

JODI MAY'S



HSA vs IT

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FOREWORD & DISCLAIMER

First and foremost, I do not own the characters of 'IT' nor the original concept. All rights remain with the original author, Stephen King. It's important to note that this is a homage to the original story, which happens to be my favourite book. I was inspired by every single page and read it once a year, every summer, to be whisked away to Derry all over again. It occurred to me, after the two recent films (I prefer the 1990's television series) that a lot of people love the story and adore 'Pennywise the Dancing Clown' but they never get the chance to read the book. Put off by its length, they miss out on the magic of the tale as King wrote it. With this crossover homage fan fiction I wanted to bring a piece of that magic (and horror) to life and it's my hope, above all, that I'll be able to encourage just one person to pick up the original book.

Secondly, the '*Hillside Academy*' characters featured in this fan fiction are all my own. The only character I took from King's story was 'Pennywise'. The rest are mine and all belong to me by law. I will also add that much of the main characters' backstories have been changed to fit this specific 'alternative universe' and several of the minor characters of the story have also been altered. To conclude, there are no spoilers to the main '*Hillside Academy*' series. Rather, it is a way for me to highlight the main eight (Erika, Dominic, Sam, Anna, Emily, Will, Elivia and Tom) in this horror fan fiction that is dedicated to not only Stephen King for inspiring me to keep writing all these years, but also to the people of Lancaster, Lancashire.

Thus bringing me to the penultimate point of this disclaimer. Throughout the book, Lancaster is referred to not always kindly and sometimes in a negative light. This is fiction. I wanted to set this gruesome fan fiction homage in this city because for one, it's truly beautiful and has a rich, fantastic history, and secondly, because I love it. I moved here just over two years ago and fell quickly in love with the history and architecture. My babies were born here and in a way, so was I. By leaving the place I grew up and all its ghosts, I was liberated. This city has quickly become not the place I was raised but the place I was born. And the people? The people of Lancaster are wonderful. They're community-orientated, kind and generous, and during a rather arduous period, the community of Greaves specifically aided us greatly. My partner and I are eternally grateful for their generosity and kindness during this time and this is my strange way of saying thank you; of bringing Lancaster to the forefront again and displaying it in all its glory. So whatever you may read, remember it is fiction and that Lancaster, UK is my favourite place in the world. So to the people of Lancaster, thank you.

And last but not least, a disclaimer to say that the content of this chapter and all the following contain strong language, violence against children, sexual references, scenes of gore and peril and is quite frankly inappropriate for young readers or anyone easily offended. But if this is all to your taste, go ahead and read.

I hope you enjoy reading this 'alternative universe' fan fiction homage as much as I enjoyed writing it. All comments are welcome (though don't be mean), shares are encouraged and remember –

Once you begin this story...*you'll float too.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Photograph

Angie had fussed over them since the moment they returned to Tom's house on Hastings Road. She'd fretted over the state of their clothes, the cuts and bruises decorating their arms and legs and faces. Malcolm, Tom's grandfather, had tried to calm his wife but the moment the first aid kit, which she kept in a cupboard in the kitchen, had come out, Mal had excused himself to the garden to continue fixing a neighbour's strimmer, leaving his wife to nurse the two teenagers.

Upon asking how they'd ended up in such a state, Erika had stayed quiet and Tom had hesitated. If he told his grandmother the truth – an epic rock battle across the train tracks – she would have a heart attack. It was hard enough persuading her each day to let him go outside and hang out with his friends, what with all the abductions and murders, but if she knew that a certain group of privileged kids also wanted him dead, he would never see the light of day again.

In the end, he and Erika had mumbled something about having a small accident in the woods at the top of Dorrington Road – somewhere none of them had returned to since the incident with the Crone – whilst adding additional sections to their den. This had soothed Angie's fretting somewhat, though she was keen to point out, all throughout dinner of bangers and mash, that they should be more careful and that the woods weren't an appropriate place to play. At that point, Mal had piped up to point out that playing in woods and building dens was *exactly* what kids should be doing instead of –

Glued to a television set and never getting any fresh air.

