

Nick Aaron

The Desiderata Stone

A Blind Sleuth Mystery



ANOTHER IMPRINT PUBLISHERS

Daisy Hayes was a sculptress, and blind since birth. In 1964 a French priest came to visit her at the collective studio in north London where she worked. He was fascinated by the impaired artist and told her, “There’s this program at the Vatican Museums, where people like you get an opportunity to study archaeological artefacts by touch. Are you interested?” — “Of course, *mon Père!*”

In AD 64 a blind masseuse working at the baths in Rome overheard some important men preparing to set fire to the city and seize power. When they found out that she knew too much, they had her arrested and tried to eliminate her. She decided she had to leave a message revealing the plot, and did everything she could to save her hide.

So, as a Vatican intern 1900 years later, Daisy uncovered a mysterious message from antiquity: the Desiderata stone.

“Without using any mixed metaphors, Nick Aaron pushes the envelope further than ever before, but still manages to land on his feet quite elegantly. Dizzying!”

The Weekly Banner

This 78k novel is a stand-alone in the *Blind Sleuth* series:

1943	D for Daisy
1946	First Spring in Paris
1952	Honeymoon in Rio
1956	Cockett’s Last Cock-up
1964	The Desiderata Stone
1967	Blind Angel of Wrath
1984	The Nightlife of the Blind
1989	Daisy and Bernard
1992	The Desiderata Gold

And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

Genesis 2:19

Salute every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren which are with me greet you. All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household.

Philippians 4:22

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I 1964: Doris Day goes to Rome

“Even today,” Daisy explained, “although we are preparing to go to the moon, blind people are still not allowed to touch the sculptures in museums.”

“Do you really believe we will go to the moon?”

“Oh ye of little faith, of course we will! Haven’t you heard about the last Apollo mission that was launched on the 28th of May?”

“But you are still not allowed to touch the sculptures...”

“Yes, exactly! But, get this: these days I never go to a museum or a gallery without a pair of surgical gloves, you know, those thin rubber ones, so that they can’t turn down my request without looking silly.”

“Oh, I see: so you *force* them to let you touch the sculptures!”

“Exactly.”

Father Boudry chortled amiably. The French Catholic priest—*l’Abbé Boudry*—spoke good English, albeit with an accent, but sometimes he and Daisy’s friend Beatrice lapsed into his mother-tongue, and a few times that afternoon Daisy had found herself speaking French without even noticing: she mastered it better than she thought. This made her feel quite sophisticated.

On the modelling stand right in front of her there was a clay head set up on a steel armature. This was the first time she made such a big piece: a life-size portrait of her best friend, Bee, who was sitting on a high stool within reach. Daisy was working hard, struggling; she palpated her friend’s face at arm’s length and probed her features with her fingertips. Her sitter shuddered, “This always gives me gooseflesh, Daise...”

“Just don’t move... I’m trying to get a clear understanding of the transition between these two edges... here... and here. Am I smudging you with clay?”

“I don’t know; I can’t see my own face. *Qu’en pensez-vous, mon Père?*”

“*Juste un peu,*” the man answered, “but nothing to be ashamed of, surely.”

He got up from his own stool and started walking around the two women. The blind sculptress had impressive dark glasses hiding her eyes, and her sitter, indeed, had comical smudges on her face. He scrutinized them both with great interest as Daisy kept probing Beatrice, and again he chuckled contentedly.

As he paced close to her, Daisy could smell him distinctly. He not only had his signature odour, like everyone else, based on breath, after-shave, and sweat propensity, but there was something different, that she associated with soldiers and police, even with mailmen and milk delivery boys. Uniforms; dry cleaners... Father Boudry was a man of the cloth, literally, you could smell it. And if you listened carefully, you could even hear his cassock swishing along his legs as he walked around.

It was very quiet in the large hall of the abandoned brewery, where a local artists’ collective had fitted out their communal studios. Most of the members had day jobs, but Daisy, who worked part-time as a

physiotherapist, was off-duty that afternoon.

"My dears," Father Boudry said, "I am reminded of our great Rodin. He was renowned for making his sitters pose uncomfortably close to him, within reach of his hands too, but whether his models ended up with clay smears on their face... or elsewhere, that I don't know, though with Rodin one might suppose *que si*."

"Yes, but obviously I *really* need to touch my sitter's features. That is why I have to be quite intimate with people if I want to do their portrait. But maybe this is a good thing, as I'm told that the result of my work is rather brutal and can be very confronting."

