

She starts two weeks into term, on the wrong day, when everyone else in her class has been at the school for four years. Her plane lands on a rainy evening and while other people close their eyes during the turbulence she presses her face to the small window and sees London. London! Its smeared varicose veins below pulse with moneyed fluorescence. She is not afraid of turbulence because her father would never let anything happen to her, because he understands the fluorescence, and he is almighty.

In the car that takes her to Kings Cross, the driver, a shrivelled man with a baseball cap and a deep voice, starts talking. They are in some kind of underpass which looks as if it might go on forever and then doesn't. None of the vehicles are moving. It's all so clogged. Atherosclerotic. A heart attack waiting to happen. A—

'Yeah, I got a Zombie Slayer,' he says, slow and sonorous. 'It's a large knife, like a machete with a serrated edge. I got it with me now, if you want to see it.'

Some fight-or-flight hormone – whatever you call it in

English, the thing that makes you fat if you don't act on it – begins to burn in her but then goes out like a match fizzing in the rain. He can't really have just said that? But perhaps dying on a slick dark night in London would be interesting. Efficient. And she would not have to lose her virginity, or learn how to use eyelash curlers, or ever go home. Still, she tilts forward a little in her seat. Manages to swirl up a few more hormones. At the next red light, she could—

‘But I need you to know that I don't want to kill anyone. That's not why I carry a knife. But of course a lot of people who don't mean to kill actually do, because once you've got a knife you can't help it and . . .’

Yes; she could probably jump out. These doors are locked, right? But only so people outside can't get in. She could leave any time she wanted, like in that film. But what about her massive suitcase? This road has no obvious pavement. How would she climb over the barrier? Is this how people actually die, worrying about silly details?

‘You need to understand that of all the young people caught up in this lifestyle, ninety per cent are coming from fatherless households.’

What? OK. Right. It's not her cab driver talking; it's the radio. A call-in programme about knife crime in the city, one of the reasons her mother did not want her to come here. The useless chemicals in her body swirl like flower petals and then sink into the mysterious darkness

of her insides, along with the Diet Coke she had on the plane, and the half lemon, and the one vegan salted caramel chocolate that she hates herself for right now, even though she threw the rest of the box away.

On the train north she worries about being raped by the unshaven man sitting opposite her. Why is he even in the first-class carriage at all? She has a large Americano that she bought from the English coffee kiosk on the platform at Kings Cross. When he goes to the buffet she puts one of her long, dark-honey hairs on it, so she'll know if he's tampered with it when she goes to the toilet. But when she comes back the whole cup is gone, and there's an East Coast Train employee limping up the carriage with a large fluorescent bag that is not full of money.

\*

Her name is Natalya but at home they call her Natasha, she explains. Like in *War and Peace*. Or Tash, which is more English, apparently. Her thighs are massive. The French girl in her dorm, Tiffanie, is demonstrating how, if you stand up straight with your legs together, you should be able to see three diamonds: ankle to calf; calf to knee; and then between your thighs. She says much of this in French, which no one seems to mind. Your thighs should not touch each other anywhere, not even if you were born like that. Everyone tries it, apart from

Bianca, who is absurdly spindly and has more diamonds than you are supposed to have anyway. Tash has the right proportions, although her thighs are still massive. They are nowhere near as big as Rachel's, though. Rachel is huge and doughy, with an enormous Roman nose and a fuscous moustache that she has to wax. And then there is Lissa, who is sort of greasy all over, like she has been smeared with butter.

Natasha does not yet know her way around the school, a vast country house with attics and turrets and ghosts. It is on the edge of a village that has a church, a shop and a phone box that now functions as a miniature library with books that smell of drunk boys' piss. The school's main staircase is haunted by the White Lady, whose portrait hangs there, and student WiFi is only on for an hour a day, between six and seven. How are you supposed to do anything with only an hour a day of WiFi? The girls compose emails offline and then hit *send* in a wild stampede at six o'clock that sometimes crashes the WiFi and ruins everything for everyone.

