



Jenny Calling

by Clare Fisher

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It was the morning, and Jenny was at the kitchen table, splattering cornflakes over her face. This was even stranger than it sounds, because she did nightshifts at the supermarket, and was usually asleep at this time.

Emma and Dan exchanged The Look. They slid off the work top and headed towards the front door.

'Aren't you coming?' asked Emma.

I shook my head; I couldn't tell them why my feet were glued to the lino, or why I couldn't take my eyes off Jenny's crusted cheeks.

Eventually she told me that she'd lost her supermarket job. As I picked up my bag, I told her not to worry, that she'd get another job in no time. She breathed in sharply and said: 'but it was my calling.'

That was the first time I went to work without Emma and Dan. I didn't get bored, though. I was so absorbed in imagining how anyone could believe they were destined to stack shelves, that I barely noticed when my head nearly got squashed in the tube doors.

That evening, Jenny didn't come out of her room. I told the other two about her whilst we ate noodles in front of the TV. Emma said that was what you got for finding housemates on Gumtree. Dan started reading out dead baby jokes from his laptop. I refused to laugh.

We didn't see her the next morning, either. At work, I was so nervous that I had to go to the loo every five minutes. What if she'd topped herself? I could have checked on her last night. I *should* have. But I'd stayed with Emma and Dan, as if we were glued together by law.

I almost laughed when I got home to find dance music thumping from behind Jenny's door.

Her bedroom walls were covered with huge blonde kids cut out of cardboard; some were playing with bright plastic toys, others were eating spaghetti. They were all smiling. It was then that I realised that although she'd lived with us for several months, no one had ever been in her room.

'They were rewards,' she said. 'From Big Beth.'

She croaked this from her bed. To reach her, I had to sashay down a narrow aisle she'd constructed out of books, magazines, folded clothes, and cardboard boxes.

I perched myself on the edge of the duvet. Her face was the colour of pebble-dash. Had she contracted a rare tropic disease? No; she had simply failed to wipe off that cereal crud.

'Nice music,' I said, although it was giving me a headache.

I was glad to have lied: she sat up and her mouth jerked as if considering a smile.

'They play this at the store in the night,' she said. 'So no one falls asleep. But it sounded different there – it must have been the speakers: they made it echo like a dream. My speakers are too small for dream-making.'

'You must feel very at home at the supermarket,' I said.

She stared at the tomato sauce kid on the wall.

‘I guess,’ she said. ‘As a kid, I loved going there with my mum. She’d throw stuff into the trolley any old way. I’d stack it up, nice and neat. Once, when we got to the check-out, the till lady noticed. She said: ‘look how beautifully you’ve arranged those things!’ No one had ever told me that before – that I could do something beautiful, I mean. After that, I went in there every spare moment I got. I drew maps of the layout and everything.’

As she talked, her hands fluttered. I was reminded of the midges that buzzed outside our kitchen window at twilight, with no idea where they were going or why, only that this was their one chance to move.

‘Well, you can still go to the supermarket,’ I said.

‘I know.’

She squinted at her aisle; her hands froze in the air.

‘It wouldn’t be the same though,’ she said. Her arms thudded against the duvet.

‘The customers need me.’

She slid back into a horizontal position.

‘People let down their guard, when they go shopping,’ she said. ‘Especially at night. What I did was, I watched them until I worked out what they needed. With some, I only needed a few minutes – Jason, for example. Jason was 15. He was trying to swagger but he kept on tripping up on his jeans. He kept looking back at the security guard, too. He grabbed a dozen games magazines and just as he unzipped his top, I whispered that the security guard had put a guy in a headlock for stealing that same magazine. I was standing right behind him, only I’d crept so quietly, he hadn’t noticed; he screamed and dropped the magazines all over the floor. I told him there was a sign in the local newsagent for someone to do the paper round. ‘That someone could be you,’ I said.

After that, he came in every Saturday morning and paid for his magazines; he was always rosy-cheeked and smiling from walking so many streets.’

She smiled so briefly and violently I was certain she felt guilty for it. Then she continued:

‘Another favourite was Prandeep. He couldn’t manage when his wife died: he’d never even *been* in a supermarket before. He circled the pasta aisle at least ten times. When I asked him what he wanted, he said vegetables. So I linked my arm into his and I told him that supermarkets could be very disorientating, but that I could tell he was the type who’d master it in no time. That’s when he told me about his wife. ‘She made it look so easy,’ he said. Over the next few weeks, he lost his frightened rabbit look; I drew him some maps, explained how the rice and vegetables and chicken and oil went together to make a meal, showed him how to weigh fruit. He was almost ready to do it by himself, he was, but then... but then the manager took me into her office and she said, she said’ –

My phone buzzed. I took it out of my pocket.

