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THE LESSONS

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Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year
Winner of the Orange Prize for
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The Lessons
by
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Prologue

When I returned from San Ceterino late in the afternoon, I found that Mark and his friends had thrown half the food in our kitchen into the swimming pool. Through the clear water I could see a panettone dissolving into a shimmer of red and green crystallized fruit, while the poolside tiles were smeared with yolks and broken shell fragments. A sodden pizza lolled lazily on the bottom of the pool, flapping at one edge like a mottled tongue. Jars of artichokes and peppers had spilled an oil slick across the surface of the water. Ripe tomatoes and peaches, two bunches of grapes, a selection of wax-paper-wrapped cheeses and cartons of milk were strewn across the underwater tiles, still intact. A poached salmon had broken into fragments, chunks of it floating by the pool filter. And among the food, various other forms of debris: a plastic garden chair, cigarette ends, a soggy paperback still barely afloat.

A quiche was ground to eggy mush on the tiles; I nudged it with the toe of my plimsoll. I looked around. No one in sight. I'd only been gone since 10 a.m. Mark must have called his friends almost as soon as I left. Faint strains of television chatter drew my attention to the converted stable block behind me. Yes. Deal with the kids first, then find Mark. I walked down the gravel path towards the stable block's lounge. The television was louder here, and I could hear occasional laughter and bursts of Italian conversation.

I pushed open the door. The room was stiflingly hot. Clothing and half-empty bags of snacks were strewn over the floor. A CD had apparently been used as an ashtray. Three nearly naked brown bodies were draped over the sofas – Stephano and Bruno were wearing only shorts, feet dangling over the arms of one sofa. Stephano's sister Magdalena was lying on her back on the other, wearing a pair of jeans and an orange bikini top, a carton of popcorn balanced on her stomach. Three pairs of eyes flicked up at me, then back to the

television screen. Wile E. Coyote was attempting to heave a boulder over a cliff, little realizing that Road Runner was right behind him. Road Runner beeped. The coyote dropped the boulder on himself. The three Italians laughed and I found myself momentarily astonished that there should still be people who watched Wile E. Coyote cartoons and laughed out loud. But they're children really. Stephano's the eldest and he can't be more than eighteen.

'Right,' I said, 'party's over. Time for you to be going.'

They looked at me, then back at the screen. Wile E. Coyote had purchased a box of ACME dynamite. Any moment now it was going to explode in his face.

I picked up a handful of clothing and threw it at the boys.

'I *said*, time to be going.'

Stephano pouted at me.

'But Mark said we could stay. Watch TV.'

'I'm sure he did, but now *I'm* telling you to leave.'

Stephano looked at me sullenly, trying to gauge whether I had any power in this situation. Still, he was young and I'd been a teacher for long enough to know how to return the stare. If he'd been a year or two older, he'd have faced me down, sworn at me. But then, if he'd been a year or two older, Mark wouldn't have been interested.

Stephano stood up with an irritated shrug and pulled his T-shirt over his head. Bruno did likewise and they began to gather together their belongings. I noticed Bruno slip a couple of DVDs into his bag as he packed, but said nothing. Magdalena couldn't find her top. I brought her an old T-shirt of mine and she made a moue but accepted the shirt. The three of them headed off down the hill.

After they'd left, I found that I was shaking. In the bathroom, I splashed some cold water on my face and stared at myself in the mirror. I looked older, tired and very white, my stubble showing darkly against my skin.

I walked around the pool to the pine summer house, always so pleasantly fresh even on the hottest days. I smelled the herbal scent of pot. The three kids had probably just smoked a joint, but judging by the state of the pool Mark had taken something a little more potent. The door of the summer house was ajar. Just inside the

threshold, clothing was scattered on the rattan mats. I recognized the trousers Mark had been wearing when I'd left for work in the morning, and a T-shirt that was too small to belong to anyone other than Magdalena. The smell was more intense inside the summer house, that telltale thick musky scent. They'd had a party, then. Of course.

The main room was disordered; Mark's remaining clothes were piled in a little heap on the table, they'd thrown cigarette ends into the old music box, the floor was wet and two of the cane armchairs were on their sides. No broken glass though. That was a blessing considering the last time. I found Mark where I expected, in the little bedroom, naked on the sticky sheets. He was lying on his back. I thought he was asleep at first, but when I stepped into the room, intending to cover him with a sheet, he opened his eyes and sat up.

