

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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With thanks to Zev for *A Coward'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.

P A R T V

Lewis

Lewis's call did nothing to allay my fears. It simply added another layer to them. Each time he told me not to worry, it made me worry all the more. I couldn't imagine what arguments he could use to persuade Peter to leave us alone. In fact, I was sure that any such appeal would let Peter know that he had found a target and make him want to hit it again and again. On the other hand, I found myself hoping against all reason that Lewis had indeed found a way to neutralise Peter.

The rehearsals went badly that day, and I'm afraid I wasn't much help to the cast. I was far too distracted. Finally about 2:00, I called a halt and suggested that we all take the weekend off and start afresh on Monday. That won a round of applause, and the theatre emptied quickly. Because I got an earlier start than I had anticipated, I was able to make it to Edinburgh before 9:00. I was so exhausted that I fell right asleep and, to my surprise, didn't wake up until almost 8:00 the next morning.

To my surprise, the meetings in Edinburgh went well. I think I was just relieved to put more distance between myself and Peter. Just being so far away made it easier for me to relax. Peter couldn't find me. I also managed to dispose of the remains of the videotape. I had cut it up into even finer pieces and distributed it among several bags. A single bag went into the hotel waste-baskets in Birmingham and Edinburgh and the litter bins at the theatre, three petrol stations, and the places I stopped along the road. Disposing of the tape did not dispose of my anxieties, however. I was growing used to them, but still the thought of Peter's threats were enough to make my stomach clench. The closer I got to Birmingham on Sunday, the stronger my fears grew. I had managed to escape them for a while, but they were waiting for my return.

As I was checking back into the hotel in Birmingham, the desk clerk handed me four message slips. Two were from the stage manager, one was from Harry with a number that I recognised as the phone in his flat, and the last one was from a Detective Inspector Geoff Harnesby. The number was for the Brighton area. The stage manager tended to be rendered overwrought by trifles, and I wasn't particularly concerned about his calls. Harry should still have been in Norfolk—he had planned to return on Thursday or Friday—and I suspected something had gone wrong. I had no idea why a detective inspector was trying to reach me, but I didn't like the sound of that.

The clerk obviously was most interested in the last message and drew my attention to it. 'The inspector was most insistent that you call him back as soon as you arrived.' The clerk must have hungered for the days when all calls would have been routed through the hotel operator, and he could have listened in.

I tried to look nonchalant, as if calls from the police were a daily occurrence in my life. 'Did he mention what this was about?' The clerk shook his head no. I wondered if he had asked. 'Well, I will call him later. I had best find something to eat before the restaurants close.'

'He was particularly anxious that you should ring him tonight.'

'Oh, I will. Geoff tends to be imperious, and I wouldn't want to anger him. The last time I did, he handcuffed me to the bed-posts and used me mercilessly.' I leered lasciviously at the clerk. 'It was great fun.' The clerk drew back and pursed his lips in disdain. He reached the conclusion I had hoped for. Being in the theatre and from Brighton made it easy to deflect his interest from my potential wrongdoings to a gay tryst.

I rang Harry first. His hello sounded dejected. I tried a bravado I didn't quite feel. 'Am I speaking to *the* Harry Castlemain, rising star of the opera world and world-renowned pleasurer of felines?'

‘Oh, Jonathan. You’re back.’ The relief in his voice was palpable, and also very flattering. At least someone I loved and admired, loved and admired me as well. In my mind’s eye, I could see Harry standing there on the other end, holding the phone to his ear, looking slightly frayed and rumpled. With his free hand, he pushed the hair off his forehead.

‘Yes, I am back.’ I struggled to find words to begin. Finally I decided to confront whatever was bothering him. ‘Harry, I suppose we could enquire about our respective trips and make polite conversation, but somehow I don’t think that’s why you called, is it? You’re back in Brighton, and I’m guessing that means that things didn’t go well with the parents.’

They weren’t happy. Not happy at all. They tried to be polite and supportive, but I could see that they were very disappointed in me. We couldn’t find anything to say to one another, and so I left. Two days of silence and not talking were enough. I think they were relieved that I was going. They can ignore the “problem” now and pretend I hadn’t spoken.’

‘Perhaps they just need a little time to get used to the idea. No. I’m sorry. That’s all wrong. You don’t need false reassurances and sympathy.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with false reassurances and sympathy. I’ll take them any day over the guilt I’ve been feeling for the past few days. I feel like I’ve done something terribly wrong and deserve to be punished. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have disturbed you with my problems, Jonathan. I just didn’t have anyone to talk with. I can’t stand being in this room by myself and I don’t want to go out and face other people.’

