

Rae Earl



**MY LIFE
GONE
VIRAL**

{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK
New York



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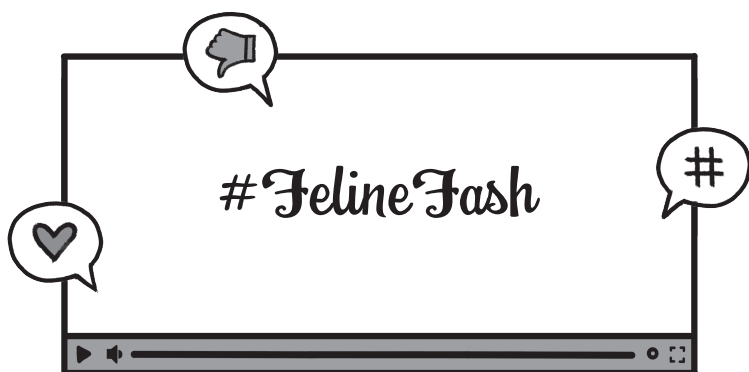
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Cents and dollars will tumble out
Without you being aware,
There'll be flies in your coffee
And bubble gum in your hair

To Kevin & Katherine
9-5 vegetable kind of people
With thanks for The Land
of Lost Content





It was the hot dog that did it. Definitely.

Generally, you can't have your cat wearing something made of pork on its head without people asking some serious questions about your life. If *your* pet has ever worn your lunch, you'll know what I mean. It's a game changer.

The thing is, eating is difficult when you're thinking hard. You just trust your body to do its chewy thing. The problem was my jaw had kind of skipped after my brain and checked into Hotel La-La Land. My mouth and eyes really didn't notice that an entire frankfurter had somersaulted from a bun. I just kept chomping on the carbs, staring into space whilst my cat did a runway show into the kitchen with some seriously avant-garde headgear.

I only noticed when Mum said, "Millie. Dave is modeling your dinner. Any thoughts?"

Then she gave one of her "all-seeing oracle" parental looks. You know the sort of thing. The "I know you're worried about something but you're not telling me because you're too worried and now, *I'm* worried and basically THIS IS A GLOBAL WORRY PANDEMIC" kind of looks.

My mum can tell a lot from a half-a-second stare. It's her special talent. Face reading, guilt-tripping, and getting things out of you that you don't want to talk about. I think the FBI needs her. She'd crack anyone in minutes.

I tried to get her off my case by asking her if she'd managed to get her phone out and record Dave doing her thing for a vlog but Mum said, "No. Creating great content is of no concern to me. It's even less of a concern to me when I think my little girl might be working herself up into a state about things."

There was another epic "drill into my brain" gaze, but at that point Dave sashayed back into the room with a sausage behind her. Mum was distracted, mainly because Dave looked like she should be on the cover of *Vogue*. You've never seen a cat work it with such total conviction. She was Gigi Hadid, but with a tail and a flea collar.

I took my chance then. "I need to go and get my stuff from Dad's place," I snapped very quickly. That's your only hope in a situation like this. Deflecting.

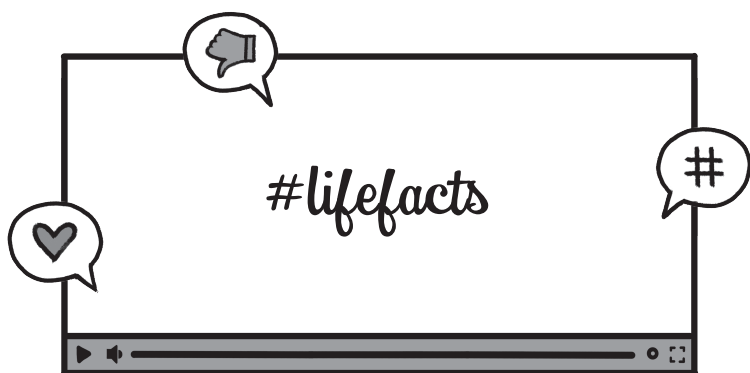
Mum kept looking at Dave, but said firmly, "Okay, Millie, but when you come back we need an honest chat. Anxiety doesn't just steal sausages. It's a thief of your time and your happiness. And it's something . . ."

At that moment Dave jumped onto my lap and dropped a gherkin into my palm. I didn't know I'd lost that, either.

Yes, Mum. We can have a chat. I just need to get things straight in MY head first. And that may take a while. In fact, it may take forever.

But I didn't say that to her. I just gave her a hug, threw Dave the rest of my hot dog bun, and left. Dave loves buns. We call bread "sliced cat-bohydrate" in our house.

I've just realized I'm still holding the gherkin. Random sliced gherkins in your hand usually mean something is not quite right with the world. Let me try to explain what. I don't think it makes me sound very nice, but it's the truth.



When I'm on my own and walking I can think. My feet are smarter than my jaw; they can do their job really well without me worrying about them. When people ask me what my favorite part of my body is I ALWAYS say my legs. It's not how they look (quite skinny calves, BIG thighs, freaky tall toes I've inherited from Dad), it's what they do.

My brain needs some love, you can tell. It's like when you accidentally leave your glass underneath the Coke dispenser and then you get distracted by a cute dog outside (don't tell Dave). You look around and, all of a sudden, you're creating a mini Niagara Falls. I'm like that. I'm overflowing with everything.

Mum, who has a head like mine, says at times when you feel like your brain is about to burst, write down the facts. Not the things you *think* might happen. JUST the facts. You don't need a laptop, a phone, or a pen. You doodle it all down in your head.

- I'm moving back in with my mum and her Neat Freak boyfriend, Gary. I moved out a few months ago because he made my life impossible, as he wants to ban dust and

grime globally. Also, my mum can be a dictator. A benevolent and low-level one, but she still has some power-hungry tendencies. However, NOW we've agreed to compromise. I will try to keep my room clean (well, clean-ISH), stop making epic biscuit crumb bombs (Gary's description, NOT mine) and stop Dave from surfing on Gary's robot vacuum cleaner (impossible. Dave is a speed freak, a celebrity stunt cat and fears no one and nothing—not even surprise frankfurters). I'm looking forward to it. I've missed my mum. YES, she's too strict, but she's basically a feminist warrior with epic taste in ankle boots. Don't get me wrong, I've loved living with my dad, Granddad, and Auntie Teresa. It's been great getting to know Dad a bit more. He's been in other countries for a lot of my life, and I do feel like I've missed out. Auntie Teresa has also been living abroad in a way—just in her head on her own planet. I think Granddad has really enjoyed having me around. He may be an epic sexist stuck in the last century, but he appreciates my streak of sensible. I love all of them, but I'd like to be in a house with an actual lock on the front door that works. It's also difficult to watch TV when two people in their forties are having a danceoff to Bruno Mars. I just want more . . . *order*. Yes, I'm tragic. I like things on the quiet side and it's difficult to get peace when Auntie Teresa's fixer-upper ice cream truck is playing "Pop Goes the Weasel" in the front yard. Also, my dresser is an exercise bike that no one uses. So, yes, I'd like something a bit more . . . normal. I will miss them, though. It's good to know some adults stay a bit

silly and don't think that having a clean kitchen sink is the peak of their existence. Gary's permanent aftershave is a mixture of Versace for Men and white vinegar.

