

*the art of being normal*



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**FICKLING**  
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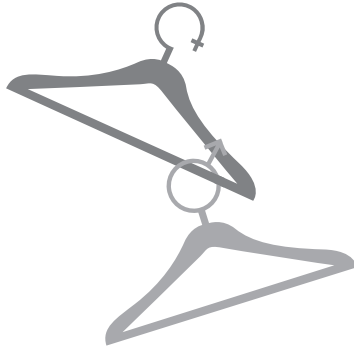
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*For Isla*





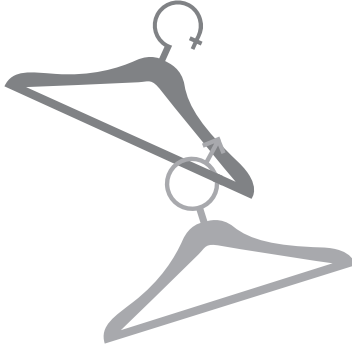
# 1

One afternoon, when I was eight years old, my class was told to write about what we wanted to be when we grew up. Miss Box went round the class, asking each one of us to stand up and share what we had written. Zachary Olsen wanted to play in the Premier League. Lexi Taylor wanted to be an actress. Harry Beaumont planned on being Prime Minister. Simon Allen wanted to be Harry Potter, so badly that the previous term he had scratched a lightning bolt on to his forehead with a pair of craft scissors.

But I didn't want to be any of these things.

This is what I wrote:

*I want to be a girl.*



## 2

My party guests are singing ‘Happy Birthday’. It does not sound good.

My little sister Livvy is barely even singing. At eleven, she’s already decided family birthday parties are tragically embarrassing, leaving Mum and Dad to honk out the rest of the tune, Mum’s reedy soprano clashing with Dad’s flat bass. It is so bad Phil, the family dog, gets up from his basket and slinks off mid-song in vague disgust. I don’t blame him; the whole party is fairly depressing. Even the blue balloons Dad spent the entire morning blowing up look pale and sad, especially the ones with ‘Fourteen Today!’ scrawled on them in black marker pen. I’m not even sure the underwhelming events unfolding before me qualify as a party in the first place.

‘Make a wish!’ Mum says. She has the cake tipped at an angle so I won’t notice it’s wonky. It says ‘Happy Birthday David!’ in blood-red icing across the top, the ‘day’ in

'birthday' all scrunched up where she must have run out of room. Fourteen blue candles form a circle around the edge of the cake, dripping wax into the butter cream.

'Hurry up!' Livvy says.

But I won't be rushed. I want to do this bit properly. I lean forward, tuck my hair behind my ears and shut my eyes. I block out Livvy's whining and Mum's cajoling and Dad fiddling with the settings on the camera, and suddenly everything sounds sort of muffled and far away, a bit like when you dunk your head under water in the bath.

I wait a few seconds before opening my eyes and blowing out all the candles in one go. Everyone applauds. Dad lets off a party popper but it doesn't 'pop' properly and by the time he's got another one out of the packet Mum has opened the curtains and started taking the candles off the cake, and the moment has passed.

'What did you wish for? Something stupid, I bet,' Livvy says accusingly, twirling a piece of golden brown hair around her middle finger.

'He can't tell you, silly, otherwise it won't come true,' Mum says, taking the cake into the kitchen to be sliced.

'Yeah,' I say, sticking my tongue out at Livvy. She sticks hers out right back.

'Where are your two friends again?' she asks, putting extra emphasis on the 'two'.

'I've told you, Felix is in Florida and Essie is in Leamington Spa.'

'That's too bad,' Livvy says with zero sympathy. 'Dad, how many people did I have at my eleventh?'

‘Forty-five. All on roller skates. Utter carnage,’ Dad mutters grimly, ejecting the memory card from the camera and slotting it into the side of his laptop.

The first photo that pops up on the screen is of me sitting at the head of the table wearing an oversized ‘Birthday Boy’ badge and pointy cardboard party hat. My eyes are closed mid-blink and my forehead is shiny.

‘Dad,’ I moan. ‘Do you have to do that now?’

‘Just doing some red-eye removal before I email them over to your grandmother,’ he says, clicking away at the mouse. ‘She was gutted she couldn’t come.’

This is not true. Granny has bridge on Wednesday evenings and doesn’t miss it for anyone, least of all her least favourite grandchild. Livvy is Granny’s favourite. But then Livvy is everyone’s favourite. Mum had also asked Auntie Jane and Uncle Trevor, and my cousins Keira and Alfie. But Alfie woke up this morning with weird spots all over his chest that may or may not be chicken pox, so they had to give their apologies, leaving the four of us to ‘celebrate’ alone.

Mum returns to the living room with the sliced cake, setting it back down on the table.

‘Look at all these leftovers,’ she says, frowning as she surveys the mountains of picked-at food. ‘We’re going to have enough sausage rolls and fondant fancies to last us until Christmas. I just hope I’ve got enough cling film to wrap it all up.’

Great. A fridge full of food to remind me just how wildly unpopular I am.



After cake and intensive cling-film action, there are presents. From Mum and Dad I get a new backpack for school, the *Gossip Girl* DVD box set and a cheque for one hundred pounds. Livvy presents me with a box of Cadbury Heroes and a shiny red case for my iPhone.

Then we all sit on the sofa and watch a film called *Freaky Friday*. It's about a mother and daughter who eat an enchanted fortune cookie that makes them magically swap bodies for the day. Of course everyone learns a valuable lesson before the inevitable happy ending, and for about the hundredth time this summer I mourn my life's failure to follow the plot of a perky teenage movie. Dad drops off halfway through and starts snoring loudly.

That night I can't sleep. I'm awake for so long, my eyes get used to the dark and I can make out the outlines of my posters on the walls and the tiny shadow of a mosquito darting back and forth across the ceiling.

I am fourteen and time is running out.