

# *Lewis*

Six Excerpts from the Autobiography  
of Jonathan Spenser



Nexis Pas

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Comments are always appreciated. Please send them to

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. The characters are not real and the events depicted in this story did not happen and are not based on my life.

This one is for Murphy.

PART I

*Lewis*

This is a story about Lewis and Harry and me—I'm Jonathan. I'm going to give away the ending right here at the beginning. This isn't a do they, don't they? kind of love story. The three of us have lived together for almost twenty years now; so we clearly did—we did fall in love and live happily ever after or, rather, as happily as any human beings ever do, I suppose. It is a love story, sort of—I don't mean to give the impression that it isn't—but it's really about how Lewis brought us together and what he did to keep us together—or, at least, what I think he did to keep us together.

I am having so much trouble getting this tale started. I've tried out ever so many beginnings, and none of them work. The 'Damn,' said the Duchess. 'What will I do now that wolves have devoured all the coachmen' opening didn't work. Nor did the breathless anticipatory scene of a rapturous coupling among the three of us (that one was unintentionally humorous; really, you've no idea how six limbs in one bed complicate things). The dramatic opening with the fire gave away too much. It has proven much harder in the event to write this up than I expected six months ago when I prepared an outline of what I wanted to say.

If Lewis were to read this, he would say that I'm dithering again. I can almost hear him now. 'Just start at the beginning, Jonathan, just start at the beginning. What's so hard about that?' He's very good at solving problems. In that supremely practical way of his, that's what he would tell me, just start at the beginning. So that's what I'll do.

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Lewis and I met Harry by accident. Well, I suppose everyone meets by accident. But it was purely coincidental that Harry was at Capers that night. If his friends hadn't come down from

London, he wouldn't have had to find some way to entertain them and have decided to take them to Capers. And it was just a coincidence that the night he went to Capers he had an opportunity to rescue Lewis and earn his undying gratitude.

In fact, Lewis and I might never have met Harry at all if Christopher hadn't deputed me to make sure that Lewis was at Capers that night to help celebrate Bobbie's thirtieth birthday. Getting Lewis to attend the birthday party was not a problem once I decided to resort to deception. Well, not out-and-out deception. I didn't go so far as to actually lie to Lewis. It's just that I neglected to tell him one small, salient fact. A sin of omission rather than commission. It may have just slipped my mind. I'm not even sure that I knew about it beforehand. Certainly I would have told Lewis had I known. Well, that's my story and I'm sticking to it. Unfortunately, the signboard outside the pub made my omission all too apparent.

'Karaoke. They're having karaoke tonight. Did you know about this?' Lewis glared at me accusingly. He had been his usual self on the way to Capers, nearly dancing in the street at the thought of a party, his arms spread wide to include everyone in his happiness. That night, even the ends of the long, thick woolen scarf he had casually wound around his neck were infected with his jauntiness. I had to push them out of my face several times. Lewis likes to share his pleasures with everyone, and in a full head of exhilaration he tends to startle passers-by. Dogs position themselves protectively between Lewis and their owners. Mothers grab their children by the hand and pull them out of the way.

It isn't that Lewis poses anyone a danger. It's just that when he's happy, he seems to occupy much more space than the ordinary human being. A total stranger can never be quite sure that Lewis won't subject him to a spontaneous embrace. You know that scene in *Singing in the Rain* when Gene Kelly is dancing and

singing the title song and he's jumping up and down in the puddles and the water is flying all over. It's like that. Lewis's happiness is so contagious. Somehow it always comes as a surprise that he isn't heading a parade of ordinary citizens boogieing on down the street. Troupes of old-age pensioners in sensible shoes and slightly shabby coats scented with mothballs swinging their canes in wide arcs against the pavement and shuffling off to Buffalo in synchronised routines. Mums wheeling strollers in close-order drill with babies chortling and gurgling and shaking their rattles in time with the rhythm. Teams of businessmen in pin-stripes carrying wicker baskets and flinging flowers into the air with abandon. Lewis, as our dancer friend Alain once put it, is like a *grand jeté en l'air*. When he's in a good mood, he never comes down to earth, and he pulls everyone along with him as soars into the sky.

But Lewis's good mood ended abruptly that evening twenty years ago when he saw the announcement in gaily coloured chalks on the board by the door of the Capers.

In the interests of preserving our friendship (and avoiding bodily harm), I lied. 'Lewis, I had no idea. But what difference does it make? We're here to celebrate Bobbie's birthday.' I held up the present I had brought and waved in his face in an attempt to emphasize that point. 'We'll probably be in the back room anyway. This is just a separate entertainment for the main room. You won't have to listen to the singing. Don't worry about it. Come on.' I tugged at the sleeve of his coat to urge him forward, knowing well that it wasn't the prospect of having to *listen* to the music that unnerved Lewis.

'I won't go in. Here, take my present. Tell Bobbie and Christopher I got sick. One of those sudden viruses that's going around.' Lewis began to turn truculently away.

Luckily Bobbie and Christopher arrived at that moment and interrupted his attempted escape. Bobbie let out a whoop of delight and enfolded Lewis in a bear hug. Bobbie is much taller and

bigger than Lewis, and Lewis disappeared in the embrace, his face buried in Bobbie's coat about mid-chest. The top of his head was barely visible above Bobbie's arms, and Bobbie was soon noisily kissing that. 'Lewlew, I am so glad you're here. I was afraid when you heard that we had arranged for karaoke and for Des de Moaner to be our MC that you wouldn't come. But I knew I could count on you. You're the best friend in all the world. I know how much you dread karaoke, and still you came to support me at this terrible hour. Thirty, I'm thirty, Lewlew. I'm old. I spent the day installing grab-bars around the bathtub so that I don't have to worry about slipping and breaking a leg. My trainer says that from now on I have to add ten reps to every exercise I do just to prevent flab. And forget chocolate or cream and any food but steamed celery leaves and nettles for the rest of my life. Oh, let's get out of this cold. Come on, Lewis.' Bobbie flung open the door to Capers and pulled Lewis inside with him. The crowd roared with delight, in equal parts for the birthday boy and for the sacrificial lamb. Of course, after that, Lewis had no choice. He turned a horrified face back toward me. I couldn't hear him over the noise, but he was clearly mouthing 'Des de Moaner' with much anguish.

