

THE HAUNTING OF
LINDY PENNYWORTH



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*This book is dedicated to my family.
Thanks for accompanying me to all the graveyards,
past and present, even though you thought
I was weird!*

NOVEMBER 2020

I'm writing this in an old, blank notebook that I found in the common room. I keep it hidden inside my pillowcase and move it on laundry day, tucking it under the waistband of my jeans and covering any bulges with a loose jumper. I don't want anyone seeing it. They'll either take it away or use it as proof against me, to keep me here even longer.

Everyone here thinks I've gone temporarily insane. 'Psychosis', they're calling it. They say that grief has warped my mind, made me unstable, a danger to myself . . . That's how they persuaded my mother to leave me in this hospital when, at first, she fought to take me home. They even threatened to put me under the temporary care of social services if she didn't agree to me being sectioned.

That's because they can't accept the reality of what I told them happened to me. Their minds are too narrow, their outlook purely clinical. What they can't see or touch or hear doesn't exist.

Tomorrow they're starting me on medication to make me 'normal' again, so I'm rushing to write this down before the pills make me forget everything. Even if it takes me all night, I will ensure that I have a record of the last couple of weeks so I don't start believing their patronising insistence that I've imagined everything because I've gone crazy with grief over my father's death.

I've *not* hurt myself to give my grief a physical outlet; the injuries are real and not self-inflicted.

Every word of this account is true. I *am* sane. I *can* speak to the dead.

And they can speak to me.





1. RUMOUR MILL

It was lunchtime and, as usual, I was sitting in a smelly toilet cubicle, pulling out my hair. I was trying hard not to choke on the fug of stale cigarettes mixed with cheap body spray, when Zoe and Chloe – or ‘The Rhyming Couplets’ as I called them – came in. Everyone knew that the best way to keep up with the school gossip was to visit the girls’ toilets.

When I heard that day’s subject, I froze – the talk was all about me.

“You know Lindy Pennyworth?”

“The girl whose father died?”

“Yeah.”

“He drove his car into a tree, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, I think he was drunk or something.”

I wanted to burst out of the cubicle and scream at them that my father wasn’t a drunk driver – it was my fault he crashed into that tree.

Instead, I yanked out a clump of hair.

An explosion of body spray. I held my nose and stifled a cough.

“People are saying there’s something wrong with her.”

“Course there is. Her dad’s dead.”

“No, I don’t mean that. Can I borrow some lipstick?”

“Here. So? What’s wrong with her?”

“Haven’t you noticed that she’s always asking to go to the toilet?”

“I just assumed she was going out to cry or something.”

“She’s skinnier and her hair’s looking different too. Patchy, like it’s falling out.”

“What, do you think she’s having chemo or something?”

“It’d explain why she’s always running out of classes. Probably throwing up – it’s one of the side effects.”

“You don’t know that for sure, though, do you?”

“All right, no need to be all preachy. I’m just saying what other people are saying. Maybe she’s got bulimia.”

“Bulimics don’t rush out of lessons to throw up. They do it after eating, don’t they?”

“I don’t know, do I? Can I borrow your eyeliner?”

“God, don’t you have any make-up?”

“Course, just left it at home today.”

“Well, don’t blunt the end.”

“Would I?”

“Yeah.”

They stopped talking. My heart was thumping so loudly I was sure they’d hear it in the silence. How had they noticed? I’d been so careful to try to pull my hair out in different places so I wouldn’t get any obvious bald patches. Either I hadn’t done a good enough job, or I was pulling too much out. I looked down at the strands in my hand and dropped them into the toilet bowl.

“So, has anyone asked her?”

“You’re joking, right? No one’s going to risk that. You know what Mr Hardcastle said about not upsetting her.”

“Well, what about Immy? She’s her best friend – she’ll know.”

“Immy’s even scarier. She guards Lindy like a Rottweiler.” Zoe growled and they both laughed.

“How about Jake? They had a thing, didn’t they?”

“Not really. He got off with her at that party at the start of term, but he said it was just because she was practically throwing herself at him. Now he won’t go near her – doesn’t want her to get all clingy now she’s got issues.”

I cringed.

Is that what people are saying?

“Can’t blame him, I s’pose. Still, he’s a bit of a loser.”

“Yeah. Totally up himself.”

“You finished? I need to speak to Sarah before next lesson.”