- I have a boyfriend. Danny. It took a while for us to get together. I was confused or he was. We BOTH were, I guess. It all got a bit weird BUT now we are an official trademarked item. He's funny, kind, and completely owns his own brand of Canadian handsomeness. He also has a pencil case in the shape of a llama and he doesn't care what anyone thinks. Nothing ever seems to faze him. He's permanently chill—like a gorgeous refrigerator but with warm arms. In the past few weeks he's been incredible because honestly, with everything that's been going on, things have been stressful. Danny is phenomenal at just making things seem manageable. He's an accidental life coach. You give him a mountain and he makes it feel like a tiny hill (in the good way). I've really appreciated that AND I am NOT being a pathetic girl. I've just needed good friends who make me laugh—and he does. He's also an epic kisser. Yeah, Danny is almost perfect. Except for liking noodles with too much garlic, but I've learned to live with that. Extra-strong mints are our friend.

This is the hard one. I'll just try to say it quickly.

I can't say it quickly. Who am I kidding? This is BIG.

- I went viral. Well, me and Dave the cat went viral. She went crazy behind me when I was doing a really personal

vlog and now we've got real human followers and someone who manages "life content creators" (why do these people always use fancy names?) wants to meet me to discuss how she can help me become "even bigger." Lauren, my BFF, thinks this is wonderful. Erin, previously known as Lady Uber Cool who was sensationally outed as the person behind the most EVIL Instagram account EVER, suddenly wants to be besties with me. My granddad is a tiny bit impressed even though he has no idea what it all means. I was just another rando recording videos in a shed and now, because of a bizarre feline accident, I'm big. And it's what I want. I'm viral and I want to keep being viral. Mum gets it. She says this is AMBITION and an acknowledgment of my innate skill set and I should EMBRACE it. I want to be a success. It is FINE to say that. Viral. It's everything I wanted and it's EVERYTHING I want but now it's happened . . .

I'll be really honest with you. It's all got a bit intense. The truth is, I'm having trouble coping with this whole "being quite great all the time" thing.

What I've found out is that I can cope with being useless. That sounds insane, I KNOW, but it's sort of fine to me. Even dreadful, crushing defeat and "throw my lunch all over the cafeteria whilst everyone watches and then applauds" mistakes. I just go to my special Zen Loo cubicle for five minutes, take some deep breaths, and start again. But success? Success is HARD. I now understand why celebrities do wild stuff when they get even a tiny bit famous. It's ODD when people

you don't know like you. The whole world is applauding you and telling you you're brilliant, but inside you don't feel any different to how you felt a week ago. You just want to say "Dear World. I'm still the same Millie. I haven't got a clue what I'm doing and I don't know what I'm going to do next either and what if it all goes wrong and . . ."

I'm taking deep breaths. HUGE ones. Mum told me she used to be this way. It's anxiety. She learned to manage it. So can I.

I know what you're thinking, because I'd be thinking the same. Millie, shouldn't you be in Vegas with a massive billboard and lots of backup dancers in sequined leotards? Because YOU have become a diva with a capital D in big lights. What a brat. What's up with me?! It's like when people post a selfie of themselves crying. Liam Whitehead did one when his skateboard lost its wheel. It's good to see a guy comfortable with his full-on emotions, but we felt total sympathy for him anyway! We didn't need a photo of his big red face with a filter that made him look like a really angry opossum with conjunctivitis.

Like Liam's crazy eye, this is probably something I shouldn't share with anyone because everyone will just start screaming STOP BEING AN ATTENTION SEEKER!

I KNOW this situation is wonderful. THIS IS ACTUALLY ALL A DREAM. If this were a film, I just would have run off to a massive piece of music, all smiles after a big Danny kiss, epic filter, skin LUMINOUS, probably riding a unicorn.

But this is real life and I'm waiting for disaster. In *my* sort of movie I'm the person shouting on the beach that the tsunami is heading straight for us. Everyone else ignores me and carries on sunbathing and eating fries.

And when the tsunami finally arrives, it's just a tiny wave that knocks over one beach parasol and slightly splashes a lifeguard.

I need to sort myself out. And fast. What I'm doing isn't wrong. Influencers need to be sure of themselves. It's feminist to go after what you want. It's basically being Beyoncé and she can do no wrong. At times like this, I need my Jay-Z.



Danny's Mum likes me. I can tell. When she opens the front door she basically drags me in and smiles from ear to ear. "Oh! Here she is! The acceptable face of cat lady!" she shouts. I think Mrs. Trudeau is also relieved, as Danny's last serious girlfriend was mainly mascara-based and there's only so long you can talk about lash length. "Millie!" she whispers. "he's upstairs! Tell him that he needs to pack SOMETHING. He can't JUST wear branches. However much he'd like to."

This makes no sense, but the Trudeau household often doesn't. It's a bit out there.

When I get to Danny's room he's looking at an empty bag.

"Hello, Mills! What do you pack for a holistic spa weekend? I'm thinking hardly anything. I might just wear foliage!"

I stare at him. "Yeah, your mum is worried about that. I don't think branches will work for you. When are you going?"

Danny looks at me with a slightly folded-up face. "Er. Tomorrow. Did I not mention it?"

"No, you didn't," I say casually. My mouth is casual. In my brain, I

am not casual in any way. I am annoyed. This is Danny. I love that he's so relaxed, but sometimes this means he lives in an extreme chill bubble. He forgets to tell me key details about his life. It's not that he doesn't care, he just floats around the earth a lot. It's Aunty Teresa disease—just a less severe case.

Danny puts his arm around me. "You're annoyed," he says. "I can tell."

Danny isn't intimidated by strong women, so I serve it up in a brilliant but not hysterical way.

"It *would* be nice to know where you are going to be. I do actually like spending some time with you. I'm not being overdramatic. I just love having a laugh with you. And you get the vlog thing even though you don't really get the vlog thing."

Danny isn't really into social media. He can check his phone twice a day and not be completely itchy about it.

"Sorry, Mills." Danny sighs. "Fair enough. Now, do you think I can just get away with a handful of leaves and some mud?"

He says this with a wink. He makes me laugh a lot. However, at times like this, I can feel my no-nonsense mum invading my brain and it's fantastic.

"I'm not organizing your wardrobe for you. Pay me to be your stylist and I'll help. Until then you're on your own."

