

On and Off the Trans-Siberian Train: Teenagers

Adolescents who don't fit in with most of their peers.

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Dima, Yekaterinburg

I grew up in Yekaterinburg, I'm transgender. It all started because I thought I liked to dress like a boy. Then I started thinking about it more, and at first I decided that I was agender, something in the middle of both sexes. Then, about a year ago, I realized that I wasn't happy with how I am. This realization came slowly. I felt like if I were to continue ignoring it, it wouldn't get any better. It's when you look in the mirror and you don't see yourself. It's me, but something is off. It's not the same feeling you have when you notice you are overweight. You see that you're just not the person that you could be. It's difficult, because it really exhausts you psychologically every single day.

When I met my new friends a year ago, I introduced myself as Dima for the first time and asked them to use male pronouns. I was 12. Up until then I wore girls clothes, I didn't feel like

that was wrong because I was a child. I have a traditional family: mom, dad, brother. My parents are great. Both my mom and my dad are good people. They're always ready to help. I love them. My parents don't know about this, about my other life. At home and at school people call me by my official name, Sveta. I have some acquaintances that I asked to refer to me as masculine. They accepted that. Sometimes they use the right pronouns, and sometimes I correct them.

I buy clothes from the boy's department and from time to time I steal clothes from my dad. He gave me one jacket because he didn't like it. Right now I'm wearing his jacket. At school I only feel uncomfortable when people call me Sveta or use the wrong pronouns. I'm not really friends with any of my classmates, it's not like I'm an outcast, I'm more just quiet. I don't really want to tell them about this because no one will care. And if everyone knows still keeps on calling me the wrong name knowing that I don't like it – that's worse than if they just don't know. I don't have the strength to correct them all the time. If I start a new life somewhere, that would make everything much easier. Soon I will visit a university fair with my mom to check out some international colleges with free tuition.

I have two friends who are going through something similar – one in Yekaterinburg and one in St. Petersburg. I met the friend from St. Petersburg online, we met on V Kontakte (*Editor's Note: Russian Facebook*) in February. He's older than me, he's about 20. We've never met in person.

When people call me Sveta, I feel disappointed. I'm not disappointed in the people, but I just feel like something isn't right. I don't feel like I'm in the right place. With friends, I can be myself. Dima and Sveta aren't two different beings. I use Dima, a name that makes me feel comfortable, with my friends.

Trans people can choose whether they want an operation or not. It is only up to them to decide. If they feel like they're not themselves in their body, just somehow off, you can call them trans even if they have not had an operation. I don't feel at home in my body. I've thought about the possibility of having an operation. As far as I know, it starts with hormone therapy. Then you can do the surgery. I'm sure that my friends would support me, they know that it's not an easy process. I don't know about my parents. I think at that point I would move out and leave. In Russia you can get prescriptions for hormones, but I think you can only do the operation somewhere out of the country.

All the time, I'm thinking about how I look. A big issue for me is which locker room I should go into. The locker room is assigned for women, and I don't assign myself to that category. I can change at home and just leave my things in the locker room. I'm not happy with either option. The variant of using the men's toilets, when I can manage it, that works. In malls, when I'm not there with my parents, I go to the men's bathrooms.

I think I'm bisexual. I was dating a girl, she lives in Estonia, so we only talked online or with video calls. We stopped dating because we started talking less. I understand her really well and now I love her like a best friend.

The Mesto47 team also met Dima's friends at a meet up of the group "Twenty One Pilots" in Ekaterinburg. We met at the square 1905, about 10 teenagers from 13-17 were at the meeting. They were immediately noticeable: they got our attention because of bright yellow tape. The

whole group had tape on them from head to toe. We got to know them, put tape on ourselves as well, and headed with them to a park, where we spent all day. I embarrass myself with the first question.

Marina: What is a meet-up?

Alena: (pink hair, 17 years old) A meet-up is a gathering of people who are connected by something. In this case it's the group Twenty One Pilots. We have a lot of common interests. When you come to a meet-up, it's like you're with friends that you've known forever. The first time it's strange, but then with each meeting, you feel more at home. You already know a lot of people. Two years ago I was scared to come, and I ended up coming to a meet-up for the first time a year ago. I've been friends with these guys for a year and they're like a second family to me. I've gotten less shy, less scared of talking to different people. Before I was really closed and I was scared of asking people for things, I would be almost hysterical, completely shaky. Now I can ask people for things with no problems.

Dima: It was music that brought me to my friends, and I actually started to play music, which helps you to feel music even more and let out your emotions. They're different feelings, playing or listening to music. You can listen to music and understand what the writer was feeling, or you can play music, and think about what you're feeling.

We sing a few songs, first in English and then in Russian. As usual, everyone is very interested in Georg, the foreigner in our group. Everyone tries to talk to him, but is shy and asks us to translate. One of the girls takes his arm and gives him a henna tattoo of the word СЧАСТЬЕ, happiness. We talk about happiness as the fulfillment of dreams.

Marina: What are your dreams?

