



Nicci
FRENCH
LAND OF
THE LIVING

'SHOCKING, UNCOMFORTABLE, EXHILARATING'
INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY



Land of the Living
by
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Darkness. Darkness for a long time. Open my eyes and close, open and close. The same. Darkness inside, darkness outside.

I'd been dreaming. Tossed around in a black dark sea. Staked out on a mountain in the night. An animal I couldn't see sniffed and snuffled around me. I felt a wet nose on my skin. When you know you're dreaming you wake up. Sometimes you wake into another dream. But when you wake and nothing changes, that must be reality.

Darkness and things out there in the darkness. Pain. It was far away from her and then closer to her and then part of her. Part of *me*. I was filled to the brim with hot, liquid pain. Although the darkness remained, I could see the pain. Flashes of yellow and red and blue, fireworks exploding silently behind my eyes.

I started to search for something without really knowing what it was. I didn't know where it was. I didn't know what it was. Nightingale. Farthingale. It took an effort, like hauling a package out of the water of a deep dark lake. That was it. Abigail. I recognized that. My name was Abigail. Abbie. Tabbie. Abbie the Tabbie. The other name was harder. There were bits missing from my head and it seemed to have got lost among the missing bits. I remembered a class register. Auster, Bishop, Brown, Byrne, Cassini, Cole, Daley, Devereaux, Eve, Finch, Fry. No, stop. Go back. Finch. No. Devereaux. Yes, that was it. A rhyme came to me. A rhyme from long, long ago. Not Deverox like box. Nor Deveroo like

shoe. But Devereaux like show. Abbie Devereaux. I clung to the name as if it was a life-ring that had been thrown to me in a stormy sea. The stormy sea was in my head mostly. Wave after wave of pain rolling in and dashing itself against the inside of my skull.

I closed my eyes again. I let my name go.

Everything was part of everything else. Everything existed at the same time as everything else. How long was it like that? Minutes. Hours. And then, like figures emerging from a fog, things resolved and separated. There was a taste of metal in my mouth and a smell of metal stinging my nostrils but the smell became a mustiness that made me think of garden sheds, tunnels, basements, cellars, damp dirty forgotten places.

I listened. Just the sound of my own breathing, unnaturally loud. I held my breath. No sound. Just the beating of my heart. Was that a noise or just the blood pumping inside my body, pushing against my ears?

I was uncomfortable. There was an ache down my back, my pelvis, my legs. I turned over. No. I didn't turn over. I didn't move. I couldn't move. I pulled up my arms as if to fend something off. No. The arms didn't move. I couldn't turn. Was I paralysed? I couldn't feel my legs. My toes. I concentrated everything on my toes. Left big toe rubbing against the toe beside. Right big toe rubbing against the toe beside. No problem. I could do it. Inside a sock. No shoe. I wasn't wearing shoes.

My fingers. I drummed them. The tips touched something rough. Cement or brick. Was this a hospital? Injured. An accident. Lying somewhere, waiting to be found. A railway accident. The wreckage of a train. Machinery on top of me. Wreckage. In a tunnel. Help coming. Heat-seeking equipment. I tried to remember

the train. Couldn't remember. Or a plane. Or a car. Car more likely. Driving late at night, headlights on the windscreen, falling asleep. I knew the feeling, pinching myself to stay awake, slapping my cheeks, shouting, opening the window so the cold air hit my eyeballs. Maybe this time I failed. Veered off the road, down an embankment, rolled over, the car lost in undergrowth. When would I be reported missing? How do you look for a lost car?

I mustn't wait to be rescued. I might die of dehydration or blood loss just yards from people driving to work. I would have to move. If only I could see the way. No moon. No stars. It might only be twenty yards to safety. Up an embankment. If I could feel my toes, then I could move. Turn over first. Ignore the pain. I turned but this time I felt something hold me back. I flexed my legs and arms, tightened and loosened the muscles. There were restraints. Over my forearms and just above my elbows. My ankles and thighs. My chest. I could lift my head, as if in the feeble beginning of an attempt at a sit-up. Something else. Not just dark. It was dark but not just that. My head was covered.

