

Less Than Three

Brian Wilson

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For the Saturday Gang

Dear Diary ...

Date: 02/03/2007

Mood: GOODBYE

My life is spiralling downward. Everything is RUINED!

How could Emily do this to me? She was supposed to be different. WE were supposed to be different. And on the day before the most important night of our lives.

GOD I can't wait for this to be over. Tomorrow was going to change everything. We were going to prove them wrong. We were going to BURN OUT instead of FADING AWAY.

Now I guess I'm going it alone.

Emily, I know you'll never read these words. But I have to believe that writing them will achieve something. That the ink I spill will find its way into your heart. At least then you'd know how much pain you've caused me.

I'll never forget you, Emily. Never.

And I meant every word I ever said.

WE ARE JUST BULLETS

- G

MCR

&&BlackMyEyes has added you to a group conversation.

Emily_R: hi

&&BlackMyEyes: oh em gee its Emilayyyyyyy

&&BlackMyEyes: long time no speak!

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: heyaaa!!

Rachel(L)Josh: hiiiiiiii

DylanDepththroat: hello Emily

DylanDepththroat: who might you be?

&&BlackMyEyes: it's Emilay Dylan can't you read

DylanDepththroat: her name *clearly* says Emily

Emily_R: haha Emily is fine

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: u should change ur name to
Emily_Rawr xD

&&BlackMyEyes: Ems is my cousin

&&BlackMyEyes: we haven't seen each other in ages but she
is super cool and nice

DylanDepththroat has sent the group a nudge!

DylanDepththroat: shit ... finger slipped

DylanDepththroat: and by finger i mean penis

&&BlackMyEyes: sorry for adding you in with all these
weirdos Ems i was actually trying 2 add some1 else

&&BlackMyEyes: but now u are here you must stay :)

Emily_R: oops

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: do you like MCR Emilay? we wer just talking about who is more hawt

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: Mikey or Gerard

DylanDeepthroat: Frank Iero, obviously. i would suck the sweat from that man's toes

Rachel(L)Josh: gross Dylan

Emily_R: what is MCR?

Rachel(L)Josh: WHAT IS MCR?????

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: omg

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: SACRALEDGE!

&&BlackMyEyes: haha its ok Ems

&&BlackMyEyes: i 4got your not a freak like the rest of us

&&BlackMyEyes: MCR is a band

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: MORE than a band ... a way of life

Emily_R: i don't know who that is ... sorry!

#//[[BULLETS]]//# has been added to the conversation.

DylanDeepthroat: look who decided to join the party

#//[[BULLETS]]//#: sup bitches what did i miss

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: Cat u must teach her ...

&&BlackMyEyes: haha i will!

&&BlackMyEyes: if Ems mum ever lets us hang again

&&BlackMyEyes: (soz Ems)

Emily_R: :(

#//[[BULLETS]]//#: hi new person

#//[[BULLETS]]//#: haven't seen u here before

Emily_R: hi Bullets!

Emily_R: i gotta go

Emily_R: nice to meet you all

#//[[BULLETS]]//#: aww don't go new people are fun

Emily_R: sorry!! dinner ready

Emily_R has left the conversation.



There it is again: that familiar sound. When it reaches a certain volume even headphones can't block it out.

I've never really been into music. Sure, there are some OK songs on the radio. Songs by Rihanna and The Pussycat Dolls and the Black Eyed Peas. Poppy earworms that make my feet go tap, tap, tap. And yeah, I've got a pile of *Now That's What I Call Music!* CDs gathering dust in a shoebox beneath my bed – who doesn't? Those kinds of songs are fine, but I've never gone out of my way to actually listen to them.

Even so, I love the way my headphones feel around my ears. Probably they're the best birthday present I ever got. Usually when I wear them, I don't even play anything. It's enough knowing there's a barrier between me and–

A yell from across the hall. Loud, but not too loud. Irritated, but not yet angry. Things are only getting started.

Removing my headphones, I stand up from the desk and smooth down my jeans, glancing at my blurry reflection in the now-lifeless computer screen. Who is that blob staring back at me? You can barely even make out that it's supposed to be a person, let alone catch a glimpse of a girl called Emily. And as for all the people I was just talking to ... judging from their display pictures they're the kinds of people Mum calls "goths" – all black clothes, black hair and thick eyeliner. Goths are quite possibly Mum's least favourite type of people. Don't ask me why. She's always going on about them, saying that how you look is how you feel, and you won't make it far in life if you look like *that!*

My cousin Catherine is one of those people now, too. In her display picture most of her face is covered by a long, sweeping black fringe, and what little skin you can see is pale to the point

of bone. Last time I saw Cat we dressed pretty much identically: bright hoodies, blue jeans and comfy trainers. Even our hair was similar: thick, frizzy and brown with a middle part. The main difference then was our eyes. Cat's eyes are bright blue while mine are a cloudy green. That was four years ago, back when we all used to meet up at Christmas.