I slid into the crowd and concealed myself behind the tallest people I could find. That wasn't hard to do since Capers was packed both for Bobbie's birthday and for the usual Friday night reasons. I figured I'd better give Lewis a chance to forget my treachery before appearing within his field of vision again. You see, it isn't that Lewis hates karaoke because all the amateur singers mangling songs disturb his finely honed musical tastes or because he dislikes popular music. Lewis is terrified by karaoke because he can't sing. Lewis croaks. He can't remember the words. He can't manage the simplest tunes. Even the most familiar songs emerge as strange beastlike howls of agony. The yapping of hyenas around waterholes in the veldt at dusk are more melodious

than what issues from Lewis's mouth. And somehow he manages to sing several notes at once, almost as if an insane string quartet were being garrotted in his throat.

Ordinarily this wouldn't matter. People with voices like Lewis's don't participate in karaoke (well, yes, they do, but not those like Lewis for whom singing is an agony). Lewis, however, is a great favourite. Someone once pushed him up on a stage and insisted that he sing a 'number'. Lewis smiled charmingly, gyrated for a few seconds in his best imitation of an unhinged rock star, and sang the word 'five.' That was enough to make his shortcomings clear. The crowd applauded gleefully. Lewis was an instant hit. He was forced to do number after number. Each futile attempt to sing made everyone clamour for more. 'Seventeen,' someone would call out, and Lewis would dutifully oblige, belting out 'seventeen' with much emotion and deep feeling and all the musical ability of a wooden spoon stirring a pot of mushy cabbage.

If that had been his final appearance on the karaoke stage, Lewis would have treasured it and handled it with his usual aplomb when his friends dredge up a Lewis moment. It would have become another of those 'remember that time Lewis . . .' stories. But Des heard about Lewis's handicap. Des's affable, libidinous drag queen act had an edge to it, and someone like Lewis who was young, cute, and popular seemed to bring out his nastiness. Every time he saw Lewis in the audience, he pulled him up on the stage, thrust the mike into his hands, turned the volume way up and made Lewis sing. Or, rather, he made Lewis try to sing. And of course, the crowd revelled in Lewis's discomfiture. Poor Lewis. He had reason for trepidation that evening. What had started as a joke had become a torture for him.

Des de Moaner waited for about an hour to begin the karaoke part of the proceedings. When it became apparent that the crew was readying the stage for amateur night, Lewis tried to slip away toward the back of the room, but Bobbie and Christopher



grabbed him and made him sit with them at the front table. At first, all went well—from Lewis’s standpoint. Des ignored him completely for the first dozen or so people. It was the usual parade of people singing off key and substituting ‘la-la-la something something’ for the words they couldn’t remember. Several of the singers tried to cover up their lack of talent with elaborate facial grimaces and fancy dance routines. Finally Christopher, who does have a decent voice, sang ‘You Are the Wind Beneath My Wings’ for Bobbie. That was a nice moment, full of quiet feeling and not at all sentimental. Still, it’s hard not to choke up and to stop your eyes from watering sometimes. You want so much for certain things to be true.

Des had stepped down from the stage when the karaoke began and was standing off to one side, announcing the name of each singer and the title of the song. Each singer was ushered off the stage with comments about their abilities—not their singing abilities, you understand. When Christopher finished, Des murmured sotto voce, ‘The wind beneath Christopher’s wings? How gassy can Bobbie be?’ That was a bit much even for Capers. When no one laughed, Des shook his head and consulted a list in his hands. He walked over and stood behind Lewis and thumbed his microphone on. Lewis slid down in his chair. ‘Before we get to the finale of tonight’s festivities, we have one more singer. Harry Castlemain. Where’s Harry Castlemain? Who’s Harry Castlemain?’ The last remark was directed over Des’s shoulder to the manager of Capers who had circulated the sign-up list for Des. To judge from the reactions of the spectators, no one had the answer to Des’s questions. All the other singers had been friends of Bobbie’s or were well-known locally as participants in karaoke.

‘Excuse me. Excuse me, please.’ Off to my left, the back of a head in shadow edged through the crowd to the front of the stage. ‘I’m Harry Castlemain.’ The audience parted to let him through as he stepped on to the platform. There was a collective

gasp as he moved into the light. Harry has never been beautiful or handsome in any conventional sense. He is of average height, but with a large chest and wide shoulders. In 1990, when the events I am relating happened, he still had a head of luxuriant dark, glossy hair that always seemed to be wind-tossed. His eyebrows are equally black, and his eyelashes are so thick that he looks like one of those portraits of a man on an Egyptian tomb with his eyes outlined in black. Oddly for someone with such dark hair, his skin is very pale and ivory coloured. When you see him up close, you realise how flawless his skin is. And his eyes catch everyone's attention. He has pale blue irises surrounded by a black circle. They are very distinctive. His nose might be a little too large for his face, the nostrils too flared, his lips a little too full. But it is a very masculine, a very sensual face. It is a face you notice, and remember.

Des lit up with delight. He leered at the audience and licked his lips, an inch of his tongue protruding and slowly circling his mouth. 'My my my my my . . . in fact, mine all mine. Isn't he a lovely bit?' Des's eyebrows rose and fell in a parody of lasciviousness. He made a show of twisting back to look at Harry's rear. He exhaled loudly, closed his eyes tightly in ecstasy, rolled his hips so that his caftan quivered suggestively, and pursed his lips in a kissing motion. 'Where have you been all my life, Harry? Tell me you're going to be a permanent resident and not just an angel who drops in on us occasionally.'

