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FOR MY FRIENDS, WHO ARE ALWAYS ON MY HAPPY LIST.

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The OVERTHINKERS' CLUB

Happy List

NAT LUURTSEMA

ILLUSTRATED BY CÉCILE DORMEAU

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CHAPTER ONE

It was Saturday morning, and this was me, Birdie, doing some of my usual overthinking.



Overthinking is when I have a small worry and then I think about the worst thing that could happen in that situation, and THEN I think what if that got worse...and worse...and EVEN WORSE and now it's a big worry and my stomach hurts.

I wish I didn't do it but I can't seem to control it.

On this Saturday morning, I was overthinking school (because it was the end of the holidays and a new term was starting on Monday), climate change (huge, so huge), my hamster (who is getting old, **I DON'T WANT TO TALK**

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ABOUT IT), becoming a teenager in a year (bit intense, no?), my broken phone (I dropped it down the toilet and it's being repaired so slowly I think the phone company have a team of snails on it) and my eyebrows (which don't match, and they **SHOULD**?!)

So, I'll take any one of these topics and overthink them like this:

"What if X happens...

And then Y happens...

And that makes Z happen and it's all out of my control...

And now I'm in trouble and people are mad at me, and there's nothing I can do to make it right!"

BREATHE, BIRDIE, BREATHE!

Overthinking feels like I've eaten rocks, and they are sitting in my stomach ready to be the world's most pointy poo.

(I should not have put my name in this book.)

The overthinking is loudest when I wake up, like my worries have been hanging over my bed watching me sleep and then swoop in as soon as I open my eyes. Then it feels like the only sensible thing to do is to curl up in a ball under my duvet and hide from the world. Which is not a brilliant long-term plan as I get quite hot under there.

I have always been a worrier, Dad says. (This is called **BACKSTORY.** I learned about it in creative writing and it's important as sometimes stuff that happened to people in the past makes them act a certain way NOW and if you didn't know their backstory, their behaviour would seem mysterious. My best friend Chloe was chased by a peacock when she was small so, years later, when we went on a school trip to a stately home, she was tense near peacocks, and I understood this was because of backstory, so I knew to shoo them away from her.)

Anyway, here is some of **MY** backstory and no peacocks are involved, sorry fancy-bum-bird fans.



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Twelve is a complicated age, I am discovering. I'm not a child (do I still watch Bluey? Yes. But THAT is just me appreciating excellent TV) and I'm not a teenager yet, (although my favourite lip gloss flavour is Summer Fridays Vanilla flavour, which is the most sophisticated flavour and shows my maturity). However, I'll be a teenager **SOON** and Dad jokes that I'll become **moody**.

Will I just suddenly wake up that way one day? **MAYBE.** because my brother, Finn, is fifteen now and I swear he suddenly got grumpy one day.

So, I'm currently not a child, not a teenager, just some mysterious in-between thing that needs to poo rocks. Great. What a situation.

I told my form teacher, Ms Mulder (8/10, really nice, but **INTENSE** coffee breath) some of this, though I didn't trouble her with the whole pooing rocks bit. And she said she *had* noticed that I was basically a ball of stress and thought maybe I was experiencing some **anxiety**?

"Mmmm, yeah, a bit, maybe?" I had said, anxiously twisting my fingers together. And she had said it was totes normal,

nothing to be embarrassed about (she's so nice) but she wanted to see if I could become less anxious and more...

I said, "Sort of okayish?" and she said, "No, Birdie! Happy, actually HAPPY!" (Coffee breath everywhere on the 'HA'. Unforch.)

Ms Mulder said she knew I liked to make lists. And so, to start, she said I should make a list of my three biggest worries, and I wasn't allowed to say **1. MY WHOLE LIFE.** (She knows me so well.)

So...okay, here are the big three.

1. **MY FAMILY.**
2. **MY HOME.**
3. **MY BEAUTIFUL, WONDERFUL, ELDERLY HAMSTER.**

WORRY #1: MY FAMILY.

