DISARRHOEA

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DISARRHOEA

Disarrhoea, they call it. I've no idea where the name came from, any more than I know where the sickness came from. Three days on, the only certainty is that we're trapped in our home like everyone else – except for those helpless souls outside.

TV and radio programming are sporadic, and the internet is inundated with reports and images of tragedy and despair. Every news source raises more questions than it answers. There's little verifiable information and no practical advice, but the consensus across all media is that it's not safe to go out. If we set foot outside, there'll almost certainly be no way back.

It's been two days since Jess ventured out and involuntarily joined what's been dubbed the Legion of the Lost.

Meanwhile, I'm upstairs, cocooned in my room with my laptop, phone, chargers and other essentials for bunker survival, thanks to Keira and Coen, who don't seem to have been affected yet.

Other than searching for and sharing the latest news, there's little that I can do in my condition, so I'm devoting my Wednesday evening to recording the events that have unfolded in the last three days. Once that's up to date I'll keep a daily log, in case anyone wants to know in the aftermath what happened in this house – and in case I'm not around to tell the tale. I've decided to type this, rather than make audio or video recordings, as I don't want to alarm the children with anything that they might overhear and don't need to

know about.

To my intense irritation as a journalist, my typing is frustratingly slow and I'm relying heavily on autocomplete. Nevertheless, I'm determined to persist with this, if only to give myself some sense of purpose, as I've been rendered redundant in virtually every other respect.

Stay at home, they say, and keep your doors and windows sealed – nothing about how to get medical attention or what to do if you run out of food. Fortunately we have sufficient supplies to get us through another week; and the water, electricity and internet are so far unaffected. Let's hope we don't lose any of those between now and whenever this invisible menace releases us from our purgatory – if it ever does.

Day 1 (Sunday)

I'll designate Sunday as Day 1, since the first extraordinary occurrence was a car colliding head-on with a lamp post directly across the road.

'Just a drunk,' Jess quipped, even though it was four in the afternoon.

Ice couldn't have been a factor. The shivering puddles indicated that the temperature was still above freezing.

We hadn't been outside all day ourselves. The weekend's washing and shopping had been done, the bin didn't need emptying, and it was one of those Sundays when we were resolved to prevent the slightest wintry draft from invading our cosy habitat.

Jess and I stood and watched from the lounge room as the young driver clawed her way up the in-

side of her open car door and hooked both arms over the top. Failed by her buckling legs, she wedged herself nervously between the door and the frame.

In the background, faces flickered behind quivering curtains and blinds, while dusky outlines lurked in darkened doorways.

We hadn't even considered going out to offer assistance when Yasmin marched down next door's garden path and strode across the road, leaving Archie scurrying in her slipstream. On approaching the car, she tapped her chest and gestured towards her husband while uttering something to the young woman by way of an introduction. She then proceeded to carefully prise the driver out of her predicament before guiding her to the kerbside. The two of them sat down together, exchanged a few words, and then Yasmin pulled her phone out and made a call. Archie found a jacket on the back seat and draped it over the shoulders of the woman, who was visibly shaken and shivering – either from the cold or shock, or both.

Curtains and blinds flicked back into place, and doors swung shut as our fellow observers withdrew, apparently satisfied, as we were, that there had been no serious injury and Yasmin and Archie had the matter well in hand. Jess and I returned to the sofa, from where we only had to crane our necks slightly every now and then to see Yasmin and Archie still sitting on either side of the driver, presumably waiting for assistance.

It was a good thirty minutes before flashing blue lights prompted our return to the window, along with several of our neighbours.

After a superficial examination, the two attending paramedics sat down on either side of the woman.

Archie and Yasmin had shuffled to their respective sides to allow the pair access, and so found themselves perched at the ends of a somewhat tragicomical-looking row of five. We expected the medics to fetch a stretcher and transport their patient away, but instead they sat gazing at the ground in front of them, exactly as the other three had for the previous half hour.

Eventually the male medic stood up, strolled with no sense of urgency to the back of the ambulance, casually opened the rear door and stepped inside.

A minute later his colleague stretched her arms out horizontally in front of her, as if about to commence an aerobic exercise. She leaned forward, rose with imperfect balance and, without paying any further attention to the accident victim, made her way around the blind side of the vehicle, reappearing briefly at the back and then disappearing, leaving the rear door open.

