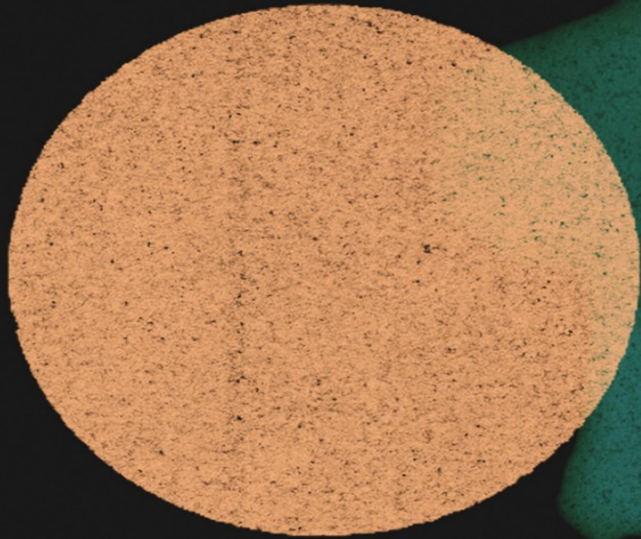


'A small miracle'
New York Times



**I Who
Have
Never
Known
Men**

**Jacqueline
Harpman**

VINTAGE

JACQUELINE HARPMAN

I Who Have Never Known Men

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY

Ros Schwartz

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Sophie Mackintosh

VINTAGE

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Introduction

I Who Have Never Known Men

About the Author

Jacqueline Harpman was born in Etterbeek, Belgium in 1929. Her family fled to Casablanca when the Nazis invaded, and only returned home after the war. After studying French literature she started training to be a doctor, but could not complete her training due to contracting tuberculosis. She turned to writing in 1954 and her first work was published in 1958. In 1980 she qualified as a psychoanalyst. Harpman wrote over 15 novels and won numerous literary prizes, including the Prix Médicis for *Orlanda. I Who Have Never Known Men* was her first novel to be translated into English, and was originally published with the title *The Mistress of Silence*. Harpman died in 2012.

About the Translator

Ros Schwartz has translated numerous works of fiction and non-fiction from French, including several Georges Simenon titles for Penguin Classics, a new translation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* and, most recently, Mireille Gansel's *Translation as Transhumance*. The recipient of a number of awards, she was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2009 and received the Institute of Translation and Interpreting's John Sykes Memorial Prize for Excellence in 2017.

ALSO BY JACQUELINE HARPMAN

Orlanda

To Denise Geilfus In friendship

Introduction

Sometimes we read a book of such singularity and uniqueness, yet such ringing truth, that we wonder why it has not found a larger audience. Jacqueline Harpman's *I Who Have Never Known Men* is beloved by a small and intense core of readers, and yet has not entered mainstream awareness. Perhaps that's not so surprising, refusing as it does to be put into a neat genre box. It's a philosophical treatise as much as it is a story about an alien world, one that prizes the humanity of its characters and places this humanity square, front and centre, even in a disorientating landscape of total strangeness. The prose is cool water. Its images are lonely, weird, sometimes horrific, and always arresting.

In recent years we have seen a boom in science and speculative fiction written by female authors, but *I Who Have Never Known Men* seems eerily prescient, a book from a hundred years ago or a hundred years in the future. Lumping together female-centred science fiction can be reductive; problems of women are still problems that affect everyone living under patriarchy. In fact, femaleness is somehow both central to and almost incidental in this novel. Yes, there are men among the dead, but the novel would look very different were men to make an appearance beyond their roles as guards and dead prisoners.

The narrator is at the heart of this doubleness, presenting her memories and theories to us from a space of peculiar neutrality. She is not like the other women of the novel, with their memories of the outside world and knowledge of relationships, sex, love and family. Her body never developed the markers of reproduction, and being raised in an underground bunker since an early age, she is in a unique position to be a person without any of the signifiers of personhood. She is an example of a person raised without culture, without societal constructs, without knowledge. She is a pure experiment asking: what does a person become when stripped to the core,

raised in isolation? What might a woman be like under these conditions? It is testament to the strength and beauty of this novel that she remains a character too, not just a device; she is formed, sympathetic, and possessing both curiosity and courage.

