

Peter Crowther's book on the election was already in the shops. It was called *Landslide!*, and the witty assistant at Dillon's had arranged the window in a scaled-down version of that natural disaster. The pale-gilt image of the triumphant Prime Minister rushed towards the customer in a gleaming slippage. Nick stopped in the street, and then went in to look at a copy. He had met Peter Crowther once, and heard him described as a hack and also as a 'mordant analyst': his faint smile, as he flicked through the pages, concealed his uncertainty as to which account was nearer the truth. There was clearly something hacklike in the speed of publication, only two months after the event; and in the actual writing, of course. The book's mordancy seemed to be reserved for the efforts of the Opposition. Nick looked carefully at the photographs, but only one of them had Gerald in it: a group picture of 'The 101 New Tory MPs', in which he'd been clever enough, or quick enough, to get into the front row. He sat there smiling and staring as if in his own mind it was already the front bench. The smile, the white collar worn with a dark shirt, the floppy breast-pocket handkerchief would surely be famous when the chaps in the rows behind were mere forgotten grins and frowns. Even so, he was mentioned only twice in the text – as a 'bon viveur', and as one of the 'dwindling minority' of Conservative MPs who had passed, 'as Gerald Fedden, the new Member for Barwick, so obviously has', through public school and Oxbridge. Nick left the shop with a shrug; but out in the street he felt delayed pride at this sighting of a person he knew in a published book.

He had a blind date at eight that evening, and the hot August day was a shimmer of nerves, with little breezy interludes of

lustful dreaming. The date wasn't totally blind – 'just very short-sighted', Catherine Fedden said, when Nick showed her the photograph and the letter. She seemed to like the look of the man, who was called Leo, and who she said was so much her type; but his handwriting made her jumpy. It was both elaborate and impetuous. Catherine had a paperback called *Graphology: The Mind in the Hand*, which gave her all sorts of warnings about people's tendencies and repressions ('Artist or Madman?' 'Pet or Brute?'). 'It's those enormous ascenders, darling,' she said: 'I see a lot of ego.' They had pursed their lips again over the little square of cheap blue writing paper. 'You're sure that doesn't just mean a very strong sex drive?' Nick asked. But she seemed to think not. He had been excited, and even rather moved, to get this letter from a stranger; but it was true the text itself raised few expectations. 'Nick – OK! Ref your letter, am in Personnel (London Borough of Brent). We can meet up, discuss Interests and Ambitions. Say When. Say Where' – and then the enormous rampant L of Leo going halfway down the page.

Nick had moved into the Feddens' big white Notting Hill house a few weeks before. His room was up in the roof, still clearly the children's zone, with its lingering mood of teenage secrets and rebellions. Toby's orderly den was at the top of the stairs, Nick's room just along the skylit landing, and Catherine's at the far end; Nick had no brothers or sisters but he was able to think of himself here as a lost middle child. It was Toby who had brought him here, in earlier vacations, for his London 'seasons', long thrilling escapes from his own far less glamorous family; and Toby whose half-dressed presence still haunted the attic passage. Toby himself had never perhaps known why he and Nick were friends, but had amiably accepted the evidence that they were. In these months after Oxford he was rarely there, and Nick had been passed on as a friend to his little sister and to their hospitable parents. He was a friend of the family; and there was something about him they trusted, a gravity, a certain shy polish, something not

quite apparent to Nick himself, which had helped the family agree that he should become their lodger. When Gerald had won Barwick, which was Nick's home constituency, the arrangement was jovially hailed as having the logic of poetry, or fate.