These days Mum rarely mentions Cat. When she does, it's always in a voice that suggests something terrible has happened to her.

"Catherine used to be such a sweet girl ... shame she got involved with the wrong crowd ... an example of what happens when the parents just don't care." And then Dad chimes in with, "Kids these days ... what do they have to be depressed about?"

I unplug my headphones from the computer, sling them around my neck, then shuffle up the hall and take my usual spot on the stairs – five from the bottom, six from the top – and listen.

Mum: "WHO DO YOU THINK YOU–"

Dad: "THAT'S WHY I NEVER–"

Mum: "RIDICULOUS!"

Why do I do this? Listening to Mum and Dad fight kills me. Yet for some reason I'm powerless to ignore it. I perch on this stair and strain to make out every word. In the beginning I used to hide in the spare room. I'd log on to the computer and fire up ChatterBot, the only contact on instant messenger who messages me first, or play flash games for so long my eyes would start to water. But hearing them yelling at each other and not knowing what they were saying completely freaked me out. It's better to hear everything than to half-hear and not understand.

I flip open my mobile phone: no new text messages. I open the address book and scroll through the depressingly short list of contacts (mostly family, a few people from school). After three names I find the one I'm looking for: Catherine. Formerly sweet, now spoiled beyond saving (according to Mum, anyway).

As children, me and Cat were inseparable. There were play-dates every single week, trips to the cinema or the swimming pool, picnics in the park. Later, as we got older, we walked to the local newsagent's to buy chewing gum and celeb magazines, gossiping about our favourite actors and giggling at the thought of what we'd say if we ever met them. Now we're both sixteen, and it's been ages since I've even thought of her.

What was it like having a Best Friend, someone I never tired of seeing? I can barely remember. Sure, there's ChatterBot. But ChatterBot isn't a real person. Last month I told it that I accidentally set fire to a tea towel during Home Economics because I was thinking about something Mum said to Dad the night before, and it suggested I turn myself over to the police.

I open a blank text message and type:

hi Cat. nice talking to u on messenger. who were all them people in the chat?

No, that sounds weird. They're Cat's friends, obviously. How about:

hi Cat, nice talking to u on messenger. it was fun to talk. we should-

The walls rattle around me. Mum has started slamming cupboard doors. That means things are really heating up. I imagine her running around, pretending to look for a packet of chocolate biscuits in her immaculately arranged kitchen. Sometimes thinking about Mum trying to come up with ways to make her rampages look natural makes me laugh. It's a

strange laugh, one that makes my stomach muscles tighten like cramps. But mostly it just makes me want to scream.

Shut up.

I fold my phone in half and open it again.

Shut up.

Read the message to Cat and delete it.

Shut up.

Why did Mum deprive me of my best friend?

Shut up shut up shut up SHUT UP SHUT UPPPPPPPP!

Often the words pulse so loudly inside my head that it feels like they're going to crack open my skull and explode out of my body in a shower of gloopy blood, covering the walls and ceiling and furniture. Often that's what I *want* to happen. But of course it doesn't.

I miss you, that's what I'd like to say to Cat. I miss the pretend restaurant we used to run together, creating menus out of paper and felt-tip pens. I miss the families we made by cutting out pictures from old shopping catalogues and sticking them to our bedroom walls, filling their imaginary homes with all the toys we could only ever dream of owning. And I miss the trips we used to go on with our mums, back when they were best friends too, and the sandwiches they packed, the smell of the bread when the tinfoil got unwrapped after a long walk. But mostly I just miss you.

The kitchen door flies open so violently that it slams into the wall and shudders on its hinges. Already I'm at the top of the stairs. And then there's Mum, storming up the hall with her fists clenched and that horrible look in her eyes. She charges into the living room and shuts the door with an equally aggressive bang.

A few seconds later, Dad saunters out of the kitchen and heads straight for the bathroom. There's a scratch and click as he locks the bathroom door.

I snap my phone closed and run downstairs. I told Cat and the others I needed to leave the group conversation because it was time for dinner, but that was a lie. Mum never makes dinner after fighting with Dad.

