

BLOCK PARTY

Navigating Friendships in the Digital World

Text Your Own Adventure

You move with the mob of students into the noisy cafeteria at lunchtime.

If you want to eat your sack lunch, continue reading.

If you want Mac 'N' Cheese for lunch, go to page 5.

If you want a corndog for lunch, go to page 8.

Your grip tightens onto your brown paper sack as you get a whiff of bean burritos. You're glad you packed a lunch. After grabbing chocolate milk you join your friends, the same group you've sat with every day since sixth grade, at the same long table.

There are eight of you. As usual, bursts of conversation rise from heads bent over phones. Your friend next to you laughs and shows you a TikTok that went viral last night. You laugh and take a bite of your ham and cheese sandwich.

You got your mom's hand-me-down smartphone when she upgraded over the summer. It's your first one. There's one small crack on the screen protector, but it looks pretty good with your stickers on the case. But it's still no social media for you and one other kid in your friend group.

The next evening, you are blowing out birthday candles as your family sings to you. Your mom begins slicing the cake, and your older brother scoops ice cream. Your grandma gathers the presents and brings them into the living room while your younger sister runs around in a party hat.

Your dad says, "Your mom and I are so proud of you. We've decided you can open a social media account." Your heart leaps for joy. "Of course, we want to help you get it started and set some rules," your dad continues. You try to pay attention, but it's hard to contain your excitement.

If you want social media but don't want to follow your parents' rules, go to page 2.

If you want social media and of course you'll follow the rules, go to page 3.

If you want to think about all this first, go to page 4.

Continued from pages 1, 5, or 8:

You hug your dad with enthusiasm. Then you immediately grab your phone off the kitchen counter and run to your room, barely registering your mom calling after you that your ice cream is melting.

You close your door and hop on your bed. You send a group text to your lunch table friends, telling them the long-awaited good news. Almost immediately, replies pour in with lots of likes and “it’s about time!”s and party emojis. It feels so good to have your friends’ support.

Your excitement is stifled by one odd reply. The friend who has had social media the longest suggests you set up two Instagram accounts, one your parents know about and a second one for conversations you don’t want them to see.

If you want to follow your friend’s advice and set up two accounts, go to page 4.

If you want to ignore your friend, go to page 5.

If you want to follow your parents’ rules, go to page 6.

Continued from page 3:

It takes courage to post to Instagram. You feel like there’s a big spotlight on you, and you wonder if people will like what they see. You wonder if it matters anyway what other people think. But, if you’re being honest with yourself, you care.

Likes start coming in. You realize you’ve been holding your breath, let it out, and smile to yourself. Whatever happens on social from now on, at least that first post got likes. You sink into the couch and feel relaxed.

Your little sister comes into the living room. It’s getting late, but she is as energized and noisy as ever. Sometimes you just wish she’d quiet down. She sits next to you on the couch and grabs your phone. She opens Instagram and starts looking at your feed. Annoyance creeps in, and you snatch your phone back. She’s not old enough to be on social media anyway.

Your sister starts chattering about a TV show all her friends are watching and how she wants to binge it tonight. By “binge,” you know your sister means watching two or three episodes before bed. Your quiet time in the living room has definitely ended for the evening. Your phone buzzes with notifications, but you don’t immediately look at it. Your heart is filled with birthday joy, so you pause to appreciate this time with your little sister.

If you want to put your phone down and watch TV with your sister, go to page 11.

If you want to wish her goodnight and get to bed, go to page 13.

Continued from pages 1, 5, or 8:

A surge of excitement overtakes you. You thank your dad and give him a big hug. Then, you kiss your mom on the cheek as she serves a substantial piece of cake onto a paper plate.

Later that evening, with your parent's permission, your brother helps you set up an Instagram account. Your parents clean up from the party as you and your brother sit side-by-side on the couch. After he shows you the basics, you hand your phone over to your mom.

She wipes her hands on a dishtowel and sets up the parental controls, including limiting screen time. She hands the phone back to you, your brother goes to his room to play guitar and left alone with your new privilege, you feel grown-up.

If you want to post to Instagram, go to page 2.

If you're worn out and want to put your phone away for the night, go to page 7.

If you want to DM every member of your lunch table before bed, go to page 8.

Continued from page 9:

There are worrying things, too, like the way some people overshare or make mean comments. It makes you cringe to read some of the things the girls in your class post.

Other things make sense, like how the funny kids at school are funny on social media; the quiet kids are present and active but don't usually post original content. There is pressure to like everybody's posts. You guess you're all just trying to figure this out together.

