

Lewis

Six Excerpts from the Autobiography
of Jonathan Spenser



Nexis Pas

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Comments are always appreciated. Please send them to

nexispas@yahoo.co.uk

With thanks to Zev for *A Comard's Noël* and for information about the theatre.

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

This one is for Murphy.

PART VI

Lewis

And what happened later? As I said at the beginning, we have more or less lived happily ever after. Harry—everyone knows how successful he has been. *And roses crown his head.* And me, I gradually gained a reputation. The productions I was asked to direct grew more and more important. Eventually I was opening new productions on the West End instead of organizing revivals in the provinces. And Lewis—well, he’s been the big surprise, hasn’t he? But, then, I wouldn’t have been asked to write this memoir if I weren’t associated with Lewis. Both Harry and I are known in our respective circles, but the wider world finds it easy to ignore us. But not Lewis. And all because he tried to reconcile me and mother.

‘Hello, you are Jonathan. I recognise you from the picture.’ A very blond young man was sitting on a chair beside the fireplace in the living room. He leaped up as I entered. He spoke with a slight accent.

‘And you are?’ I had just returned from shopping and had my hands full of packages. I hadn’t expected to find someone waiting for me, and I was startled enough by the strange voice to drop one of the bags I was holding. I didn’t know what annoyed me more—to have my identity confirmed by a stranger (did he think I was in doubt?) or to find another of Lewis’s strays invading our living room.

The young man hastened to relieve me of my burdens. ‘I am Helmut, Helmut Albrecht. We have spoken on the phone. I am your mother’s assistant. Where should I put these?’ He held the bags up.

‘Oh, yes, of course. I should have recognised your voice. Put them anywhere. I’ll take care of them later. Has something hap-

pened to mother?' I gave myself points for at least remembering to enquire for once.

'No, no, she is fine. You are not to worry. She wants to meet your . . . friend the singer. She was free today, and your other . . . friend invited us down. But this Harry is not here. He won't be back until this evening. So your other friend is making us all to eat, and we are staying the night.'

'And where are Lewis and mother?'

'They are upstairs watching that show, *Belsize Terrace*. Your mother cannot watch it always because she is out of the country so much. But your . . . friend, he has the videotapes of all the shows, and he and your mother are watching them. He is showing her the episodes she missed.'

'Mother watches *Belsize Terrace*? That came as a total surprise to me.

'It is her favourite, I am thinking.'

'I didn't know that.' Lewis's devotion to the show was total. He had videotapes of most of the episodes, and he even belonged to clubs that discussed every detail of the show at length. 'I take it you are not a fan either.'

'No, when Lou-cess asked your mother if she wanted to see shows that she had missed, she said yes, and they both went upstairs, almost running. I excused myself and am reading.' Helmut's almost impeccable English faltered with he pronounced Lewis's name. He positively hissed. Apparently Lou-cess had not made a great impression on Helmut, but Helmut may have misjudged the nature of Lewis's interest in my mother. Whatever Lewis was doing, he was not suborning her affections, whatever those might be, for Helmut.

'I have no interest in the *Terrace* either, but as you have seen Lewis does. I had better go upstairs and say hello to mother. If they plan to continue watching the show, I will come back shortly. We can go to a pub if you want a drink.'

I trudged up the stairs. The news that mother was anxious to meet Harry worried me. I wondered how she had found out that Harry and I were living together. At that time, it still wasn't generally known. And I also wondered what Lewis was doing. He needed very little time to charm anyone when he wanted to, although obviously he hadn't expended any effort on Helmut. I found the two of them sitting on a sofa facing the television, with their backs to the door.

'Dorothy is so noble. She suffers so much because of that awful bastard Harold. And her children! That Jack couldn't be worse. And Eve is a tramp. Dorothy deserves better. But she never lets herself become discouraged.' As I came through the door my mother was nodding in agreement with Lewis's assessment of Dorothy and the proximate causes of her manifold woes.

'And that Viviane. The way she treats her sister.' Mother was equally indignant on Dorothy's behalf.

'Mother, this is a surprise.' Both of them turned around at the interruption.

'Jonathan, my dearest child.' (Incorrect use of the superlative, Mother, thought I. I am your only child. None other to compare me with.) Mother held out a hand toward me. I stepped forward and lightly and briefly clasped her hand. 'My darling new friend Lewis is helping me catch up with all the episodes of the *Terrace* that I missed while I was travelling. The dear man has tapes of all the shows.'

Lewis glowered at me. 'You should have let your mother know that I have tapes of all the episodes since October 1983. I could have arranged to send her copies so that she keep up with the *Terrace* while she was overseas.' I had evidently violated some canon of filiality in regard to the *Terrace*.

'I didn't know that mother watched the *Terrace*, Lewis. We don't share information about our viewing habits. I am so sorry,

Mother. Had I known of your addiction, I would have arranged for Lewis to be your supplier.'

Mother gave Lewis one of those 'you see what I have to put up with' glances. 'You are also guilty of hiding Mr Castlemain. I am here to meet him.'