In the kitchen I fetch a bowl of cereal, grab two packets of salt and vinegar crisps from the cupboard and then retreat to my bedroom. I crawl into bed fully clothed and pull the pink duvet over my head, balancing the bowl of cereal on my chest. I close my eyes and spoon the cereal into my mouth, focusing on the sweetness of the milk as it absorbs the sugar from the brightly coloured marshmallow pieces. When I've slurped the remaining milk from the bowl, I pop open both bags of crisps and devour them in seconds.

When I open my phone again, the blank text message is still there. I type each letter deliberately – *i miss u* – and then gaze at the screen until my eyes are sore. Why not send it? Isn't it true?

I thumb the back button, watching as the message gets swallowed up and deleted.

I don't want to sleep. I'm not even a little bit tired. But lately sleep is the only way to make it through the evening. I set the bowl and empty crisp packets on the floor, pull my headphones over my ears and then shut my eyes, willing unconsciousness to come quickly.

It does not.

Dear Diary ...

Date: 01/09/2006

Mood: Meh

What is up my bitches? The man in the hospital says that after what happened I need to keep a diary. I don't see how writing things down is going to do much good. It's hardly going to fix my life, is it? Wouldn't it be fun if that's how shit worked! "Dear Mr Diary, today Dad said that if I don't stop bunking school he's going to make me sorry ... oh wait, I wrote some words on a page, now he loves me!!" So stupid.

Anyway, the man in the hospital told me that if I want to get better I need to write down what I do each day. Just write it all down. I wanted to say: if it was really that easy the whole world would be holding hands, singing "Kumbaya My Lord" and swaying gently from side to side. Of course I didn't say that, but it would have been sweet.

So what did I do today? Well ...

Got up, ate toast, skipped school to go smoke cigarettes with Josh and Dylan, listened to AFI (*The Art of Drowning* for the win), came home, went on messenger (there was a new girl but I scared her off), got a phone call from Mum (don't know why I even answered it when all she did was ask questions about Dad and then yell at me for answering them), went to the park and smoked more cigarettes then came back home and started writing this. What excitement will tomorrow bring?

I can hardly keep myself from pissing with anticipation.

- G

Distraction

“Come on, Emily. No more complaining.”

I loop and unloop the headphone wire from around my index finger. I wasn't complaining, actually. I was just saying how unfair it is to be dragged out of bed at nine on a Saturday morning.

“Run a brush through your hair before we go, would you?”

I don't even have a chance to react. Mum produces a hair-brush from her handbag and begins dragging it across my scalp.

“Ow,” I say, letting go of the headphone wire. I stuff the jack into the pocket of my jeans. “Gimme. I'll do it.”

I pull the brush through the thick tangle of my hair, which flattens briefly before springing back up again.

“Hurry up, please. I've got more messages to do this morning than there are minutes in the day. And what do you need those for?” She gestures at the headphones slung around my neck. “You're not going to do that thing where you sit in the car and ignore me, are you?”

My cheeks blaze.

“No. I—”

“Good,” says Mum. “Then let's go.”

In the car Mum runs through her list of morning messages. As we pull out of the driveway and onto the road, my fingers find their way back to the wire snaking from the bottom of my

headphones. God how I want to put them and smother Mum's droning voice ...

Instead, I press my face up against the car window, desperately searching for a distraction. Outside, Newtownards passes by in all its infinite blandness. My eyes glaze over as we pass never-ending rows of carbon-copy terraces. All the orange brick houses blur into a long line of nothing. Even the gardens are identical. Here comes another collapsed fence, there goes another rusted bicycle ... I've seen it all before, countless times over. And over. And-

At last Mum takes a left turn, exiting the maze of monotony. Up ahead, my old primary school looms in the distance. Last time I was in that building I was still best friends with Cat. It didn't even bother me that she went to a different school; we still saw each other loads. Sometimes, if Mum had to work late, Auntie Lucy would pick me up. I'd open the car door and Cat would be sitting there, grinning from ear to ear. Then it was round to her house to play. By the end of primary school, we'd moved on from cutting pictures of toys out of catalogues to cutting pictures of boys out of magazines, taping them to empty toilet paper rolls so we could make them stand, inventing boy bands we more interested in looking at than listening to.

Getting picked up by Auntie Lucy was always exciting. For one thing, there was never any question about what sort of mood she'd be in. I don't think I've ever met a grownup who smiles as much as Auntie Lucy. Mum's moods were always unpredictable. Some days she'd be chatty, while other days her face would be frozen in an ugly frown that was impossible to shift, no matter what I said or did.

