

# DARKNESS RETREAT

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Transcription of audio

## Bed

It's been too long, I miss talking to you. I was thinking the other day about a phone conversation we had when I was sitting on the top deck of a bus at the depot in Canada Water. It must have been the winter because it was early but already dark, the windows of the bus were steamed up and the harsh light made reflections appear in the windows. We spoke so often, picking up and dropping conversations. I was telling you that I'd found out about this thing called a Darkness Retreat, a friend at work had brought it up. I told you that I'd made enquiries with a retreat I'd found on the internet in Germany, 60 hours in the dark for hundreds of Euros. We laughed a lot and you said you'd come with me but I think you'd just started a new job and so in the end I went on my own.

The Ashram was so weird, a chalet set in the middle of rolling hills. The darkness retreat rooms were along a single corridor, to get into it you had to go through a door and several heavy curtains which dropped down behind me as I walked along, then my hand was guided on to a rail and I felt my way down to the room that I would stay in. I was shown into the room, bright with daylight, the windows were open and I was

struck by the ordinariness of the place, it was just a kind of hostel room; clean, faded, mismatching linen, a sofa and a small bathroom. Everything in the room was ordinary at first glance until I noticed the gaffer tape - oh my god, it was everywhere. You would have laughed so much, it was like a crime scene. The windows, the gap under the door, even the keyhole was sealed up. It looked especially odd against the backdrop of the rest of the place, crystals and flags everywhere, you can imagine.

## **Petrified wall hanging**

When you were really ill I went up to Leeds. I remember sitting in a room in a Holiday Inn by a flyover wondering why the hell I had left you, why did I go.? It was only two days away but two precious days away from you. News was flying in so fast at that point. Anyway, I went but I was in such a daze the whole time, I'd gone up to see Mother Shipton's Cave, I was trying to write about it and the trip had been planned for a while. The night before I was sitting in the hotel looking at the Mother Shipton Estate website, all swirling mystical font.

The room was so pristine, those sheets that fit so tightly and heavily over your body.

You know she predicted the internet? Mother Shipton.

Actually, when we got there the whole place was pretty unassuming. The strangest thing about it was the bric a brac hanging from the dropping well, strung up teddy bears, kettles like a jumble sale. All gradually turning to stone in the petrifying waters. Drip by drip. So macabre, like when you see a stuffed toy stuck to the front of a lorry. For all the creepiness, the idea of turning to stone, fixing, sounded so appealing. I

wished I could have slowed everything down, just turned you to stone for a few days whilst we caught up, stopped the rapid progression.

When I think about Mother Shipton now, I think about you. I think about what a vision is or a prophecy. I imagine her staring into ancient rocks full of the past in order to see the future. How strange it is to know the when the last time you are going to see someone is before it happens,

## **Sink**

They suggested that I begin my time in the dark just before bedtime, that way I would sleep and then wake up into the darkness. The guides suggested that I count my way around the room, familiarise myself with the layout, how many steps to the bathroom? To the door? Count steps so that I could get out into the darkened corridor to collect water and tea. There was an excruciatingly sincere ceremony to mark the beginning of the 60 hours, and I was given the information that if I needed any support in the darkness there was a phone in the corridor on which I could reach the team and talk. For 90 Euros an hour. I was so tired by the journey I just wanted to go to sleep. I'm glad you weren't there, I think we would have laughed too much.

In spite of my counting I found the room so different in the dark. I tried to reorientate myself, feeling around. I ran my hand over an old empty wall plug and imagined a universe of stars opening up on the other side. Spaces felt stretched in the dark, there was a slight incline where there was none in the light. The sink felt huge and

round, cold inside and smooth, I tried to wash my face but the soapy water felt deep and thick. Everything seemed amplified in the dark. When the lights came back on again I was certain the patterns on the sheets had been bolder, the curtains longer, more dramatic. It seemed so completely ordinary in the light.

## **Curtain**

Waking up in the dark was bizarre. I lost track of how many times I drifted in and out of sleep, I had no idea of the time. I tried to count a minute to see what it felt like. But strangest of all was the blurring of thoughts from dreams into wakefulness. I seemed to completely lose the ability to make a distinction between the two. I could hardly tell if my eyes were open or not.

They did warn me I might find myself crying and before I knew it my face was soaking wet, streaming with tears. I saw pools of water, miles of road, train track. I traveled miles and miles from my lying there in that bed. The other thing I was warned about were the blue flashes, I might see these in front of my eyes, they said. Muscles contracting, something about residual light, nothing to worry about. Blue flashes left behind from blue screens.

To be honest I really wasn't expecting to see much in the dark, I think I went in there with a fairly cynical mindset but there in the middle of all of the blurry dreams and tears, there was something. An image playing right in front of me, like a film being

projected on a screen. I was driving at night, headlamps on the tarmac and from the dark on the right hand side they just kept coming, piling up and up until I couldn't drive over them anymore. Snakes piling up on a road in front of me.

You know what happened? The day after I left the dark I walked down to the nearest town, it was so bright and I was walking in the grass on the edge of a road. I saw three dead snakes squashed into the tarmac. Three.

## **Circular window**

After you were gone I used to take long walks on the beach, up and down right up along the tide line. I remember seeing your name written in chalk on the wall, clear as day. A-O-I-F-E, there you were as if I'd conjured you up, there and then gone, washed away into the water. One clear day, there seemed to be a huge amount of this delicate white seaweed washing up on the shore. I scooped some out of the water near to the place we swam together. I don't know what it's called, it looks like pictures of bleached coral I've seen but more delicate and finely structured. It reminds me of the thin skin on your pale beautiful arm hanging down from the bed in the room. Your last room. Surrounded by flowers, so many flowers and with a crystal salt lamp next to your bed that I think the nurses bought in. There were cables and wires and tubes hooked up all around you but the image of those melts away and I just remember you lying there asleep with the sun on your face. That was just a few days before you left.