Gerald and Rachel were still in France, and Nick found himself almost resenting their return at the end of the month. The housekeeper came in early each morning, to prepare the day's meals, and Gerald's secretary, with sunglasses on top of her head, looked in to deal with the imposing volume of post. The gardener announced himself by the roar of the mower outside an open window. Mr Duke, the handyman (His Grace, as the family called him), was at work on various bits of maintenance. And Nick was in residence, and almost, he felt, in possession. He loved coming home to Kensington Park Gardens in the early evening, when the wide treeless street was raked by the sun, and the two white terraces stared at each other with the glazed tolerance of rich neighbours. He loved letting himself in at the three-locked green front door, and locking it again behind him, and feeling the still security of the house as he looked into the red-walled dining room, or climbed the stairs to the double drawing room, and up again past the half-open doors of the white bedrooms. The first flight of stairs, fanning out into the hall, was made of stone; the upper flights had the confidential creak of oak. He saw himself leading someone up them, showing the house to a new friend, to Leo perhaps, as if it was really his own, or would be one day: the pictures, the porcelain, the curvy French furniture so different from what he'd been brought up with. In the dark polished wood he was partnered by reflections as dim as shadows. He'd taken the chance to explore the whole house, from the wedge-shaped attic cupboards to the basement junk room, a dim museum in itself, referred to by Gerald as the *trou de gloire*. Above the drawing-room fireplace there was a painting by Guardi, a capriccio of Venice in a gilt rococo frame; on the facing wall were two large gilt-framed mirrors.

Like his hero Henry James, Nick felt that he could ‘stand a great deal of guilt’.

Sometimes Toby would have come back, and there would be loud music in the drawing room; or he was in his father’s study at the back of the house making international phone calls and having a gin-and-tonic – all this done not in defiance of his parents but in rightful imitation of their own freedoms in the place. He would go into the garden and pull his shirt off impatiently and sprawl in a deckchair reading the sport in the *Telegraph*. Nick would see him from the balcony and go down to join him, slightly breathless, knowing Toby quite liked his rower’s body to be looked at. It was the easy charity of beauty. They would have a beer and Toby would say, ‘My sis all right? Not too mad, I hope,’ and Nick would say, ‘She’s fine, she’s fine,’ shielding his eyes from the dropping August sun, and smiling back at him with reassurance, among other unguessed emotions.

Catherine’s ups and downs were part of Nick’s mythology of the house. Toby had told him about them, as a mark of trust, one evening in college, sitting on a bench by the lake. ‘She’s pretty volatile, you know,’ he said, quietly impressed by his own choice of word. ‘Yah, she has these moods.’ To Nick the whole house, as yet only imagined, took on the light and shade of moods, the life that was lived there as steeped in emotion as the Oxford air was with the smell of the lake water. ‘She used to, you know, cut her arms, with a razor blade.’ Toby winced and nodded. ‘Thank god she’s grown out of all that now.’ This sounded more challenging than mere moods, and when Nick first met her he found himself glancing tensely at her arms. On one forearm there were neat parallel lines, a couple of inches long, and on the other a pattern of right-angled scars that you couldn’t help trying to read as letters; it might have been an attempt at the word ELLE. But they were long healed over, evidence of something that would otherwise be forgotten; sometimes she traced them abstractedly with a finger.

‘Looking after the Cat’ was how Gerald had put it before they went away, with the suggestion that the task was as simple as that, and as responsible. It was Catherine’s house but it was Nick who was in charge. She camped nervously in the place, as though she and not Nick was the lodger. She was puzzled by his love of its pompous spaces, and mocked his knowledgeable attachment to the paintings and furniture. ‘You’re such a snob,’ she said, with a provoking laugh; coming from the family he was thought to be snobbish about, this was a bit of a facer. ‘I’m not really,’ said Nick, as if a small admission was the best kind of denial, ‘I just love beautiful things.’ Catherine peered around comically, as though at so much junk. In her parents’ absence her instincts were humbly transgressive, and mainly involved smoking and asking strangers home. Nick came back one evening to find her drinking in the kitchen with an old black minicab driver and telling him what the contents of the house were insured for.