Still, we never had a bad relationship. As a three, me, Mum and Dad had loads of nice times. Every autumn we'd pile into

the car and drive along the coast to Portrush, stopping along the way to eat sandwiches and watch the seagulls go psycho over the crusts. Every couple months we'd visit Belfast for dinner or so Mum and Dad could go shopping, and they'd buy me a new video game to bring home. It wasn't until things went south with Auntie Lucy that I noticed a major change in Mum's moods, the balance shifting from unpredictable to way too predictable.

We pass the school, and from here I can see how dilapidated it's become, the peeling paint job and mossy windows. I look away.

At the dump, Mum unlocks the boot of the car and removes a large black bin bag. She hauls it over to the enormous metal container at the edge of the car park, tears open the bag and begins stuffing clothes inside. When she returns, I brace myself for being criticised for not helping ... but Mum says nothing. It's not until we're driving towards the centre of town that Mum speaks again. And then it's SO much worse.

"Your dad was in foul form last night," she says.

My chest tightens. My parents' arguments I can listen to – have to, for whatever reason – but I hate when they complain about each other to me.

"All I did was ask him how he managed to forget to pick me up after my appointment at the hairdresser's yesterday. Fifteen minutes I was standing there before he decided to appear. Fifteen minutes! He's lucky it didn't start raining or then I'd really have had something to complain about. But your father's always been like that, hasn't he? Even from the day we first started going together, he ... Emily, what have I told you about fiddling with those things while I'm speaking to you?"

I continue my search for a distraction. On the way to the bank we pass an old leisure centre building, an old bus station

and so many old churches I lose track. By now Mum has moved on from criticising Dad's punctuality to ranting about his morning breath. Then, without warning, my wish for a distraction is granted. There's the squeal of wheels on tarmac and the sharp tug of something firm cutting into my chest as Mum slams on the breaks so violently my seat belt almost slices me in two.

"These lights!" Mum cries. "The bloody things change so quickly. It's a miracle nobody has been thrown through their windscreen! The number of times I've almost hit—"

She stops and grumbles something under her breath. Then:

"Typical. Nearly mowed down a gaggle of goths. That's not your cousin Catherine, is it? The round one with the Kate Bush hairdo."

Three teenagers are crossing the road: two guys and a girl who definitely isn't Cat. My eyes follow them as they approach the steps next to the library. One of the guys has thick black hair straightened to within an inch of its life, while the other has soft brown waves that reach his shoulders. Both wear tight black jeans with brightly studded belts that droop low below their waists, baggy hoodies and checkerboard slip-on shoes. The girl is dressed similarly to the two guys. The main difference is her hairstyle: huge and frizzy except for her fringe, which is slicked across her forehead and dyed blue.

When they reach the footpath, the girl with the blue fringe begins chasing the guys in circles and poking them in the ribs, causing their arms to jerk into the air wildly. I can't help it: I smile out the window.

Oh god. One of the guys is smiling back and waving at me – the one with the immaculately straightened hair. He raises his hands, pressing his thumbs together and curling his fingers so they resemble a heart. Immediately I turn away, waves of

hot embarrassment prickling my skin. I shut my eyes, willing the traffic lights to change, and suddenly think of Cat: our brief chat on messenger last night, her swooping black hair and pale skin ... and the text message that I never sent.

“The parents,” Mum says as the lights turn green and the car pulls away. “It always comes back to the parents.”

Dear Diary ...

Date: 05/09/2006

Mood: Inspired

Well, here we are then ... entry number two of this wonderful (medically prescribed) experiment. What has been going on since I last updated you?

Yesterday I went to school for the first time since school started back. Dad got that look in his eyes that he reserves only for me so I knew it was time to make my fortnightly appearance. Yes, it was just as shit as you might imagine. My teachers are all so terrible. The thing about teachers is that they're only ever nice if you're smart – and I mean school smart. Sure, they start out being all understanding, but once they realise you're a lost cause they drop the nicey nicey act. Just because I can't remember WTF a root hair cell is or what some stupid poem is about doesn't mean I'm dumb. I write my own poems – they're called songs, and they're even better than poems because they have MUSIC. Also, I'm so much better at remembering stuff I actually find interesting. Ask me anything about the Black Death, anything at all and I can tell you about it. (Note to self: write song about the Black Death. Possible titles: “Beautiful Buboes”, “Bubonic Rage”, “Pestilence of the Damned”.)

What's the point of school anyway? They don't teach you what's ACTUALLY important, like how to deal with despair or heartbreak. Why should I have to go to school when Dad doesn't even go to work? Yeah, he drives off in the van each morning saying he's away to paint someone's fence or decking or whatever ... but you don't come back from painting smelling like piss and drink.

