

Nick Aaron

Daisy and Bernard

The Daisy Hayes trilogy III

ANOTHER IMPRINT PUBLISHERS

In the summer of 1989 the Iron Curtain was unravelling, and Daisy Hayes had just become a pensioner who liked to do her ironing while listening to the latest news on the radio.

The doorbell chimed. A police officer handed over a summons—printed in Braille. Daisy was being asked to testify about a baffling and gruesome murder, and had to follow the policeman at once. During the ride to New Scotland Yard, even before the first interview took place, the blind lady reflected that, though she knew nothing about this case, she would not be able to prove her innocence without revealing the two murders she actually *had* committed—many years ago.

In an original twist to the “good cop-bad cop” routine, the older police investigator in charge of this strange case seemed to be very much in love with the blind suspect, and encouraged her to come clean and find redemption at long last.

“As we have almost come to expect from this author, Nick Aaron playfully tweaks and mixes the conventions of different genres, offering us a compelling murder mystery that is at the same time a heart-rending romance.”

The Weekly Banner

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

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

*A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to keep
silence and a time to speak; a time to embrace and
a time to refrain from embracing.*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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Prologue

The victim had been utterly crushed, so much was clear. The mangled body was lying on the concrete floor of the garage, just under a hydraulic lift. The vehicle lift had been raised by one Constable Collins, the police officer who had found the victim.

When Detective Chief Inspector Bramble arrived on the crime scene, stepping out of his car and through the workshop door, he automatically looked out for the highest-ranking member of the local police who was present. He stepped up to a man wearing the chevrons of a sergeant. “What do we have here, Sergeant, erm...?”

“Sergeant Thompson Sir. A suspicious death, to say the least Sir.”

“Any ID on the victim?”

“Yes Sir. Martin McCullough, sixty-eight years old, owner of the garage, well known to the police on account of links to the IRA... But he was retired. From the IRA, that is, as far as we know. Still liked to tinker in his garage, though.”

“I can see that.” The detective crouched next to the

dreadfully mangled body. It was a real horror show of spilling guts and brains. The dirty blue overalls the man was wearing had been mashed into his flesh.

“Any relatives we need to notify?”

“Yes Sir. I called the station, and they found out that there is a wife, Eileen, sixty-two, and a son, Neilan, thirty-three.”

“All right, I’ll have to go and see them... Any chance that it was an accident? A mechanical failure of the lift or something?”

“I couldn’t tell Sir. You’d have to ask an expert. We’ve already called in the forensic pathologist, of course.”

“Not much *he’ll* be able to do by the look of it... All right; who found the body, by the way?”

The sergeant pointed to the constable standing guard by the door and making sure that the curious onlookers didn’t come too close. “Constable Collins. He was on duty at the station when an anonymous call was made.”

“All right. I want to talk to Collins. You take his place.”

The detective motioned the constable to come over, and the eager-looking young policeman did so at once.

“So you received an anonymous call about this? Any idea what kind of person?”

“Male voice Sir, youthful-sounding, a bloke mumbling through his fist in a useless ploy to disguise his voice. Didn’t waste any words, though. The call lasted only a few seconds.”

“And what did he say, exactly?”

“That I should check on the McCullough garage. That it would be worth my while.”

“So you came over at once...”

“No Sir. The call came at half past one last night, and as I was on duty until six, I had to wait for the end of my

shift. I found the body at around six thirty this morning.”

“You were doing the night shift? So you’re not even on duty right now! Why are you guarding the door?”

“Well Sir, the sergeant doesn’t know that I’m off-duty, and I thought I’d stick around for a while. This is the most baffling case I’ve ever seen.”

When he had joined the Met, the constable had dreamed of heroic actions and of solving heinous crimes single-handedly. Instead of which he’d had long hours of office drudgery and unvarying patrols in a neighbourhood not originally his own. He was positively thrilled by the gruesome stiff that had now turned up on his turf. At last he was going to deal with a real case, after spending many nights at the station reading up on scientific criminology...

Detective Chief Inspector Bramble presently said, “What makes you say that the case is baffling, apart from the gore?”

“Well Sir, I couldn’t help overhearing just now. You were wondering aloud if it could be an accident; a mechanical failure. As it happens, my dad has a garage just like this one, and so I can assure you that an accident is out of the question. You see, that’s the whole *point* of a hydraulic vehicle lift. Hydraulics *never* fail: you want to lower the car, you have to release the lift by *actuating* a valve. You have to *do* something. The button for that is over there on that panel, at a safe remove from the installation. If an accident ever happens, it means somebody *caused* it.”

“And then he calls the local station in the middle of the night.”

“That’s right Sir.”

“Well-well, Constable, it seems that *you’re* the expert I was wishing for. I have a little theory of my own about your caller. In cases like this it is often a member of the

family who did it. It appears that the victim had a thirty-three year old son. You mentioned a youthful male voice on the phone, so what would you say? Could it be the son?"

"I wouldn't know about that Sir. Patricide is rather uncommon, but you could be right, of course. But even if it turns out to be the son, there is something else that is highly disturbing about what happened here, if I may say so Sir."

"Oh really? And what would that be?"

"If you care to take a look Sir."

Constable Collins crouched next to the body. "Do you see how the cloth of the victim's work overalls did not soak up any blood? That could be significant. It looks like the victim was bled dry before he was put through the meat grinder."

By now the detective was kneeling next to Constable Collins; he was all ears. "Wait a minute, what are you saying?"

"The victim was bled to death *before* he was crushed by the lift. You can see it on the grate of this drain well, right next to the man's head. There are traces of congealed blood. His blood just flowed into the well under the lift."

"Good God! What kind of sick ritual took place here?"

"Exactly Sir. But the *really* baffling thing is not that the victim was *bled* to death, it is rather that he was *bitten* to death. If you care to take a look at his neck—well, the part of the remains here, above his shirt collar—you can see the marks of the teeth. *Human* teeth, of course... The man was definitely bitten."

"Good Lord! But then why crush the body as well afterwards?"

"My guess would be: a useless ploy to disguise this sick ritual as an accident. This was done either by a very

dumb person, or by someone under the delusion that they were being very clever.”

“Hang on to me and act helpless, Baloo!”

The young man who said this was propelling himself through the Tube station in a wheelchair. Baloo was an elderly blind lady with pitch black round glasses and a white cane. She was tall and shapely, with a riot of half-grey, half-blonde curls gathered in an unruly bunch on top of her head. With one hand she was holding on to the shoulder of the wheelchair-bound man, while she tap-tapped spectacularly with the long white cane held in her other hand.

They approached the top of an escalator going down. Suddenly the blind lady let go of her companion, who twirled around in his wheelchair; then she stepped forwards onto the descending escalator. The young man propelled himself backwards after her, apparently bent on throwing himself down the sheer endless flight of moving stairs.

People gasped and cried out. The ones just ahead of this strange couple were quite alarmed for a moment. Already a guard from the London Underground was rushing towards them, but as the wheelchair keeled backwards, the young man leaned forwards and grabbed the rubber handrails left and right with his hands. As by miracle his wheelchair stayed in place on a step of the escalator, apparently perfectly stable.

Again the blind lady clung to the wheelchair-bound man, her arms around his shoulders, and seeing this, the guard stopped in his tracks and beat a hasty retreat. The lady was obviously as blind as a bat. He had intended to tell off the young man for his reckless behaviour—taking the escalators in a wheelchair was strictly forbidden!—but

under the circumstanced he thought better of it.

Still hanging on to his shoulders, the blind lady leaned forwards and giggled softly into her companion's ear: "Louie! How can I act helpless when I'm about to have a giggling fit!"

"No worries, Baloo. The guard has already scampered. Victory is ours! You know, the first time I saw you entering a Tube station with your white cane, I knew right away that you'd be a real urban warrior..."

"Warrior my foot. I'm a pensioner, for Pete's sake! And you, *King Louie*, are still wet behind the ears. I could be your mother, you know."

"Well, apart from all else, we have a lot in common, you and me. It takes a lot of balls and drive to get up in the morning when you're blind or wheelchair-bound. Normal people have no idea how hard we have to push ourselves, compared to them. That's why when we team up, we rule!"

It was a fine day at the end of May, and Hans Konradi was sitting at the dining table with his family, in their small flat in Lichtenberg, Berlin. "Listen, Grete, children, there's a serious rumour going around about the new regime in Hungary. They're tearing down the border fence with Austria. That's not just propaganda from the West. How about that? Apparently you can get across the Iron Curtain there..."

His remarks were greeted with an uncomfortable silence. This was Papa's dangerous talk again, using words like "regime" and "Iron Curtain". If they were being wiretapped they could get into serious trouble. But on the other hand, they were not important people, just your average Hans and Grete, not into politics at all, so why would they be bugged? "We even have it pretty good,"

Hans Konradi reflected. He had climbed up the ladder to become a shop manager. They had a flat of their own, albeit a small and derelict one. It included a private kitchen and bathroom. And they had a car, a little Trabant, parked outside in the street. But life was stifling and excruciatingly boring under the communist regime. You had no freedom. Hannelore and Hanspeter were due to finish their secondary school in a couple of years; they were bright kids, but they would not be allowed to choose their studies or their profession. If the State needed engineers you became an engineer. With his work at the State shop, Hans had always felt that he was performing under his abilities. He'd wanted to be an English teacher, but the State wanted children to study Russian only...

"Listen up, gang, here's my plan: we're going to Hungary on a weekend trip. So far nothing dramatic. But once we're there, we'll have a look at that border crossing, and if the rumours are true, we'll drive on into Austria and we'll never come back."

"Oh Hans," his wife gasped, "isn't it dangerous? It could be a trick; a trap. They'll arrest us... or even shoot us!"

"Don't worry, Gretchen, we're not going to do anything reckless. We'll take a good look at what's going on; we'll proceed only if we all agree that it's safe."

"All right, but you have to *promise* that we won't be the *first* ones to do it. I want to see *someone else* ahead of us crossing the border unharmed."

"Of course, darling, that's the idea. Now, the most difficult part for the moment is this: we may never come back, but we can't take all our possessions with us. It has to look like we're going on a weekend trip, remember? For my part I've already decided that I'll take only the clothes I'm wearing, plus our photo albums in the small suitcase;

maybe the marriage and birth certificates as well. Our family history is all that matters to me. Now, I want the three of you to think along the same lines: one bag each; take only what you want to keep for the rest of your life..."

Suddenly young Hannelore became tearful. "Papa! I'm scared... and what about my friends? Will I ever see them again?"

"Impossible to say, sweetheart. But you *do* understand that you cannot say goodbye to them, don't you? Officially we're only having a weekend outing to Hungary. Nothing more than that."

CHAPTER I

“...they are called *Traby's*, they have two-stroke engines and sound a lot like mopeds. And as these ungainly little cars cross the border, a handful of Hungarian border guards just stand by and look on with studied indifference, as if they've seen it all before. But in a not so distant past they would have been called upon to shoot on sight any citizen of an Eastern European country trying to cross the Iron Curtain without a valid exit visa...”

Daisy was ironing her handkerchiefs and her summer blouses while listening to the radio. Ironing had always been a chore she liked, because it was difficult and dangerous for a blind person to do, but she *never* burned her fingers. And: she had always prided herself on the impeccably starched and ironed overcoats she had worn on the job as a physiotherapist. Now that she was retired, she still liked a crisp style of clothing, smoothly ironed blouses and skirts, ditto summer dresses.

“...What fate awaits these very unconventional East

German holidaymakers? Well, according to West German law, these people are entitled to benefit from a “return” ruling that will automatically grant them German citizenship in the West. And as the Federal Republic applies rather generous social security programs, the newcomers will be entitled to a roof over their head as well as to social benefits that will put food on the table. Some of these GDR-citizens even have family ties in the West that will help them get back on track. But having said that, the refugees will have a hard time finding their footing in their new environment. Nothing in the communist way of life of the GDR has prepared them for the hard-headed struggle for survival in the West. Their future lies wide open...”

Daisy no longer lived in the small flat in Tufnell Park. When her father had passed away, she had decided to invest her inheritance in a basement flat under a Georgian-style house in a more central part of London. She now lived just under street level on a lovely garden square not far from Earl’s Court Tube station. A light well in front, with its typical area railing and steep stairs, gave direct access from the street. It was a very posh street, too; therefore, apparently, a very good investment. Daddy would have approved. Daisy’s friends had second thoughts about how dark and gloomy her place really was, but she told them that there are no dark places for the blind. No, for her the biggest bonus was the earthy smell coming from the square, and of course the birdsong bursting forth from dawn to dusk. On top of that, her upstairs neighbours—a young couple with a baby—had offered straight away that she make use of their garden at the back of the house. So sometimes Daisy took up a canvas chair and spent a couple of hours sitting on their

tiny lawn in the shade of their tree, reading her Braille copy of *The Hunting of the Snark*, or other short works she possessed, or larger books from the public library. The young daddy had said, "As you're blind, dear Daisy, we'll never have the feeling you could be spying on us."

"Yes, well, don't forget that there's nothing wrong with my hearing!"

Suddenly the doorbell rang, or rather an unearthly electronic chime echoed through the house, a legacy from the previous owner. In some respects this place still didn't feel like home. Daisy no longer left her front door unlocked when she was in, as anyone could enter directly from the street. She opened the front door, and a man's voice asked politely, "Mrs Daisy Hayes?"

"Yes, and what on earth is the police doing at my door?"

"Gosh! How can you tell that I'm a police officer, if I may ask?"

"The smell of the uniform is very familiar to me, but as I no longer have any military acquaintances, it *must* be uniformed police..."

"I see... You're right, of course. I am Constable Collins, from New Scotland Yard, and I'm here to hand you a summons and take you with me to the Yard. If you will reach out, I will hand it to you now."

"You do realise that I can't read your summons anyway? Am I being arrested?"

"No! No, please relax, Madam. Here, the summons is in Braille, by the way, so please read it. You'll find that you are only being called upon to testify... say: as a witness."

Daisy took the firm sheet of paper the man had pushed in her hand, and felt the familiar embossed

pattern of the Braille script. "I'll need to sit down to read this, so please come in. Can I offer you something to drink?"

The front door gave directly into the kitchen, a quirk of such basement flats that Daisy rather liked. She motioned the man to take a seat at the kitchen table.

"Just a tumbler of tap water would be fine, Madam. Take your time."

And so they spent a few peaceful minutes at the table, the uniformed man sipping water, and the blind lady reading the document with a frown over her strange, hollowed-out eyes. The constable marvelled at how the woman's slender fingers raced over the invisible print; it seemed frightfully difficult to him, reading Braille. At length she concluded, "All right, it is as you stated. I'm summoned to testify. But can you tell me what this is all about? I have no idea, and it doesn't say here..."

"Well, I'm not supposed to disclose any details, but we're investigating a murder."

"A murder! All right. And I'm supposed to know something about it? Who's the victim, anyway?"

"Well, again..."

"You're not supposed to tell; I get it. Well, really, that's wonderful!"

The blind lady was now frowning fiercely, which made the constable very uncomfortable. "Erm... does the name Martin McCullough ring a bell?"

"Oh! Sure does. Now I get it. So McCullough was murdered, huh? Doesn't really surprise me."

"Well, don't tell anyone that I mentioned his name."

A moment later they were driving through the London traffic on their way to the Metropolitan Police headquarters at 10 Broadway. Daisy was now wearing dark glasses, to the constable's great relief, and she was

holding her white cane between her legs. She hadn't said a word for quite some time, and she was still frowning as her mind was racing. McCullough murdered! Even though she knew perfectly well that she had nothing to do with his death, the news was extremely unsettling. Especially the fact that the police wanted to talk to *her* in the first place. On the other hand, the link between her and Martin's daughter Loretta had been public knowledge... twenty years ago. Then there was another problem. How on earth would she manage to prove her innocence without revealing the two murders she *had* committed... in a distant past? Both cases had involved McCullough, so this was not looking good... Not good at all.

After a long interval of tense silence, Constable Collins couldn't help himself and said, "You know, Mrs Hayes, if you're innocent, you have absolutely nothing to be afraid of."

"Oh, but that's the thing, don't you see? In my experience *nobody* is ever entirely innocent."

Daisy was introduced into an office, led to an armchair in front of a desk and asked to please sit down. Then a soft male voice said, "Thank you, Collins," and the police officer left. When Daisy heard the unknown man's voice, she pricked up her ears. Somehow he sounded familiar. Then the man spoke to her.

"Welcome, Mrs Hayes. Sorry for plucking you from your home like that, but it can't be helped. My name is Bernard Thistlehurst, Detective Chief Superintendent at the Yard."

"Bernard Thistlehurst? I know who you are! I spoke to you on the phone on V-E Day. You said 'Please call me Bernard,' but that was more than forty years ago."

"So you remember? I wondered about that. I certainly

remember you.”

“Don’t we all remember exactly what happened on V-E Day, Mr Thistlehurst?”

“Please, you may still call me Bernard, if I may call you Daisy...”

“All right. I also remember that you were called ‘one of the most brilliant criminal investigators of your generation’ by Coroner Jacobs of Saffron Walden.”

“Ah yes, Coroner Jacobs. He retired in the fifties and passed away in the sixties... I have no idea what he meant by saying that, as at the time I was the *only* investigator still operating as such.”

“Well anyway, I always referred to you in my mind as ‘the top notch investigator at Scotland Yard’. I also remember that you went to school with Cedric Clifton, who used to be a good friend of mine.”

“Yes, Cedric, of course, and you were part of ‘the gang’ at Bottomleigh House.”

“Only for a while... Now, dear Bernard, to what exactly do I owe the pleasure of meeting you today?”

“I hope you’re not feeling angry at me for handing you a summons in this official way.”

“Well, as you just said, it can’t be helped. I was very much impressed that the summons was written in Braille. Grade 2 Braille: very professional. You went to a lot of trouble.”

“Oh yes. Rest assured, my dear Daisy, that I fully intend to take into account your particular needs during these proceedings.”

“Very noble I’m sure. But my greatest concern right now is to know *why* I have been brought here in the first place. I gathered from the police officer who drove me over, that all this has got to do with the death of Martin McCullough?”

“Well, he was not supposed to tell.”

“I had no idea McCullough was murdered. It wasn’t in the news as far as I’m aware of.”

“No, it was kept from the press until now for reasons of state security. The man was an IRA operative. But you already know that.”

“Yes. That much I know. So what is this all about? Am I a suspect?”

“Hmm, not necessarily. A witness, definitely. I intend to get to the bottom of your relationship with McCullough. But first I want you to relax; I want to make our interaction as enjoyable as possible, for I believe that you are an interesting person, my dear Daisy.”

“Well, my dear Bernard, I’m sorry to say that this hardly seems the place nor the right moment for pleasantries. Am I not entitled to know as soon as possible what the police want from me?”

“Yes, of course, you’re right, but please indulge me. Before we get down to the details of the investigation, I want to take a few steps back, to take a look at the broader picture, and demonstrate something about my methods. Besides, there is absolutely no hurry; believe me, you’re going to be stuck with me for a while...”

“All right. So what do you want exactly?”

“First I want to ask you to tell me a story. Tell me some happy childhood memory, something that will show me how much you love the people closest to you, or better still, your love of humanity in general.”

There was a moment of silence, as Daisy had to make up her mind. Was she going to be difficult; stand up for her rights? Or should she go along with this strange man’s demands? Then she sighed, “All right... So, you mean something like a nice story from my school days? The girls’ school for the blind that I went to as a child, the

'Anne Sullivan', was something like paradise on earth for me..."

"Excellent! Tell me about that."

"Well, you went to a boarding school yourself: some military school in Folkestone?"

"Yes. You remember that too! The Duke of Cumberland's Royal Military School at Folkestone."

"Well then, you know exactly how this goes. In the morning after breakfast, and then again at bedtime, we all had to brush our teeth at the same moment. So you went to this big room in the sanitary block, where you had a dozen washbasins fixed to the walls in two rows, left and right... Sound familiar?"

"Yes, excellent! We had exactly the same setup at *my* school."

"Now, for blind girls the difficulty is that you can't see if there is a free basin somewhere, and it's no good asking the others because they can't see it either! But we had a funny little ritual to deal with this. We had learned it from the older girls, and each year after the summer break we explained it to the new girls. The trick was probably as old as the school itself! So you entered the room and walked along the basins on the left, holding out your hand and brushing the backs of the other girls with your fingertips. You did the same coming back along the right-hand wall. If you felt that there was a gap somewhere, you knew that there was a free spot and you took it. Otherwise you just kept moving quietly, brushing the backs of the others. This way everyone knew exactly how many girls were waiting for their turn. When someone was ready to vacate her washbasin, she would say 'I'm done!' and leave; and the girl who took her place would say 'I've got it!' and start brushing her teeth..."

"Now, this whole thing may sound a bit complicated,

but believe me, it was very natural, very cosy, and it was typical of our life at school. We were always reaching out, brushing against one another, seeking physical contact. We groped, patted and hugged a lot, too. On your way to class, your best friend of the moment would think nothing of throwing her arm around your neck and leaning heavily into you. Sometimes it was all you could do not to start snogging with abandon, you know?"

Bernard Thistlehurst burst out laughing, and Daisy asked innocently, "Did I say something funny?"

"You are hilarious my dear! I love your sense of humour. And this is a very good story, precisely what I need to illustrate the point I want to make."

"So let's have it then. I'm curious."

"Well, when witnesses testify, and that is what you will also be asked to do, they always do two things that are a little contradictory. Sometimes they simplify the story, they take short cuts, leave out the bits that seem irrelevant or simply less interesting. Sometimes they elaborate, fill in the gaps, invent details that they feel are missing in their narrative. They do this unconsciously, of course, but for the interrogator it is always worthwhile to identify these omissions and embellishments. You need to analyse and invalidate them in order to get to the truth.

"Now, you have just told me a very nice little story. You are very good at this: precise, concise and entertaining. As I asked you to convey some fond memories, I have no complaints, you did just that. But let us imagine for one moment that a murder has been committed on a poor blind girl in that big room in the sanitary block. And you are my star witness, or even a prime suspect. Suddenly, as an investigator, I have to get to the truth, weed out the inconsistencies, maybe even some lies, and I'll do my best to mine your story for as

much material information as I can get. I need the facts to solve the case...”

“All right,” Daisy said. “I understand. It is what you intend to do with me now.”

“Exactly. But I want to play the game honestly. That’s why I’m explaining my method to you beforehand.”

“Very noble I’m sure! And how exactly do you go about mining for the truth?”

“It’s quite simple, really. I always ask the witnesses to retell the story in a first person present tense narrative. ‘Go back to the moment as it is happening,’ I say to them. ‘You are there, it is happening right now, so tell me minute by minute what is going on, *here and now*.’ I have become an expert at the analysis of narrative, and that, you see, is the whole secret of my success.”

“Great,” Daisy said. “But before we go any further, I believe I’m entitled to a little story from *you*... Give me some fond recollections of your own from *your* boarding school.”

“Fair enough... But I’m afraid my recollections are not as happy and sunny as yours. You see, the Duke of Cumberland’s was not only a boys’ school, it was also a military school, with a long tradition of very strict discipline and appalling corporal punishments. An awful amount of sports, too, and I happened to be rubbish at sports... So you see, a rather grim atmosphere.

“When I arrived there as a young boy of eleven, I was terrified. I did all I could to keep my nose clean, of course. Perish the thought that they should find valid grounds to punish me! But that was not the attitude of the older boys. They were always trying to break the rules and get away with it. And when they couldn’t get away with it, that didn’t matter either, because being punished gave you tremendous prestige. It was seen as a badge of

honour, the only one that really mattered. The badge of manly defiance and suffering hard. It was recognised—never derided—by all the boys of the school...”

“And how about Cedric?” Daisy asked. “Cedric Clifton was there with you. Did he also earn those badges of bad behaviour?”

“Oh yes. We were the same age. He arrived at the same time as me, but within a year he was among the worst offenders, and I admired him greatly for that.”

“Really? So you were no exception: the only boy who disapproved?”

“Oh no! That was going to be the *pointe* of my story... Even *I* admired those tough guys immensely. Especially I, who was meek and timid. You wanted a moving story from my school days, and I will give you a moving story. Bear with me.

“When the offenders were going to be punished, the Head would read out their names from a list, after breakfast, in the hall. This always caused a lot of excitement. With each name we turned our heads to the place where we knew the culprit would be sitting, and he pretended to be completely indifferent to his plight, of course. For the rest of the school day the boys on the list basked in the glow of our admiration, but at the end of the afternoon they had to gather in front of the Head’s office, and that is when the high drama came into play. One by one they disappeared inside, and we all started to speculate, watching from a distance. It must be awful in there! What does the Head *do* to them? You wouldn’t want to trade with them for all the money in the world!

“When the heroes emerged from the lair of the Minotaur, they’d lost their swagger, I can assure you. They were subdued all of a sudden, and that was precisely what impressed me most. Some of them were obviously biting

back some tears, another couldn't help himself and let out a few sobs, but his fellow convicts didn't mock him. No, the heroes drew together and patted one another's shoulders without a word. The tough guys showed a glimpse of their most caring side; they seemed almost tender-hearted for one moment. And I always found that deeply moving to witness. Oh, I wanted so much to be one of them!"

Bernard Thistlehurst was silent for a moment and Daisy sighed, then she said softly, "And in the end that shy young boy became a top notch police investigator, and he still feels sometimes that he would like to be one of the criminals..."

"Well... yes... you may be right, my dear. With you at least there's no need to belabour the deeper meaning of a story."

"Speaking of which: can we now move on to the reason why I'm here?"

"Yes, yes. You're right. The suspicious death of Martin McCullough."

"Tell me more about it. I know nothing; I wasn't there..."

"Hmm, we'll see about that. The case is already more than a year old, but as I told you, it has been kept a secret. The man's remains were found in his garage, and the local police concluded that he had died under suspicious circumstances. But as the case is very baffling, and as no one seems to be getting any nearer to the truth, it has recently been handed over to me... I was actually called back out of retirement to handle it.

"Now, when I read the victim's name: Martin McCullough, I immediately thought of Loretta McCullough, and it was quite simple to verify that Martin was indeed Loretta's father. And then I thought of you,

Daisy, as you have been involved with both. You see, I have an encyclopedic knowledge of all the criminal records I have ever come across in my professional life. That is also one of the things that has made my reputation as an investigator. Nowadays of course, with the appearance of *desktop* computers in every office, *everyone* enjoys the benefits of such encyclopedic knowledge. But *my* recall predates the personal computer. The Loretta McCullough case crossed my path in 1967, long before the first IBM micro came on the market...”

“Well, Bernard, it’s great to have this kind of total recall, of course, but the fact that I was involved with the case in ’67 doesn’t mean I can give you information about a murder in 1988.”

“Be patient my dear. The link will become clear in a moment. The body was found crushed under a hydraulic vehicle lift, without any restraints on the limbs, perhaps in a crude attempt to make the death look like an accident. But the autopsy report is very clear. First the victim was chloroformed, then he was tied up and allowed to regain consciousness. Traces on his wrists and ankles show that he pulled hard at his restraints. Then, most significantly, the victim was bitten in the neck, his carotid artery was severed, and he was allowed to bleed to death, the blood flowing into a drain well under the lift. Subsequently the dead victim was untied, the lift was lowered, and the body was flattened. These are the facts of the case, as established on the crime scene and on the examination table by the forensic pathologist.”

“Good grief!”

“Yes. Indeed.”

The investigator and the blind lady both remained silent for a moment. Then, at length, Bernard said, “Have you nothing more to say, my dear?”

“Well, apart from: that it’s a great tragedy, no. If you think I’m a suspect, you’re going to have to tell me why. And if you want my testimony as a witness, I have none to give you, as I was not there.”

“Very well. We’ll get back to that. For the moment, what really puzzles me, is that McCullough was bitten, and that he bled to death. Now *that* is very significant because it is a highly unusual way to kill someone. The murderer could simply have crushed him while he was unconscious. Why tie him up, then bleed him, then untie him again? It’s the biting and bleeding that strikes me as an embellishment to the narrative. An elaboration. It seems to me that the murderer wanted to tell us a story. It is as if he or she is telling us, ‘I am killing this man as an act of revenge. I’m avenging someone who was bitten to death’. Of course this narrative doesn’t make sense to me right now, but I have no doubt that it is the key to the crime... You are still very quiet, my dear?”

“I still haven’t heard anything that justifies my presence here.”

“Maybe not. But here is the first thing that *does* require your presence. The forensic experts were able to make very good castings of the teeth marks on the victim’s neck. Right at this moment our people are comparing those marks with the dental records we have, but there’s no match so far. Now, what I want to ask *you*, Daisy, is to allow us to take an impression of *your* teeth. By comparing a casting of your teeth to the marks on the corpse, we will be able to exclude you as a suspect, provided there is no match, of course...”

“Good God! What makes you think that *I* could have bitten that man to death?”

“A hunch, my dear, just a hunch. Nothing specific.”

“Do you have the right to require this test of me?”

“Not at this moment, no. But I could get a court order if needed. On the other hand, if you are innocent, there is no reason not to volunteer. The test can only exculpate you.”

“All right. Impeccable logic, of course. What do I have to do?”

“I will buzz someone who will bring you to a lab somewhere downstairs. There our people will make you bite into a lump of a special material, and later they will cast a plaster model of your teeth from that. Then we will investigate both sets of teeth marks. In the meantime you will be escorted back to the car and driven home by Constable Collins. Our interview is over for the time being. I hope you did not find it all too disagreeable...”

“Well, I have mixed feelings, to put it mildly.”

“No *hard* feelings, I hope? At our next interview we will have established as a fact that you did not bite McCullough’s neck, and everything will be a lot easier, I’m sure.”

“Will I be plucked from my home again by a police officer?”

“Yes. If you don’t mind. It seems the most convenient way, don’t you think?”

“No! *You* call me on the phone, *personally*, and I’ll come to the Yard on my own.”

“Ah? Very well. Goodbye then, my dear. We’ll meet again soon.”

“Goodbye, Bernard.”