My mum is amazing, everyone says. She's a climate activist and she is off around the world fighting oil companies and general planet injustice. We FaceTime every Thursday

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evening and I really like this as I have her complete attention, but we don't hug very often and that feels weird. Her name is Jenny but I call her Mum.

Dad said she loves us very much, but being home with us when we were small and crying and flipping bowls of porridge around the place was bad for her mental health. Mental health is important, we talk about it a lot at school, so I understand.

When she left, Finn was really angry at her. He's fifteen now, sometimes spotty, and angry at lots of things. He seems most angry when he is most spotty, which is helpful – like his face is a mood ring.

Sometimes he gets angry at me but it's never fair, or deserved. I'm just noisy in the morning, and because I don't have my phone right now I treat his phone like it's basically **OURS**. And I do point out when he has spots because surely that's just helpful?

Reading that back...perhaps I can be annoying. **OH, NO.**

ANYWAY. I feel okay about Mum being gone, maybe

because I was younger when she left, so it quickly felt normal for me, and we do have an amazing dad. Honestly 10/10, I highly recommend him. He is called Teddy, and he **LOVES** being a dad. He doesn't mind when people are sick on him, he likes eating the flavours of crisps no one else wants and he tells terrible jokes that he enjoys more when you don't find them funny.

But he pretends to be sad and says, "That's how the Bantasaurus went extinct."



Dad used to do climate activism too. My family is amazing at recycling, we know exactly what goes in which bin. We even had a wormery in the kitchen to eat our food scraps, but Finn hit it with a football one day and it smashed, and the next hour was absolutely disgusting. I couldn't eat noodles for years.

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Now Dad is a consultant on environmental policy, which is less exciting but means he is always home in time for tea. He and Mum divorced 'cos it was hard to be married to someone he never saw. That's a pen pal, really.

And then, about two years ago, when I was in Year Five, he met a woman called Maxie and she had curly hair like me and taught me not to brush it but to scrunch it gently, **WHICH WORKED**! She was nice in other ways and asked me good questions. This is crucial when you are making friends with a new adult because some of them are **SO** bad at chat.



"How's school?" (Boring, do you **REALLY** want to know about the interactive white board in Room 3 going on the blink?)

"Have you got a boyfriend?" (How very dare you.)

"What are you doing?" (Oh my gosh, I don't know...just being?! Am I an **ANIMAL** being studied at the **ZOO**?)



"I love your outfit, talk me through it." (Yes, Maxie! Here we go, I can show you the badge hiding a ketchup stain and the fact that ugly shorts are "in" right now, so I stole a pair of Dad's because he's very skinny and I'm not wasting pocket money on ugly clothes.)

"Got any strong opinions lately?" (This was her latest, and it was very good. I gave her all my thoughts on lip balm and why isn't science working on extending the life span of hamsters when they are so important to people, emotionally?)

Maxie has two kids of her own – called Jay and The Pea – and she and Dad introduced us very slowly, and just for an hour at a time. (Chloe said that was how you introduced puppies to dogs and was there a chance Dad had accidentally got advice off a vet? Yes, I said, very likely, he was always chatting to strangers.)

We all went away for Christmas last year to a big cottage with fields to explore. I thought maybe we'd build a snowman and put photos on socials where we looked like

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a family from an advert? Except we all got chicken pox and everyone lay in bed shouting at each other: "I...am...**ITCHY**!"

No one's putting **THAT** on socials.

Shared experiences are bonding, I guess? Me and Jay did both get chicken pox scabs up our noses that we scratched carefully with chopsticks. One for the mems.

Now Dad and Maxie are buying a house because they have spent a year trying to wrangle everyone between two houses and someone's shoes are always in the wrong place, and it is annoying. So now we are all going to live together and our shoes will always be where we last saw them.



It's called blending.

When you smash two families together and hope there are enough bathrooms and you can't get chicken pox twice.

Maxie's son, Jay, is fifteen, the same age as Finn, though with a completely different personality and such good skin I think he might have a skincare regimen. I'm worried that he and Finn might not like living together.

But I'm also worried that they might like living together **TOO MUCH** and leave me out. Then I'd only have The Pea to hang out with. I like her but we don't have a lot in common as she's three. And she is always sticky.