At nineteen she already had a catalogue of failed boyfriends, each with a damning epithet, which was sometimes all Nick knew them by: ‘Crabs’ or ‘Drip-Dry’ or ‘Quantity Surveyor’. A lot of them seemed almost consciously chosen for their unacceptability at Kensington Park Gardens: a tramplike Welshman in his forties whom she’d met in the Notting Hill Record Exchange; a beautiful punk with FUCK tattooed on his neck; a Rastafarian from round the corner who moaned prophetically about Babylon and the downfall of Thatcher. Others were public schoolboys and sleek young professionals on the make in the Thatcher slump. Catherine was slight but physically reckless; what drew boys to her often frightened them away. Nick, in his secret innocence, felt a certain respect for her experience with men: to have so many failures required a high rate of preliminary success. He could never judge how attractive she was. In her case the genetic mixture of two good-looking parents had produced something different from Toby’s sleepy beauty: Gerald’s large confidence-winning

mouth had been awkwardly squashed into the slender ellipse of Rachel's face. Catherine's emotions always rushed to her mouth.

She loved anything satirical, and was a clever vocal mimic. When she and Nick got drunk she did funny imitations of her family, so that oddly they seemed not to have gone away. There was Gerald, with his facetious boom, his taste for the splendid, his favourite tags from the *Alice* books. 'Really, Catherine,' protested Catherine, 'you would try the patience of an oyster.' Or, 'You recall the branches of arithmetic, Nick? Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision . . . ?' Nick joined in, with a sense of treacherously bad manners. It was Rachel's style that attracted him more, as a code both aristocratic and distantly foreign. Her *group* sounded nearly Germanic, and the sort of thing she would never belong to; her *philistine*, pronounced as a French word, seemed to cover, by implication, anyone who said it differently. Nick tried this out on Catherine, who laughed but perhaps wasn't much impressed. Toby she couldn't be bothered to mimic; and it was true that he was hard to 'get'. She did a funny turn as her godmother, the Duchess of Flintshire, who as plain Sharon Feingold had been Rachel's best friend at Cranborne Chase school, and whose presence in their lives gave a special archness to their joke about Mr Duke the odd-job man. The Duke that Sharon had married had a twisted spine and a crumbling castle, and the Feingold vinegar fortune had come in very handy. Nick hadn't met the Duchess yet, but after Catherine's impression of a thoughtless social dynamo he felt he'd had the pleasure without the concomitant anxiety.

Nick never talked to Catherine about his crush on her brother. He was afraid she would find it funny. But they talked a good deal about Leo, in the week of waiting, a week that crawled and jumped and crawled. There wasn't much to go on, but enough for two lively imaginations to build a character from: the pale-blue letter, with its dubious ascenders; his voice,

which only Nick had heard, in the stilted cheerful chat which finalized the plans, and which was neutrally London, not recognizably black, though he sensed a special irony and lack of expectation in it; and his colour photograph, which showed that if Leo wasn't as handsome as he claimed he still demanded to be looked at. He was sitting on a park bench, seen from the waist up and leaning back – it was hard to tell how tall he was. He was wearing a dark bomber jacket and gazed away with a frown, which seemed to cast a shadow over his features, or to be a shadow rising within them. Behind him you could see the silver-grey crossbar of a racing bike, propped against the bench.

The substance of the original ad ('Black guy, late 20s, v. good-looking, interests cinema, music, politics, seeks intelligent like-minded guy 18–40') was half-obliterated by Nick's later dreamings and Catherine's premonitions, which dragged Leo further and further off into her own territory of uncomfortable sex and bad faith. At times Nick had to reassure himself that he and not Catherine was the one who had a date with him. Hurrying home that evening he glanced through the requirements again. He couldn't help feeling he was going to fall short of his new lover's standards. He was intelligent, he had just got a first-class degree from Oxford University, but people meant such different things by music and politics. Well, knowing the Feddens would give him an angle. He found the tolerant age range comforting. He was only twenty, but he could have been twice that age and Leo would still have wanted him. In fact he might be going to stay with Leo for twenty years: that seemed to be the advertisement's coded promise.