‘Harry, the last thing you should do is to feel that you have to punish yourself for being gay. There are plenty of people willing to do that already. And you do have someone to talk with. Two people as a matter of fact. And your problems are not a distur-

bance. They are our problems too. We all knew it wasn't going to be an easy conversation.'

There was a choking sound at the other end of the line. After a brief silence, Jonathan spoke again. 'If I had said, "Mom, Dad, I've met this wonderful woman, and we want to move in together", they would have been so happy. But when I said, "Mom, Dad, I met these two wonderful men, and we're going to live together", my mom started crying and my dad scolded me for upsetting her. Why does it have to make such a difference that we're gay? And why do I feel that I'm the one who's done something really horrible?'

'It's never easy, Jonathan. We're never what our parents want us to be. What did Lewis say?'

'I can't find Lewis. No one has seen him for days.'

'He called me on Friday. He was going to spend the weekend at his parents. You could try calling them. His father must be in the directory—all doctors have a listing. Roland Quinn, I'm sure it's Roland. Does that sound right? But there can't be more than one Doctor Quinn in Shalford. Just ask for Doctor Quinn's number. Lewis is only an hour's drive away, Harry. He must be going to work tomorrow. He'll have to return tonight.'

'I'll try. It's good to hear your voice, to talk with you. I feel better just hearing you.' There was a sniffle on Harry's end of the line.

'It makes me feel good to hear you say that.' Harry and I were whispering. No one could have heard us, but we both wanted, needed, intimacy at that moment. I felt as if we were standing together, our foreheads pressed together and our arms around each other. The elations and illusions of love. 'Harry, have you called your parents since you got back?'

'No. I thought about it, but I keep putting it off.'

'I think you should. Of course, it's easy for me to say that because I won't be making the call, but I think you should tell them

that you love them. Just that. Concentrate on what's essential and valuable and let the rest go for now.'

Harry and I continued to talk for another fifteen minutes. We didn't really say much of any importance. But the subject matter of the conversation held little significance. What was important was that we were having the conversation. That Harry had someone to talk to about his problems and that I had someone who trusted me with his problems. Before we rang off, he promised me that he would try Lewis at his parents' home and then call his parents.

Harry's troubles had pushed the thought of the other phone-calls out of my mind for a few minutes. I shuffled the other three slips of paper around on the desk that held the phone, arranging them in triangles and then aligning them up in neat rows as I pondered what to do. Finally I decided I had best call DI Harnesby before I ate. My stomach would be in better shape if I knew what he wanted. My call to the number listed on the hotel message form connected to a constable at a switchboard in some office in the West Sussex County Police. Harnesby was not there, but the constable took my name and number and told me that she would contact Harnesby and he would ring me. I told her I could only wait for half an hour and then had to go out to eat. That didn't go over well, but she said she would relay the message. My phone rang only a couple minutes later.

The voice on the other end was very hoarse. 'Mr Spenser? This is Detective Inspector Harnesby of the West Sussex Fire Investigation Squad.'

'Oh my god. Has something happened to my house? My cat . . .'

'No, no. Mr Spenser. As far as I know, your house is fine. And your cat. I'm sorry to interrupt your weekend, but we needed some information on Peter Framingham, and we were told . . .'

'Peter? I don't understand. Has something happened to Peter?'

'Haven't you seen the news reports?'

'No, I've been travelling. I haven't read a paper or even watched the television news.'

'I'm sorry to tell you this, Mr Spenser, but there was a fire at Mr Framingham's house last Thursday night. It was almost completely destroyed. I'm afraid that Mr Framingham was killed. The fire started late at night. By the time someone saw it and called it in and the fire brigade arrived, the house was already largely destroyed.'

I started retching. The bile rose into my throat. A picture of Peter burning leaped into my mind.

'Mr Spenser. I just have a few questions. I know this is a difficult moment for you, but we need information about the contents of Mr Framingham's house, and you were identified to us as a friend of Mr Framingham's and someone likely to be familiar with his house. We were given your name by one of his colleagues, a Mr Leonard Barkin.' The inspector continued calmly on, even though the sounds of my gagging must have been audible to him. 'It won't take but a few moments of your time, and it is important that we have this information quickly. I realise that this is a bad time for you. If it's any consolation, Mr Framingham would have been overcome by the smoke and died of that quickly. He would have been unconscious soon after the fire started. Do you need a few moments? I can ring back.'

'You said fire investigation. Did someone set the fire?'

'You mustn't leap to conclusions, Mr Spenser. We gather information on all fires that involve deaths. We are simply trying to determine why the fire appears to have developed so quickly. It appears to have started in a room between the sitting room and the kitchen. Can you tell us what Mr Framingham used that room for and what it held?'

