

Nick Aaron

Blind Angel of Wrath

The Daisy Hayes trilogy II

ANOTHER IMPRINT PUBLISHERS

1967 in Swinging London. The Beatles had just released *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. At Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park the hippies staged sit-ins to legalise marijuana. And even though she was blind since birth, it did not escape Daisy Hayes' attention that "The times they are a-changin'..."

But just as she reached middle-age and the height of her powers as an artist, Daisy was visited by a ghost from her past. An accomplice in an old story of revenge appeared at the opening of her new sculpture exhibition and made demands she could not ignore.

The man who challenged her was a desperate father, who told Daisy that his fifteen-year-old daughter—a hippie girl—had disappeared without a trace a year earlier. The police was powerless, or indifferent, or both. "You must help me to find her, Daisy Hayes. And you know why I'm asking *you*? It's because I happen to know that you're a real *killer*..."

"Nick Aaron has been known to write a fast-paced tale or two. But here fast-paced is not 'le mot juste'. This thriller is designed like a roller coaster, and the author will take you for a hair-raising ride."

The Weekly Banner

This is the second volume of *The Daisy Hayes Trilogy*:

- I D for Daisy
- II Blind Angel of Wrath
- III Daisy and Bernard

*And I heard a great voice out of the temple
saying to the seven angels, Go your ways, and pour
out the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth.*

Revelation 16:1

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I Here and now

This is every father's worst nightmare—and it should be every daughter's, too!

You're a man... well, maybe you're only married to one, or you're his daughter.

But let us say that you're a man like me and that you know all you need to about the dark recesses of the male psyche. Start with the urge we have to spread our genes, the urge to conquer, to score, to accumulate copulations, that is deeply imprinted into us by our biology and is barely kept in check by the constraints of society... Then add the fundamental tendency we have to dehumanize the object of so much lust: we're perfectly capable of screwing a plastic doll with only air inside! We don't find it contradictory to constantly worship her whom we consistently disregard... Finally, let us not even talk about our tendency to derive pleasure from inflicting pain, at least in our most secret fantasies. We pretend to believe that such tendencies are extremely rare, but we only need to take a good look deep inside our own sick minds to conclude that they must—unfortunately—be only too common.

You have a daughter—or more than one. Lively, smart and pretty. The apple of your eye: what an angel! She has just turned fifteen or sixteen, with all the right curves in the right places, and they are really starting to show... She is no longer a little girl, not yet a woman, but almost. And she

has become a real pain in the backside, lately. Constantly criticising, mocking your opinions, ignoring your advice: little Miss Obnoxious! But you're an understanding father. You have also been young: you've been there yourself, you don't take it personally. She has to go out and explore the world, of course: fall in love with some uncouth youth. Meanwhile, you're always a bit uneasy in your mind: how green she still is, how naïve, and how reckless. If only she would heed your warnings; if only she wouldn't dismiss all your concerns...

Then one day it happens. You know straight away that something is terribly wrong. Even though she has been difficult sometimes, your darling daughter would never disappear like that without saying a word. But that is exactly what has happened. She just didn't show up when you were expecting her, and you have no idea where she might be. So you and your wife start phoning around frantically: to her school, her friends' houses, the new boyfriend's place, the library and any other place where she could have gone...

After a couple of hours, of course, you go to the police. You tell them that your daughter has gone missing. But they are infuriatingly blasé, and very bad at hiding it. They've seen it all before. They ask, "When was it exactly that your daughter should have turned up?"

"Two hours ago!"

"Well, please come back when it's been twenty-four hours... But only if by then she hasn't made an appearance of her own accord, of course."

"Yes, but wait a minute! You do realise that time is of the essence in a case like this... I mean, shouldn't we start looking for her when the trail is still fresh? What if the rapist just strangles her after having had his way with her? I've brought some of her clothes with me—unwashed, of course. Don't you have dogs that are trained specially to

follow the scent of missing people?”

“No, sir, you are mistaken, we don’t have such dogs... Please just come back tomorrow.”

The next day, after spending twenty-four hours biting your nails and going crazy with worry, there is still no sign of your precious little girl. But you have had ample time to imagine the worst in gory detail. You rush back to the police station and find that you are now back to square one. This time they do agree to take down the particulars of the case, but maddeningly, there is still no question of immediate action.

“No sir, we are putting your daughter’s name down on the list of missing persons... What more can we do? If you’ll just fill in your name and the date and add your signature... here. Today is the fifteenth of May 1966...”

“And how many names are there on this list of yours?”

“Well, let me see... thirty-two.”

“And that’s for the whole metropolitan area?”

“Nope. Just for this police station. You know, it’s because of this whole ‘hippie’ thing that is going on right now... A lot of kids are leaving home and running away to these so-called ‘communes’ without so much as a by-your-leave... Is your daughter a ‘hippie’ by any chance, sir?”

Well, you tell yourself, lately she has been dressing up like a Gipsy queen, more and more, but that is just a kind of fashion statement... right? After all, she does put on her school uniform without complaining every morning: so there! My daughter is not a *hippie*.

A week later you go back to the police. “Listen, you were right, my daughter did abscond to a hippie commune with a new boyfriend we didn’t know about. But the disturbing fact is: now she has disappeared from that commune as well!”

“Well-well-well,” the policeman says, “so you’ve been doing some legwork on your own, huh? You’d better leave

that to the professionals, you know... But don't worry, if you give me the address of this commune, I'll send a chap round to investigate."

A month goes by. No news from the police. Meanwhile you can't stop thinking; this is when the demons lurking in the deepest recesses of your brain—there where you had banished them—come back to haunt you relentlessly. You can only imagine too well what kind of unspeakable things some sick pervert could be inflicting on your daughter right now in some dark, private dungeon fitted out under an ordinary house right here in your own city, maybe only a few streets away from where you live. Sickening fragments of dialogue out of long forgotten porn magazines come up spontaneously to the fore of your feverish mind: "I'm going to make you beg for it, you little slut!" It drives you crazy!

So you go back to the police station. This time a different officer is on duty; a younger man; a young father himself; more sympathetic. He listens to your worries with true feeling; he understands; he commiserates. But there's not much he can do for you either. He tries to explain: the sheer range of the problem; so many kids disappearing at the moment; the limited resources of the police force... "It would be touch-and-go at the best of times, but at the moment it's pretty hopeless..." And that's when it transpires that in fact the police are just waiting for your daughter's *corpse* to turn up. "You see, that's when we will actually have something to *go* on..."

II The opening

One of the most important things on a day like this was to look good, but when you're blind that can be something of a problem. It was her old friend Beatrice who told Daisy, "Of course we have to do something about your appearance: you're the artist, you'll be the star of the whole event!" And she had proceeded to go through her wardrobe with her and to groom her. So Daisy was wearing a very fetching summer dress that revealed rather a lot of her curvaceous figure. Her unruly blond curls had been put up in a kind of dashing bun, drawing attention to her small, shapely ears to the best advantage. The dark round glasses she wore to hide her atrophied eyes happened to be quite fashionable that year. "Now," dear Beatrice had concluded, "I've brought some glittery earrings, nothing expensive; let me fix them to your earlobes. There, you really look like a great star!"

And when the guests started to arrive at the opening of her exhibition, they complimented her on her appearance. "Darling, you look gorgeous today, you can be such a grey mouse sometimes." Daisy giggled and felt some relief at this opening line that was repeated by many. It was an easy way to break the ice, as she was feeling very nervous. What also put her somewhat at ease was all the hugging and pecking

that was going on. Hugging was always a favourite with Daisy, but on that day it was particularly pleasant, everyone well groomed, smelling nicely of shampoo and toothpaste, coming up to her and pecking her on the cheeks, taking her in their arms... Sometimes she had no idea who she was embracing, so she would chuckle, and say, "Nice to meet you, but who *is* this, anyway?"

"You don't know me, but I certainly know *you*, don't you worry..."

"Aha... a mystery man! I like that... Welcome to my exhibition, enjoy the show."

"Thank you. See you later."

Soon the small gallery in Tufnell Park filled up with guests, and there was quite a hubbub. Daisy liked that too. Everyone talking at once, exclaiming, laughing, the voices louder and louder as more bubbly wine was imbibed. It gave you a sense of how many people were there, and of where they were standing, even of who was talking to whom.

On the other hand, you tended to feel a bit lost in the crowd. Daisy had the gallery well mapped in her mind, including the exact location of each sculpture on display, but she hadn't taken into account that the place would be filled up with so many people. It made her lose her bearings: you could no longer move in a straight line for all the visitors standing in the way...

This was Daisy's first solo exhibition. That is to say, the sculptures were hers, the photographs and paintings on the walls were by others. So, many people from many different areas of her life had answered her invitation. It reminded Daisy of something from a novel, where half a dozen plot lines would originate from a single gathering like this one.

To start with, there were some childhood friends from

the school for the blind that Daisy had attended. She had known these girls from the age of six, until they had done their A Levels together when they were eighteen. Now the three girls that had come—well, they were mature women—clustered around one sculpture after another and touched it, and touched one another, and giggled, giggled... Daisy sighed. She would have liked to join them for the rest of the evening. There is nothing above the friendship, the deep understanding, of a bunch of blind *girls* among themselves. But there were other guests to attend to, Daisy had to perform her duties as a hostess.

Everybody was allowed to touch the sculptures, of course. Between the welcoming of guests, Daisy reflected on the difference between the 30s or 40s, when “touching things” had been strongly frowned upon, and the swinging 60s of today’s London, when the “touchy-feely” approach had become all the rage. Now a blind lady who was interested in sculpture was often allowed to touch the works on display. Daisy had just told her school friends, “I never go to a museum or a gallery without a pair of surgical gloves, so that they can’t turn down my request without looking silly...”

There were a few colleagues from work, women who were younger than Daisy and admired her a great deal as a physical therapist. The notion of the blind masseuse is a hackneyed cliché, of course, but in this case you really had to admire the woman’s deep knowledge of the human anatomy and her fabulous flair for finding out what was ailing a patient. And she was also such a friendly person, always very generous with her advice. But today these younger therapists discovered a side of their colleague that they had never suspected.

“She’s a real artist!”

“There’s bubbly wine galore!”

“Who could have imagined? Good old Daisy!”

Then there were the remnants of *the gang*, the cousins of Daisy’s first husband Ralph. She had known them since she was sixteen, and they too enjoyed an easy relationship with her, based on a deep understanding. Besides, they had all three been among her first sitters for the portraits.

Beatrice, looking at the resulting bronze cast of her likeness, felt a grim satisfaction at the result. Daisy had rendered her big nose and absence of a chin with unwitting brutality. An impressive monstrosity was looking down at her: a caricature worthy of Daumier. On the other hand, beautiful, plump Joan had been rendered as a shapeless balloon, a soft hump of dough. As for William, with his boyish good looks, he had been represented as all sharp cheekbones and jawbones, brutal edges and wedges that obliterated the doe-eyed softness of his personality... So there was no winning at this game, which was probably the reason why everybody was so enthralled by it.

On the walls of the gallery, a local photographer had hung huge black-and-white blow-ups of his portraits of the sitters, so that the visitors could compare his relatively *objective* renderings with the highly *subjective* ones of the blind sculptor Daisy Hayes... Enthralling indeed.

In the meantime Daisy was listening to William talking about computers, the only subject that really interested him.

“We’ve made tremendous progress since the war. Today almost all the banks and insurance companies in the land have their own computer.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that even Daddy’s bank sends me punched cards nowadays. Couldn’t they make those computers print my statements in Braille?”

“Of course they could! But I’m afraid there are not enough blind customers to make it worth their while... But

what I'm working on in Oxford right now is something entirely different: a new chess project! Our computer is getting pretty good at the game of kings..."

"And what's the use of that? Surely there's no joy in it for a computer!"

"Maybe not, but it's a test, don't you see? If a computer can beat a human being at chess, that's one better for the machines over us humans..."

"Oh, William, the silly things you say!"

"No, but seriously, Daise. We've been dreaming of this for a long time. In Manchester in the 40s, when Alan Turing was still with us, we used to write chess programs and play each other. At the time our computer was too primitive to run these programs, obviously, but we used to sit down at a chess board and we played one another by strictly following the instructions of our own program. The chap who won the game had supposedly written the best program. And Turing always won the tournament, of course."

"You miss the man terribly, don't you?"

"Heavens, yes!"

This conversation was interrupted by the unknown "mystery man", who suddenly appeared at Daisy's elbow and muttered, "Nice exhibition, Daisy Hayes, remarkable work..."

Daisy said to William, "I'll talk to you later, darling..." Then turning to the intrusive guest, she said, "Well, thank you for your appreciation, mister... Do you have a name?"

"Of course, but I don't think it will ring a bell. Martin McCullough."

"And we know each other?"

"You've never met me, but I know *you* from way back, when we were both still very young and idealistic... Listen, I need to talk to you urgently."

"Well, you're talking to me right now."

“No, I mean in private.”

“Well, as you can see, I’m in the middle of hosting a very public opening, so you’ll have to come back later...”

“Sure, I’ll stick around.”

Then suddenly the members of Ralph’s crew and his former batman Victor were surrounding Daisy, hugging and congratulating. Daisy’s first and second husbands had both been bomber pilots. Ralph hadn’t survived the war, but his old comrades still formed a loyal band of friends who were very protective of their skipper’s widow.

“And where’s the *new* skipper?” someone asked—Cray Collier, who had been the rear gunner—, “Is your current ex-husband letting you down again?”

“Come on, Cray, you know how it is. Nowadays Richard flies for BOAC on the line to Australia, and besides, now that we are separated, he doesn’t owe me anything...”

“But you *did* send him an invitation?”

“Of course! He would be perfectly welcome!”

“There you are then. My point exactly.”

Then Victor asked, “Who was that man you were just talking to? He seems familiar but I can’t place him...”

“He just told me that his name is Martin McCullough, but I have no idea who he is.”

“McCullough! Of course! Haven’t seen the chap for more than fifteen years...”

“He did mention that he knows me from way back.”

“Yes, but the point is, he is not supposed to know *you* at all!”

“Now you are making me curious...”

Victor made a gesture that compelled the crewmembers to huddle closer around Daisy, and then he told them under his breath, “Remember the tiny explosive lens that we needed in 1950? This is the man who provided it and built it into the miniature radio receiver. He knew what

it was meant for, but the deal was that he would not be told *for whom* he was making it.”

“Good God!” Daisy muttered, “I don’t like this at all!”

Now, Ralph’s mother and younger sister Margery came over to greet her. They knew Victor and the crew only as acquaintances one meets at precisely such events as this one, so all present greeted one another or nodded, and then the crew left Daisy alone with her in-laws.

Ralph’s mother Stella was a very frail old lady and her daughter-in-law was much impressed that she had gone to the trouble of coming to her opening.

“Oh! bless you, dear girl! I wouldn’t have missed this for the world! I am so impressed by your artistic achievements.”

“But you came all the way from Bottomleigh! How’s life at the old manor these days?”

“Oh! very nice, thank you. There are more and more local pensioners living there with me. We share the costs; we share everything. In fact, we have established a real commune along the lines of what all those hippies are doing...”

“My darling Stella, you are so full of surprises!”

“You must come and visit us one of these days, when all the excitement around your exhibition has abated.”

“Oh, I’d like to. I hope I will.”

“But there’s one thing that surprises me a little, my dear. Why are you calling yourself Daisy Hayes on the posters and in the catalogue, if I may ask? Now that you no longer need to be called Daisy Clayton, I would have expected that you would revert to Daisy Prendergast...”

“Well, I’m sorry, but yes, I use my maiden name nowadays. I never imagined that it might distress you, believe me. It may look to you as if I want to erase Ralph’s memory, but nothing could be further from the truth. I still

think of Ralph every day, but nowadays, yes, it is one Daisy Hayes who keeps those fond memories alive.”

“Of course,” Margery intervened, “We understand, don’t we Mother? You did well, Daise...”

Margery had been twelve years old the first time she had met Daisy—who had been all of sixteen. She had been deeply impressed, especially as Daisy was blind, and she had become a lifelong admirer. But now that they were both grownup women, forty and forty-four years old, both unmarried, as it happened, the difference between them had lost any relevance. They were both professional women, Daisy a physiotherapist, and Margery Prendergast a chemist who led a small research group at King’s College, London.

Margery now told Daisy that she liked her older, cubist work better than the new, expressionist portraits. “Particularly the ‘Kitchen Table’ series. Your ‘Kitchen Table XII’ was gorgeous. But there *is* something of a paradox in the fact that each iteration was so different from the previous one, while you still claim that you were only rendering a table the way you perceive it...”

“Good point, Margery. Very astute. But as an artist, am I not allowed some poetic licence? Besides, each time I made a new representation of a table, I gained new insights for the next one... A never ending process!”

Stella Prendergast now said, “You must attend to your exhibition, Daisy. Shall we leave you to it?”

“Just a moment, dear Mother. I had planned to introduce you to an old neighbour of mine who was very fond of Ralph when we moved in at Tufnell Park in ’41. She would be delighted to make your acquaintance. I can hear her over there, an old lady with a heavy French accent...”

Margery moved them over to where the lady was holding forth among a group of Daisy’s neighbours, and the introductions were made. “Ah, Mrs Prendergast, Ralph’s

mother, I am so glad to meet you at last!" Mrs Maurois exclaimed. "You know, it is funny, when your boy moved in with Daisy, they both referred to me as 'the old lady next door'. But at the time I was about the same age as Daisy is now..."

"Good God," Daisy cried, "so you were not an old lady at all!"

"Certainly not! You were just a very young and ignorant girl..."

"And blind, Mrs Em. I think there are all sorts of very reliable visual clues that allow normal people to know at a glance how old other people are. But we blind people can't see it!"

"Well, dear Ralph was not blind, but he also thought me very old when he was eighteen years of age! Anyway, I am indeed pretty old now, by any measure, and so are you, Mrs Prendergast, what do you say?"

"Yes indeed, Mrs Maurois, there comes a time when one is old by any measure..."

At that moment an unknown man joined the little group, and politely said, "Excuse me, ladies, may I take Mrs Hayes away from you? I'm a journalist, and I would like to put a few questions to the artist..."

The ladies were delighted. "A journalist! Really? My-my, Daisy, you'll become famous yet!" And they moved off, commenting excitedly on the unexpected event.

"A journalist, huh?" Daisy said, "May I ask from which paper?"

"Well, Nick Aaron is the name. I have my press card here, you can ask anyone to verify for you..."

"No, no need for that. But for which paper do you work? I'm just curious..."

"Well that's the thing. I'm a 'casual', a freelance writer, but I'm very excited by what I have seen here today, and I'm

certain that I can sell a piece on you to several publications.”

“All right. I guess a little bit of publicity can’t hurt... What do you want to know?”

“First tell me exactly how you go about modelling a portrait. I take it you work with clay?”

“Yes, I just follow the normal procedure. And you know that since Rodin was seen to make his sitters pose very close to him, *that* has been normal procedure as well. As a blind sculptor I need to touch the sitter’s face, so I make them sit on a high stool very close to me and I do exactly that... They do end up with smudges of fresh clay on their face; maybe that did not happen with Rodin, though one can’t be so sure about that.”

“Wonderful! Great story, I’m taking this down... Anything more on this closeness thing?”

“Well, I have to be quite intimate with the sitter to be able to do their portrait. Which means that if you wanted me to portray *you*, for instance, you would have to allow me to get very close first, in more than one sense... On the other hand this is a good thing, as I’m told that the results of my work are rather brutal and can be very confronting.”

“Great! Now tell me about your studio. Do you have a studio?”

“Yes, I have a plot at a collective. I was lucky to get in... In a way, being blind opens many doors and generates a lot of goodwill. So one could argue that a blind artist has it easier than most...”

“I see... great, and then you have the portraits cast in bronze. Isn’t that rather expensive?”

“Yes, you’re right about that. I’ve put almost all my savings into this project. It has taken me many years to accumulate enough pieces for this exhibition...”

“I can imagine. But now I have a completely different question. I’ve been looking at your work, and it seems to me

that there is an aggressive edge to each of your pieces, an element of violence that most people do not perceive... You've used the word 'brutal' yourself a moment ago. Is that what your inner world looks like? Is this typical of the blind? Some level of frustration, maybe?"

"No... Well, I guess you're right about an edge of violence, and why not? Isn't there a dark side to us all? But I don't think that you could call it typical of the blind. On the contrary, why would blind people be any different from others?"

"It's just that I find it a bit ironic. Listening to the reactions of the public, everyone sees you as the brave blind lady who creates beautiful art against all odds..."

"Well, you may quote me on this: I'm a normal artist. I have a dark side like every human being. And the difficulties I have to overcome are no different from those of any other artist. Or rather, as I just told you a moment ago, the fact that I'm blind opens many doors and generates a lot of goodwill..."

Then the journalist told Daisy that he was very interested in the story of the model railway set that he'd read about in the catalogue. How as a child she'd been fascinated by the train station from her daddy's railway set. That suddenly she had perceived with her fingers what normal people could see with their eyes: a train station; a locomotive; a double-decker bus; a milk float... "Are your parents here? I would like to talk to your father in particular... I assume I may use this childhood story in my own piece?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Consider the contents of the booklet as a press release. And if you want to talk to my father, I heard Daddy laughing just a moment ago. He must be somewhere in that direction, behind you, a tall, slender gentleman, balding, with a moustache; your typical Great War veteran..."

“Yes, I think I’ve spotted him, thanks. See you later.”

Daisy was left alone, and suddenly the mystery man was at her side again, saying “How is it going, Daisy Hayes?”

“Fine, just fine, Martin McCullough. Now I know who you are...”

“Yes, I saw you huddling with Victor and his men, so I thought you must be talking about me.”

“Yes, well, I find your presence here very disturbing, as you can imagine. What is it that you want?”

“I need your help, Daisy Hayes. You got some help from me at the time, remember? Now it’s your turn to help me...”

“All right. Sounds fair enough. What can I do for you?”

“Well, listen. My daughter disappeared more than a year ago, and I need your help to find her...”

“Good God! That’s awful! How old is she? What’s her name?”

“See? Already you’re asking the right questions! Her name is Loretta and she was fifteen when she disappeared. She would be sixteen now... And the police are asking all the wrong questions, they keep telling me that there is nothing they can do.”

“Well, but you do realise that as a blind person there is not much I can do either...”

“We’ll talk about that later. Here’s a gentleman who clearly is making a beeline to chat with you.”

And just as suddenly as he had appeared at her side, the mystery man was gone.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything, Mrs Hayes?”

“Mr Dobbs junior! What a pleasant surprise, how nice of you to have come!”

“I wouldn’t have wanted to miss this for the world, Mrs Hayes. Fancy you a sculptor! I would never have guessed...”

“Ah, you see, there is more to me than meets the eye! How is business?”

“Fine, thank you. As long as people need their pills... You and I, who work in healthcare, will always have enough to do.”

“True. Imagine if for once everyone felt well all the time...”

“It doesn’t bear thinking about! But you know, looking at your impressive artworks, I can’t help reflecting how my father would have loved to see this. He was a great admirer of yours; he called you a plucky girl; but that was a long time ago...”

“And I called him a clever man, and an angel, and everyone in the neighbourhood was very sad when he passed away.”

“Well, thank you... You know, I’ll never forget that day during the war, when my father got home late and told us about this blind girl whose husband had been murdered. ‘Can you imagine?’ he told us, ‘he was a bomber pilot and he was killed by someone on our own side during a raid over Berlin!’ We kids were astounded, of course, especially when Dad told us how *you*, the blind girl, had somehow found out that there must have been poison in the pilot’s thermos flask!”

“Yes, and your father, the darling man, was the only one in this whole sorry story who believed me. He just looked at the facts and accepted that I was right. Whether I was blind or not. You have no idea how exceptional that is!”

“Yes, but please tell me. We never heard the end of the story. Did you manage to find your husband’s murderer?”

“As a matter of fact yes, in the end I believe I did. It’s a long story, but again no one listened to me and the conclusion of the inquest was ‘accidental poisoning’...”

“Good God! So you would say that the murderer is still at large?”

“Well, no. Apparently he committed suicide in 1950.”

“Ah, there you are, then. You can’t get away with a thing like that forever...”

“Exactly!”

At this point the conversation petered out, and Daisy’s pharmacist—always a very shy man—excused himself, mumbling something along the line of “I don’t want to keep you...”

“Funny,” Daisy thought, “I go to Dobbs’ Chemists at least once a month, but this is the first time I discuss the murder case with Dobbs junior. It must be the special atmosphere of an opening like this...”

The hubbub had unmistakably abated. The party was winding down. Daisy drifted towards the merry group of her younger colleagues, now that she had the time to join in on their careless banter. She even managed to introduce her middle-aged blind schoolmates to the younger group, and together they suddenly formed a carefree gang of cackling girls—there were many more women than men at this opening anyway.

“Wonderful party, Daise! The bubbly wine is getting to my head!”

“Me too! But with all due respect, Daise, I’m not so sure I’d want to sit for one of your portraits!”

“Me neither, Daise! You don’t really flatter one’s looks, you know!”

“Well, girls, now that you know my secret: if I start showing an interest for your face, start screaming!”

“We will!”

“Oh yes! We’ll definitely *scream!*”

But then, after a while, the girls took their leave one by one. Daisy could feel that the party was almost over. Suddenly there was a lot of hugging, *thank-yous* and *good-byes*, everyone assuring their hostess that they’d had a

great time. Daisy was feeling very tired. To be at the centre of such an event had turned out to be even more demanding than she had expected. Plain hard work. You had to shuttle constantly between many people and keep up your end of a great variety of conversations, be available at all times and make everyone feel at ease. Quite exhausting!

Just as she was discussing the show with the gallery owner, Daisy felt the presence of her badgering mystery man again. She could smell him and hear him breathing quite near her.

The attendance had been wonderful, the owner said, but no hard sales yet, which was to be expected with sculpture. "But no worries, my dear Daisy, I have high hopes of interesting a couple of serious collectors in your work. These people never come to the opening but make an appointment at a later date."

"Let me know if I can do anything..."

"Oh yes, I'm counting on you to attend a couple of private viewings. And of course I have high hopes for a nice article by that journalist who was here. That could also bring some serious customers in..."

"The journalist seemed interested enough in my work."

"Yes, I also had a nice talk with him."

Then the owner left her, mumbling something about a gentleman who seemed to be waiting to speak to her, and Daisy said, "All right, McCullough, I haven't forgotten our little appointment you know. Just let me say goodbye to the catering people and get my things. After that you can escort me home while we talk..."

And so they started walking, Daisy probing her path with her white cane because she didn't want the man to hold her hand. He didn't offer his assistance either.

"So what makes you think that I can help you, McCullough?"

"I've seen you operate back in the day, Daisy Hayes. The way you executed that earl, the man who killed your husband... I was impressed. A blind girl is bound to be underestimated by the adversary and above suspicion from the authorities, and you're a very talented killer: a real pro... At the time I would have liked to recruit you for our cause, but the others didn't trust an English banker's daughter, educated at a posh private school... Pity!"

"All right, now why don't you first tell me how you know all this. At the time, Victor assured me that you wouldn't be told about me... Did he lie to me?"

"No, don't worry, he's got nothing to do with it. I'm the one who double-crossed *him*."

"Like I should have expected! But at least you're honest about it."

"You see, when Victor told me why he needed that explosive lens, the story made me curious. So I built an exact copy of the device and put a radio beacon inside the cigarette case, and that is what I gave to Victor. With a radio-goniometer I was able to trace the location of my beacon as Victor brought it to your place, and I managed to home in on your flat building. I detected the exact location of your flat, spied on you for a couple of days, and was astonished to find out that you were blind... Of course I then had to break into your flat when you were at work to replace my beacon with the explosive device."

"Good God! I don't like what I'm hearing! Not *one* bit!"

"Well, listen, Daisy, murdering people is a nasty business... You should have known that. Anyway, later, when I read in the papers about the 'accidental death' of the Earl of Haverford, I knew that you had carried out your mission like a real pro. Admirable!"

"Yes, well, I had second thoughts almost immediately."

"Too late for that... Anyway, as I know a lot about your story, I think you will understand mine. You know exactly

how it is when you go to the police with a serious problem and they just won't listen to you...

"Absolutely. If only the police had done their job properly, none of all that nastiness would have happened back then."

"In my case they did a pretty good job at finding out who I am. McCullough, we have reason to believe that you're an IRA operative. If you want to benefit from the protection of the law, you shouldn't be attacking the State,' bla-bla-bla. The bastards! Of course I had to make myself scarce."

"Yes, I sympathise. But now let's talk about Loretta."

"Yes. She was fifteen, getting a bit rebellious, but also very naïve, and she just disappeared..."

"That must be every parent's worst nightmare."

"Absolutely. Especially when you're the father and you know all too well how a man's mind works... My dear wife has no idea of all those things. It's been a year now, I have a strong feeling that the police have stopped looking for her, and the idea that she could still be alive in some rapist's clutches drives me crazy with grief!"

"I understand. I wish I could help you, but surely you know other people who are better qualified than me to go looking for her..."

"Sure, but that's my point exactly. I've tried everything: the best operatives I know within the movement; the best informers from the London underworld—the same network Victor knows so well, but I didn't get him involved, of course. Anyway, I did all I could, used all the resources I could think of, but to no avail!"

"All right. But I still think I'm not the best qualified person to help you. Just tell me what you actually expect me to do for you... Is there anything specific?"

"I'm glad you're asking that! As it happens I have something very specific in mind for you. You see, the last

place where Loretta was spotted before she disappeared is a hippie commune in Shepherd's Bush. I found this out on my own within a week of her disappearance, and of course the police went to investigate as well. But the thing is—as you can imagine—that these young drug addicts don't want to talk to an old *square* like me; a poor girl's daddy: ugh! They clam up completely. And with the police it's even worse... And that's where you could come in useful. I need the feminine touch. An attractive blind lady like you will never be seen as *square*. You're intriguing, you're interesting!"

"True. You might have a valid point there, I can see that. Do you have the address of that commune?"

"Of course! And I'll give you a telephone number you can use to keep in touch with me..."

"Wait a sec..."

They had reached Daisy's front door now, and Daisy stopped, as she had no intention of inviting the man to her flat. She started rummaging in her handbag, and retrieved a pocket-size Braille slate with a stylus attached to it. "So what's the address and the phone number again?"

And while Martin McCullough dictated, Daisy very proficiently punched the data in Braille on a little card fixed behind the grid of the slate. "There we are, got that..."

"That's a nifty little trick, Daisy Hayes... Now, what I just gave you is the number of a telephone set I have at work for special purposes. You can reach me there during the day, sometimes in the evenings too. Just keep trying."

