the sisters of dorley

WELCOME TO DORLEY HALL

alyson greaves

Welcome To Dorley Hall

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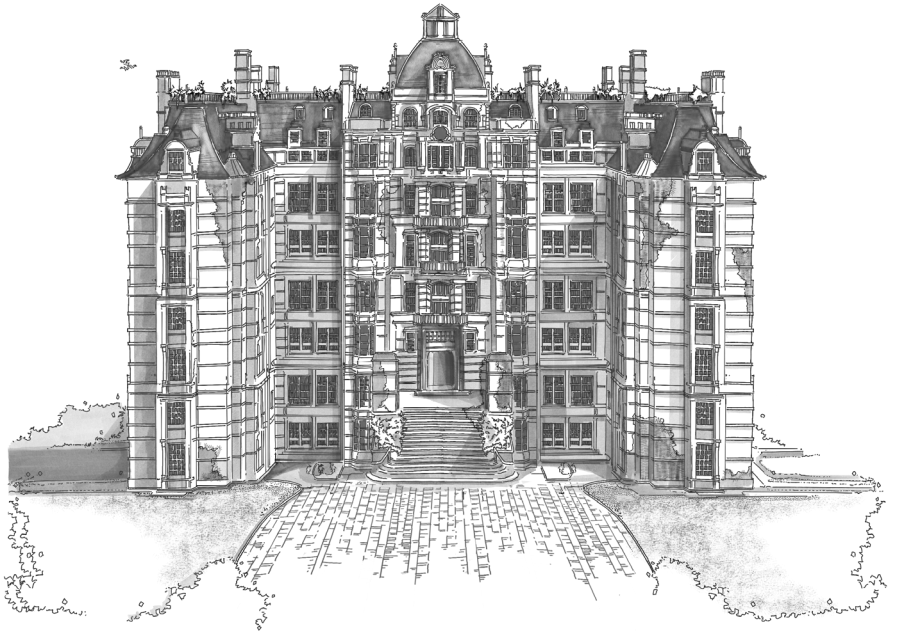
Content warning: this story engages with some dark topics, including but not limited to torture, manipulation, dysphoria, self-injury, nonconsensual surgery, and kidnapping. The characters are carrying a lot of baggage, and the exploration of the premise might be triggering for trans readers.



Royal College of Saint Almsworth
Houses of Residence: Dorley Hall

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Welcome To Dorley Hall

16 OCTOBER 2012 — TUESDAY

"I'm telling you, I'm worried about your brother."

"He's fine! It's just teenager stuff. That's what Dad says."

"*We're* teenagers, and we're not like that."

"Older teenager stuff, then. Something happens in your brain when you turn eighteen that turns you into a massive prick. It's the hormones. They go into overdrive."

"Russ, I'm serious. He didn't come to my birthday this year—fine—and he *barely* had one of his own—okay—but now he won't even reply to my texts!"

"Stef, seriously, it's nothing. He's at uni now; I bet he's decided it's uncool to keep texting his little brother's best friend. It also probably is, dude."

"If you talk to Mark, can you please just tell him to text me back?"

"Fine, if it'll make you feel better, but I've barely talked to him in ages. *You've* talked to him more than I have this year."

"*Barely.* Russell—"

"*Stefan!* It's fine. He's fine. He's probably just depressed about his acne. Now shut up; teacher's coming."

Stefan obliges and stops glaring at Russell. He glares at his World History textbook instead, in the unlikely event that he can intimidate it into making sense. Next year he can finally drop this stupid subject and never look back, but for now he really needs to commit whatever a *castellan* is to memory, and decide from the evidence supplied whether they were in servitude to the counts or ruled over them with an iron fist. Assuming castellans even *had* fists. Or iron. They could have been giant cats for all Stefan knows.

He's too distracted. Too worried about Mark.

It's not normal to be close with your best friend's older brother, especially when he's four years older than you. But not only do the

Rileys and the Vogels live on the same road, very nearly opposite each other—with the cardboard telescope from Stefan's subscription to Junior Science Magazine (plastic lenses free with first issue!) you can watch TV in the Vogels' house from Stefan's bedroom window—but Stefan very nearly shares a birthday with Russell's older brother.

Every year on September 2nd, Russell, Mark and their dad trek over the road to Stefan's house to celebrate his birthday, and every year on September 3rd, Stefan, his mum, his dad and his baby sister return the favour, visiting Russell and Mark's extended family for fun, festivities, and rather more expensive cake and presents than Stefan's parents can afford.

