

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 III

Lewis

‘I’ll bring food and make dinner.’

‘You don’t need to do that, Lewis. We can go out.’

‘No, I don’t want to go out. I want to talk, and if we go out, there will be too much noise and not enough privacy.’ (Precisely why we should go out, I thought.) ‘It’s so cold and wet that soup will be good tonight, and I’ve already bought what I need to make minestrone. You do have pots and pans, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Lewis, there are pots and pans in the kitchen. Felicity used to cook for my father, and he gave her *carte blanche* to buy cooking gear. She purchased what appears to be a complete set of medieval torture instruments. I’m sure that, should you so wish, you could kill and disembowel an ox in my kitchen. Is ox an ingredient in minestrone?’

‘The ox has already been killed. But I may need to disembowel a tomato or two.’ For some reason, Lewis found that funny.

An hour after Lewis rang off, I was seated in my kitchen watching him work. Per his instructions, I was keeping well out of his way. I had already endured a sermon on the importance of sharp knives (‘A dull knife is dangerous. You’re far more likely to cut yourself with a dull knife than a sharp one’) and a demonstration of how to sharpen one using a ‘whetstone’ and a ‘steel’, two implements I had not known I possessed. Well ‘possessed’ is too strong a word, two implements I had not known co-existed in the same dwelling as I.

After much banging around under the counter, Lewis pulled out a largish pot and inspected it carefully. ‘When was the last time this was washed?’

‘I’ve never used it. And I’ve certainly never washed it. So at least three years.’

Lewis rinsed the lid and the pot off under the tap and then sniffed the inside of the pot. That at least seemed to pass muster. The process of getting the soup started took an incredible amount of time. One by one, the ingredients entered the pot and were variously ‘browned’, ‘sweated’ (that can’t be right, do vegetables perspire? but I’m sure that’s the word Lewis used), ‘married’, and a host of other activities that I don’t think a bishop would countenance.

‘Wouldn’t it be easier just to open a can or to order in?’

‘How can you be so indifferent to what you eat? You never know what’s in a can or how long a delivery has been sitting in someone’s van.’

‘I’m not indifferent to food. I just don’t see making it as an activity deserving my participation. In any case, there are professional chefs to do this sort of work. I think we should support them in their worthy endeavours and keep them off the dole.’

Lewis looked at me as if he wanted to deliver another long lecture. Instead he settled for a theatrical shaking of his head and a glance heavenward. Eventually, the contents of the pot received a forceful stirring, the lid was lowered into place with an satisfied clang, and the heat turned down. Lewis inhaled the air with approval and sat down opposite me at the table. ‘There. That will be ready in an hour. Why don’t you pour us each a glass of wine?’

For the next hour, we sat and gossiped about our friends and acquaintances. Every ten minutes or so, Lewis lifted the lid on the pot and stirred and inspected the contents. The results were worth his efforts. It was a very good soup. I finished the meal in a decidedly better mood than I began it. Lewis’s phone call earlier that afternoon had commenced with the announcement that since Harry was up in London, he and I could have a talk. ‘I have some things to discuss with you’ was how he phrased it. I doubt that sounded as ominous to his ears as it did to mine. But in the two hours he had been in my house, he had avoided all mention

of Harry. I was beginning to hope that the subject would not be raised.

Perhaps Lewis fed me first to put me in a receptive mood and to lower my guard. Certainly I felt better disposed toward him than I had since Bobbie's birthday party. 'You can move in and cook for me.'

Lewis didn't answer. He looked at me rather solemnly for a moment, and then he stood up and began clearing up. He had his back to me, loading the dishwasher, when he spoke. 'Why don't you take our glasses and the wine into the living room and turn the fire on? I'll be in as soon as I finish here. I won't be long.'

I did as he asked and sat at one end of the sofa facing the fire. I left the lamps in the living room off. The curtains weren't pulled, and the light from the street and from the bulb in the entranceway were enough to leave everything in soothing shades of grey. Occasionally the passing of a car would send rectangles of brighter light coursing around the walls of the room. It was very restful. From the kitchen came the sounds of the dishwasher starting and the opening and closing of the refrigerator door and Lewis's footsteps. I leaned my head back against the sofa and closed my eyes. The fire had begun to take the chill off the room, and I relaxed. It was peaceful to imagine a life with Lewis in the house, or maybe Harry. Someone engaged in the cheerful sounds of domesticity.

I had eaten more than I usually do and was feeling drowsy. I was half-asleep when Lewis finished in the kitchen. He turned off the light in the entranceway, leaving the living room lit only by the flames of the fire and the light from the street. He took off his shoes and picked up a cushion and placed it in my lap. Then he stretched out along the length of the sofa, with his back toward me and his head resting on the cushion. I was at a loss about where to put my arm, but he reached back and grasped my hand in his and pulled my arm around his body so that my hand

lay pressed against his chest. Earlier, when the kitchen had gotten hot from cooking, he had taken his sweater off, and he was wearing only a soft shirt. I could feel the heat of his body through the thin fabric.

‘This is nice, Jonathan. I wonder why it feels so good to hold hands.’

‘I read somewhere that the fingertips have a high concentration of nerve endings, and that we experience more through our hands.’

‘I think it’s because we like each other.’ He grasped my hand more tightly.

‘That too. That was a very good meal, Lewis. Thank you. You can be surprisingly domestic.’