Lyosha, 16 years old: My dream is to start a band. I already know a bassist and a keyboard player. I already have the name: the last day of summer. Although it's up for discussion.

Alena: I don't know how to describe it. But after studying, I don't want to live like my parents. They can never just go somewhere, have fun, unwind. Most of the time they sit at home and watch TV. I don't want to just sit around like that, I can't stand monotony, I always need to go somewhere, even if it's just going to a different city for two days. I can't really formulate this into a dream, but not to just sit in one place, not to have every day be the exact same.

Alina, 15 years old: About different generations...I wanted to go to Moscow, actually in February, when I wanted to go to a Twenty One Pilots concert, I'd already bought the tickets, but my parents said I couldn't go. They said that they'd heard so many stories about women who had gone to Moscow for work and they'd been recruited into ISIS or taken into slavery, or raped and killed. They thought that would also happen to me, so I couldn't go.

Dima: My dream is to move out of the country, because I have some friends there, that's a plus, and also because in Russia there are too many stereotypes. There's a ton of homophobia here, sexism, and all of that and it's really hard. There are more possibilities in different countries. Actually, a dream that I've now already fulfilled is to talk with a native English speaker, because I'm really trying to learn English, I watch movies. Actually it's because of Twenty One Pilots that I got interested in English. But what's missing is practice. I have no

one to talk to.

The teenagers tell us that right now we're at the very place, where the people of Ekaterinburg fought against the Russian Orthodox Church. It's this square, and a symbolic place for this interview.

Marina: Do you get along well with some of your other peers at school?

Everyone: Noooooooooo!

Lyosha: People separate into groups. For example, more influential people with money, people who just get along and have the same interests....

Alena: I hated my class. At school, no one actually touched each other but in the air there was just an oppressive atmosphere. At recess I would also run to my friends in other classes. I was so happy to graduate.

At school we had "notes" like who drank, who smoked. In the square outside there was even a place where people would meet up for cigarettes. They didn't really do anything in particular. Sometimes there were interesting people there, but they still were living really boringly. They also were cutting, they had scars. There wasn't a single one of them with unscarred hands: they like to suffer a lot.

Aisu, 14 years old: About peers...I've been in four different schools, and I was bullied in three of them. In the first two it was just because of my nationality. My classmates were Nazis. In the others, if someone insults you, and you don't say anything back, then they just see you as a perfect target and start making fun of you to raise their own self-esteem. Right now I'm lucky in my class. I can't say that they're friendly, but they're tolerant and they just don't care that much about each other. We can get along and joke about the same topics. With the other classes it's not great. You can stand there and someone will just push you, just because you exist. I tried complaining, I told my parents. They went to the school and talked to the teachers, but after that people just made fun of me even more. Saying that I was a snitch. They think that this is essentially the way to get cool. Like look at me, I'm awesome, I smoke and I bully people.

Alena: Also about school, you know, when you see it in American shows, how they bully people...they stick someone's head in a toilet. Here, it's more like that people are talking about you, that they start rumors, they bully you online.

Aisu: But sometimes they also hit people. Once a boy took a running start and kicked me in the stomach. I was like....what did I do to deserve this.

Alena: At my school no one really hits each other, maybe just the boys. It's more verbal. Emotional violence.

Interestingly, the entire time at the park, none of the teenagers took out a beer or a cigarette. When we asked them about this, they all categorically said that that type of thing isn't what brings them together. They're brought together by music and talking about the same things. A conversation topic that kept coming up was parents.

Alena: We try to shake up our parents. I fight with my mom about homophobia. It's especially difficult if the child has a different orientation or does something that goes against their parents norms or societal norms. At their age I can't convince them of things, but I question them, I tell them some facts, and when they don't have any more arguments, then for me it's a victory, I've won today.

Aisu: I in general try not to talk about that kind of stuff with my parents. Or any stuff.

Arina: Three years ago I started talking to my mom, saying that the way I see it, it's not necessary to be homophobic. At the beginning, she almost wanted to kick me out, but now she already stopped saying insulting things about people. Like for example if a girl is walking and she comments like "wow, why is that girl dressed like that." So I believe that you can change people, because in their soul, they know that it's good. I told her, that you can't hate love, you need to accept it as their life. She started understanding that I'm right, she had no arguments left and it got better.

Aisu: Talking about optimism. When you say that you're trying to be an optimist, they tell you that you have to be a realist, or that you don't understand real life.

Lyosha: And when you saw that you're a realist, then they ask you why are you so sad.

Aisu: Or then if you complain about some problems, they tell you, that you're exaggerating. They tell you that other people have it worse, that they have real problems. They really think that I'm just exaggerating and exaggerating. And now I really know people who now have serious psychological problems.

We leave the group, we take a picture all together and then hug them goodbye. Some of the kids hide faces with their hands for the photos and Dima goes to the side to not be in the photo. After the meeting, we walk along the river and we talk about how it's great that these teenagers were able to find each other. How they're different from other people. How at school and at home people don't understand them, but this group accepts each other exactly as they are.

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