Tom agreed but his protective nan was less impressed by her husband's beliefs, talking his ear off about the abductions and murders until she was blue in the face and her dinner had gone cold. In the end, Mal had agreed with his wife – always eager to keep to the 'happy wife, happy life' motto – and Tom and Erika had agreed to be more careful in the woods. They had shared a small knowing look across the dining table in the corner of the large cosy living room at the front of 1930s house on Hastings Road; one that said – *as if we'd ever go back to those woods*. And, no matter how careful they were, It would find them. It was no longer a matter of being careful, but rather being wise.

Street-wise. It was something Tom and Erika were both familiar with, having been told since they were small children and first allowed out of their homes that they had to be 'street wise'. Gone were the days when this had only meant looking both ways when crossing the roads or knowing to stop and wait at a zebra crossing and not talk to strangers. Now, there were more rules; one must remember to run when one sees one's worst nightmares; not accept balloons from clowns or be convinced into the clutches of a monster. Considering

these lessons, including the time old ‘stop, look, listen, live’ – a motto once sung on adverts by cute hedgehogs when he was a child – Tom wondered when the world had tilted on the wrong way on axis. When his reality had gone from worrying about being hit by a car, singing that catchy hedgehog song on his way to school:

Though you know the road well,

Still you never can tell,

You’ve got to be wise,

You could be surprised,

On the roads near home,

Stop, think and go,

Woohooowhoaaaa... Woohooowhoaaaa.

To murderous clowns. If anything that day, battling with the bullies of his friends in an epic rock battle across the train tracks had been an odd type of normal he had been craving for ever since he and Elivia had met the clown, or whatever It was, in the maintenance tunnels beneath the university. Something which he found not only troubling for its sheer terror but for several other reasons. Since that day, he’d questioned several abnormalities. For starters, there were the tunnels themselves. How had his measly pass that only allowed him into that one block on campus given him access to secretive maintenance tunnels? Why had the key pad inside looked brand new? How had he and Elivia been split up? And why, when he’d taken all those photos, the flash burning It, holding It back from them, had none of them appeared on his camera?

His camera. Erika said it was token. She had encouraged them all to carry their tokens, something Tom didn’t find difficult, since his camera hung around his neck most days. So why hadn’t the clown shown up in the photos? Why had they all been blank? Was it because It wasn’t really there? Had Tom been right after all? Were they all just imagining It?

All this and more troubled Tom that evening as he set about blacking out the bathroom to develop his latest roll of film. Leaving Erika in the guest bedroom where his grandmother had set her up in the cosy guest bed, washed her clothes and fed her ever since she’d been kicked out – a type of luxury for Tom’s friend who struggled to accept it all (since she’d never had it) – Tom finished blocking out all the light around the window and door until he was left in total darkness, something he needed for colour film.

It was a difficult process but one he was adept in having been taught at his grandfather’s hip ever since he’d come to live with his grandparents ten years ago. He could have developed his film at the university in their professional darkrooms but since the incident in the tunnels, Tom had been reluctant to be trapped in a pitch black room. No, at home was best. At home, he felt safe. Kneeling in his bathroom, singing the song to another safety advert featuring more hedgehogs from his childhood, this one a rendition of the Bee

Gee's Stayin' Alive – all the lyrics changed to raise awareness of traffic and road safety – he felt contently encased in the darkness, far from the reaches of It.

After carefully removing the film from the camera, all in the total darkness and relying on his experience and adept hands to remember every step, Tom snipped off the excess at the end with a pair of scissors before feeding it onto a spall. Once securely on, he trapped it inside a black processing tank, being sure to screw it on tight. Still kneeling over the bath in that tiny bathroom where the smell of the chemicals was starting to make his nose twitch and the humidity of the evening made him sweat, Tom poured the developer he'd mixed earlier into the top. Once his stopwatch was set, he agitated the tank for several minutes. It was a long process but one Tom found cathartic and in these silent minutes, gently agitating the tank by turning it upside down and then back again, over and over again, he thought through everything they knew about It.