Nowhere in this novel is exploitation, pain for the sake of pain, or needless cruelty. The entire novel manages to balance its elegant philosophical concerns with also being an amazing feat of human tenderness. Everything is pared down, and everything has a purpose. Harpman shows the worst of what humans can inflict on humans, but also the best that love and togetherness can do. It is a 'minute account of a nightmare' (Hector Bianciotti, *Le Monde*) and yet also a triumph of the small, seemingly trivial fragments that make up who we are. "It's all so ordinary, it's the same as everybody else!" exclaims one of the women when talking about her previous life; to which the narrator responds with 'As if she did not realise that for me, nothing was ordinary, since nothing had happened to me'.

No life is ordinary, the book seems to say. No life is without hope, without light, even during the unimaginable.

The plot of *I Who Have Never Known Men* is simple. Forty women are held in what appears to be an underground bunker, where they have been for many years. They are controlled by male guards, and the usual basic provisions of modernity – electricity, food, water – are available to them. Life continues for many years, until one day a siren goes off. By a stroke of luck the women are able to free themselves, and they start out upon a mysterious world gradually realising, horror after horror, that they might be the last people on this alien-seeming planet.

Despite this the novel chooses to begin with life – focusing on the narrator's coming of age, as shown through her fascination with the youngest male guard. The narrator gives us a frank description of her own burgeoning sexuality, while simultaneously remaining dislocated from it. In many ways she is as much an alien as the planet she lives on, compared to the other women, who spent their lives working service jobs and raising families. She has no idea of what a 'normal' human life might look like, and the other women react to this with unease.

But maybe it is femininity itself that is the strange thing. From the offing the narrator's sexual fascination with the guard calls up modern echoes of submissiveness and fantasy. What could be more human than want and desire: the machinations of your body kicking in? (And what a strange thing we are forced to admit desire is, when seen at this distance.) The narrator

observes human behaviour and bodies objectively, in a way that is both curious and dehumanising; her perspective emphasises both her disconnection with her body, and the essential strangeness of having one, particularly one that you have not been taught about, one controlled by others. She may not have the learned behaviours of dances and marriages, but even a person raised in captivity learns to want, yearns to see beyond their cage.

How much of our humanity is intrinsic? How much remains, when all else is stripped away?

The story and the world the novel takes place in is pared down to the point of frustration. It possesses a Daliesque surrealism; its landscape owes as much to Beckett as it does to Bradbury. The world the liberated women walk through seems desolate, dotted from time to time with trees, rivers, and nightmare bunkers just like the one they have escaped from. There is no sense of who has confined them and for what reason, whether they're even wandering Earth. The sparse clues muddy the water further: unchanging seasons, a bus full of dead guards, captives in cages, a luxurious bunker underground. Nothing is explained, but nothing needs to be. The beauty and power of the novel is in its ambiguities, in the hypotheticals allowed to flourish and demonstrate what they need to demonstrate. It should be unremittingly bleak, for all the ingredients for bleakness are there; and yet there is a shining, searching humanity at its core that carries it through.

As the narrator discovers her own sense of selfhood and agency, the older women cling on to theirs: they discuss their pasts, they rail against having to use the toilet in front of everybody else, they discuss recipes when cooking their meagre rations of meat, water and potatoes. They are aware that the narrator exists in a different world to them, that she is of this world in a way that they are not, a bridging person between the old order and the new. Later on, devastatingly and compassionately, it is this difference that enables the narrator to enact fatal acts of love upon the older women. Death, in this world, has its own dignity, a dignity repeatedly exhorted as human. The other caged humans they discover have died terrible deaths, but the narrator admires those who have died calmly, facing the terror, unafraid. It is human to be afraid of death, of unimaginable pain, and it's another kind of humanity to transcend it.