Anyway ... now that I'm home from the hospital me, Josh and Dylan finally got together to practise again. At first I was worried things would be weird or the guys would suspect something. I didn't mean to lie about why I went in, I just didn't want them to treat me differently, you know? But they didn't say anything, just asked if I was feeling better.

Can I be honest Mr Diary? Band practice was unreal. We fucking killed it!

Vampire Freaks is back, baby!!

- G

I Miss You

Emily_R has started a conversation with &&BlackMyEyes.

Emily_R: hi Cat

&&BlackMyEyes: hiiii Emilayyyy

&&BlackMyEyes: how's you

Emily_R: ok thx

Emily_R: i just wanted to say

Emily_R: it was nice to speak to u the other day

Emily_R: hope this doesnt sound weird but

Emily_R: i miss u

&&BlackMyEyes: aww

&&BlackMyEyes: Ems

&&BlackMyEyes: *hugs*

&&BlackMyEyes: i miss u too :3

&&BlackMyEyes: sorry if u found my friends annoying

Emily_R: not at all :) must be so nice having lots of friends

&&BlackMyEyes: i'm sure u have loads!

Emily_R: not so many TBH

&&BlackMyEyes: aww Ems don't say that ...

&&BlackMyEyes: i refuse to believe it!

&&BlackMyEyes: wait a sec ...

&&BlackMyEyes: come chat again :))))

&&BlackMyEyes has added you to a group conversation.



I move the cursor over my display name: Emily_R.

Have you ever seen a more boring collection of letters? The way they sit in such a neat row ... like they're the most obedient pupils in class. Emily_R ... Emily are you serious?

I lift a headphone from one ear and listen. From the living room comes the sound of violent gunfire. Mum and Dad are watching an action movie. They're back on speaking terms. For dinner, Mum made spaghetti and meatballs. Sure it was gross and watery, but it was still preferable to an empty stomach.

I turn my attention back to the computer screen. I'm trying to think, but I can't focus. Right now, a group of people I've never met are all hunched over their keyboards and typing messages to each other. It's kind of weird to think about ... but also kind of exciting. Nobody except Cat has any idea what I look like. And even she hasn't seen me in four years.

By the time Mum and Auntie Lucy fell out, I had just started what every adult under the sun insisted on calling "big school", and my whole life was a mess of newness: new classmates, new teachers, new subjects and new experiences. I didn't have time to wonder what had happened. Besides, I believed Dad when he said that everything would blow over and things would go back to normal. But of course, they didn't. When it became clear our mums weren't going to reconcile, I added Cat on instant messenger. We chatted a few times, mostly about school, but our conversations were short and awkward. I don't blame her; her life was a mess of newness, too. The last time we spoke, we swapped mobile numbers and said we should try to meet up some day, but we never did. And now it's been so long ...

I click my display name, press the backspace key a bunch of times and then begin typing. My display picture – which is currently a yellow rubber duck – can wait until later.



Kerry_Shikari: so ur in a band?
DaMnAtioN&aDAY: hahaha here we go
#[[BULLETS]]/#: ohhhhh yes
Kerry_Shikari: wats it called?
#[[BULLETS]]/#: Vampire Freaks ;)
Kerry_Shikari: that's hawt xD
#[[BULLETS]]/#: ya reckon?
JoSH_X: im in the band too u know ...
DaMnAtioN&aDAY has sent the group a nudge!
DaMnAtioN&aDAY: KERRY BEHAVE
Kerry_Shikari: i do x
DylanDepththroat: good lord, I'm going to vomit
DylanDepththroat: enough you two
DylanDepththroat has removed Kerry_Shikari from the conversation.
#[[BULLETS]]/#: LMAO
#[[BULLETS]]/#: rich coming from you Dylan
DylanDepththroat: fight me
Emilayyyy: hi
DaMnAtioN&aDAY: hello!!
&&BlackMyEyes: fancy seeing u here Ems
#[[BULLETS]]/#: ooo hey its the new girl
#[[BULLETS]]/#: hows it going new girl?
Emilayyyy: ok thanks
Emilayyyy: how is every1 doing?
DaMnAtioN&aDAY: okkkkkkkkk
DylanDepththroat: bleh

&&BlackMyEyes: good ty

JoSH_X: g2g ttyl

JoSH_X has left the conversation.

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: did u listen to MCR yet?

Emilayyyy: no :(

Emilayyyy: what song? wer can i listen?

