

## A 60-YEAR-OLD-MAN RUNNING IN 👠

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### PENELOPE + THE VEILED TREE



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Our favorite part of this story was its high stakes. Penelope's life is a very difficult one. We applaud the writer for having the courage to write about such serious subjects. We also thought the opening lines were particularly well-suited to draw us into the story, especially the sentence *"The kind of years where she became the chalkboard with kid-after-kid lining up to drag their fingernails across her fragile being."*

- Writer Magazine



## PENELOPE + THE VEILED TREE



Penelope Court had a rough two years—the kind of years where she became a chalkboard with *kid-after-kid* lining up to drag their fingernails across her fragile being.

Penelope is the youngest of seven with three sisters and three brothers: Beatrice, Hattie, Gloria, Charles, Simon, and Chad. Twenty-three years separate Beatrice from Penelope.

Beatrice and Hattie, like Marge’s sisters on the Simpsons, lived together their entire lives.

Penelope’s hardships began after Charles suffered a catastrophic stroke. News delivered by Charles’s oldest daughter, Samantha. Samantha tried to keep in touch with Penelope, even after Penelope tripped into the arms of Harold Court—a trip bringing the Hearth family great shame.

Perhaps, the true shame should have originated from a dark Hearth family secret. Penelope was the main character in—a secret that deposited Penelope in Holly Lodge—Asheville’s Sanctuary for the insane. During her first stay, she gave birth to the triplets twins: Tiffany, Diana (and Belinda).

If you were a fly on the wall in one of Asheville’s cafes or watering holes, you might find it astounding, Penelope hadn’t become a permanent resident in one of Holly Lodge’s ramshackle rooms. You see, Penelope, although a Hearth, was deemed to be un-pure. A truth discovered by accident two decades after the Big C took her parents Jack and Marie away with its unrelenting wrath, Penelope stood bedside, for both of their final breaths.

Penelope buried her truths. Self-medication and denial became her selected path back to sanity.

Another newsflash arrived: Amanda, Samantha’s younger sister, ran with a Broughton crew, far south of savoury.

*First taste, free, in a month we’ll own you, eventually: you’ll end up selling your body and soul to repay.*

Unsavoury crashed down for Amanda; her boyfriend was busted, Amanda, luckily, escaped charges.

Amanda reached out to Penelope each time she escaped to Asheville, asking, and asking

and asking to meet. Penelope resisted, and they never met; she pushed Amanda away. Like her parents, Amanda became stricken with The Big C.

Beatrice and Hattie escaped Broughton, heading east to the pulsing energy of New Big City (NBC), a place Broughtoners believed harboured the devil.

Penelope knew, despite being born, being born was her only crime in being added to the family tree's ailing limbs. Then, one day, she'd have to travel back to Broughton to say "hello" to her actual birth mother, Beatrice.

*But how do you say "hello" to your mother decades after you believed you'd watched her take her final breath of life?*

*And after the gut-wrenching "hello," how in the hell do you find the strength to say "goodbye?" Because Beatrice's life clock was about to strike midnight.*

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With emotions running raw, Penelope knew she needed nutritious sustenance. She had not always been the best with eating habits – perhaps due to the swill they fed her during her lengthy stay at Holly Lodge. Holly Lodge's kitchens motto:

*If the psychoanalysis doesn't do you in, the food will most certainly do the trick.*

Penelope wanted to live, so, she dropped into a local Jugo Juice to get a blast of health in a smoothie and a fresh Panini.

The juice was tasty, rich in colour, infused with vitamins and minerals. It made Penelope feel better. Her chicken panini, although stained with her tears, had a lovely mouthfeel and crunch.

When Penelope finished eating, she felt more alive, her ability to continue with her daily struggles, possible!

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Penelope enjoyed retreating into Lakeside Park, where she'd sit on a log and contemplate life. Then, with the passing years ripping apart her identity, she travelled to Europe in 2003, when the bombshell of family secrecy dropped onto her lap in the form of an accidental discovery. With the discovery fresh in mind, she escaped by blasting through 11 European countries with her dear friend Dave in one month.

During another reflection. in August of 2018. Penelope flashed to the part of the trip, where, with the Citroën's gas-pedal floored, RPM redlining, every ounce of juice drained from the cylinders, as Dave held on for life, Dave withdrew from his fear to snap a photo of a bridge they were crossing in Genoa Italy, a random shot. Now, fifteen-years later, Penelope pulled up the picture, searched the web, and with her discovery: began trembling.

