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Opening extract from

Solitaire

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ONE

I AM AWARE as I step into the common room that the majority of people here are almost dead, including me. I have been reliably informed that post-Christmas blues are entirely normal and that we should expect to feel somewhat numb after the 'happiest' time of the year, but I don't feel so different now to how I felt on Christmas Eve, or on Christmas Day, or on any other day since the Christmas holidays started. I'm back now and it's another year. Nothing is going to happen.

I stand there. Becky and I look at each other.

"Tori," says Becky, "you look a little bit like you want to kill yourself."

She and the rest of Our Lot have sprawled themselves over a collection of revolving chairs around the common-room computer desks. As it's the first day back, there has been a widespread hair-and-make-up effort across the entire sixth form and I immediately feel inadequate.

I deflate into a chair and nod philosophically. "It's funny because it's true."

She looks at me some more, but doesn't really look, and we laugh at something that wasn't funny. Becky then realises that I am in no mood to do anything so she moves away. I lean into my arms and fall half asleep.

My name is Victoria Spring. I think you should know that I make up a lot of stuff in my head and then get sad about it. I like to sleep and I like to blog. I am going to die someday.

Rebecca Allen is probably my only real friend at the moment. She is also probably my best friend. I am as yet unsure whether these two facts are related. In any case, Becky Allen is very pretty and has very long purple hair. It has come to my attention that, if you have purple hair, people often look at you. If you are pretty with purple hair, people often *stay* looking at you, thus resulting in you becoming a widely recognised and outstandingly

popular figure in adolescent society; the sort of figure that everyone claims to know yet probably hasn't even spoken to. She has 2,098 friends on Facebook.

Right now, Becky's talking to this other girl from Our Lot, Evelyn Foley. Evelyn is considered 'retro' because she has messy hair and wears a necklace with a triangle on it.

"The *real* question though," says Evelyn, "is whether there's sexual tension between Harry and *Malfoy*."

I'm not sure whether Becky genuinely likes Evelyn. Sometimes I think people only pretend to like each other.

"Only in fan fictions, Evelyn," says Becky. "Please keep your fantasies between yourself and your blog."

Evelyn laughs. "I'm just saying. Malfoy helps Harry in the end, right? He's a nice guy deep down, yeah? So why does he bully Harry for seven years? Enormous. Closet. Homosexual." With each word, she claps her hands together. It really doesn't emphasise her point. "It's a well-established fact that people tease people they fancy. The psychology here is unarguable."

"Evelyn," says Becky. "*Firstly*, I *resent* the fangirl idea that Draco Malfoy is some kind of beautifully tortured soul who is searching for redemption and understanding. Secondly, the only non-canon couple that is even *worth* discussion is Snily."

"*Snily?*"

"Snape and Lily."

Evelyn appears to be deeply offended. "I can't believe you don't support Drarry when you ship *Snape and Lily*. I mean, at least Drarry is a realistic possibility." She slowly shakes her head. "Like, obviously, Lily went for someone hot and hilarious like James Potter."

"James Potter was a resplendent twat. Especially to Lily. J.K. made that quite clear. And dude – if you don't like Snape by the end of the series, then you miss the entire concept of *Harry Potter*."

"If Snily had been a *thing*, there would have *been* no Harry Potter."

"Without a Harry, Voldemort might not have, like, committed mass genocide."

Becky turns to me, and so does Evelyn. I deduce that I am under pressure to contribute something.

I sit up. "You're saying that because it's Harry's fault that all these muggles and wizards died, it would have been better if there'd been no Harry Potter at all and no books or films or anything?"

I get the impression that I've ruined this conversation so I mumble an excuse and lift myself off my chair and hurry out of the common-room door. Sometimes I

hate people. This is probably very bad for my mental health.

*

There are two grammar schools in our town: Harvey Greene Grammar School for Girls, or 'Higgs' as it is popularly known, and Truham Grammar School for Boys. Both schools, however, accept males *and* females in Years 12 and 13, the two final years of school known countrywide as the sixth form. So, now that I am in Year 12, I have had to face a sudden influx of the male species. Boys at Higgs are on a par with mythical creatures and having an actual *real* boyfriend puts you at the head of the social hierarchy, but personally, thinking or talking too much about 'boy issues' makes me want to shoot myself in the face.

Even if I did care about that stuff, it's not like we get to show off, thanks to our stunning school uniform. Usually, sixth-formers don't have to wear school uniform; however, Higgs sixth form are forced to wear a hideous one. Grey is the theme, which is fitting for such a dull place.

I arrive at my locker to find a pink Post-it note on its door. On that, someone has drawn a left-pointing arrow, suggesting that I should, perhaps, look in that direction. Irritated, I turn my head to the left. There's another Post-it