

## **Preface**

Picture your life the way it was seconds before the explosion. Every detail is forever burnt into your memory. The song playing on the radio (Bruise Pristine by Placebo), what we'd had for breakfast (hotdogs and sour gas-station coffee), the weather (snow mixed with rain), what I was wearing (the same jacket that I have on today, black jeans and white trainers: ridiculously uncomfortable Adidas Superstars that she picked for me) what she was wearing (a red winter jacket – she's wearing it in every dream I have). I remember everything. I could list a thousand more details, so that the picture in my head would become so painfully vivid. But I don't. Normally, when I think about that day, I try to stick to these things only.

I'd like to clarify that I'm not talking about an actual explosion here, but a metaphorical one. Explosion as a point in time and space, a lever that moved the Earth, a burning sensation in your ribcage and the tension in your temples, because a single moment can be so big and so heavy it won't fit into your brain, so big it's about to leak from your nose and your ears.

That's exactly how I felt that night, sitting on the snowy ground, staring at red and blue lights reflecting off of the heavy pine trees. I couldn't describe it any better no matter how hard or how long I try, all I see are the lights on the tree tops. I'm rubbish at story telling when it comes to things like this—emotional, heavy, sensitive things. I'd rather talk about something else, anything to avoid the stuff that gets under my skin. I'd rather talk more about the weather (snow mixed with rain) or about the movies on late-night TV last night.

After Ida Lynn the world became a different place. Lots of things went missing, stuff that I guess I took for granted. The first thing that went was sleep. I was never aware of sleep like you're not aware of breathing unless you are suffocating. I put my head on the pillow, I close my eyes, I switch off. Exactly like it was when I had my knee operated on in seventh grade: you count backwards from ten and before you get to seven you slip into a dark comfortable nothing. I never thought it could be different. I never thought about lots of things.

The line between sleep and reality began to resemble a long line in a supermarket, when you are stuck behind a couple with a trolley stacked with their weekly food shopping while you only have a tube of toothpaste. Annoying, unfair waiting. What happens when you finally get to the

other side is hardly better. I never had dreams before.

Dreams were Ida Lynn's territory. She liked to write them down and later look up their meanings in an old dog-eared book, one of the few things that survived the fire. She was a strong believer that there are no coincidences and the book was spared by the flames for a reason. Now, funny enough, she doesn't dream anymore, but I do.

I never remember them in whole, just odd fragments and flashes, but still when I wake up in the morning my head feels heavy and dead like I've been stuck on a train for hours next to a boring passenger who talked and talked until my head began to hurt. That passenger is myself, I know that, but it brings me no comfort, only makes it worse. Sometimes I wish there was a way to run a disk defragmentation of your own brain, so that the flick of someone's long dark hair in the light of the passing car or the taste of blood in your mouth wouldn't crash my whole system.

I know the reason for my insomnia, too. It's not the absence of the person next to me in bed and it's not a severe concussion that I suffered. It's lot simpler. There is a question that was left unanswered. It keeps popping up like one of those annoying pop-up windows that block everything on your screen. I keep closing them but they continue to reappear, always asking me about a thing that I do not know. I needed a distraction. This is how I got into video games.

## London, 2/2

The bus driver honks. The sound is heavy and slow, like we're on an atomic icebreaker somewhere deep in the Arctic. Like a tourist, I sit on the upper deck so I can see exactly how bad the traffic is. The dim crimson shine of stoplights pollutes the air. We've been stuck here for ten minutes or so, I even dozed off for a moment lulled by the vibrations of the bus engine, and now my mouth is filled with the sour taste of sleep and my head is pounding. I stare at my reflection floating in the crimson light, it reminds me of something I just dreamt of. Despite all that, I'm happy I slept even for ten minutes – any sleep is a luxury to me, even the kind you wake up from surrounded by strangers, groggy and dehydrated.

'This is a waste... a waste of our lives, you know', I can hear a passenger behind me hissing into his girlfriend's ear. 'We should have walked. I told you so, but you never listen. We would have been home by now'.

Funny enough, I told myself the exact same thing and I, too, never listen to good advice. I blame the cold. It was the frost that made me jump through the closing doors of bus number 29. Just like most people in this city I don't own any real winter clothes. We just survive winter, we don't live it. We walk faster, drink more coffee, wear more layers of sweatshirts and hoodies, maybe ride a bike to work a bit less often. Just like I did today.

February is just a long cold night that you need to live through. They said on TV it would snow today, I overheard two colleagues talking about it by the coffee machine. It's a bit late in the winter for snow in this part of the world. But where I come from there's nothing but snow till the end of March. Then, on my way out, I saw the weather woman on TV by the security booth, she was pointing at a map of the island, the city was surrounded by the circle of cyclone. I stopped and wondered for a moment how she knew where to point on the map, she wasn't even looking at it. What came first—her pink palms pointing at places on the map, or the cyclone? What if she's a goddess of the storm who creates the snow, live on TV? Or did she simply memorise the map? This always seems to interest me: the eternal contradiction of the systematic and the chaotic.

I spent half of today in the foyer by the window, waiting for the snowstorm that never came. It's not that I overthink Ida Lynn's anniversary, no. It's just a weather forecast, and it was wrong.

It's six forty six pm. I rise from the sticky plush bus seat and walk down the stairs. Sirens are wailing in the distance, getting closer and closer, I can see blue and red splashes of light reflecting in the dark shop windows. The bus moves forward abruptly, making way for the police. Someone presses the stop button, we move a little further and reach the next stop. The doors spring open. I breath in the cold oily air and step out.

The humidity level is reaching 100%, I can taste the river in the air. And something else, familiar and sickening. I zip up my jacket and take a step into the dark snowless city.

