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Obsession

Written by Amanda Robson

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AMANDA ROBSON

OBSESSION





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~ Carly ~

I am drunk; liquid-limbed, mind-pumping drunk, and so is my husband, Rob. Craggy features, softened by shadows, move towards me across the mosquito candle placed in the middle of the camping table, as he smiles at me and tops up my glass. I shiver a little and zip up my jacket. The low sky of this Breton night has brought the sort of chill that predicates frost. But although frost won't happen in July in the south of Brittany, during this camping holiday, I have not felt warm enough. Not once. Not at night, curled up beneath my inadequate blanket, or in the day when I'm supervising our children around the unheated swimming pool. The extra layer of body fat, cultivated after the arrival of our third child, is not protecting me from the cold.

Our children are asleep in the tent behind us. I feel their silence and the exhalation of their breath, deep rooted and satisfying. At least I don't have to watch their every movement until morning, as I do during the days. Holidays aren't holidays any more. We just take our children to a different place to look after them. A place that is harder work.

Everything about this camping holiday is exhausting. Standing

by the pool for hour after hour, checking that they're not drowning. The boredom of watching and waiting for the occasional sight of a familiar head coming out from behind a plastic palm tree or poolside dolphin. Holding giggling toddlers as we are tossed down knotted plastic tubes, sliding along until we're spewed out into the water, the movement almost breaking our backs. The endless cooking of barbecues – washing burnt gunk off the griddle. As far as I am concerned this is the best part of the day; the children are in bed and I have Rob to myself.

For this is what I like. Rob to myself. We married just over ten years ago, so we were alone for several years before our children were born. We met at the training hospital when I was a trainee nurse and he was a junior doctor. I will never forget the sight of him walking down the ward towards me, that first cracked smile. No doubt someone looking in would consider our relationship argumentative. Some of our friends say that they never have a cross word. How do they achieve that? Why do we argue? My mother says it is because we care. Whatever. It isn't really a satisfactory day without the rumblings of a discussion.

Tonight, sitting opposite my husband, a surfeit of alcohol pounding through my veins, I am filled with a new kind of mischief.

'Who else would you go for, if you could?' I hear myself slur.

'No one,' he slurs back.

'I don't believe you. You tell me and I'll tell you,' I push.

Rob sits in silence.

'Come on,' I say. 'Let's be really honest – to compound our relationship.'

He looks at me and puts his plastic wine glass on the metal table.

'But Carly, we don't need to compound our relationship.'

'I think we do.'

Green eyes burn to emerald.

'I don't want to know who you fantasise about.'

'But I want to know about you.'

A jawline held taut.

'I don't fantasise about anyone.'

'I don't believe you.' I pause. 'Anyway, I don't need to know who you fantasise about. We're just playing a game. Give me a name, someone you quite like.'

He shrugs his shoulders.

'I quite like Jenni.'

'Jenni?'

Jenni. NCT Jenni. Placid and peaceful with doe-like eyes. Endlessly, endlessly kind.

'What about you?'

I don't reply.

The camping holiday continues but it doesn't improve. Our two-day conjugal hangover doesn't help. The swimming pool and the weather are growing colder. Cloud gathers and hangs along the coastline, releasing a clinging sea mist which sticks to the headland, making our nightly walk along the cliff path to the nearest restaurant border on suicidal. The rain starts on Tuesday evening. On Wednesday morning I wake up and hear its soft drum beat still pounding against the canvas. At first the sound is comforting. A 'let's stay in bed and make love because it's cold and wet outside' sort of sound. I snuggle up to Rob and then reality hits me. Camping. Rain. Bored children about to wake up. I escape to the shower block.

By the time I reach the shower block I am so wet I'm not sure why I'm bothering to have a shower. The lukewarm dribble of water from the showerhead slightly raises my body temperature, but not my mood as I struggle to pull my clothing back

across my damp skin and worry about my weight. I shouldn't have eaten pizza yesterday. Or chips the day before. And what about the beer? Soft and delicious and brimming with calories.