It took the form of your worst nightmare, or rather, it seemed, something that truly terrified for you. For it hadn't been Tom's worst nightmare in that tunnel. His worst nightmare couldn't be a form. The death of his mother? How would It become that? He believed this to be true since hearing all the rest of their fears. For Anna Clearwater, proud, brave, stern Anna, it hadn't been her mother's death either, rather an executioner with a noose. Sam's had been a statue, Dominic's his brother's toy monkey, Erika's a witch in the woods, Emily's a merman, Will's a hobo and Elivia's a road sweeper. A road sweeper. These were their childish fears; nightmares that, at fourteen, they all wished to no longer fear but evidently, still did.

A puppet. That was how It had appeared to Tom. Not a great fathomless orb of darkness, of oppressive loneliness and grief, but a puppet. And It had petrified him. Shaken him to his core. Made him tremble on his knees even then as he recalled It as he emptied out the developer, poured in the bleach-fix and started the process of agitating it to a time limit all over again.

If a child, that of six or seven, was faced with a puppet like the one Tom had seen, they would have frozen in fear. Completely paralysed and unable to stop It from taking them and;

Eating them whole.

But Tom wasn't six or seven. He was a teenager and while he had been terrified, he'd run. He'd escaped. In doing so, using his camera flash, they'd even injured It. It could be harmed. Therefore, It could be killed. But how? And how would they ever learn how to if this thing, whatever It was, if they were the only ones who knew about It? For how could anybody else know about It? No one could even take Its photo and to have escaped It felt as though Tom, Elivia and all the rest of their merry band of misfits had cheated Death himself. Dumb luck. Or was it?

Tom couldn't be certain and as his brain overflowed with thoughts, his hands worked habitually, emptying out the bleach-fix and fixing the funnel lid of the tank carefully as he

started the next process of washing the film; running water straight into tank for six minutes. Back beginning to ache, his legs pinching with pins and needles, Tom stayed still, grasping that tank as cold water rushed over his wrist. His mind was clouded, the very bathroom falling away as he retreated into his thoughts. But just as he found himself standing back in that maintenance tunnel, faced with that formidable figure at the end of the hallway, the beep of the timer brought him back to reality.

After the stabilizer treatment to prevent any change in the colours of the film over time, Tom emptied the solution back into its bottle and opened the tank to reveal his developed film. This was his favourite part of the process; seeing his photos for the first time. Switching on the lights, Tom held the reel of film up to the light to view each in turn. Smiling proudly, he held each square slot close to view the small images he would later produce in larger prints. As his eyes scanned down, he came across the final photos on the film; the ones he took that afternoon of the asylum. Still kneeling over the bathroom, the film dripping water down his fingers and forearms, each plink in the shallow water of the bath like a pin drop in that silence bathroom, Tom squinted to get a better look at the last photo of the film.

It was of them. All of them. The photo Tom had insisted they all take after winning their first and hopefully their last, epic rock battle. He grinned excitedly, holding it close to pick out each of his friends' faces, all strange looking in this inverted negative. But he recognised them nonetheless.

Will's shy smile as he stood beside Emily, forever curling his shoulders forwards to make himself appear as small as possible. Emily's tentative expression of happiness as she smiled awkwardly at the camera, also trying to make herself as small as possible but for a whole other reason to Will. Anna's tall confident frame, her golden hair pulled back from her beautiful photogenic expression, one hand on her hip and effortless laughter on her lips. Sam, who filled the photo up with his arrogant stature, grinning from ear to ear even as the cut on his eyebrow bled down the side of his face; a face, Tom knew, would become handsome one day. Erika stood beneath one of Sam's strong arms, her own folded just beneath her growing bust and while Tom had thought at the time she'd looked unimpressed by Sam's confident move to put an arm around her, he could see now that the expression on her face was not sarcastic or in any way annoyed, but happy. It brought a warmth to Tom then as his eyes fell to Elivia at the front, crouched beside a version of himself from six hours ago. There was a beaming smile on her elfin face, her swan feather hair falling into her eyes which he knew, without colour yet imprinted, were blue. As blue as the summer sky that had shone down upon them. These losers.

