

OXFORD

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Oxford was head of the debate team at school. I knew this because I saw his face grinning out at me from the front page of the newsletter, his smile that didn't quite reach the front because his teeth were too far back. Oxford lived in Te Aro, a 20-minute walk from my place. I knew this because I saw him get off the 27 every morning, holding some book all crinkled with its yellowing library shrink-wrap. Plath, Palahniuk, Whitman, Wilde, Rand – I bet the aging librarians told him he had good taste, looking up through their dated glasses and brains full of dust and dead people's words. Maybe they even offered him a little stamp on his hand for being such a good boy. I called Oxford Oxford because of the way he spoke, a font dripping with derision and diction, words with the t's crossed and i's dotted. He even pronounced the 't' in the word 'exactly', and omitted it in the word 'often'. I hated Oxford, more than I had ever hated anyone. His laced-up-leather look, all bundled and pulled tight, made me want to loosen his pretty little image of himself and rip it all out. I wanted to scratch away the shine on his surface and show everyone he was nothing but hide.

He was the son of a diplomat – I had seen him get into all-black cars with those silly diplomatic plates, all coyness and carefulness and mystery. He had stickers of flags all over his computer, just to show how worldly he was; India, China, Fiji, France. I knew all of the flags because I had been obsessed with them as a child, would trace over their lines, stars, block colours, and wonder how such bland designs were meant to invoke pride. There are four UN member states that have guns on their flags: Guatemala, Haiti, Mozambique, and Bolivia. Mozambique's flag has an AK-47 on it. It's meant to represent freedom and liberty or something, cross-hatched with a book and a hoe.

Anyway, of *course* he was head of the debate team. I've never understood what's so glorious about it – argument for argument's sake, just a handful of teenagers all dressed up in their button-down shirts just to yell at each other in a room like they do every lunchtime. I've seen better debates in the Level 3 linkwells, when the boys from the next school over scrap about some girl and make the walls shake, all the posters with rhetorical devices trembling on their rusty pins, in fun colours to seem more engaging – piss yellow, smudged lipstick red, energy drink green. Oxford looked stupid when he was debating. I'd seen photos – unflattering photos, in that way that candid photos always are. Though of course, nothing he ever did was candid. I could tell that he thought hard about every little action he did, from the way he tucked his book under his arm so the title showed, or the way he stared at me

when I was reading, or the way he always tried to talk to me in class, just so he could make me look stupid, I'm sure.

It was at some museum that he properly talked to me, one of those leaky, despot heritage houses that are really only heritage to a myriad of unique fungal spores. I'd much rather tear them all down than have poor children have to wander through their refrigerator emptiness and learn about dead people. Fucking dead people. I always read living poets, got out the trendy little paperbacks with titles in all-caps Sans Serif and charmingly minimalist abstract front covers. Oxford read dead people. I didn't.

It was in the reconstructed larder, surrounded by the candelabras caked in beeswax and fake preserved lemons in jars, that he spoke. He was reading a placard, those plasticine pieces of information that everyone cares about for a day and then instantly forgets.

'They're all such tourists, aren't they?' he asked, though it wasn't really a question. He pointed to our English class listening intently to the tour guide. *'Wow, you're telling me people lived here? Of course people lived here, and it was miserable. They make it seem like such a novelty, seeing how all the maids slaved away in here and everyone shit in that horrible little outhouse. I've been to a lot of museums, and people are always like this. Tourists of the past.'*

'I guess people just don't know what to say, when they're confronted with it. I don't know. You can't act miserable about every bad thing that's ever happened. This is kind of entertainment, after all.'

Why was I engaging with him? Why had I said that? It made him smile at me – which was a terrible thing – before he turned back to the placard, his hand splayed out across the words. I noticed his ring, faded and coppery, with initials scratched into the surface: an L and an H.

'Have you ever been to the Louvre?' he asked idly.

Of course I haven't, you stupid diplomat's son, I wanted to say. But for some reason I shook my head and asked him what his favourite painting there was.

'The Angry Swan,' he replied. 'Not sure if it's actually called that, but that's what it depicts, anyway. Hissing and flying away and all that.'

'Out of all of the paintings at the Louvre,' I began, then stopped.

'How would you know? You've never been.'

And then he left me in the larder, among the lemons and the candles that would have once lit the room and dripped wax onto the tables.

The only other time I really saw Oxford was when I was walking home on some stupid, rainy summer's day. I think I was crying – either that, or the rain was blowing into my eyes. And of course, somehow, in his way that he always did, he found me, in that black car with diplomatic plates.

'Get in,' he said.

'Is that your car?' I asked, hesitating at the door.

'It's my dad's technically,' he said, and I wondered briefly why he was even out here, or if he'd stolen it.

He was a bad driver – I clung to my seat which was becoming uncomfortably wet beneath my legs, leaning to stabilise myself with every swerve. It surprised me, that he was a bad driver. I thought he would be good at everything.

'I'm going to Cambridge next month,' he said, eventually. 'Going to eat in the dining halls with all the candles, go punting on the river, all that.'

'Looking forward to it?'

'I guess.'

'I read *Fight Club* for you, you know,' Oxford suddenly said. 'I saw you reading it once. I always noticed you. All that poetry and shit. I thought you'd like me for it. But you didn't, did you?'

'I thought the narrator was so self-absorbed. It was miserable. He annoyed me,' I replied, because all of a sudden, all I could do was criticise a goddamn Palahniuk novel.

'Me too,' he laughed, smiling with those too-far-back teeth. He suddenly looked like a boy, gap-toothed and ruddy-cheeked and bashful. All that diplomacy, the debating, the antique rings and the perfect accent and the Cambridge next month, and the way that smile sat on his face still gave it all away.

'I looked at the painting,' I said, after I'd directed him through the darkness to my house, opened the black door into the rain. 'The swan. Painted in 1650. Some Dutch guy.'

'I said that as a joke, actually,' he said. 'That painting's not even at the Louvre.'

And that was the last time I ever spoke to Oxford, without ever telling him, telling him how much I hated him, more than I'd hated any other person. How much I hated the black car slicing through the night with its floodlights. How much I hated his ideas about museums. How stupid that swan painting was, or what a dumb joke it was, too. How it was weird that he wore that ring with the initials on it, the L.H. that I spent nights wondering what it stood for. How idiotic he looked when he stood up on that podium and argued for something he didn't care about, just like how he read *Fight Club*, held it under his arm to show the title, all to try and impress some boy who had always hated him for the way he made him feel.

But of course, I couldn't tell him any of this. He was already at Cambridge, amongst all the dead people, reading dead men's poetry, in that building that dead men made, with those columns designed thousands of years ago by the Greeks. He was probably halfway down the River Cam, rowing through those dead men's pond weeds that Keats probably wrote about, and wouldn't give a damn about stupid boys who hated him.