While Daisy was being driven back home in a police car—in fact it was not with Collins but with another uniformed officer—her mind was racing again. “Good God, Jonathan, how could you *do* this? Of all the useless, reckless, stupid things... you go and kill McCullough and

it has your *name* written all over it!” The moment she had heard the forensic pathologist’s conclusions, Daisy had realised that she *knew* who had done it.

As soon as she got home, she put on the kettle for a much-needed pot of tea. She pulled up the window sash and sat down at her kitchen table to mull things over some more. While she took the first sips she could hear the birds chirping in the garden square outside. This place was so peaceful, the time of day was so quiet; why did such horrible things have to happen to her *now*? Daisy twirled a silver teaspoon between her fingers, another heirloom that had come into her possession after her father died. She thought back to those movies of the thirties she had attended together with him when she was a teenager. “All this reminds me of a curse... the curse of the mummy... the curse of Tutankhamun!”

After finishing her cup of tea, Daisy slowly stood up, reluctantly followed the short, narrow passage to the back of the house and stopped in front of the only door in her flat that was closed. In fact, all the other doors had been *removed* for her convenience. Taped to this door, a handwritten sign proclaimed:

MINE FIELDS!

MORTAL DANGER!

Especially for YOU Daisy Hayes!

Daisy couldn’t see this, of course, but she was aware of it, because only recently, at her housewarming party, her friends had told her about it. They had all laughed heartily at Jonathan’s strange sense of humour. Presently she knocked softly: “Johnny-John? Open up please, I have to talk to you! Come on, it’s important!”

This was what Daisy hated most: the pleading; the subservience; the helplessness. The boy was always being

obnoxious, but she couldn't help being like putty in his hands. Jonathan had the nicest room of the flat, the one with a French window on the garden area, right next to the living room, which had two such windows. But the boy behaved as if this privilege were his due, or worse still, a barely adequate compensation for having to live in this appalling basement flat in the first place. At any rate, his room was forbidden territory, the door was always locked, and gaining access to the lair or to its inhabitant always involved a lot of pleading and lengthy negotiations.

Then there was the added frustration of knowing that the boy was achieving precisely nothing with his life. Since he'd done his A levels—surprisingly well—he'd had no plans whatsoever of going to a uni or finding a job. His gap year had merged seamlessly into a second one, then a third... Jonathan reminded Daisy of a cuckoo's young: as time went by he grew bigger and fatter every day, seeming to push her out of her nest, making her feel uncomfortable in her own home. She shouted through the closed door, "The police was here this morning, Johnny-John. Thank God you were still asleep and didn't make any noise..."

"The police? What's that got to do with *me*?"

"Open the door, Johnny-John. I've just come back from New Scotland Yard. There's some serious stuff going on."

The door opened just a crack, and Daisy was overwhelmed by the familiar smell of the room: a mixture of dirty socks and rotting banana peels. There was something disturbingly apelike going on here, that Jonathan insisted should be respected at all costs. This *lair* was where he wanted to live, and in appalling squalor was *how* he insisted on living, no interference of any kind was ever tolerated.

"Why on *earth* did you go to the police!?"

“I didn’t *go* there, Johnny-John. I was *summoned*, for Christ’s sake! Martin McCullough has been murdered, so *who* do you think is the first person they want to talk to, huh? Now you get your fat arse over to the kitchen, pronto, young man, and let’s discuss this thing like adults!”

Daisy turned on her heels and marched straight back to the front of the flat. She poured herself another cupper from the teapot. After the mandatory delay of youthful prevarication, Jonathan in his turn sauntered into the kitchen. He went straight to the fridge and helped himself to a cold beer. “Well-well-well, McCullough, huh? That bastard! I’m glad he’s dead, but it’s got nothing to do with me...”

“Don’t be stupid, Johnny-John! It’s got your *name* written all over it. You know what the investigator at Scotland Yard told me? Martin McCullough’s carotid artery was bitten through and he bled to death. Sound familiar? Now, there are only *two* people in the *world*, apart from me, who know how the Master died. One of them is the girl who was held with me in the Master’s dungeon, but she has no reason whatsoever to be angry with McCullough. On the contrary: she owes her *life* to that bastard’s crafty little schemes. And the other person is *you*, Johnny-John...”

“How do they know that McCullough was *bitten*? His body was flattened like a pancake!”

“Hah! Did you really think they wouldn’t see through that straight away? The investigator read a report to me that the forensic pathologist wrote a *year* ago. The victim was chloroformed, then tied up, then allowed to regain consciousness, then bitten and bled to death, then untied, and finally crushed. It’s all there, they’ve known the whole story from the start. *Why*, Johnny-John? Why did you

have to go and kill the man? Can't you see it's the most *stupid* thing you could do?"

"Well, aren't you at least glad that the bastard is *dead*? You of all people should be grateful to me!"

"Yes, yes, of course, but there was no *need* for all that! I had my *own* revenge at the time. I refused to tell McCullough what had happened to his daughter. I let him believe that she was still alive but refused to see him... Believe me, that made his father's heart bleed!"

"Yeah? Well, I made his *carotid* bleed. I made him scream like a pig. I put my finger on the gushing artery and I made him *beg* for mercy. I made him *grovel*; apologize *abjectly* for all he'd done. I told him *who* I am, and he was quite astonished, I could see it on his face. I told him that his precious daughter had died within a month or so after her abduction. Believe me, that made an impression too, I could see it in his eyes..."

"So you had a heart-to-heart with him before you killed him, huh?"

"Yeah, some heart-to-heart! Then I let go of the wound, the blood gushed and he died within minutes. Again, the bastard got what he deserved; you should be glad!"

"Good God, Jonathan, can't you see? This way there is never going to be an end to it! And I was hoping you would become a well-balanced and happy young man... Didn't I always support you, give you a stable home... Didn't I show you enough love?"

"You did what you could, but you're blind!"

"So what? What has *that* got to do with anything?"

"I've always felt that I had to take care of things by myself, on my own, and that's exactly what I did with Martin McCullough."

"Yes, well, what really makes my skin crawl, in this

whole affair, is that in order to chloroform such a dangerous man as McCullough, you had to take him completely by surprise... You certainly have the killer instinct... But wait! Now I understand why you were so keen to get your driver's licence. You took a car to his garage and pretended to be a customer!"

"Damn right! He never saw it coming. And neither did the police. If they are so clever, how come it took them almost a year before they thought of interrogating you?"

"Oh, they were baffled all right. They didn't know the little story that you acted out, so it made no sense to them. But now the case has landed on the desk of a crack investigator, one who is capable of solving it with his hands tied in his back... Believe me, he's good. I'm pretty sure he'll find out the truth in no time."

"Hah! Let him try! They have absolutely nothing to go on, I made damn sure of that."

"Oh really? You know what the man asked of me, just now, when I was at the Yard? He wanted to have a print of my teeth. I had to go to a lab and bite into some kind of soft material. They're going to make a plaster cast, and compare that to the cast they took from the corpse. So what do you think, Johnny-John, isn't he a clever man?"

"Why's that? The result will be 'no match', of course! *You* certainly didn't do it!"

"Yes, but they will *compare* both sets of teeth! What do you think: would you say that our teeth, especially our front teeth, are somewhat alike?"

"Well... yes. Possibly. For a man I have pretty small front teeth, just like yours."

"There you are, then. No match, but a family air! They'll be on your case pretty soon. It's only a matter of time before the police come back here and take a look around..."

“Then what do you want me to do?”

“If I were you I would make myself scarce. I don’t know; go underground, start a new life.”

“You mean like: leave this place?”

“Certainly. And take on another identity.”

“That would suit you well, huh? Get rid of me! You’re only too keen to have the place to yourself.”

“Well, it’s either that, or you’ll spend the rest of your life in prison. I’ll have the place to myself anyway... No, believe me, they’re bound to come here, looking for you. I mean, they’ll be examining the dental records and writing up a report and all that, but I don’t expect that this will take much longer than a few days. Now, if you want to stay on, suit yourself, I don’t care one way or the other. You’re a big boy now.”

CHAPTER II

“...increasing numbers of GDR citizens are camping out in the open air on the grounds of the West German embassy in Prague. The former palace of the noble House of Lobkowitz has extensive gardens, next to a park in the heart of the city. The East German asylum seekers just clamber over the high iron fences and install their makeshift shelters for a long stay. The local police do make perfunctory efforts to stop them, but they are overwhelmed by the numbers. The refugees now number in the hundreds, some sources say almost a thousand people are there, and the situation is becoming rather untenable. But still more want to join the squalid camp on the embassy grounds, often bringing their children along, hoping to be granted asylum and a free passage to the West...”

Daisy was sitting at her kitchen table, eating breakfast while she listened to the radio. She was having a bowl of Bircher muesli with lean yogurt, crushed walnuts, dried fruit and a grated apple. Her health diet. The oats would keep one sated until lunchtime.

At sixty-six, Daisy did all she could to stay in shape. Now that she no longer worked, she didn't have access to the gym equipment she'd been used to at her group practice. So in order not to interrupt a lifelong discipline of daily muscle toning, she had bought some simple equipment of her own and devised a routine she could follow at home. And she had become a paying member at a local gym. She could easily afford it. Of course, the neighbourhood being what it was, she had turned out to be the only pensioner among the young and upcoming professionals who trained there fanatically. Not to mention that she was blind, of course. No one ever spoke to her. But it didn't matter, for she had discovered the joys of the treadmill. Daisy found that she loved to run. Just stampede full out on that crazy device until you ran out of breath. Then stop, catch your breath and start all over again. Wonderful. Now she dreamed of taking up for real the running craze that had started at the beginning of the eighties. To run like that in the open air, in a park, should be great, but as a blind person you would need a seeing partner if you wanted to take it up. Her best friends, ripe old ladies like herself, were not likely to help her out... Pity. So for the moment: the solitary treadmill at the local gym.

Presently Johnny-John came into the kitchen. What a pleasant surprise. Though he switched off the radio without as much as a by-your-leave, grumbling, "Oh, puh-lease, *not* the Beeb at eight in the morning?"

"Hullo, darling, you're early today?"

"No. Actually I'm late. I stayed up all night. So I didn't go to bed yet, but I will, pretty soon."

The boy started emptying the fridge, taking out a couple of beers, by the sound of it, and sausages and bacon, by the smell of it. Soon he was frying his own

favourite breakfast, which normally would have Daisy salivating and begging for a morsel, but today she was feeling virtuous, and she had finished her oats just in time to curb her appetite.

“Listen, Johnny-John. I’ve arranged for the police *not* to pick me up this time. Remember the crack investigator I told you about yesterday? He’s going to call me and then *I’ll* go to the Yard...”

“What’s that chap’s name, anyway? The man you admire so much?”

“The crack investigator? I dunno, Detective Chief Inspector Thistlewhistle or something. You wouldn’t have heard of him, anyway. But definitely very high ranking, that I can tell you.”

“Well, of course. That’s exactly what’s needed if they want to catch a master criminal with *my* pedigree!”

“Well, they’ll catch you all right if you don’t move your fat arse soon, Johnny-boy. When I get that phone call, I’ll rap on your door and I’ll be off. I think you’d better move out fast after that. I don’t believe you can afford to wait a couple of days after all... Have I made myself perfectly clear?”

Jonathan uttered a few inarticulate and noncommittal noises that usually indicated that he’d heard all right. The boy was not stupid. Daisy stood up and poured herself another cup of coffee. “At least, I hope he’s not,” she told herself. She sat down again with her coffee and listened to the boy wolfing down sausages and bacon. He seemed to be devouring an awful lot of sausages and bacon today. Maybe a good sign.

At nine thirty, an hour after Jonathan had retired to his room, the phone started ringing. “They worked fast,” Daisy reflected, “but that was to be expected.” When she picked up the receiver her heart fluttered, not unlike that

of a young girl in love. "Hullo?"

"Daisy! It's me, Bernard. I'm calling to ask you to come over to the Yard, as we arranged..."

"Very well... And what's the result on the dental thing?"

"Patience, my dear, you'll soon find out. Now please come at once."

"All right. Just give me half an hour or so, what with the Tube and all that."

"Of course. Take your time."

Daisy went over to her son's bedroom and rapped on the door. "Johnny-John, are you awake in there? The police just called, I'm off to the Yard!"

She only heard some mumblings on the other side. Through the door she could smell a faint whiff of vinegar. Was he actually cleaning up the place? As noiselessly as she could, she felt around for the handwritten sign, but apparently it was no longer there. Daisy waited a short while longer, but didn't hear another sound from within. "All right, then. I'm going. Take care of yourself, darling."

For the second time, Daisy was escorted to Bernard Thistlehurst's office, led to the armchair in front of his desk and asked to please sit down. "I hope you had no trouble getting here, my dear..."

"None whatsoever, Bernard. I know the London Tube system like the back of my hand, and there are always friendly souls around to assist me when needed... Now, what are the results of the dental test?"

"It is not a match, I'm glad to say. You did not bite Martin McCullough to death, that is now confirmed as a fact."

"And why couldn't you just tell me that on the phone? Why did I have to come back here, as much as I enjoy

your company?”

“Sorry about that, my dear, but last time I told you that we have some unresolved issues. I want to get to the bottom of your relationship with McCullough. And the dental test has added another issue to that. Even though it is not a match, our forensic experts tell us that there is possibly a family resemblance between the two sets of teeth.”

“Hmm... I see. You do realise, though, that I have very little family left?”

“Yes, we checked the registry records. Your parents have passed away, just like mine, which is normal for people of our age. You have no siblings, just like me. You hardly have any cousins. There we differ: I have quite a lot of cousins, but we’ve lost touch altogether.”

“Well, come to think of it, my branch of the Hayes family is dying out. So it sounds like a family conspiracy is not on for the moment.”

“True. But the fact remains: there might be a family connection. So back to the original line of inquiry. Your relationship with McCullough intrigues me because I don’t understand it. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, I’m in the habit of getting to know all kinds of people from very different walks of life.”

“Very commendable, my dear Daisy. I do the same professionally. But what is very unusual, is a relationship where one is willing to kill a man on behalf of another person.”

“I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about, my dear Bernard.”

“Could I ask you to stand up and lean over my desk, Daisy? There is something I want to give you.”

“Erm... Can’t *you* just stand up and lean over, like a gentleman?”

“Well, no. Actually it’s not so easy for me to do that, as both my legs are paralyzed and I’m bound to a wheelchair.”

“Really? Good God! Sorry about that. I wasn’t aware...”

“Yes, I’m a paraplegic, and it is very refreshing to meet someone like you who cannot even see it. That is also the reason why I was feeling a bit jealous of you, a moment ago, when you told me that you know the Tube system like the back of your hand. I could never take the Tube on my own. Anyway, please reach over.”

When Daisy finally did as she was told, Bernard put a small paper strip in her hand, with Braille letters embossed on it. Even without reading it, Daisy knew at once what it was. But she sat down and read it with her fingertips anyway.

DO NOT WORRY ABOUT OTHER VICTIMS. I KILLED THE MAN WHO DID THIS TO ME.

“How on earth did you manage to get hold of this, Bernard? What I wrote on this tape was supposed to be strictly confidential, a medical secret!”

“I know. I’m sorry to spring this on you like that, but I obtained it in an entirely legitimate way. With medical secrets, you see, there are all sorts of rules and conditions that the doctor and the patient are not always aware of. The doctor is bound to secrecy as a person, but if he puts the confidential information into the medical records, the authorities will uncover it there when they receive a court’s permission to investigate such records. Besides, your doctor left St Mary’s a long time ago; he should have removed this when he departed.

“But if it is any consolation, my dear, this little Braille strip is not a very useful piece of evidence, as it doesn’t mention who killed whom. No date, no by-line. So you

could deny that you ever wrote it, but *I* for one wouldn't believe you. No, for me this find is very significant all the same, within the *context* of the place where I found it, and of the Loretta McCullough case it undoubtedly refers to."

"All right. I don't deny that I wrote this. The doctor who repaired my damaged eardrums was very concerned that the same damage might be done to others. I wrote this to ease his mind. Maybe I *lied* to reassure him?"

"Nice ploy, my dear, but I don't buy it. And you know my method. I put it to you that your argument changes nothing to the *narrative*. Your eardrums were *butchered*, and it is a very unusual relationship indeed, where one is willing to put oneself at such risk on behalf of another person..."

"All right, I get your point. But if I understand it correctly, the only thing that gives you the right to ask these questions, is that the case of McCullough's murder has just been handed over to you because no one else could make any sense of it, and you happen to believe that the Loretta McCullough case is linked to it somehow, involving me. Now, if I may inquire, what makes you think that these two cases are connected, when there's a gap of *twenty years* between them?"

"Ah, but I don't find that gap significant! Not at all. Different people navigate through time in different ways. As Henry David Thoreau said, 'Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.' You and I understand very well what he meant by that... It struck me yesterday that you seem to be very close to your childhood memories, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, but what has that got to do with anything?"

"Oh, but it is very important! I have met many people who can hardly imagine that they ever *were* children in the first place, and the few childhood memories they still

have fill them with shame! I myself am very fond of recalling the most foolish thoughts I had as a child. For instance, when I was six years old and started school, I learned the alphabet and the figures, and within a couple of months I could read and write and count up to one hundred, like most of my classmates. But I distinctly remember telling myself, 'Now that I can read and write and count up to one hundred, I know *everything* there is to know, so why do they keep me at school?' It's a good thing I didn't confide these reflections to any grownups at the time."

Daisy chuckled. "Oh, I know. I had the same kind of thing... As soon as I started talking, my father hired a special tutor for me, because he realised how vital language would be for the mental development of a blind child. The man did a good job, but I didn't like him much, because he always wanted to make learning look hard and I didn't like the smell of his cologne. So anyway, I can remember that at the age of five or six, before I went off to school, I once stepped up to my father while he was reading his newspaper, and I declared: 'I say, Daddy, now that my mastery of the English language is complete, Mr Rawnsley's services are no longer required, don't you think?' My father roared with laughter, and he did exactly as I asked. He very tactfully told my tutor that his services were indeed no longer required. He offered him a bonus because he had done such an outstanding job. And mind you, I couldn't even *read* or *write* at the time, because I only started learning Braille at the Anne Sullivan, sometime *after* this incident."

Now Bernard chuckled in his turn. "You must have been a handful as a child!"

"Yes, I guess I was."

They were both silent for a while, then Bernard said,

“We have a lot in common, Daisy. We were born in the same year, 1922. I’m from September, and you’re from November. I wish we could just go on comparing our childhood memories, but unfortunately we have other issues to deal with.”

“That’s right.”

“Anyway, this goes to show that a twenty year gap between two occurrences may or may not at all be significant.”

“All right, I get the point... Now listen, Bernard, there’s one thing that’s distracting me. I’ve just heard that you’re bound to a wheelchair, but I haven’t *witnessed* this fact yet. So do you mind if I come over to your side of the desk and probe you? Just to get an idea?”

“Of course, my dear. Be my guest!”

Daisy stood up, walked around the desk, prodding her way with her outstretched arms, and when she reached Bernard, she crouched next to him and started investigating the wheelchair with her fingertips. While she was busy doing this, fondling the tyres and fingering the spokes of the wheels, he stared at her, eating her up with his eyes, marvelling at the fact that he had never seen her from such close quarters before. Then Daisy said, “Nice chair, very sporty. Now may I touch your body and your face?”

“Of course, my dear. I have just been ogling you shamelessly, so you’re entitled to prod me as much as you want. I was just marvelling at the fact that at sixty-six, you’re still a strikingly beautiful woman!”

Daisy giggled, “Well, thank you! Unfortunately, I have no idea what it means to be beautiful. I cannot picture it.”

Then she raised herself, and standing right next to the man in the wheelchair, she proceeded to explore his features with her fingertips. Bernard closed his eyes and

almost purred with pleasure as the soft caresses moved over his face. At length Daisy said, "I say, Bernard. I don't know how to put this nicely, but your face seems to be rather... lopsided!"

"That's right. I was disfigured by the same riding accident that made me end up in a wheelchair. I look hideous; a real-life Quasimodo. My colleagues here at the Yard sometimes joke that it's a good thing they don't carry arms, for they would put me out of my misery with a bullet when they see my ugly mug."

"Good God! That is *not* a nice kind of joke."

"Ah well, I've learned to take it. Better some jokes in bad taste than embarrassed silence."

"True, I agree with you there..."

In the meantime Daisy was probing Bernard's body. "On the plus side, you have a well-developed chest and beautiful shoulders. I bet you use your arms a lot to move around?"

"Yes, that's right..."

"You know that I'm a physiotherapist? Well, I'm retired now, but I can't help noticing that your shoulder muscles are rather tight. I could give you a massage, if you want..."

"Well, another time, maybe. All this is not going to distract me from the real purpose of my inquiries, you know."

"All right, of course..." Daisy left Bernard alone and returned to her chair in front of the desk. "You're far too clever for me. I still don't understand exactly what your game is, my dear Bernard, but I do realise that I'm going to have to play along ..."

"Oh, but my game is simple enough. I want to get to the truth. Only the truth! You're not getting rid of me until you give me that!"

“Well, in my experience the truth is never simple to get at, and not easy to deliver...”

“Be that as it may, let’s get back to our business. Let’s go back to the narrative of the murder. As I already stated yesterday, the killer is telling us, ‘This is an act of revenge’, so much is clear. Now I’ve just had another thought. It’s that twenty year gap that is starting to bother me after all. Instead of dismissing it as irrelevant, we have to ask ourselves what *message* it conveys. Why twenty years? Why not ten? Why not five? Do you have any suggestions?”

Daisy felt the hairs at the base of her neck standing on end. The man was getting too close to the truth for comfort. She had to say something, if only to distract him and divert his thoughts from the dangerous track they were following. “I really wouldn’t know; it’s a complete mystery to me; I have no idea how one could possibly draw any conclusions from the fact that this murder happened twenty years after that other case; I’d still say that both events are unrelated... completely unrelated!”

Bernard impatiently raised his hand to stop Daisy’s prattling, but she couldn’t see it of course, so he grumbled, “Wait a minute, wait a minute... It’s quite obvious, isn’t it? Let us imagine that the girl who brought you to St Mary’s in 1967 was pregnant from the man who had held her and raped her for almost a year. The child, if she kept it, would be twenty or twenty-one years old right now. It would have taken this child *that* long to get to the age where it would be able to avenge its mother... Or no... of course not... it’s rather...”

Bernard thumped the armrest of his wheelchair with his fist. “Good God, of course! I’ve been blind!”

Then he picked up the phone on his desk and pushed a button. “Collins? I need my transport. And an armed

response unit.”

After pushing down the phone cradle with his finger, he pushed another button. This was clearly one of those new-fangled phones with pre-set numbers at a touch. There was a pause, then Bernard said quietly, “Judge? It’s me, Thistlehurst. I need a search warrant. Residence of one Mrs Daisy Hayes, and the address is...”

When he put down the phone, he said, “Now we wait for things to get organized.”

“What’s going on, Bernard?”

“My dear Daisy, we are going to visit your place. I’d like to meet your son.”

In the van on the way to South Kensington, Daisy, sitting next to Collins in the front, asked Bernard, sitting in his wheelchair in the back, “What makes you think that *I* am the one that got pregnant? I was forty-five years old at the time!”

“Don’t you see that the obvious is staring *you* in the face, now? The forensic expert said that there was a *family* resemblance between your teeth and the killer’s... Then if the child is bent on *avenging* its mother, that only makes sense if the mother is *you*. Why would the *girl’s* child be angry with McCullough? So I can only conclude that you have a son—or maybe a daughter—who is McCullough’s killer.”

“All right. Idle speculation; circumstantial evidence at best. We’ll see.”

When they arrived at Daisy’s place near Earl’s Court, Bernard said, “You’d better give me the key to your front door, otherwise the response unit will break it down.”

Another, bigger van arrived right behind them and the heavily armed police officers immediately ran down the small stairs to Daisy’s front door. As soon as he emerged

from his own car with a little help from Collins, Bernard handed over the door keys to the leader of the squad. The men quickly disappeared inside the flat. Standing on the pavement in front of the house, Daisy could hear the men shouting downstairs. She felt a shiver going down her spine: would Jonathan still be at home? It was up to him! She had given him enough warnings and admonitions.

But to her relief, the men came out as swiftly as they had disappeared inside a moment before, and their leader told Bernard, "There's no one there Sir. Sorry."

"That's a pity. Thanks all the same, gentlemen. Now Collins and I need to search the place; can a couple of you please carry me down?"

And that is how Bernard finally entered Daisy's home. "Do you care to show me around, my dear? I have leave to snoop, of course, but I don't want to be rude."

"Very noble I'm sure. But all right. I have nothing to hide anyway..."

So Daisy obligingly took the handles of the chair and started wheeling her guest around. Her own flat was so familiar in her mind, of course, that she could do so without using her cane or groping around in the least. But as soon as she had said, "And that, as you can see, is where the bathroom is," Bernard said, "Collins, please check it," before they moved on to Daisy's bedroom. A moment later Collins joined them and announced, "Only the lady's things Sir."

Then they stood in front of Jonathan's door. The only door in the flat, and it was closed.

"And this would be?"

"Oh, just an unused guestroom, dear Bernard. Do you want to see it?"

"By all means!"

As soon as they entered the room, they were

overwhelmed by the unmistakable odour of fresh paint, though Daisy had already caught a whiff of its vinegar smell through the closed door that morning. Bernard and Collins looked around them in amazement at the stark white walls. There was a bed, a desk and a chair; some audio equipment, but all of it looking so sterile, that you couldn't imagine that anyone ever stayed in here, even for a short while as a guest. The built-in cupboards were empty, of course. Daisy was stricken by the tellingly echoing acoustics of the place as they stepped forward. "Johnny-John!" she thought, "you certainly did a thorough job last night."

Bernard cleared his throat in the echoing silence. "Isn't it bizarre that you repainted only the guest room, which is presumably the least used room of the flat?"

"On the contrary," Daisy remarked, "the guest room is the easiest to do, so why not start there?"

"Hmm... Still, I recognise the *style*. The *mentality* seems familiar. It's that typical *overkill*, you know?"

"Whose style would that be?"

"The murderer's! As Collins observed when he found McCullough's body, the killer seems to think he's very clever, but he's not."

Daisy didn't know what to answer to that, so she said nothing.

"Once again, the underlying narrative gives away the game. The elaborations. The unnecessary embellishments. Painting over the room like this just doesn't make any sense!"

"Excuse me Sir," Collins piped up. He had been scrutinizing the walls, his nose almost touching the fresh paintwork. "If the suspect is supposed to be twenty years old, he would have had a lot of posters pinned to the walls of his room, right? Well, he painted over the existing

wallpaper, but if you look carefully, you can still see the pinpricks left by the pushpins... He even had some posters on the ceiling!”

“Ah, excellent, Collins! There you are then, Daisy. This was your son’s room, wasn’t it?”

“Well, I know nothing about posters; I’m blind, remember?”

“Now listen, Daisy, I would appreciate it if you just admitted the truth when it’s clear that Collins and I have actually put our finger on it... You know? Just a matter of fair play?”

“Hmm... maybe you have a point there, but on the other hand: have you ever managed to get anyone *convicted* by a judge on the grounds of ‘unnecessary embellishments?’”

Bernard chuckled. “No. Of course not, you cheeky girl! It is only a *means* to an *end*, obviously... So what *is* your son’s name? We can find it out on our own anyway, so you might as well tell us.”

Daisy sighed. “Jonathan... Jonathan Hadley. Born the twenty-second of May 1968.”

“Do you have any picture of him at hand?”

“No! Why on earth would I keep *pictures* of him? But he got his driver’s licence only last year, so you might obtain his photo there.”

“Thank you, my dear, I’m much obliged...”

“Have you any idea how it hurts when your son disappears from your life overnight? He didn’t say goodbye and he disappeared without leaving a trace... I’m smarting terribly right now; it makes a mother’s heart bleed!”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Daisy. I have no idea how it feels; I have no children of my own.”

“Well, lucky you! They make you suffer hell.”

Now of course Bernard wanted to know Jonathan’s

story. "How come he is called Hadley? And why didn't his name show up when we checked the registry records?"

"My son was adopted by a man named Victor Hadley and his wife. That's because my husband at the time, Richard Clayton, refused to recognize him as his own. So I, as the mother, am on the record as Daisy Clayton."

"What an incredible shambles! No wonder the police can never find a criminal when they go looking for him at the General Register Office."

Daisy chuckled, "I know, this is a very complicated story, and if you would like me to explain things in more detail, it is going to take some time, so why don't you two stay for lunch? I was going to cook my favourite dish: spaghetti with diced and fried chicken meat and spinach with Italian herbs. But now that Jonathan's no longer at home, I might as well cook for the three of us. Johnny-John is a big eater, so there would be plenty... Or perhaps Constable Collins has other duties to attend to?"

"He certainly has! Collins, I want you to go back to the Yard immediately and arrange the arrest warrant for Jonathan Hadley. Got that?"

"Certainly Sir. I'll leave you two lovebirds alone."

"Collins!"

"Sorry Sir."

In the hours that followed, while she was cooking, then as they lunched together at her kitchen table with a bottle of Italian red wine, and finally while they drank some coffee afterwards, Daisy told Bernard the story of her son's birth, and of her strange life with him.

When Daisy had re-emerged from the Master's dungeon, several weeks after she had disappeared from the face of the earth, she had been pregnant. The

kidnapper had provided his two “slaves” with *the pill*, but when Daisy had started taking hers, she had already been raped the night before. Never rely on a bloke to take proper precautions. Of course, when “the girl”, her fellow-prisoner, had brought her to the entrance of St Mary’s Hospital, Daisy had not been aware of her pregnancy yet. And the doctors who treated her and reconstructed her pierced eardrums hadn’t noticed this fact either. But then again, they had not even been looking for something like that.

It took some time before Daisy found out. As a physiotherapist she knew more about obstetrics than most women, but that was purely theoretical. None of her female friends had children, so the subject of pregnancy did never arise. In the end it was her own mother who had floated the notion for the first time. Daisy was paying her monthly visit to her parents, and for the first time ever, she turned down Mummy’s homemade scones. She had to confess that she was feeling nauseous, all of a sudden.

“Just the thought of eating a scone makes my stomach turn!”

