

Your main commentary should be focused on *sentence connection*. Other topics may also be addressed.

'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 Qyadri 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 kind a 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.