

Valentina Nazarova

The Hidden Track

A novel

For the Boys in the Band

I don't even know what I'm writing, I have no idea, I don't know anything, and I'm not reading over it, and I'm not correcting my style, and I'm writing just for the sake of writing, just for the sake of writing more to you... My precious, my darling, my dearest!
Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Poor Folk*

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Monday, 27 April 2007

Privet Jenia!

Happy Birthday to you, sestra! Mama says you're officially an adult now that you're 21. She's smiling, but I can tell she's a little sad.

Are you having fun? How's Uni? How's the weather in England? Is it warm enough to wear the blue dress that Mama gave you?

Thanks for setting up my Facebook page. I'm happy we can talk more.

By the way, it was such a great idea to write messages in English. It's like we have a secret language, like we're in a book or a movie.

Love and kisses from Saint Petersburg,

Nika & Mama

Status: read

From: Jen Lukina

To: Nika Lukina

Tuesday, 28 April 2007

Hey baby sestra,

Thanks for the birthday message! I promise I'll upload some pics soon so you can see me in my gorgeous blue dress. It's lovely here—the sun is shining, the sky is clear. I have a feeling this summer is going to be special.

How's everything back home? I might come visit in August! Are you excited? I am!

Give Mama my love.

Jen x

Status: read

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Friday, 4 May 2007

Jenia,

We're doing just fine. It's finally warm here! Well, denim jacket kind of warm. Can't wait for August!

Found your old CD player. Do you mind if I use it?

Nika xx

Status: read

From: Jen Lukina

To: Nika Lukina

Sunday, 6 May 2007

Nika,

Sure, take it, it's yours. But you've got to promise me you won't use it to listen to rubbish emo bands, OK? I know that kids your age love them, but they're shit. Go get my old CD collection from my bedroom. Give it a good listen.

Start with:

The Libertines — there are two CDs, take both. I can't pick one, love them both far too much.

Oasis — *(What's the Story) Morning Glory?*

Radiohead — *Kid A & Hail to a Thief*

Placebo — *Sleeping with Ghosts*

Nirvana — *Nevermind*

Music will help you get through anything, Nika. Life has a tendency to get difficult at times—people can make you feel worthless and low or things can get so dark and hopeless that you'll feel like there's no light left in the world—but music will help. Always. Sometimes, it'll be your only friend.

And you've got to remember, there are thousands of bands out there who pretend that their music matters. They look like they care, they even say all the right things and wear all the right clothes. But they're fakes—don't fall for them. They're just pretenders who are in it for the wrong reasons. They don't have a soul of their own and they'll happily take yours.

Love you,

J x

Status: read

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Sunday, 6 May 2007

Jen,

Thank you so much! I'll try to remember this, although I don't think I've ever met anyone without a soul.

I took another one of your CDs: *Hot Fuss* by The Killers. So far I think I like it best, even though it wasn't on your list. They sound cheerful and their lyrics tell stories. I don't understand them all, but from what I get, they're pretty cool. I took your dictionary to look up all the unfamiliar words.

Do they have a soul? I'd love to go see them live when I come visit you in England. Can we go? Please say yes.

Your baby sestra,

Nika

Status: read

From: Jen Lukina

To: Nika Lukina

Thursday, 10 May 2007

Hey sweetie,

Of course we can! The Killers are true rockers. I'm going to see them at a music festival this summer. Bilo and Biggles are going to be there too!

By the way, I've got an idea. Tell me what you're listening to every time you message me. That way I can make sure you're developing a decent taste in music. I want you to be a proper little rock chick, my love!

Kiss Mama for me!

Love you lots,

Jen xx

Status: read

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Wednesday, 13 June 2007

Radiohead – "Kid A"

Jen,

I'm going on holiday with Mama and Papa. Hope you don't mind, I'm taking your CDs with me. I'll be very careful and won't scratch them, I promise. I'll write whenever I get a chance. Not sure if they have Wi-Fi on Greek islands.

I miss you so much, sestra. I've been listening to Radiohead every night before I go to sleep. I

like the goosebumpy feeling I get me when I listen to them in the dark.

N x

Status: read

From: Jen Lukina

To: Nika Lukina

Thursday, 14 June 2007

Nika,

Have a great time on holiday.

Ask Mama to buy you an iPod. There's sooo much great music I want to share with you.

See you soon. Love you!

Jen

Status: read

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Tuesday, 19 June 2007

The Libertines – “Music When The Lights Go Out”

Jenia,

How are you? Are you done with Uni for the summer?

I'm loving the sea—how it smells and its mesmerizing colour. It's so powerful, just like music.

I'm listening to The Killers, sometimes to The Libertines, too. Other bands sound either too sad or too angry for the summertime.

I miss you so much. Can't wait to see you in August.

N x

Status: read

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Saturday, 23 June 2007

The Killers – “Jenny Was a Friend of Mine”

Hi sestra,

How are you? I'm a little bored here. We didn't go to the beach today, yesterday either. I've been hanging out by myself, headphones on. I'm starting to like it that way.

We're going on a boat trip tomorrow, not sure when I'll get a chance to write again. Hopefully there'll be a nice long reply from you and a whole load of photos waiting for me next time I check my FB.

Nika x

Status: read

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Friday, 29 June 2007

Placebo – “English Summer Rain”

Just wanted to tell you that Mama's not feeling well. So maybe it'd be a good idea for you to come sooner.

Love,

Nika

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Monday, 2 July 2007

Oasis – “Hello”

Jen,

Mama's worried sick. Please charge your phone already and call her.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Wednesday, 4 July 2007

Radiohead – “Sail to the Moon”

Are you OK? Where are you? Why is your phone switched off?

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Tuesday, 10 July 2007

Nirvana – “Something in the Way”

Jen, please reply. Just let us know you're alright.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Radiohead – “I will”

Thursday, 26 July 2007

Jen,

Where are you? Mama is ill, she's been going to doctor's a lot lately. Everyone here thinks I'm stupid and that I don't understand what's going on. But I do! I know they're all lying to me—even Mama. Something bad is happening. I'm scared, Jen. Please please reply and come home soon.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Monday, 12 November 2007

Nirvana – “Endless Nameless”

Mama died last night. It was cancer. She was diagnosed back in July, but it was too late. There was never any hope, according to Papa.

It's been over three months since we last spoke. Where are you?

The funeral is on Friday. Please come. Everyone's gone completely mental here. Especially Papa. He's crying. I've never seen him cry before.

Mama asked about you every day until the end, she kept calling people and asking if you'd been in touch. In the end, Papa took her phone away because she was working herself up too much. He said the police were handling everything and that he was sure you were OK because you weren't a little girl anymore.

A week ago Mama fell unconscious and never woke up.

Been listening to Nirvana a lot lately.

I'm not crying. I think everyone expects me to but I just can't. People keep hugging me and telling me how sorry they are—I hate it. Does it mean I'm shallow? Does it mean I didn't love Mama?

I just keep listening to your CDs in the dark. Nothing else helps.

Come home, sestra.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Saturday, 17 November 2007

Nirvana – “Polly”

They buried Mama yesterday. She was lying in a lacquered coffin in our church, and I kept staring at her. I just couldn't take my eyes off her face. It was as if it wasn't really her. I mean, I know it was her, I'm not crazy, but somehow it wasn't. Do you know what I mean? She never would've worn that much makeup. They also put a hideous curly wig on her head. She would've laughed so hard if she saw it. It was all so fake.

I don't know what's wrong with me. Papa rang school and they let me stay home today. Nothing seems real. Will it ever end? Will it ever be alright again, Jen?

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Tuesday, 1 January 2008

Tokio Hotel – “Don't Jump”

HAPPY NEW YEAR, YOU STUPID BITCH!