"Anyway," I say, "I've got to go and see my family."

Danny hugs me very hard and we have a superb kiss. We have perfected this. We're A-list kissers. "Have a great weekend!" he whispers. "Be you. Be brilliant and go for it. Do a fantastic vlog about bad boy-friends who don't tell their partners where they are going. That'll go

viral. Actually, don't do that. I'd rather keep out of it, really. BUT GO VIRAL! Whatever, just BE YOU."

This is why Danny and I work. He gets me and he gives me an ego turbo-boost. I sort of skip all the way to Granddad's house. It's not exactly a skip, as that would be highly embarrassing as I'm not actually seven, but it's a very positive stompy walk.



When I get to Granddad's house, Aunty Teresa answers the door. I ask her what she is doing. Rule number one for a calm life: NEVER ask Aunty Teresa what she is doing.

"Erm. We are mostly doing goat noises and listing people we'd like on our dartboard of hate," she says, like it's the most totally normal thing in the world.

"And how does that work?" I ask. I never learn. Rule number two: Don't ask for details.

Aunty Teresa drags me into the front room. My dad is there standing over a homemade target, which has a big red bullseye marked THE WORST in the middle of it. He gives me a huge hug.

"Millie," he says proudly, "behold the greatest advance in stress relief ever! You simply pin all the things you can't stand onto this, and then you throw darts at it."

I read what Aunty Teresa and dad have written on it.

- Noisy eaters
- People who post a sad face on Facebook so everyone writes "Are you okay, Hun?"—JUST TELL US WHAT IS ACTUALLY WRONG!

- People who walk slowly in the mall. I'm shopping. MOVE!
- Seahorses

"What's up with seahorses?" I ask.

Aunty Teresa looks at me like I've asked something incredibly stupid. "Well, you can't ride them, and all they do is float around looking pretty. I want more from my marine creatures. Look at sharks! They bring DRAMA!"

"But male seahorses can give birth!" I tell her. I've been googling a lot. Lauren and I have fact wars. This is mainly because Lauren thinks she can go on game shows with all her knowledge and become very rich very quickly. For her, the weirder the fact the better. The bizarre thing is, trivia also really helps me manage my stress. When my brain is worrying what the capital of Bhutan is, it's not full of anxiety about other stuff I can't control.

"Pregnant fish men! Fake news!" Teresa says. And I have to google this fact to prove it to her. She makes her "massively amazed" face where her nose accordions into her forehead and she practically dislocates her skull. "Right," she shouts, "seahorses are off and goats are back on."

My dad looks outraged and hollers, "NO! Think of the cheese!"

Aunty Teresa pounces on him and they start wrestling on the floor. They don't notice as I leave for the kitchen. Granddad is standing there mopping the floor. He seems like he's in another world. I say "Hi" to him, but he just carries on cleaning. I wave madly in his direction. When he's tuned out, this is the only thing that ever works.

"Oh, hello superstar," he finally says. He's called me "superstar" since all this going-viral stuff happened. I don't really like it, but this

is Granddad trying to be sweet. He doesn't normally believe in compliments. He thinks they make you arrogant and according to him there are few things worse than a "big-headed female." Yes, he is sexist as he's ancient and most people were back then. Women used to be sexist to themselves! I make allowances for my grandpa. He's family.

"Sorry, Millie," he says, "I was in a world of my own. I do my best thinking when I'm mopping. Once you are used to the nature of the job, your body does one thing and it frees your mind to ponder the complexities of the universe."

I give Granddad a cuddle. We are beyond words sometimes, especially when he goes too deep.

"I expect you've come around to get your things. So you're leaving me with these two fools?"

At that point I hear Teresa yell, "PUT MUSHROOMS BACK ON THE DARTBOARD OF HATE. They are EVIL. It's like eating moldy mini umbrellas."

Granddad looks at me sadly. "I'll miss you, gal. I will miss you."

We have an uncomfortable moment. This is because Granddad doesn't really do feelings. He gets emotional and then changes the subject to the first thing that pops into his head before you have a chance to react.

"Nothing wrong with mushrooms!" he shouts at Teresa. "Well, except the ones that can kill you."

He looks at me and winks. "Would you like to use my shed for one of your things before you go? For old times' sake?"

I've been using Granddad's shed as my vlog spot. I'd sort of hoped he'd let me keep on using it, but I think he wants his man cave back and,

as I hear Teresa and my dad fighting over murder fungi, I kind of understand that. It's good to have a place to hide in life.

I put my arm around Granddad's shoulder and give him a kiss. He grabs his mop and pretends to attack me with it. That's one of the ways he tells me he loves me.

Families are weird, aren't they? All families. I've never met a normal one.



Going in Granddad's shed feels different these days. Ever since I've known that A LOT of people might be actually watching my vlog, I've felt a bit more pressure. Messages. Notifications. Lovely Gracie at school giving me a sentence-by-sentence critique of every vlog I do.

I still love doing it, though. This is the place where I can be most "me." It's like a massive dose of concentrated Millie Mountain Dew in the big glass of my life.

Note to me: I am not a soft drink. I am actually a spoon.

I sit on Granddad's old chair and tap RECORD.

Hello! Millie here without Dave. She's currently eating my dinner. Which is sort of what I want to talk about. Hashtag Help show me how to share your lunch with your cat THE RIGHT WAY! Sometimes being a human is hard. I think cats actually have it really easy. Dave does. I make her breakfast for her. I get her gourmet tuna treats and never tell her that her breath stinks—even though it does. Badly. I style her fur every day. I check her for ticks. I don't have to do this

for the other living soul in my life. In fact I'm sure if I started checking my mum for ticks she'd be pretty furious.

Anyway, eating is harder than you think. I found this out today when I was so busy worrying about stuff that's going on in my life that I actually ignored my mouth. It's nice stuff, too. It's just new and I don't do new very well. Because of all this, my cat stole my hot dog. Dave actually twirled it around her head like a majorette. No, my mum didn't record it. That's because she's a mum.

But to make sure I can eat properly again I've been using a thing my mum does that helps my brain stop "catastrophizing." Or CAT-tastrophizing, where you think the worst AND Dave does some semi-evil feline thing.

Basically, I concentrate on the FACTS. As you can see, my granddad's shed is a bit . . . (*I try to find a nice way of saying it*) shabby chic. This is a fact. However, my catastrophizing worry brain says, "Granddad's shed is shabby chic. THEN it says, OH MY GOD this shed SO shabby that it's full of germs and is it also full of asbestos? And will that get in my lungs and am I breathing it in now and should these be fumigated by professionals TO SAVE MY LIFE? . . . and any food I might try to eat just gets forgotten because my head is exploding.