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## *Genoa bridge collapse: search called off after last bodies found.*

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Penelope's craziness had her believing it was a close call.

Penelope burst into tears. She lay on the log closing her tear-stained eyes. Her mind raced from life-event to life-event, breaking hard at a message from Samantha she received on Good Friday of 2016. Penelope checked the news. Sam's voice was quaking when she said, "*Amanda died last night. Mom discovered the body, with her dog, Kona, at her side.*"

Penelope wanted to be comforting for Samantha. She couldn't help but think of how she had pushed Amanda away when Amanda reached out to her. She knew she failed. Her previous resistance repulsed her — an unerasable regret.

She remembered Sam asking if she'd like to speak to Charles.

*How could Penelope refuse?*

The conversation shared, although pleasant, lacked depth. Charles and Penelope were talking for the first time in twelve-years. The call, fueled by emotion, but because of the family BS, it shamefully: wrung clinically. Charles had suffered a stroke, and now, his youngest daughter Amanda lay in his basement, waiting for the medical examiner to take her corpse away.

Penelope hung up, collapsing to the ground, feeling like she'd failed her family. A family that likely had failed her.



Penelope heard rustling a few feet away. She paused, momentarily stoked with fear. The branches of a tree directly in front of her swished and then —

*“Belinda, is that you? Oh my, is that blood trickling from the corner of your mouth? OMG, Belinda, who?”*

Belinda scurried away.

Asheville’s mayor wouldn’t be making it home for dinner; ever again.

Ashevillian’s would soon be forced to elect the fourth mayor of the year.

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On this brilliantly cloudless, emotionally charged day, Penelope avoided home because her husband Harold Court lacked empathy.

Instead, Penelope retreated to her preferred watering hole, *The Underbelly*, a place where, like Harold, comfort and understanding were lacking from the menu. She pulled up a stool at the bar and commenced to drown her memories away. Barney entered and sat beside her. Penelope struggled to converse with Barney on the best of days. She likens their talks to inane small talk and a painful, pointless job interview.

She strained to find civility. She asked Barney if he knew about the bridge in Genoa. Penelope pulled up photos of the bridge on her phone and then shared David’s. She emphasized the randomness of all the pictures snapped on her European adventure fifteen-years prior. Dave had snapped one crossing that same bridge in Genoa.

*“That’s a lot like when my sister was in New York City in 1999,” Barney said. “In the background of one of her pictures, you could see the World Trade Center.”*

Penelope asked Barney, *“Would you like to meet my friend Belinda?”*

She had enough frivolity: time had arrived to escape to nutrition!

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Satiated, as much as flipping from carnivore to vegetarian for a day can satisfy, Penelope sprinted on. She had enough of Barney.

Penelope loves Belinda and prays for her salvation. She fears a pending imbalance

between the number of females to males in Asheville if Belinda continues to devour her fleshy desires.

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Months later, after living in the denial of the truths floating past her and a crippling fear of sharing too much leading her to isolation, Samantha sent Penelope a text with a picture attached. Penelope's (*real*) mother was running out of time. Penelope shook uncontrollably. She was sitting on the same log she sat on months before, this time; she slid off crumpling onto the cold grass below, drowning in tears. Her mother was dying, twenty-six-years of silence needed to end, Penelope desperately had to find the strength to travel to her mother's deathbed, to say "hello" to her as her mother for the first time, and then: "goodbye."



Penelope desperately wanted to retreat into her childhood and sit in the sun-drenched parlour of the Hearth Mansion, escaping into the fantasy world of books. Reality donned a scary mask. Penelope's life crumbled in truth.

She picked herself up from the log and began sauntering back to Asheville. The cool, crisp autumn air filled with a gossamer of mist cleansed the tears rolling down her face.

She came to the corner of Davis + Burrard Streets. Exasperated commuters were rushing home from work. A horn blared, deafening pedestrians. A male driver in an El Camino raged at the driver in front of him. His rage intensified because the driver in front hadn't noticed the rush-hour turn restrictions. A man + a woman, hands clenched together, walking lockstep next to Penelope, looking like gutter-trash, began screaming at the man behind the wheel of the El Camino.

