

I let it go to voicemail the first time—and the second time, and the third time. I answered the phone on the fourth time but only because my husband told me to. I put the phone on speaker and Owen started blathering some hysterical nonsense before I could even give him some lame excuse for answering on the fourth call: “It all ends tonight. I need to see you before I end it all.”

“What?” I asked, looking over at my husband, Jackson.

“I’m so close to the answer; but I need to see you to know for sure.”

“What answer?” I demanded as I watched Jackson roll his eyes exhaustedly.

“I can *feel* them, Jenny. At first they just crawled all over me but now they’re underneath my skin, eating away at my organs.” He paused, taking in a few frenzied deep breaths, “How soon can you get here?”

I looked over at Jackson as I made a series of exasperated gestures that could only convey my complete bewilderment.

My husband nodded, encouragingly—as if I had a moral obligation to be Owen’s suicide watch.

“I suppose I could be there in 20 minutes?” I was more asking Jackson than I was asking Owen but Jackson nodded again.

“Get here as soon as possible.” Owen muttered before abruptly hanging up the phone.

I looked over at Jackson. “Why am I doing this?”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “Because I don’t want to deal with you moping around and laying in bed all day, when your pathetic, strung out ex-boyfriend blows his brains out.” Jackson paused, “I’d hate to put up with what you’d turn into if someone else’s suicide was on your hands.”

Thanks to some divine power, I summoned the will to numbly pack a bra and a pair of jeans from the dirty clothes hamper. At 8:15 pm, I left the house wearing a Pantera shirt, gray sweatpants, and lolita sunglasses. I was very much disenchanted with existence and I wanted everyone to know it—especially Owen, since this was the *seventh* time in the last four months he’d pulled this.

The sun was just starting to set as I began my drive to Owen’s place. The sky was a sorbet of pastel colors as the stars were just beginning to wake up and the dry air was beginning to cool. I rolled the windows down and stuck my hand out the window, feeling a summer wind as I drove by a skyline of corporate offices. So, this is what my life has amounted to thus far, I thought. My purpose, my meaning, my source of sustenance is in one of those enormous edifices. How sad, I found myself thinking.

Owen was standing in his driveway when I got to his house. I wasn’t really concerned until I saw him: he was shoeless, shirtless, and wearing pants that were unzipped and unbuttoned. His blond hair was nightmarishly disheveled and his once-blue eyes had turned to a pallid gray. His scraggly beard matched his bloodshot eyes and the bags underneath them, completing the look.

“Jenny, Jenny, Jenny!” He gasped as he *pulled* me out of my car, “Jenny you have to see this; and tell me honestly if you see it, okay?” He said, leading me to his house.

An overwhelming smell of ammonia nearly knocked me unconscious as I entered Owen’s living room. I had known Owen for over ten years and I had never seen his place so immaculately clean. His house was usually just a tad filthy but, on that night, I would have eaten off the bathroom floor.

“Dude, why does your house smell like a hospital?”

“Huh? Never mind. I’ll explain later. Tell me something, can you tell how much weight I’ve lost?” He babbled excitedly.

“You don’t look like you’ve lost any.” I said as he began taking off his pants. “What are you doing?”

“But you can see it in my legs, right?”

I shook my head; his legs looked like I expected for a man of his size. “What the *hell* are you doing?” I snapped as he began removing his underwear.

“Jenny, look at me, you really don’t notice *anything* different about my body?”

“I’m not looking at you until you at least put on some underwear.” I said with my eyes closed and my head turned. “Tell me when you’ve put on some—” before I could finish my sentence, he effortlessly scooped me up and threw me over his shoulder.

“What do you weigh? 100? 110?” Owen asked as he carried me towards the stairs.

“104. Owen, you’re *really* scaring me. What are you doing?” I nearly started crying.

Owen stopped on the stairs. “Jenny, I’m just showing you something. I would never, ever hurt you but you have to see this; it’s really freaking me out.” He said with some oddly calming docile despondency.

We entered the bathroom at the top of the stairs where he finally set me down. “Get on the scale.”

“105.8” I said, looking down at the scale.

Owen peered over my shoulder before moving me. “Okay, now, watch this.” He said as he stepped on the scale. “What does it say?”