One day you realize a girl from your English class has been reposting really depressing content for ten days straight. Before that, she barely posted anything. Then, in class this week, she slumps at her desk all period. Her hair is dirty, and she has dark circles under her eyes. You think to yourself that other people must be noticing this too.

You ask a few of your friends at lunch if they've noticed the changes in this girl. They shrug it off and continue playing a goofy mini-golf game on their phones. The next day, you hang back after class to talk to your teacher, but she is distracted with work and doesn't notice you. You assume someone else will help this girl if she needs it, but you can't seem to shake the feeling that something is wrong.

That night, you see she has reposted something troubling.

If you want to DM her, go to page 18.

If you want to tell your parents, go to page 19.

Continued from pages 1, 5, or 8:

A surge of excitement overtakes you. You thank your dad and give him a big hug. Then, you kiss your mom on the cheek as she serves a substantial piece of cake onto a paper plate.

Despite cheerful family conversations going on around you, you are temporarily lost in thought. Even though you have wanted social media for several months, this is a big decision. You want to consider how social media might affect your life. It's a weird feeling because you have felt left out by not being on social media. But now that it's offered to you, you are unsure.

It seems like a fun thing, but you know kids who are addicted to it. You think of your aunt, your dad's younger sister, who is always on her phone scrolling Instagram. You've even seen her pull into your driveway for a visit but remain in her car for a good ten minutes posing for her camera and sending snaps before coming into the house.

You also think about all the things you've heard about teens becoming depressed or having problems with body image. You're not sure you want to get involved with all of this just yet. But won't you continue to miss out?

If you decide to wait six months to open a social media account, go to page 7.

If you decide to open a social media account now, go to page 9.

If you decide not to open a social media account, go to page 13.

Continued from page 2:

Your friend has had social media for over a year and has three step siblings in college, so you figure they know more about this than your parents. Besides, what's the harm?

Your fingers move quickly over your phone screen as you concentrate intensely. It doesn't take long to figure out how to make an account. You use a fake name and an email address your parents don't know. You jump when you hear your mom calling you to open your gifts, and a guilty feeling comes over you as you hurry to the living room to rejoin the family.

A couple of days later, your parents discover the Instagram account while doing a random phone check. Worse than the strict punishment is how disappointed your parents are by your choice.

After soccer practice that evening, you sit on the edge of your bed feeling bad as your thoughts shift between how to regain your parents' trust and what you'll do at the lunch table without your phone for the next two weeks.

THE END.

Continued from page 1:

You put chocolate milk on your tray and join your friends, the same group of eight you've sat with every day since sixth grade, at the same long table. You slurp each noodle into your mouth one at a time, savoring the processed cheesy goodness.

The kids across from you are talking about this morning's math test while at the same time jointly DMing a girl across the cafeteria. Everyone is involved with something, so you get your phone from your pocket and open a game. As it loads, you take a swig of milk.

You got your mom's hand-me-down smartphone when she upgraded over the summer. It's your first one. There's one small crack on the screen protector, but it looks pretty good with your stickers on the case. You're glad to fit in, although your parents still don't allow you to have a social media account. It's you and one other kid in your friend group who are still without social media. That's why you're playing a dumb mobile game at lunch on a Thursday.

The next evening, you are blowing out birthday candles in your kitchen as your family sings to you. Your mom begins slicing the cake, and your older brother scoops ice cream. Your grandma gathers the presents and brings them into the living room while your younger sister runs around in a party hat.

Your dad says, "Happy birthday, Kiddo. Your mom and I are so proud of you. We've been talking, and we have decided you can open a social media account. Of course, we want to help you get it started and set some rules, but we feel you've shown you are responsible enough to handle this privilege. Plus, you've just about worn us out with all the times you've asked!"

**If you want social media but don't want to follow your parents' rules, go to page 2.
If you want social media and of course you'll follow the rules, go to page 3.
If you want to think about all this first, go to page 4.**

Continued from page 2:

You figure you can just ignore this piece of questionable advice. But later, after your grandmother has left and the dishes are loaded into the dishwasher, your phone buzzes again. It's a text from this friend, pressing you to make two accounts. You don't get it. It's late, so you turn off your phone and plug it into the charging station in the kitchen.

You sleep in the next day, and when you wake, your mom tells you muffins and bacon are in the kitchen. "And by the way," she adds. "Your phone was making a lot of noise as I was preparing breakfast." You ask her if she checked it, and she says she was too busy cooking.