How could you leave us at a time like this? I fucking hate you, do you hear me?

P.S. I'm listening to Tokio Hotel on your precious CD player, so come and give me a slap, you bitch. I hope you're dead like Mama.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Wednesday, 2 January 2008

Radiohead – “Where I End and You Begin”

Jen, I’m so sorry about my last message. I didn’t mean any of it. I miss you. I broke the Tokio Hotel CD and threw it away. I drank Papa’s whiskey for the first time in my life last night, that’s why I got so angry with everything, not just you. I feel so helpless.

I love you, sestra. Please come back home.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Wednesday, 23 April 2008

The Libertines – “I Get Along”

You’re 22 today. Happy Birthday, sestra. Are you celebrating? I am—I bought a slice of carrot cake and a single red candle.

“I Get Along” by The Libs is playing on repeat. Guess which bit of the song I like the most? I think I’m starting to get what they mean when they say ‘fuck them’ in the chorus.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Thursday, 23 April 2009

My Chemical Romance – “Welcome to the Black Parade”

Hi Jen!

Happy Birthday!

I’ve got news: Papa’s getting remarried. Her name is Olga, she’s a hostess at Papa’s favourite restaurant. She’s really pretty. I think she’s a nice person but I hate her anyway.

I’ve been listening to My Chemical Romance a lot lately. I know you probably think they’re shitty emo—‘govno’ you’d say—but I don’t care. They make me feel like I belong somewhere, like I’m not alone. Nothing else helps.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Friday, 23 April 2010

Green Day – “Boulevard of Broken Dreams”

Hey Jen!

Happy Birthday, sestra!

More big news: our half brother was born last week. Everyone’s so excited. Makes me sick. But at least they’ve left me alone! Balloons, cards, flowers, wrapping paper—everything’s baby blue and smells like poop and talcum powder. So I dyed my hair black, got super drunk and puked all over the bathroom floor while Olga’s friends were having coffee in the living room. I can’t believe Papa has forgotten you and Mama that easily! It makes me feel so weak, so little, so worthless.

Papa tries to buy my love, it’s pathetic. But I love my new iPod. I’ve downloaded three Green Day albums. I can’t figure out if they’re fake or not but I think you might like them.

And by the way, don’t know if you’ve heard, Oasis broke up. It’s official now. Noel left the band, said he’d had enough.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Saturday, 23 April 2011

Placebo – “Song to Say Goodbye”

I can feel it so clearly now—you’re dead. I’ve heard it’s possible with close blood relatives, to just feel it when something’s not right. It probably happened that summer, four years ago. I think I even know the date: July 13, 2007. Someone took your life.

But the British Police seem to think differently. One time not so long ago Papa got shitfaced, v govno, and I tricked him into telling me all about the investigation. That’s how I learnt that your phone was activated for a brief moment after weeks of silence. On July 13, 2007 they caught your signal in Kent, somewhere near the Channel Tunnel. They think you ran away to Paris or Amsterdam. Maybe you were in some kind of trouble, or maybe you just felt like it. Their other theory is that you were kidnapped by aliens. Can you believe that? They just don’t care, Jen. And, frankly, neither does Papa. The police said you were in the high risk-group: young, foreign, no family nearby and dodgy friends. Like they knew something was bound to happen. It’s stories like yours that make it so hard to get a UK visa.

I often have this vision—you’re standing on the edge of the white cliffs of Dover, your arms spread in the wind and you’re shouting ‘fuck yeah’ at the top of your lungs, like a rock star to a

mad crowd. Beautiful, impossible you.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Friday, 13 July 2012

My Chemical Romance – “The Ghost of You”

It's five in the morning. I'm watching the sunrise from a roof top. The city is coming back from the dead. MCR is playing loudly in my earphones (so what?!), red and pink sunbeams are moving across my face. This is real. This is the here and now. This is my life now. I mean I'm drunk, but who cares! It doesn't make it less true.

Five years, Jen. I can't even picture your face anymore—it's just a blur, a beautiful blur. You've even stopped visiting me in my dreams.

I try not to think about you at all, it's easier that way. But sometimes little things like songs, smells, or words I overhear on a crowded subway train remind me of you. Or of Mama. And I shudder and feel this hot dark stinging sensation deep in my solar plexus. Then I close my eyes and let the memory take me away, to the kitchen in our old flat, where Mama played her stupid songs on her ancient cassette stereo and we danced together in the middle of the room, like fairies in the woods. But mostly I just pretend that you were never real, like you only lived in my head. I can't be a victim, Jen. I can't be the girl who lost her mother. The girl, whose sister is missing. That poor little thing. I can't fucking stand it when people make me feel like a victim. I want to smash their faces. I want to throw away your CDs. I want to forget. I want to be happy and normal and someone whole... not just someone you and Mama left behind.

Goodbye.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Sunday, 31 May 2015

3:56 AM

Jenia Lubich – “Russian Girl”

Hey,

I tried. I tried my hardest to pretend that everything was alright. And it was almost alright for a

while, but life has a cruel and funny way of reminding us of who we are and what we're truly worth.

Something bad happened to me, seestra. And it turns out that you, my long gone sister, are the only person I can share my pain with without the fear of being pitied and judged.

We weren't close, you and I. I was so jealous of you—of your hair, of your skin, of the way Mama treated you. I hated how I was always second best to her. I know you and her had secrets. And then something snapped, and suddenly she was your enemy and you were packing your clothes in a big black suitcase and booking a one-way flight to another country. No one could think of a reason why you shouldn't go. And so you went away, just like that. At first I was glad, but then I realized how much I missed you. Everything grew dull and quiet without you, only to light up and come alive again when you'd visit us for a week twice a year.

Most of my memories of you have become vague and blurry, as if I'm watching them from a train window, catching only small glimpses in between passing tree trunks.

I was thirteen. Easter break was nearly over and Papa was taking you to the airport. I wasn't allowed to come along, so I was watching you put your battered suitcase in the boot of Papa's car from my bedroom window. You were about to get into the front seat when suddenly, you turned around as if you'd felt my gaze, and waved goodbye. Some people go like Mama —after a long agonizing farewell, with nothing left to say. With you it was completely different. One minute you were right there, standing in front of me and then, in the blink of an eye, you were gone. No goodbyes, no nothing.

I remember one shopping trip. You, me and Mama at the mall. Mama bought me my first ever latte. I got so hyper—you two were laughing your heads off. Then we went to that hippie store and Mama got you the blue dress, the one you wore on the day you disappeared. If only I'd known back then that would be the last time we'd be together like that, just the three of us. It was the last time someone took me shopping too. Both of you were gone within months. After that no one really cared about how I dressed, as long as my arse was covered and I didn't smell too bad. Papa just gave me money whenever I asked him for it. He still does. I discovered, perhaps too early for my own good, that Papa would do anything I asked just to stop me from embarrassing him in front of his and Olga's friends. And so I would keep up a respectable bourgeois façade of our wreckage of a family.

For years, the only two things I allowed myself to feel were hatred and anger. I cursed, I drank, I let random boys touch me. I listened to music a lot.

Your CDs transformed me. Music gave me the strength I needed to live through it all. Music had the ability to give everything around me an inexplicable painful depth, a double meaning, a purpose. I guess I was a typical emo girl—angry, emotional and obsessive. I still find it hard to

trust people if I don't know the contents of their iPods. (Did you know that there's always a big difference between what people say they listen to or which band's logo is on their shirt and what they really put on at 5:00 AM when they're wasted and alone, after another disaster of a Friday night? I always want to know the latter, because it's the raw exposed truth.)

