

DERANGED IN THE DARKNESS

By Jaslyn Mackenzie

There is nothing quite like the feeling of being blind; nowhere to turn, nowhere to run, no light switch that will bring it all flooding back. Nothing but endless blackness, and the memories of what it was like before, when the world was full of colour. That was what Annie Healfier was thinking as she sat on her rickety bed, in her tiny cell on the bottom floor of the East Highlands Lunatic Asylum. She began playing with her hair and listening for something, anything. She sighed, it was still impossible to hear anything beyond the thick concrete walls. Then suddenly, she heard the heavy iron door creak open. She turned her head sharply in the direction of the noise.

As Nurse Abigail walked down the corridor to put the little blind girl to bed, she contemplated all the horrible things that had happened to the poor child. She intended to be good and kind towards Annie, and to make her feel safe; to be the mother figure the girl had never had. Abigail slowly opened the door to the little girl's room and stepped inside. She was not prepared for what she saw. Annie's hair was long and straight, and had been twisted and tied into a neat noose that fell between her shoulder blades. The nurse tried to ignore this disturbing spectacle and continue on with the evening routine, but she struggled to hide her emotions.

Annie couldn't sleep that night, she KNEW that voice. "Alrighty dear, lights out," accompanied by an awkward silence as the nurse realised the irony of her words. But where had she heard that voice before? If only she could...

In the blackness she saw her mother's smiling face looking down at her, but as she reached out to touch it, it morphed into another woman's face; a young nurse from the Public Hospital.

"Daddy's dead, dear," the young nurse said softly. Then Annie was in her childhood bedroom - the solar system mobile hanging from the middle of the ceiling like it desperately wished it could plunge to the Earth, her single bed jammed into the corner, its pale pink sheets ruffled from the tossing and turning of last night's dreams, and her faded lolly-shaped rug that held as many memories as clouds held raindrops. Dream Annie walked down and into the lounge room to see her mother hanging from the roof's supporting beams. She started sinking through the floor as if it were quicksand, going deeper and deeper.

"Daddy's dead..." the nurse's voice swirled around inside her head like a vicious whirlpool wanting to suck her down into the depths...

Annie sat straight up in her cell, covered in sweat. The voice, the young nurse, and Abigail were one and the same.

Dr Murphy waited with anticipation for his new patient. He had heard of her tragic story, and it was enough to give anyone nightmares. The youngster had been left orphaned when her father died in a car crash and her mother hung herself out of sorrow and sadness. The girl had been sent to an Orphanage where she had begun to display peculiar tendencies. Little Annie started to develop an obsession with hanging. She had tied nooses in the other children's hair and shoelaces. She had drawn scenes of hangings all through the picture books and all over the walls. She was even suspected of hanging all the children's dolls in the staff room, but couldn't be proven guilty. The last straw for the manager (a Mrs Clottenth) of the Orphanage had come when Annie had hung the family cat. The girl had been attending therapy, but the manager had had

enough. She consulted an experimental Doctor who advised that the girl have her eyes burned out, (if she couldn't see things, she couldn't hang them,) and be sent to a high security Asylum.

"Why is she looking at me like that?" thought Nurse Abigail; what have I done wrong? Indeed, Annie Healfer was looking at the nurse as though she had just murdered her father – well, looking wasn't quite the right word, more staring without seeing – and had been looking at her like that all the way from her cell to the Clinic. "Well, here we are dear," said the Nurse reassuringly, "Have a good session! A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step!". She gave Annie's hand a motherly squeeze, placed it on the doorknob and walked pensively back towards her quarters. She intended to make herself a hot cup of tea and try to take her mind off the poor disturbed girl.

"Poor woman," Dr Murphy thought to himself. Nurse Abigail had been found on the floor in the doorway of her quarters, having fainted in horror at the "re-decoration" that her room had received. There had been dolls everywhere, all hanging from tiny nooses. The middle-aged man sighed as he approached Annie Healfer's cell; he envisioned himself walking in, finding her sitting on her bed, and giving her a stern talking to. He would be firm, but understanding, she would apologise, and he would be on his way. But his plans had one major flaw: Annie wasn't in her room.

Furious, hateful thoughts coursed through her brain as she ran down the corridors, keeping one hand on the right wall at all times. She could hear snippets of patients moaning in agony or laughing hysterically as she passed their rooms, but that was in the background. At the front of her mind was that VOICE..."Daddy's dead"...that venomous sound...the voice that had injected poison into her life to slowly kill it from the inside out. That day had been where it had all begun; those two words had changed her life forever.

The past week had been a total nightmare for Nurse Abigail; she was hated by her patient, her room had been hideously 'redecorated', and now she was being haunted. A couple of days after she had passed out from shock after being confronted by the mess that was her room, dolls had started appearing everywhere. Little linen dolls that looked like they were made to crudely represent her; they had brown hair, blue eyes, and freckles across their noses. Most distressing was that she always found them in painful situations. On Thursday she had found one with the needle of her sewing machine through its heart, on Friday there was half a doll with marker pen blood stains dripping from the bottom of its torso, and today, Saturday, she was about to lose it. She stared at the tiny doll, only twenty centimeters high, that was hanging from her bedroom door frame, and shuddered. She heard a creak behind her and jumped two feet in the air, spinning around with all the speed of a child's spinning top – only to find that there was nothing there at all. She took a deep breath and left the room.

"Ahhh silence..." thought Dr Murphy, settling into his armchair with a book. There was nothing quite like it. Chapter One – he read, only to be interrupted almost immediately by the sound of knuckles rapping on wood. He sighed. "Come in!" he called. Nurse Abigail entered the room. He invited her to sit down, for she was white as a sheet, and she obliged. "What can I do for you Miss Matin?" asked Dr Murphy.

"Well Doctor," said Abigail, and she proceeded to tell him all about the stalking, and how she, usually quite a rational woman, couldn't shake off the haunting feeling that something bad was going to happen. Michael nodded thoughtfully before replying. "Maybe you should go for a walk Abigail, clear your head a little." Miss Matin nodded, thanked him, and departed, leaving Dr Murphy with his book.

“Ph.D. in Psychology indeed,” huffed Abigail as she walked through the grounds of the Institution. Dr Murphy had shown little sympathy. A twig snapped and she whirled around. “What was that?” she thought. She tried to calm herself down, but a lump of terror was growing in her throat. Abigail kept walking at a brisker pace. There was a rustle in the leaves above her head. She jumped. “A possum,” she thought, but was paralysed with fear. She tried to tell herself that this was irrational. Her heart was beating a million miles an hour. A piece of cloth gently floated down before her; the hem of a patient’s night gown. Abigail’s throat seized up; “That’s not a possum.”

Dr Murphy walked slowly and solemnly through the halls of the East Highlands Lunatic Asylum with reluctant purpose. He still hadn’t quite processed what had happened. She was a fine nurse, a caring woman with so much to live for. She had had so much ahead of her, and yet had chosen to end it all. He arrived at Annie Healfner’s door, not ready to tell her that her nurse was gone. He took a deep breath and entered the room. But whatever he had been going to say died on his lips, for scrawled across the back wall of the empty room were three words: ABBY’S DEAD, DEAR.