I turn the corner and almost bump into a tiny woman dressed like a nurse or a masseuse. She doesn't even move, standing with her back to me and holding a huge shiny phone dressed in a pink leather case up in the air. I look where her camera is pointing and see the smoke. It's black and shapeless, like a scribble someone drew over a word so that no one would ever be able to read it again. It's coming from a broken window of a small beauty parlour. Three fire brigade cars block the narrow street.

This explains the traffic. And the familiar bitter taste in my throat.

Oblivious to the water that's pouring into the gaping hole in the window from two hoses, the fire is climbing higher and higher, now glancing into the second floor windows. The third fire brigade arrives and starts rushing around trying to get inside the building. I can feel my nose tingling from the smoke, my eyes are watering but I can't seem to be able to take my eyes off the flames. The crowd around is getting bigger, people shout and whisper and I'm watching the burning house being multiplied on countless phone screens.

'Is someone trapped inside?' a rosy cheeked, heavily pregnant girl in a brown supermarket uniform asks.

'How would I know?' I snap for no reason at all and feel ashamed almost immediately.

I cover my ears with the palms of my hands, but it doesn't help – the throbbing sound of burning is already in my head. I elbow people around me to get away as quickly as I can even if it means I have to take Camden High Street.

It's Thursday, but in Camden it's a Saturday night every night. When Ida Lynn and I first moved here I felt it more. Maybe it was because I was eight years younger or because I still had her, but the lights were brighter and the highs were higher, all together, life resembled a music

video. There were fewer places to eat and more watering holes that served cheap booze to skint students and artsy immigrants like us. People who dressed normally, like I do now, stood out from the crowd like freaks.

It's different now. Quieter, blander, wealthier. Rich hipster kids washed the streets with their triple soy lattes of all the loud, cheap vodka-puking and latex corset-wearing sub cultures. But live music nights and a couple of round-the-clock kebab shops still remained.

When I pull the door open the bell above my head makes a familiar sound. I see my dinner, a chicken kebab with chilies and fries wrapped in brown paper resting on the counter. Amir has been waiting for me.

'You're late.' he appears from the kitchen, smiling.

'There was traffic.'

I put money on the counter – seven fifty, exact change.

'Have a good evening, Serge.'

'And you, Amir.'

I try not to look into the pub windows, I walk straight home, briskly, staring at the pavement until I take a right turn onto a narrow street. My street. My house is on the corner. With its round windows and swinging doors and narrow stairs it looks like something a progressive architect drew in his notepad about a hundred years ago after taking a long joyless walk among the terrace-housed streets of Camden town. They wanted to build a house that people of the future, people like Ida Lynn and I, would like to live in. In reality things turned out differently.

It's a council house populated mainly by people with mental disabilities. When we first found it, we had our doubts. It wasn't perfect, but the owner of the flat was a downshifter so eager to go back to Bali or Goa that he agreed to knock a hundred pounds off the monthly rent if we were ready to seal the deal there and then and would pay for the new plumbing in the bathroom. It's been over eight years; the plumbing is still waiting to be fixed. Everything else has changed.

Ida Lynn used to be terrified of the house. Our new neighbors were hardly friendly, the cat in the flat directly above us scratched and screamed every night, the smell of decay and mold increased to the point that it was almost unbearable whenever it rained, and the ancient

elevator made a haunting howl whenever it moved. But she grew to love our new home eventually, or so I thought.

She decorated the walls with posters she bought from the Saatchi gallery, made me oil the door frames in the hall, started growing avocado pits on the window sill. Things did get better. That was a long time ago.

I step into the echoing hallway and walk twenty-two steps, up to the door with a number 9 stuck to it right above the peephole.

I unlock the door, yet again thinking that the locks need changing. You can pick the existing one with an Oyster card, not that I have anything to steal. Inside, I flick on the lights, take off my shoes then my backpack, hang my jacket and hoodie on the lonely hook beside the light switch. In the bathroom, I unbutton my shirt, a pale blue one from GAP, then crumple it up and shove it in the washing machine, followed by my tee shirt and socks. Then, trying not to look at myself in the milky mirror above the sink, I slowly pull out my hair tie and let my hair fall to my shoulders. This is when I really feel like the day is over.

I put my jeans away into the wardrobe in the bedroom, put on a faded Children of Bodem tee that Ida Lynn bought for me with her pocket money years ago, when we were still at school. Then I eat my kebab, take a can of coke out of the fridge and settle in front of the monitor. I turn the computer on and put on headphones. I hear the familiar throaty voice almost immediately.

‘Oi Anderson, I thought you ditched me today!’ he calls me by my game nickname, we don’t know each other’s real names.

‘Sorry, mate. The traffic was a nightmare’

‘I feel you. Working office hours is shit, I’d quit if I was you.’

I moan about my day for a few more seconds, then the game is on.

‘Tron, cover me!’ I reload my gun and crouch towards the end of the narrow passage between two shabby buildings. He watches over me. When I am finally sure that the crossroads is clear, I get up and run. A single gunshot follows – it’s Tron getting rid of a sniper on the rooftop.

‘I’m going first. I know this location,’ I say switching over to the team channel.

Online multiplayer games are a lot like real life – you can't rely on anyone, not with your life, anyway. However, unlike real life, games have algorithms to match you with people similar to you, just like on dating sites. In real life you have to do it yourself, find the people that are your match mentally, physically, intellectually. You do the best you can if you have enough social skills. Or, like me, you choose to be alone. Although I am really grateful to the guy, probably a loner like me, who programmed this algorithm which, almost three years ago, matched me with a geek named TronGuy\_18072. We've been a team ever since. The game doesn't matter, together we could play anything. And beat anyone.

