



Evasion



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We run. It's cold and the damp is creeping, driven into my bones by the encroaching night. So tired. My legs ache and plead for rest. Can't rest. They're not far behind. Tom darts on ahead. He's stronger than me, braver, more determined, resolute. I wish it had never happened. I long for home, the warmth of our cosy living room, the decadent luxury of a glass of wine. Rebecca.

We run, crossing the vast field to the trees on the farthest side. Tom has spotted some abandoned hangars and suggests we might shelter there. He knows I'm at my limit, but we cannot stop out here. They are so close and even as we run we can hear the distant whop, whop of the helicopter. They will be upon us in minutes.

So exposed, even in the dimming light. My clothes cling to me in the crawling, chilled dampness. Each step exacerbates the tightness of the wet cloth. My muscles burn and my breathing is laboured. I stumble, crying out, then stare around fearfully, seeing the soldiers to the east on the parade ground. I can see them. How can they fail to see us?

Tom grabs my arm roughly and pulls me along. My legs try to keep up with his increased pace, but flail about uselessly. I am furious with them, infuriated by their weakness. The helicopter is closer now. If my legs fail me, they will spot us and it will all be over.

We will never see our home again. If they catch us, they'll never release us. If we escape, they will watch our home, our loved ones. We cannot go home. We cannot make contact. The thought threatens to derail me, like a snare, or a garrotte. Rebecca.

Tom drives me onwards. The ground is uneven, though from a distance it had looked smooth. We lurch through the rain, blinking away drips from our hair, glancing fearfully over our shoulders at the approaching helicopter. It is so close! How can they not see us? Run!

Run on, the hangars are closer, but still so far away. The gaping mouths of their entrances reveal nothing in the half light. Their interiors are utterly dark. Who knows what we shall find when we get there? But for now, they are our only hope, the only sanctuary in this cold forbidding place. The helicopter has deployed its searchlight, sweeping the other side of the field methodically. Hunting us down.

Run. Think of nothing else, just run. We leap and scramble, stumble and stagger across the last few yards of the field, collapsing in the entrance of the middle hangar, heedless of the filthy floor, or the cold hard metal walls. For now we are invisible. They will search here. But not yet.

I sink to the ground, chest heaving, nose running, hair dripping, shivering, wretched. Tom stands near to the entrance, watching. The helicopter is closer now, sweeping the acres of the field, relentless. The soldiers are forming up on the parade ground. We hear the bellowed orders even at this distance. We will have to run again, but I need longer. How could this happen to people like us?

Suddenly, with no warning, a boy appears outside the hangar. He stares in at us. We stare back at him. He looks back at the helicopter, then away to his left. We are frozen. We can do nothing. He starts waving his arms and shouting.

I am on my knees, begging him to stop, pleading. It is so unfair. We have run so far, tried so hard. It cannot end this way, with one small, insignificant and uncomprehending boy giving us away to them. Other boys appear, one after another. They stare in at us. An older boy hits the first boy on the shoulder, silencing him. He is apparently their leader. With one nod from him the boys slowly file into the hangar, blocking our escape.

We shuffle back, clinging to each other, terrified. The whop, whop of the helicopter is almost directly overhead. It won't be long now. We cannot run. We cannot get past the boys and anyway we have nothing left for the chase.

The boys laugh and shout at each other, joshing, pushing, larking as boys will. The helicopter moves off, heading away to the west. Tom and I stare at each other, bewildered. What does this mean?

We look back at the boys. The oldest one smiles knowingly and gives a satisfied nod, then they move away, heading east along the treeline, larking and shouting still. They weren't blocking

our escape. They were hiding us!

I am overwhelmed with gratitude. Tears threaten. In this cold landscape, this hostile place, such an act is almost cruelly kind. But then concern creeps in. Groups of boys have ways of unwittingly drawing attention to themselves. Even if the soldiers don't stop them now and question them, one of them will surely tell someone they saw us.

I look at Tom and see he has had the same thought. He is adjusting the laces of his shoes, staring out determinedly at the darkening field. We must run now. I am so tired I could weep, but now is not the time. I push myself up, too exhausted to see to my own laces. I look at Tom and he nods, questioning. Are you ready?

We run. We dash from the hangar, sprinting away past its neighbour, to the west, then dart into the trees behind them, leaping and pushing, slapped by whipping branches, tripping on unseen roots. The whop, whop is barely audible now, but we cannot relax. The soldiers have joined the search and they know this land better than we do. The helicopter could be called back in a trice.

We run. Through the gloom of the night trees we can see the road beyond. Too dangerous, we run parallel to it, tracking it through the trees. If they catch up with us now, at least we have a chance to hide amongst the woodland debris. But it is hard, so hard. Each step threatens to tumble us, grasping branches reach for us, dips hidden by leaves wait to fell us.

Night has claimed the land, darkness made darker by the continuing foul weather. The soldiers had passed nearby at one point, stopping our hearts with their repetitive tread. We had dropped to the ground, burying our faces in the leaves, battling to stay perfectly still despite the dreadful cold. They had carried on, tramping along the road, their misery probably only slightly less than our own at being out on such a filthy night.