I had to force myself to calm down. 'It's his home office. He owns an animation and film processing company. But you pro-

bably already know that.' I tried to think. I knew the room the inspector was referring to. I had been in it many times. But at the moment, I couldn't call any mental pictures of it to mind.

'Mr Spenser?'

'I'm sorry, Inspector. I'm just finding it hard to gather my thoughts.' I swallowed several times to rid my throat of the taste of the bile that risen into it. 'The room has video equipment—recorders, an editing machine. Peter likes to work at home at night. He evidently often stayed up late working. He once told me it was much quieter there than at the office, and he could think better out in the country.'

'One wall appears to have held bookshelves.' The inspector's voice was much calmer than mine. I suppose he needed certain bits of information, and ignoring my hysterics must have seemed the best way to deal with them.

'Yes. But not books. That's where he stored his videotapes and films. He had a large collection. His own work. Things he recorded off the television. Tapes he bought. Films. There must have been hundreds of them.' Including Peter's special collection of tapes of me and others, although I didn't tell the inspector that.

'Did Mr Framingham drink?'

'He usually had a glass or two of whiskey after dinner.'

'Did he ever drink more than that?'

'Not often. He wasn't a heavy drinker. He could sip a glass of whiskey for a couple of hours.'

'And he smoked.'

'Yes, constantly. I guess you could say that he was a chain smoker.'

'One of his assistants—' There was a rustling of papers in the background. 'A Miss Elliott—told us that she occasionally found cigarettes smouldering in wastebaskets at work where Mr Framingham had dumped them. Once, I understand, it was necessary

to use a fire extinguisher to put a blaze out. Did you ever see anything like that?

'Not personally. He told me about the fire in the wastebasket, though. He thought it a good joke on himself. He usually just threw his cigarettes in the fireplace.'

'Did he stub them out before he threw them in?'

'Not completely. Peter can be an impatient man. At most he might crush the end a bit on the ashtray and then just toss it toward the fireplace. Sometimes he missed. The flooring in front of the fireplace apron had several burn marks on it.'

'His office had no fireplace. How did he dispose of his cigarettes there?'

'I don't know, Inspector. I never observed him working in his office. He did have ashtrays throughout the house. They were always full.'

'Where was the wastebasket in his office?'

'I wouldn't know that, Inspector. I seldom went into that room. Maybe four or five times in all the years I've known Peter. There never was any reason for me to go in there.'

'Do he use drugs or medications?'

'Drugs, no. I'm certain about that. He had bad allergies and took a prescription medicine for them.'

'Would you know his doctor's name?'

'Not his name. He went to a doctor in Brighton, I know. He had the prescriptions filled at a Boots down the street from his office. We stopped in there once so that he could refill one.'

That was the last of the inspector's questions. He rang off after again offering his condolences. My appetite had vanished. I turned off the lights in the room and sat beside the window, watching the traffic in the street below.

I could see Peter working at the table in his office, as I had seen him do so many times. His attention focussed on the television screen in front of him, making notes on a pad of yellow pa-

per. Occasionally lifting the ever-present glass of whiskey and drinking from it. The constant puffing on cigarettes, the air in the room filled with currents of drifting blue-grey smoke. The wastebasket that stood in the corner next to the drapes and the shelves filled with videotapes and films. He goes to stub out his cigarette and discovers the ashtray is full. With a gesture of impatience, he empties the ashtray in the wastebasket and returns his attention to the screen and his work. As usual, the wastebasket is filled with sheets of paper he has wadded up and scraps of video film.

Peter is so intent on his work that he doesn't notice the first puffs of smoke and then the flames rising from the wastebasket. The noise of the video covers the crackling. It isn't until the curtains catch on fire that he becomes aware of the fire. He starts up in a panic and catches his foot on a leg of the table or stumbles over a crumpled-up rug. He trips and strikes his head on the edge of the table, knocking himself out. By this time the tapes on the shelves have begun to burn, and the unconscious Peter is overcome by the fumes.

His converted farmhouse is hidden behind a row of tall shrub-
beries. It is late at night. No one is using the road. The nearest house is half a mile away, its occupants asleep behind closed and locked windows, oblivious to everything. No one notices the fire until the house is ablaze and the flames are visible over the top of the hedgerows. The fire brigade doesn't arrive for another twenty-thirty minutes. By that time, it is too late. Peter is dead and his house is destroyed, along with whatever evidence he had of my indiscretions.

