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Opening extract from

Girl Online

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One year ago . . .

22 November

Hello, World!

I've decided to start a blog.

This blog.

Why, you might ask?

You know when you shake a Coke can and then you open it and it explodes everywhere? Well, that's how I feel right now. I have so many things I want to say fizzing up inside of me, but I don't have the confidence to say them out loud.

My dad once told me that I should start writing a diary. He said that keeping a diary is a great way of expressing our innermost thoughts. He also said it would be great to look back on when I was old and that it would 'really make me appreciate my teenage years'. Hmm, it's obviously been so long since he was a teenager he's forgotten what it's actually like.

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I did try, though – writing a diary. I managed about three entries before I gave up. Most of them went something like this:

Rained today; my new shoes got ruined. Jenny contemplated skipping maths. She didn't. John Barry got a nosebleed in science because he poked a pencil up there. I laughed at him. He wasn't impressed. It was awkward. 'Night.

Not exactly Bridget Jones, right? More like 'can't be bothered'.

The thought of writing stuff to myself in a diary seems a bit pointless, really.

I want to feel like someone, somewhere, will be able to read what I've got to say.

That's why I've decided to give this blog a go – so that I have somewhere I can say exactly what I want, when I want and how I want – *to someone*. And not have to worry that what I say won't sound cool or will make me look stupid or lose me friends.

That's why this blog is anonymous.

So that I can be totally me.

My best friend Wiki *(that's not his real name by the way – I can't give his real name or this won't be anonymous)* would say that the fact I'm having to be anonymous in order to be myself is an 'epic tragedy'. But what does he know? He's not a teenage girl with anxiety issues. *(He's actually a teenage boy with parental issues, but that's a whole other story.)*

Sometimes I wonder if it's *because* I'm a teenage girl that I have anxiety issues. Let's face it – there is a lot to get anxious about.

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Top Ten Reasons for Teenage Girls Getting Anxious

1. You're supposed to look perfect all of the time

2. This coincides with your hormones deciding to go bonkers

3. Which leads to the spottiest time of your entire life *(making number 1 totally impossible!)*

4. Which also coincides with the first time you've had the freedom to buy chocolate whenever you like *(making number 3 even worse!)*

5. Suddenly everyone cares about what you wear

6. And what you wear has to look perfect too

7. Then you're supposed to know how to pose like a supermodel

8. So you can take a selfie in your outfit of the day

9. Which you then have to post on social media for all your friends to see

10. You're supposed to be wildly attractive to the opposite sex *(while dealing with all of the above!)*

Please picture me giving a dramatic, heartfelt sigh at this point.

But surely I can't be the only teenage girl who feels like this?

I have this dream that secretly all teenage girls feel exactly like me.

And maybe one day, when we all realize that we all feel the same, we can all stop pretending to be something we're not.

That would be awesome.

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But until that day I'm going to keep it real on this blog. And keep it unreal in 'real' life.

I'm going to say what I want to say, and it would be really cool if you *(whoever you might be)* join me.

This can be our very own corner of the Internet, where we can talk about what it truly feels like to be a teenage girl – without having to pretend to be something we're not.

I also love taking photos *(don't you just love the way photos are able to freeze special moments in time forever? Beautiful sunsets, birthday parties, salted-caramel cupcakes with thick frosting . . .)* so I'll be posting lots of those too. But there won't be any selfies, obviously, for anonymity reasons.

OK, well I guess that's all for now. Thank you for reading *(if anyone actually has been reading!)*. And let me know what you think in the comments below.

Girl Online, going offline xxx

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Chapter One

Present day . . .

Hey, Penny, did you know that William Shakespeare is an anagram for 'I am a weakish speller'?

I look at the text from Elliot and sigh. In the time I've been watching the dress rehearsal for *Romeo and Juliet* (three hours of my life that I will *never* get back), Elliot has bombarded me with hundreds of random texts about Shakespeare. He's supposed to be doing to it to relieve my boredom but, seriously, does anyone really need to know that Shakespeare was baptised in 1564? Or that he had seven siblings?

'Penny, could you get a shot of Juliet leaning out of the trailer?'

I quickly grab my camera and nod to Mr Beaconsfield. 'Yes, sir.'

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Mr Beaconsfield is the Year Eleven drama teacher. He's one of those teachers who likes being 'down with the kids' – all gelled hair and 'call me Jeff'. He's also the reason our version of *Romeo and Juliet* is set in a Brooklyn ghetto and Juliet is leaning out of a trailer rather than off a balcony. My BFIS (*Best Friend in School*), Megan, loves Mr Beaconsfield, but then he does always cast her in all the lead roles. Personally, I think he's a little creepy. Teachers shouldn't want to hang out with teenagers. They should want to mark books and stress about school inspections and whatever else they get up to in the staffroom.