"Brutal, yes. I am also reminded of Daumier. You may not know his work, but he made sculptures too; portraits... caricatures, really."

"Well, it is not my intention to caricature people, but rather to render reality as I perceive it... Sighted people rarely stop to think about how we blind-since-birth might picture things in our minds: that is what I'm trying to show."

"A very worthy endeavour, I'm sure."

The priest now stopped in front of the modelling easel and eyed the work in progress and the sitter, alternatively. Daisy had let go of her friend's face and was kneading the clay head again. Beatrice said, "I don't like that look, *mon Père*."

"What look would that be?"

"You're laughing at my predicament; you think the joke is on me!"

She said this fondly; she'd known the priest all her life; a friend of the family... Anyway, as Father Boudry kept looking from her to the piece, and as he knitted his eyebrows satirically, Beatrice burst out into giggles, then snorted through that rather prominent nose of hers, and tried to stifle her merriment, hiding her mouth behind her hand. Very much aware of the fact that she was no beauty, she turned quite red with embarrassment.

"My dear girl, don't blush on account of *me*, I'm only a priest, and I know you have a beautiful soul."

"That's what everybody keeps telling me, so they don't have to mention my ugly mug!"

"What's going on here?" Daisy asked.

"Father Boudry thinks your efforts do not do me justice!"

"Well, I haven't finished yet."

"That's the right spirit, *ma chère Dési*," the French priest said. Now he stared at the artist for a while: she was quite pretty, with a shock of blonde curls on her head, half-long, probably natural. You didn't expect someone like her to have a perm, somehow. The woman reminded him vaguely of one Hollywood star or the other, although he would have been at a loss to say which one. Like most French, however, he adored *'Ollywood*.

People started to arrive: other artists from the collective and their hangers-on. They needed their day jobs to keep the kettle boiling, and became painters, sculptors, etchers or photographers only after office hours. They repaired to different corners of the echoing hall: the painting studio, the photo and etching labs with their attendant dark room and printing press, and finally the sculpture studio with its clay-stained modelling stands. Fellow-artists greeted Daisy and her sitter, and were introduced to the visitor. Then, sometime later, she decided to call it a day. She covered the clay portrait with damp rags and a sheet of plastic, before she and Beatrice went to a washbasin by the wall, the former to

wash her hands, the latter her face.

"Shall we go for an early dinner? There's a new Italian place in the neighbourhood; really nice; I'm inviting you both."

Using her cane, Daisy led the way out of the derelict brewery and into the streets of Tufnell Parc. She knew exactly where to find that new restaurant, and while they walked over in the mellow early summer evening, she explained that Italian restaurants had become all the rage in London, lately, because of hugely successful pictures like 'Roman Holiday', 'La Dolce Vita', or more recently 'The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone'.

"Did you attend projections of those films?"

"I certainly did! Didn't we, Bee?"

But when they entered the establishment, with its red and white checked table cloths and empty Chianti bottles set with dripping candles, the priest cheerfully pronounced all of it "completely bogus". However, after talking with the welcoming proprietor in rapid-fire Italian, he had to admit that the man, at least, was genuine. They were the first customers of the evening, and settled down with a bottle of the establishment's "best wine", served by the *padrone* himself. Father Boudry pronounced it "adequate".

"Obviously, as a Frenchman, you must be hard to please," Beatrice remarked.

"Oh well, in France we always say: 'As long as you're in good company.'"

Daisy raised her glass and shot back: "In Britain we say, 'As long as there's alcohol in the plonk!'"

"Ah, my dear *Dési*, I can't tell you how happy I am to have made your acquaintance at last, and how impressed I am. My darling Beatrice had not exaggerated her praise of you. The fearless way you go out into the world with that white cane of yours, and the assurance with which you navigate the streets!"

"Oh, but I know Tufnell Park like the back of my hand."

"And then the way you throw yourself into your art. It is quite marvellous!"

"Though you doubt whether my efforts do poor Beatrice justice, am I right? Well, I can assure you that I *love* Bee's face, no matter what other people may say. At least she has *readable* features, when I touch them, with clear volumes and edges."

"Ah, but that is not the issue here... You see, as soon as you start 'rendering' someone's *face*, then you are confronting them with their sense of self, their identity, maybe even their very soul! Therefore the process of rendering reality as you *perceive* it suddenly becomes... rather brutal."

"I see, yes; I guess you're right."

"You know, you could learn a lot from the classics of antiquity... My advice would be: go to Rome and study them."

"You mean the sculptures?"