“Well, darling, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re pregnant and take after your mother. When I was expecting you, I suffered terribly from morning sickness.”

So Daisy went to her GP and had her urine tested. Then she knew. The Master had impregnated her, after all. The strange thing is, she could have got rid of the fruit of these unholy couplings. She was an officially recognised rape victim. The law had just been changed to take a case like hers into account. Great Britain was finally emerging from the Middle Ages! But oddly enough, Daisy had decided to keep the child.

There were several reasons for that, as far as she could now see. She had recently separated from her

second husband, but she felt that the clock was ticking. At the age of forty-five it was clearly “now or never”. Then she had a feeling that something positive should come out of the nightmare she had just gone through. Wouldn’t it be an appropriate redress for all that had happened, if a lovely little baby came out of it? Finally, as a medical professional, Daisy had felt a deeply ingrained revulsion at the thought of terminating the life of an unborn child.

So she had gone through with the pregnancy. When they had found out, her friends had been appalled at first, of course. The idea of bearing the child of a rapist was very disturbing. But when it became clear that Daisy had made up her mind, they all accepted it. She’d always had a mind of her own, a knack for embracing the unconventional point of view. And so Jonathan was born, the mother backed up by a loyal band of devoted friends and relatives.

Daisy had chosen his name carefully. Jonathan, like Anthony or Nicholas, seemed to epitomise the soft, caring, and civilised side of masculinity.

Then a strange cast of fairies convened around his crib to try and break the spell of evil that had been cast on the poor mite at his birth. There were two old maids, one a chemistry researcher, the other an heiress; a retired bookmaker and had-been kingpin of the London underworld; various ex-members of a World War II bomber crew. They cheerfully called the child “the Devil’s brood”, and the proud mother let them be. Better some jokes in bad taste than embarrassed silence. Besides, Victor—the bookmaker—and his wife Blanche accepted to adopt the boy, as Daisy’s husband—already separated and soon to be divorced—adamantly refused to recognise him.

All was well that ended well, and after a few months,

Daisy asked her friends to stop the jocular remarks. "The baby is listening. My Johnny-John is probably starting to absorb language already." She had been reading up on child rearing, and these being the sixties, her ideas on the subject were a bit outlandish. But there was one thing that Daisy never told anyone, not even Margery or Beatrice, her closest friends: she had been bitterly disappointed that her child was not a girl.

As she was blind, and besides wanted to go on working halftime as a physiotherapist, Daisy had to hire some help, but that was not a problem. She was that rare person who earned more money than she cared to spend. A half-salary from the group practice, a war-widow's pension, an annuity from her first husband's estate; living in a small flat long since paid for and not owning a car; the money kept accumulating on her bank account, carefully managed and invested with a handsome return by her banker father. Daisy had hired the best people she could find to take care of her son.

However, within a couple of years, in spite—or because—of the fancy nannies, Jonathan had turned out to be a very temperamental boy. Later on, when he went to school, he had been smart enough and done well, but he had not been one to make friends easily. Later still, at the age when kids can be really cruel to one another, his classmates called him "potato face" and hardly hid their dislike of him. At home he was cheeky and sneaky, taking advantage of his mother's blindness at every turn, plundering the fridge, gaining weight, skirting chores and hiding his rubbish under his bed. You just had to pray that he would not take after his father too much. Daisy had soon acquired a unique style of mothering that was a mixture of cajoling and bullying in equal measure.

One day, to take an example, Daisy was sitting with

her eight-year-old son at the corner of the kitchen table, in the flat in Tufnell Park. Once again they had issues to discuss about his behaviour. In the whining voice he adopted in such cases, Jonathan had complained that it was all *her* fault: what could you expect with a blind mother? She could never check on him, she couldn't see what he was doing, so could *he* help it that he behaved badly sometimes?

"Well, Johnny-John, isn't the fact that I'm blind an extra reason to be responsible and to behave? Besides, as I've often told you before, one should never underestimate the disabled."

"Yeah-yeah-yeah, but still, it's not *my* fault that you're blind."

"It's not *my* fault either, and it doesn't mean that I'm stupid. I'm on to your tricks a lot more than you think."

"Yeah-yeah-yeah..."

Utterly exasperated by now, Daisy cried, "Okay: if you're so clever, try to slap my face. Go on! Slap me! Try!"

The boy muttered something along the lines of "Well, you're asking for it," and his hand shot forwards. His mother caught his wrist with *her* hand just inches in front of her face, forestalling the slap at the very last moment.

"Huh?" the boy cried, "how'd you do that?"

"It's quite simple. You're right-handed just like me, so you're bound to go for my left cheek. Then it's just a matter of timing. I knew that you would strike within a heartbeat or two after you stopped muttering to yourself, and that is when I caught you with *my* right hand. Neat trick, huh?"

But quite typically for him, the boy felt humiliated and got very angry at his mother. He stomped out of the kitchen and slammed the door of his own room with a cry of rage. Daisy sighed, "That boy really takes after his

father after all...”

Then, by the time he turned eighteen, Jonathan had started to ask about him, about his father. It had been an expression of defiance. He kept saying that he had nothing in common with his mother, who was a real Goody Two-Shoes, according to him. “My Daddy must be really cool, incredibly smart and tough. I wish I knew him.”

“Well, Johnny-John, I beg to differ. You wouldn’t be happy at all to know your father, and he would certainly not be happy to know of your existence. So be careful about what you wish for...”

“See? The way you talk about him, I like him already!”

It was no use holding it off. The more Daisy told the boy that knowing his father would only make him miserable, the more eager he became to know him and the more insistently he interrogated her about him. In the end Daisy tried to take a different tack. “If I tell you that I don’t even know his name, what does that suggest to you?”

“What? You *really* don’t know my Dad’s name?”

“I could tell you a lot about your father, but not his name, no, for the simple reason that he never told me. So I’m asking you: what does that suggest? Think!”

“Well... artificial insemination? A one-night stand? Not very likely in your case... Wait a minute, maybe rape! Now that would be cool...”

Daisy just ignored the aggression implied in that last remark. It was typical of their relationship lately; the aggravating, mindless and heartless provocations she had to weather more and more often. “All right, smart pants, if you think it’s so cool, let’s pretend he was a rapist and just leave it at that!”

“No-no-no! I want to know, I’m entitled to it!”

“Well we’ll talk again tomorrow. Sleep on it, think it over, and tell me tomorrow if you still want to know more.”

But it was no use, of course. Jonathan's curiosity had been piqued, the next evening he got on to her again.

"Well," Daisy told him reluctantly, "in the sixties, when I got to know your father, he was already in his forties—just like me at the time. And he preyed on young hippie girls. He lured them with drugs, then locked them up and raped them..."

"Oh, cool! So he was rather oversexed, huh? Just like me. And he raped you too? How come, when he could have all those young hippie girls?"

"Will you shut up for a second? Yes he raped me too, we were the same age and I was apparently a rather fetching woman at the time. Yes he was oversexed, but not like you. You're only oversexed because you're eighteen years old... And finally, he only could have all those hippie girls because he was the biggest *bastard* and the worst *coward* that ever lived."

"Is he in prison now? I'd like to visit him."

"No, he is not in prison. And even if he had been, he would have absolutely *loathed* the notion of having a son, so forget it. We'll talk further tomorrow, if you still insist on it..."

And so it came to be that Daisy told his father's story to her son in nightly instalments, like a desperate Scheherazade. At length Jonathan's admiration became tinged with disgust, to his mother's great relief. When she told him that his father had butchered her eardrums with a sharpened screwdriver, he apparently balked.

"Huh? What did he do *that* for? I mean, it's a pretty horrible thing to do to a blind old lady like you..."

"He did it to show who was the boss. And it turned him *on* no end. He got so randy after he did this to me, that he wanted to rape me straight away, and that's when he got careless."

Now Jonathan wanted to know how it felt to be blind *and* deaf, but as usual his mother said, “Let’s wait until tomorrow”.

A few days later, Daisy finally got to tell her son that she had actually killed his father. “I had no choice. Otherwise he would have killed *me*.” She told him how she had severed his carotid artery with her teeth, while her wrists and ankles had been tied down, and how she let him bleed to death. Finally Jonathan found something to admire about his mother.

“So you’re not such a Goody Two-Shoes after all?”

“Did I ever say I was?”

“And you say that my Dad also killed one of his victims, and that he would have killed you?”

“Yes, there is at least one victim I know of for sure, and it certainly looked as if he was going to kill *me* in the end...”

“So my father *and* my mother are *both* murderers... Boy, talk about an interesting family background!”

“Darling, I’m sorry. I *told* you this story wouldn’t make you happy, didn’t I? But this doesn’t need to be the last word. When I found out that I was pregnant, I was glad. As a rape victim I could have had an abortion. But I wanted something *good* to come out of all this misery, and it *did*. That something good was *you*, Jonathan. It still is. You’re the *joy* of my life!”

But the very next evening, Johnny-John had demanded some clarifications about the role this Martin McCullough had played in the whole drama. “So *he* planted that newspaper story about you: ‘Blind Angel of Wrath?’”

“That’s right. His daughter’s kidnapper was bound to read it, and he counted on the fact that ‘the pervert’ would kidnap *me* too. There was even a very fetching photograph

of me accompanying the article in the Sunday paper. I was used as a bait, and it worked out exactly according to plan. I ended up in the clutches of the Master.”

“And later he told Uncle Rick that he counted on *you* to kill his daughter’s kidnapper?”

“That’s right. That was the plan all along. McCullough was absolutely certain that I had it in me to kill his daughter’s abductor. And he was right. That’s exactly what happened.”

At long last Jonathan had felt a holy indignation on his mother’s behalf. “Couldn’t that bastard be bothered to go and rescue his daughter himself? Did he have to trick a blind lady into doing his dirty work for him?” Daisy had been glad of the boy’s unexpected concern for her, but she had never imagined that he would start plotting his revenge on the man at once.

And she hadn’t even told her son that she’d had to *drink* his father’s *blood* in order to ensure her own survival. Nor did she disclose this to Bernard during their lunch.

CHAPTER III

“...shall I tell you about the very first time I became aware of your existence? It was in 1939. When Cedric came back from the summer hols, he told all his mates at school about this girl he’d met, this girl named Daisy Hayes, who was *soo* beautiful, *soo* sexy, and totally *blind!* Blind since birth. The worse kind of blindness, said he, who had suddenly become quite an expert. He even had a small photograph of the whole group of his cousins taken by Ralph’s mother. A Brownie snapshot with a wavy white border. You were in it too, standing there in the middle, and Cedric would point you out to us. Your head was only a tiny smudge, really, but there were enough visual clues to make out the blond curls, the dark glasses, the loveliness...

“We were all fascinated by this story, of course. It struck me that Cedric was apparently quite smitten. Very unusual for him. He not only found you attractive, but seemed to respect you at a deeper level, he who otherwise would show respect for no one on earth. He told us how you had learned to ride a bicycle and shoot a pistol, and

we all agreed that you must be a wonderful girl. Then the others got bored and started to mock Cedric for his infatuation with you. ‘Yeah, yeah, the blind girl, we know! You keep banging on about her; well, come on: a *blind* girl?’ But I kept asking for more details, for more stories, and Cedric was grateful to me for still showing an interest. He kept on talking about ‘the gang’ at Bottomleigh House and all the stuff you kids had been up to that summer. I particularly admired the play you had created: *Death of a Corpse!* I wished I could have been there and played in it...

“Anyway, that was the first time I became aware of your existence. We were all sixteen or seventeen years old at the time, very prone to falling in love, and I’m afraid I fell in love with the idea of you that I had built up in my mind. I had this idealised representation of you that stayed with me for many years after that.”

By now Daisy was almost purring with pleasure. She enjoyed the caress of Bernard’s voice immensely. It was very male but at the same time very soft and smooth, a crooning sound... yes, that was it: if he hadn’t been a police investigator and a hideously ugly man in a wheelchair, Bernard could have been an old crooner, bringing middle-aged ladies to their knees at evening do’s in derelict seaside resorts. Daisy smiled, and stroked Bernard’s muscular chest with her hand.

“I suppose you weren’t a paraplegic yet?”

“No, not at that moment, but I was to become one soon. The accident happened six months later, and while I suffered hell in a hospital bed as they tried desperately to patch me up, I was thinking of you *all* the time. It helped me to pull through.”

“And to imagine that I was blissfully unaware of all

that... So on V-E Day, when I spoke to you on the phone, you were actually hiding your feelings, even when you said 'Please call me Bernard'."

"That's right. Instead, I could have blurted out: 'I love you!' You see, in '43 Cedric had turned up out of the blue, at the Yard, and he told me how you had found out that your husband had been poisoned. I admired you greatly for that and fell in love all over again with the idea of your existence. Then, when you phoned me on V-E Day, I heard your voice for the first time. It was really you! I was thrilled!"

"And you were wheelchair-bound, then?"

"Of course! That was the only reason I was still doing a civilian job... Didn't you ever wonder why I was not under arms?"

"No, it never occurred to me."

"Women. Typical!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Only joking of course."

"Well... and now that we have made love for the first time, forty-four years on, did I live up to your expectations? I'm an old biddy now..."

"Oh no, you're not. You're anything *but*... Let me tell you something. I sometimes make use of a specialised call-girl. In my situation it's a justifiable thing to do. The one I do business with at the moment is quite young and beautiful; very competent at handling a paraplegic, and therefore the services provided are worth every penny I pay for them. But what you and I have shared just now is of another order altogether. Pure bliss! So, yes, I can assure you that you lived up to my expectations. And now I have good reason to believe that I'm really in love with you."

They were lying in each other's arms in Jonathan's

bed, a single. Bernard was bunched up against the freshly painted wall, Daisy was almost falling off on the other side. She told Bernard that she was going to put her own bed right next to Jonathan's in order to make it twin beds, so that next time they could be together more comfortably. "Now that he's gone, I think I'm going to take over this room as my own. It's a lovely room, don't you think?"

As she was feeling a cramp coming up, Daisy turned over onto her belly, half crushing Bernard under her weight, which delighted him.

"Isn't it a problem," Daisy said, "when a Detective Chief Superintendent goes to bed with a witness, or even a suspect?"

"Only if anyone finds out. I could be dismissed from the force, except that I'm already retired. And if you were ever indicted, you would only need to tell the judge about this in order to get an acquittal."

"Well, I wouldn't *dream* of doing such a thing, Bernard. For all the faults I may have, I still pride myself on a certain sense of honour. And I guess you still want to get to the bottom of my relationship with McCullough and all that?"

"Absolutely. But let's not talk about that for the moment. I owe you a debt of gratitude, by the way: the man's murder has been solved double quick. The brass will be impressed; they will not regret having called me back; I solved the case for them in about forty-eight hours!"

"Very impressive. Your own merit entirely. Now, I must have made quite an impression without realizing it, yesterday morning, when you set eyes on me for the first time?"

"Yes, you made an impression all right, but it was not the first time I saw you. You may not be aware of it, but

we'd already met at St Mary's Hospital in 1967..."

"What? You don't say! Wait a minute... there were two cops from the Yard that came to interrogate me. *You* were one of them?"

"That's right. And you were almost deaf. We had to shout. I was *not* very proud of myself, but at the time it was all in a day's work. I can tell you that I was moved to tears at the sight of you, battered in battle as you were, and I wanted to look at you all the time, which is always difficult to combine with tearfulness. So I kept wiping my eyes with my hanky while I was eating you up! A good job I was sitting behind my colleague's back and that he was too busy to notice that I wasn't contributing much to the interrogation..."

"I remember that there were two cops, but I had no idea one of them was in a wheelchair."

"Oh yes, I was in my chair all right, and I made quite an impression at the hospital. But you were still badly maimed, you couldn't possibly have registered what was going on around you. Still, when I finally managed to control myself and spoke to you, I immediately had the feeling that you perked up, reached out for me, and that there spontaneously arose a kind of natural *rapport* between us..."

"Of course! I remember now. You were the one who wanted to know if I had *given away* Loretta's name to the girl who was with me in the dungeon. And I realised at once that *that* was exactly what had gone wrong! It made complete sense. I always know immediately when I'm talking to someone who takes me seriously and who's making sense."

"Exactly! You've just summed up the very essence of our relationship."

Daisy announced that it was time to take a bath, and

Bernard agreed. Doing the honours as an hostess, she poured the last of the bottle of Italian wine into his glass and bounded over to the bathroom to run a hot bath; then, when everything was ready, she assisted her guest into his wheelchair, rolled him over to the bathtub and helped him to get in. Soon they were settled, Daisy sitting behind Bernard's back with her arms around his waist. She suddenly felt very protective of him, like a big sister, her heart brimming with tenderness. Then she said, "You know, Bernard, I still don't understand how we ended up in bed together, just now..."

"Well, darling, for me that is not so hard to fathom. It is what I always wanted. I can't tell you how often I fantasized about it, or how many times I pleased myself thinking of it."

"Oh, I see! So it was not always only romantic longing, was it?"

"No, certainly not. With blokes it never is..."

"Hmm, come to think of it, with girls it isn't either."

"There you are then."

"Yes, but apart from that phone call in '45 and a meeting in '67 that I was hardly aware of, you're a complete stranger to me... I've only *really* met you for the first time yesterday."

"Yes, but didn't we just agree that there is a kind of feeling of recognition between us?"

"Yes, I suppose there is... But has it occurred to you at all that *I* might have seduced *you* just now in order to wriggle out of the investigation against me?"

"Of course it has crossed my mind! But it is not going to work. For me one thing does not exclude the other, as you can imagine... And has it ever occurred to *you* that I might be romancing you in order to *solve a case*?"

"No, of course not! A gentleman would never do such

a thing... or would he?"

"Well, that goes to show that you're a lot more naïve than I am, but I like that about you..."

For a moment they sloshed about in the warm bath, then Daisy asked, "Why did you never seek contact with me before, if you were so much in love?"

"I'm a very shy man, Daisy. Of course I did realise that you wouldn't be put off by my appearance, being blind and all that, but I was held back because of the wheelchair. What on earth is a blind lady to do with a wheelchair-bound suitor? And then, this morning, I was astounded to find out that you didn't mind the wheelchair at all."

"Of course not, silly. Some of my best friends are paraplegics, you know."

They were quiet for a while. From behind him Daisy put her hands on Bernard's face and started probing him with her fingertips. "I can see you just as well from behind as from up front. In fact I can see you *better* from behind, because right now I'm touching your face like I would touch my own; left is left and right is right..."

Bernard giggled. Daisy explored his strangely lopsided features for a moment, and at length she asked, "Do you know that I'm a sculptor?"

"Yes, my dear. After I talked to you at St Mary's in '67, I went to see your exhibition. It was still on and having quite some success, as I recall."

"So you saw my first series of portraits?"

"Yes. Not bad. Not bad at all..."

"Well, I was just thinking, I'd like to do a portrait of you. Would you care to sit for me?"

"Well, I'm not sure about that..."

"Oh, sorry, I understand the problem. But I'm not making myself clear. I wouldn't portray you as you *are*,

whatever that means, but as I *perceive* you. In fact I could even do one better. I could portray you through the filter of my *feelings* for you...”

“Sounds interesting... Yes, now you’re making me curious.”

“It’s very simple, really. As I am not dominated by visual clues, I can pick and choose at will as it were. I could use the undamaged parts of your face to extrapolate what you would have looked like if there hadn’t been an accident... Wouldn’t that be interesting? To see the Bernard that never was but that could have been?”

All the while Daisy’s fingertips were dancing excitedly all over Bernard’s face, making him giggle some more. “For instance, I could duplicate your left cheekbone on the right-hand side, mirrored of course, then the same with the jawbone, and so on. In fact I would be creating an image of how you see *yourself*. Isn’t it true that you don’t see yourself as a hideous old paraplegic at all? Isn’t that true of every human being? We never see ourselves as we actually *are*.”

“That’s right! All the criminals I ever met in my career saw themselves as completely innocent...”

Daisy giggled. “Well, to tell you the truth, in my mind I’m still the eighteen-year-old girl who married Ralph. That is who I will always be...”

“Yes, I believe you’re right. That is who you will always be, and it is an immense privilege for me to be allowed to take Ralph’s place for a while.”

“Not for a while. Make that: from now on.”

As they were getting dressed, Daisy remarked, “And to think that only this morning I was having breakfast with Jonathan; everything was perfectly normal, him being his usual obnoxious self...”

“What you just told me about him gives me a lot of food for thought. It was incredibly brave of you to keep the child, and I find it truly tragic that it turned out so badly.”

“Yes. Like most parents I’m now wondering what I did wrong... but most parents don’t ask themselves that question on account of such a gruesome murder.”

“No. That’s what’s so appalling about this... Now, in the telling of your story you’ve also revealed how you killed Jonathan’s father. I’ll need your deposition on that, but there is no haste, of course.”

“All right. I guess we’ll have to get down to it and thrash it out.”

“I’m afraid so, yes. And there’s one question I’m dying to ask, if I may be so bold...”

“Go ahead. There’s no stopping you anyway.”

“Did ‘the girl’ ever get in touch with you *after* she brought you to the hospital?”

“Yes. She turned up on my doorstep a couple of months later.”

“Well? Tell me more! Does she have a name?”

“Yes, of course. Sue. She told me her complete name just once, the first time she visited, but I’m afraid I can’t remember her family name. Really, I assure you. I only remember vaguely that Sue stands for Susanna.”

“And did Susanna go to the police?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact she did. She went back to her family, and as her Dad had reported her missing nine months earlier, he went to the local police station with her to report that she was back. But the thing is, Sue told vague stories about staying at different hippie communes around the country...”

“Why on earth did she do that? Can’t *anyone* in this time and age just tell the *truth* to the police? This really has me stumped, sometimes!”

“Hush, darling. Sue had gone through a very traumatising experience and wanted to be left in peace. Just the idea of what she would have had to tell the police makes your blood curdle! Besides, she felt very much ashamed about what had happened. You see, she had followed the pervert voluntarily, of her own free will. She felt ashamed of having been such a dupe.”

“All right, all right, I get it.”

Meanwhile they had finished getting dressed, and Daisy decided it was time for a nice cup of tea. They proceeded to the kitchen and she put the kettle on. Bernard parked his wheelchair at the table, on the same spot where he'd taken his lunch a couple of hours before. Now he asked Daisy, “Did you learn anything interesting or important from Susanna?”

“Yes. She told me what happened to Loretta. Sue had heard it from the Master, who in his turn was never very reliable, but here goes: Loretta drowned in her own vomit while she was fast asleep from sleeping pills. She was afraid of the dark, sick with grief, and he tried to subdue her with Valium... She must have died in the very first days after the Master had locked her up. He probably buried her under the concrete floor, somewhere in his dungeon.”

“Good God, what a mess! And did you keep in touch with Susanna? Can I speak to her?”

“No, Bernard, you cannot. For a couple of years she kept visiting me every few months to tell me how she was doing. She studied to become an accountant, she who had told me that she was bad at maths... Then she fell in love and was full of plans: getting married, buying a place to live, having kids. But somehow visiting old Daisy no longer fitted into those plans. I reminded her of too many bad things, and besides, little Jonathan gave her the

creeps... So she stopped visiting after a few years. When I moved to this place, we hadn't been in touch for ages."

"All right. I suppose Susanna wouldn't have been able to tell me any more than you did just now, anyway..."

"No. She was *not* a very observant person, nor altogether reliable, believe me. Now it's my turn to put a question to you that I've been dying to ask. Did you ever find the Master's dungeon? I gave you a clue at the time that it might be a bunker..."

"Well, I tried to follow up on that, but it was no good. Building an atomic fallout shelter is not a crime, so it was never going to show up in the police records. And such bunkers could be built by *any* building company, so how do you extract this specific information from the thousands of builders working in the metropolitan area? Impossible!"

"I pricked up my ears for a couple of years," Daisy said, "hoping to hear some news about this affair. A missing person or some such. I was also astonished that the police never came back to me to interrogate me some more."

"Well *that*, my dear, you owe to me. I persuaded my colleagues that it would be useless to pester you again, even though I had a distinct feeling that you had kept some information from us."

"And now you feel you have to pester me with a vengeance!"

"Well, another corpse has turned up, so yes. I was wrong to be too complacent the first time."

"Hmm. Fair point. Now what would have happened if the Master had been reported missing?"

"We would have searched his house and found the bunker."

"Are you sure?"

“Oh yes. We would have known what we were looking for. We would have used metal detectors and all that...”

“You see, sometimes, when I think about it, I have this vision of a family living in that house, blissfully unaware of the dungeon’s existence, just living their happy family life right on top of a tomb with at least two corpses inside...”

“Well, it could be, but it doesn’t bear thinking about indeed.”

“Indeed not... But you know, I was in the middle of an investigation of my own when the Master captured me... Wait a minute, I must still have the list somewhere.”

“A list?”

“Don’t move, I’ll be back!”

Daisy jumped up from the table and bounded over to another part of the flat, out of sight from where Bernard was sitting. She stayed away for quite some time, and Bernard was just starting to worry a bit—the girl was so unpredictable—when Daisy finally came back into the kitchen, waving an old envelope. “Here it is! I knew I still had it somewhere.”

“And what is it?”

“A computer printout from 1967. Please have a look. Is it still legible?”

Bernard opened the enveloped, which was brittle with age, and took out a few pages of thick, high quality paper that had aged well. “A list of names and addresses? What is this?”

“Is it still legible?”

“Oh, yes. I remember the computer printouts from the sixties. No paper was too expensive, the teleprinters worked with the best quality ink ribbons available. These pages still look superb!”

“Well, that is as it should be, as they will provide you

with a window on the past. This list contains the names of all the men who ordered chloroform *and* a contraceptive pill on a regular basis from the summer of 1966, when Loretta and Susanna disappeared, to the summer of 1967, when *I* was abducted. It was given to me by a pharmacist named Michael Dobbs, who thought that if we checked these names at the General Register Office, we would end up with a much *smaller* list of *unmarried* men who ordered chloroform *and* the pill! The pervert was not likely to be married, and there would have been very few male customers ordering the pill who did not have a wife or a daughter... How about that?"

"Not bad, not bad at all. The only thing is, in my experience you would still have ended up with dozens of names..."

"Well, there was another idea I had at the time. You remember that the pervert went by the name of 'Jumping Jack' when he visited the communes? And that he was handing out pot and acid to the hippies like a sugar daddy at a children's birthday party? I thought at the time that this fact could have made the man traceable, at least for the police, but that fool McCullough wouldn't hear of involving you people..."

"Oh, but of course! The man is bound to have been busted while he was buying the stuff on the illegal drugs market. He would have been forced to show some ID. He would be listed in our records... even if he was busted only *once!* Now *that*, my dear Daisy, is good thinking! Yes. I'll ask Collins to go through the records and compare them with the names on your Pharmacist's list. People who ordered chloroform and the pill, and who were registered by the police for buying illegal drugs... That should narrow it down just nicely!"

"Well, don't *thank* me, Bernard. You're welcome to it."

Bernard chuckled, moved his wheelchair over to Daisy and closed his powerful arms around her waist. Then he pressed his lopsided face against her chest and cried, "Dearest Daisy, thank you from the bottom of my heart!"

Now the question arose of getting the list to the Yard as soon as possible, so that Collins could get to work on it. "May I use your phone? I'll have them send over a car for me."

"Well, I have a better idea. Let's take the Tube together! I have the distinct impression that you're always being chauffeured in a police car or a taxi and that you've never been on the London Tube in your whole life."

"You could be right about that, but I'm too old to start taking the Tube *now*."

"Oh, no-no, I don't want to hear you say that, ever. You have to tell yourself that it's now or never. At our age, if you don't try something new straight away, you're forfeiting your chance to do it at all."

First Daisy had to carry Bernard on her back, up the stairs of the front area, then she carried the wheelchair up, and at last they were on their way to the Tube station. She knew the route quite well and steered the chair without much hesitation, though Bernard couldn't help giving some directions from time to time. Daisy tolerated it.

Then they arrived at the top of an escalator going steeply down. "How do you intend to do this?" Bernard asked anxiously.

"Don't worry, it's easy, I've done this plenty of times with my friends... First you have to turn around, and I'll stay right behind you... Now you roll backwards onto the escalator and you lean forwards and hold on to the rubber

handrails with both hands:”

“Are you sure you’re strong enough to keep me from toppling over?”

“Just lean forwards and hold on to the handrails; gravity will do the rest.”

As they started to descend and the wheelchair keeled backwards, Daisy gave a shove to the large rear wheels to make sure that they were standing firmly in the middle of a step. They started drifting down, Bernard still moving backwards.

“This is pretty scary! Are you sure that I shouldn’t block the wheels?”

“Certainly not! How do you get off at the bottom of the stairs if your wheels are blocked? Just let gravity do its work; your chair is now quite stable, you’re leaning onto the castors up front, and just standing in the middle of a step; I don’t even need to hold you back...”

“Wouldn’t gravity *really* be doing its work if I went crashing down those endless stairs? You’re bent on killing me after all...”

“Oh, silly! I’ve done this so often with my friends; there’s nothing to it.”

“What friends would that be?”

“Wheelchair-bound friends from the *community*, just like you.”

“Which community would that be?”

“Oh, Bernard, where have you *been* all those years? Don’t you know there’s a *disabled* community in London nowadays? It’s great fun! Not so long ago the Underground authorities found out that people in wheelchairs were using their escalators like you’re doing now, so they tried to forbid it. Little red signs were put up; there were arguments with the guards. Then the wheelchair-bound decided to team up with the blind. We blind people are the

modern saints; you don't scold someone who's accompanied by a blind person. Very soon the red signs disappeared again."

"And how did you get to know these 'militant cripples'?"

"Oh, you just meet people on the street and exchange phone numbers. All very informal, really..."

They now arrived at the bottom of the stairs. "Watch out for the bump when you get off. Keep leaning forwards and hold on to the handrails; let *them* propel you off the escalator..."

All went well. "You'll see, going up is even easier."

They had to negotiate a second escalator, and finally they were standing on the platform, side by side, holding hands, waiting for the next train. Bernard said, "I'm afraid we're making quite a sensation: the Quasimodo type in a wheelchair seemingly escorting a beautiful blind lady with pitch dark glasses. People are staring, rather."