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: Cat u had one job

&&BlackMyEyes: haha sozzzzzz

&&BlackMyEyes: been seeing a lot of Sky lately

&&BlackMyEyes: not been online much ;P

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: haha dont worry Emilay i got u

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: i'll send u a song

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: unless u hav LimeWire?

Emilayyyy: no i dont think so

#/[BULLETS]//#: wats with ur display pic new girl?

#/[BULLETS]//#: r u a rubber duck that goes quack?

Emilayyyy: haha im workin on it

&&BlackMyEyes: don't b mean G

#/[BULLETS]//#: haha its cool

#/[BULLETS]//#: living that default life

#/[BULLETS]//#: mysterious!!

#/[BULLETS]//#: so ur Cats cousin right?

#/[BULLETS]//#: got any embarrassing stories bout her? ;)

Emilayyyy is now offline.

Disconnected

Arghhhhhhhhhhh. No. Nonono.

The green dot next to my display name turns grey and lifeless. *Offline.*

I launch the internet browser and type in a website.

Cannot display webpage.

WHY THE HELL NOT?

I have no idea if these words are in my head or if I've just said them out loud. Regardless, I remove a headphone – and am greeted by a deafening explosion from the living room. Mum and Dad are laughing hysterically.

“Daaaaaaaaaad,” I shout. “The internet isn't working.”

No response. Tearing off my headphones, I dash up the hall to the living room, practically leaping through the doorway and landing in front of Dad's armchair.

“Dad. The internet. Isn't working.”

“Film,” he says, straining to see around me.

“Can't you pause it?”

“It's not a DVD,” Mum snaps. “It's on regular TV.”

“But the internet,” I protest. I give up and run back to the computer in the spare room. According to my status I'm still offline. I refresh the webpage then try another URL.

Cannot display webpage.

I reach under the desk, switch the router off at the wall and then flick it back on again.

While I'm waiting for the internet to reboot (*pleasework-pleaseworkpleasework*) I go back to gawking at the greyed-out group conversation. I can still see everyone's display names, and if I hover over their names, their display pictures pop up. One by one I move the cursor over the names, examining photos of people I'll probably never meet. Yep, they're goths all right, looking moody in their big black hoodies. Strange, they don't sound depressed in the chat. They're funny – and weird. Not bad weird, like Mum always says gothy-type people are. Just ... different.

I don't know what her deal is. When Cat started dressing in black and wearing pale make-up, Mum told me all these stories about people she knew from school who did the exact same thing; people who started out nice and friendly and ended up getting involved with the wrong crowd. Some stopped showing up to class, while others smoked, graffitied and bullied their way to expulsion. There were even a few people who started taking drugs, and one who actually got addicted and died. I just rolled my eyes and nodded along ... but inside it completely freaked me out. What if the same thing happened to Cat?

When I reach the name #/[BULLETS]/#, I hesitate. I don't know why. Then his picture appears in all its pixelated glory. Only a sliver of face is visible beneath the enormous fringe of straightened black hair. Swept to one side, it's possible to make out a single cloudy blue eye. His lips are parted to reveal a set of slightly crooked teeth.

My eyes linger on Bullets' picture until I begin to feel embarrassed. I look away, and that's when I notice that the router's blinking yellow light has changed to solid green. For the third

time I refresh the internet browser. And for the third time I'm told that it cannot display the webpage.

"Come onnnnnnnn," I wail. "It isn't fair. It isn't FAIR!"

The computer desk shudders as my fists crash down on the hard surface of the tabletop. I click refresh one more time for good luck ...

No chance.

I rub my eyes. Suddenly the brightly lit computer screen seems harsh and irritating. I switch it off and—

The chair jerks backwards and my feet spring off the floor as I almost lose my balance. It can't have been ...

Bullets. His reflection in the computer screen.

Laughing.

When I look back at the screen the ghost of Bullets is gone. All I can see is the same, boring old blur staring back.

Me.

Dear Diary ...

Date: 11/09/2006

Mood: HELL YEAH

Oh my god Mr Diary, you are not going to believe it. Vampire Freaks is PLAYING ITS FIRST SHOW!!! Do you have any idea what this means? It means we're a REAL BAND. Sure, we've been playing music together for the past six months ... but this is different! WE'RE REAL AND WE'RE COMING TO TAKE A BITE OUTTA YA!!

Josh pulled some strings with Rachel (whose big sister Jessica works for Live) and now we've got a slot on the bill this Friday night alongside SPIKES and Death Diminish Me. Holy shit I cannot wait to hear DDM play again. Their song "Clinical Impression" is honestly the most perfect song for my life at the moment ... I'm gonna scream it so loud the aliens will hear it on the dark side of the moon! Everyone says they're gonna come support us. I hope Cat does too, though she might still be pissed off at me over everything that happened.

