

# NOT LIKE ME

Two weeks before Morgan Mallen threw herself off the water tower, I might have typed a message on her social media page that said, “Just die! Die! Die! No one cares about you anyway!”

(I’m just saying, it could have been me.)

And I say “could have” because the message was anonymous. Untraceable. Nobody knows who said that horrible thing. That was the beauty of the deal. Nobody knew exactly who said what, except for Athena, I guess. The rest of us sent messages from the shadow places and let them run loose like wolves in the forest.

No one was responsible.

I sure don’t know who typed what. Whose fingers punched the keys? Who said such cruel, unspeakable things? I wonder, *Could it have been me?*

No, that wasn’t like me at all.

# CAST OUT

I barely knew her. Not many people did. But I knew this: She was out there.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I ask you: Am I not allowed to say even that? It doesn't make me a bad person for stating the obvious. It was a fact—Morgan Mallen was different, but not in a good way. Like in a *waaaaay* way.

For example: The sky is gray, the grass is green, and Morgan Mallen became the saddest girl I'd ever seen. It even rhymes. Green, seen, mean, teen, sardine.

(Etcetera, etcetera.)

Some girls in school claimed she was this and alleged she was that. There was also a selfie that famously made the rounds. She maybe kissed the wrong boy. Who knows what really happened.

Once a message was spray-painted on the girls' bathroom door, and another day it appeared on the side of

the snack shack by the football field: “Morgan Mallen is a slut.”

Check that tense. *Was*, not *is*.

Was a tramp. A selfie-sharer. An outcast.

None of this makes me a bad person.

Right?

# SLOGANS ON SHIRTS

There are a lot of phonies in this town, I'll tell you that much.

A lot of them.

(A lot.)

The whole anti-bullying campaign is suddenly everywhere. Posters in the hallways, words on everybody's lips during morning announcements, in classrooms.

Somebody made a big sign for the front of the school:

THIS IS A BULLY-FREE ZONE!

So, *whew*, that's a relief. Now we can feel good about ourselves again. We forgive everybody, even the creeps. Please admire our cleaned-up images, like shiny pennies in a sock drawer—and about as useful.

The whole town was at the funeral, stunned and sobbing.

Long-sleeved T-shirts were handed out for the students to wear, announcing to the world that we were SOLDIERS AGAINST BULLYING! We didn't even have to buy the shirts. Just pulled them over our heads, like wool over somebody's eyes. Now look at us, TV cameras: We're good peeps. *Baa!*

Do unto others. Yeah, right, we've memorized all the best slogans.

But at night we peel off our shirts. We stand barefoot and alone before the bathroom mirror, examining ourselves through hollow eyes. And we know. Deep down we know what we did and didn't do.

I sometimes wonder how Morgan would have reacted. You know that bracelet some people wear, WWJD? Jesus, I honestly don't know. I think about Morgan, if she could look down on us from some fluffy cloud in outer space or wherever. I think she'd laugh out loud—an empty, sad, sarcastic laugh. The way she usually laughed, a little crookedly. She'd look at all of us wearing shirts like Halloween costumes. Masking our true selves. She might even be looking down on us right now, laughing at the big joke. *Ho-ho-ho.*

Funniest thing ever.

# ONE SPECTACULAR FACT

Don't expect to get all the facts from me. Okay? She stepped off the water tower. A spectacular statement, concise and final. That's the only fact you're going to need. Says it all right there.

So don't get the idea this journal will be some kind of complete document where you learn "her story," or even "my story."

There are holes in this leaky ship. We could all drown together.

All the cops standing around like on detective shows, scratching their heads, saying, "There are things here we still don't know."

No kidding.

I do have impressions, details, memories. I'll write down some things that happened. Try to remember.

Maybe it will help.

I will sit down, open this book to a clean page, and set the timer on my cell to fifteen minutes. That's the promise I've made to myself. Or maybe it's the promise I've made to her. The least I can give. If time's up, that's that. Even if the page stays blank.

# THE GAME

A lot of people wrote a ton of trash. You want specifics? It became this thing we all did sometime last year, around the start of school. It was a game of tag, basically. And what's a game without rules? That was Athena's idea. She devised the system, set the guidelines, enforced the rules.

No comment could be longer than twenty-five words. And it was important, very important, that every comment was anonymous, like a Secret Santa, but, you know, way different. The opposite of a gift.

