

20 June

How to Survive a Long-distance Relationship When Your Boyfriend is a Super-hot Rock God

1. Download Skype, WhatsApp, Snapchat and basically every communication app you can find. Stay up all night in your panda onesie, chatting with your boyfriend until your eyelids start twitching and you absolutely have to go to sleep.
2. Whenever you wake up and miss him, listen to *Autumn Girl* on repeat.
3. Set up an app on your phone that tells you the time wherever he is so that you don't accidentally wake him at 3 a.m. for a chat. (I've done this *maybe* ten times already!)
4. Buy a calendar and mark down the number of days until you see him again (which, by the way, is now only FIVE DAYS AWAY).

5. Somehow win the lottery so you can quit school and fly to wherever he is and you don't have to be apart for this long ever again.

6. Whatever you do, do NOT go online and watch videos of super-stunning pop star Leah Brown as she dips and twerks around said boyfriend in front of millions of screaming fans.

7. And do NOT search his name so you can see all the cool stuff he's doing while you're studying for your exams.

My lovely readers, even if one day I feel like I could publish this blog in a non-private way, I never will.

Because, I know – I'm not allowed to admit to feeling insecure and less than pretty and more-than-a-little jealous when my boyfriend is the sweetest guy in the world and has given me no reason to feel this way, right?

Tell me this feeling gets better. I don't know how I'm going to survive.

Girl Offline . . . never going online xxx

★ Chapter One ★★

Five days later

It should officially be illegal for exam rooms to have a view of the sea.

How is it fair that we're stuck inside, fingers cramping from gripping a pen for two hours straight, while outside the light is dancing on the waves and it looks so bright and comforting? How am I supposed to remember who King Henry VIII's fourth wife was when the birds are singing and I swear I can hear the happy, jaunty tune of an ice-cream van nearby?

I shake my head, dispelling the vision of a deliciously soft ice-cream cone with a cheeky Flake sticking out of it, and instead try to summon up a direct link into my best friend Elliot's brain. He won't be having much trouble remembering any of these facts and figures in his history exam. I gave him the nickname Wiki, because his brain seems to contain as much knowledge as Wikipedia, whereas my revision notes disappear from my memory as fast as a Snapchat.

I sigh and try to concentrate on the exam question, but

the words swim in front of my eyes and I can't make sense of my own messy scrawl. I hope whoever has to mark it has better luck.

Choosing to take history for GCSE was never a good idea. At the time, I just picked based on what everyone else seemed to be doing. The only subject I knew I definitely had to take was photography. The truth is I have no idea what I want to be when I leave school.

'OK, everyone, pens down,' says the examiner at the front of the room.

My mouth instantly goes dry. I don't know how long I've been daydreaming for, but I know that I haven't finished answering all the questions. These exams determine what subjects I'll take next year and I've already mucked it up. My palms feel slick with sweat, and I can't hear the birds outside singing any more. All I can hear is the squawk of seagulls. It sounds like they're chanting 'Fail, fail, fail' in my ear. My stomach turns, and I feel like I might be a bit sick.

'Penny, are you coming?' I look up, and my friend and classmate Kira is waiting by my desk. The examiner has already snatched my paper and I've barely noticed.

'Yeah, just a second.' I grab my bag and slide out of my chair.

And then, as I stand up, a wave of relief takes over the nausea. No matter what the result, that's it: my final exam. I'm finished school for the year!

I have a stupid grin on my face as I high-five Kira. I feel closer to my classmates – and especially the twins, Kira and Amara – than I have in my entire time at this school. They gathered round me in the aftermath of the drama at the

beginning of the year – a solid wall of friendship against the breaking tidal wave of news. The media went into a frenzy when they found out I was dating rock star Noah Flynn, and then they discovered my blog; they unearthed private details of my life and labelled me a homewrecker, since Noah was supposedly in a relationship with mega pop star Leah Brown. It was the worst few days of my life, but my friends helped me to weather the storm. And, when it was all over, the drama had brought us together.

As we spill out into the hallway, Kira says, ‘Celebratory burgers at GBK? We’re all going there before we head to the concert. You must be so excited to see Noah again.’

A familiar flutter rises in my stomach. I’m excited – of course I am – but I’m nervous too. I haven’t seen Noah since the Easter holidays, when he spent my sixteenth birthday with me. Now we’re about to spend two weeks in each other’s company. And even though that’s the only thing I want – and the only thing I can think about – I can’t help wondering whether it will be the same.