There was no further activity for about twenty minutes, other than the twitching of curtains and blinds, and no sign of the ambulance crew as Yasmin, Archie and the driver remained seated, one space apart from each other, looking bewildered and seemingly discussing little as daylight faded.

Finally a decision was made. First Archie, then Yasmin straightened up and helped the young woman to her feet. Arms were linked as each appeared to be reliant on the others for support. Then, instead of turning in a line towards the ambulance, they closed in to form a wobbly six-footed tripod – or hexapod, I suppose – and zigzagged across the road towards Yasmin and Archie's open gate. Once at the gate posts, it was a full five minutes before they broke

formation to pass through in single file and make their way up the footpath, holding hands but with an almost comedic lack of coordination.

Jess gave them a few minutes to settle into the house before phoning Yasmin to check that everything was OK. Yasmin told her that the driver didn't know why she'd veered into the lamp post. She said she felt as though she was steering straight down the road until the point of impact. The ambulance crew checked her over, as we saw, and found no injuries, so they didn't think it was necessary to take her to the hospital. Yasmin said that both the paramedics seemed rather vague, and she didn't know why the man got up and walked off without a word. His colleague said that she wondered where he'd gone, and she went to look for him. That was the last they saw of either of them. Meanwhile, Yasmin had called for roadside assistance, but it seemed that they were busier than usual and couldn't send anyone out before the next morning. Yasmin and Archie waited a while longer to see if anything was happening with the ambulance before deciding to go indoors to warm up and have a cup of tea. Yasmin also told Jess that she and Archie were feeling strange. It was obvious to us from the outset that the driver was unsteady, but it was odd that Yasmin and Archie should also be staggering on their way back to the house. Yasmin said that they were going to decide what else to do after they'd had some tea and biscuits, and Jess told her to let us know if we could do anything to help.

The ambulance didn't move for the rest of the evening, and we didn't see either of the paramedics again.

We learned from the local evening news that there

had been a spate of road accidents throughout the region all afternoon – vehicles colliding and pedestrians and cyclists being knocked down. How coincidental, we thought, that we'd had an incident in our street, too.

Dinner followed the end of the news at 6.30, then Jess and I watched a couple of sitcoms, while Keira and Coen amused themselves at the foot of the stairs with zoo animals, dinosaurs and the new set of building blocks that Grandma Emily had given Coen for his fifth birthday.

Distracted from the afternoon's occurrences by an hour of canned laughter, interspersed with cries of 'Stairquake!' accompanied by crashing, roaring and squealing, we didn't think of switching channels for a news update before going to bed ahead of another week of work and school. We were sure that the woman was being cared for next door, and her car didn't seem too badly damaged and would probably be towed away the next morning. Three days later, though, the car is still there, and so is the ambulance.

Day 2 (Monday)

I was woken before the 6.30 alarm by Jess's agitated voice downstairs. Remembering the previous day's drama, I slipped out of bed, went over to the window and peered through the curtains. I was surprised to see the ambulance still there, with its side and rear doors open, just as they were the night before – and there were two other vehicles adding to the congestion, also apparently abandoned with their doors open.

Across the road, the elderly couple at number 39

were standing on their doorstep, surveying the scene – she with her hands on her hips, and he scratching his head. They looked quizzically at each other, exchanged a word or two, and then he set off down the pathway. Two thirds of the way to the gate he hesitated, turned to look back at his wife, and then sat down cross-legged. She raised her hands to her cheeks and promptly made her way towards him. After stopping for a moment a few strides short of her husband, she managed five or six more small steps and sat down next to him, tucking her knees under her chin and wrapping her arms around her legs. It was the strangest sight – they just sat there looking at each other, then at the ground, then at each other, and at the ground again. Intrigued as I was, I was even more curious to know who Jess was talking to at that time in the morning, so I left the curtains slightly parted, donned my dressing gown and went downstairs.

She was speaking to her sister, Meaghan. I couldn't make much sense of Jess's side of the conversation: '… motion sickness … call a doctor … call me if you hear from her first, and I'll call you if I hear from her …,' so I popped two slices in the toaster, flicked the kettle on and went about my morning routine while waiting for the full story.

Half way through my first slice of toast, Jess placed her phone on the table. She told me that she'd been up for over an hour and was worried about what she'd seen on the breakfast news. She'd tried to phone her mother to check that she was all right, but there was no answer, so she called Meaghan to ask if she'd heard from her. Meaghan hadn't, but she told Jess that she herself had symptoms similar to those that Jess had described to her, and as described on the news.

