

Kazuo Ishiguro

CROONER

THE MORNING I SPOTTED Tony Gardner sitting among the tourists, spring was just arriving here in Venice. We'd completed our first full week outside in the piazza-a relief, let me tell you, after all those stuffy hours performing from the back of the cafe, getting in the way of customers wanting to use the staircase. There was quite a breeze that morning, and our brand-new marquee was flapping all around us, but we were all feeling a little bit brighter and fresher, and I guess it showed in our music.

But here I am talking like I'm a regular band member. Actually, I'm one of the "gypsies," as the other musicians call us, one of the guys who move around the piazza, helping out whichever of the three cafe orchestras needs us. Mostly I play here at the Caffè Lavena, but on a busy afternoon, I might do a set with the Quadri boys, go over to the Florian, then back across the square to the Lavena. I get on fine with them all-and with the waiters too-and in any other city I'd have a regular position by now. But in this place, so obsessed with tradition and the past, everything's upside down. Anywhere else, being a guitar player would go in a guy's favour. But here? A guitar! The cafe managers get uneasy. It looks too modern, the tourists won't like it. Last autumn I got myself a vintage jazz model with an oval sound-hole, the kind of thing Django Reinhardt might have played, so there was no way anyone would mistake me for a rock-and-roller. That made things a little easier, but the cafe managers, they still don't like it. The truth is, if you're a guitarist, you can be Joe Pass, they still wouldn't give you a regular job in this square.

There's also, of course, the small matter of my not being Italian, never mind Venetian. It's the same for that big Czech guy with the alto sax. We're well liked, we're needed by the other musicians, but we don't quite fit the official bill. Just play and keep your mouth shut, that's what the cafe managers always say. That way the tourists won't know you're not Italian. Wear your suit, sunglasses, keep the hair combed back, no one will know the difference, just don't start talking.

But I don't do too bad. All three cafe orchestras, especially when they have to play at the same time from their rival tents, they need a guitar-something soft, solid, but amplified, thumping out the chords from the back. I guess you're thinking, three bands playing at the same time in the same square, that would sound like a real mess. But the Piazza San Marco's big enough to take it. A tourist strolling across the square will hear one tune fade out, another fade in, like he's shifting the dial on a radio. What tourists can't take too much of is the classical stuff, all these instrumental versions of famous arias. Okay, this is San Marco, they don't want the latest pop hits. But every few minutes they want something they recognise, maybe an old Julie Andrews number, or the theme from a famous movie. I remember once last summer, going from band to band and playing "The Godfather" nine times in one afternoon.

Anyway there we were that spring morning, playing in front of a good crowd of tourists, when I saw Tony Gardner, sitting alone with his coffee, almost directly in front of us, maybe six metres back from our marquee. We get famous people in the square all the time, we never make a fuss. At the end of a number, maybe a quiet word will go around the band members. Look, there's Warren Beatty. Look, it's Kissinger. That woman, she's the one who was in the movie about the men who swap their faces. We're used to it. This is the Piazza San Marco after all. But when I realised it was Tony Gardner sitting there, that was different. I did get excited.

Tony Gardner had been my mother's favourite. Back home, back in the communist days, it had been really hard to get records like that, but my mother had pretty much his whole collection. Once when I

was a boy, I scratched one of those precious records. The apartment was so cramped, and a boy my age, you just had to move around sometimes, especially during those cold months when you couldn't go outside. So I was playing this game jumping from our little sofa to the armchair, and one time I misjudged it and hit the record player. The needle went across the record with a zip-this was long before CDs-and my mother came in from the kitchen and began shouting at me. I felt so bad, not just because she was shouting at me, but because I knew it was one of Tony Gardner's records, and I knew how much it meant to her. And I knew that this one too would now have those popping noises going through it while he crooned those American songs. Years later, when I was working in Warsaw and I got to know about black-market records, I gave my mother replacements of all her worn-out Tony Gardner albums, including that one I scratched. It took me over three years, but I kept getting them, one by one, and each time I went back to see her I'd bring her another.

So you see why I got so excited when I recognised him, barely six metres away. At first I couldn't quite believe it, and I might have been a beat late with a chord change. Tony Gardner! What would my dear mother have said if she'd known! For her sake, for the sake of her memory, I had to go and say something to him, never mind if the other musicians laughed and said I was acting like a bell-boy.

But of course I couldn't just rush over to him, pushing aside the tables and chairs. There was our set to finish. It was agony, I can tell you, another three, four numbers, and every second I thought he was about to get up and walk off. But he kept sitting there, by himself, staring into his coffee, stirring it like he was really puzzled by what the waiter had brought him. He looked like any other American tourist, dressed in a pale-blue polo shirt and loose grey trousers. His hair, very dark, very shiny on those record covers, was almost white now, but there was still plenty of it, and it was immaculately groomed in the same style he'd had back then. When I'd first spotted him, he'd had his dark glasses in his hand-I doubt if I'd have recognised him otherwise-but as our set went on and I kept watching him, he put them on his face, took them off again, then back on again. He looked preoccupied and it disappointed me to see he wasn't really listening to our music.