"Well let them stare, Bernard. You must learn, like the blind, not to care what you look like, nor how others look at you. It's a tiresome obsession with you normal people..."

"Hmm, that's easy for you to say... But tell me, Daisy: when the train arrives, how can you make out where the doors are?"

"Quite simple, really. The doors hiss and roll noisily open, then I just follow the stampede or the shuffling of feet, as the case may be. I'm always the last one in, of course, but I can always get a seat if I want. Especially if I pretend that there's also something wrong with my sense of balance." Bernard squeezed Daisy's hand and chuckled. The train arrived.

Daisy took a seat and Bernard parked next to her and blocked his wheels.

“Tell me another one of your childish delusions, Bernard. I find it incredibly clever of you that you still remember them.”

“Well, let me see... Ah, here’s a nice one. As a child I was so greedy and stingy, that I just didn’t understand how anyone in the world could ever *share* anything with anyone else. *I* certainly couldn’t. I would never share a toy with another boy, of course. Now, when my mother took me to the shops to buy me a shirt or a pair of socks, I would be positively shocked to see her take *her* money out of *her* purse, and pay the clerk for items that were *not* for her, but for *me*! Of course I obscurely understood that it was something adults *had* to do. So I decided: if that is what being an adult is like, I’m not looking forward to it. Not one bit!”

“Ah yes, that’s a pretty good one! It reminds me of my piggy bank. As a banker, my father wanted to teach me the value of saving, of course. Each time I was given a farthing or a penny I had to put it into my piggy bank. Daddy told me that when I had collected one Pound, I could open a savings account with him, and given enough time, I could become quite wealthy, what with the compound interest and all that... Well, in this case, exceptionally, my father’s explanations went in one ear and out the other. The only thing that interested me was the *sound* those coins made. I would sit on the rug in the middle of the parlour and shake my piggy bank violently until all the coins had fallen out; then I would put them back. Tinkle-tinkle-tinkle! I found it a very satisfying sound. It drove my parents crazy, of course.”

“As I already said this morning: a very difficult child!”

They arrived at St James’s Park, and it turned out that there were no escalators up, only stairs. So they had to organize a detail of volunteers, a few strong young men,

to carry Bernard and his wheelchair up to the street level. Daisy commented, "I had forgotten this little detail, even though I got off here only this morning. So much for the idea of you taking the Tube to work on a daily basis!"

"Never mind, my dear. This place looks absolutely beautiful, by the way."

"Yes, I think this used to be the headquarters of the London Underground..."

When they exited the Tube station, Bernard said, "Is that St James's Park I see there at the end of the street?"

"Could be. In that case we've got the wrong exit. New Scotland Yard is on the other side. But now we're here, why not take a stroll in the park? It's such a beautiful day!"

"All right. But we have to give the list from 1967 to Collins, remember?"

"Well, the Master's dungeon has held its secrets for more than twenty years now; it can keep them for a couple of hours longer, don't you think?"

They started walking down Queen Anne's Gate towards the park, Daisy pushing the chair, Bernard steering by braking slightly left and right with his hands on the push rings. They were able to walk at a good pace. Daisy said, "I find it uncanny how we share similar childhood memories. We must have worshipped the same heroes in the thirties. Everybody still remembers Albert Einstein, of course; but do you recall Professor Piccard? He was *lionised* when we were young."

"Yes, Piccard! The stratospheric balloon! And how about Doctor Schweitzer?"

"Lambaréné! It is midnight, Doctor Schweitzer... And Mahatma Gandhi!"

"George Orwell!"

"Aldous Huxley! Who was the person you admired the

most, ever, Bernard?”

“Bertrand Russell, definitely, because he was a pacifist and a Labourite, and my father *loathed* the man!”

“For me it was Helen Keller, of course, the blind and deaf girl who went to college and all that. And Anne Sullivan, who educated her and inspired the teaching methods at my school.”

“I don’t suppose you went to the cinema much, being blind? I was a great fan of Charlie Chaplin.”

“Oh, but we did go to the cinema a lot too, Daddy and I, but not to see Chaplin. He was mostly silent at the height of his career. But we were great fans of Laurel and Hardy, as soon as they started talking.”

“And how about Johnny Weissmuller? I worshipped Tarzan!”

“And me Jane! And how about Popeye the Sailor? Wasn’t *that* hilarious?”

“Oh, yes, Popeye!”

Bernard started at once to mutter gibberish under his breath, as the cartoon character used to do, and ended with “I yam what I yam, ‘n dat’s what I yam...”

Daisy laughed, and said, “I used to be a good Olive Oyl impersonator myself. Want to hear it?” And without missing a beat she yelled in a shrill, whining voice, “Heelp! Popeeeye! Saaave mee!”

Bernard roared with laughter.

They crossed Birdcage Walk and entered the park. Daisy said, “All right, Bernard, you have to navigate us; I don’t even have my cane.”

“What’s the plan anyway? Just a nice stroll through the park and then back to the office?”

“That sounds a bit humdrum. I don’t know what it is, but I’m feeling a bit high-strung, overexcited, energetic. Do we have a straight path ahead of us?”

“Yes, if we keep going across the park towards the Mall.”

“All right. The surface underfoot feels smooth, and I’m wearing my sensible shoes, as always... Are there many people about? Not crowded, is it?”

“No, it’s a weekday, and it’s teatime. Why all these questions? This sounds a bit ominous.”

“Don’t worry, Bernard, we’re going to have some fun!”

“I was afraid of that!”

“Listen. Judging by the muscles in your shoulders and arms, you’re strong enough to propel your wheelchair up to quite a speed, am I right?”

“Erm, for a short spurt, certainly...”

“Exactly what is needed. I want to run! You propel yourself and I run behind you with my hands on the handles. With our compounded efforts we should be able to get up to an honourable speed, don’t you think? So prepare for action. Ready? Steady. Go!”

Daisy gave a push, Bernard started to pump with his arms, and off they went, faster and faster. Bernard cried, “You must stop when I say so!”

“Of course! Faster!”

And they flew over the path towards the Mall. Bernard had to concentrate intensely, propelling himself, steering his chair and looking out where they were going at the same time, while Daisy just ran as fast as she could behind him, pushing on the handles. The air whooshed in their ears. After less than a hundred yards the footbridge over the lake came up ahead. There were a few people strolling on it in front of them and Bernard didn’t dare to venture onto the bridge, so he cried “Stop, stop!” and started braking. They veered off the path onto the lawn; the wheelchair almost keeled over, but Daisy managed to keep it upright. Then she collapsed onto the grass,

panting and giggling. Bernard wheeled over to her so that he could look down at her from up close, lying on her back right in front of him. "That was crazy! Are you all right?"

"Yes, don't worry! That was fun! We must do it again some time."

"You know, Cedric was right. He told us in 1939 how lovely you are when you laugh: all tiny teeth and dimples. He was right, and that was when you were sixteen, but it still applies... the wrinkles of age only add to the charm!"

"Well, you know what the problem is, though? I'm missing my sports bra! I had the feeling people were looking at us..."

CHAPTER IV

“...because of the events of the summer, the authorities have closed the border with Hungary at first, then with Czechoslovakia, and now a complete travelling ban has been instituted in the GDR. The Honecker regime is isolating itself from the rest of the East Bloc countries...”

“That’s right, my dear Alastair, it is like putting a cat in a sack. Just as their pent-up urge for freedom is at its height, the GDR citizens are in effect being locked up inside their own country.”

“Now we also hear that the GDR is cracking down on protesters in Leipzig. Would you say that Leipzig is significant, Brian?”

“Yes, it is the second largest city of the GDR, and it is at its industrial heart. And not only that. Leipzig industry is the most cutting-edge of the whole communist bloc. It produces all the high-end optics and electronics needed for the most advanced weapons systems of the Warsaw Pact...”

“So you’re saying that the Russians should be getting nervous as well?”

“Exactly. In Brezhnev’s days the tanks would already have been brought to bear on such an insurgency. But now it is the Soviets themselves, by way of Gorbachev, who are cautioning the Honecker regime to back down. A complete reversal of policies, obviously.”

“The Russians and their German client state are at loggerheads...”

“Absolutely. Gorbachev is advocating ‘Glasnost’ and ‘Perestroika’, *openness* and *reform*, and the Honecker regime just hates that. Only recently the East German authorities have *banned* several Soviet publications on the grounds that they are *subversive*...”

Jonathan couldn’t help hearing the bloody Beeb going on and on about politics in bloody Germany. Why didn’t we just crush them after we won the bloody war? He didn’t care for a word of what the radio was saying, but he recognized the kind of stuff Mummy was for ever listening to. He felt a pang of longing for his mother, and for the sausages and bacon she kept stocking up for him. Not to mention the beer. Oh, Mummy, we had it so good; why did it have to end?

And when she listened to that awful nattering on the Beeb, he would grumble at her and just switch it off. He was not very likely to do that now. It was the foreman himself who had a radio on in his shack and spent hours on end listening at this highbrow gibberish at full volume. He only turned it down to give fresh orders.

And he, Jonathan, spent those endless hours doing backbreaking work. Unloading a consignment of cement in heavy sacks from a lorry; carrying a big load of bricks up a ladder; collecting the rubbish off the building site and throwing it into a skip.

As bloody Brian and bloody Alastair kept their bogus

dialogue going, Jonathan reflected that the foreman had it easy, just sitting there, watching the others work, giving orders, probably making good money on their backs. “I wouldn’t mind being a foreman myself. How come *I’m* not and that bloody fool *is*?”

He worked as a day labourer, going from site to site, hired for a couple of hours—a couple of days at most—and badly paid because he wouldn’t show any ID, and the foremen told him he was too fat to be a good worker anyway. Well, that last problem was taking care of itself. With the pittance he earned he could no longer eat as many sausages as he wanted, and the hard work made the fat melt away. He no longer looked like the picture on his driver’s licence, the one the police had put up on the notice boards of every station in town. His face was getting thinner, his hair longer and greasier.

Another problem was that everyone seemed to think that he had a very posh accent (the idea!) and derided it. They kept imitating him, repeating every word he said with a very bad mock-posh accent, the bastards. So he had to keep his mouth shut. And again Jonathan thought of his mother: how she’d always reproached him when he talked “too common” and swore too much.

He spent most of his hard-earned money to pay the rent at the dosshouses where he stayed at night. Again, he had to pay more because he wouldn’t show any ID. The bloody slumlords exploited him mercilessly; his only consolation was that they couldn’t exploit him for long; he never slept in the same bed twice in a row, though he did come back to each address intermittently. “I wouldn’t mind having a nice little dosshouse of my own. Just sit there all day, counting my money, waiting for other poor sods to hand it over in spades.”

As he worked on for endless hours every day,

Jonathan kept reminding himself that he was not going to do this forever. He had plans. For the moment he had to keep his head down, stay out of the hands of the law, wait for things to calm down a bit. Surely those pictures of him would not stay up forever at the police stations? “I’m gonna have to leave Britain as soon as they’re no longer looking for me. Start a new life somewhere abroad. If I’m not welcome anymore in this bloody country it can’t be helped...” He had vague ideas of making it big, somehow, somewhere. Of course Jonathan didn’t speak any foreign languages, not really, but he’d been told that in places like Amsterdam, say, or Oslo, everyone could speak English anyway...

But for the moment, while he was waiting for the right moment to make his escape, his biggest dream was to make a criminal career right here in London. Burglary! Though he wasn’t really agile enough to scale facades, nor lean enough—just yet—to slip in through the slightest opening. It would have to be more in the style of breaking in with a crowbar... Imagine getting into a really posh place and just helping yourself, jewels, money, anything you want. Imagine breaking in into Marks and Sparks in the middle of the night! It’s always nice to have a dream, isn’t it?

“Hey! You! Fat arse! Get a move on with those cement sacks. I’m not paying you good money to stand there daydreaming!”

Jonathan started, and even though his back and limbs were aching, he resumed unloading the lorry in a hurry. The driver, lounging in the cab of his vehicle, sniggered. Jonathan started fantasising about murdering a couple of people in a gruesome way, crushing them under a hydraulic vehicle lift... He could still hear McCullough screaming in his mind’s ear, although that

had happened *before* he was crushed. “But wait a minute. Yes. That’s it! You could tie up a chap under that lift *without* knocking him out, then let the lift come down on him real SLOW and listen to the screams while you crush him to death... I wouldn’t mind hearing that bloody foreman and the driver screaming like that... with great conviction.”

Daisy was desperately looking for a phone number. She had once written it on a card with her pocket-size Braille slate, but she couldn’t find it in the drawer where she kept such cards. “Extraordinary!” she reflected, “I could find that computer list from twenty years ago within minutes, but King Louie’s number has disappeared...”

She’d been on the phone with Louie on a daily basis only a couple of years ago, when he’d needed her to escort him on the Tube escalators. Of course, at the time it was mostly him calling her, but sometimes she had to cancel an assignment when something else turned up, and then she knew exactly where the card with his number could be found. “I must have lost it when we moved.”

In the living room Daisy sat down next to her telephone and thought hard. She still had the same set as in the old flat, with an old-fashioned rotary dial; why change something so familiar, so easy to use by the force of habit, the habit of a lifetime? Suddenly she had an idea: why not try Bernard’s *here and now* method? Yes. Tonight I’m going to the cinema with Margery. So here I am, sitting next to the phone; I have the card in front of me on the coffee table; I put my fingers on it. First line: KING LOUIE. So I know I have the right card. Now I put my fingers on the second line, skip the area code, read the next three figures, and then my finger flies to the phone dial: six o’clock—turn all the way around; ten-thirty—turn; one

o'clock—pull down... 941!

Without thinking Daisy had already been dialling the first three digits; her index finger seemed to have kept the memory of the phone number, finding its way on the rotary dial of its own accord. She kept moving her forefinger until the number was complete.

A moment later the ringtone started buzzing in the receiver. "Let's see if my finger got it right." Then a clicking sound. "Hello?"

"Hello? Louie? Is that you?"

"Hey-hey, Baloo! What a pleasant surprise! Long time no see!"

Daisy giggled with relief. "King Louie!"

"Baloo-Bear! I tried to reach you a while ago, but your number didn't work."

"Well, that's because I moved to another place."

"Well, give me your new number right away."

Daisy dictated her new number and said, "Listen Louie, I need a favour."

"Of course, Big Bear, anything you say."

"Do you still run that soup kitchen for the disabled homeless?"

"Of course. If I stopped the charity, you'd be the first one to know, or at least your bank would be getting your money back straight away. You're still our main sponsor."

"Oh. Right. The bank, yes. I didn't think of that."

"I hope you're not thinking of spending those funds elsewhere?"

"Oh no! Yours is the best-run charity I've ever supported. I'm sure you still keep yourself very busy from dawn to dusk, focusing entirely on the task at hand..."

"You bet, Lady Posh! I can buy an awful lot of potatoes with that moolah. In fact we no longer discriminate between disabled or not; we have several

kitchens now. We have more sponsors too, so we've expanded!"

"Good. Now, what I wanted to ask you, is to keep an eye out for a young chap, twenty-one, rather fat... I'm talking about my son Johnny-John; Jonathan."

"You have a kid of twenty-one, precious? I had no idea you even *had* kids; this one's really an afterthought, huh?"

"Yes, and kids make you suffer hell, believe me. Now, my son got into trouble with the law and had to go underground overnight. I have a feeling he will be joining the homeless pretty soon, if he hasn't done so already. So if you spot him, let me know, all right? I'd appreciate any news about his welfare."

"Does Jonathan look anything like you, gorgeous?"

"Well, I wouldn't know, obviously, though it seems he takes a lot after his father. Not so long ago his schoolmates were still calling him 'potato-face'. On the other hand, he seems to have tiny teeth like me; probably dimples too when he smiles..."

"Right: a potato-face with an angel-smile... got it. I'll get back to you. We should get together again, one of these days, for old times' sake. Remember the laughs we had on the Tube?"

Beatrice lived alone in a Georgian mansion on a garden square similar to the one where Daisy lived. The house was her "ancestral home", as she called it; she was born there, like her father and her grandfather before her, and she had lived there with her parents all her life. She had never married, and now that her dear Pater and Mater were gone, she had inherited the place.

"I'm afraid my whole life has been a waiting game," she told her guests one afternoon, "I'm a bit like Prince

Charles, I have spent my life waiting in the aisle... and now that I have come into my inheritance, I have a feeling that it's all a bit too late!"

"Oh, come-come," Daisy cried, "it's not as if you have only started living now... You've had a very interesting life so far and you still have a long way to go... hopefully. And the same applies for Prince Charles, by the way."

"Yes, maybe you're right, darling. But let's not talk about me. We're here to welcome Bernard into your life, dear Daisy... Bernard, it's been a long time. Do you remember when we last met, in 1939 or 1940?"

"No, my dear Beatrice, I'm sorry to say that I don't recall ever meeting you."

"Funny, because Daisy has been telling us that you have a kind of total recall of the most fleeting details of your earliest childhood... Well, Margery, do *you* remember Bernard?"

"Absolutely! It was in the fall of 1939. I must have been thirteen, and Cedric had invited all his female relations to a social do at his school, even Maud was there. He looked magnificent in his military uniform, and so did you, Bernard. And I remember a nice boy named Peter Hodgkiss as well. He actually asked me for a dance several times. Of course, I also recall that you were not in a wheelchair then. And I can assure you that I, for one, was star-struck by all you boys on that day."

"Well, all the same, I'm afraid I do not recall seeing any of you ladies at our annual ball..."

"Typical," Margery said to Beatrice, "you dress up to the nines for an event like that, and some boys don't even register that you're there at all..."

"Not being noticed is the story of my life! Speaking of which, Daisy, Margery has sensational news to tell us, don't you, darling?"

“Yes. The confirmation has just arrived, so I guess I may tell everyone, now. I’m going to Columbia University as a tenured professor.”

“Marge! Congratulations!” Daisy cried. Bernard smiled: what a clever girls these were. He liked Daisy’s friends. He was thrilled at being presented as Daisy’s boyfriend. And even though his being wheelchair-bound had just been mentioned, these fine ladies were too well-bread to pay any heed to his appearance, which was always a relief.

“So you finally got the recognition you deserved?” Daisy asked.

“Yes. I’ve spent my life playing a waiting game of my own: the academic waiting game. I always kept my nose to the grindstone, so to speak, and one tenure after the other passed me by, because I was not willing to strive and to connive. Then one day—what do you know?—it turns out the good people at Columbia have noticed the quality of my work, and they’re offering me tenure without ifs or buts...”

“Wonderful! You’ll be dreadfully missed, of course, but we will come and visit you in New York sometime, Bernard and I.”

“I don’t know about that,” Bernard grumbled, “travelling in a wheelchair is not as easy as all that, you know.”

“Oh, hush, Bernard. In New York they also have special taxi’s you know.”

“Daisy has travelled all over the world,” Beatrice remarked.

“Yes, starting with our visit to Paris just after the war. Remember how we just took the stairs and climbed to the top of the Eiffel Tower?”

“How could I ever forget, darling, my legs still ache

when I think of it!"

"Did you enjoy the view?" Bernard asked, "That is to say, without meaning to be rude, of course, what use is the view to a blind person? What did you make of the experience?"

"I enjoyed just *being* there immensely, Bernard. Of course I asked Bee to describe what she was seeing, and she waxed lyrical about how all of Paris lay at our feet..."

"You don't mind when people wax lyrical about what *they* can see and you can't?"

"No, of course not, silly! You know, it's always a pleasure to share a view vicariously. I love it when people are enthusiastic about a spectacular vista, because they tend to describe it so well. I only wish that people showed the same abilities when they are looking at more daily, humdrum things..."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," Bernard said.

"Anyway, apart from what Bee was describing, I could *feel* that we were high up in a fresher atmosphere, I could *hear* that the sounds from the city down below were muted... It was just wonderful. I had the same experience on top of the Sugarloaf Mountain in Rio de Janeiro, where I went with Rick a couple of times in the 50s, or on top of the Gornergrat in Zermatt, where I was, with Bee again, a couple of years ago."

"You don't travel much yourself, do you, Bernard?" Margery remarked, as she noticed how astonished he was at Daisy's stories. "In fact, Daisy is our scout; she's seen more of the world than most people we know, and she reports back to us. I'll never forget how she even managed to tune in into the counterculture of the 60's at the time. Daisy was our Hippie out there on the London scene, it was amazing!"

"Oh, that reminds me, Margie. Remember how we

visited Berlin together in the 70's, and how we made that daytrip to Ost? Well, lately I've been hearing amazing stories on the news about what's happening there. Are you people aware of the fact that the communist system is unravelling, right now?"

"I must say I tend to skip those stories about the communists," Beatrice confessed, "their dismal dictatorships have been going on for as long as we've lived and it tends to get boring..."

"Exactly my opinion," Bernard said. "We've seen it all before, the communists will prevail yet again."

"No! You should all pay attention, I'm telling you that something amazing is happening right now..."

"All right," Margery chuckled, "I for one shall heed your warning. Even though I'll be very busy moving to the States, I'll try to pay attention to this thing. You know, Bernard, Daisy's not only our scout, she's also our Red Indian tracker, keeping her ear to the ground and telling us which way the bison are stampeding."

Sometime later, at New Scotland Yard, they were once again sitting across from one another on both sides of the desk, the investigator and the witness... or the suspect. Bernard said in his soft, crooning voice, "So, on the spur of the moment, you decide to *drink* the man's blood..."

"Yes... It sounds awful when you put it in those words, but at this moment in time I'm just following my animal instincts. I am *deaf* as well as blind, so I'm feeling *half dead* already, but I want to survive. I just want to live a few days more and see what happens..."

"All right. Now, before we go on, I must caution you again: I'm taking notes; I'm very proficient at shorthand. I will use all this to write up the final deposition. So now you have officially admitted that you *did* drink a human

being's blood with the aim of *feeding* yourself... I may put that on the record?"

"Yes, yes. But, God, Bernard, all this makes me feel *terribly* uncomfortable. So I was a *cannibal*! You're making me go through hell once more! Is it really necessary?"

"Well, Daisy, I've already said so a dozen times: we need to get to the *truth*. I put it to you that your whole life until now has been utterly *dominated* by these unresolved issues. Take the case of your own son, for instance. Maybe he would never have killed McCullough if your narrative had not been: 'I killed your father and got away with it.' If only you had been able to tell him instead: '*Of course* I went to the police as soon as I *could*, and the judge decided that I had acted under duress, so I was *not* prosecuted...'"

There was a long silence. Then finally Daisy said, "So it was my fault after all? I *did* fail as a mother!"

"Well, I admit that *is* what I seem to be implying, but it's not exactly what I mean... It's all idle speculation of course, and I'm being unfair. Jonathan is still personally and entirely responsible for his own actions, obviously."

"Is there any news of Jonathan?"

"No. I'm not supposed to discuss this with you, but the boy is very clever. The entire force is looking for him, but he's managed to stay out of their hands for quite some time now. Perhaps he's smarter than I credited him for, though this can't go on forever."

"I'm so sorry for what happened. I helped him to escape; I tipped him off. But what else could I do? I'm his mother!"

"That's all right, darling. Let the police do their job; I did mine; I identified the culprit. And what I want to do now, is to wrap up both the Martin and the Loretta McCullough cases, so that the Crown Prosecution Service

can take a look at them. Your deposition is central to these cases, and it is absolutely essential that you tell the truth.”

“Yes, but what has it got to do with the Martin McCullough case? Do you really need my deposition there?”

“Well, maybe it is not as essential, no. We have enough hard physical evidence. But still, we need to establish *how* you killed Jonathan’s father, so we can explain *why* the suspect killed the victim in this peculiar way. It explains his motives.”

Collins had collected enough proof for the case when he had gone to speak with Daisy’s dentist. The man told him that Jonathan had needed braces at the age of thirteen. He still had photographs he’d made when Jonathan’s braces came out a couple of years later, and he could therefore testify with absolute certainty that the marks found on the victim’s body were indeed those of the suspect’s teeth.

Even more crucially, when Collins had asked him if Jonathan had ever stolen anything from his practice, the dentist had volunteered the information that a bottle of chloroform had disappeared shortly after the young man’s last visit. He had in fact suspected the “shifty little bastard” of taking it, but did not report the incident to the police. “I see now that maybe I should have,” the man had added.

“So you see, my dear,” Bernard concluded, “even what you tell me about *chloroform* in your testimony helps us to explain why the suspect enacted his bizarre crime the way he did. But let’s get back to what happened in the Master’s dungeon. Our *here and now* narrative...”

The dungeon had been found. The pharmacist's list had worked its magic. Again, Collins had done the footwork, following the instructions of his new, temporary superior. First he'd had to compare long lists of names by hand. The police records from 1966 were not on the computer, of course. You had to go down to a vault in the basement levels of New Scotland Yard and ask the archivist to retrieve them. There were an awful lot of people who had been prosecuted for possession of illegal substances at the time. Most of them only fined for possession and released. Looking at those lists you could easily picture how it had been in the *swinging sixties*, all those people just buying drugs without a thought for the consequences, while the laws were still very strict...

After days and days of backbreaking work, finally some results. What broke your back, of course, was to bend over those files at your desk and scrutinize them for hours on end. Half a dozen names had turned up both in the police records and on the pharmacist's list. Excellent result, the boss had agreed. It turned out that three of these matches had lived in a flat at the time, so they were off for the moment, even though they could have had a second property somewhere else, of course. But at first only three search warrants were needed, and the actual "digging" had started.

As luck would have it, the very first address they investigated was the right one. The people who lived there, a couple with two preteen children, had no idea what the police could want from them and were shocked by the search warrant. Collins decided it was time to apply those famous "social skills" they had always banged on about during his probationary. Sitting with them with a cup of tea at hand, he explained that he was investigating a cold case from the sixties, that it had absolutely nothing to do

with them, that it was only the *property* that needed to be investigated.

“Well, we’re not the owners, anyway. We live here on a lease,” the man of the house said.

“There you are, then. For the moment we’ll only need to take a look at your garden and poke around in your basement. Sound the walls, maybe.”

Of course, taking a look at the garden involved a metal detector, and as soon as the technician switched it on and moved it over the grass of the small lawn at the back of the house, it started to hum relentlessly. “Bingo,” the man said, “reinforced concrete. Loads of it. Either that or it’s Captain Flint’s treasure.” The whole lawn turned out to be lying on top of the bunker, its perimeter matching the buzzing exactly. Time to go down and look around in the basement.

On the street side there were basement windows high up in the wall, on the garden side there were none. “Look, how clever,” the constable said to his colleague, “they must have raised the whole back garden by five feet or so, to cover the bunker and get rid of the earth they excavated. From the outside you don’t even notice the difference...”

Somewhere on the right hand side of the back wall stood the cupboard they were looking for. The basement was packed full with a jumble of rubbish, discarded toys and sports equipment, some old furniture; everything helter-skelter. Only the cupboard seemed perfectly straight, erect, appearing to stand guard. But perhaps you only saw it that way because you were looking for it. They had to clear a space in front of it in order to open the cupboard, and inside there was more rubbish, which they proceeded to take out and piled up on the floor. “I hope you’re gonna leave everything as you found it,” the man of

the house remarked. He had just sneaked into his cellar to have a look.

“No worries, sir. We’ll probably leave it even tidier than we found it.”

The back of the cupboard was open; you could see the concrete wall behind it and the shelves were screwed directly onto that. And there, on the right hand side, just under the middle shelf, was the hardly visible keyhole of a Yale lock. The door of the dungeon matched Daisy’s description to a T. And she had only heard that description from her fellow prisoner, Susanna. And that had been twenty years ago. “Unbelievable,” Collins reflected, “I was only a child at the time.”

To the man of the house he announced, “We’ve found what we were looking for, sir. I’m afraid we’ll have to disturb you some more.”

In fact, the family who lived in the house were sent packing; they were asked to spend the next weekend with family or friends, and the police swarmed all over the property. The basement was cleared of all the rubbish in it. This was now a crime scene.

When the lock was picked and the heavy door swivelled on its hinges, Bernard was there, in his wheelchair, insisting that he should be the first one to go in. But he still had to wait a little while longer. The head of the forensic investigators told him that first they were going to make sure that the air inside the bunker was breathable. The men shoved a flexible tube into the opening of the door and fitted the other end to an air pump standing just outside one of the basement windows; as soon as they switched on the electric motor, the air down in the basement was filled with a powerful odour of beef jerky or stale salami. A man took readings on a special meter, and at length he pronounced himself

satisfied. "You may now proceed, Sir," the head of the forensic team said.

As Collins and Bernard entered the bunker, shining a flashlight around them, they both were gripped by the pungent smell and by a sense of foreboding. "This feels like a science fiction film Sir," Collins muttered. "We're entering the lair of the aliens!"

His boss chuckled. "I was thinking more along the lines of Howard Carter entering the tomb of Tutankhamun. Now *that* was something that caused a sensation when I was a boy..."

They entered a narrow passage, and immediately on their left they came upon the first cell, the one with the metal grate, which was standing wide open. Two iron beds inside, one still had a mattress and sheets on, badly in disarray; the other one upended, mattress and sheets lying in a heap on the floor. There were chains with handcuffs anchored to the walls.

"Look," Bernard said, "The Elsan toilet! I'd never heard of such a thing before Daisy told me about them. For her they were always familiar, as they had them on the big bombers both her husbands flew."

They moved on to the second room, the one with the padded door, also standing wide open. What they saw inside gave them quite a shock, even though they knew what to expect. A chamber of horrors! The rack and the pillory that Daisy had described; the manacles hanging from the walls. The upper half of the sheet that covered the iron frame bed of the rack was pitch black: dry blood; twenty years old. Then, behind the bed, the light cone of the flashlight closed in on the Master's corpse. He lay on the floor like a discarded doll, a dislocated puppet, his limbs akimbo. The skeleton was covered with shreds of mummified skin stretched over the bones. The tightly

curled hair that had been growing around the Master's bald pate was still clinging to his skull. His jaws stood wide open, as if to holler out one last, endless scream of pain and anguish. Everything was covered in a fine layer of dust.

"There he is, at long last," Bernard said, "but we still have to confirm his identity."

