

## JENNY'S LETTER

When I was a child,  
My mother read me Fairy tales,  
Of a Princess in distress,  
And a Hero that never failed,  
All villains wore black,  
And Heroes wore white,  
There was no cause for alarm,  
Because Good always won the fight,  
So, I grew up expecting,  
Everyone to wear their true faces,  
And if I did what was right,  
Things would fall into their places,  
I believed when I stumbled,  
Someone would come catch me,  
I believed in Kindness,  
I believed in Mercy,  
But people are not color coded,

And behind masks they hide,

When I stumble, I fall,

I don't understand disguise,

Surrounded by darkness,

Life loses its luster,

Fairy Tales aren't real,

Hope harder to muster.

Sealed in plastic, papers bound together, seasons will change, but the plastic remains.

We love stories of winners, stories of Heroes and Heroines. We are raised from childhood on stories of beautiful princesses locked in towers, about to be devoured by a dragon...stolen by the villain. Women, who through no fault of their own, are thrust into the most dire of circumstances and ultimately saved. The prince always comes, someone always rescues them, the message is decoded, a secret passageway is revealed. Whatever conditions are needed to ensure their safety are met, and they are safe. They always have faith, they are always kind, and they truly believe that if they have enough faith and do the right thing, they will be saved because good always wins.

These are the stories we wrap ourselves in. The ideals we insulate ourselves with. We have created an entire culture based on these constructs. We have wired ourselves in such a way that karma, balance, laws of attraction, good, even the idea of love have become a part of our very core.

How we cling to these tenets, as if our very survival is dependant on this. We tell and retell these stories, we create Facebook memes, people have even created fortunes touting the variations of these tenets in a plethora of self help and prosperity movements.

But I have a question.

What about the other women. The ones no one comes for. The ones who also keep their faith, are kind to everyone, they do the right thing even when it is the hardest thing and are still devoured.

We talk about the moment when the princess realises that she is saved. We celebrate it and cinematically we exalt it with precise camera angles, rapturous lighting and a beautifully written score. We avoid the moment when the other princess who fought the dragon herself, until at the end of her strength, stares up into his bottomless eyes, and realises that help would not be coming. Not for her.

She is forgotten. She is unheard. She was never heard.

Stories are rarely written about a princess who fought like a warrior against legions of enemies, all the while begging for help before eventually falling. But if we dare, we must explain that she made a fatal error, that she failed an important task, if she could have held out for just one more minute, we must at all cost, blame her. My Pastor once told me that for every Daniel saved from the mouth of the lion, there were thousands of nameless men and woman torn apart. Everyone wants to be a Daniel.

They say that for every one hundred query letters a writer sends out, they should receive an estimated ten letters asking for more material. I have sent out seven hundred

letters, every once in a while, I would receive a form rejection. I kept them. They proved that I existed.

For every winner, someone needs to lose. I almost won once, but it turned out that there had been a malfunction, so I didn't. Perhaps balance is less individualistic and more general.

It was on one of those nights that I met him. The sleepless nights where the odds, the statistics, the near successes that were snatched just as I reached out my hand, the hopelessness...the loneliness, the speech. They had joined forces and they were circling. Like a storm, a hurricane battering against my heart...my faith. Like vultures. All of it was swimming around in my head, there had to be an answer, a path or a light of some kind. I had fallen into the hole, and I could find no rope.

I looked over at my children, each having a difficult night, so they had crawled in my bed and now lay on either side of me. In the distance I heard the sounds of sports of some kind playing on the television in the living room.

I desperately wanted a cigarette, but having left them in my favorite bag, I would have to venture out past my husband. He might look up at me, he might not acknowledge me. I wasn't sure where he would sway that night. And what was worse, I wasn't sure what would hurt more, the ignoring of my presence, or the turning of his disinterested, dismissive and disapproving eyes upon me before returning them to whatever sport had captured his attention.