Think clearly. There must be a reason for this. Think. People in prison were restrained. Not relevant. What else? Patients in hospitals can have restraints placed on them in order to prevent them harming themselves. Lying on a trolley. Restrained on a trolley prior to being wheeled in for an operation. I've been in an accident. Say, a car accident, which is most likely. Statistically. Severe but not life-threatening. Any sudden movement could cause, and the phrase came to me out of nowhere, severe internal bleeding. The patient could fall off the trolley. It's just a matter of waiting for the nurse or the anaesthetist. Perhaps I had been given the anaesthetic

already. Or a pre-anaesthetic. Hence the vacancies in my brain. Strange quiet, but you do hear of people in hospitals lying around on trolleys for hours waiting for a free operating theatre.

Problems with the theory. I didn't seem to be lying on a trolley. The smell was of darkness, mildew, things that were old and decaying. All I could feel with my fingers was concrete, or stone. My body was lying on something hard. I tried to think of other possibilities. After famous disasters bodies were stored in improvised morgues. School gymnasiums. Church halls. I could have been in a disaster. The injured could have been placed wherever there was room. Restrained to prevent them injuring themselves. Would they be hooded as well? Surgeons were hooded. But not their eyes. Perhaps to prevent infection.

I raised my head again. With my chin I felt a shirt. I was wearing clothes. Yes. I could feel them on my skin. A shirt, trousers, socks. No shoes.

There were other things at the edge, clamouring to be admitted to my brain. Bad things. Restrained. In the dark. Hooded. Ridiculous. Could it be a joke? I remembered stories of students. They get you paralytically drunk, put you on a train at Aberdeen. You wake up in London dressed only in your underwear with a fifty-pence piece in your hand. Everyone will jump out in a minute, pull off the blindfold and shout, 'April fool.' We'll all laugh. But was it April? I remembered cold. Had summer been? Was summer still to come? But of course a summer had always been and there was always another summer to come.

All the alleys were blind. I had gone up them all and found nothing. Something had happened. I knew that.

One possibility was that it was something funny. It didn't feel funny. Another possibility, possibility number two, was that something had happened and it was in the process of being officially dealt with. The hood – or bandage, yes, very possibly a bandage. That was a thought. I might have received a head wound, eye or ear damage and my entire head was bandaged and hooded for my own protection. They would be removed. There would be some stinging. The cheery face of a nurse. A doctor frowning at me. Don't worry, nothing to worry about. That's what they'd say. Call me 'dear'.

There were other possibilities. Bad ones. I thought of the stone under my fingers. The damp air, like a cave. Until now, there had been only the pain and also the mess of my thoughts, but now there was something else. Fear in my chest like sludge. I made a sound. A low groan. I was able to speak. I didn't know who to call or what to say. I shouted more loudly. I thought the echoing or harshness of the sound might tell me something about where I was but it was muffled by my hood. I shouted again so that my throat hurt.

Now there was a movement nearby. Smells. Sweat and scent. A sound of breathing, somebody scrambling. Now my mouth was full of cloth. I couldn't breathe. Only through my nose. Something tied hard around my face. Breath on me, hot on my cheek, and then, out of the darkness, a voice, little more than a whisper, hoarse, strained, thick so I could barely make it out.

'No,' it said. 'Make another sound and I'll block your nose as well.'

I was gagging on the cloth. It filled my mouth, bulged in my cheeks, rubbed against my gums. The taste of grease and rancid cabbage filled my throat. A spasm

jerked my body, nausea rising through me like damp. I mustn't be sick. I tried to take a breath, tried to gasp through the cloth but I couldn't. I couldn't. I was all stopped up. I tugged with my arms and my ankles against the restraints and tried to take a breath and it was as if my whole body was twitching and shuddering on the rough stone floor and no air inside me, just violent space and red behind my bulging eyes and a heart that was jolting up through my throat and a strange dry sound coming from me, like a cough that wouldn't form. I was a dying fish. A fish thrashing on the hard floor. I was hooked and tied down, but inside me I was coming loose, all my innards tearing apart. Is this what it's like? To die? To be buried alive.

