

WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE

"A dark tour de force, perfectly fashioned."
— Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

AMSTERDAM

IAN MCEWAN



A NOVEL

Ian McEwan - Amsterdam

Two former lovers of Molly Lane stood waiting outside the crematorium chapel with their backs to the February chill. It had all been said before, but they said it again.

"She never knew what hit her."

"When she did it was too late."

"Rapid onset."

"Poor Molly."

"Mmm."

Poor Molly. It began with a tingling in her arm as she raised it outside the Dorchester Grill to stop a cab - a sensation that never went away. Within weeks she was fumbling for the names of things.

Parliament, chemistry[^] propeller she could forgive herself, but less so bed, cream, mirror. It was after the temporary disappearance of acanthus and bresaiola that she sought medical advice, expecting reassurance. Instead, she was sent for tests and, in a sense, never returned. How quickly feisty Molly became the sickroom prisoner of her morose, possessive husband, George. Molly, restaurant critic, gorgeous wit, and photographer, the daring gardener, who had been loved by the foreign secretary and could still turn a perfect cartwheel at the age of forty-six. The speed of her descent into madness and pain became a matter of common gossip: the loss of control of bodily function and with it all sense of humour, and then the tailing off into vagueness interspersed with episodes of ineffectual violence and muffled shrieking.

It was the sight now of George emerging from the chapel that caused Molly's lovers to move off farther up the weedy gravel path. They wandered into an arrangement of oval rose beds marked by a sign, THE GARDEN OF REMEMBRANCE. Each plant had been savagely cut back to within a few inches of the frozen ground, a practice Molly used to deplore. The patch of lawn was strewn with flattened cigarette butts, for this was a place where people came to stand about and wait for the funeral party ahead of theirs to clear the building. As they strolled up and down, the two old friends resumed the conversation they had had in various forms a half-dozen times before but that gave them rather more comfort than singing "Pilgrim."

Clive Linley had known Molly first, back when they were students in 68 and lived together in a chaotic, shifting household in the Vale of Health. "A terrible way to go."

He watched his own vaporized breath float off into the grey air. The temperature in central London was said to be twelve degrees today. Twelve. There was something seriously wrong with the world for which neither God nor His absence could be blamed. Man's first disobedience, the Fall, a falling figure, an oboe, nine notes, ten notes. Clive had the gift of perfect pitch and heard them descending from the G. There was no need to write them down. He continued, "I mean, to die that way, with no awareness, like an animal. To be reduced, humiliated, before she could make arrangements, or even say goodbye. It crept up on her, and then..." He shrugged. They came to the end of the trampled lawn, turned, and walked back. "She would have killed herself rather than end up like that," Vernon Halliday said. He had lived with her for a year in Paris in '74, when he had his first job with Reuters and Molly did something or other for Vogue. "Brain-dead and in George's clutches," Clive said. George, the sad, rich publisher who doted on her and whom, to everyone's surprise, she had not left, though she always treated him badly. They looked now to where he stood outside the door, receiving commiseration from a group of mourners. Her death had raised him from general contempt. He appeared to have grown an inch or two, his back had straightened, his voice had deepened, a new dignity had narrowed his pleading, greedy eyes. Refusing to consign her to a home, he had cared for her with his own hands. More to the point, in the early days, when people still wanted to see her, he vetted her visitors. Clive and Vernon were strictly rationed because they were considered to make her excitable and, afterward, depressed about her condition. Another key male, the foreign secretary, was also unwelcome. People began to mutter; there were muted references in a couple of gossip columns. And then it no longer mattered, because the word was she was horribly not herself; people didn't want to go and see her and were glad that George was there to prevent them. Clive and Vernon, however, continued to enjoy loathing him. As they turned about again, the phone in Vernon's pocket rang. He excused himself and stepped aside, leaving his friend to proceed alone. Clive drew his overcoat about him and slowed his pace. There must have been over two hundred in the black-suited crowd outside the crematorium now. Soon it would seem rude not to go over and say something to George. He got her finally, when she couldn't recognise her own face in the mirror. He could do nothing about her affairs, but in the end she was entirely his. Clive was losing the sensation in his feet, and as he stamped them the rhythm gave him back the ten-note falling figure, ritardando, a cor anglais, and rising softly against it, contrapuntally, cellos in mirror image. Her face in it. The end. All he wanted now was the warmth, the silence of his studio, the piano, the unfinished score, and to reach the end. He heard Vernon say in parting, "Fine. Rewrite the stand first and run it on page four. I'll be there in a couple of hours." Then he said to Clive, "Bloody Israelis. We ought to wander over."

"I suppose so." But instead they took another turn about the lawn, for they were there, after all, to bury Molly. With a visible effort of concentration, Vernon resisted the anxieties of his office. "She was a lovely girl. Remember the snooker table?"

In 1978 a group of friends rented a large house in Scotland for Christmas. Molly and the man she was going about with at the time, a QC named Brady, staged an Adam and Eve tableau on a disused snooker table, he in his Y-fronts, she in bra and panties, a cue rest for a snake and a red ball for an apple. The story handed down, however, the one that had appeared in an obituary and was remembered that way even by some who were present, was that Molly "danced naked on Christmas Eve on a snooker table in a Scottish castle."

"A lovely girl," Clive repeated. She had looked right at him when she pretended to bite the apple, and smiled raunchily through her chomping, with one hand on a jutting hip, like a music hall parody of a tart. He thought it was a signal, the way she held his gaze, and sure enough, they were back together that April. She moved into the studio in South Kensington and stayed through the summer. This was about the time her restaurant column was taking off, when she went on television to denounce the Michelin guide as the "kitsch of cuisine." It was also the time of his own first break, the Orchestral Variations at the Festival Hall, Second time round. She probably hadn't changed, but he had. Ten years on, he'd learned enough to let her teach him something. He'd always been of the hammer-and-tongs school. She taught him sexual stealth, the occasional necessity of stillness. Lie still, like this, look at me, really look at me. We're a time bomb. He was almost thirty, by today's standards a late developer. When she found a place of her own and packed her bags, he asked her to marry him. She kissed him, and quoted in his ear, He married a woman to stop her getting away/Now she's there all day. She was right, for when she went he was happier than ever to be alone and wrote the Three Autumn Songs in less than a month. "Did you ever learn anything from her?" Clive asked suddenly.

In the mid-eighties Vernon too had had a second bite, on holiday on an estate in Umbria. Then he was Rome correspondent for the paper he now edited, and a married man. "I can never remember sex," he said after a pause. "I'm sure it was brilliant. But I do remember her teaching me all about porcini, picking them, cooking them." Clive assumed this was an evasion and decided against any confidences of his own. He looked toward the chapel entrance. They would have to go across. He surprised himself by saying rather savagely, "You know, I should have married her. When she started to go under, I would have killed her with a pillow or something and saved her from everyone's pity." Vernon was laughing as he steered his friend away from the Garden of Remembrance. "Easily said. I can just see you writing exercise yard anthems for the cons, like what's her-name, the suffragette."

"Ethel Smyth. I'd do a damn better job than she did/The friends of Molly who made up the funeral gathering would have preferred not to be at a crematorium, but George had made it clear there was to be no memorial service. He didn't want to hear these three former lovers publicly comparing notes from the pulpits of St. Martin's or St. James's, or exchanging glances while he made his own speech. As Clive and Vernon approached they heard the familiar gabble of a cocktail party. No champagne trays, no restaurant walls to throw back the sound, but otherwise one might have been at one more gallery opening, one more media launch. So many faces Clive had never seen by daylight, and looking terrible, like cadavers jerked upright to welcome the newly dead. Invigorated by this jolt of misanthropy, he moved sleekly through the din, ignored his name when it was called, withdrew his elbow when it was plucked, and kept on going toward where George stood talking to two women and a shrivelled old fellow with a fedora and cane. "It's too cold, we have to go," Clive heard a voice cry out, but for the moment no one could escape the centripetal power of a social event. He had already lost Vernon, who

had been pulled away by the owner of a television channel. At last Clive was gripping George's hand in a reasonable display of sincerity. "It was a wonderful service."