But this year, on Stefan's fourteenth birthday and Mark's eighteenth, it didn't happen, and no-one saw it coming. Yes, Mark's had a hard year, though no-one seems to know exactly why—Stefan's asked and Mark's refused to answer—but their shared birthday has always been important to Stefan and, as far as he knows, to Mark, too.

Stefan told himself that Mark was just busy, that he'd have a chance to catch up at Mark's birthday the next day. And then the next day came, and Mark made only the most cursory appearance at his own party. He talked to no-one but his dad, sliced off perhaps the smallest piece of cake physically possible, and disappeared back upstairs to his room, there to hide behind his blackout curtains with his computer and his plate of death-by-chocolate with sprinkles.

Stefan's thought about it every day since. Mark's been not just a science tutor to him, but also the older brother he never had—Stefan's sister is eleven years younger than him and just awful at physics. Mark's absences, more and more frequent this year, have been crushing. Mark's birthday was Stefan's last chance to see him before he left for university, and he didn't even look him in the eye.

8 NOVEMBER 2012 — THURSDAY

Russell's been out of school all week and no-one will tell Stefan why. He's texted, he's called, he's asked the head of year and the lunch lady; he's even stopped by the house and banged on the door for what seemed like hours.

Nothing.

So when his phone starts ringing and Russ's name comes up, Stefan doesn't care that it's almost midnight, that he has school tomorrow, and

that he's royally pissed off with Russ for ignoring him. He picks it up before the third ring.

"Russ? Is that you?"

"Stef. I'm at your door. Can you come let me in? I don't want to ring the bell and wake your parents."

"Sure, Russ, sure. I'll be down in a second."

Normally, Stefan would argue: he's not allowed visitors this late. But Russell sounded so drained, so worn-out that he wants to see him in person just to make sure he's not deathly ill. He throws on his dressing gown and some winter socks and takes the stairs down three at a time. He practically drags Russell into the living room and deposits him on the good sofa, the one that still has a nice bounce to it.

"Russ," he says, "you look terrible."

"It's Mark," Russell says. "He's missing."

It takes a while and the intervention both of Stefan's parents and of two mugs of hot chocolate each, but Russell eventually gives them the whole story.

Mark hadn't originally intended to live on campus. The Royal College of Saint Almsworth isn't far out of town, and for a fraction of the money required to rent a dorm room, Mark could have bought a crappy car and commuted. But Mark wanted a fresh start—new friends. Russ doesn't know what happened with Mark's old friends, but they stopped visiting or texting a long time ago.

Mark went off to live in dorms and reportedly had an uneventful first month at Saints. But it wasn't long before his professors started to find him "disruptive" and "disrespectful"; he was asked to leave a lecture for the first time about a week before his disappearance, and by Friday had stopped even showing up.

Then on Saturday, he didn't return home to his dorm.

According to the police, Mark entered Legend—popularly considered the worst nightclub in Almsworth; also the cheapest—at 19.24 on Saturday, November 3rd, and left at 01.44 after collecting his coat. The attendant was the last person to see him.

"We've been waiting to hear something since Tuesday, when they told us he was missing. But they have no leads, no evidence, not even a fucking suicide note! Sorry, Mrs Riley."

"That's okay, dear."

"A suicide note?" Stefan says. "You think he might have killed himself?"

Russell shrugs. "That's what Dad thinks. I mean, he won't say it, but that's what he thinks. I mean, it makes sense, right? He's not been the same since Mum died, and then his friends stopped talking to him. Then he moves out to the dorms and he's *still* lonely, so he gives up. On everything." Cupping his second cooling hot chocolate in his hands, Russell finishes, "I just wish he'd talked to me first. I would've told him not to be so bloody stupid. And now he's probably dead."

It shouldn't make sense. Stefan should be arguing for him, telling Russell there has to be another explanation, that this is all just a huge misunderstanding. But he can't. Because Russell's right.

"Jesus Christ," he whispers to himself.

"Stefan Riley," his mum says, "you do *not* have the same leeway as Russell. You do *not* take the Lord's name in vain in this house."

"Sorry."

19 JANUARY 2012 — SUNDAY

Stefan's mum never remembers to buy the stuffing.

