

## Jenny's Room

By William Johnson

The guardrails dig uncomfortably into her arm as she leans against it, the late autumn breeze carrying the smell of fish and water up to her from far below. The town looks beautiful from up here, nestled against the sea and golden in the light of the setting sun. The fisheries, shops and homes are the size of dollhouses and feel just as unreal.

Her car idles beside her with the door open, *Girl in Red* blaring from the stereo. She just needs a minute to steady her hands.

For the hundredth time, she rereads the message from Tess: "*Come home, Alyssa. The door is always open.*" Then her reply from a thousand kilometers away: "OK."

But with every day she waited, home felt further and further, until an entire ocean was in the way.

But she has to return.

She has to know.

"*I'm at the lookout.*" Alyssa texts. "*I don't know about this.*"

It takes Tess too long to reply. Alyssa sits against a tree staring at the empty parking lot and the occasional cars that drive past without a care in the world.

She's just a coward. She should run away again.

Her phone's ping breaks the peaceful quiet.

"*I'm on my way. Don't go anywhere.*"

She sighs. It's too late to tell her friend not to come. It's out of her hands now.

A bright red SUV pulls into the lot and Tess steps out.

Alyssa can't find words. Her mouth has gone dry. It feels like a lifetime has passed since she last saw her friend.

"You got a car," Alyssa finally gets out.

"I did."

She should say something to diffuse this awkwardness between them, but the only thing Alyssa finds to say is, "Red was Jenny's favourite colour."

"Yeah. I like it. It reminds me of her. I miss her, Alyssa. And I've missed you too."

Suddenly the distance between them is too much. Alyssa sinks into her friend's hug. "I know I should have come back months ago."

"You should have," Tess agrees, her voice hurt.

Neither of them speak during the drive to town. Alyssa had expected there would be so much to say between them, catching up after first year university and hobbies and music and *life*, and yet she only stares at the trees lining the road as the car winds downhill.

"I know you were closer with her than I was," Tess says softly once they reach the pale buildings of the town proper.

"We were a trio."

"That didn't mean it had to end with Jennifer. We could still have been friends, Alyssa."

"I'm sorry," Alyssa says.

“You know, it feels weird to drive you for once. It’s kind of nicer than sitting in the back.” Tess’s fingers drum audibly against the steering wheel at a stoplight. A group of laughing teens walk past her window, the sunlight glinting off their hair.

Alyssa looks away. “Well I wish our normal driver was available.”

After too many seconds, Tess agrees.

The water gleams brightly and sailboats float lazily on the water. That had been them, not long before Jenny died.

Jenny had always craved speed. She would send her family's little motorboat tearing across the water, a wild light on her face as the wind pulled at her hair. Years ago she’d told Alyssa that those were the few moments where she’d truly felt alive.

*What, speeding in a boat?*

*Going too fast with you.*

Now the memory only makes her want to throw up.

“Wait, where are we going? My house is that way.”

“There’s something you need to see,” Tess says grimly. “Something of Jennifer’s.”

Familiar narrow streets roll past, the same oaks sway in the breeze. She’s caught up in the current now, and it’s flowing to where it always has.

Always to Jenny.

Her family’s small brick house stands among golden flowers and autumn leaves at the end of the road.

“Maybe this is too soon,” Tess says, “but I think you need to see this now.”

“See what?”

“What she left for you.”

Alyssa’s hand freezes on the car door. Her throat is heavy with unshed tears and the question that had been eating at her all year.

What if Jenny blamed *her*?

But she can’t leave Tess again. She can’t leave Jenny.

“I’m tired of running,” Alyssa breathes, opening the car door.

No one answers her knock, and the driveway is empty. But that’s okay. She unlocks the front door with the key on her necklace, cringing slightly as she does. Jenny’s parents wouldn’t appreciate this intrusion, but she can’t wait for them to return either.

With Tess waiting in the car, she ascends the steps alone. The wallpaper is just as it was then; the same photos hang on the wall. A dozen Jennys smile at her from everywhere, pulling her like gravity to the bedroom at the top of the stairs even as the grief building within her screams at her to stop.

Jenny’s room has been carefully perfected since her death. All its jaggedness – all traces of *her* – washed away. Clothes that had once covered the floor were neatly folded and tucked away; the desk organised and ready to be used.

Alyssa laughs and realises she’s crying. Jenny would never have lived like this. This room is sterile, *dead*.

Except for the Polaroid on the pressed bedsheets, which is very much alive.

It’s her, asleep, leaning on Jenny’s shoulder. An infinitely rare look of contentment on her friend’s face. At that moment Alyssa finally lets the thought go.

She runs her thumb along Jenny's face. Standing in this spotless room, alone, but with the bedroom door open behind her and her friend waiting in the car, she knows she has to stay.

Even if...

Even if her best friend hadn't.

She flips the photo over, a teardrop soaking into the paper.

*I'm sorry I got sick.*

*I'm sorry it had to end.*

*I love you.*

— *Jenny.*