

## **INSIGHT**

*(Learning multiple sneezing)*

Have you ever tried putting a band round your eye for a week? We did, for fun. You know you develop other sensitivities, your senses become much sharper. Before you come to the wall or the chair or the desk, you already know it is there. We are talking of being blind to ourselves, inwardly. We are terribly aware of things outwardly, but inwardly we are blind.

**Krishnamurti** The Flight of the Eagle

We apologise. We did as best we could but most of what he did defeated us. It baffled us. It was a wild goose chase. Some of us, those that remained, wonder why you ever gave us this task. We have limited means to tell what we saw. We have even more limited means to tell what we witnessed. We picked up only bits, scraps, pieces here and there, peculiarities that struck us. Otherwise, we were often outwitted as though. No, we never thought he could have suspected us. Neither did we ever suspect that we might have been set up. Should we have done? It's hard to say now. We were not careless, and we tried not to lapse. But as we said, we had limited means. It was never for this type of work that we were trained. We expected something easier, more routine activities, more mindless. Nothing like this had ever come before. You must understand. There were times when we thought our visitor, our guest, just seemed to sense our presence.

Take the time he came out of The Replica. It was within a few days of his arrival. He had in his hand a bird; a large black squawking bird. It made a noise like a rattle. It did of course seem curious at the time that he was able to obtain a bird like this. Not only that the bird appeared tame. When he came out of the huge doors and entered the main street from the dark alley, our guest seemed to sense our presence. Are you sure that no one knew of our security mission?

We swear it was impossible for him to have seen us or have suspected someone following him. But something in the way he made for the shadows disturbed us. It was then we began to realise that he was no ordinary visitor. It was then we knew it wouldn't be easy and I apologise in advance for the gaps in our report on him. I know it is no defence, but he didn't make it easy on us either. Admittedly this is no excuse at all but your promise of an infallible training, we beg to point out, fell slightly short when dealing with this visitor in question. We were led to believe, through shadowing and tracing our victims, that all possibilities of escape had been exhausted. We were taught to think that we could cope with all, with any possible eventuality. It may have been proved otherwise here, but we stand firm. Or at least I do, now. We only did our best.

Many things disturbed us right from the beginning. First, we were afraid that we didn't have enough to go on. Often our guest would enter a café, one of the less popular ones of our city. If no one approached him, he would make no effort to order anything from the waitresses. So, he would sit. Then there was the obsession with his raincoat. He never left his coat with the doorman if he could possibly avoid it. He went to extraordinary lengths to avoid any encounter with these officials. He always had to be asked for then helped off with his raincoat. It was always a raincoat. He had many of them.

He gave the impression that he would never have volunteered his coat or indeed anything else; his scarf, his gloves, his hat. Whenever asked to give up his garment he said nothing. Throughout our whole surveillance, he has never said a word. It might have been some help, of course, if we had known that our charge were to be mute. Not that I think now it would have made any difference. Whenever addressed on buses or trams, instead of speaking he allowed a smile slowly and controllably to cover his face. It looked like mocking laughter. Then, if forced in the café, he would allow his coat to be taken away. That wasn't all. In almost every encounter, that laughter remained with him continuously.

Much of our group's time passed like this watching such moments and thinking something would happen. As I said, he never made any attempt to order in a cafe until the waitress came. You would swear at certain moments he was measuring the time it took. Only he wore no watch and never gave any indication that he was aware of the clock. When the waitress did finally arrive, he would point to something on the menu or then describe what he wanted by some motion of his hands. This started to make us laugh because in each café his play changed. Oh, of course, we were careful. He never suspected that he was being followed or that people were laughing at him. He seemed blind to any other person who might have been present.

He always chose a table where he could sit in some sort of corner. He never allowed anyone the opportunity to get behind him for some reason. And he often chose the window seats where he could sit and, out of which, stare. He stared for hours on end. Once he stared right through a riot in the old city. The café was cleared, the police came and went, and he hadn't moved his position. Curiously enough to us, the longer the waitress stayed away the happier and clearer that laughter of his

became. It unnerved us. But to be honest we have not quite been able to understand why. This was only one of many oddities we began to notice.

Sitting in a cafe his hand would go into his briefcase. He always carried a rather battered leather case. It had two handles and was ripped along the seams. First, he would take out a book. It looked like a notebook. Sometimes it would be a paperback book. We never really got close enough to see what he read. Then he would take out a piece of paper. Usually after this something else: a pen or a small silver ashtray. He never used the ashtray except as a kind of paperweight. As if he expected wind and had to hold his paper down. Then he might replace the book and stay still a moment longer. An eternity! Then he'd replace the paper. It was all done so slowly and deliberately as though. Well, we don't know what it could possibly be like.

It seemed to all of us that he lived a different time. He appeared to have nothing to do with our time nor did he seem to exist in our time. We began to think the same of the city and the country. Why had he come? Of course, this wasn't in our brief to ask such questions. We had a job to do. At first, we were bored. We expected more excitement. Terrorism had led us to expect more devious victims and visitors. We felt we were wasting our time. In the times he just stared or moved things in and out of his briefcase our group, or whoever had been following him that day, had already drunk three or four cups of coffee. And he? Often, he had still not ordered.

One favourite routine he had was of entering and choosing a table where the people had just departed. There would be empty cups and bits of cake lying on plates. Pots of tea and coffee would be left over. He would proceed to sit and, without a concern in the world it seemed to us, commenced to explore how much of the tea or coffee he could drink and how much of the cake he could eat for himself before the

table would be cleared. Quite naturally many times the waitress assumed him to be one of the people left over from the previous crowd.

Occasionally they suspected something odd but were obviously confused by his apparent ease. They rarely approached him or challenged him. The coffee, tea and cakes had been paid for. So he continued in silence. In most cafés he would also do everything possible to prevent anyone sitting at the same table. He would spread his things out on each chair. His leather briefcase he would put on one chair. His raincoat, if he had succeeded in not giving it to the doorman would be put over another chair ('draped' is the word I think they use in finer reports. Or so Rolando tells me. So, draped it is.)

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We are not only 'sniffers' as they call us in the trade. We do have something in our heads. Though, of course, we are aware that those in The Institute think otherwise. Perhaps then they should have been given this task instead of us! Here we were doing our duty, tracing our visitor's movements daily and yet it felt as if it were us who were being put to the test. Why did we get the impression that he was testing us, tormenting us and always suggesting that we could be inadequate? After all our training, here was a guest in our country sent to tell us that we could be wrong, so wrong that we didn't even consider it for one moment. I am not ashamed to admit it, but this is precisely what happened.

For instance, he would occasionally take the black bird with him to the cafe. He would hide it on another seat. Curiously during those times the bird also seemed mute. Then he would proceed to feed it on the crumbs left. And no one noticed. We stress, for one of us was always there, no one noticed. Some others may have done, of course, but none did anything. And we couldn't intervene. Were they trained also to

let things be? Really, bringing a bird into a cafe and feeding it with crumbs was not exactly what you call illegal terrorist activity. We held back.

Fortunate for us we didn't interrupt, otherwise we would not have witnessed the later events. All those things that happened up to the point where... anyway, that must come later. We have to admit it was not long before he got us all quite excited in a funny way. There were many moments when we couldn't really see what he was up to. Take the time he wanted to eat in the old part of the city. It took us quite some time to work out why he chose certain places and restaurants. And then often or not they were nearly empty which made our work much harder. This meant that he would have a table to himself, but we didn't catch on to his little system that quickly. You see what we mean about being tested. Us!

The restaurant in the old town was not one of our best. It was not one where the usual visitors go. Yet he always chose it, especially during the latter part of our surveillance. It took us ages to find out why this restaurant and not another. It was on the edge of the square. It was situated somewhere near one of the corners. The one occasion we had followed him into one of the other restaurants, somewhere near the centre of the old town we had seen him visibly disturbed. He had clutched his abdomen and was bent over double. It appeared that he wanted to vomit. He had turned quickly and disappeared into the toilet. Fortunately, it wasn't one of the locked toilets otherwise who knows what might have happened. This was not the only time we saw him clutch his stomach, bent over, in pain. And all the time he quickly surveyed the scene as though aware that he could be overseen. If he felt so, he usually found a darker place within which to get over these periods.

Far be it for me to try and explain this behaviour to you at The Institute, but it did happen to suggest something to Georges. Georges was fond of his little theories, and he was alone amongst us in suggesting that he might perhaps see the city as a body. Georges had this idea that he wanted to remain always on the edge. Hence, he chose

such restaurants. He wanted to exist on the edge of the city as if on the edge of his own body. Georges called it a pocket-suicide and said that we all had these little deaths.

We all laughed heartily at Georges' imagination. Georges wasn't hurt though. He was used to us throwing cold water on any of his ideas. When he suggested that the city could have been a womb for our visitor, we rolled on the floor. That was too much. But you see how our guest started getting inside us. Georges wasn't the only one amongst us affected by him. At first he was the only one who would admit it. Georges has always been one for that. (*I think he has even been recommended for further work demanding such sensitivity. He asked me to enquire obliquely in this Report whether anything at The Institute has moved on this.*) We are sure at The Institute you can now imagine just what we were faced with and what sort of visitor you had presented us.

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From the outset he had this habit of putting his face against windows. He would especially press his nose hard up against a window, any windows. Or at least, if he has a system for this, then we haven't been able to discover why it is some windows and not others. Even Georges came up with nothing here. One or two of us thought it might have been the colder surfaces. Like wanting air from a car window when you are about to vomit.