They've been eating on the cheap ever since Dad was downsized and Mum was forced to cut her hours or join him on the dole, and while as a family they've become expert at providing acceptable meals on a budget, every so often Mum gets nostalgic for a real Sunday lunch, and saves up until they can afford a proper roast chicken with all the trimmings.

Plus, this one's going to be a celebration: Dad might be going back to work!

But she always forgets the sage and onion stuffing mix. Just Stefan's luck that he happened to be hanging around the house with nothing to do; the perfect candidate for the half-hour walk to the big Tesco near the university.

He's waiting in line for the self-checkout machines, exact change in one hand and box of stuffing mix in the other, when he sees her.

Stefan doesn't normally talk to strangers. It's not that he's shy, necessarily, but he's not the biggest fan of being around people. He fidgets under inspection, and when people look at him for too long it makes him feel hot and uncomfortable. Pretty girls especially.

But this girl, one ahead of him in the queue and just now stepping up to a checkout, seems to be so anxious she's having difficulty operating the machine. The checkout next to her opens up and Stefan nips in and watches her scan her food with shaking hands, sometimes needing two or three tries to get things to register.

Poor girl. He wonders what she's so upset about.

He puts his stuffing through and is about to leave when she drops her debit card. When he scoops it up for her and holds it out, she looks at him like she's seen a ghost.

"Um," he says, still holding it out.

"Oh!" she says, coming to her senses. "Thank you."

God, but she's pretty. Bright blue eyes, a river of blonde hair that frames her face and looks like she put a lot of work into it, and a cute little nose that—

Stefan frowns. There's something familiar about her. Something he can't quite put his finger on.

The woman—Melissa Haverford, assuming it's her debit card in his hand—shakes herself, takes the card from him, smiles her thanks, and marches out of the store. She wobbles a little as she rounds the corner to the exit, as if she's not quite used to the modest heels on her boots.

Stefan watches her go, puzzling over the encounter. It takes him a moment to realise she left her shopping behind. He mutters a word he's not allowed to say in the presence of his mother, drops his box of stuffing into her plastic bag, slings the whole thing under one arm, and leaves Tesco at a jog.

She's not far down the road.

"Hey!" he yells, wincing at how loud and deep his voice is. "You forgot your shopping!"

She doesn't look around, starts walking even faster. Which turns out to be a mistake: the pavements are still slippery and the inevitable doesn't take long to happen. She goes down onto her butt; it looks like a pretty painful fall, but at least it gives Stefan the chance to catch up with her and return her groceries.

"Hi," he says, looking down at her. She looks every which way but back at him.

"Thanks," she mutters, and Stefan frowns. Even her voice is giving him déjà vu! She's said not three words, but something about her alto tone nags at him. Her face, her mannerisms…

He finally places it: she's just like Russell's mum! Her face and her voice are still etched into Stefan's memory. It's been a good few years since she died, but she always had a kind smile and a coke for him when he went over to see Russ and Mark. Suddenly, Stefan knows exactly why everything about this girl seems so familiar. He offers her a hand up, and as she takes it, he says, "Do you know Mark Vogel?"

"W— what?" she says, her face now pale enough that the blush on her cheeks looks almost comical.

"You look like him," Stefan says. "I thought you might be a cousin or something. Melissa, right?" She nods dumbly. "*Do* you know Mark?"

"Oh, um, I used to," she stammers. Her voice cracks a little, and Stefan scolds himself. She probably struggled with Mark's death the same as he did, and clearly didn't expect her Sunday morning grocery shopping to be interrupted by some pipsqueak fifteen-year-old unearthing buried grief.

"Shit," he says. "Sorry. If it's upsetting to think about him, I mean. I shouldn't have…Sorry…" He trails off, cheeks burning.

She doesn't look scared anymore; she's smiling, and it's horribly, wonderfully familiar, just like everything else about her. It's the same indulgent, patient smile Mark would turn on him when they went through Stefan's homework together, and Stefan made an obvious error.

"It's okay," she says. "He's been gone for a while now."

"Yeah. I miss him."

The girl, Melissa, puts a gentle arm on Stefan's shoulder, takes her shopping out of his hand. Gives him back the stuffing. Favours him with another smile. Broader; happy. Nostalgia grips him and holds him in place.

"I'm sure he'd miss you too, Stef," she says, and squeezes his shoulder.