‘Naz? drawled Dan.

‘Yes?’

‘See Emma, I *told* you she was in there! Naz, come out soon yeah, ‘cause I’m BARE hungry and we’re ordering pizza.’

He hung up. I asked Jenny if she wanted to come too.

She shook her head, pulling the duvet up over her chin. I grabbed her tiny wrist and yanked her from the bed. She looked frightened, but pleased.

Dan and Emma were splayed out on the sofa, their feet in each others’ faces. I sat on the armchair and Jenny sat on the floor. They were talking about a couple we knew, Nancy and Jo. Apparently Nancy was no longer so hot for Jo; now everyone knew apart from him. Emma defended Nancy on the grounds that Jo was the most boring person

she'd ever met. Dan defended Jo because he was 'genius' computer games. I couldn't take an angle, because I was worried for Jenny: she kept on rearranging her legs on the floor and her eyes were darting around the room, as if she was looking for somewhere to hide.

When the pizza arrived, and the room filled with its steamy, rubbery smell, she stood up, mumbling that she was going back to her room.

'No, please stay,' I said. 'I wanted to hear more about your special customers.'

Emma and Dan exchanged The Look. Usually they'd half-include me. This time, they didn't, so I knew that I as much as Jenny must be its subject.

Jenny knelt in front of the pizza box, and spoke: 'Another favourite the flat-packed woman. She was so thin that her skin was criss-crossed with purple veins. The others found this scary, but it made me relax; you knew exactly where you were with her.'

She only bought vegetables, but she always went to the check-out via the cake aisle. If she thought no one was looking, she'd pick up a cake. She'd turn it over and her eyes would pop out of their sockets. She'd jerk the cake back into its space on the shelf – like it had bitten her.

She always went for the Jamaican ginger cake and the coconut supreme. So what I did was, I cut them both up into teeny tiny pieces and laid them out on a platter, especially for her. She really did look at me as if I was trying to kill her. I ate a piece myself, making a very loud 'uuuumm,' like the woman on the Galaxy advert. With a trembling hand, she popped one of the tiny squares into her mouth. As she swallowed it, I saw something go 'pop!' in her eyes.

I never saw her again after that; the others said I probably killed her by giving her too much, too quickly, but I don't believe that; I think I got her out of that silly routine. Now she's somewhere else, living a proper life.'

There was only one piece of pizza left by this point.

‘Do ... you want that?’ asked Emma.

Jenny tilted her head. ‘Well... ok.’

She nibbled at the golden triangle from the crust inwards. I was about to respond to her story, when Dan shoved his laptop in Emma’s face. I shuffled towards Jenny, who was frowning at her pizza slice as if it were an intricate puzzle.

‘So... Are you actually from this area of London?’ I asked. My voice was a wisp above the explosions and deep American trailer voice, that were coming out of Dan’s laptop.

Jenny said that she was full. She threw the rest of her slice into the grease-spotted box, and flittered out of the room.

‘Thank *god*,’ said Emma.

‘I didn’t get what she was saying,’ said Dan. ‘And that crusty shit on her face creeps me out.’

I laughed; I’d gotten used to it.

‘Well you didn’t really give her a chance,’ I said.

‘What do you mean, *a chance*? She could have said anything she wanted, and she chose *that*,’ said Jenny.

‘Naz, you got to see this trailer,’ said Dan, oblivious to everything that had happened beyond the screen.

I said that I was going to bed, even though I wasn’t at all tired.

The next morning, I woke up sweating: I'd dreamt that I was chained to a supermarket floor. To get free, I had to pick one item from the shelves. I couldn't though, because there was so much to choose from.

The feeling of paralysis strengthened in the dry recycled air of my office. I work for an aid charity and the letters were going to important donors. Officially I'm a junior press officer. In truth, I write the occasional by-line for the website, but spend most of my days stuffing and licking envelopes. There was still a hefty pile on my desk by lunchtime; I found it hard to make the connection between the bitter taste of the envelope and the African children that were blue-tacked to the wall.

I went to the loo and leaned back against the toilet seat. The toilet cubicle was like the inside of a long-dead egg; dark, cool and spacious. Suddenly, I knew what I had to do.

Half an hour later, I was in the supermarket, being ushered into a windowless office by a woman with a mole on her forehead so big that I had to stare at it to make sure it wasn't a horn.