'I just moved here a few weeks ago. I'm planning to be around for a while, Ms de Moaner.' Somehow, that last part came very close to being pronounced 'misdemeanour'. There were a few snickers in the crowd, and Des shot a brief, angry glance into the darkened room before turning back to Harry and smirking at him.

'Then you don't need to be so formal. You can call me Des. In fact, you can call me anytime.' The old joke got its predictable

laugh. Des nodded regally to the crowd to accept their applause and then consulted his list again. ‘Hmm. Harry is going to sing ‘Flashdance’ for us. Are you sure you don’t want to try something simpler? It won’t take but a second to change the tape.’ Harry nodded no. ‘Ok, then, lad, it’s your funeral. “Flashdance” by Harry Castlemain.’ As he turned his back to Harry, Des pantomimed a show of agony. ‘We’re in for it,’ he seemed to be saying.

Harry just smiled. The stagehand held out the microphone to him, but Harry shook his head no. The lights dimmed. ‘Flashdance’ begins rather quietly. From the first note, it was obvious that Harry could sing. Even without the mike, his voice filled the room and was audible above the music. He sang so softly and introspectively—almost as if he were thinking to himself or speaking intimately just to you. His voice was a whisper insinuating itself into your mind. But when he sang “what a feeling” for the first time, he exploded with joy and triumph. It was impossible to stand still after that. That music and Harry’s voice lifted everyone to their feet. No one was proof against the elation in that voice.

When the song ended, there was a stunned, painful silence for a few seconds. One just wanted to shout ‘no’ and make the music continue. It was as if a world of possibilities had opened for a few minutes and no one wanted to interrupt the silence lest the magic disappear. Harry stood very still for a few seconds and then nodded and smiled shyly. And then it began, the clapping and the shouting and whistling and the sense of having been part of something immense for a few minutes.

Even Des didn’t recover his voice immediately. He started to say something and then stopped. Finally he sighed and said, ‘Where’s Kate Bush when you need her to do a chorus of “Wow, wow, wow, wow, wow, wow, unbelievable”?’ He paused for a long moment and then consulted his list. ‘But, alas, we have to continue. There’s one final item on tonight’s program. We drop from

the incredible to the ridiculous, the really ridiculous.’ Des’s gown was made of a coppery metallic fabric with long, wide sleeves. He folded his arms in front of Lewis so that Lewis’s face was hidden behind the drapery of the sleeves and sang. ‘Louie, louie, oh o o oh.’ Several people in the audience joined in. Soon most of the people in the pub were singing ‘Louie, Louie’. Des let the chorus continue for a few seconds and then motioned for silence.

‘Yes, gents, it’s our very own Louise, excuse me, I meant to say, our very own Louie Quinn.’ Des slowly raised his arms so that the sleeves parted like a curtain rising. ‘Take your hands off your neighbour’s arse for a second and let’s have a warm round of applause for our Lulu, who’s going to pretend to sing “Happy Birthday” for Bobbie.’ Des grabbed Lewis by an arm and dragged him onto the stage, thrusting his microphone into Lewis’s hands. A spotlight focused in on Lewis’s face and gradually narrowed. From the back of the room a cake with candles lit was being carried toward the front table.

Lewis gulped and nervously bleated out ‘Happy’. Lewis’s handicap was so well known that several people in the crowd were laughing even before he began singing. ‘Birthday’ took him no closer toward the end of the song, and the laughter was louder this time. Harry was still standing by the stage. The crowd had hemmed him in after he had finished, and he hadn’t been able to move back to his table. He stepped back on to the stage and took the mike from Lewis. He whispered something in Lewis’s ear and then turned to the crowd: ‘Let’s all join in on this, for Bobbie.’ He put an arm across Lewis’s shoulders and then led everyone in singing ‘Happy Birthday’ to Bobbie.

By the time the song was finished, the cake had arrived at Bobbie’s table. The lights in the room were turned up. Bobbie made a spectacle of complaining that there were too many candles (there must have been at least a hundred) before blowing them out. Everyone’s attention had turned to Bobbie. I was still

standing at the back of the room. From my vantage point, I could look past Bobbie and see Lewis and Harry on the stage. Harry still had his arm around Lewis's shoulder. He was watching Bobbie and laughing at his antics. I don't think he saw the look of adoration and gratitude on Lewis's face. Almost without looking at Lewis, Harry handed the microphone back to him and then stepped away. He walked back toward the table of friends he had come with. His progress was slowed by the number of people who wanted to talk with him or just to touch him.

Lewis was forgotten on the stage. He put the microphone down. Bobbie was surrounded by people and Lewis shrugged and gave up any hope of regaining his former seat. I waved at him and caught his eye. He slouched toward me. On the way, a few people chaffed him about his performance.

'Am I forgiven?' I tried to look chagrined and repentant.

'Maybe. But I will never trust you again.'

'Lewis, I swear to you that I didn't know Des would be here.'

'Can we just go?'

'Lewis, we can't just leave. It's Bobbie's party. You have to stay for him.' Lewis nodded in misery. 'Lewis, I really am sorry. If I had known, I wouldn't have let you come.'

'Excuse me. I was wondering if I . . . That is, I wanted to introduce myself.'

Both Lewis and I turned to the speaker. Harry Castlemain stood there with his hand out to Lewis. 'I'm Harry Castlemain. Is it Lewis or Louie?'

Both Lewis and I said 'Lewis' at the same moment.

'I hope I didn't interfere with the joke up there,' Harry nodded back toward the stage, 'but I thought it was getting out of hand.'

'No, it's fine. Thank you for saving me. Des always drags me out when he wants a laugh. He knows I can't sing. This is my friend Jonathan, Jonathan Spenser.'

Harry barely gave me a glance as we shook hands. All his attention was on Lewis. 'I was wondering if you would dance with me. I'm not very good. But I asked them to play a slow dance next.' A thought suddenly occurred to him. He must have wondered at the relationship between Lewis and myself. He included both of us in his next remark, 'That is, if the two of you aren't together?' He sketched an indecisive gesture in the air.

