

# **The Long Sonata of the Dead**

**Bibliomysteries**

**by Andrew Taylor, 1951–**

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I HADN'T SEEN ADAM in the flesh for over twenty years. I had seen him on television, of course—it was increasingly hard to miss him—but the last time I had met him in person was when we picked up our degrees. Mary had been there too.

“Well,” he’d said, punching me gently on the arm. “Thank God it’s over. Let’s find a drink. We need to celebrate.”

“No,” I’d said. “I don’t want to.”

Mary hadn’t said anything at all.

I don’t deny that it was a shock to see Adam after all this time, and it wasn’t a pleasant one. It was the first of the three shocks that happened in swift succession that afternoon.

I was standing at one of the tall windows of the reading room overlooking St. James’s Square. It was a Tuesday afternoon in February, just after lunch, and it was raining. I was watching the domes of umbrellas scurrying like wet beetles on the pavements and the steady clockwise flow of traffic round the square. Adam must have walked across the garden in the middle. He came out of the gate in the railings on the north side. He paused for a moment, waiting for a gap in the traffic.

That’s when I recognized him. Despite the rain, he didn’t have a hat or umbrella. He was wearing a Burberry raincoat but even that was unbuttoned. He had his head thrown back and his legs a little apart. He was smiling as if the weather was a friend, not an inconvenience.

He had been standing like that the very first time I saw him, which was also in the rain. That had been the first day of our first term at university. I was staring down from my room at the cobbled court below and wishing I was still at home. There was Adam, looking as if he owned the place. Thirty seconds later I discovered that he was my new roommate. He was studying English, too, so we saw each other for a large part of every day for an entire year, apart from the holidays.

The traffic parted before him like the Red Sea. He strolled across the road, swinging his bag. I realized that he was coming here, to the London Library.

Adam looked up at the windows of the reading room. He couldn’t have seen me looking down at him—I was too far back from the glass. But I turned and moved away as if I had been caught doing something wrong.

It will help if I explain about the London Library before I go on. It’s a building, first of all, an old townhouse that was turned into a private subscription library in 1841. Its members included people like Dickens and Thackeray, Carlyle and George Eliot. Over the years it has been extended down and up, sideways and backwards, until the place has become a maze of literature.

The pillared reading room on the first floor still has the air of a well-appointed gentleman’s library, with leather armchairs in front of the fireplace, racks of the latest periodicals and galleries of bookcases far above your head. In all the years I have known it, I have never heard a raised voice there.

There are over a million of books, they say, in over fifty languages, marching along over fifteen miles of shelving. Nowadays they have an electronic universe of information to back them up. But it’s the real, printed books that matter. I often think of the sheer weight of all that paper, all that ink, all those words, all those meanings.

The London Library is, in its way, a republic of letters. As long as they pay the subscription and obey the few rules, its members have equal rights and privileges. Perhaps that was the main reason the place was so important to me. In the

London Library I was as good as anyone else. Since my marriage had broken up three years ago, I felt more at home in the library than I did in my own flat.

Over the years the collection has grown. As the books have multiplied, so has the space required to house them. Members have free access to the stacks that recede deeper and deeper into the mountain of buildings behind the frontages of St James's Square. Here, in these sternly utilitarian halls of literature, the tall shelves march up and down.

The library is an organic thing that has developed over the decades according to a private logic of its own over many levels and floors. There are hiding places, narrow iron staircases and grubby, rarely-visited alcoves where the paint on the walls hasn't changed since the days of Virginia Woolf. Sometimes I think the library is really a great brain and we, its members who come and go over the years, are no more than its fugitive thoughts and impulses.

You never know quite what you may find in the stacks. There are many forgotten books that perhaps no one has ever looked at since their arrival at the library. Where else would I have found *The Voice of Angels*, for example, or learned about the long sonata of the dead?

Now there was a serpent in my booklined garden of Eden. Its name was Adam.

I went down the paneled stairs to the issue hall on the ground floor. I arrived just as Adam came through the security barrier. He was putting away the plastic-coated membership card in his wallet. So he was a member, not just a visitor.

He turned right and went into the little side-hall where the lockers are. I was pretty sure that he wouldn't recognize me. He never really noticed people. Anyway, unlike him, I had changed a good deal since he had last seen me. I had put on weight. I had an untidy beard, streaked with grey. I was going bald.

I lingered by the window that looks down into the Lightwell Reading Room. I opened my notebook and pretended to examine one of the pages. The book fell open at the entries I had copied from the computer catalogue when I had first searched for Francis Youlgreave in the name index. Only two of his books were listed there: *The Judgement of Strangers* and *The Tongues of Angels*. They were both reprints from the 1950s.