You imagine there are more birthday wishes and hurry into the kitchen to check your phone. Among some birthday texts are ten more messages from your friend, persisting and nearly bullying you into making a ghost Instagram account. It's out of character, and it makes you feel unsettled.

**If you want to tell your parents about your friend's unusual behavior, go to page 6.
If you want to handle it yourself, go to page 10.**

Continued from page 2:

You entertain your friend's idea for all of three seconds. Then you recall how many times they've been grounded this semester. You decide it's not good advice; your friend doesn't always think ahead.

Several months after opening an Instagram account, your parents allow you to get TikTok. They had to set stricter screen time limits a few times, but mostly your parents have been pleased with how you have managed the privilege of social media. You feel proud as you watch a Charli D'Amelio duet.

Something your parents can't see is your self-control. Sometimes when you're lying in bed, you feel an urge to get up and check your phone. Your heart quickens when you think of missing something. But you are learning to manage these feelings. When they come, you notice them, take a few deep breaths, and remind yourself that your phone is a tool. It is a tool that you use. If you let it use you, you become the tool.

If you want to start your homework, go to page 11.

If you want to create a TikTok, go to page 12.

Continued from page 5:

It turns out your friend has fallen into some pretty risky behavior. Getting your parents involved is definitely the right decision. One of your friend's step brothers has been dealing drugs, and he was looking for new customers.

Your friend was just getting involved, and because you acted quickly, adults are now taking care of things, and your friend will be just fine (after serving the parental punishment). So, although things are awkward right now, you have a good feeling that your friendship will survive.

Curled up on the couch Sunday evening, you scroll through Instagram and smile at your friends' stories and posts from your aunt. You think about the light and dark aspects of social media. It is a good feeling to be connected with your friends over the weekend, even as you are home alone.

You think of the close call with your friend's brother. A couple of wrong moves, and this chapter could have ended much differently. You take a steadying breath and then like a picture of your friend's cat.

THE END.

Continued from page 3:

For reasons you can't quite explain, you want to have this moment to yourself before going "public" to the world. So, you plug your phone into the kitchen charging station and head to bed.

As you brush your teeth, you think about your day. Scenes flash across your mind's eye: school, your lunch table, the family birthday party, and your dad's surprising statement about social media. You begin to think about how each person in your life is connected to you. You imagine them radiating around you, creating a snug web of comfort and support, and then spit into the sink. You realize how social media enables these connections and how the relationships are the point of it all. Your thoughts are interrupted as your sister knocks on the bathroom door. She is surprised by your big hug goodnight before you walk to your room.

With your head on your pillow, you thank God for the gift of your family and the excitement of your birthday. The corners of your lips lift into a blissful smile as you drift off to sleep, feeling grateful for this grown-up feeling and the tremendous gift of life.

THE END.

Continued from page 4:

You're confused by the mixed feelings. You're not anti-social media. Not at all. But you decide to wait six months to open an account because you feel conflicted. Your parents and siblings are surprised but accepting when you tell them, and you know you need to follow your heart.

In the meantime, you continue to do what you have been doing. You keep your grades up and excel in soccer. You become the last remaining person at your lunch table without social media, as the other hold-out finally gets parental permission. You begin to feel left out of some of your friends' conversations. They make efforts to include you by sending you texts, but it's an extra step, and sometimes they forget.

Six months to the day after your birthday, you and your brother sit side-by-side on the couch and set up your Instagram account. After he shows you the basics, you hand your phone over to your mom. She wipes her hands on a dishtowel and sets up the parental controls, including limiting screen time. It's admittedly not as exciting as you'd thought, but you notice how you feel a little more responsible and grown-up as you sip lemonade and start following people, like you've seen your friends do at least a hundred times.

Soon, someone you don't really know from your English class follows you.

If you want to follow her back, go to page 12.

If you want to continue following only people you know, go to page 16.

Continued from page 1:

The corndog and fries are definitely a good choice. After grabbing chocolate milk from the industrial refrigerator, you join your friends, the same group of eight you've sat with every day since sixth grade, at the same long table.

You got your mom's hand-me-down smartphone when she upgraded over the summer. It's your first one. There's one small crack on the screen protector, but it looks pretty good with your stickers on the case. You're glad to fit in, although your parents still don't allow you to have a social media account. It's you and one other kid in your friend group who are still without social media. That's why you're playing a dumb mobile game at lunch on a Thursday.