'Oh no, Jonathan and I are just friends.' Lewis spoke with eager haste. I nodded to confirm for Harry that that's all that we were. The two of them walked off together toward the small dance floor.

Just friends, that's all that we were. Not for want of hoping on my part. I tried to wish the best for Lewis. He was an incredible person, and I did want him to be happy. But occasionally I wished that he understood how special he was to me. That he might some day smile at me the way he smiled at other people. Or, rather, that there were a smile just for me that no one else received. Lewis, but he was 'only a dream' as the old song goes. And I was Dana Andrews falling asleep under his picture. Ah well, if wishes were horses. I knew it wasn't going to happen, ever. Not ever. I was an old friend, I told myself, and that's all I was ever going to be. Lewis's confidant. The person who was always there when he needed someone to talk with. And he didn't need anyone at the moment. He was doing fine on his own.

Harry put his forearms on Lewis's shoulders. Lewis's hands rested on the sides of Harry's torso just above his waist. The two are almost of a height, Harry no more than half an inch taller. I watched them as they slowly shuffled around the same spot on the floor. They were talking, and Harry grinned at something Lewis said. Then he pressed his forehead against Lewis's. After that they didn't say anything. When the music stopped, Harry took Lewis back to his table. His friends made room for Lewis.

Lewis was laughing, and soon so was everyone at the table. 'Being's believing.' He dances through everyone's life.

I finished my drink and walked over to Bobbie and Christopher. I refused the plate of cake that was thrust toward me and hugged and kissed both of them. Christopher asked where Lewis was. I pointed to the table in the corner. Christopher laughed and raised his eyebrows. 'Trust Lewis to get his hands on the star of the evening.'

I nodded and left. The night had grown cold while we had been in Capers. I should have worn a heavier coat. We had had to park several blocks away, and the cold made it a long walk back to my car. For a few minutes, I felt oddly dislocated. As if something had gone wrong. It was too quiet. The streets were almost deserted, all the traffic noise at a distance. I passed only a few solitary pedestrians taking their dogs for a last walk, our shoes scraping against the pavement the only sounds. The windows of the café next to my car were fogged over with condensation, cutting me off from the people I could glimpse through the smears of movement behind the glass. It was like a world under water, with the sound muffled, vision blurred, and motion slowed. After the experience of Harry, I expected everyone to be singing and dancing in the streets to the music that was going through my head. Instead the rest of the world had gone about its business without realising something extraordinary had just happened.

‘Hello.’ I fumbled for the switch on the light beside my bed as I answered the phone. My first thought was that this could only be bad news, that something terrible had happened to someone in my family.

‘Where did you go?’

‘Lewis? Is that you? What time is it?’ I pulled the clock close to my face so that I could see it. ‘Lewis, do you know that it’s 2:30 in the morning? Why are you calling now?’

‘I wanted to see if you were awake. I have to talk with you.’

‘Lewis, can’t it wait until the morning?’

‘Jonathan, please. It’s really important.’

‘It’s always important, Lewis. I’m in bed. I’m not getting dressed again just to listen to you complain, and it’s too cold to sit up without clothes on. If you want to talk to me, you’re going to have to get in bed with me.’ I intended this to be the final threat to discourage Lewis and make him hang up.

‘Ok.’

‘Ok? Lewis, did you just agree to get into bed with me?’ That more than anything convinced me that Lewis was serious. This was followed immediately by another thought. ‘Are you drunk, Lewis?’

‘No, I just had three cups of coffee in an all-night café in the last couple of hours. I need to use your toilet, but I’m not drunk.’

‘All right, Lewis. Where are you?’

‘I’m calling from the phone box down the street from your house. I’ll let myself in with my key.’ Lewis kept one of my spare keys in case I locked myself out. By the time I hung up and swung my legs over the side of the bed and found my slippers, I could hear the key in the front door. ‘Lewis, wait! I’ve got the



chain on.’ I threw myself down the stairs. Lewis already had the door open and was pushing it back and forth against the chain when I got there. It took a few seconds of tangled conversation to make him stop trying to open the door so that I could undo the chain. When I finally got it released and let him in, cold air rushed into the house. I became very aware that I was standing there nude with my front door open. I hope none of the neighbours was looking. Lewis stepped in. I don’t think he realised I was naked. He started up the stairs without saying another word, as I relocked the door. By the time I reached the second floor, he was already demonstrating that he had indeed drunk a lot of coffee.

I crawled back into my bed and pulled the covers up. The cat peeked around the corner and mewed at me. ‘Go back to sleep. It’s just Lewis. Breakfast in a few hours.’ In answer, Murphy leaped onto the bed and burrowed down beside me under the covers, warming his cold fur against my chest, the tip of his tail twitching and tickling my stomach. Lewis came out of the bathroom. He removed his shoes and then started towards the bed. Halfway there, it occurred to him that he should remove his coat. Once he started undressing, he continued until he was wearing only his underwear. He raised the covers and slid into bed beside me. I turned the light off. Lewis rolled over on his side to face me across the pillow. Unfortunately he encountered the cat, who protected himself with the weapons he had at hand, his claws. There was a yelp of surprise and Lewis backed off a bit. Finally I had Lewis in bed, and Murphy decided to guard my virtue.

Lewis cautiously reached out a hand and began scratching Murphy’s ears. The furry traitor began purring and switched allegiances. He rolled over so that his back was against Lewis’s chest and began kneading me. His claws were little pinpricks against my chest. I held his paws in my hands, but he continued to spread and retract his claws insistently, now against the flesh of my fin-

gers. It was not an unpleasant sensation, rather like pinching oneself to assure oneself that one was awake. Murphy's claws were confirmation that I was conscious and not dreaming. 'You wanted to talk about something, Lewis?'

'Where did you go? I turned around to find you and bring you over to sit with Harry and his friends, and you were gone.'