On the edge of my range of vision I saw Adam crossing the hall to the long counter that divides the staff from the members. He laid down a couple of books for return. The nearest assistant did the little double-take that people do when they encounter the famous and smiled at him. I couldn't see Adam's face but his posture changed—he seemed to grow a little taller, a little wider; he was like a preening peacock.

He turned away and passed behind me into the room where the photocopiers and the catalogues are. The two books remained where they were for the moment. I went over to them and picked up the top one. It was a survey of fin-de-siècle British poetry; it had been written in the 1930s by a man who used to review a good deal for the *Times Literary Supplement*. I had looked at it for my Youlgreave research but there wasn't much there of value and Youlgreave himself was barely mentioned.

The assistant looked up. "I'm sorry, I haven't checked that in yet—would you like to take it out?"

"I'm not sure. But may I look at it? And at this one."

She scanned the labels and handed the books to me. I took them upstairs, back to the reading room, and settled at my table. The other book was a biography of Aubrey Beardsley. Again, I had come across the book myself—Beardsley had provided the illustrations for an 1897 collector's edition of one of Youlgreave's better-known poems, "The Four Last Things." There wasn't much about Beardsley's connection with Youlgreave—merely the usual unsupported claim that they had moved in the same rather louche cultural circle in London, together with an account of Beardsley's struggle to extract payment from Youlgreave's publisher. But the page that mentioned the episode was turned down at the top left corner, an unpleasant habit that some readers have; Adam used to do it with my books and it infuriated me.

I knew then that this must be more than coincidence. That was the second shock of the afternoon. Adam was almost certainly researching Francis Youlgreave. The bastard, I thought, hasn't he got enough already? Hasn't he taken enough from me?

I continued automatically turning the pages. A flash of yellow caught my eye. It was a yellow Post-it note that marked the reference in the sources relating to the Youlgreave commission. That too was typical of Adam—he was always leaving markers in other people's books; I once found a dessicated rasher of streaky bacon in my copy of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*.

There was something written in pencil on the Post-it note. *You're such a complete shit. You won't get away with it.*

That was the third shock. I recognized the writing, you see, the looping descenders, the slight backward slope, the tendency to turn the dots on the "i"s into tiny but incomplete circles, drawn clockwise, from the left. It had changed significantly over time—for example, the letters were untidier in form and now ran together like a tangle of razor wire on a prison wall.

But there was no doubt about it. A working knowledge of paleography has its advantages. I knew straightaway that the handwriting was Mary's.

Mary was out of my league. She was in the year below mine. I had noticed her around—going to lectures, in the faculty coffee bar and, once, in the saloon bar of the Eagle, sprawled across the lap of a post-graduate student from Harvard who drove a Porsche. As far as I knew she wasn't even aware of my existence.

This changed one night in May when I went to a party at someone's house, taken there by a friend of a friend. We had come on from the pub. Someone was vomiting in the front garden when we arrived. The music was so loud that the windows were rattling in their frames.

We pushed our way through the crowd in the hall and found the kitchen, where the drinks were. That was packed, too. Someone passed me a joint as I came in. Everyone was shouting to make themselves heard over the music. Twenty minutes later, I realized that the joint had been stronger than I'd thought. I had to get away from all the people, the heat and the noise.

The back door was open. I stumbled outside. Cool air touched my skin. There was a little garden full of weeds and rusting metal. A couple was making out on an old mattress. Light and music streamed from the house but both were softened and more bearable. I looked up at the sky, hoping to see stars. There was only the dull yellow glow of a city sky at night.

I sat down on a discarded refrigerator lying on its side against the fence. The dope was still making my thoughts spin but more slowly now, and almost enjoyably. Time passed. The couple on the mattress rustled and groaned in their private world. Then, suddenly, I was not alone.

A change in the light made me look up. Mary was standing in the kitchen doorway. She was wearing a clinging velvet dress the color of red wine. She had a mass of dark hair. Her face was in shadow. The light behind her made a sort of aura around her.

I looked away, not wanting her to think that I was staring at her. I heard her footsteps. I caught a hint of her perfume, mingled with her own smell to make something unique.

“Why do you always look so sad,” she said.

Startled, I looked up. “What?”

“Why do you look so sad?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t feel it.”

“Not sad,” she said. “That’s the wrong word. Like you’re thinking tragic, profound thoughts.”

“Looks deceive,” I said.

“Have you got a cigarette?”

That was an easier question to answer. I found my cigarettes and offered her one. She leant forward when I held up the lighter for her. In the light of the flame I saw the gleam of her eyes, the high cheekbones and the dark, alluring valley between her breasts.

“Move up,” she said, as I was lighting my own cigarette. “There’s room for two.”

There was but only just. I shuffled along the refrigerator. She sat down, her thigh nudging against mine. I felt her warmth through my jeans.

