

Lewis

Six Excerpts from the Autobiography
of Jonathan Spenser



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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 II

Lewis

The weekend following my encounter with Lewis, Peter and I stopped by the Gardner Street Bar to eat. The waiter had just poured the first glasses of wine for us. Peter, as was his habit, was examining the other patrons. ‘Who’s that with Lewis?’

I turned around in my chair and followed the direction of Peter’s outstretched hand. ‘Oh, his name’s Harry Castlemain. He’s the singer Ian and Craig were telling you about last night.’ Lewis and Harry were standing in the queue just inside the door. The rain had closed the patio area, and all the tables inside had quickly been taken.

‘They’ll never get a seat now. I’ll invite them to join us.’

‘Oh, please don’t. I’m not in the mood for Lewis tonight.’ But I spoke too late. Peter had already stood up and waved to attract Lewis’s attention. Lewis saw him immediately and grabbed Harry by the hand and began pulling him through the crowd, obviously happy to find a place to sit and people he knew to sit with. I wouldn’t be able to say which of those considerations ranked higher in his mind.

Peter glanced down at me with a surprised look. ‘Sorry, I should have checked first. You usually like being with Lewis.’ Peter often invited others to sit with us when we went out. He liked crowds of people around him. I seldom objected. It increased the number of people to talk with and gave us a subject for conversation when we were alone later.

I shrugged and stood up to welcome Lewis and Harry. Lewis gave me an enthusiastic hug and kiss on the cheek. Peter got the usual squeeze on the arm and the full smile Lewis reserved for those he knew only slightly. Peter and I had been sitting opposite each other, and after I introduced Harry and Peter, I started to move to one of the chairs adjacent to Peter. Lewis stopped me

and almost shoved me back into the chair I had been using. I ended up with Lewis on one side and Harry on the other.

Just as we all said down again, the waiter brought the appetizer we had ordered. ‘Oh, mussels. I love these.’ Lewis beamed at the waiter. Lewis wanted him to know that his thoughtfulness in supplying Lewis with food so quickly was appreciated. The waiter smiled back at Lewis and lisped, ‘I love muscles myself, Sir.’

‘Gardner Street has the best mussels.’ That was an explanation for Harry. Even before the waiter finished putting the bowl on the table, Lewis had broken off a chunk of bread and was dipping it in the sauce.

‘Do help yourself, Lewis.’ Peter often affected a dryly amused tone at Lewis’s expense, but I think he enjoyed Lewis’s company. He took his own plate and set it in front of Lewis just in time to keep the cloth from getting stained from the juice-laden piece of bread Lewis was lifting toward his mouth. ‘Please bring two more plates and glasses. We’d better have another order of mussels and then another bottle of wine. The same again, I think.’ The last was spoken to the waiter. ‘Harry, you should try the mussels before the ravenous maw gobbles them all. Why don’t you give Harry your plate, Jonathan? I hope you two will be able to join us for dinner.’

Peter ran a company in the Brighton area that provided computer animation services for television and advertising. He was used to giving orders and having them followed and could be rather imperious. I think that was why he was so fond of Lewis. He recognised someone with similar traits.

Lewis nodded his thanks. ‘This is perfect. We were just walking past, and I was telling Harry what a great place this is, and we stopped in just on the chance that we might be able to get a table without too long a wait, and here you are.’

‘The gods do provide, don’t they, Lewis?’ Peter raised an eyebrow at Lewis’s obvious pleasure.

‘Hmmm, they do indeed.’ Lewis directed one of his high-wattage smiles toward everyone around him. ‘Jonathan told me you were in Brussels.’ Only the owner of a popular restaurant would regard the table we were seated at as large enough for four. We were forced close together. As Lewis and Peter discussed his trip to Brussels, Lewis extended his arm along the back of my chair and rubbed my neck just above the collar with the ball of his thumb. It was an oddly possessive gesture. I could see Peter’s eyes follow the progress of Lewis’s arm. The movement wasn’t lost on Harry either. Peter had more practice in hiding his emotions, however. Other than a slight flicker of his eyes and an amused lift of one corner of his mouth to indicate that he would have a question for me later, he betrayed no concern. A brief look of worry crossed Harry’s face. I must confess that I rather liked Harry’s reaction. If he didn’t feel secure in his relationship with Lewis yet, perhaps nothing had been settled yet.

After Peter and Lewis had exhausted the subject of Brussels, with many asides from Lewis to Harry to explain Peter’s work, Peter commenced his cross-examination of Harry. He did this to anyone who piqued his interest at the first meeting. He was very skilled at getting people to talk about themselves without feeling embarrassed or challenged. He soon had Harry at ease and answering his questions confidently. This was actually my first opportunity to be with Harry, too. His résumé was quite impressive. The music schools he had won admittance to and his teachers were all first rate. Harry and I were the only ones to appreciate fully what it meant to have Martha Elborg accept one as a student, but both Peter and Lewis could see from my reaction that I was impressed by this news.