'And how long after you danced with Harry did you try to find me?'

'I dunno. Half an hour, maybe an hour. It was almost closing time.'

'I was long gone by that time. I left about ten.'

'But why did you leave? I needed you.'

'I was feeling decidedly *de trop*, Lewis. Which brings me to my next question. Why are you here and not with Harry?'

'There was no reason for you to feel that way, Jonathan. And I left once I found you weren't there. I needed to talk to somebody. But I figured you had left with someone, and I had better give you a couple of hours to finish up and get back here. So I went to that café down the street and waited.'

'Lewis, I didn't leave with anyone. I came straight home and went to bed. And you know I never pick anyone up for casual sex, and if I did, I can assure you that I wouldn't be finished in a couple of hours.'

'I thought maybe Peter had shown up and you had left with him.' At that point, Murphy decided he had had enough conversation for the evening. He stood up, stretched, rubbed his chin against Lewis's face to thank him, and then left. There was a thump as he landed on the floor.

'No, Lewis, Peter is in Brussels until next Wednesday. Now do you want to discuss what brought you here? I want to get back to sleep.'

Lewis pulled the covers that Murphy had disarranged back in place and slid closer to me. 'Do you ever worry about what will

happen to you when you get old, Jonathan? I mean, if you don't have anyone?'

'Lewis, it's 3:00 o'clock in the morning. If I don't get some sleep soon, I can assure you that growing old is a future you need not concern yourself about. Why are you worrying about this now?'

'I'm getting older, Jonathan. In two more years, I'm going to be thirty like Bobbie. And he and Christopher have been living together for almost six years now. It just came to me this evening that I've got to start thinking about my future. I can't always play around the way I have been. It's been fun and all, but I need to find someone to share my life with. My parents have me and my sister and her husband to look after them when they get old, but I won't have anyone unless I can find someone.'

'So you won't be like me, you mean? An old maid at the age of 32.'

'Yes, but you have Peter, and he would move in if you gave him any encouragement.'

I was beginning to wonder if Lewis was leading up to something about us. Why else was he having this discussion in my bed, both of us more or less naked and separated by only a few inches of space, space that felt heavier and heavier the longer Lewis lay there? 'Peter and I are just good friends. It's never going to be anything more than that. If we never went to bed together again, neither one of us would feel much regret. Now are you going to tell me what this is all about?'

'Harry is nice, isn't he? That was a very nice thing he did, rescuing me, wasn't it?'

'Yes, Lewis, it was a very nice thing. But you didn't come here to have me confirm something you already know.'

Lewis nestled in closer. We were suddenly in contact along the length of our bodies. He smelled of soap. I've never known how he does that. He may have taken a shower before he met me

to go to Bobbie's party, but that would have been at least seven–eight hours earlier. Yet he still smelled clean. 'I don't know how to make him like me. Like me so much he wants to spend the rest of his life with me.'

'Do you want that?'

'Yes.'

'Lewis, you hardly know the man. You don't move in with someone after knowing them for a few hours.'

'I know that. I'm not going to do anything hasty, Jonathan. But he could be Mr Right.'

'I'm relieved to hear that, Lewis. When you do catch him, give me a few days' warning so that I can buy a gift for your wedding.'

Lewis giggled. 'But seriously, how do you make someone love you that way?'

'I'm hardly an expert, Lewis. As you can see from looking around, no one is protesting your invasion of the marital bed. Why don't you just be yourself? Everybody loves Lewis. And why are you so sure you want to live with this singer? Not even your best friends think you're musical.'

'Do you think that's enough, just to be myself?' Lewis ignored the second question. That had already been answered in his mind.

'Lewis, in your case, yourself is more than enough reason to fall in love.'

'But nobody's ever fallen in love with me before.'

'Oh, Lewis, there are dozens.' Sometimes he is so caught up in himself that he doesn't see the obvious.

'Who, for example?'

I took a deep breath and took the plunge. 'Me, for example.'

Lewis froze in place. I think he suddenly realised how close we were physically. Then he wrapped his arms around me and squeezed. 'I love you too. But we're more like brothers.' That

difficulty past, he hurried on to the point that was of real concern to him. 'Do you really think that if I'm just me that Harry will like me?'

'Yes, Lewis, I do.' I almost choked on that answer. I tried to tell myself that if I truly cared for Lewis, I would help him get what he wanted. And, then, if (and only if, I told myself) he couldn't get Harry, I would be there to console him.

'I knew you would have the answers, Jonathan.' And then he kissed me. If it's possible for two males, both still relatively young, one nude, the other almost so, to be in the same bed, and exchange a chaste kiss, we did. Or rather, Lewis kissed me chastely. My thoughts were anything but chaste.

Lewis pushed his body up against me and sighed in contentment. He had enlisted my aid in helping him find true love with Harry, which, I suppose, had been the whole point of the exercise. He had one final matter to discuss before he went to sleep. 'Who is Claus Ester something? He's a musician.'

'Do you mean Klaus Esterhazy? He's a conductor. He's the musical director of the Vienna Staatsoper. He guest-conducts with the LSO sometimes. In fact, he's going to be here in the spring. Why do you ask?' Lewis had no interest in any form of music, let alone classical music.

'Harry's going to sing with him. Is there a composer called The Mauler?'

I had to force a picture of Gustav der Moravian Mauler in wrestling togs, with Alma cheering him on from the corner of the ring, out of my mind. 'It's Mahler.' I spelled it for Lewis. 'He composed a lot of incredible pieces for voice and orchestra. Does Harry sing in the choir for the London Symphony?'

'No, he's going to sing a solo part in April with this Esterhazy. In Mahler's Eighth, I think that was the number. Doctor something or other. Does that sound right?'

‘There is a part called Doctor Marianus in Mahler’s Eighth, but that’s a notoriously difficult piece. Doctor Marianus is one of the major roles. Harry’s too young to sing that.’