I barely registered the car lights on the streets below. I was sickened more by the terror of burning to death than by the fact that it was Peter who had died. I kept seeing the flames mounting around me, surrounding me, the heat and the smoke choking me, making it impossible to breathe, and the flames moving ever closer to me. I put no trust in the inspector's confident assertion

that it was an easy death. It was a horror, far from the painless lapse into sleep that we all hope for. To see death coming and to know that it would be agony, not a few seconds of some sharp stabbing pain as one's heart spasmed, followed by an unfamiliar silence, the first time in one's life that the sound of the heart beating wasn't part of the background noise, and then the dizziness and the oblivion as oxygen ceased to flow to the brain.

But for Peter, I felt no great regret. I did not wish him the death he had, but I was not so much of a hypocrite as to pretend that I felt a great loss. Our association, for that is all that it was, was more a matter of convenience to both of us. There was no attachment other than a vague sense that each of us supplied the other with services and opportunities he enjoyed. Perhaps my tears were for him, perhaps they were just a release of the emotions that had been gnawing at me for several days. Perhaps they were just an expression of the relief I felt that we were no longer in any danger from Peter. His carelessness—the arrogant assumption that nothing would ever happen to him, that a lit cigarette tossed into a basket full of paper and celluloid fragments wouldn't start a fire—had resulted in his death. He and his tapes were gone. And I was free. We were free. Lewis and Harry and I were free. Peter couldn't harm me, couldn't harm us any more.

I suppose that seems callous. Well, it is. Horror mingled with relief. Frightened and happy and nauseous at the same time.

The next morning, I hunted up all the newspapers I could find in the hotel and the theatre. The first reports had only brief accounts of the fire and withheld the identity of the dead man until his family had been notified. The Sunday paper carried only a notice giving Peter's name. It wasn't until Wednesday that a fuller account appeared. The coroner and the police had reconstructed a course of events similar to the one I had imagined. One thing surprised me, however. The coroner had been able to determine that Peter had ingested a substantial amount of Quinalbarbitone as well as enough alcohol to be legally drunk; he concluded that Peter's reactions would have been impaired when the fire started and surmised that he would have been confused and disoriented and unable to comprehend the danger and escape. The news that Peter had been drinking didn't surprise me, but I was astonished to learn that he had taken a sedative. When I told the inspector that Peter never used drugs, I thought I was telling the truth. Peter was the type to make others take sedatives. I would never have guessed him to be the type to need a sleeping pill. Besides he knew the dangers of drugs. If he had taken a sleeping pill, he wouldn't have been drinking.

I stayed in Birmingham until the following Sunday. The rehearsals went well, and the show opened on Thursday night to an appreciative audience and generally good reviews. I worked with the cast on a few problems on Friday and Saturday. The performance Saturday night was sold out, and ticket sales were strong for the run of the play. My role was finished. I packed up on Sunday and drove back—to an empty house. Lewis had resurfaced the previous Monday and had talked Harry into visiting first Harry's parents on Saturday and then Lewis's parents on Sunday. It was decided—well, really Lewis decided—that one lover at a time

would be less stressful on the parents. I would be introduced into the equation at a later time. I'm also quite sure that Lewis felt he would be the best person of the three of us to deal with Harry's parents.

The air in the house was stale and cold. Murphy must have heard my car. He met me at the front door and wrapped himself around my ankles before I even got the door shut. His friendly greeting was brief. It was quickly followed by querulous complaints of my perfidy in leaving him to the indifferent care of others.

Dealing with him and then unpacking and going through the mail took me the better part of an hour. The tape on my answering machine was full, and I stood there with a tablet of paper and a pen and began jotting down notes and numbers. I had to replay several of the messages to get all the information. Most of the callers hemmed and hawed their way through the message and then speeded up just as they began reciting their phone number. My machine prefaced each message with the date and time. On the Thursday evening of the previous week at 6:38, I had received a chilling message.

'Jonathan, my long-silent friend. You've been out of touch. It's very rude of you not to keep your old friends apprised of these new developments in your life. Luckily Lewis has better manners. He called me to thank me for my wedding present to the three of you. He tells me that you are out of town. You probably missed receiving your copy of the tape I prepared for you and Lewis and your lovely new friend Harry. It's a pity, because I know you would have enjoyed it. Lewis enjoyed it so much that he wants to see more. He's coming over tonight to talk with me. Such a thoughtful young man you've found for yourself. He's even bringing food. A nice spicy curry he made all by himself. Just for me. You know how much I like curry. He even offered to bring a bottle of my favourite whiskey. It will probably put me in such a

generous mood that I will share the highlights of your performances with him. Give him pointers on how best to handle you, how to get the most out of you, how to whip you into shape, as it were. Ah, if you were there, you would probably say, "as you wish." Well, I do wish. I feel so privileged at being able to help your relationship along and get it started on a proper footing. Well, *a bientôt*. I'm sure we'll be talking soon.'