‘Do you know her?’ Peter turned from questioning Harry to look at me.

‘I’ve met her. She worked with my father in coaching the soloists for several of his productions. She’s noted for her skills in

training singers to project emotion through their voices. I think the last time I spoke with her was during the preparations for my father's stagings of *Riders to the Sea* and *The Beggar's Opera* for the Dublin Summer Festival the year before he died. That would have been four years ago.'

'She has several pictures of your father at work on the walls of her studio. She often speaks warmly of him and cites him as an authority for interpretations of lines and phrases.'

'Does she? Well, they were close colleagues for many years. She and her husband often collaborated with my father. Thank you telling me that.' I found myself touched by Harry's remark. Most young singers and musicians rushed to tell me how great my parents were, as if they thought I were somehow ignorant of that fact. Many, however, seemed to feel that they needed to qualify their praise with judicious reservations about this or that aspect of my parents' talents. Often their comments were addressed more to the audience than to me. Harry in contrast spoke rather quietly to me alone. Lewis chose that moment to ask Peter's advice about video recorders, and the Gardner Street Bar was noisy enough that Peter and Lewis may not have heard our exchange clearly.

Our food had arrived by that point, and we were eating. I nearly dropped my fork and knife when Lewis chose that moment to squeeze my knee. During the time we had been sitting there, his knee had brushed against mine several times and eventually came to rest against mine. I don't know what game he was playing, but I was getting tired of it. 'Oh, this table is so small. Lewis, I must apologise for bumping into your leg so often. I'll try not to step on your toes.'

My tone was sharp enough that Peter realised something was afoot. 'Let me move my chair closer to Harry. That will give you a bit more room, Lewis.' Lewis grinned at me mischievously as he moved his chair a half-inch away. His knee returned to its previ-

ous position after a minute or so. This time he moved it up and down several times. If it had been anyone but Lewis, I would have suspected that the intent was to make me feel bad. A week earlier Lewis had told me that he couldn't love me after we had spent half the night in bed together, and now I was trying to make polite conversation with his intended life-mate while he was playing footsie with me under the table.

Lewis can be self-absorbed at times but he is not insensitive to the moods of those around him. One of the reasons he is so well liked is that he does understand what others are feeling. He may regard their feelings and needs as secondary to his own, but as long as he is satisfied and happy, he sees no problem in helping others feel the same. And he was happy that night. So I don't think Lewis was trying to be cruel or to tease me.

Peter and Harry did most of the talking that evening. Both Lewis and I were relatively quiet. Relations between him and Harry were, as far as I could judge, developing along the lines he wanted. Occasionally he would smile proudly when Harry made a good point, rather like a parent whose child has said something clever. The two of them exchanged private looks often enough to make it clear that they were becoming close.

It was until we had left the restaurant that I had a chance to talk with Lewis alone. He and Harry were going on to one of the clubs, and Peter had offered to drop them off on the way. The pavement was crowded, and Peter and Harry had gotten ahead of us and were separated from us by several other pedestrians. 'Thank you for inviting us to share your table.'

'It wasn't me. That was Peter's idea.'

'But you instigated it.'

'No. It was all Peter's idea.'

'You never take credit for anything if Peter's around.'

'It's easier to let him decide things. Really, it was Peter's idea.'

'I know that's not true. In any case, I thank you. It was of nice of you to do that for Harry and me.'

I gave up trying to dissuade Lewis. He had made up his mind that I had fallen in with his schemes. My approval was apparently important enough to him that he took my denials as teasing.

'What do you think of him?'

'Harry? He's considerate of others, isn't he? That should make him a suitable partner for you.' I thought it safer to move the subject away from Harry's personality to a more neutral subject. 'He must be a very talented musician. He's had an impressive schooling. Teachers at that level accept only the best pupils. They don't waste their time with amateurs.'

'So you feel better about what I'm doing now?'

'I'm quite jealous of your good fortune. How does someone with all your impediments end up with someone like Harry?' I tried to speak lightly but my voice must have held an edge.

'Please don't be angry with me, Jonathan.'

'I'm not angry, Lewis. A bit sad perhaps and feeling sorry for myself. But I'll get over that. And you don't need my approval. It's clear that the two of you like each other.' I tried to deflect the conversation again. 'I can see your future now. You'll end up retiring together to Jersey to a sunset homes development and living out your golden years padding around in baggy beach shorts and brightly coloured shirts and rubber flip-flops. You'll have a large collection of seashells gathered from your travels around the world. Every afternoon at five, you will mix a batch of exotic drinkies that you learned to make in Bora Bora and sit out on your patio surrounded by bougainvillea and crepe myrtle and play a rubber of bridge with the couple who owns the unit next door.'

'We'll invite you over for a week's vacation once a year.'

'What a depressing thought. Not the week's vacation. I meant the retirement years. Elderly men with stringy legs and wiry white chest hair, walking the dog on the sand.'