Forget about alcohol. It's the only thing I'm enjoying about this holiday.

At least I am not like Jenni, so thin after childbirth that her breasts have disappeared. I look at myself in the mirror, cup my breasts with my hands, think of her boyish figure, and laugh. Jenni.

Rob and Jenni. Who would have thought of that?

When I return to the tent it has come to life. Rob is starting to prepare breakfast and the children are playing a shouting game, or, as I listen harder, a roaring game. Our seven-year-old daughter, Pippa, is crawling on the floor on all fours, head back and growling. She's trying to frighten her younger brothers, Matt and John, shaking her long blonde hair and attacking them with fingernail claws. They are crawling away from her and laughing, too innocent to realise that if she could, she would hurt them. Rob, seemingly deaf to the noise, is putting cereal on the table.

As soon as I enter the tent, Rob's face lights up and he moves towards me, kisses me on the lips.

'Hey you. Do you want to play?' he asks.

'Mummy, Mummy,' Pippa roars. 'You can be a tiger.'

'A tiger that needs morning coffee before it can growl,' I say, planting myself firmly on a chair.

'The swimming pool closes when it rains. What are we going to do today?' Rob asks as the kettle whistles.

'Go home?' I suggest hopefully.

Being back home has many advantages, warmth being one of them, temperature control at the touch of a button preferable to the vagaries of weather. Regular sex without worrying that

the children can hear is another positive. But the biggest advantage is sitting at the breakfast bar on Monday morning sipping coffee, waiting for my mother, knowing I have a child-free day in front of me.

My triangular-shaped mother, Heather, arrives, straight from her flat just around the corner. She steps into the hall, wearing her favourite floral dress and her M&S cardigan. Her shoulder-length curly hair looks as if it needs combing. It always looks as if it needs combing, but it's just the way her curls frizz. Some remaining brown hair peppers her grey like drizzled dirt. Mother, when are you going to improve your appearance? It doesn't seem to make any difference to how much our children love her. Pippa thunders down the stairs, two at a time, and falls into her grandmother's arms.

'Gwandma, Gwandma,' John shouts, bumbling downstairs in his Gruffalo pyjamas which Gwandma has bought him, launching himself into the hug. Before long Matt has joined the love-in too. I tip the rest of my coffee down the waste disposal, place my mug in the dishwasher and sidle towards the front door. I manage to kiss my mother as I pass her; the children have left a patch of skin on her cheek accessible.

'I hope you don't mind, but I'll be late tonight.'

'That's fine, dear. I won't be in any hurry to leave. Are you working late?'

'Going for a drink with Jenni.'

I close the front door and step into watery sunshine. My mother looks after the children for us three days a week, so that I can work for Rob in Riverside Surgery. Rob. The most popular GP in Stansfield. I hear it from our receptionists, from the school-gate mums, from the neighbours, and have no reason to doubt that it's true. Our surgery list is full. I can't compete with his popularity. Why would I want to? I'm just one of his practice nurses. All I do is give injections, take blood, and

perform breast and gynae checks. Although aspects of my job are boring, I enjoy my three days at work more than my weekdays at home with the children. Weekends at home are fine because Rob is so very helpful. But my weekdays with the children are just plain hard work. Stopping fights, making too many peanut butter sandwiches (Matt's favourite), wading through burial mounds of laundry. The worst part is Pippa's school-gate pick-up. Mother seems to relish it, enjoys talking to the school-gate mafia. She fits in. But I don't. The school-gate mafia; women who are living through their children. Women who don't have anything else.

I walk towards the surgery. Left at the end of our road, along Stansfield High Street, past the Chinese restaurant, past the fish shop. I cross the road at the traffic lights and enter the surgery through the side door, away from the receptionists and the patients. I hang up my raincoat and open the door to the nurses' station. Sitting at my desk, I switch the computer on to check my patient list. Eight patients this morning. Two breast checks. Three blood tests. Three sets of travel injections. As I press the buzzer for my first patient, the shadow that started following me on holiday begins to darken.