I continued to rebel against people who made me feel small and insecure. It was great fun at the time but then, a couple of years ago, I finally decided to get a grip. I chopped off my raven black hair in front of my bathroom mirror, hired a tutor to help me catch up on my school work, and stopped listening to your music. Life can be easy and almost fun if you keep busy and don't overthink things.

When I told him I wanted to take a gap year and see the world, Papa rolled his eyes. But what choice did he have? He didn't want me around, I knew that. He wanted to enjoy his new family. I ended up in London—I'm still here, actually. I thought Papa would be furious and demand that I come home at once, but he just told me to be careful and not get into any trouble. Then he transferred the money I needed. It wasn't cheap to keep me away. That's how little he cares, Jenia.

But let's get one thing straight, I didn't come here because of you. I didn't even think about you all that much until recently. I just wanted something new. England seemed cool. Why the hell not? Especially if I was brainy enough to get into a decent university with a nice scholarship. Papa was willing to pay the rest. Whatever made me happy and kept me away from that perfect new life of his.

London is a strange place. For one thing, it's full of Russians—they're literally everywhere. There are Russian magazines, dentists, gynaecologists, schools, shops, kindergartens and god knows what else. And they're friendly—I mean *really* friendly. They're always inviting me to parties and gigs and art shows and put these sympathetic smiles on their faces every time they ask me how life was back in Russia. Fake fake fake.

But at school everyone hated me because they knew Papa was a Noviy Russkiy—that's what they call people who got rich after the iron curtain fell. Even if they made their money the old-fashion, boring way by working, like Papa did, and not by being involved with the mafia. People didn't care. When they were done disliking me for my family's money, they were sorry for my loss. Oh sestra, how I wanted to kick them in the teeth for treating me like a sad little girl who needed their help. I didn't need anyone's help, I was perfectly capable of taking care of myself. So yeah, these British Russians act like they're in a cult — they try to charm you and get you to sign off everything you own.

London's full of people from former soviet countries. They speak Russian or, at least, understand it. I know this because of the spiteful looks they give me whenever they hear me

speak. As if it's my fault that they were robbed of their sovereignty by an egotistical dictator seventy odd years ago. (I'm rolling my eyes).

So I prefer to *avoid* mentioning that I'm Russian whenever possible. There are just too many prejudices. Although, as you know, it's impossible to hide who you are from the Brits—unless you lie to their faces. The thing is, whenever they hear an accent they feel like they have to ask where you're from, especially when it's a weird one like mine. I got mine from all the songs that I listened to because of you, from all your indie gods. And, of course, there were also numerous English language tutors—a girl from Bristol, an Australian, two American students as well—one from New York, and the other from Georgia. The guys mainly come to Russia to get laid. And the girls because they watch too much *War and Peace* with Kiera Knightley. Of all the people I've met, I like Brits best. They really and truly don't give a crap about you and they never pretend that they do. I appreciate their honesty.

I'm the same age now as you were when you disappeared: 21. Maybe what happened to me is a family curse. Hell if I know. Mama had you when she was 21. Maybe it's a significant age in our family, I don't know.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Sunday, 31 May 2015

4:41 AM

Nirvana – “Rape Me”

Sorry, I pressed send by accident.

Anyway, where was I? Oh yeah. It happened in March, on the last day of Uni. Everyone was leaving for Easter the next morning. I was actually looking forward to having the campus library all to myself—the yellow spring sunlight in the dusty halls, the echo of my footsteps, the smell of ozone and the crackly melody of the copy machines.

I'm not too big on student union bars, they're quite pathetic, but that day I let the girls from my Marketing Analysis class to talk me into coming along. Inside, it was crowded and stank of cheap shots. I ordered the weakest cocktail on the menu and stood by the bar, singing along to “Love Spreads” by The Stone Roses that was playing loudly. The girls were bitching about the head of faculty who just got divorced. A typical night, really. Then my phone rang and I went outside to answer it. It was 8:00 PM. I was only outside for a couple of minutes. Last thing I remember was taking a sip of my drink. After that the world went pitch black.

When I opened my eyes I was back in my dorm room, the curtains drawn tightly. It was dead

quiet, no kitchen noises, no laughter, no swearing or music. I reached out to grab my phone, but it wasn't in its usual place on the nightstand. I felt around for it and realized the nightstand was gone too. I sat up and looked around. All my stuff was gone. I lifted the corner of the curtain and looked outside. The sun was shining down on an empty parking lot. I realized this wasn't my room after all, but an identical one in the other wing of the building—the one by the union bar. For a couple of minutes I just stared out of the window, my mind completely blank. I got out of bed and studied myself in the mirror. My clothes were a mess: my hoodie was inside out and the long zipper on the side of the dress I was wearing was half way undone. My leggings and handbag were in a pile on the floor by the bed. I rubbed my face, then picked my stuff off the floor and quietly stepped outside. The hall was empty and quiet. I felt like I was in a zombie apocalypse movie—you know that first sequence when the protagonist wakes up from a coma to discover that the world's not the same anymore? And to me, the world will never be the same again.

My whole body was shaking, my mouth dry, my throat sore with thirst. I stumbled into the empty kitchen, opened the tap and drank until my stomach swelled up and I couldn't swallow anymore. Everything felt surreal. I walked home through the deserted campus, my footsteps echoing. The air was thick and gooey, the light dim and greenish blue, like deep sea water. When I finally got back to my room, I locked the door, undressed and walked up to the mirror—it was identical to the one in the room where I'd woken up. There weren't any bruises or scratches on me, but an unfamiliar smell lingered on my skin, sweet, faint and disgusting.

I stepped into the shower and slowly turned the tap until the water was boiling hot. The tiny bathroom filled with steam. I curled into a ball in the centre of the shower basin and stayed like that for a long long time, till the shaking stopped and the smell was gone.

It was noon, so I'd lost about sixteen hours. I'd heard about these things many times before—campus security had warned us and there was even a leaflet pinned to the fridge door in the dorm kitchen—never leave your drink unattended. It was so obvious but I couldn't bring myself to say the actual words out loud.

I lost sixteen hours of my life. I lost control of my body and self for sixteen hours. Someone took advantage of me. The thought made me so livid I wanted to smash things.

My phone was quiet—no alerts, missed calls or texts. I hadn't called anyone either. I got into bed and pulled the covers over my head. I reached for my laptop and found an old playlist I'd made on Spotify. Your music still has the ability to calm me down.

Two weeks passed. The halls of my residence hall were slowly coming back to life, but I stayed locked in my room most of the time. No one looked for me, no calls or texts, no questions or answers. As far as everyone was concerned, that night never happened. But it fucking did, Jenia.

On the first day of Uni I sublet a room from an American girl called Laura who I knew from one of my classes. I couldn't stay on campus a day longer. The sight of the building made me sick with rage and despair.

I try not to think about that night. But it kind of doesn't work like that. The more I try to forget, the more it's there, in my head and under my skin. It's like the horror version of Cinderella—someone puts a spell on you and you become an object, powerless and weak. You become someone's victim. But I'm no victim, Jenia. I'm anything but a victim. I'm strong, I own my own life. I'd rather be a villain than a victim.

I don't know if I'd actually been physically raped. I googled what to look for, but it was hard to tell. At least it was nothing violent. Or maybe I just didn't fight hard enough, I don't know. I prefer to never know. I went to Boots the next day and got the morning after pill. A Punjabi pharmacist gave me a long sympathetic look as he was taking down my details. Then, after a couple of weeks, I went to the clinic. I was clean. No point in thinking about it anymore. I don't want to know what they did to me. I'm bigger than this.

I looked up the name of the occupant of the room that I'd woken up in. But with all the evidence destroyed by the hot water and time, there was nothing that could've been done about it. I needed to forget the whole thing. All I'd get would be pity and slut shaming. Forgetting the whole thing was the only cure.

But I'm crap at forgetting things.