There was a bright-blue piece of laminated poster board, about half the size of an index card. In red letters it said:

TAG. YOUR TURN.

Another rule: You had twenty-four hours to post the next message. That was important too. You had to keep it going, you know, and not think about it too much.

(That was the trick, the "not thinking.")

When it was your turn, you had to post a secret comment



on Morgan Mallen's stupid page, then you slipped the note back into Athena Luikin's locker, and she tagged somebody else. "You're it." That was how she controlled the game. If you didn't go along, you were *out*. Not out of the game, you were cut out completely. Silent treatment, cold shoulder, and potentially a future target. Athena joked, "You'll be sent to Outcast Island."

Nobody wanted that. A fate worse than death, we used to think . . . until we saw actual death, or at least its aftermath. Not the scream, but the echo of it. What do scientists call it? The aftershock? Once you felt that shiver down in your bones, the cold permanency of oblivion, a few days on Outcast Island didn't seem half so bad.

We treated it as a joke.

I can't deny it. I know this makes me sound like the biggest jerk on the globe, but it was funny at first. We laughed about it. We tried to write the nastiest, filthiest, wildest comments possible. It was a challenge, and we all looked forward to reading the next crazy message. A lot of people were reading it at first. We loved when something got a big reaction in school.

For example:

*I'd rather crawl inside an armadillo's asshole than spend two minutes with you.*

That's creative and humorous, at least I thought so at the time. Other people wrote way meaner. I had a hard time deciding which animal it should be: a rhinoceros,

grasshopper, donkey, chicken, and so on. (Decisions, decisions.) At first I used the word *poophole*, but I changed it at the last minute. Who can know for sure. Art is so subjective.

After a while, most of us just got bored.

I am, you should realize by now, a complete idiot.

# SUPER AWKWARD

Our teachers said that it sometimes helped to talk about these things. Share feelings, exchange ideas. Whatever happens, don't keep it buried inside or you might blow like a volcano. *Ga-zoom*.

(Wait, is that the sound volcanoes make? *Ga-zoom*? Seriously doubtful. I suck at onomatopoeia. Carry on!)

It seemed like three out of every five teachers felt a need to say something wise and important. They gazed at us through sincere eye sockets. We got all quiet and tried to make it look like we were searching our souls instead of secretly watching the clock.

Grief counselors visited the school those first few days and “made themselves available.” It was super awkward. One morning announcement said there would be an open gathering after school, where students could go to talk, hang out, share memories, and “enjoy” refreshments.

For reasons I can't explain, I thought this might be a good idea. Or, I guess, the right thing to do. That's the problem. Nobody knew the right thing to do. We didn't have any experience.

The gathering was in the old lower gym—and the minute I walked in I knew it was a mistake. There were way too many teachers holding clear plastic cups, milling around in hushed tones.

There weren't many students there, and I was one of the few guys. I estimated twenty tops. Morgan Mallen wasn't super popular.

One huddle of girls stood around sobbing and patting each other on the shoulder. I took a deep breath and headed for the refreshment table.

Soon an unknown, walrus-like teacher appeared beside me as I scarfed my second fudge brownie.

“You're Sam, right?”

“Yeah, yes,” I said.

He was a lumpy man in a way-too-cheerful sweater. And I mean *waaaaay*. It was like a peacock exploded on it. Neon barf. He wore a thick, droopy mustache. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. Like some weird alien, the sweaty walrus beamed a chipped-tooth smile directly into my eyeballs. I got zapped by Mr. Sensitivity.

“I'm Mr. Laneway, one of the social workers here at school.” He extended a hand. This was awkward, because my hands were full with apple juice (right hand) and brownie (left hand), and he was all, “Oh, oh, your hands are full,

never mind, it's fine," before I figured that I could free up my left hand by balancing the brownie in the crook of my right elbow. I gave him my hand, upside down and backward.

(Genius.)

After the handshake ritual was complete, I made for the exit.

"You won the essay contest last year," Mr. Laneway said. "I remember."

This took me off guard. How did he know?

"I was one of the judges," he explained. "Your composition really stood out. Excellent work. It felt honest."

"Thanks, thank you," I said and really hoped we had reached the end of our conversation. Last stop! Everyone off the bus!

"I hope you're still writing," Mr. Laneway said. "You have talent, Sam."