I then remembered that I had left a pack with exactly one cigarette out in the garden area. I could crawl through the window in my son's room and never even have to feel him.

I chose the window. And it wasn't nearly as hard as I had expected. As a child my mother had habitually forgotten that she had children, so my sister and I had learned how to pick locks, pop window screens soundlessly and without damage, all at a very young age. It is curious what skills we remember.

As I looked up from lighting my cigarette, I saw a man. He was sitting in the chair at the end of my garden table, looking at me. It was dark out and the only illumination came from the moon and the streetlights. He had dark hair, his clothes were a sort of brown, but cut in a fashion I had never seen before. He was out of place in a way I could not describe.

He appeared quite calm for a man sitting in a chair at perhaps one o'clock in the morning, in a stranger's yard no less. He did not even appear surprised to have seen me, a fully grown woman dressed in pajamas and a robe, crawl out from a window to claim a simple cigarette. He regarded me silently, his face displaying no emotion.

We regarded each other for a long moment.

"What are you doing in my yard?" I finally asked.

"Smoking will kill you." He replied simply.

"Yeah, just not quick enough." It was my standard response when confronted by the probable consequences of my addiction.

“You want to die.” The phrasing was acknowledging, not questioning.

“Sometimes.” I mumbled. “Usually.”

He looked intently into my eyes.

“Yes.” I managed. And it was strange, although this was my very own home and this strange man had no reason or right to be there, he was by all means trespassing, I was the one feeling as if I had to justify my actions, justify my feelings.

I sat in the chair opposite him, it seemed the only reasonable thing to do.

He made a steeple with his hands and looked over it at me. “Why is it that you want to die?” He asked finally.

“I am not truly alive.” The words escaped without thought, like champagne bursting from a corked bottle. I was appalled by my forthrightness. “It was stolen.”

He nodded in such a way that I could not help but assume that he understood. “And when will this end?”

I shook my head helplessly. “I don’t know, I don’t know. But it has to, things can’t go on like this. I am bankrupt.”

And I knew that *he* would understand that I meant bankrupt not merely in monetary terms. I was bankrupt of hope, of joy, I could no longer see light, I could no longer dream. I’d forgotten how to laugh.

He leaned back in his chair and inspected me. My face, my expression, my posture, my tears. Tears that I had not even noticed sliding down my cheek until that very moment.

He didn't inspect me the way my husband did, with a rapid up and down, assessing my attractive worth. And on this he would decide how he would treat me at any given time. If I passed his inspection, he would perhaps grace me with a smile, make a crude statement or gesture. If I didn't.... This strange man was looking at something else, but I was not quite sure what.

I didn't know what to do, and the tears kept running down my cheek. "There is this river." I stammered.

"Take me to your river." He gently cut in.

And so I did. I don't remember any conversation, he silently walked beside me to the river. We walked three blocks and I in bare feet, without even saying a word. And just when I thought he may have been a figment of my imagination he took my hand and helped me down the riverbank until we were both standing at the very shore. His hand felt warm. His hand felt strong.

Together we sat on the shore, side by side. We sat there without saying a word. I watched the ripples dance about with him. This man that I did not know. This man who had appeared in my yard without regard for property nor customary rules of society.

This man that I was not afraid of. I did not ask his name.

I awoke the next morning fearing I may have had a most perplexing dream. And then I noticed the mud on my feet.

Mornings are always chaotic.

I realised that I had driven the children to school in my satin pajamas. I looked down and noticed dried dirt and what looked like a grass stain on the leg. I was so startled by the appearance as to what appeared to be more evidence that I had truly taken a nocturnal stroll down the road, that I didn't notice Patricia knocking on my window.

Startled by the sound, I nearly knocked her over as I opened the door instead of the window. She took a deep breath, but the expression on her face led me to believe that perhaps I looked as uneasy as I felt.

"Are you alright?" She asked.