We had slipped across the road shortly after that, fleeing across the dark moor on the other side, lured to the mountain of blazing lights in the distance. These monolithic apartment towns have begun springing up everywhere. Tom hopes we might be able to lose ourselves in the crowd. I am less certain, all too aware of the dangers of being recognised by someone, but I'm too tired to run any further, too heartsick to withstand a night on this bleak moor, too filthy to stomach my own company any longer. I must wash, rest, eat, think. I don't want to think. I think of Rebecca. I should think of survival.

As we approach the apartment town we can see crowds of commuters filing in through the gargantuan black steel door. Disinterested security guards stand at either side. One of them drags on a cigarette. Tom steers me towards the queue.

I keep my face down, appalled by my dishevelled state. The people around us are all smartly dressed, clean, chatting and relaxed. I imagine they know instantly what we are. But at least it does not matter that we aren't residents. They cannot tell. These places have thousands of residents so we are merely two more faces in the crowd.

We shuffle along, Tom trying to blend in with the other men, signalling me to do likewise. I glance nervously at the women. They are all fashionably made-up, hair crimped in accordance with the current trend. Their shoes are impractically high, with straps winding up their legs. I have no make-up, my hair is a riot of tangles and snarls, and my shoes are mud-caked cross-country trainers. I can no more blend in with them than I could with a group of schoolchildren.

Tom frowns at me, his maleness blinding him to the obvious. He sighs and steps to my side, wrapping his arm around me, and tickling my ribs, as a lover would. I do my best to giggle appreciatively, knowing that this is the best cover available to us. Everyone averts their eyes from lovers.

We near the giant gate, an imposing maw within the towering smooth black wall, rising high above our heads. I risk a look upwards, gasping at the scale of the place. Windows, tiny and lost in the vastness of the structure, cut orange rectangles out of the black. People's homes. People like

those around us, glad to be home after another days work, happy to return to the comfort of this bizarre steel town of apartments.

I am struck by a need to run again, never mind the tiredness, but to do so now would surely draw the attention of the security guards, one of whom is so close I can see the colour of his eyes, greyish blue, an eery echo of the architecture he guards.

He straightens up, stretching his muscles and peering out across the long slow queue. He is bored by his work. We edge by him, carefully turning our faces to each other, awkwardly maintaining the impression of lovers to avoid risk of recognition.

We're through! But now we have no idea where to go. We are in a large foyer, its ceiling way up in the clouds, walled with steel. To the right of the entrance gate is a large elevator, black as coal, unrelentingly stylish on any other day, but today, austere and forbidding. A steady stream of people fill it, the doors closing as they are whisked skywards to their apartments on any of the 24 floors in any of the 6 wings of the complex.

We push through the crowd and stand near the front, ready to board when the lift returns. After merely seconds the doors open with an ophidian hiss, revealing a cavernous space within, lined with mirrors. I gasp as I catch a brief sight of myself, horrified by my appearance.

The guards have followed the last of the stragglers through and are standing in the foyer, overseeing the boarding of the elevator. Tom guides me by my elbow into the lift, steering me into the corner to the left of the door.

There is an LED display on the other side and one of the commuters taps into it, instructing the elevator which floors are required. Tom grips me, holding me steady as the floor drops away with the sudden upwards surge of the elevator.

He stands fast as the door opens at the first stop. I look at him but he gives a barely perceptible shake of his head. When it stops the second time he gives me a gentle shove and we hurry out of the door, stepping to one side to allow others to pass us. They hurry away, unconcerned by us.

The wall on the left side is pocked with tiny windows, allowing a view down into the foyer. The wall on the other side is solid steel. Tom jokes that at least we shall be prepared for prison. I do not laugh.

We walk along the long corridor stretching away from the elevator. We can hear many voices in the distance, happy, laughing, shrieking. They must be coming from the swimming pool. All these complexes boast a swimming pool on each floor. We follow the sounds nervously, aware of the eyeball cameras in the ceiling, watching.

The smell of the chlorine hits us long before we reach the pool. A child hurtles around a corner, clad only in a dripping swimming costume, and nearly collides with Tom. She yells an apology and speeds away down another corridor, leaving a trail of wet footprints behind her. She reminds me painfully of Rebecca at that age.

The flooring changes from plush blue carpet to silvery grey non slip tiling. I feel guilty about my filthy shoes. We don't belong here. We peer through wall to wall windows at the swimmers in the pool, happily splashing and diving. Condensation drips down the glass.

I tug at Tom's arm. I don't feel comfortable. He looks at me and smiles wearily, then leads the way down another corridor, lined with locked doors. The apartments. The walls are papered with trendy patterns, relieved by tasteful prints set back in plain recesses. It is an attempt by the developers to make it seem homely. It doesn't feel homely.