This approach to death, to suffering, makes it difficult to analyse such a novel without acknowledging that the author was Jewish, having fled to Casablanca with her family during the Second World War. There are echoes of concentration camps in the senseless cruelty of their confinement, the endless cracking of the whips of the mysterious prison guards, the sickening

inevitability as they discover, over and over and over, that everyone else on the planet imprisoned in the same way as them has perished. And for what? A project with a vague beginning – the ‘confusion’ the women allude to, sirens and fire and being taken from their homes – and then nothing but an endless, pointless confinement.

Forty women in a cage; a freezer full of food at temperatures low enough to last indefinitely; electricity and water that never ceases. These situations of confinement, of cruelty, of hopelessness, are not without precedent – we’re kidding ourselves if we think of these cruelties as ones unique to a fictional alien planet.

But there is love, as well as horror, all the way through the novel. The quiet not-quite-utopia – the best that they can manage, given the strange world, their isolation – recalls a subverted *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It is a peaceful world they create, one where they stop searching, where they build houses and settle into routines and pair into couples. They form the best possible utopia available to them, despite all the odds, and so they live out their lives that way, despite the unimaginable trauma laid upon them for years. While they mourn the absence of men at least a little, particularly at the start, they also manage very well without them. The only man dwelled upon at any length in the novel is the youngest prison guard, and only in the context of the narrator’s physical reaction to him.

Though this utopia is one without hope of their discovery, or the possibility that they might learn more about their condition, it is one where the characters can live out their days. The women can continue to find a sort of beauty in companionship, adapting to a new way of being, existing in an environment empty of what they know but still underpinned by compassion. But it’s not necessarily extolling this kind of existence. Perhaps in its own way the novel slyly demonstrates the natural peacefulness that a world without men might possess, but also suggests that this settling is the downfall of the women, that they do not go on searching. Would they have searched further, railed more, had men been part of their party? Would they have found the answers over a distant horizon, even if decades in the future?

I love this book; I love its implacable calmness, its unwillingness to give its secrets away. It’s a puzzle that cannot be solved, isn’t supposed to be solved, because it is in the process of grappling with it that we discover the point for ourselves. Every time I have read the novel has been prismatic, opening up reflections on cruelty, on human nature, on capitalism. Reading it is not a passive experience but one that provokes, that exasperates, that moves.

If there is an essential message in a book full of such truth, the following sentence is a good place to take it from: 'I was forced to acknowledge too late, much too late, that I too had loved, that I was capable of suffering, and that I was human after all', our narrator muses at the start of the novel, as her life draws to an end. Then shortly afterwards, 'After all, if I was a human being, my story was as important as that of King Lear, or of Prince Hamlet that William Shakespeare had taken the trouble to relate in detail.' The smallness of one person left alive in the vast and mysterious world is a daunting concept. But doesn't the best science fiction make us think about our world anew, and who we are? If the narrator has lived a life as best as she could – wildly unconventional, but one that has given her joy in many ways – hasn't she triumphed over cruelty after all, over having everything stripped from her, her dignity and essential humanity winning in the end?

Sophie Mackintosh

2019

Since I barely venture outside these days, I spend a lot of time in one of the armchairs, rereading the books. I only recently started taking an interest in the prefaces. The authors talk readily about themselves, explaining their reasons for writing the book. This surprises me: surely it was more usual in that world than in the one in which I have lived for people to pass on the knowledge they had acquired? They often seem to feel the need to emphasise that they wrote the book not out of vanity, but because someone asked them to, and that they had thought about it long and hard before accepting. How strange! It suggests that people were not avid to learn, and that you had to apologise for wanting to convey your knowledge. Or, they explain why they felt it was appropriate to publish a new translation of Proust, because previous efforts, laudable though they may be, lacked something or other. But why translate when it must have been so easy to learn different languages and read anything you wanted directly? These things leave me utterly baffled. True, I am extremely ignorant: apparently, I know even less of these matters than I thought I did. The authors express their gratitude to those who taught them, who opened the door to this or that avenue of knowledge, and, because I have absolutely no idea what they're talking about, I usually read these words with a degree of indifference. But suddenly, yesterday, my eyes filled with tears; I thought of Anthea, and was overcome by a tremendous wave of grief. I could picture her, sitting on the edge of a mattress, her knees to one side, sewing patiently with her makeshift thread of plaited hairs which kept snapping, stopping to look at me, astonished, quick to recognise my ignorance and teach me what she knew, apologising that it was so little, and I felt a huge wrench, and began to sob. I had never cried before. There was a pain in my heart as powerful as the pain of the cancer in my belly, and I who no longer speak because there is no one to hear me, began to call her. Anthea! Anthea! I shouted. I couldn't forgive her for not being there, for having allowed death to snatch her, to tear her from my clumsy arms. I chastised myself for not having held on to her, for not having understood that she couldn't go on any more. I told myself that I'd abandoned her because I was frigid, as I had been all my life, as I shall be when I die, and so I was unable to hug her warmly, and that my heart was frozen, unfeeling, and that I hadn't realised that I was desperate.

