

Fragment One

She walks down the long corridor, keeping close to the wall on the left-hand side. The walls are a non-descript grey colour, and the corridor itself is narrow; she thinks of intestines winding around in a confined space; she also thinks of the Ghost Ride at the Fun Park where, beyond the entrance, there does not seem to be any kind of exit. Her eyes are fixed on the highly polished, dark timber flooring, and they rarely rise above the ever-changing patterns of shoes and trouser legs and the very occasional long skirt.

She knows that there are many people all around her, ordinary, anonymous people, like those she might see at the train station or in the street, hurrying in different directions. Some of them are well-dressed: she can tell by the shoes. When she very occasionally lifts her eyes from the floor, she sees tailored suits and jogging outfits side by side, young people in Gothic black with facial piercings and hair thick with gel, and trim, well-trained people alongside others who are quite obviously overweight. Almost everyone looks slightly anxious; some appear dazed. No one is talking; she knows that it is forbidden. She looks around quickly: there are no children anywhere.

She can still not understand why no one is refusing to walk along the corridors, nor can she understand why she has not refused. It is the fact that people are doing exactly as they have been told, without question, that worries her the most. She remembers once being intrigued, watching cows and sheep obediently following one another, and she wonders if someone on the outside would now be just as intrigued, watching all the people in the corridors.

Someone on the outside.

She knows that if they are inside then there must be an outside, but she cannot see anything that even vaguely resembles an *outside*. She has a very blurred memory of being somewhere else, doing other things – she assumes that it must have been on the *outside* – and then, for some reason completely unknown to her, she was suddenly here in these corridors with all these people obeying inane regulations. She has lost all concept of time: she does not know what day it is; she does not even know what time of the day it is. Her watch stopped some time back, and there do not seem to be any clocks in the corridors. She needs to know what is going on, but she is quite sure that no one around her would have any answers. When she very briefly catches the eye of an elderly man in a shabby grey overcoat, she is uneasily aware that she is not the only one thinking such thoughts.

She can already feel a film of sweat on the inside of her hands and the back of her neck. The sweat on her neck is cold, and, somewhere within her brown corduroy jacket, she knows that her heart is beating faster than normal. As she reaches the end of the corridor, she draws in her breath and lifts her head.

The man in the enormous Reception Hall had said while

handing her a long, thin key on a plaited leather ring: “Walk to the end of the corridor in front of you, then turn left. After twenty metres, you will see another corridor running off to your right; follow it to the end and then turn right again. The room you are looking for is the third door along that corridor. You can't miss it: there is a large number one painted on the door.” He had then handed her a brown pill from a large jar on his desk, saying: “Breakfast, lunch and dinner.” When she had looked at him, completely dumb-founded, he had added, “Everything you need and nothing you don't.”

There had been so much that Tilda had wanted to ask the man, but she had not had the slightest idea where to start.

Now, thinking back to the Reception Hall and the Receptionist, she has the feeling that she is an intelligent woman, and she believes that, somewhere in her past, she has been used to dealing with people. Asking questions, delegating work and formulating procedures have most probably been an important part of her life. She is quite sure that she knows how to stand up for herself, so she is confused and perplexed that she should be meekly taking orders and keys and even pills from someone with a fixed smile sitting behind a large white desk.

Then, while she is still trying to conjure up some kind of picture of her past and who she actually is, she finds herself wondering why Door One should be the third door and what numbers might be painted on the first two doors. Nought and minus one? It does not make any sense that the third door should be Door One: everything must always begin at the beginning and then move forwards. There is a distinct feeling of unease rushing through her body.

Before, when she had still been standing in front of the Receptionist, she had wanted to ask him why the beginning was the third door down the corridor, but while she had been formulating the words in her head, the dapper young man with the carefully waved hair and the advertisement-like smile had moved on to the next client, and Tilda had realized that she had already been forgotten.