"It was very kind of you to come." Her death had ennobled him. The quiet gravity really wasn't his style at all, which had always been both needy and dour; anxious to be liked, but incapable of taking friendliness for granted. A burden of the hugely rich.

"And do excuse me," he added, "these are the Finch sisters, Vera and Mini, who knew Molly from her Boston days. Clive Linley." They shook hands. "You're the composer?" Vera or Mini asked. "That's right." "It's a great honour, Mr. Linley. My eleven-year-old granddaughter studied your sonatina for her final exam in violin and really loved it." "That's very nice to know." The thought of children playing his music made him feel faintly depressed.

"And this," George said, "also from the States, is Hart Pullman." "Hart Pullman. At last. Do you remember I set your Rage poems for jazz orchestra?" Pullman was the Beat poet, the last survivor of the Kerouac generation. He was a withered little lizard of a man who was having trouble twisting his neck to look up at Clive. "These days I don't remember a thing, not a fucking thing," he said pleasantly in a high-pitched, chirpy voice. "But if you said you did it, you did it."

"You remember Molly, though," Clive said. "Who?" Pullman kept a straight face for two seconds, then cackled and clutched at Clive's forearm with slender white ringers. "Oh sure," he said in his Bugs Bunny voice. "Molly and me go way back to '65 in the East Village. I remember Molly. Oh boy!" Clive concealed his disquiet as he did the sums. She would have turned sixteen in the June of that year. Why had she never mentioned it? He probed neutrally. "She came out for the summer, I suppose."

"Uh-uh. She came to my Twelfth Night party. What a girl, eh, George?" Statutory rape, then. Three years before him. She never told him about Hart Pullman. And didn't she come to the premier of Rage? Didn't she come to the restaurant afterward? He couldn't remember. Not a fucking thing. George had turned his back to talk to the American sisters. Deciding there was nothing to lose, Clive cupped his hand about his mouth and leaned down to speak in Pullman's ear. "You never fucked her, you lying reptile. She wouldn't have stooped to it."

It wasn't his intention to walk away at this point, for he wanted to hear Pullman's reply, but just then two loud groups cut in from left and right, one to pay respects to George, the other to honour the poet, and in a swirl of repositioning Clive found himself freed and walking away. Hart Pullman and the teenage Molly. Sickened, he pushed his way back through the crowd and arrived in a small clearing and stood there, mercifully ignored, looking around at the friends and acquaintances absorbed in conversation. He felt himself to be the only one who really missed Molly. Perhaps if he'd married her he would have been worse than George, and wouldn't even have tolerated this gathering. Nor her helplessness. Tipping from the little squarish brown plastic bottle thirty sleeping pills into his palm. The pestle and mortar, a tumbler of scotch. Three tablespoons of yellow white sludge. She looked at him when she took it, as if she knew. With his left hand he cupped her chin to catch the spill. He held her while she slept, and then all through the night.

Nobody else was missing her. He looked around at his fellow mourners now, many of them his own age, Molly's age, to within a year or two. How prosperous, how influential, how they had flourished under a government they had despised for almost seventeen years. Talking 'bout my generation. Such energy, such luck. Nurtured in the postwar settlement with the state's own milk and juice, and then sustained by their parents' tentative, innocent prosperity, to come of age in full employment, new universities, bright paperback books, the Augustan age of rock and roll, affordable ideals. When the ladder crumbled behind them, when the state withdrew her tit and became a scold, they were already safe, they consolidated and settled down to forming this or that-taste, opinion, fortunes. He heard a woman call out merrily, "I can't feel my hands or feet and I'm going! As he turned, he saw a young man behind him who had been about to touch his shoulder. He was in his mid-twenties and bald, or shorn, and wore a grey suit with no overcoat.

"Mr. Linley. I'm sorry to intrude on your thoughts," the man said, drawing his hand away. Clive assumed he was a musician, or someone come to collect his autograph, and shrank his face into its mask of patience. "That's all right." "I was wondering if you'd have time to come across and talk to the foreign secretary. He's keen to meet you."

Clive pursed his lips. He didn't want to be introduced to Julian Garmony, but neither did he want to go to the bother of snubbing him. No escape. "You show the way/ he said, and was led past standing clumps of his friends, some of whom guessed where he was going and tried to lure him from his guide.

"Hey, Linley. No talking to the enemy!"

The enemy indeed. What had attracted her? Garmony was a strange-looking fellow: large head, with wavy black hair that was all his own, a terrible pallor, thin unsensual lips. He had made a life in the political marketplace with an unexceptional stall of xenophobic and punitive opinions. Vernon's explanation had always been simple: high-ranking bastard, hot in the sack. But she could have found that anywhere. There must also have been the hidden talent that had got him to where he was and even now was driving him to challenge the PM for his job.

The aide delivered Clive into a horseshoe grouped around Garmony, who appeared to be making a speech or telling a story. He broke off to slip his hand into Clive's and murmur intensely, as though they were alone, "I've been wanting to meet you for years."

"How do you do."

Garmony spoke up for the benefit of the company, two of whom were young men

with the pleasant, openly dishonest look of gossip columnists. The minister was

performing and Clive was a kind of prop. "My wife knows a few of your piano pieces

by heart."

Again. Clive wondered. Was he as domesticated and tame a talent as some of his younger critics claimed - the thinking man's Gorecki? "She must be good," he said.

It had been a while since he had met a politician close up, and what he had forgotten was the eye movements, the restless patrol for new listeners or defectors, or the proximity of some figure of higher status, or some other main chance that might slip by.

Garmony was looking around now, securing his audience. "She was brilliant. Goldsmiths, then the Guildhall. A fabulous career ahead of her..." He paused for comic effect. "Then she met me and chose medicine." Only the aide and another staffer, a woman, tittered. The journalists were unmoved. Perhaps they had heard it all before.

The foreign secretary's eyes had settled back on Clive. "There was another thing. I wanted to congratulate you on your commission. The Millennial Symphony. D'you know, that decision went right up to cabinet level?"

"So I heard. And you voted for me."

Clive had allowed himself a note of weariness, but Garmony reacted as though he had been effusively thanked. "Well, it was the least I could do. Some of my colleagues wanted this pop star chap, the ex-Beatle. Anyway, how is it coming along? Almost done?"

"Almost."

His extremities had been numb for half an hour but it was only now that Clive felt the chill finally envelop his core. In the warmth of his studio he would be in shirtsleeves, working on the final pages of this symphony, whose premiere was only weeks away. He had already missed two deadlines and he longed to be home.

He put out his hand to Garmony. "It was very nice to meet you. I have to be getting along."

But the minister did not take his hand and was speaking over him, for there was still a little more to be wrung from the famous composer's presence. "Do you know, I've often thought that it's the freedom of artists like yourself to pursue your work that makes my own job worthwhile..." More followed in similar style as Clive gazed on, no sign of his growing distaste showing in his expression. Garmony, too, was his generation. High office had eroded his ability to talk levelly with a stranger. Perhaps that was what he offered her in bed, the thrill of the impersonal. A man twitching in front of mirrors. But surely she preferred emotional warmth. Lie still, look at me, really look at me. Perhaps it was nothing more than a mistake, Molly and Garmony. Either way, Clive now found it unbearable.

The foreign secretary reached his conclusion. "These are the traditions that make us what we are."

"I was wondering," Clive said to Molly's ex-lover, "whether you're still in favour of hanging."

Garmony was well able to deal with this sudden shift, but his eyes hardened. "I think most people are aware of my position on that. Meanwhile, I'm happy to accept the view of Parliament and the collective responsibility of the cabinet." He had squared up, and he was also turning on the charm. The two journalists edged a little closer with their notebooks.

"I see you once said in a speech that Nelson Mandela deserved to be hanged." Garmony, who was due to visit South Africa the following month, smiled calmly. The speech had recently been dug up, rather scurrilously, by Vernon's paper. "I don't think you can reasonably nail people to things they said as hothead undergraduates." He paused to chuckle. "Almost thirty years ago. I bet you said or thought some pretty shocking things yourself."