Then our set was over. I hurried out of the tent without saying anything to the others, made my way to Tony Gardner's table, then had a moment's panic not knowing how to start the conversation. I was standing behind him, but some sixth sense made him turn and look up at me-I guess it was all those years of having fans come up to him-and next thing I was introducing myself, explaining how much I admired him, how I was in the band he'd just been listening to, how my mother had been such a fan, all in one big rush. He listened with a grave expression, nodding every few seconds like he was my doctor. I kept talking and all he said every now and then was: "Is that so?" After a while I thought it was time to leave and I'd started to move away when he said:

"So you come from one of those communist countries. That must have been tough."

"That's all in the past." I did a cheerful shrug. "We're a free country now. A democracy."

"That's good to hear. And that was your crew playing for us just now. Sit down. You want some coffee?"

I told him I didn't want to impose, but there was now something gently insistent about Mr. Gardner. "No, no, sit down. Your mother liked my records, you were saying."

So I sat down and told him some more. About my mother, our apartment, the black-market records. And though I couldn't remember what the albums were called, I started describing the pictures on their sleeves the way I remembered them, and each time I did this, he'd put his finger up in the air and say something like: "Oh, that would be Inimitable. The Inimitable Tony Gardner." I think we were both really

enjoying this game, but then I noticed Mr. Gardner's gaze move off me, and I turned just in time to see a woman coming up to our table.

She was one of those American ladies who are so classy, with great hair, clothes and figure, you don't realise they're not so young until you see them up close. Far away, I might have mistaken her for a model out of those glossy fashion magazines. But when she sat down next to Mr. Gardner and pushed her dark glasses onto her forehead, I realised she must be at least fifty, maybe more. Mr. Gardner said to me: "This is Lindy, my wife."

Mrs. Gardner flashed me a smile that was kind of forced, then said to her husband: "So who's this? You've made yourself a friend."

"That's right, honey. I was having a good time talking here with... I'm sorry, friend, I don't know your name."

"Jan," I said quickly. "But friends call me Janeck."

Lindy Gardner said: "You mean your nickname's longer than your real name? How does that work?"

"Don't be rude to the man, honey."

"I'm not being rude."

"Don't make fun of the man's name, honey. That's a good girl."

Lindy Gardner turned to me with a helpless sort of expression. "You know what he's talking about? Did I insult you?"

"No, no," I said, "not at all, Mrs. Gardner."

"He's always telling me I'm rude to the public. But I'm not rude. Was I rude to you just now?" Then to Mr. Gardner: "I speak to the public in a natural way, sweetie. It's my way. I'm never rude."

"Okay, honey," Mr. Gardner said, "let's not make a big thing of it. Anyhow, this man here, he's not the public."

"Oh, he's not? Then what is he? A long-lost nephew?"

"Be nice, honey. This man, he's a colleague. A musician, a pro. He's just been entertaining us all." He gestured towards our marquee.

"Oh right!" Lindy Gardner turned to me again. "You were playing up there just now? Well, that was pretty. You were on the accordion, right? Real pretty!"

"Thank you very much. Actually, I'm the guitarist."

"Guitarist? You're kidding me. I was watching you only a minute ago. Sitting right there, next to the double bass man, playing so beautifully on your accordion."

"Pardon me, that was in fact Carlo on the accordion. The big bald guy..."

"Are you sure? You're not kidding me?"

"Honey, I've told you. Don't be rude to the man." He hadn't shouted exactly, but his voice was suddenly hard and angry, and now there was a strange silence. Then Mr. Gardner himself broke it, saying gently:

"I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to snap at you." He reached out a hand and grasped one of hers. I'd kind of expected her to shake him off, but instead, she moved in her chair so she was closer to him, and put her free hand over their clasped pair. They sat there like that for a few seconds, Mr. Gardner, his head bowed, his wife gazing emptily past his shoulder, across the square towards the Basilica, though her eyes didn't seem to be seeing anything. For those few moments it was like they'd forgotten not just me sitting with them, but all the people in the piazza. Then she said, almost in a whisper:

"That's okay, sweetie. It was my fault. Getting you all upset."

They went on sitting like that a little longer, their hands locked. Then she sighed, let go of Mr. Gardner and looked at me. She'd looked at me before, but this time it was different. This time I could feel her charm. It was like she had this dial, going zero to ten, and with me, at that moment, she'd decided to turn it to six or seven, but I could feel it really strong, and if she'd asked some favour of me-if say she'd asked me to go across the square and buy her some flowers-I'd have done it happily.

"Janeck," she said. "That's your name, right? I'm sorry, Janeck. Tony's right. I'd no business speaking to you the way I did."

"Mrs. Gardner, really, please don't worry..."

"And I disturbed the two of you talking. Musicians' talk, I bet. You know what? I'm gonna leave the two of you to get on with it."

"No reason to go, honey," Mr. Gardner said.

"Oh yes there is, sweetie. I'm absolutely yearning to go look in that Prada store. I only came over just now to tell you I'd be longer than I said."