Meaghan said that she'd spent about half an hour around mid-afternoon on Sunday tidying up the garden, but had come in earlier than intended because she'd begun to feel unwell, as if she had a mild form of motion sickness. She watched TV for a while, but didn't feel any better, so she went to bed early, feeling strangely disorientated. Her partner, Sam, was away on Sunday, but was rostered on a returning overnight flight that was due to land early on Monday morning. Anyway, that was the gist of the call, and they agreed to let each other know as soon as either of them had managed to contact their mother.

I was a few minutes behind with my breakfast, even though I'd got up before the alarm, so I gulped down the last of my tea and toast and dashed upstairs to get dressed for work, leaving Jess to prepare the children's breakfast.

When I came back down just before seven, giving the kids a rousing shout as I passed their room, and skimming Jess's cheek en route to the garage, I couldn't have imagined how much our world was about to change.

With my seat belt fastened, I reached down for the remote control, opened the garage door, started the engine, shifted into reverse, checked the rear-view mirror, blinked to verify what I'd seen, turned round for a another look, slipped back into neutral and turned the engine off. The end of our driveway was blocked by a large, white van parked askew with one front wheel on the footpath and its driver's door open. It wasn't there ten minutes earlier when I looked out of the bedroom window to check on the elderly couple still sitting on their footpath.

I stepped out of the car and walked down to the

end of the driveway, from where I could see several more vehicles parked haphazardly up and down the road in both directions. Some of them appeared to have run into others and were obstructing the entire street, which probably explained why the ambulance was still there. Meanwhile, the old man at number 39 was observing me between fists clenched around the bars of his gate.

Within a minute I began to feel light-headed, so instead of looking for the owner of the van to ask him or her to move it, I went back into the house to tell Jess what I'd seen. Clipping my knuckles on the back of the car on the way in and then scuffing my shoe against the shelving unit didn't seem significant at the time. With hindsight, though, leaving the garage shutter up and the internal door ajar was a mistake.

Once inside, I perched on the arm of the sofa, feeling decidedly queasy. I told Jess what was happening – not that I really knew – and she went out to have a look for herself. A minute later she stumbled in, slammed the door behind her and slumped down beside me on the sofa.

Suspecting that we'd been affected by something in the air outside, we agreed that we should close the garage, lock the connecting door and keep the rest of the doors and windows secured, upstairs and down, until we knew more.

When Keira and Coen came downstairs, our consternation must have been obvious, because Keira asked us what was up. I told them that they might not be going to school, as something was happening outside. With little more than a shrug and barely a glance through the window, they took their places at the dining table and set about their cereals as usual.

Jess tried again to phone her mother, but there was still no answer.

Meanwhile, I unmuted the TV to find out more about the chaotic images that I was seeing. There were accounts of widespread congestion on roads all along the east coast – north and south of us. Vehicles had been abandoned and people were wandering around aimlessly because they were incapable of driving or even walking straight. As to the cause, speculation at that stage centred on a suspected chemical leak – either an unreported accident or a deliberate act. However, it was thought unlikely that an accident on such a scale would not have been reported – unless it had and was being covered up. The general advice, albeit from no official source, was to stay at home and keep all doors and windows closed in case of airborne contamination.

After about fifteen minutes we muted the TV and turned our attention to social media to see what the reaction was to the morning's news. Stories, photos and videos had been posted of traffic at a standstill and drivers staggering out of their vehicles, but it wasn't yet clear how widespread the contamination was or what the cause was. Was it a chemical spill or a terrorist attack … or the start of another pandemic?

I called my boss to say that I wasn't able to get the car out of the driveway, plus I wasn't feeling well. She said she couldn't get beyond the end of the street herself, so she reversed back home. She intended to stay put until she knew more, and we agreed that I should, too.

Jess tried to phone the school a few times between 7.30 and eight, but the out-of-hours message was still activated.

Meaghan called back shortly after eight. Sam should have been on her way home by then, but she'd just called to say that she wasn't feeling well and was resting in the airport lounge for a while before going to catch a bus. The symptoms that Sam described to Meaghan were similar to ours.

Jess and I spent the rest of the morning either online, in front of the TV or on the phone, updating and getting updates from relatives and friends. Some, like us, had been outside and described similar physical effects. Others hadn't and were so far unaffected.