“Christ, it’s cold.”

“Have my jacket,” I suggested.

When we had settled ourselves again we smoked in silence for a moment, listening to the noises from the house and the rather different noises from the mattress.

“Anyway,” she said, “you should always look sad.”

“Why?”

“Because you look beautiful when you’re sad. Sort of soulful.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say. I wondered if she was stoned. Or if I myself was much, much more stoned than I had thought, and this was some sort of hallucination.

“I’ve seen you around, haven’t I?” she went on. “It’s funny we’ve never actually met. Until now, I mean. What’s your name?”

“Tony,” I said.

“I’m Mary,” she said. Then she kissed me.

*You’re such a complete shit. You won’t get away with it.*

The words gave me a sweet, sharp stab of pleasure. The writing was definitely Mary’s. The “you” must refer to Adam. They had been together now for nearly twenty years. They had married a couple of years after university.

Over the years I had looked up Adam in *Who’s Who* and Debrett’s *People of Today* on several occasions, so I knew the dates. I knew the landmarks of his

career, too—the deputy literary editorship at the *New Statesman*, the years at the BBC, the handful of books and the four documentary series, linked to his later books. The documentaries were usually on BBC2, but the last one had graduated to BBC1.

Adam was my age but he looked ten or even fifteen years younger. He was one of those well-known authors who seem far too busy to have much time to write. I'd glanced through his articles in the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer*, and I'd heard him endlessly on radio and seen him on television. Two years earlier, he had chaired the judges of the Man Booker Prize. He was always judging something or another or commenting on something. Even Adam's friendships had a professional or literary flavor—he played tennis with a best-selling novelist, for example, and shared a holiday house in Umbria with the CEO of a major publisher.

I got up to put the books on the trolley for shelving. I was about to return to my seat when I saw Adam himself coming into the reading room by the north door, the one leading to the new staircase that acts as a spine connecting the disparate parts and levels of the library, old and new.

Panic gripped me. He glanced about the room. It all happened so quickly I had no chance to turn away. He was carrying three or four books. For a moment his eyes met mine. There was no sign of recognition in his face, which both relieved and irritated me. He saw an empty seat near the window end of the room and made his way towards it.

The spell that held me broke. I slipped through the glazed doors and onto the landing of the main staircase of the old building. I hurried downstairs, past the portraits of distinguished dead members, a parade of silent witnesses.

Once on the stairs, however, I could think more clearly. I saw how absurd I was being. Why was I acting as if I had done something wrong, as if Adam were for some reason hunting me down? On the other hand, what on earth was going on between him and Mary? And was he really planning something on Francis Youlgreave? I told myself that I had every reason to be curious.

Besides, Adam was unlikely to leave the reading room for a while.

I continued more slowly down the stairs and into the issue hall. I turned into the passage where the lockers are. These are on the left. On the right is a line of tall cupboards, always open, with hanging spaces for coats and shelves where you can leave your bags.

The Burberry was in the fourth cupboard down, hanging between a tweed overcoat and a torn leather jacket. Adam's bag was on the shelf beneath.

This was the moment when I crossed the line. It didn't seem like that at the time. It seemed quite a natural thing to do in terms of my Youlgreave book. One has to research the possible competition.

I looked over my shoulder. No one was paying me any attention. The bag was one of those canvas-and-leather affairs that look as if they ought to have a bloodstained pheasant or a dead trout inside. I lifted the flap and checked the main compartment and the side pockets. I found nothing but the *Guardian*, the *Spectator* and a couple of crumpled paper handkerchiefs.

Straightening up, I patted the coat. In one pocket was a packet of Polos and a shopping list on the back of an envelope. The list was in Adam's scrawled handwriting: *burgundy, flowers, milk, salad veg*. The other was empty.

I nearly missed the coat's third pocket, which was inside and fastened with a button. It contained something small and rectangular that didn't yield to the touch. I slipped my hand inside and felt the outline of a phone.

It was an iPhone. I had one myself as it happened, though mine was an older model. The ringer switch was in the off position. I pressed the control button. The screen lit up.

The phone was locked. But someone had sent a text, and this was briefly displayed on the screen.

*I miss you more and more every moment we're apart. J xxxx*

There was no name attached to the text, only a phone number.

So that explains the Post-it note, I thought. The complete shit is having an affair.

Nothing new there.

So I come back to Mary. She told me later why she kissed me in the garden at the party: as a demonstration of disdain to her newly ex-boyfriend, who was watching us through the kitchen window. But it developed into something else.

While the party thudded away in the house, we stayed in the garden and talked and drank and smoked another joint. I can't remember what we talked about. But I do remember that for once in my life I seemed to have leapfrogged the paralyzing shyness that usually characterized my attempts to talk to attractive girls and landed without any apparent effort into something approaching friendship.