As soon as I realised I was listening to Peter's voice, I dropped the pad of paper and the pen and cringed back against the opposite wall of the hall. The tape continued on to the next message and then the next as I stared at the machine. Innocuous and now-unimportant messages from friends and colleagues interspersed with recorded sales pitches droned on, one after the other, until the tape wound down. I barely listened to them as the import of Peter's message sank in. He had called the night he died. Lewis had visited him that night, bearing gifts. One of the hot curries Peter loved. A bottle of his favourite whiskey.

I had almost forgotten Lewis's call on Friday morning to assure me that he had taken care of everything. Now it took on a sinister meaning. I stared at the answering machine as if it were an enemy and then frantically pushed the combination of buttons that erased the entire tape and rewound it to the beginning. A moment's thought convinced me that even that wasn't enough. I tore the cassette out of the machine and pulled the tape out, snapping it apart and jerking it free of the housing. I frantically rooted through the drawer in the table underneath the phone searching for the replacement cassette I thought I had tossed in there. It wasn't until I found it and put it into the machine and closed the cover that I began to feel safe. I gathered up the old tape and thrust it into my briefcase. I would destroy it later. I had to make sure that no one ever found this proof of Lewis's guilt. I had to make sure that no one ever suspected Lewis.

I tried to remember if I had ever told Lewis about Peter's habit of tossing lighted cigarettes into a wastebasket or the incidents of the fires he had started at work. Lewis's curry could explain the drugs in Peter's system. Lewis had made an extra-hot curry, the way Peter liked them, and used the taste to mask the flavour of the drug. He may even made a milder one for himself or told Peter that he had already eaten. He probably had some scheme to steal the tapes of me and destroy them after Peter had fallen asleep, not realising that Peter had hundreds of tapes in his office and finding all those of me would take hours. Lewis sees the wastebasket and he remembers the story of the fires Peter has started. He takes advantage of this opportunity to rid us of the blackmailer for good by using Peter's carelessness to hide his arson. It is short work to create a flammable collection of paper and video scraps. He drags Peter into the office and arranges him next to his work table, as if he had fallen off his chair. Perhaps he even sits Peter in the chair and then topples it to the floor so that Peter falls naturally. He places the bottle of whiskey on the table, with the glass beside it. He dumps the contents of the ashtray on Peter's work table into the basket and positions the now-empty ashtray next to the bottle.

Lewis gathers up the remains of the dinner he has brought and takes it to his car. He returns to the house and opens several windows on Peter's ground floor. Finally, when he has prepared the scene to his satisfaction, he lights a cigarette and tosses it into the wastebasket. Or maybe he just drops a lighted match into the basket. It takes him only a few seconds to reach the front door and close it and get into his car. Even before he starts his car, the first flames are escaping the basket and rising up the curtain. The burning curtain stirs in the draught from the window, and the flames touch the wall of tapes, quickly spreading until the entire bookcase is afire. Lewis heads sedately north, continuing on to his parents' house in Shalford, twenty miles further on. He arrives

about 11:30, apologising for the lateness of the hour. He stopped to see a friend and wasn't watching the time. Sorry about the smell of smoke. The friend is a fiend about smoking. Doesn't the smell get in one's clothes? I'll have to wash these tomorrow to get rid of it.

Or perhaps Lewis only drugged Peter. When Lewis understands that his scheme is hopeless, he leaves. Peter doesn't realise how much Quinalbarbitone he has been fed. He pours his usual after-dinner drink and starts working on a project in his office. His wits are befuddled, and he half-grinds a cigarette out and throws the stub in the wastebasket.

I couldn't even let Lewis know what I suspected. If he hadn't killed Peter, then the knowledge that I thought he had would end our relationship. And he would take Harry with him. He couldn't continue to live with a person who thought he was a murderer. But if he had murdered Peter and was aware that I knew he had, then it would mean that I had condoned it and become his partner in the act. He might welcome our partnership at first, but over time the knowledge would become burdensome. If he grew tired of me, he couldn't leave because I knew too much. He might even regard me as a threat. If he killed once, he could kill again.

I admit that my thoughts weren't rational. I'm not at my best when I'm under stress. I tend to panic and imagine the worst. And I had no time to gather my thoughts that night. I was about to leave the house and dispose of the message tape when the front door opened and Lewis and Harry rushed in. They were both giddy with excitement and loud and effusive in greeting me. They were so happy that I don't think they noticed I held back. The two of them dragged me to the sofa. Harry sat down beside me and leaned against me, his head on my shoulder, one of his legs crossed over mine. Lewis stood behind me and put his hands

around my neck. He began massaging the back of my neck with his thumbs.

‘Lewis,’ said Harry, ‘is great. Stupendous. Amazing. Wonderful.’

