

PART TWO

LOSS

MONDAY

The journey back from Washington was tedious. For part of the flight, I buried myself in a book, much feted in America, by Stephen Pinker - 'The Language Instinct'. Pinker's impressive tome, accessible to the man-in-the-street and of importance to language academics, argued that there must be a genetic basis, a genetic underpinning to our use of language. In other words, language is not only a cultural phenomenon, the software of human development, but a hard-wired component of the way our brains work. One intriguing chapter summarised knowledge and understanding about the development of language in babies and I was able to match my hazy memory of Belinda's gurgling with Pinker's descriptions. He explained how new born infants are vocally restricted by the position of the larynx, which is higher up, close on the nasal passage, making it possible for them to breath and drink at the same time - I never knew this. Only when the larynx has descended, after about three months, can babies start to begin to play with sounds, usually between five and seven months, and then, at about eight months - Belinda's stage before my departure for the US - they start to babble in syllables. Belinda's favourites were la-la and da-da. I insisted this latter was referring to me, but Susan scoffed, knowing full well from her gossiping with other mothers than children do not start to speak until after their first year. The book stressed the significance of the babbling phase and drew attention to the fact that the syllables employed by babies of seven to eight months old sound the same in all languages. After I had digested that argument, I let Pinker advise me that, by the time Belinda was a year old, she would be making constructions of varied syllables. I looked forward to la-de-da.

Jet lag and the long tube ride from Heathrow, though, defeated my ability to concentrate on a book, and I endured the hour and half to Maida Vale with an unbearable impatience. I was so anxious to see my daughter, and Susan too, that when I entered the flat, near to midday, the silence was like a devastating blow. I walked through the rooms to find Susan lying on the bed, her long fine blonde hair all dishevelled, her clothes all crumpled.

"Where's Belinda? Susan, where's Belinda?" It was an instinctive question.

"She's gone." She barely moved or acknowledged my arrival. There was a blankness in Susan's face that I had come to beware of.

"Gone where?" I tried to keep calm.

“Gone.” I began to shake her and press my face in front of her to ensure her full attention.

“Gone where?” I repeated more urgently this time. When she did not reply, I raised my voice. “Susan, tell me, where is Belinda?” She closed her eyes and began to rock her head from side to side. I left her to look around the flat, expecting, hoping to find our baby in one corner or other. Toys littered both her own room and part of the lounge, as though she had been playing minutes previously - there were one or two I did not recognise. I had spoken to Susan and Belinda 24 hours previously, and Susan had not indicated any reason they would not be there on my arrival. I noticed the pushchair, usually cluttering our small hall near the front door, was nowhere to be seen.

I returned to the bedroom and carefully asked Susan again about Belinda, praying as I did so for the words ‘Damien’, or ‘childminder’, or ‘friend’s house’ to slip out. But she had nothing more to say. This was intolerable and I started shouting.

“I must know more. Tell me, where she’s gone? Where is she? Where is Belinda?” Susan tried to curl up in a ball, and cover her ears, but I forced her hands away and continued shouting. Then she started muttering something very quietly almost under her breath. I stopped and turned my ear towards her.

“I went to see Ruth. I borrowed a book. She’s gone.”

“What do you mean ‘she’s gone’?”

“Somebody took her.”

“Took her.” My whole world was imploding, I could not understand what was happening. “Took her where? Who took her? Speak to me Susan.” But she went blank again and silent.

“What about the police? Did you call the police?” Susan shook her head almost imperceptibly. I ran to the telephone and called Ruth. I had to do something, start somewhere. As I withdrew from the bedroom, the whole situation struck me as unreal, absurd. I could not understand why until I was being put through, by the publisher’s switchboard, to Ruth’s extension. Susan was alone. Why was there no-one with her? Ruth answered with sweetness and excitement in her voice.

“Bill, you’re back.” She didn’t know. I felt terribly empty.

“Ruth, you don’t know do you?”

“Know what?”

“Belinda’s disappeared.” She laughed - for a second.

“What do you mean ‘disappeared’?”

“I’ve just arrived from the airport. Susan is sitting on the bed, like a zombie, and Belinda’s gone. She was snatched from her pushchair on Sunday afternoon while Susan was visiting you, she says.”