‘I like my creature comforts. I had to learn how to satisfy them.’ He began rubbing one of my fingers with his thumb. He turned on to his back so that he could look at me. Only the half of his face lit by the fire was visible in the dark. ‘If Harry becomes a successful opera singer, what will that mean? In terms of travel and such?’

‘He’ll be gone a lot. There are only so many opera houses of the first rank, and now they exist in Asia and Australia. It’s not just Europe and the Americas any more. Most companies present a particular opera several times over the course of two, maybe three weeks. The main singers would also have to be there a week or so before the first performance to rehearse. They would either remain there between performances, or they would travel elsewhere to perform. Most would rest up. It’s very hard on the throat and vocal chords to sing at full volume for several hours. You have to rest the voice and let it recover. So he would be away for at least half the year, even if he performed mostly in Europe. The rest of the year, he would be learning new roles and practicing those he was going to perform in the coming season. Then, if he wanted, there would be concert performances with

orchestras like the Mahler Eighth he's doing in April and perhaps solo recitals. Recordings certainly, and sometimes you have to travel to do those. Mother was in Berlin last summer to record an opera. It's a busy life. Most singers continue until their fifties, some even into their sixties. Mother is 54 now, and she thinks her voice will last until she is 60 or so, as long as she doesn't overtax it. She plans her schedule much more carefully now and rests up more between appearances.'

Lewis, however, wasn't interested in my mother. 'So Harry would be away a lot. Do people take their families along?'

'Some do. Not their children usually, but you and Harry won't have to worry about that. My mother always takes her current "secretary slash assistant". My father did most of his work here in the UK or Ireland or in Europe, and he always took me along when school wasn't in session. This is bothering you, isn't it.'

Lewis nodded and then sighed. 'I hadn't thought that he might be away so much. He told me about his schedule for next year, and he will be travelling for several months. He's nice, isn't he? You like him, don't you?'

'He's very nice, Lewis, and he's very talented. I may steal him away from you.'

Lewis giggled and squeezed my hand. 'Harry said the two of you had a great time together the other day. He likes you a lot, I can tell.'

'I like him, too. A lot.'

'I like him a lot, too. In fact I love him. I didn't think that would happen. I had it planned all differently. I've never felt so strongly about anyone, Jonathan. Well, maybe once before. But that didn't work out.'

'What happened?' I found it easier to focus on ancient history than on Lewis's current love life. I really didn't want to discuss his feelings for Harry. That would cut a bit too close to home for

comfort. I was having enough trouble dealing with my feelings for both of them.

‘Oh, I realised that the other guy wasn’t dating me but some imaginary person he thought I was. I couldn’t get him to see the real me. And I couldn’t be what he wanted me to be.’

‘Do I know this person?’

Lewis sat up and buried his face in my chest. ‘That’s over with. I’m just worried I may not be good enough to satisfy Harry, and I want to be. I want to be the person he comes home to.’

‘Why are you worrying about that? I think he likes you too.’

‘I’m afraid I will bore him eventually. We went out with some friends of his over the weekend, and I didn’t know what they were talking about half the time. There was one horrible one. I think he was making fun of me, but he was talking about things I don’t know anything about, and I’m not sure.’

‘What did Harry do?’

‘He put his arm around my shoulders. That made his friend talk down to me even more. And then Harry hugged me even closer and kissed me several times. He was getting very affectionate in public. If his friend had kept on talking, Harry would probably have boffed me right there in the Prince Consort Hotel Bar. His friend just sort of trailed off and stopped speaking and then Harry said that we had to leave. When we were walking back, he called the guy a git and told me not to pay any attention. That’s was as good as admitting that the guy was being horrible to me. But he’s sort of in love with me right now. Is he still going to feel the same way a few months from now, or is he going to start taking the piss on me too?’

‘You know there’s only one way to find that out for sure. There’s never any guarantee that it’s going to last forever. Besides all singers have to eat. If you cook for him the way you cooked for me tonight, he’s never going to leave you.’

‘He did say something really sweet. You know I have just a few hairs here.’ Lewis guided my hand to the area between his pecs and rubbed the tips of my fingers against his chest. ‘Harry said that it will be nice to watch me get hairy as we grow older.’

‘Oh, Lewis, I think you’ve already got Harry.’

Lewis laughed and pushed himself up so that he was looking me in the face. ‘So what do you think? About me and Harry?’

I wish he hadn’t asked that. I can’t honestly claim that my answer was intended to promote Lewis and Harry to grow closer. ‘Well, you’re clearly concerned that Harry will grow tired of you. And your concern indicates that you’re willing to do things to keep the two of you together. But it takes two to make a relationship. You’re worried that you will bore Harry. But what about you? Is Harry boring you? Or will he begin to bore you in a few weeks?’ As a seed of doubt, I thought that rather clever. Lewis, after all, is first and foremost fond of Lewis.

Lewis lowered himself back to the pillow on my lap. He wrapped his arms around my torso and held on tight. It was an exceedingly uncomfortable position for me, but I didn’t want to disturb Lewis as he thought about what I had said.

‘I don’t much care for music.’

‘But do you think you could learn to care?’

‘I could learn to pretend to care. Some of the stuff Harry sings is ok. Some of the records you play, well I don’t love them, but they’re not bad. But I’m not really musical.’

‘I think both Harry and I have figured that out. If we’re still seeing you, it’s for reasons other than your interest in music.’