"I certainly did," Clive said. "Which is my point. If you'd had your way then, there wouldn't be much chance for second thoughts now." Garmony inclined his head briefly in acknowledgment. "Fair enough point. But in the real world, Mr. Linley, no justice system can ever be free of human error." Then the foreign secretary did an extraordinary thing that quite destroyed Clive's theory about the effects of public office and that in retrospect he was forced to admire. Garmony reached out and, with his forefinger and thumb, caught hold of the lapel of Clive's overcoat and, drawing him close, spoke in a voice that no one else could hear.

"The very last time I saw Molly she told me you were impotent and always had been."

"Complete nonsense. She never said that."

"Of course you're bound to deny it. Thing is, we could discuss it out loud in front of the gentlemen over there, or you could get off my case and make a pleasant farewell. That is to say, fuck off."

The delivery was rapid and urgent, and as soon as it was over Garmony leaned back, beaming as he pumped the composer's hand, and called out to the aide, "Mr. Linley has kindly accepted an invitation to dinner." This last may have been an agreed code, for the young man stepped across promptly to usher Clive away while Garmony turned his back on him to say to the journalists, "A great man, Clive Linley. To air differences and remain friends, the essence of civilised existence, don't you think?"

An hour later Vernon's car, which was absurdly small to have a chauffeur, dropped Clive in South Kensington. Vernon got out to say goodbye. "Terrible funeral."

"Not even a drink."

"Poor Molly."

Clive let himself into the house and stood in the hallway, absorbing the warmth of the radiators and the silence. A note from his housekeeper told him there was a flask of coffee in the studio. Still in his coat, he walked up there, took a pencil and a sheet of manuscript paper, and, leaning against the grand piano, scribbled down the ten descending notes. He stood by the window, staring at the page, imagining the contrapuntal cellos. There were many days when the commission to write a symphony for the millennium was a ridiculous affliction: a bureaucratic intrusion on his creative independence; the confusion about where exactly Giulio Bo, the great Italian conductor, would be able to rehearse the British Symphony Orchestra; the mild but constant irritation of overexcited or hostile press scrutiny; the fact that he had failed to meet two deadlines - the millennium itself was still years away. There were also days like this one, when he thought of nothing but the music and could not stay away. Keeping his left hand, which was still numb from cold, in the pocket of his coat, he sat at the piano and played the passage as he had written it, slow, chromatic, and rhythmically tricky. There were two time signatures, in fact. Then, still with his right hand and at half speed, he improvised the cellos' rising line and played it again several times, with variations, until he was satisfied. He scribbled out the new part, which was at the very top of the cellos range and would sound like some furious energy restrained. Releasing it later, in this final section of the symphony, would be a joy.

He left the piano and poured some coffee, which he drank at his usual place by the window. Three-thirty, and already dark enough to turn on lights. Molly was ashes. He would work through the night and sleep until lunch. There wasn't really much else to do. Make something, and die. After the coffee he recrossed the room and remained standing, stooped over the keyboard in his overcoat, while he played with both hands by the exhausted afternoon light the notes as he had written them. Almost right, almost the truth. They suggested a dry yearning for something out of reach. Someone.

It was at times like this that he used to phone and ask her over, when he was too restless to sit at the piano for long and too excited by new ideas to leave it alone. If she was free, she would come over and make tea, or mix exotic drinks, and sit in that worn-out old armchair in the corner. Either they talked or she made her requests and listened with eyes closed. Her tastes were surprisingly austere for such a party-loving sort. Bach, Stravinsky, very occasionally Mozart. But she was no longer a girl by then, no longer his lover. They were companionable, too wry with each other to be passionate, and they liked to be free to talk about their affairs. She was like a sister, judging his women with far more generosity than he ever allowed her men. Otherwise they talked music or food. Now she was fine ash in an alabaster urn for George to keep on top of his wardrobe. At last he was warm enough, though his left hand still tingled. He removed his coat and slung it over Molly's chair. Before returning to the piano he went about the room turning on lamps. For over two hours he tinkered with the cello part and sketched in further orchestration, oblivious to the darkness outside and the muted, discordant pedal notes of the evening rush hour. It was only a bridging passage to the finale; what fascinated him was the promise, the aspiration - he imagined it as a set of ancient worn steps turning gently out of sight - the yearning to climb on and up and finally arrive, by way of an expansive shift, at a remote key and, with wisps of sound falling away like so much dissolving mist, at a concluding melody, a valediction, a recognisable melody of piercing beauty that would transcend its unfashionability and seem both to mourn the passing century and all its senseless cruelty and to celebrate its brilliant inventiveness. Long after the excitement of the first performance was over, long after the millennial celebrations, the fireworks and analyses and potted histories, were done with, this irresistible melody would remain as the dead century's elegy. This was not only Clive's fantasy, it was also that of the commissioning committee, which had chosen a composer who characteristically conceived of, say, this rising passage in terms of steps that were ancient and made of stone. Even his supporters, at least in the seventies, granted the term "archconservative," while his critics preferred "throwback," but all agreed that along with Schubert and McCartney, Linley could write a melody. The work had been commissioned early so that it could "play itself" into public consciousness; for example, it had been suggested to Clive that a noisy, urgent brass passage might be used as a signature for the main evening television news. The committee, dismissed by the music establishment as middlebrow, above all longed for a symphony from which could be distilled at least one tune, a hymn, an elegy for the maligned and departed century, that could be incorporated into the official proceedings, much as "Nessun Dorma" had been into a football tournament. Incorporated, then set free to take its chances of an independent life in the public mind during the third millennium.

For Clive Linley the matter was simple. He regarded himself as Vaughan Williams's heir, and considered terms like "conservative" irrelevant, a mistaken borrowing from the political vocabulary. Besides, during the seventies, when he was starting to be noticed, atonal and aleatoric music, tone rows, electronics, the disintegration of pitch into sound, in fact the whole modernist project, had become an orthodoxy taught in the colleges. Surely its advocates, rather than he himself, were the reactionaries. In 1975 he published a hundred-page book which, like all good manifestos, was both attack and apology. The old guard of modernism had imprisoned music in the academy, where it was jealously professionalised, isolated, and rendered sterile, its vital covenant with a general public arrogantly broken. Clive gave a sardonic account of a publicly subsidised "concert" in a nearly deserted church hall, in which the legs of a piano were repeatedly struck with the broken neck of a violin for over an hour. An accompanying program note explained, with references to the Holocaust, why at this stage in European history no other forms of music were viable. In the small minds of the zealots, Clive insisted, any form of success, however limited, any public appreciation whatsoever, was a sure sign of aesthetic compromise and failure. When the definitive histories of twentieth-century music in the West came to be written, the triumphs would be seen to belong to blues, jazz, rock, and the continually evolving traditions of folk music. These forms amply demonstrated that melody, harmony, and rhythm were not incompatible with innovation. In art music, only the first half of the century would figure significantly, and then only certain

composers, among whom Clive did not number the later Schoenberg and "his like." So much for the attack. The apologia borrowed and distorted the well-worn device from Ecclesiastes. It was time to recapture music from the commissars, and it was time to reassert music's essential communicativeness, for it was forged, in Europe, in a humanistic tradition that had always acknowledged the enigma of human nature; it was time to accept that a public performance was "a secular communion," and it was time to recognise the primacy of rhythm and pitch and the elemental nature of melody. For this to happen without merely repeating the music of the past, we had to evolve a contemporary definition of beauty, and this in turn was not possible without grasping a "fundamental truth." At this point Clive boldly borrowed from some unpublished and highly speculative essays by a colleague of Noam Chomsky's, which he had read while on holiday in the man's house on Cape Cod:

our capacity to "read" rhythms, melodies, and pleasing harmonies, like our uniquely human ability to learn language, was genetically prescribed. These three elements were found by anthropologists to exist in all musical cultures. Our ear for harmony was hardwired. (Furthermore, without a surrounding context of harmony, disharmony was meaningless and uninteresting.) Understanding a line of melody was a complex mental act, but it was one that even an infant could perform; we were born into an inheritance, we were Homo musicus; defining beauty in music must therefore entail a definition of human nature, which brought us back to the humanities and communicativeness...