Later I walked her home, and she kissed me again when we said goodnight. The next day we met between lectures for coffee, dispelling my lingering fear that she'd have forgotten me completely overnight. By the end of the day we had tumbled into bed together.

I felt as if I'd been turned into someone new and infinitely preferable, like the frog kissed by a princess. Mary was so beautiful, so vital. She always knew what she wanted and she was very direct about getting it. I envied her that. The mystery was why she wanted me. It was still a mystery.

We lasted nearly a term as a semi-detached couple before Adam decided he would have her for himself. He and I no longer shared a room, as we had in our first year. But we still saw a fair amount of each other. I was useful to him—I was the organized one, you see, who knew when the supervisions and lectures were, which library books we needed, how to find the material that could lift your grade from a B to an A.

In a sense, it was Francis Youlgreave who brought Mary and Adam together. I knew something about Youlgreave, even then, because my mother had grown up in Rosington. Youlgreave was a Canon of Rosington Cathedral in the early twentieth century. She had one of his collections of poems, *The Judgement of Strangers*, which had once belonged to my grandparents. I was using this as the basis for my long essay, an extended piece of work we had to do in our final year which counted as a complete module of our degree. I'd made the discovery that there were several advantages to studying obscure literary figures—fewer secondary sources, for a start, and a better than average chance of impressing the examiners with one's initiative.

Mary was waiting for me in my room when Adam turned up one evening. He said he'd wait for me and, while he waited, he investigated the papers on my desk

while chatting away to Mary. He found some of the Youlgreave material and Mary told him more.

By the time I returned with an Indian takeaway for two, they were smoking a joint and chatting away like friends on the brink of being something closer. She responded to his charm like a plant to water. He had the priceless knack of seeming to be interested in a person. The takeaway stretched among the three of us. Adam and Mary got very stoned and I sulked.

Next week Mary and I officially broke up. It was one lunchtime in the pub. She did her best to do it tactfully. But all the time she was being kind to me, she was glowing with excitement about Adam like a halloween pumpkin with a candle inside.

As she was going, she said, “Don’t take it personally, Tony, will you? I’m always looking for something, you see, and I never quite find it. Maybe one day I’ll come round full circle. Or maybe I’ll find it. Whatever it is I’m looking for.”

I didn’t know which disturbed me more: the knowledge that Adam was having an affair and that his marriage to Mary was breaking down; or the growing suspicion that he would take Youlgreave away from me, probably without even knowing what he was doing.

I knew perfectly well that Francis Youlgreave wasn’t “mine” to lose in the first place. He was just a long-dead clergyman with eccentric habits, who had written a few minor poems that sometimes turned up in anthologies. Even I accepted that most of his poetry wasn’t up to much. If half the stories were true, he had taken too much brandy and opium to do anything very well.

For all that, Youlgreave was an interesting person, always striving for something out of his reach. He was also interesting in the wider context of literary history. He was not quite a Victorian, not quite a modern, but something poised uneasily between the two.

We were about to reach the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of his birth. Publishers love anniversaries, and I had pitched the idea of a short biography of Youlgreave with a selection of his better poems to an editor I’d worked for in the past. To my surprise she liked the proposal and eventually commissioned it. The advance was modest. Still, it was a proper book and for a decent publisher.

I knew there wasn’t a great deal of material available on Youlgreave. It was rather odd, actually, how little had survived—I suspected that his family had purged his papers after his death. But when talking to the editor I made a big point of his friendships with people like Oscar Wilde and Aleister Crowley, and also his influence on the modernists who came after him. There were people who claimed to see elements of Youlgreave’s work in T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, which wasn’t as fanciful as it might seem.

Besides, what we did know about him was intriguing. The second son of a baronet, he had published a volume called *Last Poems* while he was still at Oxford. He was ordained and spent the 1890s as a vicar in London. He was made a Canon of Rosington—some people said that his family pulled strings in order to get him away from the temptations of the capital—but had retired early owing to ill-health.

Youlgreave was only in his early forties when he died. I had seen reports of the inquest. He was living at his brother’s house. He fell out of a high window. They



said it was an accident. But no one really knew what had happened, and they probably never would.

I had one advantage that I made the most of with my editor. Youlgreave had been a member of the London Library for most of his adult life. After his death, his family presented a number of his books to the library.

One of them was his own copy of *The Voice of Angels*. Youlgreave's last collection of poems, published in 1903, was called *The Tongues of Angels*. *Voice* was a privately-printed variant of *Tongues* that included an extra poem, "The Children of Heracles." The poem, which has strong elements of cannibalism, was unpleasant even by today's standards; presumably Youlgreave's publisher refused to include it in *Tongues*.