‘You forgot charming,’ said Lewis.

‘And so modest,’ said Harry.

‘Indeed I am. I never boast of my accomplishments. I have no need to do so. Where others might see a problem, I find an opportunity. I am Lewis the Magnificent.’ Lewis let go of my neck long enough to pound his chest and bellow.

‘And what did Lewis do to deserve these praises?’ I tried to join in the conversation.

You should have seen him, Jonathan. Half an hour after my parents meet him, my dad is inviting him to step down to the pub to meet his mates. My mum is asking him what he eats for breakfast. They love him. They haven’t been so happy with me since I won the scholarship to music school. Mum even introduced Lewis to the people in the shops as her son’s boyfriend. “You know, like Malcolm and Dewey,” she says, just in case they didn’t understand what she meant by “boyfriend”.

‘Who are Malcolm and Dewey?’

‘You’ll have to forgive him, Harry. He is one of the three people in England who doesn’t watch the *Terrace*.’ Lewis bent over and spoke into my ear. ‘That’s what makes you so endearing. You’re such an odd duck, queer even.’ Lewis licked my ear noisily. ‘And speaking of queer, do you realize that we have been separated almost two weeks? That’s two whole weeks without sex. We’re young, we’re male, we’re gay. Do we want sex?’ Lewis was shouting and pummelling the air.

‘Yes?’ He and Harry shouted. The two of them leaped up and started up the stairs, Harry in the lead. After the first few steps, Lewis realised I wasn’t following them. He told Harry to go ahead and then turned back to me.

'It's Peter. I can't.' I couldn't go to bed with Lewis, with a murderer. I didn't want his hands touching me.

'Forget Peter. He's dead. And don't say anything to Harry. You're not going to spoil his happiness today. Let him have that. We'll talk about this later. If you can't be happy, then fake it. You direct actors. Surely you know how to give a good performance. Now come along.' Lewis pulled me to my feet.

Lewis couldn't have known it, but he was talking to me in the same way my parents did when they wanted me to do something I didn't want to. Fake it. If you aren't happy to see your grandmother, pretend that you are. Fake it. Act as if you were feeling what you were supposed to feel and soon you would feel what you were supposed to feel. Play the role and you will become the role.

Lewis must have realised that I didn't want him close to me. He put Harry between us and made sure that we focussed all our attention on him. Harry was so ecstatic that I don't think he noticed that Lewis and I weren't really interacting. Harry eventually fell asleep between the two of us. Even in the darkened room, I could see that Lewis's eyes were open and that he was watching me. He reached across Harry's body and traced a short line across my chest with the tip of one of his fingers. Then he pulled his hand back and let it rest on Harry's stomach.

Sometime during the night, both Harry and I rolled over so that our backs were toward each other. I woke up in the dark. Lewis had moved around to my side of the bed and was facing me across the pillow. He had placed his hands on my chest and was stroking my nipples lightly. When he saw that I was awake, he placed a finger across his lips and motioned for me to be quiet. Then he continued stroking me. He was very gentle but persistent. When I made no move to stop him, he moved in closer and took my bottom lip between his lips and kissed it, softly. He was like a shadow whispering against my body. He licked my lips and then

inserted the tip of his tongue between them, let it glide back and forth between them, each time a little deeper, until he had insinuated it deep into my mouth. As he did so, he pressed the tips of his fingers into my flesh, harder and harder. Invading me. Taking me over. Until I relaxed and he entered me. He was so quiet and tender. Our joining didn't disturb Harry's sleep at all. I don't think Lewis had an orgasm. That wasn't the point he was making. It wasn't about sex. It wasn't about fucking. It wasn't about being the top or the bottom. It was about being one person. He pushed himself up into the bed a bit and then kissed me on the tip of the nose and then the forehead. Then he spoke for the first time. He lowered his lips to my ear and said. 'Us.'

And that was when I decided. I couldn't live without Lewis and Harry. Whatever Lewis may have done and whatever role he may have played in Peter's death, it didn't matter. Us. Lewis and Harry and me. And me. I wouldn't have to be alone again. I would risk being happy. And me. 'And' is such a beautiful word.

Lewis would allude to Peter only once again. Several days after the three of us were reunited, I was sitting at my office table marking up a script. Harry had gone to London for the day for his lessons with Marta. Lewis brought me a cup of coffee and sat it down beside me on the table. He stood behind me and placed his hands around my neck in what was becoming a familiar gesture. He began massaging the back of my neck with his thumbs. His fingers grasped the sides of my neck firmly. He bent over and kissed the top of my head.

‘You destroyed the tape?’