‘What we need is a person who combines both of us. Someone like you, so that Harry would have someone who shared his interests, and someone like me to take care of the practical side of things.’ I don’t know if that was the first time that idea had occurred to Lewis or if introducing this subject had been his purpose in visiting.

'I can be practical.'

'About your work, yes. You're very practical about that, but your personal life is a shambles. Half the things in this house don't work right. You're letting things go. You never cook for yourself. You either go out to eat or you buy prepared food and heat it up. Sometimes you don't even heat it up. That's not healthy. You don't take care of yourself. You need someone practical, too. You and Harry both.'

'I just don't have any interest in that sort of thing, Lewis. It's fine if someone else wants to do it, but I'm not good at taking care of things.'

Lewis nodded and burrowed his face deeper into my stomach. His next statement was muffled. 'What? I can't hear you, Lewis. And could you not hold on so tight? It's beginning to hurt my back.'

Lewis moved away and stared up at the ceiling. 'Can I stay with you tonight? I just don't want to be alone. I promise I won't start anything. I just want to be with someone tonight.'

'And what are you going to tell Harry?'

'I'll just tell him we needed to keep warm. This is the coldest house. And that nothing happened. He was telling me about some story in which the hero and heroine sleep with a sword between them to keep them apart. We can do that.'

'That's not a good precedent. That particular sword wasn't very effective. In any case, I don't think I could control my sword if we sleep together again.'

'That's ok.'

'Lewis. Don't say things like that. Please. It's hard enough for me to respect your wishes and keep my hands off you. Are you trying to seduce me? Ply me with food and then suggest we go to bed together.'

'I'm cold. This fire doesn't help at all. Let's get into bed. And I don't like your mother watching us.'

‘Have you forgotten? You changed it into a picture of your Great-Aunt Flora or Fauna or something.’

‘I’m not very good as a wizard. The spell wore off, and the Queen of the Knights reappeared. Come on. Let’s go upstairs. I just don’t want to be alone tonight, Jonathan. I want to be with someone.’

I should have turned Lewis out and let him find ‘someone’. The way he spoke, it sounded as if anyone would have done. I think that realisation more than anything made me take his hand and lead him upstairs. Lewis was going to get my best, and he was going to like it. And if we never slept together again, he was going to go through his life knowing that he had had the best.

Showers are a great aid in seduction. By the time I finished washing Lewis and massaging all areas of his body with hot soapy hands, he was quite willing to go along with whatever I had in mind. And what I had in mind was to take him to the edge of orgasm, back off a bit, and then take him to the edge again. Over and over again. At first he begged me to make him cum, but after a while he was capable of nothing more than a mindless hum of pleasure. His moans got louder and louder. At the end, I don’t think he was even aware of anything but the flame in his body. When I touched him after he came, he almost screamed in pain. His senses had been so overloaded that he couldn’t tolerate any more.

He lay there for several minutes with his eyes closed and breathing hard. I went to the bathroom and rinsed a facecloth in hot water and came back and cleaned him up. I let his body dry off and then I pulled the covers up and crawled into bed beside him, covering his body with mine. I didn’t care what he wanted. He was going to do what I wanted for once. The weight of my body pushed him down into the bed, forcing him to acknowledge my body as the source of his pleasure, to acknowledge me if not as a lover then as a physical presence in his life.

Lewis wrapped his arms around me tightly and kissed my neck. And then he said in a wistful voice, 'Is it ok to be happy, Jonathan?'

'Of course, Lewis.' I suddenly felt so tender toward him. He seemed so innocent and so much in need of protection, not the least from me. Suddenly I felt embarrassed at being on top of him. I rolled off his body and stroked his hair lightly. 'Go to sleep now. I'll be here. Whenever you need me, I'll be here.'

Several hours later, I awoke. Our bodies were still entangled. I must have been dreaming about what Lewis had said. My first coherent thought was the realisation that I had misheard Lewis. He hadn't asked me a question. What he had said was, 'It's ok to be happy, Jonathan.' Lewis had been concerned about me.

In the morning, I woke up alone. There was a note from Lewis on the table in the kitchen. He had to go to work. He didn't want to wake me. There was leftover soup in the fridge. Heat it up slowly and don't let it boil. Thanks for everything. Talk to you soon.

Did Lewis really deserve Harry? That's the question that occurred to me as Harry and I sat once more on the piano bench. The day after he came back from London Harry rang up to ask if I would help him practice. He was high with excitement over his experiences. He was concerned about the performance and trying hard not to hope for a stunning success, but it was clear that he was beginning to dream about the sort of triumph that would make his name. He had had an opportunity to test his voice in Barbican Hall for his audition, and he spoke with longing of how it felt to fill that space with his voice, soaring over the music. He was hooked. For a singer, there's no greater addiction than bringing to life the notes on the page and colouring them with all the controlled intensity of one's emotions, of using your voice to tell a story. The singer making an enormous space dense with sound, weighting it with music that hovers in front of the listener's face and thickens the air. Sound that goes beyond beautiful to the sublime, sound that terrifies with its perfection.

That afternoon with me, he had sung some of the Wolf songs again to warm up. And then he began practicing the Mahler, repeating the same passage over and over until he could produce the reading he wanted each time. Most of the time he was singing softly to conserve his voice, but occasionally he would open up. My father's work room had never before been filled with such light as it was that day.

Harry had a scarf wrapped around his neck to ward off any chills to his throat. When he finished and sat down on the bench beside me, one end fell into my lap. He started to pull it away, but I picked it up and began disentangling the tassels on the end. One by one, I drew them through my fingers, straightening the threads of yarn in each tassel.