The shadow is no lighter when I finish at the surgery and am on my way to meet you, Jenni. You are waiting for me after work at the coffee shop, by the bus stop in the centre of town. I see you through the window as I move past the bus queue – sending a text from your iPhone, your glossy hair tumbling across your face. As soon as I enter the coffee shop you look up and beam at me, as if seeing me is the most important part of your day. Jenni, you always try to make people feel like that. As if they are important. It is one of your tricks. I know that now. When we first met, I fell for it.

We knew each other at nursing college, didn't we, Jenni? But only from a distance. You weren't really my type. Christian

Union. No make-up. Didn't look men in the eye. Rumour had it you didn't go out on Saturday nights, stayed in to prepare your mind for the Lord on Sunday. Jenni. What were you like?

Our paths crossed again on a couples' night nearly six years ago at our local NCT co-ordinator's house, stranded together like beached whales on a low-slung sofa, so heavily pregnant that we could hardly change positions. Mark and John incubating inside us, almost ready to be born. I was the expert because I already had Pippa. You were stick thin except for your bump, which overwhelmed you, looking so worried as the NCT co-ordinator droned on about Braxton Hicks contractions and TENS machines and whether they worked. I looked at you as you listened, chocolate brown eyes closed in fear, and wanted to protect you. To hold you against me and tell you it's not as bad as it sounds. (Even though with Pippa it was far worse.)

At the end of the meeting we went to the pub, I can't remember which one of the four of us suggested it, but we all thought it was a good idea. We went to the White Swan, down by the river at the end of our road. A cold October night, sitting by the fire drinking orange juice and tonic water whilst the men cradled their pints. We were so engrossed in our own conversation, we didn't talk to them much. It took me so long to find you, Jenni, the first female friend I really cared about. All through school and university, men had been my companions. Women can be so bitchy, don't you think? So temperamental. Men are kinder. Simpler. I had up to this point socialised with them more as a rule. But then came the female-dominated world of pregnancy and early childhood that led me to you.

Today, with Mark and John at school, and another birth behind each of us, we hug clumsily across a small wooden table in the coffee shop opposite the surgery. Across the coffee you are already halfway through drinking. Across the crumbs of

someone else's cake. I sit down on an uncomfortable wooden stool, which scrapes across the floor as I position it.

'How was your holiday?' you ask.

'Awful.'

'That wasn't what Rob said.'

Your words punch into me.

'When did you see Rob?' I ask.

'I didn't. He texted me.'

'Texted you?'

'Because he was worried about you.'

You wave and smile at the waitress, who starts to weave towards our table.

We order fresh coffee for you, and chocolate cake and cappuccino for me. The waitress presses our order into a small handheld machine and disappears to the next table.

'Why is Rob so worried about me?'

'He said you weren't yourself on holiday. You didn't seem to enjoy spending time with the children, apparently.'

'Well, did you when you were on holiday?'

Your toffee brown eyes widen as you look at me.

'Yes.'

Yes?

Jenni. You sanctimonious, husband-stealing bitch.

When I arrive home, chicken nuggets and chips are beginning to sizzle in the oven as my mother listens to Pippa read. The boys are making strange shapes with Play Doh. From the moment I open the door I feel superfluous. A feeling I do not like. A feeling I frequently have to live with these days.

'Hello, Mummy,' the boys say without turning from their Play Doh shapes.

'Good day?' Heather asks me, without lifting her eyes from Pippa's reading book. Pippa continues reading in a strange

monotone, high-pitched and proud. Two monkeys are stuck in a tree. Who is going to help them down? The monkeys' mother, apparently. Uninterested in the antics of the monkeys, I go upstairs to my bedroom to change. As I unbutton my nurse's uniform to throw it in the laundry basket (which is full again), my mobile phone rings. I pick up.

'Hi Carly. It's Craig.'

Craig. Jenni's husband. Craig. Handsome. Too handsome. The sort of good looks that I have difficulty trusting. He can have whatever he wants too easily, with too many of the opposite sex. Or so it seems to me. But you don't think like that, do you, Jenni? You love him. You trust him. I mustn't judge him by his looks. Just because he can, doesn't mean he does. Or does it?