I went missing for sixteen hours and not a single person took notice, let alone got worried or called the police. No one cared enough about me to notice I was not okay. When I casually asked the girls I went out with how their night was, they said it was quite good and it was silly of me to leave so early without even saying goodbye.

When I went back to the union bar in the daylight, I noticed CCTV cameras. They were everywhere—one by the entrance, two above the bar, a couple by the DJ booth and above the dance floor. If something bad, I mean really *really* bad had happened to me, the police would've watched the footage and found the person who had drugged me. Just like they watched the footage from the bus stop in Notown where you were seen for the last time minutes before you disappeared on that June day eight years ago. I keep misspelling the word 'disappeared' for some reason... maybe it's a sign.

This thing that happened to me triggered something in my brain. I can't change what happened to me. But I can find out what happened to you and stop being the missing girl's little sister. I'm strong and resourceful and I know I can do it. I can find the truth.

It could've happened to anyone. A bar, a stranger with a bottle of pills, friends who don't give a fuck. I lost sixteen hours. You lost eight years. Sixteen hours is enough time to transport

someone very far away. I've heard that it takes around three to five hours to get a person out of the country. Another twelve to get them pretty much anywhere in Europe. I could've woken up in a tiny apartment in a council high-rise lost in the suburbs of a big city. In a dog cage. And be rented per hour to respectable looking strangers. Cash only. Then, after a couple of weeks of abuse and starvation, I would just break. Pretty much anyone would break. Or die.

I keep going over the timeline of your disappearance—I've written down what little information I know. You left your house with a small backpack at approximately 7:50 AM on June 23 you walked towards the bus stop in the town centre, you vanished from the camera at 8:15. Your phone died around that time too. And then, on July 13 you turned your phone on again in Kent, by the white cliffs of Dover. Were you trying to call for help, Jenia?

I came up with a couple of theories on what could've happened to you, sestra.

My first is that you were kidnapped by human traffickers. It says on Wikipedia that the estimated turnaround of this business is over thirty billion dollars per year. That's pretty lucrative. I've read stories of people who've escaped slavery. If I'm right, someone lured you by promising you something you wanted badly and then snatched you. If it's true, you're probably dead by now. But that doesn't change anything, not to me.

Fuck, Jenia, how I wish Papa was 'krutoy', a tough guy, like Liam bloody Neeson. Have you ever seen *Taken*? I think I've watched it way too many times. Why hadn't he come looking for you? Why hadn't Papa ever loved you, Jenia?

I came up with the second theory one sleepless night when I was watching another episode of a bad true crime show on ITV4. Ever since the day you were gone I've been addicted to true crime. All those faded newspaper clippings, smiling yearbook photos of missing children, bodies outlined in white on blood stained floors, police lineups and smiling black dahlias. I studied the stories told by moustache-clad police officers wearing leather jackets for hours. Most murderers got caught because of an odd out-of-place detail, or on a mere hunch.

And then I saw her face. She was the newest addition to Britain's 'top unsolved murders' list. The recent discovery had made headlines: 'Dead Girl Found in the Basement of a Demolished Victorian Building'. They had no idea who she was and how long she'd been dead. Layers of thick acrylic carpet protected her body from oxygen and moisture, so it could've happened any time between the mid-seventies and the early two-thousands. Pathologists couldn't reach a verdict. The only thing they were certain about was the cause of death—a blow to the temple with a blunt, heavy object. She was found naked. Her belongings—a blue pinafore dress, an empty handbag, and a single high heeled shoe—were laying beside her. She was discovered by a construction worker. Maybe one day you'll be found too, by a guy like that. A beautiful broken

sculpture embedded in concrete, like a frozen Han Solo. Raped and killed.

To this day, the police don't know her name. No one claimed her body, even though the forensic scientists did a reconstruction of her face. She looked nothing like you, but you could've been her, sestra. Maybe you just pissed someone off. Maybe, unlike me, you fought too hard. Maybe you're waiting for me in a basement wrapped in an orange and purple carpet from someone's old Ford Contour. I'll come for you.

Someone out there knows exactly what happened. I'll find them and I'll make them talk. I promise you, Jenia. I owe it to Mama.

I keep thinking about the last time you came home. Something was wrong. You weren't quite yourself. Perhaps you knew something, a poisonous secret, that was casting a dark shadow over our last days together. Whatever it was, you never shared it. But you must've left something behind—something tiny and significant that only someone who truly loves you would notice. And that someone is me. I'll notice.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Saturday, 20 June 2015

11:49 PM

Joy Division – “Shadow Play”

Hey!

I feel strangely relived now that I've shared everything with you. Well, not with you exactly, but with your profile photo that I see here on Facebook messenger.

Remember how I said that you must've left something behind, anything, a clue insignificant to everyone but me? Like a secret code. Well, if we did have a code, something true and solid that we shared, it would be music.

You mentioned in one of your last messages that you were going to see The Killers at a music festival and that Bilo and Biggles would be there too. All these years I thought that Bilo and Biggles were just nicknames of some people you hung out with. I honestly haven't got a clue why I hadn't done this before: I googled them. Billy Bilo and Biggles are the nicknames of Peter Doherty and Carl Barat from The Libertines. So now it was easy to find out which festival you were going to. Since The Libertines had already split up, it had to be Doherty and Barat's two new bands: Babyshambles and Dirty Pretty Things. I crossed checked their tour dates for 2007, then looked for festivals that also featured The Killers. Only one UK event fit the bill:

Glastonbury Festival of contemporary performing arts. I looked up the dates for Glasto'07. It was

the weekend you disappeared. It all fit perfectly—you left Notown on a Friday morning in time to get there for the bands.

Not sure whether it was just luck or a trail of breadcrumbs that you'd consciously left behind. Either way, it looks like those people who say that if you want something badly enough the universe will always find a way to help, are not total lunatics after all. After three more weeks of searching the web and watching hours and hours of videos, I finally found a trace of you. When it happened I was in my bedroom wrapped in a blanket like a giant burrito, watching YouTube and drinking tea. If you put Glastonbury 2007 in the YouTube search bar, it comes up with over half a million results. Many of those videos aren't related to the subject at all, some of them have the wrong date, some of them are three hours long. I was willing to watch them all, sestra, if it would help me find out the truth.

I was watching footage of The Killers' set and imagining how you and I would've gone to see them together, as you'd promised me once. I was indulging in dark, nostalgic thoughts, my eyes were sore and I wasn't really paying attention to what was happening on the screen. I was half dreaming, half reminiscing. My tea had gone cold.

The video ended and the next one started playing automatically. It was a behind the scenes interview with The Killers. They were standing on a muddy lawn surrounded by people, a long green fence behind them. Brandon Flowers had a weird moustache that made him look like a pervert. He was wearing a gold sequin jacket and smiling into the camera in his charming, childish manner.

And then I saw you.

I jumped up, dropping my mug. It rolled across the blanket leaving a dark brown stain.

I paused the video. Brandon's flawless face froze in a demonic smirk mid sentence. A skinny barefoot girl in a blue dress with a crown of daisies in her hair was standing behind him, about thirty feet away. It was you, Jenia. I pressed play. You smiled and waved as you noticed the camera, then walked away, waving and shouting something inaudible to someone in the distance. The video ended.

Glastonbury Festival of contemporary performing arts is one of the largest, oldest and coolest music open airs in the world. In 2007 it was attended by 175 thousand people. I scrolled through the picture search results for Glasto'07—boys and girls in hippy clothes, laughing, dancing, kissing and smoking weed around the giant, spaceship-like Pyramid Stage in the middle of a dairy farm. Various artists performing: Bjork, Arctic Monkeys, some important looking old dudes, Amy Winehouse. Did you know that she died and Pete Doherty wrote the most amazing song about her? Sorry that was irrelevant, but I just thought you might want to know.