“152.4” I said, “Also, you don’t look any thinner. Can you please put some clothes on?”

He looked at me with some profound confusion, “I’m looking at it and it says 110.2.”

I didn’t know what to say because I was staring at the same scale as Owen and it very clearly read 152.4. I looked at Owen and, at 5’10”, there was no way that he weighed 110.2. After all the years, I had gotten into the habit of just saying whatever came to my mind when I was around Owen: “I don’t know what to tell you.” I mumbled uncertainly.

This was unlike anything I had ever dealt with regarding Owen. I was used to him screaming, crying, attempting self harm, excessively drinking; one time I even watched him snort Lortab off of a machete. This was something I had never seen. He was standing on the scale, totally naked, staring at the numbers and muttering some fantastic gibberish to himself when I realized that I had to get him out of the house before he seriously hurt himself.

“Let’s go for a drive.” I offered. “If you’re feeling up to it, we can stop by a coffee shop and you can tell me about the answer that you’re getting closer to.”

He nodded silently and I breathed a sigh of relief at the prospect of getting him into a public place.

It was nearly 9:45 before I got Owen in the car. I immediately got on the southbound freeway. I figured I could turn around as soon as he calmed down. He sat restlessly in the passenger seat, constantly whispering and fidgeting with his hands. I tried to ask him the usual questions, “Do you want to talk about it?”, “Would you like to listen to some music?”, etc. All I could get out of him was jerky head movements and mumbling. Finally, I decided to put my foot down because Owen was 28 and totally capable of containing himself.

“Owen, I’m going to a coffee shop in Nephi. It’s about an hour away. Do you think you can calm down in an hour?”

He mumbled something. I’m pretty sure he told me, “I don’t know”. But I’ve known Owen long enough to know that I can expect him to function like an adult if I force him into

situations where he can't strip down to nothing and snort opiates off of weapons. We continued on the drive for another 45 minutes and Owen became less agitated with every mile I drove. After nearly an hour, he began speaking.

"What's with the sunglasses?" He almost whispered.

"My head hurts." I murmured listlessly.

"But it's nighttime." He paused, waiting for an answer. We both knew what I'd say and he already knew all the excuses I had. So I just sat there, silently focusing on the road.

"Jenny, do you have a black eye?" He demanded.

Silence. Wasn't this night supposed to be about him anyway?

"Jenny, answer me, did Jackson hit you again?" He yelled.

I took my glasses off. "See? It's not that bad." I mumbled as I pulled into the parking lot of what must be the *only* coffee shop in Nephi. "I'm going to change into the jeans I packed; wait for me outside the car."

"Leave the sunglasses on though; I don't want people to think I did that to you." He said as he got out of the car.

I changed frantically, hoping that thirty seconds wasn't enough time for him to run off and commit various acts of insanity. Thankfully, he just stood with his back against the driver's side door.

Owen had calmed down quite a bit by the time we actually sat down with our drinks. He was so calm that I was beginning to wonder if I'd eventually regret buying him coffee. I could tell something was still wrong: his eyes languidly danced around the room before falling to the table in a dull, vacant stare. His mouth would twitch as if he were about to release whatever he'd been holding back.

"When I was naked, did you see them?" His voice trembled.

"See what?"

"The maggots."

I silently shook my head. "No." I mumbled.

"I saw one for the first time on the morning after my 28th birthday party. I was in the bathroom fixing my hair when I noticed one crawling out of a pore on my cheek. At first I thought it was pus but, when I wiped it away, it was moving. I dropped acid the night before and I thought I was still high." He whispered

I tucked my legs underneath me and leaned closer as Owen took a long sip of coffee.

"I started to taste an awful taste in my mouth, constantly—nothing I ate or drank could get rid of it. My breath is atrocious but nobody else can smell it. A few weeks ago, I began losing weight. When I look in the mirror, I see a skeleton staring back at me, Jenny. *A damn skeleton!*" He took another sip of coffee and then looked around the room suspiciously, "*But nobody else sees it,*" he whispered.

"Have you seen—" I looked up at him and saw his eager eyes looking into mine. I immediately realized now was not the time to ask if he's seen a doctor. "Have you seen anything else?" I trembled.