‘I’ll catch you at the restaurant,’ I say. ‘I just have to pick a few things up from Miss Mills’s office and then head home to change.’

Kira squeezes my arm. ‘Oh god, I have to figure out what to wear too!’

I smile weakly as she rushes off, but the elation of finishing my exams has given way to a new set of nerves. The will-my-boyfriend-still-like-me kind. I know I should feel more confident that Noah likes me just the way I am, but when your first boyfriend is currently one of the most famous new musicians on the planet that’s easier said than done.

The hallways are almost deserted and the only sound is the squeak of my Converse trainers on the linoleum floor. I can't believe this is my last catch-up with my photography teacher, Miss Mills. It feels like she's been there for me a lot this year – she's probably the only person I've really opened up to about what went on last Christmas and New Year, other than my parents. Even with Elliot I sometimes hold things back. Having a set of impartial ears was something I never wanted – but also never knew I needed.

It didn't help that I had a panic attack in the small cupboard Miss Mills converted into a makeshift darkroom. It was only a couple of weeks after the news 'broke' online about Noah and me. Normally I find the darkroom soothing, but whether it was the fumes or the enclosed space – or the fact that the picture I was developing was of Noah's handsome face, a face that I wouldn't be seeing for ages – I almost passed out into the chemicals. Luckily it was after school, so no one had to see 'Panicky Penny' in action all over again, and Miss Mills made me a cup of tea and fed me biscuits until I started talking and just couldn't stop.

She's helped me ever since, but I knew what would've helped the most: my blog. Blogging had always been so liberating. Even though I had set all future posts on *Girl Online* to private after posting my final blog 'FROM FAIRY TALE TO HORROR STORY', I couldn't ignore the familiar itch that I wanted to scratch – that urge to share my thoughts with the world. *Girl Online* had been my creative and emotional outlet for over a year, and I missed it – and the community of online readers I had come to call friends. I knew, if I had just reached out to them, my blog readers would have supported me

through this, just as they supported me through the early stages of my anxiety.

But the only thing I could picture whenever I closed my eyes and dreamt of updating my blog was all the hateful people online, poised over their keyboards, waiting to tear me apart. Even though so many people were supportive and lovely to me, it only took one nasty comment to send me back into a dark spiral. I'd never felt so paralysed before, so unable to write. Normally words flowed out of my fingers like water, but everything I wrote seemed stilted and wrong. I put it all down in a journal instead, but it just didn't feel the same.

I'd tried to describe these feelings to Miss Mills. In that spiral, the people online become clowns in thick make-up – and when they smile their teeth are razor-sharp. They're like monsters, but instead of lurking in the dark they're right there for everyone to see. They're all my worst fears rolled into one. They're a million nightmares. They make me want to pack up all my things and move in with a remote tribe in the Amazon rainforest who think aeroplanes are evil spirits sent from the gods. Elliot told me about them. I bet they've never heard of Girl Online or Noah Flynn. I bet they don't know about Facebook. Or Twitter. Or viral videos that just don't ever seem to disappear.

Even if I lived only in Brighton, England, it would be OK. Most of my school has forgotten about my 'scandal', the same way they've forgotten the name of last year's *X Factor* winner. My dad says that today's news is tomorrow's fish-and-chip paper. And he's right – the novelty of finding out about my blog, and even about Noah and me, has now worn

thinner than the knees of my favourite jeans. But I don't live in a remote jungle or really even in Brighton, England. Instead, I am a citizen of Planet Internet, and right now it's the worst place in the entire world to be me – because, on the Internet, I worry that no one will ever forget.

At least one good thing has come from the Internet, though. Pegasus Girl and I swapped email addresses after she supported me, and she's gone from being *Girl Online*'s most faithful reader to one of my best friends – even though we haven't met in real life yet. After listening to me moan for the millionth time about wishing *Girl Online* still existed, she told me that I could change my blog settings so that only people I gave a password to could read what I wrote. Now she, Elliot and Miss Mills are the only people who read my ramblings, but it's much better than nothing.

I can see Miss Mills through the warped glass in her classroom door, her light brown hair tumbling forward as she leans over her marking. I knock on the door frame and she looks up at me, smiling.