The second post was still scattered across the hall, and there was no sound from upstairs; but he felt, from a charge in the air, that he wasn't alone. He gathered up the letters and found that Gerald had sent him a postcard. It was a black-and-white picture of a Romanesque doorway, with flanking saints and a

lively Last Judgement in the tympanum: ‘Eglise de Podier, XII siècle’. Gerald had large, impatient handwriting, in which most of the letters were missed out, and perhaps unnegotiable with his very thick nib. The author of *Graphology* might have diagnosed an ego as big as Leo’s, but the main impression was of almost evasive haste. He had a sign-off that could have been ‘Love’ but could have been ‘Yours’ or even, absurdly, ‘Hello’ – so you didn’t quite know where you stood with him. As far as Nick could make out they were enjoying themselves. He was pleased to have the card, but it cast a slight shadow, by reminding him that the August idyll would soon be over.

He went into the kitchen, where Catherine, it must be, had made a mess since Elena’s early morning visit. The cutlery drawers tilted heavily open. There was a vague air of intrusion. He darted into the dining room, but the boulle clock ticked on in its place on the mantelpiece, and the silver safe was locked. The brown Lenbach portraits of Rachel’s forebears stared as sternly as Leo himself. Upstairs in the drawing room the windows were open on to the curving rear balcony, but the blue lagoon of the Guardi still gleamed and flashed above the mantelpiece. A low cupboard in the break-fronted bookcase stood open. Funny how mere living in a house like this could have the look of a burglary. He peered down from the balcony, but there was no one in the garden. He went more calmly up the further three flights of stairs, and when his nerves about Leo took hold of him again they were almost a relief from the grown-up anxieties of guarding the house. He saw Catherine moving in her room, and called out to her. A breeze had slammed his door and his own room was stifling, the books and papers on the table by the window curled up and hot. He said, ‘I thought we’d had a break-in for a moment’ – but the fear of it had already gone.

He picked out two possible shirts on their hangers, and was looking in the mirror when Catherine came in and stood behind him. He sensed at once her desire to touch him and her

inability to do so. She didn't meet his eye in the mirror, she simply looked at him, at his shoulder, as though he would know what to do. She had the bewildered slight smile of someone only just coping with pain. Nick smiled back more broadly, to make a few seconds of delay, as if it might still be one of their jokes. 'Blue or white?' he said, covering himself with the shirts again, like two wings. Then he dropped his arms and the shirts trailed on the floor. He saw night falling already and Leo on his racing bike racing home to Willesden. 'Not too good?' he said.

She walked over and sat on the bed, where she leant forward and glanced up at him, with her ominous hint of a smile. He had seen her in this little flowered dress day after day, it was what she strode about the streets in, something off the Portobello Road that looked just right for the district or her fantasy of it, but now, armless, backless, legless, seemed hardly a garment at all. Nick sat beside her and gave her a hug and a rub, as if to warm her up, though she felt hot as a sick child. She let it happen, then shifted away from him a little. Nick said, 'What can I do, then?' and saw that he was hoping to be comforted himself. In the deep, bright space of the mirror he noticed two young people in an undisclosed crisis.

She said, 'Can you get the stuff out of my room. Yeah, take it all downstairs.'

'OK.'

Nick went along the landing and into her room, where as usual the curtains were closed and the air soured with smoke. The dense red gauze wrapped round the lampshade gave off a dangerous smell, and filtered the light across a chaos of bedclothes, underwear, LPs. Drawers and cupboards had been gone through – the imaginary burglary might have reached its frustrated climax here. Nick peered around and though he was alone he mugged a good-natured readiness to take control. His mind was working quickly and responsibly, but he clung to his

last few moments of ignorance. He made a low quiet concentrating sound, looking over the table, the bed, the junk heap on the lovely old walnut chest. The cupboard in the corner had a wash-basin in it, and Catherine had laid out half a dozen things on the tiled surround, like instruments before an operation: a heavy carving knife, a curved two-handled chopper, a couple of honed-down filleting knives, and the two squat little puncheons that Nick had seen Gerald use to grapple and turn a joint with, almost as though it might still get away. He gathered them up in an awkward clutch, and took them carefully downstairs, with new, heavy-hearted respect for them.