‘You know, you’re a much better musician than you give yourself credit for.’ Jonathan leaned against me.

‘We’ve had this conversation before, or something like it. I think I told you last time that you’re too talented not to recognise mediocrity when you encounter it.’

‘You’re being modest. You don’t really want to admit that you’re good.’

I shrugged. I wasn’t going to argue the point. I wouldn’t ever be in the same class as my parents, or Harry, or thousands of other talented musicians. ‘Perhaps. You were in very good voice today. If you do as well with Esterhazy, you’ll be inundated with offers.’

‘Sometimes I’m terrified of the thought of getting up on that stage. That music is such a responsibility. If I fail, it will ruin everything and that will be the end of my career.’

‘Esterhazy must have faith in your abilities. He knows that Doctor Marianus and “Blicket auf” has to elevate the music and lead into the finale. Nothing he could do would save the Ewige Weibliche passage if you fail.’

‘Oh thanks a lot. That really helps ease my mind.’

‘Well, you are supposed to be nervous. It will give you an edge. Besides, you’re not going to fail. You’re going to triumph. Just trust in the music and let it happen through you.’ I looked up at that point and found myself staring directly into Harry’s eyes. They really are such an intense pale blue. It was one of those gazes where neither party looks away, one of those defenceless looks that only lovers exchange. My mouth had opened, and I was suddenly gasping for air. My heart was beating loudly, and I felt prickly from the heat of my body. I panicked. It all happened too suddenly. I wanted to retreat, to go back five minutes, and start over, to find a different outcome. And then Harry smiled at me—radiantly, happily—and leaned forward and kissed me on the lips.

‘Jonathan, this afternoon has been so special. Just working together with you. I mean, the past few days up in London were incredible. I didn’t think I could ever feel better than that, but just being here with you—that’s been even better.’

‘Lewis.’ I have never understood why I said that, at that moment. I have gone over and over the conversation in my mind. I may have felt some residue of loyalty and love for Lewis and was unwilling to betray him. At least I hope that was the reason. I think my fears outweighed everything else, though.

‘What?’

‘Lewis likes you a lot. I think he’s fallen in love with you.’

‘I know. I’ve fallen in love with him too. In fact, I think I’ve fallen in love with two people since I moved to Brighton. I didn’t think there would ever be anybody in my life who meant so much to me and now there are two people. I ought to feel that I’m betraying both of you, but I don’t. I just want to take you and Lewis in my arms and . . .’ Harry moved even closer. He touched my arm gently with his fingers. ‘Jonathan . . . I . . . Oh, I want to say so much.’

‘Don’t. Just don’t. Don’t say anything, don’t say anything about us. Talk about the weather, your trip to London, what you’re going to have for dinner tonight.’

‘And why would I talk about those things, when I want to talk about you, maybe about us? Is it so difficult to accept the fact that I might fall in love with you? That you might fall in love with me?’

I bent over the piano and put my hands over my eyes. I didn’t want Harry to look into my eyes again. And I didn’t want to talk, for fear that I would give myself away. I couldn’t let myself do that. I didn’t trust myself and so I chose silence. It’s the moment in the movie when the hero and hero(ine) fall into each other’s arms. But this wasn’t the movies. I wasn’t being noble and sacrificing myself for Lewis. I wasn’t even really thinking of Lewis at

all. The idea that Harry might love me and want me terrified me. I couldn't let myself be loved. That was the last thing I wanted at that moment. I could contemplate Harry as a lover in my imagination, but I didn't want to face him in that role in the flesh.

'What about Lewis?'

'Lewis again. Why do you keep returning to Lewis? I love him. But I think I love you too.'

'Lewis loves you.'

'I know. Don't you think I know that? I, I love him too. But I am beginning to love you too. Why does this have to be so hard. Is it Peter? Are you in love with him? You don't want me because you love somebody else?'

'We're just friends. Nothing more.'

'You have a lot of friends. But I know Lewis is more to you than just an ordinary friend. I'd like to be that too.'

'If you wish.'

'What about what you wish?'

'I am even less skilled at being a friend than I am at playing the piano.' I played a series of menacing dissonant chords in the bass.

Harry bumped up against me several times in succession and shoved me down the bench. He swung around to face the piano. 'I think we could be more like this.' He played a series of ascending major chords.

'You mustn't. You mustn't say such things.'

'Why not? We could be friends, or even more than friends. We wouldn't know until we tried. We made some good music today. I told you things about myself I don't usually discuss with others. I think you opened up to me. Why should that stop?'

'Lewis is my friend and your lover.'

'Yes, as you keep reminding me. Lewis and I love each other. But I don't see why that prevents us from being friends or even lovers. I haven't met anyone like you before. Someone I can talk with, who understands. I just felt so close to you when we were

singing and talking. Lewis doesn't own me. I can make my own decisions about who I want to be with.'

'You don't know me. It's not just music.'

'But I would like to come to know you. Why are you suddenly putting this barrier up?'

'Lewis . . .'

'Stop using Lewis as an excuse. I'm not trying to hurt you. I like you. Can't a person like you? So what if we fell in love? Would that be so terrible?'

I didn't answer. I just sat there staring at the keys, hoping that he would go away. I could feel him looking at me, the weight of his gaze on my face. After a few minutes, he reached up and traced the line of my jaw with a finger. I sat there passively, unmoving, not reacting. Then he took one of my hands and held it between his.