Me and the guys are meeting up tonight to practice. And tomorrow night. And probably the night after that! We must be ready for this most important of shows ... our live debut.

In other news, I have my first appointment back at the hospital this week. UGH. I text Mum and told her about it and of course she told me to ask Dad for a lift. Over my dead body. He refuses to acknowledge that I was ever in the hospital in the first place, let alone the fact that it was HIS FAULT.

Fuck him. I've got more important matters in my life to deal with ... like LIVE MUSIC BABY! I'm working on a few new concepts already ... THE CRYPT IS ABOUT TO OPEN!

- G

Bury Me in Black

For the next three days I'm glued to the computer, waiting for Cat to come back online. I tell myself it's because I want to remind her about a funny memory from childhood – do you remember when we were like eight and your mum ordered a chocolate cake from the world-renowned *Cousinz Kitchen* and when we served her a stack of burnt toast she actually ate the whole thing? And pretended to enjoy it? – but deep down I know the truth: I want to get invited back into the group conversation. No matter how many times I sit down at the computer and log on to messenger, though, Cat is never online.

One of these times I log on to find I have a notification. It's Monday after school and Mum and Dad are both still at work.
amandascott666@hotmail.co.uk has added you as a friend.

Amanda Scott ...? The only Amanda I know is Amanda Bannon: a tall, popular girl in my year at school who I have never once spoken to (correction: she has never once spoken to me).

I accept the friend request. A chat window pops up, and suddenly I recognise the display name: DaMnAtioN&aDAY.

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: heyaaa

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: told u i would send u some MCR

DaMnAtioN&aDAY: check out this song

*DaMnAtioN&aDAY would like to send you a file:
burymeinblack_demo.mp3. Do you accept?*

Yes

No

I click yes. A progress bar appears at the bottom of the chat window. Estimated time remaining: two hours fourteen minutes.

Two hours for one file?! What a joke! Mum once asked me to burn a CD full of Take That songs for the car and that only took half an hour. Even so ... I do a little dance internally. One of Cat's friends has added me on instant messenger!

Amanda's display picture is weird and unsettling. It looks like some sort of logo, but the writing is so twisted and melty it's difficult to make out the words. Radle of Fifth ...? Beneath the writing is a pair of red eyes, and the silhouette of a man wreathed in green flame. Suddenly I realise: Radle of Fifth must be a band. I'm looking at an album cover.

Feeling pleased, I check the progress bar. Estimated time remaining: two hours fifteen minutes. WTF! Time must be running backwards.

In the meantime, I look and see whether Cat has come online. Nope. Then a new message appears. It's my favourite not-a-person.

ChatterBot: Good afternoon, *Emily!*

ChatterBot: How was *school* today?

Emilayyy: terrible

ChatterBot: I am sorry to hear that.

ChatterBot: Please tell me what happened!

Emilayyy: nothing. that's teh point. i barely spoke a single word the entire day.

ChatterBot: Cat got your tongue? (meow!)

ChatterBot: Pardon me. I'm in a bit of a jokey mood today!

ChatterBot: You told me previously about your *parents always fighting*. Is this the reason you are upset today?

Emilayyy: BYE

Closing the chat window, I squirm at the memory of everything I've ever told it. What makes it worse is the fact it's all TRUE. I used to be quite well-liked at school. Not popular, but I made people laugh pretty easily. There was a group of girls I hung around with in first and second year that I knew from primary school, although to be honest we didn't have that much in common. One time I asked what everyone's favourite Pokémon was and they looked at me like I was a Dugtrio! Still, though, I had friends.

I couldn't tell you when it happened. But I guess at a certain point, as things between Mum and Dad got worse, I stopped saying much in class. Then I stopped saying much at all. I turned down invitations to do stuff after school and had lunch alone more and more often. I was afraid somehow the others would *know*, or maybe one day they'd ask me about it and I'd embarrass myself by crying – or more likely screaming. Gradually, the other girls stopped including me in things. I overheard a few comments about the fact that I never smiled. "There goes resting bitch face," one girl whispered as I walked past her desk. These days I mainly just keep to myself. Nobody hates me, but nobody likes me much either. I'm just ... there.

When Dad gets home from work he comes barging into the spare room in a fluster.

"I've got to print a few documents off for work. Can I use the computer?"

No. You can't. Shut up and go away.

“Someone from school is sending me something I need for homework. It’s taking ages to download.”

