

HAUNTED

FOUR TALES
OF OBSESSION



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Dear Jenny (*after Amanda Palmer*)

We told them the fire had nothing to do with us. We could convince our parents, our teachers, the police and, eventually, even ourselves of that, very easily. They were faced with the alibi of a group of normal fifteen-year-olds versus the protests of an unstable loner with no regard for personal hygiene. Our version of events was, by default, gospel. The intention had only ever been to get Jenny expelled. Five years later, they still haven't let her out.

The smoke was a thick blanket on the horizon, visible from the other side of town. The image still flickers in my mind every night as I chase sleep. I see my proper little private school being chewed up by the flames, all the years of history within the building's walls smouldering and dying amidst the chaos, the swarm of locals running down the hill to watch the elegant building in its final moments, the sirens and the fire brigade working desperately to stifle the flames. We stood back, regarding our work with the same triumphant disdain an artist would a particularly disturbing painting. As planned, Jenny was nowhere to be seen.

They demolished the gutted remains eventually. No attempt was made to replace it. It's all fenced off now, charred remains and pieces of brick still lying among the overgrown grass. It is its own little hinterland; the ground zero of Helsey. Hell-by-Sea, we called it back in school. I had to come back. I have to see Jenny.

Nothing has changed. It is still your standard small village, with one main road and no train station. Everyone carefully documents one another's business. We moved away shortly after the fire, my family and me. This place is full of crazy inbred hill-billies, my parents said. They wanted to protect me. I've not been able to look them in the eye since.

As I begin the pathway up the hill back towards the main road, I remember the time we made Jenny lick the soles of our shoes. We were twelve, thirteen, maybe; we cornered her in the girls' bathroom at break. Once, she came into school with patchy pink hair, the poor result of trying to dye it with food colouring. Lucy spat a big wad of gum into it and she had to go to the school nurse to get it cut out. My stomach knots. I clench my fists in my pockets.

The layout of the village is still firmly rooted in my memory, with the little residential roads, their names all ending in "Close" or "Gardens." I see the quaint little nursing home opposite the fire station, the greengrocers which always smells like soil. I keep my head down, catching glimpses of people I recognise out of the corner of my eye. Some of them are looking at me. They don't smile. They don't say hello. I tell myself there's no way they can know anything. I smell fish and seawater.

It doesn't take me long to reach my destination. We used to go down there a lot when

we were bored, in the hope that we might see some drama. It's in a secluded area of the village, down a little dirt path next to a park where they take them sometimes to get air. They call it the Beach House now, but if you look really closely you can still see the faded carving of "HELSEY LUNATIC ASYLUM" above the doorway. I press the buzzer.

* * *

It's far less terrifying inside than I imagined. I was thinking brick walls, cells and figures wandering the halls like zombies, glassy-eyed and emaciated. The walls are plastered with artwork and poems by the patients, next to photographs of the staff with their names underneath.

I come to a living room area with a TV mounted on the wall and a coffee table littered with battered magazines before a sofa. I jump as I see a girl sitting on the floor in the corner, eyes resting on an old fashioned telephone beside her. I creep over, trying not to startle her. Gently, I say, "Excuse me."

She glances up briefly, then back to the phone. "I'm waiting for a call."

"I can see that." The phone isn't plugged in. I notice it doesn't even have a wire. "Sorry. I just wondered if you knew where visitors are supposed to go."

When she looks up again, I notice her face is fully made up. Her hair hangs lankly around her powder-caked cheeks, thick with grease. "I get lots of visitors," she says. "I don't know where they go." When she raises her hand to tuck a stray piece of hair behind her ear, her sleeve slackens, revealing a collection of bumpy, discoloured scars. I hope she doesn't notice my grimace.

I force a smile instead. "Do you know Jenny?"

"No." She shifts away from me, closer to the phone. "Leave me alone."

I return to the corridor. Finally I spot an office area at the other end, protected by a window. Another girl, her back to me, bangs on the glass, whilst a long-suffering nurse on the other side says something I can't decipher. I move closer.

The girl begins to shout. "Look at my skin! I need to go outside."

"There's nobody to take you out at the moment," I hear the nurse say.

"I need some fucking *sun*." More banging. "Look how white I am. I'll sue!"

