

ECLIPSE A NIGHTMARE

Hugues de Montalembert

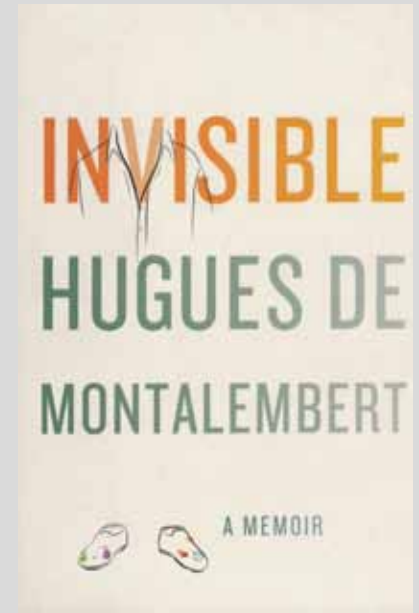
About thirty years ago, Hugues de Montalembert was attacked and viciously abused in his apartment by two junkies. In the ensuing struggle his blood was spared, but his eyes were severely damaged. Four years later, at the end of a roller coaster of hope and despair, his sight lost forever, he was ready to go through his grief and start a new life. Hugues wrote his first book: "Eclipse". But writing had not been a choice. He had to find another way to communicate – his painter's brush and his camera having been made useless by the aggressors that blinded him. Amazingly, he chronicled the events that changed his life with the eyes, if we can so say, of a detached witness, even if the suffering human being that he observed was himself, and he didn't have any idea of what his future might become. In the following years, Hugues travelled the world but didn't pursue writing as his consoling art. Then, three decades later, he has written the same book once more. The subject has not changed: light and darkness. Light was his inspiration for half of his life and darkness has escorted him for the other half. And he is deeply familiar with these words, in all their connotations, far beyond the materiality of the senses. "Invisible – a memoir" is a much shorter book that – beginning from that fatal hour that split his human journey into two halves – distills thirty years into a gallery where each page paints a canvas of a significant moment of his life. Because, in the end, the essence of our whole existence rests in just a limited series of moments whose weight defies any conceivable scale – a tragic demise, the smile of somebody that we will never know, a life changing event or a line of a poem is what defines our life and we don't know why. Everything else is inconsequential noise. Both works are poignant, steeped in compassion

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INVISIBLE A MEMOIR

Hugues de Montalembert

for the human condition. De Montalembert writes beautifully and his thoughts are full of dignity, wisdom and hope. Anybody in deep despair will find strength and succor in his words.

But there are many other good reasons to read Hugues, because his books have a much wider breath than an autobiography. They are reviewed here, in this Justice issue, to inspire a criminological discourse that would include the victims in its analysis. In Hugues's terse description of the assault, and his own excruciating transformation into a victim, the scholar will find material for reconsidering his focus. All too often criminology and lawmakers have confined their attention to the crime and the criminal. The victims, real or potential, are the motivation of the whole subject, but they soon fade into oblivion. The rights, management, treatment and suffering of the criminal, or the ontology and epistemology of crime, dominate the scene of any serious academic discussion. Then, according to the ideological inclination, the tone is set by empathetic indulgency, stiff intolerance or denial of crime itself – labeled as a social artifact. The victims are only material for the media, at least when the crime can attract the morbid curiosity of the readers. But it is the victim that defines the crime, because without a victim, real or potential, there is no crime, only freedom.

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ECLIPSE

For the last few weeks I have felt in danger. There have been warning signs which I haven't been able to analyze. I have been living in New York for two years; I feel morally, spiritually worn out. It is spring and tonight, May 25, in spite of a little rain, I am going for a walk in Washington Square. I live in a small house at the end of the narrow cul-de-sac called MacDougal Alley, at number 13 in fact. The street is a historic place; many well-known painters and writers have lived here. As I arrive home and start to insert my key in the street door, two hands grab me by the shoulders and violently push me inside. The door closes and I hear the voices of black men giving me orders. They are behind me. There is a knife. They force me to climb the stairs to the living room on the second floor.

There are two of them, both black. One is tall and strong and holds the knife. The other is effeminate, skinny, maybe Jamaican, with an earring. In their rhythmic voices they demand money. I have thirty dollars with me. I put the bills on the table, but they don't even look at them. The strong one presses the knife against my throat, threatens me, and continues to demand the rest of my money. I don't have any more cash. I explain to him that it's all in the bank and I turn my pockets inside out. He swears, presses the knife against me, and orders me to take off my clothes. I undress. I am afraid. I feel very tired. I know that I will not find the words that might calm things down. I remember other dangerous situations, in Asia, Vietnam, Africa, that I escaped by diffusing hatred through a force which is not within me tonight. The effeminate one has disappeared. He has gone up to the studio where I paint, one flight above. He comes back down carrying a radio, which he turns on full blast. He sits down on the sofa, lights up a joint, and hands it to the man with the knife.

“In his eyes I see sadism, like a kind of madness, an amusement. And suddenly I realize that it's no longer money that interests him; it's me.”