I crouch under a gate and find myself in a wide, empty yard. Everything seems quiet, apart from the noise chickens make in a cage in the corner. A smoke grenade explodes right beside me leaving me blind and disorientated.

'Watch out on your left' Tron screams into my ears just as the thick grey air is pierced by the first bullet. But thanks to Tron I manage to duck away. He kills the terrorist before the smoke is gone, his body lands by my feet.

'Whatever he's got on him it's mine, I shot him. And you better watch out for those bullets next time, Neo'.

'Thanks Morpheus.'

'So what's he got?'

'A lovely R250.'

'My R250, you meant to say.'

'Sure thing. I'll be happy to take the smoke grenades that he's got on him.'

'Go ahead, I'm not interested in those.'

Tron lands on the ground next to me. I hand him the gun.

'Jeez isn't it a beauty? An R250! As if!'

That was another reason why I enjoyed playing with Tron – he was a genuinely happy person. Guns and other loot made him laugh joyfully and whistle, I envied that. Judging by his voice, the

vocabulary and the kind of stuff he found funny and shared with me in our private chat, he was my age, maybe even a little older. Another thing I was sure of was that just like me, Tron was what my mother calls 'an IT guy'.

The game turns out to be a fast paced one, but Tron seems like he's not really there, his reactions are a fraction of a second slower than usual, even the cool trophy gun is not making him as happy as it normally would. I wait till we both hide in a barn, turn the team channel off and say:

'You seem distracted today.'

'Sorry, man,' He sighs. 'Bad day.'

I'm waiting for him to add something but he's silent, which means that I need to think of something to say. I really am no good with people.

'Well, a bad day doesn't give you the right to risk both our lives and the team score'.

He sighs again.

'Are you okay?' I say, finally.

'I guess. Just a little paranoid.'

'About what?'

Truth is I know next to nothing about his life. I know him, but I know nothing of him – like where he lives or if he's married, that kind of stuff. That is that pact that we made, a silent one. We only talk about the game and things on the Internet, real life is out of bounds. This is the first time one of us is breaking the rules.

'I wouldn't want to bore you, it's a long story.'

'Okay,' I say, relieved. 'But if you ever...'

'I know. I appreciate it.'

We talk via the team channel for some time, Tron instructs our less experienced teammates on how to kill more terrorists. When we are alone again, he speaks:

‘Anderson, do you ever feel like you’re being watched?’

‘So you did watch that Snowden documentary I was telling you about? We’re all being watched. It’s about time we accept cookies and move on with our lives. No one is going to tell your mum that you watch porn if that’s what you’re worried about. You know as well as I do that because you watch it you are going to be shown certain kinds of ads online, like dodgy dating sites or Viagra. They are only watching you so that they can make more money off of you.’

Tron lets out a short, fake laugh.

‘That’s not what I’m talking about.’

‘Then explain.’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

‘Then stop being... oh look who do we have here!’ I point at a lone terrorist at the far end of the street. But this time he is faster than me – the figure in black drops dead after a single shot from Tron’s rifle. ‘That’s what I’m talking about.’

‘Listen, about Snowden,’ he says after a long pause. ‘If you had something as valuable and dangerous as what he’d gotten his hands on, where would you store it until you figure out what to do with it?’

‘Don’t tell me you hacked Langley?’

‘Maybe.’ A familiar fake laugh. ‘I’m just talking hypothetically.’

‘About hypothetical data?’ I say as I reload my gun.

‘Yes.’

‘Depends on the volume.’

‘A lot. A couple of terabytes.’

I let out an involuntary whistle.

‘Don’t tell me you filmed a porno? Many pornos, in fact.’

'Yeah, I did a remake of the original Star Wars saga starring my body parts as main characters.'

'That's vile. Why did you put that image into my head?'

'How do you know what I look like? Maybe I'm Ryan Gosling's twin brother.'

'For all I know you could be the actual Ryan Gosling. But I'd prefer it if you were Scarlett Johansson, dude, which you are definitely not. So go ahead make me forget that you're a perv.'

'These aren't the droids you're looking for... but seriously where would you keep the data?'

'Definitely in the cloud. A physical disc would make it far more dangerous and too easy to tie it to you. Most probably I would rent one of those anonymous hostings where child porn and pirated films are stored and pay for it with cryptocurrency. And put a big fat password on the whole thing. Something like that...'

'That exactly what I've... I would have done... Hypothetically.'

'Of course.'

'And you know, speaking of paranoia, there was this guy who always thought he was being followed by men in black. You know who he was?'

'I have no idea. Tell me.'

'Ernest Hemingway, the writer.'

'How fascinating,' I reply, too eager to return to the game to really listen to him.

'And you know what? It turned out he was right all along. That's why he killed himself.'

I laugh. The new mission is loading. I get another can of coke.

'This is the last one, right? You've got work in the morning, and it's past midnight now.'

'I don't care. I never sleep anyway,' I say.

'You're full of surprises, Mr. Anderson.'

'You bet.'

'Don't tell me you're one of those guys who plays a game over and over again until he gets all the possible endings?'

'Is there any other way to play a game?'

I'm thinking about Silent Hill now, part two, and my endless, fruitless attempt to bring my dead wife back to life. What was her name? I never got her in the end.

'So you like to win?'

'No, I just don't like being manipulated. I want to see all the different turning points in the game.'

'So you're a smart ass?'

'Maybe.'

Tron laughs. Suddenly, I feel relieved. This time it's genuine.

The game is on. I can hear Tron rustling with chocolate bar wrappers.

'What are you doing over there?'

'Eating an energy bar.'

'Is it like Red Bull, only edible?'

'Yeah.'

'It probably burns holes in your stomach.'