Most of the morning's communication was with Meaghan, who, while having no news of Emily, gave us frequent updates from Sam, who was unable to find a way home, as there were no buses running, and the taxis parked outside were either unoccupied or the drivers had no intention of opening their doors. As the morning wore on, the airport became increasingly crowded with streams of long-haul passengers feeling unwell on arrival and having no means of onward transport, or no inclination to leave the building. There was also a shortage of staff, presumably due to illness or the unavailability of public transport.

I called my sister, Naomi, some time after nine to tell her what had been happening in our street since the previous afternoon and find out how she, Damon and Casey were. She said she'd seen a few 'funny' posts before going to bed on Sunday night, but she and Damon didn't generally watch the evening news, so they weren't aware of what had been going on until they woke up on Monday morning and turned the TV on. I asked her if they'd opened any doors or windows. Fortunately Damon wasn't on the early shift, so he hadn't gone out and they hadn't opened anything. I

advised them to keep everything shut, which they had anyway after seeing the morning's news, even though they're two hours' drive away from us and no-one knew at the time how localised this thing was.

It's hard to remember the exact sequence of events from two days ago, as so much was going on, but there were a few text messages from Naomi after our phone call, which give an idea of the timeline:

09.46: *All doors and windows locked but tiberius went out through the cat flap hope hell be ok.*

11.12: *Tiberius is back stumbling around in the garden sniffing and pawing the walls and door like he cant find the cat flap i wont risk going out to get him hell have to find his own way in.* Then: *Keeps meowing*.

11.35: *He kept rubbing himself against the door till the flap opened a bit i reached through and pulled him in the cat flaps locked now hope hes alright.*

12.10: *Looks like our neighbourhoods affected too chaos outside*. Then: *Staying trapped inside damos not gone to work*. Then: *Feeling a bit strange sort of light headed like seasickness damo too*.

By the time I'd replied to that one, Jess had gone. She'd been increasingly worried all morning that her mother might have had a fall and could be lying injured, alone and helpless at the foot of the stairs or on a slippery bathroom floor; and even though Jess wasn't feeling well herself and was aware that there were unknown risks outside, she was determined to go. I was against the idea, but she was adamant. She reasoned that, with a mask on, a scarf wrapped round her face, and her hood up, she'd be able to manage the twenty-minute walk to Emily's place.

Amid the morning's confusion, the children were

as good as gold, taking turns playing games on the tablet, doing puzzles and colouring in their books. Jess told them that she had to go out to check on Grandma, as her phone didn't seem to be working, and that she'd be back soon.

That was the last we saw of her.

It wasn't the last we heard from her, though. Fifteen minutes after leaving, she phoned. It was a perplexing conversation. She sounded vague, saying that she wasn't able to cross the road near Mackeson's and couldn't walk in the direction that she wanted to. She felt as though she was going to fall over and needed to sit down – like we both did that morning after stepping outside, and like I still do two days later. She described people sitting on the footpath, in the road, in their garden or in their car. Some were trying to walk but were bumping into walls and lamp posts, or falling into hedges. Those attempting to drive were unable to avoid mounting the kerb or hitting other vehicles. She said she was having a short rest before trying again and would call back later. Mackeson's is about a third of the way, so allowing for another break to sit down, or even two, I expected her to be at her mother's within forty-five minutes.

An hour passed – nothing. I waited another five minutes and called her. There was no reply, other than her invitation to leave a message. I tried again, and again. It was at the fourth attempt that a young male voice answered. I asked for Jess, but the young man could only explain that he'd found the phone lying on the ground. I described Jess and what she was wearing and asked if he could see her. He could, across the road. I heard him call out, 'Jess!' He said she waved back and tried to walk towards him, but

instead she turned and headed in a different direction, and then she fell over.

By a quirk of circumstance this young man had become Jess's lifeline. I desperately needed the help of this faceless stranger and didn't want him to give up. I asked him his name. He said it was Joel. I asked Joel if he could take the phone over to Jess. He said he'd try, and for a while all I heard was shuffling. Then Joel came back on and said that he tried to walk towards her but he kept veering away. He told me that Jess had stood up and was reaching out both arms to him from the other side of the road. There was a pause, and the next thing he told me was that she was walking, but not towards him – she was moving farther away, even though she was looking at him and still reaching out a hand. He said every time he tried to take a few steps towards her, he ended up somewhere off to the side, so he said he'd leave the phone on the ground where she could see it and come and get it herself. I heard him telling her in a raised voice what he was intending to do, and I was sure I heard a faint reply from across the road.