The door slammed behind them, leaving the stench of their body spray and their rumours ringing in my ears. I knew that people felt uncomfortable around me – that’s what death did. It didn’t just rob you of the person you loved, it also took away others because they didn’t know how to handle you.

I had to find another way to cope, so I pulled out my hair: my lovely, long chestnut mane – the envy of many of the girls in college.

It began by accident when I caught a few strands in my watch strap while tying my hair into a ponytail. The brief sting distracted me from the unbearable pressure in my stomach every time I thought about Dad, which was pretty much all the time. It was so easy and effective, I wished I’d thought of it earlier. All I had to do was escape to the girls’ toilets during breaks and pull while pretending to pee.

I used to love holding the fine, wavy hairs up to the light, looking at the tones of gold among the brown. Little silken trophies waving in the air – proof that I was master of my emotions. Then I flushed away the evidence and got on with the rest of the day.

Those few strands held down the threat for a while, but the tension in my stomach became more demanding. I tried to ignore it, but it grew bigger, crawling up my throat, forcing me to excuse myself from lessons so I could pull four, five, six times a day. The teachers never asked why I needed to go so often – they knew to cut me some slack – but it was obvious my classmates were looking at each other with a “WTF?” expression every time I slipped out, mid-lesson. More hair had to come out each time, too, to get the same sense of relief. The hairs now looked less like trophies and more like tentacles, reaching out to claim my sanity.

At least at home, Mum was oblivious to what I was doing. She was walking around in a daze, gulping down cups of coffee to counteract the hangover she’d given herself from the night before. However, the morning after that particular episode in the toilets, she was obviously more on the ball because she realised I was running half an hour late for college and came into my room, unannounced, catching me in the act.

“What are you doing?” She frowned. “Why’s all that hair in your hand?”

I stammered the first excuse that came to mind. “I, uh, caught it in my brush. I couldn’t get it out, so I had to pull really hard.”

“But it’s in your hand, not your brush.”

“I’ve just pulled it out of my brush to put in the bin.” I looked around for my bin and dropped the hairs in it.

“You’ve been up here for ages.”

"I'm having a bad hair day. I can't do anything with it."

She rolled her eyes. "So? Don't be so vain; you're going to college, not a beauty pageant. Just shove it into a ponytail."

"It won't go."

"Don't be daft. Your hair's halfway down your back. Here, let me—"

I backed away. Her eyes narrowed. "What are you hiding from me?"

"Nothing."

"Come here a minute."

"No."

"Lindy – show me your head."

The game was up. I took a couple of steps forward and bent my head.

"Good God," she whispered. "What have you done to yourself?"



2.
I KNOW YOU
ARE LYING

The doctor signed me off college for the rest of the month, saying we should meet then to review the situation and consider if I was ready to go back. I think he knew what was behind my hair loss but told my mother that it was stress-induced alopecia, rather than worry her with the fact that I was pulling it out, which was good of him. But then he referred me to Dr Greenwood, which was not good of him.

Dr Greenwood was supposed to be one of Oxford's top consultant psychiatrists, specialising in teenage mental health. All I can say is he was Oxford's top irritating jerk. On the several occasions when I visited him, he just sat in his chair with a professional expression of kindness plastered on his face, raising his bushy eyebrows at ten-second intervals – I counted – and steepling his fingers every five minutes or so.

Our first hour-long session was all about “getting to know Lindy”, but I didn't want to tell him anything about me, so it only lasted ten minutes. He called my mother into the room.

"Lindy seems reluctant to talk right now, Mrs Pennyworth, so I'll just cut to the chase and tell you what I think is wrong," he said.

"Our GP already said it's stress-induced alopecia—"

"Not alopecia, I'm afraid." He shook his head. "Trichotillomania."

We both looked at him in confusion.

"Alopecia normally means your hair falls out on its own," he explained. "Trichotillomania is when you pull it out yourself. It's a form of anxiety-driven self-harm."

Mum looked like she was going to faint.

"Can we stop talking about this, please? You're upsetting my mother," I said.

He held up a hand. "There's no point in avoiding it, Lindy. Let's call it what it is. *That's* the first step to recovery. Your mother needs to know because she can support you while you're getting better."

"I just don't think you should be worrying her—"

"She's already worried. *That's* why you're here. The next thing we need to do," he said, as he produced a pen and started writing, "is to give you something to help calm down the compulsion to pull. We have an antidepressant that has a very good track record of helping teenagers with anxiety and obsessive behaviour."