"It's mostly the maggots. Jenny, I can *feel* them. First they were just crawling all over me: crawling up my arms, down my spine...Now I can see them under my skin, munching away at my organs. Munching, munching, munching..." His voice trailed off as his eyes began to dart around the room.

"Anything else?" I asked, hoping to get him to focus on something instead of spiraling out of control in a coffee shop right before closing time.

“I hear flies buzzing. Constantly buzzing. I tore apart my entire house, cleaning every square inch of it, trying to find the source.” He paused and stared into his cup, “Only to find it wasn’t the house that was attracting the flies.” He grinned eerily as he stared into his coffee cup, “It was me.”

Before I could faint out of blind terror and concern, Owen looked up at me with tranquil eyes, “You know, I think I’m ready to go home.” He sighed.

In the moment, he seemed so calm and collected, I naively acquiesced. The tranquility followed us out into the car. Perhaps I should have known better; getting Owen to calm down had never been so sudden.

As I pulled out of the parking lot, my thoughts were beginning to drift when I saw Owen pull something from his waistband.

My heart sank.

“Owen? Is that a gun?”

“Go South. I have a lot to tell you and not a lot of time.”

I nodded while tears began welling up in my eyes. “Can we make a deal?” I choked, “Once we get on the highway, can you put the gun away?”

“Fine. Why does Jackson hit you? What do you fight about?” He demanded.

“Uh, I, uhm,” I stuttered nervously, totally unable to focus on anything other than the gun in Owen’s hand.

“Jenny, I have a gun!” He yelled.

“I’m depressed!” I blurted out, as tears burst from my eyes and my entire body began shaking. “I’m depressed and anxious all the time. I still have night terrors about that night. I don’t want to live anymore.” I sobbed.

“Jackson hits you because you have PTSD?”

“It’s the vaginismus more than anything. I have flashbacks and sometimes we just can’t do it; can you please put the gun away? I’m getting on the highway now.”

“What would you do if I weren’t around to protect you? What is your plan, Jenny? I need to know!” He shouted.

“I don’t know!” I shouted louder. “I’m not sure. He’s not controlling, or possessive, or abusive like in the movies. He just loses his temper when I go through depressive episodes and stuff.” I began to cry all over again.

Owen stuffed the gun in his waistband and looked out the window as I convulsively blubbered. The immense darkness began to swallow my car as I drove on into the stygian bleakness ahead of us. I looked out the window for stars whenever the emotions began to overwhelm me; yet I couldn’t see any over the interior lights of my car. I looked over at Owen. He was still staring out the window intently, staring as if he was searching for something and on the verge of finding it. I waited with trepidation bordering on dread for Owen to break the silence. He must have been quiet for half an hour before he began speaking.

“I used to know why I was doing all this.” He spoke clearly and without agitation, “Just one high was enough to live for. It didn’t Oweener if it was alcohol, or dextromethorphan, or ecstasy: I was living for whatever took me out of reality.”

I listened earnestly, too unnerved to reply.

“But somewhere along the way, it became...not enough. I dumped Hailey because she got fat and started nagging me about marriage. I tried to lose myself in more drugs and meaningless hook-ups. It was never enough.”

“Yeah, well, marriage is never enough.” I mumbled.

“Jenny, I am dying and everything I do is totally meaningless.”

“We wouldn’t have been meaningless.” I whispered, almost to myself.

“I know.” He mumbled.

That’s when I wanted to tell him. At this point in my life, I spent half of most nights staring at the ceiling after I had woken up screaming. I thought about dying constantly and I obsessively cleaned the house to numb the existential anguish. I was able to get out of bed early every morning but only because I had already been awake for hours, just thinking about death. I fretted incessantly about the idea that my life was but a conglomeration of meaningless tasks, a finite to-do list before walking into my grave. I wanted to say it. I was too frightened to speak so I simply looked at him. And he knew. We were like that, Owen and I.

“Get off on the next exit, we need to find a hotel.”

I exited toward the nearest town. The town was so full of lights, I finally felt safe enough to speak. “I need to tell Jackson we’re getting a hotel. You can even watch as I’m texting him; he just needs to know.”

“Well, from what you’ve told me, he already knows you physically can’t cheat on him.”