Whichever way we looked at it, it all appeared infantile to us. No doubt this was where he had us from the very start. But as we had been warned we gave him the benefit of any doubt. Though, God Knows, looking back one should wonder why. It was not just windows that slowed us down. There was the problem of crowds. We noticed that he would often draw aside from a crowd all going in one direction along the street and place his nose against the nearest available window. Again, remarkably no one noticed, no one paid any attention. Or was this all orchestrated? We don't

know why we expected people to notice but something in our guest's prompted suspicion. Yet he showed no awareness that he might be noticed, looked at, or even suspected. In fact he showed no sign of being present at all.

Georges said that it might be one of those well-known diseases, the type that affect people who imagine that they cannot go inside anything or any place without wanting immediately to leave it. Georges had theories about absence and unrest but none of us took them seriously. We laughed at the way Georges continually interpreted what our visitor was doing. It was probably out of embarrassment. You see we couldn't really imagine someone living in between a possible and an impossible world. This was how Georges described our visitor. But it didn't seem to explain to us his behaviour in the cafes, nor did it explain why he wanted to walk up and down the same street for hours on end. Still, what Georges said, made us think. There may just be something in all this.

*For example, I have been doing a little headwork apart from the others and I came up with the idea that our guest lived both in a beginning and an end at the same time. I know it sounds a little ugly and frankly doesn't seem to make a life, but it became easy to think of him like this. I'm not used to putting these things into words, but I thought maybe our guest just really wanted to kill time just like some of us want to kick the habit of whisky or wine because of our livers. Kick the habit! Well, it was only an idea. I must admit I didn't tell the others. I wasn't as strong as Georges and couldn't face their laughter. I hope however that The Institute will not hold it against me for telling this in confidence.*

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Then there was his silence. Not his muteness but his silence. It disturbed us at first. We were much more used to those visitors who spoke, even if they don't speak our language. We got used to it although none of us managed to come up with anything

like a suitable theory to explain it. We spent some pleasant hours, even days discussing it, whilst we took turns in watching him across tables, auditoriums, bars, streets, theatres, cinemas and street cars.

In the street cars we had to be slightly more careful than usual. Often I had the group split up only to rejoin later. We began to have our own rituals. We couldn't wait for the recount of the story of his journeys home which one of the Group would have to tell. We'd roll on the floor in laughter. It was so much beyond our understanding that we started to enjoy everything about our duties. Even everything about him. No, we weren't getting sentimental, but you must remember, most of our previous work had been so ordinary and dull that we welcomed any unusual aspects. He had what I might call rather innocently - knowing what I know now - quirks.

His silence became second nature to us. We expected it. It began to make things easier for us. More surprising was the fact that he made no possible effort at all to speak our language. Unlike most of the visitors, most of the victims that have arrived before who try to learn a few phrases and use them endlessly, he showed no desire to pick up anything. He seemed to be managing alright without any language whatsoever. He managed in the cafes, as we have said. He managed in the restaurants and in the theatres. His gestures were funny and entertaining. We don't just mean to us because most others, the waitresses and the usherettes, always managed a laugh or two at our friend's efforts.

But his silence remained unnerving. When it coincided with his laughter, there was no mistaking the evil in his intentions. We were never certain of him. There was in that smile an intention which none of us could work out. Often, this combined with those periods of fake blindness when he started closing his eyes. There was an emerging mystery about him that we had never met. Frankly, and we can now only admit it here, we began to be scared, really scared.

You see, refugee, terrorist, alien or not, he was unlike all the other guests to our country that security had asked us to follow. Everything was so normal about him and this visit and yet it wasn't. We had to amuse ourselves otherwise we feared for our sanity. We started placing bets and gambling amongst ourselves on the outcome of his visit. We placed bets as to what could possibly happen to our guest and why he had come here in the first place.

None of us imagined that he would once take a complete streetcar ride. His visit to the brothel was quite normal when compared to the streetcar ride. We couldn't all go on the ride. I detailed Georges, or perhaps it was Samuel, to accompany him. Yes, it was Samuel for I remember his story in the morning. It was a riot. It had us all in stitches. Samuel told us that he not only stayed on the streetcar for the whole circle around the outer city. But he continued passed his own stop. Samuel sensed his fear at getting out at his own home stop. Said it was familiar. It always happened to people living in those cells, Samuel said. And although we had one of our more attractive colleagues, Simone I think it was, situated to keep an eye out from the adjoining high-rise block, she was never able to obtain much more in the way of revealing our guest's fear. Of course, there was no way she could have been seen, so we can just assume he was extra careful until he arrived back at his own cell.

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Apparently, according to Samuel, he took out various things from his pocket during the streetcar ride and changed them around. Then he would start altering seats.

Subtly, of course, as though he was aware that such an action might be looked on rather unfavourably. But he was never nervous. Or so Sam said and it seemed to be reinforced by our other members.

Sam was not sure, but he thought that our friend occupied every seat of the streetcar during one complete circuit around the outer city. At one point Sam told us there were so few people on the car that he had to skip into the back car to avoid becoming conspicuous. This was a regular route and so had one of those double cars. Fortunately, Sam was able to follow everything from the back car without causing any suspicion. At other moments, in between changing seats, Sam said our guest just appeared to fix his head and stare through the windows.

As the streetcar goes deep into the countryside surrounding our city for a short period before entering the city proper again, the streetcar was the only light in a vast darkness. At these times, our visitor wanted to walk from the front of the car to the back. Sam was unable to make it out clearly, but he did see the visitor walk to the front, stop, turn, and then walk slowly the length of the car to the back window. Then Sam had to be careful. The visitor just stared right through the back streetcar down the receding metal lines which quickly darkened. Sam had to hide himself and he obviously missed a crucial part of our visitor's experience. What it was we will never know.

The whole trip according to Samuel took a good two hours. Asked what he thought the visitor was up to, Sam replied that he was possibly reliving his birth and walking into his mother's womb. That caused a riot! You see Sam was joking with Georges and his theories. Only the rather comical thing about it all was that Georges thought it was an excellent theory, not to mention a plausible reason for our visitor's behaviour. Well, this creased us all finally. Every time the visitor took the street car, members were fighting to be the one who witnessed all this. As you can imagine, I had to take personal control of this hysteria and operate a rota system. I was aware that our

subject was getting a little out of hand but I didn't realise how powerless I was to control the situation. But more of that later!

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As our subject's silence made it easier for us, or so we thought, our own imagination seemed to start running away with us. We have no excuse here. It may have been caused by the number of tedious exercises we have all been sent on recently in the name of security and terrorism. Frankly, we had all got tired of this little censorship detail and were all relieved to get our teeth into something slightly extraordinary. Alright, we admit it now, something totally incomprehensible. But the visitor was taking over us. Amongst us he was getting known as a character. We even began fighting over our duties and the possibility to be the one following him. Of course, he wasn't doing strange things all the time.

For instance, his visits to the brothel seemed quite normal. There, things went as with most visitors, or that's what it seemed. It is Albert's account that we have to rely on here. It was Albert who was detailed to follow him. Albert knew the lady in question and found out all that there was to know. As usual Albert picked up our guest at his cell after Simone had been on home duty during the night. He followed him to the bus. Nothing untoward happened on the bus. Usually the visitor was totally absorbed on the bus, either in the worn remains of the maps situated in the front part of most buses, or then he stared out of the bus to the left. He always stared from the same position through a very small slit of available window. The buses as you know are mostly barricaded now for security purposes.

Albert reckoned he couldn't see much, to which Georges replied this was precisely the point. Oh, there was one unusual incident during these trips. It concerned a woman who happened to be standing besides the visitor on his right. He offered his seat to her. She refused. Albert said that they had then embraced in a manner that

would have reminded us of old lovers. Hardly the action of unknown people who just happened to find themselves travelling on a bus at the same time!

Albert added that this was the sort of thing that appealed to him too. He felt he could understand the visitor somehow. We have to take his word for it. Albert said something about hating it if women talk in bed. I'm sorry that's not quite to the point but it does indicate how we were all in our own ways being taken over by our nameless friend. It shows also just what sort of a group you have given me to run this security operation.

The visitor would always step into the brothel after a period of long reflection at something above the doorway. By this time, we had all got used to these long pauses. It seemed he didn't know what to do: whether to go forwards, backwards, upwards. Downwards, Sam joked, but that was Sam! Perhaps it was this in-between period. Strange, but I felt he wanted to live in such moments.

It was just as well that Albert tipped the whore otherwise we would never have known what went on. He was there until dark. We couldn't believe it and yet Albert couldn't get anything more out of the woman except that they made love several times. Albert thought there must be more to it. He had to pay quite a lot.

*Incidentally our advances do not cover this type of enquiry. Fortunately, Albert was prepared to pay out of his own pocket.*

The whore, it's hard to think of her as a whore, but anyway she told Albert of a spasm that ran through the visitor's body when she held him. Albert noticed that she was plainly touched and affected by his visits. She said he was no ordinary visitor. He was so afraid of making love and yet would have stayed inside her all day. As you can imagine we couldn't make this out. We are rather inclined to think nothing special

of all this. He fucked her, if you'll pardon my language, and he fucked her again, and again. And he was fucked. What more could there be to it?

We suspected the woman in question, the whore, was holding something back from us. For this purpose, you understand, and for this purpose only Albert slept with her. It didn't help much. His only comment was that she talked too much. We thought this was the idea. She muttered something about the visitor being much better than all the others because he didn't say a word. She said all this whilst Albert was trying to make love to her. Albert takes his work very seriously. We admit; it takes all sorts.

The whore went on to tell Albert that she would like to contact the visitor again and asked Albert to arrange this. She was struck by our guest who hadn't noticed a thing. As far as the visitor was concerned, Albert felt his visits were just filling in time between midday and evening. It shows how much we knew. Each time he stepped out of the brothel and looked back up towards the doorway, there was the laughter again forming on his face. A smile, Albert felt, given for our benefit. He knew? No, he couldn't possibly have known. Albert was so careful. But it makes you think. Did he know?