By now I am completely naked. The big one shouts insults and makes demands that I hardly understand. He plays with the knife over my body. The skinny one gets up and disappears to the floor below. I hear sounds of furniture being moved about, drawers being opened. He seems to be in a fit of rage. I discover later that he has emptied all the drawers into the middle of the room. He comes back up. By the way they talk I know they are heavily drugged, probably on speed. I can't remember their words, but they seem to be disappointed. There is no money in this house, no jewelry, no valuable objects. Holding the tip of the knife against my throat, the big guy begins to hit me on the head, in the ribs. He runs the knife over my body and I'm afraid he'll kill me, castrate me. In his eyes I see sadism, like a kind of madness, an amusement. And suddenly I realize that it's no longer money that interests him; it's me.

The danger is palpable. I know that if I don't do something, I am going to die. For a second, his eyes turn away from me. A few feet off, hanging from the mantelpiece, is a heavy iron poker with a hook at the end. Quickly, I seize it and hit him with it, as hard as I can, but I haven't aimed at his head. There is a fight, confusion; furniture falls; the poker is grabbed out of my hands. I know I'll find another poker hanging from the fireplace on the ground floor. I run to the stairs, race to the bedroom, and grab it. The knife is behind me. I strike out. He doesn't seem to feel anything. We go round and round a table. I climb the stairs with him behind me. Upstairs, I see the thin one but pay no attention to him. He doesn't count. I could kill him with a single blow. I get to the middle of the room and face my attacker.

This time, I am ready to aim at his head. I am ready to kill. We look at each other. I stare into his eyes to anticipate his next move, and it is at that moment that I receive hot liquid full in the face. I fall to the ground.

I have had just enough time to realize that it was the Jamaican who has thrown it at me. I think, foolishly, that it is coffee he has made without my noticing. I scream. Blinded by the burning liquid, I wipe my eyes and feel something sticky on my fingers.

Acid. I recognize it from chemistry lessons. I howl at the top of my lungs. Not because of the pain, but because I am terrified. I'm afraid of the knife, I'm afraid they'll kill me. I howl so loudly that it scares them and I hear them running down the stairs. I rush into the kitchen and over the sink splash my face with cold water. It burns. I wash, wash, and wash. The police, call the police. Get to a hospital as quickly as possible. I direct myself toward where I know there is a telephone. I am moving in an aquarium. Everything is glaucous.

I dial zero. I get the operator, a black woman, I can tell from her voice. She swears to me that she's going to contact the police. I am hardly reassured. I hang up, go downstairs, and discover the street door has been left open. I am naked. I close the door. I get under the shower to wash off the acid, which keeps burning my face and which has dripped onto parts of my body. Again I wash and wash and wash. But it is still there! Already I see less. My vision is fuzzier, more opaque. Suddenly, I realize that under the shower I will not hear the police arrive. I get out of the shower and grope for clothes. I can see scarcely anything now. I stumble over the drawers that have been turned upside down in the middle of the room. I put on the first things I find. I come back down and open the street door.

I hear people walking by and stop them, saying: "Please! Call the police. I have been attacked. I have acid in my eyes. Call the police, please get the police!" The footsteps have stopped, but there is no answer. "Please, I've been mugged. I have acid in my eyes. Please get the police!" The steps move on. Still there is no answer. Finally, someone says to me, "O.K., don't worry, I'll get help." I close the door. Now I'm sure that the police will arrive. I take some cigarettes from the bedside table, sit down on the stairs facing the door, and wait. Half an hour passes and nothing happens. I go back to my bedroom and manage to dial the number of a painter friend of mine who lives in the neighborhood. I explain what happened and ask him to call the police. I go back to the stairs and force myself to smoke to stay calm, hoping that this familiar act will help.

When I understood that it was acid, there was a second when the animal in me reacted with such a violence, with such a roar, that at that moment I nearly lost myself in madness. It has taken all my will, all my vital instincts to stop the panic, to reverse the process. From that moment on, I act. I do not think. No longer am I tired. The sensation of something irrevocable twists my guts. I know that something very serious has happened, but I don't know exactly what and I don't want to think about it. I sit on these stairs, smoking. I wait. I don't think. The unreality paralyzes my brain. There are knocks at the door. The police have arrived at last, along with a painter friend on his bike. I put out the cigarette. Arms grab and pull me. I stumble down the steps. I am still barefoot. They help me into the police car, which starts off immediately. Soon we are at the hospital, in the emergency room.

They make me lie down on a metal table and male nurses begin to douse me with water. I am naked. They have taken off all my clothes, they have





Photo: Phaedra Brody

even taken away my gold baptismal chain, which I will never see again; it will be stolen from this emergency room. New York and its scavengers. The water is ice cold; the acid burns. I howl. I tremble. My body is nothing but a panic-stricken tremor, which knocks against the metal. I am aware that my sight is diminishing, and I cannot make out the people around

“I see only shadows [...] I want to know. Is it serious? [...] A voice answers me: It is very serious.”

me. I see only shadows, as if I were plunged into a deep sea. The metal of the table resounds with the panic of my body. I ask: “Where is the doctor? Tell me if it’s serious. I want to know. Is it serious? I am a painter, I have to know.” A voice answers me: “It is very serious.”

I stay on that table a long time. Around me, in the emergency room, there are all kinds of confusion. People groaning, children crying. Someone keeps on bathing my face.

I am put in a metal chair, under a shower, and asked to open my eyes as much as possible and to hold my eyelids open with my fingers. I raise my face toward the shower head, which is covering me with cold water. I am frozen. I find myself lying in bed in a room where, all night long, a very gentle nurse bathes my eyes every half hour. I can no longer see anything. I am not in pain and my brain continues to anesthetize itself I do not think. Morning comes. All seems so irrevocable.

