

# Abigail

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace, in peace because  
they trust in you.

—Isaiah 26. 3

For a place dedicated to healing, the sensory environment of the hospital is ill-suited to its task. Overhead, fluorescent tube lights flicker and hum, releasing a relentless, low-frequency drone to drown out the already scarce silence. Their chrome fixtures mounted on smooth, industrial ceiling tiles, the arrhythmic blinking of the worst maintained is reflected in that glossy surface, producing an unpleasant strobing effect as one proceeds down the corridor. Underfoot, the waxed floors offer little respite from the lurid torment above. Gurneys are wheeled back and forth – their casters whimpering under the weight of each new passenger. Fire doors swing shut upon their hinges. From behind each of them emanates the desperate, beckoning chatter of medical machinery; no one seems particularly concerned.

On entering the emergency care department, patients are immediately subjected to the intense humidity of a waiting area whose typical occupancy would be better accommodated in a room twice the size. All about is an air of weary resignation and of that peculiar malaise particular to overworked medical staff – a combination of lassitude and dutiful ardour. There are few voices, but those that can be made out are obnoxious: a drunk threatening their doctor between mouthfuls of regurgitated liquor; an anxious parent inquiring for the fourth time as to when their child might be seen. Most of those assembled, having hours still to endure, subscribe to an unspoken rule of silence; to give it voice would constitute a breach of what is,

in any case, more a courtesy. Note the occasional whisper, the leafing of pages – such things are politely tolerated; few begrudge them their foresight those who thought to bring a book.

The bay in which lay Abigail was an oasis of tranquillity amidst this assault on the senses. It was not that any given sensation was actually muted; little more than five metres separated the foot of the bed from the rows of seats that populated the waiting room. Rather, her immediate locale was characterised by an overriding impression of calm; the collective tumult of environmental information was subdued in her presence. If ever there was a deafening silence, this was it.

Of course, there is something inherently peaceful about sleep; even so, that Abigail appeared not only serene but dignified in her torpor was truly remarkable – all the more so for the ordeal that she had suffered and for the anxious pacing of her brother at the bedside. When, at last, her eyes quivered open, they seemed not to register his relieved expression; they were instead riveted to a point beyond his shoulder, where they met a stranger's gaze. With this, Abigail's brother, now satisfied that she would recuperate, set about chastising the girl – admonition supplanting compassion as the primary articulation of his concern. Either this lecture was a familiar one or the contents of her cannula numbed her to its motives, for soon enough she had taken once more to slumber.

By the time Abigail next stirred, her brother had already departed. Having first left his contact details with the nurses, he had set off in search of his own bed. A chart at the foot of hers documented her condition. Under 'emergency contact' it read 'stephen.malling@edifyingmail.com'. Some way above that, the word 'overdose' was plainly visible. So too was the stranger, upon whom those piercing eyes remained locked, resuming their steadfast vigil; it was not long before even they took their leave.