"Yup. The lists tell us his name was Robert Parker."

"Yes, but what's in a name?"

"What indeed Sir?"

On the other side of the bed, closer to them, stood a simple wooden chair with its back to the wall, and a small pile of clothes neatly folded on its seat. Only the trousers had been disturbed and lay on the floor. Right under the chair there was a kind of oversized, single handcuff—two half-circle elements with a hinge—that sent a chill through the spines of the two men. "The clamp!" Collins gasped.

"All right," Bernard concluded, "we've seen all there is to see. We've had the privilege of the first glimpse. Let the forensics people get on with their work now. We're out of here, Collins."

Not only did the police document the crime scene in detail, but as soon as the dead body had been taken away to the forensic pathologist's lab, the search for Loretta's remains could start in earnest. The floors and the walls of the whole bunker were sounded, but no anomalies were found. As the man in charge said, when he reported back to Bernard, "It stands to reason, Sir: reinforced concrete is not ideal for digging a makeshift grave."

"Yes, come to think of it, that was never going to be the most obvious solution for the killer. What *would* be, is to bury the poor girl in the garden. I would suggest that Bobby Parker dug a hole somewhere along the outer walls

of the bunker.”

“You may be right, Sir, let’s start there.”

So the men prodded the perimeter of the small back lawn with thin metal rods, following the outline of the bunker, and sure enough they found a grave eventually; the remains of a young girl were unearthed. The family living in the house had to stay away a couple of days longer.

The forensic people completed a systematic survey of the garden on the off-chance that other corpses might be buried there, but nothing more was found.

In the meantime Collins went looking for the dental records of Robert Parker and Loretta McCullough, and Bernard had the owner of the house called in for interrogation. Another junior officer took notes during the interview.

Of course the owner was not happy at all to hear that two corpses had been found on his property. “I really had no idea!”

“Oh, I believe you, sir. I have no reason to assume that you are responsible in any way. But I have to ask: do you recall anything of a tenant named Robert Parker or Bobby Parker, who went missing in 1967?”

“1967 huh? That’s a long time ago... My father would have been in charge then... He’s in his seventies now and lives in Spain... However, I do remember that one day, when I was a teenager, he complained about a tenant who did a moonlight flit. Left without notice and without paying the rent. Daddy was furious about it. We kids had to give a hand to remove the man’s possessions as fast as we could, so that Dad could put the house back on the market as quickly as possible.”

“So your father wouldn’t have gone to the police to report that his tenant had disappeared?”

“Certainly not! Not his style at all. He just took his losses and carried on. My father’s only consolation was that he got to keep the deposit.”

“And how about the bunker? That went missing too!”

“I had no idea it was there. Daddy would have known about it, of course, but as he was in a hurry at the time, it may have slipped his mind, or he couldn’t be bothered about it...”

“Any idea if he was the one who had it built?”

“No idea, no. Maybe it already existed when he bought the place in the fifties...”

“Well, never mind. Thank you for your time. My assistant will now draw up your deposition...”

Bernard told Daisy, “The hierarchy is much impressed by the fact that I solved the Loretta McCullough case within a couple of weeks after solving the murder of her father.”

“I can imagine. They must be absolutely in awe of your powers, Bernard!”

“And once again I owe you a debt of gratitude, my dear. Together we’ve done a tremendous job. You intuited correctly that you were held in a fallout shelter from the fifties, and the Master was even a dentist, as you thought. His name was Robert Parker and he was born in March 1927. So he was forty years old when he died in the summer of 1967.”

“Really? So the man who lusted so strongly after me was five years my junior!”

“Apparently, yes. And your vision of a family living there, blissfully unaware of the dungeon’s existence, turned out to be uncannily exact. The only thing you got wrong, in the end, is that Loretta was not buried inside the dungeon, but in the garden.”

“Yes, somehow I was sure that she was lying very close to us...”

“Oh, but that she was! Right next to the wall, only on the outside.”

“How awful!”

“Yes. But now there is one thing left to be done. I have personally drawn up your deposition, based on my notes, and I’ve had it transcribed in Braille by a sworn-in transcriber. I want you to read it, and sign it, if there are no objections.”

He pushed a rather heavy ring binder across the desk, and Daisy, hearing it sliding towards her, drew it towards her and opened it in front of her. Inside were the familiar sheets of heavy paper, embossed with Braille script. It was a quite thick stack; a long document. She started reading with the fingertips of both hands, and Bernard looked on, fascinated. A long time went by in absolute silence, ruffled from time to time by the turning of the heavy pages, and he reflected that only with the great love of his life could he enjoy this so intensely: just being together in a room, in peaceful silence.

When she had finished reading, Daisy said softly, “Limpid prose, Bernard. I notice that you don’t mention the episode of cannibalism?”

“I didn’t think it would contribute anything to the case.”

“Well, thank you for that, anyway.”

“Is everything else to your satisfaction?”

“Yes. Well, there’s not much satisfaction to be had about all this, is there?”

“Maybe not. But is it the *truth*? Do you agree to put your signature under this document?”

“It is truthful enough, but what am I letting myself in for by signing it?”

“As I already told you, it will be submitted to the Crown Prosecution Service, the office of the public prosecutor, who has to make a decision about your role in this whole affair. In the worst case you would face criminal charges... There is no statute of limitations on murder, for one thing.”

“That sounds rather daunting... Even ominous.”

“I know. But in my view it is absolutely necessary. Only *they* can decide to leave you alone. No one else can.”

“And what if they decide to prosecute me?”

“As far as I can tell, the worst you could be accused of is obstructing a police investigation. I’m not sure they can still bring that up after all these years, and in my *own* report I have stressed that in 1967, after we interviewed you at St Mary’s Hospital, my colleague and I decided not to pursue the matter any further, on compassionate grounds... I also mentioned how *you* provided the all-important ‘pharmacist’s list’, of course.”

“All right. But what I’m really concerned about is this: if they decide that I am guilty of anything reprehensible, will you still love me?”

Daisy was frowning fiercely by now, fighting back her tears by the sound of it, and Bernard was deeply moved. “Of course I will still love you, Daisy, of course! No matter what happens!”

Daisy picked up the ballpoint lying in front of her and put her signature under her deposition.

There was a new recruit among the homeless sleeping in the bushes of the little park. The regulars were not glad nor welcoming; they never were when fresh competition showed up. But the new recruit was out of the ordinary and did arouse some curiosity. For one thing, he was rather youthful, looking even boyish and thriving, in a

plump kind of way, his smooth baby face sporting only the slightest wisp of a beard. Fresh competition indeed. He also had a posh accent.

Another thing that couldn't escape the notice of the regulars was that the chappy came begging for food as soon as he saw anyone putting anything in their mouth. Hungry little bastard! This was very bad form. When they retired into the bushes for the night, these panhandlers wanted to be left in peace to enjoy the fruits of their daily scrounging. They beat off the newcomer mercilessly, scolding and cursing.

Jonathan sighed and unfolded his blanket. At least this group didn't mock his accent. He resigned himself to go to sleep on an empty stomach. This was still far better than doing backbreaking work all day long and spending your earnings on a bed in a dosshouse. In fact, that last consideration had led to the first step. On a mellow late summer night Jonathan had seen some ghostly figures congregating in the bushes at the edge of a playground. He had jumped over the low fence and joined them. It had been his first night out in the open. Perfectly all right, albeit a bit chilly towards the early hours of the morning. He then invested the money he'd saved on the dosshouse to buy himself a blanket. It was also better to collect some banana boxes beforehand, at the back entrance of a greengrocer's, to use as a mattress. And so he had been perfectly happy, changing his location every night, resorting to covered shelters like porches and underpasses when it rained, taking the blanket with him to work in a kit bag every morning. Why had he never thought of that before?

Then once, for a couple of days, he hadn't been able to find any work and ran out of money. Again he just imitated the homeless he had recently joined and spent

the day panhandling at the entrance of a busy Tube station. He was successful at first and started wondering why he should work at all, when it was so easy and restful to be a beggar. But then it soon turned out that he was really too young and prosperous-looking to thrive as a panhandler. In fact, even the most generous souls would give him advice rather than money. "What is a fine young man like you doing on the streets? You have your whole life in front of you, don't throw it away!" Talking down to you like you were their dog.

Then he had pinned all his hopes on the charities that catered to the homeless. You only needed to line up with your colleagues for a while and they would give you a bowl of soup and a big chunk of bread. But here again, Jonathan had been singled out for a sermon about his "potential", his "prospects" and his "future". They even asked him to join them and help them distribute the food to the others! Next thing, they would be inquiring about his background and fishing for his identity... There was one chap in a wheelchair in particular, who appeared to be very nosy and much interested in his case. Jonathan never returned to the food line, and as he hardly collected enough to sustain himself, he now had to go through the rubbish bins as well. It beggars belief what perfectly good foodstuffs people throw away! Still, even so it was hard to find enough to eat. Jonathan suddenly realised that he'd always had a big appetite. On the other hand, he had no intention of ever taking on one of those backbreaking odd jobs again.

Jonathan was still dreaming of a criminal career. With the money left from his last job, he had gone to a DIY-store and bought himself a nice, fire red crowbar. He put it in his kit bag together with his blanket and carried it along at all times. Now that he no longer worked, he had

all the time in the world to go looking for promising locations that might be in need of a good burglar. Dreaming of brilliant capers and pulling his blanket snugly around his shoulders, Jonathan settled down on his cardboard mattress, the crowbar safely tucked away in the bag by his side.

But just as he was about to lose himself in sleep, a hand roughly pawed his shoulder and a familiar voice croaked, "Johnny-John! Look what I've got here!"

He groaned and turned around to face the man, who was holding up a chocolate bar, still half in its wrapper, with only one bite out of it. "Look what people throw away, it's a disgrace!"

It was old Paul, the king of beggars. He was one-eyed, his right eye socket spectacularly hollowed out and mangled, and one-armed, the stump of his left arm always prominently on display, at least when he was panhandling. The first lesion had been caused by a barroom brawl, the second by a work accident on a building site. In both cases, Paul liked to reminisce, he had obtained a load of money in compensation and had lived like a king for a while. Now that he'd lost his home, he still lived like a king among the beggars. He was a well-spoken man, and that was the reason why no one around here ever mocked Jonathan's style of speech either. But this apparently well-educated panhandler never had any trouble collecting money. With his scars, his grizzled looks and his ostentatiously tattered outfit, he was the most obvious and legitimate object of pity. His clothes were held together by safety pins and pieces of string. Money just streamed into his paper cup.

"Are you hungry, Johnny-John? Do you want it?"

Paul had had no trouble at all to worm this name out of the younger man, he could trick people into telling him

their secrets as easily as he tricked others into giving him their precious money. “Well, what do you say?”

“Yes... Yes! Paul. You know bloody well I’m always hungry.”

Jonathan had already disentangled one arm from his blanket and was reaching out for the treat like a child.

“A-a-ah! I want a kiss first!”

That was another thing about Paul: he was an old fairy, for ever lusting after the plump young man. Jonathan knew what he had to do: he offered his face to the old beggar and closed his eyes. Very slowly, tenderly, Paul leaned forwards and kissed his lips. Ugh! Then he handed over the chocolate bar with a magnanimous, toothless smile.

Jonathan grabbed the prize and sat up at once. You didn’t want to stay lying down with that old lecher hovering over you. As he sat there devouring the sweet, the old man fumbled in his trouser pocket, and just as the young man thought that he was about to pleasure himself—the old bastard!—his hand came up waving a ten Pound note. “Look what I have here, pretty boy! I had a very generous sponsor today; we talked for more than an hour; I turned on the old charm on her. That’s hard work, believe me.”

“Well, bully for you, Paul. Just be careful that no one steals it, waving your money like that...”

“Thanks for your concern, darling boy. Now I was just thinking; I’m very much in the mood. How about a romantic date, just you and me?”

The chocolate was already gone and Jonathan was smacking his lips despondently.

“What exactly do you have in mind?”

“You know that all-night place just off Piccadilly? We could have us some delicious fish and chips, or sausage

and chips if that's what you'd rather have, and a couple of beers of course."

Jonathan's mouth started watering again, the juices in his stomach seemed to be flowing already at the vision of the food that the old lecher had just conjured up in his mind. But he knew from experience that there would be a price to pay. There always was, and this offer of a complete meal, including drinks, was unprecedented. "So what's the catch, Paul?"

"No catch, pretty boy. Just don't call it that. As I said: I'm in a romantic mood. And you know what would make me completely happy tonight? After a nice, hearty meal, when plenty of beer will have relaxed you a bit, we go together to the Gents, and in the cubicle of your choice you let me have my way with you..."

"That's a tall order, Paul..."

"Oh come on, it's not *that* bad! You just let me do my thing; I'll be gentle about it."

And after a while, as Jonathan said nothing, the old beggar waved his ten Pound note again, and said, "Think of all the sausages you can savour tonight!"

"All right, all right! But on one condition: I don't want to do it in the loo. I know another place where we can be alone and have plenty of room and peace and quiet. Just let me pack my things..."

With his back turned to the old man, he stuffed his blanket into his kit bag, and fingered the fire red crowbar for
reassurance.

CHAPTER V

“...during the whole month of September, the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig—and in other Eastern German cities—have been growing steadily. At the beginning of the month, we were still speaking about 1,200 to 1,500 demonstrators, many of whom were beaten or arrested by the police and the army. By September 25, the protests attracted 8,000 demonstrators. Then, the fifth successive Monday demonstration on 2 October attracted 10,000 protesters, and the Party leader Erich Honecker issued a *shoot and kill* order to the military. The communist authorities prepared a huge police, militia, Stasi, and troop presence and there were rumours of a Tiananmen Square-style massacre being planned for the following Monday’s demonstration on 9 October.

“Now tell me, Harold, you were there in Leipzig and witnessed the outcome, the climax of this dramatic faceoff. First, what was your take on this confrontation beforehand?”

“Well, Alastair, I thought the authorities were making a huge mistake by *announcing* this repression. If they

thought people would stay at home because of it, they were wrong. They could only lose the moral high ground, either by beating down the protest or by backing down. Damned if you do and damned if you don't. And the opposition leaders, of course, were smart enough to see that. They didn't *dream* of calling off the whole thing..."

"So what happened on the ninth?"

"Well, in spite of the dramatic threats, a staggering 70,000 citizens turned up in Leipzig yesterday, and to make a long story short, the foot soldiers on the ground refused to open fire. Now this victory of the people facing down the communist guns is probably going to encourage even more citizens to take to the streets. So I'm really anxious to see what will happen next Monday..."

Daisy sighed, "Dramatic developments... We're witnessing the demise of communism, as I already told you."

"Still seems a bit doubtful to me, that," Bernard answered. "There have been similar upheavals before, you know."

"Yes, but this time it's the Soviets themselves who are stoking the unrest. That Gorbachev is incredible. For the first time the outcome seems wide open."

"I must admit that I don't understand that man's game..."

"*You* admit that, Bernard? You of all people?"

Bernard chuckled and stretched his arms and neck a little, while Daisy bounded over to his stereo tower and switched off the radio. Her favourite news magazine was over. Then she came back and sat down on her stool behind the wheelchair. With her arms around Bernard's shoulders and her hands enfolding his face, she started to palpate his features with her fingertips. "Now where were

we?”

“The hollow between my left eye and the root of my nose?”

“Yes, your nose! What should I do with it, Bernard? You’ve only got one and it’s badly damaged... Don’t you have a cousin or something, who has the nose you’d have had without the accident?”

“Hmm, clever thinking. I have a cousin named Claire. Nice lady. Not a beauty, but she definitely has the Thistlehurst nose. So you want her to sit for you too?”

“You’ve got it in one! At least if you like the idea of your portrait having Claire’s nose.”

“Oh yes. Even Claire will like the idea, I’m sure.”

Now Daisy let go of Bernard and turned to a modelling stand right next to his wheelchair. There was a life-size clay head set up on a steel armature. The clay had been allowed to go a bit leathery by letting the rags that kept it moist become progressively dryer and dryer. The modelling of Bernard’s portrait was in its last stages now, and that sitting with Cousin Claire would have to be soon. Daisy enfolded the face of the portrait with her hands and started working on it from behind, exactly in the same way she probed the sitter’s features. This was a brand new approach, never tried before, and only suitable for a blind artist, of course. Daisy thought that it worked like a charm. She was very enthusiastic.

“It’s a good thing that paraplegics need to take a bath so urgently after sex. That’s how I found a new way of doing sculpture, just when I was in the right mood to take it up again.”

“Yes, we paraplegics are sometimes full of shit.”

“Bernard, please!”

“Sorry, not funny, I know. Still, I’m very lucky to have you, because it doesn’t seem to put you off in the least...”

“Hush... It would take a lot more than that to put me off. You know, so many things called sex have nothing to do with lovemaking... and sometimes real lovemaking isn’t exactly what you’d call sex... But tell me what’s happening on the river?”

“Ah? How do you know that I’m looking at the river?”

“Easy. You were talking just now when you turned your head. So? What’s so interesting?”

“Well, just a barge. Full of garbage. Doing its rounds. I love to look at the barges, they appear so peaceful.”

“Maybe an illusion? Maybe steering a barge up and down the Thames is a hair-raising experience for all concerned?”

Bernard chuckled and turned around to look at Daisy behind him. How happy and relaxed she seemed.

They were sitting in front of the bay windows in his flat. Bernard had a very desirable place on the Chelsea Embankment, right across from Battersea Park. Looking out over and in between the plane trees, one had a nice view of the recently constructed Peace Pagoda—Bernard called it the “Peace Wedding Cake”—and the river.

The place was small but well appointed, situated on the top floor of an extraordinary Victorian mansion block, nowadays equipped with a lift—which was indispensable for this tenant. In fact, the blind and the wheelchair-bound have a lot in common in their needs for their homes’ arrangements. No carpeting, no rugs. Daisy and Bernard had both had the thresholds removed from the inner door-openings. It was a pity, though, that Daisy’s place could only be entered by a steep stair. That’s why she came here most of the time, and she loved it. The only thing that Daisy found a bit disturbing here was that many of the amenities were rather low-slung for her, especially in the kitchen and in the bathroom.

But the main attraction of course was the view. Bernard had gone out of his way to describe it, the first time he took Daisy to his flat. Now the nook by the bay windows was their favourite spot, and Daisy professed to enjoy the view just as much as Bernard did.

Presently, probing his face once more, Daisy said, "You know, Bernard, feeling all these bumps and craters, I'm getting very curious about this mysterious accident of yours. Do you mind telling me what happened?"

"All right... Well... It was a polo accident... I told you we did a lot of sports at school and that I was no good at it? Well, there was one exception. As a child I had always been an excellent rider, even as a toddler on my first pony. And at seventeen I was an excellent polo player. Now, we didn't have stables at school, but there were enough polo enthusiasts among the elder students to organize two sides and play a match from time to time. You know: on an appointed weekend the families would bring over the horses in their trailers and a match would be held on one of the lawns. As it happened, I became the captain of the Reds, and Cedric was the captain of the Blues. Competition was fierce, of course. The whole school was watching. And one day at the end of May 1940, the lifechanging mishap occurred. I had an accident. I fell off my horse during a run to the goal and I was trampled under the hooves of other players on their mounts. I was badly injured.

"I was rushed to a hospital in London, where my parents thought I could get the best care available in the country. This would normally have been the case, but the country was at war, and the casualties evacuated from Dunkirk were flooding all the hospitals, the good ones as well as the lesser ones. I landed in a ward with other kids

of my age, or rather, just six months older than me, but *they* had been shot at by German artillery and the Luftwaffe. When the surgeons and other staff looked at the chart hanging from my bedstead and they saw the mention 'polo accident', I could hear them scoff. What a despicable patient I was; they couldn't care less about my wellbeing.

"My wounds were numerous, extensive and severe, and required a great deal of reconstructive surgery. Apart from a spinal cord lesion, I had broken ribs, a broken jaw, cheekbone, nose and eyebrow. I had to be operated repeatedly; the rosters of the surgeons were packed full. I suffered hellish pain, but painkillers were rationed. The treatments went on and on, and in July, just as the casualties from Dunkirk were leaving, the first wounded of the Battle of Britain were brought in. Bombed-out RAF ground personnel; fighter pilots, real heroes all of them!

"And as I told you briefly before, throughout this whole ordeal there was a bizarre blind angel of mercy hovering by my bed, a creature of infinite kindness and beauty, wisdom and caring. A creation of my own mind, I was aware of that, but it was a tremendous consolation to know that she actually existed somewhere in the real world, outside of my feverish brain. The proof of her existence was the fact that she had a name: Daisy Hayes! And I thought of her all the time; and she helped me to pull through."

Daisy now chuckled a bit uncomfortably. "For me that last part sounds rather disturbing, Bernard!"

"I know. Don't pay any attention; it was long ago; another example of childish foolishness. But anyway, if I'd had my accident only a year before, or a couple of years later, my treatment would have been much better and the consequences not as visible, apart from the wheelchair of

course. And the strange thing is, I'd always thought that I'd have to fight a war when I turned eighteen, but instead I was almost the only one of my generation who didn't go into battle..."

"What do you mean by that, I'm not sure I understand."

"No, you wouldn't. Yet another instance of childish foolishness. You see, when I was a little boy, the Great War was still close in the past and in the minds, and people talked about it a lot, about England's finest snuffed out in the prime of their youth and all that. I listened, and drew the conclusion that when a boy turned eighteen, he had to go to war. And so I assumed that 'they' would stage a brand new war, just for me, when I would get to that age. I regretted bitterly that I wasn't a girl, I can assure you. Of course, the war for me actually materialized at the appointed time, but I was not in it, as it turned out."

"Oh Bernard, what an anxious child you were!"

"Yes. And I've been thinking this over lately. But it stands to reason, really. Our parents were of a generation that was not capable of talking to their children. No one ever explained these things to me. We had to be seen, not heard. The rest of the time we were ignored. With hindsight I now realise that my parents were incredibly immature. And when I was a child, I just wondered why I was there at all. My parents didn't seem to have any use for me; none whatsoever. And that was long before I ended up in a wheelchair. I distinctly remember feeling suicidal at nine or ten years of age. I thought that this longing for death was normal, part of being 'a big boy'."

"Oh, no, no! That was not normal at all. With me it was not like that... At least my father was different. My mother definitely found it hard to talk to a child, but never Daddy... You see, my father would have liked to have

many children, and at least one son, but instead he only got one daughter, and a blind one at that. But in the end it didn't make any difference to him. He was remarkably openminded for a man of his generation and he always treated me like he would have treated a son. He respected my intelligence and accepted me as I am. Always."

"Well, to be fair I must say that with my parents it was not all doom and gloom, either. They really loved to go to the seaside, for instance, and so did I. And when we were at home in London and it was raining, I would ask myself, 'Why don't we go to the beach? The sun always shines there!'"

"Oh, I love that! Thinking that the sun always shines at the beach!"

After going back and forth a few times more between her sculpture and Bernard's face, Daisy declared herself washed out, and decided to stop. "Shall we go for an early dinner in the park?"

"Excellent idea!"

Daisy covered the clay with damp rags and a sheet of plastic, then she and Bernard went to the bathroom, she to wash her hands, he his face. "But first call your cousin Claire. I want to study her nose. Does she live in London? It would be nice if she could come over later, after dinner."

"Should be feasible; her place is not that far from here."

And then they were walking towards the Albert Bridge along the Embankment, Daisy pushing the wheelchair and Bernard steering. He started to describe the autumn colours of the plane trees. As they crossed the bridge, Daisy sighed with satisfaction. "Do you think it will always be this enjoyable if we're together all the time?"

"Well, darling, we certainly get on like a house on fire.

But don't ask *me* if it will last or pall. *I* was never married; *you* had that privilege twice."

"Yes, but don't you see? For me this is also an entirely new experience. Ralph and Richard were both pilots, they were hardly ever at home, and I had my own job. Now we're both pensioners, if we wanted we could be together all day long, every day."

"Yes, we could. I'd like that. But before that can happen, we still have some unresolved issues to discuss."

"Oh, bother!"

"I'm sorry, Daisy, as much as I love you, I don't want a relationship based on lies... or omissions. You told me about Richard, and how he adamantly refused to recognise Jonathan. How you two got divorced. I suspect that this was an example of a relationship that faltered because there were secrets between you; things you didn't tell him and that he was very much shocked to find out in 1967..."

"Yes, yes, you're quite right, Bernard."

Those last words were said in a way to close the conversation, in a tone that suffered no contradiction. In the meantime they had entered Battersea Park and were walking towards the Boating Lake. As soon as they reached the Central Avenue, Daisy cried, "Shall we have a run, Bernard?"

"Oh no, not again! You didn't say beforehand."

"I don't need to; I'm wearing trainers and a sports bra all the time now. Come on, just five hundred yards, don't be a spoilsport!"

And off they went, by now a quite familiar sight to the regulars walking their dogs: an ugly man in a wheelchair bombing along at full clip, pumping with his arms, with a blind lady running at top speed behind him, pushing on the handles. Quite extraordinary.

Then they were sitting on the covered terrace of the Lakeside Café, waiting to order dinner. It was a circular brick building from the forties with a covered terrace under a concrete canopy. Bernard described how the arc of the terrace was lined with slender steel columns, designed to avoid obstructing the view over the lake. He reported how pretty the park looked in its autumn attire.

Daisy said, "Speaking of architecture, there's one place I've heard about recently that I'd like to visit very much."

"Tell me."

"There was a thing on the Beeb about the new Lloyd's Building. Very spectacular, apparently. If we could visit it together, you could describe what you see and help me get an idea of the place."

"I'm not sure the public can visit..."

"No, they can't, but you're not the public. Can't you make up a good reason to search the premises? I'd be your assistant, of course; just tell them I'm a clairvoyant!"

Bernard burst out laughing. "I'll see what I can do. I'd certainly like to indulge you on this. But you must understand that I'm no longer a police official. I'm a pensioner. Even when I told you I was a Detective Chief Superintendent, on that first day, remember? Well, that was the last rank I held, but it was given to someone else when I retired, of course. I was only sitting in that office as a consultant, and the rank no longer applies."

"In that case you'll have to use your wiles to get in, like everybody else."

They were silent for a while, just enjoying the moment. Then suddenly Bernard said, "Listen, Daisy, you're always doing all you can to wriggle out of the conversation about your relationship with Martin McCullough, so I'm going to try a new approach. I

understand that all this is very painful, so I have concluded that the best way to go about it is to offer you a theory of my own. Then you can tell me if I'm completely wrong or not."

"All right, Bernard, if it can't be avoided, let's have it. I'm all ears..."

"First I want to talk about Cedric Clifton's death in 1950."

"Yes, I know when he died. That was a long time ago."

"Well, you see, when I read the police report at the time, I didn't believe for one moment that it was a shooting accident..."

"No, me neither. Go on."

"Cedric's death was clearly made to *look* like suicide, but I didn't believe that either."

"No?"

"Certainly not. At the time I came to the conclusion that Cedric had been *executed*."

"Good God! How so?"

"My theory is that you, Daisy, hired Martin McCullough to kill him..."

"All right... Remarkable theory... Could you elaborate on that?"

"Certainly. You see, when you called me on V-E Day, I clearly perceived that you were hiding something from me. You asked me about a pharmacist's letter, but you didn't dare to ask what you *really* wanted to know... By the way, was that pharmacist named Dobbs?"

"Yes. But that was the *father*. The list from 1967 was compiled by his son."

A waiter now approached to take their orders, and they had to interrupt this very confidential exchange, that they had been holding almost under their breath so as not to be overheard by anyone sitting at the other tables

around them. Daisy was sometimes unaware of eavesdroppers, but Bernard was very vigilant, and would signal to keep their voices down when needed. They both ordered a hamburger with a Caesar's salad.

"Now, in 1949, when Ralph's father passed away and I realised that Cedric was the heir to the title, it finally dawned on me that he really had many motives indeed to murder Ralph. Apart from the fact that he was madly in love with you and that you were happily married to Ralph, there was now the matter of inheriting Ralph's title as well. So I had to think back to our conversation on the phone, and I started to wonder if *you* had thought all along that Cedric might have killed your husband. You had already done an admirable job by finding out that Ralph had been poisoned; maybe you also thought that you had enough evidence to inculcate Cedric? Of course I'd read Chief Inspector Cockett's report—with growing disbelief! I now realised how frustrating it must have been for you to be foiled by such a fool."

"Ah, at least you admit that I was wronged?"

"Oh yes, you were wronged, but then you took the law into your own hands. Never a good idea... Cockett's report also made me aware of the fact that Victor Hadley, Ralph's batman, was a bookmaker and something of a kingpin of the London underworld. Our own files on him described your friend Hadley as a 'positive and stabilizing influence' in the criminal circuit, so we always left him alone. But *he* must have been the man who recruited McCullough for you... So, to recap a long and hypothetical story, McCullough was able to blackmail you in 1967, because you had hired him to kill Cedric in 1950. Does this make any sense?"

"Hmm, let me think... You know we've decided that I would admit the truth when you had put your finger on

it? Well, you certainly did that just now. Up to a point. The only thing you've got wrong is rather essential: I didn't *hire* McCullough to kill Cedric, I executed him *myself*. McCullough only provided the weapons I needed: a miniature explosive lens, and dum dum bullets of the right calibre for a Luger."

"Good God, Daisy, now you're really making me curious. What happened?"

"Long story, Bernard. We'll need to have another one of our sessions of *here and now* narrative. For the moment, let's enjoy our meal."

The waiter was back and served them their food. Bernard thought it diplomatic to stay quiet for a while. He enjoyed his meal, Daisy's company—still—and the nice surroundings. He peered at the waterfall on the opposite shore of the beautifully landscaped boating lake. But then he couldn't help saying, "I believe we've made a good start, at last..."

"Oh yes. I must admit that you're pretty brilliant at this kind of thing. But there's one small detail in your story that strikes me as odd, even though you seem to know what you're talking about. Do you really think that Cedric *loved* me? I always assumed he only *thought* he loved me, because he wanted to have everything that *Ralph* had."

"Oh no. In his crazy way Cedric really loved you. Let's finish our plates first, then I'll tell you a story from school about that."