I had to breathe. How do you breathe? Through your nose. He'd said so. The voice had said he'd block my nose next. Breathe through my nose. Breathe now. I couldn't take enough air in that way. I couldn't stop myself trying to gasp, trying to fill myself up with air. My tongue was too big to fit in the tiny space left in my mouth. It kept pushing against the cloth. I felt my body buck again. Breathe slowly. Calmly. In and out, in and out. Breathe like that until there's nothing except the sense of it. This is how to keep alive. Breathe. Thick, musty air in my nostrils, oily rottenness running down my throat. I tried not to swallow but then I had to and again biliousness flowed through me, filled my mouth. I couldn't bear it. I could bear it, I could, I could, I could.

Breathe in and out, Abbie. Abbie. I am Abbie. Abigail Devereaux. In and out. Don't think. Breathe. You are alive.

The pain inside my skull rolled back. I lifted my head a bit and the pain surged towards my eyes. I blinked my

eyes and it was the same deep darkness when they were open and when they were closed. My eyelashes scraped against the hood. I was cold. I could feel that now. My feet were chilly inside the socks. Were they my socks? They felt too big and rough; unfamiliar. My left calf ached. I tried to flex my leg muscles to get rid of the crampy feeling. There was an itch on my cheek, under the hood. I lay there for a few seconds, concentrating only on the itch, then I turned my head and tried to rub the itch against a hunched shoulder. No good. So I squirmed until I could scrape my face along the floor.

And I was damp. Between my legs and under my thighs, stinging my skin beneath my trousers. Were they my trousers? I was lying in my own piss, in the dark, in a hood, tied down, gagged. Breathe in and out, I told myself. Breathe in and out all the time. Try to let thoughts out slowly, bit by bit, so you don't drown in them. I felt the pressure of the fears dammed up inside me, and my body was a fragile, cracking shell full of pounding waters. I made myself think only of breathing, in and out of my nostrils. In and out.

Someone – a man, the man who had pushed this cloth into my mouth – had put me in this place. He had taken me, strapped me down. I was his prisoner. Why? I couldn't think about that yet. I listened for a sound, any sound except the sound of my breath and the sound of my heart and, when I moved, the rasp of my hands or feet against the rough floor. Perhaps he was here with me, in the room, crouching somewhere. But there was no other sound. For the moment I was alone. I lay there. I listened to my heart. Silence pressed down on me.

An image flitted through my head. A yellow butterfly on a leaf, wings quivering. It was like a sudden ray of

light. Was it something I was remembering, a moment rescued out of the past and stored away till now? Or was it just my brain throwing up a picture, some kind of reflex, a short circuit?

A man had tied me in a dark place. He must have snatched me and taken me here. But I had no memory of that happening. I scabbled in my brain, but it was blank – an empty room, an abandoned house, no echoes. Nothing. I could remember nothing. A sob rose in my throat. I mustn't cry. I must think, but carefully now, hold back the fear. I must not go deep down. I must stay on the surface. Just think of what I know. Facts. Slowly I will make up a picture and then I'll be able to look at it.

My name is Abigail; Abbie. I am twenty-five years old, and I live with my boyfriend, Terry, Terence Wilmott, in a poky flat on Westcott Road. That's it: Terry. Terry will be worried. He will phone the police. He'll tell them I have gone missing. They'll drive here with flashing lights and wailing sirens and hammer down the door and light and air will come flooding in. No, just facts. I work at Jay and Joiner's, designing office interiors. I have a desk, with a white and blue laptop computer, a small grey phone, a pile of paper, an oval ashtray full of paperclips and elastic bands.

When was I last there? It seemed impossibly far off, like a dream that disappears when you try to hold on to it; like someone else's life. I couldn't remember. How long had I lain here? An hour, or a day, or a week? It was January, I knew that – at least, I thought I knew that. Outside, it was cold and the days were short. Maybe it had snowed. No, I mustn't think of things like snow, sunlight on white. Stick only to what I knew: January,

but I couldn't tell if it was day or night. Or perhaps it was February now. I tried to think of the last day I clearly remembered, but it was like looking into a thick fog, with indistinct shapes looming.