I didn’t have to ask which tape. I hadn’t told Lewis about the message Peter had left on my answering machine. ‘Yes, I cut it up into pieces and put them in several different bags and left the bags in different bins along the road between Birmingham and Edinburgh. I couldn’t find any means of burning the pieces. I couldn’t just light a fire along the road or in the hotel.’

‘The other copies are gone. We won’t have to worry about them.’

‘Lewis, did you . . . ?’ I couldn’t bring myself to voice my suspicions.

‘I did what needed to be done. And you are not to talk about it again. This is the only conversation we are ever going to have about it.’

‘Lewis, I am sorry.’

‘I know you are, Jonathan. But it mustn’t happen again. You are not to get involved with anyone else. You have to put all that behind you. And Harry is never to find out about this. If you feel a need for that sort of thing, then you come to me and we will discuss it. I won’t hurt you, but we will talk about it and get you past it. Promise me that you will do that for Harry and me.’

I nodded my acquiescence, and Lewis hugged me tightly and kissed the top of my head again.

‘We can make a very pleasant life for the three of us. I can help you and Harry. I’m much more realistic than either of you, and I don’t have any qualms about doing what has to be done. So if you have problems, you come to me and talk about them, and we’ll work it out. That’s what a relationship is, Jonathan. People trusting each other and doing things together to make their lives better. You’ve just got to learn to trust me. I’m not going to hurt you. I promise you that. I’ve never going to hurt you. And I can do all the things that will make us all comfortable so that you and Harry can concentrate on your work. We’ll be happy together, the three of us. You just have to learn how to be happy, Jonathan.’

And with that we put Peter behind us. Whatever had happened, whatever Lewis had done, we tacitly agreed that we would never speak of it.

Lewis changed the subject to other matters. He had arranged for hotel rooms for the three of us and for Harry’s parents in London for Harry’s first appearance in Mahler’s Eighth. Harry had said he would be too wound up to eat before the concert. Lewis had decided that we would take Harry’s parents to a restaurant. It would be an opportunity for them to meet me. But we had to find a place that was special so that it would be a memorable occasion, but not so formal that Harry’s parents would feel uncomfortable. What did I think about Luciana’s? Italian would be good. Not too strange but different enough to strike them as unusual and a way to celebrate Harry’s success. Had I ever eaten there? Would real Italian food be too weird for Harry’s parents? His mother was really a plain English cook, probably hadn’t looked at her copy of Elizabeth David since she got it as a wedding present. But we had to have more than fish and chips or beef with Yorkshire pudding and two veg. And what should we do after the concert? What did the soloists usually do? Would

there be a party? Or did everyone just go home? And what did people wear to the symphony? Did everyone wear dinner jackets like in the movies?

In the years that followed, I would come to recognise this as Lewis's method of talking about a serious matter. The discussion of the major topic was buried in mundane planning for other events—We did have to face up to the fact that Murphy was getting old and might have to be put down soon. It would kinder than letting him suffer further. And, by the way, would I be able to take two weeks off in June? Harry was free then, and the three of us should take a vacation. Lewis had always wanted to visit Bermuda. Had I ever been? And what did I think of it? Or, shouldn't we replace the drapes on the ground floor? The present ones were getting so old and dusty. And, by the way, you really should see a doctor about that mole on your back. You shouldn't let things like that go too long. My father will look at it when he's here this weekend. And let's go to a movie tonight.

That day, after Lewis had finished alluding to Peter, he pulled up a chair beside me and took my hands in his as he planned our activities for Harry's concert. Harry's parents had already acquiesced in whatever plans Lewis would make. At Lewis's urging, Harry had taken to calling his parents frequently. Sometimes Lewis would pick up the other phone and a three-way conversation would occur. As far as I could judge from the parts of the conversations I overheard, Lewis was quickly becoming a great favourite of Harry's parents and been accepted as part of their family. Matters had progressed to the point that Lewis was exchanging family gossip with Harry's mother and trading tips about the sales at Tesco's and Sainsbury's that week. The conversation switched to sports when Harry's father came on the line.

I had already been coached on possible topics of conversation for my first meeting with Harry's parents. Lewis thought they would like to hear gossip about the actors and singers I knew.

Shakespeare and opera and literature and the other things that occupied my time were not suitable subjects. I mustn't overawe them with my education. Did I know anything about birds? Harry's father was an ardent birder. I could ask him about that. They, too, liked cats. Murphy should be good for a story or two. Oh, and we should be careful not to discuss the more intimate details of our life together. Three blokes sharing a house, mates, chums, but certainly not gay lovers. We had to give Harry's parents time to adjust to the relationship. Once they saw how good we all were together, they would come around. But, for now, we didn't want to rub their noses in it.