Clive Linley's *Recalling Beauty* was published to coincide with the premiere at the Wigmore Hall of his *Symphonic Dervishes for Virtuoso Strings*, a work of such cascading polyphonic brilliance, and interrupted by such a hypnotic lament, that it was loathed and loved in equal measure, thereby securing his reputation and the currency of his book.

Creation apart, the writing of a symphony is physically arduous. Every second of playing time involved writing out, note by note, the parts of up to two dozen instruments, playing them back, making adjustments to the score, playing again, rewriting, then sitting in silence, listening to the inner ear synthesise and orchestrate the vertical array of scribbles and deletions; amending again until the bar was right, and playing it once more on the piano. By midnight Clive had extended and written out in full the rising passage and was starting on the great orchestral hiatus that would precede the sprawling change of key. By four o'clock in the morning he had written out the major parts and knew exactly how the modulation would work, how the mists would evaporate. He stood up from the piano, exhausted, satisfied with the progress he had made but apprehensive: he had brought this massive engine of sound to a point where the real work on the finale could begin, and it could do so now only with an inspired invention—the final melody, in its first and simplest form, baldly stated on a solo wind instrument, or perhaps the first violins. He had reached the core, and felt burdened. He turned out the lamps and walked down to his bedroom. He had no preliminary sketch of an idea, not a scrap, not even a hunch, and he would not find it by sitting at the piano and frowning hard. It could come only in its own time. He knew from experience that the best he could do was relax, step back, while remaining alert and receptive. He would have to take a long walk in the country, or even a series of long walks. He needed mountains, big skies. The Lake District, perhaps. The best ideas caught him by surprise at the end of twenty miles, when his mind was elsewhere. In bed at last, lying on his back in total darkness, taut, resonating from mental effort, he saw jagged rods of primary colour streak across his retina, then fold and writhe into sunbursts. His feet were icy; his arms and chest were hot. Anxieties about work transmuted into the baser metal of simple night fear: illness and death, abstractions that soon found their focus in the sensation he still felt in his left hand. It was cold and inflexible and prickly, as though he had been sitting on it for half an hour. He massaged it with his right hand and nursed it against the warmth of his stomach. Wasn't this the kind of sensation Molly had had when she went to hail that cab by the Dorchester? He had no mate, no wife, no George, to care for him, and perhaps that was a mercy. But what instead? He rolled onto his side and drew the blankets around him. The nursing home, the TV in the dayroom, bingo, and the old men with their fags, and piss and dribbling. He wouldn't stand for it. He would see a doctor in the morning. But that's what Molly had done and they had sent her off for tests. They could manage your descent, but they couldn't prevent it. Stay away then, monitor your own decline; then, when it was no longer possible to work, or to live with dignity, finish it yourself. But how could he stop himself passing that point, the one Molly had reached so quickly, when he would be too helpless, too disoriented, too stupid to kill himself?

Ridiculous thoughts! He sat up and groped for the bedside light and pulled out from under a magazine the sleeping pills he preferred to avoid. He took one and leaned back against the pillows, chewing it slowly. Still massaging his hand, he mothered himself with sensible thoughts. His hand had been in the cold, that was all, and he was overtired. His proper business in life was to work, to finish a symphony by finding its lyrical summit. What had oppressed him an hour before was now his solace, and after ten minutes he put out the light and turned on his side: there was always work. He would walk in the Lake District. The magical names were soothing him: Blea Rigg, High Stile, Pavey Ark, Swirl How. He would walk the Langstrath Valley, cross the stream and climb toward Scafell Pike, and come home by way of Alien Crag. He knew the circuit well. Striding out, high on the ridge, he would be restored, he would see clearly.

He had swallowed his hemlock, and there'd be no more tormenting fantasies now. This thought too was comfort, so that long before the chemicals had reached his brain, he had drawn his knees toward his chest and was released. Hardknott, 111 Bell, Cold Pike, Poor Crag, Poor Molly...

The thought recurred to Vernon Halliday during an uncharacteristic lull in his morning that he might not exist. For thirty uninterrupted seconds, he had been sitting at his desk gently palpating his head with his fingertips and worrying. Since arriving at the Judge two hours earlier, he had spoken, separately and intensely, to forty people. And not only spoken: in all but two of these exchanges he had decided, prioritised, delegated, chosen, or offered an opinion that was bound to be interpreted as a command. This exercise of authority did not sharpen his sense of self, as it usually did. Instead it seemed to Vernon that he was infinitely diluted; he was simply the sum of all the people who had listened to him, and when he was alone, he was nothing at all. When he reached, in solitude, for a thought, there was no one there to think it. His chair was empty; he was finely dissolved throughout the building, from the city desk on the sixth floor, where he was about to intervene to prevent the sacking of a long-serving sub editor who could not spell, to the basement, where parking allocations had brought senior staff to open war and an assistant editor to the brink of resignation. Vernon's chair was empty because he was in Jerusalem, the House of Commons, Cape Town, and Manila, globally disseminated like dust; he was on TV and radio, at dinner with some bishops, giving a speech to the oil industry or a seminar to European Union specialists. In the brief moments during the day when he was alone, a light went out. Even the ensuing darkness encompassed or inconvenienced no one in particular. He could not say for sure that the absence was his. This sense of absence had been growing since Molly's funeral. It was wearing into him. Last night he had woken beside his sleeping wife and had to touch his own face to be assured he remained a physical entity.

Had Vernon taken a few of his senior staff aside in the canteen and confided about his condition, he might have been alarmed by their lack of surprise. He was widely known as a man without edges, without faults or virtues, as a man who did not fully exist. Within his profession Vernon was revered as a nonentity. It was one of the marvels of newspaper lore, difficult to exaggerate and often recounted in City wine bars, the manner in which he had become editor of the Judge. Years back, he had been the bland and hardworking lieutenant for two gifted editors in succession and had shown an instinctive talent for making neither friends nor allies. When the Washington correspondent fell ill, Vernon was ordered to stand in for him. In his third month, at a dinner for the German ambassador, a congressman mistook Vernon for a writer on the Washington Post and tipped him off about a presidential indiscretion—a radical hair implant procured at taxpayers' expense. It was generally accepted that "Patagate," a story that dominated American domestic politics for almost a week, had been broken by Vernon Halliday of the Judge. Meanwhile, back in London, one gifted editor was falling to another in bloody battles with a meddlesome board of directors. Vernon's return home coincided with a sudden realignment of proprietorial interests. The stage was littered with the severed limbs and torsos of titans cut down to size. Jack Mobey, the board's own placeman, had failed to take the venerable broadsheet far enough downmarket. There was no one left but Vernon.

Now he sat at his desk and tentatively massaged his scalp. Lately he had realised he was learning to live with nonexistence. He could not mourn for long the passing of something-himself—that he could no longer quite recall. All this was a worry, but it was a worry that was several days old. There was now a physical symptom. It involved the whole of the right side of his head, both skull and brain somehow, a sensation for which there was simply no word. Or it might have been the sudden interruption of a sensation so constant and familiar that he had not been conscious of it, like a sound one becomes aware of the moment it stops. He knew exactly when it had begun—the night before, as he had stood up from dinner—and it was there when he woke in the morning, continuous and indefinable, not cold, or tight, or airy, though somewhere in between. Perhaps the word was dead. His right hemisphere had died. He knew so many people who had died that in his present state of dissociation he could begin to contemplate his own end as a commonplace—a flurry of burying or cremating, a welt of grief raised, then subsiding as life swept on. Or perhaps he had already died. Or again—and he felt this strongly—perhaps all that was needed was a couple of sharp taps to the side of the head with a medium-sized hammer. He opened his desk drawer. There was a metal ruler left by Mobey, fourth editor in succession to fail to reverse the Judge's declining circulation. Vernon Halliday was trying not to be the fifth. He had raised the ruler several inches above his right ear when there was a knock on his open door and Jean, his secretary, entered and he was obliged to convert the blow into a pensive scratching. "The schedule. Twenty minutes." She peeled off a sheet and gave it to him and left the rest on the conference table as she went out.