"Yes, the Roman sculptures and the copies of the Greeks... There's this program, organized every summer at the Vatican Museums by an Irish priest, Father Cadogan, a good friend of mine, where blind people get an opportunity to study archaeological artefacts by touch. Would you be interested?"

"Of course, *mon Père*! So they're not only allowed to touch the sculptures, but are even *encouraged* to do so?"

"That's right, and I don't think they're required to wear those rubber gloves you were talking about."

"But surely this is only open for Catholics?"

"Oh, you're not one of us then, are you? Well, it doesn't matter, I guess... this is not a religious event." And after a moment's reflection he added, "They may expect you to attend Mass once in a while, if that is all right."

"Yes, but would it be all right with Father Cadogan, too?"

"We wouldn't tell him... just promise not to partake in the Holy Communion, is all I'm asking."

"Nor in any other sacrament; I get it."

So that summer, just like that, Daisy ended up in Rome for a fortnight's holiday. That busybody Boudry had been true to his word, but now Daisy was wondering if it had been such a good idea after all, to set off on such a daunting venture on the basis of such a flimsy invitation. It had all gone so fast. She'd taken two weeks off from work, and her husband Richard, who was a pilot with BOAC, had arranged a flight over the phone from Sydney, in Australia, where he happened to be at that moment. It was the first time she went abroad without an escort: Bee would have liked to come along, but Father Cadogan had vetoed the idea, as Daisy would be part of a group. Fair enough.

The trip had been all right, she'd taken a taxi to London Airport, and Richard had made sure that a stewardess would be there to help her through customs and bring her to the aircraft. At Fiumicino, the airport of Rome, Father Cadogan had come to pick her up personally. So far so good.

Then she and the other participants had been taken to a meeting room somewhere within the depths of the Vatican Museums. The only thing Daisy knew for the moment, was that the museums were a huge maze of galleries and corridors, and that they had been taken to a part of the complex that was not even open to the public, but was used by visiting scholars and researchers.

Once they were all gathered in this room, Daisy could hear the conversations of half a dozen people around her, speaking Irish English and sounding very youthful. She expected that most of them would be blind, and as she listened more carefully, she was able to ascertain that this must indeed be the case, although there was no telling if they were totally blind or not. None of them spoke to her, as she had just joined them, a late arrival, a newcomer, and the only non-Irish member of the group. *They* had all travelled together from Dublin. And as they couldn't see her, how could they even think of making an effort to include her in their conversations?

So right there and then she suddenly realized that this was going to be much more difficult than she had foreseen. For the first time since leaving school she became aware of the fact that she was no longer used to being with other blind people. At the 'Anne Sullivan', her old boarding school for blind girls, it had been second nature, automatic, for many years. You knew you couldn't rely on your friends for assistance because they were just as blind as you, and you learned to rely on yourself only. But since then she'd lived exclusively among the sighted and had come to take the convenience of seeing the world through the eyes of others for granted. Wistfully she thought back to that afternoon and evening with Bee and Father Boudry: how relaxed and easy-going all three of

them had been! When the priest had pronounced the Italian restaurant “completely bogus”, he had immediately proceeded to describe the décor to Daisy in order to substantiate his harsh judgement. The plastic vines hanging from the mock beams of the ceiling, complete with ripe grapes ‘made in Hong Kong’; and the gaudy fresco of Mount Vesuvius on the wall, with non-descript ruin-pillars (“Pompeii-style”) on the foreground... Daisy had raised her arm and fingered the plastic grapes; for the gaudy Vesuvius she had to take Boudry’s word. But she’d acquired a very clear picture of her surroundings. Now she had no idea where she was, and her young Irish companions would not be able to supply a better sense of the place for her.

Then Father Cadogan made his presence known, but even before he started his welcome speech, he told the room that as some of them were deaf, there was a “friendly lady” standing right next to him, Sister Maria Elizabeth, who was a very competent sign-language interpreter, and that she was signing every word he was saying, “as I speak”.

“I’m only telling you this because the true blind among you are not aware of Sister Liz’s presence, nor, perhaps, of the presence of your deaf fellow-participants... Liz, do you want to say a few words?”

“Yes, Father. Hello everybody. Obviously you are going to wonder if it is possible at all for the blind and the deaf to communicate directly... we’ll see about that later. But for the moment it seems that all your exchanges will have to pass through me, so feel free to use my services as you need them, but please be aware I can’t help everyone at once. Please don’t overwhelm me.”