I suspected that the cataloguer hadn't realized how rare this book was. It was not in the British Library or the Bodleian or Cambridge University Library. As far as I knew, the London Library's edition was the only known copy in a collection that was accessible to the public, though there may have been a few in private hands.

*The Voice of Angels* was valuable not just for its rarity and for the extra poem. This particular copy had penciled marginalia by Youlgreave himself. Some of them are illegible, but not all.

Best of all, on the endpaper at the back, Youlgreave had jotted down a number of disjointed lines and clusters of words—fragments, I believed, of a poem he hadn't lived to write. One phrase leapt out at me when I first saw it: *the long sonata of the dead*.

I recognized the phrase. This was going to be one of the main revelations of my biography. Samuel Beckett had used the identical words in his novel *Molloy*, which he published nearly half a century after Youlgreave's death. It was too unusual to be dismissed as coincidence. To clinch the matter, "The Children of Heracles" included the line: *What words and dead things know*. Beckett had used an almost identical phrase in *Molloy*.

There was only one conclusion: that Beckett had somehow seen *The Voice of Angels*, this very copy that I had found in the London Library, and he had admired it enough to plagiarise at least two of Youlgreave's lines.

Now I had to face the possibility that Adam was going to take that from me too.

All this passed through my mind as I stood there with Adam's phone in my hand.

I still had one thing in my favor: *The Voice of Angels* was safe on my shelf at home. It wasn't listed in the library's computer catalogue yet, only in the older catalogue, which consists of huge bound volumes with strips of printed titles pasted inside, the margins of the pages crowded with hand-written annotations by long-dead librarians. But, if Adam were serious about Youlgreave, sooner or later he would track it down and put in a request for it. Then I would have to return it to the library.

It was possible he wouldn't notice the discrepancy in the title. It was possible, even, that he wasn't doing anything significant on Youlgreave. That was what I really needed to find out.

I thought of Mary right away. She would know—she was credited as a researcher on the documentaries and in the books. And it would give me an excuse to see her, which was what I wanted to do anyway.

But did I want to see her? The very thought terrified me. Since Adam had walked into the London Library, all the comfortable certainties that shored up my life had crumbled away. Would she even talk to me after all these years? What would happen if I showed her the message on Adam's phone and proved to her that her husband was having an affair?

I had a practical problem to solve first of all. I didn't even know where to find her. Adam hadn't included his private address in his *Who's Who* entry. The library would know it but members' addresses were confidential.

That was when I remembered the crumpled envelope I had found in the Burberry. I took it out again. It was a circular addressed to Adam. There was the address: *23 Rowan Avenue*.

I glanced over my shoulder. No one was looking at me. I slipped the phone into my trouser pocket.

The library kept a *London A-Z*. Rowan Avenue was out towards Richmond, not far from Kew Gardens.

I gave myself no time to think. I took my coat and left the library. I cut across Pall Mall and the Mall and went into St. James's Park. Hardly anyone was there because of the rain. My hair and my shoulders were soaked by the time I reached Queen Anne's Gate. A moment later I was at the Underground station. I was trembling with cold and, I think, excitement.

Proust was right about his madeleine.

Once something unlocks the memories they come pouring out. I was drowning in mine just because I'd seen a man standing in the rain outside the London Library.

Adam had always been a bastard, I thought. People don't change, not really. As time passes, they just become more like themselves.

I didn't have to wait more than a couple of minutes for a Richmond train on the District Line. Kew Gardens was the last stop before Richmond. It was now late afternoon. The carriage was at the end of the train and nearly empty.

I sat down and stared at my reflection in the black glass opposite me. I saw an untidy middle-aged stranger where I half-expected to find a slim, sharp-featured student with shaggy hair.

It was still raining when I left the train and took my bearings. Kew was a nice place, just right for nice people like Adam and Mary. You couldn't imagine poor people living there. But it wasn't not for the very rich, either, for people who flaunted their money and slapped it in your face. In a perfect world I might have lived there myself.

Rowan Avenue was a gently curving road about five minutes' walk from the station. The houses were terraced or semi-detached-solid Edwardian homes, well-kept and probably unobtrusively spacious. The cars outside were Mercedes, BMWs and the better sort of people carriers designed for shipping around large quantities of nice children.

Number 23 had a little glazed porch with a tiled floor, a green front door and a small stained glass window into the hall beyond. I rang the bell. Adam and Mary

had no children—I knew that from Who’s Who—but there might be a cleaner or a secretary or something. Mary might be out. The longer I waited, the more I hoped she would be.

There were footsteps in the hall. The stained glass rippled as the colors and shapes behind it shifted. My stomach fluttered. I knew it was her.