She was adamant that he shouldn't call anyone – she hinted that worse things would follow if he did. Nick paced about in his uncertainty over this. His ignorance of what to do was a sign of his much larger ignorance about the world in which he'd recently arrived. He pictured the sick shock of her parents when they found out, and saw the stain on the record of his new life with the Feddens. He was untrustworthy after all, as he had suspected he was, and they had not. He had a dread of being in the wrong, but was also frightened of taking action. Perhaps he should try to find Toby? But Toby was a non-person to Catherine, treated at best with inattentive politeness. Nick was shaping the story in his head. He persuaded himself that disaster had been contemplated, stared at, and rejected. There had been a ritual of confrontation, lasting an hour, a minute, all afternoon – and maybe it would never have been more than a ritual. Now she was almost silent, passive, she yawned a lot, and Nick wondered if the episode had already been taken away, screened and isolated by some effective mechanism. Perhaps his own return had always played a part in her design. Certainly it made it hard for him to refuse her when she said, 'For god's sake don't leave me alone.' He said, 'Of course I won't,' and felt the occasion close in on him, suffocatingly, from a great distance. It was something else Toby had mentioned, by the lake: there are

times when she can't be alone, and she has to have someone with her. Nick had yearned then to share Toby's duty, to steep himself in the difficult romance of the family. And now here he was, with his own romance about to unfold in the back bar of the Chepstow Castle, and he was the person she had to have with her. She couldn't explain, but no one else would do.

Nick brought her down to the drawing room and she chose some music by going to the record cupboard and pulling out a disc without looking and then putting it on. She seemed to say she could act, but that deliberations were beyond her. It came on jarringly. The arm had come down in the wrong place, as if looking for a single. 'Ah yes . . . !' said Nick. It was the middle of the scherzo of Schumann's Fourth Symphony. He kept an eye on her, and felt he understood the way she let the music take care of her; he saw her drifting along in it, not knowing where she was particularly, but grateful and semi-interested. He was agitated by indecision, but he went with it himself for a few moments. The trio returned, but only for a brief airing before the magical transition to the finale . . . based, very obviously, on that of Beethoven's Fifth: he could have told her that, and how it was really the second symphony, and how all the material grew from the opening motif, except the unexpected second subject of the finale . . . He stood back and decided, in the bleak but proper light of responsibility, that he would go downstairs at once and ring Catherine's parents. But then, as he left the room, he thought suddenly of Leo, and felt sure he was losing his only chance with him: so he rang him instead, and put off the call to France until later. He didn't know how to explain it to Leo: the bare facts seemed too private to tell a stranger, and a watered-down version would sound like an invented excuse. Again he saw himself in the wrong. He kept clearing his throat as he dialled the number.

Leo answered very briskly, but that was only because he was having his dinner and still had to get ready – facts which Nick

found illuminating. His voice, with its little reserve of mockery, was exactly what he had heard before, but had lost in the remembering. Nick had only begun his apologies when Leo got the point and said in an amiable way that he was quite relieved, and dead busy himself. ‘Oh good,’ said Nick, and then felt almost at once that Leo could have been more put out. ‘If you’re sure you don’t mind . . .’ he added.

‘That’s all right, my friend,’ said Leo quietly, so that Nick had the impression there was someone else there.

‘I’d still really like to meet you.’

There was a pause before Leo said, ‘Absolutely.’

‘Well, what about the weekend?’

‘No. The weekend I cannot do.’

Nick wanted to say ‘Why not?’ but he knew the answer must be that Leo would be seeing other hopefuls then; it must be like auditions. ‘Next week?’ he said with a shrug. He wanted to do it before Gerald and Rachel got back, he wanted to use the house.

‘Yeah, going to the Carnival?’ said Leo.

‘Perhaps on the Saturday – we’re away over the bank holiday. Let’s get together before then.’ Nick longed for the Carnival, but felt humbly that it was Leo’s element. He saw himself losing Leo on their first meeting, where a whole street moves in a solid current and you can’t turn back.