These words created a slight stir, a flutter among the blind youths around Daisy. “Of course!” she thought: she’d already noticed that there were more than half a dozen people in the room, maybe twice that much. You could sense their presence by their odours, the shuffling of feet and scraping of chairs. But she’d just assumed they were ‘the silent majority’, people too shy to say much on a first meeting, just like herself. Now it turned out that they might have been chattering as freely among themselves as the blind youths... but in sign language! After all, they too had travelled together and got to know each other beforehand. And at least they could see who was there.

This was strange and disturbing: blind and deaf people together in a group. As father Cadogan continued his little welcome speech, Daisy reflected: why exactly were deaf people so disturbing? Probably it had to do with the fact that you couldn’t communicate with them at all, as Sister Liz had already pointed out. So why bring them together? And then there was the fact that you just had to wonder—you couldn’t help yourself—which was worse: being blind or being deaf? Perhaps that was only a matter of degree, but Daisy always felt that being totally blind must be a lot worse than being totally deaf. After all, *they* could still see their loved ones and read their faces, enjoy normal books, admire art, and the far vistas of foreign landscapes... Oh, to see Rome for just one minute!

In the end Father Cadogan asked all those present to introduce themselves one by one, and Daisy went into mind-mapping mode, concentrating fiercely. She put the name and voice of each blind participant in a mental pigeonhole in her head, together with any particulars he or she mentioned. All of them were still at school or at a Uni and were very proud of it. When her turn came she decided to be deliberately vague.

“Hi, my name is Daisy Hayes and I’m from London. I’m no longer at

school, but I work part-time as a physiotherapist, and part-time as a sculptress.”

How about that for size? But when the deaf introduced themselves in the same way, you already had a problem: it was Sister Liz who translated what they said. She sounded very friendly and competent, but how would Daisy ever be able to keep all those deaf people apart?

Then came the real shocker. Father Cadogan announced that they were going to be paired up, because they would all be staying two by two at different convents near the Vatican. “Now, part of the set-up of our stay in Rome is that the blind and the deaf get to know each other better, so I will assign a partner for each of you: ladies with ladies and gentlemen together, but one deaf and one blind on each team.”

This announcement caused quite a stir, Daisy could hear, at least with the blind. And you could imagine the deaf commenting excitedly in sign language as well. But what could they do? They had to go along with it.

Daisy was assigned a girl named Morag. (“Hi, I’m Morag,” Sister Liz had interpreted, “I’m Scottish, but also a Catholic. I’m reading History of Art at the University of Dublin. So now you can imagine why I’m here.”) Then, at length, the two of them were escorted to their residence by a Roman youth, a volunteer from a local parish who didn’t speak English at all, but was quite proficient in Latin; Daisy remembered some Latin from school, not much, but it did help a bit. They followed this Giovanni into the streets outside the Vatican, up the Janiculum hill, while Daisy tried to map their route in her mind. In fact, they’d been told, it would be the deaf partner’s responsibility to guide the blind to their digs, but you could never be too careful. Starting the next day, the two were supposed to shuttle on their own between the Vatican and the ‘Congregation of the Sisters of St Plautilla’, the convent where they would share a room.

And the next day, sitting on a hard chair in another lecture room, or maybe it was the same one as the day before, Daisy decided that she would have to speak to Father Cadogan privately about her misgivings.

They were listening to a presentation by some priest whose English sounded atrocious. He was explaining that throughout antiquity, people had assumed that Homer had been blind. “Now, some writers thought up completely fanciful biographies of Homer, it was all the rage, but these had no historical validity whatsoever, except for one thing: the fake ‘lives of Homer’ reveal a lot about the daily life of blind people in ancient Rome and in the Hellenistic world, where these fanciful biographies were written, between a few centuries BC and a few centuries AD... So, thanks to the Homer myth, we know quite a lot about the daily life of the blind at the time!”

The man’s English was quite good, actually, albeit a bit long-winded; it was his Italian accent that was atrocious. And Daisy felt too tense and nervous to take an interest in what he was saying, although she realised it must be compelling enough.

While the scholarly priest droned on, Daisy reflected carefully about what she should tell Father Cadogan. For starters, she was the only adult in the group: there were a dozen teenagers and young adults in the room, and she could have been the mother of most of them. Secondly, she hadn’t realised there would be lectures and guided tours; she’d expected that she would be free to roam the museum galleries, probing the antique

sculptures at her leisure. And thirdly, she wondered if she shouldn't own up right away to the fact that she was not a Catholic. Now that she was actually inside the Vatican, she felt like an intruder. Pope John XXIII had died a year back and Paul VI had just taken over; the Second Vatican Council was still in full swing, she'd heard; all that was happening right here, at this very moment.