‘It is rather awful to contemplate, isn’t it? Well, we’re still a good many years away from that.’ I glanced over at Lewis. He was looking ahead of us and almost jiggling down the street. He was well fed and content and full of energy and goodwill. When he became aware that I was watching him, he turned to me and smiled, radiantly. He is such a beautiful person. It’s hard not to be fond of him at moments like that.

As we were dropping Lewis and Harry off, I asked Harry if he would like to see my father’s collection of annotated scores. I guess I felt I had to do something to show Lewis that I still liked him and would keep my promise to help him ensnare Harry.

‘You were quiet tonight.’ Peter was attempting to pull back into the street after letting Lewis and Harry off. He was turned away from me, looking back over his shoulder into the lane of approaching traffic. The rain had stopped, but the street was still wet and the many lights of Kitchener Street were duplicated over and over again on every surface. ‘What was going on between you and Lewis?’

‘He kept kneeling me under the table and touching me. It was annoying.’

‘He did seem rather more generous than usual with his carresses. Since he and the young Mr Castlemain were obviously out on a date, I wondered if he was trying to make Harry jealous by playing up to you.’

‘No, it wasn’t that. We were talking on the way to your car. He thought I was the one behind the invitation to share our table. It was his way of thanking me.’

‘Given your feelings for Lewis, I wondered if you weren’t the one who was jealous. I’m taking you back to my place, by the way. Do you need to stop at your house first to get anything or take care of that cat of yours?’

‘Is it that apparent? And no, I have everything I need. Am I staying the night? I need to get back early to feed Murphy before he tears the kitchen up trying to feed himself.’

‘I’ll see what I feel like after I finish. I may drive you back tonight when I am done. And yes, your feelings for Lewis have long been apparent, to everyone, I should imagine. I also had the definite impression that something has happened between you and Lewis. You were rather distant toward Harry at first. I could see that he was confused by your attitude. It’s hardly his fault that you’ve have the hots for Lewis. You mustn’t let your unrequited

feelings spill over onto Lewis's dates. What are Lewis's intentions toward Harry, do you know?'

'Which of those questions and suppositions do you want me to deal with first?'

'Why don't you just tell me what happened? It will save us both time. Why must you always try to provoke me by playing these stalling games.'

'As opposed to provoking you by playing the games that you do like.'

'As opposed to the games that we both like. Since we cannot play them while I am manoeuvring through all this traffic, I suggest you use the time productively and tell me what happened.'

So I did. The recital took all of the three-quarters of an hour it took to drive to Peter's place in the country. I began with the scene at Capers and progressed to Lewis's early morning phone call and ended with his departure late Saturday morning. By the time I had finished relating the story to Peter, we had arrived at his house. He was seated in an armchair by the fireplace, sipping a glass of whisky and smoking a cigarette. I was standing beside him. As usual, he was dressed and I was naked. His left hand was stroking my body casually. He often treated me like a pet when we were alone. He would touch me frequently, sometimes just drawing the tips of his fingers lightly over the skin, sometimes massaging the muscles vigorously. Occasionally there would be a rougher contact. Or he would make me walk back and forth before him, displaying myself. Sometimes I had to kneel by the chair, and he would pat my head and neck. I would sit, roll over, heel, beg, all at his command and for his amusement.

'I wish I had been there to see you and Lewis having sex.'

'I don't think Lewis would have been in bed with me if you had been there.'

'Oh, I didn't mean a three-way. I meant that I would have liked to have watched the two of you. I wouldn't have let Lewis know I

was there. That would have made it more amusing. You would have known that the two of you were being watched. He would not have. I don't suppose you taped it.'

'You know I don't have that kind of a set-up.'

'I shall have to remedy that. Then you can invite Lewis back. Is Lewis hairy?'

'He has some fuzz on his legs and forearms, a bit of hair on his chest, around the nipples and between the pecs. The usual hair around his groin.'

'Spread your legs a bit further apart. How did he react when he found that you are hairless?'

'He didn't say anything. Perhaps it didn't strike him as unusual.'

'What did he say when he saw the welts and bruises on your body? It's been almost two weeks now, and they are still visible. They must have been even more apparent last weekend.'

'It was dark in the room. The curtains were pulled, but there was enough light coming in from outside that we could see, see well enough for what we were doing. We didn't turn the lights on. He probably didn't see them. In any case, Lewis didn't devote much attention to inspecting my body. He was horny. He just wanted to get off.'

'What he good in bed?'

'Good enough. We both had orgasms.'

'Can a simple orgasm still satisfy you, Jonathan? A pity Lewis doesn't know you as well as I do. It would be interesting to know how Lewis would react to the knowledge of just what the elegant, cultured, ever so preciously overeducated Jonathan Spenser likes to do.'

'Lewis isn't a sadist.'