I breathed a heavy sigh, “Yes, but he should still know where I am. He might get worried and call the cops or something.”

I could tell by the way Owen was acting that he was wholly annoyed with my devotion to Jackson but instead of saying all that, he just said, “Fine. Once we get in the hotel room.”

We pulled into the first motel we saw with “vacancy” still illuminated. It was one of those retro motels from the 1950’s. The room was just as vintage and retro as the exterior. In fact, whole thing smelled like 1954 and I found myself casually wondering if Owen was going to murder me in the hotel. Thinking back on the car ride, I realized that I wasn’t quite ready to die but I still felt a constant, exhausting disenchantment with life.

I turned towards Owen as he shut the door, “Okay, what now?”

He pulled out a pill bottle from his pocket and tossed it to me. “I’ve been saving this for you; take all three and take the round pill too.”

“What is it?” I asked, looking at the scratched off label.

“It’s the best night of sleep you’ll ever have.” He said nonchalantly as he sat on the bed looking up at me.

“Look, I’m not ready to die just yet.” I said, staring at the pills.

“I know. They won’t kill you, they’ll just help you sleep and I can see it in your eyes, you haven’t slept in months.” He collapsed into the bed and sighed deeply, “It’s just percocet and promethazine. Will you please chill out?”

I shrugged and tossed the pills into my mouth, feeling a mixture of hope and sadness. I was hoping it really was oxycodone and promethazine. And I was sad that he didn’t cut the promethazine in half—I could have passed out before peaking. I collapsed onto the bed and looked over at Owen and watched him stare up at the ceiling just like I had done on so many sleepless nights. I felt a strange sort of sadness come over us; the raw emotion of the evening came to an apex at that moment and, lying there numb, tears began to roll down my cheeks.

“What is the answer you’re so close to?” I whispered amidst a muffled cry.

He rolled over, facing me. “Jenny,” he said, wiping the tears off of my cheeks, “there’s nothing left for me here.”

I shook my head in denial.

Tears began to well up in Owen’s eyes as well, “Jenny, I’m rotting away here.”

I knew what he was saying and, I also knew by the way he looked at me everything he wasn't saying. I don't know if it was a decade's worth of rage and anguish, or if it was just the emotional inertia of the evening, but something inside of me exploded in a chaotic fashion I hardly thought myself capable of. I immediately jumped out of the bed and screamed at him in a way I had never done before: "You can't just leave me here!" was all I got out before a fit of writhing sobbing possessed me. "Without you, I'd be all alone in this world." I fell to the floor, hysterically wailing.

"Jenny," He whispered. "Jenny?" He scooped me up from the floor and pulled me onto the bed as I continued my uncontrollable weeping. "Jenny, I can't stay here. I'm miserable. You don't want me to be miserable, do you?"

I responded only with continued crying.

Owen put his arms around me, "I love you, Jenny. I always have."

"Then you can't leave me!". I began to cry harder, but the drugs kicked in. The constant, looming anxiety that filled every extremity with tension slowly dissipated and a dull, warming sensation filled the vacancy. I was suddenly ambushed by an immense fatigue; I put my head on Owen's chest, "Please don't ever leave me." I sniffled as reality gradually faded into a dream.

I drifted off into some distant memory. It was one of those nights we were both struggling with finding a reason to be alive. Owen and I were in my old car and I was staring out the window, hypnotized by some languid self-absorption.

"Hey, Jenny, do you know what would make us feel better?"

"High West?"

"What if, after we get on the freeway, we just sing 'Dear Maria, Count Me In' at the top of our lungs? Do you think that would make us feel better?"

We looked like Las Vegas: I had on one of those short red dresses and Owen was wearing some cartoonish purple paisley suit jacket and aviators. I think I even let him wear my grandmother's rosary that night for the sake of panache—may she rest in peace. We rolled down all the windows and I stuck my bare legs out, kicking them around the temperate, April air.

"Cause I got your picture, I'm coming with you, dear Maria, count me in. There's a story at the bottom of this bottle and I'm the pen." We screamed (sang?) into the night.

I opened my eyes to Owen walking out the motel door. I closed my eyes, desperately trying to fall back into the dream I had been having.

But a gunshot pulled me back to life.