With a rattle, the door opened a few inches and then stopped. It was on the chain. I felt unexpectedly pleased—London is a dangerous city, growing worse every year; and I was relieved that Mary was taking precautions.

“Hello,” she said, giving the word a slight interrogative lift on the second syllable.

“You probably won’t remember me.” I cleared my throat. “It’s been a long time.”

I could see only part of her face. She seemed a little smaller than in memory. The hair was carefully styled and much shorter.

She was frowning. “I’m afraid I don’t...”

“Mary, it’s me—Tony.” Despair nibbled at me. “Don’t you remember?”

“Tony?” Her voice was the same. Slightly breathless and husky. I used to find it unbearably sexy. I still did. “Tony?” she repeated, frowning. “From university?”

“Yes,” I said, more loudly than I intended. I touched the beard. “Imagine me without this.”

“Tony,” she said. I watched recognition creep over her face. “Tony, yes, of course. Come in.”

She unhooked the chain and opened the door. She was still Mary, my Mary. She was wearing jeans and a green shirt with a jersey over it. Cashmere, I thought. She was looking at me and I was acutely aware of my own appearance, something I rarely thought about.

For the first time I saw her face properly. “What have you done?” I said. “Are you OK?”

Her upper lip was swollen on the right hand side as if a bee had stung it. Or as if someone had hit her.

“I’m fine. I walked into the bathroom door last night. So stupid.”

The hall was large and long, with rugs on stripped boards. Mary took me through to a sitting room dominated by an enormous TV screen. The furniture was modern. There were hardback books lying about—new ones, recently reviewed—and a vase of flowers on the coffee table.

“This is... nice,” I said, for want of something to say.

She switched on a couple of lamps. “Do you want some tea?”

“No, thanks.”

I thought she looked disappointed.

“Do sit down. It’s good to see you after all this time.”

That’s what she said: what she meant was: *Why are you here?*

I sat down on a sofa. There was another sofa at right-angles to mine. She chose that one.

“It’s been ages, hasn’t it?” she said. “How’ve you been?”

“Fine. I—”

“What have you been doing?”

“This and that,” I said. “I review—I do odds and ends for publishers—reading for them, sub-editing, blurb-writing. I’ve ghosted some memoirs. That sort of thing. I’m working on the biography of a poet at present.”

“Which one?” she asked.

“Francis Youlgreave.”

“Really.” Her eyes widened as the memory caught up with her. “You always had a thing about him. Funnily enough, Adam’s thinking of doing something about him too.”

“There’s an anniversary coming up,” I said.

She nodded. “It’s part of a series for him. Another documentary.”

“What’s it about?”

“Literary culture in the 1890s—*The Naughty Nineties*, I think that’s the working title. There’s going to be a book, too.”

“Of course,” I said.

“It’s going to be revisionist,” she went on. “In the sense that they’re arguing the really influential figures aren’t the obvious ones like Wilde and Henry James.”

“Hence Youlgreave?”

“I suppose. I don’t really know. Tony—it’s awfully nice to see you, of course, but is there a particular reason for you coming? Like this, I mean, out of the blue.”

“This is a bit difficult,” I said. I wanted so much to be honest with her. “I saw Adam today—at the London Library. I didn’t even know he was a member.”

“So he knows you’re here?”

“No—I don’t think he saw me. But I... I happened to see his phone—he’d left it lying around. There was a text.”

She sat up sharply, her cheeks coloring with a stain of blood. “A text—what do you mean? You’re telling me you’ve been reading Adam’s texts?”

“I didn’t mean to, not exactly.” I knew I was coloring too. “But, Mary, I think you should see it. That’s why I’m here.”

I took the iPhone from my pocket and handed it to her. She stared at the screen. I couldn’t see her face.

*I miss you more and more every moment we’re apart. J xxx.*

“He’s having an affair, isn’t he?” I said. “Did you know?”

She didn’t look up. She shrugged.

“Did he hit you, too?”

“If you must know, yes.” Mary put down the phone on the arm of the sofa. She stared at me. “We’re getting a divorce. We—we can’t agree about who gets what. The old story.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

Her expression softened. “I really think you are. Bless you.”

“I know what it’s like. I was married for a while but it didn’t take. Who’s *J*? Do you know?”

“She’s called Janine—she used to be his PA. About ten years younger than me.” She swallowed. “Nice woman.”

“Not that nice.”

She stood up suddenly. “I’m going to make some tea. Will you have some now?”

“Is it OK me being here? What if Adam comes back?”

“He’s meeting his agent for dinner at Wilton’s at nine o’clock. That’s what his diary says, anyway. He was going to work in the library until then.”

I followed her into the kitchen. She put on the kettle and then stood, arms folded, looking out of the window at the back garden.

