



Includes an
excerpt from
*Last Little Blue
Envelope!*

13
Little Blue
Envelopes

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MAUREEN JOHNSON

13 Little Blue Envelopes

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Maureen Johnson

 HarperCollins e-books

*For Kate Schafer,
the greatest traveling companion
in the world, and a woman
who is not afraid to admit
that she occasionally can't
remember where she lives.*

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Dear Ginger,

I have never been a great follower of rules. You know that. So it's going to seem a little odd that this letter is full of rules I've written and that I need you to follow.

"Rules to what?" you have to be asking yourself. You always did ask good questions.

Remember how we used to play the "today I live in" game when you were little and used to come visit me in New York? (I think I liked "I live in Russia" best. We always played that one in winter. We'd go to see the Russian art collection at the Met, stomp through the snow in Central Park, then go to that little Russian restaurant in the Village that had those really good pickles and that weird hairless poodle who sat in the window and barked at cabs.)

I'd like to play that game one more time—except now we're going to be a little more literal. Today's game is "I live in London." Notice that I have included \$1,000 in cash in this envelope. This is for a passport, a one-way ticket from New York to London, and a backpack. (Keep a few bucks for a cab to the airport.)

Upon booking the ticket, packing the backpack, and hugging everyone good-bye, I want you to go to New York City. Specifically, I want you to go to 4th Noodle, the Chinese restaurant under my old apartment. Something is waiting there for you. Go to the airport right from there.

You will be gone for several weeks, and you will be traveling in foreign lands. These are the aforementioned rules that will guide your travels:

Rule #1: You may bring only what fits in your backpack. Don't try to fake it out with a purse or a carry-on.

Rule #2: You may not bring guidebooks, phrase books, or any kind of foreign language aid. And no journals.

Rule #3: You cannot bring extra money or credit/debit cards, traveler's checks, etc. I'll take care of all that.

Rule #4: No electronic crutches. This means no laptop, no cell phone, no music, and no camera. You can't call home or communicate with people in the U.S. by Internet telephone. Postcards and letters are acceptable and encouraged.

That's all you need to know for now. See you at 4th Noodle.

Love,

Your Runaway Aunt

A Package Like a Dumpling

As a rule, Ginny Blackstone tried to go unnoticed—something that was more or less impossible with thirty pounds (she'd weighed it) of purple-and-green backpack hanging from her back. She didn't want to think about all the people she'd bumped into while she'd been carrying it. This thing was not made for wearing around New York City. Well, *anywhere*, really...but especially the East Village of New York City on a balmy June afternoon.

And a chunk of her hair was caught under the strap on her right shoulder, so her head was also being pulled down a little. That didn't help.

It had been over two years since Ginny had last been to the 4th Noodle Penthouse. (Or "that place above the grease factory," as Ginny's parents preferred to refer to it. It wasn't entirely unfair. 4th Noodle was pretty greasy. But it was the good kind of greasy, and they had the best dumplings in the world.)

Her mental map had faded a bit in the last two years, but 4th Noodle's name also contained its address. It was on 4th Street and Avenue A. The alphabet avenues were east of the numbers, deep into the super-trendy East Village—where people smoked and wore latex and never shuffled down the street with bags the size of mailboxes strapped to their backs.

She could just see it now...the unassuming noodle shop next to Pavlova's Tarot (with the humming purple neon sign), just across the street from the pizza place with the giant mural of a rat on the side.

There was a tiny tinkle of a chime and a sharp blast of air-conditioning as Ginny opened the door. Standing behind the counter was a pixie of a woman manning three phones at once. This was Alice, the owner, and Aunt Peg's favorite neighbor. She smiled broadly when she saw Ginny and held up one finger, indicating that she should wait.

"Ginny," Alice said, hanging up two of the phones and setting down the third. "Package. Peg."

She disappeared through a bamboo curtain that covered a door into the back. Alice was Chinese but she spoke perfect English (Aunt Peg had told her so). But because she always had to get right to the point (4th Noodle did a brisk business), she spoke in halting single words.

Nothing had changed since the last time Ginny had been here. She looked up at the illuminated pictures of Chinese food, the shiny plastic visions of sesame shrimp and chicken and broccoli. They glowed, not quite tantalizingly, more radioactively. The chicken pieces were a little too glossy and orange. The sesame seeds too white and too large. The broccoli was so green it seemed to vibrate. There was the blown-up and framed picture of Rudy Giuliani standing with a glowing Alice, taken when he had shown up one day.

It was the smell, though, that was most familiar. The heavy, fatty smell of sizzling beef and potatoes and peppers and the sweetish odor of vats of steaming rice. This was the scent that seeped through Aunt Peg's floor and perfumed her. It rang such a chord in Ginny's memory that she almost swung her head around to see if Aunt Peg was standing there behind her.

But, of course, she couldn't be.