'Oh absolutely, but I'm out of food and everywhere is closed now.'

I don't say anything, this is too familiar, only I have Amir and his 24/7 kebabs.

'Let's go then?'

'Yeah. Oh wait. Give me a second,' I can hear voices over the speaker. 'There's someone at the door. I'm going to go get it. Hold on a moment.'

He leaves me alone with static whispers in my headphones. Then I hear voices again, muffled

and far away. Maybe, it's just static. I wait for a few more minutes.

'Mr. Anderson? You there?' asks Tron, finally. 'You ready?'

'Are you asking me? You've got guests, not me. I thought I heard a woman's voice.'

'That was Alexa.'

'Who?'

'My assistant?'

'Who are you? Batman?'

'She's electronic. Like Siri in a box.'

'Ah that device from Amazon?'

'Yeah, got it a couple of days ago. You know me, I am sucker for a new gadget.'

'Have you asked her if she works for Skynet yet?'

'I have. Actually,' he laughs. 'She says she has nothing to do with them.'

'As if she'd confess. I wouldn't trust her if I were you.'

'But who am I to trust if not her? She's so good to me, she reminds me to pay my bills and creates shopping lists.'

'Maybe you feel like you're being watched because that little box in your house listens to every word you say?'

'Nah, it's got nothing to do with Alexa.'

'Can she order pizza?'

'No.'

'She's useless then, get rid of her.'

'It's only because there are no pizza places where I live. Maybe she could do that if I lived somewhere else.'

'Where do you live? On the Moon?'

'Close.'

'Are we playing again or what?'

'We are.'

He quickly loads the game and we're back in action.

When we say goodbye a few hours later and I fall on the bed face down I can still hear machine guns shooting. I am exhausted, but we did it, we've improved our team rating. I smile and force myself to get up and go brush my teeth. I turn the light off and crawl under the duvet. In winter the flat is dark, freezing and damp, but at least it stays cool during summer heatwaves.

I shut my eyes and listen to the sounds of the house that's only pretending to be asleep. The phone is ringing and ringing next door desperate for someone to pick it up. That awful cat scratches the floor upstairs. I'm sure it's the same one that used to keep Ida Lynn awake years ago. I would have thought the owner had died and the poor animal was trapped inside the flat. But just this morning I saw its owner, a crazy old lady with horn-rimmed glasses and a bird's nest for a hair-do calling for it in the backyard – the cat had climbed to the top of an old maple tree.

Sleep that seemed so close only a second ago vanishes for no reason. I listen to floorboards creaking upstairs, then a toilet flushing, then some water splashes. A TV set below me mumbles something about good shopping deals. Then I open my eyes and look out of the window. I don't have curtains. People whose windows face the yard rarely do, almost as if they have nothing to hide. I remember Ida Lynn sitting on the window sill watching our neighbors move around their brightly lit rooms. I think about something else, but the thought is too quick, like a cat, it jumps away before I manage to capture it. It's the third of February already, the day of the anniversary is over. Almost as if the sky overheard my thoughts, it begins to snow. I get up, go to the window and open it. I breathe in the air that still tastes like ashes.

**Kookies sample 2**

## Bretagne, 17/2

I can't remember the last time I took a plane somewhere. I have nowhere to go, no one to visit. My mother gave birth to twins the year I left home for Uni, she and her perfect Christian husband lost all interest and faith in me after that. My dad rings once a year, on my birthday, although last year he opted to send a text instead.

I pack an overnight bag and leave the house, my head is hazy with anxiety. The tiny blue plane jumps up and down in the turbulent clouds above Normandy. The airport is small and empty. I have to wake up the car rental clerk who dozed off in his cozy little booth. He presents me with a key to a brand new white Citroen with a built-in satnav.

The village where Tron lives is about three hours away from the airport, but it feels a lot longer because of the miserable scenery: rows of little houses with closed shutters and half-melted grey snow. It felt like walking through the cabin of a trans-Atlantic flight – everything was asleep.

The only thing that kept me conscious and aware that I was still on Earth were the headlights of passing trucks, yellow and blurry, through the thick silvery mist.

'Swoot-swoot, swoot-swoot,' the wipers whistle and sing along to the radio, clearing the thin film of moisture off the windscreen. Here and there, on the sides of the road, stood ancient idols, dark and solemn. I imagined old Bretons, barbarians from a thousand year ago, praying to the stone figures for the rain to stop and for their wives to give birth to good warriors.

Suddenly, I remembered a grey day just like this, with a black strip of road twisting between stony hills. I was in the passenger seat of the old Volvo that belonged to Ida Lynn's uncle. A familiar song was playing on the radio. The air smelt like burnt dust, vanilla air freshener and cheap cigarettes. She was driving, we were coming off a bridge that looked like a mammoth's backbone and stopped at a petrol station. Where were we going? Did it even matter? I don't remember anymore.

It begins to rain harder when I reach the village. Everything is closed for the season, the air is thick with a particular kind of desperation, stillness, death. I make a right and drive towards the sea, passing long, neat lines of whitewashed houses sealed until the summer, like Christmas trees in July.

I make another turn and finally find myself on the right street. It looks a little more alive, not all the shutters are down. I search for the right house number driving back and forth along the tiny street a couple of times until I finally spot it next to the Bakery sign. I park and step into the rain. The place resembles Silent Hill and it gives me the creeps as well as a topic for future jokes to crack when I finally find Tron.

The Bakery is shut. I knock on the door, but no one answers. I turn around, ducking from the heavy raindrops. About a block ahead, towards the sea, I spot a giant mural on the side of a building. It's a mermaid, ginger and unfriendly, with purple sea stars covering her nipples and a sign that says Le Franc Bord in her hand. Behind her, there's a door and it's wide open. 'Just like in Silent Hill,' I think to myself and rush towards the door, searching the ground for a metal pipe or a wrench, just in case.

