

School sucks.

Why oh why is there work? I don't— I don't get it.

Mm.

Look at me. Look at my face.

Does it look like I care about school?

No.

'lonely boy goes to a rave', Teen Suicide

**UNIVERSE CITY: Ep. 1 – dark blue**

UniverseCity

109,982 views

In Distress. Stuck in Universe City. Send Help.

Scroll down for transcript >>>

Hello.

I hope somebody is listening.

I'm sending out this call via radio signal – long out-dated, I know, but perhaps one of the few methods of communication the City has forgotten to monitor – in a dark and *desperate* cry for help.

Things in Universe City are not what they seem.

I cannot tell you who I am. Please call me ... please just call me Radio. Radio *Silence*. I am, after all, only a voice on a radio, and there may not be anyone listening.

I wonder – if nobody is listening to my voice, am I making any sound at all?

[...]

## FUTURES

“Can you hear that?” said Carys Last, halting in front of me so suddenly that I almost crashed into her. We both stood on the train platform. We were fifteen and we were friends.

“What?” I said, because I couldn’t hear anything except the music I was listening to through one earphone. I think it might have been Animal Collective.

Carys laughed, which didn’t happen very often. “You’re playing your music too loud,” she said, hooking a finger around the earphone’s wire and pulling it away from me. “Listen.”

We stood still and listened and I remember every single thing I heard in that moment. I heard the rumbling of the train we’d just got off leaving the station, heading farther into town. I heard the ticket gate guard explaining to an old man that the high-speed train to St Pancras was cancelled today due to the snow. I heard the distant screech of traffic, the wind above our heads, the flush of the station toilet and “*The train now arriving at – Platform One – is the – 8.02 – to – Ramsgate,*” snow being shovelled and a fire engine and Carys’s voice and ...

Burning.

We turned round and stared at the town beyond, snowy and dead. We could normally see our school from here, but today there was a cloud of smoke in the way.

“How did we not see the smoke while we were on the train?” Carys asked.

“I was asleep,” I said.

“I wasn’t.”

“You weren’t paying attention.”

“Well, I guess the school burned down,” she said, and walked away to sit on the station bench. “Seven-year-old Carys’s wish came true.”

I stared for a moment more, and then went to join her.

“D’you think it was those pranksters?” I said, referring to the anonymous bloggers who had been pranking our school for the past month with increasing ferocity.

Carys shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter, does it? The end result is the same.”

“It does matter.” It was at that moment that it all started to sink in. “It’s—it looks really serious. We’re going to have to change schools. It looks like the whole of C block and D block are ... just ... gone.” I crumpled my skirt in my hands. “My locker was in D block. My GCSE sketchbook was in there. I spent days on some of that stuff.”

“Oh, shit.”

I shivered. “Why would they do this? They’ve destroyed so much hard work. They’ve messed up so many people’s GCSEs and A levels, things that seriously affect people’s futures. They’ve literally ruined people’s lives.”

Carys seemed to think about it, and then opened her mouth to reply, but ended up closing it again, and not saying anything.

## **1. SUMMER TERM (a)**

## I WAS CLEVER

“We care about our students’ happiness and we *care* about their success,” said our head teacher, Dr Afolayan, in front of 400 parents and sixth formers on my Year 12 summer term parents evening. I was seventeen and head girl, and I was sitting backstage because it was my turn to speak on stage in two minutes. I hadn’t planned a speech and I wasn’t nervous. I was very pleased with myself.

“We consider it our *duty* to give our young people access to the greatest opportunities on offer in the world today.”

I’d managed to become head girl last year because my campaign poster was a picture of me with a double chin. Also, I’d used the word ‘meme’ in my election speech. This expressed the idea that I didn’t give a shit about the election, even though the opposite was true, and it made people want to vote for me. You can’t say I don’t know my audience.

Despite this, I wasn’t quite sure what I was going to talk about in my parents evening speech. Afolayan was saying everything I’d scribbled down on the club-night flyer I found in my blazer pocket five minutes ago.

“Our Oxbridge programme has been particularly successful this year—”

I crumpled up the flyer and dropped it on the floor. Improvisation it was.

I’d improvised speeches before so it wasn’t a big deal, and nobody could ever tell they were improvised anyway; nobody ever even *wondered* whether they were. I had a reputation for being organised, always doing homework, having consistently high grades and having Cambridge University ambitions. My teachers loved me and my peers envied me.