When that happens, I just go back to the facts. Granddad's shed is a bit shabby chic and has a bird calendar in it that

my cat likes to eat. And I STOP and I go do something else. And HONESTLY, that is it. I don't always manage it. That's why I lost my sausage—but I'm trying. And when it works, it just helps me through. And I can finish any meal without becoming a total spoon.

Anyway, thank you for watching. Leave any comments, and I'll see you next time.

And I put my thumb up at the end. I have no idea why I do this. As I upload it, Lauren messages me.

Mills. Need to CU. Come around. Plse



Ever since Lauren and I had a fight, I've tried to put her first. I totally became a horrible friend and let my online life rule everything. I was a single-minded vlog robot. So now, when Lauren says she wants to see me, I go.

Her parents *really* don't get along. They throw shopping bags at each other on a regular basis. They aren't even living with each other at the moment, but they still have a war every time they meet. Lauren has told me she thinks she might be the result of a scientific experiment where they got two of the most unsuited human beings in history and forced them to have a child. I think this may be Lauren being a bit paranoid, but I can see her point. Her life does sound like a Marvel superhero's life. You know, overwhelming home life, and then one day you realize you can fly or that you're invisible. Well, she isn't that because we can all see her, but you know what I mean.

Lauren meets me at her front door. She's wearing her "I'm-so-excited-I-could-burst" face. She beckons me in, grabs both of my arms, and starts doing little jumps on the spot.

"I'm SO glad you're here!" she whispers. "I have just found out the most unbelievable thing! Are you ready for this?"

I don't think I am, but I don't think I've got any choice, either. I know my best friend. She looks like she might burst. Lauren takes a deep breath.

"Millie. Termites eat wood faster when they listen to rock music."

I start giggling. "C'mon, Lauren. That is just some bored pest controller man writing something random on Twitter for a joke and then someone believes it and . . ."

Lauren interrupts me. "No! I thought exactly the same thing, but I've read a ton of articles and I swear it's true. Clever people have confirmed it!"

I have an idea. "Okay. We should totally try to prove it. It could be a vlog! Hashtag Help the insects to eat my house faster! Well, you know what we need! We need termites."

Lauren looks at me. "There must be some in here. It's like a sanctuary for crawly things."

Lauren's house is honestly fine, but her dad and mum have spent so much time arguing over the years that the basic maintenance of the place has been ignored. This is extra strange as Lauren's dad is a KING Handy-Man!

The issue is you need teamwork to tile a bathroom, and you can't be a team when you're bringing up everything that the other one has ever done wrong EVER. Lauren says her mum makes a list of "bad memories" in the notes section of her phone so she can use them at will in arguments.

Lauren and I start to look for termites. We google what they look like, but we don't find any. Lauren reads that you can hear them eating your house if you put your ear up to a wall. She spends the next ten minutes with her face pressed up against every flat surface in the place. All we find is lots of dust (Gary would FREAK out!), a dead spider, and a slipper in the shape of a pizza that Lauren had when she was six. I post this on my Instagram page with #ShoeGoals.



Lauren picks up my phone and pretends to vlog. “Hashtag

Help me prove that termites like tunes as they work! Sorry, guys! Sadly, this amazingness could not be proven, as we couldn’t find any willing termites. In fact, we couldn’t find any termites at all. Next time, join us for Hashtag Help! Can giraffes swim? In fact, can they high-dive in an emergency?”

This makes me really laugh. When Lauren goes on one of her fantasy trips, she’s really funny. I don’t know if anyone else would, but I don’t care. You know what best friends are like. You have tons of private jokes between each other that no one else gets.

I look at Lauren. “How are things here, anyway?”

Lauren looks down. “Oh, they’re definitely splitting up, Mills. I’ll be staying here with Dad. Mum’s gone to live with my aunt, but I see her lots. It’s better but, you know, I’m really down about it. I love both of them, and they love me, but they just *hate* each other. Mum said she only liked my dad for about twenty minutes in 2004. When they got married, they had an argument about how to cut the wedding cake. Mum wanted to do it with a normal knife. Dad wanted to do it on his own using a

ceremonial dagger someone had given him at a Latin American music festival in 1996. Yeah. It didn't look good from the start, really."

This is funny and sad at the same time.

I give Lauren a squeeze. My parents split up, but they still get along. I know this is a nightmare for her. I don't think she really got me around to see if insects like their music. I think she wanted a hug. I totally get that. If I were in her position, I'd want a hug 24/7.

"Let's go back to my house," I say. Lauren's coat is on before I finish the sentence.



As soon as I open the front door at Mum's house, Dave attacks my ankle. This is the new normal.

Mum says animals don't understand fame, but if my cat had opposable thumbs she'd definitely be trying to offer you an autograph right now. I go to pet her these days and she either walks off with her tail poker-straight in the air and her butt wiggling OR she tries to bite me. I put up with all of it. She's one of the keys to being viral, and she knows it.

Mum is looking tense. I'm half expecting her to launch a full psychological investigation into the sausage incident, but she seems distracted and a bit angry. Gary is not here and, breaking news, his robot vacuum cleaner is not around, either. It still follows him around like a dog and he still calls it McWhirter. He's probably taken it out on the street for a dust and a walk.

Mum looks at both of us. She can sniff out that there's been some fun.

"What have you two been up to?" she asks. This makes us both giggle. "Oh, I don't want to know, actually. Gary's gone out. McWhirter's little wheels that help it roll around broke and it needs looking at."

I think I hear Mum mutter, “I think he needs looking at” under her breath, too.

“Anyway,” she shouts, “I need to go get some milk. You two behave yourselves!”

Lauren falls into the big armchair and flops her legs over the sides. Gary would not approve of this, but Gary is not here. “Okay, Mills!” she exclaims. “Let’s have a look at how your latest vlog is doing!”

I’ve been nervous about doing this because of what I told you before. The bigger it all gets, the more my brain becomes a mixture of excitement and total doom. I really want this to work. I want Mum to be proud. She’s a go-getter. I don’t want to be just a “slightly better.” I’d never vlog that rhyme. It’s dreadful.

My vlog has already got thousands of views and lots of likes. It’s really weird thinking I’m in someone’s “liked” file. Or in their history. Or—

Deep breaths. My ribs are beginning to hurt with all of this.

I focus my attention on the comments.

LOVE THIS. Love you Millie. Love your work. (People are lovely)

Shut up. No expert. Pull yourself together. Everything is a drama with you (Well, most people are lovely)

What’s the thumb about? (Fair comment)

We need the cat. (This is harsh, but I get it)

Get Dave in. Dull without Dave (Bit too harsh)

Need more cat (Okay, I get the message)

Would be better with someone hot. (Oh, GO AWAY Sunshine Genius45738—you are clearly a nine-year-old boy)

Lauren leans over and reads. “Wow, Millie. Loads of views. You are getting bigger and bigger.”

“Yeah,” I mutter REALLY quickly. “Want to watch something on Netflix?”