No one wants to or can accept my version. Impossible! Impossible for the police. Detective Marzoto came the day after the attack and again on following days. I could feel his suspicion. He made me repeat endlessly the order of the events, hoping that I would contradict myself, and wrote a report that had nothing to do with my statements. There were some errors in it, including certain serious ones, such as saying that I had opened the door to the attackers, implying that I knew them. “That’s what you told the police the night of the attack.” I knew that wasn’t true. But why did he want to make me say that? What was he trying to prove? Vengeance, a homosexual crime? His mind was definitely working in that direction. I told him he was wasting his time. I was exhausted. A doctor came into the room and, before I realized what was happening, made an anal examination. Why? To find out if I was homosexual, to determine whether I had been raped? I was sure that it was at the request of the police.

I am on the V.I.P. floor under special protection. The police fear something. Not I. There are journalists downstairs, eager for a story. I refuse to see them. Television and the New York Times have reported the attack, with incorrect details. I am described as somebody rich and important. I sense that people don’t believe me. A relative of mine who is in town for a few days calls me from the Hotel Pierre. Months later, I learned that before phoning me he had called the police, who told him that some details of the case remained unclear. He went back to Europe with his version: drug dealing! Homosexual, raped, and a drug dealer!

It is more than a month that I have been in this hospital, and time has undergone a slight distortion.

I bathe my eyes with artificial tears, which I carry in a little bottle attached like an amulet to the string of my pajama top. This morning, as usual, they wheel me to the treatment room. Two fingers on my shoulder and the voice of Dr. T.: “I have to talk to you.” I am surprised at the warm intensity he communicates to me by the pressure of his fingers, even though his voice remains cold. This finger language has been established between us over the course of the past days.

Idanna shows up and asks to come along with me. He agrees, with what seems to me like relief, and pushes my wheelchair to his office.

I already know that something is wrong. The animal in me can smell it. His monotonous voice informs me: “Your eyes are not doing well. The tissues are dissolving and I fear perforation. I must perform an ablation of the left eye.” I sustain a colossal punch in the stomach. I feel nauseous. Without understanding its complete meaning, I know that this sentence announces something horrible. I try not to confuse courage and pride. Not to stand like a cathedral whose closed doors conceal its collapsed vault. I am also wary of that indulgence people feel obliged to lavish on someone in my condition. I continue to moisten my eyes myself, but since Dr. T.’s news, I feel like a gardener watering dead flowers.

For the last two days, since knowing that my left eye is to be removed, I have this fear in my stomach, a disgust for my body, which will be irrevocably mutilated. I have this continually recurring image of a small spoon detaching an oyster from its shell and of a mouth gulping it down. This mutilation seems to me a further plunge into darkness, a thickening of the nightmare, a process of degradation that cannot be halted. Luck, that famous luck of mine which has always saved me at the brink of catastrophe, has definitely forsaken me this time.

At times, I am afraid that the memory I have of the visible world is disappearing little by little, to be replaced by an abstract universe of sound, smell, and touch. I force myself to visualize the bedroom with its metal furniture, its window, the curtains. I bring to mind paintings, Rembrandt’s Polish cavalier, Francis Bacon’s portraits of Innocent X.

My ability to create images absolutely must not atrophy. I must remain capable of bringing back the world I looked at intensely for thirty-five years. I don’t want to bother with my eyes any longer. I don’t want anyone to talk to me about them. I let others be responsible for treating them with balm. I don’t want to go on being the gardener of these dead flowers. The others see only the closed petals, but I know very well that the pistil is dead. I am between death and birth. I am dead to my past life and not yet reborn to this new one. This whole period is merely an extraordinary labor through which I am giving birth to myself. I feel much blinder than I did a few days ago. I perceive less and less light. My obscurity is more opaque. My eyes hurt. Vulnerable to stabbing pains, apoplexy, they are like two plastic bags full of water and ready to fall to the floor when I lean over. The burn is so deep, Dr. T. has told me, that he is afraid there’ll be a perforation at any moment. Even before the doctor gave me the sickening news, I had noticed a change in the nurses. A serious nuance in their voices, a grave nuance hiding behind trivial conversation. The nurses from other wards also would come to see me, and that sudden attention alerted the animal in me. It smelt of danger. Now that they know I am aware of the situation and they see that my behavior hasn’t changed, they relax and I no longer hear in their voices the graveness of the secret. We are waiting for the Fourth of July weekend

to pass. It is, on the roads, one of the most murderous weekends in the year and the Eye Bank will have a superabundance of stock. Dr. T. is waiting to be able to choose the most appropriate tissues to perform the grafts he hopes will prevent the right eye from bursting.

The intern has come to get me, as he does every morning, and pushes me in a wheelchair to the treatment room. This time it isn't Dr. T. who examines me. I hear the masculine voice of a woman as she walks toward me. Then a hand lifts up my head by pushing me under the chin, a light shines first in my left and then in my right eye. "Will you clean up this garbage!" says the woman doctor with disgust. The intern, without saying a word, guides me toward the table on which stands that hard apparatus I now know so well. I put my head in it slowly, with precaution, and place my chin on the chin rest, as the light flares up again. Using a delicate steel instrument, the intern cuts the filaments of flesh that grow like buds every night, connecting the eye to the eyelid. A job requiring patience on his part as well as mine. He pours a liquid in my eye, wipes it with what seems like a cotton pad, then goes on cutting. At first, I had a hard time taking these daily sessions, and then I developed a way of breathing that puts my brain to steep. I absent myself, so to speak.