“Oh God. I don’t believe it. Why didn’t she tell me?”

“I must go, Ruth, I thought you might have been involved. Forgive me for calling. I’ll call you this evening when I know more.” I went back to Susan and spoke as firmly and calmly as I could.

“Have you told anybody, Susan?” Again, a very slight shake of the head. I repeated my question, more urgently. Then, in the same faint absent voice as before, she said the one word ‘No’.

I exploded at Susan without knowing what I said. Then I calmed myself and went back to the telephone. I made quick and awkward phone calls to a friend who lived in the same street, to Susan’s father, to Damien, to the childminder, in each case using a simple excuse for my light enquiry as to whether any of them had seen or heard from Susan and Belinda in the last couple of days. Then I walked down the stairs and asked an elderly woman in the flat below us, who had seen or heard nothing, and tried the flat above, where no-one answered. Then I rang the police.

When I said I wanted to report a missing child I was told to hang on; and when I explained that the missing child was not yet a year old and that it might have been stolen, I was told to wait again. Finally a responsible person came to the phone and recorded my name, telephone number and address. He said an officer would be with me soon. Susan’s complete and continuing state of collapse gave me no choice, after my initial rages, but to remain calm and unemotional. I told her the police were coming. She started and sat up. I placed an arm around her bowed form and, for a very short moment, I felt an echo of the depth of her distress, rather than mine - the fact that she had not told anyone at all indicated a pathos beyond my comprehension.

“Susan, the police will be here soon, what will you say to them? You’ll have to speak to them.” She didn’t look up or show any sign of listening. I continued to hold onto her in silence but there was no mutual flow of sympathy between us, no exchange of self-pity. She was impermeable, she took in no warmth and gave out none. While waiting for the police, I no longer needed to take immediate action and this, unfortunately, gave me time to reflect. Minute by minute, incrementally, the pain got worse and worse; I kept imagining possible scenarios in which Belinda would be found safe and sound, but it was impossible to match up Susan’s state and the ignorance of our friends, with any of them. And then I started thinking about who would take a baby like that, and why, and trying to remember what had happened in similar cases reported in the news.

Suddenly, for no discernible reason, Susan came to life. She lifted a small suitcase out of a cupboard and proceeded, almost mechanically, to fill it with clothes. I asked her what she was doing but she did not reply. I followed her out to the lounge and hall, where she collected her handbag, and put on a coat. At that point, the street doorbell rang, I buzzed to unlock the front door of the building, and waited by the lift. Two men, neither of them in uniform, arrived via the stairs. The older and more smartly clothed man, with a well clipped beard showing signs of grey, introduced himself as detective inspector Don Miller from West Hampstead police station. I asked them to go through to the lounge. Susan ignored their arrival, picked up her suitcase and handbag, and walked out.

“Susan,” I shouted after her, and then to the police, “that’s Susan, Belinda’s mother. She’s gone very strange. Our baby’s disappeared and she won’t talk.” My words seemed unreal. The policemen looked at each other, I saw what looked like suspicion on their faces, suspicion that they were being led a song and dance. “Stop her, can’t you,” I pleaded; and then I left them to race out after Susan. I caught up with her on the pavement. “We need you, we need you to help find Belinda.” No response. “Where are you going, at least tell me that.” Miller had followed me out and taken note of my short dialogue with Susan.

“Mrs Lambert . . .” I interrupted him.

“It’s Ms Ross. We’re not married but we do live together.”

“Ms Ross, it would be more convenient if we could go back to your home and talk.” Apart from an occasional cockney lilt, there was a strength in his voice which halted Susan for a second but then she walked on. We followed. “Is it true your baby, Belinda, has gone missing, as Mr Lambert says?” I understood then, of course, he had no idea whether this was a true emergency or whether it was simply a family bust-up and I was trying heavy tactics. At least, I reasoned, the station had sent a senior officer.

“I tell you, she’s gone very strange, she won’t talk.”

“She’s lost her nine month old child and she won’t explain it. You have to understand Mr Lambert that, frankly in my experience, that’s highly unlikely.” He wasn’t trying to be clever, simply straightforward.