Tom steers me to one of the few public bathrooms, instructing me to be no longer than five minutes. I hurry in, looking longingly at the pristine shower. There is no time. I rummage in the basket of complimentary samples. The residents here pay handsomely, rewarded with such titbits by the corporate owners. I do my best to clean myself, then attempt to tame my mane of hair.

I need make-up. In this fashionable environment, an unmade face stands out. I pick through

the samples again, finding a lipstick and eye pencil. They are not my shade, but creative application produces a satisfactory result. My time is up. With one last look at the shower I push back through the door and find Tom at the end of the corridor.

I gaze at the locked doors, knowing that beyond them are homes, sofas, TVs, coffee machines, photographs. Tom snatches my hand and hurries me back to the corridor leading to the elevator. He had heard two men talking about a search for fugitives. He pauses at one of the tiny windows, then steps back nervously. There are soldiers down in the foyer. It won't be long before they review the surveillance footage. Such folly to have come here! A ridiculous mistake.

We hurry back the way we came. Tom has studied the fire procedures notice and thinks there may be another way out. We skirt the swimming pool, losing ourselves in the maze of corridors and apartments. I am sure I can hear the tiny eyeball cameras whirring as they turn to track our movements.

We eventually reach an emergency staircase, bursting through the door, close to panic. The stairs, in contrast to the rest of the facility, are uncarpeted, undecorated. The lighting is harsh, fluorescent, burning away what colour there is from the magnolia walls.

We hurry down the first flight, our tired muscles complaining at the return to exercise. Tom stops at the door to the first floor, pausing with his hand on the handle, peering through the slit window. He reaches a decision and pulls me on down the stairs.

We clatter down and down, until the last semi-landing. Tom pushes me into the corner, then crouches down, edging his face around the bannister. There is a fire door at the bottom. He cannot see what awaits us outside. He gazes back up the stairs, torn with indecision, but there is nowhere for us to hide in this place. There are too many people, too many cameras. We should not have come here.

He lunges, grabbing my hand and hurrying down the last few steps. He pauses at the door. It is alarmed. The minute we open it, the authorities will know. They will know where, they will surely know who. What choice do we have?

We take deep breaths, then share a nod, before Tom grasps the handle and pushes it down with all his weight, breaking the seal. The siren sounds instantly but we do not wait to hear it. We are out and running, pounding across the soggy gardens, dimly lit by solar powered lights.

I daren't look around, concentrating on where to put my feet, irrationally delighted to be out of that place. Tom, with his longer stride, has time to take in our surroundings. He assesses the route ahead. We can dimly hear the siren sounding inside the massive steel structure, but there is no sound of running soldiers, no guns, no whop, whop.

I shiver as the cold strikes my flesh, made warm by the centrally heated corridors of the apartment town. The rain has not let up, and drops smack against my exposed cheeks as we tear through the shrubbery, forcing our way through the hedge and out onto the moors again.

The road lies to our left, army jeeps parked up, engines idling, lights burning. We veer away, heading deeper into the moor, running, running. The ground is spongy with rain soaked moss, and we slither and slide down dips and gullies, never pausing, just running, desperate for distance.

We finally slept. Huddled together in the meagre shelter of a scrubby tree. The rain still beat down on us, and the cold worked its fingers into our sodden clothing, but exhaustion overrode all other concerns. We slept.

When we woke it was to the sight of a grinning army colonel, his rifle held loosely by his side. Behind him we could see a small troop of soldiers, laughing, relaxed. The rain had stopped. We untangled ourselves and got cautiously to our feet, knowing there was no more running. In a dispirited and resigned way, I was relieved.

I cannot remember the walk back across the moors. I cannot remember soldiers, or uniforms, or guns. I remember nothing. I was utterly numb, unable to feel any emotion for our failure. I

remember being loaded into the back of a jeep. The colonel climbed into the front seat and looked back at us, grinning, happy, no doubt delighted to have completed his mission. I could not share his delight.

We drove for several hours, bouncing and bumping along the potholed roads. I was thirsty, parched, but no drink was offered. Eventually we gazed out onto familiar landscape, driving into town, through the suburbs with the large houses, tired but yet still elegant in their way.

I braced myself as best I could, trying to prepare for jail. I longed to be running now. I closed my eyes, not praying as such, I no longer believe in such things, but steeling myself. Tom gripped my arm, forcing me to look out.

Our home. The gate was open, a soldier standing beside it, snapping off a sharp salute to the colonel. The colonel laughed at our bewildered expressions, then gestured for us to get out. We staggered out of the jeep and lurched down the path to the open front door. The colonel followed us. He laughed again, then saluted and handed us a copy of the morning paper, before turning away crisply and marching back to the jeep.

The soldiers left. Tom and I stood in the doorway, staring at each other, confused into speechlessness, but then Rebecca squealed from the stairs, tumbling down them, falling ecstatically into our arms. I never thought I would hold her again.

The paper tumbled, forgotten, to the floor, the front page covered with a dozen portraits, including our own, beneath the headline "Heroes of the Revolution".