Start with New Year's Eve, dancing with friends and everyone kissing each other on the stroke of midnight. Kissing people on the lips, people I knew well and people I'd met a few times and strangers who came up to me with arms open and an expectant smile because kissing is what you do on New Year's Eve. Don't think of all that, though. After New Year's Eve, then, yes, there were days that stirred in my mind. The office, phones ringing, expense forms in my in-tray. Cups of cooling bitter coffee. But maybe that was before, not after. Or before and after, day after day. Everything was blurred and without meaning.

I tried to shift. My toes felt stiff with cold and my neck ached and my head banged. The taste in my mouth was foul. Why was I here and what was going to happen to me? I was laid out on my back like a sacrifice, arms and legs pinned down. Dread ran through me. He could starve me. He could rape me. He could torture me. He could kill me. Maybe he had already raped me. I pressed myself against the floor and whimpered deep down in my throat. Two tears escaped from my eyes and I felt them tickle and sting as they ran down towards my ears.

Don't cry, Abbie. You mustn't cry.

Think of the butterfly, which means nothing but which is beautiful. I pictured the yellow butterfly on its green leaf. I let it fill my mind, so light on the leaf it could be blown away like a feather. I heard footsteps. They were soft, as if the man was barefooted. They padded closer and stopped. There was a sound of someone breathing

heavily, almost panting, as if he was climbing or scrambling towards me. I lay rigid in the silence. He was standing over me. There was a click, and even from beneath the hood I could tell he had switched on a torch. I could hardly see anything, but I could at least see through the grain of the fabric that it was no longer entirely dark. He must be standing over me and shining a torch down on my body.

‘You’re wet,’ he murmured, or maybe it sounded like a murmur through my hood. ‘Silly girl.’

I sensed him leaning towards me. I heard him breathing and I heard my own breathing getting louder and faster. He pulled the hood up slightly and, quite gently, pulled out the cloth. I felt a fingertip on my lower lip. For a few seconds, all I could do was pant with the relief of it, pulling the air into my lungs. I heard myself say, ‘Thank you.’ My voice sounded light and feeble. ‘Water.’

He undid the restraints on my arms and my chest, so that only my legs were tied at the ankle. He slid an arm under my neck and lifted me into a sitting position. A new kind of pain pulsed inside my skull. I didn’t dare make any movements by myself. I sat passively, and let him put my arms behind my back and tie my wrists together, roughly so that the rope cut into my flesh. Was it rope? It felt harder than that, like washing line or wire.

‘Open your mouth,’ he said in his muffled whisper. I did so. He slid a straw up the hood and between my lips. ‘Drink.’

The water was tepid and left a stale taste in my mouth.

He put a hand on the back of my neck, and started to rub at it. I sat rigid. I mustn’t cry out. I mustn’t make a sound. I mustn’t be sick. His fingers pressed into my skin.

‘Where do you hurt?’ he said.

‘Nowhere.’ My voice was a whisper.

‘Nowhere? You wouldn’t lie to me?’

Anger filled my head like a glorious roaring wind and it was stronger even than the fear. ‘You piece of shit,’ I shouted, in a mad, high-pitched voice. ‘Let me go, let me go, and then I’m going to kill you, you’ll see –’

The cloth was rammed back into my mouth.

‘You’re going to kill me. Good. I like that.’

For a long time I concentrated on nothing but breathing. I had heard of people feeling claustrophobic in their own bodies, trapped as if in prison. They became tormented by the idea that they would never be able to escape. My life was reduced to the tiny passages of air in my nostrils. If they became blocked, I would die. That happened. People were tied up, gagged, with no intention to kill them. Just a small error in the binding – the gag tied too close to the nose – and they would choke and die.

I made myself breathe in one-two-three, out one-two-three. In, out. I’d seen a film once, some kind of war film, in which a super-tough soldier hid from the enemy in a river breathing just through a single straw. I was like that and the thought made my chest hurt and made me breathe in spasms. I had to calm myself. Instead of thinking of the soldier and his straw and what would have happened if the straw had become blocked, I tried to think of the water in the river, cool and calm and slow-moving and beautiful, the sun glistening on it in the morning.