"Yes, of course I am fine." I replied automatically with an equally automatic smile. "I didn't sleep well last night." Indicating my soiled sleepwear with a sheepish shrug.

"Meet me around the corner...halfway down the street." She nodded rapidly.

"Absolutely." I agreed, having replayed this scenario frequently at regular intervals.

I drove around the corner and stopped at the appointed spot, unlocked the doors and waited for Patricia to get in.

She slid in and I handed her a cigarette, which was after all why she had asked me to park away from the school. She then commenced with her newest litany of comical complaints against her husband. The husband that for all appearances adored her and would have brought her the moon had she but asked. He was also the husband who did not know that she secretly smoked and had decided quite offensively to work from home that day.

I did understand her unspoken request.



“Well, I do think I was going to go through Sadie’s clothes today, making a donation pile. I could use some help but it would take much of the afternoon....would Andrew object?” I handed her a cough drop to mask the scent of her secret smoking.

“I can be there at noon.” She hugged me and left the car. Patricia did indeed join me several times throughout the afternoon between her shopping shifts. She did not however sort any clothing. I hadn’t expected her to.

Aside from the secret smoking sessions with Patricia, not a single person spoke with me that day. The children made their typical demands and my husband looked through me, even to the point of banging into me in his attempt to brush past, without even acknowledging the collision.

I stumbled from the impact; but I don’t believe anyone had noticed.

But I was accustomed to this.

I looked out the window but did not see the dark-haired man, so I crawled out the window again to smoke reflectively in my yard.

Though, as I looked up, he had appeared. Dressed the same as the night before, he sat at the end of my table. I regarded him curiously for a moment, his attention was not directed towards myself.

I followed his gaze to Miranda. My plant. Perhaps remnants of what used to be a plant would be more accurate. She had been badly battered and was now reduced from a flourishing, vibrant plant, to stalks, salvaged and paced in a glass bowl of water.

“Her name is Miranda. I put her in this glass bowl of water to root. She needed a quiet place to grow, it was only for a short while.” I explained. “The rest of her had died and I had hoped to save her...somehow.”

I looked up at him and he gestured for me to continue. “I think I left her too long. Now she is trapped. And I am afraid.”

He folded his hands and leaned back in his chair.

“She rooted. But I forgot about her, I became distracted, now her roots encase the bowl, they are shaped around the bowl. I forgot about her, and she can no longer live on water and sunshine. Her glass sanctuary has become a prison, but if I try and release her, she may die anyway. If I pull her out, I risk ripping vital roots out of her, if I smash the bowl, she may be so damaged she will never recover.”

“She will die if you leave her in her glass prison.” He acknowledged.

“Yes.” I agreed sadly.

“She may die if you attempt to release her.” He recalled quietly.

I nodded glumly; the fate of the forgotten plant weighed heavily on me.

“She does not look so very happy.” He observed.

“She isn’t, she is desperately unhappy, but she is afraid and paralysed, she can no longer see a way out. She tries to smile but she was betrayed by the very thing she thought would offer peace.”

And I realised that we were no longer speaking of the ill-fated Miranda.

“Peace.” He whispered quietly.

“Peace.” I repeated. “Sometimes we make decisions, decisions that seem safe. We are tired, we are sick of fighting, sick of games, tired of getting hurt. We need to feel safe. We want to feel like someone has our back. We want to feel as if we exist. And it is at these exhausted and desolate moments, glass bowls offering fresh water and sunlight envelope us, and for a time we believe again. They trick us, you see? Because water and sunshine can only sustain us for so long, we need substance. And by the time we realise our safety was merely illusionary, we are trapped in the bowl. It cleverly encases us, and we die slowly by starvation and strangulation.”

He drummed his long fingers against the table without looking up.

“I have always had a soft spot for Anne Boleyn.” I realised.

“Have you.” He looked up this time.

“Upon learning the identity of her executioner, she made a witty comment with regards to her ex-husband having been thoughtful enough to have requested a skilled swordsman. It is the humor I appreciate.”