"Very cloak and dagger! All right, I'll go and check if that commune is still there."

"Oh, they're still there all right, I just checked myself..."

"All right... And another thing. I need a photograph of your daughter to show around. I myself have never heard her voice, never smelled her, so I wouldn't know her even if I bumped right into her... Is there anything that I can touch

with my fingers that could identify Loretta? A mole or a wart at a specific location on her face, maybe?”

“No, she’s a flawless young beauty, but I have something else.”

The man took a photo of his daughter from his wallet and handed it over, and then he put his hand down his shirtfront and retrieved a little cross on a silver chain that he was wearing around his neck. He took Daisy’s hand and let her probe it with her fingers. The cross felt warm from his body.

“Aha, I understand,” Daisy said. “A Celtic cross with a little stone in the middle.”

“That’s right. Loretta would be wearing exactly the same one around her neck, just like me and my wife and her little brother...”

“Good, that might help. So I’ll go and talk to the hippies, and you’ll hear from me... I don’t know why I’m doing this, it’s completely crazy.”

“Well, to put it simply, you can’t refuse to help me, because I *know* you’re a killer. And the main reason why I’m asking you, is *because* you’re a killer.”

III Here and now

When I regain consciousness, I feel completely lost at first. I remember hearing a train rushing towards me; the sudden panic; the fear of being mangled by an onrushing machine, but it's a very fleeting memory, although it seems to have happened only an instant ago... or not at all.

Then I'm overcome by that strange feeling you sometimes have when you're waking up in the morning, still half inside a dream you no longer recall, just dreaming that you are going to wake up at any moment now... But I can't remember going to sleep. Not one bit. "I definitely did not go to bed... yet," I tell myself.

Then there is a sense of disorientation. I have absolutely no idea where I am, even though I'm pretty sure by now that I'm wide awake. I move my head a little; I feel dizzy, but I'm back... Of course, at this stage, normal people would open their eyes to find out what is going on. "I'm simply in my bed, but I was completely drunk last night..." or "now I remember, we're in a hotel room, it must be the jet lag..." or "I'm lying on the bathroom floor, I must have fainted after a too hot bath!" Sometimes it takes a few moments, but eventually you figure out where you are and what happened to you.

Having reached the conclusion that I must have passed out, I, on the other hand, have no way of checking

my whereabouts. The first thing that strikes me is that I'm wearing all my clothes, including my shoes. Then, when I try to move, I can't. A flash of panic: "Am I paralysed? But I can *feel* my clothes, my shoes..." I try to move my fingers and my toes. Everything seems to be working all right, and I realise that my body is restrained somehow.

Finally it dawns on me that I'm not lying down, but hanging by my wrists against a wall. I try—and manage—to get onto my feet; to stand up and regain my balance. I'm still feeling a bit dizzy.

Standing there, apparently strapped to a wall, I suddenly remember what has happened. My last memory before passing out is of walking in the street and being attacked from behind and knocked out with chloroform. "Oh! The irony of it," I reflect, "the tragic irony!" Attacked and captured by the man I've been hunting...

Now I focus my attention on my surroundings. I prick up my ears, sniff the air, and come to the conclusion that there's someone else here, not far from me. A man. "Who are you? Where am I?" I demand.

"Whoa, girl! Don't you take that tone with me! You're in no position to order me about..."

A harsh, impatient voice, with an edge of aggression in it that is hard to miss. A bit raspy, with the whiff of tobacco of a heavy smoker. The accent not very refined, to say the least. Definitely not a gentleman.

"Ah... erm... no, listen... Are you the pervert who abducted Loretta?"

By way of an answer I feel a blow hit my face, apparently the man's fist. I'm stunned more than hurt, and think, "That probably means yes."

"Is Loretta still alive?" I ask.

Another blow. "You ask too many questions, girl. You'll find out in due time. For now let's take care of what *I* want from *you*..."

“Why do you call me girl? I’m forty-four years old, you know.”

“Yeah, and I find you pretty sexy... girl! Your eyes are a bit off-putting, but your body looks hot.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, eh?”

I’m feeling really angry; angry at myself and at this coward who is hitting me. But then I feel his hands groping my breasts through my clothes. “So that’s what all this is about,” I tell myself. I don’t say a word. After the first reflex movement of trying to turn my chest away, I realise that I am at the man’s mercy, shackled to a wall, my arms raised, my bosom unprotected... So I stop moving and brace myself for what is to come next.

“Ah yes, this will do,” the man wheezes, and he keeps groping. “This will do nicely...”

“Just remember that those appendages of flesh belong to a human being, yes?”

Another blow, this time to the chest. “I’ll make you change your tune yet, girl. Cold bitches like you are what I like best. And you know why? Because you’re only starved for sex. I bet you’re gagging for it. By the time I’m done with you, I swear you’ll be begging for more...”

“Maybe. But you do realise, don’t you, that it will hardly be sincere?”

An hour later, I have been raped.

The man has gagged me with some kind of leather dog’s collar, after punching me in the stomach to make me open my mouth.

Then he has stripped me almost naked and untied my shoelaces, of all things.

Then he has hit my thighs and calves with some sort of horsewhip, making me squirm and ordering me to get up on my toes and to “jiggle those titties”.

Then he has violated me standing up.

During this part of the ordeal, while the man is exerting himself noisily, groping me roughly, I tell myself, “Right, that settles it... If I get a chance, I’m going to kill you!” And biting hard on the leather strap of the gag, I keep repeating it in my mind: “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!”

But there’s worse to come. When he’s sated, the rapist holds a little speech: “Listen up, girl, I’ll explain this only once. I’ve invented a special device for handling my slave girls safely. As you’re blind I can’t show it to you, but it’s a clamp, see, with a very clever locking system. I’m going to put it around your neck and squeeze it shut in such a way that it will *almost* choke you to death... Now here’s the rule of the game: you do as I tell you, and double-quick, or you choke to death. It’s all up to you how fast I can transfer you to your living quarters and release the clamp. Got that? And don’t even think of doing anything funny, or you’ll die asphyxiated. Now let’s go!”

And suddenly I have the sensation of being throttled by two hands, with both thumbs closing around my windpipe in a deadly vice. Only the thinnest gurgle of air can still trickle through. “Keep breathing in,” I tell myself. “Suck in the air as long and hard as you can...” Meanwhile my tormentor unstraps my wrists and orders me to put my arms behind my back. He handcuffs me. Then he frogmarches me through a narrow passage to another room. There he throws me on a bed, locks some other shackles around my wrists, and at last releases the clamp. He then unlocks the handcuffs and removes the leather gag I am still wearing.

“How did you like it, girl? I see you got the point of this game: you moved really fast!”

I am gasping spasmodically—gulping for air—my throat on fire. I can’t utter a word. My ears are ringing with dizziness, and I can only make out the words spoken to me across a foggy divide, as if from a great distance.

“Not so talkative now, eh? No cheeky repartee... I like it better that way!”

Through the same dizzy haze I hear a soft voice pipe up: “Who is that, Master?”

“Loretta!” I tell myself.

“You’ll find out soon enough, pet,” the man says. “I’ll leave you two together now... Just remember that I can hear everything you say!”

Then the metal clanging of a barred door being slammed shut reaches my consciousness, and the rattle of a key turning in a lock. I can just make out the man’s footfalls receding.

“Who are you?”

That sweet voice again. Like a little girl lost in a deep forest. And my nostrils are overwhelmed by a not entirely disagreeable smell of unwashed female hair. I try to say something, but I can’t get my vocal cords to work. They only produce a squeaky, rasping sound. Then I try for a loud whisper. “Can’t talk! Can you hear me?”

“Oh... Oh yes, sorry. The clamp hurts really bad the first time... I remember. But you get used to it after a while...”

“You all right?”

“Erm, you mean apart from everything else, right? I mean, I’m not very happy at the moment, but I guess I’m all right, yes... But who are you, anyway?”

“Your father sent me. I was looking for you.”

“Well, you’ve found me now. What took you and Daddy so long? I’ve been here for ages and ages!”

“Your dad never stopped looking for you...”

“Okay... And now what’s the plan, anyway?”

“No plan... I’ve been captured.”

“Great! That’s really going to help.”

The girl stops speaking. “At least she seems to be all right,” I tell myself while I sit up at the edge of the bed. I

have to struggle with my chains to do so. Groping around me, I discover that there are two long chains connecting my wrists to a solid ring bolted to the wall. Each movement you want to make is impeded by these cumbersome chains and accompanied by a concert of rattling sounds. The girl seems to be all right, but I suddenly have the feeling that I myself am standing on the rim of a deep well of despair. It wouldn't take much to push me over the brink and throw me into the abyss, with no hope of ever coming back...

Casting around in my mind, groping for anything to hold onto in the recent events, I suddenly tell myself that in theory this nasty man is still a human being. At least he seems to be acting in an intelligent, rational way. "He was whipping my legs, but only to make me jiggle my breasts, not really to inflict pain... He could have whipped much harder; he could have whipped my breasts, but apparently he doesn't want to damage the goods... And then that awful clamp: it's a sick invention, but it works; the bastard only wants complete control when he's moving us around... There's a method to his madness."

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I start to massage my neck and throat to ease the pain. At least, I reflect, I have the advantage of being a professional and experienced physical therapist. "That is going to serve me well to get through this ordeal." Already I feel that I am taking a step back from the brink. After a while I try to use my vocal cords: "Baa... Baaa..." I find that speaking in a soft voice—what the girl seems to be doing—hurts less. It's ironic, in a way: as a blind person you tend to overcompensate with a hectoring voice. That's why the rapist was so taken aback by my tone, when I was only asking "Who are you? Where am I?" It had not been my intention at all to sound snotty... at first.

Thinking of that very first exchange between my captor and me, I now suddenly remember his last remark before

he left. "I can hear everything you say..."

"Loretta?"

"Yes? Call me Lorry. Everybody calls me Lorry..."

"Lorry? All right. Now, Lorry: what did the man mean, when he said that he can hear everything we say? Are there microphones hidden in here? Do you know anything about this?"

"No... it's the first I hear about it!"

"Okay... Now tell me: have you had any company before? It's not like he has been eavesdropping on conversations from here before?"

"No! I'm always alone... But the Master says these things sometimes, you know. Like you're supposed to know something, but you actually know it's not true... For instance: how long have I been in here, anyway?"

"A little more than a year."

"See! Only the other day he made me believe it's been much longer. Two years, more like..."

"No! Definitely no more than a year! But why are there two beds in here? I'm assuming that you are also chained to a bed?"

"Well, can't you see that for yourself?"

"Actually, no. I'm blind..."

"What? Blind! Show me your face... Oh yeah, I can see it now. Your eyes are all funny... Well, that's great! What help am I supposed to get from a blind old lady, huh?"

I am a bit shocked: talking to this teenager turns out to be more difficult than what I experienced recently at the hippie commune. You would think that such a young girl must be shattered by the experience she's been through this past year... So maybe the fact that she's being so obnoxious is only a positive sign. "I was also young once," I tell myself, "these hippie creatures are not so different from me and my school friends when *we* were sixteen..."

"Listen, Lorry. Never underestimate the capabilities of

the disabled... As for being an old lady: how old would you say the 'Master' is, himself?"

"Old... About the same as you... you know..."

"Hmm... I thought as much... That's why he calls me 'girl'. He seems to find me very attractive, which is a good thing. So tell me: why are there two beds in here? Has there ever been another girl with you in the time you've been here?"

"No, I told you! You see, the reason there are two beds, is that sometimes the Master doesn't want to go to the trouble of transferring me to the Pleasure Room, so he just comes in here and fucks me on the clean bed. That is, the one I'm not using at the time... And that's fine by me, because then he doesn't need to use the choking device for so long."

"But he does use it, even to transfer you from one bed to the other inside this room?"

"Oh yes! Otherwise I could attack him, see? He doesn't want that."

"All right. So, if you've been alone all that time, if there hasn't been another girl in the picture, then maybe you're the first one he's ever abducted. This gives us some hope. Maybe I can talk the man into letting you go, now that he has me..."

"I don't know about that... He has often told me that he'll never let me out of here."

"Yes, but you know that the Master says these things sometimes, even if they're not true... So, to recap, there are two beds in here, and we're chained to the wall and have to stay sitting or lying down all the time. And how do you go to the toilet?"

"There's an Elsan toilet next to my bed. You know: a chemical toilet. It's shoved over to your side when I change beds... I guess that now that there's two of us, we won't be changing beds any more..."

“No. But I assume the man brings you clean sheets from time to time?”

“Oh yes! And I’ve become really good at changing them. I didn’t use to, but I’ve become a real little housewife in here...”

“And what about the grub?”

“Well, what about it?”

“Do you get enough to eat?”

“Oh yes! The Master says he wants me to stay nicely plump and chubby. So he brings two meals a day, and most of the time there are also some biscuits and chocolate bars I can have at lunchtime or when I feel peckish...”

I reflect that the great Master seems to be rather busy catering to his victim. Bringing clean sheets. Food twice a day. Well-well-well... And if there’s an Elsan toilet, he must be taking it away from time to time to empty it somewhere and refresh the chemicals.

“All right. And what do you do all day long. Is the light on, right now?”

“No, of course not! It’s the middle of the night, can’t you see? Oh! I guess you can’t, can you? I can only just make you out... The main lights are on during the daytime, but when it’s time to go to sleep, they’re switched off, and only an emergency light is left burning...”

“Like in case of a fire alarm you can evacuate the building?”

“Very funny! It’s more like so you can take a leak if you need to in the middle of the night.”

“And what do you do during the time the lights are on?”

“I read books if I have some, and otherwise I always have my dictionary...”

“The Master brings you books to read? What kind of books?”

“Mostly crime mysteries and thrillers... The thing is, I

never read books before I came here. Then, when I started reading, you know, to pass the time, I found that there were a lot of words I didn't know. So I asked the Master every time he came down, and that annoyed him a bit, so he gave me an old dictionary... So now, even when I don't have anything to read, I study my dictionary. It's amazing, the words you find there that you've never heard about, and that are still quite interesting... Right now I'm trying to memorize whole lists, like *oleaginous*: pertaining to oil; *olfactory*: connected with the sense of smell; and *oligarchy*: a small group of people who run a country, and so on and so forth..."

"Sounds impressive, well done!"

"Are you a teacher or something?"

"No, not at all... I just believe knowledge is important, that's all... Can you imagine how it is to be born blind? To have no idea what light or colours look like? No possibility to visualise a face, or a street, or the sky... So your whole world boils down to what you know. That's why words are incredibly important to me. Most of the time a *word* is all I can know about a thing..."

"Hmm... It sounds like being blind is very much like being locked up in a cellar by a pervert, huh?"

"Maybe, yes. You know, Lorry, you must promise me that when all this is over, you'll go back to school... Your father told me that you're very smart, but that you never did well at school..."

"Great... is that all my old man has to say about me, huh?"

"No, Lorry, no! He loves you very much! He told me that the idea you could still be alive in some rapist's clutches drives him crazy with grief... The police have stopped looking for you, and it drives him nuts. That's why he asked me for help..."

"Yeah, but that's where his love becomes pretty

useless, you know? You're talking about when all this is over, but you said yourself that you don't know how to get us out of here..."

"Yes, but now that I have been kidnapped as well, the police are going to start looking again. Your dad will make sure of that... Anyway, you have to start thinking about the future: decide what you want; make plans."

"Really? You seem to be very confident all of a sudden. Maybe more than you actually feel?"

"Well, as I see it, there are only two possibilities: either we soon get killed by the rapist, or we soon get out of here. In both cases it makes sense to make plans for the future..."

"Or, maybe, we stay prisoners here for many, many years..."

"Even then, you still have options: you have to decide what you want to do. If you want to do something about your education, I can help you. We can start working on it tomorrow... Start a new life, you know what I mean?"

"Hmm... Look, I'm glad you're here, I'm glad for the company; I haven't had a normal conversation for a year... But still, I don't understand how you can be so upbeat... I don't find that very convincing, you see?"

"Well, let me put it another way: have you ever thought about how it is to be a soldier in the war? When you're sent into battle and every moment can be your last one? My husband was a bomber pilot in the war: every time he took off, he knew it could be his last bombing mission... But he always told me that he enjoyed every minute of it, one minute at a time. He just loved flying that big Lanc..."

"So your husband was one of those criminals who dropped bombs on the civilian populations of Germany, huh?"

"Yes. With hindsight you could say that, of course. But at the time we didn't think we could do anything else... We

had to fight back; we couldn't let Hitler just get away with it; doing nothing was never an option."

"And did your husband survive?"

"No..."

"Bad example, then..."

"Well, actually he was murdered, and not by the Germans... But isn't life always like that? You could die at any moment, you can never tell, and in the end no one is immortal. But in the meantime we must make the best of what we have..."

"Hmm," Loretta says. "Let's get some sleep now..."

"Yes, of course. Tomorrow we have a busy day... Nice talking to you, Lorry."

But while I try to go to sleep, I feel the abyss of despair closing in on me again. Suddenly I am one step closer to the rim of a deep well of depression, contemplating the long fall down to the bottom, with no way of climbing out again. I have been raped. It feels completely unreal, like nightmares often do. "I must keep it that way," I tell myself, "as unreal as possible... A nightmare. It didn't really happen, not to me anyway."

I try to reason like a dictionary. Rape: Forcing someone to have sexual intercourse against their will. In this instance, the male has selfishly satisfied his own base instincts without a thought for his female partner. The female had no choice but to submit to being overpowered by superior physical force. Try not to take it personally. It would simply not do to go to pieces because of this.

Apart from that, I have the uncomfortable feeling of existing in a kind of limbo; I have had no opportunity to map my surroundings... it feels as if I'm floating in an abstract, hostile environment. I put my hand to the wall next to my bed and probe its texture with my fingertips: smooth concrete, with the sharply edged pockmarks left by air bubbles...

“Do you mind?” Loretta mutters. “I’m trying to sleep, so please stop moving. It makes those chains rattle so...”

“Sorry, I’ll try to sleep as well now. By the way: my name is Daisy.”

IV The Island

So the address that Martin McCullough had dictated was on Uxbridge Road. Daisy had to take the Tube to Shepherd's Bush Market Station, and in the middle of the Saturday crowd that streamed out on their way to the market grounds, she started asking around for directions to the address that she had written down in Braille. There were always some good souls to be found everywhere, who would manage to tear themselves away from their own pursuits long enough to help a blind lady, even at the exit of a bustling Tube station.

In fact, Daisy asked to be directed a few doors further down the road from where she needed to be, because she wanted to size up the place beforehand. After thanking the last person who had guided her, she turned back and ambled along the busy pavement, crowded with summertime strollers, and she listened intently. She recognized the hippie commune at once. There were kids hanging around left and right of the front door. The door itself was propped open, you could hear youthful voices coming from inside. After a first walk-by, Daisy came back, veered sideways right in front of the open door and walked in. After a few steps into a corridor she could hear that there was another open door on her left, the voices still

coming from within, so she veered again.

Tap-tapping spectacularly with her white cane, her face and dark glasses held high, Daisy walked straight into the front parlour of the house and stopped smack in the middle of it. Everyone in the large room fell silent at once. Only the sitar music kept on playing in the background, probably Ravi Shankar on the turntable. The place reeked of pot, patchouli oil and joss sticks; unwashed youthful bodies.

“Excuse me,” Daisy called out, “is this a Lions’ tea shop?”

A few of the youngsters sniggered, then one of them, a boy, said, “No, Granny, this is definitely *not* a Lions’ tea shop.”

“What is this place called, then?”

Silence. Daisy just stood there, apparently undisturbed. At length another male voice said, “As a matter of fact, if you really want to know, we call this place *The Island*. It’s a hippie commune...”

“Really? Interesting! Would that be as in *Island*, the last novel published by Aldous Huxley?”

“Yeah! Yeah! You know about Huxley, then?”

“Of course! I’ve been a great fan of Huxley since I was sixteen...”

Another silence, filled with awe, this time. The same—rather posh—male voice said, “That must have been a long time ago?”

“Oh yes! But you know, Aldous Huxley goes back a long time too. He published his first novel in 1921, just before *I* was even born!”

“Wow! So how old is he now?”

“Well, I don’t know: he’s dead! He passed away a couple of years ago...”

“Wow!”

The young man softly took Daisy’s arm, led her to the

side of the room, by the open windows, and invited her to sit down. "If you don't mind sitting on a mattress on the floor?"

"Oh no, that's all right. Just like at a picnic!"

The noises from the street were coming in through the windows, there was traffic and there were throngs of chatty pedestrians. Ravi Shankar was still twanging in the background. The nice young man was very anxious to hear the blind lady out about Huxley. Daisy was amused by the trouble he was taking to hide his polished accent.

"So how old would Huxley have been when he died?"

"I don't know exactly... but wait, I seem to remember he was almost seventy. Yes, he died in sixty-three..."

"Jesus! That's old!"

"Yes, but he was something of a hippie all his life. He must have been around sixty when he published *The Doors of Perception*..."

"Yeah! *The Doors of Perception*! You know, we're completely into that. Accessing the deepest levels of awareness of the brain with psychedelic drugs. Turn on, tune in, drop out..."

"And how about *Island*?"

"Well, I haven't actually read the book, you know, but with the little group who started this commune a year ago, we were completely into the Huxley novel because of the free love and the Tantric sex practices, apparently."

"And what does 'Tantric sex' involve, if I may ask?"

"Well, erm... it's like... if they hold back, delay orgasm a bit, a couple can enjoy themselves much longer. Things like that. Tiger and Piglet are very good at those techniques and they teach us..."

"Sounds like fun! But I find it hard to imagine someone like Huxley writing about such things... The man was old enough to be my father!"

"Wow! Then how old are *you*, anyway?"

"I'm forty-four, going on forty-five, hardly old enough to be your Gran, by the way, but I could definitely be your mother. And I wouldn't mind a nice boy like you as a son..."

A couple of the other kids were hovering nearby and listening in: they sniggered at Daisy's last remark. "You can't see it, Babushka," a girl said, "but Dragon is blushing to the roots of his hair!"

"Dragon? What a strange name! My name is Daisy, by the way. And you would be?"

"Roxanne... May I ask you something?"

"Ask away, Roxanne!"

"Are you blind since birth? If you don't mind my asking?"

Another well-bred kid, who forgot for one moment that she was no longer *square*, *straight*, and that she was supposed to be rude at all times.

"Yes, blind since birth, and no, I don't mind. I even appreciate your interest."

"So how can you picture colours in your head?"

"I can't. For me colours are just words... The sky is blue, the village green is green, and the green smells of grass!"

Daisy explained more or less what she always told people: how she only knew the world from sounds and smells; from her sense of touch; how important miniatures and models were to her, because she could apprehend them with her fingers to get an idea of the larger objects they represented. She explained the importance of language for the blind, and of the innate sense of orientation we all have.

"When I was at school—a special school for the blind—, they taught us the techniques of *mapping* knowledge in our minds. It's like putting different ideas and objects in different rooms of a mental house so that you always know where to find them. Most people have no idea of these

techniques, but normal people could benefit from them as well...”

“Why do you refer to us as ‘normal people’? Doesn’t that imply that you are *abnormal*, somehow? And you were just telling us that you don’t see yourself as inferior?”

“Valid point, Roxanne! But to tell you the truth, when I refer to ‘normal people’, I’m implying that we blind people are *superior* to you normal people in some ways...”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, and I’d like to give you a little demonstration of my powers... Who wants to play a special kind of blind man’s bluff? I need twelve volunteers!”

All the youngsters in the room stirred; just like little children they seemed to be strangely roused by the prospect of playing a game with the blind old lady. Daisy instructed them to sit in a circle around her; then when discussions arose, she insisted that yes, they had to be twelve. A couple of volunteers were sent outside to commandeer a few of the kids hanging around by the front door. In the meantime Daisy had taken place in the middle of the room on a meditation cushion provided by Roxanne, who was very excited by the prospect of this unknown game.

“Now,” Daisy finally instructed, “I want all twelve players to sit around me at an equal distance from one another. The person sitting right across from me goes first. You say: ‘the person sitting to the left of me is...’ and you give me the name of that person. Then that person repeats the phrase and gives the next name. Get it? Never give your *own* name, only your *neighbour’s*... Now let’s go!”

And they did what Daisy asked, the names went round the circle with lots of giggling: Dawn, Julian, Felicity, Piglet, Roxanne, Dragon...

“All right,” Daisy said as soon as the circle had been completed, “now we start playing a kind of blind man’s

buff... Anyone in the circle can ask me 'who is sitting two positions to my right?' or 'three positions to my left?' and I have to answer. Who wants to start?"

"I do!" Roxanne immediately cried, sitting somewhat behind Daisy. "Who is sitting four positions to my right?"

"Dawn... and you are Roxanne."

"That's right!"

Then a boy sitting exactly on the left asked, "Who is sitting three positions to my left?"

"Dawn again, of course... and you are Bruce."

"Yeah! Groovy."

And so it went on for a while, faster and faster. Someone even asked the name of who was sitting eight positions to her left, and after a short hesitation Daisy answered correctly. Then two kids tried to stealthily trade places, but Daisy heard them shuffling and took note. When the others excitedly started asking trick questions, Daisy could still serenely identify the two, especially as it were a boy and a girl who had swapped positions. She turned out to be unbeatable.

Of course, when they had satisfied themselves that Daisy knew them all by name, they wanted to know how she did it. "Well, it's a simple example of mental mapping... I memorised twelve voices and twelve names, and I pinned them to the twelve hours of the clock-face around me: Amber at twelve o'clock, Dawn at one o'clock, Julian at two, Felicity exactly at my right hand side, at three, and so on and so forth. With that information firmly mapped in my head, it is easy enough to answer all your queries... It *looks* as if none of you has given me their own name, but that's irrelevant, because I pinned the voice and the name of each person to *one same* clock position..."

The hippies were much impressed and immediately started discussing Daisy's little demonstration. And now that she knew most of them by name, Daisy had no

difficulties following what was going on, even though the conversation was rather incoherent. The young people tended to speak in short exclamations: Groovy! Far out! Trippy!

One girl, Morag, said, "I had no idea that being blind is so cool!"

"Yeah! I always pitied the blind, but, you know, maybe they can see more than us?"

"Yeah, yeah, right!"

"Being blind is totally trippy!"

Daisy sat on her cushion in the middle of the room, smiling like a benevolent Buddha, and enjoyed herself immensely. When a few kids asked her to take off her dark glasses, she obliged them without hesitation. Their reactions to her atrophied eyes were frank and brutal, as was always the case with children. At some stage the boy named Dragon, who hadn't said much, moved closer to her and muttered, "Wait a minute, wait a minute... Daisy, is it okay with you that we talk about you like this? I mean, we're not hurting your feelings or anything?"

"No, no, not at all, darling. As I already said: I don't miss what I never had, and I don't feel diminished in any way."

At length Daisy decided that it was time to take her leave, as the conversations around her had petered out and she didn't want to overstay her welcome. She made a point of telling the whole company that she had enjoyed their hospitality very much, and that maybe she would pay them another visit, sometime soon.

Daisy then hinted that she needed help to get to the Tube station, even though she knew her way by now, and that it was only five hundred yards down the street. Dragon immediately volunteered. While they walked hand in hand, Daisy asked, "Dragon is not your real name, I suppose?"

"No. The others call me that, but I see myself more as

'Dragon-Slayer'... You know when you take an acid trip? Sometimes you can have a *bad* trip? Well, I'm the one who helps those on a bad trip to stay cool. I help them *slay* their *dragons*, see?"

"Does that mean that you're *not* high on acid at that moment?"

"Yeah. I always hold back a little... you know?"

"Well, that's very nice of you, Dragon. I myself am a physiotherapist. I slay the dragons of pain!"

"Cool!"

As they took leave of one another in front of the Tube station, the boy spontaneously folded Daisy in his arms and cuddled her. She responded with a very strong bear hug of her own, almost lifting the slightly built boy from the ground. "At my old school for the blind, we used to call this the 'heart-throb hug', because if you do it properly you can feel the other person's heartbeat throbbing against your own chest."

When Daisy got home on that Saturday afternoon, her neighbour, Mrs Maurois, came out on the landing and said, "I've been waiting for you, dear, there is something in the paper I must absolutely read to you: an article about your exhibition!"

"Oh! great, Mrs Em! Please come in, let's have it! But first I must put on the kettle, I'm dying for a cup of tea. I have just spent an exhausting couple of hours at a hippie commune in Shepherd's Bush!"

"Good Lord! What on earth were you doing there, my dear?"

"What indeed? It was very interesting, though..."

"My dear Daisy, as always you never cease to astonish one!"

As soon as they were settled in Daisy's sitting room with a cup of tea at hand, Mrs Maurois rustled the

newspaper. "This is the last edition of the Islington Gazette. I don't have a subscription myself, but Mrs Bonner from the grocery shop always gives it to me when she's done with it. And here we have a nice feature about you, our great artist, with a whole page of pictures of your works. It's called *Blind Artist's Vision*."

"Very catchy title! And the by-line?"

"Erm... Ah, yes: Nick Aaron."

"That is indeed the man who interviewed me at the opening... Please proceed."

The old lady read out the story with great relish, as it was very positive and clearly meant to be rather flattering for the artist. But Daisy frowned severely, and when her friend had finished reading, she grumbled, "Once again, the press has published a deplorable piece of prose, Mrs Em..."

"Really? Why on earth should you say that?"

"Well, when we talked at the exhibition this Aaron chap was putting very intelligent questions to me and seemed genuinely interested in my work, so I had high hopes for a competent piece of reporting. But instead, he has produced some tired bromides about the brave blind lady who creates beautiful art against all odds. He has written exactly what the public wants to read and what the Islington Gazette are willing to print. The 'difficulties' I'm supposed to have 'overcome' exist only in the man's imagination!"

"Oh Daisy! Sometimes you are too hard on yourself and on others..."

Daisy thanked her neighbour for reading the newspaper piece to her, and then invited her to stay on and watch a rerun of *The Avengers* on ITV. Mrs Maurois and Daisy were both great fans of John Steed and Emma Peel, and the older lady was a great admirer of Daisy's expensive television set. Of course, when her blind neighbour had acquired this marvel, she had been baffled. Daisy had

explained, “Remember when people used to sit by the wireless in the evenings and listened to blood curdling radio plays? Well, for me an episode of *The Avengers* is just like that.”

“But you can’t even see what they *look* like. Steed has a bowler hat that he can use as a throwing weapon, and he has an umbrella with a hidden sword inside, and pretty Emma is always wearing outlandish outfits...”