“This is going to be so bloody awful,” she said. “He’s got most of our assets tied up in a couple of companies. One of them is offshore, which makes it even more complicated. And he controls the companies; that’s the real problem. I was so naive, you wouldn’t believe. I just signed where he told me when he set them up.” I thought of the Post-it note I had found in Adam’s library book. *You’re such a complete shit. You won’t get away with it.* But it looked as if he would get away with it.

“You’ve talked to a solicitor?”

“Yes. For what it’s worth. If I fight Adam for my share, it’ll cost a fortune. But I haven’t got a fortune. I’ve hardly got anything. I shouldn’t be telling you this—it’s not your problem.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Anyway, the odds are I’ll lose if we go to court.”

“What will you do?” I said.

“God knows.”

She turned to face me. I couldn’t see her face clearly; the window was behind her and the winter afternoon was fading into dusk. Neither of us spoke for a while. The kettle began to hiss quietly at first and then with steadily rising urgency. At last there was a click as it turned itself off.

“I normally have green tea in the afternoon,” she said, as if this was a normal conversation on a normal day. “But there’s ordinary tea if you prefer, or herbal—”

“Green tea’s fine,” I said.

She picked up a packet of tea and a spoon. Then she stopped moving and the conversation wasn’t normal any more. “I made a mistake, Tony, didn’t I?” she said. “I wish...”

“What do you wish?” My voice was little more a whisper.

“I wish I could put time back,” Mary said. “To when it was just you and me in the garden. Do you remember? At that stupid party? It all seemed so simple then.”

On Tuesdays, the London Library stays open until nine p.m. When I got back it was nearly six o’clock. The Burberry was still hanging in the cupboard. I hung my own coat beside it.

I had asked Mary if I should take the phone back and leave it where I had found it. She told me not to bother. Adam often left his phone at home or mislaid it—he wouldn’t be surprised if he couldn’t find it in his coat. He was careless about his possessions, she said, just as he was careless about people.

The library was much emptier than it had been. I liked the place especially on a winter evening, when the only people there seemed to be a few librarians and a handful of members like me. In the stacks—and most of the place consists of the stacks—each run of shelves has its own set of lights. Members are encouraged to turn off any lights that are not in use. So, on a February evening like this, most of the library consists of pools of light marooned in the surrounding gloom. Sounds are muted. The spines of the books stretch away into an infinity of learning.

Adam wasn't in any of the reading rooms. I guessed that he was either searching for books or working at one of the little tables scattered around the stacks. It didn't matter because I didn't want to find him. I didn't want to see him ever again or hear his voice. I didn't want to think of him.

I sat down and tried to work, which was how I had always intended to spend this evening. But my mind was full of Mary and I couldn't concentrate. I had a pencil in my hand and I wrote the words *the long sonata of the dead* on the inside cover of my notebook. I looked at them for a long time and wondered whether even Francis Youlgreave or Samuel Beckett had known what they meant.

A little after eight-fifteen, I decided I'd had enough. I packed up my work and went downstairs. As I reached the issue hall I nearly bumped into Adam. He had come out of the catalogue room.

We both pulled back at the last moment before a collision became inevitable. We muttered reciprocal apologies. But his words were no more than a polite reflex. He looked through me. I didn't exist for him.

He went over to the enquiries desk. I turned aside and pretended to study a plan of the library on the wall.

"I found a book in the old printed catalogue but I can't see it on the shelves," he said to the librarian. "Can you check if it's out?"

"What is it?" the librarian asked.

"It's by Francis Youlgreave." Adam spelt the surname. "It's called *The Voice of Angels*."

A moment later the librarian said, "I'm afraid it's out. Due back on March the sixth. Would you like to reserve it?"

"Yes, please."

Afterwards Adam went upstairs, glancing at his watch. After a moment I followed him. I was wearing trainers and I made very little noise. He turned into one of the older stacks and walked steadily towards the back. I couldn't see him because the lines of bookcases were in the way. But I heard his footsteps ringing on the iron gratings of the floor. You can look down at the floor below and up at the floor above. I suppose they had to make the floors of iron in order to bear the weight of all the books.

There was a further stack beyond this one, part of the History section. Very few lights were on. I waited near the archway leading into the rear stack. I stood in the shelter of a bookcase containing books on gardening.

The levels on the older stacks are connected internally with steep, narrow iron staircases in a sort of bibliographic snakes and ladders. Some of the staircases still have their original signs—an elegant silhouette of a hand with a pointing finger accompanied by a legend saying something like "Up History" or "Down Society." One of these was nearby, which gave me the reassuring sense that I could slip away if someone else came up behind me.

I listened to Adam's footsteps until they stopped. Then, for several minutes, I heard nothing else except the hum of the strip lighting and a faint crackling sound that might have been rain on a distant skylight or window.