Lauren knows what I’m doing. “Excellent change of subject. But you need to get used to this, Millie. This is your life now. You’re sort of famous—”

At this precise moment Dave jumps on Lauren’s shoulder.

“Sorry, Dave, yes!” Lauren says. “You are famous, too!”

Lauren is saying this as a joke, but I know that Dave totally understands what Lauren is saying and that she completely believes it. Dave falls into Lauren’s lap and rubs against her chin for some attention. When Lauren isn’t quick enough to give it to her, Dave punches her arm without using her claws. This is her latest party trick. Everyone thinks this aggression is cute—including Lauren.

“Oh, Davey-Lady,” she says in a really silly voice, “are you being ignored by the horrible humans?”

Dave half closes her eyes in agreement. Lauren and I both start stroking her.

Lauren looks at me hard. “By the way, where’s Danny going this weekend?”

I sigh. “Oh, he’s going with his parents to some kind of spa. Facials. Pedicures. That sort of thing. He can’t really text me much because they were in the middle of nowhere. So it will probably be all massage. No message.”

I’m quite proud of this joke, but Lauren completely ignores it.

Lauren looks down at Dave. “Must be weird wanting to spend time with your parents. I couldn’t relax with mine—even if I’d had an anesthetic. I don’t even mean local anesthetic. It would have to be general. I’d need complete unconsciousness.”

Lauren is really getting good at the dark humor thing. I don't know whether I should laugh or just hug her again. Instead, I say what's been on my mind for a few days.

"To be honest, Loz, Danny doesn't generally message me as often as I thought he might do. Even when he's not in the middle of a forest having microdermabrasion he's not really . . . very . . ."

"Into you?" Lauren blurts out. I know she doesn't mean to be so blunt, but this STINGS.

"No. He likes me. I think he's into me. We've spent quality time together. It's going really good, but . . ."

How do I explain this to Lauren? You know when you've got a tiny bit of peanut butter left in the jar and you have to spread it really thinly over your toast to make it work? Danny is that peanut butter. He is spread very thinly. His parents love him. His friends love him. I love him. So we all get little bursts of his buttery time. And like I've said before, he's so relaxed sometimes he's practically asleep. He's Zen. In fact, he's his own brand of Zen. He's Danny Zen—*Zan*. I LOVE that about him, but sometimes I want him to be more a part of my life and more a part of my vlog.

He puts his phone away too much. I try to be cool with it, but he puts it down in his room and doesn't check it for hours. I'm not like that. I'm a bit more . . . look, I love my friends and I love my phone. I just wish Danny were a bit more . . . present? OH NO. I SOUND PATHETIC.

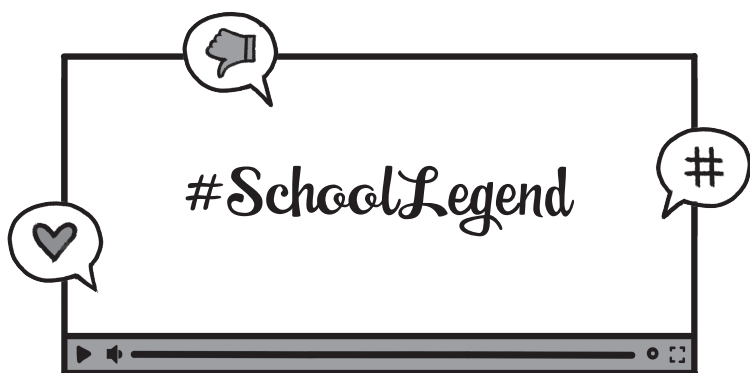
"Oh, Lauren," I say with a tut. "I think love might have turned my wise-woman button off and my obsessive-girlfriend button on."

"Not you, Mills," Lauren scoffs. "You'll be sensible till you die. That's what Hashtag Help is all about. Solid advice! OUCH!"

Dave scratches Lauren with her claws extended.

“And you, Dave, obviously,” Lauren snaps.

That was absolutely not a coincidence. I’m sure Dave can understand just about everything that we are saying. Knowing Dave, she can probably speak several languages. She already knows English and Cat. She’ll be learning coding next and, after that, it’ll be Dave World Domination.



When I wake up on Monday morning, the first thing I'm *STILL* thinking about is SunshineGenius45738 and the “Would be better with someone hot” comment.

Of course this is what I am thinking about. If there are 100 people saying nice things and one total troll saying sexist nonsense GUESS WHO HAS WALKED TO THE FRONT OF MY BRAIN WHILST I'VE BEEN ASLEEP?! SunshineGenius45738 presses the button in me that thinks all this is just a crazy burst of luck and I'm going to be found out as just someone with quite a good cat. GO AWAY BRAIN BURP OF INFERIORITY.

This is my new reality. Telling people I don't know to remove themselves from my head as their comments are irrelevant and haters gonna hate.

That's not the only thing that has changed.

Walking into school these days involves some points and whispers. You know the sort of thing. People putting their hands up to hide their mouths when they see you (obvious!) OR people turning their back, giggling and then pointing (even more obvious and rude!). I'm not being paranoid. You can ask Lauren. I have to make sure I do schoolwork

really well as teachers have made snarky comments like, “YOU can’t make a career out of being on the Internet talking about random things!” Actually, you can, and I’d like to for the moment—and there is nothing wrong with that.

It’s amazing how people think you’re getting arrogant when inside you’re feeling just relieved and excited and satisfied and nervous and you’re going around like a washing machine on a HOT MESS SPIN CYCLE.

Lauren thinks teachers wouldn’t even say that if I were a boy. If it were a boy doing a #Help vlog, they’d be congratulating him on doing such a positive thing and saying things like, “Isn’t it wonderful to see a sensitive man trying to help people like that?!” Plus, they’d all be asking him for his autograph for their children and taking him to important meetings in London and stopping at Starbucks on the way. “Yes, of course you can have a caramel latte with an extra shot and a danish. I’ll pay, Corey. It’s fine!”

Corey doesn’t exist and this IS probably a bit farfetched, but if a boy does anything in this school that doesn’t involve fighting, bullying, skipping school, or destroying stuff, teachers go overboard. A girl does something good and they just pull the biggest MEH meme face in history.

You can tell my imagination is running pretty wild. I need twenty minutes of mindfulness. Or twenty years.

Luckily, I don’t have much time to concentrate on my whirlwind brain as I see my boyfriend hurtling toward me like the world’s most lush missile. His hair is incredible. He looks like a walking statue. I’m sure he has a stylist waiting by his front door every day. It’s probably his mum with a really good detangling hairbrush, but STILL he looks as sleek as an incredibly healthy and handsome dolphin. The cleverest

dolphin. He doesn't just jump through hoops for fish. He does quantum physics, too, with his fin. His spa retreat really did him good.