There was one thing that all the photos from Glasto had in common—mud. Thick brown mud

covered everyone's faces, clothes, shoes, instruments—pretty much everything. What a perfect disguise.

So you were there, Jenia. I watched the video hundreds of times trying to find something that might lead me to the next clue. Who were you there with, sestra? There was someone, there had to be. I asked you again and again out loud every time your face appeared on the screen. But you wouldn't reply to me, you just smiled, waved and shook your flower-crowned head.

I emailed the festival enquiries helpline to check if you had registered for Glasto. I knew that 2007 was the year they'd launched the new registration system, which means they had the details of all ticket holders on record. If you had gotten a pass, they would know. Within an hour or so I got a short and very polite reply. They assured me that neither one of your two email addresses (that I knew) had ever been used for registration. Same thing about your name, all five variations that I'd given them, including Mama's maiden name. You weren't there. But I knew that you were. Someone must have helped you sneak in. Who was it, sestra?

I went into the kitchen to put the tea stained bed covers into the washing machine, although I was pretty sure they were ruined. The light was on, my flatmate was in. We weren't exactly friends, but not because I disliked her. It's just I kind of lost faith in the whole idea of friendship after that episode at the union bar. Who needs enemies when you have friends like that. I'm sure you get it.

'Nika, didn't know you were in. How's tricks?' Laura smiled, but didn't take her eyes off her laptop.

'Not bad. Yourself?' I smiled back. 'You've been to Glastonbury before, haven't you?'

'Yeah, I have.' Now that I'd mentioned something that truly interested her, she gave me a curious look. 'Last year. And I'm going this year as well. Why?'

'No reason. Just wanted to know what it's like. Is it... dangerous?'

She pushed her laptop aside.

'Hmm... Dangerous?' She frowned. 'Well, you shouldn't go by yourself, if that's why you're asking. You see, there's so many people there, some of them are bound to be jerks. It's a statistically proven fact. And everyone's off their face. But it's not dangerous. It's just different from any other festival that I've been to. It's full of hippies. And the atmosphere is quite whimsical, it's like everyone pretends it's 1969 forever. It's definitely way better than Coachella. The lineup is usually really good. Only the best bands get to play.'

Laura narrowed her eyes, waiting for an explanation. My sudden interest in the subject must have raised questions.

I love music. In fact, I couldn't have survived without it. You were so right when you said it

would be the only friend who'd never let me down. Music makes me feel alive, sometimes too alive for my own comfort. It makes me lose my head, it brings out all the stuff that I try to block, it makes it impossible for me to pretend to be this happy bubbly whatever person that I want others to think I am. It makes me vulnerable. When I go to a gig, I always get this feeling, you know, like when a boy goes down on you and your body starts to bend involuntarily and you feel this scary energy building up inside. Like an exorcism. I just want it to stop, because it makes me lose control, Jenia. This is what live music does to me—I just stop being myself, or, the self that I've chosen to be. So I rarely go to gigs.

Music is a form of art, it's not a cult. You can love it without having to submit to it. When I do go to a gig, I'm one of those people who hang out by the bar, Instagram a lot and never sing along. I just can't allow it get under my skin, like I used to when I was young. Rock music makes you feel real pain and real joy. And, just like crying or having sex, it's too much of a private thing to indulge in publicly. I just don't enjoy it that way.

Laura used to invite me to gigs, but I always turned her down. No wonder she was so surprised now that I asked her about Glasto.

'So why do you want to know?'

I wanted to tell her about you. Just as much as I wanted to tell lots of people before her, but it's so hard to talk about. I have issues with people pitying me. It makes me feel small and helpless and also really exposed. I know sharing helps get through things, but I really struggle with it and often end up lying by omission. My dark side belongs to me and me only. I don't let other people see it. No one needs to know that I wake up 4:00 AM every morning, paralyzed with fear or that I could swear that sometimes something stares at me from dark corners and alleyways. No one needs to know how I trick myself into falling asleep every single night and how I hide an old CD player under the pillow as if it were a silver crucifix soaked in holy water. I'd like other people to see me as a strong, happy and light-hearted person who doesn't have secrets. But to hell with my feelings, I was on a mission and I needed to talk to someone who had been to Glasto.

'May I?' I leaned over Laura's laptop. She nodded. I opened YouTube, typed in the name of the video and pressed play. I paused it a couple of minutes later.

I pointed at the screen, leaving a sweaty fingerprint on the brand new retinal display.

'That's my sister, Jenia.'

'I thought that was Brandon Flowers.'

I gave her a sharp look. Laura smiled apologetically.

'That's so cool. Your sister's hanging out with rock stars. Awesome! And that's Glasto! What year is it?'

‘2007,’ I swallowed loudly, getting ready to say what I’ve never said out loud before. ‘She’s gone.’

‘Gone?’ Laura’s mouth turned into a sad emoji. ‘Gone as in... dead?’

‘I don’t know. She went missing in 2007. On that particular day, actually.’

‘Oh jeez!’ Laura covered her mouth with the palm of her hand. ‘Shit, honey, that’s awful. I’m so sorry. How... what happened?’

Maybe it was because I spent so much time hiding from the world, or maybe all I needed this whole time was a friend, but once she asked me, I couldn’t stop talking. I just talked and talked, without even looking at her. At one point I felt my eyes welling up in tears.

‘The girl in blue is my sister Jen. Well, her actual Russian name is Jenia, but she likes people to call her Jen. She’s eight years older than me. I was only eleven when she left home and moved to England to study literature. But really, I think her decision had a lot to do with her passion for rock music. She used to come back home to visit us, and we chatted on Facebook, but then it all just stopped. She went missing. We weren’t even sure exactly what day it happened, because we were on this boat trip. The reception was really bad, we were on a tiny island in the Mediterranean. When we got back home and Mama rang Jen, her phone was switched off. Mama phoned her Uni, then the police. She was nowhere to be found. Then they sent us some CCTV footage. She was at a bus stop with a backpack in the early hours on a Friday morning. And then she disappeared. We had no idea where she went or what happened next... until this video.’

I pressed play again. Brandon talked, you smiled.

‘My goodness, that’s terrible. I... I’m so sorry, Nika.’ Laura patted my shoulder. ‘What did the police say?’

‘Nothing much,’ I was staring out of the kitchen window, watching the blinking light on top of the British Telecom tower in the distance. ‘Just one thing, really. Her phone was briefly switched on again one last time in mid July in Kent. So they assumed she took a ferry to France, or somewhere else in western Europe. Or she was put on a ferry. Well, they didn’t really say that out loud, but I knew it’s what they meant.’ I gave her a meaningful look. ‘Human trafficking.’ ‘Sweetie, that is so fucked up,’ Laura looked stunned. ‘But surely she could’ve just gotten on a ferry or a train by herself and... run off?’

‘Well, it’s not that simple. You see, her passport would’ve been stamped and there would be some sort of record of her crossing the UK border. We’re Russian, which means we aren’t free to travel wherever we please, like you guys. We need visas and have to wait in that line at the airport designated for people from “All Other Nations”.’

‘Have they ever found her passport?’

‘Nope. No passport, no purse, no cash or cards. That was enough for the police to decide that it

wasn't worth pursuing. A young girl from a third-world country without a job, property or a husband is as high of a risk as they come. I'm probably high-risk too. Just another reason to make UK visa requirements even more strict. People like us are just statistics to them.'

Laura put her arm around my shoulder, an uncomfortable half hug. I pressed play again and we watched you wave and smile and walk away.

'Were you guys close? It must've been so hard for you.'