The place turns out to be a hotel with a tiny lobby bar that is doubling as a reception desk. It smells like old damp wood half-eaten by insects. Behind the desk or the bar I notice a girl that looks exactly like the mermaid from the mural, she's reading a book, her elbows leaning on the bar.

She acknowledges my presence with a slight nod and a glimpse of her watery green eyes.

'Hi, bonjour,' I respond, suddenly smitten by the sight of the pink freckles on the bridge of her nose.

'Can I help?' say her lips but her face says she doesn't want to help me.

'I'm looking for a place, do you know where it is?' I show her the address written on a piece of paper.

She rolls her green eyes and closes the book, a battered copy of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

'That's two doors up, the boulangerie.'

Suddenly a cold wet gust of wind enters the room and shuts the doors with a loud bang. The reception girl rolls her eyes again and stares at me expectantly.

'Do you know a man who lives there? A foreigner?'

'There is no man. It's a boulangerie.'

'Okay, merci.'

I go back outside.

The wind grows stronger. Big, cold drops of rain are flying almost parallel to the ground drumming at my jacket. I go back to the shop window and lean against it trying to see what's inside. This time I notice that the light is on. I turn the handle, and, to my surprise, it moves. I step in. A woman sticks her head out from the counter, she looks like a Siamese cat, all soft and mellow with triangular glasses, her voice fits just right.

'Bonjour, monsieur!'

I take off my hood spilling rain water on the clean wooden floor.

'Bonjour, Madame,' I reply, then my French runs out and I switch to English, slow and loud, as if speaking to a child. 'I'm looking for my friend from London. I was told that this was his address here in France. I'm an old friend'

I study her face as I give her Tron's description and a few more details. Finally, her catlike eyes light up.

'Ah, oui!' she says something else but I only smile guiltily. She gestures for me to come to the counter. On a sheet of paper with a photocopied tourist map of the village she circles a house by the sea, about a mile away from here then smiles and hands it to me. I thank her and buy one of the postcards with a lighthouse on it. We say goodbye.

As I return to the car I feel my heart beating loudly in my temples – this is what they call a hunter's high. I'm there. I found him. I won.

I get in the car, turn on the ignition and stare into the rain. That was easy, almost too easy, like there is a trap up ahead, but life is no game, I remind myself, as the car's tires rustle softly over the wet ground. My mission is nearly over.

About five minutes later I park in the driveway of an old stone cottage on the tip of a cliff. The shutters are closed, there's no light or sound, but I know he's in there, he must be. For a second, just before leaving the car, I pause and think about how awkward the encounter might be, but then I remember, it's Tron I'm here to see, we've been through so much, it will be okay. I dive into the rain and knock on the door. No answer. A seagull flies low overhead with a loud sharp cry. I walk around the house and notice a small gate in the long green hedge. I open it and cross the un-mowed lawn. The back door of the house appears to be unlocked. I step inside. This is when I hear voices.

'Let me give you some advice', says a woman with a strong American accent. 'Don't lie to him, he knows almost everything about you.'

Inside the house it's cold and dark. I look around and see stairs in the middle of what appears to be a living room. To the left is the front door and a couple of battered leather sofas facing each other, to the right – a tiny kitchen corner with dirty plates piled up in the sink.

'I'm guessing you must be feeling like Alice half-way down the rabbit hole,' comes a male voice from upstairs. It sounds a little like Tron's but the accent is different. 'You look like someone who's asleep and will wake up any minute now.'

I do, actually.

'Yo, Tron!' I yell. 'It's me, Mr Anderson. You home?'

The house is silent. I walk towards the stairs and look up. There is a mansard window right above me. I can see a dark swollen sky, so low it almost touches the roof. I take a couple of steps up.

'It's awful to think that you are being manipulated...' the conversation upstairs continues after a pause.

As I get closer I'm starting to get a feeling that I might recognise the voice.

'Tron! Oi Tron!

I reach the landing. There are four doors ahead of me, all of them are shut. I follow the sound of voices.

'Tron, please don't freak out! You disappeared from the game after that night and I thought... I thought it would be fun to find you. Please don't be armed.'

I let out a short uncomfortable laugh and open the door at the far end of the corridor.

A long time ago I read an article, or, maybe, it was just a random piece of information and not an article at all, it doesn't really matter how I know this, but I know that blood doesn't smell of anything. The smell that we sense when we see it is projected by our subconscious, it's an evolutionary glitch. Blood is supposed to scare us, which is why, in our brain, it smells like iron, because the weapons that cause us to bleed were made of iron.

Like I said, I don't know if that's true, but when I enter the room the first thing I sense is the smell. Like someone broke a jar of pennies – it's thick and sickly sweet and heavy. I stop and stand very very still until slowly, I begin to see the dark shapes of objects inside the room.

The only source of light inside the room is a tiny TV set in the far corner. I pick out two men, both sitting in chairs, in a dark room with a high ceiling.

'I understand you. Let me explain why you are here. You're here because you feel something but you can't grasp what it is. All your life you felt that there is something wrong with this world. It's a weird thought, but you can't get rid of it. It's like a thorn that's stuck in your brain and never letting you go. This is what brought you here,' says Morpheus, his eyes hidden behind small round sunglasses.

Now was the time for Mr Anderson to pick which pill to take. I watch him do it as if I've never seen it before, as if I'm looking at the screen and the screen alone, and the room around me disappeared and I'm home again and I never noticed the body that was laying on the bed, face down, blood caked in its dark curly hair.