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We even started thinking that all was returning to normal - whatever normal was - until more alarming symptoms showed up. That was when he began closing his eyes. A sort of fake blindness. He began walking the street as if blind. He would stop at moments to press his face against cold surfaces, shop windows, the sides of parked cars.

Before we got used to him, his daily trips to the theatre baffled us. They were regular and seemed precisely timed. Often around dusk: either before, during, or after dusk. The significance of this has so far escaped us. More remarkable to us was that he understood nothing that he heard. He didn't understand a word. But it wasn't only

that. It was - how should I put it - when inside and the lights dimmed his eyes would close. But all the time we had this impression that he wasn't sleeping. All of us felt this.

We took turns following him into the theatres and performances. All of us agreed that, although his eyes were closed, it didn't resemble sleeping. As Georges pointed out more than once, there was still that smile across his face. As though he was involved elsewhere during the performances. As if, Georges suggested, he had left his own body. This spooked most of us. Frequently he would then open his eyes, grimace, appear to be in pain and then close them immediately. But it was only towards the end of the second period of surveillance that we began pooling our observations on all this in any serious way. We still had nothing more than these simple repetitious patterns of behaviour.

These performances began boring us and it was only Sam and Georges who continued to volunteer for this part of the duty. The darkness upset most of us and as for the performances. They were just, how could we put it, positively strange. Either he had picked these performances himself or then had them chosen by The Academy. But they were mostly distasteful performances. I remember the one I went to, a bit too much happening on the stage for my liking. Too many people coming and going! Too many long words and jumps here and there, no story at all. You never knew where you were. I couldn't understand anything. I couldn't make out what they were saying, and I'm supposed to speak this language! Some secret code no doubt. Or this is what we suspected at first. Could he have been receiving special information through performances which he pretended not to understand?

Meanwhile our friend was either smiling in his fake blindness or watching the occasional piece of action. In the performance I witnessed there was a point where they took out the character's eyes. That was too much for me. I had to turn away. It seems there are so many things where this happens today but it's certainly not for

ordinary folks like me. Frankly, I couldn't make anything out of these visits at all.

Why did he go to this darkness every day? What was this theatre to him?

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It was then that I thought perhaps he had the right idea. Shutting his eyes I mean. He was avoiding most of what happened in the theatre. So I too began closing my eyes. I started trying these small experiments. But for all of us it was worse. We understood the words. We couldn't escape the sense that no one was making. At least the visitor had this advantage. He could escape all this language. And if he closed his eyes, it looked as if could escape almost everything else as well. But where was he?

You might not believe it, but we began envying him for this. We thought he might have something more to him than we could ever understand. I decided personally not to attend these performances again. Eventually only Sam and Georges went. It had disturbed all the others too much. Of course, Sam and Georges both loved these duties. They usually don't get sent to such places and they certainly would not have gone otherwise. Georges continued to put forward his womb theory which then began interesting Sam. We didn't take much notice of this, but I began realising that I had never seen them take so much interest in their work before. None of the other visitors had interested them. They were positively transformed. They argued with each other continually, always trying to go further than the other, always proposing something absurd. And whenever one proposal was made, the absurdity of it appeared normal as the next absurdity took over.

It was unstoppable, though I suspect the Institute will think I should have controlled it. No doubt those up there will think I should have seen what was coming. Sam said all this security was a case of insight. When the eyes had gone, everything was clearer. I must admit I still haven't been able to work that out fully. And here I could

be speaking for most of the others. But there was no harm done. At least not at that stage. He never suspected that we were there.

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Once, and it must have been early on because we began to ignore these little fits later, he rushed out of a hotel and thrust his arms around a lamp-post. Perhaps he thought it a woman. I think it was Rolando who noticed this. At first, we were taken aback as most people might have been. Visitors were never supposed to do these sorts of things. But our friend had this knack of recovering quickly. He would appear as though no other person would notice or even take an interest in what he did. He was careful.

After the lamp-post affair Rolando said he followed him to The Academy. You know that all aliens must register and our friend had not done this yet. He stopped in at one of the Institutes but seemed, to Rolando, only to stare at a notice board before clutching his stomach and leaving. Rolando noticed a woman of extraordinary beauty staring at him. However, this time, he didn't stay in the Academy. He took one look and exited.

Rolando coped with his work by imitating the visitor. He thought it fun and joined in. You should forgive him for this, but we all had to invent ways to remain unaffected. Rolando later suggested that his gesture of putting his head to one side and feeling the back of his head with his hands must have had something to do with a more extreme form of headache. Rolando suffers from migraine as you know. He has his pet theories on why some people call them migraines and some call them bad headaches. It made us think. All of us.

A strange period began. The incomprehensibility of the visitor alarmed us. We began putting forward rather extreme ideas in an attempt to explain his behaviour.

No, in actual fact looking back it was our attempt to remain in control. We were so easily depressed by our work though we did have some humour left despite what The Institute thinks of us. We like to think that we were not so innocent and naive. Put yourselves in our situation. What would you have done?

We did get carried away. We began thinking we could surprise some of you up there at The Institute. Sam had this one idea. To me it was rather dubious and slightly far-fetched, but we went along with it. He had done a spot of reading since following our friend. He said our friend resembled a character from a book he had recently read. This character talked to ducks in a cemetery whilst he pushed a bicycle around in the rain. He doesn't remember the title, not that I imagine you would want to check up on Sam's idea. Myself I couldn't see any connection and neither, for once, could Georges. Georges had, after all, earlier been the first to agree with Sam's other theories. But since their visits to the theatre some rivalry has begun. Georges and Sam began outbidding each other with their silly ideas and theories. The more difficult our guest became the more absurd their theories became.

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Anyway, it broadens the mind! That's the way I see it. Incomprehensibility does that. But this didn't stop us laughing at someone talking to ducks in a cemetery whilst pushing a bicycle around in the rain. Everything seemed to be all right. It all seemed to be fitting into a picture, slotting together, though none of us knew which picture. And none of us knew why it had to be raining. There was always something that we could not agree on.

Take his sneezing. There was a day when he had been invited to a lecture in the theatre down by the river. Albert and Philippe followed him there and clearly noticed something was wrong with his head. They saw him put one hand to his temple and the other to the back of his head. The Migraine Test, Rolando had informed us later. Perhaps he was right, we couldn't say. But the sneezing?

Albert said it was always between six and eight times. Regular as clockwork. Albert even had us try it to convince us. It wasn't easy. Not one of us could manage eight sneezes. Rolando managed five and said it was impossible to do more with a migraine. Sam managed six. It was Philippe who managed seven, but only after using pepper which most of us thought was cheating.

So obsessed were we by this that when we met in the late evenings to report on the day's events, we would begin by our sneezing exercises. It became more than a little joke for us. We even contemplated, well actually it was Sam's idea, inviting our guest one evening. Sam thought he could demonstrate to us his sneezing technique. The visitor fascinated us that much.

The lecture was apparently a bore. Albert and Philippe decided to watch from behind the curtains. *No doubt this was when the affair started. We had suspected for some time after Albert's visit to the brothel. But that's another report. I understand Rolando is preparing a dossier on Infidelity for The Institute.* The lecturer babbled for well over an hour. Supposed to be famous in his field. He might have talked for two hours because Albert and Philippe left to follow our friend. He had obviously had enough of the name-dropping. People none of us had heard of, Kovskies, Zitskies, Mnemonens, Gards, Albert said. Most of the audience had fallen asleep and the visitor had once again closed his eyes until he left.

Once outside he seemed to drink the air and sway into the wind. He opened his mouth upwards towards the sky and stood there making strange gulping motions with his mouth. They then followed him to one of his favourite cafes where he performed the same routine. The usual. Empty table. Crumbs left over. Bags and clothes over all seats. Didn't order. Stayed for hours. Or so we thought.

This time, instead of emptying his bag and pockets and changing all the objects from time to time, he started staring at his pen. He held it in front of his eyes like a huge needle and remained staring at it. Philippe and Albert were admittedly a little irresponsible here. They both took a spoon and did the same. Only they laughed so much I am sure the visitor must have noticed. I reprimanded them for this music hall lapse. Apparently, he noticed nothing.

They then followed him to another bar. During the journey through the city they passed a street band. The visitor was fascinated by the banjo. It's hard to see why. The idiot - we started calling him that playfully you understand, we never meant harm or disrespect - well, he started attacking some posters that were pasted up on the wall near the band. Frederick took over surveillance here. His story is peculiar to say the least. None of us knew what or who to believe. Frederick, the idiot or just folly!

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Most of the events cannot be explained. Frederick said that the visitor walked past the band and posters several times. One poster of a chair seemed to obsess our idiot more than anything else. When he thought no one was looking, and it is this we cannot believe, Frederick said he approached the poster and took out a huge knife from somewhere. He proceeded to slash with clear expert strokes what would have been the upholstery of the chair. Now, you may think this was all right. Most of us anyway have always wanted to do this in our city especially during the period when our World was under siege from The East.

Naturally it is surprising that no one else noticed but we only have Frederick's word for this. Foreigners and visitors were being followed all over the city and attacks on their cells and clubs were not unusual. But that wasn't all. Frederick said that from

behind the poster the insides of a chair began falling to the ground. How did he know this? Then it all got out of hand. The idiot, our gentle cretin – you must understand our terms of endearment for him, began slashing all seven posters and before anyone knew it, all sorts of things were swimming out over the ground. Again no one looked. Frederick said that the band played on and the banjoist continued collecting the money. The strange thing was the banjoist never ever played his banjo.