“Susan, tell him, tell him you’ve lost Belinda.” She continued to walk on in the direction of the St John’s Wood station. “Please, Susan, please.” She stopped, and turned to the policemen. Using the same very small voice - he had to strain forward to hear her against the street noise - she told him exactly what she had told me, but she told it as though the whole event had happened to somebody else, and somebody else’s child. In response to one question, Susan also described what Belinda

had been wearing. She paused then turned to me, and said, in a still softer voice, almost under her breath.

“Bill, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m going home. Goodbye.” With that she marched off quickly along the pavement. We continued to follow her

“Ms Ross, I must insist you give us more information,” Miller demanded, but she said nothing. He turned to me and asked if I knew where she was going. I told him that ‘home’ almost certainly meant her father’s house in Woodbridge. He asked her if that was so, but she said nothing further.

“Susan’s very deeply disturbed,” I said. He tried again as we approached the entrance to the tube station.

“Ms Ross, as I say, it is very important you talk to us.” There was an edge of anger in his voice, and I could tell he did not know what to do. Susan bought a ticket and proceeded through the gate.

“I think Mr Lambert,” the detective said, “we should go back to your flat, hear the full story, and take it from there.” I wanted to go with Susan because she was the only one who had any relevant information, the only one who might be able to unlock the terrible mystery, the only one who might lead me back to my daughter. I started to talk, but Miller wanted me to wait until we got back to his colleague in the flat.

It did not take long to explain my movements, what had happened since my return, and to repeat Susan’s sparse information. In addition, I described the various people involved in our life and confirmed that I had spoken to them all. Miller asked whether there had been any unusual events in recent months, and whether we had ever been watched or followed at any time. There was nothing I could tell him.

Then he moved on to a new line of questions, one obviously designed to investigate the possibility of Susan having walked out on me and having invented the story of the missing baby to give her time. I answered the questions as honestly as I could, but I downplayed the tension in our partnership, and emphasised the fact that Susan had exhibited strange and vacant behaviour before. When Miller asked for examples, I explained the story of when Susan had dropped Belinda, but there were no others I was comfortable recounting. He did not find my analysis very convincing, or so it seemed, but, by this time, I had begun to feel myself under scrutiny. The assistant, whom had been taking copious notes, was dispatched to question other people in the house, while Miller himself asked for recent photographs of Belinda and Susan, and various addresses and telephone numbers: Ruth, the childminder, Edward, Damien who was our chief babysitter, Susan’s doctor, and several other friends and acquaintances.

I asked him what would happen next. He said he had no reason to disbelieve me, but he had found Susan's behaviour extremely worrying.

"I won't beat around the bush, Mr Lambert, but if your baby has been taken by a stranger, for whatever reason, then the 24 hour delay in calling us could be disastrous. On the other hand," he went on quickly, "these things can often turn out to be a misunderstanding." I had remained calm since making the phone call to the police nearly two hours previously, but I had felt a growing frustration at Miller's unhurried and partly disbelieving approach and the fact that nothing practical was being done to find Belinda. When Miller used the word 'misunderstanding', it triggered anger. I shouted the word back at him.

"A misunderstanding, a misunderstanding. You think this is a misunderstanding. But what if it's not; what if Belinda is . . ." I was going to say 'dead', but my mind was suddenly swamped with confusion. I realised that if she were dead, speedy detective work would make no difference, but, at the same time, the reality of her being dead was impossibly painful. I stuttered. ". . . has been . . ." My imagination gave out on me. My anger disintegrated into anguish. "Who, who would take her? why?"

"That's exactly what we have to find out, Mr Lambert. I know how painful this must be for you," Miller's first show of sympathy almost led me into tears, "but I promise you we will do everything we can."

"But what, what can you do?"

"The first thing," he said very carefully, "is to find Ms Ross, hopefully at her father's in Woodbridge, and establish that Belinda is not with her." He saw me start to anger again, I suppose, and continued quickly. "It's not impossible, is it, that her father, Mr Ross, lied to you on the phone?"

This had truly not occurred to me. Immediately, my thoughts, having gone round and round in circles on the same track, were sent spinning into an entirely new orbit. I remembered Felicity. Could Susan have discovered my disloyalty. How would she have found out? Did I leave evidence? Did Felicity tell her? Could this all be a charade, Susan's way of revenge? Surely, she would not have gone so far as to allow me to call the police.