"Here," Alice said, emerging from the beaded curtain with a brown paper package in her hand. "For Ginny."

The package—an overstuffed padded brown envelope—was indeed addressed to her, Virginia Blackstone, care of Alice at 4th Noodle, New York City. It was postmarked from London and had the faintest aura of grease.

"Thanks," Ginny said, accepting the package as gracefully as she could, given that she couldn't lean over without falling face-first onto the counter.

"Say hi to Peg for me," Alice said, picking up the phone and launching straight into an order.

"Right..." Ginny nodded. "Um, sure."

Once she was out on the street, scanning Avenue A nervously for the cab she was going to hail for herself, Ginny wondered if she should have told Alice what had happened. But she was so distracted by the sheer terror that her task caused her. Cabs were yellow beasts that sped through New York, whisking people who had to *be* places to the places they had to be and leaving terrified pedestrians scrambling for cover.

No, she thought, raising a timid hand as far as she could as a herd of her prey suddenly appeared. There was no reason to tell Alice what had happened. She barely believed it herself. And besides, she had to go.

The Adventures of Aunt Peg

When Aunt Peg was Ginny's age (seventeen), she ran away from her home in New Jersey, just two weeks before she was supposed to go off to Mount Holyoke on a full scholarship. She reappeared a week later and seemed surprised by the fact that people were upset with her. She needed to think about what she wanted to accomplish in school, she explained, so she'd gone off to Maine and met some people who built hand-crafted fishing boats. Also, she wasn't going to school now, she informed everyone. She was going to take a year off and work. And she did. She gave up her scholarship and spent the next year waitressing at a big seafood restaurant in downtown Philadelphia and living with three other people in a small South Street apartment.

The next year, Aunt Peg went to a tiny college in Vermont where nobody got any grades and where she majored in painting. Ginny's mom, Aunt Peg's older sister, had a pretty clear vision of what "real" college majors included, and this was not one of them. To her, majoring in painting was an act of insanity akin to majoring in photocopying or reheating leftovers. Ginny's mom was born practical. She lived in a nice house and she had a little baby (Ginny). She encouraged her younger sister to become an accountant, like herself. Aunt Peg replied in a note that said she had picked up a minor in performance art.

As soon as she graduated, Aunt Peg went off to New York and moved into the 4th Noodle Penthouse, and there she remained. That was about the only constant in her life. Her job changed constantly. She was a manager at a major art supply store until she accidentally hit the zero one too many times on an online order form. Instead of the twenty non-returnable, custom-made Italian easels she was supposed to get, she was surprised to take delivery of two hundred. She answered phones as a temp at Trump headquarters until she happened to take a call from Donald himself. She thought it was one of her actor friends pretending to be Donald Trump—so she immediately launched into a tirade of "scumbag capitalists with bad toupees." She enjoyed recounting the experience of being escorted out of the building by two security guards. To Aunt Peg, these jobs were just the things she did until her art career took off.

Again, this caused Ginny's mother to despair over her little sister—and she always tried to remind Ginny that though she should love her aunt, she shouldn't try to *be* like her. There was never really any danger of this. Ginny was just too well behaved, too normal for that ever to be an issue. Still, she loved her visits to Aunt Peg's. Though they were erratic and all too infrequent, they were also magical experiences during which all normal rules of living were cast aside. Dinner didn't have to be balanced and on the table at six—it could be Afghan kebabs and black sesame ice cream at midnight. Evenings weren't spent in front of the TV. Sometimes they wandered through costume

shops and boutiques, trying on the most expensive and outrageous things they could find—things Ginny would have been mortally embarrassed to put on around anyone else, and frequently things pricey that she felt like she needed permission to touch them. (“It’s a store,” Aunt Peg would say as she put on the five-hundred-dollar, saucer-sized sunglasses or the huge feathered hat. “The stuff is here to try on.”)

The best part about Aunt Peg was that when Ginny was around her, she felt more interesting. She wasn’t quiet and dutiful. She was louder. Aunt Peg made her different. And the promise had always been that Aunt Peg would be there—throughout high school, throughout college—to guide Ginny. “That’s when you’ll need me,” Aunt Peg always said.

One day, in November of Ginny’s sophomore year, Aunt Peg’s phone stopped working. Ginny’s mom sighed and figured the bill hadn’t been paid. So she and Ginny got in the car to drive up to New York to see what was going on. The apartment above 4th Noodle was vacant. The super told them that Aunt Peg had moved out several days before, leaving no forwarding address. There was a little note, though, stuck under the welcome mat. It read: *Something I just have to do. Be in touch soon.*

At first, no one was too concerned. It was assumed that this was just another Aunt Peg escapade. A month went by. Then two. Then the spring semester was over. Then it was summer. Aunt Peg was simply gone. Then came a few postcards, basic assurances that she was doing well. They were postmarked from a variety of places—England, France, Italy—but they contained no explanations.