“Your left eye is indeed in very bad shape and runs the risk of being perforated at any moment and emptying itself. In that case, the only thing to do will be to remove it.”

When the cleanup is at last finished, the intern takes me back to the woman doctor; the little penlight shines again.

"Do you see the light?"

"Yes."

She moves the light.

"And now?"

"Yes, and now, yes." It seems to me that this is the hundredth time I have been examined. The same questions, the same answers. Or maybe it's the same session, which has never stopped, which goes on indefinitely. I'm not even interested in it anymore. I answer mechanically. She covers my left eye. "And now?" "Yes." She covers my right eye. "And now?" "Yes." She speaks to the intern and explains in a peremptory tone that I am wrong, that actually I don't see anything with the left eye but that I imagine seeing the light. I interrupt her:

"No! I see the light with my left eye, really."

"You believe you see the light, but that's not so. Actually, it's a normal reaction."

My anger is flaring up. Every day in my room I submit both my eyes to tests that will tell me whether or not their sensitivity to light is weakening. I know that I see light with my left eye.

"In any case, if you think they're wrong and that you really see light with your left eye, why don't you ask them to get a second opinion? I have the name of a very reputable doctor here in New York."

When Dr. T. comes by later in the afternoon, I ask him if he has any objection to my being examined by one of his colleagues. He hesitates, then he asks noncommittally:

"Are you thinking of any particular doctor?"

"Yes, Dr. Muller."

"No, I have no objection. I know Dr. Muller well; we often work together

and he's a friend. I'll get in touch with him myself if you'd like."

Dr. Muller is a young man, sporty, very energetic. Communication is easy with him. He came the following morning. There is no time to lose. Once again, the little light. "And now?" "Yes." "And now?" "No ... Yes ... Yes ... No" etc. First one eye is covered, then the other. Finally I hear the click that means he is turning off the penlight for good.

"You are absolutely right. You see light with both your eyes. It's a good sign as far as the optic nerve is concerned, and then, even if it's not much, it is important to try to preserve it for the future. Your left eye is indeed in very bad shape and runs the risk of being perforated at any moment and emptying itself. In that case, the only thing to do will be to remove it. I will recommend in my report that every possible effort be made to try to keep the left eye, since it sees light perfectly well." Sun! Sun! The nightmare of the empty socket, of mutilation, of the gulped-down oyster, of a part of myself thrown into a trash can on Greenwich Avenue and taken at dawn to the garbage dumps of New York, fades away. So what! What difference does this really make? No difference and a big difference. It isn't logical; it's animal. Even if they are dead, I want to keep my eyes. I want to die complete.

Later, I reply to Dr. T., who has read his colleague's report and indicates to me that the chances of saving my left eye remain minimal:

"Listen, I don't give a damn even if I have to go back under the knife three days later because it hasn't worked and the eye gets perforated; we've got to try."

He laughs; I don't know why.

Now everything is different. To hell with resignation! Defeat is not obligatory. The fight goes on. There is this suspense now. The operation is no longer merely a nasty sanitary measure. Hope hangs in suspense. Oh, no big deal, but a possible halt in this degradation, this putrefaction that has continued slowly, irrevocably, since the acid spurted into my eyes.

My hand squeezes Idanna's. Idanna, my faithful ally, who refuses to give up and who fights for me inch by inch, who has spent hours talking to lawyers, doctors, organizations that might help. The bills must be paid, and they are now becoming exorbitant. She has discovered a state agency called the Crime Victims Compensation Board, which covers the medical expenses of victims of crimes committed in New York State. Innocence must be proved. She spends afternoons in police offices compiling a file, examining Detective Marzoto's reports and contesting them. She now knows the facts as well as I do, but I sense that even she is not convinced. "Later ... later," I tell myself when I get irritated by this incredulity.

My burned eyelids have a tendency to retract and turn inward. My eyeball is scratched by the lashes, or, more accurately, what is left of them, and that friction becomes a Chinese torture. I lose patience, bathe the eye, hold the eyelids away with my fingers. It's getting later in the day; it is hot. This obsessive, constant irritation gradually invades me completely. I try to calm down, without success. Finally, I ask for some pain killers, but I have waited too long and they produce no effect. I ask for the doctor. It is Saturday; the intern on duty has already gone home. I try to reach Dr. T. at the various numbers he has given me in case of emergency. An answering service replies that the doctor has gone away for the weekend to attend a convention in Dallas. Night is one of those endless tunnels. I wait for morning, I wait for the intern's arrival. I count the seconds. The night nurse has refused to give me the shot of Demerol I asked for because it isn't indicated on my chart. Finally, morning comes, and so does the intern.

"I see only one solution," says the young doctor, "and that is cutting off the eyelashes."

The pain is confined to the right eye because the edge of the upper and lower eyelids of the left one were completely eaten away by the acid and the lashes have disappeared.

"Cut them off, do anything as long as it stops the pain."

But again I notice that we can get used to anything; this pain gradually becomes normal, an integral part of everyday reality. It doesn't disappear, but my brain organizes itself in such a way as to absorb it, channel it, digest it.

