

There's something singularly evil about a crime carried out in secret, don't you think? Especially if it is repeated on a regular basis. And especially if the victim is powerless to prevent it.

Let me explain my circumstances. I'd like you to understand.

My skull is my prison. I exist within the cranial roof, the calvarium, and the cranial base, a six-bone structure comprising the frontal, sphenoid, ethmoid, occipital, parietal and temporal. Temporal: enduring for a time only. It's a good word. It tells it as it is. I cling to this truth, because I know that one day it will be over.

When the stroke happened I knew immediately what I was dealing with. I knew what was in front of me, what kind of life lay ahead. No family, no friends. All dead, long ago. This is the great tragedy of longevity. One feels like a representative of a bygone age. No one to look out for you, no one to send a card to cheer you up, no one to comfort you in your isolation. A hundred and one years old and I might as well be from another planet, so little do I have in common with the modern world. A hundred and one and not even a telegram to look forward to. I've been there, got the T-shirt. Isn't that the expression they use these days?

All this, and a stroke to boot. Tell me, who would embrace such a prospect? Certainly not I, but my generation was brought up to grin, bear it, soldier on. If there's no choice, why rail against it? I am the age I am. The stroke happened. Some people might say I've been jolly lucky to get this far, and I suppose there is some truth in that. I could have passed away years ago, like my dear Jack.

And so here I am, trapped in my cranial gaol.

But I can think. My skull may be my prison, but my mind is my refuge, and *oh!* – how far I travel some days; back, back, back down the years, or right across the globe to revisit all the wonderful countries I have seen in my lifetime.

I can breathe.

I can see (which means I can read my newspaper – a lifeline.)

I can hear. I can tell who's coming. They say that ones remaining faculties become more sensitive, and I believe that to be true. I can easily distinguish Etta's firm tread, or Gunnel's busy scamper. And I'm certainly aware when *he* is nearby; his peculiar, lopsided gait is a sure giveaway. . .

I can suck food through a tube – when I am offered it. Aye, there's the rub, as a famous poet once said.

On a good day I might be able to tap my forefinger in

response to a question. One tap is no. Two is yes. Three is emphatic yes, four emphatic no. Continuous tapping is my emergency signal – to telegraph distress. On a bad day it's down to my eyelids. Same system. It gets me by.

So, you see, I'm locked in. All of me lives in this tiny space beneath the calvarium. A roof with no tiles, just a thin thatch of grey. Make no mistake, though, the cogs and dials are still whirring. Shall I prove it? All right, let's start with the classic poser: what day is it?

It's *Tuesday*. Yesterday was Monday, and in the evening I watched *The One Show* with Michael Flatley as the special guest. Etta wheeled me to and from the day room. She's doing extra shifts this week because she has to feed a visiting family of four. A lovely Nigerian lady, she brings me my breakfast and pops back for my tray when I've finished. Boris Johnson is the Prime Minister, and *what* a sorry mess he's making of it.

Tuesday. A red-letter day for cuisine. I will eat and drink. Tonight and tomorrow . . . is another story. But here's Gunnel. She's Swedish and her name means 'battle maiden'. It's from the old Norse, she tells me, and I must say she does look rather fierce. She's pleasant enough, although I can't entirely make her out – there's something about her. . .

'Hallo, Helen. How is it with you today?'

She bustles about the room, tidying my books, making my bed, fussing with my blanket.

'You want to keep this on your knee, yes? So, how are you? Is it good with you, today?' She glances at my arthritic hands. Nothing, not a twitch. She peers into my eyes. I focus my mind, will my finger to move. It won't. Today is not a good day. I blink twice.

Gunnel nods. 'Good. You are feeling well.'

I hesitate. Am I being honest? Am I in danger of making that all-too-common knee-jerk response to an enquiry concerning my well-being? The age-old lie: 'Oh, I'm fine, thank you.'

Of course I'm not fine. I'm paralysed. But I'm coping. *That's* how it is with me today. My eyelids twitch, open and close once. Gunnel frowns. 'Oh, not so good, then.' She sits on the bed next to me, pats my hand.

'Poor Helen. It is not fair what has happened to you.'

How should I respond? I blink once. No, it damn well isn't.

Gunnel is looking at me with concern. 'In some countries, Helen, if you wish, you may make a decision to finish. It is better, I think. My country will allow this soon, I am sure. It is bad to suffer. And I don't like to see you sad.' She takes my hand. It rests limply in hers. 'I am saying this, and

it is our secret, yes? If you want, I will help you . . . finish. I go tomorrow, leave this place after breakfast shift.'

She pauses. I wonder what's coming next.

'You know, I have an understanding about these things . . . I have drugs . . . they will help you, and I will be gone . . . no one will know.' She nods, watches me carefully. The morning sun streams through the window, catches her hair. She is pretty, in a hard kind of way. Is it her real hair? Her skin is dark for a blonde.

But have I heard her correctly? I replay the words, turn them over and over in my mind. Not much room for misinterpretation there. And then with a jolt like an electric shock I recall a column in yesterday's paper; the care-home murders. Some right-to-die vigilante is targeting care homes around the country. Police believe that the victims are fed a potent cocktail of drugs. No one has been caught. Evidence is hard to come by. Three dead so far.

I look at Gunnel. Surely not?

But, maybe. . .

I am about to blink an emphatic negative, but then I think of the weeks and months ahead, I consider this evening, tomorrow morning. I foresee long, hungry days ahead. Who was it that said 'if a window of opportunity appears, don't pull

down the shade'?