We are inclined to think that Frederick exaggerated all this. He could also have been drinking. We have had problems like this before. There were traces of cognac (as always) on his breath. So, although extreme, we felt we couldn't do anything against the visitor for this. His parole, you see, hadn't really been broken in so many words. I know he had destroyed vital property and some of the art of our glorious society, but it wasn't really the action of a maniac. Cretin yes, maniac no! Idiot yes, terrorist no!

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I did at this stage suggest a tightening of the watch. We were to remain vigilant but still distant. I never sent Frederick on his own again. You see Frederick's theory (and I know he has filed his own Report to The Institute) was amusing but hardly convincing. He claimed that everyone had a right to stupidity. He claimed this of Democracy, of Solidarity. That it was a sort of holiday. Every society, country and person had 'to go lulu', Frederick said, for a period of time. And everyone then would feel much better. It got rid of a natural tiredness, an inevitable boredom, Frederick claimed. All the world had to take a breather, though at different times.

We didn't understand what Frederick meant here but assumed he was taking his own breather at the time the idiot was slashing the poster. At least I saw it like that, and I was still the leader at that time. I asked Georges and he agreed. We decided to say no more about it and gave both Frederick and the idiot the benefit of the doubt.

Please remember, we only called him *the idiot* playfully. I suspected Frederick was the real idiot. (*Just where did he do his training and why was mine the unfortunate division that ended up with such a lunatic?*)

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None of us noticed what was happening to us. Each in our own way was affected by the visitor. It changed our work. It no longer appeared work to us. I found each member volunteering for duty, turning up early to follow the visitor. Georges and Sam always accompanied him to the theatre, as I said. Albert went wherever he thought a chance of having a tryst with a lady. (*Don't they use such a word in fine reports? I have been trying to improve myself.*) Simone stayed behind the curtains at the last streetcar stop where his cell was located. She dreamed of playing a prostitute and seducing the visitor. Rolando wanted to follow the visitor if he ever saw signs of his head playing up. Rolando had, at that time, begun a study on migraine and security. Rolando saw some connections between pain and censorship that most of us didn't even feel.

As you can see, we were never short of volunteers. Georges always wanted to follow him into churches as well as theatres and Frederick, well none of us understood Frederick as I have said. He just seemed to be completely insane in his own way. But there was room for all in our division. And I? Well, I just tried to keep some order. But funnily enough, word got round about our division and the visitor. We started getting enquiries from other security forces and surveillance groups asking if they could come and work with us. They had heard of an interesting character. Their own parolees seemed to be the more ordinary, dull kind. Immediately we became the elite. It makes you think doesn't it, if you see what I mean.

After the slashing of the posters, a rather interesting incident occurred. Frederick only remembered it later. He had at first thought it had no relevance for the Report. Before the visitor had left the bar which he had entered in some uncertainty, an incident occurred which might have been his fault. We are all at a loss to know why Frederick was not clearer about this. Surely something obvious must have happened in the bar.

One of the waitresses, the prettiest one according to Frederick and also obviously to the visitor, suddenly ripped off her apron, flung it down in disgust and left the bar. The visitor followed soon after. Frederick said that he, the visitor that is, had possibly put his hand on the waitress's breast. The left one, Frederick said, though how he knew this and was so unclear about the rest none of us could work out.

Questioned further, Frederick thought that the cretin must have touched some part of the woman's body but he wasn't sure which. Naturally Frederick might have been lying or then had invented the whole scene. The idiot might just have taken the waitress's wrist in a rather sad gesture of expressing his loneliness and liking for her. This caused a scene if we are to believe Frederick. It was as if all the others in the bar were jealous. This was when the visitor decided to leave too. By the mood of the others in the bar it looked as if they might lynch our guest. This we cannot believe of our own society, but Frederick is adamant. The visitor seemed to have no idea what was going on and was as far from everything as he usually was. Even the Door Supervisor, as they like to be called now, realised and threw his raincoat, scarf and hat after him into the street. He would probably have left without them. *(This was just like the cretin. If he had given up his coat, hat and scarf then he would willingly leave them behind. It was as if he felt contaminated, Georges said.)*

As far as we know these two, our guest and the waitress, never met again. But it wasn't the first instance of something going on with a waitress. No one came up with any more theories about this incident. For some reason, it became taboo.

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It must seem as though I am giving the impression that we were always joking about our friend, our little cretin, making gentle suggestions and innuendoes about his life and purpose in our country. We were. But it wasn't always the case, and we did have other things to think about. Believe it or not, we were not obsessed that much. And speaking of women, we might as well cover another incident. We are stepping a little out of sequence here but for purposes of putting forward our side of the story it seems a better way.

I apologise for this slight inconvenience, I know how particular they are at The Institute in relation to Reports, and our group has been one for trying to make its Reports always if anything interesting. Considering how dull the visitors have been lately this has not been easy. I know at times we have taken a little licence, but we've felt it necessary. And before you jump to conclusion, we have never fabricated anything. You know how we hate things that haven't really happened. We were always taught in the training camps to distrust anything that has not happened to us personally. In the group we have always discussed what we saw and felt with each other. Only then, as you know, do we include something if it seems plausible and meets the approval of the majority in the group. We worked the same way with this visitor. It is the fairest way we know. One we were trained to respect.

Yes, the other incident. It was Albert and George who followed him that particular day. This day as it happened followed another where there had also been an incident in a cafe. But first things first. This incident happened in a bookshop. It was the erotic scenes that worried us. Georges and Albert are usually both good at erotic encounters but this one had them concerned. Before Albert met Georges that day he had already followed our guest to the bus. He had made the journey from his cell to the bus, over a quarter of a mile, with his eyes closed.

This fascinated Albert and he began demonstrating to us how our friend did it. He put his hand out in an arc, always in an arc, to see if anything obstructed his path. He didn't use a white stick then at all. This we also started to practise ourselves. This and the sneezing. And I can tell you, if you have never tried being blind, then it is something you should try. It is far from easy. Our admiration grew for our crazy visitor. None of us have as yet have perfected the art of walking out of the room blind, let alone walking from one's own front door to the bus stop. On that day Albert said his smile was acute. It was early afternoon. (*We never saw him in the mornings. We have a theory about that too.*)

Cunning, Albert said he looked, unconcerned, as though congratulating himself for getting this far. This far? we asked Albert. This far in life supposedly! Or could it be this far in our country as a visitor? It is remarkable now, is it not, how little there was to notice about him and yet how much of his visit has stuck in our minds?

The incident I am trying to tell you about took place in the old town. He had made his way there after alighting from the bus near The Grand Hotel. It was a little walk from there. We were surprised that he had not been to the old town earlier as we were

already by then, I think, in the second stage of his parole. From our experience we have observed that most visitors very early on in their visits go to the old town. Even if just for the remaining churches. It is also a popular place for the visitor with many bars, cafes and restaurants.

This visitor, however, never once showed any interest in these places and if it had not been for this visit to the bookshop, as Albert pointed out, he might never have gone to the old town at all. Strange, we thought. He showed no interest in buying any of the available information on the old town.

Most visitors rush to buy the very reasonably priced picture books and little objects that remind them that they have visited us. This visitor was obviously different. We were dealing with someone special. Long ago we abandoned any possibility of expecting the normal dull routine. After all, we were not trained to put interest where interest didn't exist. We were surveillance group members, highly trained, special forces. We knew what those thugs in the Culture Ministry think of us. But frankly we, too, never bothered with this part of town either. The prices were high, the culture was artificial, the visitors were rude, the events were meaningless and the women unfriendly. Why should we be surprised that our visitor didn't want to visit our heritage? In fact, to be blunt about it, we didn't give a tinker's cuss about the old town. All we were interested in by now was this visitor himself.

On this day, Albert and Georges followed him, as I said, to the bookshop. They seemed to have witnessed an extraordinary scene. Our friend had only been about four minutes in the company of the woman from the bookshop when he must have fainted. Perhaps it had been a fit. We cannot be sure as neither Georges nor Albert could quite get close enough to follow the scene with any detail without being

noticed. Georges immediately said it must have been something to do with his mother, and that it showed the visitor wanted to make love with someone impossible. How he worked that out none of us were sure. But one of our new members, one of those we accepted upon application, Stanislaw, said it was more a fear of the predatory. Only laughter followed that suggestion.

Predatory! None of us knew what the word quite meant, whilst all thought we did. We were out of our depth. This extraordinary visitor had attracted a completely different type of security official and Stanislaw was one of them. Suave, slightly insane but erudite, Stanislaw began lifting us all above our usual infantile reactions and titter. It seemed that most of what he said could have been true. Looking back now, it probably was. However, when he said that the woman in the bookshop could have been a preying mantis (he must have looked this up in a book) the joke seemed to have gone too far. Woman? A preying mantis? An endangered species, Stanislaw said.

There was no truth in this we thought. But we dismissed it too quickly. We dismissed it before we could even think about it because events in our country had taken over. We were no longer ourselves. Carrying out our own orders and looking after our own interests we were lost. It was Rolando who suggested that this outburst by our friend was mere epilepsy. Mere epilepsy, he said. And we bought this. We bought this precisely because we couldn't anticipate the future anymore.

Rolando said it was normal for sufferers of migraine to attempt to re-enact their births. And we, all of us, even Stanislaw eventually, fell for this extravagance.

Everyone except, that is, Georges. Georges, as you have guessed by now, was sometimes impossible, I don't mind telling you.

But this wasn't all at the bookshop. It was the thing that happened next. The kiss. Strange as it may seem this excited us. After what seemed like hours of walking slowly from one of the old squares to the other, back and forth, the two of them, our guest and the woman from the bookshop, stopped. Her hands were inside his hands. They never looked at each other for a second. The woman appeared frightened. Possibly the aftermath of the fit had scared her. But, according to Albert and George, there was nothing, absolutely nothing happening in The Square.