He scanned the lists. Under Foreign, Dibben was writing on "Garmony's Washington triumph." That would need to be a sceptical piece, or a hostile one. And if it really was a triumph, it could stay off the front page. On the Home list was, at long last, the piece by the science editor on an antigravity machine from a university in Wales. It was an attention-grabber and Vernon had pushed for it, half dreaming of a gizmo you strapped to the bottom of your shoes. In fact the thing turned out to weigh four tons, required nine million volts, and didn't even work. They were running the piece anyway, at the bottom of the front page. Also under Home was "Piano quartet," quadruplets born to a concert pianist. His deputy, along with features and the whole home desk, was fighting him over this, all of them hiding their fastidiousness behind a pretence of realism. Four

wasn't enough these days, they were saying; and no one had ever heard of the mother, who wasn't pretty anyway and didn't want to talk to the press. Vernon had overruled them. Last month's circulation average was seven thousand lower than the month before. Time was running out for the judge. He was still considering whether to run a story about Siamese twins joined at the hip who had secured a job in local government. One of their hearts was weak, so they couldn't be separated. "If we're going to save this paper," Vernon liked to say at the morning editorial conference, "you're all going to have to get your hands dirty." Everyone nodded, nobody agreed. As far as the old hands, the "grammarians," were concerned, the Judge would stand or fall by its intellectual probity. They felt safe in this view because no one on the paper, apart from Vernon's predecessors, had ever been sacked. The first of the section editors and deputies were filing in when Jean waved to him from the door to pick up the phone. It had to be important because she was mouthing a name. George Lane, her lips said, Vernon turned his back on the room and remembered how he had avoided Lane at the funeral. "George. A deeply moving occasion. I was going to drop you a-" "Yes, yes. Something's come up. I think you should see it." "What sort of thing?"

"Photographs."

"Can you bike them round?"

"Absolutely not, Vernon. This is very, very hot. Can't you come now?" Not all Vernon's contempt for George Lane had to do with Molly. Lane owned one and a half percent of the Judge and had put money into the relaunch that marked the fall of Jack Mobey and Vernon's elevation. George thought that Vernon was in his debt. Also, George knew nothing about newspapers, which was why he thought the editor of a national daily could saunter out of his office to cross the entire width of London to Holland Park at eleven-thirty in the morning. "I'm rather busy at present," Vernon said.

"I'm doing you a big favour here. Sort of thing the News of the World would kill for."

"I could be there sometime after nine this evening."

"Very well. I'll see you then," George said huffily, and rang off. By now every chair but one at the conference table had been taken, and as Vernon lowered himself into it the conversation subsided. He touched the side of his head. Now that he was in company again, back on the job, his interior absence was no longer an affliction. Yesterday's paper was spread before him. He said into the near silence, "Who subbed the environment leader?" "Pat Redpath."

"On this paper, hopefully is not a sentence adverb, nor will it ever be, especially in a leader, for god sakes. And none..." He trailed away for dramatic effect while pretending to scan the piece.

"None usually takes a singular verb. Can we get these two things generally understood?"

Vernon was aware of the approval round the table.

This was the kind of thing the grammarians liked to hear. Together they would see the paper into the grave with its syntax pure.

Crowd-pleaser dispensed, he pressed on at speed. One of his few successful innovations, perhaps his only one so far, was to have reduced the daily conference from forty to fifteen minutes by means of a few modestly imposed rules: no more than five minutes on the post-mortem-what's done is done; no joke-telling, and above all, no anecdotes-he didn't tell them, so no one else could. He turned to the international pages and frowned. "An exhibition of pottery shards in Ankara? A news item? Eight hundred words? I simply don't get it, Frank." Frank Dibben, the deputy foreign editor, explained, perhaps with a trace of mockery. "Well, you see, Vernon, it represents a fundamental shift in our understanding of the influence of the early Persian Empire on-" "Paradigm shifts in broken pots aren't news, Frank."

Grant McDonald, the deputy editor, who was sitting at Vernon's elbow, cut in gently. "Thing is, Julie failed to file from Rome. They had to fill the-" "Not again. What is it now?"

"Hepatitis C."

"So what about AP?"

Dibben spoke up. "This was more interesting."

"You're wrong. It's a complete turnoff. Even the TLS wouldn't run it." They moved on to the day's schedule. In turn the editors summarised the stories on their lists. When it came to Frank's turn, he pushed for his Garmony story to lead the front page.

Vernon heard him out, and then: "He's in Washington when he should be in Brussels. He's cutting a deal with the Americans behind the Germans' backs. Short term gain, long-term disaster. He was a terrible home secretary, he's even worse at the Foreign Office, and he'll be the ruin of us if he's ever prime minister which is looking more and more likely."

"Well, yes," Frank agreed, his softness of tone concealing his fury about the Ankara put-down.

"You said all that in your leader, Vernon. Surely the point is not whether we agree with the deal, but whether it's significant."

Vernon was wondering whether he might just bring himself to let Frank go.

What was he doing wearing an earring?

"Quite right, Frank," Vernon said cordially. "We're in Europe. The Americans want us in Europe."

The special relationship is history. The deal has no significance. The coverage stays on the inside pages. Meanwhile, we'll continue to give Garmony a hard time."

They listened to the sports editor, whose pages Vernon had recently doubled at the expense of arts and books. Then it was the turn of Lettice O'Hara, the features editor.

"I need to know if we can go ahead with the "Welsh children's home." Vernon said, "I've seen the guest list. A lot of big cheeses. We can't afford the legal costs if it goes wrong."

Lettice looked relieved, and began to describe an investigative piece she had commissioned on a medical scandal in Holland.

"Apparently, doctors are exploiting the euthanasia laws to-" Vernon interrupted her. "I want to run the Siamese twins story in Friday's paper."

There were groans. But who was going to object first?

Lettice. "We don't even have a picture."

"So send someone to Middlesbrough this afternoon." There was sullen silence, so Vernon continued. "Look, they work in a section of the local hygiene department called Forward Planning.

It's a sub's dream."

The home editor, Jeremy Ball, said, "We spoke last week and it was okay. Then he phoned yesterday. I mean, it was the other half. The other head. Doesn't want to talk.

Doesn't want a picture."

"Oh God!" Vernon cried. "Don't you see? That's all part of the story. They've fallen out. First thing anyone would want to know-how do they settle disputes?"

Lettice was looking gloomy. She said, "Apparently there are bite marks. On both faces."

"Brilliant!" Vernon exclaimed. "No one else is onto this yet. Friday, please. Page three. Now, moving on. Lettice. This eight-page chess supplement. Frankly, I'm not convinced."

Another three hours passed before Vernon found himself alone again. He was in the washroom, looking in the mirror while rinsing his hands. The image was there, but he wasn't entirely convinced. The sensation, or the nonsensation, still occupied the right side of his head like a tight-fitting cap. When he trailed his finger across his scalp, he could identify the border, the demarcation line where feeling on the left side became not quite its opposite but its shadow, or its ghost. His hands were under the drier when Frank Dibben came in. Vernon sensed that the younger man had followed him in to talk, for a lifetime's experience had taught him that a male journalist did not urinate easily, or by preference, in the presence of his editor.

"Look, Vernon," Frank said from where he stood at the urinal. "I'm sorry about this morning. You're absolutely right about Garmony. I was completely out of order."

Rather than look around from the drier and be obliged to watch the deputy foreign editor at his business, Vernon gave himself another turn with the hot air. Dibben was in fact relieving himself copiously, thunderously even. Yes, if Vernon ever sacked anyone, it would be Frank, who was shaking himself vigorously, for just a second too long, and pressing on with his apology. "I mean, you're absolutely right about not giving him too much space." Cassius is hungry, Vernon thought. He'll head his department, then he'll want my job. Dibben turned to the washbasin. Vernon put his hand lightly on his shoulder, the forgiving touch. "It's all right, Frank. I'd rather hear opposing views at conference. That's the whole point of it."

"It's kind of you to say that, Vernon. I just wouldn't want you to think I was going soft on Garmony."