They – the boarders, the imprisoned – are perhaps the only people left in the country who are so antiquated that they still use email, but there is no other choice. After the stampede they spend the rest of their hour downloading music, and streaming like crazy. You can't get Instagram or Snapchat offline, but there are two or three celebrities whose feeds and stories are compulsory, to whose lives an hour a day of access is not enough.

The girls are not allowed on YouTube because they are too precious. They are not allowed to upload anything, ever, because their lives are still little foil-wrapped secrets. They hear of new platforms and apps, but what are you supposed to do when you are locked up in this place with its wood panels, heavy curtains, dangerous tasselled rugs, BO and acne? Who needs group chat when you are a group that chats anyway, like IRL, like literally all the time, even in bed?

Danielle lives in the village. She spends every evening in the Year 11 common room half in the IRL group-chat and half creating capsule wardrobes on Pinterest for holidays she will never go on, to Abu Dhabi and Kenya. She goes home just before it gets dark. Tonight, in the bad corner of the common room by the ancient CD player and the old beanbags with the period stains, Lissa manages to get a search result on antique erotica, despite the 'parental' controls. For some reason the only images that make it through are of big-arsed women with enormous dark bushes, which Donya says will turn them all lesbian, which means wearing horrible boots with laces and driving your own car. There are no penises. Tits everywhere, of course. Strange stomachs that must be over 35 per cent fat. Skeletons, for some reason, looming. Fainting couches. Bianca is like a looming skeleton herself. She leans over like a damp paper straw and types something into Lissa's iPad and lo there are some cocks, although one looks like a carrot and the other is on a

boy who looks about twelve. They are line drawings, not photographs. Woodcuts, FFS.

Tiffanie gets out a Sherbet Fountain, which she calls a ‘dib-dob’. She eats all the sherbet and saves the liquorice stick to hide in Donya’s bed. Later, while trying to remove some of the grease from her forehead with a cotton wool ball, Lissa whispers to Tash that Bianca has secretly joined a Pro Ana WhatsApp group and spends all her time in the loos puking, which is why she has such bad breath. She adds that Bianca also does not TePe daily. Outside the windows is a dark silence, the dark silence of English villages in autumn, the barest sound of leaves fluttering to the ground and the last wasps sucking out the insides of the last plums, and mysteries in the depths beyond the gloom.

These two dorms are stuck together out of the way, in one of the old turrets. They have sloping ceilings and shiny wooden wardrobes with little brass keys. Tiffanie, Lissa and Natasha are in one; Donya, Rachel and Bianca are in the other. It’s as if they were put here for some deliberate reason, to make them feel different from everyone else: to make them go bad. Then again, things stored carefully in dark remote places are not supposed to go bad, are they? Like apples; and potatoes, which are apples of the ground, according to Tiffanie.

Before lights-out, Rachel has a bath, and then offers Natasha the used bath water. Is that what they do here? Should she accept to be polite? But she has never done

that. She is not polite, not any more. And just imagine what there would be in someone else's bath water. Pubes. Microbes. Bits of fuscous moustache. So gross.

'No thanks,' she says.

Rachel smiles. Natasha has passed the test. Tiffanie has Marlboro Lights hidden in the top of Donya's wardrobe, foreign ones without pictures of desperate old people's black lungs and missing toes. Does Tash want to go to the woods with them tomorrow? She does. It's damp and mossy and English, English, so fucking English. But the smoke reminds her of her father, and home. It tastes how he smells. She remembers his aftershave, and the haze of his big cars with the leather interiors, and the way he loves her more than he ever loved her mother, or his last wife. He loves her more because she is his own flesh and cannot ever betray him. Because she is new. And because she is thinner.

\*

Horse-riding is on Sunday morning, after church, a blur of girls in green felt capes and the death-ray stares of villagers who hate them. In the dorm Natasha's thighs look like prize-winning hams in her pale jodhpurs. She has to stand on her single bed to look in the wood-framed mirror on the wall and she notices then how her fat wobbles. She has never seen her fat wobble before. She is thinner than her mother but her fat still

wobbles. Is it because she is standing on a bed? But everything looks wrong here in the strange low light filtered through ancient dust and history that is different from home.