The Italian priest was telling them, "It will surely not come as a surprise to you that sign languages for the deaf already existed in antiquity... Saint Augustine, who was writing around 400 AD, was fascinated by how deaf people and their carers communicated by means of gestures; how they could answer questions, or even give explanations of their own without being asked. Not only could they refer to visible objects, but also to quite abstract notions. After all, the Church Father wrote, mimes in the theatre can tell quite elaborate stories by gestures alone, without using spoken words... Elsewhere he wrote about a family where the healthy parents had invented a sign language in order to communicate with their deaf children. So you see, sign languages already existed, but people were not aware of the fact that *the deaf themselves created them!* Because probably it were not the carers who had invented those gestures for their charges, and it must have been the deaf children themselves who had taught their hearing parents to communicate with them, not the other way round. After all, as Joseph Schuyler Long writes somewhere, 'So long as there are two deaf people upon the face of the earth and they get together, so long will signs be in use.'"

Ah, yes, interesting. That was another thing Daisy wanted to tell Father Cadogan, the thing that bothered her most but that she would be almost too ashamed to mention: her aversion for her deaf partner. Morag was a very sweet person and all that, but deep down, for no good reason at all, it made Daisy's skin crawl to be thrown together with her like this. She'd hardly slept a wink that night.

The scholarly priest with the Italian accent had come to the end of his 'introduction' about the daily life of the blind and deaf in antiquity. A short and polite applause helped him on his way to the exit, coming mainly from the blind, supposedly, although maybe the deaf *knew* about applause as well, and applied that knowledge. This introduction had been the last item on the day's agenda, so it was time to go back to their lodgings.

Daisy expected that her deaf partner would be making a beeline for her now; here she was; she recognized her by her odour. But as her partner could not hear her if she spoke to her, and as she herself didn't know the first thing about sign language, she had no choice but to turn her face towards the girl and to mouth the name "Morag" histrionically with her lips. Voicelessly, Daisy pinched an emphatic M between her pressed lips, then formed a nice round O before displaying the tip of her tongue against her palate for the r-sound, and she finally widened "-ag" into a little smile. The deaf girl responded by tapping Daisy's forehead twice with the tip of her forefinger, meaning "yes". Well, this was the first sign Daisy had learned from her new friend, the other being a light bump with the closed fist on her forehead, meaning "No". Both of these improvised signals were derived from the standard Irish Sign Language, or ISL, that was being used by the deaf participants. Morag also 'spoke' British Sign Language (BSL), which in fact was her 'mother-tongue'; she was bilingual, and very proud of it.

Anyway, Daisy now raised her hand, palm forward, in what she hoped was a universal sign meaning "Wait!" Then she called out, "Father Cadogan? Could I have a word with you?"

"Yes of course! Over here!"

Daisy now motioned Morag to follow her, also with a pair of signs she hoped would be self-evident, a 'pulling along' movement of the hand and forefinger and an emphatic nod of the head 'that way'. They navigated between the chairs and tables to the front of the room.

"How did you like old Contini's lecture?" the Irish priest asked.

"Interesting, but that's one of the things I wanted to discuss with you. Can we talk in private?"

"As the others are leaving in a hurry, we'll be alone in a moment, yes."

"All right. Well, to start with, I'm a bit... disappointed that we don't get to explore the collections more... on our own, you know?"

"Fair point. But I'll ask you to be patient, Daisy dear; in due course you will have more freedom, I promise, and by that time you will also be more familiar with the lay-out of the place and the location of all the stuff."

Then, as she could hear that they were quite alone now, except for Morag of course, Daisy explained how uncomfortable she felt to be the only adult participant; "I could be the mother of most of these kids!"

"Only if you'd had a teenage pregnancy," Cadogan chuckled, "and nobody is accusing you of that!"

"How old do you think I am?"

"Erm... thirty to thirty-five, at most? You're not supposed to discuss her age with a lady."

"Well as a priest you should be able to handle that... I'm forty-one, going on forty-two, so no need for a teenage pregnancy, either."

"Sweet Jesus! If only I'd *known* I'd have turned you down... just kidding, of course."

"And I'm not even a Catholic."

"That I'm aware of; my friend Boudry confessed; but my secret hope is that you might become one of us... one day. No, believe me, Daisy, you're the right person at the right place as far as I'm concerned. Boudry was right to sing your praises; he told me about your sparkling personality and your inquisitive mind, and he was not lying about that."