Yesterday evening, the intern came to see me. I was drowsing. He touched my arm. I jumped violently and then discovered that I was afraid. He had come to notify me that I would be operated on the next morning at ten o'clock. He had me sign a paper releasing the surgeon from responsibility in case of an accident. As soon as I wake, the waiting begins. Ten-thirty. They are late. Eleven. The sound of a trolley being wheeled in the corridor warns me, and then the room is invaded. Sounds of metal. I raise myself onto the narrow, hard stretcher. They wrap my body up in thick linen. In the corridor the nurses wish me good luck. One of them is crying, which doesn't leave me much hope for my left eye. I wonder whether something has been hidden from me. We are late; the nurses wheel me along quickly. Doors close behind us. The anesthetist shakes my hand, introduces himself, sticks a needle in my left arm. Dr. T. has just come in. He fixes an apparatus to my head. I feel myself losing consciousness.

"Doctor, I think you can begin," I say before dropping off, but I don't drop off and the surgeon's voice answers me, in the same polite way:

"It's over, Monsieur de Montalembert."

I don't understand. I don't understand that between the moment when I thought I was losing consciousness and my ridiculous sentence, five hours had passed.

I don't feel any pain and am perfectly wide awake. It's behind me, it's behind me! I repeat to myself with relief.

I am wheeled to my room. Idanna's voice whispers to me very softly, next to my ear:

"He kept the eye. It was not removed."

A bandage covers my face from forehead to upper lip. Later, Dr. T. comes by to see me. His voice reflects fatigue but I detect something else in it.

"You seem pleased with yourself, Doctor."

He laughs. The explanations he gives me in his professional voice are too technical for me to understand, but I listen as I try to hear in his voice a little hope, a chance to read my future.

The anaesthetic drugs are gradually wearing off and needles pierce my eyes. Soon two sea urchins have settled in the eye sockets and my brain is on fire. In the middle of the night an ingenious nurse fills two rubber gloves with ice, seals them up tight, and attaches them over my face to act as a decongestant.

A little later, an intern comes to bring me the report on the operation. A friend who happens to be there reads me the document. Once again, the truth is hidden behind an incomprehensible scientific vocabulary. But there is the last sentence: "The prognosis for restoring the vision is fair." Trumpets sound in the sky; my heart swells with thanksgiving. "The prognosis for restoring the vision is fair."

Fair! I cling to that word. As precise and prudent as he is, Dr. T. would not have used it without reason. And – considering this surgeon's pessimism – the word leaves no room for uncertainty. I will see again, that's for sure! It's a question of time and fighting.

When Idanna comes back, I tell her the good news and have her read the prognosis. I don't yet know that Michael lied to me and that it isn't fair that Idanna is reading with embarrassment, but poor. The chances for recovering my vision are poor. I cling to any possible hope.

I analyze every word. Each phrase has a meaning. On his next visit, I ask the surgeon questions and he talks to me, in his flat voice, about "atrophy": "Perhaps in two years, when a prosthesis-keratoplasty may partially restore sight in the right eye. It's too early to say." Blind for life, for the rest of my life. What life? Here I am, thrown onto this bed like a fish washed up on the shore. Through the window I hear the flow of life, the hum of New York. I feel how much heavier my body has become from two months of being in bed, making only careful, restricted movements. My neck is stiff and my shoulders tense. For life ... what life?

I am afraid of rotting away, morally and physically, of giving up.

A blind man returns home on a winter evening, with a big black accordion and his white cane. The place where he lives is poor and lonely. No family, no wife and rosy children. He doesn't turn on the lights and, in the dark, opens a can for his meal. Then he goes to bed and masturbates under the covers to give himself some comfort. The cliché from the last century's fondness for portrayals of misery. Money, family, love, solitude, these fears, these subjects of anguish are the roars of that monster living down there in darkness. Lying on that bed, full of fear, I did not yet know that a vital instinct, still intact, was going to give me the strength needed to fight the monster.

"The stitches will be removed in two weeks."

Three weeks go by, but the left eyelids are too badly burned to grow together and I have to be operated on again.

This time the operation is performed by a woman, Dr. Rowland. She has invented a system of clips, which make me suffer less. They have little pieces of sponge attached to them, and once again my face is enclosed by bandages. Dr. T. comes to see me. Always on the lookout for whatever information I can glean from his words, I ask him what comments Dr. Rowland had made. "Everything is all right; it's healing."

I jump to the conclusion that both eyes are healing, which is much more comforting than what his assistant had responded to the same question an hour earlier:

"Your right eye is doing well and your left eye for the moment is holding."

"Admitted on May 25, I am released from the hospital two months later, with six stitches in each eye, blind, handicapped, feeling a nausea for life, for the rest of my life."

Healing ... Holding. Medical terminology makes every patient suddenly aware of the importance of semantics.

"In a few days you can go home," the doctor tells me, and slowly my impatience to leave the hospital shifts to indifference- in fact, to hidden fear. Besides, I don't have a home anymore.

Retreating into myself, I analyze my own reactions to get a clue to what lies ahead for me. I have to understand who I am for others, and if the image is distorted, to try to redress it.

"Tomorrow, if you want to, you are free to leave the hospital." I have been waiting for this news for several days and now that I am confronted with it I don't know quite how to react. Free! Free to go where? To what future?