I was clever.

I was the top student in my year.

I was going to Cambridge, and I was going to get a good job and earn lots of money, and I was going to be happy.

“And I think,” said Dr Afolayan, “that the teaching staff deserve a round of applause as well for all the hard work they’ve put in this year.”

The audience clapped, but I saw a few students roll their eyes.

“And now I’d like to introduce our head girl, Frances Janvier.”

She pronounced my surname wrong. I could see Daniel Jun, the head boy, watching me from the opposite side of the stage. Daniel hated me because we were both ruthless study machines.

“Frances has been a consistent high achiever since she joined us a few years ago, and it’s my absolute honour to have her representing everything we stand for here at the Academy. She’ll be talking to you today about her experience as an Academy sixth former this year, and her own plans for the future.”

I stood up and walked on stage and I smiled and I felt fine because I was born for this.

## THE NARRATOR

“You’re not going to improvise again, are you, Frances?” asked Mum, fifteen minutes previously. “Last time you ended your speech by giving everyone a thumbs-up.”

She’d been standing with me in the corridor outside the stage entrance.

My mum always loved parents evening, mostly because she loves the brief, confused stares people make when she introduces herself as my mother. These occur because I’m mixed-race and she’s white, and for some reason most people think I’m Spanish because I did Spanish GCSE last year with a private tutor.

She also loved listening to teachers telling her over and over again what an excellent person I was.

I waved the club flyer at her. “Excuse me. I’m extremely prepared.”

Mum plucked it out of my hand and scanned it. “There are literally three bullet points on this. One of them says ‘mention the Internet’.”

“That’s all I need. I’m well-practised in the art of bullshitting.”

“Oh, I know you are.” Mum handed me back the flyer and leaned against the wall. “We could just do without another incident where you spend three minutes talking about *Game of Thrones*.”

“You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

“No.”

I shrugged. “I’ve got all the main points covered. I’m clever, I’m going to university, blah blah blah grades success happiness. I’m fine.”

Sometimes I felt like that was all I ever talked about. Being clever was, after all, my primary source of self-esteem. I’m a very sad person, in all senses of the word, but at least I was going to get into university.

Mum raised an eyebrow at me. “You’re making me nervous.”

I tried to stop thinking about it and instead thought about my evening plans.



That evening I was going to get home and I was going to make a coffee and have a slice of cake and then I was going to go upstairs and sit on my bed and listen to the latest episode of *Universe City*. *Universe City* was a YouTube podcast show about a suit-wearing student detective looking for a way to escape a sci-fi, monster-infested university. Nobody knew who made the podcast, but it was the voice of the narrator that got me addicted to the show – it has a kind of softness. It makes you want to fall asleep. In the least weird way possible, it's a bit like someone stroking your hair.

That was what I was going to do when I got home.

“You sure you’re going to be okay?” Mum asked, looking down at me. She always asked me that before I had to do public speaking, which was frequently.

“I’m going to be okay.”

She untwisted my blazer collar and tapped my silver head girl badge with one finger.

She asked me, “Remind me why you wanted to be head girl?”

And I said, “Because I’m great at it,” but I was thinking, *because universities love it*.

## DYING, BUT IN A GOOD WAY

I said my piece and got off stage and checked my phone, because I hadn't checked it all afternoon. And that's when I saw it. I saw the Twitter message that was about to change my life, possibly forever.

I made a startled coughing noise, sank into a plastic chair, and grabbed Head Boy Daniel Jun's arm so hard that he hissed, "Ow! What?"

"Something monumental has happened to me on Twitter."

Daniel, who had seemed vaguely interested until I said the word 'Twitter', frowned and wrenched his arm back. He wrinkled his nose and looked away like I'd done something extremely embarrassing.

The main thing that you need to know about Daniel Jun is that he probably would have killed himself if he thought it'd get him better grades. To most people, we were exactly the same person. We were both smart and we were both going for Cambridge and that was all anybody saw: two shining gods of academia flying high above the school building.

The difference between us was that I found our 'rivalry' absolutely hilarious, whereas Daniel acted as if we were engaged in a war of who could be the biggest nerd.

Anyway.

Two monumental things had happened, actually. The first was this:

**@UniverseCity is now following you**

And the second was a direct message addressed to 'Toulouse', my online alias:

Direct Messages > **with Radio**

hi toulouse! this might sound really weird but i've seen some of the Universe City fan art you've posted and i love them so much