

I

Tuesday 17th March 2020

I am engulfed in emptiness. I'm not in my bed. I am not in any bed.

In the instant my eyes flutter open I know there is something wrong. Seriously wrong. It's dark. I'm suspended in a threatening, airless blackness. I'm lying down but am disorientated because I'm on a cold concrete floor. A floor that looks as though it's waiting to be tiled, but something immediately suggests to me it never will be. My mind is lazy and unable to process why I think this. I can't remember when I last slept on a floor, a million years ago when I was a student and would bunk in another student's room if I was too drunk to get home. I try to sit up; my limbs feel heavy, my head sore. I try to stand up but as I do so, I am yanked back down, my left hand is tethered. Chained. I hear the rattle of the chain at the same time as I feel the cold tug. Am I dreaming? My head pulses, swells and then bursts, I close my eyes again, my lids are like sandpaper scratching, I open them for a second time, giving them a chance to adjust to the darkness. Is it my dizziness that's leaving everything unfamiliar? Shaky? I feel slow, behind myself.

How much did I have to drink last night? I try to remember.

I can't. And then – this is terrifying – I realise I can't remember last night at all. I feel sick. I can smell vomit, suggesting I have already been sick. I should not be waking to the smell of vomit. Where is the smell of my husband's early morning breath? There is no smell of toast from the kitchen, no traces of the Jo Malone Lime Basil and Mandarin room spray that I sometimes wake to. I'm somewhere dusty, not damp, a little overwarm. Am I in a hospital? No. What sort of hospital makes patients lie on the floor, chains them? There are no sounds. My boys are not arguing in the kitchen, the TV is not blaring, no doors opening, slamming, no demands, 'Mum, where are my football shorts?' I wait, sometimes I wake to something more serene. Sometimes it is Radio 4 and the smell of coffee.

Nothing.

Alarm and horror flood through my body. My organs and limbs turn to liquid and I can't coordinate my movements. None of us are that naive anymore. The news doesn't always enlighten or inform, often it terrifies. My foggy mind realises I must have been drugged. I have been abducted. The terrible thing that you read about that happens to someone else – someone other – has happened to me.

Panicked, I tug hard at the chain, there's no give. I scramble about in the darkness. Trying to understand my environment. I can't move far because of the chain, which is attached to a radiator at one end and through a zip tie that is tight around my wrist on the other. The chain is about a metre long. As my eyes adjust, I see that I am in a room that is about three metres long by just over two, like a standard guest room. The walls are manila. It is clean and bare. I am not in a derelict warehouse or abandoned cottage. It's bland to the state of anonymous. I imagine that is the point. I could be anywhere. There's no furniture in the room. None at all. Not a bed, a mattress, a lamp. Nothing to soften or comfort. Just a plastic bucket. I realise what this is intended

for and my stomach heaves. I can see the outline of a door and a boarded-up window. I can't reach the door as it's in the far corner, or the window as that's at the end of the wall opposite the one with the radiator I am chained to.

I go to check the time, but my Fitbit has been removed. Not knowing what time it is, or even what day it is for sure, sends spikes of isolation and confusion through my body. Still, I have my voice. I can shout and maybe attract attention. I fleetingly consider that shouting will attract the attention of whoever it is that brought me here. He could do a lot worse to me than chain me up, but I have no choice.

'Help! Help me! Help!' My voice shatters the dead, unnatural silence. I yell over and over again until I become hoarse. The pain in my tender head intensifies.

No one comes.

No one responds.

The silence stretches. I stop yelling and listen. Hoping to hear something, cars in the distance, people in the street, birdsong, as the light has started to eke around the boarded window. A new day, but which day is it? Nothing. It's like I'm in a vacuum. Then, I hear footsteps coming towards the door.

'Please, please let me out,' I whimper. I'm crying now. I'm not sure when I started crying. Tears and mucus pour down my face. I don't want to be weak. I want to be strong, brave, resistant. That's what you imagine you'll be in a situation like this but it's beyond me. It's a ludicrous fantasy. I am just terrified. I will beg, plead, implore. Anything to stay safe. Anything. 'Please, please don't hurt me. Please.'

Then I hear the distinct sound of the keystrokes of an old-fashioned typewriter being pounded. A sort of shuffling rat-tat-tat. Slow, precise. Like a hostile countdown. Next, the hurried juddering whirl of paper being forcefully pulled out of the machine's roller. It is incongruous, this passé sound is the

domain of busy newspaper rooms in decades gone by. Who has a typewriter anymore? There is rustling, as the piece of paper is pushed beneath the door. I stretch to reach it, but it is tantalisingly out of my grasp. I lie on the floor and carefully, oh so slowly, edge it nearer with my toes until I can drag it close enough to snatch it up.

I am not the villain here.