He was dead. Reduced from a person to just a body, from subject to an object, from he to it. His blood on the floor glistens in the TV light, it resembles the stuff that leaks out of old batteries. This is when I notice the mess. The closets and chest of drawers are turned inside out: clothes, books, video games all scattered across the floor. The desk is empty, some wires are still hanging from it, behind where the monitors must have been – they look like hospital drips. A half-eaten energy bar is still sitting by the mousepad. Looks like the only piece of equipment that survived the invasion was the old TV.

'... the Matrix is everywhere, even in this room,' Morpheus continues.

I take a few steps towards the bed, trying not to step on anything, wrap my sleeve around my fingers, pick up the TV remote and turn the TV off. Mr Anderson disappears, swallowed by the dark.

I go back downstairs, into the kitchen, run the tap and gulp some cold water. Then I watch the lighthouse flickering in the dark somewhere off shore. Then I finally make the call.

There are two officers. At least at first. The younger one, who can speak a little English, takes my statement. The second one, much older, gives me a long uneasy look then steps out to make a phone call. I can hear him speak Breton quietly and calmly. About half an hour later the place reminds me of the Normandy beaches in June of 1944 – teeming with people.

An ambulance, two more police cars, the weeping cat lady from the bakery, neighbours from down the road who never saw or heard anything. Two doctors dressed in dark green uniforms pronounce Ilay Gordon dead. He was 34 years old, that's only six years older than me.

They seem to have forgotten all about me. I sit in the kitchen, playing with my phone, drinking water and tea and coffee that they keep offering me, listening to the cat lady's soft sobs – she

was his landlady, it turned out. Meanwhile upstairs they were packing Tron's body away along with all the evidence.

Finally, one of the cops, the young one who speaks English, takes a seat opposite me at the kitchen table. He doesn't say anything or look at me, he's on the phone with someone and something tells me it's not work related. Maybe he is telling his wife that it's going to be a long night. I study my surroundings. Empty cans of energy drinks, half-full wine bottles, an overflowing rubbish bin in the corner. The only item in here that looks personal is a lone photo from an Insta photobooth stuck to the fridge door with a magnet. Tron and two girls, a blonde and a brunette, smiling happily in a photobooth, the date said it was taken on February 24 last year, almost exactly one year ago. I study his face – happy drunk and alive until my thoughts are interrupted by the police officer.

'Mr Venäläinen, please explain once again what were you doing in this house?'

I take a deep breath. This is the third time I'm telling them the story that I carefully thought through when I first called them. I'm starting to regret I hadn't just left and pretended that I was never there. I'm starting to wish that after no one answered the door and I would've just driven off. But that would have been too suspicious because too many people saw me, too many people knew I was looking for him, both in London and here, in Bretagne.

Very slowly and carefully I tell them that we are old friends and that I got worried when he stopped appearing online so I decided to check on him. The policeman looks at me the entire time, nodding, but taking no notes. Something tells me this won't be the last time I'm telling this story. Meanwhile his colleagues dust the house for prints. Someone puts a fresh coffee in front of me. I stare at the photograph on the fridge, almost like I'm telling the story to Tron himself and not to this man.

Finally, the policeman interrupts me.

'Mr Venäläinen, your alibi checked out. You're free to go.'

'My... Alibi?'

'Yes. Your employer confirmed that you were in the office all week. That is, of course, if you hadn't traveled here after work and then returned before the start of your office hours,' he chuckles and takes a sip of his coffee.

'What?'

'I'm only joking. You are not a person of interest. Mr Godon has been dead for five days, at least.'

'So it happened a long time ago.'

'Yes. Maybe even longer than that – the coroner will let us know soon. I am asking you to come to the station tomorrow to make a formal statement, okay?'

I nod.

'In any case, I am very sorry for your loss. I hope we will catch the bastards soon enough.'

'So do I. What do you think happened?'

'Well, it's very clear. It was a simple burglary that went wrong, that is all. He was asleep when they broke in, they thought the house was empty, but he woke up and they attacked him. It's simple, that's what the evidence says.'

I open my mouth to tell them that the TV was on when I came in, so they must have known someone was in, but then close it again. I need to think everything over before I get the police involved.

### Cookies sample 3

#### Barcelona 24/2

The closer I get to the sail-shaped building, the bigger chunk of the sky it eats up. When I'm finally standing in front of the main entrance, all I can see is dark blue glass and the lights inside of the hotel. I'm trying to picture Lisa in her red dress, smooth and nacreous, like a glass figurine. I wonder how long it will take her to charm Alex and get him so drunk he won't notice her game.

I walk around the building and stare into the dark horizon above the sea. The sea is crashing over the concrete breakwaters forcefully. I breath, in and out, on the count of four, then turn around and walk back to the beach.

An hour passes. I send her a text, a question mark. No reply. I wait another thirty minutes watching men in black maintenance uniforms install fireworks on the beach. When the wind quiets down a little I hear the party, it must be in full swing, all music and laughter and the clinking of champagne glasses. I heard Mark Zuckerberg himself might stop by.

I pick up a smooth oval stone and throw it into the water. Then another. Thirty minutes later I finally give up and call her. As I'm listening to the far away ringing I throw another stone. Then I hang up and dial Oliver's number.

'Hey man,' he says joyfully and I feel disgusting straight away. She hasn't told him yet, he has no idea that I slept with her. Or maybe she means so little to him that he simply doesn't care, I wouldn't put it past him. 'You coming or what?'

'Thinking about it.'

'Think faster! I'm all by myself here, Lisa ditched me for her old boss. I'm tempted to take off my badge and party like there's no tomorrow. I need a wingman.'

'I might come.'

'Oh man, please come. I put your name on the guest list, but I didn't know the surname so tonight you're Sergio Leone, hope that's alright with you.'