"Okay, honey." Tony Gardner straightened for the first time and took a deep breath. "So long as you're sure you're happy doing that."

"I'm gonna have a fantastic time in that store. So you two fellas, you have yourselves a good talk." She got to her feet and touched me on the shoulder. "You take care, Janeck."

We watched her walk away, then Mr. Gardner asked me a few things about being a musician in Venice, and about the Quadri orchestra in particular, who'd started playing just at that moment. He didn't seem to listen so carefully to my answers and I was about to excuse myself and leave, when he said suddenly:

"There's something I want to put to you, friend. Let me tell you what's on my mind and you can turn me down if that's what you want." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Can I tell you something? The first time Lindy and I came here to Venice, it was our honeymoon. Twenty-seven years ago. And for all our happy memories of this place, we'd never been back, not together anyway. So when we were planning this trip, this special trip of ours, we said to ourselves we've got to spend a few days in Venice."

"It's your anniversary, Mr. Gardner?"

"Anniversary?" He looked startled.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just thought, because you said this was your special trip."

He went on looking startled for a while, then he laughed, a big, booming laugh, and suddenly I remembered this particular song my mother used to play all the time where he does a talking passage in the middle of the song, something about not caring that this woman has left him, and he does this sardonic laugh. Now the same laugh was booming across the square. Then he said:

“Anniversary? No, no, it’s not our anniversary. But what I’m proposing, it’s not so far off. Because I want to do something very romantic. I want to serenade her. Properly, Venice style. That’s where you come in. You play your guitar, I sing. We do it from a gondola, we drift under the window, I sing up to her. We’re renting a palazzo not far from here. The bedroom window looks over the canal. After dark, it’ll be perfect. The lamps on the walls light things up just right. You and me in a gondola, she comes to the window. All her favourite numbers. We don’t need to do it for long, the evenings are still kinda chilly. Just three or four songs, that’s what I have in mind. I’ll see you’re well compensated. What do you say?”

“Mr. Gardner, I’d be absolutely honoured. As I told you, you’ve been an important figure for me. When were you thinking of doing this?”

“If it doesn’t rain, why not tonight? Around eight-thirty? We eat dinner early, so we’ll be back by then. I’ll make some excuse, leave the apartment, come and meet you. I’ll have a gondola fixed up, we’ll come back along the canal, stop under the window. It’ll be perfect. What do you say?”

You can probably imagine, this was like a dream come true. And besides, it seemed such a sweet idea, this couple-he in his sixties, she in her fifties-behaving like teenagers in love. In fact it was so sweet an idea it almost, but not quite, made me forget the scene I’d just witnessed between them. What I mean is, even at that stage, I knew deep down that things wouldn’t be as straightforward as he was making out.

For the next few minutes Mr. Gardner and I sat there discussing all the details-which songs he wanted, the keys he preferred, all those kinds of things. Then it was time for me to get back to the marquee and our next set, so I stood up, shook his hand and told him he could absolutely count on me that evening.

THE STREETS WERE DARK and quiet as I went to meet Mr. Gardner that night. In those days I’d always get lost whenever I moved much beyond the Piazza San Marco, so even though I’d allowed myself plenty of time, even though I knew the little bridge where Mr. Gardner had told me to be, I was still a few minutes late.

He was standing right under a lamp, wearing a crumpled dark suit, and his shirt was open down to the third or fourth button, so you could see the hairs on his chest. When I apologised for being late, he said:

“What’s a few minutes? Lindy and I have been married twenty-seven years. What’s a few minutes?”

He wasn’t angry, but his mood seemed grave and solemn-not at all romantic. Behind him was the gondola, gently rocking in the water, and I saw the gondolier was Vittorio, a guy I don’t like much. To my face, Vittorio’s always friendly, but I know-I knew back then-he goes around saying all kinds of foul things, all of it rubbish, about people like me, people he calls “the foreigners from the new countries.” That’s why, when he greeted me that evening like a brother, I just nodded, and waited silently while he helped Mr. Gardner into the gondola. Then I passed him my guitar-I’d brought my Spanish guitar, not the one with the oval sound-hole-and got in myself.

Mr. Gardner kept shifting positions at the front of the boat, and at one point sat down so heavily we nearly capsized. But he didn't seem to notice and as we pushed off, he kept staring into the water.

For a few minutes we drifted in silence, past dark buildings and under low bridges. Then he came out of his deep thoughts and said:

"Listen, friend. I know we agreed on a set for this evening. But I've been thinking. Lindy loves that song, 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix.' I recorded it once a long time ago."

"Sure, Mr. Gardner. My mother always said your version was better than Sinatra's. Or that famous one by Glen Campbell."

Mr. Gardner nodded, then I couldn't see his face for a while. Vittorio sent his gondolier's cry echoing around the walls before steering us round a corner.

"I used to sing it to her a lot," Mr. Gardner said. "You know, I think she'd like to hear it tonight. You're familiar with the tune?"

My guitar was out of the case by this time, so I played a few bars of the song.