This festival of first-naming marked the end of the exchange. Vernon gave a little reassuring laugh and stepped out into the corridor. Waiting for him right by the door was Jean, with a bundle of correspondence for him to sign. Behind her was Jeremy Ball, and behind him was Tony Montano, the managing director. Someone whom Vernon could not see was just joining the back of the queue. The editor began to move toward his office, signing the letters as he went and listening to Jean's rundown of his week's appointments. Everyone moved with him. Ball was saying, "This Middlesborough photo. I'd like to avoid the trouble we got into over the wheelchair Olympics. I thought we'd go for something pretty straightforward..." "I want an exciting picture, Jeremy. I can't see them in the same week, Jean. It wouldn't look right. Tell him Thursday."

"I had in mind an upright Victorian sort of thing. A dignified portrait." "He's leaving for Angola. The idea was he'd go straight out to Heathrow as soon as he'd seen you."

"Mr. Halliday?"

"I don't want dignified portraits, even in obits. Get them to show us how they gave each other the bite marks. Okay, I'll see him before he leaves. Tony, is this about the parking?"

"I'm afraid I've seen a draught of his resignation letter."

"Surely there's one little space we can find."

"We've tried all that. Head of maintenance is offering to sell his for three thousand pounds."

"Don't we run the risk of sensationalism?"

"Sign it in two places, and initial where I've marked."

"It's not a risk, Jeremy. It's a promise. But Tony, head of maintenance doesn't even have a car."

"Mr. Halliday?"

"The space is his by right."

"Offer him five hundred. Is that the lot, Jean?"

"I'm not prepared to do that."

"The letter of thanks to the bishops is just being typed."

"What if they were both talking on the phone?"

"Excuse me. Mr. Halliday?"

"It's too weak. I want a picture that tells a story. Dirty hands time, remember? Look, you'd better throw maintenance out of his space if he's not using it."

"They'll strike, like last time. All the terminals went down."

"Fine. Your choice, Tony. Five hundred pounds or the terminals." "I'll ask someone from the picture desk to pop up and—"

"Don't bother. Just send the guy to Middlesborough."

"Mr. Halliday? Are you Mr. Vernon Halliday?"

"Who are you?"

The talking group came to a halt, and a thin, balding man in a black suit whose jacket was tightly buttoned pushed his way forward and tapped Vernon on the elbow with an envelope, which he put into Vernon's hands. Then the man planted his feet well apart and read in a declamatory monotone from a sheet of paper that he held in front of him with two hands. "By the power of the above-headed court in the Principal Registry invested in me, I make known to you, Vernon Theobald Halliday, the order of said court as follows: that Vernon Theobald Halliday, of thirteen, The Rooks, London NW1 and editor of the Judge newspaper, shall not publish, nor cause to have published, nor distribute or disseminate by electronic or any other means, nor describe in print, or cause such descriptions of the proscribed matter hereafter to be referred to as the material, to be printed, nor describe the nature and terms of this order; the aforesaid material being..." The thin man fumbled the page turn, and the editor, his secretary, the home editor, the deputy foreign editor, and the managing director inclined toward the tipstall, waiting. "... all photographic reproductions, or versions of such reproductions whether engraved, drawn, painted, or produced by any other means, of the likeness of Mr. John Julian Garmony of number one, Carlton Gardens..." "Garmony!"

Everyone began talking at once, and the final rhetorical flourishes of the thin man in the suit two sizes too small were lost. Vernon set off toward his office. These were blanket provisions. But they had nothing on Garmony, nothing at all. He reached his office, kicked the door shut behind him, and dialled. "George. These photographs are of Garmony."

"I'm saying nothing until you get here."

"He's already served an injunction."

"I told you they were hot. I think your public-interest arguments will be irresistible."

As soon as Vernon hung up, his private line rang. It was Clive Linley.

Vernon hadn't seen him since the funeral.

"I need to talk to you about something."

"Clive, this isn't really the best moment for me."

"No, quite. I need to see you. It's important. What about after work tonight?"

There was a heaviness in his old friend's tone that made Vernon reluctant to put him off. All the same, he tried half-heartedly.

"It's rather a hectic day..."

"It won't take long. It's important, really important."

"Well, look, I'm seeing George Lane tonight. I suppose I could call in on my way."

"Vernon, I'm very grateful to you."

He had a few seconds after the call to wonder about Clive's manner. So pressing in a lugubrious way, and rather formal. Clearly something terrible had happened, and he began to feel embarrassed by his ungenerous response. Clive had been a true friend when Vernon's second marriage came apart, and he had encouraged him to go for the editorship when everybody else thought he was wasting his time. Four years ago, when Vernon was laid up with a rare viral infection of the spine, Clive had visited almost every day, bringing books, music, videos, and champagne. And in 1987, when Vernon was out of a job for several months, Clive had lent him ten thousand pounds. Two years later, Vernon discovered by accident that Clive had borrowed the money from his bank. And now, in his friend's moment of need, Vernon was behaving like a swine.

When he tried to call back there was no reply. He was about to dial again when the managing director came in with the newspaper's lawyer. "You've got something on Garmony you didn't tell us about." "Absolutely not, Tony. Obviously, something's floating around and he's panicked. Someone should check if he's served on any of the others." The lawyer said, "We have. He hasn't."

Tony was looking distrustful. "And you know nothing?"

"Not a thing. Bolt from the blue."

There were more suspicious questions of this sort and more denials from Vernon.

As they were leaving, Tony said, "You won't do anything without us, now, will you, Vernon: 1" "You know me," he said, and winked. As soon as the two had gone he reached for the phone. He was just beginning on Clive's number when he heard a commotion in the outer office. His door was kicked open and a woman came running in, followed by Jean, who rolled her eyes heavenward for the editor's benefit. The woman stood in front of his desk, weeping. In her hand was a crumpled letter. It was the dyslexic sub. It was hard to make sense of everything she was saying, but Vernon could discern one repeated line.

"You said you'd stand by me. You promised!"

He could not know it then, but the moment before she entered his room was the last occasion he would be alone until he left the building at nine-thirty that evening.

Molly used to say that what she loved most about Clive's house was that he had lived in it so long. In 1970, when most of his contemporaries were still in rented rooms and several years away from buying their first damp basement flats, Clive inherited from a rich and childless uncle a gigantic stuccoed villa with a purpose-built two-story artist's studio on the third and fourth floors whose vast arched windows faced north over a mess of pitched roofs. In keeping with the times and his youth—he was twenty-one—he had the outside painted purple and filled the inside with his friends, mostly musicians. Certain celebrities passed through. John Lennon and Yoko Ono spent a week there. Jimi Hendrix stayed a night, and was the likely cause of a fire that destroyed the banisters. As the decade progressed, the house calmed down. Friends still stayed over, but only for a night or two, and no one slept on the floor. The stucco was restored to cream, Vernon was a lodger for a year, Molly stayed for a summer, a grand piano was carried up to the studio, bookshelves were built, oriental rugs were laid over worn-out carpets, and various pieces of Victorian furniture were carried in. Apart from a few old mattresses, very little was ever carried out, and this must have been what Molly liked, for the house was a history of an adult life, of changing tastes, fading passions, and growing wealth. The earliest Woolworth's cutlery was still in the same kitchen drawer as the antique silver set. Oil paintings by English and Danish impressionists hung in proximity to faded posters advertising Clive's early triumphs or famous rock concerts—the Beatles at Shea Stadium, Bob Dylan on the Isle of Wight, the Rolling Stones at Altamont. Some of the posters were worth more than the paintings.

By the early eighties this was the home of a youngish, wealthy composer—by then he had written the music for Dave Spieler's hit movie, *Christmas on the Moon* and a certain dignity (so Clive considered in his better moments) seemed to fall from the gloomy high ceilings onto the huge lumpy sofas and all the stuff, not quite junk, not quite antique, that had been bought in Lots Road. The impression of seriousness was furthered when an energetic housekeeper started to keep order. The not-quite-junk was dusted or polished and began to look antique. The last of the lodgers departed and the silence in the house was workmanlike. Over several years Clive seemed to race through two childless marriages relatively unscathed. The three women he had known closely lived abroad. The one he was with now, Susie Marcellan, was in New York, and when she came over it was never for very long. The years and all the successes had narrowed his life to its higher purpose; he was becoming not quite zealous, but cagey, about his privacy. Profile writers and photographers were never invited in these days, and the time had long passed when Clive snatched hours between friends or lovers or parties to write a sudden daring opening, or even a complete song. The open house was no more. But Vernon still took pleasure in his visits, for he had done a lot of his own growing up here and had only fond memories of girlfriends, hilarious evenings with various drugs, and working through the nights in a small bedroom at the rear of the house. Back in the days of typewriters and carbon copies. Even now, as he left his taxi and mounted the steps to the front door, he experienced again, though only vestigially, a sensation he never had these days, of genuine anticipation, the feeling that anything might happen.