'I would like to make you smile, to talk with you. I've seen you do it with others. Lewis makes you happy. Is that it? You love Lewis so much that you can't love anyone else.'

'I don't love Lewis.'

'He says you do. I think he told me the truth when he told me about you. Perhaps you love Lewis because you know it's hopeless, it's safe to love Lewis. There's no danger he will ever love you back.' Harry grabbed me and wrapped his arms around me and put his head against mine.

'I'm sorry, Harry, but I can't do this. Please let me go. Please leave.' I tried to push him away.

'No. Not until we settle this. When you were talking about the music, you were alive. You were feeling things. You even liked me because we were producing something worthwhile together. Does that happen so often in your life that you can push it away? Damn it. Look at me.' Harry grabbed my chin and pulled my face around. Then he kissed me. Violently. He pressed against my lips trying to force them open with his tongue. My mouth was pain-

fully forced flat against my teeth. I was struggling to get away from him, and he was struggling to hold us close. It wasn't like the movies. The moment of passion didn't lead to love. It just made both of us angry.

Finally he released me and jumped up. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I'm going to leave now, but I will be back.' He ran out, his feet pounding on the stairs. In a few seconds I heard the front door open and then slam shut.

My lips hurt where Harry had crushed them. I ran my hands over the keyboard. Soundlessly I pressed down the keys to form first a D major and then a b minor chord. Those are my two favourite keys. I don't know why. They shouldn't be any different from any other major or minor triads, the ratios between the notes are the same. But the C major chord sounds too formal to me, the G major too weak, and A major too bright. And I've never liked the flat keys much. It makes no sense. But D major, b minor, they always embody joy and sadness for me in ways the other keys do not, both so strong in what they represent, the two poles of my emotional range. I alternated between the two chords, careful not to strike the keys hard enough to make any sound. There is a technique in piano playing in which a key or a chord is depressed without sounding the string. The soundless string will reverberate slightly when other notes are sounded; the technique is used to add overtones and enrich the sound. Sometimes one holds down a chord and then strikes another chord loudly with the pedal down. When the second chord and the pedal are released with the keys of the first chord still depressed, the first chord will become audible. The sound will be faint but perfect, a tiny noise that is heard only when everything else is quiet. That's what I felt like, what I am. A key that reverberates when another key is struck, a tiny noise that can be heard only after the other sounds have been dampened and stopped.

I didn't want any noise. A world without music. I had been surrounded by music since birth. It had never stopped. A sequence of two notes is enough for me to supply the rest. Thousands of notes in my head. They exist there in absolute purity. The only place where they attain that state. I can look at the notes on the page and hear them in all their perfection in my head. But when I try to bring them to life, to restore them to sound in the real world, I come up short. I am never able to match the sounds in my mind.

‘Poor Jonathan. You are suddenly blessed with too many lovers. For most people it would be a matter of “How happy I could be with either, were t’other dear charmer away.” But for you, it’s a torment to have even one person after you. And poor Harry. He must have been completely baffled by your response. He tenderly broaches the subject of love and suddenly finds you panicking and retreating into one of your silences. Perhaps he doesn’t realise that you view love as a threat. How carefully Mummy and Daddy trained you to think of love as a slap in the face. Something you have to be punished for wanting.’ Peter reached over and patted my cheek twice with an open palm, the second pat stopped just short of being a slap. This was our second meeting since the night he decided that he would forgo physical torture for mental tormenting. Our previous meeting had not revealed what that might be. In contrast to our earlier encounters, we were both seated, on opposite ends of my sofa, and I was fully dressed.

‘I don’t view love as a threat.’

‘Oh, but you do, Jonathan, you do. Love is something you prefer to daydream about. Rather than prolonging your tryst with the singing wonder, you make up an excuse to show him the door and then rush off to London so that you don’t have to confront even the smell of him in your house. What were you afraid of? A stray note from that beautiful throat lingering in the hallway? For you, love is something to be enjoyed in the abstract. It’s so much safer that way. No imaginary lover is ever going to hurt you. Or you chase after someone unobtainable like Lewis, knowing that Lewis’s ego protects you against any real involvement with him. You idealise him so much that even he knows he could never live up to that ideal. And now he’s seduced you twice. Is he really

chasing after Harry or just trying to make you jealous and force you to commit yourself?’

‘Well, we’re never going to find out. It’s over. I’m not going to see either of them again. That job in Birmingham directing *A Coward’s Noël* starts next month, and then I have the rehearsals in Edinburgh. I can stay up there instead of commuting back and forth. That should keep me away for a month or two. By the time I get back, I won’t be on their radar anymore.’

‘Running away again? I don’t think so, Jonathan. I’m afraid I’m going to insist that you stay and see both of them again. I will have to install that hidden camera in your bedroom. Two trysts with Lewis that have gone unrecorded and now Harry is chasing you. You will have to have sex with both of them, either singly or together. Unfortunately singly seems more likely. A threesome would have been amusing. It’s always interesting to see who ends up in the middle. Harry seems to be tiring of Lewis, however, and Lewis of Harry. A pity. You must play the matchmaker and bring them back together, if only for a session in your bedroom. Later, after we finish talking, I will take some measurements. Perhaps I can arrange to be in the next room or upstairs. Surely somewhere in this cavern you live in there is a secluded room that your paramours would not visit while you are entertaining them. Why do you stay in this place?’