"Take it up," he said. "Up to E-flat. That's how I did it on the album."

So I played the chords in that key, and after maybe a whole verse had gone by, Mr. Gardner began to sing, very softly, under his breath, like he could only half remember the words. But his voice resonated well in that quiet canal. In fact, it sounded really beautiful. And for a moment it was like I was a boy again, back in that apartment, lying on the carpet while my mother sat on the sofa, exhausted, or maybe heartbroken, while Tony Gardner's album spun in the corner of the room.

Mr. Gardner broke off suddenly and said: "Okay. We'll do 'Phoenix' in E-flat. Then maybe 'I Fall in Love Too Easily,' like we planned. And we'll finish with 'One for My Baby.' That'll be enough. She won't listen to any more than that."

He seemed to sink back into his thoughts after that, and we drifted along through the darkness to the sound of Vittorio's gentle splashes.

"Mr. Gardner," I said eventually, "I hope you don't mind me asking. But is Mrs. Gardner expecting this recital? Or is this going to be a wonderful surprise?"

He sighed heavily, then said: "I guess we'd have to put this in the wonderful surprise category." Then he added: "Lord knows how she'll react. **We might not make it all the way to 'One for My Baby.'**"

Vittorio steered us round another corner, and suddenly there was laughter and music, and we were drifting past a large, brightly lit restaurant. Every table seemed taken, the waiters were rushing about, the diners looked very happy, even though it couldn't have been so warm next to the canal at that time of year. After the quiet and the darkness we'd been travelling through, the restaurant was kind of unsettling. It felt like we were the stationary ones, watching from the quay, as this glittering party boat slid by. I noticed a few faces look our way, but no one paid us much attention. Then the restaurant was behind us, and I said:

"It's funny. Can you imagine what those tourists would do if they realised a boat had just gone by containing the legendary Tony Gardner?"

Vittorio, who doesn't understand much English, got the gist of this and gave a little laugh. But Mr. Gardner didn't respond for some time. We were back in the dark again, going along a narrow canal past dimly lit doorways, when he said:

"My friend, you come from a communist country. That's why you don't realise how these things work."

"Mr. Gardner," I said, "my country isn't communist any more. We're free people now."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to denigrate your nation. You're a brave people. I hope you win peace and prosperity. But what I intended to say to you, friend, what I meant was that coming from where you do, quite naturally, there are many things you don't understand yet. Just like there'd be many things I wouldn't understand in your country."

"I guess that's right, Mr. Gardner."

"Those people we passed just now. If you'd gone up to them and said, 'Hey, do any of you remember Tony Gardner?' then maybe some of them, most of them even, might have said yes. Who knows? But drifting by the way we just did, even if they'd recognised me, would they get excited? I don't think so. They wouldn't put down their forks, they wouldn't interrupt their candlelit heart-to-hearts. Why should they? Just some crooner from a bygone era."

"I can't believe that, Mr. Gardner. You're a classic. You're like Sinatra or Dean Martin. Some class acts, they never go out of fashion. Not like these pop stars."

"You're very kind to say that, friend. I know you mean well. But tonight of all nights, it's no time to be kidding me."

I was about to protest, but something in his manner told me to drop the whole subject. So we kept moving, no one speaking. To be honest, I was now beginning to wonder what I'd got myself into, what this whole serenade thing was about. And these were Americans, after all. For all I knew, when Mr. Gardner started singing, Mrs. Gardner would come to the window with a gun and fire down at us.

Maybe Vittorio's thoughts were moving along the same lines, because as we passed under a lantern on the side of a wall, he gave me a look as though to say: "We've got a strange one here, haven't we, amico?" But I didn't respond. I wasn't going to side with the likes of him against Mr. Gardner. According to Vittorio, foreigners like me, we go around ripping off tourists, littering the canals, in general ruining the whole damn city. Some days, if he's in a bad mood, he'll claim we're muggers-rapists, even. I asked him once to his face if it was true he was going around saying such things, and he swore it was all a pack of lies. How could he be a racist when he had a Jewish aunt he adored like a mother? But one afternoon I was killing time between sets, leaning over a bridge in Dorsoduro, and a gondola passed underneath. There were three tourists sitting in it, and Vittorio standing over them with his oar, holding forth for the world to hear, coming out with this very same rubbish. So he can meet my eye all he likes, he'll get no camaraderie from me.

"Let me tell you a little secret," Mr. Gardner said suddenly. "A little secret about performance. One pro to another. It's quite simple. You've got to know something, doesn't matter what it is, you've got to know something about your audience. Something that for you, in your mind, distinguishes that audience from the one you sang to the night before. Let's say you're in Milwaukee. You've got to ask yourself, what's different, what's special about a Milwaukee audience? What makes it different from a Madison audience? Can't think of anything, you just keep on trying till you do. Milwaukee, Milwaukee. They have

good pork chops in Milwaukee. That'll work, that's what you use when you step out there. You don't have to say a word about it to them, it's what's in your mind when you sing to them. These people in front of you, they're the ones who eat good pork chops. They have high standards when it comes to pork chops. You understand what I'm saying? That way the audience becomes someone you know, someone you can perform to. There, that's my secret. One pro to another."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Gardner. I'd never thought about it that way. A tip from someone like you, I won't forget it."