Never before had I been so devastated. I would have sworn it couldn't happen to me; I'd seen women trembling, crying and screaming, but I'd

remained unaffected by their tragedy, a witness to impulses I found unintelligible, remaining silent even when I did what they asked of me to assist them. Admittedly, we were all caught up in the same drama that was so powerful, so all-embracing that I was unaware of anything that wasn't related to it, but I had come to think that I was different. And now, racked with sobs, I was forced to acknowledge too late, much too late, that I too had loved, that I was capable of suffering and that I was human after all.

I felt as if this pain would never be appeased, that it had me in its grip forever, that it would prevent me from devoting myself to anything else, and that I was allowing it to do so. I think that that is what they call being consumed with remorse. I would no longer be able to get up, think, or even cook my food, and I would let myself slowly waste away. I was deriving a sort of morbid pleasure from imagining myself giving in to despair, when the physical pain returned. It was so sudden and so acute that it distracted me from the mental pain. I found this abrupt swing from one to the other funny, and there I was, I who not surprisingly never laugh, doubled up in agony, and laughing.

When the pain abated, I wondered whether I had ever laughed before. The women often used to laugh, and I believe I had sometimes joined in, but I was unsure. I realised then that I never thought about the past. I lived in a perpetual present and I was gradually forgetting my story. At first, I shrugged, telling myself that it would be no great loss, since nothing had happened to me, but soon I was shocked by that thought. After all, if I was a human being, my story was as important as that of King Lear or of Prince Hamlet that William Shakespeare had taken the trouble to relate in detail. I made the decision almost without realising it: I would do likewise. Over the years, I'd learned to read fluently; writing is much harder, but I've never been daunted by obstacles. I do have paper and pencils, although I may not have much time. Now that I no longer go off on expeditions, no occupation calls me, so I decided to start at once. I went into the cold store, took out the meat that I would eat later and left it to defrost, so that when hunger struck, my food would soon be ready. Then I sat down at the big table and began to write.

As I write these words, my tale is over. Everything around me is in order and I have fulfilled the final task I set myself. It only took me a month, which has perhaps been the happiest month of my life. I do not understand that: after all, what I was describing was only my strange existence which hasn't brought me much joy. Is there a satisfaction in the effort of remembering that provides its own nourishment, and is what one recollects less important than the act of remembering? That is another question that will remain unanswered: I feel as though I am made of nothing else.

As far back as I can recall, I have been in the bunker. Is that what they mean by memories? On the few occasions when the women were willing to tell me about their past, their stories were full of events, comings and goings, men... but I am reduced to calling a memory the sense of existing in the same place, with the same people and doing the same things – in other words, eating, excreting and sleeping. For a very long time, the days went by, each one just like the day before, then I began to think, and everything changed. Before, nothing happened other than this repetition of identical gestures, and time seemed to stand still, even if I was vaguely aware that I was growing and that time was passing. My memory begins with my anger.

Obviously, I have no way of knowing how old I was. The others had been adult for a long time whereas I appeared to be prepubescent. But my development stopped there: I started to get hair under my arms and on my pubes, my breasts grew a little, and then everything came to a halt. I never had a period. The women told me I was lucky, that I wouldn't have the bother of bleeding and the precautions to be taken so as not to stain the mattresses. I'd be spared the tedious monthly task of washing out the rags they had to jam between their legs as best they could, by squeezing together their thigh muscles, since they had nothing to hold them in place, and I wouldn't have to suffer stomach cramps like so many adolescent girls. But I didn't believe them: they nearly all menstruated, and how can you feel privileged not to have something that everyone else has? I felt they were deceiving me.