She's halfway up the road and boarding the bus back to the university before Stefan realises he never told her his name. Confused, he watches the bus pull away, clutching his box of sage and onion stuffing, his shoulder still warm where she touched him.

14 SEPTEMBER 2015 — MONDAY

Stefan sits alone for his first class in AS English Language. Around him, his new classmates—some of whom he knows, most of whom he doesn't—settle into their chairs, chatting, laughing. He doesn't mind being alone; he needs to concentrate. His GCSEs were only average, so the next two years need to go well if he's to get into the Royal College of Saint Almsworth and qualify for one of their small number of assistance grants.

Saints has a fantastic and highly sought-after Linguistics programme, and Stefan curated his choice of subjects at AS-level

to give himself the best chance possible: English Language, English Literature, German and Psychology. He doesn't have a second-choice university; it's Saints or it's nowhere.

He saw Melissa Haverford only once more, a year ago, outside his then-new part-time job at the Tesco. She didn't see him, or pretended not to, and climbed into a waiting car less than a minute after he spotted her. She looked different: more adult, more poised.

Stefan has a theory about that.

On his sixteenth birthday, his parents told him he wouldn't need a part-time job. Dad was working full time again and Mum had found a job she could do on a laptop from the front room, so she could keep Petra in her sight at all times. Enough money for the family *and* for an allowance! But he took a job anyway, because working at the big Tesco gave him an excuse to wander over to the Saints campus on his lunch break or on his way home, the better to look for Melissa, or Mark, or clues.

Mark isn't the only boy to have vanished. Stefan's painstaking research indicates that, going back at least two decades, between two and six boys have vanished almost every year while attending the Royal College. Like Mark, they rarely disappear on campus. Some go out into town and never come home; some leave campus at the end of term and never get off trains they were seen boarding; some leave suicide notes and vanish into the night. Unruly boys, most of them, with bad reputations around campus. A woman in the admin office implied, when Stefan pretended to be a reporter following up on the disappearances, that the school was better off without them!

Stefan's not convinced the school *is* without them, though. It wasn't hard to get pictures of most of the vanished boys, and after a few nights spent memorising their faces, he was pretty sure he'd recognise them even if they… looked a bit different.

So far, he's seen five. Six, if you include Mark—or Melissa. Five other girls, all of them so startlingly exact a match to their missing counterparts that they're either unusually similar-looking siblings, or could they *be* the missing boys?

Compared to the photos, some of them have definitely had some work done—a brow-reshape here, a tracheal shave there, in addition to a catch-up girl puberty—but if Stefan was given to gambling, he'd stake all his savings on them being the same people.

He's convinced *someone* at Saints is helping closeted trans women start new lives. And comprehensively, too: Stefan's looked it up, and the

facial surgery he thinks some of the girls have had runs to thousands of pounds. And then there's the faked disappearances and the new identities they'd need. Maybe whoever is doing this prioritises girls escaping unsupportive families? It makes sense, thinking about Melissa: her dad's always been rough around the edges, and after his wife's death he became…well, Russ has always been reluctant to talk about it. His dad got moody, is all he'll say.

He's still pondering the question when he gets home. It preys on his mind as he collates his notes from the day's classes, as he showers, and as he sits up in bed, reading on his phone, too wired to sleep.

It lines up. Even the rumours of the boys being "unruly" prior to their disappearances; in that last year here on Rectory Street wasn't Melissa, when she was still Mark, so depressed as to be barely functional? Easy to imagine trans girls in similar situations expressing their frustration outwardly instead.

As for who is helping them, he doesn't have any names, but he has an address: all the girls live at Dorley Hall, an older dormitory on the edge of campus. It's reserved for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, and if anyone qualifies as disadvantaged, it's trans girls so afraid of their families that they feel they have to pretend to *die* before they can transition.

Stefan closes the book on his phone—he wasn't reading it, anyway; he'll have to go back a couple of dozen pages to pick up from where his mind started to wander—and opens the camera app. He switches it to selfie mode and examines himself on the screen.

He *needs* to get into Saints. He needs to find whoever is doing this, whoever is helping these women, because his parents, well, they're nice enough, but they've always been religious and rather strict about it.

In the camera, he runs a finger over his pronounced brow, his masculine jawline, his high hairline, and sighs.

If there's one thing Stefan's sure of, it's that he's *not* a boy.

He sure looks like one, though.