"So tonight," he went on, "we're performing for Lindy. Lindy's the audience. So I'm going to tell you something about Lindy. You want to hear about Lindy?"

"Of course, Mr. Gardner," I said. "I'd like to hear about her very much."

FOR THE NEXT TWENTY MINUTES OR SO, WE SAT IN that gondola, drifting round and round, while Mr. Gardner talked. Sometimes his voice went down to a murmur, like he was talking to himself. Other times, when a lamp or a passing window threw some light across our boat, he'd remember me, raise his voice, and say something like: "You understand what I'm saying, friend?"

His wife, he told me, had come from a small town in Minnesota, in the middle of America, where her schoolteachers gave her a hard time because she was always looking at magazines of movie stars instead of studying.

"What these ladies never realised was that Lindy had big plans. And look at her now. Rich, beautiful, travelled all over the world. And those schoolteachers, where are they today? What kind of lives have they had? If they'd looked at a few more movie magazines, had a few more dreams, they too might have a little of what Lindy has today."

At nineteen, she'd hitch-hiked to California, wanting to get to Hollywood. Instead, she'd found herself in the outskirts of Los Angeles, working as a waitress in a roadside diner.

"Surprising thing," Mr. Gardner said. "This diner, this regular little place off the highway. It turned out to be the best place she could have wound up. Because this was where all the ambitious girls came in, morning till night. They used to meet there, seven, eight, a dozen of them, they'd order their coffees, their hot dogs, sit in there for hours and talk."

These girls, all a little older than Lindy, had come from every part of America and had been in the LA area for at least two or three years. They came into the diner to swap gossip and hard-luck stories, discuss tactics, keep a check on each other's progress. But the main draw of the place was Meg, a woman in her forties, the waitress Lindy worked with.

"To these girls Meg was their big sister, their fountain of wisdom. Because once upon a time, she'd been exactly like them. You've got to understand, these were serious girls, really ambitious, determined girls. Did they talk about clothes and shoes and make-up like other girls? Sure they did. But they only talked about which clothes and shoes and make-up would help them marry a star. Did they talk about movies? Did they talk about the music scene? You bet. But they talked about which movie stars and singers were single, which ones were unhappily married, which ones were getting divorced. And Meg, you see, she could tell them all this, and much, much more. Meg had been down that road before them. She knew all the rules, all the tricks, when it came to marrying a star. And Lindy sat with them and took everything in.

That little hot-dog diner was her Harvard, her Yale. A nineteen-year-old from Minnesota? Makes me shudder now to think what could have happened to her. But she got lucky.”

“Mr. Gardner,” I said, “excuse me for interrupting. But if this Meg was so wise about everything, how come she wasn’t married to a star herself? Why was she serving hot dogs in this diner?”

“Good question, but you don’t quite see how these things work. Okay, this lady, Meg, she hadn’t made it. But the point is, she’d watched the ones who had. You understand, friend? She’d been just like those girls once, and she’d watched some succeed, others fail. She’d seen the pitfalls, she’d seen the golden stairways. She could tell them all the stories and those girls listened. And some of them learned. Lindy, for one. Like I say, that was her Harvard. It made her what she is. It gave her the strength she needed later on, and boy, did she need it. It took her six years before her first break came along. Can you imagine it? Six years of manoeuvring, planning, putting yourself on the line like that. Getting knocked back over and over again. But it’s just like in our business. You can’t roll over and give up after the first few knocks. The girls who do, you can see them any place, married to nobodies in nowhere towns. But just a few of them, the ones like Lindy, they learn from every knock, they come back stronger, tougher, they come back fighting and mad. You think Lindy didn’t suffer humiliation? Even with her beauty and charm? What people don’t realise is that beauty isn’t the half of it. Use it wrong, you get treated like a whore. Anyway, after six years, she finally got her break.”

“That’s when she met you, Mr. Gardner?”

“Me? No, no. I didn’t come on the scene for a while longer. She married Dino Hartman. You’ve never heard of Dino?” Mr. Gardner did a slightly unkind laugh here. “Poor Dino. I guess Dino’s records wouldn’t have made it to the communist countries. But Dino had quite a name for himself in those days. He sang in Vegas a lot, had a few gold records. Like I said, that was Lindy’s big break. When I first met her, she was Dino’s wife. Old Meg had explained that’s how it happens all the time. Sure, a girl can get lucky first time, go straight to the top, marry a Sinatra or a Brando. But it doesn’t usually happen like that. A girl’s got to be prepared to get out of the elevator at the second floor, walk around. She needs to get used to the air on that floor. Then maybe, one day, on that second floor, she’ll run into someone who’s come down from the penthouse for a few minutes, maybe to fetch something. And this guy says to her, hey, how about coming back up with me, up to the top floor. Lindy knew that’s how it usually played out. She wasn’t weakening when she married Dino, she wasn’t cutting her ambition down to size. And Dino was a decent guy. I always liked him. That’s why, even though I fell badly for Lindy the moment I first saw her, I didn’t make a move. I was the perfect gentleman. I found out later that was what made Lindy all the more determined. Man, you’ve got to admire a girl like that! I have to tell you, friend, I was a bright, bright star around this time. I guess this would be around when your mother was listening to me. Dino, though, his star was starting to go down fast. It was tough for a lot of singers just around then. Everything was changing. Kids were listening to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones. Poor Dino, he sounded too much like Bing Crosby. He tried a bossa nova album folks just laughed at. Definitely time for Lindy to get out. No one could have accused us of anything in that situation. I don’t think even Dino really blamed us. So I made my move. That’s how she got up to the penthouse.