The next evening, you are blowing out birthday candles in your kitchen as your family sings to you. Your mom begins slicing the cake, and your older brother scoops ice cream. Your grandma gathers the presents and brings them into the living room while your younger sister runs around in a party hat.

Your dad says, "Happy birthday, Kiddo. Your mom and I are so proud of you. We've been talking, and we have decided you can open a social media account. Of course, we want to help you get it started and set some rules, but we feel you've shown you are responsible enough to handle this privilege. Plus, you've just about worn us out with all the times you've asked!"

If you want social media but don't want to follow your parents' rules, go to page 2.
If you want social media and of course you'll follow the rules, go to page 3.
If you want to think about all this first, go to page 4.

Continued from page 3:

Your lunch table friends do not disappoint with their enthusiastic replies. First, you hear from the six friends with Insta accounts immediately. Then, you text your seventh friend, who also replies right away. Their support is incredible. Social media makes you feel like you have entered a clubhouse and found a new world.

You play around on your phone for another hour and now have a good understanding of Instagram. You find some pretty cool stuff but also some stupid and creepy stuff. You realize you can navigate the app, but there is way more to learn about social media culture.

If you want to put your phone down and go to bed, go to page 11.
If you want to continue DMing your friends, go to page 14.
If you want to explore social media culture more, go to page 15.

Continued from page 4:

These are good things to consider, but maybe you're overthinking. Of course, you are going to open a social media account! You take a big bite of cake.

Later that evening, with your parent's permission, your brother helps you set up Instagram. Your parents clean up from the party as you and your brother sit side-by-side on the couch. After he shows you the basics, you hand your phone over to your mom. She wipes her hands on a dishtowel and sets up the parental controls, including limiting screen time. She hands the phone back to you, your brother goes to his room to play guitar and left alone with your new privilege, you feel grown-up.

You've seen your friends work Instagram hundreds of times, so this is nothing new. You begin following friends you know from school and soccer. You follow some of your brother's friends too.

Now fully skilled in Instagram function, you begin to notice the little things about social media. You know in person most of the people you follow online, and you see how some of them present themselves entirely differently on Instagram. Some people are trying too hard.

If you want to stay on Instagram, go to page 3.

If you want to put your phone down and do something else, go to page 20.

Continued from page 16:

You DM your friend and she is so glad you reached out. It's been a stressful day as her parents argue over how to pay all the medical bills. But by Christmas break of the following year, her sister is cancer-free and steadily improving. The whole family is doing better.

You no longer have English class with your friend, but you're in the same science and social studies classes this year. You are glad your online interactions developed into an in-person friendship.

One Saturday afternoon, you ride your bikes to get ice cream and then take a walk through a neighborhood park. Your friend tells you how her Catholic faith got her through the darkest days of her sister's illness. You listen with interest. When she invites you to attend her church youth group the following evening, you accept.

You love everything about her church youth group, and soon you are attending with her every week. The friends from your lunch table start coming, too. You're not sure yet, but you think this church thing will be a big part of your life in high school.

THE END.

Continued from page 5:

You decide to handle it yourself and fire off a light-hearted reply, something about leaving you alone and giving you time to think about it. Your friend rapid-fires three rude responses. You feel your heart rate rise, and you realize you can either put your phone down or get into a major text feud with your friend. You storm into your room without eating breakfast.

Your friend's comments and weird behavior bother you a lot. So without really thinking about it, you open Instagram and make a false account. There, it's done. Now your friend can leave you alone.

Except that's not what happens. Over the next few weeks, your friend gets steadily angrier, brooding, and bullying. Your parents comment on your attitude, as well, half-heartedly making a joke about teenage angst, but their concern is genuine.

One day after school, your friend approaches you in the bus line and begins talking fast. You don't hear everything because you're caught on the first thing: your friend wants you to use an Instagram account to make drug deals. What?! Your focus narrows on your friend, and everything else around you seems to disappear as you realize you have turned a dark corner.

But before you can reply, a teacher on bus duty overhears the conversation and hauls the two of you into the principal's office. What have you gotten yourself into?

THE END.

Continued from page 15:

Only half paying attention, you set your phone down on the kitchen counter, replaying in your mind the crude jokes and racist language with disbelief. This is way out of line. Up until now, you thought this new friend was a lot like you, and now you realize how much you don't know about who is on the other side of the screen.

You walk back down the hall with a knot in your stomach. You get in bed where you toss and turn all night.

