

The Cave

Mary slept fitfully. She tossed and turned without ever properly waking up, and dreams of anxiety came and went as the moon inched its way reluctantly across the cloudless sky. For the first time in many a night she was woken by neither the cries of her hungry young son, nor the late arrival of her workaholic husband.

The previous day had been a long and tiring one. Alfie had been grumpy, and had refused his milk all afternoon. Only by late evening had he finally given up and gone to sleep. The heating had broken down in the morning and the plumber hadn't answered his phone. On top of that, Rob's Garage had contacted her after lunch to explain that the repairs to the car were going to take much longer than expected; apparently the drive shaft was corroded and the gear box had to be replaced. Where the money was going to come from she didn't know. She had tried to phone Jake at the office for support but had just got through to his voice mail every time. Her best friend Belinda, to whom she would normally turn for help, was on holiday and her elder sister Kate was away in Kent on business.

As she awoke, Mary felt her pillow dig sharply into her neck and she moved her head to one side to relieve the pain. A sudden shallow scratch appeared on her left cheek and she sat up with a cry of surprise. Raising her hand to her face, she dislodged the culprit - a small grain of sand - which fell silently and sulkily to disappear into the gloom by her hips.

Her bed felt hard – like stone. She put a hand down onto the mattress to discover that her favourite soft cotton sheets were unexpectedly damp and strangely unyielding under her exploring fingers. A fraction of a second later she was wide awake, mind racing, as she realised that she was not in her bed - nor even in her bedroom! Her heart drummed a frightened rhythm on her ribs and the pupils of her lovely eyes widened in a desperate quest to gather light for her brain. Mary's right amygdala screamed at her to take action, but what action? She scrambled to her feet and hit her head hard on a rocky ceiling. Tears appeared in her eyes but she blinked them angrily away and searched in the darkness for a landmark.

Over there! A lighter patch of dark – no bigger than a grape! With her left hand outstretched, and her right hand shielding her bruised head, she bent over at the waist, crouched as much as comfort would allow, and carefully made her way towards the light.

To keep her fear at bay, she focused her thoughts on other things: the price of children's clothes; the baby aardvark at the zoo – recalling that "It feeds on ants and termites." She remembered the local newspaper report of the man who had apparently gone missing "without trace" from his seaside holiday home last week and that her husband was particularly fond of cheesecake.

The floor was highly uneven, but largely flat and free from obstructions, and Mary made steady progress towards her goal, collecting only minor bumps and scratches on her elbows and shins. Soon, the light had become the size of a football, and then large enough for her to see more clearly and allow her speed to increase. She soon reached the entrance of the cave.

Stopping suddenly with a sharp intake of breath, Mary looked down in disbelief. Below the delicately painted toenails of her besmirched and grimy feet stretched a sheer limestone cliff face. At its base, perhaps one hundred metres below, snaked a silent silvery stream, shimmering in the sunlight.

A large, sharp-beaked bird sat on a long moss-covered ledge to the left of the cave entrance. There was no escape that way; the ledge petered out after a few metres and in any case, it was barely wider than her foot. To the right, a few small stunted bushes clung tenaciously to the rock face, their gnarled roots taking advantage of a few deep cracks from which dark stains – evidence of water – emerged to tarnish the cliff face beneath.

Twisting her shoulders and poking her head out into the nothingness, she swivelled her eyes skywards and saw that she was standing about ten metres below what looked like the top of the cliff. She couldn't be sure, but she thought that she could see some thin trees and yellow-flowered gorse bushes just above a line where hard grey gave way to soft green. Feeling suddenly dizzy, Mary withdrew her head into the comparative safety of the cave and sat down to think.

Her frontal lobe arrived at the obvious answer at the same time as the alarm on her mobile phone informed her that it was time to feed Tiger, the neighbour's cat. Peter was away in Cyprus and she had volunteered to look after his beloved pet until he returned. Heaven knows why it was called Tiger – it was jet black with green eyes and it was as scared as an elderly lady in a shark tank.

Mary silenced the inappropriately jolly and annoyingly persistent tune, and noticed at the same time that there was no signal – strange, since she was so high up. She pointed the screen towards the sky, but there was still nothing. With a shrug, she got up, adopted her crouching stance, and began her journey back into the cave.

After some minutes, she looked behind her and saw that the light at the entrance had dwindled to the size of a peanut. Using the torch on her phone to speed her progress and protect her aching body from the harsh rock, she continued down the ever-narrowing tunnel. Over the last few minutes, her feelings of optimism had been gradually fading as the space around her diminished - and they were soon to evaporate completely.

After a few more steps, Mary came across the thing that she had not even dared to contemplate. The tunnel ended abruptly. She had reached the back of the cave! The walls, roof and sides of her subterranean prison joined together in a stony embrace and her way was completely blocked. She frantically waved her torch around in the darkness and checked three times in every direction, but there was no alternative. Her hopes were dashed; she had no alternative but to go back.

Surely this was impossible. How had she got here? What was going on? Her brain ached as she fought back the panic. “Think Mary, think!” Her neurons fired like an artillery barrage. Fight, flight or freeze!? None of them were an option and she knew it. She forced herself to remain calm, turned around and began reciting prime numbers to help her remain in control. She began to retrace her steps.

When she was at last reunited with the daylight, she once more poked her head out into the abyss and reassessed her limited options. Far below, she thought she could make out a yellow excavator approaching a little bridge across the river, but it was too far away to help her. Taking a deep breath, she turned her back to the sun, slid her left foot out of the cave and placed it into a small hole.

She began to climb.