And then there was Dominic. Tom's boyfriend. His best friend. His beloved with that sullen grief in his eyes that was almost extinguished today; the shadows chased away by the light, the goodness, by this group of losers that made Tom smile even then. Even with the storm cloud of It hanging over them. They found some happiness today, in spite of It. And tomorrow, at Sam's suggestion, they would escape it all for one day as teenagers. One day where they wouldn't have to fear for their lives. Where they would regain their strength,

remind themselves what it meant to be teenagers and hopefully, with that, learn how to fight It. How to kill It – once and for all.

Tom was looking forward to tomorrow. He believed it would do them all some good, especially Erika. He thought of her now, just a few metres away in the guest bedroom, nose buried in a book and music playing quietly from a borrowed stereo. He wanted to see her smile again as much as he longed to see it on his boyfriend's face. Yes, it would all do them some good.

Just as he went to stand up to hang the film up to dry, something else caught his eye. Moving that small square of film closer, he squinted into the background of the photo of himself and his friends, the asylum towering over them behind and saw something which hadn't been there that afternoon. Something he hadn't spotted the first time. Something he would have surely seen if it had indeed been there. Surely?

His breaths came quickly, his heart rate soaring in his young chest as his eyes focused on the figure standing to the right of the shot. White face, silk silver suit, those red pompoms dotted down the front and those red tufts of hair either side of Its head. Just as it had been in the maintenance tunnels. The clown. It.

In Its grasp, raised in a wave was an object of some sort. An appendage. Upon closer inspection, vomit crawling up his throat, Tom understood what the clown was holding. If this photo hadn't been a negative, if he was to develop it, he would see yellow. A yellow sleeve of a waterproof coat. And a hand. A small boy's hand hanging limply out the end. Toby's hand. Toby Johnson's arm still hanging in its waterproof jacket just as it had been back in October when it had been torn from its socket.

Stifling his vomit, Tom tossed the film into the bath. Jerking back in his fear, in his absolute need to get as far away from that film as possible, Tom's back met the toilet. But before he could fall any further, one hand over his mouth to clasp in the vomit, his other hand was pulled forward with such force his entire arm felt as though it, like Toby's, was about to be yanked from its shoulder socket. Chest and ribcage slamming against the side of the bath, Tom's neck and shoulders tilted over the edge as his arm was pulled into the water which was no longer a cool shallow pool, but fathomless black lake. He wailed as sharp claws drew deep across his forearm submerged in the inky ice water, tugging him deeper until his legs were unfurling from beneath him. His socked feet struggled to find purchase against the bath mat which slid out from under him as he writhed. All air had been sucked from his lungs, leaving him breathless and mute as he tried to scream for help. As he pleaded silently for someone, anyone, to help him.

He'd thought he was safe here. In his house. In his bathroom. Developing his film. His grandparents downstairs watching the ten o'clock news. Erika just a few paces away reading Lord of the Rings in the guest bed. But he wasn't. None of them were. While It still lived, while It still breathed, they were all in danger. A fact Tom understood more and more so as his shoulders slipped over the side of the bath and his lips caressed the cool surface as he drew his final breath. And all at once, he was pulled under and all was black.

Heart beat pounding in his ears, water stinging in his wide eyes, his arm still pulled deep in front of him, the only thing stopping him from being completely consumed his other arm gripping the side of the bath in a death-grip. But his wet fingers were losing purchase. His socked feet slammed against the ceramic of the toilet and with each writhe, bubbles of air escaped his tight lips. Not a sound. Not a breath. Nothing to do but stare back into the fathomless darkness and watch as two yellow orbs drew closer. Widening, brightening, closer and closer until Tom stared into infinity. Suddenly, the urge to survive, to be free of this disembodied grasp, left him. And as it did, his grip on the side of the bath loosened, just his littlest finger clinging on with that small sliver of hope.

Hope.

You can't have me!