“We got married in Vegas, we had the hotel fill the bathtub with champagne. That song we’re gonna do tonight, ‘I Fall in Love Too Easily.’ You know why I chose that one? You want to know? We were in London once, not long after we got married. We came up to our room after breakfast and the maid’s in there cleaning our suite. But Lindy and I are horny as rabbits. So we go in, and we can hear the maid vacuuming our lounge, but we can’t see her, she’s through the partition. So we sneak through on tip-toes, like we’re kids, you know? We sneak through to the bedroom, close the door. We can see the

maid's finished the bedroom already, so maybe she doesn't need to come back, but we don't know that for sure. Either way, we don't care. We tear off our clothes, we make love on the bed, and all the time the maid's on the other side, moving around our suite, no idea we've come in. I tell you, we were horny, but after a while, we found the whole thing so funny, we just kept laughing. Then we'd finished and we were lying there in each other's arms, and the maid was still out there and you know what, she starts singing! She's finished with the vacuum, so she starts singing at the top of her voice, and boy, did she have one lousy voice! We were laughing and laughing, but trying to keep it silent. Then what do you know, she stops singing and turns on the radio. And suddenly we hear Chet Baker. He's singing 'I Fall in Love Too Easily,' nice and slow and mellow. And Lindy and me, we just lay there across the bed together, listening to Chet singing. And after a while, I'm singing along, really soft, singing along with Chet Baker on the radio, Lindy curled up in my arms. That's how it was. That's why we're gonna do that song tonight. I don't know if she'll remember though. Who the hell knows?"

Mr. Gardner stopped talking and I could see him wiping away tears. Vittorio brought us around another corner and I realised we were going past the restaurant a second time. It looked even more lively than before, and a pianist, this guy I know called Andrea, was now playing in the corner.

As we drifted again into the dark, I said: "Mr. Gardner, it's none of my business, I know. But I can see maybe things haven't been so good between you and Mrs. Gardner lately. I want you to know I understand about things like that. My mother often used to get sad, maybe just the way you are now. She'd think she'd found someone, she'd be so happy and tell me this guy was going to be my new dad. The first couple of times I believed her. After that, I knew it wouldn't work out. But my mother, she never stopped believing it. And every time she felt down, maybe like you are tonight, you know what she did? She put on your records and sang along. All those long winters, in that tiny apartment of ours, she'd sit there, knees tucked up under her, glass of something in her hand, and she'd sing along softly. And sometimes, I remember this, Mr. Gardner, our neighbours upstairs would bang on the ceiling, especially when you were doing those big up-tempo numbers, like 'High Hopes' or 'They All Laughed.' I used to watch my mother carefully, but it was like she hadn't heard a thing, she'd be listening to you, nodding her head to the beat, her lips moving with the lyrics. Mr. Gardner, I wanted to say to you. Your music helped my mother through those times, it must have helped millions of others. And it's only right it should help you too." I did a little laugh, which I meant to be encouraging, but it came out louder than I'd intended. "You can count on me tonight, Mr. Gardner. I'm going to put everything I've got into it. I'll make it as good as any orchestra, you just see. And Mrs. Gardner will hear us and who knows? Maybe things will start going fine between you again. Every couple goes through difficult times."

Mr. Gardner smiled. "You're a sweet guy. I appreciate you helping me out tonight. But we don't have any more time to talk. Lindy's in her room now. I can see the light on."

WE WERE GOING BY A PALAZZO we'd passed at least twice before, and I now realised why Vittorio had been taking us round in circles. Mr. Gardner had been watching for the light to come on in a particular window, and each time he'd found it still dark, we'd moved on to do another circle. This time, though, the third-storey window was lit, the shutters were open, and from down where we were, we could see a small part of the ceiling with its dark wooden beams. Mr. Gardner signalled to Vittorio, but he'd already stopped rowing and we drifted slowly till the gondola was directly beneath the window.

Mr. Gardner stood up, making the boat rock alarmingly again, and Vittorio had to move quickly to steady us. Then Mr. Gardner called up, much too softly: "Lindy? Lindy?" Finally he called out much louder: "Lindy!"