In my mind, the water grew slower and slower until it was quite still. I imagined it starting to freeze, solid like glass so that you could see the fish swimming silently underneath. I couldn’t stop myself. I saw myself falling through the ice, trapped underneath. I had read or heard

or been told that if you fall through ice and can't find the hole, there is a thin layer of air between the ice and the water and you can lie under the ice and breathe the air. And what then? It might be better just to have drowned. I had always been terrified of drowning above all things, but I had read or heard or been told that drowning was in fact a pleasant way to die. I could believe it. What was unpleasant and terrifying was trying to avoid drowning. Fear is trying to avoid death. Giving yourself up to death is like falling asleep.

One-two-three, one-two-three, I was becoming calmer. Some people, probably about two per cent of the population at least, would have died already of panic or asphyxiation if they'd had done to them what I was having done to me. So I was already doing better than someone. I was alive. I was breathing.

I was lying down now, with my ankles tied and my wrists tied, my mouth gagged and a hood over my head. I wasn't tied to anything any more. I struggled into a squatting position, then very slowly stood up. Tried to stand up. My head bumped against a roof. It must be just under five foot high. I sat down again, panting with the effort.

At least I could move my body. Wriggle and hump along, like a snake in the dust. But I hardly dared. I had the sense that I was somewhere up high. When he came into the room, he was underneath me. The footsteps and his voice came from down below. He climbed to get at me.

I stretched my feet in one direction and felt only the floor. I swivelled painfully around, my T-shirt riding up and bare skin on my back scraping along the roughness beneath me. I stretched my feet. Floor. I humped for-

ward. Slowly. Feet feeling. Then not feeling – not feeling the hardness underneath. Stretched over a space, a blank. Nothing underneath. I lay down and moved forward again, bit by bit. Legs hanging over, bent at the knee. If I sat up now, I'd be sitting over a fall, a cliff. My breath juddered in my chest with panic. I started shifting backwards. My back hurt. My head crashed and banged. I kept wriggling and scraping backwards until I was pressed up against a wall.

I sat up. I pressed my bound hands against the wall. Damp coarse brick against my fingertips.

I shuffled upright along the wall in one direction, until I met the corner. Then in the other direction, my muscles burning with the effort. It must be about ten feet wide. Ten feet wide and four feet deep.

It was hard to think clearly because the pain in my head kept getting in the way. Was it a bang? A scrape? Something in my brain?

I was shivering with cold. I had to keep thinking, keep my mind busy, keep it off things. I had been kidnapped in some way. I was being held against my will. Why did kidnaps happen? To take hostages, for money or for a political reason. My total wealth, once credit card and storecard debts were deducted, amounted to about two thousand pounds, half of it bound up in my rusty old car. As for politics, I was a working-environment consultant not an ambassador. But then I didn't remember anything. I could be in South America, now, or Lebanon. Except that the voice was clearly English, southern English as far as I could tell from the soft, thick whisper.

So what other reasons were there? I had argued myself towards an area where everything looked really, really

bad. I felt tears bubbling up in my eyes. Calm down. Calm down. I mustn't get all snotty, blocked up.

He hadn't killed me. That was a good sign. Except it wasn't necessarily all that good a sign – in the long run it might be a bad sign in a way that made me feel sick even to think about. But it was all I had. I flexed my muscles very gently. I couldn't move. I didn't know where I was. I didn't know where I'd been captured, or when, or how. Or for what reason. I couldn't see anything. I didn't even know anything about the room I was lying in. It felt damp. Maybe it was underground or in a shed. I didn't know anything about the man. Or men. Or people. He was probably close by. I didn't know if I knew him. I didn't know what he looked like.

That might be useful. If I could identify him, he might . . . Well, that might be worse. Professional kidnappers wore hoods so that the hostage never saw them. Putting a hood over my head might be the same thing, the other way round. And he was doing something to his voice, muffling it somehow, so that he didn't sound like a human at all. It might even be that he was planning to hold me for just a little while and let me go. He could dump me in some other part of London and it would be impossible for me ever to find him again. I would know nothing – nothing at all. That was the first bit of remotely good news.