'Close? Kind of, but not really. I think we would've grown really close once I got a bit older. But... I guess it just wasn't meant to be, you know. I remember I was always a bit jealous of her and wanted to be her, because she was just so cool.'

Laura was still hugging me and I felt a sudden urge to break free from her sympathy, so I reached for the half eaten packet of crisps on the other side of her laptop.

'I know that she went to Glasto on June 22 and was still alive the next day, because this was filmed on the 23. This is very important. She was there, but she never bought a ticket. Is it difficult to sneak in?'

Laura chuckled.

'Difficult? More like impossible!'

'That makes it even weirder then,' I sighed.

'Are you going to show it to the cops?'

Laura put the kettle on and took two cups out of the cupboard. I munched on her Salt and Vinegar crisps.

'I don't know. They didn't do much eight years ago. What difference would it make now?'

Laura put a cup of steaming herbal tea in front of me and put on some music. It was a dreamy instrumental melody that I didn't recognize.

'So what are you going to do about it?'

I shrugged. I really hadn't had a chance to think about it yet.

'Do you think it's possible for a person to be alive after being missing for eight years?'

As if her opinion would really mean something. Laura looked away. I was stirring sugar into my tea. The song ended.

'I really don't know.'

'Of course...'

'But I know what you should do now, Nika,' her face suddenly lit up. 'Post something on Facebook. This video, a couple of her photos, everything you just told me. Add some hashtags, like Glasto and The Killers, and some other stuff that's important. Just put everything together, make it short, informative and touching. And maybe, just maybe, when people start sharing it someone will see it and it will trigger their memory. Anyway, that's what I would do.'

‘You recon? It was such a long time ago,’ I stood up and went to put on another tune. The silence was doing my head in. ‘I mean, who remembers what was going on eight years ago?’ I pressed a button and waited for a second. I let the god of shuffle decide what would happen next. A beautiful broken voice filled the kitchen air. It was “Shadowplay” by Joy Division. ‘Well, you definitely do. If I were you I wouldn’t stop, I wouldn’t rest until I knew the truth or, at least, knew that I’d done everything in my power to find her.’

I looked outside again, the streetlight tinted everything orange, the exact shade of the Instagram filter Kelvin. I have this love-hate relationship with the dark, sometimes I crave it, sometimes I run away from it.

‘Nika?’ Laura’s voice sounded like it was coming from a great distance. The song had ended, a new one started. It was loud guitar post rock that Laura played a lot—too loud for the mood I was in, and the name was too fancy, three words one of which was ‘red’. I blocked out the sound, deep in thought. I must have been standing by the window for ages.

‘Are you alright?’ I heard Laura’s voice behind my back.

‘I’m OK. I’m just going to go to my room for a bit now.’

I logged onto Facebook and found your profile. It was a typical abandoned page—full of spam and lame Birthday messages. I could never bring myself to turn it into a memorial. I browsed through your stuff. There wasn’t much and I’d seen it all a thousand times before. You belonged to that dark pre-iPhone era—back in the day, you guys didn’t document everything you saw and did like we do now. I picked a picture of you I liked best. It was the last one that you had uploaded. It was taken on a sunny day, you were in someone’s backyard, there was a house in the background. Your hair was hanging to one side, you looked so cute and so 2007. You were covering your eyes from the sun and smiling, the cigarette between your fingers was burnt to the filter.

I added it to my post, along with a link to the video. It read: ‘Hi everyone! I need your help. My sister Jenia (Jen) Lukina went missing in the summer of 2007. I’ve just found out that she was last seen at Glastonbury Festival on 23 June 2007. She was wearing a pale blue sundress and a crown of daisies in her hair. If you knew her or have seen her, please contact me. If you haven’t but still wish to help please share this post with your friends. Together we can find my sister. Thank you.’

I pressed the post button before giving myself a chance to change my mind. For the first time in months I didn’t cover my head with a blanket. Not because it was too hot, but because I kind of wanted the monsters under my bed to come out.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Sunday, 21 June 2015

5:31 PM

Radiohead – “How to Disappear Completely”

Privet sestra!

I’m writing this on a train, I guess it means I’ve passed the point of no return. The view is plain and dull: outer boroughs, ugly council houses, grey multi-storied parking lots, the far away ghostly shadow of Wembley stadium. Even the sunlight isn’t making it look any better. Maybe England isn’t that nice, after all. So I put on my headphones, find the right soundtrack for the scenery and press play.

I think it’s quite a good idea to write down everything I’m about to do on Facebook. If something happens to me, this will be found and used as evidence. What an optimistic thought, that’s a promising start for my journey! Another good thing about writing to you is that it definitely has a certain therapeutic effect. I mean, look at me, leaving the house and actually going somewhere besides Uni or Tesco’s for the first time in months. Or maybe I’m just desperately trying to find an excuse for the fact that I’m talking to a dead person.

You probably want to know why I got on this train and where I’m heading off to because, as you’ve probably guessed by now, it’s related to the investigation. Did I really just call my little project an investigation?! Does it make me a detective? Ha!

This morning I woke up with a start and sat up in bed. My head was heavy—as if I’d been drinking the night before, which I hadn’t been. I reached for my phone. It was noon. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept that late. I’ve always had trouble sleeping—I get six hours tops, even on weekends. As any social media addict would do, I checked my Facebook first thing. My post from last night had gotten a phenomenal amount of attention, especially for something posted on a Saturday night. Likes, shares, comments—*wow*, I thought, *I’m bloody popular!* And then it struck me. The vast majority of the 367 people who were my friends on Facebook had no idea that you ever existed, let alone that you’d gone missing. Even my Russian friends and people I went to school with had no idea. And now twenty per cent of my friends reacted to my post. It was pretty impressive. I don’t think I’ve ever had that many notifications before. There were so many that I almost missed the single most important one. It was a friend request from a woman called Hannah Bellamy. You weren’t on her friends list but she lived in Notown. I accepted and went to the kitchen to grab a coffee.

After saying good morning to Laura I told her about the post and all the attention it was getting. ‘Yeah, I saw it and shared it. I think Glasto’s official page shared it too. That’s pretty

impressive,’ she said while pouring some hot milk into her freshly brewed Nespresso. ‘Actually, Nika, this would make such a great topic for your dissertation.’

We talked about our dissertations all the time, in fact, it was something that really brought us together—the fact that we both cared about it without being obsessively geeky and that we looked forward to writing it. I was concerned about the super high entering requirements for the MA programmes that I wanted to get into. The competition to get in would be quite tough, so I would really need to put my heart into it if I didn’t want to end up at a mediocre school.

‘How is it related to my dissertation?’ I asked Laura, who was chewing on a lock of her bleached blond hair, deep in thought.

‘Finding a missing person using the power of social media. Just think about it for a moment. You could share the progress and the results on Facebook and analyse the speed and scale of the virality of your original post and all further updates. They could even offer you an internship or something.’

‘“They” meaning Facebook? Yeah, right!’ I chuckled. ‘Zuck himself is going to Facetime me and ask me to join the team.’

‘Don’t underestimate the power you have in your hands, Nika. You can turn the world upside down using social media. People don’t even realize how much information is out there. Even if you find nothing, it’d still look good on your application.’

‘That’s the last thing that I’m thinking about right now,’ I said. But she was right.

‘I’m sure you’ll find... something. It was on the news the other day, this American girl who found her identical twin in South Korea on YouTube. They were separated at birth or something. So it’s a trend—finding missing sisters online!’ Laura giggled. ‘Sorry if I sound shallow, I honestly didn’t mean to,’ she said, noticing the look on my face. ‘I’m just trying to cheer you up. Think of it as your course project.’

‘Only I study marketing, not criminology,’ I smirked and went back to my bedroom.