The troops were absent. No riot police were present. The clergy had disappeared. No one was out. Dusk had come. Some bells, admittedly, were ringing but these could hardly be taken for imminent danger. It was, all in all, they thought, perfectly harmless. Neither Albert nor Georges could make out the next move.

The woman clutched at our guest, viciously, according to Georges. She dragged him into the darkness where they seemed to molest each other. In the darkness and only watching the silhouettes, Georges said they clawed, spat, tore and finally embraced each other. It was the unusual ferocity for people who had never met before that surprised Albert and Georges. Albert played it down. He said they kissed only. But Georges wanted to make more of it, as Georges would. Georges suggested that in their debauchery they had planned to go further than they had ever gone before. This, according to Georges' view of the erotic world, was normal for two unknown people. Especially for two unknown people, Georges added.

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Well, that was what Georges made of the incident. We laughed but there was unease in our laughter. What if they had only kissed passionately, without this terror? What if we had invented it all? I couldn't give this insight much thought. I didn't want to give it much thought. Perhaps Albert was on the right track here because he said it stopped as quickly as it had started. The two of them were back in the Square almost before they had time to hide themselves again. It was only at this point that I began suspecting my colleagues' reports. Incomprehensibility invites the imagination to step out of line. Each one of them began trying to explain everything they saw. And everything they didn't see.

As to be expected, Georges went further than most. Georges wouldn't stop trying to tell us that all this had something to do with the Alien's relationship to God. By this he meant his denial of God. He even went as far as suggesting this the reason the visitor came to our country. He may have something there. We all know how much our copies of the originals were being admired all over the world. We would soon be in a position where the world would forget the originals and think that we had been responsible from the very beginning.

Not that any of us could care about this of course, we had other things to worry about. Most of us had lost our families and partners. Being employed by the Institute had taken most of our time and, frankly, it had begun destroying our lives.

Oh, I know what you are thinking. Why, why, did we not get out of it sooner? Why did we not recognise the disaster ahead of us? It's easy to say that now isn't it. Especially from your position.

Georges was the only one who warned me about this situation and I'm sorry now that I paid no attention to him. More than once had I given others the chance with the visitor because I thought Georges was monopolising him. But his idle speculations were finally not idle. By then, it was too late.

This is not to say that we ever forgot we had a job to do. Stanislaw and Georges would go into a corner. They began isolating themselves, sulking a little because we would give no credence to their theories about the visitor. How wrong we were to laugh about their preying mantis and God ideas. But you can never say that they were not interested in their work even though they did carry it a little too far.

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But back to the incident and Albert. What followed then was a little unclear. The visitor and the woman ran along the darker streets. They would stop, freeze and all clung to each other. Albert said he couldn't keep up. These embraces resembled no other. At least none that we have been trained to watch and follow. And in all the visitors we have trailed we've never seen such embrace. Georges went on again a little too much. He said they were embraces of death. That was hard to believe. Not because it wasn't true but because none of us understood if it was true just what an embrace of death could be.

Fools we were, we didn't know what it meant. Our understanding was out of control. We didn't know why we did this job anymore. If only we'd just given Georges a little more credibility instead of our inane impotent laughter! Some of the others might still be here now if we'd done that. Albert shocked us then. He said it was clear. One of them, the visitor or the woman, would die. Georges agreed but added a terrifying thought. He said that one of us would have to die too. He seemed certain of it.

We were scared. All of us were literally terrified. None of our training had helped us for this situation. Suddenly our own terror surfaced. And you know what was

behind it. We realised without speaking to each other that we might lose our visitor. We knew that we had long ago lost control and had not kept up with him. Now it felt we were being put through yet another test. This time, the last test.

It wasn't that the visitor outwitted us. He had done everything and nothing in order to encourage us not to take him seriously. We had gone along with this and found ourselves facing death. Sam agreed with this when he thought back to the streetcar. And none of our little stories and theories, our wonderful interpretations discussed over poker and vodka late at night would help us now.

I am not certain when our minds began going. The moment Albert said that they along with one of us would die, we froze. We fell apart. We entered a coma. None of us could believe it. We thought the Security Divisions were immortal. We thought our power was greater than the artists. We thought we could out-thug those thugs at The Culture Institute. But none of us knew how it felt to be taken by this feeling of death. I have never seen a group change so much and so quickly. That our visitor could die touched us more than anything we had done in our distinguished careers destroying other people's reputations.

Simone and Philippe began crying. It was unusual for them to show any emotion towards men. We were moved. We were all moved. You know I really think our group wanted the visitor, this gentle cretin as we had come to call him, to remain alive. We loved his quirks. We loved his idiocies. We laughed at him and we cried for him. We loved his uselessness, yet we were attached to it. We loved him and we knew nothing of him.

If this incident and many others like it had been an embrace of death, though none of us really believed in this stuff, we were not going to take any chances. That much of our discipline and training survived. At the risk of losing our positions and jobs we made a pact together. At the next sign of danger or torment to our little friend we would interrupt, we would intervene. We could not let it happen. This was strictly against our training of course as I am well aware being the Senior Officer. The visitor meant that much to us. Intervention was the word, you understand, at the next sign of danger.

You do understand, don't you? We didn't have that much to go on but we had to act. The day before the fit in the old town, for example, some rather curious incidents had occurred in the Cafe Europa, at The Museum of Disaster and in the markets of the city. Philippe had followed him once and had seen something strange develop from an event in the Cafe. A pattern emerged which we didn't understand. It could only be connected to cafes. The Cafe Europa orchestra had been particularly bad that day, Philippe had said. Perhaps the noise was unbearable. Whatever it was, our guest prostrated himself in front of yet another waitress. His arms were wide. The waitress, clearly quite scared at this irrational behaviour, ran into the kitchen and, Philippe wasn't sure why, began throwing meat and bones at our guest. From the kitchen door she hurled literally the contents of the kitchen.

Philippe said the moment was extremely funny as she had no idea why our guest got down on his knees in the first place. The waitress it transpired was unnecessarily brutal. The visitor hardly looked like a lady-killer. That, most of us agreed. It was unimaginable as he moved only in shuffles, in darkness with his head bowed very low. How this visitor could have attracted anyone we could never make out. Even his age was ambiguous. We never really knew if he was middle aged, old or then an

infant. He acted at times in the day as if he were all these and more. We tried guessing his age, but we disagreed. We narrowed it down to somewhere between forty and seventy. But it was certainly hard to tell.

That was the trouble everything, just everything about him, was hard to tell. The quiet surface was so unsuspecting. This is what made following him each day difficult. Suddenly, as Philippe discovered just like the rest of us, she would find him in a cafe sitting totally apart, unnoticed, with nothing to do with the world.

Or then, within seconds, he was involved in a scene with meat and bones being thrown at him. And all this time, no words, no reaction even when the restaurateurs, the waitresses and the other clients hurled abuse after abuse at him. Dwarf, they shouted at him. Stupid dwarf. But no reaction.

No reaction at all. He seemed to have all the luck, all the possibilities of human error, without any of the usual worries that accompany them. And he didn't seem to show any reaction to anything that might befall him. When Philippe explained this, I didn't understand what she meant. But it seems the others did. They were handling these events with much more sense than I was. More than once, I would have said all this behaviour was irresponsible. I would probably have had him dealt with in the usual way for such a person. To the hospital or the camp. But something made me hold back. Was I becoming human? And we didn't like it that others called him 'dwarf, stupid dwarf'.

I think you can see why he became a character for us. He still had no name. We knew nothing of him, and we couldn't have laughed more at his unbelievable behaviour.

But we loved him. Somehow without him ever realising, he was entertaining us all. No one failed to respond to his day. We sneezed, we went blind, we pressed our faces against cold surfaces, just as he had sneezed, gone blind, pressed his face against cold surfaces. We walked blindly across squares in the hope of trying to understand what was happening to us. In the hope of understanding why we did these things. How much of it worked for us I cannot say.

As for myself, I must be the dumb one in the group. The others caught on to it all much quicker. Though they certainly weren't as good as him they made an admirable effort to keep up. I am absolutely satisfied as to the performance of the whole group on this particular job. I am, though, disappointed with my own effort. If anyone is to blame for what happened, then it must be me.

Philippe put forward an idea that the visitor was not only feigning blindness, but he faked muteness and also deafness. Peculiar? Well, having seen the visitor more than once nearly step into the path of cars without showing any sign of hearing the horn or the cursing of the drivers, she concluded his deafness might be real. No one can remain so concentrated, so separate and live such an existence without meaning it. The visitor continued walking whenever he could. When he went into museums or galleries the abuse from the Door Supervisors and the Curators was so bad, Philippe said, that you would have thought he would react. Instead, he kept walking. He acted

as though nothing had touched him. There was a purity about him that Philippe thought so innocent. No I don't know why she was called 'Philippe'.

Why did he go to museums and galleries? Why only to the Museums of Disaster and Catastrophe for there were still other museums in the country? We don't know. Nobody knew why he went anywhere. Even when he began curling himself up into a little ball and making himself as small as possible, the usual theories really didn't apply. Perhaps it was this that caused the anger at the museums. He had a terrible time with officials. All officials. More than once, he was chased away.

He even went to one of our largest hospitals and did the same things. Only he must have picked the wrong time and the wrong place. He was taken into the operating theatre before realising that he was not the person intended for the operation. This angered the auxiliaries and the porters. Our guest was suddenly faced with a barrage of old bones and human fragments. It seemed the whole contents of the day's operations waiting for incineration were hurled at the visitor.

Philippe thought this funny though none of the others did. We still laughed. Probably because we could not admit to each other, despite the pact, that we were out of control. Imagine the picture: the visitor running away from the hospital with bones flying at him from all directions, hurled by auxiliaries and porters.