'Afternoon, Penny. Are you all done for the year, then?'

I nod. 'Just finished my history exam.'

'That's great! Come on in.'

She waits until I've sat down in one of the hard plastic chairs. All around the room are my fellow students' photography projects, mounted on black foam board ready for the summer exhibition. Against Miss Mills's wishes, I specifically asked not to put my work on display. I completed all the assignments but couldn't face showing my photographs to anyone else. Most of my class also put their portfolios online, but I stopped uploading mine after Christmas. I'm terrified

someone will find it and use it to make fun of me. Instead, I've been compiling a paper portfolio and handing it in to Miss Mills each week. The physical act of creativity has been very therapeutic.

She pulls out my portfolio and hands it back to me. 'Great job, as always, Penny,' she says with a smile. 'This is our last meeting for a while, isn't it? I wanted to talk to you about your last blog. You know, it does get better.'

I shrug. Getting through each day seems to be just about all I can handle.

As if she's reading my thoughts, Miss Mills continues. 'I think you can do far more than simply survive each day. You can thrive, Penny. You've been through a lot this past school year. I'm glad you've decided to continue with your A levels – especially in photography – but I don't think you should let your choices worry you too much. You're allowed to not know what you want to do yet.'

I want to believe her, but it's hard. It feels like everyone has their lives all figured out, except me. It's not something Elliot can relate to. He knows he wants to study fashion design and he dreams of one day having his own label. I just found out that Kira wants to be a vet so she's taking biology and maths to make sure she can get into a good university. Amara is some kind of physics genius and has always wanted to be a scientist, so she is set. All I like to do is take pictures and write blog posts that I can only publish in secret to a select group of my closest friends. I don't think there's a career in that.

I know there's an ocean of possibility out there, but I'm stuck on the shore, not prepared to dive in. 'Didn't you always want to be a teacher?' I ask.

She laughs. ‘Not really. I kind of . . . fell into it. I wanted to be an archaeologist! Until I realized that archaeology isn’t about Indiana Jones-style adventuring and too often involves categorizing tiny fragments of bone for hours on end. I spent a lot of time feeling lost.’

‘That’s how I feel,’ I say. ‘Lost in my own life. And I don’t know how to use a compass. Is there GPS for your life?’

Miss Mills laughs. ‘No matter what those *other* adults might tell you, I’ll let you in on a little secret: you don’t have to know now. You’re only sixteen. Go ahead and enjoy yourself! Live your life. Turn that internal compass of yours upside down and backwards and in circles so it doesn’t know which way is up. Like I said, I fell into teaching completely by accident, but now I wouldn’t want to do any other job.’ She leans towards me and smiles. ‘So, are you looking forward to the concert tonight? It’s all anyone in my other classes could talk about. Isn’t Noah supporting The Sketch?’

I grin, glad for the change of subject. My heart lifts as I think of seeing Noah again. There’s a point when Skype and texting just don’t cut it, and that point is now. It’s also going to be the first time I’ve ever seen him perform live on stage, in front of thousands of screaming girls. ‘Yes, he’s the opening act. It’s a huge deal for him.’

‘Sounds like it. Well, you take care of yourself over the summer. And don’t forget about your prep for A-level photography.’ She gestures to my portfolio. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to exhibit? You’ve got some amazing work in here, and it deserves to be recognized.’

I shake my head. She sighs, but she knows it’s a losing battle. ‘Well, all I can say is keep on writing your blog, Penny.’

It's your talent. You know how to connect with people, and I don't want you to lose that. Make that your summer assignment from me this year, alongside your photographs. I want a full report of your travels when you get back.'

I smile, sliding the portfolio notebook into my bag. 'Thanks for all your help this year, Miss Mills.'

I think about our photography assignment for the summer. Miss Mills has asked us to look at 'alternative perspectives'; a challenge to see things from a different angle. I have no idea what I'm going to do, but I'm sure going on tour with Noah will offer up a million different opportunities.

'You're welcome, Penny.'

I leave the classroom, and am back in the deserted hallways. I feel my heart beating inside my chest as I pick my pace up to a jog, and then a run. I burst through the doors that lead outside, throw my arms wide and twirl on the front step of the school. I blush pink when I realize how cheesy that must look, but I have never been so ready for the school year to be over. Freedom has never felt so good.