I smile at the nurse cautiously as she catches my eye, afraid to get too close. "Just give me one moment, Jenny," she says.

The girl turns. It's her. Older, slimmer, hair free of food colouring; the pathetic face that once evoked such scorn in me has aged, hardened, now possessing a wild, almost feral quality, but amidst this is an odd sort of prettiness. Catching me looking, she scowls. "What?"

she says. “Shocked at how pale I am? It’s fucking neglect, I’m telling you.”

I’m astounded. Doesn’t she recognise me?

The nurse shoots her a quick glare, like a parent silently reminding a child to say please or thank you. “That’s enough,” she says. She turns to me. “Can I help you?”

I motion for the nurse to come closer. I watch Jenny out of the corner of my eye as I whisper who I intend to visit.

* * *

The nurse lets me take Jenny to the park.

We sit on a bench beside the bushes. Five boys are playing football down the other end, all sardonic put-downs and rowdy laughter. The occasional dog-walker passes.

Nothing changes here. This could be now, it could be five years ago; even Jenny could be anybody. Giant sunglasses obscure most of her face. She smokes compulsively. I fiddle with the zip on my jacket. Neither of us says a word. I am so quiet and unobtrusive, and as usual nobody knows I am losing my mind.

It has to be now.

“Jenny,” I begin. “I...”

“Were we friends?” she cuts in.

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“At school. Were we friends?”

I can’t make out her expression behind her sunglasses. I go back to fiddling with my zip as I say, “I feel like you don’t know who I am.”

“Bastards,” she mutters. “They didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

She smiles, almost apologetically. “I don’t remember anything,” she says. “I remember being really little, like, infant school, then nothing. Nothing until the fire.”

Carefully, I say, “The fire?”

She draws a breath then says, very quickly, “I burned down my school. Our school, maybe.” Her hand trembles a little as she reaches for another cigarette. Another is still burning between her fingers. “I don’t remember that either. I see a psychiatrist. We’re still trying to get to the bottom of it.” I don’t realise I’m staring at her until she laughs nervously, giving me a little nudge. “You knew, right?” she says.

I nod slowly. I can feel my eyes beginning to glisten. “None of this is fair,” is all I can say. “I’m so sorry...”

“Oh, don’t start.” She throws her cigarette to the floor, instantly putting the new one

to her lips. "I'm sick of pity parties."

She doesn't know a thing. She won't remember all the times I called her a freak, a loser, a slut, all those throwaway words that made her spend much of her early teens in hiding; the times we threw her schoolbooks over the fence, only to laugh at her trying to climb over it to get them. No one ever found out. She was too afraid.

I swallow violently at the growing lump in my throat. "Yes," I say. "We were friends. That's why I'm here."

"Then why have you never come to see me before?" she asks. "And if we were friends, why don't you know about the fire?"

"I do know about the fire," I say.

"Then why did I do it?" She stares into her lap, and for just a moment I see the old Jenny; forlorn, vulnerable. Easy enough a target to just invite my cruelty. I shudder. "You must know, if we went to the same school..."

"Yes, but I moved away," I say. "Years ago."

"Then why don't I remember you?" she snaps. "How old were we?"

"I don't know!" Everything makes sense now; why they never gave a second thought to our insistence that Jenny was the culprit. Why they never investigated further, why no one ever questioned us; why I've been free all these years, left to drive myself insane with guilt and disgust. To hate myself for even having the idea, for hearing our laughter, mine, Lucy's, and the others, as I lit that match. They thought Jenny was just... mad. And now, she is. She's lost her mind, quite literally, because of us. It's only fair that I am beginning to do the same.

"You're lying." She points her cigarette at me, accusingly. "Don't fucking lie to me! Who are you? Some kind of undercover therapist, I bet..."

"I'm not, I promise."

"Are you recording this?" She grabs my handbag from my shoulder; I let it go. I have nothing to hide.

"I'm just an old friend..."

"Bollocks." A passing dog-walker turns to look, increasing his pace when he catches my eye. The boys are still lost in their game. Jenny throws items out of my bag: my purse, my keys, my phone; I hastily pick them up again, remembering the days when I would do this to her. Frustrated, she throws my bag to the floor. I grab it.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Get me out of here," she says.

"What?"