"But then why am I feeling so inadequate, so out of place all the time?"

"Maybe it takes some getting used to, to be in a group with other blind... and deaf people."

"Yes, well, speaking of that, why on earth did we have to team up like this, each blind person with a deaf partner?"

"So that's what is making you uneasy? Well, you're doing just fine, my dear Daisy. I observed your little interaction with Morag just now, and how you led the way to the front of the room with your cane... a case of the sheep leading the sheepdog! And right now young Morag is sitting next to me, waiting patiently for the end of our conversation, and she's just looking at you all the time... looking at you *adoringly!*"

"Really?"

"Absolutely, and this demonstrates how right I was to team you up with her. Only, she must be wondering what has brought that cross frown onto your beautiful brow."

"Are you going to tell her?"

"I'll give her a quick rundown in a moment, yes."

"So you can *sign* too?"

"Yes, but I'm not an interpreter like Liz, in case you're wondering."

"That I am. Where is Sister Liz anyway?"

"Just powdering her nose. What is this, the Spanish Inquisition? I still perceive some slight hostility here."

"Sorry about that, but I'm still not clear in my mind: is this a pet project of yours, this mixing of the deaf and the blind?"

"You could say that, yes."

"But *why*? Can you just explain why?"

"Well, in my work with impaired young people, back home, I've often noticed that the deaf and the blind feel a deep aversion for one another. It's a bit like cats and dogs. And I find that a great pity, especially as blind people always seem to think that they are worse off than the deaf, and the deaf believe they are worse off than the blind! It is only by getting to know each other that you'll find out this is not true. I want you to realize how good you have it. I believe this can reconcile you no end with yourself and with your condition... In my experience it can be very therapeutic."

"But there's a little flaw in your reasoning: which one, deaf or blind, should find out that they're better off than the other?"

"Well, *both* of course!"

A moment later Daisy and Morag were following endless, echoing corridors on their way to the exit. Morag knew how to get there and was leading her partner by the hand, but Daisy still kept tapping her cane on the hard floors, so she could *hear* the numerous statues and paintings they were passing. Besides, it was always good fun to make such a racket in a hushed museum. They went out into the gardens, suddenly feeling the heat of the summer afternoon, and Daisy could hear the changed acoustics of being out in the open. They took the shortest route to the south gate of the Vatican fortification, and once outside, followed the wall, going down to a thoroughfare by the Tiber, very busy with cars. It was the rush hour. They crossed over, Morag obeying the indications of the impressive, uniformed policeman who directed the traffic with waving arms at this hour of the day. Morag would have liked to describe his white gloves with wide, starched muffs attached. Daisy could only smell exhaust fumes and hear a lot of honking, like everywhere in Rome. It always gave you the feeling that everyone was on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

On the other side of the road they climbed a flight of stairs and followed a small street up the Janiculum hill. The blind woman and the deaf girl had to walk in silence all the while; there was not much they could communicate to one another. That was a pity, Daisy thought, as the Scottish student must be incredibly smart, studying art history at the Uni in spite of her disability. You had to admire that. She tried to simply enjoy the other's company; it was nice to be holding hands; Morag showed much care and consideration for her older companion all the time. And Daisy had to think of what Father Cadogan had said: that she had looked at her adoringly... With hindsight, Daisy felt a bit ashamed of her truculence with the priest, and of the implied hostility towards poor Morag. After all, she was really sweet.

Suddenly a man, walking downhill on the other side of the street called out, "*Ciao bella! Ciao Doris Day!*" Daisy giggled and waved him on;

it was the first time anyone called her that: Doris Day... "Do I really look like her?" she wondered, "Maybe only because I'm blonde, or because of the dark glasses." She'd never seen the Hollywood star, obviously, but knew that much about how she looked. She'd 'attended' a couple of her movies, too, and found them nice enough, albeit a bit jejune. At least old Doris, who was her age exactly, also believed in human goodness. And at least she could sing.

But already Morag had stopped in her tracks and pulled Daisy aside. Then, holding her shoulder with one arm, she started tapping her partner's forehead with her forefinger, five or six times in rapid succession, like a funny little woodpecker. This was the third 'word' in sign language that had spontaneously been introduced between them: it meant "What? What's going on?" and was always accompanied by a great deal of excitement and urgency from the deaf girl. Daisy tucked her cane away under her arm, opened her handbag, and retrieved a little notebook. With the attached pencil she scribbled a few words in caps: THE MAN CALLED ME DORIS DAY!