'I'm sure that Harry will be honoured, Mother. Now if the two of you want to go back to viewing the *Terrace*, I will take Helmut out for a drink. He is languishing downstairs rather at loose ends. A poor use to make of such a beautiful young man. I gather that you have invited mother and Helmut for dinner, Lewis. What time should we return?'

When Helmut and I arrived back just before 8:00, we found Harry and my mother seated across from each other at the dining table. An elaborate service was laid out, and Lewis had produced flowers from somewhere. A dozen carnations floated in a crystal bowl in the centre of the table. From the kitchen came sounds of cooking. Lewis was in his element. Harry was being worshipful, which must have flattered mother. We came in on a discussion of the roles Harry was learning, and mother was advising him with much vehemence and certainty to do the opposite of what all of his teachers and his agent were telling him to do.

Lewis came bustling in, holding a tureen of soup. 'Ah, you are just in time. We were about to start without you. Sit down. Jonathan between your mother and Harry. Helmut, please sit here. We haven't had a chance to talk yet, and I want to get to know you.' Lewis sat the tureen on the table and began ladling it into bowls. How he had found time to cook at all, let alone soup and what smelled like roast chicken, was beyond me. By then I had had many opportunities to watch him cook, and I knew it was never less than an elaborate undertaking.

Poor Helmut and Harry. Neither of them stood a chance. Helmut received the full blazing force of Lewis's charm. By the time Helmut left the next morning, he and Lewis were fast

friends. And poor Harry. Mother was trying to interest him in a production of *Lucia* at Covent Garden three years hence. She wanted Harry to sing the role of Edgardo. After much badgering, Harry agreed that he would talk to his agent and begin learning the role. Mother, in turn, promised to demand that Covent Garden engage Harry for Edgardo. For the most part, I was left out of both conversations. Occasionally one of the participants would appeal to me for a supporting comment.

Later, after Lewis had cleared the table, and we were finishing the wine, mother and Lewis returned to the subject of *Belize Terrace*. I don't remember which of them first voiced the wish to appear on the show, but both of them quickly took it up enthusiastically. Mother, to Lewis's delight, knew the producers. 'I'm sure I could arrange for both of us to watch a taping. Maybe we could even appear on it, if only as extras in the Captain's Arms.' She named the local of the residents of the *Terrace*. 'You would have to join the actor's union, Lewis, but that's quickly done. Oh, this will be such fun.'

Several weeks later, Lewis travelled to London to appear in an episode of the show. Mother played a minor royal who descended on the Terrace to open a community hall. Lewis was her driver and bodyguard. He wore a black chauffeur's outfit which fit him much more closely than anyone's comfort would allow. It also did nothing to hide his considerable physical assets (later that year he won the great arses of England award). After mother had launched the hall in proper form, there was a scene in which the cast stood around drinking tea and eating sandwiches in the hall. Mother was surrounded by the principal female characters and chatting knowledgeably in an impossibly astringent accent about juvenile delinquency and the importance of sports in building character. The camera slowly drew back to take in the crowd. Lewis was standing by the refreshments table surveying the scene. Jack, the long-suffering Dorothy's ne'er-do-well son, approached

him. Jack and Lewis exchanged a smouldering glance. Nothing was said, but it was apparent that an agreement had been reached between the two young men. And that was the start of Lewis's acting career. He became Jack's male bit on the side. Lewis was competing with several nubile nymphs for Jack's attention, and he seemed to be winning the battle until an unfortunate accident on the M1 rendered him incapable of satisfying Jack's needs. There was a poignant scene at the hospital as Lewis's character realised that Jack was throwing him over for a muscular nurse.

Lewis loved it. He loved being recognised on the street as Alan Horsley. The fan magazines praised him for his acting, and he was a hero in the gay pubs for playing an openly gay character with dignity and realism instead of offering yet another caricature. When Jack abandoned him in the hospital, Lewis thought that was the end of his acting days. He had a good laugh about it and went back to his job and his life with us.

It might have ended there, except that Mother persuaded a colleague of her agent to take an interest in Lewis's career. Lewis was sent to an acting coach. A few minor appearances on television and in films followed. But it wasn't until Paul Norman cast him in *A Silence in the Eye* that his career took off. Lewis's rendering of a psychopathic contract killer was widely praised.

You may remember that in the opening scene, as the title and the names of the actors scroll up one side of the screen, two important-looking men—businessmen perhaps or high-level civil servants or maybe even politicians, we are never told—are walking along a busy street. The camera catches sight of Lewis's face over their shoulders, his eyes focussing on them intently. Several other pedestrians separate the two men from the watcher. Gradually Lewis moves forward, his eyes occupying more and more of the screen, until he is standing directly behind the two men as they wait at a street corner for the light to change. Lewis never blinks. When the light changes and the men begin to cross the

street, his eyes stare emotionlessly for a second at back of the head of one of the men. A startled look appears on the man's face. His companion is so intent on what he is saying that he doesn't notice immediately that the other man has tumbled to the street. By the time he reacts and realises that the man is dead, Lewis had stepped around them and continued on his way, as have a dozen other pedestrians.