She huffs, kicking at the dry, sandy mud around the bench. My bag is covered in it. “You say you’re my friend,” she says quietly. “So help me find out what happened.”

I chew my lip nervously. I can tell her exactly what happened. That if it weren’t for me, we wouldn’t be standing here. Instead, I say, “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can!” She whips her head behind her suddenly. “Come on! We have to go now. They’re probably spying on us out of the window, you know.”

I stare at her disbelievingly from my position on the ground. “Can’t you just sign yourself out?” I finally say. “You’re old enough.”

“I’m under section, you fucking retard.” She growls, like an agitated bulldog, her uniquely pretty face taking on a sinister ugliness as she glares down at me. “Let’s just go, okay?”

“Your parents,” I say desperately. “Can’t your parents get you out?”

She startles me as she laughs. “My parents? My middle class, Catholic, pillars of the community parents? They’ve been out of the picture a long time.”

“But how?” I have to. I know I do. “Where are we supposed to go?”

“Anywhere.” She extends her hand to me, helping me up. I brush the sandy mud off of my knees. “Anywhere we want.” She’s grinning, a renewed excitement in those feral eyes. “We’ll be like Thelma and Louise. It’ll be great.” Sheepishly brushing the remaining mud off my bag, she adds, “Sorry about that. I can’t control my temper sometimes.”

“Trust me,” I say, with a grimace, “I know the feeling.”

And then we’re running. We’re running towards the high street, and we’re laughing, and it’s like we really are old friends after all, as we double over and struggle to catch our breath. People are staring, but we don’t care. Jenny throws her arms around me. “Thank you,” she says.

I can’t believe I’m hugging Jenny. If only my 14-year-old self could see me now, I think bitterly. “What now?” I ask.

“I guess we just fuck off. Where do you live?” Before I can speak she cuts in, “Actually, no. That’s the first place they’ll look.” She frowns as she thinks. “I don’t know. Let’s just get on the bus.” It’s not a fantastic escape plan – only one bus comes to Helsey, and it only goes to the nearest town, Richester – but it will have to do.

Jenny lights another cigarette as we head towards the bus stop. Even after all this time, I remember where it is, the only one in the entire village. I notice her hands are trembling. She makes a little noise in her throat every few seconds, a nervous squeak.

“So,” I say, suddenly intrigued, “have they told you what’s actually wrong with

you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me," she says. "They can put all the names on it they like."

"What names?"

"Nothing is wrong," she repeats. "I'm just sad all the time, and I don't know why. I don't know any more about me than you do."

"How do you know I don't know anything?"

"If this is going to work, you need to stop fucking with me." She stops, extending her hand. "Give me your purse." I hesitate. "Look, I'm not going to steal your fucking identity. Just let me..." She trails off. "Oh, shit." She grabs my wrist. I gasp as she begins to run, yanking me along with her.

"Where are we going?"

"Shut up," she hisses. "You wanna draw attention to us?!"

We're doing enough of that already. Heads are turning up and down the quiet high street. Jenny drags me down a side alley next to the bank. I prop myself up against the brick wall, struggling to breathe.

Jenny peers around the corner. "Shit," she mutters. "Shit, shit..."

"What?" She doesn't respond. "What is it, Jenny?"

"I thought I saw my dad." She kicks out at the wall. "Oh, shit. I don't know what to do."

"It's okay..."

"How the fuck is it okay?" Her breaths are escalating, the way they used to do when we cornered her. We would laugh scornfully. I close my eyes, trying to stifle the memory. It plays in my head, over and over, like a stuck record, many more beginning to penetrate my mind; all those awful things I said to her, how she was absent the night of the fire because we told her if we ever saw her outside of school, we'd kill her. How once, on the only occasion when she dared to stand up to me, I almost did, pushing her down the stairs. How she'd never tell. How this is all my fault.

"Go," I say. I throw my bag at her. "Take my stuff and go."

She stares down at it from behind her huge glasses, her breaths still coming thick and sharp. "I..."

"Go!"

She is still for a moment. Then, slowly, she nods. "I don't know what to say," she whispers. She moves forward to embrace me again, but I push her away.

"Don't."

She looks surprised, but stops. "I'll never forget this," she says.

As I watch her walk away, I know what I have to do. I head back towards the Beach House.