Lewis is so beautiful. I don't mean in looks, although he is handsome. He sat there that afternoon chatting me up and bringing me around to his point of view. He was excited and vibrant and happy. I felt happy just to be sitting beside him, and more alive. He is so alive and it spills over onto those around him. You know, it isn't the sex that has kept us together, although that is terrific. It's the quiet moments when you walk into a room, and one of your lovers looks up and smiles and holds out his hand. It's when you've lived with someone long enough to tell when he needs an arm around his shoulders and a few words of comfort.

With Lewis's help, I did make a favourable impression on Harry's parents. I've never achieved the level of intimacy with them that Lewis has, but then he tends to be better at making friends than I. Harry was a success. His voice soared that night. His parents and Lewis were so proud. They couldn't stop smiling. They stood backstage after the concert watching people congratulate Harry. Esterhazy's voice broke and faltered a bit when he thanked Harry. Harry introduced his parents and Lewis and me to him. Esterhazy assured Harry's parents that their son had a splendid career ahead of him. Lewis got a raised eyebrow.

When Harry told Esterhazy who my parents were, I was singled out as a person he could talk to. Several others who were

backstage recognised me or soon learned who I was, and I was surrounded by people wanting to talk about mother or reminisce about my father. I became separated from Lewis and Castlemains. The people who were talking with me were buoyed up by excitement over the concert and were chattering away. The various conversations around me didn't require much of my attention. I watched Lewis and Harry. Lewis contrived to shield Harry's parents from the crowd around Harry, yet at the same time let them share in Harry's success.

Harry knew that he had done well, but he couldn't let himself believe in his success too much. He was critical of himself. He had entered just a bit flat there. He hadn't shaded that note right. But he didn't want to leave the hall either. It was as if his triumph might fade when he left. So he stood there as the crowd of his admirers thinned until only a few hung on. There are always a few who never want to leave every time Harry performs. He always is surrounded by admirers and well-wishers and people who want just to be near that voice.

Finally Lewis and Harry's father went to find us a taxi to take us back to our hotel. Harry walked over to me. 'It went well, didn't it?' He smiled at me shyly and took me by the hand. A dozen people noticed that gesture. Neither Harry nor I cared. We might as well have been the only two people standing there. I drew him in and hugged him tightly.

'What can I say?' I feigned indifference. 'You were ok.'

'Just ok? Is that the best you can do?'

'What about stupendous. A new star in the firmament. An angel come to earth to share his heavenly voice with us.'

'Are you jealous?'

'Sure. Now you'll get all the guys.'

'We've got Lewis already. He's more than either of us will ever be able to handle.'

'He's going to manage both of us, you know. We should send Lewis to agent school. When he graduates, we can fire our current agents and let him run our careers.'

'I did well?'

'Yes, you did well.'

'It means more when you say it. The others, I don't care about.' My world compressed to a very small area. It was as if a spotlight had narrowed in on the two of us.

'You don't think I'm partial in my opinions? I am, you know.'

'Yes, I know. But you wouldn't lie to me. Neither you nor Lewis ever lies to me. It's just that Lewis doesn't understand music and you do. He's just reacting to the excitement and all the noise around us. But you know.'

'You were perfect. Just perfect. If I had been alone, listening to a recording, I would have been in tears over the sheer absolute beauty of it. You're that good.' Harry's smile was just for me. I had never been near that much intense happiness before. I've never seen it again. I suppose such triumphs come only once. It isn't that Harry has gotten used to the accolades. He still receives them with surprise and wonder that he occasions them. But none of the subsequent applause has ever brought him as much joy.

'We'd better go now. Lewis and your father must have found us a taxi by now. You need to take something for your throat and rest your voice.' I put my arm around Harry's shoulder and ushered him and his mother outside. Just as we stepped out the door, a taxi drove up and Lewis jumped out to hold the door open for us. Lewis's timing is always impeccable.

That night is still the benchmark performance of Mahler's Eighth for everyone who heard it. Esterhazy arranged for Harry to repeat the performance in Vienna the next season, and they recorded it that winter. It launched Harry's career.

The words the reviewers used to describe Harry's voice that night have been repeated over and over. Everyone remarks on

how warm his voice is, how rich. How well he projects—his piano notes as audible as the forte fortissimo ones. How accurate his pitch and timing are. And above all, how intelligently and vibrantly he sings. How intensely human his voice is. Some singers never do more than sing the notes. They practice all day, and then they get up in front of an audience and they practice some more. Harry is different. He takes risks. He gives everything. Harry sings the music. That's what he's learned from Lewis.

Some people mistakenly credit me with helping him achieve all those qualities. They're wrong. I may have helped here and there with the technique, but it was Lewis who gave, who gives, Harry what he needs to be a singer.