Back then, I wasn't curious about things, and it didn't occur to me to ask what the point of periods was. Perhaps I was naturally quiet, in any case, the response my rare questions did receive wasn't exactly encouraging. More often than not, the women would sigh and look away, saying 'What use would it be for you to know if we told you?', which made me feel I was disturbing or upsetting them. I had no idea, and I didn't press the matter. It wasn't until much later that Anthea explained to me about periods. She told me that none of the women had much education; they were factory workers, typists or shop assistants – words that had never meant very much to me, and that they weren't much better informed than I was. All the same, when I did find out, I felt they hadn't really made an effort to teach me. I was furious. Anthea said that I wasn't entirely wrong and tried to explain their reasons. I may come back to this later, if I remember, but at the time I want to write about, I was livid. I felt I was being scorned, as if I was incapable of understanding the answers to the few questions I asked, and I resolved not to take any further interest in the women.

I was surly all the time, but I was unaware of it, because I didn't know the words for describing moods. The women bustled about, busying themselves

with the few day-to-day activities but never inviting me to join them. I would crouch down and watch whatever there was to see. On reflection, that was almost nothing. They'd be sitting chatting, or, twice a day, they'd prepare the meal. Gradually, I turned my attention to the guards who paced up and down continually outside our cage. They were always in threes, a few paces apart, observing us, and we generally pretended to ignore their presence, but I grew inquisitive. I noticed that one of them was different: taller, slimmer and, as I realised after a while, younger. That fascinated me. In their more cheerful moments, the women would talk of men and love. They'd giggle and tease me when I asked what was so funny. I went over everything I knew: kisses, which were given on the mouth, embraces, making eyes at someone, playing footsie, which I didn't understand at all, and then came seventh heaven – my goodness! Given that I'd never seen any sky at all and had no idea what the first heaven or any of the others in between were, I didn't dwell on it. They would also complain about the brutality. It hurt, men didn't care about women, they got them pregnant and then walked out, saying, 'How do I know it's mine?' Sometimes the women would declare that it was no great loss, and at others they would start to cry. But I was destined to remain a virgin. One day, I screwed up the courage to put aside my anger and question Dorothy, the least intimidating of the two elderly women.

'You poor thing!'

And, after a few sighs, she came out with the usual reply:

'What point is there in your knowing, since it can't happen to you?'

'Because I want to know!' I raged, suddenly grasping why it was so important to me.

She couldn't understand why someone would want knowledge that would be of no use to them, and I couldn't get anything out of her. It was certain that I would die untouched, and I wanted to satisfy my curiosity at least. Why were they all so determined to keep silent? I tried to console myself with the thought that it was no secret anyway, because they all shared it. Was it to give it an additional sparkle that they refused to tell me, to give it the lustre of a rare gem? By remaining silent, they were creating a girl who didn't know and who would regard them as the custodians of a treasure. Did they only keep me in ignorance so they could pretend they weren't entirely powerless? They sometimes claimed it was out of modesty, but I could see perfectly well that, among themselves, they had no modesty. They whispered and tittered and were lewd. I would never make love, they would never make love again: perhaps that made us equal and they were trying to console themselves by depriving me of the only thing they could.

Often, in the evening, before falling asleep, I would think about the young guard. I drew on the little I'd been able to guess: in another life, he'd have

come and sat beside me, he'd have asked me to dance and told me his name. I'd have had a name which I'd have told him, and we'd have talked. Then, if we were attracted to each other, we'd have walked hand in hand. Maybe I wouldn't have found him interesting: he was the only one of our six jailers who wasn't old and decrepit, and I was probably indulgent because I'd never met any other young men. I tried to imagine our conversation, in a past that I hadn't known: Will it be fine again tomorrow? Have you seen next door's kittens? I hear your aunt's going on holiday ... but I'd never seen kittens and I had absolutely no idea what fine weather might be, which put an end to my reverie. Then I'd think about kissing, imagining the guard's mouth as precisely as I could. It was quite wide, with well-defined, thinnish lips – I didn't like the full lips that some of the women had. I pictured my lips drawing close to his: there was probably something else I needed to know, because I felt nothing in particular.