He was drunk of course, but of course not just drunk. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes large, his movements jerky and uncoordinated. He moved his head back and forth, trying to bring me into focus. At last, he smiled.

'Oh, it's you, James, you –' He broke off, looked around him and continued after a moment. 'You've been gone for *days*. We had to hide, in here we had to hide. There was danger outside but it's better here.'

'There's no danger. I've only been gone a few hours. Only since 10. It's 6 now.'

He smiled at me again. A stupid smile. He shook his head.

'No . . . I know. You've been gone for days. That's why we had to make preparations, you see, we had to make everything ready.'

'Ready for what?'

He shook his head and touched one finger clumsily to the side of his nose.

'Mark, what happened to the pool?'

He blinked at me.

'The pool, Mark. It's full of food.'

He looked at me, trying to keep his face solemn, but his mouth kept twitching and he broke into giggles.

'It was *soup*. We made soup! We were hungry, so I said let's make

the biggest soup in the world! You haven't eaten it all, have you? Have you?'

'No, I . . .' I rested my thumbs on my temples and massaged my forehead. 'I'm very tired, Mark. You should rest too. We'll talk in the morning, OK?'

He looked at me, suddenly sly.

'Are the boys here? You should send them. I want . . . I want the boys here.'

I felt a tightening around my head, as of a strap being pulled closer and closer.

'I've sent them home. Their parents would be worried otherwise. You remember what happened before, don't you? You shouldn't keep them up here so long.'

He muttered something, too low for me to catch.

I turned to leave.

'I *said*, you want me all to yourself, then!' Mark shouted after me.

I stood with my hand on the door.

'No,' I said, 'I want to call the pool man to get the mess you've made cleared up so I can get to bed before midnight. I have work in the morning.'

'You *do*,' he said. 'You *do* want me to yourself. That's all you've ever wanted. The only reason you're here is that you think one day I'll run out of other people and you'll still be here waiting.'

I felt a blush begin to rise.

'That's enough, Mark.' I sounded, even to my own ears, less certain than I had talking to Stephano.

'It's *not*,' he said. 'What do you go to that job for anyway? Just to pretend that I don't pay the rent and the bills and the housekeeper and the bloody pool man too. This is what you've always wanted, isn't it? Since Oxford all you've ever wanted . . .'

I turned my back on him and walked out of the summer house. He raised his voice as I left but I thought of other things and closed my ears to him.

He was sorry later. I'd known he would be. It's the same every time.

I heard him padding around the kitchen in the early hours of the morning. He'd been crying – his eyes and cheeks had that squashed, overripe look – but he doesn't cry in front of me any more. He'd showered – his hair was still damp and falling into his eyes. He blinked at me through his fringe and apologized over and over again until I could hardly bear to hear him keep talking.

I made coffee and we sat in the living room. We talked a little about the house, the trip to the mountains we'd planned but which he kept putting off. It was a peace offering. He wore me down, as he always does. My anger dissipates as soon as we begin to speak, and I remember how he used to be. He knows this.

After we'd talked for a while, he said, 'What I like about having you here, James, is that you remember me. You *know*. No one that we see here knows. To them I'm just some English bloke with too much money who drinks too much and smokes too much and takes too many drugs. But as long as you're here, as long as you remember how I used to be, I'm more than that. Do you see?'

I did see. I'd known all this for a long time. We'd talked about it before.

When the sun began to rise, we took cans of cider into the orchard, disturbing clouds of spindle-legged crane flies as we walked through the grass. There are benches placed at odd intervals – some whim of Mark's from the days he still imagined holding frequent parties here. But he never had the wood properly treated and many of them have already rotted through.

We found one which still had all its struts intact, next to a rusted oil drum in which he'd once hoped to plant creeping violets. It stood empty now, half-filled with rain water, another reminder of Mark's problem – or at least one of Mark's definitions of his problem: that his ambition has never been quite large enough to fill up his money. We sat in silence as the sun came up, taking long pulls on our drinks and listening to the cacophonous cackle of birds awaking in the trees.

Eventually Mark said, 'I want her back. I want Daisy back.'

I said, 'I know.'

He said, 'She's all I want, all the time. Even when I'm . . . all the time.'

I said, 'I know.'

He leaned closer and I put my arm around his shoulder. I kicked my legs against the oil drum. The noise of it was louder than I'd expected – a wild clanging, as though I'd struck a huge brass gong. Above us three geese honked, flying in triangular formation across the blue-white sky.