But I will. And then, I will lick the meat from your bones and suck the juice from your marrow. And you will float. You will float like all the rest. We all float down here...

With a great force, Tom was pulled from the water. A gasp of relief and desperation gobbled the air into his lungs as he collapsed backwards on the bathroom floor, his limbs clattering against the toilet and basin, a soft cushion beneath him. One he hardly registered as he tried to regain his breath, as his heart thundered and his head throbbed from the lack of oxygen. A cushion which cradled him, their lips to his wet cheek and their arms tightly wound around his collar bone, the strength of which was almost suffocating but appreciated in those moments as Tom lay dripping on the bathroom floor, staring at the side of the bath, convinced the clown would crawl out after him. But after a few moments where only his pants for breath filled the room, nothing happened. Nothing emerged from the bath after him and Tom could finally turn to face his saviour.

“Erika,” he breathed.

“I heard you – I heard *It*,” she shuddered, her arms around him unfaltering.

“How?”

“I don't know...I was just lying on the bed and I knew.”

“Angie? Mal?” Tom sniffled, slowly and cautiously sitting up to peer over the side of the bath. The black lake had gone. The shallow bath water had been replaced and as he peered down he saw only his and Erika's reflections staring back at him.

“They haven't moved, or at least –.”

The bathroom swung open to reveal Angie's round, perturbed frame. “What on *earth* is going on in here?!” she boomed, torn between her need to nurture and protect these two young teenagers and her abhorrence at the sight of all that spilt water, soaking the bath mat beneath them.

“I –,” Tom stammered, looking from his grandmother’s furious red face to the innocent bath water.

“Tom was going to help me wash my hair,” Erika said quickly, her hand instinctively going to her chest where her long hair had once sat. She chewed anxiously on her bottom lip, caught in this lie. When she’d stayed with them before, Tom had washed her hair over the side of the bath several times. But there was no need for that now her hair was almost as short as Elivia’s. And Angie knew that. She wasn’t an idiot but looked sorely offended either of them would take her for one.

“We have a shower, Erika. There is no need for that,” Angie said stiffly.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

“Clean this mess up,” Angie ordered with a tut, “In future, if you two want to play with water, go to the leisure centre, not in my bathroom.” Pushing the door open further pointedly, Tom suddenly understood that his nan didn’t just believe they’d been up to no good in the bathroom, but that their ‘up to no good’ was of a sexual nature. And that thought, that hilarious notion, brought an uncontrollable smirk to Tom and Erika’s mouths which they stifled as Angie gave them each one last stern look before stomping back down the stairs. But as soon as she was out of ear shot, the two sniggered into each other’s shoulders, all the terror of the last ten minutes suddenly lost. Just like that.

Giggling frantically, each time one tried to stop, the other started again until the two were in a pool of tears of laughter on the wet bathroom mat, the clown and Tom’s almost untimely death almost forgotten. Almost.

Wiping his eyes, his damp fringe hanging into his eyes, Tom knelt up to peer back into the bath and that shallow pool of water. The humour dissipated as quickly as it had appeared; a sense of dread rushing back to them both. “It was deep. Black and like a lake.”

“I saw it,” Erika muttered.

“You know, before this, I was just beginning to wonder whether It was all in our imagination. How It can change things. How adults can’t see It. You know?”

“You still think Its our imaginations now?” Erika said, nodding to the bath.

“Maybe,” Tom shrugged, “Maybe not. But something’s killing those children.”

“Something tried to kill you, too, Tom. Twice. It tried to kill me, and Emily, and Will and Sam and Anna and Elivia and Dom. And It *did* kill Toby. It did that, Tom. It’s not our imagination.”

He gave another shrug. Somehow, he felt detached from that; enough so he could reach into the bath and yank out the plug without even a flinch. The water was quickly swallowed into the pipes, gurgling away into the darkness.

“All I know is, something gives It its power. There must be a reason why adults can't see It. Why It takes on our fears. So what is It?”

In reply, Erika could only shake her head, her eyes on the last of the water being sucked down the plughole into the drains...into the sewers.