

## **Mandy**

i

The ladder to the loft- unused in the five years since we moved back into the house. Creaked like stiff joints when we climbed it that first time. Protesting the weight of two fully grown adults and the rotting corpse of a dog.

“Mandy,” I’d said, frazzled enough that I didn’t even berate her when she stopped halfway. Her Halloween costume vampire cape she’d put on to make everything more ‘authentic’ fluttering around my head so that I couldn’t see the next rung up, “this is insane.”

“It’s aluminum, Kenzie, noncorrosive. Just think skinny thoughts.”

“I mean Bru-...the dog, dickhead, not the shitty ladder.”

“Just think of it as a practice run with the added bonus of Bruceter-bear back, doesn't that sound good to you?” Then: “UGH, how’s he heavier dead than alive?” as she finally hauled herself up into the thick darkness that had always filled the loft like low-hanging smog.

“It *sounds* to me like quarantine is getting to you a bit...fags and yankee candles? Please tell me we’re not performing necromancy with fags and yankee candles.”

*I knew Amanda better than anyone*, which is to say that after her brother’s passing I could recognize her manic and pissed off and sadly nothing else. So I knew that her laughter then was supposed to come off as amused as she smiled with just her mouth making “hahaha” like an alien copying human emotion from a telly ad.

“Mam’s candles.” She explained. “And Dad was the only one that ever bought fags cheap enough that they don’t self-extinguish. It’s all I had in the house.”

“You couldn’t have just gone to the shop?”

“No.” And with a cagey look in her eyes and a sudden sharpness to her movements, slid the dog from her shoulders and a lighter from her pocket and began.

ii

I’d met Amanda when I’d moved to her primary school, where our last names, Jackson and Jacobs had had us sat next to each other and paired up for almost everything. At break time she’d tote me around like a prize to be shown off to her gaggle of friends with grabby hands- so honest in her admiration it made me blush.

I hadn’t met her brother Chris until after school a few weeks deep. He’d been suspended for throwing another kid’s shoes onto the roof at the time. Amanda explained to me that he was “a nasty piece of work” as he greeted us, a screamed “EW” from the top of the stairs, but she

loved him “lots and lots”, which is to say that as we grew up she was the only one in the family to actively encourage him to not pickpocket at pizza shops.

The thing is, when he died, I guess I kind of mourned him too.

He was nice to me in a way he wasn't to most, but the Jacksons always were, and he was young, and he was funny, and then suddenly he was dead, and it became that he *had* been young and he *had* been funny,

past tense.

The funeral had been in July, on a day so hot that one of Amanda's uncles had joked that there would be no water left in his body to cry with if he kept sweating like this. Amanda, holding my wrist in a possessive white-knuckle grip, had hissed “bald pig” under her breath upon hearing that, but neither of us seemed to be able to cry at all that afternoon... so maybe there had been some truth in it after all.

iii

I wasn't heartless, I didn't say I told you so when we reburied the dog in the garden. Enough time had passed- it was getting dark out. Behind us Amanda's childhood home stood in silent judgement as we repackaged the mud and uprooted crocuses we had left in a pile that morning. Over the fence one of our neighbours stood backlit against his orange kitchen light. Sipping from a cup periodically and watching us like you might a soap opera. I distantly wondered if he'd called the police or if he could see the crushed expression on Amanda's face and taken pity on the meltdown of the poor orphan girls next door.

“I'll get back in and make spaghetti for tea.” I told Amanda when his eyes became too much. Left her kneeling in the flower box with my cardigan wrapped around her shoulders like a shawl, her cape discarded on the stairs when the joke of it all was no longer funny, although I couldn't tell if to Amanda it had ever been a joke and to me it had certainly never been funny.

