HELLO NOW

Books by Jenny Valentine

FIRE COLOUR ONE

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For Jeff

NOVO

WHEN IT HAPPENS, I DON'T FEEL IT. I NEVER feel it. I just sleep. And they wash away, the things I've held on to, all of them. I let them go, leave them unchanged, and they are clean and new and nothing and then I am back. Never the same place – sometimes the cut and pulse of human traffic, sometimes a vast empty space. Anywhere and Always. The hot bite of dust, a blanket of snow. Soft opening of a morning or deep, sharp night. Sometimes before Now, and during, and also after, just the land holding bodies and the birds rising up over the sea. Square one, in all its different disguises. Always moving. Always alone.

I never forget what I am looking for, over and over, somewhere in that black-hole sleep. The one that keeps me. The one I can keep. My hook. A face at a window, the

air in a bubble, a bird in a cage. Consequence. Purpose. Belonging.

A street. Here. Now.

Will it be this time? Will it be never? I get out of the car, know my name and my age, my own hands, all my histories, same as ever. Quiet facts come to me like old finger drawings on glass, only traces. These trees. This house. This beginning. I stand at the side of the road, taking it all in, hoping and hoping. And I wonder, not for the first time, if it has some kind of start, this life, and who's controlling it, and if it is ever, ever going to stop.

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1

JUDE

I'VE NEVER BEEN INTO LOVE STORIES. TOO MUCH sugar, too much gloop, same reasons I don't like candyfloss or fondue. Only so many sunsets and hand-holds and ever-afters I can stomach, honestly. Seven words for it in Greek. Twenty-seven in Tamil. All those subtleties, like Eskimos and snow, and we just have this one four-letter word and expect everyone to make a religion out of it.

I've never been into magic either, not the made-up miracle kind. Not when there's the miracle of actually existing to deal with, the magic of infinitely small particles, the exact same particles, coming together to make a human being or a seashell or the Earth's atmosphere or a cup of tea or just a log. There's magic in putting one foot in front of the other, isn't there?

There's magic in a foot, come to think of it. It's everywhere. Even to be here is so much.

That's what I knew about love before, when it was still just a spectator sport for me. Here's what I learned by osmosis. That people spend their time wishing so hard to be with someone else they forget how to be a proper version of themselves. That we are all too ready to give up our independence, ache to hand it over gladly like it's nothing, and make someone else responsible for our happiness, someone way less invested, way less qualified than us.

That kind of love is a selfish thing, transactional, an exalted kind of laziness, and that's why nobody says 'I love you' without wanting it said back.

But love is not a transaction. Four-letter love is a big black hole and that's why you fall into it. The finest bubble, the best dream, where you don't want to wake up, not for a second, not ever, because you know you have to, you know you will, and that then, nothing else will come close. It makes all the everyday miracles duller and more ordinary, just from having been there, from having gone. That kind of love and magic feel the same. I know that now, for a fact. I'm an expert on the things I used to say didn't exist.

Other loves aren't a difficult ask for me. I love my mother. That goes without saying, even when I don't like her. I love London, and my old house and all the days of my childhood, all my friends. I love the sea, and walking on its edges, and the taste of salt and vinegar on a hot chip. I love dancing in dark rooms and getting lost in a long book, and you've got to love laughing, everybody loves a decent joke. I love strangers and the internet and I love snow and sand and new places. I love obvious signs of loneliness, for some reason, and old people and young people and most dogs and the things we say to each other and singing and all types of fire and the underdog and a lot of movies, even bad ones, and marmalade on dry brown toast and clean sheets and ginger tea and I am really only just getting started.

Love is everywhere too.

I could fill this whole page with the things I love. I could carry on thinking of new ones without stopping, twenty-four hours a day, until I die. But all of them, standing together, armed to the teeth and in organised ranks with me leading the charge, still couldn't have prepared me for Novo. Of having him. Of having him with me, alone, the great weight of his arm. And then not.

When I think about that, I feel the impact in my chest,

the air pushed from my lungs, the clean sharp break of all the bones in my body. It hurts. It's a violent equation, love plus loss. I don't want that to be true. But I don't know how else I'm supposed to put it.

Look how hard it hit me. I'm bleeding love story all over the place.

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2

IN THE BEGINNING, BEFORE I KNEW THAT I DIDN'T know much about anything, my mum and I moved into a house with a stranger in it. It was a big house in the small town she grew up in (and then left, by the way, swearing never to return) on a street where fat-knuckled trees pulled at the pavements with their roots, and the average age was well over fifty, and nobody said very much.

The stranger wasn't hiding in the attic or lurking under the floorboards. He wasn't a blind purchase. His name was Henry Lake, and he came with the sale, refusing to budge. A sitting tenant, Mum said. A fly in the freeholder's ointment. A stick in the capitalist mud. 'Something we can both get behind,' she said, which I told her was optimistic, and, at the time, frankly, pushing it.