The stables are also different from the ones at home. The horsesmell is the same, but here everything is done by red-faced village girls who work in return for free rides at the end of the day. They talk all the time about the rich girls who own the horses but never ride them. They look at the girls from the school with bafflement and pity. First of all, because they are rich but don't even own horses. They have to come here and ride tired old Min and moody Lucky and restless Pablo, who has that mad look in his eyes. They can only ride once a week! No one trusts them with anything, and they aren't even allowed to tack up.

Natasha is given Pablo, possibly as some kind of prank, but she controls him easily. She knows how to talk to animals so only they can hear. To Pablo she says things like: *I know how you must feel, because you were expensive once and now you've gone a bit crazy and no one cares about you except for a lot of stable girls with bad clothes and fat mothers.* And he understands that they are the same, that maybe she too has been sent to this place to die, and so he canters for her in a way he won't for anyone else and everyone is impressed but Tash just shrugs. She still doesn't know why she was sent here, to this remote, dowdy place. There is cheap, watery hot chocolate afterwards, and village



boys, of course; village boys are everywhere. It's just that no one ever sees them.

\*

On Monday everyone starts a new diet. It's Lissa's invention.

The diet is this: wholewheat bread and Sandwich Spread only. No butter. Vegetables are allowed but no fruit. And no potatoes. Natasha has never had Sandwich Spread. It's English and gross, like cold sick. At lunchtime they ask for vegetables only and old Mrs Cuckoo the cook rolls her eyes and laughs at them and saves them extra treacle tart for dinner, which by then they all eat, except Bianca, who crumbles hers into tiny pieces that she feeds to the birds.

Late at night the girls do their secret things, after telling each other stories of the village boys. The village boys howl outside the windows after lights-out, like wolves, because they are so desperate for it. But from whom, exactly? Not Rachel, whose dark regiment of pubic hair has paraded shamelessly up to her belly button and down her thighs. Not Lissa, whose T-zone cannot be absorbed by all the cotton wool balls in the world. Not Donya, whose underarms smell of offal. Tiffanie: yes. The village boys would probably kill for Tiffanie, with her B-cup French breasts and shiny hair. Maybe that's why, when everyone is asleep, they bay at the windows like beasts; perhaps it's all for Tiffanie, or perhaps now some of the

clamour is for Natasha, with her odd purity, her dark-honey hair and blank blue eyes. Her ability to ride.

Bianca doesn't care about the village boys, and so when everyone else is asleep she sneaks out of the old servants' door and does star-jumps in the moonlight while bits of dandelion clock and fairy circles whirl in her head.

\*

The White Lady is called Princess Augusta. There are pictures of her everywhere. The biggest one is on the wall opposite the grand staircase, facing you as you come down. It depicts her in a flowing white dress, with a turban, holding a large harp between her legs, its shiny head nuzzling her right breast. The dress makes her look immense. For some reason she is wearing sandals with it, and sitting by an enormous pale classical column which reflects the light in a way that does not flatter her. The light instead picks out the complex black jewel in the turban. The jewel sucks in the light and absorbs it and hints that it is gone forever.

Tash finds Bianca at the bottom of the stairs gazing at a smaller portrait of Princess Augusta, aged fifteen, looking almost pre-Raphaelite with her halo of pale physalis hair and her pomegranate lips. The odd jewel is there, this time on a choker. Her skin is smooth and powdered like white marshmallow. She is not wearing a bra. Natasha suddenly realises that Bianca has exactly

the same halo hair and is about to say something when Bianca glides away, sits at the grand piano and starts playing Chopin.

The dark eyes in the painting are like polished lychee stones. They are saying ‘Make me.’ They are daring, dangerous eyes, especially for a fifteen-year-old. They are saying, ‘Go on, then. Do it.’ The jewel glints in the same way.

The story the girls tell on the rare nights when there are no village boys goes like this: the man who first owned this house was called Sir Brent Spencer. He had high cheekbones and a pure white beard and kept a nightingale in a turquoise cage. He was in love with Princess Augusta, but as he was a mere commoner they were not allowed to marry. Instead, they lived in sin and he died clutching a simple silver locket containing her picture and then she drowned in the lake beyond the sheep field. She had been ruined years before by the sultan who gave her the black diamond, but Sir Brent Spencer didn’t care.