‘Well, we’ll find out. I told him you liked music, and he’s going to get us tickets. Do you have a recording of it? I need to listen to it.’

‘I have several.’

‘Can I borrow one? Is it a long piece?’

‘Ninety minutes or so. The vocal parts are in Latin and German, you know.’

Lewis sighed. ‘Well, I’ll just have to get through it, then. You’ll help me, won’t you, Jonathan?’ The question was just a polite fiction. He had already decided that I was to help him. Lewis had finished with his mission for the evening. He gave me another hug, took a deep breath and went to sleep.

Lewis had solved his immediate problems and could sleep. I couldn’t. Did I really want to be noble and devote myself to helping Lewis in his latest campaign? Was this Harry even interested in Lewis? Why was Lewis with me and not with him? And what about me? Why shouldn’t I be the one to grow old with Lewis? I alternated between anger and exasperation with him as I lay there, unable to get back to sleep.

I loved Lewis, but I wasn’t blind to his faults. Like all of us, he has his good points and his bad points. His parents and even his sister dote on him, and he passed his youth the centre of their universe. He sees no reason that everyone shouldn’t feel the same about him. It never occurs to Lewis that what he wants might not be obtainable, that his self-centredness requires others to be selfless. There is something so innocent and pure about his self-absorption. I know that is a strange thing to say, but Lewis likes people. He wants them to be happy, and he feels that he can best contribute to their happiness by allowing them to do things for

him. Those of us who know him and think of him as a friend somehow fall in his with view of life and want to protect him, to preserve him against harm and unhappiness. He is so happy being Lewis that it seems reasonable to help him to go on being happy.

His behaviour that night was typical. He had a problem to solve. Being alone was apparently the ultimate horror for Lewis, and he was worried that if he continued on his present course, that would be his fate. He met someone who could solve this problem, and he decided on his own that Harry would do. I've never known how he reached this decision or if he sounded Harry out before focussing all his many charms on his favoured candidate for life partner. And then he came running to me for assistance. I don't flatter myself that Lewis felt that I was the only person who could help him. I just happened to be the one who occurred to him that evening because we had been together earlier. I suppose, too, that his need for information on 'The Mauler' made him think of his one friend with some knowledge of classical music.

I lay there on my side, facing Lewis. When he fell asleep, his grip on me loosened, but his arms still held me within their circle, one of his hands resting lightly on my hip. Had Lewis even registered that he was touching my bare flesh? His hair brushed against my face. I could feel his breath on my lips. I cautiously slid an arm under the pillow beneath his head and then placed my other arm around his back. He stirred slightly and then sighed in contentment as I drew closer to him. I felt so protective of him at that moment, so filled with desire to be Lewis's lover. I lay there tracing the shape of his head in the dark with my eyes. If he had let me, I would have made him the centre of my universe. The longing to be tender was an ache in the heart.

At some point during the night, Lewis rolled over. When I awoke, my arms were still around him, but his back was pressed

tightly against my chest. Murphy was perched on my hip and kneading it. He wanted to be fed. I could tell from the yellow light around the edges of the curtains that it was long past his usual breakfast time. In the faint light in the room, I could see the knobs of the vertebrae between Lewis's shoulders and the top of the deep groove down the start of his spine. A light frizz of dark hair formed a shallow V on the back of his neck. I grasped a few of the hairs gently between my lips just to enjoy the sensation of touching them. That alerted Lewis to the fact that I was awake.

'Hmmm.' He moaned in contentment. 'I love lying here like this. It's my favourite way to wake up in the morning. With someone's arms around me.' Lewis turned his head back so that he could smile at me. He saw Murphy. 'Oh, your cat wants attention.' Lewis threw back the covers and strode to the door. Murphy leaped off the bed with delight—someone was going to feed him. Lewis let Murphy run through the door and down the hall and then closed the door. 'There, the little beggar won't bother us now.' On the way back to bed, he discarded his underwear and dove back into bed. 'Now we can be closer.' Murphy had already begun an angry assault on the door.

Lewis wrapped me in a tight embrace and gave me a long kiss. There was a satisfied grunt and he smacked me lightly on the back just below the waist. 'Why didn't you tell me you loved me before? I always thought you and Peter were a couple, and you were off limits.' Lewis did have a few standards of behaviour. He never interfered between couples. If he wanted one member of the pair, he waited until they broke up before making a move. 'I thought you and Peter were lovers.'

'I like Peter, but I don't care passionately about him.'

'And you like me and care passionately about me.' Lewis smiled in satisfaction. He made that seem like the most reasonable behaviour imaginable. All was right with the world, at least



with his portion of it. It didn't escape my notice that he hadn't mentioned whether he liked me or cared in any way about me.

I nodded. 'You should have told me. We could have slept together before. God, I am so horny this morning. I thought I was going with Harry, but those friends of his are staying with him this weekend and there wouldn't have been any privacy at his place. And I couldn't take him to my place because he has to be the good host and can't desert his friends. He gave me his number and told me to call him on Sunday afternoon after they go back to London. But luckily I don't have to wait until then. I couldn't believe it when you invited me into your bed last night. That's just what I need. You're doing your good deed for today and saving me from losing my vision.' Lewis's cock was already rubbing hard against me.

'Lewis, I don't get you. You came over here last night to ask for advice on how to ensnare Harry and now you want to have sex with me.' The anger that I had felt off and on the last few hours resurfaced. 'I don't want you on those terms. Am I nothing to you but a convenient lay?' I tried to push him away.

Lewis was having none of that. He laughed contentedly and held me tighter. My resistance was just a joke to him. 'Oh, Jonathan, don't be difficult. We're brothers, remember. This is just fun for both of us. We're not hurting anyone. And you want it, I can tell.' He rubbed my swollen cock with his hand as he kissed me again. 'It'll be fun. Just relax. You'll enjoy it. I promise.'