I shrugged. ‘I inherited it. Where else would I find a place this large?’ I was relieved to change the subject.

‘It is damp and cold and draughty. All the windows need to be reglazed. Except for the top floor, it’s dark. And why do you never turn on any lights? It must be like living in a crypt. You have the weight of your father’s work overhead. Your mother hanging in the living room. Is that why you stay? So that you can be close to your loving parents? Constant reminders of their successes and what you regard as your failures. A kitchen you don’t use. A plumbing system that belongs in a museum of antiquated

technology. It's as if you've chosen to be haunted by the past, yours as well as others.'

'You really are odious.'

'Odious? Odious, Jonathan? Is that the best you can do? You won't sully your mouth with words like effing bastard. You can't even swear. Well, you found me, Jonathan. And you've enjoyed using me for your purposes. If I didn't exist, you would have to invent me and hold imaginary conversations with me. Little dramas in your head. Phantasmic playlets. You'd probably like that. I shouldn't give you ideas. An imaginary torturer who could be summoned up any time you needed him. That way you wouldn't have to have even the type of contact we've had over the past few years.'

'I've had an imaginary torturer all along. I didn't give him up just because you happened across my path. It's rather like continuing to masturbate even though you have a sex partner. Sometimes it's just more satisfying to autowank.'

'To autowank. Another word you've made up. Which in this case means the same as the word it's replacing. You can't even say wank off. You use language so carefully to protect yourself, Jonathan, to deflect incoming missiles with humour, to distance yourself from the psychological harm I intend. This story is very interesting. I wonder if you just made it up to irritate me. Let's suppose for the sake of conversation that you are telling the truth. Is it male or female?'

'Who? The imaginary torturer. Oh, he's male. But I've never given him a face. Just a hood.'

'A masked executioner. You see you can't even confront a real human being in your imagination. The first thing you mention about him is that he is masked, the only detail you give me is to deny him the most uniquely human part of the body. And what does this Torquemada do to you? What sort of tortures does he subject you to?'

'I don't like this game any more. You are much less tedious with a whip in your hand.'

'Odious and tedious. I am doing well today.' Peter leaned back against the corner of the sofa and spread his arms out along the arm and the back. He crossed his legs and wiggled his brightly polished shoe in my face. 'I should have trained you to lick my boots. But, now that I think of it, I believe I did train you to do just that.' He regarded me with amusement. 'This is ever so much fun, don't you think? Why do you suppose I made you shave your body.'

'I don't know. I guess I just assumed that you like smooth bodies.'

'That was part of it. But there are plenty of boys with smooth bodies. Why make you expend the effort to remove all your hair?'

'Because you like giving commands and having them obeyed. My hairless body was proof that I was obeying you.'

'But there was no resistance on your part and hence no challenge for me. You denied me even that victory. You didn't even bother to discuss it or raise an eyebrow. You just did it. What do you feel when you shave yourself?'

'I felt used . . . naked . . . defenceless. As if I were removing any barriers to your control. I used to imagine that each hair I removed was one more castration of myself for you. It was a way of releasing myself from the burden of decisions. Emasculating myself for you.'

'You have been using the past tense. Have you stopped shaving yourself?'

'The last time was ten days ago or so. Since we are no longer interacting physically, I didn't see the point. It takes quite a bit of time.'

'Interacting physically. Is that what we did? Nothing so crude as fucking or sucking. Not even "going to bed together", let alone "making love". Well, you are right. It was a clinical exercise. We

should have written up a research proposal and applied for NHS funding. Wired your brain and measured your reaction to each blow. It would have made an interesting research protocol, enlivened some bureaucrat's day. Of course, we would have needed several control cases, to compare the reaction of the normal male to the abnormal one. It will be fascinating to watch your physical interactions with Lewis and Harry. I wonder if you will be able to manipulate either one into satisfying your masochism. Perhaps I should take one or the other of them in hand and instruct him in the right way to please you.'

'No. Leave them alone, you bastard.'

'Ah, anger. I don't think I've ever seen you show anger before, Jonathan. So protective. I mention Lewis and Harry and you suddenly become as protective as a mother hen. Well, you didn't learn that from the bitch on the wall.'

'Don't call my mother a bitch.'

'Did I mention your mother? I spoke only of a bitch. How telling that you should immediately equate the word bitch with your mother.' Peter smiled. He was enjoying himself immensely. 'But, back to Lewis and Harry. We must plot a gathering of all three of you after I install the cameras. I can use one of the spare bedrooms or your office. They would have no reason to look in other rooms, especially after the evening's festive events began.'

'No. This is the last time we will see each other. I'm putting an end to this.'

'You don't mean that, Jonathan. But I do appreciate the protest. It will make my victory even sweeter. And don't worry about the cameras. No one but you and I will know that they are there. And I'll install them some afternoon when you aren't here.'

'I couldn't do that to Lewis and Harry.'