He laughs again drunkenly. I hear a woman's voice in the background.

'Is that Lisa?'

'She says hi.'

'Can you...'

'I've got to go man, I'm being attacked by this woman in red, it's like that scene in The Matrix, remember? She's agent Smith, though, you can't fool me! Alright, my man, see you soon.'

He hangs up.

I stand in the wind trying not to think about them being together, drinking together, going up to his room, their fingers intertwined.

My phone rings a minute or so later and at first I don't notice it. When I finally answer it – it's a number I don't recognize, I expect to hear her voice saying that it's over with her and Oliver and that the plan has worked and she got what we needed and is now coming to meet me outside.

But it's someone else.

'Hey Sergio,' says Shaun.

I totally forgot that I promised to meet him tonight.

'Hi, look I'm so sorry, something came up. Can we do it another time?'

'Do what?'

'That beer.'

'Ah that, I forgot. I'm calling about something else. I found something.'

'Really?' I ask but I already know what he is about to say – Rita's death had something to do with Alex.

'Yeah. That girl, Rita, on that day, a year ago, she didn't order a taxi from that address. But someone else did, at quarter to five in the morning. It was cancelled straight away that is why I couldn't find it in the logs.'

'And who was it?'

'A bloke, give me one second.' I can hear him typing on a keyboard. 'Yeah, here it is. Oliver England.'

'What?'

'It's a weird name, right? Like a spy in a film.'

'Are you sure?'

'One hundred percent. I have his phone number here and his credit card details. He only ever used the app once, that night.'

He says something else but I can no longer hear him. The blood is rushing into my brain and my heart beats in my ears at a deafening volume. Oliver England. Oliver. Two figures in the dim light of the streetlamp, his hand sliding down her body and resting on the small of her back.

Olly. I feel an ice bomb exploding in the middle of my solar plexus.

'Thank you, Shaun,' I manage to say then hang up.

Then I ring her. She doesn't pick up so I leave a message saying just one thing: 'IT WAS OLLY'. I ring him, he doesn't answer. They are together now, she is telling him that it's over between them and his pale face is going scarlet with rage and he is hitting her and strangling her and throwing her on the floor, just like he did with Rita.

I have to go in, I have to find her before he hurts her. Of course it was him. It couldn't have been anyone but him. And Tron knew about it and must have had some sort of proof, that's what he was hiding and that's why he's dead. Olly must have hacked into Tron's Alexa and overheard everything that went on inside that house. He knows who I am – that's why he has been so suspiciously friendly with me all along.

The hotel foyer is lit with dim pink lamps and I follow the signs that say private event dialing her number over and over again. Girls in tight pink dresses check that my name really is on the guest list, not for a second concerned with how fake it sounds.

I walk into a room full of people. The sound of the music and chatter ricochets off of the low ceiling and spreads around in overwhelming hot waves. I am being touched by so many elbows and looked at by so many eyes that all I want to do is leave right now. But I can't, I need to find Lisa and save her.

Finally, I manage to make my way to the smoking room. From there it's easier to observe the crowd without getting into close contact with anyone. I scan the room for Lisa's red dress, like looking for a ladybug on a tree trunk or noticing a droplet of blood where you touched some shattered glass. The music is getting louder, a band is playing covers of loathsome pop songs, I touch the shoulder of a woman in red, but it's not her and I am thankful for how loud it is so I don't need to mumble apologies, I just walk off.

I see Alex and Michael on a small balcony surrounded by a small group of VIP guests. They are smoking shisha and laughing heartily. But neither Lisa nor Olly are anywhere to be seen. I go back outside, then back in and then I finally see her – she's queuing to the bar, shifting from one foot to the other, uncomfortable in her sky-high heels.

'Why don't you answer your phone?' I place the palm of my hand on her bare shoulder. 'I called and called.'

'It's on "do not disturb" until I call you.' She turns to face me and gives me a long, cold stare that I did not expect. 'What are you doing here? We had a plan.'

'Forget the plan.'

'What do you mean? I'm so close, Alex invited me to the afterparty.'

'Alex has got nothing to do with it.'

'What are you saying? You know who killed Rita?'

'Yes. I know who murdered both of our friends.'

She looks me straight in the eye, her nails are digging into my palm so hard it hurts.

'Are you going to tell me?'

'Let's find some place quiet.'

'It's a bloody party, Serge, it's loud. Just say it now.'

'It was Olly.'

'What? My Olly?'

'Is he yours?'

She frowns.

'Serge tell me everything. Now.'

'It was Olly who was with Rita that night. The tall man that was caught on tape, it's him.'

'And you know that how?'

'He used an app to get a taxi at half past four in the morning.'

She places both of her hands over her gaping mouth.

'Olly...'

'Did you know?'

'What do you think? I had no idea. I mean... Of course not.'

'Did you know that him and Rita were seeing each other? You two were so close, how could you not know?'

'Looks like we weren't as close as I thought we were.'

'Where is he now?'

'I'm going to kill him, you know,' she says with quiet certainty. 'I'll burn the bastard to the ground, Serge.'

'No.' I touch her hand and squeeze it in my palm. 'We're leaving now. We need to think things over, since we have the benefit of knowing his secret.'

'You don't understand,' she pulls her hand away. 'You don't know what it means.'

'Lisa, wait!' I try to grab her arm but she slides away from me, swallowed by the crowd.

I'm in the middle of the room in pursuit of her but she is smaller and quicker so I lose sight of her in the crowd. I look around but she is nowhere to be seen. People are closing in around me, tighter and tighter, something is happening on the stage. Suddenly, the music stops. The crowd grows silent then explodes with cheer. Someone taps on the microphone. I turn around and see

Michael Vilin. He is standing in the middle of the stage dressed in a sparkly tuxedo, like a cheap Elvis Presley lookalike. His face, a fake-tan orange, gleams with such delight, he is clearly enjoying the moment.

