

368 FRIENDS

By Bradley Walton

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AUTHOR NOTES

My wife persistently suggested to me for a year or more that I should write a forensics script about someone who posts on a social networking website that they're going to commit suicide, and none of their "friends" does anything to help. I thought it was a very good idea and that I'd make a one-act out of it, but the spark of inspiration was never quite there. So for a very long time, the idea lurked in my head, collecting mental dust. But shortly after finishing up a dramatic monologue called *I'm Not Okay*, I found myself in an appropriately somber frame of mind, and *368 Friends* slid right out of my head in the form of a monologue, which is what my wife had in mind all along.

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AT RISE: LORNE or LAURA, a male or female teenager, on a bare stage.

A couple of months ago, I found out a guy in my chemistry class wanted to be friends with me. Truthfully, I thought he was kind of a jerk and I didn't like him that much, but he sent me a friend request online, so I accepted it. I mean, it's not like I was gonna say no. I didn't want him to think I was rude, and it could've gotten awkward at school. Especially if he'd told any of his friends who are also my friends online. It's not like any of them really hung out with me or even talked to me that much, but we were still connected. It would've sucked if they'd all started talking trash about me behind my back. Or worse, if they dropped me from their friend lists. I didn't want to go losing any friends.

There was this play we read in English class, which seemed kind of funny to me because it was actually a French play that had been translated into English. It was called *No Exit*, by a guy named Jean-Paul Sartre. It was about these three people who had died and gone to Hell. Only, there was no fire or brimstone or anything like that. The characters were locked in a room together and basically they didn't like each other. They were all dependent on other people to affirm how they thought of themselves, only they couldn't get that affirmation. So that was their hell. At least, that's what the teacher told us. I had to take her word for it. All I got was that it was these three people in a room and it was kind of boring.

Still, though... whenever I thought back on what the teacher had explained, it made me feel good about what I had. I had friends. And any time I ever started to feel down about myself, I could just go and pull it up on the computer. I had 368 friends. 368! It was hard to wrap my head around. When I was little, it didn't seem like I had any. But when I got older and my parents let me have my own computer and I started networking, it was like a whole new world opened up to me. There was this girl named Stephanie (*or boy named Steven*) who I thought was sort of cute, and I really, y'know... liked her. But I could never work up the nerve to talk to her in person. I was scared I'd get tongue-tied or make myself look like an idiot somehow. When I got my account set up online and I started looking around to see who else was there, my stomach did a flip when I saw Stephanie's name. This was it. This was my chance to

connect with her. With just the click of a button. It was the hardest time I ever had clicking a button in my life. It was like I was sticking my neck out on a chopping block to find out if the person standing next to me was holding an axe. What if she turned me down? What if she told her friends at school and they thought I was an idiot? I stared at the screen for half an hour with my finger on the mouse button. And finally, somehow, I did it. I sent the friend request. And then I sat there freaking out, wondering why I'd done it. But then less than 10 minutes later, a message showed up on my computer. Stephanie had accepted my friend request. It was the greatest feeling in the world. She didn't hate me or think I was a loser. She wanted to be friends. And for the first time in my life, I felt like I actually mattered to other people my own age. And so, with a new boost to my confidence, I fired off another friend request to someone else from school, and less than an hour later, I had a second new friend. And I sent another and another. And they got accepted. After a couple of days, I had people sending *me* friend requests. Lots of them. Some of them were people I didn't even know, but they were friends of my other friends. And I felt really good about myself. That I wasn't like those characters in *No Exit*. That I wasn't a loser like them.

I never did work up the guts to talk to Stephanie in person. Or try to email her or chat online. But that was okay. She'd accepted my friend request. That was all I needed. I had lots of friends online. And I could keep up with what they were doing over the weekend, what teachers they hated, what movies they liked... even what they were having for dinner sometimes. Almost every day, it seemed like, there were more and more people who wanted to share those things with me. I was so very, incredibly lucky to have that. It was all I needed. It was all I needed for a really long time.

I don't know exactly what it was that made me start to notice it. To feel like maybe things really weren't the way that I thought. Maybe it was sitting by myself in the cafeteria during lunch, watching Stephanie and her friends and noticing how they didn't seem to notice me. Or how whoever sat next to me on the bus—usually somebody who was my friend online—how we never seemed to have anything to say to each other. And I'd go home and I'd stare at my number on the computer screen. The number of friends that I had. The number that told me just how much other people thought of me. And I found myself having to stare at it harder and harder, trying to will it to mean as much to me as it used to. Trying to ignore the nagging doubt that maybe outside of what I believed, it didn't actually mean anything.

I'd never really posted much in the way of status updates for myself. My life just didn't seem that interesting. When I did, it was about some movie I'd seen, or to cheer on the football team or something. Nobody ever posted any comments on my stuff, but really... I guess I never posted anything that was worth commenting on. Then one night I was feeling sort of down, and no matter how hard I stared at that number, it just wasn't making me feel any better. So I clicked on the tab to update my status, and I typed in that I was sad. That was all. No need to write a book. I just wanted to let my friends know how I felt. To give somebody a chance to say something to make me feel better. To prove that the number really did mean something. I stared at the computer for four hours. Nobody responded. I finally went to bed. I checked again as soon as I got up. Still nothing.

But I figured that just saying I was sad was something that people probably didn't know how to respond to. I mean... what do you say to something like that? I guess you could ask why... or say cheer up... or say that things have a way of working themselves out. But people are busy. And somebody just saying they're sad... what is that, really?

And I thought for sure somebody would say something about it at school the next day. Except nobody did. But y'know... no biggie. Stuff just flies under the radar sometimes. It happens. I tried not to let it get to me. But still, it kind of did.

That night, I posted that I was depressed. No responses. Nothing the next day. Hadn't anyone noticed my post? Didn't anyone notice how I was acting at school? The way I was slouching? The way I avoided eye contact? How I barely touched my lunch? Didn't anyone care?

Last night I posted that I was thinking about killing myself. Nothing. Someone new from art class had even added me as a friend and my number was up to 369 and... nothing.

Two hours ago, I posted that at 10:00 tonight, I was going to go to the playground at the park two blocks from my house, and that I was going to sit at the base of the slide, and swallow a bottle of pills. To my mild surprise, three of my friends actually chimed in telling me things would get better and not to do it. But no one called my house, even though my phone number is listed on my profile. No one is at the park now. It's 10:02, and I'm the only one here.

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