Dad said I was sticky at that age too, and surprisingly farty. He said that in front of Jay, and I was so ashamed; I wanted to collapse into dust and blow away.

We call The Pea "The Pea" because her full name is Penelope and Maxie says it is too much name for a small person. She is the size of two loaves of bread and that is with a coat on.

I have some more **BACKSTORY** for you, trivia fans, *my* name is actually Elizabeth but when I was born, Finn was four and could only say, "Elsszz (spit everywhere) zbba bird". And I'm glad Mum and Dad decided to go with the second bit, not the spitty bit.

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So, I think overall the blending is a good thing, it's just lots of things could go wrong. And Ms Mulder said, yes, **BUT** lots of things could go right and I could have a new brother and sister. And I know she's right, but that anxious little voice at the back of my head keeps whispering...

WHAT IF NO ONE WANTS YOU THERE?

Stupid little voice. Making my stomach feel full of rocks.

Dad taught me a saying, "There's your thoughts and there's the truth," which is tricky to get your head around, but basically just because something **FEELS** very true and real in your head, it doesn't mean it **IS**.

But how to tell the difference? I don't know, if I'm honest. I'm just trying very hard and it's exhausting.

WORRY #2: THE NEW HOUSE.

Me, Dad and Finn live in our house, which is small and new, and always the right temperature. In two and a half weeks, we are going to live with Maxie, Jay and The Pea in a new house, which is – confusingly – old. This house is big and the

windows rattle in the wind, so you know what that means: **HAUNTED**. I've seen films.

Old houses are haunted. And poorly insulated, so we are going to lose a lot of heat and be chilly and environmentally unfriendly. If two climate activists have a kid, she **WILL** worry about things like this.

And each family have to get rid of half their furniture or else we'll have two of everything. But surely we are going to end up with a jumbled mess of stuff that doesn't match?

Also, the new house only has one bathroom. Chloe did some (gross) maths on it and that will be one very busy toilet.

Back to the list.

WORRY #3: MY BEAUTIFUL, WONDERFUL, ELDERLY HAMSTER.

Love of my life, my hamster **PAMELA HAMELA** (I let Dad name her because I'm a trusting fool) is getting old and I worry the house move will stress her out and make her ill or dead.

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I can't imagine my life without her scrabbling gently in the corner of my bedroom with a slight whiff of wee. If she isn't there, it will mean everything in my life has changed. Mum chose her for me.



I don't want to think about this any more right now.

My other best friend, Chloe (human), is an overthinker too, so Ms Mulder said we should tackle this together. We named ourselves The Overthinkers' Club and I doodled it on my school bag.



Ms Mulder said this was an excellent name and she thought most of the teachers would like to join but they'd only cramp our style. She suggested we make a Happy List of ideas to boost happiness and then try each one and see if anything helped. We would tackle **FEELiNGS** (vague, unknowable) with **SCiENCE** (solid, factual).

Top of the list was Chloe's idea, which is called *gratitudes*.

Every morning, at school, we will tell each other three things we are grateful for. Just small things, to remind ourselves of good stuff in our life that we take for granted. This is an idea Chloe's mum's therapist gave her. So, it is stolen. We are thieves.

You're all caught up now. Just in time for the first day of summer term and **DAY ONE** of the **HAPPY LiST**.

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CHAPTER TWO

I woke up and looked left to say good morning to Pamela, as I did every day. She put on a brave face, but I could tell she was worried. She was picking up on the moving-house vibes. Finn said it was amazing how well I could read Pamela's moods, and I know he was making fun of me, but joke's on him because I **COULD** actually.

I tidied up Pamela's bedding as she had thrown it all in the air during the night, for good reason, I'm sure. I chatted to her as I did it, and told her that this was **DAY ONE OF BEiNG HAPPY**. I saw a diagram when I was researching happiness and it said that fifty per cent of your brain is ruled by genetics, twenty-five per cent is circumstances, and twenty-five per cent is life skills.