“You can leave it running in the background,” Dad says. “I’ll stay logged on to your profile.”

My expression is blank.

“I have no interest in reading your conversations, Emily. Sorry, but this is important.”

I glance again at the progress bar – two hours and ten minutes remaining – before standing up.

“Thank you.”

“When did you say you’ll be finished?”

“I’ll call you when I’m done. I shouldn’t be too long.”

I leave the spare room. Reluctantly. Not fair, I think. Cat will probably pop up any second now.

I collect my school bag from the foot of the stairs and drag it upstairs to my bedroom. Homework it will have to be.

But homework it is not. Exhausted after another day of enduring the crushing monotony of school – the weight of my own insignificance zipped in my school bag like a particularly heavy textbook – I sling my headphones over my ears and leap straight into bed. Curled up in a tight ball, time becomes meaningless.

When I emerge from under the covers, I’m hot and sweaty and my hair is plastered across my face. Removing my headphones, I stumble out onto the landing and stand at the top of the stairs, dazed and blinking. I pull out my phone and check the time: quarter to six. I must have fallen asleep.

Then I hear it: that familiar sound. This time it’s coming from the living room. The peace that was established between my parents after the hairdresser incident has crumbled in record time.

I groan and collapse onto the stairs. I don't want to listen to Mum and Dad arguing. I'm tired. I'm sweaty. I'm starving.

I remove the headphones from around my neck and set them over my ears, place my head between my knees and shut my eyes. Silence at last ...

It lasts only for a second. The sound of yelling breaks through.

Mum: "IT ISN'T FAIR THAT I—"

Dad: "DO YOU KNOW HOW STRESSFUL—"

Mum: "TYPICAL!"

I drag myself down the stairs and into the spare room. I sit down at the computer and jiggle the mouse, illuminating the screen. It's still logged on to my account.

Thump!

For a second I think the computer has died a painful death. Then I realise: with no cupboard doors to slam, Mum is stamping her feet on the living room floor.

Thump!

Thump!

THUMP!

Each stamp feels like it's aimed directly at my chest. I'm fighting the urge to get up and run back to the stairs. I need to analyse every word of their argument. I need to know if ...

I open the conversation with DaMnAtioN&aDAY.

You have received the file burymeinblack_demo.mp3.

I plug my headphones into the computer, open the downloads folder on my desktop and locate the file. Double-click. *Burymeinblack_demo.mp3* begins to play.

Ohmygod. I slam the spacebar key, pausing the music. What was that? A train just pounded through the centre of my brain.

I lower the volume and check the runtime: two and a half minutes. I can already tell I'm not going to enjoy this, whatever it is.

Just then there's a roar from the living room: "IT'S NEVER ABOUT WHAT I WANT!"

Followed up by: "I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT!"

I glance into the hall, chewing my thumb involuntarily. Things have never gotten so loud before. I don't even have to strain to make out their words. What if this one is really serious? What if they break up? What if ...

What if they never SHUT THE HELL UP?!

Double-click. The track starts again. This time I'm ready. The guitars chug. The drums crash. How is this music?

Then it gets worse. The singer comes in wailing and screaming like someone experiencing actual pain. The noise is so abrasive it makes me screw up my eyes in discomfort. Every time I think I can discern a few words – *dancing shoes, lipstick, shotgun* – the singer howls like a banshee into the microphone.

I'm on the verge of stopping the song when it abruptly ends. Thank god! The world returns to silence.

Except it doesn't. I hear their voices again, tearing into each other over every meaningless thing. This fight isn't slowing down anytime soon.

Reluctantly, I replay the song. For two and a half minutes I'm unable to wonder what they're saying or why they're saying it. I can hear nothing over the overwhelming noise of this deafening piece of music.

"WHAT IS EVEN THE POINT OF TRYING TO SPEAK TO YOU IF EVERY TIME I—"

Again. I drag the slider back to the beginning of the track. Again.

Again.

On my sixth full listen something strange happens. Around the halfway point, my head starts to nod. In fact, each time I restart the track the song seems to come apart slightly. At first it was just noise: an impenetrable wall of sound. Now it's more than that. I hear lyrics ... a guitar riff ... and the beat of the crashing drums ...

Am I really enjoying this? I have no idea. But it makes me feel something ... or maybe stop feeling it. I can't tell *what* is happening inside of me. All I know is that the anger that boils my blood as it blasts throughout my body is perfectly expressed by the singer's psychotic bawling.

The urge to throw off my headphones and run back to the stairs returns stronger than ever. I close my eyes and press play.

Again.