'I'm planning a surprise birthday party at the pub for Jenni on Friday night. Can you and Rob make it?' Craig asks.

'That sounds great.'

Dancing to please Jenni. Great, Craig, great. We all dance to please bitch-whore Jenni.

Friday night. Walking to the pub, arm in arm with Rob, carrying the lilies I bought for Jenni. A chilly summer evening, the pavement still wet from earlier rain, making my world look grey – grey upon grey. The lilies make me think of my father's funeral, of the curved petals crawling across his casket – soon to be destroyed by the heat of the furnace. My mother standing next to the casket, trying not to cry. Mother, still so bereft without my father, seven years since his death just before Pippa was born. Seven years of centring her life on us.

As soon as I enter the pub, I push death away. We are wrapped in noise and warmth. Jenni moves towards me, smiling. So pleased to see me. Trying to make me feel warm. Trying to make me feel special.

I hand her the lilies, and the card I have chosen, and she shrieks with delight. A small shriek from the back of her throat.

Jenni. They are only lilies.

A few minutes later we can't get near Jenni and Craig; so many well-wishers have turned up. I sit at a small rickety table by the log fire, which the landlord has lit even though it's summer, while Rob heads for the bar. Jenni is surrounded by people, her head is thrown back. She's laughing. I stare at her: Jenni looking so good, chestnut hair falling in waves across her shoulders, a simple dress extenuating her slimness, her fragility. The fragility which makes people want to protect her.

'I thought it was just Craig and me, coming for a quick drink,' I overhear her explaining to yet another person I don't recognise.

Rob returns from the bar with a glass of red wine and a pint of Doombar.

'She knows so many people,' Rob says, his eyes following mine as I watch.

'It's the choir thing.'

'It's the church thing.'

'Maybe it's because she's nice,' Rob says.

'Nice is such an ordinary word.'

'There is nothing ordinary about Jenni.'

'Don't start that again.'

'I didn't start it in the first place.'

Saturday morning. I'm in the car with John and Matt. Pippa is out for the day at a friend's house, doubtless being drowned in pink. Pink-walled bedroom, pink ballet dresses, a selection of dolls all dressed in pink. Suffocation by candyfloss.

'Where are we going, Mummy?' Matt asks.

'Snakes and Ladders.'

'Why isn't Daddy coming with us?'

'His turn for a lie-in.'

'What about Jenni and the other Gospels?' John suggests hopefully.

Wincing at the use of the word Gospels, the cheesy nickname Jenni has coined for our children – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the conjoined products of our NCT friendship.

'I thought we could enjoy some time on our own,' I reply.

'Please, Mummy. Phone Jenni. You can talk to her while we all play on the slides,' Matt begs.

Jenni. Holding my hand and laughing. Jenni. Before she started making cow eyes at Rob. I push the memory away.

'You'll have to make do with Mummy,' I snap.

I signal to pull off the main road, and turn into the car park of the state-of-the-art climbing facility. Brightly coloured plastic slides and climbing nets, all hidden from parental sight by giant yellow plastic walls. It's simple, and expensive. You pay for your children to go in. They take their shoes off, leave them with you and disappear. You sit and drink coffee. You read a book or a newspaper. They reappear several hours later, hot, sweaty and requiring drinks, but too tired to give you any more trouble for the rest of the day. A perfect way to keep children amused on a Saturday morning. Maximum expense. Minimum effort. My favourite treat for them.

After I have flashed my credit card, my sons disappear through the yellow and blue plastic doorway that leads to the gargantuan play frame. I buy a large cup of coffee and a shortbread biscuit from the café and set myself up at a table. I plug my earplugs in (small foam ones that I bought at Boots yesterday), spread my newspaper out on the table, and home in on the magazine supplement.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I know, I open my eyes to find John shaking my arm. He is red-faced, blond curls plastered to his head with sweat.