"You're putting her on antidepressants?" Mum asked. "Isn't that premature? Maybe we could try counselling first."

"By the look of things, Lindy has been engaging in this behaviour for quite a while now, Mrs Pennyworth, which is why the antidepressants are strongly indicated as a necessary course of action. But the great thing about these pills is that they help calm down the mind so that it is ready to reap the benefits of counselling. I've pencilled in a session with Lindy next week, in fact."

Lucky me.

He smiled as he handed me the prescription.

“Start taking them tomorrow, with your breakfast. They may make you feel drowsy or sick initially, but if this happens you should start feeling better in a week or so. If you have any . . . er . . . *distressing* thoughts, call us immediately.” He gave my mother a knowing look. “It’s all in the contraindications.”

I went to stand up, but he raised his hand again.

“One second, Lindy. Before you go, I’d still like to hear *something* from you. For example, what kind of things do you like?”

What planet was this guy on?

“Er . . . I don’t know.”

“Come on, Lindy – don’t be rude,” Mum scolded me, like I was a naughty toddler.

“It’s all right, Mrs Pennyworth. Talking about ourselves can be a difficult thing. Why don’t I get the ball rolling, Lindy, and tell you what I like?”

I shrugged, ignoring the darts of anger Mum was shooting my way.

He cleared his throat. “Well, let me see. I love wearing cartoon ties to work because they make my patients laugh. Isn’t this one great?” He held it out towards me. “I chose it because I think the Mr Men characters encapsulate human emotions really well. If you could pick one of these on my tie today, which would you be?”

“Are you joking?” I snorted.

“Lindy!” Mum hissed.

“It’s all right, Mrs Pennyworth, let her speak – I want to hear her reasoning. What makes you think that I’m joking, Lindy?”

“Well, firstly, they’re all male and I’m female. Secondly, Mr Greedy, Mr Noisy, Mr Nobody, Mr Bump and Mr Worry are all *bald*.”

He looked less sure of himself. “Well, yes, but I fail to see why this is so important—”

“Do they have Trichotillomania too, Dr Greenwood?”

He wore Kung Fu Panda the next week.



The sessions were not going well. I wasn't trying to be deliberately nasty or anything, I just knew that the guy was patronising me and I despised him for it.

Just before we left for my third session with him, Immy called. I hesitated – I didn't want to answer, but I also felt guilty because I hadn't replied to any of her messages since I'd been signed off college.

“Hi, Immy.”

“So you *do* still exist.”

I smiled. Her humour had kept me sane – relatively speaking – since Dad's death.

“I've been so worried!” she continued. “Why aren't you at college?”

“Ask Zoe or Chloe. According to them, I've either got an eating disorder or cancer.”

“Idiots. If they don't know something, they make it up.” She paused, then said more carefully, “But you were going to the toilet a lot. Are you sick?”

“No, course not.”

“So what *were* you doing in there? You weren't . . . you know . . .”

“What?”

“Throwing up? You *have* got really skinny.”

"I'm not bulimic!"

Mum yelled up the stairs for me. "Sorry, Immy, I've got to go."

"Where?"

I sighed. "To see a psychiatrist."

A pause. "Oh. I'm so sorry, Lindy. Are you OK? I mean, of course, after what happened—"

Mum shouted again, louder, and Immy heard it this time. "You'd better go. But make sure you call me later, OK? Have fun . . ."

There was that sense of humour again.



Mum and I were mainly silent on the way to the clinic, apart from a brief discussion about what to have for dinner. I fiddled with my beanie, something I'd started wearing out in public since the bald patches were obvious now. I didn't want Dr Greenwood staring at them, though I reasoned I could always point out his if he got too personal.

Mum dropped me off outside the clinic and carried on to the supermarket. I considered skiving from the session, but I knew they'd call her and I'd have to come back another time. It was best to get it over and done with.

Dr Greenwood was sitting, as usual, behind his massive wooden desk, pushing his podgy fingertips together as if in prayer. "How are we today, Lindy?"

"I don't know how *you* are, but I'm fine, thanks."

He chuckled. "Impressive way to deal with the royal 'we'. It's good to see that you have the courage to challenge my way of speaking. May *we* assume this is partly thanks to the medication kicking in?"

Smug bastard. “It’s still making me feel tired.”

He nodded. “That’s a fairly normal reaction because they work by calming down your nervous system. It should improve soon. I see you’re still wearing your hat. How many times a day have you pulled your hair since the last time I saw you?”