'Meaning that I am.' Peter took a long sip of his whisky and then looked at me analytically. 'As usual, you mislabel. The sadism is just a means of expressing a power relation. You invited

me to use you and dominate you. It was our bargain. The more temperate means of doing so quickly paled. We had to resort to sharper means of satisfying your desire to be punished. Eventually, I suspect, your needs will outdistance even my willingness to accommodate them. Then you will have to move on and find someone else. Would you have told me about your encounter with Lewis if I hadn't asked?

I had to consider my answer to that. 'I don't really know. I think not.'

'But you must, Jonathan. The details interest me enormously. How many others have there been since we first found each other?'

'Lewis is the only one.'

'Well, if there are others, you must tell me about them. Promise me you will.' I nodded. "Good. I may even arrange an encounter for you. I have other friends who would find pleasure in using you. We could do it here, and I could tape it or spy on you. Would you like to be a porno actor?'

'You already tape me. So in a way I am.'

'But those tapes are just for my own amusement. I could easily produce a professional-quality movie. You would need another name, however. "Jonathan Spenser" is too bland for the professional world. Unfortunately, you are getting too old to be a star in that world. So the film would have to be for limited release for gentlemen with refined tastes. I shall think about it.'

I didn't respond. Peter continued to stroke my legs absent-mindedly. He didn't like to be interrupted while thinking. When he next spoke, he reverted to the subject of Lewis. 'I think you are misinterpreting what Lewis was doing last weekend. For whatever reason, Lewis is beginning to devote some thought to securing his comforts in the future. If this Harry is as talented as you say, his career promises to be successful. So he became a candidate. But look at it from Lewis's standpoint. Among his

many acquaintances, who else has as much money as you? Who else leads an interesting life that takes him places Lewis would like to go? Lewis is nothing if not calculating. He can be quite sensible and level-headed in assessing how to get what he wants. I imagine it was a short jump in Lewis's thought processes from a promising young singer to the love child of a famous conductor and a famous singer, who already has what Lewis wants in plentiful supply. You are a few years older than Lewis, but not so much older that it would develop into a problem soon. Otherwise, Lewis might have picked me or someone like me. But the disparity in our ages probably led him to realise that I would reach the geriatric stage long before him and die on him, leaving him stranded past his prime and unable to attract anyone else.

'No, I think Lewis was trying you out last Saturday. Would you do or should he set his cap at Harry? Lewis knows of your infatuation. He knew it would take little expenditure of his charms to convince you to set up housekeeping. I wonder in what respects you disappointed Lewis. Poor Jonathan. You must have felt so inadequate when you found that your love for Lewis was not sufficient to attract him. You might have had better success if you had offered to turn over all your worldly goods to him.'

'He said he couldn't be what I wanted him to be, that I would know that he was acting, and the act wouldn't be enough for me.'

'Lewis is sometimes more perspicacious than I give him credit for.' Peter drank the last of his whisky and stared into the glass. 'Should I have another? I think not. I am tired of the subject of Lewis for now. I will devote more thought to this situation later. Now it is time for you to amuse me in other ways. Go upstairs. Wait for me face down on the bed.' He tossed the stub of the cigarette into the fireplace and stood up.

When Peter finished shutting up his house and came upstairs, I was lying on the bed he kept for sex. That night, he cuffed me and chained my ankles and wrists to the bedposts. Sometimes he

allowed me to be free. As usual, the act of tying me down was a sign that he would be rougher than usual. Peter was very skilled in pacing his torments. At first he just continued to stroke me. He seldom spoke during these sessions except to issue brief commands. I knew from experience that he wanted me to relax, to just lie there docilely. We had long passed the point where my struggles meant anything. He knew I wanted him to hurt me. I knew that I wanted him to hurt me. Attempting to resist him or pretending to be frightened would have been playacting.

The first strokes of the crop against my buttocks were just taps. Peter drew the tip of the crop across my body, teasing me with it. The first strong blow surprised. Peter hit me with the palm of his hand with all his force. The sting of it forced the air out of my lungs and I cried out. Peter resumed hitting me with the riding crop, a little more forcefully than before, a little more frequently. Occasionally he would spank me with his hand again.

Eventually he moved on to the belt and the paddle, and finally the tawse. He once made me watch a video he had made of one of these beatings. I was surprised how hard the blows were and how noisy they were and how loudly I cried out. I could recall none of that. There always came a point when the blows ceased to hurt, when I found myself anticipating them and raising my arse to receive them. There was no pain then, only mindless involvement in the now of the beating. No past, no future, just now. It drove everything else out of my mind. The violence brought me peace and serenity. It was not until a session had ceased that my body became aware of the pain again. It was only in the days that followed that I hurt.

As usual, Peter made me get on my knees and suck him off. He grew larger as he reached the point of orgasm and repeatedly thrust his cock deep into my mouth, his hands clasping my head tightly against his groin and his breath coming in gasps. At the end, he ground his cock so hard into my mouth that the hair

around his groin tore at my nose and mouth. He shouted as he came in my mouth. He usually did that only when he was very excited. He liked to pull himself out at the last minute and cum on my face. But this time I felt the hot spurts of his cum on the back of my throat. I swallowed automatically, without thought. He let his cock rest in my mouth for a few seconds. As it deflated slightly, I licked it clean for him.