'So.'

She clinked her laminated Word Art sign reading 'Bethany The Manager' across her desk. Sitting up as straight as I could, I told her that I was Jenny's lawyer and we were suing her for unfair dismissal.

'Uh-huh, uh-huh, is that so?' she replied, caressing her mole. 'Well I'm not being funny, I'd like to know what evidence you'll be using.'

'Evidence?'

'Yeah,' she said, in the tone that people say 'Duh!' in American films.

'We have actual CCTV footage of her harassing customers,' she said.

'Oh, that's just a point of view!' I said. 'She was *helping* them.'

She rolled her eyes; the mole did a little dance.

'Is that really what she thinks? F-lapping Nora!' said Bethany The Manager. '

I didn't realise she was *that* much of a mentalist! I'm not being rude, she's a nice girl and all, but we can't have staff who jump on our customers' backs, it's against company policy.'

She folded her arms. In a nasal, monotonous voice, she reeled off a list of Jenny's misdemeanours. When she got to the one about Jenny informing a customer about the store's imminent rearrangement, I made my excuses, and left.

I put my i-pod on full blast all the way home, lacking the energy to engage with my tangled thoughts.

Jenny was dragging two tatty suitcases down the garden path. I asked where she was going. At least she'd cleaned her face.

'I can't pay the rent anymore.'

'Don't worry, I'll cover it for you until you get another job.'

She shook her head. 'Doesn't matter. There are too many memories here now.'

'But where will you go?'

She shrugged. 'There are places.'

She kicked a pebble with her toe.

'Jenny.'

I put my hands on her narrow shoulder. She looked straight into my eyes. I looked into hers and what I saw there was a hazelnut swirl of contradiction; hers were the eyes of a newborn baby and an OAP. She was terrified.

I embraced her. Weakly, she placed her hands on my back. I squeezed her close against my chest.

‘Thank you,’ she said, when we pulled apart. ‘There aren’t many people that know how to give real hugs.’

‘What, as opposed to imaginary ones?’ I said.

She made a noise that was as close to a laugh as she could get.

‘A real hug is a hug with squeezes.’

The tendons in her arm stuck out as she picked up her bags.

‘Wait!’ I shouted, just before she got to the front gate. ‘How... how did you know what your calling was?’

She dropped her suitcases. She told me how, when she’d failed at school and was unable to get a job, she’d spent her time wandering the supermarket. One day Mrs. Mole had offered her a trial. Mrs. Mole told her that she was the best shelf stacker she’d ever seen. She gave Jenny a job. Jenny had a place then; when she slipped her arms into that orange and green uniform she was *somebody*. She was part of something.

‘The best thing though,’ she said, ‘was that I could see right into the old times with my mum. I could see her telling me to get out of the trolley and to put back those expensive chocolate biscuits. I could see us so clearly that sometimes I would forget time had pulled us apart.’

‘What... happened to her?’

'She left. When I was ten. I had foster parents after that.'

'That's tough.'

'No, it was ok,' she said quickly. 'They were ok. I didn't cry much when she left or anything like that. I don't usually let things get to me, it's just this time... Well, I should go now. Bye.'

I felt sad, going back into that empty house. I was scared, too. I sat on Jenny's bed. She'd packed up her aisles but the faces were still on the wall, still smiling and still messy with food.

I was on the verge of some new and disturbing insight about the world and my place in it, when Dan and Emma burst in. They pointed at me and laughed. They pointed at the wall and laughed again. Emma did an impression of Jenny throwing away the pizza and goggling her eyes; they laughed some more.

Right now, they're composing a Gum Tree ad for a new housemate. They're going to put something like: 'no wierdos.' I'm not so sure, though. I'm not sure why I'm friends with them either, or whether I really still am.

Sometimes they joke that any day now, we'll open the paper to read that she jumped off some bridge, suitcases and all. When they say that, I clear my throat, and even if they're already talking about something else, I push out the words: 'she's still alive. She's out there somewhere.' When they ask how I know this, I say: 'I just do.'

Then I retreat to my bedroom. The supermarket children beam down from my walls. Sometimes I kiss their shiny lips before I get into bed. Other times I have an uncanny feeling that they are Jenny and that she is watching me; those are the times when I dream that she is calling. Emma and Dan don't know that this is how I know she is alive. I don't know what they would do if they knew that I too am a wierdo. I don't know why

she calls me and not them, or why I feel I have to save her. There are a lot of things I don't know; Jenny showed me just a few of them.