Did her hair look like that while she was drowning? Did her eyes? Did the locket tarnish until it was turquoise like the bird cage and then crumble into dust?

Tash wants to ask Bianca for directions, but Bianca has her eyes shut, her narrow, ravaged body bent like a claw over the piano. Her arms are like brittle talons. She is the only girl who does not roll up her regulation green kilt to mid-thigh. She instead wears hers absurdly long, ending mid-calf.

Where is the Porter's Cabin? It's apparently where the post comes. If you have post you get a notification on your School Tablet. There is no map on the tablet, and the school is a complicated burrow of stairs and passageways and back-stairs and servants' areas, some reserved for Year 10 and some reserved for Years 12–13. Tash can't find the Year 11 stairs and then takes the wrong door down the wrong flight of stairs and ends up in a cold boot room surrounded by lacrosse sticks and carrier bags and a couple of sulky Year 10s giving her The Look. The Look says, *Who the fuck are you?* It says, *Why are you here?* It says, *You're lost, and we're not going to help you.* It says, *You're new money. You're foreign. You're a Jew. Your father is an oligarch and you don't even know what that means.*

Back up the stairs and through a different doorway and into the wide corridor that leads to the front door that nobody uses. The headmaster's study is here. Outside his door it smells of coffee and old wood. Is she allowed to be here? She isn't sure. Tash hurries down the corridor before anyone sees her, past more pictures of Princess Augusta, and a framed list of School Rules. One picture of Princess Augusta shows her in the lake, floating on her back holding a withered rose in her pale dead hands. Outside the windows are the gardens with their bright green grass and geometrical hedges, all draped with new cobwebs.

By the time Natasha gets to the Porter's Cabin, the one-hour allotted time for picking up post has passed,

but he gives it to her anyway. Why is this? Is it the way she bites her lip and looks like she might cry? But she doesn't let that feeling into her eyes. Her eyes express something else entirely.

\*

It's a letter, from Nico. The envelope is thin, and smells of his mother's cheap Russian cigarettes, the only ones you could get during communism. He's got the address of the school slightly wrong. His handwriting looks like that of a slow child who has only just learned English letters. On the back he has written his address across the seal in Russian. Natasha hates him so much. She hates him for being innocent, and Russian, and poor. She hates him for his cheaply cut thick hair, and for his pathetic aspiration to be a martial arts sensation on YouTube and eventually move to Moscow. Not Paris, not London. *Moscow*. She hates his saliva, the memory of it. His white socks.

She hates the pact they made, that they would only communicate by letter from now on, because why? Because people might read the emails? Because the servers might go down? Because anything might collapse at any time: the electricity companies owned by the oligarchs, or capitalism. Capitalism might be the next thing to go. But the postal service? Natasha hates Nico's faith in the postal service.

She hates his belief in aliens.

His cold face.

His bitten fingernails.

His small hands.

\*

Another trip to the Porter's Cabin. A parcel from Tash's father. At last. She hasn't heard from him in weeks, not since the visit when it was decided about the English school. It's a pair of boots in a wrapped box. No one in the school is allowed to order anything online: all parcels must be sent from home. But you can't buy these boots online anyway: they have long since sold out and there is a lengthy waiting list. They are from the Balenciaga shop in Moscow, where someone knows someone who . . . In Moscow, 'knowing' sometimes involves guns and threats but not in Natasha's world. Not yet. Not that she knows of. But anyway, why has he bought them in pink when she specifically asked for them in white? She sighs and asks who wants them, these useless millennial-pink sock boots in a size 39.

She thinks her father would like this: she's sure of it, in fact.

Danielle's eyes are wide. The boots cost a thousand pounds.

Natasha gives them to Tiffanie, and at six o'clock she emails her father for the right colour. She complains to

him about the email system here. About the food. It's all so fattening, she says. So English. But she will probably get into an English university; that's the main thing. And she'll try out for the sports teams but she won't develop too much muscle.