"Has something new occurred to you, Mr Lambert, anything, however trivial, might help?"

"No, no." I did not sound very convincing.

"How are your relations with Mr Ross, is it remotely possible that Belinda is there?"

“No I rang him before you came, I’m sure it’s not possible, I know Susan better than that.” I paused. “Why don’t you ring him yourself,” I suggested without being able to disguise a touch of resentment.

“Do you mind if I use your phone?” I told him to go ahead, and then gave him the number to use. The conversation was short and brief. Of course Edward had no idea what was going on and convinced Miller quickly that Belinda was not there. My heart sank and sank. Miller told him there appeared to be a problem with Belinda’s ‘whereabouts’, that Susan had so far been unhelpful, and that she had departed Maida Vale, probably to go to him. It was imperative, Miller said, that he speak to Susan as soon as possible, and he would, therefore, be driving out to Woodbridge shortly. He gave Edward a telephone number and asked him to ring when she arrived.

The younger officer returned during the phone call and stood quiet until Miller had finished his conversation. He reported that not everybody who lived in the house had been in, but of those that were no-one could remember having seen or heard Belinda or Susan for several days. I told Miller that was not unusual, as we all generally kept ourselves to ourselves.

“Thank you, Mr Lambert,” Miller said with determined politeness. “No doubt I’ll speak to you again today. Meanwhile, if you think of anything at all, or Susan contacts you, please call.” And he gave me his card.

That was it. They were gone, and I was alone.

I sat on the sofa with my head in my hands. A kind of paralysis took over, as though I had been clicked into neutral. No immediate forces were demanding physical or verbal action, and yet all kinds of conscious, semi-conscious and unconscious thoughts were shuffling around inside my head vying for precedence. Should I stay with my head in my hands, or pace around the room? Should I get a drink or stay thirsty? Should I imagine Belinda struggling in the arms of a faceless stranger, or lying peacefully in her pushchair waiting to be found? Should I let anger or fear predominate? Should I cry out or just cry? Should I go to the toilet and piss, or ignore my bladder for longer? Should I unpack my suitcase, or check through Belinda’s toys? Should I call Damien or Ruth? Should I check the flat for evidence of Felicity, or call and ask whether she’d spoken to Susan.

The word ‘misunderstanding’ used by Miller and what it might mean, and the idea that somehow Susan might have discovered the affair with Felicity, were the two ideas circling closest to my conscious self when the telephone rang. I got up, mechanically at first, and then enthusiastically reached for the receiver: maybe it was the police ringing to tell me Belinda had been found, or maybe it was Susan ringing to confess, or . . . such possibilities were to spark into life every time the telephone rang over the next few days.

But it was Damien. He was devastated with the news and insisted on coming straight round. Consequently, for a few minutes I resumed normal, as opposed to neutral, mode. It was a little after 4pm. I put my suitcase in the bedroom, took a shower, put on fresh clothes, tidied up the toys in the lounge and the mess left by Susan in the kitchen, and switched the kettle on. As I moved around the flat, my eyes looked incessantly for evidence as to the train of events that had led to the loss of Belinda. Had Felicity forgotten some telltale toiletry? Was there a significant note on the noticeboard or by the telephone? Were there any unusual letters in Susan's desk? Was that broken glass under the bed or a piece of cellophane? However much I tried to interpret the presence of things I hadn't seen (food packets, magazines), or the new position or absence of things I had, there was nothing that gave up any clue at all.

I was in Belinda's room crying when the doorbell went. I obliged myself to stand, to walk through the lounge and hall, and buzz to open the front door. A minute later, Damien arrived via the lift, and, immediately, took me in his arms. The gesture was so unexpected that I burst into more tears. When an echo of the pain of losing my parents surfaced for a moment, maybe triggered by the way Damien held me or even his smell, my tears thickened and turned into a profound sobbing which did not stop for an age. Eventually, Damien manoeuvred me, and his own large frame, into my lounge and sat me down. By the time he had made a pot of tea, I had composed myself sufficiently to talk him through everything I knew. He asked lots of questions, not in the manner of the police because there was a job to be done but because, like me, he was desperately involved, and desperate to help. His old suspicions about Susan surfaced and unsettled me strangely, but he was sufficiently sensitive to desist pressing the matter. It was only when Damien fielded the telephone a couple of times and I listened to him talk to the callers - once Alex, the science magazine editor, and once Ruth - that I became aware of his own distress.