Danny stretches his arms around me. He smells like a mixture of laundry powder and mints. It doesn't sound that nice, but if it were an aftershave they would call it *L'Eau de Beautiful Homme*.

I'm trying to be a bit less of a gushy girlfriend and a bit more of a feminist powerhouse, so I don't give him a full squeeze, just a casual back-tightening.

"Hello, Lady Millie," he purrs.

"Hello, you," I say breezily. Mum says to treat ALL men like you'd treat the mailman—friendly but with a distance.

I tackle him directly. "You didn't text me!"

Danny looks down, shuffles his feet from side to side, and then kicks some imaginary dirt. It must be imaginary. We are standing on concrete and we have the bossiest, cleanest school caretaker in the history of mankind.

"Yeah, I'm just trying to be more . . . in the moment," Danny says. "When we weren't doing spa stuff I was watching lots of programs about the ocean. We all need to use less plastic, you know, Millie. The sea is this amazing place. There's a lake at the bottom of the ocean. A saltwater lake! Also, and I don't know how to break this to you, some sea turtles breathe through their butts."

This makes me really smile. In fact, I really want to guffaw like a maniac, but I don't want to be a tedious "giggle at everything boys say" sort of girl, so I just think of something terrible. That's a top tip of mine. If you need to stop laughing at something (this is particularly handy in school), think of your cat running away or breaking your nose in a freak lamppost accident.

Danny smiles. "This is serious, Millie! We must protect the endangered rears of marine animals!" But he laughs, too. "Anyway, Mills. Better go to class. See you later!"

He pecks me on the cheek and runs off. I stand there thinking why on earth don't I just TELL HIM HOW MUCH I MISS HIM when he's not around?! Why don't I tell him I want to see him more and I want him to just message me even if it's once a day. I don't want to be pathetic, but I want to be in a relationship that feels a bit more . . . real.

At that moment my phone beeps. It's Lauren.

**Where R U? U R NOT sick R U? PLEASE DON'T BE! I can't
face history without you. PS HAVE U SEEN YOU KNOW
WHO?!**

Lauren has this sixth sense that only best friends have. I'm feeling uncomfortable, and magically she texts. I'm feeling sad, and she messages me a cat video. I'm feeling worried and—

Oh no.

Erin Breeler is standing straight in front of me.



Erin Breeler used to be the social media QUEEN. At school we lived and died by her every post. As soon as you got the notification of ANYTHING she did—you looked. It was like the law.

Erin used to make my life a living hell.

Things have changed. Not so long ago, Erin standing in front of me would have been the worst start to a school week since I was eight and accidentally spent an entire Monday with a huge cornflake in my hair. No one needs cereal dandruff. That was bad, but I would have preferred that to Old Erin. Old Erin was MEAN.

New Erin is different. New Erin is still gorgeous as ever, but she's actually managed to turn into a human with feelings that you can relate to. Also, she seems a bit . . . lonely. In fact, she's kind of sad. Ever since she was outed as Mr. Style Shame, her world has changed a lot. Mr. Style Shame was the Instagram account that humiliated everyone within a 100-mile radius of the school. It caught you at your very worst moment and posted it for entertainment (including poor Lauren's high-heel disaster). Erin was behind it, and once we all found out, she deleted it. All of Erin's social media accounts have lost loads of followers, and because of that, shops and designers don't send her anything. She's not

an influencer anymore. She's just one of us now, completely harmless. The Goddess is gone.

I feel bad for her. I know I probably shouldn't because she made my life a living misery, but lately she's seemed so defeated.

None of this explains why I am feeling sick and why my heart is pounding out of my chest. Mum would call this "muscle memory." Your body reacts to a previous threat whether you want it to or not, EVEN when that threat has disappeared. Erin is the tarantula who bit me, but who has now lost her fangs of doom. I'm still terrified of her, though.

Erin with eight perfectly tanned, toned legs—that's a terrible thought.

"Hello, Millie," Erin says very softly. She doesn't so much stand as float. She's a wasp in a really nice coat. No, not a wasp—a bee. She probably could still sting, but she can be cute, too.

"How are you?" I manage to get out. In my head she's still loaded with potential danger.

"Oh, you know," she groans, "I'm just trying to be a better me."

If this were a daytime talk show, we'd all be clapping for her now. But it's not. It's my school.

Erin keeps talking. "No one really talks to me these days. It's just . . . I'm trying to be different. I know I did wrong. I'm trying to be a better me. Does that make sense?"

It does. I totally get what she is saying. We've all done things we regret. We've all done wrong. Erin did REALLY bad stuff, but she knows about her fashion. She knows about style. She totally gets going viral and she understands the world I'm now in. Perhaps she could . . .

A thought flashes through my head like a greyhound that's seen a really big bone. I let it go though as it would cause trouble. BIG trouble.

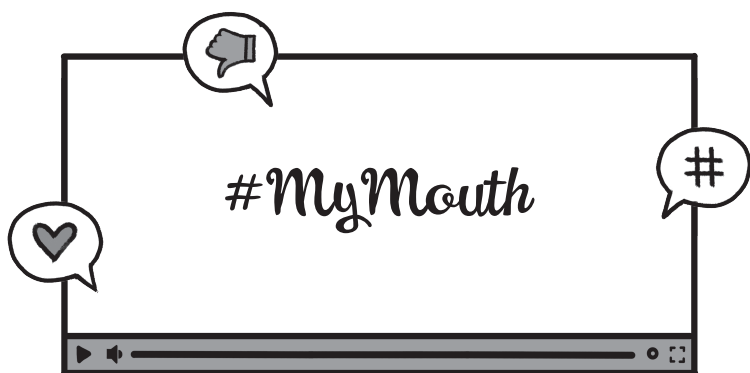
Instead, I try some comforting stuff. “You could always start again, you know. All your skills are getting wasted. Perhaps you could do something else online, but just something that isn’t . . . evil.”

Erin gives me a hurt, hard stare.

“I don’t mean evil!” I blurt. I think I save myself. “I mean, something positive that lifts people up! You can make people look incredible! Why not start again with something totally new?”

Erin sighs. “Perhaps,” she murmurs. “Anyway, it’s going great for you. You’re doing so—”

I interrupt her immediately. I can’t cope with sudden vocal compliment outbursts yet. “Yeah!” I say. “Not too bad. Anyway, we better get going. See you soon!”



Lauren is looking at me like I'm completely insane. We are just waiting for class to begin.

"Why did you say that to her?!"

"I don't know!" I snap. "I was trying to . . . I don't even know what I was trying to do. I just felt sorry for her. She's had a hard time!"

"Completely of her own making!" Lauren shouts. "She wrecked lives! She posted photos of me that are still being shared everywhere. There's a gang of ninth-grade boys who still call me Cinderella because I left my shoe behind! Now you're encouraging her to start again! In what universe does she deserve a second chance?!"