12 OCTOBER 2019 — SATURDAY

He hates how fucking cold his room is. It's costing him almost £600 a month and the view out of his tiny window is mostly of an advertising hoarding but the worst thing is undoubtedly the way he has to do his assignments under the duvet if he doesn't want his typing fingers to seize

up. It's not even that cold out! It's just that the shape of the building and the curve of the street together contrive to funnel wind right through the tiny window into his room, his bed, and his bones. He'd run his little oil heater all the time if he could afford it, but he can't.

He can't afford anything much anymore.

Two whole years at Saints, waiting fruitlessly to be found. Is he wrong? Was he imagining it all? Whatever mechanism the Dorley people use to identify closeted trans women clearly hasn't worked on him. And he's looked! He's looked everywhere. He spent all his spare hours searching, scouring, hoping, convinced there was some secret he hadn't found, some code word he hadn't learned, some sympathetic ear he hadn't caught the attention of. He even went to Dorley Hall and asked to see Melissa or to talk to someone who knows her, pretending to be on some innocent errand, but they turned him away. He wasted enough time on his search that he almost failed his second year and had to retake two exams over the summer, all the while staying in an overpriced, undermaintained house-share with people he barely knows. And he can't even go back and live with his family to save the money, because Dad got an amazing opportunity in London last year, and now his childhood home belongs to someone else.

It's not like he had much of a home to return to even before they moved away. His few acquaintances have all moved on, and Russ, the only one who hasn't, doesn't speak to him anymore. Shouldn't have told him he thought Mark was still alive. "People die, Stefan. Move on, Stefan. Get over it, Stefan. Leave well alone, Stefan! Shut the fuck up or piss the fuck off!"

His twenty-first was the most depressing birthday of his life. No Melissa or Mark or whoever; nobody at all. One of the girls at work gave him a cupcake and he ate it alone.

Worse: he had thought he looked unrecoverably boyish at sixteen, but it turned out puberty had a few more tricks left up its sleeve, and it deployed them at regular intervals. It's not that he's unattractive—before his third year at Saints, when he started wearing his bad mood on his face and not just under his skin, girls hit on him relatively regularly—but he's so… male. He knows that's not a very helpful way of thinking about it, but if what he sees glaring back at him from every mirror, window and piece of cutlery he encounters is at all accurate, then even the world's most accomplished plastic surgeon would have their work cut out. Probably a Nobel-worthy feat, carving an attractive, feminine face from his caveman mug.

"Not helpful," he tells himself again, trying to divert his thoughts from the track that usually ends in alcohol, Netflix and a perplexing inability to cry, even though sometimes it feels like he'll die if he doesn't. "Not fucking helpful."

He's given up. Officially. But it's harder than he expected.

It'd be easier if he could be certain. He's read about dysphoria, devoured every description of it he could find before he had to step away from the websites he found them on, lest he drink even more. These sites are full of people who are moving on and living their lives while he hides in a cold, drafty room and dreams of a friend who probably hasn't thought of him for years. He envies their certainty.

Although he's read about dysphoria, and while sometimes he thinks he can almost feel it, most of the time he just feels numb. And that's not something he can work with. Yes, sure, he's still pretty certain he's not *really* a boy—say it, Stefan: you're twenty-one now; it's not *boy* you're failing at, it's *man*—but he can't say, after all these years, that he's a girl. Without that conviction, that rock on which to rebuild his life, he's stuck. And all the time he's obsessing over what he can't have, he's missing out on what he can.

Would he be *happier* as a girl? Almost definitely. But he's had to admit that it's a dream, and he has to live in reality. Whatever happens in the shadows at Saints to give trans girls a new start has passed him by, found him unworthy, or never existed in the first place, and there's nothing he can do about it. It's time to make the best of what he has, and what he has is a masculine body and no money.

He's told no-one of his theory. Even if they—whoever they are—can't or won't help him, he wants them to keep helping others, and secrecy is obviously an important part of that. He thinks of Melissa in that Tesco sometimes—beautiful; scared—and for her, and everyone like her, he'll keep the secret.

Plus, if he told anyone, they'd think he was fucking crazy.

Fuck it. Stefan's housemates invited him out tonight and, as part of his deal with himself to get the hell over it, he's going to go. Surprise them all: the hermit gets drunk with other people for a change.