I remained kneeling on the floor beside the bed while he went into the bathroom. The shower ran for a time, and then he disappeared into his own bedroom. When he returned, he was dressed in street clothes. 'Get up on the bed.'

Peter usually became very tender and almost compassionate when he was finished. If he had come on my face or body, he would clean me up with a warm facecloth, sometimes even bathing me. As he did that night, he always checked my body for any open wounds and put antiseptic on them. He dressed me carefully to avoid causing me more pain. He was quite solicitous as he helped me into the car, even putting a pillow on the seat to cushion my now-tender rear a bit.

During the half-hour it took to drive me home, Peter didn't say much. When we reached my house. He shut the engine off to avoid disturbing the neighbours. He didn't turn to face me as we spoke. The light from the streetlamp was cut off by the roof of the car and only his hands resting on the steering wheel and the lower part of his chest were lit. His profile was simply a darker area against the hedge opposite. 'Are we approaching the end of the affair?'

It wasn't until I thought about that night later that I realised that he was reverting to a subject he had raised earlier. Our 'contract' specified that either of us could opt out at any time. We simply had to tell the other. There would be no discussion, no attempts to dissuade the partner.

'I have felt more and more lately that I am reaching the limits of my ability to satisfy your desire for cruelty. I wonder if I should move on to another person or find a less physical way to hurt you. That would be more of a challenge.' Peter finally turned to look at me.

'Would that make it more interesting for you? It would certainly be less predictable.'

'Yes. You would never know what was coming next or when. Shall we try?'

'If you wish.'

'Another of your verbal tricks. "If you wish"—that always leaves your wishes unstated, as if you had none and your only thought was to conform yourself to the other person. As if you were dependent on the other person to determine your behaviour. You always make the other person responsible for what happens. Perhaps I shall be so cruel as never to torture you again. To force you to make your own decisions. To confront your own desires and take steps to satisfy them. That way you couldn't pretend that they didn't exist.'

'Oh, I know that they exist.'

'Do you? I sometimes wonder if you realise the extent of your masochism, the number of ways you express it.'

'You have been teaching me that.'

'No, you have been using me to learn that. I am only an instrument of your will. And a sleepy instrument at that. We should say good-night. Have we ever kissed?'

'No, I don't think so. I can't recall that we ever have.'

'Perhaps that would be a good way to mark the new stage in our relationship. I wish to remain in touch. I want to know what is happening in your life. I may even intervene. We shall go out to dinner once a week or so and you will update me.' Peter put a hand behind my head and pulled me closer. He started to kiss me

and then drew back and laughed. 'No. Perhaps not. A handshake would be more appropriate, I think.'

Peter drove off even before I reached my door. Murphy was thumping against the other side, reproaching me for leaving him alone so long. I picked him up and carried him upstairs with me. I didn't turn on the lights. I didn't want to see myself in the mirror over the bathroom sink.

‘How did they manage to get a piano up here?’

‘I don’t know. It’s always been here as long as I can remember. The windows aren’t large enough to admit it. So it had to have been brought up the stairs. My father liked the light up here, and he thought walking up all those stairs was good exercise for his lungs.’

‘Someone told me that there is a firm called “Death Wish Piano Movers” in Boston in the States. It must have been someone like that. Are you expecting someone else?’ Harry pointed to the table on which I had set out a carafe of coffee and three cups.

‘I thought Lewis might come with you.’

Harry guffawed with delight at the image of Lewis sitting there. ‘I don’t think this would interest him very much, do you?’

‘No, as many times as he’s been in this house, I don’t think he ever expressed a wish to see my father’s work room.’

‘There must be hundreds of scores here.’

‘Oh, this is just part of what was here when he died. We gave all the correspondence and his notes about productions to the Music Library at Goldsmiths College. He also had an enormous number of vinyl records. A lot of them were inscribed by the performers who gave them to him. Once I started replacing them with CDs, those went to Goldsmiths too. I kept the scores because I use them in my studies, but I’ll donate those when I’m finished with them.’

‘May I look at them?’

‘Of course, that’s why you’re here. They’re arranged alphabetically by composer. It gets a bit haphazard after that, but they’re more or less grouped by genre—piano works, chamber music, operas. What are you working on now, besides the Mahler Eighth?’

‘Martha has me studying Wolf’s settings of Morike’s *Lieder*.’

‘Oh, we’ll have a copy of those. Just a second.’ I headed down the appropriate aisle of shelving. Unfortunately the W’s were on the bottom shelf, and I had to get down on my hands and knees to search for the Wolf.

‘What a beautiful cat.’

‘What? Oh that’s Murphy. He likes to sit on the window sills up here and watch the street. Ah, I found it. You’re in luck. My father marked this copy heavily. He must have worked on this with someone.’ When I emerged from between the rows of shelves, Harry was scratching Murphy behind the ears. To judge from Murphy’s response, Harry was a good petter. ‘He won’t let you alone as long as you are willing to pet him.’