I consider all the possibilities, but under such conditions no future attracts me. Images cross my mind – I see myself creeping down a street, feeling my way along a wall, dragging my feet. Horror! I was thirty-five, in the prime of manhood, young and slim, and now I see myself a bloated body, a package of darkness, a crawling locust. I am afraid. I'm afraid to get out, to collect all my courage and still to end up like that.

Admitted on May 25, I am released from the hospital two months later, with six stitches in each eye, blind, handicapped, feeling a nausea for life, for the rest of my life. I do not say this simply to paint a gloomy picture or to make people feel sorry for me; I am trying to explain, as best I can, the fear and mental anguish of those who, like me, have been stabbed in the heart of life.

"Phone back! Insist. You weren't clear enough. Maybe she thought you just wanted to have some glasses made! You really don't know how to get things done. You sounded like somebody who wanted to see him about a sty." And she goes off in a gust of wind from the Russian steppes, banging the door shut.

The next day, toward the end of the afternoon, the telephone rings, and in a lilting, triumphant voice, she announces:

"You have an appointment with Dr. K. Thursday at nine."

"But. . ." But she has already hung up. I call her back.

"Will you come with me?"

"Of course!"

"Only then do I realize that, behind my eyelids, my eyes have become two balls of raw meat."

Just then, the secretary calls out my name and we go into Dr. K.'s consulting room. Without a word Valushka takes a seat somewhere behind me

"If I were you or if you were my son," he says in a calm, warm voice, "I'd go see Dr. A. in Barcelona. He has developed and perfected an operation called odonto-keratoprosthesis. It was invented by Dr. Charleux, a Frenchman, and Dr. Strampelli, an Italian. I'll explain it to you briefly. It involves inserting an artificial lens in the eye. First of all, they extract a tooth, generally a canine, and they cut off the bony part of the root. The lens is placed into this cone, which is inserted in the cheek beneath the eye. It is left there for three months so that the root and the lens become covered by a thin organic film, which will lessen the chances of rejection. The whole thing is then implanted in the eye, and if it is successful, you obtain a kind of vision called tunnel vision.

"Can you give me Dr. A.'s address and tell me how to get in touch with him?" Valushka's questions are precise, essential, practical. All of her Slavic eccentricity seems to have disappeared.

But the doctor has understood that what he has before him is a phenomenon of love, that this young woman of twenty-four has decided to fight for me, that she has no time for politeness or humor. For her, every second of my blindness is one second too many, and she doesn't want to leave anything to chance.

Before leaving, I want some explanations. We slip into Dr. K.'s office between two patients.

"Excuse me, Doctor, what is that eggshell Valushka tells me is put on or in the eye at the end of the operation?"

"Oh, it's just a plastic prosthesis to make the eyeball look normal."

Only then do I realize that, behind my eyelids, my eyes have become two balls of raw meat. I had naively thought that behind my eyelids, perhaps because I was able to perceive light, everything was there, still intact. Back on the street, with Valushka holding onto my arm, I am no longer quite sure that I want to have my eyelids opened to uncover that horror. I am not so sure I want to have that monstrous thing, impaled by a tooth, peering from behind a motionless, plastic façade. And all that in order to obtain a range of vision no broader than a piece of confetti. I almost begin to cherish my darkness and my eyes with their slightly Mongolian look. I don't want to become an object of horror. For a tiny patch of blue sky, I am not ready to jeopardize my relationship with others. In any case, according to Dr. K., there is only one eye that may be operated on, the left one. It was supposed to be removed but has apparently done better than the right, which has almost completely atrophied.

"A single eye is much better," says Valushka. "With a black patch you'll look just like a pirate."

She laughs and then suddenly becomes serious.

"You're going to see again. And after the operation, we'll arrange to meet

in a cafe, in New York or Paris. It'll be extraordinary. You will see me, you will see my face, and I'll be afraid that you won't like me. I want so much for you to see me, to see my eyes. I'm not very good at using words. I am a dancer and the only way I can truly express myself is through my eyes and my gestures. Call Dr. A. right away."

I walk towards Dr. A.'s office with confidence. The doctor's voice, softer when he greets Valushka, grows harsh again when he addresses me: there is, I think, atrophy of the eyeballs.

Atrophy, my eyes like two little shoe buttons. The verdict affects me like a new ice age. My luck hasn't turned. The prognosis is bad. Standing before the great doctor and Valushka, I am almost ashamed of the pitiful state of my eyes. Her voice, almost tender, asserts:

"But doctor, you are going to do something!"

"Madam," and his voice becomes gentle again, "I am the best in the world for this particular operation. The state of Monsieur de Montalembert's eyes is not good at all. I believe, you understand, I believe there is atrophy. I must open them up to be certain." Then, turning to me: "Come back Monday morning at nine o'clock, without having eaten, and I will operate on you." "The surgeon who operated on me in New York gave strict orders that my eyes were not to be touched for two years; that is, for another few months. He said the eye must be given time to heal and stabilize. That's why he sewed the eyelids and. . ."

"Ridiculous! When were you operated on? More than a year ago! And you

"No hope, there is absolutely no hope. I will die blind. I refuse to let myself cry for fear that tears so soon after the operation will burn my eyes."

imagine that everything has healed in that time? No! If he sewed your eyelids, it was to hide the shit, like putting a diaper on a baby's bottom."

There's a comforting image! The doctor gets up, comes over to me, and pulls back my lips with his thumb to examine my teeth. I remain motionless, like an animal at a fair, because however roughly he treats me, he is still my only hope. As we leave, Valushka says:

"He's an extraordinary man. I have complete confidence in him. You'll see!" I don't dare ask her to clear up this last ambiguity.