He came out at last. I watched him approaching through the slit between the top of a row of books and the bottom of the shelf above. He had both arms full with a pile of four or five heavy books, a folder of notes and a slim silver laptop. He

was wearing a pair of gold-rimmed reading glasses that gave him a scholarly air he didn't deserve.

He passed very close to me. He began to descend the iron stairs. He was in a hurry.

At first, all I did was touch him, rest my hand on his shoulder.

When I touched him, Adam began to turn towards me. But too quickly.

That was the thing: it happened so very quickly. His own momentum still carried him forward. He was encumbered with the weight in his arms. His awareness of the fragility of the books and the laptop perhaps made it harder for him to protect himself.

Then I pushed his shoulder. Not hard, not really—barely more than a gentle nudge, the sort of gesture you might make when you meet an old friend. If you could translate the gesture into words, it would say something like, “Hey—good to see you after all this time.”

Except it wasn't good to see him. It wasn't good at all, not for me and not for him.

Adam overbalanced and fell with a terrible scraping crash. The laptop and other objects skipped and clattered down the stairs, making a sound that might have been a form of hard, atonal music.

*The long sonata of the dead.*

I ran down the stairs. Adam was lying on his front with his books and notes around him. He wasn't moving. He made no sound at all. His head was bleeding. I wondered if the blood would drip through the iron grating and fall to the level beneath. I hoped it wouldn't damage any books.

I listened for sounds elsewhere, for running footsteps, the sound of voices. I heard nothing but the hum and the crackling and, loudest of all, my own rapid breathing.

The laptop had skidded across the floor and come to rest against the base of a bookcase. It looked undamaged. Adam's glasses were beside his head. They were unbroken, too. I remember thinking how easy it is to miss your footing if you forget to take off your reading glasses. Especially if you are going down a flight of stairs.

There was a phone on the floor, just inches from his hand as if he had been carrying that as well.

I picked it up. It was another iPhone. The screen was shattered. Without thinking, I pressed the control button. Nothing happened. The phone was dead. But why was there a phone in the first place?

*A dead phone, I thought: What dead things know.*

I left the library, walked through the rain across the park for the third time and caught a train to Kew.

At this hour, and on a night like this, the train wasn't crowded. Someone had left a copy of the evening's *Metro* on the seat next to mine and I pretended to read it as we trundled wearily westward.

There were four other passengers in the carriage. All of us avoided eye contact. One of them was a thin-faced woman sitting diagonally across the carriage from me. She was younger than I, in her early thirties perhaps, and looked like a character in a Russian novel. She ought to have been travelling by troika rather

than London Underground, despite the fact that she was reading something on her Kindle.

When the train stopped at Kew, I hung back, letting the other passengers leave the station first. Three of them took the eastern exit in the direction of Mortlake Road. I left a decent interval and then followed.

It was raining harder than ever. One of the people ahead had turned off. The second one went into a house on the right. That left the thin-face woman, striding down the rain-slicked pavement in her long black coat and long black boots, sheltered by an umbrella. She turned into Rowan Avenue.

I didn't want to give her the impression I was stalking her so I waited before following. I took shelter under a tree but there wasn't much point. I was already soaking wet.

A moment later, I turned the corner. Number 23 was on the other side of the road. The lights were on in the hall and behind the blinds of a ground-floor room at the front with a bay window. I had no idea what I would say to Mary. Or even if I would have the courage to ring the bell. But it didn't matter. It would be good to know she was there, in that house. It would be good to know she was alive.

The woman ahead crossed the road. I hesitated. She was approaching the gate of Mary's house. She opened it.

I darted after her and took cover beside a black SUV so absurdly large it would have concealed an elephant. I edged sideways. I could now see her standing in the little porch by the front door. She had closed her umbrella and left it on the tiled floor.

A light was on above her head and she might have been standing on a miniature stage. She glanced over her shoulder. I saw her face, all bones and shadows and glaring white skin.

The door opened. There was Mary. She had changed into a dark blue dress since this afternoon.

"Janine," she said. "Janine."

The women embraced. But it wasn't as friends embrace.

"I'm so sorry," Mary said. "He took my phone, would you believe?"

"So does he know?" Janine said.

"He must have seen the texts. Anyway, come here."

Mary drew the younger woman inside.

She was smiling as if she would never stop. The door closed.

I closed my eyes. The rain fell. The raindrops tapped on the dark, shiny roof of the SUV. A car hooted on the Mortlake Road. Traffic grumbled. Tires hissed over wet tarmac. A door opened down the street and, for a moment before it closed again, I heard a piano playing the saddest tune in the world.

My eyes were closed. I listened to the long sonata of the dead.