Daisy smiled, and Morag patted her shoulder, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, then raised herself on the tip of her toes and nibbled at the taller woman's earlobe. Another sign of great merriment, Daisy knew. The girl was such a fun-loving creature, but somehow she could never giggle or laugh audibly; instead, nibbling at your earlobe was her way of letting you know how funny she found a situation. This was another signal that had emerged between the two of them, spontaneously expressed and understood at once on both sides. Daisy thought back to the lecturer's remark, that two deaf people thrown together would create their own sign language; it could even work with a blind-deaf pair.

The catcalls from local men appeared to be part and parcel of life in Rome, but what made the two women laugh was that as a matter of course they had been aimed only at poor Daisy. Morag was small and mousy and slight; even scrawny, and just a kid: they would never call *her* Doris Day! But apparently she knew how the actress looked, had perhaps also watched a few of her movies, and she found the likeness between the Hollywood star and her companion very entertaining.

As for the trick of writing something down in a notebook, that was a *cheat*, as Sister Maria Elizabeth had already pointed out to them, and it only went so far, as Daisy could not read anything that Morag might want to write in reply. Sister Liz had also remarked it was a good thing for the "project" that not all the blind participants could write in Latin script like that. Daisy had answered she could even use a typewriter. "I could write Morag a *long* letter if I wanted!"

They arrived at the convent and were welcomed by many friendly voices chattering enthusiastically in rapid-fire Italian. The Congregation of the Sisters of St Plautilla was clearly *not* a silent order. In fact all the sisters were nurses, or carers, and worked at the children's hospital across the street. And the convent where they lived was another one of those big buildings with many rooms and long echoing corridors, where the stone floors smelled of the mop. Daisy expected to be passing her whole vacations in those, rather than outside. But that was quite all right, as it was rather hot, the Roman summer not exactly what one was used to, coming from London. She now wore a light summer dress at all times, and even sandals, which was quite exceptional for her, who at home was known by all as "Miss Sensible Shoes". Inside the Vatican

Museums or in this convent, at least, the temperature was bearable.

And in here, once again, the assistance of her deaf partner was invaluable, as they made their way to the upper floor, dropped their things in their room, and went over to the communal bathroom to refresh themselves, before going down again for dinner. Daisy didn't understand much Italian, could only react with "si", "no", and "grazie" from time to time, which again encouraged the sisters to keep chattering away. Morag, on the other hand, had one advantage: like all Italians, the nuns just couldn't keep their hands still when they were speaking, and she could see their very expressive gestures as they talked... The nuns realized this: they thought the friendly blind woman was rather vague, but the little deaf one had a sharp mind, *she* understood. So they would gesture and mime any messages they needed to convey, and Morag caught their meaning quite well and guided her blind partner accordingly... Time to go to the refectory now; we're supposed to sit here today; the ground-floor lavs? Wait... Aha, yes, follow me. At their first 'debriefing', Morag had told Sister Liz, "The Italian nuns just *know* my language... somehow... almost."

Later that night they retired to their room. It was just a cell, really, where a sister would normally have lived on her own, and with two beds it was rather cramped. But for Daisy this didn't matter, as she couldn't even see it, and Morag seemed to appreciate their little nest well enough. In the evening they liked to settle on their beds and do some reading. Daisy had taken a Braille book along on her holiday, *Les Antiquités de Rome*, by Joachim du Bellay, a collection of French sonnets she'd found in Paris just after the war, almost twenty years back. The slight volume of verse made for a bulky book in Braille; the French poems made for a challenging read that whiled away the evening hours.

Nouveau venu, qui cherches Rome en Rome

Et rien de Rome en Rome n'aperçois.

Morag, at least, could read normal books; she had a couple of mystery novels in pocket editions to keep her amused. She also had a book about Renaissance art that she'd borrowed from the museum library.

But on that particular night they had something else to amuse them besides. In the morning the whole group had taken a guided tour of the *Forum Romanum* together. Their guide spoke adequate English and had been asked to describe what he showed them for the benefit of the blind; Sister Liz had interpreted for the deaf. Then, as the guide kept mentioning columns of one 'order' or the other, Daisy had asked him to *describe* those orders to them, although she already knew about them in theory. Then, after they'd returned to the Vatican in their small chartered bus, Sister Liz had taken Daisy along to the museum's 'educational service', and to make a long story short, they had given her a set of miniature columns on loan. Three plastic models of the three classical orders, which Daisy now retrieved from her handbag. She started to finger and caress the little pillars delightedly.