“Excuse me?”

“Have the urges to pull decreased?”

“Yes. I’m down to one or two times a day now.”

The eyebrows rose. “That’s . . . better than I would have expected.”

In other words, you know I’m lying.

He picked up a piece of paper and handed it to me, along with a few colouring pens.

“From our previous two sessions, I know that you find talking about your emotions difficult, Lindy. I think that this might be what drives your Trichotillomania. So, today, I’d like you to draw me what you’re feeling instead. Many people find this an easier path into therapy than talking. I’ll leave you alone for a minute or two while I have a word with my secretary.”

He shut the door as he left the room. I wanted to scream that I didn’t need a psychiatrist to make me feel better. If I needed help from anyone it would be in the form of a psychic, but if I admitted that to him then he would use that as proof that I *definitely* needed psychiatric help.

The more I thought about it, the more I could see sense in talking to a psychic. The one thing that I wanted more than anything was to talk to Dad and take back the horrible last words I’d said to him before he died. I needed to tell him that it was the anger talking, not how I really felt. I needed to hear him say that he understood and that everything was OK.

I needed his forgiveness.

I'd tried tarot cards, I'd bought a Ouija board on eBay and I'd sat by myself in a church hoping that he'd whisper something in my ear, like you sometimes see in films. None of that worked, so I'd started working my way through *Talking to the Dead – Your Guide to Spiritual Conversation*, which I'd picked up at a second-hand book stall in the market for five pounds. It was a huge book, filled with lurid illustrations that screamed the 1970s. When I found it, I felt as if fate – or rather, Dad – had thrown us together.

Imagine if I told Dr Greenwood this. He'd have me committed. I wished Dad could have met Dr Greenwood. He'd have had a great time imitating his nasal voice, daring me to draw a caricature of the hairy doctor as one humungous eyebrow.

My phone vibrated with a text from Immy.

Hey! All OK?

I'm in Hell.

Aren't you supposed to be having therapy? 🤔

Aren't YOU supposed to be in class? 🤔

Teacher's off sick. The TA is texting on HER phone!

So what are you doing?

I'm supposed to be drawing something. 🤔



As he opened the door, I picked up a pink pen and stabbed a dot in the middle of the page before replacing the lid.

Dr Greenwood sat down and looked at it for a minute. “Interesting. Is the tiny dot you and the white expanse of paper the overwhelming grief you battle every day?”

“No.”

He looked surprised. “Oh. All right. You’ve given me a challenge, Lindy. I’m considered quite the expert in this field!” He laughed. “Why don’t you tell me in your own words what this does mean to you?”

“Uh . . . it means I can’t draw?”

“Is that because you’re too afraid of what might come out?”

“No. It means I’m bad at drawing.”

He sighed. “Lindy, it doesn’t matter if you’re not an accomplished artist. The aim is to help you release emotions that you might otherwise find unspeakable. It’s extremely therapeutic.”

He gave me a fresh piece of paper, which I thought was wasteful considering what deforestation does to the planet. I decided that this drawing should count, to make the dead tree's life matter.

A few seconds later, I pushed my drawing across the table to him.

"Much better, Lindy," he nodded. "Right, here goes . . . This stickman is your dad. And the strange fish clinging on to his neck is you, desperately trying to stop yourself from drowning in a sea of grief. Your penmanship shows pain; anger. And the speed with which you drew this shows me that, despite the barriers you always erect in my company, you're desperate to tell me about it all."

He leant back expectantly.

I grabbed my bag and stood up.

"You have *way* too much faith in my artistic ability, Dr Greenwood. Here's what the drawing means: the stickman is you and that thing you think is a fish is one of your ridiculous ties. But thanks. I do feel a lot better now I've got that off my chest."

I smiled at the receptionist as I walked out, and she gave me a surprised nod. Maybe I was cured after all.



3. AMATEUR PSYCHIC

I wasn't.

I texted Mum to say I'd left the appointment early and skipped home, happier than I'd been in a long time. But, as predicted, she'd heard about my behaviour and as soon as I shut the front door, she started yelling at me for walking out of my session. I ran upstairs and locked myself in the bathroom, wrapped strands of hair around my fingers and pulled, while she yelled outside the door that I was deliberately trying to make our lives difficult.