My body betrayed me. And it was fun. Lewis likes his pleasures and he likes to share them, and he is terrific in bed. When we finished, he lay back against the pillows and stroked my head. 'We'll have to do that again sometime. We're good together. But for now, we had better feed ourselves and your cat breakfast. And you have to find that recording of Mahler for me—do I have to listen to the entire ninety minutes or is there a short version? Can I use your shower first? Is it all right if I borrow one of

your razors? Don't get up. I know where everything is.' Lewis bounded from the bed and ran across the hall into the bathroom. In a moment the shower started, and the plumbing began knocking as the water rose through the walls from the boiler off the kitchen.

I put on my robe and slippers and went downstairs to see if I had anything to feed Lewis for breakfast. Murphy was quite vocal in his grievances and discontents. I kept mine to myself although I may have opened Murphy's tin of food more forcefully than was necessary. And I quite intentionally filled the coffee carafe from the hot water tap—given the antiquity of the plumbing in my house that ensured an interruption in the flow of hot water upstairs. I may even have smiled to myself when a few seconds later a distant shriek of surprise recorded the arrival of a burst of cold water in the shower.

‘I poured you a cup of coffee. You don’t have any milk.’ Lewis gestured toward a cup of cold coffee sitting on the counter. When I came downstairs from shaving and showering and getting dressed, I found Lewis sitting at the table in the kitchen reading the liner notes for the recording of Mahler’s Eighth that I had left for him. ‘Why do they print these things in such small type?’ He held up the booklet that came with the CD.

‘I don’t use milk. Should I run out and get some for you?’

‘No, it’s ok. I can do without this time.’ All four slices of toast I had left on the table had disappeared. Lewis was scraping the sides of a now-empty jar of strawberry jam with a spoon and licking off the residue.

‘I have to go out and get some bread for my breakfast anyway. Should I get you some milk?’

‘Well, as long as you’re going out. Then I can have some of that muesli you have.’

‘That box is months old. It’s probably stale or rancid by now.’

‘Oh. Then maybe you can get some more. I like muesli for breakfast. And maybe some bananas. You should eat fruit for breakfast. It’s good for you.’ Lewis glared at me. I was neglecting his proper diet.

‘Yes, Lewis. Is there anything else you want?’

‘You don’t need to take that tone. I’m just thinking of your health. At your age, you need to start watching what you eat.’

‘Yes, Lewis. I’m sure that someday I will thank you for that advice. I’ll be back in fifteen-twenty minutes.’

‘I’ll start listening to this.’ He removed the CD from the case and walked into my living room. As I put my coat and boots on, I could hear the opening notes of Mahler’s Eighth. Murphy knew what was coming. He jumped down from the window sill where

he had been surveying his back yard. He doesn't like loud music. He headed for the stairs. I knew he would hide out on the third floor until the Eternal Feminine had ceased leading us on. 'Coward,' I whispered to his rear end as he scampered away. He flicked the tip of his tail in response. 'Coward,' I whispered to myself as I walked out the door.

It took me longer than I had anticipated to get what I needed from the small store a few blocks from my house. When I got back, the staccato male chorus near the beginning of the second part of the Eighth was playing. Lewis regarded me with horror. He must have felt that it would never end. His groans drowned out the music. 'How will I ever learn enough about this to impress Harry?'

I pushed the pause button on the CD player. 'Lewis, you don't have to do this. It isn't like a school assignment and studying for exams. You don't have to swot up on the subject. Just confess to Harry that you know nothing about classical music and ask him to teach you. Saving you from your ignorance will give him a mission in life, and by the time he finishes teaching you, both of you will be old and ready for an elder-care home.'

'But I have to be able to talk to him about his interests, Jonathan. How long would it take you to teach me everything you know about music?'

'Lewis, you have to remember that I grew up in a house where I heard music every day and heard passionate discussions and arguments and gossip about it from some of the best in the world. I don't even know when I learned half of the stuff I know. It was just part of the atmosphere.'

'Oh, that reminds me.' Lewis looked decidedly uneasy about something. 'I forgot about it till now.' Lewis glanced up at the Abramson portrait of my mother as the Queen of the Night. It occupied most of the physical space over the fireplace and all of the psychical space in my house.

'Lewis, what did you do?'

'I may have mentioned to Harry who your mother is. I think he's hoping to meet her.'

'Oh, Lewis, you didn't. Mother likes to choose her own protégés. She won't pay more than a moment's attention to any singer I drag to see her.'

'But Harry's got such a great voice, Lewis. As soon as she hears him, she'll be enthralled.'

'Mother expects people to be enthralled by her voice, not vice versa. In any case, she's off giving master classes and singing in Tokyo now and then she's in the States for two months.'

'But how could she not like Harry?'

'One, he's a tenor. By definition that makes him a rival for applause. Two, he's gay and therefore useless to her in fulfilling what is to her a male's primary purpose. Three, she would meet him through me, a reminder of what she regards as the worst mistake of her life, taking up my father. Fourth, she would fear, probably rightly, that like most young singers she meets he wants to use her to get ahead. None of those four things would commend Harry to my mother. And in any case it's not the splendour of a male singer's *vocal* equipment that interests mother.'

'But she's your mother. How could she not do things for you?'

'Lewis, your mother does things for you. You mustn't judge other people's mothers on the basis of your mother. Look at that.' I pointed to mother's portrait. 'Do you know what the high point of the Queen of the Night's time on stage is? She gives her daughter a dagger and orders her to kill someone. Then she sings this demented aria and threatens to disown the daughter unless she commits the murder. What sort of message do you think my mother intended when she marched in here one day with a pair of workmen, took down the picture I had over the fireplace and had them put this one up in its stead? She could have given me a

studio shot in a nice silver frame if she wanted me to think of her. She was sending me a message she knew I would understand. Lewis, there are some things I cannot do for you and introducing Harry to my mother is one of them. I will help you all I can, but

that I can't do.' Mother glowered approvingly at me from the wall. I suddenly realised that in return for not introducing Harry to my mother, I had promised to aid and abet Lewis in his scheme to take Harry as his mate for life.