*I went into the house and went straight to bed. I knew neither of us would be eating that night.*

iv

I never officially moved into the house with Amanda: at least I can't pinpoint a date where *my home* became synonymous with *Amanda's home*. But, as July wore on it became the norm that every time I went round to the house Amanda was laid on the same couch in the same clothes. She complained that “the days are so long these days don't you think the days are so long these days when did the days start getting so long these days”.

So I decided it was best if she and I spent more time together in a friendly, you're-worrying-me-sick way.

It was even nice to have our own space, nicer still when we established the one unspoken rule of the house: we do not talk about Chris, brought into effect after Amanda went through a phase where she'd wear nothing but his clothes and scream and scream and scream.

"He was in love with you." Was her favourite yelled accusation to follow me from room to room with, dead-eyed and hands balled up over her chest. "*He was in love with you, you bitch.*"

"That's not my fault." I'd say back or "You're just tired, Mandy." or, when I hadn't slept: "Are you jealous?" After that one we didn't talk for a week. We avoided each other in the same cramped house that seemed to have wilted two sizes. It was as if the bricks and mortar were breathing in the same foul poison in the air as us.

Then, on the first day of August when the sound of the rain had kept me awake all night, I went downstairs and she had laid out two plates of scrambled eggs, badly burnt and freezing cold. We choked down the whole disgusting mess and never talked about him again.

v

I didn't know what to do when I woke in the middle of the night to a whining noise coming from the garden. For a while I just laid there and thought to myself that maybe Amanda really had lost her mind this time and was now starting her new life pretending to be her dead family pet. *As far as coping mechanisms go it's not the most unhealthy*, I tried to convince myself, until I heard a door slam and Amanda burst into my room with a wild look in her eyes. The whining very obviously not coming from her.

"It's him." She whispered and took off down the hall to the stairs, standing at the top of them and smiling downwards in a way that made the shadows on her face morph into something gruesome. "He's come back to me."

"Mandy..." But she was already off, so I followed her like I always had.

The sight of him was unbearable. Bructer-bear but all nightmarish and wrong, laid in a flickering circle of tiny flames Amanda must have transplanted from the attic. He was still a mess like he had been since the moment the car had hit him, his legs all twisted up like tangled headphones, the lungs we had forced breath back into visible where the fur and skin had been eaten away from the startling white of his exposed ribs.

"Mandy." I said again, I couldn't think of anything else, my head empty and my ears stuffed full of cotton wool, my eyes unable to focus on anything but grave mud grave mud grave mud.

"Mandy, what have we done?"

"I thought it would be different." She whispered, then knelt and ever so gently. She reached out and took an outstretched, rotting paw in her hand, the same way she'd done at sixteen while the woman who'd been speeding in a housing estate cried and cried and cried.

"It's not fair, this isn't how I wanted it. I want them back. I want it how it used to be."

“I know.” I said, and for once *I wasn't lying*.

Then I climbed into the flower bed and pulled her away.

Away from her dead dog and her impossible dreams. The malformed circle of her hoarded parents' possessions, used only because she hadn't been away from the house in years. Told her: “We can't do this, Mandy, no one can turn back time.” Blew out *Summer Wish* with shaking breath, the candle her mum used to burn in the bathroom and watched as the light once again left Bruceter's eyes.

“They're dead.” I said to Amanda and the bright balloon of the moon, our only witness, realizing it was the first time either of us had admitted it. “They're dead and we have to stop killing ourselves over it.” Enough ghosts roamed the halls of our home, and I pressed a promise into Amanda with my arms around her that we'd stop being two of them.

vi

The next day, I made scrambled eggs for breakfast, and we ate them warm with grated cheese. Then we took a walk together to a graveyard we'd never visited. They're all sat together, my family and hers, like Jackson and Jacobs used to in primary school- out of the way towards the back where the gravestones stand like sentries at the tree line.

When we found him, his grave was the same as it had been at the funeral, except someone had planted yellow crocuses that reminded me of a shirt he used to wear. There, he exists present tense and is always happy to see us.

And finally, together, sat with him, we cried.