

AMSTERDAM

By Ian McEwan
DOUBLEDAY

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 humor, 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 gray 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 be 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 recognize 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 standfirst 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 shriveled 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 honor, 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 fingers. "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 honor 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 gray 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 favor 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 hot-head 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 civilized existence, don't you think?"

Chapter Two

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 recognizable 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 apologia. The old guard of modernism had imprisoned music in the academy, where it was jealously professionalized, isolated, and rendered sterile, its vital covenant with a general public arrogantly broken. Clive gave a sardonic account of a publicly subsidized "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 recognize 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 synthesize 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 color 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 Allen 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, Ill Bell, Cold Pike, Poor Crag, Poor Molly ...