‘I wish others felt that way.’

‘Murphy, get down. Harry doesn’t want you fussing at him.’ Actually I didn’t want Harry to pet Murphy. He had taken Lewis and now he was seducing my cat.

‘It’s all right. I like cats.’ Murphy settled himself on Harry’s lap as Harry paged through the music until he found the piece he wanted. Murphy opened and closed his eyes at me. I had lived up to his standards in cat lovers.

‘Oh, this is interesting. This is a very different reading of the line.’ Harry sung a phrase quietly. Murphy was about to fall asleep on Harry’s leg. At the first note, he sat up and looked at him fiercely and then jumped down and scurried from the room.

‘I’m afraid Murphy doesn’t like music.’

‘Rather like Lewis.’

‘In many ways.’

‘Yes, Lewis is rather catlike, isn’t he? May I try this on your piano?’

‘Or I could play for you. Accompanying singers is my one musical talent.’ For the next hour or so, Harry sang. At first, before his voice had warmed up, he held back a bit, but after a while, he

began using more of his voice. That night in Capers, he had sung in a popular style. Now he was using his trained voice. As is true of many musicians I have known and of all the great ones, his concentration on the music was intense and complete. What I hadn't expected was how intelligent his singing was. Once he had absorbed how my father had envisioned the line, that became the basis for an emotional projection of the meaning. Sometimes he adopted my father's version. At other times he adapted it. And at still other times he rejected it entirely.

Making music under such circumstances can be a very intimate activity. It brings two people together in a project that involves minute adjustments to the other. When both singer and pianist are skilled, the collaboration can be marvellous. The results are so much greater than the individuals. Unfortunately I fell short. But even so, it was a very satisfying hour. We hadn't been speaking much, just the occasional comment on the music, but it felt as if we had had a long and deeply personal conversation about important matters. I actually played better than I usually do, and that always feels good. I suppose that gave me a feeling of gratitude toward Harry. That and the illusion of intimacy may have led to what followed. When we finished, I somehow felt that Harry and I were far closer friends than we were and had known each other for a long time.

Harry sat down next to me on the piano bench. I was still facing the keyboard, and he sat with his back to it. It brought us into an odd sort of propinquity. When either of spoke, he turned his head to look at the other, who remained facing away from the speaker. I was the first to break the silence. 'This room is not large enough for your voice. Nor are my skills as an accompanist equal to your talents.'

'Not at all. You were great.'

'There's no need to be polite. You are too talented not to know how good you are and how mediocre I am. At best I am

satisfactory. If you are planning to give song recitals, you will need someone with far greater abilities than I have. Or do you already have someone?

Harry shook his head no. 'I would like to give more recitals, though. It is one way to get stage experience. I've only done a few local concerts, benefits mostly, to help raise money for the local church or some other charity. And the odd concert appearance here and there. I sometimes wonder if I shall ever do anything other than the annual Christmas appearance as the tenor in the *Messiah* in Lower Piddlington-supra-Mare or be the understudy for Rudolfo in the Sunderland Light Opera.'

'Perhaps I can find someone for you. My mother uses Hans Kollner. I doubt that he is available, but I will ask her if she knows of someone. If she can't recommend someone, there are other people I can ask.'

'Oh, you mustn't do that. I'm not ready for your mother yet.'

'Few people ever are.' My resentment must have been obvious. Harry leaned against me briefly.

'Was it difficult?'

'What?'

'All of this.' Harry gestured around the room. 'I'm sorry, that's a very personal question. It's just that so many of the students I went to school with were children of musicians or came from very musical families. I didn't. My mother had the radio on one day, and "Dance with Me" was playing. Do you remember that song? I started singing along with it. Both my mother and my father came running in to see who was singing. I was six at the time. After that, I was trotted out whenever they wanted to amaze people. Whatever was the "top of the pops" that week was my specialty. I was a great hit in Burnham Market. The local choir director persuaded them to take me to a voice teacher in Cambridge when my voice changed and settled. It wasn't until then that I ever met anyone more skilled than the church pianist. But I

was always better than everyone I knew. Everyone thought I was special and raved about my talent. It wasn't until much later that I found out how much I still had to learn. I can't imagine what it would have be like to have been . . .' Harry suddenly pulled himself up short and looked embarrassed.

'To have been the less than talented offspring of two incredibly talented people?'

He nodded. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken.'

'It's an honest question. I was a disappointment to them. Better than average, not without some skills as a piano player, but not great, not at all in their league. I was exposed to a lot of music and know a lot about it. I think I have some understanding and feeling for it, enough to write about music and to teach others about it and to direct musicals. But, no, it was always apparent that I would never have their talents. My father forgave me my shortcomings. My mother has yet to do so.'

'What about you?'

