

Nick Aaron

Blind Angel of Wrath

The Daisy Hayes trilogy II

ANOTHER IMPRINT PUBLISHERS

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

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

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

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

The Weekly Banner

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

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

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

Revelation 16:1

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I Here and now

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Two hours ago!"

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

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

follow the scent of missing people?”

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

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

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

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

“Well, let me see... thirty-two.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II The opening

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you. See you later."

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

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

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

To start with, there were some childhood friends from

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

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

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

“She’s a real artist!”

“There’s bubbly wine galore!”

“Who could have imagined? Good old Daisy!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Heavens, yes!"

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

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

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

"And we know each other?"

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

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

“No, I mean in private.”

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

“Sure, I’ll stick around.”

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

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

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

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

“Of course! He would be perfectly welcome!”

“There you are then. My point exactly.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Now you are making me curious...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, I’d like to. I hope I will.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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