Here I am. I have just woken up and I wait, wait impatiently, to see Dr. A. and to learn the outcome of his investigation. Valushka has not telephoned. How strange my life is: they open my eyes while I'm asleep and shut them again when I wake up. It is ten o'clock at night when Dr. A. tells me:

"You must stay calm, Monsieur de Montalembert. You must not get excited." And my heart jumps, for joy, for what could possibly get me excited if not hope, the possibility of a different kind of future? There will not be this wall between you and me, this thing that my gaze cannot penetrate. I am going to be able to direct my eyes, or at least one eye, far off into the distance, free myself from this claustrophobia, escape from the dark labyrinth, and slit the Minotaur's throat.

"You must stay calm. I opened up your eyelids, and nothing can be done." I miss the rest of what he says: "opened ... eyelids ... atrophy ... projection ... very bad." No hope, there is absolutely no hope. I will die blind. I refuse to let myself cry for fear that tears so soon after the operation will burn my eyes. I am ice cold. I extend my hand, which he takes.

"Thank you, Doctor, for having tried, and also for having always been honest with me. You have always said you thought nothing could be done."

"I will stay in touch with you."

His voice is incredibly gentle, and I sense that he is overcome with pity. I feel a desperate need to talk to Valushka and, at the same time, I'm afraid

to. She has fought so hard for her hope. She has wanted so passionately for me to see again. I don't know how to break the news to her. I feel very tired. I have fought, and fought alone, which is the way such a battle should be waged. I have fought well, and in the end I have been defeated.

So many questions come up. What is my life going to be like during the forty or fifty years to come? I feel calm, but I hear the slow sadness of my beating heart.

I could very easily break down. I'm not sure of myself. The situation is horrible enough for me to be well aware of the danger. I will get my strength back, but for the moment I feel defeated. It can't be denied that I have lost the battle, physically. I wonder about the clotted life that lies ahead. Out of this devastation, out of these ashes, no flower can ever bloom again. I took the sleeping pill and this morning I woke up with these words hammering in my head: "No hope, no hope." Life is a tremendous anvil on which you can be either forged or broken. The bandage across my eyes has loosened and the pain is now bearable. How ashamed I feel, even though I don't know just why. What am I to do? Leave New York and go to Paris? My intellectual life would perhaps be easier there; in any case, my physical life seems permanently compromised. I phoned Valushka to tell her that I will never see her. She didn't say a word. There was a long silence. I could hear her breathing so close. I said good-bye and hung up. I will leave the Barraquer Clinic. I feel as empty as a woman who has undergone an abortion.

INVISIBLE

You live in a city like New York. You read the papers. You look at television. But you never think it will happen to you. It happened to me one evening. Going back to my house near Washington Square I was attacked by, I suppose, people looking for money to buy drugs. When they saw there was no money in the house, it became quite nasty. It was no longer for money; it was for, I would say, fun. There were two of them. A very big one and a smaller, less strong one. I attacked the big one with a poker; there was a fireplace so I attacked him with a poker. I could feel he was dangerous. He had a knife. I didn't pay attention to the little one. The little one had a weapon in his pocket. Paint remover. It's not an acid, it's a base. If you wash a base with water it doesn't go away. It continues to dig. While I was fighting with the big one, the little one threw that paint remover in my face. I understood that something quite serious had happened. I thought they would kill me so I started to scream. I was screaming so loudly that they got scared and they left. I immediately went to the shower. But I could see my sight going away, away, away. I called a friend because I didn't know the telephone number of the police. I said, Please ask the police to come, I have been attacked. But I could hardly even see the numbers to dial. It was already getting difficult. The police came maybe thirty minutes later. I was brought to the emergency room of the nearby hospital. They tried to wash it out, but as it was a base there was nothing to be done. I could see

“While I was fighting with the big one, the little one threw that paint remover in my face.”

that I was losing more and more of my sight. I asked the doctor: Tell me the truth, is it serious? He said, It's very serious. I understood that probably I'd lost my sight.

The morning came and already I knew that I was on the way to an irrevocable fate. By the morning I was totally blind. So it took me a night; it was very fast, very drastic. And then you find yourself lying in a bed with that new situation at hand. With that new person. You are somebody who used to be totally free and could look and see.

I was a painter and I was making films. My life was based on seeing.

It was not total darkness, I could see a light. Even if my eyelids were closed, I could still see through my eyelids.

I could see a golden light. I was not in total darkness for another reason, which at first was incredibly disturbing.

My brain, wanting to see images but not receiving any perceptions through the eyes, would create very strong images on its own. Vivid images. It got to the point where I would be talking to you and suddenly I would see something like a vision, totally produced by the brain, absolutely real to me. Very strong images, very disturbing.

For example, I would see the head of a man in marble. Just a head and two white globes, his eyes, globes in white marble. And suddenly I would see black lightning on them, as if those two white globes would crumble in cracks of black light. I see the cracks of my own retina. My brain can see those cracks and creates an image with it.