A hand pushed the shutters out wider, then a figure came onto the narrow balcony. A lantern was fixed to the palazzo wall not far above us, but the light wasn't good, and Mrs. Gardner wasn't much more than a silhouette. I could see though that she'd put up her hair since I'd met her in the piazza, maybe for their dinner earlier on.

"That you, sweetie?" She leaned over the balcony rail. "I thought you'd been kidnapped or something. You had me all anxious."

"Don't be foolish, honey. What could happen in a town like this? Anyway, I left you that note."

"I didn't see any note, sweetie."

"I left you a note. Just so you wouldn't get anxious."

"Where is it, this note? What did it say?"

"I don't remember, honey." Mr. Gardner now sounded irritated. "It was just a regular note. You know, saying I'd gone to buy cigarettes or something."

"Is that what you're doing down there now? Buying cigarettes?"

"No, honey. This is something different. I'm gonna sing to you."

"Is this some sort of joke?"

"No, honey, it isn't a joke. This is Venice. It's what people do here." He gestured around to me and Vittorio, like our being there proved his point.

"It's kind of chilly for me out here, sweetie."

Mr. Gardner did a big sigh. "Then you can listen from inside the room. Go back in the room, honey, make yourself comfortable. Just leave those windows open and you'll hear us fine."

She went on gazing down at him for a while, and he went on gazing back up, neither of them saying anything. Then she'd gone inside, and Mr. Gardner seemed disappointed, even though this was exactly what he'd suggested she should do. He lowered his head with another sigh, and I could tell he was hesitating about going ahead. So I said:

"Come on, Mr. Gardner, let's do it. Let's do 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix.'"

And I played gently a little opening figure, no beat yet, the sort of thing that could lead into a song or just as easily fade away. I tried to make it sound like America, sad roadside bars, big long highways, and I guess I was thinking too of my mother, the way I'd come into the room and see her on the sofa gazing at her record sleeve with its picture of an American road, or maybe of the singer sitting in an American car. What I mean is, I tried to play it so my mother would have recognised it as coming from that same world, the world on her record sleeve.

Then before I realised it, before I'd picked up any steady beat, Mr. Gardner started to sing. His posture, standing in the gondola, was pretty unsteady, and I was afraid he'd lose his balance any moment. But his voice came out just the way I remembered it-gentle, almost husky, but with a huge amount of body, like it was coming through an invisible mike. And like all the best American singers, there was that weariness

in his voice, even a hint of hesitation, like he's not a man accustomed to laying open his heart this way. That's how all the greats do it.

We went through that song, full of travelling and goodbye. An American man leaving his woman. He keeps thinking of her as he passes through the towns one by one, verse by verse, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Oklahoma, driving down a long road the way my mother never could. If only we could leave things behind like that-I guess that's what my mother would have thought. If only sadness could be like that.

We came to the end and Mr. Gardner said: "Okay, let's go straight to the next one. 'I Fall in Love Too Easily.'"

This being my first time playing with Mr. Gardner, I had to feel my way around everything, but we managed okay. After what he'd told me about this song, I kept looking up at that window, but there was nothing from Mrs. Gardner, no movement, no sound, nothing. Then we'd finished, and the quiet and the dark settled around us. Somewhere nearby, I could hear a neighbour pushing open shutters, maybe to hear better. But nothing from Mrs. Gardner's window.

We did "One for My Baby" very slow, virtually no beat at all, then everything was silent again. We went on looking up at the window, then at last, maybe after a full minute, we heard it. You could only just make it out, but there was no mistaking it. Mrs. Gardner was up there sobbing.

"We did it, Mr. Gardner!" I whispered. "We did it. We got her by the heart."

But Mr. Gardner didn't seem pleased. He shook his head tiredly, sat down and gestured to Vittorio. "Take us round the other side. It's time I went in."

As we started to move again, I thought he was avoiding looking at me, almost like he was ashamed of what we'd just done, and I began thinking maybe this whole plan had been some kind of malicious joke. For all I knew, these songs all held horrible meanings for Mrs. Gardner. So I put my guitar away and sat there, maybe a bit sullen, and that's how we travelled for a while.

Then we came out to a much wider canal, and immediately a water-taxi coming the other way rushed past us, making waves under the gondola. But we were nearly up to the front of Mr. Gardner's palazzo, and as Vittorio let us drift towards the quay, I said:

"Mr. Gardner, you've been an important part of my growing up. And tonight's been a very special night for me. If we just said goodbye now and I never saw you again, I know for the rest of my life I'll always be wondering. So Mr. Gardner, please tell me. Just now, was Mrs. Gardner crying because she was happy or because she was upset?"

I thought he wasn't going to answer. In the dim light, his figure was just this hunched-up shape at the front of the boat. But as Vittorio was tying the rope, he said quietly:

"I guess she was pleased to hear me sing that way. But sure, she was upset. We're both of us upset. Twenty-seven years is a long time and after this trip we're separating. This is our last trip together."

"I'm really sorry to hear that, Mr. Gardner," I said gently. "I guess a lot of marriages come to an end, even after twenty-seven years. But at least you're able to part like this. A holiday in Venice. Singing from a gondola. There can't be many couples who split up and stay so civilised."