'I have developed a thick hide. I don't allow that or other things to bother me. Over the years I found that a lack of emotions is sometimes a good defence against those who are supposed to love us. I'm sorry. That sounds bitter. Well, it is bitter. I should not have spoken so openly. We don't know each other well enough for me to impose such knowledge on you.'

Harry looked at me as if he wanted to say something more.

I forestalled him and changed the subject. 'You are very empathetic, aren't you? That must be good for your music but bad for your personal relationships. You see too much.' Lewis, it was becoming apparent to me, had underestimated Harry.

Harry nodded. 'May I come back? I would like to study the Wolf score further.'

I took the book from the music stand and closed it. 'Here. I will make you a gift of the Wolf. You will get far more use out of it than I. And of course, you may come back. You are welcome at

any time. I enjoyed accompanying you. I'd like to do it again. And I like talking about music. Most people I know socially don't know enough to really discuss it.'

'How long have you known Lewis?' Harry's voice was oddly strained as he asked that.

'Five, six years, something like that.'

'How did you meet?'

'You know, I don't remember. I don't think we were ever formally introduced. There was never a "Lewis Quinn, meet Jonathan Spenser. Jonathan Spenser, Lewis Quinn" moment. When Lewis got his job here, he just became part of the group of people I have drinks with in pubs. I don't know who brought him the first time. He was just there, and everyone liked him. There was one evening we were the only ones left at the table. Maybe everyone else got up to dance or to use the loo, to get another round of drinks. But we started talking, and then we became friends. He didn't have a car at that time, and I once drove him to his parents' home. They asked me to stay to lunch, and then Lewis and I walked around a woods near their house for a couple of hours. It was a nice time. We talked a lot that day.'

That was the afternoon I fell in love with Lewis, although I didn't tell Harry that. At one point, Lewis stopped and stood on the other side of a tree from me. He rested a forearm on a low-lying limb and then placed his chin on his arm. He didn't say anything for a while. He just looked at me, his eyes gazing at me while I spoke. It was an oddly speculative sort of look. He examined me closely that day. After a while, he remarked that his parents would be wondering what had become of him and that I had better start back before the traffic got bad. We walked to my car. I drove off feeling almost a physical pain from being separated from him.

'Were you ever lovers?' Harry tried to ask that question nonchalantly, but he's not that good of an actor.

I took the liberty of squeezing Harry's forearm to reassure him. 'No. I hope you haven't been worried about that. On that score you have absolutely no reason for concern. We're just friends, good friends, but that's all we are—friends. We went to bed once, but that was merely a mutual convenience. A form of joint masturbation. Why did you ask that? Are you worried about your relationship with Lewis?'

'There isn't a relationship yet. I think both Lewis and I are beginning to want one. But we're not quite sure yet what kind of relationship it will turn out to be, and we've been holding back.'

'I would say that Lewis knows what he wants and he tends to get it.'

'I can see that. He's great fun. People like him a lot. Well, I like him a lot. He makes me happy. He makes me feel good about myself. Plus, he's very sexy and attractive. It's been very flattering to have someone like him interested in me.'

'So what are you worried about then? Just go for it and hope for the best. In any case, Lewis should be flattered that someone as sexy and attractive and talented as you is interested in him.'

'Now you're trying to flatter me. And you mustn't do that.' He looked at me rather sadly. 'What worries me is that I've never really been in love with anyone before. I lived with someone for a few months, but after the first few weeks, it really wasn't very intense. I liked Paul, but when he got a job in Leeds, we went out for one last, special dinner. We had sex. I don't think we could say that we were making love by that point. But we both knew how to please the other. After we finished, he packed. And then in the morning he called a taxi and went to the train station. We said we would spend some weekends together, but we never did. We talked on the phone once or twice a week for the first few weeks, but then the time between calls got longer and longer. And now it's been over a year since I last spoke to him.'

‘You know there’s only one way to find out if it will work between you and Lewis.’

‘Yes. But I don’t know if he wants it or not. And I don’t think I’m ready to risk a rejection.’

‘Isn’t that the type of thing that just becomes clear with time? Sooner or later it will be apparent if you and Lewis are to become a couple.’

‘Has Lewis said anything to you?’

‘Not about you in particular. I know he wants to settle down. He talks about other couples, and he wants something like that. You know, despite his looks and the way he behaves sometimes, I think Lewis will be faithful once he finds someone. Once he decides it’s what he wants, he’ll set his mind on making the relationship work. And what about you? Do you want a relationship? Mr Right and all that.’

‘I don’t know. I guess I’m like everyone else. I want Mr Right. But I also want a career as a serious singer, and you know what that means. Continual travel. Lots of work and hours and hours of practice. Memorizing parts. Especially for a younger singer, you have to go where the jobs are. You don’t have the luxury of picking and choosing the parts. It’s not the best time to form a relationship or keep one going.’

‘And what do you want at the end of the road?’