Fifty per cent genetics means twenty-five per cent Mum and twenty-five per cent Dad. My mum is a complicated person, but Dad dances to the tune the washing machine plays when it's finished. Every time. So that's my genetic mixture.

ANYWAY – I can't control that, and happiness is all about

knowing what you can't control and leaving it alone. Then looking at what you **CAN** control and doing something with it.

I read that on a hair serum bottle, but if anyone asks, let's say it's a quote from Greta Thunberg.

Twenty-five per cent of your happiness comes down to your circumstances, and again I couldn't really stop the blending, or having to go to school or Pamela Hamela getting old. When you're twelve, you're basically not in charge of anything and everyone tells you what to do all the time. It's low-key constantly unfair. So, I have a pretty big list of things I can't control.

But twenty-five per cent of my brain is **LiFE SKiLLS**! Which Chloe and I were going to work on. We already had a long list, which I was keeping safe in my diary.

Item two on the list was something the internet went on about a **LOT**:

Drink water.

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So in the interests of science and happiness I drank a litre of water that morning. Messily, over the sink.

"I'm in my water era," I said to the tap, because there was no one else to tell.



Fine, I would tour this era until I found someone who cared!

I drank the whole glass then I lay on the floor because I thought I might burst. My stomach bubbled.

Dad stood over me and told me his plans for packing up the kitchen ahead of the house move, which was intensely boring, so I tried to leave, but my stomach was so heavy with water I had to edge along the floor like a seal.

Finn came in and watched me belly flop across the kitchen floor. "You won't be able to do this when we live with Jay,"

he pointed out. He's right, I won't. I'll have to walk upright **AT ALL TiMES** like some sort of duchess.

"Dang!" I sighed. (Dad is strict about swearing so Finn and I use words like "dang" and "crumbs" but secretly we are thinking swear words. It's a genius system, Dad hates it.)

I edged across the floor, enjoying my last few days of being a wet mess in my own home before I have to have **DiGNiTY** around Jay.

Dad drove me to school, my belly sloshing as we went round corners. He told me he would put boxes in my room for all my things. "Do I have to pack my own stuff?" I asked, feeling too young for all this responsibility.

"Yes! You want me going through all your stuff and chucking out your gunky lip balms that you swear you still use?"

"Absolutely not. But, wait, is it still okay for Chloe to come over for a sleepover the weekend before we move?"

"Mmm..." Dad pulled a face. "It would be easier if she didn't. Just with the move, it might be a bit dusty?"

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"She loves dust," I lied. "And it's important for me to say goodbye to the house. The only house I've ever known," I said poetically and stared out of the window like a sad princess in a fairy tale.

Dad snorted a laugh, which ruined that. **"FiNE."**

I hopped out of the car, holding my stomach, and saw Chloe waiting for me inside the school gates. She had her arms folded tightly. She always stands like that, since she started getting boobs. Which is **Not A Big Deal**, her mum, Diane, said to me and I said, "No, no, absolutely not," out of politeness. But me and Chloe know it **IS A BiG DEAL, ACTUALLY**.

We hugged hello, Chloe felt soft and smelled nice. We both wear vanilla peach body spray, because we like it but also it feels like **Our Thing**, we are a gang even in smell. We hurried into school, which is called Grove Park School and Finn goes here too although he is three years above me, so I only bother him if I have a gigantic nosebleed or other such drama.

Dad thinks Grove Park is cool because it has a good

recycling policy and a living roof. (Living roof is when there's grass on the roof and it's good for the environment. You probably already knew that.)

"Grats," Chloe said, pointing at me. She'd already shortened "gratitudes" to "grats" for speed and efficiency. Love that for us.

"I'm grateful for Pamela's health, for Finn not being in a bad mood and for drinking a whole litre of water this morning."

"I did too. How do you feel?"

"Sloshy."

"Me too. I'm all bubble guts. Today I'm grateful for no maths, Mum giving me a lift and not having chewing gum stuck in my hair."