I stayed three months in the hospital because we tried everything. I had three operations and not one was a success. So, three months later, I found myself out in the street holding the arm of somebody and totally scared of the outside world, of the street, of the noise, of everything. I am released from the hospital with six stitches in each eye, blind, handicapped, feeling nausea for life, for lifetime. I do not say this to paint a gloomy picture; I am trying to explain, as best I can, the fear and mental anguish of those who, like me, have been stabbed in the heart of life. Out of the door of the hospital, my legs feel like cotton and I am already exhausted. The noise of the city swallows me. The cars seem to be heading right for me. Impossible to get my bearings in this neighbourhood even though I know it by heart down to the smallest detail: Greenwich Avenue, Eleventh Street, Christopher Street. Geometrical lines and the points of the compass danced in my head. I will never be able to function again.

I force myself to visualize this hospital bedroom with its metal furniture, its window, the curtains. I bring to mind paintings, Rembrandt's Polish cavalier, Francis Bacon's portraits of Innocent. My ability to create images absolutely must not atrophy. I must remain capable of bringing back the world I looked at intensely for thirty-five years. By contemplating in my memory the volcano of or the perfect harmony of a building designed by Michelangelo, I continue to receive instruction and knowledge from them. That is the immense privilege of blind people who were formerly able to see.

In St. Vincent's hospital in New York, when I started to walk out of my room or was in the room by myself, I banged my head several times, and I was always afraid something would stick into my eyes. I wanted a form of protection, but not made of glass, because I was afraid of getting broken pieces in my eyes. So on a piece of cardboard I designed these glasses, or the mask, or whatever you want to call it. So I now wear a band in the shape of glasses cut out of a sheet of steel. The metal reflects the lights of the city, other people's eyes, as mirrors were used to catch larks. It covers my fear, my wound, with a kind of brutal arrogance. This band rules out pity I knew a little Italian jeweller in SoHo and he understood what I wanted and he made it. And I must say, it does work very well for me, gives me confidence. I mean: scars, they are very private.

I had to learn to be helped. I had to learn order – I was not a very ordered person – because otherwise I could not find things around in my own room, and that was quite a new way too. Patience, patience most of all, patience and acceptance. To accept being helped is probably the hardest thing. The first time I walked out of my bedroom in the hospital, just to go to the corridor, I found myself holding the arm of a friend, and I understood: you will need help all the time and you will have to accept it. If you are very independent and not very patient, circumstances like mine are a good school to transform your character. Spring has come and I feel claustrophobic, hemmed in by the city. Meanwhile, I have fallen in love with a whimsical and unpredictable ballerina. In fact, she is so unpredictable that by the end of June she has vanished in an ultimate pirouette. That is

how I find myself embarking on a most extraordinary and unexpected journey. Someone told me that she has gone to India, to the Himalayas, Kashmir, and Ladakh. Ladakh. I try to remember Years ago I had seen some photographs of a fertile valley amid a fantastic wilderness of stone and beyond, towering above, the far snow-capped peaks of the mountains. I had always been reticent about going to India. I felt that I was too ignorant. But now I am in love with this woman and I want to find her.

I started to travel alone in Kashmir, then Ladakh, then Zanskar, which are valleys in the Himalayas. I travelled alone for two months. Nothing bad happened to me, absolutely nothing. Quite the contrary. And I think there is a good lesson in it: If you find a way to dance with people, to dance with life, nothing bad can happen to you. I have to hope so. I have to believe in it. When I arrived in India-in New Delhi-at once my bag, my money, everything disappeared. And I said, well, I have been robbed, the only thing I can do is take the next plane back to New York. In fact, after one hour everything was brought back by those people. They didn't say a word to me. In silence they took my hand and they dragged me through customs and so on and gave me my money back, with some of it changed into rupees. They put me in a three-wheeled taxi, one of those inexpensive ones. And when I wanted to thank them and to give them a little bit of money, I couldn't find them with my hand. So I asked the driver of the taxi, "But where are they? Who are they?" And he said, "Oh! Just beggars." They were beggars living in the airport. They saw me and saw I was helpless. And they just took it on themselves to do everything for me. And I thought, this is going to be an interesting trip.

Yes, I have regrets. I would prefer to see – definitely – and if tomorrow somebody tells me about the possibility, I will jump on it. I think it has made my life much more complicated. But I also try to use it as a yoga. Yet I don't succeed all the time. Sometimes I get very exhausted. When you are exhausted and you cannot reach what you want, you become depressed. And then you have to be careful. Clear your mind of all negative thinking, it's too dangerous. Since I lost my sight I have had two very close friends commit suicide, and they told me they couldn't understand why I didn't commit suicide. Suicide? No. Orders are to go on living, meanly, painfully, scrupulously.

“Since I lost my sight I have had two very close friends commit suicide, and they told me they couldn't understand why I didn't commit suicide.”

The fact that I lost my sight is very spectacular, but there are things which are much more terrible.

The other day I took a taxi. The driver was a little Cambodian guy, and in a very nice way he said, What happened to you? Is it that you are just sick but your vision will come back, no? And I said, For the moment, it's permanent. And he said, Oh I cannot express my emotion toward what happened to you. I said, That is very kind of you, but you know, it's very nice because of course you can see what happened to me and you give me your compassion, but you know there are so many people much more wounded than me, and you see nothing and they don't receive any compassion. And the guy was silent for a moment, then he said, Monsieur, I understand very well what you say because my wife and my four children were killed in front of me in Cambodia. So there he was, driving his cab in Paris with this huge wound that nobody could see. It's not comparable. That is much worse.

Photo: Phaedra Brody