As usual, first thing I did was check my phone. A message from Hannah was waiting for me:

‘Hello there, thanks for adding. How’s things? I’m Hannah, Jen was my best friend. I’d be happy to talk if you like. x’

My iPhone almost slipped from my sweaty fingers as I rushed to type back:

‘Hi, Hannah. Thanks for reaching out. I’d like that very much. Did you know Jen went to Glasto? Could you please tell me everything you know?’

‘Sure, no probs.’

‘Can we talk today?’

‘Today? Let me see.’

There was a pause. *Please please please say yes*, I thought. Then three grey dots appeared on the

screen of my phone, indicating that she was typing something.

‘Please.’ I hastily added.

Another pause, then, finally, a message:

‘OK, I’ll go look for her stuff now.’

‘Her stuff?’

‘Yeah, no one ever came to collect it back then. I should have it somewhere.’

‘So you want to meet in person?’

‘Well, yes. That a problem?’

‘No, not at all.’

‘Good then. You in London?’

‘Yes.’

‘Take any Nottingham train from Euston. They all stop here. It’s an hour ride.’

‘Ah OK. Sure.’

‘Notown.’

‘I know.’

I agreed before she gave me a chance to think it over. A trip to a godforsaken town in the middle of nowhere, on my own, to meet a perfect stranger claiming to be your BFF. It’s like jumping into cold water—you either do it without thinking or you never do it at all.

‘When do you recon you’ll be here?’

‘Is 5:00 PM a good time?’

‘Yeh. I’ll see you in a bit then. x’

‘Thanks Hannah.’

She inboxed me her phone number and went offline.

I booked my ticket, a window seat, and opened her profile. It didn’t say her year of birth, but I guessed she was a little over thirty. Her hair was bleached professionally to that expensive, cold shade of blond, her face was puffy, her pale grey eyes had a nervous look in them. She had one of those typical British faces, resembling a frightened rodent. She had a baby girl, around five years old, with a cute pointy face and ginger hair.

I scrolled down her page, Facebook’s equivalent of a geologic time scale, going all the way back to 2007. My heart skipped a beat. There you were, in photos that I’d never seen before, happy, drunk and alive.

The album was called “Halloween at The Queen’06”. Your last Halloween. You looked fly dressed up as Ziggy Stardust. A great wide smile. Another album was called “NYE’07”. It contained typical overexposed party photos of the pre-hipster era. In one photo you’re sat on the lap of a long-haired, bare-chested boy with a rose tattooed on his ribcage. Your lips are touching

his in something resembling a bite rather than a kiss. The room is dark, but I can see Hannah in the background having a beer with tall guy in a trilby whose face was turned away from the camera. Great big glittery letters behind your backs say “Happy New Year 2007”. There was another one, a group photo. You’re wearing a flowery chemise dress, your long hair straightened flat. A glassy-eyed bald man with a goatee has his arm around your waist. He looks a bit like Merlin the wizard from that book we had as kids. Who was he? You seem carefree and happy, you’re laughing your head off, sipping bubbly with your eyes rolled back.

There was another album: “Phone”. A bunch of blurred images. I found one of you dancing with a cigarette in your hand. The only visible thing in the background is a giant sign above the stage that says ‘shambles’. You’re looking somewhere up above you, lids half closed, smoke coming out of your mouth. I closed my eyes and imagined being there with you. I could almost taste your cigarette and hear the rough guitar chords. I just wish I could see the world through your eyes, Jenia, even for one second. What a magical place it must have been for you.

I threw some clothes on, took my backpack and went into the living room. Laura was watching TV and typing something on her laptop. She looked up with an expression of slight surprise—it wasn’t very often that I left the flat on weekends.

‘Where are you off to?’

‘Notown.’

‘Where’s that?’ she frowned.

‘It’s the town where my sister lived. It’s in the middle of nowhere, really, the name kind of speaks for itself.’

‘So you got a reply?’ her eyes widened.

‘Yes. I got a message from Jenia’s friend. She saw my post and offered her help.’

Laura’s face lit up with excitement. For a second there I thought she was going to jump from the chair and drop her laptop on the floor, but she just gasped and clapped her hands with pure joy.

‘Oh wow, so it worked!’

‘I guess so,’ I shrugged. I really didn’t want to raise my hopes up too much at that point, so I needed to get away from Laura and her positive attitude as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, her smile faded a little, as she added:

‘You know, posting something is like throwing a stone into a pond—you send out this ripple into the universe. Who knows who else it might reach and what else could be uncovered. But it’s definitely out there now and it can’t be... undone.’ She noticed the anxiety in my eyes and stopped talking. ‘Do you want me to come with you? How far away is it?’

I shook my head.

‘Thanks Laura, that’s really nice of you, but there’s no need. I’ll be fine. I’m only going to be

gone for a few hours and besides, judging by the Google street view, it's not the most exciting place to spend your Sunday.'

'Oh really? I think I know what you mean. I've been to Leicester. It's a small industrial town populated by Gallagher brothers lookalikes: rude boys in polo shirts and tight jeans. I wanna come!' She stood up, her laptop finally falling off her lap, landing on the carpet with a quiet thud. 'Notown... it rings a bell, for sure. I heard the name just the other day, I think someone famous was born there or something.'

It probably would've been a good idea to take her with me, considering that I was dead scared to go on my own. But the truth is, I didn't want her to come. I wanted to go alone, I needed to go alone, in fact.

'No, really, Laura, don't worry. I'll get you a fridge magnet,' I hugged her goodbye.

'Get me one with a picture of some tough indie rocker boys, hungry for fame and fortune!' She giggled. 'One that'd look authentic on the pictures from the Rough Trade photo booth! I'm so sick of hipster dorks!'

'I will, Laura, right after I take that call from Zuck.' I shut the door behind me and walked to the nearest tube station to take me to Euston.

Euston station resembled an enormous fish tank filled with cold recycled air. I cheered myself up with a tall caramel latte, trying not to think of how afraid I really was.

Did you know that, statistically, railway stations are among the top five places where missing people are seen last? Just in case, I walked past a bunch of security cameras, staring them straight into their blinking red eye. Some people use Swarm, but lately I prefer security cameras if I want to check in somewhere.

I curled up in my second class seat, looked out of the window and took a sip of my latte. I've never been anywhere up North. Of course I went on day trips to Oxford and Cambridge, but surely that didn't count. The train made a little twitch, then began moving slowly, gliding away from the familiar noises and smells of London. As I was watching the world I knew slip away I felt the little drop of darkness in the middle of my chest moving, as if it was getting comfortable for the journey ahead of us.

You might ask, why I'd never been to Notown before, given it's only an hour ride. The truth is, I just didn't want to ruin that image I had in my head: narrow streets, cobblestone, haunted Victorian mansions, tall spiky hedges, secret gardens and a medieval castle on a cliff lost in the moors. I guess this is how everyone pictures rural Britain after watching *Harry Potter*. I know it's a stereotype but I was only eleven years old when I made up this world of yours, Jen.

After the train finally crawled out of London's swollen body, the scenery changed. All I could see were fields of various shades of emerald green, sheep, and the occasional picture perfect

village.

The painfully empty space between my headphones was slowly filling with the sound of Thom Yorke's voice, beautiful and out of this world. I was listening to "OK Computer" and thinking about you. You know, as I was growing up, the memories of you grew up and transformed with me. Questions started to arise, questions, that no one had answers to. Papa was busy with his new wife and baby and I was still recovering from the shock of it all. You slipped away, no one really mourned you. Everyone did their best to survive Mama's death. But then, one morning I woke up and realized that this darkness in my chest wasn't going away no matter how much I drank or smoked, or how many boys I kissed. So, just like I did today, I went and I bought a train ticket. I went to our old summer cottage and spent that entire summer in the garage where Papa put all of your and Mama's stuff to make room for his new life. I smoked stolen Marlboros and listened to your old CDs. I memorized thousands of song lyrics and I looked up every unfamiliar word that I came across, until its meaning became perfectly clear to me.