“I know, I can’t see all that, but I get the idea all the same. And I just adore the witty dialogue, the crazy plots... And later in the evening, I find that the Newsroom broadcasts are often more interesting than the news bulletins on the radio!”

“Well, by that time I’m already in bed and snoring, thank you very much.”

“But that’s the thing Mrs Em, when I want to turn in early, or when I have to go out and I don’t want to miss *The Avengers*, I can always record it on my tape deck!”

“Good Lord! You mean you can watch it from a tape?”

“No! Of course not! But I can *listen* to it! No, fancy watching motion pictures from a magnetic tape!”

Daisy didn’t even mention the complicated timer she had to set for the appointed hour, which switched on the tape deck and the TV simultaneously, so that the former could record the latter. All this high-end audio equipment had been acquired and installed only recently: radio tuner, HiFi stereo amplifier and loudspeakers, ditto turntable. Mrs Maurois had compared this new-fangled “audio wall” to the Mission Control room of the American space program in Houston.

“You’re absolutely right, Mrs Em,” Daisy had replied, “this is the nerve centre from where I monitor the modern world. We live in the age of the mass media, and I like to keep abreast of things...”

After the rerun of *The Avengers*, Daisy was left alone

and decided to do some ironing while listening to her brand new Beatles LP: Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band! Mrs Maurois could have stayed, but listening to the Beatles was just one bridge too far for her. "I'm not going to waste my precious time with those long-haired monkeys!"

"But they're wonderful, Mrs Em! Their lyrics are hilarious!"

"No, thank you all the same!"

So she had fled. Daisy put side two on the turntable and listened to the first song, "Within You Without You", the one with the sitar music. She unfolded her ironing board and collected her freshly laundered white overcoats from work. She set to do her chore and listened.

Daisy had liked the Beatles as soon as she had become aware of them a couple of years before. That had been at the beginning of the Beatlemania, of course. The Fab Four had taken the land—and the commercial radio stations—by storm: John-Paul-Georges-and-Ringo were suddenly everywhere. And they were fun, you had to admit it, and their hit singles were damn good. Then you had a lot of other so-called Rock bands as well, and even *folk* singers like Bob Dylan and Donovan, all of them damn good; all pretty exciting in Daisy's humble opinion.

And so Daisy had embraced the "swinging sixties", which was highly unusual for someone of her generation, but that was perhaps because she could not *see* what was going on, she could only *hear* it on her top notch audio wall, especially on the FM stations on the radio. What you could *see* was rather off-putting to most people her age: the long hair, short skirts, scruffy looks and so on.

Also, Daisy had just found out that she had come full circle with her sunglasses. In the thirties and forties it had been normal to wear round glasses—Huxley, who was almost blind at the time, had done the same—, but in the fifties it had become out of date. Everybody was wearing

butterfly glasses, and Daisy at the time had been hopelessly out of fashion because she kept to her old-style specs when she went out. But now she was fashionable again: even John Lennon, apparently, wore round glasses nowadays.

Then recently the hippies had made their appearance on the scene. Some of them came over from the States, lured by the reputation of “Swinging London”, but most of them were simply local kids who morphed into San Francisco-style hippies, inspired by the “Summer of Love” that was all over the news.

During her lunch breaks in Hyde Park, Daisy witnessed the “sit-ins” of the hippies on Speakers’ Corner to “legalize pot”. She got to know the pungent smell of marijuana and unkempt bodies. The sound of Indian music and of the wooden clogs the girls were wearing. In places like Notting Hill, Petticoat Lane, Piccadilly Circus, the hippies had suddenly taken over the streets. It felt as if there had been an invasion of a benevolent alien race from outer space who had conquered the world and imposed a new order through silly idealistic slogans: “Peace and love”; “Make love, not war.”

Daisy didn’t mind, she thought it was rather fun, even though she didn’t take their ideas too seriously. Her younger colleagues from the group practice where she worked, on the other hand, felt too close for comfort to this younger generation that seemed to dismiss *them* out of hand.

But even the new ideas coming out of the so-called “youth culture” were not completely alien to Daisy, as she had always kept in touch with the works of Aldous Huxley. *Brave New World*, which she’d actually read, or rather, that Beatrice had read out to her, had already prepared her for a world where sex and drugs had a free reign. And that was a book from the thirties, that Beatrice and she had read in the late forties! Then there had been *The Doors of Perception*

and *Island*, the former in the fifties and the latter at the beginning of the sixties. Daisy hadn't read these, but had heard about them on the radio. Long before the first hippies had appeared on the scene, Huxley's outlandish ideas were being discussed in dead earnest on the most highbrow literary magazines on the BBC. Listening to these, it had struck Daisy that most of Huxley's admirers were older than herself, and some of them much younger. But the intellectuals of her own generation, those who had done the actual fighting against Hitler—or had been engaged or married to them—, those did not seem to care much for Huxley's ideas. She herself being something of an exception...

Daisy was listening to side one of Sgt Pepper for the second time, and she was almost done with ironing her overcoats. She always felt some satisfaction at the crisp and professional feel of her work uniforms. And that was when the telephone started ringing. Before she could pick it up she had to deposit the hot iron in its metal cradle—as a blind person you couldn't be too careful—and step over to the stereo to turn the volume down. But the phone kept on ringing relentlessly. When Daisy finally picked it up, a male voice exclaimed, "Ah, there you are, Daisy Hayes, you took your time!"

"Well, McCullough, a blind girl has to grope her way to the bloody phone, you know!"

"Oh! keep the tragic stories for those who actually believe them!"

Daisy chuckled. "Why are you calling, anyway? Wasn't I supposed to call *you* when I had any news?"

"Well, do you have any?"

"Well, I spent a couple of hours at the *Island* on Uxbridge Road, yes."

"Any information about Loretta?"

"Well, no. I can't just go barging in there and demand

to know exactly what happened to Loretta a year ago, can I? Although, come to think of it, that's probably exactly what *you* did, am I right?"

"Well..."

"There you are, then. And the police did the same. No, you wanted the feminine touch, McCullough, and that is what you will have. This afternoon I was able to get to know a dozen kids in there. And I got them all interested in the outlook of a blind old lady. But there were two in particular, who seemed even more amenable than the others: a girl named Roxanne and a boy everyone calls 'Dragon'. I have high hopes of establishing a real understanding with at least one of those two, or even with both. I didn't say a word about Loretta, of course, but I did manage to more or less get permission to come back next Saturday."

"Next Saturday? But then you'll waste a whole week!"

"I know! And I understand that you're anxious to hear more about your daughter, but believe me, there's no way I can get these kids to confide in me if I move any faster than that. In fact, I'm already pushing my luck as it is..."

"Yeah... Okay... You're probably right, I can see that. You're doing a good job, Daisy Hayes. We'll talk again next Saturday."

"Goodbye to you too," Daisy muttered to the dead phone. The man had already hung up.

V Here and now

I am still asleep when the Master brings something down for breakfast. I don't hear him coming. Suddenly I wake up and he's there, addressing Loretta bossily. "I've cooked a double portion. You share with the new girl. Be good; I'll be back tonight..."

He shoves a tray with food and water through a hatch at the bottom of the barred door. Or so it appears to me, listening carefully to the scraping sounds. Some other supplies have been shoved back and forth over the concrete floor just before that, a pail with water taken out, another shoved in.

Then a key is turned in the lock of the hatch, apparently, and shortly after that the man's footsteps recede. "So he doesn't even enter our prison to feed us," I tell myself. "We're like dangerous beasts kept in a cage..."

For breakfast we're having overcooked spaghetti with some cheap tomato sauce, obviously something out of a tin. The whole thing lukewarm. But I am hungry and wolf down my share, that is: what's left after Loretta has finished eating and passes the pan and spoon over to me. The first mouthfuls of food and water are painful to swallow, because of last night's throttling, but the pain eases after a while.

“Do we always have pasta for breakfast?”

“Not always. Sometimes rice with a curry sauce from a tin, or baked beans... Oh yes, and a couple of pills. Reach out for the tray, here are yours.”

“What kind of pills are these?” I ask a little apprehensively.

“Oh, you know, just a vitamin pill... and *‘the pill’*.”

“You mean like a contraceptive?”

“Yeah, that’s it!”

“Well, I have never taken that before, and I was raped last night, so it might be a little late.”

“I know, but take it anyway... Just feel around on the tray, there’s two pills right in front of you.”

We are both sitting on the concrete floor in front of our beds. The chains attached to the wall above us don’t allow us to touch, but Loretta passes things on to me by pushing the tray over to my side. So I find the pills and take them with a sip of water, hoping it is nothing more sinister than a contraceptive and multivitamins.

“Now let me guess: dinner will be more of the same, right?”

“Yes, the Master must have a lot of crates full of tins in stock... and biscuits and chocolate bars, of course. We have a portion here that we’ll have to share and make us last until dinnertime...”

After eating, we wash and groom ourselves from a pail of water, brush our teeth with Loretta’s toothbrush and paste. We have to wash up our breakfast utensils with the same water. “A bit disgusting,” Loretta admits, “but it can’t be helped.”

Then I want to get dressed. The previous night the rapist brought me back almost naked and manacled me while the clasp was still chocking me. After groping around I find my clothes in a heap at the foot of my bed, but it is not so easy to put them on. With my knickers and my skirt,

my sheer tights and my shoes, there is no problem, but because of the chains I cannot put on my bra, my blouse and my sweater, so I have to tie something around my shoulders in such a way as to be as decent as possible.

“And now what?” I ask.

“And now nothing. We have to wait. We have to amuse ourselves. I don’t have anything to read at the moment, apart from my dictionary.”

“But the lights are on?”

“Oh yeah. They were switched on when the Master came down and they’ll be switched off when it’s time to go to sleep...”

“And that’s how you’ve been living for a year now?”

“Yeah. Sometimes I find the days so long that I almost look forward to a fuck with the Master in the evening”

“Oh! poor thing. I’m really sorry...”

“Well, last night he didn’t touch me, and then he came back with you a couple of hours later.”

“Was that the first time he didn’t rape you?”

“No. Sometimes he skips a day, and sometimes, as I told you last night, he just has a quick one in here...”

“And when he skips it? Does he still bring you food and all that?”

“Yes. I have no complaints there.”

“A pretty conscientious fellow, huh?”

Now I ask Loretta to describe herself, the surroundings, the layout of our prison and of this so called ‘pleasure room’. Loretta speaks haltingly, in a roundabout way. She seems to have trouble focusing on what she is saying, but she does expound at some length on the fact that she herself is very pretty and that she has beautiful hair: a “mane” of blond, wild, curly hair, “quite smashing, in fact.”

Meanwhile I explore our cell, for as far as I can reach, but apart from some spectacular rattling of chains, the

results of this probe are meagre. We talk about the daily routine, what the Master looks like, his tastes and his habits. Loretta tells me that the Master is something of an exhibitionist, and likes to show off and brag about his cock, "But with you being blind, I guess he won't have much fun on that account..." Loretta tells all she knows, and in the end she reflects: "What a funny thing it is, Daisy, that a man like that never seems to tire of fucking someone he doesn't even like, day after day after day..."

"I'm glad you still find that strange, even after all you've been through..."

"But the strangest thing of all, you know, is that after he's done, he just goes on and on playing with my hair... Like he can't get enough."

"Well that's good... It sounds like, in a perverse way, he's really infatuated."

I am now sitting on the floor in front of my iron cot, leaning back on my arms, the chains stretched. "Tell me Loretta, erm, Lorry, if you also sit like this, can we touch one another with our feet?"

"Well, I dunno... Let me try." The girl shuffles forward on her behind, and it turns out that we can touch quite well...

"Wait," I say, "I'll take off my shoes. You take off yours if you're wearing any..."

"I only have a pair of wooden clogs. By the way, why do you wear such sensible shoes, Daisy? It's so ugly!"

"Well, as a blind person you want to be able to feel where you're walking, so you're never going to wear high heels or wooden shoes. But in the summer when it's really hot, I like to wear those Indian flipflops that are all the rage at the moment, the flimsier the better..."

Now we sit on the floor in the middle of our cell, facing each other, and I find that I can massage the girl's legs with the soles of my outstretched feet. I can reach almost to the

top of the girl's thighs. "Wouldn't it be a lark if I could arouse you sexually with my big toe? We could cuckold the Master!"

Loretta giggles, and starts caressing my legs as well. "You're an all right lady, Daise."

"Tell me, Lorry, why do you always refer to that pervert as 'the Master'?"

"In the beginning he just kept hitting me until I called him that... Now it's become a habit, almost second nature."

"Oh God, I'm so sorry! When I hear this, it makes my blood boil..."

"I know... and it makes you wonder, again, what's eating a man like that?"

"I think it's a problem all men have. They're randy. They're obsessed about sex, but they just can't accept that the object of all this desire, women, are also human beings, with a mind and a will of their own. A lot of them just can't handle that... You ask any man what he really wants, deep down, and you'll find that his secret wish is to be like King Solomon and have a thousand wives. A lot of young wives, a few more mature; Chinese ones, Negro ones, Swedish type and Spanish; blondes, brunettes, redheads; plump and skinny ones and everything in between... And all of them only too willing to do all the tricks their king and master asks of them. And he, of course, finds that when he doesn't need them, they should just leave him alone..."

Loretta giggles again. "You have a way of putting things, Daise...Would you say that my father is also like that?"

"Oh yes. I've talked to your father often enough to know that he's a *real* man..."

"And your own father?"

"Hard to say! A gentle, quiet banker. But probably him too, yes..."

"Can we ever win from them, do you think? I mean

from *men*?”

“Well, at least we can try. We must fight back. The good thing is that men are rather predictable in that way. The Master treats us like dangerous beasts, precisely because he’s afraid of us... Now I want you to describe this clamp he uses to throttle us: how does it work?”

Loretta finds it difficult to describe and explain. Apparently there are two half-circle elements with a hinge, that close around your neck, and there’s some kind of ratchet mechanism—you can hear it clicking—by means of which the Master tightens it just so you almost choke, but not quite...

“So you might say that this looks like an oversized handcuff, yes?”

“A handcuff? Now that you mention it, yes. Maybe it’s the same kind of thing.”

“But how does he release it? That’s the main question...”

“I don’t know. That part always happens in my back, of course, so I can’t see it. All I can say is that he can release the clamp instantly when he wants to.”

“Exactly. So there must be some kind of latch that frees the ratchet at once. Now, tonight the Master is probably going to take me away with him again. I want you to look closely when he puts on the clamp. And when he brings me back, how he releases it. I’m pretty sure you can figure out how it works. You see, what is new is that we are *two* now. We can work together; gather all the information we need... And then one of these days, if I could knock the rapist out during a transfer, you could unlock the clamp for me, even though my hands will be manacled in my back... For instance, when he brings me back, and we’re all three together in here, in the cell.”

“All right, but how do you want to knock him out, with your hands tied in your back?”

“I was thinking of a headbutt or something, hitting the base of his nose with my forehead as hard as I can...”

“Okay! That sounds good.”

“But for the moment we have to observe and prepare...”

“You know, Daise, for a blind person, you’ve got pretty good ideas.”

Now at least Loretta sounds hopeful, I reflect. That’s a good thing.

As soon as I get my vocal cords under control again, I say: “You seem to think that you’re very clever, but I find you pathetic...”

“Oh really? But you’re the one who’s tied down with her legs wide open, and I’m the one who’s going to shave your bush...”

“My point exactly! Your whole life is dominated by your most base instincts. You seem to devote an awful lot of energy to satisfying your animal lusts.”

“And what’s wrong with that? By the way: you’d better keep still or I’ll cut up your pussy with this razor... You can’t see it of course, but it’s sharp!”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong, apart from breaking every law in the book. When I married for the first time, my husband and I were both eighteen years old and madly in love... When we kissed, our lips would tingle! Now, those first times that we went to bed together, that was something... A fuck to die for! Each and every time! And that’s why I’m not afraid of dying anymore. My life has been fulfilled...”

“Be careful what you say, girl. I might very soon oblige you about dying.”

“Well, anyway, you’re pathetic. I’m pretty sure you never could find a girlfriend; you can’t keep a girl happy; you have to lock us up!”

“Okay, now I’ve heard enough from you... It’s time for some serious work...”

I have been tied down on what Loretta calls *the rack*, one of the contraptions of the so-called *pleasure room*. (“We know only too well who’s pleasure we’re referring to,” I said to her.) It’s just an iron frame double bed, fitted with the leather shackles needed to tie someone down spread-eagled. But the reason why Lorry calls this setup “the rack”, is an added feature: a solid wooden beam attached transversally to the frame of the bed, so that when your ankles are attached to it and the shackles pulled tight, your legs are forced wide open, at almost a right angle with your rump.

In the meantime the rapist has finished shaving my bush, and he announces: “Now: didn’t I tell you that I intend to make you change your tune, girl? And you already know about the horsewhip, right? You can’t see it but I have it right here. So now that your legs are wide open, I’m going to whip that nice pussy of yours until you beg me to fuck you...”

And immediately I feel the sharp sting of the first blow on that most sensitive part of my body, that the contraption I am tied to forces me to expose. The pain literally takes my breath away.

“Okay, missy, now I want to hear you say ‘I beg you: fuck me, Master!’ Come on! I want to hear you say it!”

Another blow. “Ouch! All right! I beg you: fuck me, Master?”

“That’s better, but I want it more sincere, more heartfelt!”

A few blows of the horsewhip follow, and each time I repeat “I beg you: fuck me, Master!”

Then finally the rapist seems satisfied; I can hear him put down the whip; and in a girlish voice I now add, “... pretty please, darling Master?”

“Don’t start me again, girl! Anyway, you’ve given me a tremendous hard-on, thank you very much. You girls are lucky that I’m so easily aroused. Time to gag you.”

“Yeah, well. Please don’t stomp me in the stomach. I’ll open my mouth if you ask nicely...”

But the man punches me anyway. And then he lies down on top of me. Apparently he is very much into shaved pussies, deep penetration, and the missionary position. Of course, deep or not deep, under normal circumstances a man would be supporting his weight with his elbows, but the Master just wallows with his whole weight on top of his victim like a big fat pig, grunting and panting, taking his time. Probably something to do with the Tantric sex practices he learned from Tiger and Piglet.

I try to remain detached. “Undergo the whole thing with the clinical attitude of a true physical therapist,” I admonish myself. The rapist, I now observe, is rather fat but not very tall. In fact, he must be a lot shorter than me... “That could be useful to know someday.”

I also note that I am only being gagged at the last moment, when the man needs to get physically close to my face for intercourse, and I draw the conclusion that he is afraid of being bitten. “The reason he stomps me in the stomach is not only to force me to open my mouth, but to debilitate me by making me gasp for air. He’s afraid I might bite his hand while he’s putting the dog’s-collar in my mouth...” To explore the setup further, I now focus my attention on my rapist’s neck.

When the man finally starts exerting himself, I discreetly nuzzle his shoulder, the inside of his neck, feeling my way around with my nose and my cheekbone. “If only I could bite him, just as he’s working up some steam, his heart pumping nicely, his blood pressure up. Then if I could bite right... here, I should be able to section the carotid artery... The blood would just squirt out and the

man would bleed to death within minutes. Wonderful!” But of course this only proves that the man is right to be very careful. “He won’t forget to gag me in a hurry... Maybe if I manage to engage him in a very distracting conversation... Or on the contrary, keep so quiet that he just forgets that I’m even there... On the other hand, I would still be tied down to the rack, with no means of escape. Difficult!”

While I am being frogmarched back to the cell with the clamp almost throttling me, I carefully observe what happens. Because of the chocking device, the man appears to be in a great hurry to undo and retie the different sets of leather straps and handcuffs involved in each of these *transfers*. As a means of speeding up the proceedings, it seems to work both ways... He is perhaps being rushed along just as much as his victim. Interesting!

As soon as the man has left us alone, and when I can speak again, I croak, “Did you manage to see how the clamp works, Lorry?”

“No! I’m sorry, Daise! The Master was standing in the way. On purpose... He was keeping an eye on me and he made sure I couldn’t see what he was doing.”

“Oh! well, it doesn’t matter, darling... Another time maybe... There’s another thing that you should be able to tell me: are your wrists thinner than mine?”

“My wrists? Yeah... It’s hard to tell as we’re always manacled, but I’m definitely much smaller and sligher than you... Why do you ask?”

“Well, I’m interested in the workings of those leather straps that the Master keeps tying and untying on a daily basis. After all this time there must be a dent in the leather where the buckle is fixed around your wrists. But for me it probably needs one or two holes extra, and there’s no indentation in the leather yet... So maybe somehow I could induce the Master to tie me too loosely, without him even noticing...”

“Ah yes, that’s clever thinking...”

“Well, it’s one of the possible strategies to explore, you know. Another thing I’m interested in, is the door that gives access to this dungeon from the outside. Have you ever seen it?”

“Yes, I did... I like ‘dungeon’, by the way, that’s exactly what this place is, huh?”

“So you weren’t unconscious when he brought you here?”

“Oh no. But I’d rather not talk about it...”

“Oh, sorry! I understand: painful memories... But you see, it strikes me that just now the Master brought down the food *before* he took me to the pleasure room. So obviously he doesn’t want to make two trips... So is the entrance to the dungeon hard to operate?”

“Yes. The door is concealed behind a closet, you know, a cupboard that is fixed to the door, and the whole thing is very heavy, made of concrete or something, and hard to move...”

“Rather like a bunker door, then? All right. Good. Now think carefully. Did the Master use a key, or did he use a code to open that door, do you remember?”

“A key! That I remember! He opened the cupboard, removed a few things, and stuck the key in at the back somewhere. When we were inside, he closed the door and turned the key in the lock on the inside... That key is part of those that he carries with him on a key ring, together with the keys of the door of our cell and of the hatch. And then there is also a key that fits all the handcuffs, hanging on a chainlet attached to the keyring.”

“Excellent! That’s great news. We must find a way to get hold of that keyring. And imagine the difficulty if there had been a numeric lock with a keypad and the Master had the code in his head...”

“You’re right! I’ve never thought of that. So you’re really

making plans for an escape, huh?”

“Well, let me put it this way: I’m certainly reviewing all the options.”

We two prisoners settle into a daily routine. After breakfast, the morning toilette, and washing up, I insist on a serious workout session—what I call “chain-rattling callisthenics”—for at least an hour. “Apart from the chain-rattling,” I say, “I want to hear you panting, Lorry. You really need some exercise...” As a physiotherapist, of course, I’m an expert at this kind of thing and I know an endless number of effective movements to bring enough variety into these sessions.

The same thing applies for massage, the next item on the agenda. Sitting across from each other at the end of our chains, we can touch one another’s legs with our feet. I first rub Loretta’s legs to relax her, before Loretta tries the same moves on her teacher—me. “You’re really good at this stuff,” the girl marvels, “where did you learn all this gymnastics and massage stuff, anyway?”

“Well, I’m a professional physiotherapist! You don’t even know half of what I can do...”

“A therapist, really? So you’re a masseuse... But how’s that even possible? You’re blind!”

“Never underestimate the capabilities of the disabled, didn’t I tell you? Besides, it’s an old tradition for the blind to do massage; it’s one of the many jobs that suit us perfectly...”

“What are the other ones, then?”

“Telephone switchboard operator! Actually, there aren’t many of those anymore... No, but you know, nowadays blind people can do almost anything they set their mind to. When I was young it was much harder to find a suitable trade.”

Having taken care of the body, we now turn to training

the mind. "Let's first concentrate on the dictionary, Lorry." To start with, we help one another for a while to memorise the definitions of new words that the young girl reads aloud for us both. Then we like to play a game that I have devised: taking turns, we submit a difficult word, and the other has to tell its meaning. Even if you don't know, you have to try anyway, give any definition you can think up, and that's the fun part: it really makes you laugh when you find you have it all wrong. Of course I know a lot of words, but my challenger has a dictionary and she can make her queries really hard... Then, when it's my turn, I have to come up with a challenge from memory alone. And so, most of the time, we end up playing pretty much even.

I marvel at how smart the girl really is. "Tell me, Lorry, why did you hate school so much? Why did you run away from home?"

"Well, it's going to make me look pretty stupid, looking back, but the thing is, you know, they make you wear a dumpy uniform, something really pathetic. And then one day you meet these girls dressed like Gipsy queens, really beautiful, and you just never want to go back to school again... And those hippie princesses tell you 'come with us, you can stay at our commune, there's room for everyone, no worries'. And you follow them, and there's no going back. And now here I am, in the Master's clutches..."

Loretta asks me about what is going on outside. "Are the hippies still going strong? Are the freaks still hanging out all over Notting Hill?"

"Oh yes! You can smell the pot all day long, and at night of course... And you can hear the strumming of guitars... It is still one big Gipsy camp out there!"

I tell her about the sit-ins at Speaker's Corner to legalise marijuana, and I describe the extraordinary cover of the Beatles' new LP: *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. I haven't seen it myself, of course, but Margery and Beatrice

have described it to me.

I report how Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones was sentenced to be jailed for a year for possession of illegal drugs, and that Mick Jagger was sentenced to three months for the same offence, but that of course they both got out on bail the very next morning...

“Oh, how I would like to be out of here!” Loretta cries wistfully.

“Yes, that’s the worst of it,” I tell her. “The Master is stealing your youth from you!” Then I say, “Now, talking of which, if you get a second chance, will you go back to school instead of only hanging out?”

“Well, apart from the dumpy uniform, there’s another problem: I suck at maths!”

“All right then, maybe we can take up some maths in our daily routine. It’s not easy without paper and pencil, but I can teach you to organise your thoughts like a blind person, to map it in your mind, to put things in ledgers left and right and manipulate the contents at will... Do you remember the word problems they made you solve a couple of years ago, when you started doing algebra?”

“Word problems? Ah, yeah, I hated those...”

“Now let me think... Ah yes, for example: the farmer’s wife keeps chickens and rabbits. All those animals running about in one pen create a lot of confusion in her mind. The only thing she knows for sure is that there are 25 animals altogether. Now one day, in a playful mood, she counts their legs: they have 64 legs altogether. Can you tell the farmer’s wife how many rabbits and how many chickens there are?”

“Oh yeah, brilliant! Like she knows how many legs, but not how many of each kind of animal there are...”

“Well, it’s just so you can do some algebra. Now, you have to imagine three cubicles mounted on a wall in front of you. On your left there are two red pigeonholes, on the

right a blue one. —For me red and blue are only words, of course, but even so it helps—. In the first cubicle on the left you place X , the number of rabbits. All right? In the second cubicle you place 25 minus X , the number of chickens... And on the right hand side, in the blue cubicle, you place the number 25 , the total number of animals. So X and 25 minus X together are equal to 25 . Got it? Do you see those three cubicles on the wall? Do you see what's inside each one of them? Can you see it all in your mind's eye?"

And so we carry on for a couple of hours.

VI The Island revisited

When Daisy arrived at the Island on that second Saturday, she sensed immediately that something was different. Hovering by the door of the big front room, she could hear the same sitar music twanging in the background, and the place still smelled of pot, joss sticks and unwashed bodies, but there seemed to be some tension in the air. It felt like walking into a room after there has been some bickering going on. You were struck by a kind of embarrassed silence. Daisy wondered, “Were they having a row?”

She stepped forward and made a point of calling out light-heartedly, “Hullo? May I come in?”

The reactions were mixed; she was greeted by many voices at once. There were friendly voices welcoming her, “Hey-hey, blind lady! You back?” There were demonstrative groans as well, as was to be expected, “Oh, no! Not you again!” A mocking boyish voice (Piglet?) joked, “Still looking for Lions’ tea shop, lady?” A couple of other kids sniggered at that. Daisy stayed put in the doorway, noncommittal, smiling blandly. Surely they were not going to throw her out? She listened carefully for the voices of the kids she knew.

Then a more hectoring male voice that she had never

heard before challenged her. "What do you want, anyway?"

"Oh, erm... actually, I'd like to speak to Dragon... Is he around somewhere? Dragon!?"

Daisy hadn't heard her great friend's voice yet, but then again he was not the most talkative of the kids. Suddenly she felt a feminine presence at her side: patchouli and pungent hair. "I'm glad you're here, Daisy," a soft voice murmured. "Dragon is freaking out. He's in a funk."

"Roxanne?" Daisy involuntarily made a welcoming gesture with her arms, and the girl fell into an embrace with her and held her tight for a few seconds.

"Where is he? Can I see him?"

"Yes, yes, he's in one of the pads upstairs, I'll show you the way." Taking her hand and leading her up the narrow, steep staircase at the end of the corridor, Roxanne said, "I recognized your voice from upstairs. What a relief!"

Daisy said nothing: what on earth was going on?

She was led to a small room with an overwhelming musty stench to it: stifling, and reeking of unwashed bodies and clothes, of perennially unchanged bedding. Sometimes you can smell despair just as plainly as you can see it. Roxanne pulled Daisy down and made her sit at the edge of a mattress on the floor. Groping around her, Daisy felt a clammy, unresponsive body lying there on its side. "Dragon? Is that you?"

The mumbling that answered her made her think that sometimes you can *hear* despair as plainly as you can see it, too. But it was Dragon all right, unmistakably. "What's the matter, darling? What's wrong?"

There was no answer. Daisy turned her face towards where Roxanne was standing and mouthed "Thank you"; and with a slight nod she motioned her to leave them alone. Roxanne shuffled out and closed the door quietly. Then Daisy put her hands on Dragon's tense shoulder and neck, brushed his long hair aside and started massaging softly.

“You know, darling, I have the feeling that there’s a dragon with us in this room, and I’m not going to leave you before we’ve slain it together...”

Still no answer. “Turn over... Lie on your belly so I can massage both shoulders... Try to relax.” Daisy went on kneading the tense flesh.

“What is it, Dragon? What’s bothering you? You know that you can trust me, don’t you?”

“Yeah...”

“So? What on earth is going on?”

“I’m in love.” Almost a whisper.

“Well, isn’t that supposed to be a source of happiness?”

“No!” A despairing wail, this time. “It’s *no good*, because we believe in *free love!*” The boy tensed under her fingers and Daisy kneaded harder.

“Yes... yes... that *does* complicate things, huh? And *who* are you in love with?”

“Amber...”

“Amber, right. I remember Amber. And what does *she* have to say about this?”

“Well, that’s the thing. She’s not here. They took her away...”

“Took her away? Who took her away?”

“Tiger and Piglet.”

“Are those two in charge around here?”

“No! In a commune *no one* is in charge!”

“But still, Amber has to do what those two say?”

“Well... yes. But only if she wants to.”