The three orders of classical architecture. The Doric one had a simple, sausage-like ring at the top; the Ionic column had two opposed curly scrolls, forming a square-sectioned top; and the Corinthian one had frilly leaves and four smaller curls in a kind of inverted pyramid. Interesting. The Doric pillar was sturdy and had few grooves, the other two were more slender and the grooves were finer. The plastic models just gave you the *feel* of the ancient pillars, of their beauty and

permanence. "Oh, I adore miniatures," Daisy told herself, thinking back to her childhood and to the Dinky Toys models her father used to give her.

Morag came over to sit by her side; Daisy felt her weight depress the mattress. She turned her head to her companion and smiled, holding up the three plastic pillars to share her delight with her new friend. Morag took them away and placed another object in her hand: she had also received an interesting item on loan from the educational service. It was a replica of a pair of Roman wax tablets: writing tablets. Two wooden planks tied together by a pair of string hinges; on the inside, the framed lower planes were covered with a layer of beeswax; there was also a stylus with a dull point to scratch words into the wax, and a spatula at the other end to erase them.

Daisy fingered the object, frowning; she knew what it was, but... then she realised that Morag had written something. Clever girl: the scratches were as deep as possible, and the letters were so big that you could follow the grooves of each letter with your forefinger to make out its shape; and in doing so you could make out the words:

C A N
Y O U
R E A D
T H I S

Of course! Daisy giggled, and nodded emphatically: yes, I can! She groped for Morag's face and kissed her on the cheek. The deaf girl nibbled her earlobe with relish, and then she took away the writing tablets and set to work again. A moment later she gave them back to Daisy, who deciphered the next message:

H E L L O
D O R I S
D A Y

II AD 64: A hot summer night

Sextus Pomponius Sacer was proud of his slave. That is to say, the poor girl was deaf and dumb, and probably a bit retarded too, and she was not really pretty. So he was not particularly proud of her as a person, but he was proud of *possessing* her. In the tenement block where he lived with his little family, that was quite exceptional. In fact, none of their neighbours had a slave. No one could afford it. When you bought one, even a dirt-cheap bargain like Felicitas, you needed to register the transaction at the *tabularium*, on the Forum, and pay a fee for that; and once a year you had to pay a tax for the privilege of owning a slave. Then, for all your trouble, you had another mouth to feed in your household.

Reclining on his bed, leaning Roman-style on one elbow, Sextus sighed and looked despondently into the gloom that a single oil lamp, nearby on a stool, struggled to dispel. It was hot and stuffy and he was sweating. His home was just one room under the roof beams of the five-story building. There were no windows, but there was a gap between the top of the low wall and the overhanging eaves; all the noises from the street below came through and were reflected by the slanting roof tiles overhead. In Rome the nights were noisy, as carts were forbidden to enter the city by day; the deliveries were brought in from dusk to dawn, the wheels rattling and the drivers cursing. The summer sun had beaten down on the roof all day long and the garret remained incredibly hot. In the winter the place was draughty and freezing cold, but that was only a distant memory now. Still, the home is a man's castle.

Sextus had to look hard for reasons to be proud, but fortunately he was quite good at that. To start with, apart from the fact that he owned a slave, he was also a Roman citizen, albeit a dirt-poor one. That meant a lot to him and had many advantages: you were entitled to a free ration of grain, distributed once a month courtesy of the emperor himself. You had the right to go to the baths free of charge and had free seats at the circus or the amphitheatre for various shows and games, gladiator fights and chariot races. You were entitled to go to any public library without paying an entrance fee; not that Sextus made much use of *that* privilege. And what else? Ah yes: you could even take your little family to the zoo in the gardens of Lucullus for nothing... Anyway, when his good wife Claudia complained about their numbing poverty and hinted that he was no more than an idler and a parasite, he would tell her, "Never forget that your husband is a *real* plebeian, a free citizen of Rome. Always remember that I have the vote!"

And that was the second thing he was proud of. Sextus loved politics and spent a lot of time supporting his patron, senator Antonius Soranus Canio, one of the 600 members of the Senate, a minor but ambitious politician, and wealthy enough to patronize dozens of poor clients like him. In fact he'd spent all day hanging out with his patron, as a member of his numerous retinue. In the morning he'd passed a couple of hours waiting in the lobby of Canio's big *domus*, or townhouse, on the Esquiline hill, being fed some bread and olives and served some wine. Then, as the

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