But then, one evening, instead of falling asleep from the boredom of trying to imagine a kiss that would never happen, I suddenly remembered that the women had spoken of interrogations, saying they were surprised that there'd never been any. I embellished the little they'd said: I imagined the guards coming to fetch one of the women, taking her away screaming and terrified. Sometimes, the woman was never seen again, sometimes she'd be flung back among us in the morning, covered in burns, injured, moaning, and would not always survive. I thought: 'Ha! If there were interrogations, he'd come and get me and I'd leave this room where I've always lived. He'd drag me along unknown corridors, and then something would happen!'

My mind worked incredibly fast: the boy was propelling me along with seeming dedication to his job, but, once we rounded the corner and were out of sight, he stopped, turned to me, smiled and said: 'Don't be afraid.' And then he took me in his arms and an immense sensation surged through me, an overwhelming eruption, an extraordinary burst of light exploding inside me. I couldn't breathe – and then I breathed again, because it was desperately brief.

After that, my mood changed. I no longer tried to persuade the women to tell me their secrets; I had my own. The eruption proved difficult to achieve. I had to tell myself stories that became increasingly long and complicated but, to my utter dismay, I never experienced that explosion twice in a row, whereas I wished it could have lasted for hours. I wanted to feel that sensation all the time, day and night, swaying deliciously, like the rare patches of grass on the plains caressed by the gentle breeze that blew for days at a time, but which I didn't see until much later.

I now devoted all my time to the task of producing the eruption. I had to invent exceptional circumstances where we found ourselves alone, or at least

isolated in the midst of the others, face-to-face, and then, after much agony, I had the exquisite surprise of finding his arms around me. My imagination developed. I had to exercise rigorous discipline, because I couldn't dream up the same story twice: surprise was crucial, as I realised after trying several times to relive the exquisite gesture that had transported me, without feeling the slightest stirring. This was extremely difficult because I was simultaneously the inventor of the story, the narrator and the listener awaiting the shock of the unexpected. Thinking back, I'm amazed I managed to overcome so many obstacles! Imagine how fast my imagination had to work to prevent me from knowing what would happen so that I'd be caught unawares! The first time I imagined the interrogation, I'd never made up stories before, I didn't even know it was possible. I was completely swept along by it, marvelling both at such a new activity and at the story itself. Then I soon became adept at it, like a sort of narrative engineer. I could tell if it had begun badly or if it was heading towards an impasse, and could even go back to the beginning to change the course of events. I went so far as to create characters who reappeared regularly, who changed from one story to another, and who became old friends. I was delighted with them, and it is only now that I'm able to read books that I can see they were rather limited.

I needed to invent increasingly complicated stories: I think that deep down something inside me knew what I wanted from them and objected; I had to catch myself off guard. Sometimes I had to keep it up for several hours, to lull my inner audience into a false sense of security so that she'd be entranced by the pleasure of listening, enjoy the story and lower her defences. Then came the magic moment, the boy's gaze, his hand on my shoulder and the rapture that invaded my entire being. After that, I was able to sleep. Perhaps, in stopping the story, I was disappointing an inner listener who preferred the story to the turbulence, which is why she always spun it out and would happily have deprived me in order to prolong her own pleasure. Sometimes, halfway through, I'd try to argue with her: 'I'm tired, I want to go to sleep, let me get to the eruption, I'll carry on tomorrow.' But it was no use, she wouldn't let herself be fooled.

The women noticed that I'd changed. They observed me for a moment, saw me always sitting down, my knees tucked under, my chin resting on my folded arms, and I suppose I had a vacant stare. I was oblivious, because I wasn't bothered about them any more, and I was surprised when Annabel came to question me.

'What are you doing?'

'Thinking,' I replied.

That puzzled her. She stayed a little longer, waiting for me to say more, then went to convey my reply to the others. They argued for a while, and

Annabel returned.