We began to see things Philippe's way. In secret, though, we suspected Philippe of falling in love with our guest. Suddenly, it seemed more than possible that all of us were affected. There was something fatally wrong with our thinking. Our imagination

was to blame. None of us could believe Philippe. Or then we didn't think our guest capable of going that far.

What else did we expect?

It's hard to say. We were breathless. We all needed a rest and yet our friend was emerging each morning as though nothing in the world had happened the day before. Each day appeared to him as the first day on earth. Christ! if you don't mind me saying, it was getting strange. It was beyond a joke. I had a terrible feeling that it all had a meaning. And it seemed that I was going to be the last one to know. I was frightened, this time for myself. Everyone but me started to understand the Grand Plan. Everyone but me! I felt left out, useless, redundant in my own group, in my own country.

Jesus Maria, how was it going to end? How were we to put a stop to it? What was the limit of our own duty and security missions in this situation? Our flippancy, as Sam pointed out one evening when we discussed all this, was no longer a match for his. Our lives couldn't keep up, even though we had thought of ourselves as terribly modern. We were so devastatingly modern, yet we had failed. Our visitor had gone further than we had ever gone. He was dragging us with him. Suddenly there was no way back. It started to tell on us. We were involved in madness greater than ourselves. A madness that made us suffer for him. Stanislaw said this was impossible. Georges, always the sovereign one, said that this was exactly what made it possible.

Possible or impossible? The rest of us stared at Georges and Stanislaw. Surely either something was impossible or it wasn't? We began to have nothing to say to each other. Silence was natural. We decided as best we could to remain calm, go with it and try and watch it out to the end. I think we all thought it would resolve itself. We all thought the visitor would go away. Just vanish into thin air.

Our theories for everything he did had no future and they had no effect on the visitor. The most impossible thing was that we began to think we had imagined it all. And us, so earth-bound, so real! We, the security officers, were now losing our lives. We had to step outside ourselves once more and think again if it was not too late.

Of course it was too late. It was probably the visit to The Academy that sealed our fate. I assume the Professor in question has already sent his report to the Institute but the rumours of a pistol shot and then the Professor's disappearance seem to haunt us. None of us could explain it. Rolando had been given the duty that day and had followed the visitor to the Academy. He was rather used to these types of duties and knew his way around. Which was obviously more than our friend did.

From the entry through the usual heavy curtains, he began to hug the walls. Rolando noticed how he always kept to the edge of the stairs. He would pause each time he had to turn a corner. Funnily enough it resembled just the type of caution we are trained to take when following victims. And it certainly resembled someone who thought himself followed. But the visitor never once looked behind him. Only that which happened in front of him took his attention. If a group of students or professors passed him, he froze. He pretended to be absorbed in something or other. His attempt at concealing himself without a newspaper or anything of the sort was at best futile. But, as Sam was to say later, this was him, this was our visitor. If he never thought anyone looked, then he would never need to hide himself or look over his shoulder.

Rolando said not only did he not seem to know where he was going but he seemed to delight in the fact that he might never arrive at the Professor's room. As if he would have crawled not to bring any more attention to himself. Someone else would pass and he would turn towards the wall in a deliberate effort to study the pattern. And, the

idiotic thing is, Rolando said, he did begin studying the texture of the wallpaper. But there was no wallpaper, someone pointed out. It was probably Stanislaw because he knew the Academy quite well.

No one mentioned this but it was obvious. Either Rolando was now going 'lulu' or then everything that happened had broken down. Whichever it was, the visitor seemed determined to arrive at the Professor's room without being questioned, approached or even, was this possible, noticed? Once an official was about to stop him when he dived into the nearest available door. There could not have been anyone there because it caused no problems for him. After some minutes he exited. He had avoided the confrontation.

He had been a good hour or two, Rolando said, feeling the walls and wandering the corridors of The Academy before finally arriving at the Professor's door. And this he didn't seem too eager about either. Twice he went away only to return a little later. He paused, turned, went back, walked away, looked at the walls, kicked the skirting board, marked the paint and turned to go back. Rolando said it was one of the most difficult pieces of detective work he had ever done. If the visitor had not been in a world of his own so much, he would certainly have sensed Rolando's presence.

*Rolando has proved to be one of our best. He is certainly one of the most reliable and always manages to come up with something when put in a tight spot. He said more than once he hid in the curtains behind the main doors at the end of each corridor. He even got used to the continual reversals our guest made. Not moving once from behind the curtains, the visitor passed Rolando three times. Such was Rolando's intuition and our guest's uncertainty.*

What happened from thereon is guesswork. Rolando is adamant that he saw the visitor enter the Professor's room. But, as Rolando says, and this we have to believe, he never left. Or then he gave Rolando the slip. Of course, we have no proof that Rolando didn't doze off or even suffer from one of his migraine attacks. These do after all take him out completely. He is known to have missed whole days, even whole weeks, with attacks of this sort. But the truth of the matter is that Rolando lost him. Though he vaguely remembers a loud bang coming from the room, Rolando was not sure whether it was in the inner room or the anterior room. The sound might have been muffled a great deal. It was only then that Rolando suspected that things weren't quite what they seemed. He couldn't trust anything that he had seen and began distrusting anything he might see.

It was, naturally, a bit late for that now as we know how much Rolando had a way of dressing things up rather. This didn't leave us in a very happy situation. We had lost our visitor. And considering what was to follow, it seemed from now on only the visits to the brothel were going to be anything like normal parolee behaviour.

Stanislaw came up with the idea that he might have spirited himself through the doors in front of Rolando and escaped being noticed. He would have then returned home and none of us would have known. He could then have re-emerged from his cell as another person, perhaps in disguise, and begun life in our country.

Rolando naturally denied this theory of escape. He said it was impossible for anyone to have past him. Only in theatre and film could such a spirited escape be

made. And, Rolando said, we were neither in a theatrical situation nor were we in a film. This was, he tried to convince us, real life.

In our embarrassment, we all laughed at this. Real life? Anyone talking about real life after what we had experienced deserved drowning. Stanislaw wouldn't let it go though. With encouragement from Georges, Stanislaw offered the idea that ghouls, vampires, ghosts and spirits all had a way with doors that we could never know. This was plainly absurd but when Stanislaw agreed and said our guest could have extracted himself from the room as a dead person, we all cracked up.

No, Stanislaw was adamant. Our guest had had experience in the theatre, he had checked his files. He could have extracted himself by applying black make-up to his lips and whitening his face. This, according to Stanislaw, would have immediately fooled Rolando who would have taken it for an impossible ghost. It was some minutes before we stopped laughing at this theory.

Some of the others groaned from the idiocy of everything. They really had lost their heads now. Even ideas about ghosts and spirits were being taken seriously. And none of us could explain how the visitor, the very next day, re-appeared on his way to the brothel. As fresh as rain, Simone said. And Albert confirmed this, as fresh as rain.

Christ, I am sure you are beginning to see what sort of a mess we were in. I began to feel as though I couldn't handle all this again. Our training was useless, our handbooks were of less use and our stamina was almost spent. It was only interest that kept us going. Any other abnormal things like paying his bus and streetcar fares, crossing on red lights and showing obvious irritation in queues we just had to ignore. These were all insignificant besides the events he was leading us into. As I have to keep saying to convince myself we did right, it all got very frightening towards the end. We could no longer keep up with him. Why didn't we stop, you ask? Why didn't

we just inform The Institute earlier and get ourselves out of this dilemma? I cannot answer that. I just don't know.

The visitor left us with a feeling that there was always something that we could not reach. If we interrupted him, intervened somewhere, there would always be something which we couldn't get out of him. He paralysed us. Georges said it was his laughter. He said it had always been his laughter. Few of us laughed anymore. Whether his laughter went beyond everything else that happened, beyond death, we couldn't understand. In the face of death, what did we care, what did we know whether the visitor's laughter would remain?

We all started to take Georges a little more seriously especially after the day he returned to the old town. The visitor was trying to repeat everything he had done the day before. Only this time none of it worked. Yet the chilling thing about it was that the visitor still found someone else to embrace. Both Albert and Frederick swore that there was no one there.

No one was lying obviously but nothing about the idiot was true any longer. We had no choice then but to disbelieve our own security group, our own members. We were left with no option. We had to disbelieve ourselves, our own eyes. None of this had ever seemed possible and yet none of us could have arrived here without this happening, without the visitor. We owed everything, our whole existence now to the visitor. We were yearning for an end and yet knew it could never come. Not at least

on our own terms. Some tried to resign but I refused. If anyone should go, I told the group, it should be me. I was the leader and here I was, in charge of one of the finest Security Divisions the country had ever trained for its censorship programme, baffled beyond belief.

And what had the visitor done, the one we called the cretin? All he had done was sneeze eight times. All he had done was walk home in a fake blindness. All he had done was press his face against cold windows, empty, cold, shop windows. All he had done were a few bizarre, inexplicable incidents with women in cafes or restaurants.

And what had we done? All of us tried to sneeze eight times to understand his experience. All of us walked home in fake blindness, crashing into things, in order to understand his motives. All of us got involved in our own bizarre incidents with the women or men in our lives which gave us less and less insight into mankind. More than once our world had come to seem ridiculous. It had ceased to be funny. The game our lives had been had become serious. But we were not trained for this seriousness and thus, it seemed, we had to die.

As the leader I tried playing a waiting game. I didn't know how to continue. I apportioned our guest each day to one or other in the group in the hope that we wouldn't have to witness the great moment. But it wasn't enough.

Having arrived at this point in my report which I have read in a voice as near normal as I can, I have forgotten to mention some of the earlier events in connection with the visitor. As we didn't know how he was going to spread out his time in our country we took the early odd events for granted. Most visitors go a little off the rails at first. We thought he was no exception.