'Why don't you just take the picture down?'

'Mother had the workmen anchor the frame in the wall. I'm afraid the house will fall down if I try to remove it. Besides it's seared into my mind. Removing it would not remove the image of it.'

'Then you can borrow my mother. We're brothers, so she is your fairy godmother.'

'Perhaps you should ask her if she wants that role.'

'Oh, she would do it for me.' Lewis looked exceedingly smug. He stood up and grabbed me by the shoulders and turned me around so that I was facing him and then clasped me to his chest. 'Close your eyes.'

'What are you doing?'

'Just close your eyes for a second. There. Now. Shazam! Ab-racadabra. Fixus pixus. Ok, I have changed the portrait. It is now a picture of our Great-Aunt Clara. I don't think you ever met her. But it's Clara down to the thin moustache over her upper lip. No, don't look. You're better off not looking.' He held me in that position so that I couldn't look away from him. 'I'm not what you think I am.'

'What are you talking about, Lewis?'

'We wouldn't be good together. We make good friends, but you would get tired of me after a while if we were living together. I wouldn't be as exciting or as fun as you think I am.' He looked

sad as he said that. 'It would be nice if we could live together. I like you a lot better than I like most people, but you would soon cease to like me if you had to put up with me all the time. I know you love me and want me to be more than a friend, but it wouldn't work. I've tried to show you that. I'm not what you want me to be.'

'Lewis, you can't know that.'

'Oh, I know what I am. I am actor, a jester. I make people laugh, and they like me and like to be around me for a few hours. But I would bore them if I stayed too long.'

'I don't think that's true. And if it is true, why are you chasing after Harry?'

'Because he needs me. Or at least he's going to need the person I'm going to become.'

'Then you could become the person I need.'

'No, you would see through me. Harry won't. He's just a great voice and an interesting face. But he doesn't understand people. All he knows is music. It's all he really cares about and understands. Well, he'll care about me. I'll make things easier for him, and I'll be there when he needs me. He will get used to me being his lover. It will just be what I am. And I'll be good for him.'

'Lewis, you can't do that. What about you? Who's going to be there for you? And it's immoral to use someone else like that.'

'Is it any more moral to use me the way you want to use me? You just want me to be the recipient of your love, to accept you as my lover and be what you want me to be. I'm not smart like you, Jonathan. I don't have any talents like Harry. I'm never going to go anywhere in my job. I'm just going to get older, and then it won't matter how funny I can be, because no one will be interested. I would become one of those old men who doesn't have anyone, who sits in a room most of the day and wanders out

occasionally trying to find someone who will talk with him. So I need to find someone before that happens.'

'I would be interested, damn you. How can you deny me a chance to make you happy?'

'Don't get angry with me, please don't. I charm people. It's what I've been doing all my life. I don't have any other abilities. Making people like me is my only talent. It's all I have going for me. Oh, I'm cute now, but that won't last forever. I know what I'm planning sounds manipulative and devious, Jonathan, maybe it is, but I'll be good for Harry. That will be my career. And you've got to help me. Please. I'll help you find someone. Someone who will be good for you. I'm just not that person, Jonathan. I thought it all out. Besides you don't want me. You've had plenty of opportunities to speak, but you've never said anything. If you really wanted me, you would have said something before now. If it could work, I would let you catch me and love me, but it wouldn't work. You deserve better than someone like me. You deserve someone who's going to love you as much as you love them, and I'll never be that kind of person.'

'Lewis, this is insane. Nobody forms a relationship just so they'll be secure, so they won't be alone.' As soon as I said that, I knew it was untrue. So did Lewis. He raised an eyebrow. After a second, I smiled ruefully at him. 'Oh, Lewis.' I hugged him as tightly as I could. I didn't want to let him go.

'It will work, Jonathan. You have to help me do this. I know it isn't what you want or what you would do. I like Harry, and I will love him as much as I can. That will be enough for him. He won't look any further.'

'But how do you know it will be enough for him? You just met him a few hours ago.'

'That's my one talent. Knowing how to read people and knowing what they want from me. I know it will be enough. Now,



you've got to let me go. Come on. Let go.' Lewis gave me a valedictory kiss on the forehead and pushed me gently away.

I released him reluctantly and walked to the window. I didn't want to look at Lewis again for fear that I would start begging him to let me be the one. 'Lewis, promise me one thing. I'll never ask again, but if it doesn't work out with Harry, please come to me.'

Lewis didn't say anything. I've never known if he nodded yes or no or simply did nothing. After a silence, he said he had to go. He went upstairs to get his coat from my bedroom. In a few seconds, he came down the stairs. He walked over to me and embraced me from behind. 'I will talk with you soon.' Then he was gone. The front door opened and closed. He paused by the front step and pulled a cap from a pocket and put it on. Then he walked up the street. He didn't look back.

I carried the groceries into the kitchen and put the milk in the fridge and the box of muesli on the shelf beside the other box. I wasn't hungry anymore. I ate a banana just to put something in my stomach along with the sour cold coffee.

I wasn't angry with Lewis. I didn't have the energy for that. I just felt abandoned and alone again. Lewis was wrong about one thing. I would have been satisfied with the pretence of a relationship. Skin deep would have been enough for me. Lewis is so alive. He supplies something that's missing in me. The rainbow to my grey clouds, the music for my parade, the great leap into the air, the dizzy run down the hill where one's legs move faster and faster and one's steps become longer and longer leaps until one is flying through the air, soaring over the rocks and trees in the way. I knew that I shouldn't live my life through him. He was right about that. I would try to force him to be an actor playing a role in my drama. I would be the producer, director, casting agent, lighting man, chief grip, best boy, stage dresser, in the daily soap opera *Lewis & Jonathan of Kilsyth Terrace*, with all of daily episodes repeated on Sunday for those who had missed them. Still—