"Hey, fucker, keep laying on the horn, moron." Penelope + Belinda shouted in unison. "Fucking idiot. You need to go to anger management. Jackass." They smiled at each other with a sense of accomplishment.

Just as their next vitriolic squeal was to be delivered, Penelope calmly grabbed their attention.

"You know you're not helping, don't you? You don't understand? You're adding to the noise. You get that: don't you? You don't? Okay, let me simplify, he honks, you scream, then someone needs to scream at you for screaming, and then someone needs to scream at them for screaming, and then someone –"

Penelope raised her voice slightly and continued with a soft but biting southern drawl. "I kindly suggest; you shut-the-fuck-up!"

Penelope reached home. Harold pulled his stunning satin-gold-black-wrapped Bentley around to the front of the mansion. He gingerly placed both Penelope's luggage +

Penelope into the egg-shell white downy leather seats. Then, during the fifteen-minute ride to Asheville's airport, they never spoke a single word. The silence was deafening.

A single tear fell from Penelope's chin when she exited the car; she turned and stumbled toward the sliding airport doors. Each step, bringing her one step closer to never being able to go home again.

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### **Dateline: Friday 7 October 2016**

Penelope violently trembled. An early fall snowstorm pelted NBC, freezing everything in its path; the calendar showed October. The weather screamed: long and painful.

Penelope picked up a rental car from an airport kiosk, GPSing the hospital's address. When Penelope arrived at the hospital, she couldn't muster the courage to go inside. Penelope would only be given one opportunity to make a last and first impression.

After checking into her hotel, Penelope went searching for memories. She sat at a stool in a bar on the main floor of the apartment tower her mother, Beatrice, and Aunt Hattie called home for a large swath of their lives. A home Penelope often visited when she was a child. During the visits, Beatrice played the role of toxic sister, a haggard bitch. Penelope finished her ale and *worked* her way back to the hotel through the blustering snow, shivering, frightened.

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*Why was she here? Why did it matter? What would hello, and goodbye accomplish?*

Penelope already watched her mother die once, a second time —

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### **Dateline: Saturday 8 October 2016**

Sleep escaped Penelope. She rose early, knowing if she was ever going to see her mother one last time, this was the day.

Snow and sleet assailed the windshield of the rental car on the drive to the hospital. Penelope parked in the hospital's huge parking garage. The hospital's hallway stunk with a sterile familiarity as Penelope spent seven years visiting her parents as they battled the Big C, facing their demises a mere few years apart.

Penelope meandered past ward-after-ward, eventually arriving at the nurses' station of a hospital ward that could only be labelled: terminal. She checked the chalkboard for room assignments. Beatrice Hearth's final resting place was to be in Room 110.

Penelope went to enter the room...she paused...because from underneath the curtain, four sneaker-clad feet faced the bed.

*Don't let it be family, Penelope thought. I can't survive family. Ending a lifetime charade is enough. Saying "hello" to Beatrice for the first time as my mother, bordered on unbearable.*

Penelope placed her hands on the wall to maintain balance. The seismic event rolling through her veins was making collapsing imminent.

*"Excuse me, nurse," Penelope's voice cracked. "May I speak with you? I need to speak to you."*

For the next several minutes, Penelope shared her story with the sympathetic nurse.

*"I was the youngest child, one of seven. I never belonged. My parents died. I watched them take their final breaths. Thirteen-years ago, I found out my life had been a lie. I was a secret baby, born in a secret place. Religion judged us. I became the shame of family, the shame of community. My mother played the role of angry sister. Now, she's in Room 110 with her life winding down. I'm not sure why I'm here? I will say hello. I will say goodbye. I will feign strength. I will stay strong for her. When I leave her bedside, I think my 'being' may shatter into thousands of pieces resulting in me turning into a frozen drivelling mess as my home that never will be no more."*

The nurse looked into Penelope's tear-soaked eyes, and with the utmost of tenderness, said, *"Don't forget about you."*

The curtain opened, and two orderlies walked out. It was time for Penelope to go home one last time.

Before she entered the room, the photo Samantha sent flashed in her mind. Years ago, Penelope had darted to her dying father's deathbed, his frail body ravaged by cancer. She had dashed to her dying mother's deathbed, her weak body ravaged by cancer. Tears poured from her eyes as she recalled her mother whispering to her the day before she died, *"goodbye."*

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Penelope hated goodbye.

