Lovereading.co.uk

Nocturnes

Kazuo Ishiguro

Published by Faber and Faber

Extract

All text is copyright © of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

NOCTURNES

Five Stories of Music and Nightfall

Kazuo Ishiguro

ff

faber and faber

First published in 2009
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA
This paperback edition published in 2010

Typeset by Faber and Faber Ltd
Printed in England by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon

All rights reserved
© Kazuo Ishiguro, 2009

The right of Kazuo Ishiguro to be identified as author
of this work has been asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–24500–0

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Crooner

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

But here I am talking like I'm a regular band member. Actually, I'm one of the 'gypsies', as the other musicians call us, one of the guys who move around the piazza, helping out whichever of the three cafe orchestras needs us. Mostly I play here at the Caffè Lavena, but on a busy afternoon, I might do a set with the Quadri boys, go over to the Florian, then back across the square to the Lavena. I get on fine with them all – and with the waiters too – and in any other city I'd have a regular position by now. But in this place, so obsessed with tradition and the past, everything's upside down. Anywhere else, being a guitar player would go in a guy's favour. But here? A guitar! The cafe managers get uneasy. It looks too modern, the tourists

won't like it. Last autumn I got myself a vintage jazz model with an oval sound-hole, the kind of thing Django Reinhardt might have played, so there was no way anyone would mistake me for a rock-and-roller. That made things a little easier, but the cafe managers, they still don't like it. The truth is, if you're a guitarist, you can be Joe Pass, they still wouldn't give you a regular job in this square.

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

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

movie. I remember once last summer, going from band to band and playing 'The Godfather' nine times in one afternoon.

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

Tony Gardner had been my mother's favourite. Back home, back in the communist days, it had been really hard to get records like that, but my mother had pretty much his whole collection. Once when I was a boy, I scratched one of those precious records. The apartment was so cramped, and a boy my age, you just had to move around sometimes, especially during those cold months when you couldn't go outside. So I was playing this game jumping from our little sofa to the armchair, and one time I misjudged it and hit the record player. The needle went across the record with a zip – this was long before CDs – and my mother came in from the kitchen and began shouting at me. I felt so bad, not just because she was shouting at me, but because I knew it was one of Tony Gardner's records, and I knew how much it meant to her. And I knew that this

one too would now have those popping noises going through it while he crooned those American songs. Years later, when I was working in Warsaw and I got to know about black-market records, I gave my mother replacements of all her worn-out Tony Gardner albums, including that one I scratched. It took me over three years, but I kept getting them, one by one, and each time I went back to see her I'd bring her another.

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

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

them on his face, took them off again, then back on again. He looked preoccupied and it disappointed me to see he wasn't really listening to our music.

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

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

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

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

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

So I sat down and told him some more. About my mother, our apartment, the black-market records. And though I couldn't remember what the albums were called, I started describing the pictures on their sleeves the way I

remembered them, and each time I did this, he'd put his finger up in the air and say something like: 'Oh, that would be *Inimitable*. *The Inimitable Tony Gardner*.' I think we were both really enjoying this game, but then I noticed Mr Gardner's gaze move off me, and I turned just in time to see a woman coming up to our table.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I'm not being rude.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Honey, I've told you. Don't be rude to the man.'

He hadn't shouted exactly, but his voice was suddenly hard and angry, and now there was a strange silence. Then Mr Gardner himself broke it, saying gently:

'I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to snap at you.'

He reached out a hand and grasped one of hers. I'd kind of expected her to shake him off, but instead, she moved in her chair so she was closer to him, and put her free hand over their clasped pair. They sat there like that for a few seconds, Mr Gardner, his head bowed, his wife gazing

emptily past his shoulder, across the square towards the Basilica, though her eyes didn't seem to be seeing anything. For those few moments it was like they'd forgotten not just me sitting with them, but all the people in the piazza. Then she said, almost in a whisper:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'It's your anniversary, Mr Gardner?'

'Anniversary?' He looked startled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

For the next few minutes Mr Gardner and I sat there

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So I played the chords in that key, and after maybe a whole verse had gone by, Mr Gardner began to sing, very softly, under his breath, like he could only half remember the words. But his voice resonated well in that quiet canal. In fact, it sounded really beautiful. And for a moment it was like I was a boy again, back in that apartment, lying on

the carpet while my mother sat on the sofa, exhausted, or maybe heartbroken, while Tony Gardner's album spun in the corner of the room.

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

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

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

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

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

'It's funny. Can you imagine what those tourists would

do if they realised a boat had just gone by containing the legendary Tony Gardner?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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