Apart from the vague suspicions about Susan, Damien's presence was immensely comforting. I would never have imagined it to be so, for I had become accustomed to the arrogance, and the flippant, occasionally camp manner. Despite his role in helping me overcome the death of my parents, which I remembered more as a fact rather than a live expandable memory, as an adult he was never my first choice for sympathy; for intelligence about the world, yes; for choices between theoretical alternatives, yes; but for emotional support, never. It was as though he had used his arrogance to build up fortifications against humankind, fortifications which I had come to accept as impenetrable. Yet here he was, letting down an otherwise invisible drawbridge and opening up a sumptuous dwelling of rich and soft fabrics. It was not only the voice which he modulated, and which transported me back for the first time in many years to his study at our school where, on the death of my parents, he had encouraged me to reflect on the past and my relationship with them, but it was the intensity and interest with which he involved himself in my trouble.

And so, with Damien's help, the deep anguish I had expressed on his arrival was slowly and carefully corralled, fenced in, and penned, for the time being at least. I again began to take charge of my thoughts and intellect. This led to the identification of a clear need to be doing something practical. We discussed various possibilities, but the most appealing was to go there, to the place where Susan had, apparently, lost Belinda. Damien agreed to stay and man the telephone.

I walked the same way I always walked to Ruth's, and the route Susan must have taken - along Maida Vale, and the Kilburn High Road, and then taking the ever so slightly longer route through the small park with its tennis courts, playground and grassy area. Did Susan stop here, I wondered, to watch the children on the swings? Did she talk to anyone? There were two adults standing around watching their toddlers, and several young teenagers. I spoke to them all in turn, asking if they had been in the playground yesterday, Sunday morning. One of the teenagers had been there, so I asked her if she could remember a woman with blonde hair (what had Susan been wearing then, I did not know - the same as that morning?) and a baby wearing a crimson anorak, a royal blue cord dress, light blue tights and stripy blue and white soft shoes (as Susan had described to Miller - but what about her small soft giraffe, was she carrying that? I could not find it in the flat.) The girl had the intelligence to reflect on my descriptions for a second before saying no, she couldn't remember anyone like that.

I walked out through the park gates. Did someone follow Susan unnoticed the same way, past the Kingsgate workshops, and up Cottleigh Street to where Ruth lived near a small library? Did that someone pause by a lamp-post, cower in a porch, cross the road, while Susan put the brake on the pushchair, walked the few steps to Ruth's front door, pressed the doorbell and went in? I paced the route slowly, my eyes peeled to the ground, surveying the pavement, the tarmac street, the gutter, the drains, the entranceways to the terraced houses. A few times I stopped to stoop and examine a piece of litter before throwing it back in the gutter. What did I hope to find? Maybe Belinda's giraffe. How would finding it help? I had no idea.

I rang Ruth's doorbell, but there was no reply. I returned to the playground to see if there was anyone new there to quiz, and then I walked back to Cottleigh Street and began stopping every pedestrian, and every person who parked and got out of a car. Most answered my questions politely but could not help, a few were too short of English to understand, and a few others rudely told me to mind my own business. After an hour or more, I walked quickly towards West Hampstead until I found a phonebox and called Damien. He reported that Edward had rung to discuss Susan, who had arrived at Woodbridge, and suggested I call later. I walked back again through Cottleigh Street to the playground quizzing everyone I saw with regard to their movements on Sunday morning and any sightings of Belinda and Susan. By chance, I met Ruth on her way home soon after 7pm. Once inside her flat, I rang Damien a second time to tell him where I was and that I would be back in an hour or so.

Although Ruth's horror and exclamations threatened to slow me down and oblige a renewed self-confrontation (especially when she came over to hug me, more for herself I suspect than me, and I had to push her away gently), I managed to tell her the basic facts, without breaking down. I spoke quickly, though, and switched as soon as I could to questioning her about Susan's visit.