The next morning, you have DMs from your school friends and one out-of-place, racy DM from the stranger. You self-consciously look over your shoulder to be sure your little sister is not nearby. Noticing your reaction causes strength to rise in you, and you hit "remove."

Somewhere across the country, in a small, poorly lit bedroom, a middle-aged man curses and slams his laptop shut. He'll start preying on someone else tomorrow.

THE END.

Continued from pages 2, 6, or 8:

As time goes on, you know you've found a good balance between on-screen and off-screen activities. The initial excitement about social media among your friends has evolved into responsible management.

You begin to realize that social media is one of many things you will need to juggle as a high school student. There are so many exciting things to look forward to, and you want to be present for all of them.

When you are in moments of prayer, you thank God. You haven't become obsessed with selfies or unhealthy body image like some of your peers. You can recognize social media drama and when to step away. This is somewhat due to your efforts, but mostly due to God's grace.

On the bus heading home, your phone buzzes. You see a snap from your brother. It makes you smile to know he is thinking about you. You snap him back and check your Instagram feed. Your friend sitting behind you taps you on the head and asks you about the science homework. You talk about the assignment and share a joke. You check your digital calendar to figure out your study schedule for next week's test since you'll also have an audition for the all-school musical. You think you have a chance at a lead part.

You turn off your screen and put your phone in the front pocket of your backpack. As you gaze out the rectangular window, you notice a large bird gliding alone across the clear blue sky. The bird looks free and peaceful. As the bus bumps along the familiar neighborhood street, you notice your heart feels that way too – free and peaceful.

THE END.

Continued from page 14:

You fully disconnect from social media for a week. You have a twinge of pain for the loss of some mean snap streaks. Then you think of how strange it is that less than a year ago, that wouldn't have mattered. The camp has some enjoyable outdoor activities, and only 30 minutes after arrival, social media is the furthest thing from your thoughts as you dominate Nine Square.

Camp turns out to be the most significant thing you do all summer. You meet a lot of really cool kids, and some of them go to your school. The adults are pretty cool, too. One of them is an excellent listener as you share about your grandpa's sudden passing a few years ago.

Most importantly, these people introduce you to God. This becomes the most important relationship of your middle school, high school, college, and adult years – the most important relationship of your life.

Go to page 20.

Continued from page 6:

Your first TikToks are admittedly pretty dumb. Okay, maybe the first two dozen TikToks are pretty dumb. But then you stumble into a formula that works.

Before you know it, your TikTok videos are getting more and more notice. A few companies contact your parents about monetizing your videos. Unfortunately, you have to give up soccer to make time for this new hobby, but it seems like a good trade-off.

A year later, your TikToks are so influential you are regularly recognized in public. Your little sister's friends start a fan page. Things start getting weird at school when kids who never spoke to you last year suddenly want to be your best friend. Even some of the teachers act strangely; one asks for your autograph for her daughter.

One night at dinner, you unload to your parents about how stressful it has become. You like making TikTok videos, but all the attention is a significant change. Your parents have noticed the strain, and they mention they've been thinking about switching you to homeschooling. You're going to have to think long and hard about this.

THE END.

Continued from page 7:

By the end of the school year, you are close friends. You are grateful that this friendship, which began online, has blossomed into a strong relationship. So when she invites you to a week of church camp in the summer, you don't hesitate to join her. Your parents agree, and your dad surprises you by sharing that he attended a church camp in high school. Who knew?!

At camp, you stay pretty close to your friend at first. You don't know anybody else there, and to make matters worse, there is no cell service or WiFi, so all cell phones are basically useless (except to take pictures). So you fully disconnect from social media for a week. You have a twinge of pain knowing you'll break some mean snap streaks. Then you think of how strange it is that less than a year ago, that wouldn't have mattered. Anyway, only 30 minutes after arrival, social media is the furthest thing from your thoughts as you dominate Nine Square.

Camp turns out to be the most significant thing you do all summer. You meet a lot of really cool kids, even some high school students who are camp counselors. Some of the kids go to your school, and now you'll know them when the new school year starts. But, most importantly, these people introduce you to God. Your relationship with God becomes the most important relationship of your middle school, high school, college, and adult years — the most important relationship of your life.

THE END.

Continued from page 2:

You don't go right to bed. Even though you feel really tired, you're too enthralled with Instagram to sleep. You get ready for bed and turn your lights out, but the soft glow of your screen stays on for hours after your parents go to sleep. Somehow you avoided turning your phone in for the night, probably because it's your birthday, and you plan to take advantage of it.