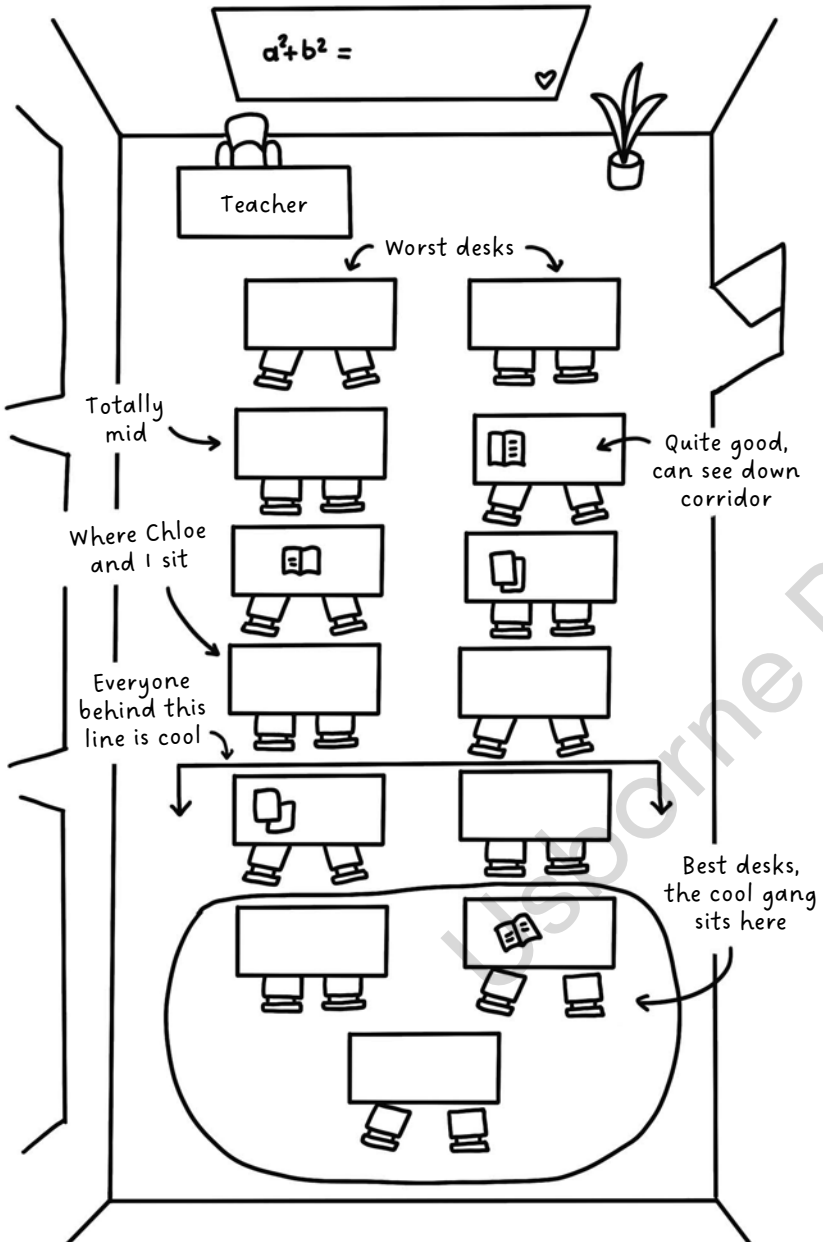
"Oh, no, did you have gum in your hair?"

"No...? And I am grateful I don't."

Right, well, it was the first day of this, she'd get the hang

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of it in time, I assured myself. We hurried to our form room, which was called 7M. The room was laid out like this.



A girl called Lainey sat behind us, by herself. She was part of the Cool Gang, seven girls who **DOMiNATED** our form as there were so many of them and they were mean and...a word I'm not allowed to say but it rhymes with witchy and isn't **TiTCHY**.

Because the Cool Gang was an odd number, someone had to sit alone and it was always Lainey. I'm glad I'm not part of a big gang, all I need is my bestie. I will add that to tomorrow's grats. I'm a very efficient person.

Another thing I am grateful for is our school uniform, which is a stripy shirt and scratchy trousers... But Grove Park's uniform is bright purple! Whenever I see other people in their super bland blue or green uniforms, I always give them a little smile like, "Sorry, sucks to be you."