Over the years Lewis and I have lived together, I have become familiar with that look. Occasionally I glance up to find Lewis looking at me with that same emotionless stare, as if he were wondering who I am or why I am there in the room with him. When he realises that I am looking at him, he smiles, but there is always a gap between the gaze and the smile. For a few seconds, the two never seem to connect. And then the smile reaches his eyes.

Lewis was hailed for his ability to lose himself in the role. 'Immensely charming and quite insouciantly deadly' was one assessment. The critics were under the misprision that he was acting. When I attended the premiere of the film, I came away with a new respect for Norman. He saw through Lewis's genial façade to the inner assassin.

And so, our little ménage has continued. Lewis wasn't successful in reconciling Mother and me completely. There's too much history there even for him to overcome. But he and Harry became the sons she never had, and I became their tolerated friend. Harry sang several duets with her at her farewell concert, and she and Lewis and the cast of *Belsize Terrace* did a reprise of their famous appearance on the show to the affectionate laughter and applause of the audience. I stayed backstage and helped manage the traffic flow. My most important job was to make sure that Mother was deluged with flowers at the end.

Of course, I shall have to omit these chapters from the published account of my life. I wrote them to put the events straight in my mind. But I will press the delete key on the files when I am finished. I shall have to write another account of our relationship—a somewhat more fictional account, one that omits a great many episodes.

As my editor reminds me frequently, the public doesn't want to read the maunderings of a neurotic man (she never uses the word 'neurotic', but it is obvious that is what she means). Readers, she assures me, want amusing stories about my parents and Harry and the other actors, singers, and musicians I have known, and about Lewis, particularly about Lewis. 'A few of these revelations about your life,' she explained in an email, 'will add a bit of depth to the account, but only if they are widely separated by scintillating anecdotes about the famous people you have associated with. That's what will sell books.' And so, I will continue to write the parallel account I have been composing—the amusing, scintillating fairy tale about life in a magical kingdom governed by wise and loving royal parents and two prince charmings who wander into the castle's garden and befriend a minor character who lives there with his cat.

Another consideration that will prevent me from revealing too much is the question of my culpability in Peter's death. I seem to remember reading that there is no statute of limitations on murder. I'm not sure if that applies to an accomplice after the fact as well. It's not an enquiry one can make of a lawyer or the police without raising questions about the reasons for asking it. I consulted Wikipedia, but it was uninformative on the matter. I suppose I could pretend it is background information for a play I am considering and ask the police to assist me in my enquiries, but they can be so suspicious, and I prefer to let sleeping dogs lie. I could also tempt my editor with the revelation that Lewis apparently murdered Peter. That tale would help sales enormously,

and I'm sure the publisher would consult a great many lawyers before it allowed the story to be published. That would answer the question of my criminal status, if any. But if I told my editor and even if the story weren't published in the book, it would become gossip and eventually become known. Somehow I think Lewis would not find that amusing or even scintillating. Nor would I. And I am far more devoted to Lewis, and quite honestly to the comfortable life the three of us lead, than to the abstract issue of seeing Peter's killer brought to justice or to monetary rewards of increasing sales for the book. So I will keep my suspicions to myself.

I've never known if Lewis really murdered Peter. I think he did, but I'm not sure. If he did, I imagine he acted to preserve the life he was making for himself. Perhaps he wanted to protect me and Harry. It likely was some combination of those and other reasons. At some point, the truth of the matter ceased to concern me greatly, except as an unsolved mystery, a subject for curiosity. I sit at the table with him, eating one of his memorable meals, watching him entertain our guests, making all of them laugh and feel good about themselves. I watch him sleep, his chest rising and falling with his breath—the proverbial sleep of the innocent. He sits beside me and holds my hand chatting with delight about his days. I have seen him bound down our steps to welcome Harry back after one of his many absences and enfold Harry triumphantly in his arms, screeching 'Siamo amore' in that awful voice of his. Because we are Love. Love. We are love. Does he believe that?

I love Lewis. I truly do. It is less difficult to love a murderer than one might imagine. Time and custom have quelled any moral reservations I may have had, not that I ever had many of those. I like to think that Lewis did whatever he did for the three of us. It is flattering to believe that. How many people can boast

to themselves that their lover killed someone to preserve their relationship?

And I love Harry, and Harry in turn loves Lewis and me. He is the apex of our triangle.

And Lewis loves Harry. I don't know how he regards me. Harry and I may have begun as Lewis's 'pension plan', as Peter put it so long ago. I know Lewis didn't love me when he brought the three of us together. Oh, he liked me, and he could tolerate me. But he didn't love me. He may have said he did, but at best he found me useful. He had fallen in love with Harry, and he needed help in retaining Harry's affections, and I supplied that. I was his backup singer, the supporting actor to his leading man.

Lewis is a great actor. I don't think Harry has ever suspected just how great an actor Lewis is. I knew he was acting, and for me the act was enough. He was my pension plan too.

But if you act the part and play the role long enough and say the lines over and over, the role becomes your truth. Perhaps he loves me now.