I go up the steps at the side of the stage and crouch down beneath Megan. She's wearing a baseball cap with SWAG printed on the front and has a thick fake-gold chain with a huge fake-gold dollar sign dangling from her neck. There's no way she'd be seen dead in that outfit anywhere else; that's how much she loves Mr Beaconsfield. I'm about to take a picture when Megan hisses down to me: 'Make sure you don't get my spot.'

'What?' I whisper back.

'The spot on the side of my nose. Make sure you don't get it in the picture.'

'Oh. Right.' I shift to one side and zoom in. The lighting from this side isn't the best but at least the spot isn't visible. I take the picture then turn to leave the stage. As I do, I glance out into the auditorium. Apart from Mr Beaconsfield and the two assistant directors, all of the seats are empty. I instinctively breathe a sigh of relief. To say I'm not very good with crowds would be a bit like saying Justin Bieber isn't very good with the paparazzi. I don't know how people can

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actually perform onstage. I only have to go up there for a couple of seconds to take a photo and I feel uneasy.

'Thanks, Pen,' Mr Beaconsfield says as I hurry down the steps. That's another cringe-fact about him – the way he calls us all by a nickname. I mean, seriously! It's OK for my family but not my teachers!

Just as I get back to my safe spot at the side of the stage my phone bleeps again.

Oh my God, Juliet used to be played by a man back in Shakespeare's day! You have to tell Ollie – I'd love to see his face! ☺

I look up at Ollie, who is currently gazing up at Megan.

'But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?' he says, in the worst New York accent ever.

I can't help but sigh. Even though Ollie's dressed in an even worse costume than Megan's – making him look like a cross between a *Jeremy Kyle* guest and Snoop Dogg – he still somehow manages to look cute.

Elliot hates Ollie. He thinks Ollie's really vain and calls him the Walking Selfie, but, to be fair, he doesn't really know him. Elliot goes to a private school in Hove; he's only seen Ollie when we've bumped into him on the beach or in town.

'Shouldn't Penny take a picture of me in this scene too?' Ollie asks when he finally gets to the end of his speech. He's still talking in his fake American accent – which he's been

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doing ever since he got the part. Apparently all the top actors do it; they call it 'method acting'.

'Of course, Ollz,' says Call-Me-Jeff. 'Pen?'

I put down my phone and run back up the steps.

'Can you make sure you get my best side?' Ollie whispers at me from beneath his cap. His one has STUD printed on the front in black diamanté.

'Sure,' I reply. 'Er, which side is that again?'

Ollie looks at me like I'm crazy.

'It's just so hard to tell,' I whisper, my face flushing crimson.

Ollie continues to frown.

'Because they both look good to me,' I say, desperation setting in. Oh my God! What is wrong with me?! I can practically hear Elliot shrieking in horror. Thankfully at this point, Ollie starts to grin. It makes him look really boyish and way more approachable.

'It's my right side,' he says, and turns back to face the trailer.

'Is that – er – your right, or mine?' I ask, wanting to make double sure.

'Come on, Pen. We haven't got all day!' Mr Beaconsfield calls out.

'It's my right, of course,' Ollie hisses, looking at me like I'm demented again.

Even Megan's frowning at me now. My face burning, I take the picture. I don't do any of my usual things, like checking the lighting or the angle or anything – I just press the button and stumble out of there.

When the rehearsal is finally over – and I've learnt from

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Elliot that Shakespeare was only eighteen when he got married and he wrote thirty-eight plays in total – a group of us head to JB's Diner to get milkshakes and chips.

As we reach the seafront, Ollie starts walking along beside me. 'How you doin'?' he says in his fake New York drawl.

'Um, OK, thanks,' I say, my tongue instantly tying itself in knots. Now he's out of his Romeo gangster gear, he looks even better. His blond surfer-dude hair is perfectly tousled and his blue eyes are sparkling like the sea in the winter sunshine. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure if he's my type – he may be a little too boy-band-meets-athlete perfect – but it's so unusual for me to have the undivided attention of the school heart-throb that I can't help feeling embarrassed.

'I was wondering . . .' he says, grinning down at me.

Instantly my inner voice starts finishing his sentence: *What do you like to do in your spare time? Why have I never properly noticed you before? Would you like to go out with me?*

'. . . if I could take a look at the picture you took of me? Just to make sure I look OK.'

'Oh – er – right. Yes, OK. I'll show you when we get to JB's.' It's at exactly this moment that I fall into a hole. OK, it's not a big hole and I don't actually disappear inside it or anything, but I do catch my foot and end up tumbling forward – making me look about as attractive and sophisticated as a Saturday-night drunk. That's one thing I hate about Brighton, where I live. It seems to be full of holes that exist just for me to fall into! I style it out and, luckily, Ollie seems not to notice.