Following one kid opens the suggestion to follow five more. You can barely hold your eyes open, but you keep your fingers to the screen into the early morning hours, finally succumbing to exhaustion.

You wake late the following day, feeling blurry-eyed and grumpy. You smell bacon from the kitchen, and your stomach growls, but before you get out of bed, you roll over and find your phone on the carpet. You pick it up and begin to scroll.

Fifteen minutes later, you reach your screen time limit for the day. It must reset at midnight, you realize, and since you stayed up late, your time is up. Shrugging, you put the phone down on your desk, get dressed, and grab a muffin before heading out to the backyard to work on your soccer game. It's a good day for balance training.

THE END.

Continued from page 4:

Even though you are interested in social media, you hesitate to make an account. At your lunch table, you and one other friend are the only two without social media for another month. Then it's just you. You tell your friends you'll get on in high school, but not even you are convinced as you say it. Now with your parents' permission, there are no more excuses to stay off social media, but your friends can't pressure you; it's your choice.

Freshman year, you put it off again and decide to wait until you're 16 to get on social media. With all the homework and sports and activities in high school, you don't need one more thing. As a result, you start to lose touch with your friends and often miss school events advertised on social media.

Your sixteenth birthday comes and goes. You don't open a social media account or test for your driver's license. Spending time alone with your thoughts energizes you and restores you after the school day. You're happy, your grades are excellent, and your college prospects are good. Maybe you'll open a social media account in college.

THE END.

Continued from page 8:

Over the next several months, your lunch table changes from a group of somewhat immature kids to a tight group of close friends. You love your family and everything, yet more and more you want to spend time with this crew who is beginning to feel almost as close as family.

Social media is one way you and your friends stay connected. Getting together in person, eating lunch together every day, and texting and talking on FaceTime are other ways you keep in touch. Social media isn't the be-all, end-all. You don't get too caught up in the middle school drama that brings down some of your peers.

Near the end of the school year, one of your friends invites the group to attend a week-long church camp over the summer. Your parents agree, and your dad surprises you by sharing that he attended a church camp in high school. Who knew?!

Five of you go to camp. At first, you stay pretty close to your friends. You don't know anybody else, and to make matters worse, there is no cell service or WiFi, so all cell phones are basically useless (except to take pictures).

If you want to search for a cell signal, continue reading.
If you want to join the outdoor activities, go to page 11.

You wander off from the group with your cell phone raised in the air until a camp counselor finds you. The counselor is a college student who does a good job of sympathizing with you, even though he looks like he was born to live outdoors and could probably win a season of "Survivor." You bury your skepticism about his tech savvy, and receive his kindness.

You walk together back to the large group and he teaches you to play Nine Square. Ten minutes later, social media is the furthest thing from your thoughts as you progress to the king position in the game.

The rest of camp goes really well. You find you can still live without your phone, although not by choice. You love the time around the campfire, making S'mores and singing worship songs. The starry sky is breathtaking, and you even spot an owl one night in a tree above the fire circle.

After the week of camp, you continue to attend church youth group. Your grades are good, and you continue to play soccer. As time goes on, you know you've found a good balance between on-screen and off-screen activities. The initial excitement about social media among your friends has evolved into responsible management. Your parents notice this too.

Go to page 20.

Continued from page 8:

Anyone can post on social media. You feel overwhelmed at first by the amount of content on Instagram, but this passes, and as the weeks and months go by, you get more comfortable with it.

It's a Thursday after school when you get a DM from someone you don't know. "Hey, what are you doing?" When this happened before, you asked your older brother for advice. He told you to check what connections you share with the stranger and then choose to either ignore the message or reply.

Now you're in a hurry to get to play practice, so you fire back a reply without even checking mutual connections. Anyway, it's probably someone from your school or soccer, as usual. By the time you rush to the car, you're in a conversation with this new contact and getting to know each other fast. You have your head down the whole car ride, which has clearly annoyed your mom, so you quickly brush a kiss across her cheek before dashing into rehearsal.

A week later, you've talked to your new friend at length every day, sometimes hastily completing homework or ignoring friends at your lunch table to keep the conversation going. Starting a relationship with someone you've never met in person gives you a rush. You congratulate yourself for your charm, wit, and overall mad social media skills.

Things are going well until late Friday night. You are about to turn in your phone when it buzzes. Smiling, you check your notifications and open Instagram. A DM from your new friend sends a chill up your spine.

If you want to block your "friend," go to page 10.