So Aunt Peg was exactly the kind of person who would send her to England alone, with a package from a Chinese restaurant. That wasn’t so odd.

The odd part was that Aunt Peg had been dead for three months.

That last fact was a little hard to swallow. Aunt Peg was the most lively person Ginny had ever known. She was also only thirty-five years old. That number was stuck in Ginny’s head because her mother kept repeating it over and over. Only thirty-five. Lively thirty-five-year-olds weren’t supposed to die. But Aunt Peg had. The phone call had come from a doctor in England explaining that Aunt Peg had developed cancer—that it had come quickly, that everything had been tried but nothing could be done.

The news...the illness...it was all very distant to Ginny. Somehow, she’d never really believed it. Aunt Peg was still out there somewhere in her mind. And Ginny was somehow speeding toward her on this plane. Only Aunt Peg could make something like this happen. Not that Ginny hadn’t had to do her part. First, she’d had to convince herself that she could follow what seemed like an obvious flight of insanity from an aunt who wasn’t known for her reliability. Once she’d done that, she had to convince her parents of the same thing. Major international treaties had been negotiated in less time.

But now she was here. No going back now.

The plane was cold. Very cold. The lights were down, and it was completely black outside the small windows. Everyone but Ginny seemed to be asleep, including the people to either side of her. She couldn’t move without waking them up. Ginny wrapped herself in the tiny and ineffectual airline blanket and clutched the package to her chest. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to open it yet. Instead, she’d spent most of the night looking out of her darkened airplane window at a long shadow and several blinking lights, at first thinking she was looking at the coast of New Jersey and then maybe Iceland or Ireland. It wasn’t until the dawn, when they were just about to land, that she saw that the whole time she’d been looking at the wing.

Below them, through a cottony veil of clouds, was a patchwork of green squares. Land. The plane was actually going to *land*, and they were going to make her *get out*. In a *foreign country*. Ginny had never been anywhere more exotic than Florida, and nowhere by herself.

She pried the package from her own grip and set it on her lap. The time had clearly come to open it. Time to find out what Aunt Peg had planned for her.

She pulled open the seal and reached inside.

~~The package contained a collection of envelopes much like the first. They were all blue. They~~
were made of heavy paper. Good quality. The kind from one of those boutique paper stores. The front
of each envelope was either illustrated in pen and ink or watercolor, and they were bundled together
with an overstretched rubber band that had been doubled around them.

More importantly, they were each marked with a number, starting with two and running to
thirteen. Envelope #2 had an illustration of a bottle, with a label that read OPEN ME ON THE PLANE.

So she did.

Dear Ginger,

How was 4th Noodle? It's been a while, huh? I hope you had some ginger dumplings for me.

I'm well aware that I owe you an explanation about a lot of things, Gin. But let me start by telling you about my life in New York, before I left, two years ago.

I guess you know that I caught a lot of flak from your mom (because she cares for her wayward little sister) for never having a "real job," and not being married, and not having kids and a house and a dog. But I was okay with that. I thought I was doing things right and other people were doing them wrong.

One November day, though, I was riding on the subway up to my new temp job. That bling guy with the accordion who rides the 6 train was playing the Godfather theme song right in my ear, just like he did every other time in my life I've ever taken the 6. And then I got off at 33rd Street and bought myself a cup of burned, stale coffee from the closest deli for 89 cents, just like I did every other time I went for a temp job.

That day I was going to a job in an office in the Empire State Building. I have to confess to you, Gin...I get a little romantic about the old Empire State. Just looking at it makes me want to play some Frank Sinatra tunes and sway a little. I have a crush on a building. I'd been in there several times but never to work. I always knew there were offices in there, but that fact never penetrated me really. You don't work in the Empire State Building. You propose in the Empire State Building. You sneak a flask up there and raise a toast to the whole city of New York.

And as I walked up to it and realized that I was about to enter that beautiful building to file or make copies—I stopped. Too quickly, actually. The guy behind me walked right into me.

Something had seriously gone wrong if I was going into the Empire State for that.

That was how it all started, Gin. It was right there on the 33rd Street sidewalk. I never went to work that day. I turned around, got back on the 6, and went home. As much as I loved my apartment, something in me was saying...it's time! Time to go! Like that rabbit in Alice in Wonderland who runs past saying, "I'm late!"

Late for what, I couldn't really tell you. But this feeling was so intense, I couldn't shake it. I called in sick. I wandered around my apartment in circles. Something wasn't right about what I was doing. I'd been comfortable in my apartment for too long. I was doing boring jobs.

I thought about all the artists I'd admired. What did they do? Where did they live? Well, for the most part, they lived in Europe.

What if I just went to Europe? Right then? The people I admired had sometimes starved and scraped their way along, but it had helped them create. I wanted to create.

By that night, I had purchased my ticket to London. I borrowed \$500 from a friend to do it.

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