She remembered the street from her childhood, sort of, and that the houses were beautiful. And massive. And had gardens that sloped right down to the sea. This meant less than nothing to me – five hours' drive from my current definition of home – and I told her that too. But because of this stranger still living in it, this house on the sole of the boot of the country was a whole lot cheaper than anything else she'd managed to find. Thanks to Henry Lake being there, it was the one she could afford, so it was happening, we were going, end of discussion, and that was that. It's thanks to him and because of him that so much other stuff happened too, and is still happening, but I'm getting ahead of myself, and when I started writing this down, that's one of the things I swore I wouldn't do. This particular love story is bewildering enough as it is without me helping.

We didn't have a separate front door or anything. Henry Lake's rooms were on the middle floor, and we were just meant to move in and live around him like the white surrounds the yolk of an egg. I said that was flat-out ridiculous, and when Mum told me to get used to it, every cell in my body screamed *never*.

'Seriously?' I said. 'No locks on the doors? What are

you thinking? What if he's unhinged? For all we know he could be a killer,' and, while I was saying it, something dark scuttled down an alley in my stomach, this idea that I might be right, that this was my fate, set already, bound to happen. Game over. Job done.

'Plus it's miles away,' I said again, into the void Mum left by not responding. 'No joke, Mum. You've lost your actual mind.'

'No, Jude,' she said, folding into her chair like a dropped flag. 'I've lost everything else.'

Everything else translated loosely as Mark, her boyfriend for just under a year, her latest Holy Grail, her answer to just about every question under the sun. Mark wasn't all that, but he was all right. He was pretty nice to her and he didn't act like I was the unwanted guest or the icing on the cake, unlike some previous boyfriends I could mention. He worked in insurance and you'd think from the way she batted her eyelashes at him when he droned on about assets and premiums that a man in insurance was all she'd ever wanted, the sum total of her heart's desires. My mum is a very good actor. She couldn't give a shit about insurance. What she wants is not to be alone.

Anyway, Mark had taken his assets and premiums

elsewhere, and because he was also our landlord, while we'd lived with him, that included the roof over our heads. Mum was still in phase one, acting like it was the end of the world, which it blatantly wasn't. She was doing that thing she does where she just takes for granted that it's me and her against the world, without even asking if I was on her side for this one. She said, 'Can you believe this is even happening to us?' and when I pointed out it was actually her decision to drop everything and drag me to a sad-sounding, pensioner-dense, end-of-the-road, far-as-the-eye-could-see whites-only seaside town from her distant past, she welled up and went all defenceless wounded puppy on me, because it works every time and she knows it. Takes the sting right out of my fight.

'A new start,' she called it, without asking me if I even wanted one, because it was obvious I didn't, and I said, 'Haven't we had our share of those?' One for every Mark that turned out not to be God's gift after all. Such an over-investor. She might as well have invented the concept of eggs in one basket. Eight full new starts, and three or four half-hearted versions, where I didn't have to move schools at least, just took way longer to get there and was always late for everything, always left behind. It was

always like that, since my dad, I guess, who was the first but who came and went just like the others. A link in a chain, and a stranger now. If I saw him in the street I wouldn't know him. Sad but true. I've made my peace with that.

This time, phase-one Mum was really shaking things up. Maybe I should have been more positive. She was doing it by herself, after all. Declaring independence. But at the time, she knew how I felt about it. I reminded her it had taken work to make even the few friends I had. I said we both knew there was no way I'd be able to keep them, not at that distance. I wanted that to count for something. I was looking for mercy, but that well was dry.

'You'll get new friends,' she said, like I could just pick some out in a gift shop, like that was how easy it was, and it stunned me, the ignorance, the carelessness of that.

'Ouch,' I said. 'Blunt.'

'What?' she said. 'You're good at it.'

'Yeah? Because I've had to be.'

'Well, life teaches us the skills we need,' she said, trying to make a virtue out of throwing me in at the social deep end every time a new Prince Charming withered on the vine.

When I was eight and we were moving for the third time in a year (a real bad patch – Jim, I think, then Danny, then Joe) I tried to stop the move from happening by tying everything in my room down with string. I got a ball of it and I cat's-cradled the hell out of my bed and my radiator and my toy cupboard and my bookshelf and then I waited like Charlotte in the middle of her web to see what I'd spelled. Mum used to tell that story to people like it was funny. I've heard it a hundred times over the years, and I've smiled and nodded and put up with being laughed at. She even laughed at me when it happened. She opened the door and she opened her mouth and threw her head back and I could see the undersides of her teeth, the biting edges, and I remember thinking, *How could she?* because it was the opposite of funny to me. I was dead scared of losing something. I didn't want things to change. Not again. But they did, and they do, and I guess I started learning way back then that you can't stop your world from turning, however tight you tie it down, however hard you try.

So. Here we were again. Move number thirteen. Mum was on her own, not counting me. She was acting out and we were packing up and I was all set to repeat, all

set to be brand new in another place. I could feel it coming – the unknown, the sudden onset of lonely. First-world problems, sure, but still. Problems all the same.

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