His visits to the local canteen were pure farce but he stopped going there. It may have been the food (we can't recommend it either!). It must have been the food which forced him to clutch his stomach in a gesture we were to get used to. He was never sick, but Albert said that he had ordered the food by pointing to it. He usually went to sit down as far away as possible from anyone else and would then proceed to stare at his food until, quite obviously, it had gone cold. Then he would stand up and often timed his exit from the canteen to coincide with the bus to the city.

Come to think of it, I don't know how he survived. He never finished his food. It was all right for us. We would get home at some time of the day and have decent food. But he hardly ever ate. He didn't shop. Simone never noticed him carry food back or even go into one of the supermarkets. All this, though, appeared normal when compared to some of the other incidents we have described.

I think you can see now how easy it was to ignore these events and concentrate on the more bizarre behaviour of our visitor. There were other incidents. Though most of these happened in cafes, still we were unable to put a pattern to them. Then there were those other periods which we were not clear about at all. This was when he would go prowling in the underpasses of the city.

Once, Philippe reported, there was a vague event during a wedding ceremony. It took place in a restaurant. Our friend had got himself involved with the dancing. And

before Philippe knew it there was nothing but flowers. Flowers seemed to fall everywhere. Before anyone else knew what was happening the visitor had left. The restaurant seemed to disappear under fragments of flowers. All the flowers had been trampled, kicked to death, Philippe said.

As you can see none of our reporting remained stable. Philippe made us laugh with one more funny idea. She said that the flowers obviously meant something else. They were, and Philippe was very serious, more than flowers. She spoke of some universal pattern, some symbolic structure of a code that all the people on the city had no access to. Once the women had been showered with petals and flowers, their minds become disturbed. This, Philippe insisted, was why the visitor left before something moved inside himself. All this was pretty strange to say the least. It might not appear now, but then we didn't have the advantage of hindsight. Now the situation appears normal but then it was far from normal.

We feared for everyone's sanity except his. I only took it seriously when Rolando agreed with Philippe. Then the laughter stopped. Rolando had been quite right to be offended. It was he who went on to say that we should not dismiss all these little events and ideas merely because we had previously only dealt with the more ordinary visitor. Just because we had dealt with the visitors who had done the more normal things, those with the guns, those who had bombed the theatres and the museums, those who had detonated themselves in the hotels and the stations, there was no reason why we should pay less attention, give less respect, to this visitor.

As it happened Rolando was correct. I have to admit Rolando recognised this much earlier than I gave credit for. And I also admit now that it was right that he should take over the group. When the others were bold enough to ask for my resignation, Rolando was the obvious choice. But still, I haven't finished the report yet. There are

still the events with the dogs; the dogs, the underpasses and the darkness. If Philippe, this time, was right and I personally could never see a way of proving it or disproving it, then flowers, dogs, underpasses and darkness all became something else than what they were.

Sam used to follow the visitor from the theatres to his home. He did say the only time when the visitor came anywhere near to a conversation was once with a dog. The dog ran after him and, as dogs do, at least our friendly city dogs, rubbed his nose against the visitor's legs. For one moment it looked, according to Sam, that he would neither move nor stay in that one position where dog looked at man and man looked at dog. He was paralysed.

And this wasn't the only incident with dogs. Often, he would go and sit down by the river. Even when it was freezing and a thin layer of ice appeared on the surface of the river. The visitor always sat by a tree, the same tree. Each time, the same dog would come and piss against the tree. The visitor would not move. This story is true because I followed him there. He just never moved. Then after some minutes another dog would arrive and, as sure as eggs are eggs, this second dog would lift its leg and piss against the tree. Always after smelling the trace of the first dog. And so it would continue, with our guest slowly pulling the collar of his raincoat higher. Around his ears, pulling his hat lower over his forehead.

Sam immediately commented when I told this that it reminded him of another story he had been reading somewhere. But we quickly shut him up about all that. Frankly we'd got tired of Sam's stories. We'd all had enough of these idle similarities as if it all came round to one point time and time again. What good did it do any of us after

all if the world was just to return to the fixed point that was always turning? What good did it do to say that it had all happened to others, that it was the same as something that had happened to another before? It was him now not history. It was this visitor. Not the next. Nor the last one.

Nothing familiar to me, I was the one there in the park by the river watching him. When enough dogs had come, and it may have been six eventually, our friend would shuffle on. The smell was intolerable even from where I was hiding. It was unbelievable. Georges started to say. I won't repeat what Georges said. In the underpasses the visitor would prowl around the edge of the concrete. He would stay away from any bright light. This lasted hours. Hours it was when he seemed to have time to kill. But having time to kill: isn't that incomprehensible now? He had nothing but time to kill, for the visitor had removed everything else from his life and ours.

He never wooed anyone, never approached anyone. He even refused the whores with the roses, the transsexuals and all the stray street walkers. Occasionally he coughed and spluttered but none of us ever saw him being sick once. In this respect he was certainly clever.

*Incidentally, I don't see how Sam coped with this work in the darkness. He had been passed on to our Division, after failing his eye test for the Air Exclusion forces. He had wanted to become a pilot. And here he was in the city's grottoes groping after the visitor. Looking back, I certainly had a weird group on my hands but surely, I cannot be blamed for their failure too. It was obvious, long before it did happen, that something was about to happen. We were finally to come unstuck. But by then we had unstuck ourselves. The visitor had won.*

Funny now isn't it, how it all slots in! Nothing is so strange anymore. There were two or three days when he didn't come out at all. Or if he did then he managed to slip past our Duty Officer, Simone. I expect you will have a report from the housekeeper.

Some of us did suspect Simone but that's over, hardly important now.

We were a bit cruel though. We all reckoned that the visitor must have been sleeping or masturbating. Or then he was having an affair not with Simone but with the housekeeper herself. She really was a nice old dear and probably took pity on this uncertainty of a man. When you come to think of it, it's not surprising he needed some days in bed after what he was going through. Even our group members began showing signs of wear.

Rolando complained of headaches insisting they must be migraines to be so serious. Sam began his regular disappearances. Albert and Philippe, we were certain, had begun their affair. Georges was seen in churches praying and following nuns about. Frederick, convinced the visitor was mad, convinced himself he was mad too. It was Frederick who was the first who managed to sneeze eight times.

We had a celebration then. Oh, how we celebrated! You've never seen such a celebration. There was still a little left from our budget so we decided to go out and down, I might add, in style. We all got tight and extravagant. We played poker over interminable vodka and lost our souls to each other. We had already lost our families and fortunes. I didn't realise it at the time, but everything was out of control. I know I have kept repeating this but it is now, at this moment, the only way to hold on to

reality. The group had long since been beyond my control but then I thought I could rely on the common sense of the group. How stupid of me!

Even common sense had disintegrated. We were drunk and overflowing with laughter and larkery. And why? All because Frederick had perfected a way of sneezing eight times. Would you believe it, but one of us, I don't remember who, had the bright idea of calling up the visitor and inviting him along for the celebration. We didn't finally. It went the way of every suggestion toward the end of our period together. No one would amake the effort.

It's a little difficult to remember how things went from then onwards. It may have started by Sam rolling on the floor with his legs up inside his stomach. He was crying and bawling like the big baby he probably was. Georges, well it just had to be Georges didn't it, said this looked like the visitor and that he had been born too long. No one quite understood that.

Then we were off again. The word seemed to stick. Somehow in the intoxication everyone wanted to invent something about the visitor. Everyone wanted their own interpretation of the events. No one listened to each other as if they were afraid that their versions of reality were wrong. Sam replied by saying that if the visitor had been born too long, then it was he, himself, who had been born incorrectly. Born incorrectly, what do you make of that? If all this was bizarre, we were all too far gone to care what we said anymore. Rolando offered his usual measured answer. Said the visitor had been delayed at birth only. This creased us all up until Albert added his little theory. He said the visitor had no memory of his birth at all and hence he always thought it worth trying again. Philippe felt she was a little like the dwarfed visitor herself. She, too, thought she had been born too long.

This prompted Georges to tell of his birth. There was just no stopping him but he did, actually, come up with the most original idea. He said his birth was over-complete. Christ knows, but those were the words he used. As for me I was completely lost. I'd just never thought of it. We were Security Officers not Gynaecologists! I began to find all this more disturbing. What struck me was that I had no recollection of anything. Not even my own birth. I felt utterly and completely stupid. I felt redundant.

The evening sneezed on you might say. Frederick perfected eight sneezes. His birth, he said, was an unwanted one. Everything in his life was unwanted, he added, until he discovered his own democracy. His right to stupidity.

The drinks continued flowing all night. We all became paralytic. Stanislaw turned up for the evening in make-up. He looked a scream. His make-up began to run. We thought he was trying to spirit himself through doors so that he could follow our visitor from close quarters. But it was all too late.

We even suspected, it was Albert and Georges who both felt this, that Stanislaw wanted to sleep with the visitor. You can see how it all went now. I have no excuse really. I did my best to the very end. Stanislaw had all us in fits of laughter again when he suggested the idea of multiple births. It suited him well. He laughed more than the others. He seemed to have a secret none of us knew about. As if he knew that we had given birth to something monstrous and there was no way of knowing where and how it would end. Death, you see, was no answer to this.

Our drunkenness and debauchery led on from one thing to another and none of us could stop the slide. Everyone outbid each other with their lives first, then their deaths. We seemed to become eternal gossip before our own eyes. Anguish took over

everything we did. We were plainly involved in something we couldn't get out. From following a visitor who moved in a country where nothing seemed to exist for him and where the buildings were theatres, cafes, churches, where people were always absent and darkness favoured, we had decayed into a group of indistinguishable idiots. We were thugs, drunks, sex maniacs, drug addicts and neurotics. The visitor had beaten us and we couldn't get him out of here.