That was the last time I heard Jess's voice.

I sat there in the armchair, staring at the captions on the muted afternoon news, hoping that Jess would get to her phone and call me back. I thought about everything that I'd seen and heard in the last twenty-four hours and wondered if it was really happening, or if I was about to be woken up by the 6.30 alarm. Then Keira tiptoed over and discreetly pointed out that we hadn't had lunch yet.

I leaned forward with the intention of getting us all something to eat, but fell straight back as though a puppeteer had cut my strings. I told Keira that I was-

n't feeling well and wondered if she could see if there were enough cheese slices in the fridge to make us all a sandwich. There were, so she gladly set about making cheese, lettuce and pickle sandwiches, with a tomato each on the side, which we ate like an apple, as I didn't want her to use a sharp knife, even though she's almost eight. I thought that we needed some ice cream after that, and the kids raised no objection, so we each had a generous scoop of Neapolitan.

I felt increasingly unsteady during the afternoon, so I gave up on my feeble attempts to leave the armchair, and instead half-watched the muted TV for about an hour while trying Jess's phone every few minutes.

Then Meaghan phoned. I didn't know that she didn't know that Jess had gone out. She'd been trying to contact her but couldn't get through. She was troubled by what I told her and was concerned about Jess's prolonged absence. She also told me that Sam's phone battery was getting low and that she hoped she could charge it somehow, so that she wouldn't lose touch with her as well. That made me wonder how much power Jess's phone had left.

Meaghan's call spurred me into action. I'd been putting off paying my first p.m. visit to the bathroom, but I couldn't delay it any longer. I leaned forward and stretched my arms out in front of me, as I'd seen the paramedic do the day before, tipped myself forward and teetered for an instant before my knees buckled and I collapsed in a heap on the floor. I was glad the children were upstairs at the time and didn't witness my moment of indignity. However, avoiding calling for their assistance meant that I had to fend for myself.

There was no way that I was going to get to my feet, so I crawled over to the foot of the stairs, hauled myself up at a rate of about four steps a minute, slumped onto the landing, rolled in the general direction of the bathroom, dragged myself through the doorway and clambered clumsily onto the toilet seat, where my legs established a reasonably stable tripod stance in partnership with the base of the toilet bowl. With one hand on the towel rail, I was able to complete the manoeuvres necessary to relieve the mounting pressure with alarmingly little time to spare.

After reflecting for a while on a mission accomplished, I glanced up to see Coen standing in the open doorway with a dribbly finger in his mouth. Expressionless and without a word, he closed the door, and I listened as his footsteps faded away.

That started me thinking about the children, and how they hadn't been affected so far – at least not to the extent that their mother and I had. Perhaps that was because they hadn't been outside, or because they were upstairs when the garage door was opened. Almost everyone else that we'd heard from described similar symptoms, with the exception of Naomi, Damon and Casey, who, as far as I knew, had kept their doors and windows closed. It crossed my mind, though, that their open cat flap might turn out to be a source of exposure. I mentioned that to Naomi as I exchanged a couple more messages with her there and then on the toilet, but she didn't seem particularly concerned.

I was still secure in the tripod posture when Meaghan phoned back. Neither of us had any news of Jess, but she'd heard from Sam again. Sam told her that no-one at the airport seemed to be going any-

where, so she had a decision to make: either walk the three and a half hours home, or stay at the airport for the night and see what options there were the next day – and possibly end up walking home anyway. She still hadn't been able to charge her phone, and so decided to buy a portable charger. Unfortunately, everyone must have had the same idea, as they were all sold out. Meaghan kept the call short to save power for another update.

Twenty minutes later I was back on the stairs, making a cautious descent, when Meaghan phoned again to say that Sam's phone had cut out during her latest call. The news from the airport was that the crowds seemed to be thinning, as there were no more arrivals and people were deciding to make their way to their onward destinations on foot. Sam told her that, although there was less jostling, people (herself included) were bumping into each other, colliding with walls and doors and tripping over inanimate objects, such as cordons and luggage. She said that her battery was on 4% shortly before contact was lost.