“And what if she doesn’t?”

“Then we won’t get any pot and acid and stuff...”

“What stuff?”

“You know, like food, money to pay the rent?”

“Okay... So Tiger and Piglet took Amber away, but only because she wanted to. So where did she go? I believe Tiger and Piglet are downstairs right now...”

“Yeah, I know, but Amber will be back later...”

“But where did she go? Where is she now?”

“I don’t know! That’s the thing: I’m worried sick about her!”

“Well, you just said that she’ll be back later. The girls that are ‘taken away’ always come back, don’t they?”

“Smm’vthmdunnt...”

“What’s that? I didn’t hear you.”

“*Some Of Them Don’t!*”

“Oh! Well. But that means that most of them do! Amber will soon be back, believe me. And you know what you’re going to do when she does? You’re just going to *tell* her that you love her, okay?”

“*No!* I can’t! We don’t believe in possessive love anymore! Amber would *hate* me...”

“Well, that’s where you’re completely wrong, darling. There’s no girl *on earth* that *hates* a bloke for saying nicely that he loves her! She may not love you *back*, okay, but she definitely won’t *hate* you.”

“Oh, but that’s so *square!*”

“Yes, but *you* are swallowing an awful lot of rubbish in order *not* to be square. You love a girl but you’re not *supposed* to. You’re being bossed around by Tiger and Piglet, but you don’t follow *leaders*. And apparently you lot will do *anything* to get high on drugs!”

“Well, but, what about your old friend Huxley? Isn’t all this what *he’s* about, too?”

“Yes, well, I’m afraid my old friend Huxley was talking a lot of *rot* at the end of his life. Old men will *do* that you know. I have the feeling the man has a lot to answer for these days...”

They were silent for a long while. Daisy kept on softly massaging the boy’s neck and shoulders, then she asked, “Are you feeling any better now, Dragon?”

“Well...”

“Listen, it’s not for me to give you advice, but there are a couple of things I want you to consider. You have to look at your options, right? When Amber comes back you could tell her that you love her...”

“Hmm?”

“And if she loves you too, you *could*, just *could* ask her to come away with you; elope from this place; go back to your family, or hers.”

“And if she doesn’t love me?”

“Well, here’s another thing: Roxanne is very much in love with *you*, I think. Why not consider *her*?”

“And elope with Roxanne, huh?”

“Sure. I don’t like this place. I think you should get out anyway.”

“And what if Amber doesn’t come back?”

“You go to the police with Roxanne and you *report* it.”

“You have all the answers, huh?”

“I’m showing you the options, that’s all. *You* will have to make your own decisions.”

Again they remained silent for a while, until Daisy finally asked, “Are we good now? Did we clear out a couple of dragons or not?”

“Yeah. I guess we did... Thanks for your help.”

“All right. I’ll leave you now. Take care...”

When Daisy emerged from the stuffy dorm room, Roxanne was sitting at the top of the stairs, waiting for her. She took her arm and helped her down the steep flight of stairs. Then she marched her straight through the corridor and out of the building, on to the street. “Better not hang around right now, Daisy.”

“I agree. What a difference with my first visit! What has been going on? Did you people have a row or something?”

“Yeah, there’s been some bickering about money and things like that...”

“Money. What about it?”

“Well, you know there are always some differences about how to spend it and who decides about that?”

“Well, *who* decides? I would expect that everything in a hippie commune is shared equitably and that decisions are made democratically and in complete harmony...”

“Yeah, well, that’s how it should be, but sometimes Tiger and Piglet get a bit bossy, especially about money.”

“Those two again, huh? Is it Tiger who was growling at me when you came down to fetch me?”

“Yeah, you’ve got that in one. He was not there the last time you came, but when he heard about your visit, His Majesty was not pleased. So we bickered about that as well... and also everyone is all of a flutter due to the fact that darling little Amber has gone missing, especially Dragon.”

“You’re right, Dragon is worried sick about Amber...”

“Did you get any wiser about what’s eating Dragon? Is he in love or something?”

“Yes, and he’s not supposed to be, according to the hippie ethos! But what’s going on with her?”

“Well, she’s been away for a while. We’re all a bit worried, even Tiger and Piglet are getting worried by now...”

“But they’re the ones who took her away!”

“Yes, but even *they* would rather get her back: their precious little Amber...”

“And where did they take her? Where is she supposed to be?”

As they were still holding hands on their way to the Tube station, Daisy could feel Roxanne shrugging. “Dunno. Some rich bloke’s place... fashion designer or rock musician or whatever... throwing a big party: sex ’n drugs ’n Rock ’n Roll... It can last a couple of days, and they like to have chicks like Amber there. And then, when the party is over, she may go off with someone for a while...”

“Dragon seems to think that Tiger and Piglet get

something back in exchange for providing the chicks?”

“Yeah. You could look at it that way...”

“And he seems to think that the *chicks* don’t always come back...”

“Well, what if they find an interesting boyfriend? For all we know, Amber could be making out with Mick Jagger right now!”

“Or someone pretending to be Mick Jagger’s best friend...”

“Oh, but isn’t every one of them Mick Jagger’s best friend? But don’t you worry, Daisy, she’ll be back...”

Presently they reached the entrance to the Tube station and stopped by the side of it so that they could keep on talking. The Saturday crowds just passed them by without heeding them.

“You know, I told Dragon that when she does come back, he should just *tell* her that he loves her.”

“Well, he hasn’t got a chance in *hell*! She’s a smasher, Amber is, and Dragon’s definitely not the most good-looking bloke around...”

“But she sounded so sweet and shy, the other day... and very young!”

“Yes, and why do blokes always fall in love with much younger girls?”

“I know! And how about *you*, in the looks department?”

“Same as Dragon. *Not* a smasher. Too fat.”

“Well, there’s still hope, darling. I told him that you love him.”

“It’s *that* obvious, huh?”

“It is for *me*. And I’m sure Dragon will come around in the end.”

“We’ll see about that. Thanks for putting in a good word, anyway... even though you are one *hell* of a meddling blind lady!”

“I know, I know...” Daisy sighed. “The thing is, I’m

looking for someone, that is: searching, of course. Loretta McCullough?”

“Never heard the name... She was at the Island?”

“Yes. A year ago. She disappeared.”

“That was before my time.”

“The thing is: if I give you my phone number, could you ask around and report back to me? Maybe Dragon knows what happened to her, but I couldn’t ask him now, in that state...”

“Yeah, Dragon was around from the start. Okay, give me your number... and some coins for the phone booth.”

“Oh yes, sure. Thanks, darling, I’m really grateful.” And for the second time they hugged, in front of the Shepherd’s Bush Market station.

Roxanne said, “Do you know that we call this the ‘Daisy-hug’ now? It’s Dragon who told us about it when he came back from the Tube station last Saturday. He showed us how it’s done, and for a week it’s been all the rage with those of us at the Island who are in favour of you.”

As soon as she got home, Daisy called the number that McCullough had given her. He answered the phone at once. “Daisy Hayes! I was waiting for your call. Is there anything new?”

“Yes, McCullough, I’ve found out disturbing things about this commune. There are some sordid transactions going on. Apparently, there are men from outside the commune who are seeking sex with young girls. In exchange, they provide the funds and the drugs that the commune requires. If this were some sleazy nightclub, we would be talking about a prostitution ring involving underage girls, and heavy trafficking in illegal substances. But just because it’s a hippie commune, the sex is provided under the mantle of ‘free love’, and the drugs are donated under the heading of ‘turn on, tune in, drop out’.”

“Jesus, you’ve been doing some good work there! So you’re saying that Loretta was farmed out for sex by these damn hippies?”

“I haven’t worked it out exactly yet. Most of the current bunch of kids were not there a year ago. That’s another thing: it seems to me that a high turnover rate is exactly what they need to keep their little traffic invisible... But obviously, as Loretta was fifteen at the time, and assuming she’s pretty, she must have been a prize catch for the ringleaders!”

“Who are they? Who are the ringleaders?”

“Well, as far as I could make out there are two blokes called Tiger and Piglet, not their real names of course, and there might be other people in charge outside of the commune. They might be exploiting other hippie communes as well, who knows?”

“Okay, good job; now you must try to find out these people’s real identities, especially if there are people from outside...”

“Well, have you any idea how hard that is for someone who’s blind?”

“Nonsense! You’re doing an outstanding job, just like I predicted you would.”

“Besides, my testimony wouldn’t even hold up in court.”

“Just try to find out more details about what happened to Loretta.”

“Well, a good day to you too, you oaf!” Daisy said to the dead phone.

VII Here and now

In the dungeon a kind of routine sets in during the first week. The first days, the Master is only interested in his newest acquisition, which at least gives me the satisfaction of taking the heat off the young girl.

When he comes to get me, he orders me to take off my clothes before he even opens the cell, and I comply. There's no gain in antagonizing the man over such things.

Then by the end of that week, the rapist starts taking Loretta to his *pleasure room* again from time to time. On these occasions, I listen carefully, but I soon come to the conclusion that the said pleasure room must have a padded door that is closed during the proceedings. From our cell, I can't hear anything of what's going on in there.

When it is my turn again, I try to engage the rapist in conversation as much as possible, even though I find this highly distasteful and disagreeable. The man is so cold, so ruthless and self-centred, that these chats with him send a chill through my spine at every word. But I believe it is important to keep him talking.

The conversations never last long, anyway. They last only as long as it takes the rapist to set up his victim on one of his contraptions, and they always end brusquely with a punch in the stomach before the gag is applied.

When I am tied to the wall with my arms above me, I find that I can prolong our chat by jiggling my breasts in a particularly fetching way; and on the rack, it is the shaving of the pubic area, when needed, that especially absorbs the man and makes him forget himself in conversation...

In a strange way he seems to like these exchanges, and at one time he confides that at least with me he can have an intelligent heart-to-heart, not like with Loretta, who is “way too young”, and something of an “airhead”.

“Well, now that you have *me*, darling Master, why don’t you let her go?”

“Oh no, girl. That is out of the question. She knows a lot more about me than you do. Besides, I’m thinking of having a threesome, once in a while... In fact—or rather: in theory—you’re the one I could let go without any risk to myself. You know absolutely nothing about me, and you have no idea where we are... You’re just a stupid blind girl!”

“Are you saying that Loretta knows who you are and where this lair of yours is located?”

“All I’m saying is that the young one knows a lot more than she is letting on, but that she’s smart enough to keep it to herself... You see, that little Miss Holier-than-thou is not as innocent as she wants you to believe.”

When I have been brought back to our cell that night, I broach the subject as soon as I can speak. Loretta starts sobbing straight away, which takes me aback. Then, in her typically roundabout style of speech, interspersed with a profusion of sobs, hiccups and sighs, the girl confesses that she has not been kidnapped at all.

This is something that I already know: that she has met the Master at the hippie commune where she stayed after running away from home. That she has followed him voluntarily, because he was plying her with “groovy” drugs. But it is the part I didn’t know yet that really appals me: that she has stayed in the house with him for a while, right

here, above the dungeon. That he has even taken her down a couple of times to show her his “secret pleasure room”; it even seemed exciting at the time. “I just digged the kinky sex, you know, but that’s because I was stoned out of my mind half of the time.” And finally, after living upstairs with her new lover for a few weeks, Loretta became bored with him and wanted to leave, she wanted to “move on”, but that then the Master had forced her to stay and locked her up down here...

“Oh darling, don’t cry,” I say at the end of the story, “You were lured, you were tricked, it’s not your fault...”

“I know, but I feel so stupid!”

“Well don’t! It’s too late for that now...”

“But I should have seen it coming! I should never have trusted such an old bloke...”

“You know, what happened to you is only human; it’s nothing new. It’s the story of Little Red Riding Hood, it’s Bluebeard, it’s a timeless story! And believe me, the Master has broken almost every law in the book... Even if he managed to trick you, he is still guilty, he’s a criminal...”

“But I just can’t believe that I jumped into the sack with him and that we had great sex at first!”

“Well, even if you offered yourself, he had no right to have sex with a fifteen year old girl. That’s a heinous crime!”

Still Loretta is inconsolable, snivelling and stuttering, so I move forwards on the floor and say: “Come here, let me give you a nice foot massage to calm you down...” And I do just that for a long while; then in the end, when Loretta has stopped crying, we just sit there silently with our legs entwined. Finally I say, “Let’s go to bed, now. Tomorrow morning we’ll discuss this further...”

While I try to go to sleep, the recent revelations racing through my mind, I tell myself, “We already knew that the Master’s statements are unreliable. Even Loretta is aware of

it. But the fact that she herself turns out to be not entirely candid in what she tells me and what she holds back, *that* I find disturbing!”

The next morning, the first thing I want to know is, “What happened at the Island?”

“What do you mean? What’s the *Island*, anyway?”

“The commune! Where you met the Master!”

“Oh! is that how it’s called? I didn’t even know that the commune had a name...”

“Well, what happened? How did you get to know the Master?”

“Well, what can I say? He was just hanging around there... He provided everybody with goodies. You know: pot, speed, LSD, the stuff we were taking all the time...”

“And did Santa Claus have a name?”

“We only knew him as Jumping Jack.”

“Jumping Jack? Why’s that?”

“I don’t know. Probably because he was so bouncy and bubbly at the time. You have no idea how different he was from now. Always joking and laughing, always friendly... We just loved him, all of us!”

“Yeah... It seems to me that all of you were quite easy to deceive, too. Anyway, this man called Jack took you home with him, yes?”

“That’s right. He said he was going to take special care of me, spoil his hippie princess rotten...”

“Okay. So he brought you here in his car... Have you any idea to which neighbourhood he took you that day? The name of the street maybe?”

“No, sorry. I can only say that we’re in South London: we went over a bridge on the Thames that day...”

“Good! Which one? Do you remember which bridge you crossed?”

“No! They all look the same to me... Jesus!”

“Okay, it doesn’t matter! So you arrived at the house with the Master. You didn’t happen to look at his family name on the mailbox? You didn’t see it on the front door or above the doorbell?”

“No, I told you, I don’t know his family name!”

“All right, never mind. What I’m interested in now is what the house looks like from the outside. I’m guessing a freestanding, single family home with a high-walled garden all around...”

“That’s it exactly! How can you tell?”

“It just *has* to be...”

Painstakingly, I spend the next hours trying to make Loretta describe the Master’s house and the neighbourhood around it. What could she see from the windows? Didn’t she look out of the window of her room on the first floor, when she stayed there for a couple of weeks? But it is useless: the girl seems only to have had a tenuous grasp on reality during her stay above ground, her mind perhaps addled by drugs... I marvel at the fact that someone with two perfectly functioning eyes to see the world with, seems to be using them so little.

The only subject where some more information can be gathered, is that of the secret entrance to the hidden cellar. This at least appears to have made a great impression on the girl, and it now turns out that she has entered the Master’s secret lair through it at least half a dozen times. When closed, the ordinary, inconspicuous closet attached to it makes the door completely invisible. No one inspecting the “normal” cellar in the basement of the house would ever suspect the existence of another, hidden one behind the closet.

What also has made a great impression on the girl is that after he locked her up, the Master forced her to kick her drug addictions cold turkey. “The bastard! Suddenly he refused to give me *anything*... How I suffered!”

“Well, then at least *one* good thing came out of all this...”

“Ha-ha! How *straight* you are, old lady. Pathetic!”

I say, “You know what your problem is, darling Master?”

“No, my blind slave girl, you tell me.”

“You just don’t seem to have any *imagination*.”

“How’s that?”

“Most men fantasize about having a slave girl or two at their disposal from time to time, right? But you’re the only one who goes to the tremendous trouble of actually looking after and providing for a couple of those in your own cellar. Do you realize how much simpler it would be to just keep this kind of thing a fantasy? Or to visit a good brothel from time to time? A kinky club or something?”

“Well, I beg to differ, there, girl. That wouldn’t be the same thing at all. I at least am making real what almost every man on the planet only dreams of... Doesn’t that make me superior to all those idle wankers?”

“No. My point exactly. It only emphasizes your lack of imagination... Your approach is just too literal-minded. Don’t you ever find that acting out your deepest desires is in fact something of a putdown?”

“Nope. Sorry for you girl, but I don’t.”

“Oh well... Your lack of imagination is even worse than I thought, then.”

Again, I marvel at such a discussion, and that the man seems to enjoy this while he is raping me. This time my neck and wrists are locked in the holes between the beams of a pillory, so that I am forced to bend over, my behind exposed. The man has just been giving me a spanking with his bare hands, and now he is violating me from behind. He doesn’t find it necessary to gag me and just keeps the conversation going.

The pillory is the third contraption the Master has installed in his underground pleasure room. I tell myself that it's a good thing I couldn't see this whole cabinet of horrors when I regained consciousness in this place, on that first night. On the other hand, the girl did see it all the first time she came here, and then she came back of her own accord half a dozen times... Unbelievable!

But now, while he is still taking his pleasure in his typically longwinded way, the man casually drops one of his bombshells: "I've heard about your escape plans. You want to knock me out with a head butt during a transfer... I can only tell you: forget it!"

I tense, and feel such a chill going through my spine, that it leaves me speechless.

"Yeah, I gottcha there, huh? You wouldn't have expected me to get on to your little schemes..."

"So you *do* listen in on us after all... I was always very doubtful that the mics were actually there..."

"I never said anything about microphones, bitch. I only said I can always find out what you two are talking about. Actually it's Loretta who told me everything I wanted to know."

My mind reels: "Oh Loretta! How could you!" But then the man imitates the German accent of the stock character of a Nazi torturer: "Vi haff vayz to mek pipple tok!"

"Good God! What did you do to the poor girl? She's only sixteen, you coward!"

The man cackles with laughter, before he punches me viciously and puts the gag on. "I realize now that I'm taking a tremendous risk by keeping two slaves. Maybe I'll have to kill one of you, but I'm just wondering: which one?"

Finally he's done, and squeezes the clamp around my throat and brings me back to the cell.

As soon as I get my vocal cords under control again, I tell Loretta what I have just heard, that the Master is aware

of our escape plans. Then, with great concern, I ask, “Did the bastard hurt you, poor Lorry?”

“Well, no, he didn’t really torture me or anything... It’s just, you know, he was taunting me, telling me how stupid I am, and he got on my nerves, so I couldn’t help bragging a bit, that you have a plan and that you are going to get us out of here... And then the bastard tricked me into telling him some more.”

“Oh God, Loretta! This is not helping! I have to be able to rely on you!”

“Don’t call me Loretta! Everybody calls me Lorry!”

Loretta and I are both tied up against the wall with our arms raised above our heads, standing side by side. The Master has been very busy, ferrying both of us to the pleasure room and tying us up. I wasn’t even aware of the existence of a second set of straps on the wall. Now, with everything finally set up properly, he makes an announcement in the tone of an enthusiastic scoutmaster.

“Okay, listen up, girls. I’ve decided that keeping two slave girls is too much of a hassle, so I’m going to have to kill one of you. Of course the big question is: which one? So, after thinking it over, I have decided that I’m going to keep the one who is best at suffering in silence... So here is what we’re going to do: I’m going to whip your bare tits real hard with my faithful horsewhip, taking turns between the two of you, and the first one who utters a sound is going to die. Of course it is not forbidden to jiggle those titties in an enticing way... It may even help you to save your skin!”

“Excuse me,” I say as soon as the Master has completed his explanations. “I hate to be a spoilsport, but your little game is not on: I’m going to *scream* straight away! I’ll be the one you’ll have to kill... There’s no way I’ll try to stay alive by having you murder a sixteen-year-old girl.”

“Oh! how very noble of you. Well, you may be tired of living, but have you any idea how painful your death is going to be? Have you any idea how I’m going to kill you?”

“I’m guessing that you’ll use the clamp. I’m also guessing that you’ve done this before. There must have been other poor girls before Loretta, and you’ve murdered them too... Am I right?”

“Never mind about that. But you’re damn right about the clamp! Which means that I can choke you for as long as I want. In fact, I’ll fuck you while you’re slowly dying. And not just once, mind you, but several times...”

“Well, in the end the result will be the same. Either you kill me, or you don’t. You can’t have it both ways...”

“Well, it’s funny that you should say that... Because you see, I was more or less expecting that you would try to spoil the fun. I anticipated that, and I’ve given it some thought too. So let’s change the rules of the game. I whip you both, and if Loretta cries first, I’m going to gouge her eyes out. If it’s you, I’m going to pierce your eardrums... In either case I believe I won’t have any trouble with you two anymore.”

Loretta cries out in horror, and I don’t say a word. I must admit that I’m struck with terror too; I feel the hairs at the base of my neck standing on end... This has always been my biggest fear in life: to go deaf as well as being blind. My worst nightmare!

“Now you’re not so cocky anymore, eh? Rather silent all of a sudden? And I can assure you that I’m perfectly capable of doing it. It’s very simple, really. I’ll come down while you’re asleep, chloroform you, and just use an awl or a sharpened screwdriver to pierce your eardrums. Or Loretta’s eyeballs...”

“Yeah, well, you sadistic bastard! can’t you see that this doesn’t change anything? I have no choice: I can’t do anything that would make you maim Loretta instead of

me...”

“Then you’ll have to say bye-bye to your hearing.” The man pulls viciously at one of my ears. “You’ll be locked up for good inside your own head...” He now raps his knuckles hard on my forehead. “You’re gonna be very lonely in there!”

“Well, if you’re foolish enough to do this, I won’t be able to say a word to you anymore, which you will find a bit boring after a while. And I’ll no longer have to hear the ugly sound of your voice, which will be a bonus for me...”

“Well that’s fine by me. I’m fed up with you, little Miss Blind-Angel-of-Wrath!”

VIII Blind Angel of Wrath

Roxanne called two days later at the appointed time, after Daisy had come back from work. She sounded very shy, but she assured her new friend that Dragon had a lot of information about Loretta, and that if they could get together, Daisy would hear the whole story of what had happened to her. It was Roxanne who suggested that they meet up in a pub in Shepherd's Bush. "That is, if you think you can find the place..."

"Oh, don't worry, darling. There are always people willing to help a blind lady to find her way. So the White Horse it is, tomorrow morning at ten thirty."

And so the three of them ended up at a table, nursing the beers paid for by Daisy. In the background you could hear the clang of billiard balls colliding on the pool tables, conversations and bursts of laughter in a far corner; the air was redolent of stale tobacco smoke mingled with the sour stench of the wet rags that the table tops had been wiped with. What Daisy could not see, was that the two hippies had some plastic bags by their side, containing all of their meagre possessions.

"Well?" Daisy asked, "Has Amber shown up yet?"

"Yeah, yeah, no sweat!"

"And did you talk to her?"

"Yeah, yeah, we're cool..."

“What did she say? Come on!”

“What Dragon is dying to tell you,” Roxanne explained, “is that he followed your advice and declared his love to her...”

“Really? Good!”

“This is none of your business, Roxanne!” Dragon growled. “In fact, it is none of Daisy’s either.”

“You’re right, of course. Sorry. I just hope she wasn’t angry and didn’t mock you, that’s all...”

“No, you were right, she was very nice about it, but she argued that she believes in free love and doesn’t want *me* to be in love with her *only*.”

“The conceitedness of a smasher,” Roxanne grumbled.

“Anyway, we two are together now, I mean Roxanne and I, and we want to leave the Island and go to Roxanne’s place.”

“My parents are rather nice, unlike Dragon’s. We will tell them that *he* persuaded *me* to go back home; my parents will be mighty impressed by the fact that Dragon is one of the founding members of the commune, and that he’s giving it all up for my sake...”

“Ah yes, Dragon, I remember you told me you were there a year ago when Tiger and Piglet set up the thing...”

“Yeah. Tiger and Piglet and Dragon-Slayer... the new names we chose for ourselves when we started our experiment.”

“So you’re saying you were on an equal footing with them?”

“Oh yeah! Yeah.”

“But *you* don’t have a penny in your pocket to pay for a couple of beers. And I bet that Tiger and Piglet *do* have money in their pockets, even a lot of it...”

“Yeah, well, we don’t believe in money and possessions, but *someone* has to take care of paying the rent and stuff...”

“Still, I think you will be better off if you get out now.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right about that... But before Roxanne and I ‘elope’, as you suggested, I wanted to tell you what I know about Loretta. I remember her well.”

“All right, I’m very grateful for that. So she joined you very soon after the three of you started the commune?”

“You could say that, yeah! Just a few days after we started, in fact. So here we are, Tiger, Piglet and me with the girlfriends we had at the time and a couple of other kids we knew, and in walks this girl with her boyfriend and tells us she wants to join us...”

“The first kids you didn’t know beforehand.”

“Yeah, that’s right! But others followed very soon. It was amazing how fast this thing *grew*...”

“But Loretta was only fifteen, and so was her boyfriend, I guess?”

“Yeah, but they were not the only ones who were a bit young. A lot of kids are running away from home. We never ask how old anyone is; you don’t need to give your real name, even; you can make up a new name and start a new life...”

“But Loretta kept her real name...”

“Oh yeah! Only, we started to call her Lorry, which annoyed her a bit, but we found it a lark, ‘cause she was such a wisp of a girl. In fact, *Lorry* was the right name for her, ‘cause she was angry and determined. Her boyfriend soon decided to go back home, but Lorry said ‘no way’ and stayed on.”

“Did she tell you about her Irish background? Did she talk about her father?”

“Oh yeah. Yeah. Loretta loved all the Celtic stuff. She wore a Celtic cross around her neck, but she hated her father, because her old man only believes in blowing things up, killing people. Loretta was a real pacifist...”

“We all are,” Roxanne remarked, “Make love, not war!”

“And this cross, did it have a semiprecious stone in the middle?”

“Yeah! Yeah. How do you know?”

“Her father showed me the one *he* wears around *his* neck, and he told me that Loretta had the same, and so do her mother and her kid brother.”

“Oh? I didn’t know that...”

“Well, anyway, one day Loretta was taken away, right? Like Amber the other day. But she is one of those who didn’t come back.”

“Actually, no. She wasn’t really taken away like Amber... No. She *eloped* with an older bloke. Then she never came back, but we didn’t expect her to!”

“Why’s that?”

“Because the guy she left with was a photographer. He always carried a huge bag with an expensive reflex camera and a lot of fancy equipment. First he wanted to make a book about hippie girls, and he kept taking pictures of all the girls; well, the youngest and the prettiest ones, that is. Then he told Loretta that he was going to do a book about her; only her; and that it would launch her career as a model. Just like Twiggy or Jean Shrimpton.”

“So she went off with the guy...”

“Yeah.”

“What was his name?”

“I don’t know. We called him Jumping Jack.”

“And what did he look like? Can you describe him?”

“Well, first of all he was a lot older than most of the freaks and pushers that hang out at the Island. I mean, he had long frizzy hair and everything, like a hippie, kind of, but he also had a bald pate... And he was fat, and pretty short, with a pot belly, so he didn’t look like a real hippie at all. But he was cool all the same, you know? You shouldn’t judge people on how they look! He was handing out pot and acid to everybody all the time... that’s why we liked him.”

“And you called him Jumping Jack. Why?”

“Oh, you know, just because he was a kind of bouncy guy, always bubbling over with energy. Always joking and laughing...”

“So you guys gave him that nickname... or was *he* the one who suggested it?”

“Yeah, now that you ask: *he* suggested it. Definitely.”

“Very convenient! That way no one ever thought of finding out his real identity while he was plying you with drugs and taking pictures of the girls...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know... We’re not very smart that way.”

As calmly as she could, Daisy inquired more specifically about the physical appearance of this child molester: colour of eyes (dark brown) and hair (golden blond, probably out of a bottle Daisy thought); pug nose, thick lips, a bit like a postcard Santa Claus... But in the meantime she felt thoroughly appalled by what she had just heard.

“And so Loretta went off with this Santa Claus, and both were never seen again... And no one ever wondered what had happened to her?”

“Well... I guess we were just assuming that she was having a great time, happily modelling for her photographer boyfriend...”

“But if she’d had such a great time, she would have come back to hang out with you at the Island from time to time, and she would happily have told you about it all, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, maybe... I dunno...”

“And I mean, her father and the police turned up and made inquiries...They told you she had disappeared from the face of the earth. Didn’t that make you wonder?”

“Nah, not much... The pigs are always trying to bust us for drugs possession, and the daddies always blame the hippies for everything that went wrong with their precious

kids anyway...”

“I still find it strange that none of you had second thoughts about this... I mean, assuming Lorry was really having a good time with her new paramour and that she was having a fulfilling experience as a budding model, she was only fifteen! To become a model she would have needed her parents’ *consent* to sign a contract!”

“Never thought of that... What do you want me to say? We were busy with other stuff... We didn’t stop to think!”

Roxanne now intervened, “But tell me, Daisy, what exactly are you and Lorry’s father afraid of? That she’s been raped and killed?”

“Yes, of course! Or worse still, that she’s still alive, being held against her will by some pervert who does unspeakable things to her...”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute... Isn’t someone running away with a pretty sick imagination here?”

“Well yes, you could have a point there, Dragon... That would be Martin McCullough’s imagination, of course. Me, I couldn’t even start to imagine what a pervert would want to do to such a young girl.”

“Yeah! Yeah: me neither. But that’s why I have my doubts. I mean, is it really out of the question that everything’s all right, here? Maybe one day Lorry will just turn up at home and say hello to her Dad, when *she* is ready for it, you know?”

“Yes, maybe you’re right... I certainly hope so. Anyway, I’m grateful that you went to the trouble of telling me all you know. But now I think I’ll go to the police with this information, and with all the other things I’ve found out... Maybe this will mean the end of the Island, I don’t know, but you two had better get out now! And that reminds me: there’s one more piece of the puzzle you could provide, Dragon. Or rather two. Do you know Tiger’s and Piglet’s real names?”

“Yeah, of course. We all went to school together...”

“Well? Do you care to tell me?”

“Erm... I'd rather not...”

“Oh, come on, Dragon. It's not like *they* will be accused of Lorry's murder or anything, but I still need to know, otherwise the police are not going to listen to me. The thing is, you see, here you have a dragon or two that still need to be slain, and you're the only one who can do it...”

“Okay, okay. Tiger's real name is Phil... that is: Philip Underwood, and Piglet is really Ian Lindon. Do you want me to write it down?”

“No. Hold on a minute.” Daisy retrieved her pocket-size Braille slate with its stylus from her handbag. “If you can just spell those names, I'll braille them...” And once again she made a great impression while she punched the letters on a little card.

“Right, I'm very grateful to you both. Now, do you and Roxanne need some money to get to Roxanne's parents?”

“Actually, yes!” Roxanne exclaimed. “My parents live in Birmingham. We'll need to buy train tickets...”