*Be strong.*

Penelope entered the room. Beatrice's skin was pallid, looking as it was about to turn to dust.

Beatrice glanced at Penelope with sparkling smiling eyes, tears began flowing.

*"Hello, mother," Penelope said as her body shuddered.*

*"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what you had to endure. I'm sorry we missed each other's lives. I'm sorry for family, religion, community."*

Beatrice's voice cracked, *"We had nothing against you."*

At the moment, Penelope thought nothing of those words. Later that day, they stung, she was in a room with her dying mother, no other family, and *"we had –"*

For ninety-minutes, Penelope attempted to *birth* a relationship with her dying mother. It was the most time they'd ever spent together.

Beatrice railed against the family.

*"Dad was awful, a bitter man, an angry man."*

Penelope attempted to change the flow of the conversation.

*"I have to ask: Who's my father?"*

Beatrice's eyes became shaded with anger, *"I'm happy, it wasn't that asshole,"* she barked in a soft tone.

That asshole happened to be the man listed as the father on Penelope's birth record. That asshole happened to be a man. Penelope built a two-year relationship ending with a DNA test.

*Be Strong.*

*"Who is this woman? Why is she here?"* A frail lady in the next bed asked. A lady who happened to have been Beatrice and Hattie's roommate fifty-years ago in a small town outside of NBC. Now, they were dying together in the same sterile hospital room.

*"She's my daughter,"* Beatrice proudly stated and then turned back to Penelope.

*"We had nothing against you. Your father – my father – wasn't a good man. The night before they were coming to take you away, I begged, cried, and pleaded to mother for us to keep you. Mother finally gave in. We kept you."*

Penelope's mind jumped to an obliterating cold December night when her mother, Marie, became gravely ill, and Penelope needed to drive her to the hospital. On the steps of the family home, they paused, and Marie looked into Penelope's eyes and said, *"I'm never going to be home again, am I?"*

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8 Penelope pulled Beatrice's fragile body close, hugged her delicately, looked into her eyes, and whispered, *"I give you, my love. I love you. Be strong."*

Penelope kissed her cheek; they broke the embrace. It was the second hug of their sporadic lives together. The first came the night Penelope, and Beatrice's mother, died. Now, Penelope's mother was dying a second time.

Penelope ambled out of the room. She looked back at Beatrice. Beatrice's eyes were teaming with tears. Beatrice looked at Penelope and softly said, her voice filled with anguish, *"I am never going to see you again, am I?"*

Penelope stumbled past ward-after-ward until finally while passing the third ward, she collapsed on the floor and began sinking in despair. At that precise moment, she realized: she would never be going home again.

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The next night, Penelope returned to NBC and crashed in misery, but Sleep escaped her.

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## **Dateline: Saturday 15 October 2016**

Penelope's phone pattered off its base, shaking Penelope's broken soul from her sleepless bed. Penelope picked up her phone, *"Hello,"* slipped from her mouth.

Hattie was on the line, "Hello, she's gone; Beatrice passed last night."

"Sorry to hear that. Stay strong," Penelope offered. Click, the call ended.

*That's all, Penelope's mother dies, and the call of condolence lasts less than a minute?*

Penelope Court sat alone in darkness; mind stilted in sorrow.

That night she drifted to a treacherous sleep.

Sunday morning, the phone rattled again. Hattie was on the other end once more; coldness emanated from the receiver.

*"You may need to fly to NBC since you are Beatrice's only child. You may need to sign the death certificate."*

Weeks slipped by, turning into a month. Penelope waited anxiously for word about the signing, words that never came.

One month folded into two; the phone rang again. This time, Samantha was on the line. Penelope's once-youngest sister, Gloria, died the previous night. Penelope collapsed on the floor, crumpling into a ball, shaking, defeated.

Penelope recalled the last words Gloria shared with her to comfort her after the death of her mother Beatrice; the words came two months prior.

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*What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.*

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These hackneyed words instantly became indelible in Penelope's hippocampus, ready to haunt her for the rest of her life.

Her once-niece, Amanda, was dead; her once-sister, Gloria, had died, and now, her (real) mother, Beatrice, was dead as well.

Penelope Court had a rough two years.

Another kid approached; Penelope was feeling anything *but strong*.

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To be continued?

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