As we contemplated the fading afternoon light together, Meaghan and I wondered how Jess, Sam and Emily were going to get through the night. We considered notifying the police, but we didn't think that either Sam or Jess would be considered as missing persons yet. I wanted to go out and look for Jess, but even if I could get to my feet, I couldn't take a chance on being unable to find my way home and leaving Keira and Coen to fend for themselves. We agreed to sit tight and let each other know as soon as we heard anything new.

In the meantime I needed to complete my descent, so that Keira, Coen and I could make preparations for

dinner. They were both downstairs by then, having stepped over me while I was talking to their Auntie Meaghan.

We had pasties and baked beans with bread and butter that evening. I asked Keira to heat up the frozen pasties in the oven, as my fingers were finding it difficult to grasp what I was aiming for, and equally difficult to avoid what I didn't want to touch. I considered it relatively safe for my not quite eight-year-old daughter to use an oven for the first time, under my close supervision, of course, from my seat at the dining table – likewise with the microwave. I managed to open the tin of beans without cutting myself, and Keira followed my instructions to pour them safely into a bowl and heat them up. Meanwhile, I gave Coen the job of buttering the bread with a blunt knife.

The dinner-time conversation centred on when Mummy was coming back. I reassured the children that she was probably spending the night with Grandma Emily and would hopefully be home tomorrow. I was unable to reassure myself, however, that Jess wasn't sitting on the side of a road somewhere, thirsty, having not eaten since breakfast, and listening for a distant ring tone in the twilight, while facing the prospect of a night in the open, dressed only in her daytime clothes and with temperatures likely to drop below freezing.

After dinner I turned the volume up on the TV to catch the news of what they were now calling the mystery contaminant. The source was still unknown, as no chemical leak had been reported, and if it was a deliberate act, no-one had yet claimed responsibility. Accounts of disruption were coming in thick and fast. Most flights had been cancelled that morning due to

staff shortages and difficulties with refuelling and baggage handling. One airline had attempted a departure but the pilot taxied off the runway. Soon after that all aircraft were grounded nationwide. Roads were congested, trains were cancelled, and ships were unable to dock. Hospitals were in crisis with staff unable to get to work or operate equipment safely, and numerous emergency crews had been sent out but hadn't reported back. Hundreds, if not thousands of children who had walked or cycled to school, or who had set out to catch public transport, were missing. Their families had presumably been unaffected on Sunday and were still unaware on Monday morning of the scale of what was happening beyond what was visible from their windows.

Alarmed by all that I'd seen and heard, I decided to phone the police to report Jess missing. There was no reply in the twenty minutes that I spent listening to the automated message telling me that my call was being held in a queue, before I gave it up as a lost cause and tried Jess's number again – another seemingly lost cause.

Meaghan called once more that evening to say that Sam had managed to get to a public phone after queuing for over an hour. She'd decided to stay put for the night, where she at least had warmth and shelter, and then she'd think about what to do in the morning. Meaghan herself was feeling queasy, having spent most of the day sitting and lying on the sofa, while trying to get whatever news she could from any source.

After Meaghan's call, the children escorted me dutifully upstairs. They showered and brushed their teeth first, and we said goodnight before I took my

turn, sitting down in the shower to avoid slipping. Once finished, I found that the towel rail was out of reach, so I crawled out wet, dried and partially dressed myself, then kneeled in front of the wash basin to brush my teeth. Having done everything that needed to be done in the bathroom, I sat down with my back pressed against the open door. From there I pushed myself up by straightening my legs as best I could and slid across to the wall, then along the wall as far as the open bedroom door, at which point I turned, braced myself in the door frame and launched myself towards the bed. Plunging face down onto the unmade bedding, I thought to myself how fortunate I was not to have missed the target.

I tried Jess's number half a dozen more times before going to sleep, aware that each call was lighting up her screen and running the battery down. I figured that a lit up screen at night would give her, or anyone, a better chance of finding her phone than it would in the light of day. I didn't dare think that the battery was already flat.

Day 3 (Tuesday)

Tuesday (yesterday) was the last time that I made contact with anyone via Jess's phone. In a way I was pleased to discover that the battery wasn't already dead as a result of my repeated calls on Monday night, but in the end it didn't matter anyway.

My heart skipped on hearing a female voice at the umpteenth attempt, but I realised instantly that it wasn't Jess.

I explained that I was trying to find my wife, and