He nodded. “Shall we?” He inquired as he stood and extended his hand.

And I knew, we would walk down to the river. We would sit side by side and we would not need words.

I placed my hand in his.

The next morning, I was shocked to discover that I did not recognise the woman looking back at me. She was a stranger. My hands brushed her hair, my hands painted her face, but I did not know her. My thoughts drifted back to the woman I had known years before, we resembled each other, but that woman had had dreams, that woman knew joy, that woman believed that the world was open before her and she had passion and felt purpose. That woman believed in love. That woman was dead.

I had no idea who I was, nor how this had happened. And I missed my father, he was the only person who had ever loved me. But he was gone, and so was love.

I loved my children, and beneath their childish demands and insults, I knew that they did love me. But beyond that, I was bereft. I had once, in a fleeting moment of strength, thought that maybe I could leave, and I could find love. Someone who saw me, someone who allowed me to exist.

But I no longer believe in love.

That night I poured a glass of wine and tried to explain my panic and sense of disconnect to the dark-haired man.

“You adapt, I suppose. You exist under the Influence.”

He cast a side long look at me.

“Under the Influence.” I nodded. “Not to be confused with consuming a box of wine. Under the influence of a being that excels at smothering your fire. They walk into a room, and they are so oppressive, stifling. You find yourself shrinking for survival.

Shrinking until you no longer resemble who you once were, you can no longer recall what you were, you begin to question if you ever were.”

He nodded, as if encouraging me to explain further.

“Existing isn’t living. If one forces you to merely exist, having destroyed all else inside of you, have they not truly killed you? Should not living be more than a heart that continues to beat?”

His eyes, usually so impassive, seemed almost to show a form of empathy.

“I remember a story, a fable from my childhood. A story about a small creature, I don’t recall what it was, but this creature had secured an underground den in which to hibernate in. Just as the first snow appeared, a porcupine poked their head in and begged for hospitality, for sanctuary from the harsh winter that was now upon them. Now, the small creature was not overjoyed at the thought of sharing their den, but the kindness in their heart prompted them to agree to the arrangement with one condition; that the porcupine stay in the far corner of the den, to keep their quills as far away from their reluctant roommate as possible.”

“Now this arrangement worked quite nicely for the first while. But as the winter progressed and the surface became uninhabitable...the porcupine spread out. The creature was shocked, and quite angry I would suppose as well as he reminded the porcupine of their agreement, to which the porcupine responded, ‘I am quite comfortable here, but if you choose to leave, I will not stop you.’

I plucked a single blade of grass and rolled it between my fingers. “That winter was one of the harshest on record.”

“What did the small creature decide upon?” He asked.

“I don’t know, either choice was death.”

“Trapped.” He nodded.

“Trapped.” I agreed.

We sat close together for some time after that, as the breeze gently played with our hair.

It was an obligatory evening. The evenings that we pretend we have choices with regards to, but silently acknowledge that we, in fact, do not. The evenings that instead of uniting, leave you feeling raw, as if someone had stolen something of great value from you.

Infinite sadness. I waited until everyone in the house was asleep, and I silently crept into my yard. Expecting the dark-haired man without a name, yet knowing I could never speak of the preceding events.

And he was there for me. Reclining in the chair at the end of my garden table, it seemed the moon bathed him in soft light, I was not unhappy to find him.

We gazed at each other for what seemed like an uncommonly long time, I found myself wondering what it was he was watching in me. If this feeling of great loss, of shame, showed upon my face. I could not read his.

“Are you going to ask if I am okay?” I finally queried.

“No.” He replied simply without a change in his expression.

“I suppose that is best.” I nodded. “I don’t know why we ask questions like that. We are obliged to say ‘Yes.’ Even if we if we are falling apart and breathing seems difficult. No one expects us to say we aren’t, and I believe most people breathe a secret sigh of relief when we assure them that we are fine. I think it’s a societal obligation to ask, and although many will deny it, it is also a societal norm to assure the asker and relieve them of any burdensome obligation. Or perhaps it is simply easier to reply that we are fine, because explaining our pain is so daunting, often humiliating....sometimes it is just too heavy for someone else to handle.”