I shifted on my feet. I didn't ordinarily love this kind of under-the-spotlight deal. He wasn't a creep or anything—I mean, he was actually saying nice things—but I wanted to be invisible about the whole writing thing. Keep it on the down low. I never should have entered that contest.

"You probably want to join the others," Mr. Laneway observed.

(Yes, I super do!)

"You should try keeping a journal," he suggested. "It's important, at times like this, to have a place to go with your thoughts and feelings."

I gave him a blank look.

He waited, wanting more.

“Maybe I’ll try it,” I said.

“Please know, Sam, that you are welcome to come by my office anytime if you”—his perfectly round head tilted east, then west, then east again—“if you want to discuss things or, you know, talk about Morgan, or—”

“Yeah, I mean, yes! That’d be great, thanks,” I sputtered. “I might.”

(Unlikely!)

Mrs. Kalman, the principal, asked for us to all gather around. (Except she said, “Gather *round*,” though I don’t completely get why.)

She made some important and serious remarks in an official manner. Clearly Mrs. Kalman was trying to say all the right things, but it felt artificial to me, like the orange soda at Walmart. I totally regretted coming to this meeting /gathering/get-together thingy. All the adults were just way too eager to be sensitive and supportive. I kept wanting to shout, “Minimize, minimize!”

I faded in with a small group of students, quasi-friends and familiar faces. Mrs. Kalman talked and we listened, still numb. I don’t think anybody knew how to act, even the adults—or maybe *especially* the adults. The bizarre thing is that I felt perfectly normal in so many ways. I woke up, ate the standard amount of frozen waffles (four, starving!), rode the bus (groan), laughed when something funny happened in school—then immediately felt bad about laughing,

because it was so obviously wrong to be alive and happy at a time like this. There was a weird vacuum suck inside me, like an air bubble under water, and I felt like, I don't know, I had to burp all the time. But I couldn't. I just walked around with that swollen, full-up, burpy feeling. The pressure building, building.

A school counselor spoke. She gestured to a table with stacks of papers and fancy pamphlets and told us that we should consider taking this time to fill out one of the worksheets. She said it might be a good mental exercise. I grabbed one, to be exactly like everybody else, thinking: *Burpies for brains, this is so yuck*. I folded the sheet and stuffed it into my pocket. Some girls actually took out pencils and chewed on their erasers in a thoughtful manner. I grabbed another brownie—sue me: they were *really* good!—and waited for this grim gathering to conclude. When they asked us to hand in our activity sheets at the end, I was all, “Huh, what?”

I guess I didn't really see the point. They treated us like we needed to be cured or fixed or something. I don't know, maybe they were right about it. But this didn't feel like the way to get it done. It did get me thinking about Morgan, though. And if it makes anybody out there happy, I had a hard time getting to sleep that night.

# THE FIRST TIME

This is how we met. It happened by accident, late in October, months after she had become Athena Luikin's favorite target.

So I'm saying: This is the first time I talked to the real person. Not just through the internet or as the nearly invisible person drifting through the school halls. I mean the real girl.

I looked Morgan in the eyes, made her laugh, saw her smile, heard her voice, smelled her shampoo. I'm trying to say that she became real to me. That should have changed things. I know that. I know how it makes me look. And I really know how it makes me *feel*. But let's forget about that for now. Let's focus on . . . not me.

It was the Pumpkin Fest, and I had volunteered to help out. Well, okay, not true. My mother signed me up and told me I was doing it.



“No choice?” I protested.

“No choice,” she answered.

“That’s not fair,” I said.

“I pay your monthly phone bill,” she countered.

So I volunteered to help out at the Pumpkin Fest. I figured it couldn’t be too terrible. I like little kids as long as they 1) don’t try to bite me; 2) don’t have goobers running down their noses; and 3) don’t act like little brainiacs who want to tell me all about dinosaurs or *Star Wars* or whatever (though, yes, I can talk the history of Marvel Comics all day long).

I’ve got a little brother and sister at home and I’ll say it: I love those guys almost all the time. Which is a pretty high percentage, if you think about it. I’ve compared notes with other brothers, so I know what I’m talking about.

At the Pumpkin Fest, I hoped I’d get assigned to the corn maze or the haunted house, something cool like that, where I could jump out with a plastic chain saw in my hand and scare the candy corn out of those kids. That, I would enjoy. *Bwa-ha-ha-ha!* Giving four-year-olds a cardiac arrest? I’m all in.