I had no idea how long I had been here but at the very outside it couldn't be more than three days, maybe even two. I felt dreadful but I didn't feel especially weak. I felt hungry but not ill with hunger. Maybe two days. Terry would have reported me missing. I wouldn't have turned up at work. They would phone Terry, he would be baffled. He would have tried my mobile phone. Where was that? The police might have been called within

hours. By now there would be a huge hunt. Lines of people scouring wasteland. All leave cancelled. Sniffer dogs. Helicopters. Another promising thought. You can't just grab an adult off the street and hide them somewhere without creating some sort of suspicion. They would be out there, knocking at doors, marching into houses, shining torches into dark places. Any time now I'd hear them, see them. All I had to do was stay alive as long as . . . Just stay alive. Stay alive.

I had shouted at him before. I'd said I'd kill him. That was the only thing I could remember having said to him, except I'd said, 'Thank you,' when he gave me water. I hated the fact I'd said thank you. But when I'd shouted, I'd made him angry. What were his words? 'You kill me? That's a good one.' Something like that. That's not promising. 'You kill me?' That might seem good to him because in fact he's going to kill me.

I tried to seize some other kind of comfort. It might just seem funny to him because I was so much in his power that the idea of me getting back at him was completely ludicrous. I was taking a risk being rude to him. I'd made him angry. He could have tortured me or hit me or anything. But he hadn't done anything. That might be useful to know. He had kidnapped me, he had me tied down and I'd threatened him. It could be that if I stand up to him he feels weakened and unable to do anything to me. If I don't give in to him, that may be the best way of playing him along. He might have kidnapped a woman because he's frightened of women and this is the only way to control at least one woman. He might expect me just to be begging pathetically for my life and that would give him the control he wants. But if I don't yield, then it's not going according to his plan.

Or it might be the opposite. It might have shown nothing more than that he's in control. It doesn't matter to him what I say. He just finds it funny and is proceeding with his plan, whatever that is. Surely the point is to be as much of a flesh-and-blood person for him as possible so that he finds it harder to do anything to me. But if that is threatening to him, then it might make him angrier. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't fight, I couldn't escape. All I could do was slow him up.

What was the best way of doing that? Making him angry? Happy? Scared? I lay on the floor and stared into the stifling darkness of my hood.

There was a change of texture in the blackness around me. There was a sound and a smell. Once again there was that hoarse, croaking whisper. 'I'm going to take your gag out. If you shout I'll bleed you like an animal. If you've heard and understood what I've said, nod your head.'

I nodded frantically. The hands – large, warm hands – fiddled behind my neck. The knot was untied, the cloth pulled roughly from my mouth. As soon as I was free I coughed and coughed. A hand held my head down and I felt the straw pushed into my mouth. I sucked the water until a bubbling sound told me it was gone.

'There,' he said. 'There's a bucket here. Do you want to use it?'

'What do you mean?' Get him talking.

'You know. Toilet.'

He was embarrassed. Was that a good sign?

'I want to go to a proper one.'

'It's the bucket or you can lie in your own piss, sweetheart.'

'All right.'

‘I’ll put you by the bucket. You can feel it with your feet. I’ll stand back. You try anything funny I’ll cut you up. All right?’

‘Yes.’

There was the sound of him going down some steps, and then I felt his arms under my armpits, then as I slithered towards him, around me. Hard, strong hands. I was pressed against him. An animal smell, sweat, something else. One arm under my thighs. Nausea in my throat. Swung across and put down lightly on a rough floor, gritty. I raised myself up straight. My legs and back felt terribly sore. My hair was seized by a hand and I felt something hard against my neck.

‘You know what this is?’

‘No.’

‘It’s a blade. I’m going to untie the wire holding your hands together. Try anything and I’ll use it.’

‘I won’t. I want you to leave me alone.’

‘It’s dark. I’ll step back.’

I felt pressure as he freed a knot behind my back. He stepped away. For just a second I thought of trying something until I saw the absurdity of it. Partially tied up, hooded, in a dark room with a man carrying a knife.

‘Go ahead,’ he said.

I hadn’t really meant it. I just wanted to be moved. I felt my clothes. T-shirt, slacks. I couldn’t do this.

‘You’ll have the bucket again tomorrow morning.’

Tomorrow morning. Good. Some information. All right, all right. He said it was dark. I unfastened my trousers, pulled them and my knickers down and sat on the bucket. Nothing but a dribble. I stood up again, pulled the trousers up.