By the time they'd been served their coffee, Bernard started his tale.

"It must have been at the beginning of October, just like now, only in 1939.

"Here we are, at school, wiling away a lazy afternoon on the grounds, me just minding my own business with a

good book. It's that precious time of day, after lessons and study and before dinner, when everyone can do their own thing. Suddenly an ambulance with clanging bells comes speeding up the drive and stops by the main entrance. The paramedics rush into the building with a stretcher. We all flock around to have a look. Moments later they come out of the building, carrying Cedric. There's blood on his uniform and Cedric, always a pale chap, is now as white as a sheet. They put him in the back of the ambulance and drive off with clanging bells.

"You can imagine the excitement, the speculations. But no one has the slightest idea what happened. A couple of hours later Cedric is brought back by the ambulance, without the clanging bells this time, and he is carried directly to the infirmary. We are not allowed to visit him there, for he is under disciplinary detention. And so he remains in exile for a week. Then he's finally released from the infirmary. And at the first occasion, during the long morning break, we older students congregate around our classmate in a remote corner of the grounds and we demand to know what happened.

Cedric smiles without a word, starts undoing his belt, and with his legs held slightly apart, he lets his trousers drop to his knees. He turns in such a way that we can take a good look at his left thigh. And then we see and we understand. Cedric's thigh has been butchered, it is crisscrossed with cuts, a battlefield of dried blood, stiches and bright red mercurochrome. Cedric announces proudly that he's done it with his own razor. 'They had to put in dozens of stitches,' he says. And also, 'The scars will remain visible as long as I live.' And when you take an encompassing look at the mess on his thigh, squinting through half closed eyelids, you can see that he has carved huge letters there with his razor: *D-A-I-S-Y*.

“So there you are. In that crazy, unhinged way that was rather typical of him, he did love you deeply.”

As they were heading for the exit of the park and the Chelsea Bridge after their dinner, Daisy asked, “So you think that love, rather than the title, was the real motive Cedric had for murdering Ralph?”

“Well, there are *two* answers to that. First: yes, Cedric’s love—and lust—for you were certainly strong enough to be his main motive. But on the other hand, there is no evidence whatsoever that Cedric murdered Ralph in the first place. Almost every man dreams of killing a rival in love—once in a while—but thank God very few act on it...”

“We’ll go into that, Bernard. I think I have a pretty convincing case against Cedric.”

“We’ll see. But apart from that, am I right to assume that you never told your second husband about this *execution*?”

“No, I didn’t. And you’re right, he did find out in 1967, because that bastard McCullough *told* him.”

“Now the big question is: *why* didn’t you tell Richard? That is what I’d like to know.”

“Well, for one thing, obviously, I was deeply troubled by what I had done. I regretted killing Cedric almost immediately. Avenging Ralph didn’t bring me any relief or sense of peace. So I didn’t say a word to Richard because I feared he would recoil in horror, and I just couldn’t face that possibility... Of course he might have supported me, out of love... but what I feared even more than horror from him, was that he might have been fascinated, that he could have found this murderous streak in his lover quite exciting, even sexy. That would have been much worse than rejection.”

“You’re right; I can see your point. But you and I are

not going to make the same mistake. That's why we're going to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible."

Having crossed the Chelsea Bridge they walked back to Bernard's place along the Embankment. They didn't speak much.

As soon as they got home, Bernard phoned his cousin Claire again, and she came over at once. She was there within half an hour. Then, when Bernard opened the door, it struck Daisy how the two cousins greeted one another: she could hear a brief pecking of cheeks and a lot of diffidence.

"Long time, Bernard. How *are* you?"

"Claire. I'm fine; *you*?"

"Yes."

The very polished voice of a well-bread lady. Bernard made the introductions, and Daisy stepped forwards with an outstretched hand.

"Pleased to meet you. May I touch your nose?"

"Of course, that is what I came for. May I see your eyes?"

Daisy smiled, and took off her glasses. She never wore them when she was alone with Bernard, but had put them on when the doorbell rang. She put them away again and stepped forward, and while she started feeling around Cousin Claire's face, the said lady peered intently at the ghoulish slits of Daisy's atrophied eyes.

"How do you like my snout?"

"Fascinating! How do you like the Gorgon eyes?"

"Fascinating as well. Do you really want to give Bernard my nose?"

"Hmm, I'm having second thoughts. Your nose is so much *you*. Maybe a compromise is in order: soften the blow on Bernard's nose, so to speak, by making it tend a

little bit towards yours...”

“Sounds interesting. Let’s see that sculpture of yours, I’m very curious.”

They moved over to the modelling stand by the bay windows, and the artist started to unwrap the plastic sheet and the damp rags.

As soon as the clay head was revealed, Claire exclaimed, “Oh, my dear Daisy, you are incredibly talented, I can’t believe mine eyes! Wait a minute... yes, this is the spitting image of Bernard when he was young. Only... with almost fifty years of maturity added. Yes, that’s it; it’s like the Picture of Dorian Gray, but then the other way round. The model carries all the traces of human degradation, but the portrait preserves the expression of primeval innocence and beauty...”

“So you like it? You approve?”

“Oh, yes! Yes. And I would add that you must put in my nose after all. When we were both seventeen, people said we looked like brother and sister because we both had the Thistlehurst nose. So if you take my nose as it is now, you’ll have that same maturity included.”

Bernard now grumbled, “Excuse me, I’m sitting right here in my wheelchair. Could one of you girls please acknowledge my presence?”

“Hullo, Bernard,” Daisy chuckled, “it’s so nice to have you with us. You are the lodestar, the centrepiece of the proceedings, so please don’t be grumpy. Now Claire, please take a chair and sit right here, with your back turned to me.”

And she started to palpate the sitter’s nose from behind. At length she took a small lump of clay and proceeded to correct the portrait’s only deformity, also reaching from behind.

“Is that how you do it? Incredible! Is it normal for a

blind sculptor?"

"No, it's a brand new approach, even for me. I thought this up the first time I took a bath with Bernard."

"Oh, darling, I love what you are doing; I see so much *healing* going on here!"

Daisy smiled at the unexpected characterization, and Bernard grumbled, "What on earth are you talking about, Claire? Have you suddenly become a psychologist or an oriental sage?"

"Hush, Bernard, you can be so tetchy, sometimes."

"I must say, Bernard, your cousin's visit seems to bring out the worst in you. Isn't it nice of Claire to lend you her nose so readily?"

"You know," Claire said, "for us cousins our relationship with Bernard was always a difficult one—after the accident, that is. He didn't like our sympathy, which made him bristle, so he received embarrassed silence instead, which he hated even more. There's no pleasing some people!"

"Yes," Bernard countered, "but some people don't seem to understand that their sympathy is a mirror that projects my misery back at me."

Daisy said, "Well, right now you're doing just fine, Claire, because you're gently teasing. That's the way to go."

"Oh, Bernard, do you hear that? *I like* this girl!"

Finally the nose on the portrait was to the artist's satisfaction, Daisy thanked her sitter, kept prodding the whole clay head for a moment, and then asked, "Bernard? What do you think? Are you satisfied?"

Bernard approached the modelling stand, then moved back again, squinting. "It's a pity that the work is placed so high, I can't see it properly, but I believe Claire is right, it now really looks like my former self, with the maturity

added. For the moment I find it a slightly disturbing sight, though.”

“Well, you need to get used to it, darling.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will. As Claire said, you’re a very talented artist.”

“What are you going to do with it now?” Claire wanted to know, “let it dry and bake it?”

“Oh no, that wouldn’t work at all, if only because of the steel armature inside. No, I have to keep it slightly moist until a plaster cast can be made of it, and then that will go to the bronze foundry. For now I’ll leave it, so that you two can look at it while we have a well-deserved drink.”

They all settled in the central area of the living room with G&Ts at hand. The ladies seated themselves in the extremely low-slung armchairs, depositing their drinks beside them on the floor, while Bernard towered over them in his wheelchair, a slightly comical setup that reminded the ladies of the inferiority complexes of bygone dictators. The sighted, Claire and Bernard, kept looking at the clay sculpture, and commented on it, and complimented the artist in subtle and polished terms.

Bernard wondered aloud what the influence of her school could have been on Daisy’s artistic development. Daisy answered that at the ‘Anne Sullivan’ they had certainly strived to stimulate any potential talents their charges had, “but I didn’t take up sculpture as such before 1945. I’m a self-taught artist, really.”

At that point Cousin Claire remarked on the fact that she herself had been very lucky to go to Cheltenham Ladies’ College.

“You know, the higher up the social ladder a girl was in the thirties, the less opportunity she was given to receive a proper, formal education. But my mother, for

reasons that had nothing to do with my own welfare, insisted on packing me off to a school where I would be the only genuinely upper class student. Nevertheless, I benefitted immensely from that non-U education.”

“Well,” Daisy said, “I’m from a solid middle class background myself, but of course I was very fortunate to be able to attend a public school for blind girls.”

“So you say that you went to the ‘Anne Sullivan’? I’ve never heard of it, but I wouldn’t, of course. Where exactly did you say it was?”

“I have no idea, really. Daddy would drive me there on Monday mornings before he went to the bank, and he would pick me up on Saturdays at noon. Then I would spend the weekend at home, like most of the girls. During the Blitz we were not much affected by the bombings, so the school must have been outside London.”

“Does it still exist?”

“Oh no. It was closed down soon after I left, maybe from a lack of students. At any rate, nowadays the people who decide about these things believe it is wrong to put blind girls together in a protected little world of their own. Better send blind children to a regular school and teach them to adapt to the real world from an early age. That’s all very well, but I loved it at the ‘Anne Sullivan’, I learned a lot from the other blind girls, and afterwards I could fend for myself in the real world just fine.”

“This must be strange, a school that packed up. I myself so much enjoy the reunions of alumnae.”

“Yes, sometimes I wonder if I didn’t dream it all up. But even if I did, I learned almost all I know at that school...”

Claire now chuckled in a very aristocratic way. “Dear Daisy, you are priceless! This school you dreamed up did a good job indeed. You are certainly very articulate and

well-spoken.”

“But tell me something, Claire. Are the Thistlehursts really as upper class as all that? Bernard never mentioned it.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t! As a matter of fact, your wheelchair-bound boyfriend has just become a Peer of the realm, now that his father died, haven’t you my dear cousin? You could style yourself Sir Bernard now... Lord Cornandevron!”

Daisy was quite astonished. “Darling, is this true? I had no idea!”

“Well, didn’t I tell you that my father passed away recently?”

“That you did, but not the other thing.”

Cousin Claire asked, “Have I put my foot in it?”

“Well, Claire, I’ll be damned if I take up that title, as its previous owner wasn’t even speaking to me, his only child, for almost fifty years!”

“Good God,” Daisy exclaimed, “was that because you’re a paraplegic?”

“No. That he wouldn’t have minded at all, if only I had come to live at the Manor—with him lording it over me of course—and had done absolutely nothing useful for the rest of my life. No. What he couldn’t forgive, is that I took up a proper job, and was damn good at it, and worked hard for a living like everybody else...”

Later that evening, when Claire took leave of her cousin and his new girlfriend, she spontaneously hugged the other woman and said, “Daisy, you seem to be a nice girl, but I must warn you: there are many unresolved issues in Bernard’s life.”

CHAPTER VI

DCI Bramble had a disturbing feeling of *déjà-vu*. Another poky garage. Another crushed stiff. But the sergeant from the local police station told him that it was impossible to identify the victim. “I know this garage, but I have no idea who this one-armed man could be.”

“Well, assuming he was already one-armed *before* he was crushed to death, it shouldn’t be too hard to find out... Who raised the hydraulic lift?”

“I did, on the off-chance that we could reanimate him.”

“All right; sound procedure; no worries.”

Another difference with the case from a year back, in that other garage, was that this time there had been a break-in. The sergeant led the detective over to the door and showed him the traces of forced entry. “Seeing the smudges of paint, I would say a fire red crowbar, Sir.”

Then there was the fact that this corpse was completely naked, making the display of mangled meat all the more gaudy and distasteful to witness. The man’s filthy and tattered clothes were lying in a sorry little heap

not far from his remains.

“So, who found the body?” the detective wanted to know.

“I did Sir,” the sergeant replied. “Some neighbours of the garage called the station to report bloodcurdling screams in the middle of the night. The man on duty notified me immediately and I came at once to investigate.”

“Called straight out of your bed, huh?”

“That’s right Sir. I was here at half past three...”

“Excellent. Commendable job, Sergeant.”

“Thank you Sir.”

Presently another police car screeched to a standstill just outside the workshop door, and a strange pair of colleagues emerged from it: an old, disfigured man in a wheelchair, and a young bobby whom Bramble immediately recognised as none other than Constable Collins. Introductions were made, rather unnecessarily.

“I know who you are, Mr Thistlehurst. Everyone at the Met knows you: the Yard’s own secret weapon against crime!”

Bernard chuckled. “Pleased to meet you, Bramble. All I can say is that the case I have recently taken over from you had been well handled; very well handled indeed. I like to see paperwork well done...”

“Thank you Sir. And congratulations for solving the case within forty-eight hours! Very humbling. But I understand you’re retired, so I don’t suppose I need to address you by your rank?”

“No, of course not. I’m a civilian now. The current Commissioner believes in the unorthodox approach, but the fact that I’m the beneficiary of this policy doesn’t mean that I approve of it. I myself like to stick to the rules, you know...”

Constable Collins was already crouching by the corpse, and during this exchange of pleasantries between his superiors, he had been scrutinizing the scene.

“What do you say, Collins? Jonathan’s handiwork?”

“Absolutely Sir. There’s no doubt about it: we now have a serial murderer on our hands.”

“Couldn’t it be a copycat killer?” the detective asked. “There are differences with the previous case, you know.”

“Yes, but I don’t think so Sir. If you’ll recall, I was instrumental in keeping onlookers away from the scene of the first garage murder, a year ago, and then this state security thing kicked in, the case was kept under wraps, so I’d say that the public at large is not aware of any example to copy.”

“Right; true!”

“Of course, this time the victim is naked, still tied up with electric jump leads, and he’s not been bitten and bled to death, by the look of it. He seems to be homeless, judging by the pile of clothes and by his hands and feet: incredibly dirty. Even though he is one-eyed and one-armed, it will not be easy to find out his identity; it never is with homeless people...”

“Any ideas about motive?” Bernard asked.

“Hard to tell Sir. It seems to me that Jonathan himself must have joined the ranks of the homeless. Maybe the victim had some money that he wanted to steal; maybe there’s no other motive than crushing someone to death while he screams? The case was reported because of the screaming, so maybe Jonathan has acquired a taste for staging this kind of horror show.”

“Very good, Collins! You’re getting better at extracting the *narrative* out of a crime scene!”

Bramble discreetly shook his head and thought, “Old Thistlehurst’s famous literary method... though you won’t

hear anyone sniggering right now at Scotland Yard: the man has had spectacular results!”

As they were leaving the crime scene in the able hands of their colleagues from forensics, the detective pulled Collins by his sleeve and asked discreetly, “How’re you doing these days, my friend?”

“As you can see, I’m having a ball!”

“What happened? I’m really dying to know...”

“Well, I was detached to the Yard to assist the old man on the McCullough case. Another constable was sent over to my station for the duration. I owe this little caper to you, Sir, because at the time you reported our conversation so well, giving me my due. That’s why the boss wanted me on his team when he was called back from retirement.”

“I see. Well, I’m a bit jealous, now. Will you get any promotion out of it?”

“No Sir. The boss doesn’t believe in jumping the queue. But he says I have talent and that I should take the required courses to become a detective as soon as possible.”

Sometime later, at New Scotland Yard, an important meeting convened in one of the bigger conference rooms. The Commissioner of Police was there, and he pointedly introduced Bernard as Detective Chief Superintendent Thistlehurst. Bernard took the floor to explain what was going on and to give a brief description of the suspected serial killer Jonathan Hadley. “A real psychopath. We have reason to believe that he has joined the ranks of the homeless. Either that, or he will be looking for his next victim among the panhandlers. I’m also concerned about the safety of the killer’s mother; he might want to hurt her as well. At any rate it will be hard to nab him: he is very

clever. On the other hand, he is smart, but not wise. He is bound to make a mistake sooner or later.”

Then the chief of operations for the task force was introduced, and he started to spell out the plan of action. “We have to ramp up our search for this man. I am sending our best undercover agents and informers into the field to infiltrate the homeless scene and gather information. The identity of the last victim is still unknown, so we will be looking into that as well. Then I want extensive measures in place to capture our quarry. As soon as he has been spotted *anywhere* in London, we turn out in great numbers and close off a large perimeter around his last known location. I want everyone in this room to set up a direct communication link to the *ad hoc* coordination unit. From now on we are on a permanent alert concerning this case.”

Jonathan was longing for home. Surely they must have stopped looking for him by now? He was sitting on the ground, his back against a wall of the Earl’s Court Tube station. He looked awful: blackened eyes, puffed-up lips and a big, red, bruised nose. His clothes were incredibly dirty and in tatters. But the paper cup in front of him was full of coins; Jonathan was getting more money than ever before. He looked so awful that most people had to avert their eyes as they walked by—the invisibility of those no one wants to see!—and a fair number of the morning commuters who hurried past him gave him some coins to assuage their conscience for not even looking at him.

He had recently been beaten up by a whole posse of panhandlers. They had ganged up on him, dragged him through mud and dog shit, beaten and kicked his face to a pulp. They accused him of killing old Paul. They didn’t

know how he'd done it or where he'd left the body, but the case was clear. He had gone off with the old man, and that was the last they had seen of him. And the young one had come back alone, with a lot of money in his pockets, which of course they'd taken away from him after leaving him unconscious in a back alley. These homeless people wouldn't dream of going to the police to report a murder, but after they'd beaten up the culprit—guilty as charged—justice had been served as far as they were concerned. Jonathan reckoned that he was lucky to be alive.

Now he was sitting there with his mashed-up face and his filthy clothes, looking like a helpless old man, and he longed for home. Mummy's place was only a couple of blocks away, but the last time he had checked, it had still been under police surveillance. He had been there on a recce several times, before he had been beaten up. They were still looking for him then. The setup was obvious: sometimes there was a bobby patrolling the square, sometimes a bloke in an unmarked car, and once he'd even spied a pair of plainclothes men hiding in the bushes, hoping to nab him if he tried to enter his house. At the time he'd still had his key, but no longer: his attackers had taken that away as well.

Anyway, Jonathan had managed to spy on the police detail without being detected. "I'm too clever for them," he reflected, "I'm on to their little games." One night he'd even managed to slip unseen to the back of the house by way of the mews. There was a hedge he knew, with a gap in it where he could peer into the garden of the upstairs neighbours. Then, climbing the ladder of a fire escape on the back wall of a neighbouring house, he'd been able to peer inside the light well at the back of the basement flat. The lights were on. His mother was in bed with a man. "Wait a minute," he'd almost cried out, "that is *my* room,

my bed...” Well, they’d made a double bed for themselves by putting Mummy’s bed along his own. The bastards! So much for his dream of going home and telling Mummy to shut up and let him hide there. Now he had to find out who the lover was. He wouldn’t mind killing that man. He wouldn’t mind making him scream...

In fact he wouldn’t mind killing Mummy as well, but there Jonathan was not so sure. She wouldn’t be able to see the beam of the hydraulic lift coming down... She would sense it, though, but that was not the same. Besides, Mummy would never, ever scream. “Just think back to that time when she was hit by a bicycle speeding down the pavement... I was only a kid, but I remember well. It was just ‘Ouch!’ and ‘Drat!’ though she did end up in hospital with a pair of broken ribs... No, crushing Mummy just wouldn’t work.”

Lately he had been keeping an eye on her movements. She went out almost every day, seemed to stay away a couple of nights every week, then came home for a few days. She probably stayed at her lover’s place, and he came to stay with her, but *he* didn’t take the tube, so Jonathan hadn’t spotted him again since that night, from the mews. He wouldn’t mind taking a closer look at the lover... to begin with.

Suddenly his attention was drawn by the tapping of his mother’s cane. She was coming! Her forceful style of echolocation was unmistakable. The pitiable panhandler almost held his breath. He’d always had the feeling that his mother could see right through him. She could smell him; she’d recognize his voice from a mile away; she could read his very soul like an open book. But here she was now, passing along a few yards from where he was sitting, unaware of his existence. He no longer smelled the same, of course, and he kept his mouth shut... held his breath.

A moment later she was down the escalator. Jonathan got up slowly, like an old man, his limbs still aching. He followed his mother at a safe distance, down to the platforms. He'd bought a Tube ticket for the day; he was bent on finding out what was going on. Mummy took the District line to Upminster; Jonathan boarded the wagon next to hers. Then she changed lines at South Kensington, took the Eastbound Circle line. Her son followed suit. Finally she got off at Aldgate Station, her son still on her heels, at a safe distance. And then there was this guy in a wheelchair waiting for her. Jonathan froze and hid inside the Tube station gate; the guy could easily spot him if he wasn't careful. Mummy bent over and kissed the cripple on his cheek... Then she took the handles and they crossed the street, Mummy pushing the bloke in the wheelchair. They went into a café on the other side. Good. Jonathan sat down by the entrance of the Tube station with his paper cup in front of him, perfectly invisible again, and kept an eye on the door of the café across the street. He would be able to spot those two as soon as they got out again.

Stirring his coffee, Bernard said, "I have some momentous news for you, darling. Good news and bad news."

"All right. Start with the good news then; that's always what I want to hear first."

"Well, we've had an answer from the Crown Prosecution Service. They are *not* pressing any charges against you for the death of Robert Parker in 1967."

"Good. That's a relief. And what's the bad news?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you this, but it concerns you directly: Jonathan has killed a man again..."

Daisy took a sip of her coffee, apparently

undisturbed. "Thank you for telling me, Bernard, but I'm already aware of that. Very distressing news, of course..."

"I beg your pardon? How do you know? It happened only a couple of days ago, and it hasn't been in the papers yet."

"I can't *read* the papers, Bernard. But the rumour on the street is that a panhandler named 'old Paul' has disappeared, and his friends believe that Jonathan has killed him. So they beat him up very badly, but he survived. Now he's making good money as a beggar because he looks awful."

"The rumour on the street? I'd be interested to know who exactly your informer is. The police would like to talk to him—or her—very much."

"Well, I can't tell you that, Bernard. It's just a friend of mine who happens to know a lot of people on the street, so I asked him to report to me about Jonathan, if he could get any news... But please tell me what happened. Did the police find the body?"

"Yes, crushed under a hydraulic lift, in a small neighbourhood garage... But now *you* please tell me: who is this 'old Paul'? The Metropolitan Police still have no idea of the victim's identity."

"Well, *that* I can disclose. The story on the street is that old Paul used to be a bookmaker. So I phoned Victor Hadley, who told me that this must be Paul McKenzie, indeed an old colleague of his, who lost an eye in a barroom brawl, and an arm in an accident on a building site. Does it ring a bell?"

"That's him exactly. And Jonathan has been badly beaten up, you say? Don't tell me you've been in touch with him yourself."

"No, Bernard. I don't know where he is. But on the other hand, *he* knows exactly where *I* am... He can find

me anytime he wants to.”

“True. Could he hurt you? Do you feel threatened?”

“No. Don’t worry. I can handle my own son.”

“Good. But I still think that you should let me talk to your informer. Jonathan has now become a serial killer: time is of the essence!”

Daisy’s answer sounded a little tetchy. “Look, my friend only gave me some news of my son on the understanding that I wouldn’t disclose his identity to the police. Otherwise he would not be giving me *any* information *at all*. So be grateful for what I’m telling you and use the intelligence well, Bernard.”

“All right, all right! Now if you’ll excuse me for a moment, I have to make an important phone call...”

Bernard propelled himself to the back of the café, whipped out a badge, and was immediately escorted into a backroom by a waiter.

Daisy shook her head slightly and thought, “On the phone with New Scotland Yard, no doubt. Once a cop, always a cop.”

She was feeling uneasy, and she knew exactly why. When Bernard had called her to set the time and place where they would meet up, he’d also told her that her second deposition had been delivered by the transcriber. Her “confession” about Cedric’s death. She would have to read it and sign it at his place that very same day. It was like having an appointment at the dentist’s for a root-canal filling or something. It put a damper on your whole day; made you feel like you’d rather have stayed in bed that morning.

Jonathan saw his mother and the wheelchair-bound man leave the café. They started walking down the street, away from the Tube station, so after a short while the

“old” panhandler got up, stiffly, and followed them at a distance. He felt unwelcome and conspicuous in the arid ravines of bank facades of the City. Fortunately the man in the wheelchair couldn’t turn around and see him; Jonathan was walking behind them, and his mother was pushing the chair, screening him off all the time. The pair of them seemed to be lost in conversation anyway. All the better.

After five hundred yards they came to a tall building that looked a bit like a factory, with stacks of steel drums and bundles of pipes on the outside. Very unlike the smooth glass towers rising high in the vicinity. The two moved towards what looked like the main entrance of the building, under a canopy of steel girders and glass, and there they waited. Jonathan had to duck into a recess of the intricate façade; his mother had let go of the wheelchair and the man was now facing her, still talking animatedly. Again, he could have been spotted quite easily, an old panhandler, completely out of place among these glistening buildings.

This creep and Mummy seemed to be getting on like a house on fire. Could it be that this was the man he’d seen in bed with her? “Naah,” Jonathan reflected, “cripples like him can’t even get it up... or can they?”

Presently another man approached them; stocky but handsome, elegantly turned out in a charcoal pinstriped suit and a bowler hat. “That’s more like it,” Jonathan thought. “That must be the man I saw in bed with Mummy, only without the suit... and without the bowler hat!” Introductions were made all around and the three of them made their way to a side-entrance where there were no stairs, and they disappeared inside the building together. Jonathan settled down with his paper cup in front of him. Why not panhandle for a while among the

rich bankers of the City?

As he turned his wheelchair around, Bernard said, "Here we are, my love. We're right in front of the Lloyd's building. Our escort will be there any moment."

"Well? Tell me what you see! I'm counting on a running commentary from you."

"Well, it's impressive; a lot of steel and glass..."

"And? Come on! Is it tall?"

"Oh yes; let me see; I'd say about twenty stories... But the thing is, you have all these steel pipes running everywhere, and stacks of shiny drums and boxes. And you have glass elevators going up and down on the *outside* of the building. I can see the tiny people *inside* the elevators from this spot! You know, this building really looks like a huge factory, or like something that could be launched straight to the moon!"

Daisy bounced slightly on the balls of her feet. "There you are, Bernard... I'd heard the report on the Beeb, but now I can really see it through your eyes!"

Then their escort approached, heralded by the leather-soled footfalls of some dressy footwear, and an unmistakable whiff of expensive cologne. Daisy smiled, even before she heard him speak. "Bernard! It has been ages..." Another soft, crooning voice, cultured and cajoling; the idea of this man was clear in her mind after only a few words.

"Daisy, this is Peter Hodgkiss, an old friend of mine. He danced with your friend Margery in 1939, remember? Nowadays he's an insurance broker who does a lot of business here."

"Well, currently I'm retired, but I still have quite some contracts running at Lloyd's, and I have my old contacts, of course. So I was able to get us some tickets to visit the

place. Delighted to meet you, my dear.”

“How do you do,” Daisy said. “So let’s go! What are we waiting for?”

They stepped over to the entrance. The porter knew Peter Hodgkiss by name, and after a brief exchange of pleasantries they were allowed through. As soon as they reached the ground floor—“the Underwriting Room”, Hodgkiss said—Daisy and Bernard both had the same reaction: “Wow!”

“What do *you* make of it?” Bernard asked.

“It’s like entering a cathedral, only more so. I can sense infinite space all around me... I can hear a strange humming; I can hear that it’s huge!”

“You’ve got that right,” Hodgkiss crooned. “This atrium is two hundred feet in height, crowned by a majestic barrel-vaulted glass canopy that always reminds me of Crystal Palace!”

“And there are endless cascades of escalators, dear Daisy, I’ve never seen so many escalators in my life!”

“And what do we do when we encounter escalators, dear Bernard?”

“We take them! Tally-ho!”

“Keep your voices down, I beg you,” Hodgkiss hissed. “Are you sure of this, Bernard?”

But already his wheelchair-bound childhood friend was going up the first flight of mechanical steps, holding on to the rubber handrails with both hands. He had to follow suit.

“You know what the extraordinary thing is, Daisy? These escalators are entirely clad in glass, so that if you look up, you can clearly see the steps, folded away flat, going down on the underside of the escalator above you.”

“Fantastic! But tell me please, Peter: how come this place sounds so cathedral-like?”

“Well, the interior is one huge room, really. All the floors are open galleries looking onto the atrium, and all the offices are so-called ‘open floor’, so from this escalator you can virtually see each and every employee sitting at his or her desk, most of them behind computers of course.”

“Ah, so you can hear the hum of every conversation.”

“It reminds me of a science-fiction set,” Bernard said, “something from Star Wars. Yes, Hodgkiss, I went to see the whole Star Wars trilogy at the time... Anyway, this huge open space is dominated by a few massive concrete columns that seem to be supporting the sky itself... eight humongous pillars. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that these spectacular columns must be made of cardboard!”

Daisy giggled. “I see!”

“Did you attend the Star Wars films, Daisy? Or don’t you go to the cinema?”

“Oh I go very often, but of Star Wars I only saw the first instalment; a bit disappointing for me. If you miss the visual effects, the story itself turns out to be rather thin... But where are we going, anyway?”

“I don’t know; I’m just following Bernard; *he* seems to know where we’re going.”

“We’re going up! Up to the top of these wonderful escalators, then we’re going all the way down again.”

“Would it be tactless of me to mention that everybody is looking at us? And that means hundreds of people!”

“Never mind, Petey. Daisy, wouldn’t your militant cripple friends be proud of me?”

“Yes, darling. I can’t wait to report this scene to them.”

“Militant cripples? Does such a thing really exist?”

“Bernard calls them that. I prefer ‘disabled community’. A very friendly little network, really.”

“Anyway, there is a specific place where we’re taking you, Daisy. That is, Petey: did you manage to arrange for our special surprise?”