So it sucked when I was told to go over to the Face Painting Station.

“Seriously?” I asked.

I received an enthusiastic nod from a seriously coffeed-up yoga mom. She was like the queen of volunteers and actually had a clipboard tucked into her armpit.

“I’m no Picasso,” I said.

“It’s easy,” she assured me. Big smile, blazing white teeth, crazy stiff hair, bony arms. “The kids want stars or pumpkins or rainbows. Simple stuff. There’s a sheet you can follow.”

I hesitated.

“You’ll have fun,” she lied, and shoved me in the direction of the Face Painting Station.

It’s hard to say no to an enthusiastic yoga mom. After all, I had volunteered, which was like showing up with a giant “YES!” marked across my forehead.

I trekked over to the picnic table, which was surrounded by a ragged bunch of twerps. I wondered if the PTA ladies realized that they basically created a training class for the future tattooed freaks of America.

Morgan was painting a jack-o’-lantern on the pudgy face of a freckled, red-haired girl. It was pretty sweet, actually, the way that little girl stood with her arms frozen to her sides, trying to hold herself so perfectly still.

“Does your nose itch?” I asked the little girl.

Her eyes narrowed as a new worry entered her skull.

I made a big show of scratching my nose very dramatically. “It’s hard to hold still when your nose itches, don’t you think?”

The little girl’s rabbit nose twitched. Her shoulders wriggled.

“Don’t listen to him,” Morgan said, grinning. “You can scratch if you want.”

The station consisted of a picnic table and a hand-lettered

sign that read, you guessed it: FACE PAINTING STATION. An assortment of paints was scattered on the table, a total mess, very haphazard, if you ask me. An untidy line of future gang members stood anxiously waiting their turn with the fake tattoos.

“So, um,” I pointed back in the direction of the hyper mom, “she said I should come over to help out.”

Morgan put the finishing touches on the redhead’s chubby cheek. “There you go,” she said, holding up a hand mirror. “What do you think? Do you like it?”

The kid nodded solemnly. She asked, “Will it come off?”

Not missing a beat, Morgan replied, “Yes, it will wear off in a year or two.”

The kid’s eyes bulged out like a cartoon character after it realizes that it’s raced off a cliff. Nothing but air under its feet. Scooby-Doo’s “Ruh-roh.” Funny.

Morgan smiled. “I’m joking. A little soap and water will wash it off.”

The relieved kid waddled over toward the cupcakes.

“Can you paint a spider on this girl’s face?” Morgan asked me.

And that was the first time we ever talked.

It was about a spider on the day I sat down beside her.

Clever, huh?

# SOMEBODY ELSE

I sometimes daydream about becoming somebody else.  
Anybody else.

Not me.

I imagine how I might lose myself, my old self. Shed it like a winter coat on the first warm spring day. I'd become something new. Something free.

I'd be older, with a car, and I'd drive around from state to state, a nameless drifter hitting all the nowhere towns. I'd get a series of mindless jobs that didn't matter. Maybe I'd work as a dishwasher somewhere, happy to punch the clock, or I'd find construction work with a roofer, like my cousin Tim. I'd haul heavy packages of shingles on my shoulder and climb high ladders. Develop serious muscles, get all ripped and studly. I'd wear floppy hats, bang nails till sundown, shirtless and tan, not a thought in my head. Just hauling and banging, stopping for lunch and sunscreen, then

hauling and banging some more. I wouldn't have to think. I'd meet people who didn't know anything about the old me—I would be a clean slate. There would be no "I." And I, this person with the pen, would become whatever anyone wanted me to be.

"Do you like electronic music?" somebody might ask.

And I'd smile real big. "Oh, yeah! You bet I do!"

Even when the old me might have thought, *Hell no I don't!*

I'd be happy. For a while, at least. Then I'd feel that old yank of the heart, you know, gotta move on. The mysterious drifter. I'd shove off to some other place, maybe steal a little money along the way, not too much, nothing crazy, break into a house while rich folks slept, grab enough to get by till I found a new job somewhere. And I'd invent myself a new life, in a new place, and maybe even fall in love. Or better still, find someone, anyone, who could fall in love with me.

She'd ask my name.

And I'd look into her pretty blue eyes and say, "Baby doll, I don't even know who in the world I am."