The next day a padded envelope arrives. The porter raises his eyebrows. So much post for the sexy Russian girl. Inside the envelope is a book of Chekhov's short stories in the original Russian, and hidden in a hole cut out of the story 'Peasants' is a thin, shiny, silver 5G-ready iPhone which connects to a secret network and allows its owner fast unlimited internet access for free, wherever they are in the world. It has an Apple Music account activated, which is useful, and an app called DarkWeb, which is frightening. The phone has been set up so its owner can look at literally anything: beheadings, anal penetration, how to make bombs. Not that Natasha would want to look at those things, of course. She really only wants to look at girls who are about the same shape and size as her wearing clothes she hasn't thought of wearing. And boys with longish dark hair and freckles. And fierce-looking ponies.

Sellotaped to the back of the phone is a black Amex card in her name, and a note in Russian, in handwriting she doesn't recognise, saying, 'Buy anything you need with this. You may not hear from your father for a couple of weeks, but don't worry.' The card is more solid than other credit cards: harder and more lustrous.

Natasha hides the phone and the black Amex in the secret compartment in the lid of her trunk that her father showed her before she came. ‘If you have to hide something really dangerous,’ he once told her, ‘put it in someone else’s things. Some secret place they don’t even know they have. And then say it’s theirs.’ She has thought about that a lot. When he first said it to her she didn’t know what he meant, but she does now. It’s a bit like Tiffanie always hiding cigarettes in Donya’s wardrobe.

That night Lissa goes looking for porn again through the school’s WiFi. Today, she manages to force through the parental controls some Victorian charcoal illustrations of a fat man in a top hat waving his massive dick at a frightened servant, and a woodcut of a Japanese man penetrating a peasant who has her legs tied to a broom handle. His penis is enormous.

‘Is that what they really look like?’ asks Danielle.

‘Haven’t you ever seen one?’ says Lissa.

‘Have you?’ says Danielle.

‘Of course,’ says Lissa. ‘Hasn’t everybody?’

No one actually has, except Tash. And even then, she didn’t really see it.

After lights-out everyone has something glowing under their sheets. They write to parents, siblings, attractive cousins; they listen to podcasts to help them sleep. They listen to music they have downloaded earlier. Then there are the secret things. And the things that are too banal to be made public. Tiffanie listens to French pop music



and plans her modelling career, and then her wedding, and then her funeral, which will have a botanical theme.

Bianca has downloaded *Fanny Hill* for free and has found details in it far more troubling and thrilling than anyone could discover with a search engine. But she does not tell anyone about it, because she does not really tell anyone about anything. She doesn't tell anyone about the sadness and the failure and the light inside her that is a bright white colour but is never bright or white enough. She doesn't tell them that she wants a black diamond like Princess Augusta's that will take the light away, and purify it, and make it better.

\*

It is Exeat, which is Latin for getting the fuck out of here, and means a weekend at home. Some of the girls can't go home, because home is too far, and so they stay. Tash gets a day out in London with a glamorous aunt she's never met. The aunt, Sonja, is in cyber-security, or something like that. She has her own company. It turns out that she is the one who sent the iPhone. She is Natasha's father's sister.

'Well,' says Aunt Sonja, kissing Tash on both cheeks, when she meets her at Kings Cross. 'You look adorable. So fresh and young. Like a flower. I've been absolutely dying to meet you. Why did your mother hide you away for all these years, huh?'

Aunt Sonja has a car with a driver parked outside the German Gymnasium. They are driven to a Chinese restaurant down a back street behind Tottenham Court Road that smells of incense and is full of millionaires in white jumpsuits drinking jasmine tea and eating lotus-bulb salads.

Natasha feels empty and vaguely rotten inside. To her it is older people who look best. They have wisdom, experience. They have had proper sex. They know how to use make-up. They can go out in the day and buy useful things. They do not have to go to school, and no one tells them what to do. They can flaunt their power. Get fat. Spend whole days alone and naked. They can buy horses and diamonds without having to ask anyone's permission. They can get piercings and dye their hair. They can talk to people without blushing, without the words cracking halfway through. They know who their parents are at all times. Even wrinkles are attractive to Tash because they talk of real life and age and knowledge. All she wants – what she yearns and yearns for – is knowledge. She doesn't know *anything*. Well, nothing useful. She particularly does not know how to talk to this woman, with her blow dry and smooth forehead and perfect pink nails.