“I did, Berny. No worries.”

“Special surprise? Oh golly, I love the sound of that!”

At length, when they were back on the ground floor, they moved over to a quiet corner partly hidden under a staircase, and there a scale model of the building, about the size of a big cardboard box, was on display in a glass case. Hodgkiss went off looking for the person who had the keys, and Bernard said, “Do you have your surgical gloves, Daisy?”

“Yes, always. They’re here in my bag. Is there a sculpture to admire?”

“Wait and see, darling, but put on the gloves.”

“You know, Bernard, I’m really bowled over that you remembered what I said about this building and that you went to all that trouble to get us in.”

“No trouble at all. Hodgkiss is a dear old friend...”

Then the friend was back with an attendant in tow, who was jangling a bunch of keys. Introductions were made and the typical clang of a glass display-case being unlocked was heard. “I see you’re already wearing surgical gloves, Madam; that’s good; it tells me you’re used to this kind of thing. So I probably don’t need to tell you that this model could be fragile and that you should be careful. I have orders to stay right next to you, I’m afraid...”

The man quietly moved Daisy around by her shoulders, positioned her in front of the open display case, took her wrists, and carefully brought her hands into contact with the scale model. Daisy started probing ever so lightly with her fingertips.

“A model of the building! How wonderful.” And she giggled with delight. Her hands danced and glided,

pranced and lingered; she muttered “wonderful... wonderful... a modern cathedral... and a factory... oh, this is the part like Crystal Palace... these are the space stations ready for launch...” The three men around her looked at one another and smiled: the childlike delight of the blind lady! After a while Daisy sighed, “I don’t want to keep you waiting any longer, sir.”

“Oh please, Madam, take your time.”

“But that’s the thing: I could go on like this for hours.”

“I’m delighted that you like it. I’ve never had a blind visitor before...”

Finally Daisy let go of the architect’s model, and they took leave of the friendly attendant.

“And now,” Hodgkiss announced, “we have lunch at the staff restaurant, Follow me.”

He had booked a table for them, and as they settled down, waiting for the entrees they had ordered, Daisy asked, “Peter, do I understand correctly that you two went to school together?”

“Yes, indeed. Bernard and I were in the same class at the Duke of Cumberland’s Royal Military School at Folkestone. We were both eleven years old when we met for the first time, and we were both terrified.”

“Peter and I became friends because we were always together at the back of every queue.”

“At school we had to wait in line all the time. In the morning to have a wash; at noon to get our lunch, after recess to enter classes... All day long one queue after another.”

“The others were older and stronger than us—and assertive—and they thought nothing of jumping the queue. They were bullies and they knew they could get away with it...”

“Having to stand in line, knowing that *we* could never win that game, gave us a terrible sense of injustice. And as we were queuing all the time, we were reminded every day that life is unfair... And that is what sealed our friendship.”

“I wager you never felt that way at your school, did you, Daisy?”

“No, Bernard, not in the least. Our teachers avoided making us wait in line at all costs. We blind girls were just too touchy-feely, giggly, and generally unruly. When they made us wait in line we always ended up on the floor in a big heap of writhing bodies... Well, we did that often enough, regardless of whether there was a queue or not... Anyway, the poor doctor who came for our medical check-up once a year always forgot this, so the corridor in front of his consultation room became the scene of an annual orgy!”

“This I would have liked to witness,” Bernard chuckled.

“Well, I’m exaggerating, of course... only slightly. But Peter, tell me, you seem to be very fond of childhood memories, just like Bernard?”

“Oh, I’m not as good at it as he is. Bernard has this kind of total recall, sometimes, it just amazes one. But I’m not ashamed nor embarrassed by such recollections, no.”

“Ah, speaking of which, Petey, here’s one for you. Do you remember that in those *first days*, when we were standing there at the back of each queue, trembling for all those rowdy schoolmates, we actually *held hands*?”

“Yes... you’re right... I remember that too. In fact, that first time, *you* took *my* hand, because you were slightly bigger than me, and a lot braver. There and then I worshipped you for that.”

“Oh Petey, it is kind of you to say so. But our hand-

holding days did not last.”

“Indeed not. Some snotty schoolmate noticed it, and they all started mocking us mercilessly.”

“That’s right. So we stopped holding hands at once and we never mentioned it again...”

“Well, if one of us had ever mentioned it, Bernard, our friendship would have shattered like glass.”

“True. That is probably why we never talked about it until today.”

“Wait a minute,” Daisy said, “is this really the *first* time you two men talk this over since the *thirties*? Well, I must say, I didn’t get out of bed for nothing this morning after all, and you two are truly English gentlemen!”

All three of them chuckled; the food and wine were served, and they enjoyed each other’s company immensely. Then, when they had finished eating, Hodgkiss asked if there were any other plans; any wishes?

“Yes,” Bernard announced, “I want to take a ride in those glass elevators. Maybe not so interesting for you, Daisy, but I’ll tell you what it’s like.”

“Of course. That’s the idea.”

“So I suggest we just go up... and down, and after that we can call it a day, Petey.”

So they adjourned the prandial get-together and left the restaurant. On their way to the elevators they passed an area of the Underwriting Room where a small group of men were having an animated discussion in hushed voices. Daisy caught a name that made her stop at once. She turned to one side, facing the group, and asked softly, “Excuse me, did I hear someone say that Erich Honecker has *resigned*?”

“Yes, Madam, it was just on the news. He’s being replaced by Egon Krenz, apparently.”

“Never heard of that one. Another apparatchik, no

doubt? He won't last!"

"Do you think so, Madam? What makes you say that?"

"Well, I heard on the Beeb that there'd been 120,000 demonstrators in Leipzig. Now, two days later, they send their General Secretary packing. Next Monday there will be even more people taking to the streets, so how long can the new man last? The communists are no longer in control of the situation. In the end they will have to organize free elections like in Poland, and that will be the end of them."

"Really? So you envision a complete change of regime?"

"Of course! Can't you see? It's inevitable!"

"And how about Russia?" another man asked. "Do you think the Soviet system will collapse as well?"

"Oh, I don't know about that, but I would say that poor Gorbachev's days in power are numbered as well. In the end, the Russians will hold free elections too, and Gorbachev deserves to be re-elected of course, but that won't happen. It'll be just like the general elections in '45: Churchill had led us through the war, but as soon as it was over we all voted for Labour. I remember *I* did..."

"Remarkable analysis, Madam," a third man said, "we are certainly going to make good use of your insights."

"Oh please, don't tell me that you see me as some kind of sibylline oracle with an exclusive insight into the future. I just listen to the Beeb like everyone else. Don't believe all those myths one hears about blind people!"

"We understand that, Madam. Maybe we're only too eager to hear someone, *anyone*, voice our worst fears for us..."

"...and doing it in what appears to be the voice of down-to-earth *reason*."

“All right. But why are you gentlemen so afraid of the collapse of communist power in the first place? Surely that could only be a good thing?”

“Yes, but our concern is for the business interests that are insured with us. We are trying to assess the risks of the present situation. If those businesses that depend on the communist regimes fail, we’ll have to pay out huge amounts on their insurance policies...”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that if I were you.”

“Really?” someone gasped eagerly, “why’s that?”

“It won’t make any difference for businesses if the communist system fails. If you’re selling shoes, people still need shoes. If you’re selling diamond rings, the new bigwigs will also want to buy diamond rings for their ladies... No, as long as all this doesn’t lead to *war*, you understand, *that’s* what you should keep an eye on...”

As they walked on towards the elevators, the little group of underwriters followed Daisy with eyes that were moist with adoration. Bernard said to Hodgkiss, “This is my girlfriend, Petey! Isn’t she wonderful?”

“I must say, you two are the most romantic couple I have ever met.”

Jonathan was panhandling at the entrance of Aldgate Tube station, drinking yet another beer, hiding the can between his raised knees after each sip. He’d first spent an hour or two near that crazy building they’d entered, then he’d started worrying that they might leave by another entrance, so he’d hurried back here, assuming Mummy at least would be taking the Tube again. Lunchtime had gone by and he’d become hungry, so he’d bought a couple of sandwiches, and those beers. Then he’d waited, wondering if his mother would ever show up.

“We’ll see,” he muttered to himself, “we’ll see.” He’d

been waiting for hours now, but at least it gave him something to do. He had plenty of time to spare. Time was the only thing he had plenty of. Suddenly Jonathan perked up. "Here they come, the two of them, at last!"

She was still with that ugly mug in the wheelchair, not with the pinstripe and bowler hat. Unbelievable! But wait a minute, this time the ugly man was in front, looking straight in his direction, Mummy walking behind. On the other hand, they were still far off, and he himself was in the shadow of the entrance, but they *were* coming his way. Nowhere to hide. No good darting off, either, that would only draw the chap's attention. So Jonathan quietly pulled his blanket from under him, wrapped it around his shoulders and lay down right where he was, with his face to the wall, resting his head on his folded elbow. He lay still, pretending to sleep.

At length they entered the Tube station. Jonathan could hear his mother's voice, utterly familiar. They walked by, just ten feet from him, and he heard Mummy saying, "It's not a problem at all; we've done it before..." The man muttered something in response to that, and then they were gone. Their voices receded as they proceeded further into the station.

Now that they had their backs turned to him, Jonathan looked up and saw them standing at the top of the stairs talking to some passers-by. After a while two young chaps lifted the wheelchair-bound man up and carried him down the stairs to the platform. What a freak show! Jonathan hated this; he had a mind to walk over to those two right now and tell them what he thought of them making such an exhibition of themselves. His whole life he had been ashamed of going out with his blind mother; he'd hated it when she cajoled or hectored complete strangers into helping her, when he himself had

refused to do it—rightly so. Besides, why didn't she use a guide dog like other blind people!

The two of them got on the westbound Circle Line, and Jonathan boarded the next wagon as inconspicuously as he could. They got off at Sloane Square Station, and this time they were able to take an escalator up, the man clinging to the rubber handrails like an orang-utan. He looked exactly like King Louie in *Jungle Book*! Jonathan had been to that flick with his mother when he was ten years old: he'd loved it... Mummy too; they'd both loved it. Now it turned out that he himself was a lot like Mowgli: a defenceless orphan, and Shere Kahn was baying for his blood. He'd have to flee the jungle as soon as possible. "I'm fed up with life on the streets, anyway."

After leaving the Tube station, the two of them walked for about a mile in the direction of the Thames, ending up on the Embankment, and entering a very posh building there. Jonathan wondered: could it be that Quasimodo actually lived here? Was he Mummy's new lover after all? She'd had lovers before. She'd never made a secret of it. And he'd hated them all with a passion. He now had the disturbing feeling that this could well be the place she had been visiting so often lately. "All right, we'll see." It was still early in the afternoon. Jonathan settled down for another long wait.

Daisy and Bernard were sitting side by side at his desk in the office corner of his living room. Once again Daisy was reading a bulky Braille document held together by a heavy ring binder, slowly going through a thick stack of embossed paper. Then at length, when she'd come to the last page, Bernard asked eagerly, "What do you think? Is it right?"

"Well, I have a question. I told you in detail what my

case against Cedric was; what evidence I had; why there was not the least bit of doubt in my mind that he was the one who had poisoned Ralph... Now, I find nothing of all that in what is supposed to be my deposition.”

“Yes, I know. I left that out. It is not relevant, unfortunately. A hypothetical judge handling this case would tell your lawyer at once that *the victim is not on trial.*”

“Wonderful! So the only thing I could say in my own defence is not valid?”

“I’m afraid not. What if Cedric was *not* your husband’s murderer? You tell me that no member of the bomber crew could have done it, but what if the crew as a whole had conspired to kill Ralph? They could have fed you false information during your flight with them... And with a little bit of imagination I could even devise a scenario where William or even Beatrice would have ‘done it’.”

“Well, that would be completely implausible, is all I can say.”

“Agreed. It is only for the sake of argument. In fact, there is something else that *does* exonerate you up to a point. As you could read, I went out of my way to report in detail how grievously the police and the justice system did let you down after you had reported that your husband had been poisoned. Now *that* is a valid argument. Especially the cunning tricks this Chief Inspector Cockett devised to make the case go away... That should constitute mitigating circumstances, if I know anything about it... Accidental poisoning indeed!”

“Yes, but in this deposition I’m practically confessing to a premeditated murder. You’ve already told me that there’s no statute of limitations on that. So if I sign this, I’m liable to get a *life* sentence or something...”

“Well, would you be willing to pay that price if society

demanded it?"

"Society, huh? Putting me away *forty years* after the fact? That's a tall order, Bernard. Have you any idea how bleak prison must be for a blind person? But I'm still hoping that all this is purely hypothetical. I mean, nobody knows that you've been taking down this deposition. You're not handling this case for the Yard..."

"And the transcriber is bound to secrecy, that's right."

"Well? Now that you have gotten to the bottom of the thing; now that I've told you the truth, can't we call it quits?"

"Well, no. I'm not making any promises. I could or I could not submit your deposition to the prosecutor. But I want you to trust my judgment and put your signature under that document *before* I tell you what I intend to do."

"I see. Playing games, are you, Bernard? I hope you do realise that in a relationship you can never be completely right and your partner completely wrong. Even if your partner happens to be a murderer!"

"Of course! I'm only asking for your trust. And I want you to admit your crime in such a way that it *could* have consequences for you."

"Oh! you can be so... smug, sometimes!"

"No! Don't you remember what we said at the beginning of our relationship? We take one another seriously and we make sense? Well, that's exactly what I'm trying to do right now."

"I don't know about that. I have the disturbing feeling that you're taking me very seriously, but not really making sense. Or are you making sense but not taking me seriously? Either way, something is wrong."

"The only thing I know is that a relationship should be based on openness, not on dissembling."

"Well, in the face of such high standards, maybe I'll

have to decide that it's time to end our relationship... I don't know; I'll have to think about it."

"You're prevaricating, my dear."

"I know, I know... But this whole thing is driving me crazy, don't you understand? Just give me some time to make up my mind... How about an early dinner in the park first?"

"All right. But *then* you'll have to decide... I mean today, or tomorrow morning; at any rate before you go back to your place."

So they adjourned to their favourite café by the Boating Lake in Battersea Park. On their way over they were rather silent, Daisy walking briskly behind Bernard's chair. At their favourite table, waiting for their orders, they had to make an effort at conversation. Daisy thanked Bernard once more for the wonderful time they'd had at the Lloyd's building. "Peter Hodgkiss is a lovely man. You have nice friends..."

"Only nice people are willing to put up with me, Daisy. Not to mention that most people only see an ugly cripple in a wheelchair."

"I know, darling, for us blind people perception is also a problem."

Then Daisy told Bernard about her latest artistic project. "I want to model images in bas-relief; images of things that I can't normally visualise, like landscapes, with clouds in the sky and so on. That way I'll be able to see a landscape with my fingers... The only problem with this project is that the result will seem rather humdrum to normal people, perhaps even excruciatingly boring, but that can't be helped..." And so she chattered on, carefully avoiding the subject that was at the forefront of both their minds.

Bernard reflected wistfully on the difference with the

first time Daisy had signed a deposition. At the time she had been vulnerable and tearful. Today she was being evasive, and beneath the façade of light-hearted conversation, she was being hostile and defiant. Bernard had not counted on that at all.

Finally, as they were leaving the café, a strange and frightening man accosted them just outside. Hirsute, with a puffed-up face and tattered clothes; clearly a homeless individual. He stopped Daisy with a hand on her arm and said, “Lady, can you spare some change for a man who is worse off than you?”

Daisy immediately let go of Bernard’s chair and opened her arms. “Johnny-John! Is that you? Oh! give Mummy a hug!”

Bernard turned himself around and looked on in astonishment as she enclosed this pitiable individual in her arms and cuddled him for a long time. She appeared to be clinging on to him for dear life. Even Jonathan seemed slightly taken aback by his mother’s passionate embrace. Then she let go of him and started probing his face with her fingertips.

“Good Lord, the beard! The long hair! The smell! I understand you’ve joined the homeless... Well, I think you look a lot like a young Santa Claus now, just like your father did in the swinging sixties...”

“Hah! my father... but who’s the freak in the wheelchair, anyway?”

“Well, darling, say hello to Bernard, he’s my new boyfriend... Bernard, this is my son Jonathan.”

“Boyfriend? You must be joking? But he’s hideous! He’s a monster! I thought I’d seen every freak show in town by now, but this really takes the biscuit, my own mother and her new lover!”

“Now-now, you’re being very rude, darling. And don’t

forget that I'm blind, so it doesn't make any difference to me how my boyfriend *looks*... As long as he's got good manners... and *you* could learn something from him in that department, young man. Now what do you want from me: I take it you didn't come here just to give your old mother a hug?"

"I need money. How much have you got?"

"You mean right now in my purse? Something like fifty Pounds..."

"Is that all? Okay, give it to me!"

"Very well, but you're leaving me penniless, you know. What do you want it for, if I may ask?"

"I'm going to make a run for it now that things have calmed down a bit. I'm gonna leave the country. I believe they're no longer looking for me at the moment..."

"Oh, but they're *always* looking for you. Your name's on their *lists*, you know."

"Never mind, the way I'm looking right now, they won't recognize me anyway. That's why I have to make my move pretty fast... I'll outsmart them yet!"

"Well, be careful all the same... Bye-bye, darling."

As soon as Daisy had handed over the money, her son departed without a word. Then Bernard propelled his wheelchair back to the café entrance and muttered, "Can you hold the door open for me, Daisy? I have to get to a phone urgently. I hope you don't mind."

"No, not at all, darling. You just do what you have to."

CHAPTER VII

Bernard was waiting in his wheelchair by the area railing in front of Daisy's place. He looked anxiously down into the light well, where Collins was knocking at the front door, ringing the chimes, and peering inside through the chinks between the curtains of the windows. "Any sign of life, Collins?"

"No Sir. I'm afraid she's still not at home."

Bernard had been coming repeatedly to Daisy's door since Thursday, since the morning after Jonathan had been arrested. Normally, when he visited Daisy at her place, he would order a wheelchair transport from his usual taxi company, the driver would go down and ring at her door, then Daisy and the driver would carry him down the short flight of stairs. No problem. But for several days now, she had not been at home. He'd had to take the taxi back to his own place without seeing her. He had no idea where she could be. So this time, on Monday, he had asked Collins to go there with him in the police van. "I tell you, she seems to have disappeared from the face of the earth."

“Let’s ask the chaps from the surveillance detail... Someone must still have been there after the arrest...”

“Yes, let us check with them at the Yard...”

They boarded their van and drove off. Now that Jonathan had been arrested, only hours after his presence in Battersea Park had been reported, Bernard and Collins were back in full swing, handling the aftermath of the case at headquarters.

It was easy enough to find out who had been monitoring Daisy’s place on Wednesday night. And even though the surveillance people had been on the lookout for Jonathan, it turned out that they had seen the blind lady get home late that night, and then leave again a short while later. She had not been carrying any luggage, just a shoulder bag, nothing unusual, and she had not been seen since then. But of course, they had been called off before the end of their shift, due to the arrest of the suspect.

“All right, Collins. Another line of inquiry: look for any signs of life after Wednesday night, Thursday morning. Phone calls; credit card or bank transactions... You know what I mean.”

“Yes. I’ll have a look Sir.”

A couple of hours later, the constable was able to report that on Thursday ‘Mrs Hayes’ had withdrawn a sizeable amount of money from her bank account. “In fact, the maximum allowed. And apart from that, no signs of life.”

“Very well. It is now clear that she has fled ... She would even have had the time and the opportunity to go abroad... Can you please check that for me?”

“Well, I seem to be spending an awful lot of time on the lady’s case, if I may say so. What’s going on Sir?”

“Check the airports and the ferries first. I’ll explain

later.”

After a few hours more, the constable came back to his superior’s office and reported a negative result. “We may assume that Mrs Hayes hasn’t left the country, Sir. And I did a sweep of the hotels on the computer. Even though Daisy Hayes is a pretty common name, there were no matches between Thursday and last night...”

“Very well, Collins, thank you. Now close the door and I’ll tell you what is going on... But first you must promise me complete secrecy. Not a word to anyone.”

“Ah... Do I understand correctly that I should not disclose this to the police or the authorities?”

“Precisely! Do I have your word?”

“Word of honour Sir. Now I’m really getting curious.”

“The thing is, Collins: I’ve made a huge mistake with Daisy, and I’m desperate...”

“Yes? Go on!”

“To make a long story short: I have discovered *how* Martin McCullough was able to blackmail Daisy into helping him in 1967. It is because in the fifties, Daisy had hired his services to kill a man.”

“Good God! Premeditated murder! I would never have suspected the lady of such a thing. I guess she had some pretty good reasons to do this?”

“That she had, yes. Even to the extent that I had no intention of turning her in.”

“Good Lord... erm, I mean: now I understand the oath of secrecy.”

“Yes. Quite so. However, I did draw up a deposition after Daisy admitted the whole thing. Just as in the Loretta McCullough case. She put her signature under the document the very same evening her son was arrested.”

“All right... But you had no intention of handing her confession over to the prosecutor’s office.”

“That’s right, but Daisy wasn’t aware of that...”

“Oh. So let me guess: the huge mistake you just mentioned is that you let her believe that she might be prosecuted...”

“You’ve got it in one, Collins. Pretty good. Daisy signed; she said, ‘my fate is now in your hands;’ and she walked out the door without further ado. I haven’t seen her since then.”

“So she has disappeared because she’s afraid of getting arrested. Quite understandable.”

“I had asked her to trust me: I had told her I would do the right thing. The message she is conveying by disappearing like this is clearly: ‘I do *not* trust you.’”

“Or alternatively: ‘I refuse to put my fate in someone else’s hands.’”

“Yes, well, that’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

“If you say so Sir. Now, what are we going to do about this? Asking the police to go looking for her is out of the question, I suppose.”

“That’s right. I’d go looking for her myself if I had any idea where to start, but I draw a blank; I have no idea where she could have gone. Do you have any suggestions, Collins? I can’t think straight anymore!”

“Well, I can only think of the normal procedure with missing people: talk to relatives and friends, ask them if they have any idea where she could be...”

“Yes, I’ve already done all that. Daisy has no relatives left, and I’ve phoned a couple of her friends, but without results... I need you to think of something new, Collins, I need some fresh ideas. And this time it isn’t just a token challenge to build up your abilities. This is the real thing!”

Collins nodded. The two of them sat silently for a while, the constable first looking at his boss, still in the habit of expecting a lead from him, then staring dreamily

at a spot on a blank wall to the left of his boss's head. At length he screwed up his eyes, a sure sign, Bernard knew, that he was concentrating intensely. Then he softly muttered, "Jonathan is the key..."

After another silence, Bernard said, "What was that?"

"You will find Daisy, erm, Mrs Hayes, through Jonathan. I was just thinking about what you told me last week. How tenderly his mother hugged him when he showed up in the park; and before that, how she somehow kept herself informed on how he was doing. She clearly loves him very much; she must be aware of the fact that he was arrested; the operation on Wednesday night was quite spectacular and was all over the news... So, she will be burning to get in touch with him. Now, as soon as Jonathan is transferred to a proper prison, we must make sure to communicate to the press which prison that will be..."

"You want Daisy to know his whereabouts; I get that, but if she's hiding from me—from the police —, she's hardly likely to turn up at the prison gate to visit her darling Johnny-John..."

"No, she's not that stupid. But she'll try to get in touch anyway. She might send him a letter..."

"But she can give her son any answering address she wants, even a PO box: we'll still not know her whereabouts..."

"That's right Sir, but what you need to do is leave a message for *her* with *Jonathan*."

"What! How could I rely on that psychopath!"

"Just tell him the truth Sir. I'm sure even Jonathan will understand that it's in his own interest, and in his mother's, to relay your message to her."

"Hmm, all right. Not bad. The only drawback is that this approach is going to take some time..."

“That it will Sir. All the more since you can’t talk to Jonathan as long as he’s in police custody; you need to talk to him off the record, and that is not possible right now. You’ll have to be patient. But on the plus side: Daisy needs some time to cool down, to think things over... and so do you, I guess.”

Bernard and Collins started working double quick on the case against Jonathan Hadley, and pushed their colleagues to make haste and wrap things up. The interviews were rounded off and the deposition was drawn up. (When Jonathan was asked his profession, he had answered “Housepainter.”) Beautiful photographs—with fiftyfold magnification—were made of the dental casts taken from the first victim, and other pictures at the exact same scale were taken of the suspect’s teeth; there was a perfect match, plainly visible for all to see in a court of justice. Likewise a fire red crowbar had been found in possession of the suspect at the moment of his arrest. Magnifications were made of the damage on the paint coating, corresponding quite well to other pictures that had been made of red paint traces that the crowbar had left on the doorpost of the garage. Soon Jonathan could be brought over to the jail where he would await his trial, while the police completed its reports and the prosecution prepared its case.

And then, at last, it was possible for Bernard to pay a visit to Jonathan in a private capacity.

“What do you mean: ‘private capacity’? I’m not stupid you know. You’re the man who’s in charge of the investigation...”

“That’s right, and I’m not going to say a word about the case; I only want to talk about your mother.”

“Well, what about her? I know you’re her lover; I saw

you in bed with her!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Johnny-John. Daisy and I go back a long way, and we enjoy each other’s company a great deal, that’s all.”

“I don’t know about that. This is a complete nightmare. The freak in the wheelchair shows up at every turn... I don’t know what kind of sick little game has been going on here, but I have a mind to tell my counsel that my Mum has been sleeping with the police bigwig in charge of my case. How about that, eh?”

“It won’t help you any, Johnny-boy. Just go ahead and accuse me, but you have no evidence that I’m your mother’s lover: it will be your word against mine. You’re not getting away with *two* murders on account of this... And if your mother should be asked to testify, I can assure you that she’ll deny that we ever slept together.”

“And why isn’t Mummy coming to visit me, anyway? When will she come? Does she know that you’ve locked me up?”

“Well, that’s the thing I want to discuss with you. Daisy does not know, but she’ll find out soon enough. The problem is: she has disappeared... I don’t know where she is.”

“What do you mean: ‘disappeared’? She finally got fed up with you?”

“She has run away; gone underground; hiding for the police. She’s afraid of getting arrested for premeditated murder.”

“Good God! You mean: because she murdered my father?”

“Yes, something like that...”

“But she had every right to kill the man!”

“I know. I agree. But there’s been a misunderstanding, because of something I said. Now

here's the thing, Jonathan: I'm absolutely certain your mother is going to get in touch with you very soon. Secretly, you understand, not in person. She'll send a letter or she'll send someone over with a message from her. And when she does that, you must let her know that the police is *not* looking for her. You must tell her that Bernard told you so. Tell her that I'm *not* handing her deposition over to the prosecutor... Have you got that?"

"Yes, yes, I get it. But why should I help *you*?"

"Well, it's very simple really, Jonathan. If you want to see your mother again—I mean in person—you'll have to let her know that the police is not looking for her... you *do* want to see her, don't you?"

"I dunno about *that!*"

"Don't be stupid, Johnny-John. No one else is ever going to come and visit you. As soon as she gets in touch, you make sure to let her know what I just said. *Then* she'll come and visit you. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

When Bernard got back to New Scotland Yard, there was a message on his desk to the effect that the Commissioner of Police wanted to speak to him. He took the elevator to the top floor at once.

"Ah! come in, Bernard, come in. There's just one little concern I'd like you to assuage for me..."

"What on earth could that be, Sir?"

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing. I've been going through the paperwork, and something strikes me as suspicious... At least, the counsel for the defence could use it to cast doubt on our work... For instance, on that fateful eighteenth of October—Wednesday last week—you call us in the morning and tell us the identity of the second victim. Then the very same evening, the suspect shows up in Battersea Park—where you are having dinner—and you

become instrumental in his arrest a few hours later. Add to this your incredibly swift results on solving the first murder, and then a cold case from 1967, and you have Jonathan's counsel claiming in court that they can smell a rat... Now, my dear Bernard, I hope and trust that you have a plausible explanation for all this. We all know how good you are at your job, but you can't be *that* good."

"Well, the explanation is quite simple, Sir. Daisy Hayes is the key to everything. As soon as I saw the name Martin McCullough, I thought of her, because she was involved in the *Loretta* McCullough case that I handled in 1967. And as luck would have it, her own son turned out to be the culprit. Then the same lady gave me some leads that allowed us to find her abductor's lair, and the bodies. Now, in the meantime it transpired that Daisy and I had a lot in common. We were both born in 1922; a cousin of her first husband was a classmate of mine at Folkestone, and so on. So more or less spontaneously we kept in touch. On the eighteenth of October I spent the whole day with her, and she happened to know the name of this one-eyed, one-armed man through a common acquaintance. As for Jonathan turning up on the evening of the same day: it was always clear in my mind that our young suspect would want to get in touch with his Mummy in the end. So it turned out that it was a good idea to stay close to Daisy Hayes..."

"All right... As an explanation it should be good enough. Maybe you can put this in writing for the record? Only, please, Bernard, play it down as much as you can; don't use the word 'relationship'. Yours has been a highly unorthodox approach, to say the least."

"I know Sir. Funny that *you* should say so. Normally you're the one who believes in the unorthodox approach, and *I* am the stickler for rules!"

The Commissioner chuckled, then he said, "In any case, your girlfriend might be called upon to testify about all of this. I hope she's reliable?"

"Oh yes, that she is. The only problem is that she has disappeared... I have no idea where she has gone. You see, she got very angry at me after her son was arrested."

"Well, just make sure she has reappeared by the time the trial starts, Bernard... That will be all."

On the evening of that same day, Beatrice paid Bernard a visit at his flat on the Embankment. She wanted to know what had happened to Daisy.

"It is all good and well, phoning *me* to ask if I have any idea where dear Daisy might have gone, but the fact is, I cannot get in touch with her *either*."

"I'm working on it, my dear, believe me, I'm doing all I can. Could you describe the last time you saw her? What was her mood?"

"Well, *she* came to *my* place the other day, and she was quite happy and full of plans. I had to take her around the house and describe each painting, each print on the walls of the ancestral home. She was interested in landscapes particularly. I had to describe those in detail, analyse the composition, explain the perspective used in each one of them. I happen to know a lot about art in general, so we had quite an intense session... Daisy was very excited by her latest art project."