When Clive opened the door, Vernon saw no immediate signs of distress or crisis. The two friends embraced in the hall. "There's champagne in the fridge." Clive fetched the bottle and two glasses, and Vernon followed him up the stairs. The house had a closeted atmosphere, and he guessed that Clive had not been out for a day or two. A half-open door revealed the bedroom to be in a mess. Clive sometimes asked the housekeeper not to come in when he was working hard. The state of the studio confirmed the impression.

Manuscript paper covered the floor; dirty plates, cups, and wineglasses were strewn around the piano and the keyboard and MIDI computer on which Clive sometimes worked out his orchestrations. The air felt close and damp, as though it had been breathed many times.

"Sorry about the mess."

Together they cleared books and papers off the armchairs, then sat with their champagne and small talk. Clive told Vernon about his encounter with Garmony at Molly's funeral.

"The foreign secretary actually said 'fuck off?'" Vernon asked. "We could have used that in the paper."

"Quite. I'm trying to keep out of everyone's way."

Since they were on Garmony, Vernon gave an account of his two conversations that morning with George Lane. It was just the kind of story to appeal to Clive, but he showed no curiosity about the photographs and the injunction and seemed to be only half listening. He was on his feet as soon as the story was over. He refilled their glasses. The silence that announced the change of subject was heavy. Clive set down his glass and went to the far end of the studio, then paced back, gently massaging the palm of his left hand.

"I've been thinking about Molly," he said at last. "The way she died, the speed of it, her helplessness, how she wouldn't have wanted it that way. Stuff we've talked about before."

He paused. Vernon drank and waited.

"Well, the thing is this. I've had my own little scare lately..." He raised his voice to forestall Vernon's concern. "Probably nothing. You know, the sort of thing that gives you the sweats at night and by daylight seems like stupidity. That's not what I want to talk about. It's almost certainly nothing, but there's nothing lost by what I'm going to ask you. Just supposing I did get ill in a major way, like Molly, and I started to go downhill and make terrible mistakes—you know, errors of judgment, not knowing the names of things or who I was, that kind of thing. I'd like to know there was someone who'd help me to finish it... I mean, help me to die. Especially if I got to the point where I couldn't make the decision for myself, or act on it. So what I'm saying is this. I'm asking you, as my oldest friend, to help me if it ever got to the point where you could see that it was the right thing. Just as we might have helped Molly if we'd been able..." Clive trailed away, a little disconcerted by Vernon, who stared at him with his glass raised, as though frozen in the act of drinking. Clive cleared his throat noisily.

"It's an odd thing to ask, I know. It's also illegal in this country, and I wouldn't want you to put yourself on the wrong side of the law, assuming, of course, you were to say yes. But there are ways, and there are places, and if it came to it, I'd want you to get me there on a plane. It's a heavy responsibility, something I could only—ask of a close friend like yourself. All I can say is that I'm not in a state of panic or anything. I have given it a lot of thought." Then, because Vernon still sat in silence, staring, he added with some embarrassment, "Well, there it is."

Vernon set down his glass and scratched his head, and then stood.

"You don't want to talk about this scare you've had?"

"Absolutely not."

Vernon glanced at his watch. He was late for George. He said, "Well, look, it's quite a thing you're asking me. It needs some thought." Clive nodded. Vernon moved toward the door and led the way down the stairs. In the hallway they embraced again. Clive opened the door, and Vernon stepped out into the night.

"I'll need to think about it."

"Quite so. Thanks for coming."

Both men accepted that the nature of the request, its intimacy and self-conscious reflection on their friendship, had created, for the moment, an uncomfortable emotional proximity, which was best dealt with by their parting without another word, Vernon walking quickly up the street in search of a taxi and Clive going back up the stairs to his piano.

Lane himself opened the door of his Holland Park mansion.

"You're late."

Vernon, who assumed that George was trying on the part of press lord summoning his editor, declined to apologise or even reply and followed his host across a bright hallway into the living room. Fortunately, there was nothing here to remind Vernon of Molly. The room was furnished in what he had once heard her describe as the Buckingham Palace style: thick mustard-yellow carpets, big dusty pink sofas and armchairs with raised patterns of vines and scrolls, brown oil paintings of racehorses at grass and reproduction Fragonards of bucolic ladies on swings in immense gilt frames, and the whole opulent emptiness over lit by lacquered brass lamps. George reached the massive brecciate marble surround of the coal effect gas fire and turned.

"You'll take a glass of port?"

Vernon realised that he had had nothing to eat since a cheese and lettuce sandwich at lunchtime.

Why else would George's pretentious construction have made him feel so irritable? And what was George doing wearing a silk dressing gown over his day clothes? The man was simply preposterous.

"Thanks. I will."

They sat almost twenty feet apart, with the hissing fireplace between them. Had he been alone for half a minute, Vernon thought, he might have crawled over to the fender and knocked the right side of his head on it. Even in company now, he did not feel right.

"I've seen the circulation figures," George said gravely. "Not good." "The rate of decline is slowing," was Vernon's automatic response, his mantra.

"But it's still a decline."

"These things take time to turn around." Vernon tasted his port and protected himself with the recollection that George owned a mere one and a half percent of the Judge and knew nothing about the business. It was also useful to remember that his fortune, his publishing "empire," was rooted in an energetic exploitation of the weak-headed: hidden numerical codes in the Bible foretold the future, the Incas hailed from outer space, the Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant, the Second Coming, the Third Eye, the Seventh Seal, Hitler was alive and well in Peru. It was not easy to be lectured by George on the ways of the world. "It seems to me," he was saying, "that what you need now is one big story, something that'll catch fire, something your opponents will have to run with just to keep up."

What was needed for the circulation to stop going down was for the circulation to go up. But Vernon kept a neutral expression, for he knew that George was working his way around to the photographs. Vernon tried to speed him up. "We've got a good story on Friday about a pair of Siamese twins in local government..."

"Pah!"

It worked. George was suddenly on his feet.

"That's not a story, Vernon. That's tittle-tattle. I'll show you a story. I'll show you why Julian Garmony is running round the Inns of Court with his thumb up his arse! Come with me."

They went back down the hall, past the kitchen, and along a narrower corridor that ended in a door, which George opened with a Yale key. Part of the complicated arrangement of his marriage had been that Molly kept herself, her guests, and her stuff separate in a wing of the house. She was spared the sight of her old friends stifling their

amusement at George's pomposity, and he escaped the tidal waves of Molly's disorder engulfing the rooms of the house used for entertaining. Vernon had visited Molly's apartment many times, but he had always used the external entrance. Now, as George pushed the door open, Vernon tensed. He felt unprepared. He would have preferred to look at the photographs in George's part of the house.