‘Good evening my dear guests,’ he says in the manner of a wedding DJ. ‘How are you all doing? Has everyone found their hookup for tonight? I don’t want anyone to leave my party alone.’ He laughs heartily, the folds of his double chin wobble above his shirt collar. The crowd is ecstatic. Then my eye catches them. First I see Olly’s tall figure, he’s facing me, his long thin fingers are resting on the back of her neck. She’s talking to him, saying something that causes him to smile with the corner of his mouth. What is she playing at? Olly catches my eye, his smile widens, I watch him touch her, his fingers slide down the silk of her dress in slow motion and finally rest on the small of her back. He takes her by the elbow and guides her towards the exit. I rush towards them, suddenly everything around me is moving and screaming, cameras are flashing leaving me blind. For a second I think that she must have stabbed him in front of all those people, but I am wrong.

It takes me a couple of seconds to register what really happened. Michael is still standing in the middle of the stage surrounded by girls in pink Lover uniforms. Well, what’s left of them – just the skirts. They are holding their tops up, demonstrating their pale naked breasts, each with something written on it. I pause for a second to read: dating apps exploit women. I remember now, I saw those women outside the conference hall on the day I got there. They are called The Femenides. A moment later the stage is infested with men in black suits, they grab the protestors by their bare arms and drag them away from the stage. One of them manages to splash something that looks an awful lot like blood right into Vilin’s face.

I turn around and see Lisa and Olly heading towards the elevators, I rush after them but suddenly someone grabs my arm. I turn around and see one of the security officers that was on the stage a moment ago. He adjusts a tiny speaker in his ear and says in an unmistakable Slavic accent:

‘I need to search your backpack, sir.’

He is bigger than me and he looks like he means business.

‘Sure.’ I unzip the bag.

He presses the earpiece with his index finger and says something inaudible into the microphone attached to the lapel of his jacket.

‘Let’s step outside, sir.’

‘Outside?’

'Are you going to cause problems?'

'No, no problems.'

He pushes me out through a door and I find myself in a maintenance closet where another man in black with a headset is waiting.

'What's going on?'

'Someone wants to speak with you.'

'Who?'

'Just follow us.'

Their fingers close on my shoulders. My body breaks into a nervous sweat. They push me to the staircase then down to the parking lot. I turn around looking for security cameras, but there are none, or at least non visible to me.

'Get in the car,' says one of the men. His voice echoes in the empty underground parking lot.

The other one opens the back door of a black Land Cruiser with a dent on the right side. My mind is trying to grasp onto every detail: the make of the tires, the tread, the shoes they are wearing – a pair of old workman's boots and brand new black Nike trainers, the air freshener in the car – a yellow tree. They push me in my back. I lean over to get into the back seat half expecting to see someone else there, but there is no one and nothing but an old sleeping bag and the smell of old sweat and burnt transmission. They shut the door behind me.

The first strike comes when I try to get out when we drive out of the parking lot. The man in the passenger seat hits me on the head with something hard and smooth, I can taste blood on my lips. After that, I sit very still and just wait for the car to stop.

After about five or seven minutes the car stops suddenly and abruptly. That's when they hit me again, on the head, then drag me out of the car and throw me onto the sand like a sack or garbage.

'What do you want from me?'

They hit me again, this time I don't even know which man, they are dressed in black and the sky above me is dark, all I can see is dim starlight and their smudged faces. I try to grab their feet, try to fight back, but one of them throws me down, then a work boot kicks me under the ribs and I scream and a billion white dots scatter before my eyes. I fall unconscious for a moment and when I open my eyes I see the stars shining right above me and the moon. But then the moon turns orange and it's no longer the moon but a face, fat and round. It opens its mouth and speaks to me in a low squeaky voice.

'You're a sticky piece of crap, aren't you. The stickiest one that I've ever stepped on,' says Vilin. He spits and the spittle lands right next to my face. 'Now let me explain it in a way you'll definitely understand.'

He kicks me in the liver. I scream, tears run over my face, I try to get up, I try to grab onto the air but they drag me down again. Someone throws a handful of sand right into my face. Then they hit me again, in the face and chest, and I try to roll into a ball and I think of Lisa and I try to picture her face, but I see Ida Lynn and her red winter coat and her lips are saying something and I try to read them but I can't.

Suddenly everything stops. I can hear them talking, something muffled, then car doors slam and engines roar and then it's all quiet. All I can hear is the tide and the city somewhere behind me in the dark.

I open my eyes. The sky above me is high like the ceiling in a gothic cathedral. I rub the blood off my face with my sleeve and spit out something that looks and tastes like black tar. I wonder why they let me go.

Then I hear a familiar sound, somewhere close by, it's a phone and it's buzzing. It's my phone. I crawl forward following the sound, past my laptop broken into two and my ripped apart backpack. Here it is. I carefully press the green button on the shattered glass.

'Hello?'

'Serge, you should have seen it, Vilin was attacked by the naked protestors, it was epic, I got some very good shots and tweeted them already.'

'Oh really?' I sigh.

'Why aren't you at the party?'

'I was, just a minute ago.'

'And you left? No wonder I saw your girlfriend getting into an elevator with Olly England.'

'If you see her, stop her.'

'Why?'

I'm trying to stand up slowly, my body is not really with me on that.

'Because it was him. He killed Rita and Tron.'

'No way.'

'Look, I can't explain now, I've got to go.'

I hang up and start walking towards the building shaped like a sail. Now it's all lit up in sparkling light.