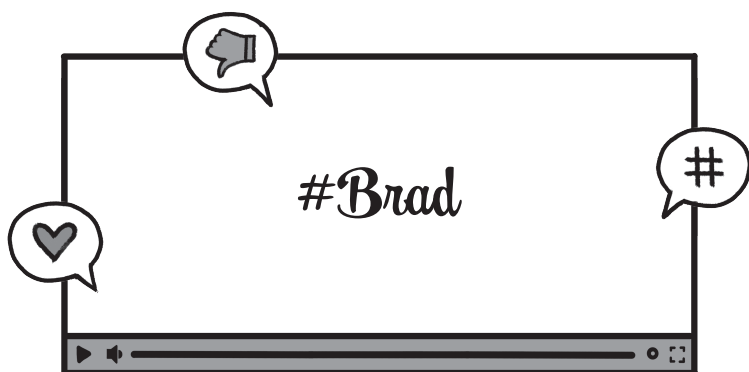
There's a big pause.

"Some burglars only get six months!" I say.

I am running out of arguments.

"Okay then, Lauren." I'm getting angry now. "How long should we punish trolls for?"

She thinks for about two seconds. "For an eternity," she snaps. "Erin Breeler should not be part of our lives. She doesn't deserve a second chance. Though"—Lauren softens a bit—"she is apparently responsible for something fairly incredible and amazing. . . ."



“That,” Lauren proudly exclaims, “that is...what I was messaging you about! That is what everyone is talking about.”

Bradley Sanderson, who previously was the greatest geek on the planet, has changed.

Bradley’s hair has been restyled into something that makes him look like he’s from one of those old films you see on vintage stations when you’re flicking through the channels. A brooding hero. A star. Do I sound like a twonk? Yes. But I am also speaking the truth. He looks taller, and he’s walking differently with his head up and a semi-smile. His dorky glasses are the same, but they seem uber-cool dripping off his nose now. This is Bradley 2.0, and it is wonderful.

It’s also confusing.

Bradley and I are sort of unfinished business. He helped me a lot with #Help. He understands it because he runs a very successful vlog called The King of Elevation, which is entirely about elevators and escalators. Yes, I know that sounds very dull, but Bradley makes it interesting. Once you understand the workings of a Schindler 5500 and its optimum space configurability (ask Bradley what that means), you can look at going up and down in a whole new way.

I had an odd, stirry tummy, and warm feelings for Bradley. Then we kissed, but we shouldn't have. I liked Danny, Danny and me happened, I put Bradley in the friend zone, and Bradley got hurt. He asked me to give him space and he has used that space to make himself really hot.

Boys are confusing.

Lauren stares at me and purses her lips. "That, Millie, is a classic revenge makeover. You reject him. He, like an ignored rosebush in the garden, waters himself and blooms."

Lauren has gone full spoon. This makes me giggle.

"Seriously, Millie." Lauren is getting annoyed. "That's what he's done. And do you know who is apparently responsible for that? Erin."

You can say what you like about Erin (and we all have), but what she's done to Bradley is incredible. It proves she's changed, too. Erin was always horrible to Bradley. She didn't like boys like him. He wasn't in her "tribe." But perhaps he is now. Bradley is lovely underneath it all. He would give anyone a second chance.

"Erin has made him into an Adidas," Lauren says proudly.

"I think you mean Adonis, Loz," I reply.

"Whatever," Lauren says. "The fact is, he's red-hot geek hot."

We have to stop talking because for the first time in what seems a very long time, Bradley is looking at me. He smiles, waves, and gets up to talk to us.

"Oh, HELLO," Lauren whispers to me. "Looks like someone wants to be friends again."



Bradley slumps beside us. His navy wool coat is far too big for him, but it looks really good. He smells a bit musty, but it's a good musty. It's the smell of old books and antiques that you shove in your wardrobe for years and turn out to be worth a fortune.

"Hello, Bradley!" Lauren is loving this, I can tell. "This is a whole new look, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he says really casually. "I just felt like shaking things up a bit, you know."

"And Erin helped you?" Lauren asks. I jab her with my elbow. She knows this is a naughty thing to say. Her eyes go wide and she wiggles her fingers.

Bradley looks down and plays with his pockets. "Yeah. I felt a bit sorry for her. And she's talented with looks stuff. That's not my thing, but as I always say, get the experts involved. She knows jumpers and coats. I know machines."

"And have you helped her up any escalators recently, Bradley?" Lauren asks. She's trying to act innocent but we all know what she means.

I knock Lauren so hard that I think Bradley notices. He also knows EXACTLY what Lauren is inferring.

“No. It’s just professional. I’m single and happy,” Bradley announces proudly. “It is possible, Lauren, for males and females to just be colleagues.”

Lauren looks at me with a bit of shame. I believe him. Bradley doesn’t lie. But the thought of Bradley spending even non-loved-up time with another woman makes me feel odd. It’s the same feeling I get when I see Danny chatting to another girl for too long. It feels like ants on bicycles are riding through your stomach—you’re very angry that they are using your tummy as a velodrome and you want to just push them all over and puncture their wheels.

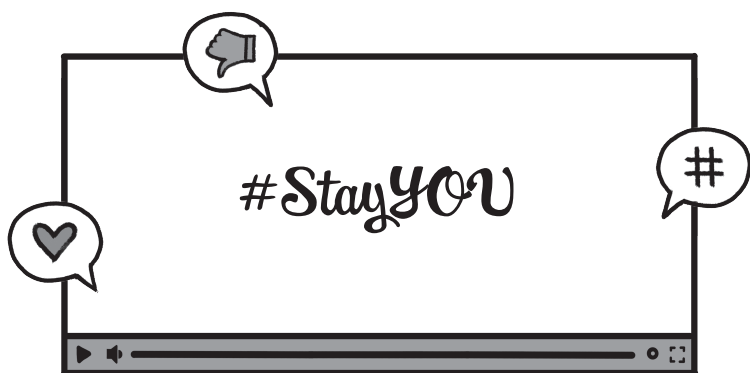
I think this feeling might be jealousy.

At this moment, Lauren decides that she needs to go and talk to someone. She doesn’t say who. This leaves me and Bradley. Just sitting there. In silence.

This is not good. Silence feels prickly. I get up to go to class and Bradley tugs gently at my bag.

“Come on then, Millie Porter. Hashtag Help me. Tell me what’s been going on with you?”

I sit back down.



I don't know how to handle this. I think this is probably Bradley's way of saying, "Let's be friends again," but it feels really strange. I still feel bad about how I treated him. I decide to be factual again. It's always a sound plan. Stick to the facts.

"Good!"

This is my completely useless Millie one-word answer.

Bradley smiles at me. "I know it's been going well for you. I've watched all your stuff. You're great. You come across really well."