‘The best thing is, if you give us a ring next week,’ said Leo.

‘I most certainly will,’ said Nick, pretending he thought all this was positive but feeling abruptly miserable and stiff in the face. ‘Look, I’m really sorry about tonight, I’ll make it up to you.’ There was another pause in which he knew his sentence

was being decided – his whole future perhaps. But then Leo said, in a throaty whisper,

‘You bet you will!’ – and as Nick started to giggle he hung up. So that little pause had been conspiratorial, a conspiracy of strangers. It wasn’t so bad. It was beautiful even. Nick hung up too and went to look at himself in the high gilt arch of the hall mirror. With the sudden hilarity of relief he thought how nice-looking he was, small but solid, clear-skinned and curly-headed. He could see Leo falling for him. Then the colour drained from him, and he climbed the stairs.

When it had cooled Nick and Catherine went down into the garden and out through the gate into the communal gardens beyond. The communal gardens were as much a part of Nick’s romance of London as the house itself: big as the central park of some old European city, but private, and densely hedged on three sides with holly and shrubbery behind high Victorian railings. There were one or two places, in the surrounding streets, where someone who wasn’t a keyholder could see through to a glade among the planes and tall horse chestnuts – across which perhaps a couple would saunter or an old lady wait for her even slower dog. And sometimes in these summer evenings, with thrush and blackbird song among the leaves, Nick would glimpse a boy walking past on the outside and feel a surprising envy of him, though it was hard to know how a smile would be received, coming from the inside. There were hidden places, even on the inside, the path that curled, as if to a discreet convenience, to the gardeners’ hut behind a larch-lap fence; the enclosure with the sandpit and the children’s slide, where genuine uniformed nannies still met and gossiped with a faint air of truancy; and at the far end the tennis courts, whose overlapping rhythms of serves and rallies and calls lent a calming reminder of other people’s exertions to the August dusk.

From end to end, just behind the houses, ran the broad gravel walk, with its emphatic camber and its metal-edged gutters where a child's ball would come to rest and the first few plane leaves, dusty but still green, were already falling, since the summer had been so hot and rainless all through. Nick and Catherine strolled along there, arm in arm, like a slow old couple; Nick felt paired with Catherine in a new, almost formal way. At regular intervals there were Victorian cast-iron benches, made with no thought of comfort, and between them on the grass a few people were sitting or picnicking in the warm early twilight.

After a minute Nick said, 'Feeling a bit better?' and Catherine nodded and pressed against him as they walked. The sense of responsibility came back to him, a grey weight in his chest, and he saw them from the point of view of the picnickers or an approaching jogger: not a dear old couple at all but a pair of kids, a skinny girl with a large nervous mouth and a solemn little blond boy pretending he wasn't out of his depth. Of course he must ring France, and hope that he got Rachel, since Gerald wasn't always good with these things. He wished he knew more about what had happened and why, but he was squeamish too. 'You'll be all right,' he said. He thought that asking her about it might only reopen the horror, and added, 'I wonder what it was all about,' as if referring to a mystery of long ago. She gave him a look of painful uncertainty, but didn't answer. 'Can't really say?' Nick said, and heard, as he sometimes did, his own father's note of evasive sympathy. It was how his family sidled round its various crises; nothing was named, and you never knew for sure if the tone was subtly comprehensive, or just a form of cowardice.

'No, not really.'

'Well, you know you always can tell me,' he said.

At the end of the path there was the gardener's cottage, huddled quaintly and servilely under the cream cliff of the

terrace. Beyond it a gate gave on to the street and they stood and looked out through its iron scrolls at the sporadic evening traffic. Nick waited, and thought despairingly of Leo at large in the same summer evening. Catherine said, 'It's when everything goes black and glittering.'

'Mm.'

'It's not like when you're down in the dumps, which is brown.'

'Right . . .'

'Oh, you wouldn't understand.'

'No, please go on.'

'It's like that car,' she said, nodding at a black Daimler that had stopped across the road to let out a distinguished-looking old man. The yellow of the early street lights was reflected in its roof, and as it pulled away reflections streamed and glittered in its dark curved sides and windows.