"You don't get it, Mum," I said, trying to block out her ranting. "He was awful! He was smug and patronising – you saw that – and he treated me like a five-year-old—"

"So you decided to behave like one and throw a strop and walk out, did you? I don't understand you, Lindy. You've got a problem – don't argue with me, you *know* you do – and people are trying to help you overcome it, and all you do is throw it back in their faces."

"He made me want to pull my hair even more. How is that helpful?"

A pause.

"I admit he's not got the best manner, but we need him."

"Why?"

"Because I can't do this on my own! Look, I can't keep talking to a door. Please come out."

I didn't want to see her. I didn't want to look at her strained, pinched face. I knew she shared my guilt. She could have stopped me that day. She could have stopped me from yelling, "I *hate* you!" as I ran out of the house – the last words I ever spoke to Dad. But she just stood and watched.

"I just need time," I mumbled.

She walked away and I pulled some hairs from my crown. The relief was instantaneous.



"I'll be back at seven. There's a ready-made risotto in the fridge – can you heat it up in the oven for then, please?"

"Sure," I said, as Mum grabbed her yoga mat and headed out the door. She was calmer than earlier but still needed to find her "Zen", apparently.

I headed upstairs and grabbed *Talking to the Dead – Your Guide to Spiritual Conversation* from under my bed. Since things hadn't worked out with Dr Greenwood, I figured I might as well try this again.

The book instructed me to sit in a dark, candlelit room, so I drew the blinds and clicked on some battery-operated fake candles, hoping that spirits can't tell the difference between real flames and LED ones.

I breathed deeply, holding Dad's watch as a spiritual conduit – apparently, an important tool for the amateur psychic. I closed my eyes and focused on his face – his scratchy beard that tickled my cheeks when he leant in to give me a goodnight kiss, even when I was old enough to tell him that it was gross.

“Where are you, Dad? I need to talk to you – tell you that I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said.”

All I could hear – and feel – was the ticking of his watch in my hand. I gripped it harder, remembering when I gave it to him.



“Happy Birthday, Dad!”

He grins as I hand over the parcel, wrapped in silver paper, then gives it a playful shake.

“Interesting. It’s making some sort of whirring noise.”

I want to shake him for drawing this out, but settle on tapping my foot with impatience and excitement. I’d saved up my pocket money for weeks to help Mum pay for this.

“I think I’ll just have another coffee—”

“Dad! Stop kidding around.”

“Sorry. OK, here goes.”

He pulls the bow on top and puts the ribbon in my hair before opening the box and revealing the silver watch nestling inside.

“Wow!” He whistles. “This is amazing.”

“It’s a kinetic watch. It charges itself through your body movement whenever you wear it.”

He holds it up to his ear and tilts it backwards and forwards. “What a clever idea. I can hear the mechanism inside it.”

“And you’ll never need to buy a battery – it will keep going as long as you do!”

He stands up and envelopes me in a huge hug. “I love it. I’ll always wear it.”



When he died, I asked Mum if I could keep it – I couldn’t bear the thought of it dying with him. I wore it halfway up my forearm on the tightest setting – by keeping it running, I could still keep a part of him alive.

A slight disturbance rippled through the air. My heart quickened.

The temperature hadn’t dropped – a common sign that a spirit is near – but the air felt different; charged. My skin prickled and I held the watch up to my lips.

“Dad? Is that you?”

Something brushed against my right arm. Something hairy, soft and familiar.

Bofur.

One of my cats meowed as he climbed into my lap, nudging his head against the hand holding the watch.

I laid the watch down and gathered him in my arms, inhaling the strange scent of pears that always perfumed his fur. He headbutted his face against my chin and purred loudly, placing his front paws on my shoulders.

“Silly boy. What sort of witch’s cat would you make? There’s no way we’ll make contact with him now.”

Bofur pushed a whiskery face against my cheek and darted a sandpaper tongue against my earlobe.

I giggled, then buried my face in his fur. “Where is he, Bofur?”

He squirmed to be let free, so I put him down on the carpet and tried to stand up, cursing my right foot, which had gone to sleep. I wiggled my toes as Bofur watched me, sitting on top of the psychic guidebook.

“Keeping my place, huh?”

I got up and hobbled to turn on the light switch. “Or are you telling me that book is just another waste of money, like the Ouija board and tarot cards?”

Bofur yawned, lifted his hind leg and started cleaning his rear end.

“Thanks for your honesty.”

If I couldn’t contact Dad myself, it was time to find someone who could.