He must have invented quicker than we could have explained ourselves. The visitor rested and laughed. He practised blindness and deafness until he had us running around in circles. And that wasn't all. Women seemed just case studies to him. His silence was so normal that we wanted to cut out our own tongues. As Rolando pointed out before I eventually bowed out to his leadership, our guest had gained control. Like no other visitor before him, he had gained control in a control-less world.

Impossible, you say! How did it happen? Georges persistently likened it to The Impossible. He promised to resign and write a book about it. He said as long as no one ever understood this the situation was under control. We still managed a weak laugh at that but we were gone. It was too explicit. We had opened ourselves down the middle just as a pathologist might have done with our corpses. The visitor had a flippancy to stay alive which was no longer morally questionable. Not in this world, not in our country. He had, Albert said, made his own rules with a panache and seriousness which we envied. He was right. The visitor had defeated us.

What followed happened so quickly that I am at a loss to recount it to you. I have just bits and pieces. We all took the last days admirably. Our training had done that for us even though we were defeated and paralysed. It was incomprehensible that it

could happen and yet we still trembled. We not only feared for the visitor. We feared for ourselves, our city, our country. The visitor would survive, not us. He lived this side of a sanity we never knew, Georges said. He was right. What was more; the visitor had pulled us along with it.

Frederick was a good example. He spent his days sneezing. He was determined to make it a local record to nine. He was inside and he couldn't get out. We all saw ourselves going the same way. The visitor scared us stiff. When it happened, we didn't know what it was, what it meant or whether we were there. And we only had ourselves to blame.

Georges came through the door in an outraged sweat. We couldn't calm him down. Albert and Frederick had been there first but ran away frightened. Georges was twitching uncontrollably. It was some minutes and a few strong drinks before we could get any sense out of him.

Sense, ah you must laugh at that now. Still, we got some garbled version. The visitor had roamed all day. This day particularly restless, he had not stayed in any one position for more than some seconds. He looked towards the sky continually. He must have run all over town in his blindness because he gave all three of them quite a chase. He embraced people, although the three of them said no one was there. He invaded people's photographs but disappeared as quickly as he had appeared on the scene. There had been a wedding ceremony and a funeral, but everything had got mixed. Something went wrong with the timing. Georges thought he saw the same priest officiating in both services, simultaneously.

Georges couldn't be convinced otherwise. He started rambling about the visitor standing with a flower in his hand. A secret desire to be a priest or a monk. Celibacy had been too much for him. But what did Georges know? Georges was already insane

and we hadn't realised it. Albert took over. Albert said that if the visitor, the alien, the terrorist had really wanted to be a priest, he would have been much more open to the women. I failed to see any connection in this one. Wasn't he open enough? His debaucheries were evidence enough? Or had we invented all these to keep our jobs?

Georges was delirious now, sweat pouring off. He went on about priesthood and water. Water if it moved, he said, could not be painted. So too, our visitor. What have we got with all these pictures of him that added up to nothing but movement?

This was really the end.

As far as we were all concerned Georges was now lost. His words meant nothing. Admittedly Georges had had a hard day, but hadn't we all? And I know he had kept up with the visitor where Frederick and Albert had just run off. Though it wasn't like them to be cowards.

The events got stranger. No one could describe them. No one was sure they had happened. But our training kept us going. We had to invent events and we had to invent the visitor as if he no longer existed. And we only had Georges' account. Georges borrowed a monk's habit to disguise himself. This was when the visitor finally got caught between the wedding and the funeral. As Georges passed in disguise, the visitor lifted up his hands to greet Georges himself. His hands were covered in blood. Could we believe anyone?

Rolando fortunately took over here. He had apparently reached the scene and found Georges, rambling on the floor. During all this IO was reduced to a shivering mess. Rodolfo coldly pointed out that we had all got carried away with our work. And even though our imagination was all we could rely on, it was still at fault. Reality was so

much calmer, Rodolfo tried to say. We all sat down and waited for Georges and the others to calm down.

Frederick didn't help the situation when he came in sneezing, arm in arm with Stanislaw. Both looked like death warmed up. It must have been the end then. Why didn't I see it and stop then? I suppose it was Rolando who made a valiant effort to keep us all going. On hindsight the end began there. None of us recovered. Georges spent the next day whimpering by the side of the cathedral. We couldn't move him. He wouldn't take off his disguise.

We stopped calling the visitor, idiot, alien, cretin or dwarf. But it was too late. We were powerless. I am trying to stay as calm as I can now under these circumstances. But when you hear of the events that followed you can understand my fears. Of course, I have been helped with this Report by Rolando. He has promised to bring along the recording when it is complete. You will, as you can understand, not hear from me again.

This visitor proved so unlike others that it should have been clear from the beginning that I couldn't handle it on my own. I was stubborn, very stubborn. However, as Rolando and I are the only two remaining, we have done our best to collaborate on this Report. We have tried to recount what happened without any excessive emotion or sentiment.

It has, though, been very difficult. Most of the members of our group were close friends of mine. I had trained them and seen them through the terrorist period and the riots. When the country lost all credibility on the international scene we survived. Only Stanislaw joined later but even he became close to us with his own craziness.

He showed us how we could understand our own character a little more. I didn't believe him when he said we all had feminine and masculine parts to us. Well, I suppose I wouldn't believe that, would I? Perhaps I should have listened. But then Stanislaw might have started the rot. If he hadn't come along with his ghouls, spirits and man-eating woman and woman-eating man, then we might still have kept all this under control. We might have remained whole as a group if we had managed a reasonable explanation of the events.

Still, there's not much point going on about this now. Stanislaw is two metres under, and we haven't much idea of the rest of the group. It was soon after that evening, I think. Now everything has blurred. It's even difficult for me to continue. If Rolando wasn't here, I don't think I could. Jesus Maria, I must pull myself together. It all got too much.

After Georges had broken down, we decided to go in pairs to follow the visitor. We felt we needed to be together to try and remain in control of what we saw. It was in an ordinary hardware shop where the end came. There was a rumpus inside the shop. The visitor had gone inside. It seems he was looking for a white stick. Albert and Philippe had picked him up in the morning as usual as he left his cell. His fake blindness was by now brilliant. He had walked from the base of his apartment block to the bus stop. The feat was astonishing. The visitor was, according to Albert, quite assured. Others of us joined Albert at the bridge. We had decided to keep in radio contact continuously. We all spread out and followed him.

His technique was staggering. He was so convincing, so utterly convincing. His fake blindness must have had a meaning all along. We were pulled like magnets to his

blindness. Inside the hardware shop, before we knew it, there was a shot. People had crowded everywhere and we lost sight of the visitor. Like the visit to the Academy he had vanished. But this time we weren't sure.

Had he really died?

And how, if he had, would we know?

This is the final point. I have to admit, we lost him. I know this is the worst failure of our group. We were trained for everything but losing the visitor. But the events that happened to the group were in some way stranger than those that had ever happened to the visitor. At the same time as the pistol shot, it seemed Stanislaw had also shot himself. It wasn't a nice sight. As quick as we could we manned all the exits of the hardware emporium and we swear, well Rolando and I do as there were only two of us as it turned out, that the visitor could not have got away.

Nobody with a white stick passed us; that we are sure of. We stayed for hours until Stanislaw's body had been identified and carried away. It was only then and perhaps even more as Rolando and I finish this Report that we had to admit this devastating failure.

The group has disintegrated and we have had to wait so long to make this Report because we had no knowledge of the whereabouts of the others after the incident. The whole affair is now incomprehensible. Days ceased to be days in any normal sense of the word. Only Rolando retained any control over himself and despite his occasional migraines he is about to retire also. He talks of going off to the North of Europe to look after his aging mother. I, myself, can only do the honourable thing and hope that in the light of these circumstances The Institute will do nothing but accept my

resignation. If I am guilty of anything it is of gifts misunderstood. I failed to prevent our decay. We, or rather I, interpreted everything about the visitor wrongly. He was no cretin, no idiot, no terrorist. He was harmless but what does it matter now?

I have no hesitation in proposing that the Institute accept Rolando as leader. He could, though he will need persuasion, continue if you so desire to try and reform the new Security Force. He's standing besides me here and nodding his head sideways. I think that means no, but I suggest you don't take my word for it.

As to our members: Albert shot himself also. Perhaps it was over Philippe who had been carrying on with Georges it seemed. Philippe has left the country. It was her goodbye to history, she said. Sam? We haven't heard anything of Sam. It seems he became completely silent. Some rumour has it that he went and lived with a young pianist somewhere out on an island in the archipelago.

Frederick is virtually lost to us all. He got carried away with his sneezing and has become a virtuoso. He now has an agent, an entrepreneur behind him and sneezes for audiences. It goes down quite well but he doesn't recognise anything about his previous life. Georges - without future and hope - abandoned *The Impossible* and thought of becoming a monk. He is chasing nuns now somewhere.

Another rumour has it that he didn't die at all and has settled a little. He is possibly writing some of his impossible theories we so good naturedly laughed over. Our affiliated member, Simone, decided to become a prostitute. She was cut up about the visitor. She said we had never given her a chance. Simone can be found in the city's underpasses selling roses when she's not selling herself. It has been rumoured that Georges has also been seen visiting her in a monk's habit and cowl.

They say Georges is recognisable because of the different beards he uses. He weeps a lot, too. Rolando is here, as I said beside me, reluctant to begin again. I can only say once more that I hope The Institute accept our blunders as my blunders. I would like to go out as Stanislaw and Albert do but I haven't got the courage. Instead, I'll just forfeit my pension. I know it isn't the same. (Roger Connah ©1984/2006/2026)

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