"Yes, I know, she told me about her plans to model landscapes in bas-relief."

"So then what happened, Bernard? I'm assuming that you know more about this than *I* do, so let's hear it!"

"I don't know what to say..."

"Have you two had a lover's tiff?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it *that*. I'm afraid there's been a

terrible misunderstanding, as a result of which Daisy is under the misapprehension that she might get arrested by the police at any moment..."

"Good God! What on earth are you talking about? When you get all pompous like that I have to start fearing the worst... Has this got anything to do with what happened in 1967?"

"Yes... yes, but I cannot disclose any particulars."

"So let me guess: did she actually *kill* the man who abducted her? The rapist? Is that it?"

"My dear Beatrice, I am not at liberty to tell. You have known Daisy since you were both teenagers; it would feel wrong of me to tell you anything that she has chosen not to disclose in all those years."

"Well, if this has got anything to do with Jonathan's father, let me tell you that as far as I'm concerned she had every right to kill the man!"

"Yes, quite so. Even the Crown Prosecution Service has come to that conclusion. But that's not what all this is about."

"Oh, Bernard! You can be so infuriating, sometimes..."

"Well, I'm awfully sorry, Beatrice. I'm sure Daisy will tell you more herself by the time she emerges from hiding. I'm sure that by then she'll want to strive for more openness in her relationship with her friends..."

"Oh really? Listen to yourself! I don't know what has gotten into you."

"I wonder about that as well, you know. I regret all this as much as you do."

As soon as Beatrice had left, Bernard reflected, "What indeed is happening to me? Each time I talk to someone I keep... dissembling! First with Collins, then with Jonathan; the Commissioner, and now with Beatrice..."

Dissembling all the time... I hate that! From the moment Daisy disappeared I have become..." Bernard thumped three times with his fist on the armrest of his wheelchair, "a dissembling... little... prat!"

"...the last demonstration in Leipzig was already very impressive, with 300,000 people showing up to demonstrate peacefully against the regime. But today, on this fourth of November, we are witnessing something even more impressive, as at least *half a million* people have swamped Alexanderplatz, in the heart of the GDR capital of East Berlin. For the first time a demonstration has been authorized by the powers that be, a reflection perhaps of the new outlook of the regime since Honecker has stepped down, but even so the new leader is not popular. Some of the banners carried by the demonstrators proclaim 'We are no fans of Egon Krenz,' which in German rhymes nicely, and 'Socialism yes, Egon no'..."

Daisy was sitting in a pitch dark cellar, listening to a transistor radio. Down in her concrete cell, she could only receive broadcasts by way of a wire going through the pipe of an air vent and connected to an antenna hidden among the rubbish at street level. The cellar was situated deep under a flat building on a council estate. Normally it was not in use, but a camping bed, a table and a chair had been installed for her sake, and there was an electric water boiler that allowed her to make some tea. While she sat at her table and worked on her new art project, Daisy listened intently to the latest news from Berlin.

"...In fact the banners carried along by the throngs of protesters give a fair idea of the demands of the citizens of East Germany. They say 'We are the people'. They ask for

more freedom as they repeatedly refer to articles 27 and 28 of the constitution, which in theory guarantee freedom of speech and freedom of assembly: 'Civil rights not only on paper', 'Facts instead of phrases'. They demand 'Democracy for the GDR' and 'Real elections instead of fake figures'. Some banners are rather humorous: 'Privileges for all' or 'Change without ifs or buts'. Right now a long succession of personalities are giving speeches. Some of them are government officials, who get jeered at and booed by the crowds; most are opposition leaders and leading artists, and are warmly applauded. More remarkably still, the whole thing is being broadcast live on the GDR state television..."

Daisy was working on a landscape. With tiny balls of beeswax that she softened between her fingers she was drawing an image in raised lines and volumes on a smooth, glazed kitchen tile. The beeswax smelled delicious. The landscape was fascinating. A street lined with terraced houses; a few cars parked by the curb of the pavement; a lamppost and a road sign. A very ordinary scene for normal people, but for her it was an absolutely thrilling experience to be modelling such a street view. "Why have I never thought of this before?" Above the roofs she had even added a few very exciting details: a puff of smoke coming out of a chimney; some clouds floating in the sky; a couple of pigeons in flapping flight... all these outlandish details plainly visible under her fingers. Incredible!

As she kept working on her "piece", Daisy's mind kept racing along several parallel tracks. It is fascinating how the human mind can follow all these threads in short bursts of apparently random thoughts.

First: the momentous events of the day on

Alexanderplatz; “I wonder if my old friend Hans Konradi is there today? What has become of the young chap who guided us in East Berlin when we visited the place in the seventies, Margery and I? We gave him all our Ostmark for his trouble... Charming boy; quite proficient in English.”

Then: Jonathan’s spectacular arrest only hours after she had held him in her arms in Battersea Park; “It was all over the news; it was only to be expected, after showing up in front of Bernard like that; the worst blunder he could have made! Oh well, I hope he can find some peace of mind, now that he is in custody, poor boy...”

And her own escape from Bernard: “I told him, ‘My fate is now in your hands’, but I’m damned if I was going to leave it that way. He can hand over my confession to the prosecutor if he wants—yes, I signed the thing in the end—but if they want to arrest me, they’ll have to find me first...”

Speaking of which: Constable Collins had come to the door of the flat upstairs. He must have traced the very last phone call she made before she disappeared. But the tenant of the flat had said, “Yes, I had a posh lady on the phone, but it was a wrong number.” Clever man, that Collins.

And finally: how lucky she was to have found such a reliable hiding-place; “The *disabled community* owed me, and that comes in handy now...”

There was a knock at the door of the cellar; a special signal made up of three-two-one raps. Daisy got up and went over to unlock the door. After a short hesitation, she whispered, “Louie? Is that you?”

“Yep. Step back, Baloo, I’m coming in...” Daisy quietly closed the door behind the man’s wheelchair.

“How did you get down here?”

“Some kids hanging around outside carried me down.

Booh, it's pitch-dark in here!"

"Well, switch on the light, why don't you? As long as it's not visible from outside..."

"No, I want to sit in the dark with you for a while... feel how it is to be blind."

"Well, for one thing, *I'm* not sitting in the dark at all. For me it's as if I'm sitting in broad daylight: I'm working on my art project; I can read one of my books if I want to; my tactile watch tells me what time it is..."

"Ah, but that I have too: the screen of my digital watch lights up in the dark!"

"All right, so we have at least one thing in common."

"What books do you have; can you read me something?"

"Oh yes, right now I'm memorizing an old favourite of mine: *The Hunting of the Snark*, by Lewis Carroll." At once Daisy started reciting.

*"Just the place for a Snark! the Bellman cried,
As he landed his crew with care;
Supporting each man on the top of the tide
By a finger entwined in his hair..."*

The man in the wheelchair listened in complete silence, and by the time all 140 quatrains of the poem had shimmered in the darkness in Daisy's soft voice, three quarters of an hour had gone by in a flash. Then, after a moment, the man asked, "Did you just deliver that whole poem off the cuff, Baloo?"

"No, silly, I've only memorized five pages so far. But I had the book in my hand, counted the lines I was reciting with my finger, and as soon as I didn't know my lines anymore I started reading in Braille. I suppose the light is still switched off, so you were none the wiser."

King Louie chuckled, "This is incredible, my precious! As soon as I'm in your company I'm having a ball, each and every time. It was already like that in the days of our urban war campaign, remember?"

"Yes, we always got on well."

"But I also found it a bit annoying that you kept saying that I could have been your son..."

"Really? Why's that?"

"Well, you're an attractive woman. You could be my mother but you could also be my lover, if only I could make you see me that way. What should I do to make you take me seriously?"

"Gosh, I don't know... How old are you, anyway?"

"I'm thirty-eight, but that's my point: I don't believe it's important. So what would it take to make you see me as a possible love interest?"

"Well... first, let me touch you."

Daisy stood up, stepped over, and standing right behind the wheelchair she put her hands around Louie's head and started probing his features. "You still have long hair and a beard... Not getting bald one bit... Powerful shoulders, of course. Now let me feel your face..." The caresses of her fingertips made King Louie smile with pleasure in the darkness. "Straight nose, strong cheekbones, firm lips, broadly smiling... oh, and I like the wrinkles in the corners of your eyes... Am I right when I say that you're a very good-looking man, in a Jesus-Christ kind of way?"

"Absolutely, Lady Posh, just you believe it. I can tell you there's a lot of interest from a variety of chicks, some of them quite sexy, some of them a lot younger than me, some disabled, some not..."

"All right... Now, you want me to give you a fair chance as a possible love interest, so I have just one

question. Why don't you give one of those attractive young 'chicks' a chance, instead of pining for old me?"

Suddenly Louie lifted Daisy's wrists off his shoulders, turned about with his chair and closed his arms around her waist. He leaned forward and pressed the side of his face to her chest. "With all those sexy chicks I have to *prove* myself all the time, and I'm already *knackered* as it is... Only when I'm with *you* I feel *completely* relaxed... Only with you, Daisy."

Now he felt Daisy's hands stroke the back of his head softly. "Good answer, that, Darren..."

They remained a long while like this, without speaking. The man listened delightedly to the lady's heartbeat, which seemed to fill up the whole room in the pitch darkness. And she caressed his long hair, basking in the bright warm glow that shone inside her as from an inner sun. At length Daisy said softly, "You know what I like most about you? You didn't ask me *once* why I needed to go in hiding. Not a word. That I call self-control! You're a *real* gentleman."

"I don't give a damn about your reasons, Daisy. I'm just glad this brought you back to me, that's all..."

King Louie, as he was known to all on the development, lived on the ground floor of a council high-rise. That was his privilege as a wheelchair-bound paraplegic, though it also meant that there was a lot of rubbish in front of his door, and a lot of noise from loitering youths. But *the king* had some authority, he had a way with people and made use of it to keep things under control. Also, he had very little use for a cellar he could not reach without being carried down a flight of stairs by helpers. That is why it had been almost empty when Daisy had shown up and expressed an interest in hiding down

there during the daytime.

In the meantime nightfall had come, when the two of them emerged from Daisy's hiding-place. Louie called out to the youngsters hanging around the main entrance, and they came inside and carried him up the stairs.

"Are you hungry, Baloo? Let's go buy something for dinner ..."

This was their daily outing, walking briskly over the estate grounds to the nearby low-rise neighbourhood with its dingy little shops. Daisy pushed the wheelchair and Louie steered the course, so that she didn't need her cane and could take big steps without any hesitation. And for the first time in her life Daisy was wearing her prosthetic eyes. She'd had them for many years, but had never really taken to those plastic *beans* you had to squeeze behind your eyelids so that other people could mistake you for a normal person... But now, walking in the dusk behind Louie's chair, it was the perfect disguise; Daisy looked and behaved like a sighted person, turning her head from time to time as if her eyes had been drawn by some detail or other around her.

"Talking of the reason why I'm hiding, Louie; recently I had a boyfriend who kept telling me how bad it is of me to keep things hidden from my friends and from those I love... I think he was right... Is there anyone around who can hear us?"

"Nope, you're safe, but I'm not sure I want to hear this."

"Really? But it's important... I killed a man."

"Yeah? Is that all? Well, so did I. That's how I ended up in a wheelchair: the other bloke was dead."

"Sorry to hear that. But in my case it wasn't an accident; it was murder. So the other day the police finally got the evidence for a conviction, and I don't want to

spend the rest of my life in prison, so here I am. The crime happened a long time ago, and if they had caught me when I did it, I would have been hanged...”

“*That* long ago, huh? And they can still arrest you *now*?”

“Oh yes. There is no statute of limitations for premeditated murder. I was lucky that I got away with it for so long, but that’s because they never thought of suspecting a blind woman... until a very clever policeman came along.”

“Okay, that’s all I need to know for now. You can tell me the details some other time, and only if we’re going to stay together... I mean, otherwise it’s not really worth the trouble, right?”

“Yes, you’re right. As I said before, I admire your restraint.”

“Well, what I’m really interested in, without restraint, is that boyfriend you just mentioned. Are you still seeing him?”

“No, silly, of course not. Otherwise *he* would be hiding me...”

“Okay, so you’re available... and what went wrong, if I may ask?”

“You may... I had to *prove* myself all the time and I got exhausted.”

“There you are. Just as I said. The thing to be avoided at all costs.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. Sometimes it’s just fine to prove yourself, and certainly to give some proof of your love... Maybe I should say that my boyfriend didn’t do *that* enough.”

“Tough luck for him; he had his chance... Was he much older than me?”

“Yes, he’s exactly my age, and he’s not *dead* yet, you

know.”

They arrived at the shops where they had been purchasing their food lately. The shopkeepers were under the impression that King Louie’s mother was staying with him. She was not bad looking for her age. Apparently she insisted on cooking a fresh meal for him every day. Normally he would eat at one of his soup kitchens and he never shopped for edibles; now he came with his Mum every night and helped her choose their groceries. She was a bit strange, that lady: incredibly sweet but a bit vague. You would show her a cabbage or a bunch of fresh spinach and ask, “Is this all right, Madam? Do you want more?” and she would turn to her son and go, “What do you say, Louie, do we take that one? Is that enough?” And then the great King Louie would look up at her adoringly from his wheelchair, with a twinkle in his eyes, and he would go, “Sure, Mother, seems all right to me.” And it was always Mummy who paid. She handed over the money reluctantly, or so it seemed. And when she looked at you then, you sometimes got the strange feeling that she was staring straight *through* you with those incredibly bright blue eyes, or that she was peering right into your *soul*. But she always smiled very sweetly, like a little girl, so you had to conclude that she *liked* what she was seeing there...

“To get back to what we were saying, Louie: as far as I’m concerned, you prove yourself everyday by going out and feeding the homeless like a wheelchair-bound Jesus Christ.”

“And *you* prove yourself by paying for it.”

“Oh, but that’s easy enough when you’ve got the money.”

“Have you got a lot of moolah, Lady Posh?”

“Yes, I guess I have...”

“I always like that in a girl I’m dating.”

“Oh, hush, Louie. I don’t believe in the cynical persona for one moment... What I’m really trying to say, is that you’re pretty good at *organizing* things... In another life you might have been... I don’t know, a *bank manager* or something. So I’m just wondering, out of idle curiosity: what went wrong? How did you end up in that wheelchair?”

“Well, I was a skinhead once; that’s how it all started. Then with my first year’s pay from my first lousy job I bought a Harley and hooked up with a motor gang... We drove recklessly of course, always showing off. Then one day I just crashed into a bloke at a punk rock do, you know, on the grounds of an abandoned factory... The poor sod was dead, and I drove into a lamppost like the incredibly dumb *ass* I was... and the rest is history.”

“So you weren’t a hippie in the sixties, then?”

“Oh no, certainly not! But here I am now, pretending to be a middle-aged hippie to make good for my old sins. Do you still think I’m *proving* myself?”

“Well, the real question is: do you still hate yourself for what happened?”

“I positively *loathe* myself, precious.”

“Well, you should stop it. It’s not very becoming in a man, and besides, you’ve paid the price after all those years...”

“But I still feel so stupid! I had a lot of warnings; I never listened. I never learned from my mistakes until it was too late. To give you an example: when I was eleven years old, I crashed into an old woman on the pavement. I had this derelict bike that I drove recklessly all over my neighbourhood. Later I heard that the lady had ended up

in hospital with a couple of broken ribs... Of course I had fled; I didn't stick around, and I got away with it."

"Wait a minute, this is extraordinary! I was hit by a kid on a bicycle too, once, and ended up with a couple of broken ribs as well..."

"Oh no! When was that? Where?"

"Let me see: I was with Jonathan, and he was seven years old. So that would have been in 1975, in Tufnell Park."

"Well *I* was eleven, so it must have been 1962, and it was in Peckham... Thank God it wasn't *you* I mowed down. But you would be right to hate me now... and my point is, I didn't *learn* anything from that incident."

"Oh well, if it's any consolation, Louie, I have pretty fond memories of *my* accident. And you know why?"

"No, Baloo, you tell me!"

"It's because of my darling boy. He was shocked; he crouched by my side as I lay on the pavement and wept bitter tears on my behalf; he kept repeating, 'How can he *do* such a thing? You're *blind!* You couldn't even see him *coming!*' And I kept saying, 'I'm all right, Johnny-John, it was an accident,' but I was moved to tears by my boy's reaction... such concern for his Mummy! I still choke up when I think of it."

"Yeah, I can hear that... It must be strange, though, being the mother of such a sick bastard."

"I know, but that's the thing: he was my *baby* once; at seven he could still be a very loving son sometimes, and as a mother you never forget that... At the moment I'm suffering hell because I can't go and visit him in prison... You know what, Louie? *You* must go and visit Jonathan! Tell him that the police is looking for me right now, but that I'll come and see him as soon as I can."

Jonathan was looking forward to spending some time in prison. He was assuming that he would not have to stay for very long anyway. But in the meantime the food was not too bad and you didn't need to worry about it: he was not going to spend his days scrounging for it. He had a cosy little cell of his own. That was a vast improvement on sleeping out in the open, especially now that the winter was coming. The heating was on and it was nice to have a reliable shelter. The cell was smaller than his room in South Kensington, but it was much bigger than the broom closet in Tufnell Park. And they had a library here. He had just found an interesting book about clocks. He'd spent hours studying how clocks work exactly, and the incredible thing was: he now understood. It wasn't all that complicated after all, and maybe they had other books like that... Maybe they would let him build a clock of his own in the prison workshop?

King Louie didn't expect a warm welcome when he went to see Jonathan, so when potato-face sat down at the table in the prison visitors' room, he was ready to wrangle. But the bloke seemed more relaxed than was normal for him, and he was only slightly hostile.

"Hey, I was wondering who this Darren Miller could be, but now I know who you are. You're the nosy wheelchair guy from the soup kitchen, right?"

"You've got it in one, my friend. I come in peace..."

"Are you a police snitch or something?"

"No way! Think straight: why would I show up here *after* your arrest?"

"To gloat?"

Louie chuckled. "No, believe me, Jonathan, I could have delivered you into the hands of the law anytime... but I didn't. And you know why? Because I'm a friend of your mother's. *She* asked me to look out for you..."

“A friend of Mum’s, huh? Why is she so obsessed with wheelchair cripples, all of a sudden? Do you also sleep with her, like the other guy?”

“No, what are you talking about? Wait a minute... Are you telling me that the *other* boyfriend is *also* a paraplegic?”

“Yup, if that’s what you want to call it. You know, Mummy’s kind of funny that way. She was married twice, both times to a bloody *bomber* pilot. Now she has one boyfriend after the other in a *wheelchair!*”

“Okaaay... interesting... and you’re saying she actually *slept* with the other guy?”

“Oh yes, I saw them... I spied on them from the mews... They were sleeping together in *my* bed, in *my* room, the bastards!”

“Well-well-well, the more I hear about your dear mother, the more I like her, Johnny-John!”

“Yeah, well, anyway. If Mummy didn’t come along with you, I guess she’s still hiding from the police, right?”

“Yes! So you already know about that? Your Mummy sends me to tell you that she can’t come for the moment, but that she will as soon as she can. Right now you’ll have to make do with *me...*”

“Well, that’s the thing, I have a message for her too, so listen carefully. The police is *not* looking for her. She can visit me any time she wants. Tell her that *Bernard* told me so. Tell her that he’s *not* handing her deposition over to the prosecutor... Have you got that?”

“Sure, I’ve got that, but who is Bernard? Is that the policeman?”

“Yes, yes, don’t be so thick! Bernard is the police chief in the wheelchair, the one I saw in bed with her from the mews.”

“Oh... right! So the ‘very clever policeman’ and the

'boyfriend' are the same person. For a moment I was a little muddled there."

"Well, sort it out... take your time... but make sure you tell my mother that everything's all right. Tell her she must come and see me as soon as possible!"

"You miss her, do you, Jonathan?"

"Yeah, sure... Tell her I *forgive* her... you know? I love my Mum in spite of everything!"

"I'll tell her, my brother. I'm *with* you there... How can anyone *not* love the old girl?"

"Oh, and tell Mummy to bring me a big, old-fashioned alarm clock... don't forget!"

Epilogue

Daisy was working at the kitchen table of her basement flat, with a bouquet in a vase in front of her. She fingered the flowers and the leaves, stuck her nose in to smell them, and then she went on modelling a representation of the bouquet with tiny pieces of softened beeswax. In the flower shop at the Tube station, where she'd bought it, she'd asked the sales girl to describe it to her. "I want you to wax lyrical, you understand: just try to explain to a blind person like me why people find a bouquet like this so appealing..." The girl had giggled, but she'd done her best, and she'd made a good enough job of it. Daisy had thanked her and given her a tip. Now the idea was to create a tactile representation of all these impressions. "Maybe I'll become a real impressionist!" she told herself.

The chimes rang out, and after turning down the radio and putting on her dark glasses, Daisy went to the door. It was already late; who could it be at this hour? There was a man standing there, who didn't say a word and who smelled like he was wearing a uniform of some

sort. Only not a military or a police uniform this time. Those she could identify plainly by now. This man was less... crisp; he lacked the professional discipline, he didn't have his uniform cleaned as often as his military or police colleagues...

"Are you a cab driver? From a company?"

"Yes! you've got it in one. Incredible! Mr Thistlehurst told me you would figure it out."

"Is Bernard with you in the cab?"

"No. He sent me to take you to his place, if you please. He wants me to tell you that the bronze sculpture has arrived, and that he would be much obliged if you would come and inspect it."

"All right. Just a second, I'll be with you in a moment."

Bernard said, "I heard from a colleague at your local police station that you were back home. I take it that you got my message from your son?"

"Yes, yes, thank you. Brilliant way to get in touch with me!"

"Collins's idea entirely. He sends his regards by the way... Now, the bronze cast of your sculpture arrived, and I thought you might want to inspect it. I'm not even sure if it's mine to keep. I paid the foundry of course, but how about the artist?"

"The bronze is yours, Bernard. No charge from the artist. And they already returned the plaster master cast to me, so everything is settled..."

They moved over to a low table in the hall, facing the front door of the flat. Daisy whipped a pair of surgical gloves out of her handbag and put them on. As she started prodding the cast of her work with competent fingers, Bernard said to her, "I put it here so that my

portrait is the first thing I see when I get home.”

“Nice thought, Bernard... So you like it now? You don’t find it disturbing anymore?”

“Oh no! I love this strapping, mature man with the barely perceptible smile on his lips, looking at the world’s follies with a forgiving glance in his wise eyes... Your original goal has been achieved, my dear. This is how I like to see myself in my mind’s eye, when I’m not looking in the mirror.”

“Yes, well, don’t forget that every criminal you’ve ever met saw himself as an innocent...”

“Thank you for reminding me. But still, it doesn’t happen often that *someone else* manages to see you the way you see yourself. You went to an awful lot of trouble on my behalf and succeeded in doing just that...”

Daisy didn’t answer at first, then after a while she took off her gloves and said, “The foundry did an outstanding job as well. I’m always thrilled when I touch a bronze version of my work for the first time... There’s something magic about the whole process.”

“All right. Now, as you didn’t come to see me of your own accord after you got back home, am I correct in assuming that our relationship is over?”

“Yes, I’m afraid it is, Bernard. While I lived in hiding, I have moved on... Maybe I should have gotten in touch anyway to let you know, but there you are, I didn’t. Sorry.”

“That’s all right, I’d already drawn my own conclusions... Take a seat, my dear. There are still some topics I need to discuss with you. Can I serve you something to drink?”

“I’ll have a G&T for old times’ sake.”

Daisy sat down in one of the low-slung armchairs, took a sip from her drink, and said, “After I got your message from Jonathan, I assumed I now have your word

that you will never submit my deposition to the Crown Prosecution Service. Am I right?"

"Yes, absolutely. And *you* told me once that you wouldn't dream of using our relationship against me in a court of law, remember? Now, when Jonathan's trial starts, you may be called upon to testify about some alleged 'sexual intercourse' between us by your son's counsel, so I'm assuming I have your word of honor about that as well?"

"Absolutely! It's none of their business. I'm looking forward to asking the gentlemen how *exactly* they envision sexual intercourse with a paraplegic."

Bernard chuckled. "Oh, my dear Daisy, I'm sure they're going to regret bitterly that they ever called you to the stand!"

"And I will *not* be wearing my dark glasses, of course..."

"Of course not!"

"That is settled, then, my dear Bernard. Anything else on your mind?"

"Yes. There's something else that makes me feel a bit guilty... When we were drawing up your deposition about Cedric's death, there is one piece of information that I did not disclose... It's about the polo accident... You see, it was not really an accident; in fact, not an accident at all."

"Really? All right, let's have it, I'm all ears."

"The thing is, Cedric *caused* the accident deliberately. He came alongside me while we were in full gallop during a run to the goal, and he put the handgrip of his mallet under my knee and yanked it upwards. I flew off of the saddle; I was upended; I was helpless.

"Of course Cedric just pretended that this had never happened. He came to see me in hospital and commiserated with me on the 'tragic accident'. I would

have liked to close my hands around his scraggly neck and strangle him to death. But of course I couldn't, and I didn't tell anyone what had happened, because you were not supposed to *rat* on a schoolmate.

"Later I came to the conclusion that if only I had ratted on Cedric and caused him enough trouble, he would have thought twice about poisoning Ralph Prendergast during the war. So in a way I'm also responsible for what happened then.

"After I came out of the hospital, I managed to pass my A levels, and to make a long story short, I sought a job with the Metropolitan Police. As everybody was out there fighting the war, they welcomed a wheelchair-bound young man like me with open arms. I did the required courses, and within a couple of years I managed to build up a reputation as an outstanding investigator. And you know why? It's because I was extremely motivated. After what had happened with Cedric, I was never going to let *anyone* get away with *anything*. With that in mind, I thought nothing of working twelve hours a day or more, and of juggling half a dozen cases at the same time, single-handedly. At the Met they were delighted.

"Then, when I heard that Cedric was dead, in 1950, I rejoiced. And I started speculating, as I told you. The fact that I came to the conclusion that *you* could have been involved somehow, was entirely the result of wishful thinking at first. I *wanted* to believe that you, my imaginary angel of mercy, had somehow ridden the world of this evil creature. Then thinking about it some more, it started to make sense, it fitted the facts... Once again I had to conclude that my wishes, my dreams, did not preclude the reality of the thing, where you were concerned. There were some concrete elements, and many signs that pointed in your direction, and that is how I

came to the conclusion that you, my dear, had killed Cedric...”

“All right,” Daisy said, “but does this mean that all along you had no intention of submitting my confession to the prosecutor?”

“Well, no, I wouldn’t put it that way. It was not that simple. I can assure you that it was a struggle for me as well... in the light of what I just told you about not wanting to let anyone get away with anything.”

“Yes, but by the time you had drawn up my deposition, you could have told me this story straight away. I mean, I just don’t understand how you could leave me *in doubt* like you did... I could have forgiven you this whole charade if only you had *told* me the very moment I put my signature under that document... Even waiting for *half a minute* was damnable. So how could you let me walk out the door without saying a *word*? What were you thinking, Bernard? What was the idea?”

Bernard said nothing. He looked very pained, but Daisy couldn’t see that. So she shouted in a very unladylike manner, “Answer me, dammit! Be a man!”

“Well, you walked out so fast... You were being so tetchy, so obstinate... I wanted the whole thing to really *sink in*, I guess...”

“Well, of all the *heartless* things you could do to me, Bernard... You left me *dangling*! What choice did I have but to hide?”

They were silent for a moment. Then Daisy said calmly, “When I was in hiding, I had a lot of time to think things over... I’ve come to the conclusion that in a case like this, we’re *both* going to have to pay a price. Not only the *sinner* needs to atone for her crimes if she wants to achieve redemption, but the *confessor* needs to atone as well for the pain he has inflicted on the penitent...”

Daisy finished her drink, and then she got up, gathered her things, and asked Bernard to call a cab, "I'm off now... I'll see you in court, whether I have to take the stand or not... I'll be there for Jonathan's sake. But apart from that, I don't think we shall be seeing one another again... So take care of yourself. Oh, and listen to the news on the radio, there's some interesting stuff going on tonight... goodbye!"

After Daisy had pulled the door shut behind her, Bernard remained alone in the silent flat. He wheeled over to his stereo tower and switched the radio on. It was still tuned to the BBC news channel where Daisy had left it on her last visit.

"...at a press conference today, Günter Schabowsky, an East German government spokesman, presented the far-reaching changes to the travel regulations between East and West planned by the authorities, and then he declared that these measures would 'take effect immediately, without delay'. This sensational news was broadcast on the evening bulletins of the major West German television stations, which means that it was seen by nearly everyone in East Germany as well.

"After hearing the news, East Germans began gathering at the Wall, at the six checkpoints between East and West Berlin, demanding that border guards immediately open the gates. The guards were overwhelmed and vastly outnumbered; they made many hectic telephone calls to their superiors without getting any clarity about the situation.

"However, thousands of people kept demanding to be allowed to cross the border, 'as Schabowski himself has said we can'. It soon became clear that no one among the East German authorities would take personal

responsibility for issuing orders to use lethal force, so at 10:45 p.m., they finally yielded, allowing the guards to open the checkpoints and let people through with little or no identity checks.

As the *Ossis* swarmed forward, they were greeted by *Wessis* waiting with flowers and champagne amid wild rejoicing. Soon after that a crowd of West Berliners jumped on top of the Wall, and were joined by East German youngsters. They danced together to celebrate their new freedom.

“There were even people who started chipping at the wall, using various hand tools, who were immediately dubbed *Mauerspechte*, ‘wall woodpeckers’. They have started demolishing pieces of the Wall and are creating several unofficial border crossings of their own...

“The Berlin Wall is *falling* as we speak!”

Bernard marvelled at what he was hearing on the radio. Daisy had been right all along! And as the excited voices of different correspondents on the scene prattled on, tears started to trickle down the old detective’s rugged cheeks.

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Also many thanks to you, dear reader who read my book. If you really liked it (or loathed it!) I'd appreciate your review.