If you want to get your parents involved, go to page 19.

Continued from page 17:

Your friend understands that you already have summer plans, but when you hear about it afterward, it sounds like so much fun that you decide to go the following year.

Camp turns out to be the most significant thing you do that summer. You meet a lot of really cool kids, even some high school students who are camp counselors. Some of the kids go to your school, and now you'll know them when the new school year starts. But, most importantly, these people introduce you to God. Your relationship with God becomes the most important relationship of your middle school, high school, college, and adult years — the most important relationship of your life.

THE END.

Continued from page 7:

For now, you only want to follow people you know. Your feed remains small, and you get the hang of things.

A few months later, one of your friends reposts an Instagram challenge from the girl in your English class. She wants to bring awareness to children’s cancer research. You take a photo, post, and tag it, congratulating yourself for your mad social media skills.

Later that night, the girl from your English class DMs you. She gives you a standard message thanking you for participating and then adds, “Hey, don’t we have a class together?” You begin a conversation, and you learn her little sister has cancer. Your heart hurts as you imagine your little sister. You realize this girl from your English class will need all the friends she can get right now. So, in a symbolic gesture, you immediately follow her on Instagram. It’s a small thing, but it’s something.

Then, for the rest of the school year and summer, you make an effort to stay in touch. You don’t have a lot in common, but you enjoy her quiet, calm presence. You like every post of the beautiful photos of her sister and track her cancer journey through social media. When her family sets up a Go Fund Me, you find about it over social media and talk to your parents.

If you want to DM your friend, go to page 9.

If you want to make a donation, go to page 18.

Continued from page 17:

At camp, you stay pretty close to your friend at first. You don’t know anybody else there, and to make matters worse, there is no cell service or WiFi, so all cell phones are basically useless (except to take pictures). So you fully disconnect from social media for a week. You have a tinge of pain knowing you’ll break some mean snap streaks. Then you think of how strange it is that less than a year ago, that wouldn’t have mattered. Anyway, only 30 minutes after arrival, social media is the furthest thing from your thoughts as you dominate Nine Square.

Camp turns out to be the most significant thing you do all summer. You meet a lot of really cool kids, even some high school students who are camp counselors. Some of the kids go to your school, and now you’ll know them when the new school year starts. But, most importantly, these people introduce you to God. Your relationship with God becomes the most important relationship of your middle school, high school, college, and adult years — the most important relationship of your life.

THE END.

Continued from pages 7 or 18:

After sharing so much over Instagram last night, you wonder if it will be weird to see her in class today. After all, you've barely exchanged more than a glance and a smile in person. So you take your time walking to English and slide into your desk just as the bell rings. You make eye contact, and she gives you a friendly wave.

Over the next couple of weeks, you begin to walk to class together. Your new friend is funny and easy to talk to. As you learn more about the friend drama from a few weeks ago, you realize it was mostly a misunderstanding. She begins to patch things up with the old friend group.

After Christmas break, she confides that she had been depressed earlier in the school year. At the time, she did not know how it would get better. The night you reached out was the night she had broken down in tears and prayed for a new friend. Then, less than an hour later, you had sent that DM.

You've noticed the improvement in her mental health. Her posts, her appearance, her posture, and her attitude all reflect a healthy person. In February, when you have a setback with your science grade, she is the friend who tutors you and encourages you to get back on track.

By the end of the school year, you are close friends. You are grateful that this friendship, which began online, has blossomed into a strong relationship. So strong, she invites you to a week of church camp in the summer, and you consider it.

If you already have summer plans, go to page 15.

If you want to check out church camp, go to page 16.

Continued from page 20:

You open the note and read it.

She has written about how she had been depressed earlier this year, and no one had noticed. The night you reached out to her was the night she had broken down in tears and prayed for a friend. Less than five minutes later, you had sent that DM. She wrote about how she felt God had used you to reach her and that she would forever be grateful.

You smile to yourself as you switch out your English book for math. You have mixed feelings as you refold the note and put it in your pocket. You are thankful she feels better and that you were part of that. You feel some regret, too, that comes from missing an opportunity. You wish you had made an effort to get to know her in person. Maybe that time will still come.

THE END.

Continued from page 9:

You barely know the girl. It's probably really dumb to reach out to her. You make all kinds of excuses to yourself, but still, you DM her.

"Hey, I'm in your English class. Do you know the homework assignment?" Lame, but maybe it will get her talking.