‘What about?’

The full force of my anger returned.

‘When I asked you what people do when they make love, you wouldn’t tell me, and now you expect me to tell you what’s going on inside my head! You keep your secrets, if it makes you happy, but don’t expect me to tell you mine!’

She frowned and went back to the others. This time, the debate went on longer. I’d never seen them talk at such length and with such seriousness – usually they’d burst out laughing after ten minutes. Apparently I’d provoked something new in their minds. Another woman then stood up and came over to me. It was Dorothy, the eldest and most respected. Even I didn’t hate her. She sat down and stared hard at me. Her presence annoyed me greatly because she was interrupting me at a crucial point in the story, which had been going on for a very long time: I was going to be locked up alone in a cell and had overheard a few words about the relief night guard who I had every reason to believe was the young man. How could I carry on in front of this old woman who was staring silently at me? At least I could try not to lose sight of the situation: I was alone, breathless and scared, and I could hear voices and the clink of weapons in the corridor. I didn’t know what was going on and was frightened by the atmosphere of urgency and turmoil. I tried to suspend the scene in my mind while studying Dorothy who was studying me. I told myself that if the eruption didn’t happen soon, I would have to make some sense out of the situation. But what on earth could I imagine that would feed back into the static world in which we lived, women locked up for so many years that they’d lost all notion of time?

‘So, you’ve got a secret,’ said Dorothy at long last.

I didn’t reply, because it wasn’t a real question. I could tell she was trying to faze me with her heavy stare and her silence. There was a time, before I’d found the inner world where I entertained myself, when I was still inquisitive and docile, when I’d have been intimidated. I’d have wondered what I’d done wrong to deserve this scrutiny, and I’d have feared the punishment. But now I knew I was beyond their reach: punishments were never more than being left out, excluded from futile, flighty conversations about nothing in particular, and that was all I wanted so that I could continue my secret pursuit in peace.

Since I didn’t react, she frowned.

‘I spoke to you. It is only polite to reply.’

‘I have nothing to say. They told you I have secrets. You tell me they told you I did. Well, so what?’

‘I want to hear them.’

I began to laugh, as much to my surprise as to anyone else's. I'd been used to respecting the women's wishes, especially those of the eldest who had the most authority, but everything had changed because I could no longer see any basis for that authority. I suddenly discovered that they had no power. We were all locked up in the same manner, without knowing why, watched over by jailers who, either out of contempt or because they were obeying orders, didn't speak to any of us. They never entered the cage. They were always in threes, except when they changed shift, and then we saw six at a time, but they didn't speak to one another. At mealtimes, one of the big double doors would open, a man would push a trolley along the gap between the cage and the wall, and another unlocked a little hatch through which he passed us the food. They wouldn't answer our questions and we had long since stopped asking them any. The old women were as helpless as the younger ones. They had seized some imaginary power, a power over nothing, a tacit agreement that created a meaningless hierarchy, because there were no privileges that they could grant or refuse. The fact is that we were on an absolutely equal footing.

I sat still for a few seconds, registering those familiar facts that suddenly became stunning revelations, and looking Dorothy squarely in the eyes.

'You want to hear my secrets,' I said, 'but all you can do is inform me of your wishes.'

I noted with interest the effect my words had on her: at first, when she saw that I was about to answer, she looked smug, she must have thought she'd won my obedience. Then she listened, and grasped the meaning of what I was saying, but she was so taken aback that she thought she hadn't understood.

'What do you mean?'

'Just think about it,' I said. 'I mean exactly what I said.'

'You haven't said anything!'

'I said I wouldn't tell you my secrets. You told me you wanted them. That's not telling me anything new, I was already aware of that. You think you only have to tell me you want to know for me to tell you.'

That was indeed what she thought.

'That is how things should be,' she insisted.

'Why?'

She was disconcerted. I saw she wasn't thinking about my question, she was so shocked that I could have asked it. She'd inherited a tradition to which I did not belong: when an older woman asks a younger woman to reply, the younger one does so. She'd never questioned that, but I, who had grown up in the bunker, had no reason to comply. After a few moments:

'What do you mean, "why"?''