“All right. I'll give you five Pounds. That should tide you over nicely. I consider it as money well spent...”

“Thanks, Daisy,” they both muttered.

That day, after she got home and had eaten something for lunch, Daisy called the number that Martin McCullough had given her. This time it took much longer for him to answer the phone. “Hey, Daisy Hayes! Sorry to make you wait, I was kinda busy. What news have you got for me?”

“Well, I've got all the information you asked for, including the real names of the ringleaders.”

Then Daisy reported to the father that a year ago his daughter had left the hippie commune of her own accord with a man who pretended to be a photographer. “I have a description of the man, who went under the alias ‘Jumping

Jack'. Now I think it is time to go to the police. It seems to me that I have unearthed some elements of the puzzle that they may not be aware of..."

"Let's not rush into anything like that! There's no need to call in the help of the cops just yet. You see, they've already concluded that Loretta went away of her own accord with a 'person unknown'."

"What!"

"Yeah, but you see, there's the rub. Just because she left voluntarily, they concluded that there is no foul play. But that's where they're completely wrong... That this 'Jumping Jack' bastard was able to lure my Loretta away, does not mean that he's not a pervert and a rapist, you know?"

"Of course, I can see that! But how do you happen to know all this? How do you know what the police has concluded?"

"It was all in the report they handed over to me when they closed the case."

"What! Couldn't you tell me that before? Couldn't you have given me a copy of that report, you bastard!?"

"What good would that have done? You're blind! You couldn't have read it anyway."

"Don't be disingenuous, McCullough. You could have told me what you know; I could have asked a friend to read out that report to me; I could even have had it printed in Braille by a transcriber... By the way, do the police also know the real names of the leaders of that prostitution ring?"

"Yes, if you're talking about Philip Underwood and Ian Lindon, their names were mentioned in the report as well. Those two probably couldn't refuse to show some identification, under the circumstances. However, the police did not seem to reach the same conclusion you did about the nature of the transactions taking place at that

commune... But *I* tend to share *your* point of view, my dear Daisy.”

“Don’t you ‘dear Daisy’ me, you bastard! This is really the limit!”

“You’re pretty mad at me, huh?”

“You bet! If only I knew where to find you, I’d come over and punch your face!”

The man just roared with laughter.

“How on earth can I work for you if you keep such essential information back from me!”

“Okay, listen, I’ve got my reasons. I know how to handle an agent: I’ve had a lot of experience in the field myself... If I had briefed you on all the information I had, you couldn’t have helped me any further. But now that you have found out all this stuff on your own—which is absolutely brilliant of you—I’m pretty sure you’ll know exactly what to do next. In fact, I’m sure you already have the next step planned right now! Am I right?”

Daisy sighed deeply, and reluctantly admitted, “Yes, I guess so. On the tube on my way home this morning, I was thinking things over...”

“Go on, I’m listening...”

“I came to the conclusion that there are *three* possibilities. Either Loretta is having a perfectly good time with her mature lover, or she is being held against her will by him—which is what *you’re* very much afraid of—or she’s long since dead. Well: in each case Jumping Jack is the key anyway. He’s the only one who knows which possibility applies. So we have to find out who he is. And the only useful piece of information we have about this man, is that he was handing out pot and acid to the hippies like a sugar daddy at a child’s birthday party. This fact alone makes the man traceable, provided you have a good source of information about the drug market in London... Of course, the police would be a good source of such information...”

“No, no, not the police... Think it over, Daisy Hayes. For a year the police have had exactly the same information about Jumping Jack that you have now... If they had wanted to trace the man through his drug dealings, they would already have found him...”

“Well, I was also thinking that while the police worked on the case I could make inquiries of my own... I have at least one contact in the London underworld: Victor. You know him as well, don’t you?”

“Yes, good thinking, Daisy Hayes! You do that: you go and talk to Victor!”

“And a good day to you too, you bastard!”

Daisy had last met Victor at the opening of her exhibition. That had only been a couple of weeks back—three weeks at most—but it seemed ages ago. She had the feeling that she was now living in an entirely different world; even the prospect of meeting potential buyers for private viewings had slipped to the back of her mind. “I should call the gallery owner and ask if there have been any developments,” Daisy reflected. “Maybe he has already received some clients without me; I should at least pretend to show some interest!”

For Victor, however, the opening, being a very unusual experience, loomed much larger in the mind and seemed very recent. He did not find it strange or unexpected that Daisy suddenly called him on the phone and said, “We need to talk.” He invited his old acquaintance to his home—a first—and said mildly, “I want you to meet the Missus...”

“Victor! I had no idea that there *is* a Missus!”

“Oh yes, there sure is. You just come and visit us and you’ll get to know her... She’s looking forward to meeting you.”

Victor gave Daisy an address in Stoke Newington and told her to take a taxi, as the place was rather hard to find.

And so Daisy discovered a new house, mainly by her sense of smell, of course. This is something you'll experience even if you're not blind: when you visit the home of other people for the first time, you'll notice without even trying that their place has its own distinctive odour, hanging heavily and unmistakably on the premises. It will be a mixture of the food cooked, the cleaning agents used, the aftershave of the tenant and the favourite perfume of his wife. Victor's wife Blanche came forward and hugged her guest heartily and firmly. Daisy always enjoyed a bearhug immensely. She concluded that the house smelled a lot more like the lady than like the man.

"I've heard so much about you, darling Daisy," Blanche exclaimed, "and I'm so happy to meet you at last!"

"Well, dear Blanche, why didn't you come with Victor to the opening of my exhibition? I would have loved to make your acquaintance as well!"

"Oh no! An art exhibition is nothing for *me*, I wouldn't know how to behave!"

"Well, there's nothing to it, really. Just be yourself. Victor and the crew managed to do that just fine..."

Daisy asked Blanche and Victor how long they had been married. As she had never suspected that Ralph's old batman had a wife, she was really curious to know.

"Well, we were married in the spring of 1937," Victor replied. "For our thirtieth anniversary, this May, we went on a cruise down the Rhine. I wanted to visit the Ruhr, Düsseldorf and Cologne, where so many of our bomber boys lost their lives..."

"Thirty years! Well, congratulations. I was something like fourteen years old when you two got married!"

"Well, *I* was only eighteen at the time," Blanche explained. "I married young, and so I'm not that much older than you are, darling. Victor, on the other hand, was all of twenty-five!"

Now Daisy was dying to tell Victor about Martin McCullough's assignment and about the latest developments in her investigation, but she had no idea how much Blanche knew about her husband's activities. There was a moment of awkwardness. "Do you still run a betting shop?" Daisy asked innocently.

"Good God, no! I've retired ages ago. Betting is heavily regulated nowadays and there's no money in it anymore... I was smart enough to see the changes coming and to step out on time with a nice egg nest to my name. As any banker in the City will tell you: crime only pays if you stop at the right moment!"

"Speaking of which: do you still have contacts with people like McCullough?"

"My dear Daisy, I'm being awfully thoughtless! You said on the phone that we needed to talk. Well, you may speak freely in front of Blanche, you know: my darling is aware of all the facets of my past activities..."

"Very well," Daisy said, and she started to tell her hosts what Martin McCullough had demanded of her and what she had found out about his daughter's disappearance.

At length, when she had finished her story, Victor exclaimed, "My poor Daisy, I'm appalled by McCullough's behaviour! Not only is he blackmailing you, but he's been manipulating you like a pawn, and it's not at all clear what game he's playing. That's by far the most disturbing part of your story... Now what can I do for you? I'd be only too willing to help if I can."

"Well, dear Victor, at the time you seemed to know the London drug scene quite well. I seem to remember that the Americans were clamouring for cocaine! So what I had in mind is this: 'Jumping Jack' was handing out LSD—among others—to those hippie kids; now if only we could circulate the kidnapper's description in the small world of London drug dealers, we might get to know more about the man's

identity...”

“Yes, good thinking, but...”

“Of course I proposed to ask the police to look into this, but McCullough wouldn’t hear of it!”

“No, he wouldn’t, would he? But what I was about to say is this: I don’t know the world of drug dealers and ‘pushers’ anymore. That’s the thing. If I still had been a ‘kingpin’—as you used to call it—like in the thirties, forties and fifties, then yes, I could have helped you. We would have hounded down your chap... But a whole new generation has taken over and my old contacts in the underworld have died out. Believe me, the drug market is a nice example of Darwin’s *Survival of the Fittest*: a scene like that hates a vacuum; new overlords come forward overnight and take over!”

“I see... Yes, I can imagine! That’s a pity... Now, I still have a tidy amount of money in the bank, even after paying the foundry for my sculptures. What if I myself went out to buy LSD and pot, passing myself off as, say, ‘the blind hippie pusher’? Then I could discreetly inquire about ‘Jumping Jack’ while I’m shopping around for drugs...”

“Hmm... Also a clever idea, but it wouldn’t work and it would be bloody dangerous too. You see, it’s unthinkable that the dealers would give a customer—especially a new, unknown one—information about other customers. It was only going to work if a ‘kingpin’ like me had started throwing his weight around to find a man he had a score to settle with. I’m awfully sorry that I can’t help you any more there, Daisy...”

“No, that’s all right. I’m glad for you that you’re happily retired, of course.”

“Victor was always a happy man,” Blanche remarked, “even when he had to deal with the shabbiest criminals.”

“Ah! Blanche, you are such a sweet little thing... But Daisy, let us review your options. All you really have to do

is keep McCullough happy, right?”

“Of course... But I *do* care for poor Loretta, you know!”

“Of course! But you can only help her if we assume that she is still alive and being held against her will. Then we have to prove or disprove this hypothesis. Now, what you told me about the sort of ‘prostitution ring’ at the commune is nothing new. There always were silly young girls who let themselves be lured by sugar daddies and were then groomed to become prostitutes. But the job palls pretty fast and the silly girl balks and wants to get out, and that’s when things start to get nasty. I’ve seen it happen many times. Of course there’s violence and intimidation involved, and at first only that. But in my experience, in the long run your pimp—or pervert—is going to need some ‘medication’ to keep a girl in check. You know, things like barbiturates, opiates or chloroform ...”

“Chloroform! That’s good thinking, my dear Victor. *That* is what a kidnapper would need and there are probably not many people who buy something like that.”

“Exactly! Now, at your opening I had a long conversation with your local pharmacist, Mr Dobbs junior. He seems to be a very smart chap, and he’s quite devoted to you. You should go and speak to him. Maybe he could help you to narrow down the list of suspects by inquiring who in London ordered chloroform, starting a year ago... things like that.”

“Excellent idea, Victor! You’re right: all I need is to throw a bone at that mad dog McCullough from time to time. This ‘medication’ thing would fit the bill perfectly and allow me to play for time... Meanwhile I’ll do what I can to find Loretta, but I’ll do it on my own terms and in my own way.”

When Daisy came back from her visit to Stoke Newington, her friendly neighbour Mrs Maurois was waiting

for her. Not only was the distinctive smell of her flat clearly present on the landing, through her open door, but also the typical odour of sawdust and printing ink of the newspaper she was holding in her hands as she came forwards.

“Another article about me in the press, Mrs Em?”

“Good Lord, my dear Daisy, how can you tell?”

“That’s easy, Mrs Em: I can smell the paper. Please come in. You know I’m always thrilled by the news items you gather for me, so let’s have it.”

As soon as they were settled in Daisy’s sitting room with a cup of tea, Mrs Maurois opened the newspaper. “This is the *Sunday Mirror* that came out today. I don’t buy it, normally, but Mrs Bonner from the grocery shop came all the way to my door and gave it to me because she had noticed the piece about you...”

“All right. Is it about the exhibition?”

“No, that’s the thing. It’s a very disturbing story, and there’s a huge portrait of you printed right next to it. Give me your hand, I’ll show you how big.”

The old lady took Daisy’s forefinger and outlined the contour of the picture with it.

“How did they get that picture, Mrs Em? I don’t understand.”

“Oh! but that’s easy, my dear. You remember that journalist? Nick Aaron? He had a fancy camera and he took a picture of you that day. He was standing right in front of you, and his flashlight would have blinded you if you hadn’t been blind already!”

“Well, I wasn’t aware of that. In the hubbub of the opening I didn’t hear a thing. And I couldn’t have smelled him either: that party was a riot of odours and perfumes, and then there was all the cigarette smoke... Anyway, let’s have the article now, Mrs Em!”

“Very well. Here comes:

“BLIND ANGEL OF WRATH

“By Nick Aaron.

“A year ago, a London garage owner named Martin McCullough was telling the press, “This is every father’s worst nightmare!” His daughter Loretta, 15 years old, had just disappeared without a trace, and her bereaved Dad made an appeal to the public in the columns of this paper—and others. At the time, we printed the poignant portrait of the very pretty Loretta in our pages.

“A year later, the girl has still not been found, and we just got news that Mr McCullough, out of despair, has enlisted the help of a lady with very *unusual* talents. She is not a psychic, nor is she a female James Bond, but she is BLIND since birth! During the war, Mrs Daisy Hayes was married to a bomber pilot. Then one day, when her dead husband’s body was carried off a Lancaster bomber after a raid on Berlin, it was *she* who found out that he had not been killed by flak, nor by enemy fire, but that he had been *murdered!* Later on, this BLIND war widow was able to *prove* that her husband had indeed been a victim of *arsenic poisoning*. It is this BLIND sleuth who is now going to investigate the disappearance of sweet young Loretta.

“Mrs Hayes and Mr McCullough were not available for comment, but it is a remarkable development, to say the least, that the desperate father should now seek the help of this BLIND Angel of Wrath!”

After Mrs Maurois had finished reading, there was a moment of stunned silence. Then the old lady asked, “Is this story true? Was Ralph really murdered?”

“Yes. I’ll tell you about it some other time...”

“And are you really looking for this Loretta?”

“Yes, yes. That’s why I was hanging out with those hippies in Shepherd’s Bush, remember?”

“I see! *I did* wonder about that. Do you realise that this is a *national* paper, my dear, with a very *wide* circulation?”

“Yes! That makes it even worse, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed!”

“Mrs Em, did I hear from the intonation of your voice that the word ‘blind’ is printed in *caps* or *bold* throughout the story?”

“Let me see... well yes, you’re right! How perceptive you are! The word ‘blind’ is indeed printed in caps each and every time.”

“Good God! Now I *really* feel like a monkey at the zoo!”

IX Here and now

When I wake up I realise straight away that something is wrong. There's a sensation of emerging from a very deep sleep, and I am feeling dizzy. Then there's the pain radiating from inside my ears, and at the same moment I perceive the tickling of blood dripping from my earlobes to the back of my neck.

Suddenly, when I move my body, my hands, I realise that I can't hear the rustling of sheets and blankets that I'm expecting... not even a rattling of chains!

"Oh no! He has gone and done it! He has pierced my eardrums!"

My first reaction is panic. I feel as if I am falling down into a deep well. I brace mentally for the moment when I am going to hit the bottom really hard. Then there is despair: for the first time in my life I feel crippled; I have the sensation of being helpless and isolated... The despair feels like a thick blanket that is smothering me. I can hardly breathe.

I make a conscious effort. "Whoa! Slow down. Keep breathing... At least you know exactly what happened, there's no mystery there... You *knew* it was going to happen. Now you must stay alive, keep going, keep your wits about you... As your skipper used to say: *stay sharp!*" But it's no good; it's just like holding your breath, you can't

keep it up for long. Soon you have to suck in some air; I can't keep the despair from flooding my soul. But it no longer feels like falling into a well; it's more like slowly sinking away in quicksand, suffocating all the while...

Then suddenly someone touches my shoulder, and I jump out of my skin. In a kind of animal reflex, I lash out and hit something, hit a part of someone with a sharp blow of my clawing hand. I wonder if that could be the Master, standing there to see me wake up, gloating over what he has done... But the touching is not repeated. The Master, if it is him, is not insisting, which is strange.

I sniff at the air, but I can't smell his presence. "Maybe my sense of smell is gone as well, for some reason..." Tentatively I touch my nose, but it doesn't hurt, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it. Holding my hands close to my face, it slowly dawns on me that my wrists are not manacled. For the first time I am no longer chained to the wall...

"Hey... I wonder if Loretta is still chained? Maybe it was her that just touched me? I must find out... I must wander over to her bed."

But I still feel dizzy. Probably from the chloroform. Now I'm afraid that I will faint if I get up. My ears are still dripping blood, so the first thing to do is to rip off some pieces of cloth from a corner of one of my sheets. Without getting up I proceed to do so. It is very strange to tear the fabric to pieces without hearing a sound. I stuff little fragments in my ears to staunch the bleeding. Again, strange to be fumbling inside your ear tracts with wads of cloth and not hearing a single sound. "This should stop the bleeding..."

Having taken care of that, I now wait. I will try to get up in a moment, I decide, it may take some time before the bleeding stops. "Then I will try to find out how Loretta is doing... Let us see if she is free to move and if it was her

that just touched me...”

Then a horrible thought strikes me, that makes my heart stop. “I wonder if the girl has been blinded!”

A moment later I feel a hand touch my shoulder again, and again I am startled—I just can’t help it—but this time I make sure to open my arms in an inviting gesture. I hug the girl as soon as she bends down, I take her in my arms and make her lie down next to me on the bed. I marvel at what is happening: “We’re both free of chains: the Master has changed the rules completely!”

Now I probe the girl’s eyes, anxious to know if they are unharmed, but it is hard to tell. The girl’s eyelids are closed, but that is because I’m touching them; and they feel wet, soaking wet even, but it is impossible to say if it is because of the tears streaming out of them, or if it could be blood...

The girl is shaking all over. “Poor thing”, I reflect, “the horror she must have witnessed! She must be terrified...” I rub her back soothingly, and push her head in the nook of my neck. I can smell the girl like I never did before, especially her hair, that now bunches up right under my nose, its pungent, unwashed odour unmistakable.

Loretta is sobbing, her back and shoulders heaving violently, but of course I can’t hear a single sound. Then the girl raises her head up and turns her face towards me. I can feel this with the hand that is resting in the nape of her neck. I also feel wisps of her breath on my face. I deduce that the girl must be talking to me, and that she is probably getting quite desperate at not receiving any answer. I motion towards my ear with my other hand, shake my head and shrug my shoulder. Loretta’s head sinks back despondently and nestles again in the nook of my neck.

“Well, at least it seems that she isn’t blind,” I tell myself. All I can do now is to keep stroking her to calm her down; massage her shoulder and her neck to relax her.

“How nice it is, how wonderful, how pleasurable to be holding someone else in my arms again!” For a couple of weeks now I have been chained to my bed and have only been able to stroke Loretta’s legs with my feet. Apart from that, of course, I have also felt the rubbing of another person’s body against mine while I was being raped...

I put the tips of my fingers on Loretta’s throat and feel the vibrations of her vocal cords: she must be keening or moaning... She seems to be mourning me as though I have just died. If only I could comfort her!

As I lie there on the bed with Loretta in my arms, stroking her back and shoulder endlessly, I start sinking back into a quagmire of despair: I can’t hear a sound; I’m crippled! I’ve never known what light and darkness really mean for normal people, but now that I suddenly experience complete silence for the first time in my life, it’s as if I’m also experiencing darkness in a way I never did before: a veil of doom closing in on all sides... I must stop this. Think of something... positive. Suddenly an idea strikes me, that seems rather silly at first: “Now I have become like Helen Keller!”

The dark veil is no longer closing in on me, I can perceive a point in front of me that is glowing with hope. Helen... Helen... the great heroine of my youth! She was also blind... *and deaf!* When I was growing up in the 20s and 30s, Helen Keller was a celebrity. Everybody had read “The Story of My Life”, and every girl at my school for the blind—including myself—wanted to be like her.

“She’s an old lady now, in her eighties, and she has retired from public life, but only a few years back she visited the White House and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Lyndon B. Johnson...”

Breathing in the scent of Loretta’s hair, I think of the story about the honeysuckle. Helen Keller became deaf and blind at the age of eighteen months, after a bout of “brain

fever". At first she was completely isolated, locked up in her own head by her double disability, though she did spend her days playing wild games with her slightly older friend Martha Washington, the daughter of the family cook. According to her memoirs, there was a honeysuckle growing just outside the porch of the family house in sunny Alabama, and this played an important part in her life as a child, because the scent of it was such a landmark in her world.

"Now the equivalent of that honeysuckle for me is the scent of Loretta's hair!"

While playing with her young black friend, little Helen had spontaneously devised a sign language of about sixty different 'words', all of them relying on the sense of touch, of course. For instance, pinching a small piece of skin on the back of the hand meant 'small'; opening one's fingers in the palm of the other person's hand meant 'big'. With their private code the two children had been able to communicate among themselves, up to a point.

"This is something that I really need to work out with Lorry as well, urgently!"

I start to review all the means of communication that allowed Helen to unlock herself from her isolation. First there's fingerspelling: writing words in the discrete alphabet of the sign language for the deaf. When Helen was six years old, her parents hired a twenty-year-old teacher, Anne Sullivan, to take care of their daughter. Anne started fingerspelling words onto Helen's hand-palm, and by this means she managed at length to teach her English. Before that, of course, her pupil didn't really master speech, except for those sixty signs.

"If we ever get out of here, and if the damage to my eardrums turns out to be permanent, I'm going to have to learn the British Sign Language for the deaf... Difficult!"

By the time she was a student at Radcliffe (to make a

long story short), Helen didn't need fingerspelling anymore. Anne Sullivan now worked as her interpreter, rendering the teachers' lectures in standard sign language, with her hands, while her pupil "read" her signing with her fingertips. And so Helen managed to graduate *cum laude* from Radcliffe College in 1904, at the age of twenty-four. She could also lip-read what people were saying by touching the speaker's mouth. There are photographs, apparently, of Helen at a Hollywood studio, lip-reading off Charlie Chaplin's mouth!

"I can't imagine that I will ever be able to do that! It has always seemed an almost superhuman feat to me..."

Then finally, Helen had learned to speak. At the age of ten she started to take speech classes at the Horace Mann School for the Deaf in Boston. But it took her almost twenty-five years to learn to speak so that others could understand her. By the time she could do so, she had become a social activist, passionate about social justice and civil liberties, and she went on to propagate her ideals on the national and international lecture circuit...

"That, at least, is one of her achievements that I could easily match! I can *already* speak..."

Suddenly I can feel an almost physical wave of relief pushing back the veil of darkness all around me.

"Wait a minute! Oh! but wait a minute... *Just* wait a minute! Of course! Deaf or not, I can still speak!"

Like walking, swimming, or riding a bicycle, speech is one of those skills that once acquired cannot be unlearned. It doesn't require any conscious effort, just as with breathing. And even while I can't hear a thing, I now realise, I can probably still speak normally...

But there are two problems, I now tell myself. "First: Loretta can't answer me... But that doesn't matter, I can still comfort her; try to reassure her; tell her that I still exist in here, inside my head... Then there is a second matter..."

I think back to what the Master said the previous evening: “You’ll be locked up for good inside your own head; you’re gonna be very lonely in there!” It is essential that the man keep thinking along these lines, I decide. “The fact that he has unchained both of us only demonstrates that he believes that he has completely destroyed my will to fight by piercing my eardrums...”

Of course I cannot be certain that the Master is not lurking just outside the cell, spying on his prisoners. So I decide to take a number of precautions. And then, just at that stage of my reflections, I have another brainwave: there exists a simple way for Loretta to answer me!

With the tips of my fingers on Loretta’s throat, I can feel the vibrations of her vocal cords: she is still moaning. Now, with my lips very close to the girl’s ear, I whisper softly, “Loretta?”

The vibrations under my fingertips stop at once, and I wait for a while. Then, when I can feel the vocal cords vibrating again, I have the impression that the vibrations are more irregular than before: Loretta is saying something.

“Keep on moaning... Don’t talk to me, I can’t hear you, but maybe the Master is listening. So keep moaning...”

When the regular vibrations are back, I whisper, “Okay, I can’t hear you, because the Master has pierced my eardrums, but if you nod or shake your head against my shoulder, you can say yes or no to me. Do you understand?”

After a short hesitation, the girl lying in my arms nods, her head still nestled in the nook of my shoulder.

“All right... Keep moaning... It’s very important that the Master should not find out that we can communicate... That’s why I’m whispering... Do you think that the Master is still around in the dungeon?”

— No.

“Did the Master do anything to your eyes?”

— No.

“So you’re all right?”

— Yes.

“You can understand me well, when I whisper like this?”

— Yes.

“Well listen. It’s a good sign that the Master has unchained us both. This means that he’s letting down his guard. Nothing has changed, we might still get a chance to escape; and the police must be looking for us now... You get that?”

— Yes.

“What time is it anyway? I mean, has the Master already come down to bring the food?”

— Yes.

“And you definitely heard him leave?”

— Yes.

“Listen: the moment you hear him coming, you must warn me. Knock on my head with your knuckles, like this... so that I’ll know, all right?”

— Yes.

“And now I suppose we’d better have something to eat. Though I’m not very hungry... are you?”

— No.

“But we must eat something anyway, we must make sure that we stay in good shape...”

So we get up from the bed, I still feel a bit dizzy, and then, sitting on the floor, we eat our morning spaghetti. For the first time we can sit side by side, taking turns digging up a mouthful from the pan and passing the spoon back and forth. We no longer need to push the tray back and forth over the floor. The girl is behaving with unusual kindness and consideration, going out of her way to help me feed myself, now that I am truly crippled.

Meanwhile, I try to keep up a conversation, speaking

normally, as I'm pretty confident that the rapist is not there. When I expect a *yes* or *no* from Loretta I reach for the girl's head or face with my fingertips in order to be able to read her answer. In this way I manage to create an illusion of casual banter, but as a matter of fact, I still find it very strange to be speaking without hearing a word of what I say, and to be receiving only mute nods and head shakes as an answer. Though now that I'm using my voice again, I do feel the vibrations of my own vocal cords, and that feels good, kind of reassuring.

After our meal, hoping to restore a semblance of normality, I suggest a session of callisthenics—no longer “chain rattling”—, but Loretta declines.

“And how about a word problem? You could give me the answer by holding up the correct number of fingers for me to probe...”

— No.

“You're not really in the mood, huh?”

— No.

“Well, maybe tomorrow, then...”

— Yes.

“You know what? I'm pooped, and so are you, I guess... Let's just lie down on the bed and take a rest.”

— Yes, yes.

Again we lie down together, and once more I enjoy the pleasure of holding someone else in my arms. I stroke the girl's back and shoulder, enjoy the weight of her head on my own shoulder, and after a while I start thinking over the important pieces of information I have gathered yesterday evening. The rapist really intended to kill one of his two slaves. The way he talked about it clearly indicated that he must have done this before. “And if he is capable of piercing my eardrums, he must be capable of killing...”

Then there is the fact that there are two beds in our cell. Loretta's explanation, that the Master just wants to

rape her “on a clean bed” from time to time, no longer seems convincing after what happened last night. There must have been two girls kept in this cell originally... In the end I decide to speak up: “Tell me something, Lorry. Do you think the Master has had other girls in here before?”

— ...Yes.

“Have *you* ever been together with another girl?”

— No!

“But how can you tell that there’s been another girl, then? Wait! Wrong kind of question...Umm... Did you find some kind of clue?”

— Yes, yes!

Suddenly the girl jumps up and disappears for a moment. Then she’s back, lies down next to me, takes my hand and puts a small object there. It’s a chainlet with a little cross hanging from it... Fingering it, I find out that she’s handed me a pendant in the shape of a Celtic cross. “Wait a minute... Your father showed me one just like this... Or, no: not *your* father. This belonged to Loretta McCullough, right?”

— Yes.

“So... you are *not* Loretta?”

— No.

“Did the Master kill Loretta?” I feel the girl shrug her shoulders.

— I don’t know...

“But this pendant is not yours...”

— No.

“It belonged to Loretta...”

— Yes.

“So who are *you*?”

The girl starts to shake all over, her back and shoulders heaving, and I try to calm her down. “It’s all right, it’s all right... No harm done. I understand what must have happened: I was asking for Loretta, and you just

wanted to oblige me, and once you started there was no going back...”

— Yes, yes!

“All right. Now let’s try a little experiment. I want you to spell your name in block letters on my hand... Got that?”

The girls nods her head, takes my open hand, and slowly traces three letters with the tip of her forefinger: S, U, E...

“Sue? Like in Susan, Suzanne? Well, that’s an easy name... Nice to meet you, Sue!” We shake hands.

But I am amazed by this latest revelation, of course. The girl has changed her story before; who knows if she won’t change it again. Does she even know the difference between the truth, her half-truths and her lies? Oh well, it can’t be helped... The poor girl has been grievously abused for more than a year, and she’s still so young... or is she?

“Sue? May I ask you something? How old are you? Can you write your age in my hand?”

The girl nods, takes my open hand, traces a straight line for 1, then a double loop for 8... It takes a moment for me to make sense of the double loop, but then I suddenly understand.

“You’re eighteen years old, is that it?”

— Yes.

“All right, well done! You’re pretty good at communicating... Now listen, it makes no difference. As I’ve told you before: the Master has broken every law in the book, and *you’re* the victim. I’m mad at *that man*, not at you: *never* at you. The fact that you’re two years older doesn’t change a thing... You’re still incredibly young to have to go through all this!”

I wistfully tell myself, “I wish we could get out of here... If only I knew how...” And even while I stroke the girl’s shoulders, I realise that I will have to rely entirely on myself. Not only is Sue—if that is really her name—not to

be trusted, but also, she is simply too clumsy...

Finally, after a while, Sue seems to be falling asleep, and I tell myself that taking a nap is maybe not such a bad idea right now... But before I slip into a slumber, I find—to my own surprise—that I am thinking back to the day, in a distant past, when I found out for the first time that I was blind...

At the age of five, when other children start asking such questions as “How are babies made?” and “Where do people go when they die?”, I had asked my mother, “What does ‘blind’ mean?” My mother had clearly been taken aback. “That’s hard to explain, darling... Maybe you should ask your father when he comes back from work. Daddy is a lot better than me at explaining these things...”

“Yes but, Mummy, are *you* blind *too*, just like me?”

“No! I am not!”

“Is Daddy blind?”

“No!”

“And what about Granma, Aunty Agatha, and Cook, and Nanny?”

“No, no, they’re not blind either, none of them!”

“So it’s only *me*?”

“Yes... Well, there are other blind people in the world at large, but you don’t happen to know them.”

“But what does it *mean* to be blind, then? You’re always telling other people that I’m blind, so you *must* know...”