Aunt Sonja looks more like a young person than old people usually do, and this means that she spends thousands of pounds, Euros and roubles each month on every tiny part of her. But nevertheless something about her

still looks wise. Is it in her eyes? Is that how you tell someone has knowledge and experience?

‘I don’t know how to talk to young people,’ says Aunt Sonja. ‘It’s been so long. I don’t even talk to clients’ children now, although I used to enjoy scaring them.’ She winks, and Tash notices that she has somehow managed to put mascara on in such a way that each long, black silken lash is separate. When Tash puts on mascara it just clumps into a massive dead squashed spider.

Tash tries to smile encouragingly; she raises her shoulders and it comes out as a shrug. Aunt Sonja has been speaking Russian but now switches to English.

‘You are not on social media?’

‘No,’ says Tash. ‘I mean, only to follow people, not to post. At school we’re not really allowed. At home I . . .’ She shrugs again. How to explain home to this person?

‘Good.’ Aunt Sonja switches back to Russian. ‘In my job I come across – used to come across, because now I do more blockchain work – billionaires’ children who had no clue. They’d put up pictures of the family castle on Instagram. The helicopter they were flown there in. Names of pets. Pictures of the interior of their bedrooms. The names of their gyms. Their personal trainers. They may as well have sent out invitations to be kidnapped.’

Natasha shudders. But she’s in the UK now. No one kidnaps anyone here. That’s what her father told her mother. He is almighty, and it is OK. Also, Tash is here

because he is super-cautious, not because he's in any sort of danger. And she has been invisible all her life so why not just stay invisible now? And prepare for the future: university at Oxford or Cambridge, followed by—

'Can I curse in front of you or are you too young?' says Aunt Sonja in English.

'We swear at school,' says Tash in Russian. Then in English: 'It's OK.'

'Fuck and cunt, or just fuck? I need to know where the boundaries are.'

'Whatever you like.' Tash blushes like a pathetic child. She wants her aunt to say cunt; then again, she doesn't. Or fuck. At least she's not saying them in Russian, which would be awful. Something about swear-words in other languages is amusing and comfortable. Tiffanie says *putain* all the time, which is French for 'prostitute' and is apparently one of their worst swear-words. *Putain, merde*, she says, every time she drops something in the dorm. *Putain mer-DE*, she says, emphasising the last syllable of the word so it sounds like *murder*. All the other girls say it now too, whenever they want to swear.

Aunt Sonja looks at one of her pink nails as if seeing it for the first time. 'What do you talk about with your friends? Boys, I suppose. Diets. Shoes. Ha!' She laughs. 'Just like we did.'

But surely it's not like it was? Despite her talk of social media, Aunt Sonja has that quaint air of someone who

grew up before memes and YouTube families. How can Tash explain that in conversations nowadays boys have been reduced to their body parts, or really just one body part, and that her friends' diets are so secret and weird that you could never, ever discuss them with an adult? Why is that? Because they are ridiculous. Because their diets, and everything they think, and everything they do, is ridiculous when compared to real life.

For Tash, real life is somewhere between a known unknown and an unknown unknown. Categories which are themselves unknown unknowns. Well, sort of. Her father said something like that once, didn't he? The first meeting or the second one. Last year.

'Do you look at porn on the internet?' asks Aunt Sonja.

She blushes. 'No. We try. But no.'

'It's corrupting. Don't. Use your iPhone to shop for clothes and cheat in exams.'

'OK.'

'Have you had a lesbian experience?'

More blushing. 'No.'

'Do it. It's underrated. But not with someone from school you have to see every day. I'll call someone. Someone discreet.'

'Nono. You really don't have to. Please. I'm—'

'Look at your beautiful skin . . . I didn't appreciate my skin when I was your age.'

A pause to finish digesting the lesbian comment. For it to be processed and removed.