"She dropped in for less than a minute. I gave her a book and she went."

"No, please," I pleaded, "tell me in detail, every detail you can remember."

"I was writing a letter when the doorbell went. I wasn't expecting anyone, and wondered who it could be. Susan . . ." I interrupted.

"What was she wearing?"

"Black jeans, I believe, and an open jacket with a blue polo, her hair was tied back in a pony."

"That's what she was wearing today. Forgive me, carry on."

"I greeted Susan, she gave me a kiss on the cheek as usual, and I asked her inside; but she said she was only passing and wanted to pick up a book we had discussed previously . . ."

"What book?"

"It was an American book about healthy diets and exercise - no clues there Bill." I'd seen it in the flat. "Oh god, I don't believe this is happening."

"Go on, please,"

"Belinda was in her pushchair, a few feet behind Susan, so I walked past her and bent down to pat her head, as one does. I probably said something in baby language. . ."

"What was she wearing?"

"I don't know . . . something red I believe, and blue shoes."

"Do you remember, if she had her giraffe?"

"Oh yes, because I referred to it. Then, Susan came in, she stood by the door, watching after Belinda. I fetched the book, gave it to her. She said she would organise for us all to go out soon . . ."

“She said that?”

“Yes, because she wanted to hear all about China. And I said I wanted to hear about your trips too. And then she went. I waved as she walked down the hill, and then went back to my letter. Oh God, if I’d known, I could have walked . . .”

“But she never came in, and you watched her and Belinda walk away.”

“Yes.”

“But Susan said Belinda was taken while she was visiting you.” What did she say exactly?

“She may have meant during her trip to and from here.”

“Yes, but how could she lose Belinda if she was with her all the time?”

Ruth poured us both a glass of sweetish wine. She suggested I stay to eat and that I ring Damien to join us. But I told her I had to get back to be near the telephone. I gave her more detail concerning the visit of the police, the questions they had asked and the actions they intended to take. I said they would probably be contacting her shortly. We sat in silence for a few minutes. I finished my drink, thanked her for being so patient, and asked if she would mind talking to her neighbours to see if they had noticed anything. She agreed and I said I would ring her after work the following day.

On the way back to Maida Vale, I reflected more carefully on Susan’s movements. Why would she have hurried away from Ruth’s like that? She must have taken Belinda to the playground, and then remembered she wanted to borrow the book. As she was close to Ruth’s she probably thought it was worth dropping by to see if she was there. But, by then, it would have been near the time for Belinda to feed and then sleep. If so, they would have returned the quicker way - not through the park - the very way I was walking. Did Susan then go into a shop and leave Belinda outside? This junk shop, now closed? This corner shop? I went in and asked the same questions I’d asked earlier. Then I tried the supermarket on the Kilburn High Road. Surely, Susan would not have abandoned Belinda alone outside the supermarket. It was all pointless speculation. She would have to tell what she knew. I remembered that Miller had gone to Woodbridge, and so marched on home to ring Edward first, and then Miller.

Damien listened to a summary of my afternoon and then went to the kitchen to find bread and cheese. I telephoned Edward. He was not very friendly. In a tone that implied the inconvenience was all my fault, he told me that Miller and a colleague had stayed for nearly two hours.

“But did Susan tell them anything useful?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t with them most of the time?”

“Did she say anything to you?”

“No.”

“Can I speak to her?”

“No, she’s sleeping.”

“Hell, Edward, your granddaughter’s missing and you don’t seem the slightest bit concerned.”

“Of course I’m concerned, Bill,” his voice took on a managerial firmness, “but I’m equally worried for Susan. She’s having a kind of breakdown. Battering her with questions is no help. I told as much to the police. I’m taking her to the doctor in the morning.”

“But what about Belinda?” I had difficulty in keeping my voice below a shout. “We don’t even know exactly what happened, where Belinda was taken, and how, because Susan won’t tell anybody.”

“If she won’t talk, she won’t talk.” It sounded like he had had experience of Susan’s strange behaviour, and so, rather insensitively, I tried to ask him about Susan’s past and particularly her childhood - something I should have done a long time ago.

“Did she do this kind of thing, close up and not talk, maybe because she was feeling guilty, when she was younger?” This was too much for Edward, his usually formal exterior cracked open - the first time ever with me, although I had seen his wrath towards Susan.