She replies about twenty minutes later, and just like that, you've started a conversation. It's surfacy at first, but since it seems easier to ask a stranger a tough question online rather than in person, you go for it.

"Are you ok?"

It feels like forever until she replies, but it is just the opening she needed. She shares about her friend drama and how about three weeks ago, her group just dropped her. Not only that, but her parents have been fighting a lot. It's surprisingly easier to talk to her than you'd thought.

After exchanging messages for about fifteen minutes, you both feel a lot better. You wonder if you've made a new friend.

If you want to talk to her the next day in class, go to page 17.

If you want to stay in touch over social media, go to page 20.

Continued from page 16:

By Christmas break of the following year, your classmate's sister is cancer-free and steadily improving. It feels like so long ago when your family donated to the Go Fund Me, including your birthday cash contribution. You no longer have English class with your friend, but you're in the same science and social studies classes this year. You are glad your online interactions developed into an in-person friendship.

One Saturday afternoon, you ride your bikes to get ice cream and then take a walk through a neighborhood park. The birds chirp, and lots of people walk their dogs on this perfect day. You talk about a song recently released by your favorite artist and the new pizza place opening down the street. The conversation grows more serious, and your friend tells you how her Catholic faith got her through the darkest days of her sister's illness. You listen with interest. When she invites you to attend her church youth group the following evening, you accept.

You love everything about her church youth group, and soon you are attending with her every week. The friends from your lunch table start coming, too. You're not sure yet, but you think this church thing will be a big part of your life in high school.

THE END.

Continued from page 9 or 15:

You know it's late, but you need to talk to your parents. You knock and barely wait for an answer before entering their bedroom and spilling your guts. You begin calmly, sharing all the details with your mom and dad, leaving nothing out. You're not exactly sure why you start to shake and cry, but you feel better once everything's out in the open.

Social media has made you feel grown-up, but now all you want is to be a middle school kid in the comfort and safety of your parents' home. First your mom hugs you, and then your dad. Your parents reassure you and tell you how glad they are that you came to them. Finally, they tuck you back into bed, and you sleep all night restfully.

When you wake the following day, you feel like a weight has been lifted off your shoulders. You go to the kitchen, where you find your mom and dad have been up for hours making phone calls and contacting the proper authorities. They share their updates with you as you eat a bowl of cereal.

As they describe what they've learned, you realize all was not as it seemed. You are struck by how two-dimensional social media profiles can be and how easy it is to create a false identity or withhold information.

Your quick action may have caught a criminal.

THE END.

Continued from page 20:

You decide to read the note later. You have mixed feelings as you switch out your English book for math.

You are thankful she clearly feels better and is back in the good graces of her friend group.

But you feel some regret, too, that comes from missing an opportunity. She seems like a really nice person, and you wish you had made an effort to get to know her better this year.

Maybe that time will still come.

You quicken your pace to catch up with some other friends on your way to math.

THE END.

Continued from page 9 or 14:

Several months after opening an Instagram account, your parents allow you to get TikTok. They had to set stricter screen time limits a few times, but mostly your parents have been pleased with how you have managed the privilege of social media. You feel proud as you watch a Charli D'Amelio duet.

Something your parents can't see is your self-regulation. Sometimes when you're lying in bed, you feel an urge to get up and check your phone. Your heart quickens when you think of missing something. But you are learning to manage these feelings. When they come, you notice them, take a few deep breaths, and remind yourself that your phone is a tool. It is a tool that you use. If you let it use you, you become the tool. You're not going to let that happen.

THE END.

Continued from page 11:

Now that you're old and nearing the latest years of your life, you can look back with satisfaction. You are grateful for your long marriage to your spouse, someone you met at summer camp. You are thankful for your children, your grandchildren, and your great-grands, the relationships God has used to teach you about love. The connections between these relationships are maintained over social media as much as in-person. You lay your head back in your rocker and close your eyes. You feel a cool breeze through the screen door sweep over your forehead. It has been a good life, and you are at peace.

THE END.

Continued from page 18:

You continue to DM now and then but never have a conversation as deep as the one you did that first night. You notice how her posts become lighter, and she eventually has much fewer reposts and much more original content. You discover she is pretty funny.

She patches things up with her friend group and begins to attract attention from other kids at school. She is known for her positivity, and by Christmas break, she is clearly over her depression and radiating health and happiness.

One day around Easter, she hands you a handwritten note as the bell rings. You walk with your friends toward your next class but separate from the group at the locker bay.

If you want to read the note now, go to page 17.

If you want to read it later, go to page 19.