‘Can I say something?’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know what this is about. But you mustn’t do this. You won’t get away with it. You may not realize what’ll happen when they find me. But you can let me go. Drive me somewhere. Turn me loose. That’ll be it. I’ll have been reported missing, they’ll be looking for me. I know you can do what you like to me and it probably won’t do me any good but you’ll be caught. If you let me go, we can just go back to our lives. Otherwise, you’ll be caught.’

‘That’s what they all say. When they say anything.’

‘What?’

‘Stand still.’

‘All?’

The sensation of knots being refastened. The sensation of being lifted up high, set down like a small child being put up on a high shelf. Like a doll. A dead animal.

‘Stay there,’ he said. ‘Right there.’

I sat there, thinking he would go away now.

‘Open your mouth.’

He was beside me. The rag was pushed in, another cloth tied hard around my face. I heard footsteps then felt a new pressure around my neck. Tight. I was pulled back. I could feel the wall behind my back.

‘Listen,’ the voice said. ‘This is a wire looped around your neck. It goes through a loop behind you and fastens on a bolt in the wall. Understand? Nod your head.’

I nodded.

‘You’re on a platform. Understand?’

I nodded.

‘If you move, you’ll slip off the ledge, the wire will throttle you and you’ll die. Understand?’

I nodded.

‘Good.’

And there was silence. Just silence. And my heart,

pounding like the sea. The wire burned my neck. I breathed, in and out, in and out.

I was standing on a wooden jetty and the lake around me was still as a mirror. Not a ripple of wind. I could see smooth pebbles far beneath me, pink and brown and grey. I bent my knees slightly and brought up my arms to dive into the cool, quiet water, and then suddenly something caught me round the neck, and I was falling with a sickening lurch but being held back at the same time, and the water disappeared, became inky darkness instead. The noose was digging into my neck. I sat up straight. For a moment I was a blank, then fear rushed in, filling all the spaces in my body. My heart was pounding and my mouth dry. Sweat ran down my forehead, under the hood, and I could feel wisps of hair sticking to my cheeks. I was clammy with fear, itchy and sticky and sour. My fear was so real now it was something I could smell.

I had fallen asleep. How could that be? How could I sleep when I was trussed up like a chicken waiting for its neck to be snapped? I'd always wondered how prisoners could sleep before the day of execution, but I'd slept. How long for? I had no idea – perhaps a few minutes, nodding off on this ledge before the noose woke me; or perhaps several hours, longer. I didn't know if it was night still or morning. Time had stopped.

Except that time hadn't stopped. It was marching on. It was running out. Silence roared around my ears. Something was going to happen, and I didn't know what and I didn't know when, but I knew something was going to happen. It could be now, as soon as I stopped this thought, or it could be ages away, through the sludge of days. His words came back to me, and with them

came a burning sensation in my stomach. It was as if there was an animal inside me, a scabby rodent with sharp yellow teeth eating away at me. 'That's what all the others said.' What did that mean? I knew what it meant. It meant that there had been others before me. They were dead and I was the next here on a ledge with a noose round my neck, and then after me – after me . . .

Breathe and think. Make plans. Plans of escape were futile. All I had was my brain and the words I spoke to him – when he pulled this foul rag out of my mouth. I counted in my head. Seconds into minutes into hours. Was I counting too fast or too slowly? I tried to slow down. I was thirsty and the inside of my mouth felt soft and rotten. My breath must stink by now. I needed water, ice-cold water. Gallons of clean water pulled up from a well deep in the earth. I was no longer hungry at all. Eating food would be like eating twigs or gravel. But clean cold water in a tall glass tumbler, chinking with ice, that would be good. I kept on counting. I mustn't stop.

One hour, twenty-eight minutes, thirty-three seconds. How many seconds was that altogether? I tried to continue counting while doing the sum in my head, but everything scrambled, and I lost the time and I lost the sum. Tears were rolling down my cheek.

I shuffled forward and stretched my body out as far as I could, leaning back my neck until the noose cut in just under my chin. I balanced myself on the ledge, its edge sharp in the small of my back and my lower body hanging over. The wire must be about three feet long. I was like a see-saw. I could tip backwards again, and go on sitting and waiting and counting seconds and minutes and hours, or I could tip forwards into the darkness. He

would find me hanging there, the wire noose around my neck. That would be one way of beating him; beating time. It would be that easy.