As the train is bringing me closer and closer to your last known address, I'm asking myself all those questions all over again. Why did you leave home? What made it so special there, in Notown? What were you so upset about when I last saw you? Why do you never reply to me? Who are you, Jenia? I will find the truth, I promise. Whatever it takes. I want it badly enough to make it happen. These thoughts are calming and disturbing at the same time, just like Thom Yorke's music or walking in a forest after dark. I'm thinking about my own fears. I guess I only have one—to be so weak, insignificant, and worthless that I'll disappear completely. That's why I always look for security cameras, nearest exits and police stations. I pay by card only, enable geo and and sync with iCloud. I must be the only person who's actually happy about the fact that Google and Facebook are keeping an eye on us.

Status: unread

From: Nika Lukina

To: Jen Lukina

Sunday, 21 June 2015

7:51 PM

The Enemy — "We'll Live and Die in These Towns"

I had to use Google to find a song miserable enough for this place. The Enemy, the band, is actually from Coventry, which is like a 20 minute drive from Notown.

As the train was slowing down before the Notown stop, I dialled Hannah's number. She picked

up almost immediately.

‘Hi, Hannah. This is Nika.’

‘Hiya! I see you’re right on time, that’s something Jen was never good at.’ She sounded like a chain smoker. ‘I’ll pick you up from the station.’

‘Oh... no thank you, there’s no need. I prefer to take a walk, just tell me where to go.’

‘Okay, suit yourself, but I have to warn you it won’t be on the list of UK’s top ten scenic walks. I’ll meet you at Costa near the market square, it’s about twenty minutes by foot.’

I let Google calculate the optimal route and walked out of the train station through the sliding glass doors and turned left.

Hannah was right—it wasn’t the prettiest of sights. Behind the half empty parking lot was a grim, narrow street lined with what looked like abandoned factories whose windows were either shattered, the broken glass sparkling in the sun, or plastered with For Sale signs. I walked on. I passed an ASDA, a Working Men’s Club, a heavily pregnant woman smoking at a bus stop, more For Sale signs and then I walked straight into a large council estate. They’re so easy to recognize: tiny, filthy windows, washing hanging up on communal balconies, tacky graffiti and the stench of weed and piss. This was the dystopia of modern Britain—the place that I’d been trying very hard to avoid, much preferring the picture perfect life of a Londoner.

Soon the road ended at a tiny, pointless roundabout and I walked towards a bridge over a cloudy canal, wide enough for two barges to pass each other. The opposite bank looked more promising— Victorian terrace houses, a Morrisons and what I suspected to be the steeple of the local cathedral.

But that wasn’t the way Google wanted me to go. I followed the green arrow on my phone screen and turned into a small square with a couple of benches, slides and swings surrounded by bleak estate buildings. A couple of fat faced women with tight pony tails and massive gold earrings were staring out from open windows. I could smell weed and cooking oil burnt in a deep fryer. The walls of the building were covered in signs that read: ‘Notown borough council operates CCTV in this area for prevention and detection of crime.’ I counted four cameras, one in each corner of the square. Each one was pointed at one of the four alleyways leading into the square, as if the neighbourhood needed to look any more dodgy.

A small gang of pre-teens were throwing stones at beer cans. Their speech oozed with oi’s and innit’s. I picked up my pace and turned into an alleyway that led me to a narrow footbridge across the canal. It too, was heavily decorated with security cameras.

I crossed the Morrisons car park and walked up a sloping hill, passing the town hall, a theatre,

and a few bakeries and estate agents. A little further ahead, behind a taxi rank, I saw green and red market stalls. The smell of rotting fruit and heated cobblestone burnt my nostrils. And then I felt something weird, like *deja-vu*, only it couldn't have been because it was my first time there. I stopped and looked around. So this is what your world was like, *sestra*. The town hall clock struck 5:00 PM. The market was closing for the day—the traders were packing up and some last-minute customers were buying bargain cherries and strawberries, that wouldn't survive till the next day. The Gig Issue man was wishing everyone a nice day. A pawn shop sign flickered purple and green. A rowdy crowd was cheering at something on Sky Sports in a corner pub. I looked to my left and saw it—the bus stop. It's camera was staring at the bench. The place you were seen last. That is, until that video I found a few days ago.

I turned right onto a busy pedestrian street. I passed a Burger King and a Phones4You. Everything was shutting down for the day. Costa was just a few steps away when I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket.

'Hi Hannah! I'm literally—' she didn't let me finish.

'Nika, I'm behind you.'

I turned around and saw a tall blonde waving at me. She ran up to me and gave me a hug. Her hair smelled nice, of expensive salon conditioner.

'It's so good to meet you. You look exactly like her!'

'Really?' I wasn't so sure about that.

'Cross my heart! Only you're taller and more feminine...'

She was referring to my boobs. Just so you know, Jenia, they're bigger than yours. I smiled, we went inside and ordered a couple of iced lattes.

'So, welcome to Notown, Nika,' Hannah said when we'd sat down at a table by the window.

'How are you liking it here so far?'

She made a theatrical gesture with her arm, as if showing me the view. I instantly took to her irony. She seemed cool.

'It's alright. But what's the deal with all the abandoned factories?'

'See, this is why I wanted to pick you up and spare you the walk through the ghost part of town. This used to be the shoe capital of Britain.'

'The shoe capital?' I thought I'd misheard her.

'That's correct. This town used to manufacture eighty per cent of all the shoes in the country. You wouldn't have recognized this place! But then factory owners moved everything to China. It made a lot more sense from an economical perspective—cheap labour. The only factory that survived round here specializes in fancy footwear that's sold at a thousand quid a pair on Regent

street. Since then it's been a bit of a ghost town.' She smiled a sad little smile and looked away. 'But it all happened when I was little, I never really knew any different.'

The sky above the town hall turned peachy pink.

'So, you're looking for her?' She said after a short silence.

I shrugged. I didn't really have the answer to that question, or at least I wasn't ready to say it out loud.

'It all happened so quickly. I posted that video on Facebook and the next thing I know I'm here. Thank you for agreeing to talk.' I fixed my hands on my coffee cup to fight the restlessness that was overcoming my body. 'I don't know what I'm looking for. Maybe I just want to get to know more about her. Don't you think that it's no coincidence that you saw my post? That maybe it was meant to be—that I was meant to come here?'

I knew I was talking rubbish but I didn't care.

'It was hardly magic. Someone we both knew reposted your video.'

'Of course. I just meant...'

'I know what you meant. You feel that maybe she's calling for you.'

Astonished by the accuracy of her perception, I nodded.

'You were her best friend?'

'Yes. We worked together and shared a house.' She tucked her blond locks behind her ears and I saw how old and tired she looked. She must have been what? Thirty five? Thirty seven? Even with her tan and made-up face, her skin looked thin and fragile.

'How did you meet?'

'At work. When she first started at the pub I absolutely hated her. She was always daydreaming, and fluttering her long lashes before she spoke, as if it took her physical effort to switch back to the real world. I thought she was fake, but she wasn't. We had a lot in common in terms of music tastes. That means a lot when you're young, as you know. So we became friends.'

My brain was limp. I knew I needed to ask her something significant, but I just couldn't think of anything. What was the point of coming all the way to this place just to chit-chat about your music tastes.

'You mentioned that you've still got some of her stuff.'

'Oh yeah, it's in the car.'

We both fell silent, each in our own world, each with our own version of you.

'Hannah,' I finally spoke. 'Do you know what happened to her?'

She stirred her drink, her eyes filling with remorse.