SECTION I

The Lies

I

First year, November, third week of term

For me, it began with a fall. Not, as Mark might have said, a fall from grace. Nor was it the hopeless, headlong capitulation of love. That came later. It began simply with a tumble on an icy path. I stumbled, I tottered, I teetered, I fell. There's no disgrace in falling. Everyone falls. But I have found that getting up has proved more difficult than I could have anticipated on that icy path in Oxford long ago.

I ran, in the first faint hum of early-morning light, along a quiet path by the river. I ran for pleasure. Night had licked the leaves of the overhanging willow trees with frost. The path was muddy, but the mud had frozen into crackling shards. My breath came in quick gasps, achingly cold, steam-snorting.

I ran in steady, effortless, piston rhythm. A full-body rhythm: my feet on the path, my thighs bunching and loosening, vertebrae and diaphragm, flexors and extensors, all the mechanisms of the human body running smooth and true. The blood thumped in my ears. I was cold but I did not feel it. I ducked my head under a low-hanging branch of ice-prickled hawthorn, moving without thinking. Running emptied me of all thought. This was why I ran. It was three weeks since I'd arrived in Oxford, and things weren't going to plan.

There had been a plan. At least, it seemed to me there had been. My sister Anne, an Oxford graduate, had told me what to do. She had come to our parents' house, my mother had roasted a chicken for dinner, so that she could tell me these things. I was to join societies, I was to participate in activities, I was to work extremely hard. Oh yes, Anne had said, leaning forward to wrench a leg off the chicken carcass, and I was to make friends with the right sort of people. She herself had fallen in with the Labour Club during John Major's

premiership, when the Conservative Party lay bloated and dully throbbing, like a dying star. Her boyfriend, Paul, a pale and blinking specimen, worked for the Labour Party. Great things were expected of him. I'd do well, Anne said, to find similarly influential friends. Our parents smiled as we talked. My father poured another half-glass of wine. Anne bit into her chicken leg down to the white bone and gelatinous gristle at the joint. I noticed that I was thinking of Anne. I quickened my running pace a little. My breath became more ragged. I rounded a bend, and thought vanished into a new vista of half-thawed ice-river.

Oxford is beautiful; its beauty is its plumage, its method of procreation. The beauty of the dream of Oxford, of spires and quiet learning, of the life of the mind, of effortless superiority, all these had beguiled me. Oxford was a tree decked with presents; all I had to do was reach out my hand and pluck them. I would achieve a first, I would gain a blue, I would make rich, influential, powerful friends. Oxford would paint me with a thin layer of gold.

In my first meeting with my tutors, Dr Strong and Dr Boycott, I had taken down the list of books on the smooth, white page of my notebook in clear fountain-pen strokes. The very thought of it thrilled me: an Oxford reading list in preparation for an Oxford tutorial.

One of the other men in the group – Ivar, a Norwegian – said, 'Isn't this rather a lot? For one week?'

Dr Strong and Dr Boycott exchanged a glance. The rest of the students looked down at the swirling green and gold curlicues of the carpet. We knew that Ivar had shamed us.

'We expect a lot, Mr Guntersen,' said Dr Boycott at last. 'That is why you are here.'

Dr Strong stroked his beard impassively. His legs were stretched out in front of him, feet clad only in sandals although the cold of autumn had already begun to bite.

Dr Boycott broke into a smile. 'I'm sure you'll find yourselves more than capable, with a little application. And if not –' his smile deepened – 'Oxford's not for you. And best to find that out now, eh?'

We seven Gloucester College physicists walked out of Dr Boycott's book-lined study and stood, a little dazed, in the quad. The sun was

passing in and out of shadow. The creeping plants covering the walls were dying russet. We looked at each other, half-friendly, half-appraising, and, with smiles, loped towards the library. I remember this as the last moment I believed without question in my intellectual powers. My dreams were there: the influential friends, the first, the running blue. All this was within my grasp. And here I was, running. Surely all must be well?

I rounded the second sharp bend, feet digging into mud and ice to gain traction. The morning mist had not yet dissipated, and as I left the grove of overhanging trees my surroundings blurred and dissolved. I ran on, my feet dislodging small stones and pebbles, and, once or twice, almost sliding from under me. The cold became delicious, my pace was strong. I came to a forking of the ways and chose the longer path.