"But why wouldn't we be civilised? We still love each other. That's why she's crying up there. Because she still loves me as much as I still love her."

Vittorio had stepped up onto the quay, but Mr. Gardner and I kept sitting in the darkness. I was waiting for him to say more, and sure enough, after a moment, he went on:

"Like I told you, the first time I laid eyes on Lindy I fell in love with her. But did she love me back then? I doubt if the question ever crossed her mind. I was a star, that's all that mattered to her. I was what she'd dreamt of, what she'd planned to win for herself back in that little diner. Whether she loved me or not didn't come into it. But twenty-seven years of marriage can do funny things. Plenty of couples, they start off loving each other, then get tired of each other, end up hating each other. Sometimes though it goes the other way. It took a few years, but bit by bit, Lindy began to love me. I didn't dare believe it at first, but after a while there was nothing else to believe. A little touch on my shoulder as we were getting up from a table. A funny little smile across the room when there wasn't anything to smile about, just her fooling around. I bet she was as surprised as anyone, but that's what happened. After five or six years, we found we were easy with each other. That we worried about each other, cared about each other. Like I say, we loved each other. And we still love each other today."

"I don't get it, Mr. Gardner. So why are you and Mrs. Gardner separating?"

He did another of his sighs. "How would you understand, my friend, coming from where you do? But you've been kind to me tonight, so I'm gonna try and explain it. Fact is, I'm no longer the major name I once was. Protest all you like, but where we come from, there's no getting round something like that. I'm no longer a major name. Now I could just accept that and fade away. Live on past glories. Or I could say, no, I'm not finished yet. In other words, my friend, I could make a comeback. Plenty have from my position and worse. But a comeback's no easy game. You have to be prepared to make a lot of changes, some of them hard ones. You change the way you are. You even change some things you love."

"Mr. Gardner, are you saying you and Mrs. Gardner have to separate because of your comeback?"

"Look at the other guys, the guys who came back successfully. Look at the ones from my generation still hanging round. Every single one of them, they've remarried. Twice, sometimes three times. Every one of them, young wives on their arms. Me and Lindy are getting to be a laughing stock. Besides, there's been this particular young lady I've had my eye on, and she's had her eye on me. Lindy knows the score. She's known it longer than I have, maybe ever since those days in that diner listening to Meg. We've talked it over. She understands it's time to go our separate ways."

"I still don't get it, Mr. Gardner. This place you and Mrs. Gardner come from can't be so different from everywhere else. That's why, Mr. Gardner, that's why these songs you've been singing all these years, they make sense for people everywhere. Even where I used to live. And what do all these songs say? If two people fall out of love and they have to part, then that's sad. But if they go on loving each other, they should stay together for ever. That's what these songs are saying."

"I understand what you're saying, friend. And it might sound hard to you, I know. But that's the way it is. And listen, this is about Lindy too. It's best for her we do this now. She's nowhere near old yet. You've seen her, she's still a beautiful woman. She needs to get out now, while she has time. Time to find love again, make another marriage. She needs to get out before it's too late."

I don't know what I would have said to that, but then he caught me by surprise, saying: "Your mother. I guess she never got out."

I thought about it, then said quietly: "No, Mr. Gardner. She never got out. She didn't live long enough to see the changes in our country."

"That's too bad. I'm sure she was a fine woman. If what you say is true, and my music helped make her happy, that means a lot to me. Too bad she didn't get out. I don't want that to happen to my Lindy. No, sir. Not to my Lindy. I want my Lindy to get out."

The gondola was bumping gently against the quay. Vittorio called out softly, reaching out his hand, and after a few seconds, Mr. Gardner got to his feet and climbed out. By the time I too had climbed out with my guitar-I wasn't going to beg any free rides from Vittorio-Mr. Gardner had his wallet out.

Vittorio seemed pleased with what he was given, and with his usual fine phrases and gestures, he got back in his gondola and set off down the canal.

We watched him disappear into the dark, then next thing, Mr. Gardner was pushing a lot of notes into my hand. I told him it was way too much, that anyway it was a huge honour for me, but he wouldn't hear of taking any of it back.

"No, no," he said, waving his hand in front of his face, like he wanted to be done, not just with the money, but with me, the evening, maybe this whole section of his life. He started to walk off towards his palazzo, but after a few paces, he stopped and turned back to look at me. The little street we were in, the canal, everything was silent now except for the distant sound of a television.

"You played well tonight, my friend," he said. "You have a nice touch."

"Thank you, Mr. Gardner. And you sang great. As great as ever."

"Maybe I'll come by the square again before we leave. Listen to you playing with your crew."

"I hope so, Mr. Gardner."

But I never saw him again. I heard a few months later, in the autumn, that Mr. and Mrs. Gardner got their divorce-one of the waiters at the Florian read it somewhere and told me. It all came back to me then about that evening, and it made me feel a little sad thinking about it again. Because Mr. Gardner had seemed a pretty decent guy, and whichever way you look at it, comeback or no comeback, he'll always be one of the greats.