“Well, being blind means that you don’t have eyes... You cannot see things at a distance. For instance, if I look out of the window with my eyes, I can see that our good neighbour Mrs Mulronee is walking down the street. And she sees me looking at her and waves at me, and then I wave back...”

It had suddenly dawned on me that most people were *not* blind, and that they had wonderful powers that I did *not*

possess. This had made my very sad... and a bit angry as well.

When my father came home in the evening, he noticed straight away that something was bothering his little blind daughter. In a whispered exchange with my mother, the problem was explained to him, and he then sat down in his favourite armchair and said, "Daisy, darling, please come here..."

My father lifted me from the floor and sat me on his lap, he hugged me tenderly, and said, "Now look here, my clever little girl: you *do* love your Daddy, don't you?"

"Of course, Daddy! I love you very much! And Mummy too..."

"Good! Well then: love is something that no one can see... Have you ever thought of that? No one in the world can see it, whether they have eyes or not, but still it exists. So if you love *me* and your *mother*, if you love *yourself* and the *whole wide world* around you, well, believe me, you will never be missing out on *anything*..."

It had sounded so simple. But what my father had not told me, is that this is a very hard thing to do: to *love* the whole wide world!

X An angel defeated

“Listen, Daisy Hayes, it says here, ‘Mrs Hayes and Mr McCullough were not available for comment,’ so how can you say that *I* went and blabbed to that reporter? It doesn’t make sense!”

Daisy was on the phone again, trembling with rage and frustration. “Now *you* listen to me, you bastard! I find this whole thing very fishy, and that’s an understatement!”

“Well, I can only protest my innocence again! The man must have overheard us at the opening, then he must have done some research. There’s nothing in that piece that is not public knowledge. Your story was published as an inquest report at the time; my story has been all over the papers a year ago, because I did all I could to raise public awareness of Loretta’s disappearance...”

“And then there’s a large picture of me, in a high circulation Sunday paper!”

“I know! Very unfortunate! I agree with you entirely...”

“And you *do* understand what this means, don’t you? I’ll just have to stop my investigation, at least for the time being, as the whole situation has become too dangerous for me...”

“No, no, Daisy Hayes, you must carry on regardless! I know how much you care for poor Loretta, and as her

father I'm very grateful for that. But that is precisely why you must carry on. Do it for *her*. And if this unfortunate business in the Sunday paper can encourage the pervert to manifest himself, all the better!"

"Yes, but that's easy for you to say; you're not the one at risk!"

"Well, whether you keep searching or not will no longer make a difference in that respect. The harm is done; you might as well carry on!"

"You certainly have the gift of the gab, don't you, McCullough?"

But it was no use. The man had already hung up. Daisy felt like dialling back immediately and venting her fury some more, but she already knew that the man would not pick up the phone a second time.

Right after Mrs Maurois had read the article to her, Daisy had started to hear of it left and right. She had found out that everybody had read it. For instance, when she had gone to work on Monday, the first of her two and a half weekly workdays at the group practice, her favourite colleague, Astrid, had discreetly taken her aside. "My dear Daisy, are you aware of the fact that there's an article published about you in a major national Sunday paper?"

"I suppose you're referring to 'Blind Angel of Wrath'?"

"Yes! And is it true? Did you find out singlehandedly that your husband had been poisoned by his crew?"

"Well, that's *not* exactly what happened..."

"And are you really looking for this Loretta girl?"

"Yes, *that* much is true."

"Well then, you *are* a real-life blind sleuth! Incredible, you never cease to amaze one! Nice picture of you, by the way..."

Then Victor had phoned and told her, "Now I'm

starting to understand what kind of a dirty little game McCullough is playing. One way or another he must be responsible for this..."

"Yes, but he's never going to admit it."

"True, and short of leaving the country for a while, there's nothing you can do about it."

"Well, I'm hoping that Rick will come back one of these days. When he gets in touch, which he's bound to do eventually, I'll ask him to take me with him to Singapore or Sydney or somewhere like that..."

"Do that, yes. It would be a relief to us all—I mean also Blanche, and the crew of course—if we could be sure that you're safe."

With Stella, her mother-in-law, and Beatrice, and Margery, it had been rather touching. All three of them phoned to express their concern, but as they were "gentry"—whatever that meant nowadays—they would never admit to reading a Sunday paper, so they all had a similar story at the ready, to the effect that "the charwoman", or "a friend", a "colleague" had drawn their attention to the alarming article. Even her parents, who were *not* gentry, had found out about it indirectly, or so they claimed. At any rate, the story was being widely circulated, and even though Daisy knew that her fame would not last longer than a week or two, it was clear that the man who was responsible for Loretta's disappearance was not going to forget her that easily.

Daisy decided to carry on with her investigation, but out of sight, from behind the scenes so to speak. The next point on the agenda was to seek the advice of her neighbourhood chemist, Dobbs junior, as Victor had suggested. Daisy found it a bit awkward to make an appointment with the man. For many years now she'd had

a purely professional relationship with him, based mainly on the need for antiseptic ointments and pain killers to tend to her birth defect. And for birth control devices, which was a highly confidential matter, of course. When she called on him at his pharmacy this time, however, it was the first time that she needed his help in a less professional, but at the same time even more confidential capacity. But the “young” man, who was only about ten years her junior, turned out to be very eager to help, and to raise his relationship with Daisy to a more personal level. In fact, as a shy man is sometimes wont to do, he invited himself for dinner at her home.

“Pardon me if I’m being overly bold, but you see, I’m a bachelor, so I love to dine in good company. Of course I could ask you out to a local restaurant, but I gather that we have rather delicate matters to discuss...”

“Well, what gives you that idea?”

“Oh, erm, a certain article in a certain Sunday newspaper?”

“Oh, of course! Silly question! Well, I’ll be delighted to cook something for you; something simple. How about this evening?”

“Perfect! I’ll come to your place as soon as I’ve closed the shop.”

And so that same evening Daisy was serving her shy pharmacist a plate of spaghetti with diced and fried chicken meat and spinach with Italian herbs—a personal recipe—and refilling his glass with Italian red wine in the hope of loosening him up a little. At length Dobbs junior blurted out, “So you already lived here with Ralph, before he was murdered?”

“That’s right, we bought the place in the spring of forty-one, when we were both eighteen years of age.”

“So that’s... twenty-five, no, twenty-six years you’ve been here?”

“Apparently, yes... It does make me feel old when you put it that way!”

“Well I’m sorry about that... And did you ever remarry, if I may ask?”

“Yes... yes. I remarried in fifty-two with another bomber pilot, Richard Clayton. But in the meantime we are separated.”

“And did you live here with Mr Clayton as well?”

“Yes, but as an intercontinental pilot he was not often at home...”

“But still, if you ever should marry again, I would suggest that you move to a bigger place. Even though this flat is very cosy, it is rather small, and it seems to me that it might be a problem for a husband to live here with you...”

“Well, I’ve never thought of that, but I must admit that it’s a sound piece of advice.”

“Thank you. Now, you had some sensitive inquiries to put to me; I guess it has to do with this Loretta McCullough?”

“Yes, yes, let’s get down to brass tacks. I was discussing Loretta’s case with my good friend Victor Hadley the other day; you know him; you met him at the opening...”

“Oh yes: Mr Hadley. He seems to be a very smart man, and he’s quite devoted to you.”

“Well, he suggested that in the event that a kidnapper would be keeping a young girl against her will, he would need some “medication” to keep her in check. Things like barbiturates, opiates, or chloroform. Now, Victor thought *you* might be able to help me with a list of people who ordered such a combination of drugs in the London area, starting a year ago... There are probably not many people who buy something like that?”

“Hmm... Though it is an excellent line of reasoning, of course, my dear Daisy—may I call you Daisy?—I’m afraid

that there would be literally thousands of people in London alone who would have a perfectly legitimate reason to order these items... You see, every GP, every dentist, every medical practitioner in town would prescribe these products on a regular basis.”

“Oh... I see... I hadn't thought of that.”

“I'm awfully sorry to have to disappoint you... On the other hand, the *chloroform* at least would have to be ordered apart, specifically for medical practitioners registered by name... By the way, your spaghetti is delicious; I'm really impressed that you can cook at all, if I may say so...”

“You may say so, yes. A blind person just has to be a lot more cautious than normal people do... Now listen, Mr Dobbs...”

“Please, Daisy, call me Michael!”

“Well, Michael, I have to tell you something about my relationship with Loretta's father... The man is forcing me to help him through a subtle form of blackmail; he is manipulating me like some kind of pawn; that piece in the newspaper must have literally been dictated by him to the journalist...”

“Good heavens! I think I saw that McCullough at your opening, didn't I? I recognized him from pictures in the papers a year back. Well, I didn't like the look of him...”

“And what *did* he look like? Can you describe him?”

“Military appearance; hooked nose, crew cut, thin lips, and when he forces a smile on his grim face he looks like a wolf.”

“Excellent. I get the picture: charming man!”

“And is there nothing you can do to keep him in check?”

“Well, yes. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. What I really need to do now, is to give this McCullough chap a list of some kind—something pretty convincing—

and tell him to do some legwork of his own, just to keep him off my back... You see what I mean?"

"Yes, I see. We must try to come up with something workable, then? Let me think... Here's one possible idea: let us say that the perpetrator is a medical practitioner of some kind, holding a young girl against her will and abusing her... So he not only needs chloroform and such, but he also needs to administer a contraceptive to his victim..."

"The pill!"

"Exactly! Now, as it happens I could obtain a usable list of names from my supplier. You see, *Dobbs' Chemists* is part of a network of shops that order all their drugs centrally. Ours is the biggest such network in the land, and we have a central *computer* to take care of the staggering flow of orders... I happen to know the man in charge of the computer, and I can ask him for a list of all our customers who order chloroform *and* a contraceptive pill on a regular basis. If this is feasible at all, the machine should be able to spit out such a list within minutes!"

"Incredible! And how many names do you reckon you would get?"

"A few hundred at most, I suppose."

"That's still a lot. Maybe we could drop central London and only take the outer neighbourhoods into account. After all, the kidnapper is most likely to be holding the girl in a freestanding single family home on the outskirts of town..."

"Yes, that is possible, if the list should indeed turn out to be too long... But there's another possibility I thought of just now, and it would have the advantage of keeping McCullough very busy..."

"I'm all ears!"

"The pervert is not likely to be married, so there should be very few male customers ordering the pill who do *not* have a wife or a daughter. This can easily be checked at the General Register Office, though not by a blind person,

obviously. So I say let McCullough do it. If he does the job properly, he should end up with only a handful of highly suspect people... *Unmarried* men who ordered chloroform *and* the pill!”

“Now *that*, my dear Michael, is excellent thinking! I want you to get me that list as soon as possible! And by the way, could you ask the computer man for a duplicate? I might want to study the names on that list myself...”

“I can certainly ask for a duplicate, yes, but how are you going to read it?”

“Well, I’ll have it copied out in Braille by a *transcriber*, a sighted person who transcribes documents for a fee...”

“Oh, I see! And you’re thinking of carrying on an investigation of your own?”

“Maybe. You know, I’m *really* very concerned about Loretta’s plight, and I’m still anxious to find out what happened to her. Now, for reasons of his own, McCullough doesn’t want to get the police involved, but in the end, *they* would be the ones that could really *do* something with that list!”

After the Blind Angel of Wrath-piece had appeared in the paper, Martin McCullough started calling on a regular basis. That is to say, he made sure to keep the pattern of his calls as irregular as he could, sometimes ringing very early, before Daisy left for work, sometimes late at night, just as she was about to go to bed, and at any time in between. Daisy realised that he was checking on her, and reflected, “If I no longer answer the phone, he’ll have to conclude that I’ve been abducted by Loretta’s kidnapper...” So for a while she stopped answering her phone. She also decided to stay at home as much as possible, but she still needed to go to work and to the shops for groceries.

Then one day her new friend Michael Dobbs came round with the promised computer list. Daisy was much

impressed, and put one copy in an envelope to send to Loretta's father, and made sure to set apart the other copy for herself. As soon as the pharmacist had left, she picked up the phone and dialed McCullough's special number.

"Daisy Hayes, is that you! I tried to reach you several times lately, but you were playing hard to get..."

"Well, you don't sound very happy to be hearing my voice!"

"Oh, but I'm delighted! I was getting very worried about you."

"Well, tell that to someone who actually believes it! Anyway, I have something interesting for you: a list of people who have ordered chloroform *and* a contraceptive in the past year. My source is a pharmacist... and *he* suggested that if one would run this list by the General Register Office, one could sift out the *unmarried* men and end up with only a handful of highly suspect people. Of course, as I'm blind, I couldn't do this little piece of vetting by myself, but the question is: are *you* interested? Shall I send you this list?"

"Yes, yes, by all means! I'd certainly like to take a look at it. Good work..."

"All right, then, what is your address?"

"Well, I'm not going to disclose my address to you, obviously, but you can send the material to my PO box in town. You have that Braille thingy at hand?"

"Always at the ready! Let's have that PO box, then."

And as soon as she had punched the address on a card, Daisy said, "I'll post it to you, McCullough. Now it's your turn to do some legwork..." But of course he had already hung up.

Then all Daisy had to do was to write down the address of the box on the envelope. She mastered the Latin alphabet perfectly, like most blind people, and used a special writing frame to get the lines straight. In a drawer

she had her stamps sorted, each value labelled in Braille. So she stuck the correct stamps on the envelope and put it in her handbag, intending to drop it in a post-box on her way to her next rendezvous.

Daisy regularly went out with her sister-in-law Margery; a while ago they had made an appointment to go to the cinema together, and Daisy didn't want to miss it, even under the present circumstances. So she was off to Leicester Square, where she met up with her old friend, and they went to a summer rerun of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*.

Margery always found it fascinating how her blind relation enjoyed "attending" a film; Daisy didn't even want her to describe what was happening in between dialogues, because "it would disturb the other moviegoers". But when they discussed the film afterwards, it appeared that she didn't miss a beat of the plot or of the action. In fact, it was also fascinating to hear how Daisy could sometimes perceive details that had escaped her, Margery, probably because she'd been distracted by what she was *looking at*.

On this evening Daisy was quite excited by an idea that had occurred to her at the end of *Dr Strangelove*, when the whole cast of characters convened in a fancy War Room and discussed plans for their own survival in mineshafts transformed into huge, luxury nuclear fallout shelters. In the lobby on the way out, Daisy asked, "Do you remember the Cold War panic in the fifties, Margery? Even in London there were people who had fallout shelters installed in their back gardens... Now, what if Loretta's kidnapper had such a bunker at his disposal? That would be ideal for his purposes!"

She asked Margery to guide her to the phone booths in the cinema lobby, and there she made another call to Martin McCullough, telling him the idea she'd had, and suggesting that he start looking for people who had built

atomic bomb shelters in the fifties. “By comparing that information with the pharmacist’s list, you should be able to identify your man, McCullough!”

After that, the two friends went to an Italian restaurant for a late dinner. Then finally it was time to call it a night and to say goodbye. Margery lived across the river near Kennington Park; Daisy had to head north to Tufnell Park. They parted at the Leicester Square Tube station.

There was a non-descript man standing by the side of the pavement, leaning against the front door of a non-descript van—an old Bedford van like thousands of others—while he was smoking a cigarette. He seemed to be waiting for something; he had been there for a couple of hours now, sometimes disappearing inside the van, sometimes emerging to smoke another cigarette in the balmy summer evening. The man was obviously a bit nervous; in fact he was excited and apprehensive at the same time. He was looking forward to the fruition of his plans, but he was also acutely aware of taking a tremendous risk. “Luring some silly little hippie girl to your house is one thing,” he mumbled to himself at some point, “but kidnapping a grownup woman on the open street is something else...”

Still, he had worked out his plans very carefully, and everything was in place right now. He had found his quarry’s address, located her flat building, observed her movements for several days. She was indeed a very sexy little number, just as her picture in the paper had suggested! She was out tonight, bound to come back in the course of the evening, and he had parked his faithful van on a very quiet street she always took on her way home from the Tube station... During the last couple of hours he had hardly seen any passers-by; it was the kind of short, narrow backstreet where almost no one ever ventured, but

it happened to be a shortcut for this Daisy Hayes number. On top of that the lamppost right next to the van was out of order: the man had made sure of that. Wearing non-descript worker's overalls and a cap, he had taken a ladder out of his van, climbed up to the light, and sabotaged it. That had been before nightfall, of course, but even if someone had seen him at work, they would have been none the wiser. Now the little street around him was plunged into darkness and gloom. Perfect!

Suddenly the man heard the tap-tapping of the blind woman's cane, and he sprang into action. Daisy Hayes was coming! He retrieved a rag from the left-hand pocket of his overalls, and a little bottle of chloroform from his right-hand pocket. He started emptying the contents of the bottle onto the rag: "Glug-glug-glug!"

He slipped out of sight behind the van. Of course he knew that the woman couldn't possibly see him, but she might smell the chloroform... As she approached, he made ready to pounce on her. And as soon as she came up to the level of his van, the man sprang forward, his rag drenched in chloroform at the ready. When Daisy heard his footfalls, she cried out, "Is that *you*, McCullough?" Those were her last words before she was grabbed and chloroformed.

A moment later the van roared off, the driver handling the steering wheel like a real-life getaway gangster, his inanimate victim prone in the passenger seat next to him, her head resting on his lap, her face pressing against the front of his overalls. "The magic is working again!" the man cried out. "I'm having a fantastic hard-on!"

In the end, only an abandoned white cane lying on the pavement indicated that anything untoward had happened in that empty, darkened backstreet.

XI Here and now

When the Master comes down in the evening, Sue and I are still fast asleep. We've lost ourselves in slumber all afternoon. But the girl wakes up at the first rasping of a key in the outside door. She hears the Master coming in. She shakes me awake, and raps her knuckles on my head to let me know that the Master is there...

As soon as I'm awake, I freeze: the man who punctured my eardrums is back and I cannot hear him coming! I cannot even detect his presence... my mind starts racing. "What can I do, I'm defenceless... But I must make sure I keep quiet, maintain the impression that I'm truly locked up inside my own head..." I feel so overwhelmed anyway, that I don't even need to pretend that I'm completely defeated and subdued. I actually am. And that's exactly the impression I want to give.

Then he is right next to us, inside the cell. I can smell him. Of course I didn't hear the key turning in the lock of the barred door, its familiar clanging sound, but already I feel that the girl is being wrenched away from my arms, from my bed... The man is probably chaining Sue to the other wall, by her own bed. When a moment later his hands close around my wrists and grip me, I almost scream. But just in time I check myself: at all costs I must

avoid letting the man know that I can still use my voice. Meanwhile I am paralysed by fear and submit passively to the Master's rough handling.

First he presses both my hands to the front of his trousers so that I can feel his erection. He rubs himself against the back of my hands. "Oh no, unbelievable! Don't tell me that the sick bastard is going to rape me! How can he even think of it after what he did!"

Loretta has told me that the Master is something of an exhibitionist. He likes to wag his erect penis right in front of her face, for instance when he's tied her to the rack or locked her in the pillory. But this is the first time that he makes *me* touch his crotch like this. I now realize that he must have found it too embarrassing to do this with a blind woman, and a woman of his own age at that. But now that he thinks that he has "destroyed" me, he is no longer holding back.

I tell myself, "Great! This really excites you, huh? Your handiwork makes you randy? I get the picture, you sadistic bastard: you probably went to work this morning—say as a dentist—as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. You treated your patients all day long, all the while lost in fantasies about this moment. Now you can finally play with your new toy!"

The Master yanks off my clothes and ties my wrists in my back with the handcuffs. I am already bracing for the clamp, but to my great relief the Master skips that and starts frogmarching me to his pleasure room without throttling me. "Well, at least that's a good sign. The man is definitely letting down his guard; he must be quite confident that he has crushed me completely... Great!"

On the way to the pleasure room my mind is racing. In those few seconds I realise that a head butt is no longer an option. Even though he is holding my elbow and propelling me along, the man is quite "invisible" to me. I can't even

hear him breathing. How can you hit someone hard on the root of the nose if you can't locate the spot at all?

In his pleasure room, the Master pushes me onto the bed and proceeds to tie my limbs to the rack. He seems to be in a great hurry: still feeling very randy. Suddenly I feel a surge of anger deep inside. I have never felt more disgusted than now. "He is really enjoying this! Gloating over what he's done to me, the little shit! Still, it must be a bit annoying for him not to be able to taunt me... That's why he's so eager to fuck me." I am literally shaking with rage now: let him believe that I am trembling with fear. I am careful to still go along with the part of the hapless victim...

And soon enough the man is on top of me, wallowing with his whole weight on me like a big fat animal, as is his habit. But immediately I become aware of an astonishing fact: the Master has neglected to gag me! Apparently he is throwing all caution to the wind in his haste to satisfy his lust... Of course this is not entirely unexpected under the circumstances; I had been hoping for it. "Now let us think this over carefully," I tell myself. "There is no hurry..."

I wait for a while, allowing time for my rapist to work up some steam. No Tantric tricks this time; he is hardly holding back; maybe he's confident that he can achieve several orgasms tonight... In the meantime I focus on his neck, right under my nose; I can smell his skin, feel its heat radiating on my face. Through my own chest I feel how the man's heartbeat accelerates, how it starts pumping harder and harder. Talk about a heart-throb hug! "Let his blood pressure rise a bit further..."

Finally I decide, "Now the moment to strike has come..." As unobtrusively as I can, I probe the man's neck with my closed lips. He keeps on exerting himself. And the problem is that by now he's bobbing up and down on top of me without restraint, bent on reaching his climax. How can I bite him if he keeps moving like that?

Suddenly an idea strikes me. In a very normal tone of voice—I hope—I utter these words in his ear: “You’ve made a mistake, *Master!*” And just when the rapist freezes in astonishment, I open my mouth wide, whip forwards, and sink my teeth into his left mastoid.

The mighty bundle of muscles seizes up immediately under the acute lesion of the bite; it contracts violently, paralyzing the neck on one side. The man is thrashing wildly on top of me, and through my teeth and my jawbones I can feel the silent vibrations of his screams. He must be squealing like a pig at the slaughterhouse! Now he tries to free himself from the grip of my teeth, but the mastoid is a very solid muscle, the sinews that anchor it to the sternum, the clavicle and the skull are incredibly tough: my grip on my prey is completely secure. Of course my limbs are tied wide apart, my wrists and ankles strapped to four solid anchor points in such a way that I am forced to lie spread-eagled on the bed. But that is precisely why, by tightening my arms and legs, I get a solid grip on the rapist’s neck with my clenched jaws...

By now the man is hitting me furiously, trying to beat me off him with his fists, but his efforts are pitiable and ineffectual. My head is sunk in the nook of his left shoulder, so his left fist hasn’t much range: it’s like trying to hit yourself. The rest of my body is buried completely out of reach under his own: he has no access to it. In the meantime I am shaking my head left and right, pulling on that mastoid muscle like a wild dog harassing its quarry, yanking on those tough tendons so as to inflict maximum pain. The man stops thrashing about, paralysed in agony.

This is the moment I have been waiting for. The muscles of my jaws and neck are starting to smart from the exertion. So I let go briefly, and immediately snap at another, smaller area where I know I can find the carotid artery. With surgical precision I cut through it with a

shearing movement of my front teeth. A straight jet of blood starts gushing.

My mind is racing: I am completely focused on the task at hand and on what still needs to be done. "I have to drink his blood... I have to drink his blood!" Taking hold of the mastoid again with my teeth, I start swallowing small gulps of the blood that is gushing through my open mouth. It requires my utmost concentration not to gag on it, and not to drown in the stuff. At length the man stops moving; he is no longer screaming; he must have fainted a few moments ago, either at the sight of so much of his own blood spilling all over the bed, or because his brain is no longer getting enough oxygen... Now I relax my grip and just keep on sucking up blood in tiny gulps, at a slow but steady pace. After a while I can feel that the heartbeat of the man lying on top of me is petering out... Then the moment arrives when I conclude, "The Master is dead!"

But I keep sucking on his severed artery. It is evening, as far as I can tell, and my last meal—not a very hearty one—was in the morning; my last drink of water just before I went to sleep in the afternoon. "Now," I reason, "I need to live for as long as possible on the blood I can drink in one go... my survival depends on it."

Then there's another problem to deal with. Not only does a meal of fresh, hot human blood lie heavy on the stomach, but so does the corpse of the man who is providing it. Without letting go of his neck, I rotate my upper body to one side and manage to push the man off me. His slack penis slithers away from inside me... With the weight off my chest and stomach, I now can breathe more freely and I continue to suck tiny gulps of blood for a while longer.

At last I decide that I've had enough. Drinking any more would only make me vomit. This time I can release my grip for good. My jaws are aching and I now move them

slowly, cautiously, to relieve my cramped and stiffened muscles. With a sweep of my head and neck I push the Master's head away from me. His body is still weighing on my inner thigh, cutting off the bloodstream to my leg. So jerking my knee and turning my leg left and right, I manage to move the body along inch by inch. It takes a long time, maybe an hour, but eventually the corpse has been inched along far enough to fall off the bed: it suddenly disappears and I am free from any contact with it.

So here I am, spread-eagled, tied to the bed, unable to free myself. My belly feels sated and queasy with blood. Oh, and another thing: I'm blind and deaf of course... I reflect that Sue is probably chained to the wall inside our cell, but there's no way of being certain of this. Maybe the Master left the keys lying about somewhere, within reach... He was being incredibly careless, just now.

Sue must have heard the screams, even if the Master closed the door to the pleasure room, but the girl has no way of telling if it was him or his victim who was screaming like that. I wonder if I should try to shout a message over to Sue: let her know that I'm all right, that the Master is dead... But I feel so queasy that I'm afraid I might throw up; and why give her false hope? If Sue starts shouting back, I cannot hear her. She'll find out soon enough that no one is coming over to her cell. "The Master brought down food and water for two before he took me to this place," I reflect, "so Sue has enough in stock to survive as long as I do... If we have to die here, we will die more or less at the same time."

For hours I keep thinking back to what has just happened. It all went so fast! "I hardly had the time to think things through, obviously..." Now I can't help obsessing about other courses of action I could have taken: the ones where I would *not* have ended up spread-eagled on a blood-drenched bed. For instance: make the Master bleed, bite

through his carotid all right, but then tell him, “I’m a trained nurse, if you untie me I can save your life...” Of course he would have jumped off me straight away, and he was surely smart enough to know that you must press your finger to the wound... No-no-no, it is not sure at all that this would have worked. “In the end he would have killed me anyway!”

Then, finally, after brooding like this for a couple of hours more, I fall asleep at last.

XII Ulysses' homecoming

When a pilot like Richard Clayton refused to take off from Heathrow with his VC10, you knew better than to overrule him. You had the aircraft checked just as he asked, until you found the life-threatening defect that the man had not so much observed or detected, as sniffed out. He had been a bomber pilot during the war, and after that a real pioneer of British intercontinental civil aviation. He was experienced through and through, knew all the globe-spanning routes, and he had been the first one at BOAC to fly the latest flagship of the British aeronautical industry. The sleek Vickers VC10 with its four jet engines bunched together at the rear, just under the elegantly slanting T-tail, was a real beauty and a pleasure to fly.

“First you found fault with your regular kite,” Richard’s superior, sitting behind his desk, complained, “and when I gave you a replacement, you found fault with that too! You’re impossible, Ricky, you’re costing us tons of money...”

“I know, Dicky, I know. But it can’t be helped; I want to land in one piece, and so do the customers. I mean, we don’t have a single parachute on a kite nowadays, can you credit that?”

“Yeah, when you come to think of it, Rick: if they had told us back then, when we were flying bombers, that one

day people would pay good money to fly without a chute, we would have laughed at such a silly notion..."

"Exactly! It's a shame that you stopped flying, by the way, but if you want to climb up the corporate ladder, you have to stay on the ground, I guess... You remember flying, Dicky? It's what the birds do!"

"Yeah-yeah! Get out of my office, Ricky! Stay away! I don't want to see your smug face again until the end of the week!"

And so, unexpectedly, Richard Clayton was back in London for a couple of days. He had recently moved to Sidney, but he hadn't told Daisy yet, so he decided to go and see the old girl. Maybe she would let him stay. Maybe they would have a little tryst for old times' sake, as they sometimes did. "There's still sexual chemistry galore there," the middle-aged pilot muttered to himself as he rode into town in the back of a cab.

But when he arrived at the flat in Tufnell Park, the door was locked and Daisy was not answering. Normally it was still Richard's privilege to just knock, push the door open and cry out, "Hello, it's me!" So it appeared that Daisy was out. It wasn't one of her workdays at the practice, but she could have gone to the shops or something. At any rate: very annoying. This could take all afternoon. A blind girl like dear Daisy needed a lot more time for her daily chores than sighted people; she tended to lose track; sometimes she forgot to check her tactile watch and would turn up at the shops long after closing time, firmly convinced that it was much earlier... "What do I do now?" Richard thought.

Just then the door behind him on the landing opened. "Thank God it's you, Richard! I knew I'd heard someone at Daisy's door..."

"Oh hello, Mrs Em! How do you do? I'm looking for Daisy..."

"I'm worried sick about the girl! She disappeared a

week ago.”

“Disappeared? Good Lord!”

“Please come in, dear Ricky, please come in. I’m at my wits’ end and you must help me.”

“Of course!”

The old lady filled in the younger man on what had happened: that Daisy didn’t come back from a night at the cinema with Margery: “I found her phone number in the book—Margery’s—, but she has no idea what could have happened.” She told him that Daisy would never go away for a week without giving her the keys so that she could empty the mailbox and water the plants...

“So all this is highly unusual,” Richard exclaimed, “what could possibly be going on, have you any idea?”

“Well yes, as a matter of fact I have. Let me show you something...”

And the lady retrieved the *Sunday Mirror* from a low table next to her armchair, opened it at the little *Blind Angel of Wrath*-piece—with its largish photograph—and handed it over. As he took it Rick muttered “nice picture,” but as he started reading, his eyes opened wide.

“What on earth is this? When did this article appear?”

“Something like two and a half weeks ago.”

“And how does Daisy even know this man, this McCullough?”

“I think it’s the man who knows *her*,” Mrs Maurois explained. “He came to the opening of the sculpture exhibition... He must have invited himself, then he probably just talked her into helping him.”

“No, no, this can’t be right! She’s been set up to serve as a bait, not only for this Loretta’s kidnapper, but for every pervert in London! The picture even shows a great deal of cleavage...”

“Well, Richard, now you understand why I’m worried. I hadn’t yet dared to put it into words the way you do, but

it's quite clear, isn't it, that poor Daisy has been badly taken advantage of. I can assure you that she was quite shocked, even deeply unsettled, when I read that piece to her. And now she has probably been abducted..."