He knows I struggle with the whole confidence thing. This is a really sweet thing to say.

"I don't *feel* great at it, Bradley," I confess. "I want this to work. I want it to be big. But to be honest, I'm finding it hard. I can't quite believe what has happened. I keep expecting something to go horribly wrong and everyone is going to discover—"

Bradley interrupts. "Stop thinking that way! You are rocking this. What you've got, Millie, is a classic case of impostor syndrome. It's when you doubt yourself constantly. You need to stop it. You're very good at what you do."

I look at him. He has pushed his glasses down so I can see into his eyes.

“Thank you,” I manage to blurt. It’s good to have Bradley back in my life.

Then I do something silly. For whatever reason, my jaw again detaches itself from my brain and decides to ask Bradley, “Are you single? Come on, you can tell me.”

As the words fall out of my mouth, I know it’s the wrong thing to say.

Bradley goes a bit frosty and mumbles, “No. I told you before. Even if I was, it is no one’s business. It’s certainly not your business.”

This feels harsh. I think Bradley realizes he’s gone too far, because he changes the subject fast.

“What’s next for you then, Millster?”

I look through my bag and pretend to reorganize it. When my hands are doing something, I can say things I’m struggling with in a better way. Classic nervous fidgeting. I pull out my pencil case, some tea tree oil, and a squeaky mouse. A squeaky mouse?

Dave!

Dave has a habit of dumping things in my belongings. I should probably be grateful it’s not an actual dead mouse.

“What’s next for me is I’ve got a meeting after school tomorrow with someone who manages vloggers. Lydia Portancia. She calls herself a ‘life content creator.’ She thinks she can help me take Hashtag Help to a new level. I want to grow what I’ve already got, but . . .”

Suddenly, Bradley takes hold of my right hand. It’s the one with the toy mouse in it. It squeaks. This is funny, but Bradley is deadly serious.

“Don’t lose yourself, Millie. You’re fine as you are. Don’t let anyone change your thing. Listen to what they have got to say, but you

don't *have* to follow their plans. You are fine as you are." He squeaks the mouse again. "And Dave is fine, too. Give her a pet from me. See you around."

With that, Bradley gorgeously geeks away.

"Don't lose yourself, Millie."

"You are just fine."

This is very sensible advice.

What is not sensible is standing on your own like a spoon holding your cat's raggy toy in the drizzly rain. It's not a good look. I go to class and squeak Dave's mouse all the way there.



I didn't sleep last night. School's over, but I feel like a total zombie. Getting up at 5 a.m. after falling asleep at 4:43 a.m. is NOT a good idea. Eight minutes' sleep does not give you a clear head.

Eight minutes' sleep also means you can't even do basic math.

I got through the day, but I didn't learn anything. Information splashed off me and nothing soaked in. It felt like I was walking round with a mini tornado on my head that turned just in the middle of my eyes. It's difficult to think about osmosis and the civil war when there's a major weather condition doing its thing on your face.

Mum and I are in the car on the way to meet the agent and she keeps asking me if I'm okay. I tell her I am, but I am not. The truth is I'm very, very worried about meeting the agent. I can tell this for the following reasons:

- In addition to the tornado, a hurricane, a cyclone, and a drought are now happening all over my forehead and chin. My cheeks are also on fire. Blotchy red is not a good look. The government has declared my face a disaster zone and the army is currently evacuating the area.

- My body is in a knot. I had a necklace once that had a knot in it that was impossible to undo. I threw it out of my bedroom window in a temper. My body definitely feels like cheap jewelry you should defenestrate.
- “Defenestrate” is the best word ever. Granddad threatens everyone with it. It means to throw something out of a window.
- My granddad would never really defenestrate anyone, by the way. His hips and knees are too weak. He’d need the help of a winch.
- I am worried about the earth leaving its orbit and heading nearer or farther away from the sun. Which would I choose? Boil or freeze to death? Probably freeze.
- Forget freezing to death. No one looks good in a heavily quilted jacket.
- I’ve eaten two bars of chocolate and a brie and red onion relish baguette. It’s pure stress hunger. I HATE red onion relish. Why do they always let brie suffer? Brie is the queen of cheese. She should be able to sit on her throne alone without stinky bits of root vegetables.

It hits me.

I’m just about to meet someone and have catastrophically bad onion breath. The sort of breath that stops traffic and the police are called and they put DO NOT CROSS tape across your face. Nice one, Millie. I check it with Mum. She grimaces, turns her head to the side, and gives me a squirt of breath freshener. I close my eyes and try to focus. A bit of mindfulness. Think about the nice things in life—music, coconut ice cream,

the smile of a Danny, Dave when she spots a can of tuna and tries to open the can with her paws and then, when that fails, her tongue.

All this is interrupted by seven of the most frightening words in the history of mankind.

“Can we have a chat now, Millie?”

Here’s a warning: Parents are slightly evil. I mean, they can be snake-like with their cunning. Mum has hidden behind the wheel in a tight coil and is now bursting out with fangs to interrogate me. I’m cornered. I can’t get off. We are on something that is going 80 mph and has child-proof locked doors. Mum even controls the volume to the radio. I’ve witnessed some songs by a group called the Backstreet Boys that no one should have to hear. This car can be like a prison cell. A prison cell with really bad tunes about everybody rocking their body in the correct way.

Mum takes a big breath. “I know you’re getting your head around everything that is going on. I saw your last vlog. Whatever happens in this meeting, just see all this as . . . froth on your coffee.”

Froth on my coffee. I’m about to have one of the most important meetings ever and Mum is saying it’s like the top of a hot drink. Mum has explained to me that she has a brain like mine! She, of ALL people, should understand that keeping calm when the stakes are THIS high is IMPOSSIBLE. I can feel my face collapsing. I do not have a poker face, as Auntie Teresa calls it. I wear my emotions like a very loud shirt.

Mum can see I look confused and tries to explain.

“I mean, this is just a wonderful experience. It’s not the REALLY important stuff of life. It’s just fun. FUN! F. U. N. Something to enjoy and have a laugh with Lauren about!”

I’ve noticed that when someone says something is going to be fun, it’s not. If it really is going to be fun, you don’t need to label it.

This is when I have to tell Mum I feel a lot differently about it. All this is very important to me because I want everything I do to go viral. I like to get things RIGHT and a lot of people see my posts. Probably everyone. And they'll all have an opinion on it and feedback and comments and trolls. Basically, trolls doing their trolling thing.

Mum stares at me. "Work out who matters and concentrate on the facts. Something else, too, Millie. Don't sweat the small stuff."

Mum says this with a wink.

Don't sweat the small stuff. That phrase was never designed for me. I sweat all sizes of stuff. I do not discriminate. If it's big, I worry, and if it's tiny, I worry. Mum says I run an equal-opportunity kind of anxiety. She's right.