The party is on campus, in one of the new luxury dorms out where the old Psychology building used to be. The place was a building site for years, one he walked past almost every day during his first year at Saints. As he looks around, he keeps seeing things he half-recognises, altered, recontextualised.

Everything changes but him.

This was a bad idea.

But then someone from last year's Psycholinguistics class spots him, waves him over, offers him something to smoke, and he re-evaluates his plans to leave. Maybe he'll stay awhile, get high, and reconnect with people. If he's going to commit to his new goal, to just be a guy, or some approximation of one, then step one should be to stop being so fucking miserable all the time. Hang out with friends. Remember what it's like to be a person.

Forget his obsession with something that probably was never real in the first place.

He meets Christine an hour or so later. Auburn-haired and *seriously* pretty, she's sitting cross-legged on a snooker table, drinking from a bottle, laughing with another girl. A mutual acquaintance makes the introduction and after checking with her friend, she pats an empty spot of green baize, inviting him up. Feeling a little light-headed, he hops up on the table. He almost loses his balance finding a way to arrange his limbs without making potentially unwanted contact with the girl. A pointless exercise, since she giggles at him and stretches her legs out onto his lap.

No, she's not drunk, she tells him piously; she's *high,* and she's happy to share. They swap trivia about themselves as they do so, and he's pleased to find she's studying Linguistics, too. Planning to specialise in speech and language therapy. He's impressed, because she's much earlier in her degree than he is, and he doesn't have any plans at all. She encourages him to look into speech therapy. Very rewarding, she says. There's no money in it, but if it's money you want, piss off to the Business School and become a heartless bastard.

He laughs.

She hops off the snooker table and beckons him to follow, snatching a half-bottle of something alcoholic as she leaves the room. The building's unfinished, and dangerously exciting to explore together. They poke drunken heads into rooms marked as construction sites, stagger down flights of stairs that lead to doors that won't open. Eventually end up on the roof.

There's something calming about a clear, starry sky. The Royal College is far enough out from Almsworth proper that the light pollution from the town mostly doesn't reach it, and as he looks up into the infinite he feels, for the first time in a long, long time, almost content.

Maybe he can't be a girl. Maybe he shouldn't be. But maybe he doesn't have to be a guy, either. A thought for another day. What he

can do is make friends, meet nice girls, and drink and smoke with them under the stars.

He tells her about his family, who still text all the time. His little sister's ten now, and learning to play the trombone; both existentially terrifying concepts. She laughs and, with only a little hesitation, kisses him on the temple. She's glad she took a chance on a good-looking guy tonight, she says. It's just a shame she has a lot of work on, or they could stay up all night.

He offers to walk her home, but she declines with a smile. She's not turning him down; she thinks she'd like to see him again. It's just that she lives on campus, and it's a very short walk. Whereabouts? Dorley Hall.

"Oh, hey," he says, warm from the alcohol and loquacious from the weed, "I know a funny thing about Dorley Hall…"

13 OCTOBER 2019 — SUNDAY

The bright overhead lights aren't the only reason he's got a pounding headache when he wakes up—that he imbibed basically everything Christine handed him last night is probably a major contributor—but they aren't fucking helping. Where is he, anyway?

He opens his eyes a crack, but can't see anything useful until he forces himself to sit up and angle his head away from the lights above. His fingers close around a thin, cold bedframe and through the glare and the headache he realises his bed for the night was a small, hard and completely unfamiliar cot.

Did Christine take him to her place? He looks around, but she's nowhere in sight. The room itself isn't much to look at: bare concrete walls on three sides, and a clear glass wall and door on the fourth. It looks like it leads into an equally bare, though less brightly lit, concrete-walled corridor, and when he stands up, staggers over to the door and leans on the handle, it doesn't move.

The floor is concrete as well, and cold against his feet.

Wait. Why are his feet cold?

He looks down: his shoes are gone. As are his socks and all his clothes except his underwear, replaced by a green smock that goes down to just above his knees and just behind his wrists.

He tries all the walls, the door again, the joins where glass meets concrete. He pulls the tiny mattress off the cot; he pulls the cot away from the wall. Nothing. Grudgingly he remakes the bed, sits heavily

on it and cradles his headache in his hands, waiting for whatever is happening to happen. Perhaps it can bring him a painkiller when it does.

A few minutes later, the shriek of an intercom system obliterates the eerie silence, and a voice he doesn't recognise addresses him over a speaker he can't see.

"What do you know, Stefan Riley?"