"You're right. How awful! Poor Daisy!"

"But what can we do about it? That's what I'd like to know."

"Well, we must go to the police at once!"

"I already did that, but they dismissed me. I'm just a neighbour, this Mrs Hayes has only gone missing for a couple of days. That she forgot about the mail and the plants is neither here nor there... I showed them the piece in the paper, of course, but that only reinforced their impression that I'm just a meddling old gossip."

"Oh no, Mrs Em, you were never a meddling neighbour, I can vouch for that. Now, you told me that you phoned Margery Prendergast; I assume Daisy's whole gang knows about this, the family, the friends, the colleagues, the crew..."

"Yes... yes, I certainly believe they all know about it."

"And do you know if anyone else went to the police, or contacted the paper's editor?"

"Not that I know of, no... But you understand, none of us has even thought of contacting the editor. Can one phone a paper just like that?"

"One certainly can, Mrs Em. Those people clearly have a lot to answer for! If I may use your phone, I think I'm going to try them right now..."

"Isn't it a bit late? It's almost closing time..."

"Not for a paper's newsroom. Let's see if we can get this Nick Aaron on the line..."

But first Richard Clayton had to pick through the pages of the paper, looking for the editorial box where all the phone numbers were listed. Then he picked through the numbers, carefully choosing the one that seemed most

promising. And finally he uncradled the phone. It took some time, some negotiating, some toing and froing—"Yes, yes, I'll wait..."—until he could speak to a junior editor who could give him the number of the "casual", the freelance journalist who had written the piece. "That will be his *home* number, in fact..." So, next thing, Richard got a little girl on the line, who was gone a long time, "fetching Daddy", and at last the author of the confounded piece identified himself. Richard explained his business and burst out into recriminations.

"You can be proud of your handiwork, *Mister Aaron!* Now that Daisy has actually been abducted, you might soon have another juicy story to publish, like that of an unwitting blind lady who came to grief by *your* doing! I just heard that you have a daughter of your own, you bastard, how are you going to explain this to her when she grows up, huh?"

"Wait-wait-wait! Just wait a *minute!* What are you talking about, Mr Clayton? Mrs Hayes was not *unwitting*, you know. As far as *I'm* aware of, she and Martin McCullough had *agreed* to follow this strategy. They wanted to *lure* Loretta's kidnapper out into the open. McCullough *assured* me he would be tailing Mrs Hayes day and night; that is of course, as soon as she left the safety of her home. So I went along with it... I only did what was *asked* of me!"

"And did you go to the trouble of verifying this whole rigmarole with Mrs Hayes herself?"

"Well... no. I took McCullough's word for it."

"Aha! Wrong! Wrong-wrong-wrong! I can assure you that Daisy was *not* aware of this hare-brained scheme at all. Not for *one* moment! But of course she's only a woman, and she's blind, so she doesn't count..."

"Oh, come on! That's not fair. I respect the lady deeply; I even published a piece about her art..."

"Yeah, well, you've still got a lot to answer for in *my*

book. But I'll tell you what you can do to make up for it, for now. I want you to give me the address of that Martin McCullough. And don't tell me you don't have it, or that you have to protect your sources, 'cause then I'll come to *your* place instead and punch your face!"

And that is how Richard Clayton was able to write down the address of Martin McCullough's garage on the notepad lying next to Mrs Maurois' telephone.

"There we are Mrs Em. Now we're getting somewhere!"

"Well, my dear Richard, I'm impressed. And when I see how passionate you are about defending Daisy, it makes me wonder why on earth you two ever separated..."

"Oh, don't ask, Mrs Em, I don't understand it myself."

"And what are you planning to do next?"

"Tomorrow morning first thing I'm going to confront this McCullough personally. Then I'm going to frogmarch him to the nearest police station and force him to tell them his story. I'll twist his arm out of his shoulder if I have to!"

"Well, be careful, dear. At the opening I could see that the man looked rather like a thug. He might be dangerous..."

"So you knew who he was?"

"I'd seen his picture in the papers a year ago, yes."

"Oh, I see. Well, I can be quite dangerous myself."

Mrs Maurois was greatly relieved that a man had finally turned up with the wits and the wherewithal to deal with this whole unsettling affair. She was so grateful, that she not only asked Rick to stay for dinner, but also offered to put him up in her guest room. "It's more like a broom closet, but there's a bed that I can make up for you." Rick accepted both offers. An hour later, as they were sharing a meal, they spontaneously made a point of *not* discussing Daisy's plight.

"Tell me something, Mrs Em; I've always wanted to ask. Are you a Belgian refugee from the Great War?"

“Well, no, but I was married to one. Me, I’m pure English stock, a Londoner born and bred. I met Jean-Jacques at a ball for refugees; you know, to foster understanding with the local population and encourage fraternization. It worked like a charm! It was love at first sight for both of us.”

“And then your husband died and you never got remarried?”

“Indeed. But that had nothing to do with the war.”

“And how come, then, if I may inquire, that you speak English with a French accent?”

“I took that over from Jean-Jacques. And after he passed away I held on to it, because it is much more ‘chic’ than the Cockney accent I took away from home in the East End.”

“I see! You’re probably right about that. I’m also a *real* Londoner; I also did something about my accent. During the war I acquired a very ‘chic’ RAF accent.”

“There you are, then.”

Lying in bed that night, Rick had to think back to Mrs Em’s question earlier: “Why on earth did you two separate?” Good question. It had been by mutual consent, that much was clear. But *why*? For one thing, perhaps, their relationship had been provisional from the start. Daisy had told him that she loved him, but that she still longed for Ralph every day. So there was no need for him—Rick—to be faithful to her. “I don’t mind if you have a girl in each port of call.” Imagine that: a sexy lady like Daisy offers you the deal every man dreams of, but of course you, even though you have a solid reputation as a lady’s man, *you* stop dallying at once! Then, when Daisy had found out about this faithfulness—it had taken some time—, she had agreed that they “might as well get married”. As he loved her, and as the sexual chemistry was definitely there, very strong, Rick had accepted.

But then, things had turned out to be rather difficult on many planes. Rick was not an intellectual; Daisy was nothing *but*. He didn't understand much about modern art or medical things; his wife was very passionate about her profession and her sculpture. And so on and so forth... Of course, such differences need not be a problem for a couple, but there was more. Daisy was always holding back; it had nothing to do with Ralph; she kept something hidden inside, at her very core. Rick wanted to give himself entirely to her; she was not willing or even capable of doing the same the other way round.

And so, in the end, after almost fifteen years of marriage they had agreed to call it quits. They had separated. They intended to get divorced as soon as the law would be changed in such a way that you could do so in a civilized manner.

"And now," Rick told himself, "let's go to sleep."

The next morning he got up early, as did his hostess, who served him his breakfast. Rick explained that if McCullough was actually running his own garage, he was bound to be there before his employees, and that if you wanted to confront the man without witnesses and without his own men to back him up, you had better catch him before opening time.

"Remember what I said, Richard," Mrs Maurois exclaimed. "The man could be dangerous. Please be careful."

When he arrived at the address the journalist had given him, Rick was relieved to find a garage there as promised, and as the workshop door was open, he walked in. The place was rather poky and derelict, and standing under a car that was raised on a hydraulic lift, there was a man who exactly fitted the description Mrs Em had given of McCullough: tall and wiry; a hard profile and a crew cut. A

whippet; a thug. Rick was taken aback by the fact that he was actually working on a car, dirtying his own hands. That was not what he had expected, and looking around him at the modest workshop, he wondered: could this be a one-man concern? Were there any employees at all? Such small businesses always make you marvel: can a chap actually make a living this way?

Rick cleared his throat. "Martin McCullough?"

"Yes." The man turned his face to him with a wolfish smile. "What can I do for you? Your car need repairs?"

"No. I want to talk. About Daisy Hayes. I'm her current ex-husband."

"Ah. So again: what can I do for you?"

"I have reasons to believe that *you* are responsible for that nasty little piece in the paper a while back. Blind Angel of Wrath?"

"Listen, don't blame me, I'm also a victim. That damned journalist must have overheard us at Daisy's opening..."

"Don't waste your breath, McCullough. I *talked* to Nick Aaron. *He's* the one who gave me your address. And he told me the *whole* story."

"Okay. So if you already know the whole story, what can I do for you?"

"Stop saying that, you smug bastard! Daisy has disappeared. You were supposed to be *tailing* her. So what happened? Where is she now?"

"I can't tell you *where* she is, except that she's probably in that pervert's clutches. And I can't tell you *what* exactly happened, because I was *not* tailing her. That was never the plan."

"What? You crazy bastard!"

Rick had been standing at a respectful distance, as you would when you entered another man's lair; now he took a few steps forward, looking angry, ready to confront

McCullough face to face, so to speak. But suddenly the man, who had been wiping his hands with a rag, whipped out a small revolver from somewhere—it was impossible to say from where—and pointed it at Rick. He growled, “I feel threatened: I take precautions.”

Rick raised his palms in front of his shoulders. “All right! Take it easy! I admit I wanted to punch your face but now I’m thinking better of it.”

“Good. Step back. I liked where you were standing before just fine. Let’s talk like civilized men. Any particular question you want to put to me instead of idle recriminations?”

“Well, why didn’t you just follow the plan you told Nick Aaron about? If you had actually shadowed Daisy like you said, you could have captured your daughter’s kidnapper.”

McCullough put his gun away as fast and as stealthily as he had taken it out. “Don’t you see? That would have been Loretta’s death sentence! The man would have been taken into custody all right, by me or by the police, but he would have denied everything. He would have clammed up and we would never have been able to find my daughter. So she would have been buried alive in the dungeon where she is being held, dying alone in the darkness of hunger and thirst...”

“So you lied to the journalist.”

“Of course! I wasn’t going to sacrifice my own daughter!”

“But what *is* the plan, then? Now that Daisy has been abducted, what do you hope to achieve? Tell me that!”

“Well, don’t you understand? The moment that sorry bastard grabbed Daisy, he signed his *own* death sentence. She’s going to kill him, if she hasn’t already done so, and then she’s going to escape from the dungeon *together* with Loretta.”

“No! What are you talking about? You’re deluding

yourself. Daisy is blind, how can she do all that?”

“She’s a real killer. I don’t doubt for a single moment that the man is gonna die...”

“You’re crazy! Daisy is the sweetest, kindest person I’ve ever known...”

“And you say that *after* divorcing her? That girl is *really* clever. Did she ever tell you about what happened in 1950?”

“We got *married* in ’52!”

“Ah. So you don’t know, do you? You have no idea? In the winter of ’49-50, *before* she married you, she killed a man... And believe me, your sweet blind girl executed that man like a pro. He’d had a military training, like everyone at the time, and he was something of a weapons expert, a crack shot, but he didn’t stand a chance. He got killed. And sweet Daisy just walked away without a scratch.”

“And who is this man she’s supposed to have executed?”

“The Earl of Haverford. The man who poisoned her first husband. The bastard got what he deserved.”

“Cedric! But he committed suicide!”

“That’s what Daisy wanted the whole world to believe. You know, because she’s a woman, and blind on top of that, everyone gets a completely wrong picture of her... How long were you two married, anyway?”

“Almost fifteen years, why?”

“So in fifteen years of marriage she never filled you in on what happened in ’fifty? Typical!”

“All right, all right, I get the picture. So you’re pretty sure that Loretta’s kidnapper doesn’t stand a chance, huh? Only, there’s one *hell* of a flaw in your crazy little plan.”

“And what would that be?”

“My ex-wife will be raped! Repeatedly! She probably already *has* been raped.”

“Ah, but for a girl like Daisy it’s not the same thing as

for other women. She's not a hapless victim you know, she's a fighter. While the pervert rapes her she'll be plotting her revenge. It will motivate her for the kill and soothe her conscience after she's taken another life."

"Well, McCullough, you've really got all the answers, huh? You're completely crazy! And one of these days they're going to find you with a big mechanic's screwdriver stuck into your heart."

"Are you threatening me, man? Be careful, two can play that game... And now I want you to get off my property. You've got your answers."

On the tube back to Tufnell Park, Rick kept thinking of the revelations he'd just heard from McCullough. He only half believed what that madman had told him, but the half he *did* believe made him wonder. Could that be the explanation of what Daisy had been holding back all those years? "Let's just call it some dark secrets and leave it at that..."

Then suddenly Richard Clayton was able to put his finger on what had been wrong between Daisy and him: sometimes he had just felt *lonely* when he was with her. Of course every human being is lonely in the end. Even without being an intellectual he could see that. After all, as a long-haul pilot he had often been away, and was quite used to being on his own. But what was not normal, was to come *home* to your wife and feel *more* lonely than when you were on your own. In fact, sometimes he had been able to get more warmth and companionship out of a one-night tryst with a stewardess than from a whole period of leave with his own wife. This, of course, was *after* he had started dallying again... without telling Daisy. Oh, skip it!

The next point on the agenda was to go to the Tufnell Park police station and give them a piece of his mind. Even though frogmarching McCullough was no longer on, Rick

had now gathered enough information to tell the police a gripping story. And that is what he did as soon as he could get hold of an officer who was willing to handle his complaint. As always, Rick assumed that his pilot's uniform would carry some weight, give him an advantage, but to his dismay, the officer immediately started to cast some doubts on his story.

"Let me get this straight, Mister Clayton. You're separated from your wife, right? And you flew in from Sidney yesterday and wanted to say hello to your ex-wife, but she wasn't home?"

"Well, the fact that I live in Sidney now is not material to the case. It's just that you wanted to have my official address..."

"Yes, but put yourself in my shoes, sir. You're no longer living with the woman and you only just arrived. How am I to decide if there's anything untoward going on, and if she's really in danger?"

"No-no-no. Now *you* listen to me. With all due respect, you guys are always putting the complainant on trial. A lady called Mrs Maurois came here a while ago and expressed the same concerns about Daisy Hayes, and you sent her packing without taking down her deposition, for the simple reason that she is 'only a neighbour'. Now, you have to admit that when *two* British citizens come to you with the same story, it already sounds more serious, yes?"

"Well, maybe. But for the moment no direct family of the alleged victim have come forward to report her missing..."

"Oh, all right, so it's *direct* family that you want? Well, that can easily be arranged. I can send in a whole crowd of 'direct family' to this office and I'll make damn sure that their depositions are duly tabled. Daisy's father used to be a bank manager; he's not going to let you send *him* packing in a hurry!"

“All right, all right, hold your horses!”

“No, no, I’ve just had another thought. Daisy is also a widow. She was once married to a very posh man, Ralph Prendergast, who was heir to the title of an earl. So Daisy’s mother-in-law is the dowager Lady of Haverford, who’s husband used to be a Labour MP. She probably still has friends in the party: I understand that Harold Wilson himself was a great admirer of Gerald Prendergast back in the days...”

“All right, all right, stop it already, I’ve got your point. I’ll take your deposition. And I’ll have someone look into it at once. All right? As it happens, I know a chap at the Yard who just adores such iffy cases, he’ll take the larger view on a thing like this; the long-term follow-up, definitely.”

“Yeah, well, thanks. I only hope it’s not gonna be *too* long-term, though. The blind lady’s life is at stake *right now*.”

XIII Here and now

“There is always a plan B,” I reflect, “but there are never any guarantees...” I have just woken up, tied down naked to a blood-drenched bed, hoping that I have slept for a long time.

The silence in my head is oppressive. I suddenly realise that this is going to be the greatest ordeal for me from now on: being deaf. That is, of course, being blind *and* deaf. Being blind is no problem: it has always been second nature and always will be. But being deaf as well: that is only bearable as long as there is another human being close at hand, someone you can touch and smell... If only I could communicate with Loretta—that is: with Sue. The silence and the loneliness are oppressive.

Still, there is nothing else to be done but to wait. The plan B that I have improvised yesterday entails a long wait: at least 48 hours. When I discovered that I was not manacled to my bed, yesterday morning when I woke up with pierced eardrums, I decided to act immediately on a notion I had been mulling over for a long time. So I banged my right-hand wrist several times against the concrete wall next to my bed. I banged it quite viciously, hoping to get a nice fat hematoma. I happen to be rather prone to bruises, contusions and swellings of all kinds. People who know me well often joke about my porcelain complexion and the fact

that I seem to be just as fragile as the real thing in that respect...

Anyway, the idea was that once my wrist had thickened, the Master would no longer be able to tighten the manacle on that side as much as he usually does, the next time he would shackle me again. The hematoma would take up too much space. Then, if he would leave me alone for long enough, I would be able to nurse and massage the bruised wrist until the hematoma receded. Finally I would be able to slip my hand through the opening... Of course I was assuming that the Master would not go back to his usual routine, but that he would be raping only the girl for quite a while. I just couldn't imagine that he would want to rape me instead, and straight away at that!

"It doesn't make any difference, though. Here I am now, the setup is the same..." I can feel my swollen wrist throbbing, the leather strap encloses it snugly like a pressure dressing, which will only help to staunch the internal haemorrhage. It is now a matter of time before the hematoma subsides. And that is precisely why I have forced myself to ingest a solid meal of human blood last night: this could take a few days... Thinking this over, I realize that thirst, not hunger, is going to be the hardest to take. My mouth and throat will get dryer and dryer. Thinking back to my sense of isolation, I long once again for some form of communication with Sue. If I want to shout a message over to the girl, I conclude, I must do it now.

"Yes, I must try, if not for her sake, then at least for my own. It will make me feel less solitary... The silence and the loneliness are really oppressive!"

So, to start with, I test my vocal cords: "Baa... Baaa!" in order to get them under control. When I attempt to utter these baaing noises I don't hear a single sound, of course, but I can feel my voice vibrating in my throat. "Funny," I

reflect, "I've never been one to shout much... just from time to time to hail a taxi."

Now I have to think hard about what I want to say to Sue. For one thing, I decide, I'm going to call her Lorry again, because Sue is not a very shoutable name. "So here goes, give those vocal cords a good push!"

"LOORRIIE!"

"HOLD ON IN THERE!"

"THE MASTER IS DEAD!"

I just have to assume that I still control my voice and my diction in a way that doesn't require any conscious effort, and that I have just shouted these words at the top of my lungs. After all, during all my yes-no conversations with the girl, Sue appeared to understand me just fine. At least I myself am feeling a little better now that I have taken care of that.

In the meantime I have become more and more aware of the aching in my limbs. I am tied down in a very unnatural position, my legs wide open, almost at a right angle to my rump. My back is hurting from staying in the same position for so long. My neck and jaw muscles are still sore from yesterday's violent action. The next hours, I decide, will have to be dedicated to devising a special program of callisthenics to counter these cramps that are torturing me. I start exploring my body limb by limb, muscle by muscle, to test how much of it I can activate. I wriggle my toes, twist my ankles and legs back and forth, left and right, tilt my feet up and down to contract and stretch my calves. The same kind of thing with all the parts of the rump: tilting the pelvis, twisting the backbone, contracting and relaxing the diaphragm, the deep, then the superficial stomach muscles...

But just as I am getting the hang of it, I suddenly feel a strange thud going through my body. I freeze instantly, and a moment later the fleeting impression is confirmed: there

is definitely a kind of thud, a barely perceptible shockwave coming from the bed... I feel it a bit better in my feet and legs, because they are resting on a hard wooden beam attached directly to the iron frame of the bed. The thuds must be coming through the floor: the whole cellar is quaking! My mind starts rushing: could there be minor earthquakes in London? Are there heavy lorries driving by on the street outside? But the thuds are coming at very regular intervals... "Wait a minute," I tell myself, "that must be the girl... Yes. If she is banging the iron frame of her bed against the concrete wall of her cell, it could produce such thuds..." A moment later, when the thuds have stopped, I shout,

"LOORRIE? IS THAT YOU?"

Another thud, —Yes.

"ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

Two thuds, —No.

"HOLD ON IN THERE!"

"I'M WORKING ON SOMETHING!"

"BUT IT TAKES TIME! ALL RIGHT?"

One thud. —Yes.

I sigh. This is extraordinary. Sue has found a way to communicate with a deaf and blind person from one room to another. The human instinct to connect and to master signs is incredible! I only hope she doesn't expect me to keep up the banter... But as the thuds have stopped, I go back to my callisthenics.

After spending a few absorbing hours at my task, I am finally satisfied that I have brought my body back into balance. I have managed to ease the cramps enough to be able to sleep, later on, when the time comes. Then I turn my attention to my wrist. The hematoma is no longer throbbing. That is a good sign. I start massaging my wrist against the inside of the leather sleeve enclosing it, trying to stimulate the blood circulation, hoping to speed up the

draining of the swelling. I am starting to feel thirsty. Hungry too, of course, but the hunger can still be ignored, not the thirst. On the positive side, the lack of water, the dehydration will only speed up the resorption of the damaged tissue.

And so time goes by. I no longer feel oppressed by my inner silence. With a newfound sense of purpose, I no longer feel isolated. I even spend a couple of hours lying perfectly still and relaxed, thinking back to my early childhood, to the discoveries of that age, to all those firsts, and to how it slowly dawns on you that people tend to pity you, and how that can be very annoying. It always gets in the way of being loved and appreciated for who you really are... “Even Mummy had problems with that, especially Mummy. But not Daddy... never Daddy. Maybe not all men are awful, after all...”

And just when I’m thinking back to my honeymoon with Ralph at the beginning of 1941, when we both had been eighteen years old, I feel a thud again. And then another. Sue is signing in.

“LOORRIE? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?”

Thud, —Yes.

“ISN’T IT TIME TO GO TO SLEEP NOW?”

Thud, —Yes.

“WELL, GOOD NIGHT!”

“WE’LL TALK AGAIN IN THE MORNING, ALL RIGHT?”

Thud, —Yes.

When I wake up, my body is aching, and I feel terribly thirsty and hungry. And there’s nothing to be done about the last two problems, so I start performing my special callisthenics to ease the pain in my stiff limbs. Then suddenly it hits me: I realise that my wrist is no longer swollen! The sleeve enclosing it feels a bit loose... No wonder: once dehydration sets in, a hematoma can subside

fast.

Carefully I pull at my arm, narrowing my hand as much as I can, my fingers and thumb bunched together. I can already move my hand quite far inside the sleeve, but not enough to pull it through. I try to push my hand out again, spreading my fingers as far open as they will go, but now my wrist is stuck inside the sleeve. "Never mind," I reflect, "let's give it some time..." I tug at my hand a bit more in such a way that it wedges itself even more tightly. Then I wait.

In the meantime the shockwaves are back. Sue has also woken up and is sending her morning greetings (if indeed it is morning right now). But my mouth is too parched, my throat too dry to utter a sound. The girl will have to wait. "It shouldn't take long," I decide. "In a moment I'll know for certain if I can free myself or not." For about an hour I stay perfectly still, trying to relax all my muscles as far as possible, getting my blood pressure down, and giving my hand enough time to be compressed and to adapt to its constriction. "Let the bones and cartilage settle nicely..."

Then at last I am ready. I brace myself, and straining all the muscles in my legs and arms, I pull as carefully and as hard as I can on the wrist that is already stuck inside the sleeve. Wiggling and twisting my hand, ignoring the pain as much as I can, I manage to inch it backwards and squeeze it bit by bit through the leather vice that is holding it tight. But then, with a sinking heart, I come to the realisation that I might be stuck for good. I feel a wave of desperation rushing over me; I hold my breath and pull with all my might, as if to rip my arm off at the wrist if I have to, and suddenly my hand shoots free... "Thank God!" I gasp, at the same time suppressing a cry of pain.

It takes me a few moments to get my fingers under control; my elbow is hurting like hell now that I am bending

it for the first time in something like thirty-six hours. Presently I have to turn over on my side, reach out for my other wrist and claw at the buckle of the outermost leather strap holding the sleeve together. With trembling, painful fingers, I manage to unshackle my other arm... Now I have to double over, reach sideways and unbuckle one ankle, then the other. All the while my head is spinning from raising myself up—even if only my rump—after reclining for so long. Adding the starvation and dehydration to that, the resulting dizziness is overwhelming. I fall back on the mattress of the bed; I am free, but too weak to move.

Again some time goes by. “I have to find the keys; they *must* be here somewhere; the Master *must* have had them with him... and then we’ll get out of here.” Slowly I raise myself in a sitting position, throwing my legs over the side of the bed, and remain seated for a while, fighting the dizziness. The Master’s corpse must be lying on the floor on the *other* side of the bed, behind me, and I hope that I will find his clothes on *this* side. I slowly get up into a standing position, holding tightly on to the iron bedpost. Then I take my first steps, find a wall, start groping my way around... and there it is: a simple wooden chair with its back to the wall, a small pile of clothes neatly folded on its seat. “The randy bastard still took the time to fold up his trousers before he jumped on top of me...”

A moment later I finally retrieve what I’ve been looking for in the right-hand pocket of the pair of trousers: a set of three large keys on a key ring, and a smaller one on a chain for the handcuffs, just as the girl has described. “Free at last! to quote a speech that made the headlines...” Without waiting a moment longer, I now move forward with my arms stretched out in front of me, and in a few steps I reach the door of the pleasure room. I know exactly where the door is situated with respect to the “rack”, that is one path at least which is now well mapped in my mind. I know

that this first door is not locked, and I step outside, hoping never to come back here again, ever.

The little passage between the cellar rooms is also very familiar after having been trodden so often. Groping my way forward, I reach the grille of our holding cell. Sue, the girl, must be able to see me now, if she's conscious, but as she's probably attached to the wall next to her bed at the back of the room, she can't make her presence known. And as I am no longer able to make my vocal cords produce a single sound, there is no communication possible as long as I'm struggling to find the door. It turns out that the Master didn't even lock it; it is wide open, and this fact confuses me for a short moment: I'm still searching for a locked door... Then finally I am inside, step over to the girl's bed, and feel her arms close around my neck in a passionate hug.

I hand the key ring over to Sue, and try to whisper one word: "Water!"

Then everything happens very fast. Sue unlocks her handcuffs, grips my arm and takes me over to the heavy door that leads to the outside world. I don't know it; I have never been allowed to touch it before. On the other side of the door there is another cellar, with a kind of old fashioned laundry room. Here there is a concrete sink with a tap. Sue immediately draws some water and offers me half a plastic beaker full. After we have both gulped down some water, Sue puts my arm around her neck and pulls me up the stairs to the house. There she leads me to the bathroom, starts running the taps for a hot bath, and helps me to climb in as soon as there's a bottom of water to dip into. I am still stark naked, and the moment has come to wash off the Master's dried blood and semen from my body.

While I start soaking, I suddenly notice that Sue is no longer with me, but some time later the girl comes back with a little pan containing a double portion of lukewarm

tinned spaghetti. With Sue sitting on the edge of the bath, we wolf down the food, taking turns with the spoon. From time to time we cup our hand under the cold tap and drink a little water. Then Sue puts aside the pan and starts scrubbing me down in a very motherly way. I giggle. I realise my voice is back; my vocal cords have just vibrated. With my fingertips on Sue's forehead, I make my first try at conversation.

"You all right, Sue?"

— Yes.

"Me too! I killed the Master. Want to know how?"

— Yes!

"He forgot to gag me, so I bit his neck, the carotid artery, and he bled to death..."

As an answer, Sue gently strokes the hair on top of my head.

"Don't you need a bath urgently, Sue? Get in with me..."

— Yes.

But first Sue lets part of the water drain away, then opens the taps again.

"Water too dirty for you, huh?"

— Yes.

"It'll be even more disgusting when you've finished washing your hair!"

— Yes!

"Now, after our bath we must close down the Master's dungeon, and get out of this house without leaving a trace."

— Yes.

"And then you must bring me to a hospital. I believe pierced eardrums can be repaired with surgery."

Sue hugs me long and hard to show her relief at this piece of information.

When we have both taken a bath together and Sue has washed her hair, I give more instructions. "Listen, I'm going

to clean the bathroom; we have to remove every trace of blood, not leave any hair behind... Meanwhile you fetch my clothes in the dungeon, all right? On the way out you make sure to close and lock up the secret passage so that it's completely hidden, got that?"

— Yes, yes.

Sue disappears again and I go to work on the bathtub. Performing this humdrum chore feels completely unreal. Only a couple of hours ago I was still tied to a blood-soaked bed, staring death in the eye... I try to focus my mind on the familiar gestures of scrubbing a very dirty bathtub. When Sue comes back some time later, I ask, "Did you take a look at the corpse?"

— Yes.

"Wasn't looking happy, huh?"

— No.

"Let's see what you brought back, so I can get dressed... Wait a minute: didn't you find my white cane, my dark glasses and my handbag?"

— No. No.

When I have finished dressing, I ask Sue to search the house for anything that belongs to us. She disappears, and in the meantime I take a rest in a comfortable armchair in the sitting room. I now let happiness flood my brain: the satisfaction of being free... After a long while Sue returns with my handbag and a canvas tote bag with her own possessions: the things she took along when her kidnapper brought her to his house. I find my glasses back inside my handbag, but there is no trace of my white cane. "I must have dropped it when he chloroformed me..."

Finally we leave the house. We take our first breath of fresh air. The sun is shining, I can feel its warmth on my face. And just as we start walking down the street, Sue seems to falter at my side and stops. "What's wrong? Not feeling well?"

— No.

And as I have just put my fingertips on her head, I notice that the girl is covering her eyes with one hand.

“The light blinding you? is that it?”

— Yes.

“Well, here, take my glasses, they’re good sunglasses, very groovy too...” And after Sue has put on the glasses, we move on.

“Listen, Sue, I’ve got some money in my bag. If you can find a Tube station, we can take the Tube. I want you to take me to St Mary’s Hospital near Paddington, that’s a hospital I know well... If you can get me there I’d be very grateful.”

During our ride on the Tube, I can feel how tense the girl is, sitting next to me, holding my hand. I myself also feel overwhelmed by all the bustle that I sense around me, but that I can’t hear. I touch Sue’s head with my forehead and rub her hand gently. “Are you nervous, poor darling?”

— Yes.

“It’s not that easy, huh, being free after all this time?”

— No.

“I’m sure you’ll get used to it pretty fast. You’re young, you’re going to enjoy it. Just forget all the bad things... What time is it anyway?”

Sue opens my hand and draws a large 4 in my palm.

“Four o’clock in the afternoon?”

— Yes.

“That’s more or less what I thought, too. Funny, how well we keep time in our mind... Now, listen, are there any people reading a newspaper around?”

— Yes.

“Well, go and take a look—discretely—what day it is...”

Sue leaves my side, and when she comes back, I ask, “Have you seen the date on the newspapers?”