Finn said older girls at our school used to roll their skirts up really short but now they wear them as big and long as possible, and the same with their trousers. It has a real Billie Eilish vibe, until their trousers fall down. Which does happen quite a lot.

I wear some of Finn's old school uniform, so they are always

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a bit big, and school has a policy on not being strict if it's hand-me-downs from a sibling. Otherwise, it's punishing you for not being rich. And that is injustice, which is wrong.

I did a quiet watery burp and Chloe did Big Eyes at me. Our class is strict about burping. No one knows why. And I am not popular enough to style out a burp. Me and Chloe are not cool but we are not uncool. It is a tricky position.

While Ms Mulder took the register, Chloe and I examined the Happy List. It was quite long, with some wildcard options, but I said we had to keep an open mind. Chloe disagreed, saying we couldn't have our minds flapping open like cardigans on a windy day, but *I* said mental health was a mystery, and we had to try everything. (It wasn't an argument, we never argue. It was just a debate.)

Anyway, this was rich coming from Chloe, as she'd put crystals on the list.

I already felt better just looking at our list. Like we were Dealing With It. We were going to try a new one every few days, which would take a month and I read somewhere that it took a month to form a new habit! Perfect, the maths was mathsing.



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"Were you not doing that one?" I asked, pointing at *breathing*.

Har har, I am *so LOLs*. Chloe gave me nothing, which meant she was laughing inside.

Her mum, Diane, teaches yoga and is into crystals and spirituality and I could see which ideas came from her. That meant she could help us with them, though. Teamwork!

"I'm going to teach you all about crystals," Chloe promised/threatened me.

"Well, **FINALLY!**" I said. She didn't appreciate my hilarious sarcasm so I changed the subject. "Did you get a water bottle?"

Chloe pulled something out of her bag that was the size of a vacuum cleaner. She put it on her desk and we stared at it. It was literally the biggest water bottle I'd ever seen. "Mum gave it to me," she said unnecessarily. Not to be rude but this bottle had a real **LiVE, LAUGH, LOVE** energy, which was very Diane.

Chloe picked up the bottle with both hands and lifted it to her mouth, arms trembling. I just had an old plastic bottle I was refilling, but I wasn't jealous, it did the job.

"Hey." I spotted a new item on the list. "Um, *new friends*? Did you add this? What do you mean?"

"I thought it might be helpful to have more friends. Than just each other?" she said, **LIKE IT WAS NOTHING**.

"Helpful, how?" I asked, trying to not sound offended.

"You're offended," she said.

"Oh...no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no problem," I said. I was being breezy. "It's just, you know, don't come crying to me when you have to buy thirty Christmas presents."

"I'm not looking for twenty-nine new friends!" she said. "Just one or two."

ONE OR TWO. That felt **worse**. It was specific. I wondered if she had anyone in mind.

I stared around the classroom, eyes narrowed, trying to identify a friend stealer. Everyone was acting normally. Which is what you **WOULD** do if you had an evil plan to steal a nice, anxious person's friend, wasn't it?

Chloe added something **ELSE** on to our **HAPPY LiST**. What fresh hell was this?

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"Okay, fine. I feel a bit...I've got some feelings! Look, new friends is not a bad idea, per se," I said, using a new phrase to cheer myself up. It's Latin. It means **BY ITSELF**. Which is funny, 'cos if you try and tell people fun Latin trivia, you will end up by yourself.



"But—" I continued, when suddenly, out of nowhere, I surprised **MYSELF** with a loud burp. It popped out of my mouth, I never even felt it coming! The whole class, perhaps the whole world, stared at me with horror and burst out laughing. There might have been pointing, I don't know, I had my eyes closed and my head on my desk.

THIS was why I was anxious! Because life is full of horrible surprises; sometimes they even come from **inside** me.

Nowhere is safe!

"That wasn't *me*," I heard Chloe whisper, because my body **AND** my **BFF** were betraying me today.

Good luck, Happy List. Your job just got a **LOT** more difficult.

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