'Of course, you can. Don't be silly. We'll both enjoy it. Besides you must make young Mr Castlemain happy. Think of it as your contribution to art. He needs the joy of sex to sing that role. Help

him to find true love and a high C or whatever so that he can sing to the Virgin with longing and adoration. Without you and your wonderful technique, he will never know happiness and never be able to gaze upward into the celestial sphere with ecstasy. He will flounder in the role, leaving the musical world mute with disappointment. And it will be all your fault. Once again, your existence will deprive music of a shining star. How long was your mother out of commission after having you? Was it eighteen months the world was bereft of one of its most promising young sopranos because of nasty old Jonathan and his Caesarean birth? Well, as Mummy says in every interview, discipline and will and hard work brought her back from the abyss of giving birth to you and she was able once again to devote herself to her Art and satisfy her legions of fans. What didn't defeat her only made her stronger, as she put it so memorably in one of her cliché-ridden utterances. It must be so rewarding to know that you helped Mummy conquer new heights. She has been able to express pain with such great understanding since birthing you. Her Medea is so chilling. The relish with which she kills her children and displays their bloody clothes to Jason—audiences love it. And think, Jonathan, she owes it all to you.'

'You don't know what you're talking about.'

'Oh, but I do, Jonathan. I salute your mother. I am a connoisseur of evil and cruelty. Doesn't the thought of evil ever tempt you? Think of it. You seduce Harry. We arrange for Lewis to discover the two of you *in flagrante*. Imagine his feelings. The friend he has counted on to help him obtain a secure old age has betrayed him, suborned his pension fund of choice and, horrors, Harry is giving you what Lewis thinks is his, undying love. Passionate embraces over the piano, duets that begin with music and end with the harmonies of love. You pressed to Harry's magnificent chest as he yodels out his love for you. Those arms holding you tight. The two of you enjoying the sound of rain against the

windows while you lie in a warm bed on a cold morning. Poor Lewis. So much beauty destined never to be his. And then Harry finds out that you've been boffing Lewis on the side. Enraged arias on the staircase, doors slamming, all the cacophony of love outraged. How can you resist, Jonathan? You can ruin others' lives as easily as you ruin your own. Love is never more beautiful than when it lies dying. So much promise forgone. So many hopes dashed. So sad, but such a beautiful sadness, it hurts so much. Oh, tell me that you'll do this for me, Jonathan. It will be the perfect gift. I promise never to ask you for anything else.'

'You know what I think?'

'No, do tell me. This will be fascinating, I'm sure.'

'I think that you are the weak person you claim that I am. By torturing me, by making me do things, you can pretend to be the stronger person. But when you're beating me, you're really trying to beat your weakness out of yourself, to prove to yourself that you are not what you know yourself to truly be.'

'Psychology? It ill becomes you, Jonathan. I suppose in this fantasy of yours that you are the stronger person?'

'Yes, I think I am. I have faced up to what I am.'

'And I haven't.'

'No, I don't think you have. You hope by pretending to be a certain type of person that you will become that person. And you're wrong about Lewis and Harry. They're far stronger than either of us. Both of them are confident enough in themselves that they don't need to hurt others to prove themselves. They don't need cruelty.'

'You're idealising them again. Lewis and I are much more alike that you think. I don't know Harry, but why should he be any different from the rest of us? Everyone needs cruelty.'

'No, that's your way of excusing your own cruelty.'

‘I like you better with a gag in your mouth. At least that way you can’t express these silly fancies. It’s another way for you to avoid the truth about yourself.’

‘Well, we are a pair in that respect. Neither of us looks at himself truthfully.’

Peter shot me a look of pure hatred. He detested me at that moment. ‘I am getting tired of your attempts to make me angry. And it is getting late. I think I will leave you. Let me know what day you will be gone, and I will come by and wire your bedroom.’

‘No, this is the last time. I am invoking the separation clause in our contract.’

‘Are you sure? Perhaps for now. But you will come back to me. And I will make you suffer even more. Or perhaps not. I may have other plans that don’t include you. So don’t wait too long before you call and beg me to hurt you again.’

‘I think it is time for you to leave. To run off.’

‘I am not running, Jonathan.’ Peter stood up and looked around the room. ‘I am sauntering out, of my own free will. But I will do you one final favour.’ Peter picked up his wine glass. An inch or so of wine remained in the bottom. He threw it against my mother’s portrait. The glass shattered when it hit, and the shards fell to the mantel and the tiled area before the fireplace. A large irregular blotch of red wine stained her gown where it flared out below her waist and ran down the skirt. ‘A bloody picture in more than one sense now.’ He grabbed his coat and left, leaving the door to the street open behind him.

I waited until I heard him drive away and then stood up and closed the door. I got a cloth from the kitchen and was able to remove much of the wine before it dried, but the stain was still visible. Unfortunately Abramson’s heavy impasto technique provided many spots for the wine to pool. I would have to make arrangements to have it cleaned. Luckily I caught Murphy when he came to investigate what I was doing and prevented him from

cutting himself on the broken glass. I had to shut him away in the kitchen. As I was picking up the pieces, I cut my finger. As often happens with tiny cuts, it bled all out of proportion to the seriousness of the wound. I had to put an Elastoplast on it before I could continue.

The encounter with Peter had left me numb. In a way, it was good to have menial tasks to occupy my mind. I didn't have to think about what he had said or what I would do. I didn't want to think about what he had said. As usual with Peter's remarks, there was a core of truth there, even though many details were wrong. Enough truth that it hurt. I tried to deny it and ignore it, but the words kept coming back. Failure, disappointment, coward. Frightened of feeling, of emotion, of entanglement. Able to imagine love but running from it when it threatened to become real.