‘Oxford is a race,’ Anne had said. ‘No more, no less. Remember that.’ We all knew it, each of the physics men. We did not discuss our first assignment, did not sit together in the library. Later, when times became more desperate, we pulled each other by the collar over fences and hurdles, copying one another’s work in a manner we would have scorned at school. But this first time, we worked as each of us was accustomed to work, each the best in his class, each entirely alone. I chose a seat sheltered on three sides by long walls of books. The sun, shining through stained glass, illuminated motes of dust and cast gules and amethyst on my squared paper. I attempted a question, expecting to find it simple. My work at school had always been simple. But this was not so easy. I made some notes. I looked around at the other students, then back down to my work. I tried again. I was uncertain. In the gallery and in the deep central book well the other students were hard at work. Soon, their industry began to seem oppressive to me. They made notes. They flicked through books. Would none of them ever take a break? Were none of them puzzled, as I was, with a hot itch of incomprehension at the base of my skull?

It was that itch, and my inability to tolerate it, which proved my eventual undoing. I was not undone on that day, or the next, or the next. But the slow increase of days pulled me downward. I have

blamed the fall for what happened, but it seems to me that it had begun to happen even before. Even in that first week I began to work in my bare little college room and not in the library. Away from distraction, I said to myself. But also away from the companionship of labour. I slept a little more each day. After the second tutor group meeting, I took a nap in the middle of the day. I wondered if I was sickening for something.

I understand now that I should have drawn comfort from that second meeting. After my days of quiet intense effort, I sat somewhere around the middle of the pack. Not as good as Everard or Panapoulou, but not as lost as Kendall or Daswani.

‘Yes,’ said Dr Strong as he handed me back my work, ‘keep at it.’

These were words of encouragement. I see that now. At the time, I tasted ashes. Like every student in Oxford, I had only ever been the best. To be average, to be ‘normal’, seemed beyond humiliation to me. The true star of the group was Guntersen. He alone received the plaudits of Dr Strong. He alone had solved the eleventh question. In the quad, a tall willowy woman was waiting for him. She greeted him in Spanish and he spoke to her in the same language. As they embraced I caught a hint of her perfume: cinnamon and cloves. They walked towards the lodge arm in arm, her hair dark and curly, his blond and straight.

‘To the winner –’ Kendall leaned in uncomfortably close. I could smell old cups of tea on his breath – ‘go the spoils.’

I slept that afternoon until it was dark outside and the college bell was ringing to summon us for dinner. I looked at the next tutorial sheet on my desk, pristine and unconquered. I wondered if Guntersen was already hard at work in the library. In the corridor, I heard the sound of girls laughing and wondered, with a pang, who they were, what they were talking about. I thought of Guntersen’s Spanish girlfriend, of the easy way he rested his arm around her shoulders. A run, I thought, to clear my head.

I ran then without any firm idea of destination or direction. I rounded Hertford, under the Bridge of Sighs, headed towards the University Parks. It was only after a week of exploration that I had found my favourite route. A long quiet trail through the open

country to the south of Oxford. I could guarantee to be almost alone if I came out early enough in the morning. On that day, I had set out at 6.30 a.m., just before dawn. The path would not be in heavy use for two hours yet. This thought pleased me. I ran between two saplings, breaking a spider's web strung between them. A memory tickled. Wasn't there a parable of an inspirational spider, representing diligence or resilience?

I should have been more resilient, I thought. I should have been more diligent. I had worked hard, certainly, but had I worked hard enough? Guntersen had worked harder. He was probably working even now. If he wasn't in bed with that Spanish woman.

I had found myself thinking of this woman more frequently than was sensible. It was not that no other opportunities presented themselves to me. Two girls on my staircase, Judy and Hannah, had separately made drunken attempts at conversation. Judy had found me in the Gloucester College bar, spent twenty minutes telling me about her parents' divorce, then put her hand on my knee, at which point I made my excuses. Hannah I encountered in the corridor outside my room on the way to get milk from the fridge. She was pretty, in a tousled and bleary way, but stank of cider and cigarettes.

'James!' she said. 'James, James gorgeous James, Mr James Stieff.'

'Yes,' I said.

The corridor was narrow. She put her hand on my chest and pushed me back towards the wall.

'Mysterious James,' she said, 'prettiest boy on staircase eight, no doubt about it.'

She pressed her body against me. She smelled faintly of vomit.

'Lots of girls would like to get to know you, Mr James Stieff. We all talk about you because you are so very . . .' She wriggled slightly, a stale odour of sweat and smoke in her hair. 'Just so very . . .' She reached her hand down to my crotch. 'Are you stiff, Mr Stieff?'