He gestured to the seat next to his and I sat. He reached out and took my hand in both of his, holding it safely as I cried without saying a word.

When I was ready, he walked me to the door and I silently crept back into my home, safe to sleep. I don’t recall him saying another word that evening.

He would never accept a glass of wine, nor any food from me. I had grown to accept this, but I wanted to give back. I was never sure how. I was beginning to need more. I began to realise, that I need him.

“I looked to the side, and I noticed an ant and a spider.” I began one evening. “The ant was somewhat larger than the ants I am accustomed to seeing in my yard. The spider, I am not fond of spiders you see, the spider was an evil looking thing, black with thicker legs, very predatory in appearance. They were engaged in a fight, and the ant...the ant was fighting fiercely. And I stared at them, spiders horrify me, but the ant...the ant was

giving his all and the spider seemed to be retreating. For the first time in what seemed like years, I felt hope. The ant was fighting so very valiantly and it appeared that he would win and suddenly it felt so personal. As if this fight taking place not two feet from me, was enacted for my benefit. Which of course is absurd, but I none the less was enrapt, daring to hope. I was invested.”

I looked back up at him, and he nodded for me to continue. Although his face was expressionless, I did not find it to be emotionless. I knew he was listening, and perhaps more importantly, understanding. He understood me on a level that no one I had ever encountered could.

“It was at that moment that I felt the switch, a change in the air around me. I glanced back down and the spider, it seems, had been holding back, and with a sudden burst of hidden strength, he reached out and easily overpowered the ant. It was as if the spider had been playing with the ant, allowing the ant to believe, to allow hope in and when the spider grew bored, he crushed him. It was shocking, so very abrupt. It lingers.”

“I should have saved the ant. I should have swiped the spider away.” I wiped a tear away from my cheek. “But I thought the ant was going to win, he looked like he was winning. I thought he was going to get away, that he was saved, freedom was mere seconds away. I thought, ‘For once, for once it would work out, that committing yourself to survival would be enough. Maybe sometimes there is a chance. But the spider tricked us, and right when we truly believed, the spider crushed us. I had a chance and I failed. I should have saved the ant.”

“Did the ant ask for help?” He asked me gently.



“Where do ants look, when they need help?”

“They look up.”

And he didn't say another word that night. He simply sat next to me, comforting me merely by his presence. I leaned against him and allowed him to bear some of my weight.

Throughout the summer, I would step out and speak with this man. Every night. This man that never told me his name, where he came from, nor what he wanted from me. Any attempt to query him, an attempt to understand him, was always skillfully evaded. He was there for me, but I could not be there for him.

There was a wall between us, one that for reasons beyond my understanding, I could not scale. And although it hurt, this distance between us, his presence, his warm hands and his silent acceptance, they were all I had. He was all I had.

And then one evening he wasn't there. He was not there the next either. It was shocking how his absence felt as a knife severing my soul.

I could not even call out his name for he had never given it to me.

Indescribable pain.

In desperation, I released Miranda. I smashed her bowl, my face wet with endless tears, and potted her in soil. I did everything I could to ensure her survival, I watered her, monitored her sunlight, fed her the best fertiliser. But it was too late.

Miranda could no longer survive. I waited every night for the dark-haired man to return as I watched Miranda and I shrivel.

I no longer noticed my husband's veiled insults, the silence of my telephone unless I initiated a call. I no longer felt pain when I realised that I had only been spoken to because someone needed something from me, I was no longer there. I truly had ceased to exist.

I sat at my garden table and watched Miranda die. It was over and I had lost. I carefully wrapped papers in plastic and walked down the street to the river as he and I had so many times before. Only this time I walked alone.