The memories that Peter had stirred up kept coming back. When I was six or seven, my mother had had the nurse bring me in while she was giving an interview to a journalist. We sat there in her bright, sunny conservatory on her white wicker chairs with the floral cushions, me dressed in new, neatly pressed clothes for the occasion, my legs sticking out straight because the seat of the chair was so long. The nurse was seated behind me watching over my behaviour. From time to time, she reached forward and cautioned me to sit still and be quiet. I started out simply as one more piece of decoration, the great singer shows her domestic side amid flowers she gathers from her garden, the tea service she handles so gracefully, the elegant little *gateaux* her faithful cook and general dogsbody makes for her, the child she raises with such dedication, taking time out from her busy schedule of rehearsals and performances to share her life with her legions of devoted fans.

At first, I paid more attention to my shiny new shoes than to the conversation around me, slowly moving them and watching as the light was reflected off them, and wondering when the cake

would be cut up and served. Eventually the conversation was brought round to my birth, and the sound of my name caused me to focus on what my mother was saying. For the first time, I heard how much pain I had caused my mother and how she had almost died in labour. And how only the emergency Caesarean had saved her, at the cost of ripping her abdominal wall apart. For the sake of ensuring that her line of musical geniuses would continue, she had risked her future ability to thrill the world with her voice and brought me into being. For months, no one had known if she could regain the muscular control needed to sing. I didn't know what all the words meant at the time, but I was old enough to feel the weight of the journalist's disapproval and my mother's anguish. Even the nurse was moved to female solidarity and rapped me smartly on the arm.

I hadn't even realised until that moment that a physical sequence of steps had been necessary to make Mother into my mother. A few weeks earlier, I had been sitting on the steps into the lower garden. My cat came over—my best friend, the only person who listened when I talked. The first in a series of cats Mother named Kätzel and I secretly called Murphy was tolerated because she kept me occupied. Kätzel was my mother's name for the animal. Some German friend of hers had suggested it as a proper name for a cat, and Mother had adopted it. I don't know why I settled on the name Murphy instead.

The first Murphy had wandered into the garden and taken up residence there on my invitation. She was allowed to remain as long as she kept away from the house. Murphy avoided every human but me, and that meant that she was never taken to see a vet. The result was a litter every few months for the two years I resided primarily with my mother and Murphy lived in the garden. As I was petting Murphy, she began giving birth, and I watched in fascination as three tiny kittens came out one after another and Murphy licked them clean and ate the afterbirth. Until that day in

the conservatory, it had never occurred to me that humans might be born in much the same way. The vision that rose in my head when Mother started discussing my birth was enough to start me retching, and I was sent out of the room in disgrace. That was only the first time I heard the story. Over the years, my mother has perfected her tremulous but brave delivery of the story. It's a pity no composer has set it to music. As I grew older, I even got to read several versions of it. Everyone who follows opera knows the story. I'm the child who almost deprived the world of Anna Beirlant. One reason I liked being with Lewis so much was that he didn't know the story. Even if he had, it wouldn't have mattered to him.

When I finished cleaning the portrait as best I could, I turned out the lights again and sat in the dark. I didn't turn the fire on, and I pulled the curtains. I like sitting in the dark. Objects become indistinct and restful. Nothing demands attention. Shadows are much more tranquil than the bright colours invading your eyes. Lighting directors and actors complain that I always want to leave the stage too dark. Some day I shall do a play in a completely darkened house. The actors' voices will emerge out of the black at the front of the theatre. The emergency lights over the exits and at the stage director's desk and in the prompter's box shall be the only illumination. At least the producer will like it. No bills for costumes or scenery. No designers or stage crew to pay. And it will force the actors to act with their voices. No gestures to save them, no props to hide behind, just the naked words revealing who they are. 'We didn't need dialogue. We had faces,' Norma Desmond says. Well, my actors will be able to say 'We had dialogue. We didn't need faces.'

The phone rang several times while I was sitting there. No one left a message the first time, and I summoned enough energy to get up and turn the answering machine off. I fed Murphy and then returned to the sofa. There were times I thought about

never leaving the house again. Just settle in and close the door. I could order in what I needed, and there was money enough for me to survive as long as I lived simply. Or I could sell the house and move to a small place in some tower of anonymous flats, perhaps in some foreign city whose language I did not speak, some place like Buenos Aires. No one would notice when I came or went. I wouldn't have to talk with anyone or interact with them. I could be completely alone. I could have it sound-proofed to keep out all the noise, and heavy blackout curtains installed. No one but me would ever enter. And no music. No radio, no television, no CD player.

It was a dream that attracted me. I knew it was hopeless, but I often thought about escaping, at least from the physical reminders of my life. I didn't delude myself into thinking I could escape the psychological reminders by fleeing. At the very least, I resolved to avoid further involvement in Peter's schemes. I couldn't allow Lewis and Harry to suffer because of them. And I hoped I was through with Peter. That I would have the sense not to see him again. My problems of what to do about Harry and Lewis remained, however. Should I contact either of them or both? Should I look for a job out of the country, maybe in New York, and hope that the problems had solved themselves by the time I returned? Murphy came and sat on my lap and began purring as I petted him. I envied him. It would be so nice to be a house cat, well fed and petted. But Murphy was a lucky cat. There were plenty of strays who weren't. I would have to find someone to take care of him and the house if I went to New York. I would call my agent on Monday and have him look into the possibilities of jobs in the States. And I would contact some of my acquaintances there to see if they knew of a small apartment I could sublet while I was there. Or perhaps I should stay in a residence hotel. At least that way, I would have housekeeping services. And with that thought, I stood up and climbed the dark stairs to my bed.