

## Story of Jenny

Jenny grew up in Rankin Park, Newcastle. In her early teenage years she fell into a pattern of long running battles with her parents. They didn't react too well when she came home with a nose ring. They were furious when she stayed out all night without so much as a phone call to tell them where she was. Her friends weren't exactly her parent's first choice.

One night Jenny and her folks have a huge fight. "I hate you!" she screams at her father as she slams the door to her bedroom. That night she acts on a plan that's been forming for some time. Once everyone has gone to sleep she gets dressed, packs a bag and goes into the kitchen. Opening the kitchen drawer she rifles through her parent's wallets. She takes the credit cards, the cash, and their bank book. She hops on the train and heads for Sydney. When she gets there she waits on the doorstep of the Commonwealth Bank so she can be the first through the door. She forges her mother's signature and withdraws \$12500 her parents had in their investment account. She grabs a cab to the airport and uses Dad's credit card to buy a ticket to Melbourne – she figures the last place her parents will look for her is on the streets of St Kilda.

She arrives in Melbourne and pretty soon she's enjoying the high life – a new group of friends, plenty of booze, late nights, sleep all day, no school, no parent's hassling her about a nose ring, let alone her experiments with sex and drugs. It doesn't take long til the \$12500's gone and the credit cards have been cancelled.

Back home her parent's are frantic. Mum's had to start packing shelves at night to pay off the credit card debt, and the \$12500 set aside for her sister's university fees is gone. The police are notified, the streets are searched – first Newcastle, then Kings Cross. Her parents don't know what's happened. They fear the worst.

Meanwhile down on the streets of St Kilda things aren't going too well. Jenny's soon addicted to heroin and the money she stole doesn't go too far. She moves into a squat and starts selling herself for sex.

One day she's walking down the street and sees a poster on the telegraph pole. It's headed "Have you seen this girl?" Below the heading is a photo of her – at least as she used to look. The poster's got her parent's phone number on it, and asks for anyone with information to call. Jenny rips the poster down, folds it up and puts it into her pocket.

The months pass, then the years. Jenny's been careless one time too many. At first she writes off her sickness as just another bout of flu. But the illness persists. She goes to the free clinic to discover she's contracted Hepatitis C and HIV. Not even the brothel wants anything to do with her now.

As she sits lonely, tired and hungry in the squat, she looks at the poster she'd rescued from that telegraph pole and saved for the last few years. She thinks back to her previous life – as a typical schoolgirl in a middle class suburban Newcastle family. It triggers memories of the famous family waterfight one steaming summer day when she was 12; and of crazy moments dancing together; of her sister's comforting arms when she broke up with David. "God, why did I leave?" she says to herself. "Even the family mutt lives a better life than I do." She's sobbing now, and knows that more than anything she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Mum, dad, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a train up to Newcastle. I'll be at Newcastle station about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well I guess I'll just stay on the train til I get to Queensland."

The next day on the train Jenny thinks about all the flaws in her plan. What if mum and dad were out and miss the message? And what are they going to do if they heard it anyway – after all, it's been 10 years and they haven't heard a word from me in all that time. How are they going to react when they discover I'm a junkie with AIDS? If they do show up what on earth am I going to say?..."

The train pulls into Newcastle station at ten minutes past midnight. She hears the hiss of the brakes as the train comes to a stop. Her heart starts pounding. "This is it. Oh well, get ready for nothing."

Jenny steps out of the train not knowing what to expect. She looks to her right and sees an empty platform, but before she can look back she hears someone call her name. Her head whips around and there's her mum and dad and her sister and her aunts and uncles and cousins and grandmother. They're holding a banner that reads "Welcome home", and everyone's wearing goofy party hats and throwing streamers and popping party poppers, and there's her mum and dad running towards her, tears streaming down their face, arms held wide. Jenny can't move. Her parent's grab her with such force it almost knocks her over.

"Dad, I'm sorry. I know..."

"Hush child. Forget the apologies. All we care about is that you're home. I just want to hold you. Come on, everyone's waiting – we've got a big party organised at home." And Jenny finds herself awash in a sea of family and love that she has not known for over 10 years.