“This is not the time to be applying any of your pop psychology, your half-learnt science, your medical mythology . . .” I interrupted his unexpected attack.

“Edward, forgive me, I didn’t mean anything by it.” He composed himself hurriedly.

“I have to go,” he said, “goodbye.” I told him I would call tomorrow and hung up. Straightaway I retrieved Miller’s card and rang his number. He was off duty. What type of job was that, I thought, where you could take on the case of a missing child in the afternoon, and then, with the child still missing, go home to dinner, or a movie, or a game of pool.

Through a light supper and for hours after I talked everything over and over with Damien, as though somehow further analysis of Susan's behaviour, or what questions the police had asked, or what Ruth had said could lead me nearer the truth. But from whichever angle I approached the mystery, I stumbled to a halt for want of knowing exactly what had happened to Susan. I needed to know what she had done, and my thinking could not get beyond that. Damien, though, proposed the use of a hypothesis. He suggested we imagine that Susan had gone into the corner shop, and come out to find Belinda gone. This then allowed our discussion to progress a little along two different lines.

Firstly, Damien encouraged me to consider Susan's behaviour on exiting the shop to find Belinda missing. Perhaps she would have rushed up and down the street and gone back in the shop (then the man behind the counter would have remembered her) but at some point, perhaps very quickly, something happened to her. I had assumed that guilt was the underlying reason for her behaviour, her inability to tell anyone, but I didn't know whether it was an entirely unconscious reaction to the event, or one that had a conscious element. I had veered backwards and forwards over this all day. But Damien suggested that panic or fear could also have led to her slipping into the trance-like state I had described to him.

Secondly, Damien took me on to consider the reality of what might have happened to Belinda while Susan was in the shop. All day I had been unwilling to travel this route in my mind, but Damien's calm and careful manner helped fortify me for the worst of the mental voyage. A madperson or a pervert could have taken her, killed her, and dumped her body somewhere. If so it would soon be found, and I would know the worst. Yet, putting this possibility into words, out loud, made it appear improbable, far more improbable in fact than my subconscious had feared.

We moved on to discuss the possibility of a woman who had recently lost her own child having taken Belinda. For me this was the most likely scenario. Damien confirmed my opinion and that it was not only hope tainting my reasoning. If this were the case, then the chances were high that Belinda was being cared for, if not in luxury, then adequately. If such a woman were then to get fed up, or scared, she would surely abandon Belinda in a place where she could be found easily.

The other possibility we imagined was that someone known to Susan or me had taken Belinda in order to hurt us. But I considered this highly unlikely since we lived relatively simple lives and did not make enemies. I mentally logged through every friend and acquaintance of recent years, without coming up with a single name that would be capable of such an action. Despite his earlier caution against criticism of Susan, Damien reminded me of the business with the card index, and how deeply I had been hurt by that. He suggested it was possible, not probable but possible, that Susan had tricked someone in her past, before me, who had not resolved their hatred. I considered this idea for a few minutes. We had, naturally, discussed all our previous relationships, and I knew about most of the

men with whom she had been involved. I had the impression, admittedly gained from Susan in the case of all but one of her previous lovers (the one in Germany who I had met), that none of the relationships had terminated in a sinister or bitter way. And besides, I said to Damien, why would such a person have waited so long. I dismissed the idea.

At one point during the evening, Felicity rang. I was surprised because she must have expected me to be tied up with Susan and Belinda on my first night back from the US. But she didn't want anything other than to give me her new telephone number. I said I needed to tell her something important - she made a joke because she couldn't imagine what could be serious between us - and I arranged to meet her in a pub early the following evening. Also, Ruth rang to say she had talked to several of her neighbours but they had nothing to report, and that she had told Dennis who said I should ring him any time day or night if he could be of help. I told her that Damien was doing a good job looking after me at present.

It was after midnight when my body - weakened by jet lag and ravaged by emotional turmoil - finally gave in to exhaustion. Damien saw me to bed, before tidying up, leaving very quietly, and catching a cab home. I woke several times in the night and lay awake for an hour or more going over one detail or another again and again, before weariness nudged me across the sleep threshold until the next waking.