I wasn't. Not by any means. I pushed her away from me.

'You should go to bed,' I said, and I think she said, 'With you?' but by then I was letting myself back into my room and closing the door behind me.

A few days later the Gloucester College gossip sheet, pinned up in every lavatory in the college, named me '5th hottest male fresher', said that I had indulged in a 'four-in-a-bed sex romp' with Judy, Hannah and a girl I had never met called Elaine, and that the next JCR Meeting would vote on whether I had won the crown of College Slag from someone called Mick. I pulled down the sheets whenever I saw them and did not attend the JCR Meeting.

But Guntersen's Spanish woman obsessed me. Her name, I had learned from Kendall, who made it his business to know such things, was Emmanuella. She was from Madrid, studying law at St Catherine's. How had Guntersen met her? This Kendall did not know and I dared not press him to find out.

'Foreign students,' Kendall had said, 'they stick together.'

'Rich students you mean,' said Daswani.

I did not quite know how it had come about that I spent so much time in the college bar with these two. I did not like them. I felt myself their intellectual superior; this both repelled me from them and drew me to them.

'Same thing,' said Kendall. 'Massive fees for foreign students, only the rich ones can pay them.'

Daswani nodded sagely into his beer.

Can this be it, I thought? Is this all Oxford has to offer? For all the promises of glamour and glory, is this it? Passes from drunken stale-smelling girls? To be mediocre, sitting in a damp-walled bar on a Wednesday night with other mediocrities, tracing shapes in beer with my finger on a scratched table? I could not accept it. Guntersen and his girlfriend spoke of other possibilities.

I talked to her, once. It was early in the morning, I was returning from my run as she and Guntersen were kissing at the gates to the college library. They kissed with intent, his hand sliding down her back, grasping her leg at the top of her thigh, her arms encircling his waist, reaching up under his cable-knit sweater. I stopped to stretch my calves on the low stone wall next to the library gates. They didn't notice me. As the 8 a.m. bell rang, the great curved wooden doors to the building opened from the inside. Guntersen pulled away, returned, kissed her again, his hand in her

hair, and then was gone, into the library to do battle on the plains of physics.

Emmanuella noticed me then. I was bending over, stretching my hamstrings, a deeply undignified position. Her face was still pillow-creased, her hair dishevelled. I caught her eye and she smiled.

'You are in Ivar's tutor group, yes? James?'

'Yes.'

'He says you are quite good.'

It was the 'quite' that destroyed me.

'Aha?'

'Oh,' she laughed softly, reached out and touched my arm. Her fingertips were warm and brown against my goose-prickled white. 'That means he thinks you're very clever. Don't be offended. He's not . . .' She broke off and looked at me. 'You run?'

'Only for . . . yes. Yes, I run.'

'Of course. Don't race Ivar. He likes to win.'

I smiled.

'Perhaps if we raced, I would win.'

She smiled back.

'Perhaps.'

And she turned and walked towards Broad Street.

When I ran I thought of her, and of him. I thought of them entwined together, pressed up against the iron curls of the library gate. I thought of them, and of Guntersen's hard work and Kendall's tea-breath and of the work that still awaited me in my room. I thought of the Oxford life that, it seemed to me, was always happening somewhere else.

I rounded another bend, a sharp one, and began the downhill part of the run. My breath was coming in quick clear gasps, I was not yet tired. I ran along the edge of a water meadow. I thought of the work I had left to do that day. I had reached number five out of twelve on the question sheet. Tomorrow was tutorial day. I could perhaps finish another question today. I let the thought go. The birdsong was louder here. I wondered if Guntersen ever came this way, if he ever heard these birds sing. My feet hit the hard dry earth, one-two, one-two, and I thought of Guntersen and Emmanuella and wondered if they

ever came here together, in the early morning, she putting her arms around his neck and he leaning her against a rough-barked tree. I closed my eyes for a moment, imagining it and, and. And this was enough.

My right foot came down not on hard earth but slid across ice. It turned right, and then round, and, with a wrenching tearing twist, further round and away. I tumbled and, as I fell, the leg twisted further, buckling under my weight, and there was a sick sensation in the joint and in my stomach and I found I was thinking of my sister Anne, again, and of her twisting the drumstick off the chicken, revealing the inner white of bone and string-like sinews and the gristle of the joint. And then there was violent, loud, aggressive pain, drowning out everything else, and then there was nothing at all.