I find myself returning two blinks.

Yes.

And then three, to make sure.

'You wish? You *do*?' A sigh, a moment of reflection, then, 'All right, my lovely Helen. I will prepare for you. I come at breakfast. You will feel nothing, just sleep. You will be free.' She bends and kisses my forehead. 'And then I go to my next job. It is nice, I think, in Cambridge, There is river, and young people.' A smile. 'Our secret, yes?'

And she leaves, shuts the door gently behind her.

But Gunnel's words stay behind. They arrange themselves haphazardly on the square metre of wall in front of me until, eventually, I am able to place them in order, read from left to right, check that I have the full sense of her meaning. I think, Cambridge, yes, there will be young people. But there will be old folk too, just like me.

Later, I try to read, but I can't concentrate. My mind will not be still; the thoughts jiggle and twist, like restless children in a church service.

I'm awake early. I hear clattering from the kitchen.

I'm not a religious person, but I think I'll begin the day with a prayer. I wonder what it will feel like as the drug

takes effect?

Etta has set out the pages of my newspaper on the overbed table, bless her. She must have been as quiet as a mouse – she didn't wake me. I comb the front page, and my silent praying intensifies. I know what I'm looking for.

'Hello, Helen.'

Gunnel sounds positively cheerful. Does she enjoy this sort of thing? She must, or she wouldn't continue. It's wrong, of course. Why has she chosen this path? What trauma has she experienced to prompt her into such a drastic course of action?

I hear the tray being set down.

Am I ready?

'Would you like cereal first?'

First. The condemned woman's succour. I test my finger.

It moves.

One tap on the *Times*.

'No? OK, here we are, then. This is . . . how do you say . . . yes, for the *best*, Helen.'

She looks at me. She's holding a coffee cup, the straw protruding like an accusing finger. This is the moment. I tap a continuous rhythm.

Gunnel frowns. 'What now? You upset, Helen? You change your mind?'

One tap.

'Then what is—?'

My finger rattles on the paper. I can't control it very well, but it has the desired effect.

She looks to see where my wavering digit is pointing. A column header.

*Watch out! The police are coming to visit*

It's an article concerning door-to-door enquiries. The content is immaterial. It's the header I want her to see. She reads. Looks at me. I see the unspoken question in her eyes.

*You know who I am?*

And then the panic.

'Police? They come? But how? *Helen?*'

I can't blink any faster.

She bangs the coffee cup onto the tray. Her face is drained of colour. 'I go. I get someone else to give you, all right?'

And she leaves.

I pray again.

*Let it be him. Oh, please let it be him. . .*

Five minutes pass before I hear Colin's soft-shoe shuffle. The door opens.



'Aha. My favourite resident. And how are we this beautiful morning?'

I give thanks. Maybe there is a God.

He sits on my day chair, places the tray on his knees.

'Not up yet? Exciting day planned? No? Too bad.'

He examines my meal. 'Now, what have we this morning?

Mmm. Porridge. I love porridge.'

Colin is overweight, carelessly shaved. His blue overalls are covered with stains; I don't care to imagine their origin. But he is about to begin, and he likes me to pay attention.

'What shall we start with, I wonder?' He passes the bowl under my nose. 'Straight in, eh? Smells good.'

There is a small liquidiser on the tray to remove stray lumps. It's quick and efficient. Etta is an expert, liquidising everything from apples to puddings, patiently allowing as long as I need to suck up the life-preserving goo. I used to miss the variety of consistencies I enjoyed in my previous life, but now I'm grateful for what I can get.

But Colin doesn't use the liquidiser.

Not ever.

He digs the spoon in, crams porridge into his small, mean mouth. 'Well, you don't need it, do you, darlin'? Frankly, I reckon you could lose a bit around the old midriff. I'm not being rude, just sayin''.

The same routine, the same cruel jibes. I watch as he finishes my breakfast, picks up the coffee cup. He passes wind, giggles. 'Oops. Begging your pardon, your highness.'

I stare at the wall as I hear him drink.

'It's been fun, Helen. Catch you later.'

And with that, he is gone.

I consume the silence.

My stomach is a butterfly cage.

And then I hear, as though from a great distance, a shout, a cry of surprise. The noise of someone falling. I've heard it before – in a place like this, it's inevitable. Maisie broke her hip last month, came down with such a crash. But this is different. What follows is not commotion, but a terrible stillness.

Serenity washes through me like a rich, red wine. I read my newspaper, scan the columns for a reference to Cambridge.

A knock. I must have drifted off. My eyes open reluctantly.

'Mrs Perrin?' A man's voice.

Now Etta's voice. 'She can't speak, Detective Inspector. But she can answer simple questions. Helen, darlin', are you awake?'

I manage two sleepy blinks.

'She can tap her finger, too – if she's feelin' all right, if it's a good day for her. One for no, two for yes.' Etta smooths her cool hand over my forehead, brushes a stray wisp of hair from my eyes. 'Oh, Helen, something terrible's happened. It's Colin . . . you know, I just *can't* believe it. He was givin' me all the banter this mornin', just like he always does.' Etta sniffs, shakes her head. 'Helen, this policeman . . . he wants to ask you some questions. I've told him not to make you tired. Can you tap for him? Is it a good day?'

I tap three times.

Oh yes, Etta. Today is a *very* good day.