When we get to JB's, Ollie dives straight into the booth next to me. I see Megan raise her eyebrows and I instantly

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feel like I've done something wrong. Megan's very good at making me feel this way. I turn away and concentrate on the Christmas decorations around the diner instead – the swirls of green and red tinsel, and the mechanical Father Christmas who yells 'Ho, ho, ho!' every time someone walks past. Christmas is definitely my favourite time of the year. There's something about it that always calms me. After a few moments, I turn back to the table. Luckily, Megan's now absorbed with her phone.

My fingers twitch as the inspiration for a blog post pops into my head. Sometimes it feels as if school is one big play and we're all supposed to perform our set roles all the time. In our real-life play, Ollie isn't supposed to sit next to me; he's supposed to sit next to Megan. They aren't actually dating or anything but they're both definitely on the same rung of the social ladder. And Megan *never* falls into holes. She just seems to glide through life, all glossy chestnut hair and pouting. The twins slide into the booth next to Megan. The twins are called Kira and Amara. They have non-speaking parts in the play and that's kind of how Megan treats them in real life – as extras to her lead role.

'Can I get you guys anything to drink?' a waitress says, arriving at our table with a pad and a grin.

'That would be awesome!' Ollie says loudly in his pretend American accent, and I can't help cringing.

We all order shakes – apart from Megan, who orders a mineral water – and then Ollie turns to me. 'So, can I see?'

'What? Oh, yes.' I fumble in my bag for my camera and start scrolling through the pictures. When I get to the one of

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Ollie, I pass it to him. I hold my breath as I wait for his response.

'Sweet,' he says. 'That looks really good.'

'Ooh, let me see my one,' Megan cries, grabbing the camera from him and pressing at the buttons wildly. My whole body tenses. Normally, I don't mind sharing things – I even give half my advent-calendar chocolates to my brother, Tom – but my camera is different. It's my most prized possession. It's my safety net.

'Oh. My. God. Penny!' Megan shrieks. 'What have you done? It looks like I've got a moustache!' She slams the camera down on the table.

'Careful!' I say.

Megan glares at me before picking up the camera and fiddling with the buttons. 'How do I delete the picture of me?'

I grab it back from her a little too forcefully and one of her false fingernails catches on the strap.

'Ow! You've broken my nail!'

'You could have broken my camera.'

'Is that all you care about?' Megan glares at me across the table. 'It's not my fault you took such a terrible picture.'

In my head an answer forms itself: *It's not my fault you made me take it that way because you've got a spot*. But I stop myself from saying it.

'Let me see,' Ollie says, taking the camera from me.

As he starts to laugh and Megan glares at me even harder, I feel a familiar tightness gripping my throat. I try to swallow but it's impossible. I feel trapped inside the booth. *Please don't let this be happening again*, I silently plead. But it is. A burning

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heat rushes through my body and I can barely breathe. The pictures of movie stars lining the wall all suddenly seem to be staring down at me. The music from the jukebox is suddenly too loud. The red chairs too bright. No matter what I do, I can't seem to control my own body. The palms of my hands go clammy and my heart starts to pound.

'Ho, ho, ho!' the mechanical Father Christmas by the door calls. But he doesn't sound cheery any more. He sounds menacing.

'I need to go,' I say quietly.

'But what about the picture?' Megan whines, flicking her glossy dark hair over her shoulder.

'I'll delete it.'

'What about your milkshake?' Kira says.

I take some money from my purse and put it on the table, hoping they don't notice my fingers trembling. 'One of you guys have it. I just remembered I have to help my mum with something. I need to get home.'

Ollie looks at me and, for a second, I think he actually looks disappointed. 'Will you be in town tomorrow?' he asks.

Megan glares at him across the table.

'I guess so.' I feel so hot it's making my vision blurred. I need to get out of here, now. If they keep me trapped in this booth for much longer, I'm certain I'm going to pass out. It takes everything I've got not to yell at Ollie to get out of my way.

'Cool.' Ollie slides out of the booth and hands me my camera. 'Maybe see you around then.'

'Yes.'

One of the twins, I can't tell which, starts to ask if I'm

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OK, but I don't stop to answer her. Somehow, I make it out of the diner and on to the seafront. I hear the shriek of a seagull followed by a shriek of laughter. A group of women are tottering towards me, all spray tans on high heels. They're wearing Barbie-pink T-shirts, even though it's December, and one of them has a string of learner plates round her neck. I internally groan. That's another thing I hate about living in Brighton – the way it's invaded by stag and hen parties every Friday night. I dart across the road and head down to the beach. The wind is icy and fresh but it's exactly what I need. I stand on the wet pebbles and stare out to sea and wait until the waves, crashing in and rolling out, coax my heartbeat back to normal.

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