

Your main commentary should be focused on *the preterit tense*. Other topics may also be addressed.

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.

5 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.'

10 '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.

15 '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 title?'

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.'

20 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.

25 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.'

30 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?'

35 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".'

40 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:

45 '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?'

50 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.'

55 '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.'

60 '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.'

70 '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.'

75 I was about to protest, but something in his manner told me to drop the whole subject. So we kept moving, no one speaking.