on to new thoughts. Thoughts that made sitting in the uncomfortably confining blue room desks nearly impossible.

Oh my Space God. What the Space Hell do I do now?

I have a best new thing in the world today, Rachel. This segment hasn’t been on *The Brynn Harper* show in a long, long time.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: October 17  
Subject: Belief, continued

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Michaela came back today. Michaela will come back every day. Michaela gave up her study hall to come peer tutor us, having been at Westing High only a week. She was a peer tutor at her school in Michigan. Michaela likes peer tutoring.

Michaela, Michaela, Michaela.

Today she helped Lance for twenty minutes on the intro paragraph to a persuasive essay.

Then she was going to help me with something, but instead Lacey checked Michaela's bio lab for her. It took Michaela like two minutes to figure out the awesome that is our blue room leader.

So she really is smart.

With curly dark hair and eyes that I swear fucking *twinkle*.

Michaela looked over to witness me totally creeping on her, and like always, she smiled. I tried to smile back, but I think my face didn't understand the messages coming from my brain, it was so out of practice. I just sort of grimaced.

Every day, she'll come back, Rachel. Every. Day.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: October 18  
Subject: Every day

Dear Rachel Maddow,

Today, Michaela sat down next to *me*.

“Hi,” she said.

“Um. Hi?” I said.

“Lacey said I should talk to you.”

“Oh yeah. She gets sick of helping me with math all the time.” I looked down at my hands.

“She didn’t mention math.”

I snuck a glance over at Lacey. She was noticeably turned toward the opposite side of the room.

“Oh.”

“But I can help you with that if you want. I love math!” Michaela beamed.

“Okay.” I prayed that Lacey hadn’t exaggerated my conversational skills.

I didn’t say much as Michaela bent over my math book, explaining a theorem to me. I watched the black coils of her hair bounced when she moved her head.

“Are you listening to me?” she asked.

“No. I was too taken with your glorious hair. Also, your eyes,” I said, nervous truth-spewing in full effect.

I could feel the heat in my face as I watched attractive red blotches rise on her neck.

“Oh, wow. Um. Thanks.” She pulled at a dark lock next to her chin.

“But I’m impressed by your mathematical, uh, prowess. As well. You are impressive.”

“Oh, wow. Um. Thanks,” she said again.

If I kept speaking, I thought both of our heads might just spontaneously combust. Just then, the bell rang.

“Well. Okay. I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” she said, mostly to me. Lacey turned around and grinned. I just shook my head back at her, kind of stunned.

I don’t know what the hell happened there, Rachel. Something. Something happened. But that’s all the news that’s fit to print at the moment.

Sincerely,  
Brynn

Folder: Drafts  
To: Rachel@msnbc.com  
From: Brynnieh0401@gmail.com  
Date: October 19  
Subject: Freckle Juice

Dear Rachel Maddow,

If you are in the market for a relentless and indefatigable high school intern, I know a guy.

“Brynn.”

“Justin.” We basically had a ritual greeting at this point.

“The paper—”

“Needs me. Only, yeah, no it doesn’t. I read your piece about cafeteria trays. Who knew it actually was better for the Earth.” I rolled my eyes. “In the pocket of SGA now, are we?”

Justin grimaced. “Listen. I stand by the reporting on that. But I’m telling you, things are weird. Like, War Memorial weird. I’ve been working that story since it broke, and I think if you just look at all the accounts you’d be able to see how conflicting everyone’s explanations are. Maybe if you could just come down to the journalism room once in a while to visit?”

“No.”

“Sarah’s not even there anymore. You know that. Neither is Adam. Or Nancy.”

I raised my eyebrows.

He shrugged. “This is not news to you. But what *could* be news is this War Memorial stuff. I think maybe even people we know could have been involved. People from here at school, Brynn.”

A tiny spark of interest thrilled with in me. It quickly fizzled when I realized a 2.3 was still far away. I sighed. “I’ll think about it.”

“No, you won’t. You are saying that to get rid of me.”

“Well, okay. I probably won’t. But Mr. McCloud would be there and