I shuffled myself back into a sitting position. My whole body was trembling with the effort. I concentrated on breathing, in and out. I thought of the lake in my dream, with its still water. I thought of the river and its fish. I thought of the yellow butterfly on the green leaf. It quivered there, almost as light as the air around it. One whisper of wind would dislodge it. That's like life, I thought; my life is that fragile now.

My name is Abbie. Abigail Devereaux. Abbie. I repeated my name to myself; I tried to hear the sound out loud. But the sound quickly lost its meaning. What did it signify, to be Abbie? Nothing. Just a collection of syllables. Two syllables. Two mouthfuls of air.

'I had this dream,' I said. My voice sounded hoarse and feeble, as if the noose had already damaged my windpipe. 'I slept and I had this dream. Did you have a dream? Do you dream?' I'd rehearsed this sentence while waiting for him – I didn't want to tell him personal things about myself, because somehow that felt risky. And I didn't want to ask him anything specific about himself, because if I knew anything about him he could never let me go. I asked about dreams, because they are intimate but abstract; they feel important but their meanings are vague, insubstantial. But now, speaking my sentence out loud with him beside me, it sounded fatuous.

'Sometimes. Finish your water and then you can use the bucket.'

'Did you dream last night?' I persisted, though I knew it was futile. He was a few inches from me. If I put out

an arm I could touch him. I resisted the sudden urge to grab hold of him and wail and howl and plead.

‘You can’t dream if you haven’t slept.’

‘You didn’t sleep?’

‘Drink.’

I took a few more sips, making the water last as long as I could. My throat was sore. It had been night, and yet he hadn’t slept. What had he been doing?

‘Do you have insomnia?’ I tried to appear sympathetic; my voice sounded horribly artificial.

‘That’s crap,’ he said. ‘You work and then you sleep when you need to. Day or night. That’s all.’

There was a faint grainy light showing through the hood. If I lifted my head up high and peered downwards, perhaps I would see something; his outstretched legs beside mine, his hand on the ledge. I mustn’t look. I mustn’t see anything. I mustn’t know anything. I must stay in the dark.

I did exercises. I pulled my knees up and let them down again. Fifty times. I lay down and tried to sit up. I couldn’t do it. Not even once.

People in solitary confinement often went mad. I had read about that. I must have imagined briefly what it would be like, to be locked up and all alone. Sometimes they recited poetry to themselves, but I didn’t know any poetry, or if I did I could remember none of it. I knew nursery rhymes. Mary had a little lamb. Hickory dickory dock. The cheery, insistent rhythm felt obscene and mad, like someone inside my sore head, tapping away. I could make up a poem. What rhymed with dark? Stark, hark, lark, park, bark. I couldn’t make up poems. I’d never been able to.

I tried once more to reach back into my memory –

not my long memory, the memory of my life and my friends and my family, not the things that made me into who I am, the passage of time like rings in a tree trunk, not all of that, don't think of that. My recent memory, the memory that would tell me how I came to be here, now. There was nothing. A thick wall lay between me here and me there.

I recited tables inside my head. I could do the two times table, and the three, but after that I got muddled. Everything became jumbled up. I started to cry again. Silently.

I shuffled forward until I found the drop. I struggled into a sitting position. It couldn't be that high. He had stood beneath me and lifted me down. Four feet, maybe five. Not more, surely. I wriggled my feet in their bindings. I took a deep breath and shuffled forward a few inches more, so I was teetering on the edge. I would count to five, then I'd jump. One, two, three, four . . .

I heard a sound. A sound at the other end of the room. Wheezing laughter. He was watching me. Squatting in the dark like a toad, watching me writhing around pathetically on the platform. A sob rose in my chest.

'Go on, then. Jump.'

I wriggled backwards.

'See what happens when you fall.'

Back a bit more. Legs on the ledge now. I shifted myself back against the wall and lay slumped there. Tears rolled down my cheeks, under my hood.

'Sometimes I like watching you,' he said. 'You dunno, do you? When I'm here and when I'm not. I'm quiet, like.'

Eyes in the darkness, watching me.

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