‘This room. Oh, not necessarily this particular room, but a room like this. A friend who can play the piano to accompany me while I sing and knows music so that we can talk about it. And Mr Right. It would be great if the accompanist were Mr Right, but I would settle for separate people. And a cat that likes music.’

‘Well, for now I can provide the room and the accompaniment. You are welcome to avail yourself of either or both at any time. Mr Right, you have to find for yourself. The cat—well good luck on that wish.’

Harry laughed and leaned against me. ‘Does Murphy sing?’

‘About as well as Lewis.’

‘He is awful, isn’t he?’

‘He was very grateful to you, you know. When you stepped in and led everyone in singing “Happy Birthday” that night. It was a nice thing to do.’

‘I hope I am as lucky in my friends as Lewis is.’

‘What?’

‘You keep bringing the subject back to Lewis. Are you trying to play matchmaker? This is really weird. I don’t think I’ve ever had a conversation this personal with anyone, let alone someone I’ve met only twice before.’

‘We have interests in common. You’re easy to talk with. I tend either to have intense friendships or to interact only on superficial levels. I’m not good at anything in between. Not interested in them enough to try to be good enough at them, I suppose. And how many meetings does it take for a friendship to become intense?’

‘Thank you for accepting me on the intense level, then.’

‘I hope you will come back. I meant it when I said I would like to accompany you. You have a wonderful voice. And now unfortunately, I am going to have to chase you out. I’ve an appointment up in London tonight, and I have to catch the 4:30 train.’

I walked Harry downstairs. As we were saying goodbye at the door, he asked if I had really meant it when I invited him back to sing again. I assured him that he was welcome at any time. I locked the door behind him and then stood in the window to watch him walk away. He had only gone a few steps when he turned around and looked back up at the house. When he saw me standing there, he smiled and waved at me.

I didn’t really have an appointment in London. After Harry left, I called an acquaintance who lived in Chelsea and arranged to meet for dinner. I didn’t want to prolong that afternoon with Harry, but I didn’t want my excuse for sending him away to be a

total lie either. That would have seemed a betrayal of him. Nor did I want to spend the evening alone. I felt that something new had entered my life, and I wanted to celebrate that, but I didn't want to celebrate it with Harry. I needed to get out of the house, to get away from the scene of our meeting. The house felt too heavy and pregnant with significance, and suddenly too empty and dismal. I knew that if I stayed there, I would suffocate. I called a hotel near my friend's flat and booked a room for the night. I needed a place that wasn't familiar. I felt decidedly odd and I needed to think about that.

I hardly slept at all that night. Even with the drapes pulled and the lights off, the hotel room was much brighter than I was used to. The pattern and shape of the light coming through the windows even felt different. It wasn't as diffused. The corners of the room never became as dark as my bedroom. Then, too, it was noisier. I am accustomed to the sound of the wind blowing through the trees beside my house and in the small park in the centre of the road, but this was a very different sort of noise.

The pillows were made of some plastic foam substance. They were too soft and offered no support for my head. Yet when I tried to fold them over to lend them some substance, they became like springs that insisted on returning to their original shape. I ended up lying on one side and holding one of the pillows against my body with my arms around it. I had tossed the duvet to one side. It lay heavily against my back, almost as if a person were cuddled up next to me.

I couldn't stop thinking about Harry. I replayed every second we had spent together, from those few seconds in the Mastiff when Lewis introduced us to our dinner with Peter and Lewis to our meeting earlier. I repeated every word he said, examining it for significance. Had he meant more than the literal words? Had he put a little bit more stress and emphasis on some words?

Admonitions to myself that I was behaving like an adolescent were of no use. Twenty times that night, I reminded myself that I really needed to get some sleep. But each attempt to clear my mind and relax and go to sleep was quickly interrupted by more thoughts of Harry. I wasn't even conscious of willing Harry into my thoughts. I would focus on sleeping and then find myself a few seconds later reverting to something Harry had said.

The first train back left at 6:10. I was up and dressed and ready to leave the hotel at 4:00. I took a taxi to the station and sat in the twenty-four-hour café there drinking weak stale coffee until it was time to leave. There were two messages on my answering machine when I got home. Harry had called to thank me and to say that he hoped to see me again soon, but that he had to go London for a few days to audition for another role and to rehearse the Mahler. Lewis called to tell me that Harry was going to be away for a few days and asked if we could meet. The machine is in the ground floor hallway next to the stairs. There is never any direct light in that area, and it always feels cold. The voices rang hollow.

While they were speaking, I looked up between the flights of stairs. Motes of dust were moving in the beams of light that fell downward from the music room on the third floor. Murphy stuck his head over the edge of the stairs leading to the second floor and looked at me. He disappeared from view. I could hear him descending the stairs. Presently he appeared. He continued down the stairs without stopping and sauntered into the kitchen. I could hear him bumping against the door of the cupboard that held his tins of food. He was hungry.

Nothing had changed in my absence. I had hoped that the house would have undergone a metamorphosis, that it would have become a different place. But I returned to the same place I had left. I always do, no matter how often I run away.