Average height with short, greying hair and blue eyes, she is still an attractive woman, in spite of her fifty-plus years. Her body is supple and well-trained and her face, more oval than round, is perfectly balanced – a balance that often instils a feeling of calmness in others, similar to the effect that can be derived from a beautifully crafted portrait hanging in an art gallery. She is wearing a pair of dark blue jeans, a soft white cotton shirt, with the top button undone, and her brown corduroy jacket. It is what she was wearing when it all began, though of the actual *beginning*, she has absolutely no memory.

As she turns left, she clenches the large key between her sweaty fingers. She can feel the ornate bow of the key that has been cleverly moulded to simulate two tightly intertwined branches. Her fingers run down the shaft while she thinks of tree trunks. She tries to reassure herself: trees are friendly things – they indicate growth and life – the complete opposite of this maze of corridors going nowhere. Her mind is quickly filling with images of all kinds of trees, layer upon layer of green and brown and even yellow and orange. She thinks about autumn, and then she thinks of winter, and the images become stark and grey, and she can no longer see any leaves.

Left, right, right. Would she remember it all correctly?

She is nervous, and she knows how easy it is to forget things when one is nervous. Or to mix them up with other things. She knows that she must have often forgotten things before. Before what? She wonders about the word *before*; then she thinks about the word *after*. Would she experience an *after*, or would there just be a *before* and then nothing?

Without actually looking around, she is conscious that there are not as many people in this corridor, and she feels less intimidated – she has not been able to understand why she, of all people, should feel intimidated – and she is able to keep her gaze straight ahead of her instead of somewhere near the floor. Her mind is still attempting to process images of trees and leaves and different seasons and the two words: *before* and *after*. She turns right, into a new corridor, the sound of her hard-soled shoes echoing on the compact timber floor.

There are no windows in any of the corridors, and there is only cold artificial light coming from what seem to be long, thin, white tubes running along the ceilings. She had not reflected on the lack of windows earlier, and this new awareness is beginning to push in on her, like some kind of tight blanket. Once again, she thinks of the Ghost Ride and the solid darkness broken suddenly and erratically by exaggerated figures of death and dying. She remembers the high-pitched screams of people who knew that no one had died, or would die, and who were quite sure that the ride would soon burst out into the sunshine – people revelling in the controlled sensation of fear.

But now the sensation is not controlled, and everything within her seems to momentarily stop working as her mind gingerly fingers the idea that there may not be any way out. She gasps for air, like someone breaking the surface of the water after having been submerged too long, and then she

turns to her right.

The man in Reception, with his well-cut, grey suit and his blonde, wavy hair, had smelt strongly of some kind of spicy aftershave. Tilda had not been able to put a name to the aftershave, even though the olfactory sensation insisted on lingering; she is still unsure as to whether the sensation had been unpleasant or not. She remembers the man's smile. It had been a Reception smile, white and sterile like something pasted across a poster, without any real feeling. The man in Reception with his hair and his aftershave and his smile was obviously used to dealing with clients: handing over keys and giving directions.

Tilda can already see the door with the large numeral one painted boldly in black, just like the man had said. It is an ordinary door, and, like all the other doors in that particular corridor, it is oak, completely flush and without panelling; on its right-hand side, there is a large round doorknob, most probably brass. A couple of people walk quickly past the door without looking at it. Tilda wonders if she might be brave enough to walk past it. Perhaps she could then continue on down the corridor, past all the doors; perhaps, somewhere, she might find an exit. Perhaps she might even find some trees.

She sighs, but then, as though she is trying to convince herself that what she is about to do is her only option, she shakes her head. Somehow, she knows that she cannot just walk past the door, even though, more than anything, that is what she wants to do. She finds herself actually envying the people who are now much further along the corridor, but, while she watches them, she knows that there are many other doors. She stops in front of Door One and fits

the key into the lock. She takes a couple of deep breaths, looks furtively behind her, and then, turning the key, she opens the door.