'It sounds almost beautiful.'

'It is beautiful, in a sense. But that isn't the point.'

Nick felt he had been given an explanation which he was too stupid, or unimaginative, to follow. 'It must be horrible as well,' he said, 'obviously . . .'

'Well, it's poisonous, you see. It's glittering but it's deadly at the same time. It doesn't want you to survive it. That's what it makes you realize.' She stepped away from Nick, so as to use her hands. 'It's the whole world just as it is,' she said, stretching out to frame it or hold it off: 'everything exactly the same. And it's totally negative. You can't survive in it. It's like being on Mars or something.' Her eyes were fixed but blurred. 'There you are, that's the best I can do,' she said, and turned her back.

He followed her. ‘But then it changes back again . . .’ he said.

‘Yes, Nick, it does,’ she said, with the offended tone that sometimes follows a moment of self-exposure.

‘I’m only trying to understand.’ He thought her tears might be a sign of recovery, and put an arm round her shoulder – though after a few seconds she made another gesture that meant freeing herself. Nick felt a hint of sexual repudiation, as if she thought he was taking advantage of her.

Later on, in the drawing room, she said, ‘Oh, god, this was your night with Leo.’

Nick couldn’t believe that she’d only just thought of that. But he said, ‘It’s all right. I’ve put him off till next week.’

Catherine smiled ruefully. ‘Well, he wasn’t really your type,’ she said.

Schumann had given way to The Clash, who in turn had yielded to a tired but busy silence between them. Nick prayed that she wouldn’t put on any more music – most of the stuff she liked had him clenched in resistance. He looked at his watch. They were an hour later in France, it was too late to ring them now, and he welcomed this rational and thoughtful postponement with a sense of cloudy relief. He went over to the much-neglected piano, its black lid the podium for various old art folios and a small bronze bust of Liszt – which seemed to give a rather pained glance at his sight-reading from the Mozart album on the stand. To Nick himself the faltering notes were like raindrops on a sandy path, and he was filled with a sense of what his evening could have been. The simple Andante became a vivid dialogue in his mind between optimism and recurrent pain; in fact it heightened both feelings to an unnecessary degree. It wasn’t long until Catherine stood up and said, ‘For god’s sake, darling, it’s not a fucking funeral.’

‘Sorry, darling,’ said Nick, and vamped through a few seconds of what they called Waldorf music before getting up and wandering out on to the balcony. They had only just started calling each other darling, and it seemed a nice part of the larger conspiracy of life at Kensington Park Gardens; but outside in the cool of the night Nick felt he was play-acting, and that Catherine was frighteningly strange to him. Her mirage of the beautiful poisonous universe shimmered before him again for a moment, but he couldn’t hold it, and it slipped quickly away.

There was a supper party in a nearby back garden, and the talk and light clatter carried on the still air. A man called Geoffrey was making everyone laugh, and the women kept calling out his name in excited protest between the semi-audible paragraphs of his story. Out in the communal gardens someone was walking a small white dog, which looked almost luminous as it bobbed and scampered in the late dusk. Above the trees and rooftops the dingy glare of the London sky faded upwards into weak violet heights. In summer, when windows everywhere were open, night seemed made of sound as much as shadow, the whisper of the leaves, the unsleeping traffic rumble, far-off car horns and squeals of brakes; voices, faint shouts, a waveband twiddle of unconnected music. Nick yearned for Leo, away to the north, three miles up the long straight roads, but possibly anywhere, moving with invisible speed on his silver bike. He wondered again in which park the photo of him had been taken; and of course what person, routinely intimate with Leo, had taken it. He felt hollow with frustration and delay. The girl with the white dog came back along the gravel path, and he thought how he might appear to her, if she glanced up, as an enviable figure, poised against the shining accomplished background of the lamplit room. Whereas, looking out, leaning out over the iron railing, Nick felt he had been swept to the brink of some new promise, a scented vista or vision of the night, and then held there.