— Yes.

“Now I want you to do some mental arithmetic: calculate how long you have been a prisoner in the dungeon, and write the answer in my hand.”

A few moments pass, then Sue takes my hand and traces the number 9 there.

“Nine months? Is that the answer?”

— Yes.

“And did you really believe at some stage that you had been held for two years?”

— Yes, yes.

“Well, that goes to show how boring life was down there, in the Master’s clutches... I myself only spent a couple of weeks in his dungeon, but it seems like ages! But the good news is: you only lost nine months of your life. You’re young, Sue, you can do plenty yet, don’t waste any more time, all right?”

— Yes.

Walking hand in hand we leave the Paddington Tube station. From now on I am in familiar territory, near my work; I have known these streets since I was eighteen years old, when I started my education as a physical therapist at St Mary’s. While I in fact lead the way towards the hospital, I say, “Listen, Sue, if anyone there asks where we come from, or where you found me, don’t mention the Master or the dungeon, right? Just tell them that you found me wandering in the neighbourhood and that you think there’s something wrong with my ears... Oh yes, and another thing: after you leave me at the hospital, don’t forget to get rid of the Master’s keys. Drop the whole bunch of them into the Thames the next time you cross a bridge.”

The girl nods her head and puts her arm around my waist, and I sense how tense she still is. “I guess it is time to say goodbye, huh? Are you sad, darling Sue?”

— Yes, yes!

“Me too! I hope we’ll meet again. Come and visit me

here one of these days.”

— Yes.

“You can keep my sunglasses!”

We climb the steps leading to the entrance, Sue pushes the heavy glass door, and we are both overwhelmed by the typical hospital smell of the place. Suddenly Sue comes to a standstill, and I ask: “What’s the matter?”

The girl takes me in her arms, gives me a kiss on each cheek, and then lets go of me. Now she turns me around in the right direction and gives me a push with her hand in the small of my back. With my arms stretched out in front of me, I walk towards the reception desk, assuming that soon some nurse will be rushing forward to help me.

XIV An angel resurgent

So, several weeks after she had disappeared from the face of the earth, Daisy re-emerged at St Mary's Hospital near Paddington. From that moment on, many people wanted to talk to her; they just couldn't wait to find out what had happened.

The first one was the surgeon who had carried out the operations on Daisy's ears in order to restore her damaged eardrums. Within a few days, when he had ascertained that the patient was recuperating well, he appeared at her bedside to interrogate her. Of course Daisy still couldn't hear a thing, her ears were swathed in bandages and the wounds still healing. But being an ear specialist, the man was used to such situations. Only, in this case it was not a sign language interpreter that he needed to charter, as he sometimes did, but a so-called "transcriber", a person specialised in the transcription of important documents into Braille.

The surgeon brought this lady transcriber along with him and presented his mysterious patient to her. Daisy raised herself and sat up straight. She knew that it was her doctor, his aftershave was familiar by now, and she identified the smell and the perfume of a lady she did not know. A bed tray was placed in front of her, straddling her lap, and the unknown lady placed a tape writer, a small

Braille machine on it. Daisy fingered the familiar keys, three on the left, three on the right and a big one in the middle. "A tape writer," she exclaimed, "I haven't touched one of these for ages! We used them a lot at school to take notes or make corrections. We would put the notes between the pages of our Braille schoolbooks, and the correction strips we would paste on in our essays and so on... We were using those strips all the time. At home nowadays I only use the full-scale Perkins Brailler, of course..."

In the meantime the lady had taken place at a small table with another tape writer in front of her, and she wrote in Braille what the surgeon dictated. Then a little piece of embossed tape was placed in Daisy's hands to read.

WE DID NOT KNOW THAT YOU CAN SPEAK?

"Oh, but I talk to the nurses all the time, didn't they tell you? They always jump out of their skin the first time I talk to them, just like you did just now—most probably—but I really try to be gentle about it, I mean, I always know exactly when I haven't met a nurse before, I keep tabs on them, I know them by smell, so I say, 'Are you new? You smell so good!' But anyway, I found out pretty soon after my hearing was destroyed that I could—indeed—still speak. It is apparently something you never unlearn..." Daisy was feeling very chatty, she had an irrepressible urge to prattle...

Another piece of tape was put into her hands.

CAN YOU GIVE US YOUR NAME AND PARTICULARS?

"Oh, of course! My name is Daisy Hayes, born the twenty-first of November 1922 in Barnsbury, London. But you know, you could have found my name and particulars in my handbag, if only you had looked... I mean, I'm awfully sorry that you had to operate on me and all that without even knowing who I am..."

WE DO NOT SEARCH PATIENTS' HANDBAGS.

"No, of course, sorry! Now, please tell me something,

Doctor. Have the operations been successful? Shall I be able to hear again? I mean, I really appreciate all you've done for me so far, of course. I don't want to sound ungrateful or anything, I just want to know, that's all!"

YES. DON'T WORRY. IN DUE TIME YOU WILL HEAR AGAIN.

"Oh, what a relief! I can't tell you how glad I am. You know, my chatting may give you the wrong impression, but as a matter of fact it *is* awful for a blind person to be surrounded by complete silence all of a sudden... I can't even hear myself speaking—literally—while I'm talking! Anyway, is there something you wanted to ask me? As you've gone to the trouble of bringing along a friendly and competent transcriber, I'm assuming you too have something on your mind..."

YES. YOUR EARDRUMS WERE BADLY BUTCHERED. WHAT HAPPENED?

"Well, that's hard to say. I was chloroformed in my sleep when it happened, and when I woke up I was deaf and my ears were bleeding. That is when I put in those little pieces of cloth that you probably had to pry loose and extricate when you operated me... The only thing I know is that the man who did it was talking about using an awl or a sharpened screwdriver to pierce my eardrums."

WHO IS THIS MAN? WHO DID THIS TO YOU?

"Again I cannot tell you much, dear Doctor. He never told me his name. And as I'm blind I never saw him and cannot describe him. He kidnapped me on the street one night and shut me up in a cellar somewhere. I have no idea of the exact location; somewhere in London, apparently. Oh yes, and he raped me almost every night for a couple of weeks... That's all I know."

SORRY. MY CONCERN IS THAT THIS MAN MIGHT DO THE SAME THING TO OTHER VICTIMS.

Suddenly the deaf and blind patient started toggling

the keys of the tape writer still placed in front of her on the bed tray. While she typed proficiently, she said, "Listen, Doctor, what I am writing on this tape is strictly confidential. You and the transcriber must promise to keep this information to yourselves. Consider it as a medical secret, yes? And I'll ask you to please leave me alone now, when you've read this... All right?"

She handed over a little piece of embossed tape, which the surgeon handed over to the transcriber sitting at the table. The lady read it, then stood up and came close to the medical man, and with a stricken expression on her face, she whispered Daisy's message in his ear.

DO NOT WORRY ABOUT OTHER VICTIMS. I KILLED THE MAN WHO DID THIS TO ME.

Then, a few days later, the doctor was back, and gave Daisy another strip of Braille to read.

THERE IS A MAN NAMED RICHARD CLAYTON WHO WOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU. IS THAT ALL RIGHT?

"Oh yes! He is my current ex-husband, so please let him come in!"

A moment later Richard was there at her side, folding her into his powerful arms. Daisy noticed straight away that he was not wearing his uniform, but a light sweater. Then something even more unusual happened. Her ex-husband, still her occasional lover, started sobbing. At least his shoulders were shaking in that typical way... Daisy had never witnessed such a thing before. Suddenly she longed to hear Rick's voice. It made her realise that she still loved him a great deal. It made her heart ache.

"Oh, darling, hush! You were worried about me, huh?"

Rick spontaneously started nodding against her forehead, pressing her cheek in the nook of his shoulder.

— Yes.

"I bet you were looking for me? You went to the police?"

— Yes, yes.

“Well, I’m going to be all right now, see? The operations on my eardrums were a success... You know, when I was being held by that pervert, I thought of you, my skipper, how you used to admonish the crew: ‘Stay sharp! Stay sharp!’”

Rick didn’t answer. He just kept on holding on to Daisy in a tight grip, and the sobbing subsided.

“Remember that time you took me along on a bombing run to Berlin?”

— Yes.

“Just before you started the engines, you said to me on the intercom, ‘If you want to get off the plane, this is your last chance to do so.’ Well, I realised at that moment that you were the real thing, just like Ralph, a real bomber skipper! That is when I kind of fell in love with you, or at least I realised that you could very well stand in Ralph’s shoes...”

Rick made no answer to that. He loosened his grip, suddenly realising that Daisy needed *his* sympathy as much as *he* needed consolation from *her*... So his embrace became much softer, he caressed his ex-wife’s shoulders.

At length Daisy said, “If you care so much for me, maybe we should get back together one of these days, don’t you think?”

— No!

Daisy sighed, “You’d rather not, huh?”

— No.

“Well, I think I can see why. It’s because I’m a lady with too many dark secrets, am I right?”

— Yes!

The third delegation that came to the hospital to check on Daisy was the police: two detectives from Scotland Yard.

By this time Daisy could use her hearing again, albeit only with the help of a hearing aid. If you spoke loudly and she tuned the amplifier at maximum volume, she could hear you as if you were talking from a great distance. As she told her surgeon, "It's wonderful to be able to hear again, but for the moment it feels as if I'm sitting at the bottom of a deep well."

"Please be patient," the man replied, "My therapy is based on the premise that it is a good idea to stimulate your eardrums as much as possible as early as possible... In that respect, I'm going against the opinion of most of my older colleagues, who believe only in absolute rest in order to let the restored organs heal fully, before even trying to use them for the first time."

"Well, I'm happy with your approach, sir. I'm very eager to make progress as fast as I can..."

So the police officers were welcome to interview the patient, but they were told to speak up, loud and clear. Unfortunately, this meant that the detective who was leading the inquiry started to shout at the top of his lungs, leaning in very close to the lady he wanted to interrogate, inflicting the full force of his foul breath on her. There was a second police officer in a wheelchair, a remarkable fact that Daisy was not aware of, especially as her hearing was too weak yet to notice that one of the two men in the room was not producing any footfalls. The wheelchair man just remained seated at a distance without interfering.

"Mrs Hayes!" the first officer yelled. "I want you to tell us in your own words what exactly happened to you these past few weeks!"

Daisy was able to give the man all the details of her abduction. She remembered exactly the name of the street and the day and time. On the other hand she couldn't tell whether it had still been light, or dark. "You'd have to check your calendar for the ephemeris of that day." And of course

she couldn't say anything about the streetlights either. "The man must have been shadowing me from his car, and at the first opportunity he chloroformed me and took me to his underground lair..."

"And is there anything you can tell us about this man, Mrs Hayes? Tall, short, any particulars?"

"Well, he's a smoker, that I could smell on his breath while he was raping me night after night... He must be a bit shorter than I am and rather fat... He never told us his name; he forced us to call him Master at all times. Loretta had met him at her hippie commune before her abduction, and at the time the man had called himself 'Jumping Jack', that is all I know about him... Of course it doesn't help to be blind, in such a case. I believe that as a blind person I am not even authorised to identify people anyway..."

"Well, be that as it may, 'Jumping Jack' is an alias we are already aware of..."

Now of course the metropolitan police also knew everything about Daisy's quest on behalf of Martin McCullough, they were apprised of the unfortunate newspaper report about the "Blind Angel of Wrath"...

"So after your abduction you did find the girl you were looking for?"

"Oh yes, there was a young girl there with me in that horrible man's cellar. Only, as I am blind, again, I have no way of telling you what she looked like. My testimony would never stand in court, of course... But she did manage to tell me that she was Loretta McCullough. That was before my hearing was destroyed, you understand."

On the subject of her escape, Daisy became very vague, claiming complete ignorance due to the fact that she had been deaf *and* blind at the time. The police detective became very impatient.

"But surely you can tell us *something* about how you managed to get out of there, Mrs Hayes!"

"I have really no idea, Inspector! Can you imagine how it is for a blind person to lose her hearing?"

"No, sorry about that. But I take it that it was the *girl* who somehow managed to effect your escape?"

"Yes, yes, obviously. I think our kidnapper must have become rather careless after he pierced my eardrums. There is one thing I *can* tell you in that respect..."

Now Daisy explained the procedure of the neck clamp that the kidnapper used to transfer his sex slaves from one cell to another. "So, the thing is, after he took away my hearing, this horrible man became very keen to rape me. But he no longer bothered to choke me with the device while he was transferring me. And my predicament apparently made him so randy, that he must have forgotten Lorry altogether and thrown all caution to the wind. My guess is that she got hold of the keys and effected our escape during the day, when the Master was not there..."

"All right, Mrs Hayes, so the girl brings you outside the cellar, and then what?"

"We go out of the house. I could smell the fresh air. Then we take the tube. I could feel the rumblings of the escalators and of the trains. Then she brought me to this hospital."

"So you are positive that Loretta McCullough was alive and well, and escorted you all the way to the hospital door?"

"Yes, of course! Ask the staff who were on duty that day. They must have seen her."

"Well, the strange thing is, Mrs Hayes, that the girl has disappeared again without leaving a trace..."

"Good Lord! I'm awfully sorry about that. But maybe she will turn up at her parents' house eventually, or here at the hospital, you know: to see if I'm all right... And I'll make sure to leave my address at the reception when I'm discharged, so she can find me."

“You do that Mrs Hayes... And let us know if she turns up.”

For the first time the second policeman, who all the while had listened in silence from his wheelchair, piped up.

“Excuse me, Mrs Hayes, just one more question, if you please. Then we will leave you alone. What exactly did the girl tell you her name was? Can you try to reconstruct the very first conversation you had with her?”

“Sure, I’ll try. I said: ‘Loretta? Is that you?’ And she said: ‘Yes. But please call me Lorry. Everybody calls me Lorry’ And I said something like, ‘Funny name for a girl.’ And even though I thought it a bit ridiculous, I called the girl Lorry, and when I forgot to do so, and called her Loretta instead, she would sometimes be quite angry... Is this any help at all?”

“Yes, yes, Mrs Hayes, you are being very helpful, thank you. But what I have to ascertain now is this: you didn’t ask the girl ‘who are you?’ or ‘what’s your name?’ Are you absolutely positive that you gave the name away, as in: ‘Is that you, Loretta?’ Which was it?”

“Oh, I see what you’re getting at, sir. I did indeed give the name away...”

“And did the girl ever *volunteer* the name McCullough as her family name?”

“No, she did not... You’re absolutely right, sir. For all we know the girl may not be Loretta McCullough at all.”

“Good! That at least is clear now. Just another question, if you’ll pardon me: is there any physical clue you can think of, that could give us an idea of where you were being held? Anything you could—literally—put your finger on?”

“Yes! Now that you mention it: when I put my hand to the wall next to my bed and probed its texture with my fingertips, I could feel smooth concrete, with the sharply edged pockmarks left by air bubbles... I would suggest that

Loretta' and I were being held in a nuclear fallout shelter, an antiatomic bomb bunker from the fifties."

It took a while before the next visitor turned up, looking for answers that only Daisy could provide. By this time the patient was back at home at her flat in Tufnell Park, able to look after herself again, but still needing a hearing aid set at maximum amplitude for the time being. The surgeon was hopeful that she would soon manage to do without. He was very anxious for his method, which he called "dynamic healing", to succeed. He told Daisy that she should be as active as possible. "Within reason, of course. Just take up your normal life again." And as she was only too eager to do precisely that, he called her "the ideal patient."

She was reunited with her good friend Mrs Maurois, who on the first evening invited herself to cook a meal at her neighbour's place and help her settle down. They sorted through the mail that had accumulated for several weeks. Among other things, Daisy was particularly thrilled by a postcard from Birmingham, depicting canals and bridges and navigation tunnels, under the heading "Birmingham Canal Navigation". Mrs Em read out loud the message at the back.

"Dear Daisy, thank you very much for your help. Dragon and I are so happy! We're both undergraduates at the Uni now, and we're living together on a barge just like those on the pictures. Please ask a friend to describe them to you. It's pure bliss. Daisy-hugs from Roxanne and Dragon."

Mrs Em also reported at length on the visit—and the endeavours to find her—of Richard Clayton, "That nice second husband of yours, who still cares a great deal about you!" On that first evening the good old lady didn't leave before Daisy went to bed.

Then one day, when Daisy was alone at home, there was a knock at the front door. This was a sure sign that she had an unexpected visitor, for the door was never locked and most callers just entered and said "Hello!" So she walked over and opened the door, sniffed the air, and tentatively said, "McCullough?"

"Yup. You've got it in one, Daisy Hayes..."

"What do you want?"

"We need to talk, Daisy. May I come in?"

"Nope. You have already violated the sanctuary of my home once in the past; you are no longer welcome here..."

"But we need to talk. Come on..."

"Well, we can talk here, at the door."

"Okay, okay, suit yourself. You're mad at me, huh?"

"You could say that, yes."

"Well, listen, have a heart. I'm pretty desperate too. Loretta has disappeared again! That is: she never showed up at home. The police tell me that a young girl was seen to deliver you at the entrance of the hospital a couple of weeks ago, but if that was Loretta, she hasn't shown up at our place. So where is she? It wouldn't be like her at all, after what she's been through, not to come and see us, at least to say hello to her mom and her kid brother!"

"How should I know where she is, McCullough. I was deaf as well as blind when we escaped the pervert's dungeon, as you probably heard. If she told me where she was going, I couldn't have heard it anyway."

"But are you sure this girl was Loretta?"

"How should I know, for crying out loud! I told you at the time that it was an illusion to think I would make a better sleuth, somehow, than any seeing person. So now you just have to accept the fact that I never *saw* the girl, I couldn't *recognize* her from a photograph, and I can't give you a *description* of what she looked like, all right? On the other hand, if I heard her voice again, maybe then..."

“Well, I have the feeling that you are not being entirely level with me... nor with the cops. You know more than you’re letting on...”

“My-my, aren’t we having a conversation like genuine Hollywood gangsters? If you want me to level with you, McCullough, you’ll have to do the same with me. Remember that little article in the newspaper about the ‘Blind Angel of Wrath’? I’m still wondering if that was not *your* handiwork?”

“Come on, Daisy, we’ve already discussed this. I told you the man must have overheard our conversation at the art exhibition and all that...”

“All right, whatever you say. But if you tell me the truth, I can give you an interesting piece of physical evidence about your daughter, something I actually kept from the police. Interested?”

“Of course! What do you want from me?”

“Well, the truth, that’s all. Did you or did you not talk to that journalist?”

“All right! Yes, I did...”

“There, then. Is that so hard to admit? So your intention from the very beginning was to use me as a bait, am I right? Oh! and wait a minute... Come to think of it: the journalist’s presence at my opening wasn’t entirely fortuitous either, was it? You tipped him off, you made damn sure he would be there in the first place!”

“Yes, yes! And it worked, didn’t it?”

“Oh, you certainly got what you wanted! I paid a heavy price, but I managed to get your daughter out of the pervert’s clutches...”

“And did you kill the man?”

“Was I supposed to? You didn’t say I should, not specifically... I mean, I’m not going to tell you if I did... I can’t trust you. You could use it against me, like you did before...”

“Oh! Come on! Can’t you tell me a little more about what happened? How was it down there? What did the pervert do to you? What kind of a sick bastard was he? And how did my baby cope with all the horror?”

“Look, do I owe you my life story? I don’t think so... The man was not worse than you. And if you want more details, go to the police and ask to see their report... I believe I’ve paid a heavy price for what I did in 1950, right? Now we’re even... You got exactly what you wanted.”

“Well at least don’t forget to give me that piece of physical evidence you just promised me...”

“Oh yes! You’re entitled to that now, of course. Just wait a second; I’ll get it for you.”

Daisy disappeared inside the flat, closing and locking the front door behind her. A moment later she reappeared at the door, holding Loretta’s Celtic cross on its silver chain in her hand.

“Do you recognise this, McCullough? Loretta gave it to me, and I think I was supposed to keep it. You know, I told her how you had blackmailed and manipulated me into helping you to find her, and at the time she was no longer so proud to be a real McCullough anyway... But I’ve just decided that maybe she wouldn’t mind too much if I handed this over to you, even though she no longer wants to have anything to do with you...”

Martin McCullough snatched the tiny cross from Daisy’s outstretched hand and looked at it intently. After a lengthy silence, a strange and unexpected thing happened: Daisy heard a deep sigh, and then the man burst out into loud sobbing. As he started to weep like a lost soul, she thought, “Now it’s your turn to feel the pain...” before she quietly closed her front door on him.

The last person who came to see Daisy was the first one who was not just looking for answers, but could

actually satisfy *her* curiosity as well about a number of things she still didn't know. Daisy had been home for several months before this last visitor turned up, and by now she no longer needed a hearing aid.

When Daisy opened the door, she was overwhelmed by a familiar and not entirely disagreeable smell of unwashed female hair.

"Loretta? Erm... Sue?"

"Yes! Susanna Carney, in fact."

"Nice to make your acquaintance... again. Please, do come in!"

Spontaneously they fell into each other's arms and had a nice long hug. "Oh, darling," Daisy sighed, "The smell of your hair certainly brings back fond memories... Isn't that crazy?"

"Yes... I made sure not to wash it for a while so that you could recognize me. By the way, my hair is long and curly all right, but not blonde. I'm a brunette, just so you know."

"Oh, Sue! Don't tell me that you're one of those people who keep on lying to the blind, just because they can get away with it. That wouldn't reflect well on you, you know..."

"Well, it's true that I lied to you a lot, but not because you're blind... I mean, I still don't understand why I did it, but it was not to take advantage of you, you know... And I'm sorry I was so rude, sometimes: I called you a blind old bat!"

"No you didn't! If I recall correctly you only said 'blind old lady' and you called me 'straight' and 'pathetic'. But don't you worry about that and about all the lies, darling, I think I understand. Perhaps it was the only way you could exert some control and lash out in a situation where you were completely powerless, am I right?"

"Yes, it's nice of you to say that, Daise. I like to think that I'm not so nasty, nor such a liar under normal

circumstances.”

“Of course not! May I offer you a beer? I feel like having one...”

“Oh yes, exactly what we need right now!”

“Please take a seat.”

Daisy went to fetch two bottles from the fridge in the kitchen, and the two of them settled cosily side by side on the living room sofa. They clinked their bottles and sat in silence for a while, sipping from their beers. At length Daisy exclaimed:

“I can’t tell you how happy I am that you came to see me! So what have you been doing with yourself? Did you go back to your parents?”

“Yes, yes. That’s the first thing I did, and they were very glad to see me.”

“Good! That’s really good news... And did you go to the police?”

“Well, yes, I had to... My father insisted, because he had reported me as missing, and he wanted them to be able to close the case properly. So I stood there lying through my teeth—as usual—, telling them that I had stayed at different hippie communes around the country, a very confused and confusing tale, the same I have dished up to my parents.”

“You poor thing! But in this case I’m glad you lied...”

“Well, the funny thing is, for the first time I had no pleasure in deceiving people, but as you just said, in this case it was really necessary. From now on I hope that I can afford to live truthfully...”

“I’m sure you will. It won’t always be easy, though...”

“Oh, but now I’m making a real effort! I’ve gone back to school. That is, to night school. They don’t make you wear a dumpy uniform; they treat you like an adult. So now I’m preparing my GCE A Levels! How about that?”

“Well, I’m proud of you, Sue. I couldn’t be more pleased

for you... And what do you do by day?"

"You mean apart from sleeping, right? Well, I can proudly tell you that I have a day job too, stocking shelves for a couple of hours at the local supermarket... In fact, I've changed my outlook a great deal. I'm no longer a hippie girl. Of course you can't see it, but I'm very straight, now, very square, and except when I'm visiting you, I really wash my hair properly..."

"Have you ever been back to your commune?"

"A couple of times, yes, you know, just visiting. But it's strange: a year ago they were the *only* people who understood me and accepted me the way I was. And now they're the only ones who *don't* understand me. I don't think I'll go say hello again... How is such a thing possible?"

"Well, darling, *you* have matured and *they* have not..."

"You know, Daise, what happened down there in the dungeon really goaded me into action!"

"Yes, it would... It was really awful, wasn't it?"

They both giggled nervously at that, and took another sip of their beers.

"Thank God we got out! You know, Daise, I owe you everything!"

"Oh no, darling, I don't see it like that at all! You owe a lot to yourself, Sue. You survived the ordeal on your own for many months. You didn't let the man get you down. I admire you a great deal for that..."

"Well, it's very sweet of you to say so, Daise."

The younger woman leaned over, touched the older woman's head with her forehead and rubbed her with a nodding motion. "I think I love you more than my own mother..."

"Don't you ever tell *her* that!"

"I won't."

"Well in that case I love you too, you nitwit!"

Sue giggled. "How tenderly you say that..."

They both took a few more sips from their bottles, then Sue asked, “But how exactly did you manage to free yourself, Daise? And why did it take so long? I mean, biting the man and letting him bleed to death, that I understand, but not the other thing...”

“I know. It must have been horrible for you, isn’t it? The endless wait? What did you imagine was going on?”

“Oh, it was scary, all right. I heard the screaming and it was impossible to say if it was him or you, but it just sounded horrible. Then I started thinking that *you* would never scream like that, Daise, you were always one to suffer in silence, you were incredibly brave and tough. But on the other hand, I just couldn’t imagine what you could have done to make the Master scream so. Then I decided that you might have bitten off his cock or something...”

“Good heavens, no,” Daisy giggled, “I only sunk my teeth in his mastoid muscle... I didn’t hear a thing of the screaming of course. And when the man was dead, I wanted to shout a message to you, but I was feeling too queasy because of all that blood.”

“And I kept wondering when you—or he—would come back. And when no one showed up, I wondered, ‘Shall I eat Daisy’s portion as well now?’ And still it went on and on and you didn’t show up. It drove me crazy, of course...”

“I’m so sorry, Sue. But anyway, to answer your question, here’s what happened...” And Daisy told Sue the story of how she had caused a serious hematoma by banging her wrist against the wall, and that she had to wait until it subsided enough to allow her to slip her hand through the leather manacle of the *rack*.

“So you had a plan all along, but you didn’t tell me.”

“Yes, sorry about that. It was not a very good plan anyway, but it worked. In the end it all happened on the spur of the moment. And I didn’t dare disclose my idea to you beforehand because I no longer trusted you... Besides,

I was really afraid of the Master, once I'd lost my hearing."

"All right, I understand."

The bottles were empty by now, and Daisy asked her guest if she wanted another beer, or something to nibble maybe? Sue said she would like both, that would be nice, thank you, and her hostess went to the kitchen to get them more beers and some crisps. Susanna Carney looked around her and marvelled at the small Spartan flat where her friend lived. Very sparsely furnished, no clutter of little pieces of furniture like at home at her parents' house. No pictures hanging anywhere, of course. There were a lot of knickknacks, miniature models of the Eiffel Tower and of Lady Liberty, for instance, but they were all neatly aligned on shelves halfway up the walls. Clearly the home of a well-organized blind lady.

When Daisy came back with the refreshments and snacks, Susanna sighed, "Lovely, thank you. I can't tell you how much I enjoy this..."

"Me too. Isn't it nice, just the two of us? But now, there are a couple of things I'm curious about. First, sorry if I have to bring back painful memories, but I just have to ask. Were you a witness of what happened on the night the Master pierced my eardrums?"

"Yes and no... When I woke up he was holding a rag of chloroform to your mouth and nose. I could smell that awful stuff! Of course I understood immediately what he intended to do, so I started screaming, screaming... Then, as soon as the bastard was sure that he had knocked you out, he came over and chloroformed me as well. When I came to in the morning, you were still unconscious, and we were no longer chained to the wall. So I came over to your bed, but I didn't dare to touch you at first, because you were bleeding and everything... And you know the rest of the story, right?"

"Yes. Poor darling! It must have been a terrifying

experience! Now... the second thing that is a complete mystery to me, is how on earth did you produce those thuds that I could feel through my bones while I was waiting to free myself..."

"Well, I was banging the iron frame of my bed against the concrete wall of our cell..."

"Yes, I had worked that out, but what stroke of genius made you realise that I would be able to perceive the shockwaves from the next room?"

"As a matter of fact I didn't. I was only trying to break off the metal rings to which my chains were anchored. You see, the Master had chained me to the wall again, but he had left the door of our cell wide open! I really felt that I was *this* close to freeing myself... At least that's what I hoped. So I was using the iron bed as a battering ram. It didn't work in the end, but then I heard you shouting your message from the cell next door, and immediately I thought of using the 'bed-banging' as a means to answer *yes* or *no*..."

"Still a stroke of genius! Now there's a third thing I'm very anxious to know. What can you tell me about Loretta McCullough?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. I never met her... If she was abducted a year before *you* showed up, that must have been three months before *I* was brought in... But as it happens, the Master himself told me *how* she died, though he didn't say exactly *when*... She drowned in her own vomit while she was fast asleep from sleeping pills..."

"Good God!"

"Yes. What I understood from the excuses the bastard was making for himself, is that Loretta was literally sick with grief, nauseous all the time, and she was afraid of the dark, too... And that is why by the time he locked me up, the Master had activated the emergency lights in the dungeon, so that it would never be completely dark, and it

is why he never gave me Valium or any other drugs. And he was telling me how lucky I was: 'I've learned my lesson, see; I'll take good care of you; I don't want you to die on me.' Yeah-yeah-yeah, you bastard!"

"And how did you get hold of the Celtic cross?"

"Loretta must have hidden it under her mattress; I found it there one of the first times I made up my bed with clean sheets. I didn't tell the Master, of course, and I just kept it hidden there, my own little secret."

"I see. And did the Master tell you what he did with Loretta's body?"

"No. And I didn't ask..."

"Very wise. But we may safely assume that she was buried somewhere within the dungeon, under a layer of concrete... So now there are two corpses in there. Let's hope that no one will ever find them. That reminds me: did you get rid of the keys?"

"Yes, I dumped them in the Thames as you told me... Listen, Daisy, I can tell you that the bunker door is very thick and incredibly well camouflaged; I shouldn't worry that anyone will ever find the bodies. And if one day they do, well, you did nothing wrong, it was self-defence; I will testify in your favour..."

"That is sweet of you, darling... At least one can no longer be hanged for murder."

"You know, I will never forget that you were willing to die to save my life... And in the end the Master actually pierced your eardrums because you refused to let him play his little games with us... I still find that incredible!"

"Well, darling, when you'll be my age, I have no doubt whatsoever that you'll be capable of doing the same thing. You too will risk your life if you can save someone else's, and you'll be willing to kill a man if you have to."

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