In the semidarkness, during the seconds it took George to fumble for the light switch, Vernon experienced for the first time the proper impact of Molly's death—the plain fact of her absence. The recognition was brought on by familiar smells that he had already started to forget—her perfume, her cigarettes, the dried flowers she kept in the bedroom, coffee beans, the bakery warmth of laundered clothes. He had talked about her at length, and he had thought of her too, but only in snatches during his crowded working days, or while drifting into sleep, and until now he had never really missed her in his heart, or felt the insult of knowing he would never see or hear her again. She was his friend, perhaps the best he had ever had, and she had gone. He could easily have made a fool of himself in front of George, whose outline was blurring even now. This particular kind of desolation, a painful constriction right behind his face, above the roof of his mouth, he hadn't known since childhood, since prep school. Homesick for Molly. He concealed a gasp of self-pity behind a loud adult cough. The place was exactly as she had left it the day she finally consented to move to a bedroom in the main house, to be imprisoned and nursed by George. As they passed the bathroom, Vernon glimpsed a skirt of hers he remembered, draped over the towel rail, and a towel and a bra lying on the floor. Over a quarter of a century ago she and Vernon had made a household for almost a year, in a tiny rooftop flat on the rue de Seine. There were always damp towels on the floor then, and cataracts of her underwear tumbling from the drawers she never closed, a big ironing board that was never folded away, and in the one overfilled wardrobe dresses, crushed and shouldering sideways like commuters on the metro. Magazines, makeup, bank statements, bead necklaces, flowers, knickers, ashtrays, invitations, tampons, LPs, aeroplane tickets, high-heeled shoes—not a single surface was left uncovered by something of Molly's, so that when Vernon was meant to be working at home, he took to writing in a cafe along the street. And yet each morning she arose fresh from the shell of this girly squalor, like a Botticelli Venus, to present herself, not naked, of course, but sleekly groomed, at the offices of Paris Vogue.

"In here," George said, and led the way into the living room. There was a large brown envelope on a chair. As George was reaching for it, Vernon had time to glance around. She could walk in at any moment. There was a book on Italian gardens lying face-down on the floor and, on a low table, three wineglasses, each with a lining of greyish green mould. Perhaps he himself had been drinking from one. He tried to remember his last visit here, but the occasions blurred. There were long conversations about her move to the main house, which she dreaded and resisted, knowing it would be a one-way journey. The alternative was a nursing home. Vernon and all her other friends advised her to stay in Holland Park, believing familiarity would serve her better. How wrong they had been. She would have been freer, even under the strictest institutional regime, than she turned out to be in George's care.

He was gesturing Vernon into a chair, relishing the moment as he pulled the photographs from the envelope. Vernon was still thinking of Molly. Were there moments of clarity as she slid under, when she felt abandoned by the friends who did not come to visit her, not knowing they were barred by George? If she cursed her friends, she surely would have cursed Vernon. George had placed the photographs—three ten-by-eights—face-down on his lap. He was enjoying what he took by Vernon's silence to be speechless impatience. He piled on the supposed agony by talking with slow deliberation.

"I should say one thing first. I've no idea why she took these, but one thing is sure. It could have been done only with Garmony's consent. He's looking straight at the lens. The copyright was hers, and as the sole trustee of her estate, I effectively own it. It goes without saying, I shall expect the Judge to protect its sources."

He peeled one off and passed it across. For a moment it made no sense, beyond its glossy blacks and whites; then it resolved into a medium close-up. Incredible. Vernon stretched out his hand for another; head to foot and tightly cropped. And then the third, three-quarter profile. He turned back to the first, all other thoughts suddenly dispelled. Then he studied the second and third again, seeing them fully now and feeling waves of distinct responses: astonishment first, followed by a wild inward hilarity. Suppressing it gave him a sense of levitating from his chair. Next he experienced ponderous responsibility—or was it power? A man's life, or at least his career, was in his hands. And who could tell, perhaps Vernon was in a position to change the country's future for the better. And his paper's circulation. "George," he said at last, "I need to think about this very carefully."

Half an hour later Vernon left George's house with the envelope in his hands. He stopped a cab, and having asked the driver to start his clock and stay put by the side of the road, he sat in the back for a few minutes, soothed by the engine's throb, massaging the right side of his head and considering what to do. Finally he asked for South Kensington.

The light was on in the studio, but Vernon did not ring the bell. At the top of the steps he scribbled a note, which he thought the housekeeper was likely to read first and which he therefore kept vague. He folded it over twice before pushing it through the front door and hurrying back to the waiting taxi. Yes, on one condition only: that you 'd do the same for me.

As Give had predicted, the melody was elusive as long as he remained in London, in his studio. Each day he made attempts, little sketches, bold stabs, but he produced nothing but quotations, thinly or well disguised, of his own work. Nothing sprang free in its own idiom, with its own authority, to offer the element of surprise that would be the guarantee of originality. Each day, after abandoning the attempt, he committed himself to easier, duller tasks, like fleshing out orchestrations, rewriting messy pages of manuscript, and elaborating on a sliding resolution of minor chords that marked the opening of the slow movement. Three appointments evenly spread over eight days kept him from leaving for the Lake District: he had said months before that he would attend a fund-raising dinner; as a favour to a nephew who worked in radio, he had agreed to give a five-minute talk, and he had let himself be persuaded into judging a composition prize at a local school. Finally, he had to delay yet another day because Vernon asked to meet him. During this time, when he wasn't working, Clive studied his maps, rubbed liquid wax into his walking boots, and checked his equipment—important when planning a winter walk in the mountains. It would have been possible to back out of his engagements by assuming the licence of the free artistic spirit, but he loathed such arrogance. He had a number of friends who played the genius card when it suited, failing to show up for this or that in the belief that whatever local upset it caused, it could only increase respect for the compelling nature of their high calling. These types—novelists were by far the worst managed to convince friends and families that not only their working hours but every nap and stroll, every fit of silence, depression, or drunkenness, bore the exculpatory ticket of high intent. A mask for mediocrity, was Clive's view. He didn't doubt that the calling was high, but bad behaviour was not a part of it. Perhaps every century there was an exception or two to be made. Beethoven, yes; Dylan Thomas, most certainly not. He told no one he was stalled in his work. Instead, he said he was off on a short walking holiday. In fact, he didn't regard himself as blocked at all. Sometimes the work was hard, and you had to do whatever experience had taught you was most effective. So he stayed on in London, attended the dinner, gave the talk, judged the prize, and, for the first time in his life, had a major disagreement with Vernon. It was not until the first day of March that he arrived at Euston station and found an empty first-class compartment on a train bound for Perth.

He enjoyed long train journeys for the soothing rhythm they gave to thought exactly what he needed after his confrontation with Vernon. But settling down in the compartment was not as easy as it should have been. Coming along the platform, in a dark mood, he had become aware of an unevenness in his stride, as though one leg had grown longer than the other. Once he had found his seat he removed his shoe and discovered a flattened black mass of chewing gum embedded deep in the zigzag tread of the sole. Upper lip arched in disgust, he was still picking, cutting, and scraping away with a pocket knife as the train began to move. Beneath the patina of grime, the gum was still slightly pink, like flesh, and the smell of peppermint was faint but distinct. How appalling, the intimate contact with the contents of a stranger's mouth, the bottomless vulgarity of people who chewed gum and who let it fall from their lips where they stood. He returned from washing his hands, spent some minutes searching in desperation for his reading glasses before finding them on the seat beside him, and then realised he had not brought a pen. When at last he directed his attention out of the window, a familiar misanthropy had settled on him and he saw in the built landscape sliding by nothing but ugliness and pointless activity.

In his corner of West London, and in his self-preoccupied daily round, it was easy for Clive to think of civilization as the sum of all the arts, along with design, cuisine, good wine, and the like. But now it appeared that this was what it really was—square miles of meagre modern houses whose principal purpose was the support of TV aerials and dishes; factories producing worthless junk to be advertised on the televisions and, in dismal lots, lorries queuing to distribute it; and everywhere else, roads and the tyranny of traffic. It looked like a raucous dinner party the morning after. No one would have wished it this way, but no one had been asked. Nobody planned it, nobody wanted it, but most people had to live in it. To watch it mile after mile, who would have guessed that kindness or the imagination, that Purcell or Britten, Shakespeare or Milton, had ever existed? Occasionally, as the train gathered speed and they swung farther away from London, countryside appeared and with it the beginnings of beauty, or the memory of it, until seconds later it dissolved into a river straightened to a concreted sluice or a sudden agricultural wilderness without hedges or trees, and roads, new roads probing endlessly, shamelessly, as though all that mattered was to be elsewhere. As far as the welfare of every other living form on earth was concerned, the human project was not just a failure, it was a mistake from the very beginning. If anyone was to blame, it was Vernon. Clive had travelled this line often in the past and had never felt bleak about the view. He couldn't put it down to chewing gum or a mislaid pen. Their row of the evening before was still sounding in his ears, and he worried that the echoes would pursue