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# The Drowning Lesson

Written by Jane Shemilt

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# The Drowning Lessons

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# Chapter One

*Botswana, March 2014*

The hot evening closes around the track, the rasp of cicadas is dense. My feet crunch quietly on the stones. Walking seems as easy as breathing; my thoughts loosen and drift in the warm air.

Adam will be sipping beer, happy; that new word . . . Zoë, maybe under the trees with a lizard in her hands. Alice will be near Teko, reading, dark hair sweeping the page, calmer than this morning. The scent of supper diffuses into the garden; Elisabeth puts flowers in a glass.

A crested bulbul startles up from the track, his staccato call tearing the peace: *be quick, be quick, Doctor, be quick*. The gold light darkens between the trees; a desert flower flares red in the shadows, and then it's dusk.

Supper time. Bath time. Sam might be crying.

Another bird answers the first and another, then all the trees are full of their broken sounds. The darkening air feels thick as cake in my mouth.

In front of my feet a thin snake slithers lightning fast across the track and disappears into a gully. I

want a drink with gin in it. I want Adam to be impressed – I made it home on foot – sorry he forgot to check the car, sorry he didn't charge his mobile.

The gate is shrouded in shadow by the time I reach it, though the wood is still hot under my hand. It swings back with the familiar two-tone whine. The frogs have started their night-time belching in the pond behind the house. When I kick off my slimy flip-flops, the dust is soft under my feet. Relief at being home blooms like a pain under my ribcage and I round the curving sweep of the drive, impatient to see the first lights pricking across the scrubby lawn.

It takes seconds to register that all the lights in the house are blazing, that torch beams are moving jerkily across the lawn. Adam is shouting, his voice a low-pitched bellow like an animal in pain. He's over by the trees. When I start running, his face turns towards me, glimmering white through the dusk. Zoë, inside, stands against the wall, crying quietly. It's not her then. Alice squats in the corner; she sees me and stands with fluid grace. It's not her either..

And then I know.

The shadows in our bedroom flicker differently: it takes me a second to see that the curtains are torn, and moving a little in the slight wind. A glittering pile of glass lies in front of the window on the carpet, a few jagged shards still lodged in the frame.

The cot is empty.

# Chapter Two

*London, March 2013*

It was a bad time to start a conversation. Midnight. Rain crackling at the windows, an empty wine bottle on the table between us. Adam's slim face was flushed, his dark hair sticking up where he'd run his hands through it so many times. I wanted to smooth it down and put my lips against the lines between his eyebrows, but there was a secret gleam about him that kept me away.

The kitchen was messy: Sofia had gone to see a Polish film with her friends, and the children's shoes and bags were strewn about the floor. Our glasses and the food cartons needed clearing away. Zoë's drawings lay in sliding heaps on the sideboard, Alice's maths neatly piled, both waiting for my approval.

Tomorrow's list started at eight a.m., with two hysterectomies. I pushed back my chair and got up. Adam's expression was inward, as though he was working out a difficult sum in his head. I began to clear the table, stacking bowls on the crowded draining-board.

My father had an antique weighing machine: it used to sit on the desk in his study but it disappeared after he died. It was made of polished wood and brass, with embossed metal weights; he'd let me use it as a child, to weigh his letters and parcels. A thin sheet of paper could make all the difference. My relationship with Adam was evenly weighted with work and success, but the balance could tip at any moment. I clattered the cutlery into the sink. I loved him. I loved almost everything about him: the smile that deepened the creases around his eyes, the way he swung up the children at the end of the day, the warmth of his body in bed next to mine, but if he was winning, it meant I was losing. I wanted him to do well, just as long as he didn't do better than me.

'Tell me.' I reached for his plate. This needn't take long. It might be nothing, a clever diagnosis, perhaps, or the winning shot in his lunchtime game of squash.

'A research opportunity has come up.' He cleared his throat, an unnecessary sound that grated. His voice was monotonous, but as his eyes tracked mine, the dilated pupils gave him away: this was no routine project. I dumped the plate in the sink on top of the knives and forks and sat down to face him, hands on the table, braced.

'Let me guess. The Wellcome Trust agreed funding for your cancer stem cell project?' Pride and jealousy curdled in the pit of my stomach.

He shook his head; his eyes skated sideways. 'Remember when you did that research post in San Francisco twelve years ago?'

I nodded, though it seemed longer ago than that, a strange and distant time of missing Adam, of walking alone up and down the foggy hills to the hospital, and of the faint strains of jazz reaching through the open windows in the lab. I'd spent my days and nights staining and studying slides, then analysing results; hours writing up my findings.

'. . . just married but it was your big opportunity and I let you go,' Adam was continuing.

The memory of the shining midnight lab, the racks of slides and empty coffee cups faded. Adam was staring at me, tapping his fingers.

I stared back at him. 'What's this really about, Adam?'

His eyes flickered downwards. 'I've been offered a research post for a year in Botswana.'

In the silence that followed, the dishwasher clicked: the end of the cycle. We often pretended not to notice it needed emptying, but this was a whole new game. It was as though he'd punched me in the gut, more a fight than a game.

'Offered? You applied some time ago, then.'

Around us the children's paintings were stuck on the cupboard doors; Zoë's clay animals cluttered every sill. A squash ball lay among the oranges in the

fruit bowl. Alice's violin was in the corner ready for tomorrow, swimming-pool times were pinned to the fridge with a heart-shaped magnet. My on-call rota was Sellotaped to the wall above the phone. Adam's news could change everything but he had kept it completely secret until now.

'The offer came out of the blue, Em. I'd have discussed it first if I'd applied. Of course.'

A muscle in his cheek flickered. The movement was minute – if I hadn't been watching so closely I would have missed it.

'That can't possibly be the whole story, these things take discussion and planning. Why didn't you tell me before?'

'It's difficult to talk to you sometimes . . . You get so wound up by my success.'

'So you kept it secret?'

'I couldn't find the words.'

'Tell me now.'

'Chris Assazar emailed me from Johannesburg.' Adam leant forward. 'He's read my paper on serum markers for lymphomas and he thinks an oncologist could do something useful out there. He'd supply funding.'

'Useful . . . Meaning what exactly?'

'He runs a research center for HIV in southern Africa. Botswana has the fastest growing infected population in the continent. We know AIDS patients

are at risk of lymphomas . . .' He was beginning to sound portentous, as he probably did when lecturing the medical students. He caught my glance and his voice quickened: 'So if we can tell from serum markers who is at particularly at risk, we can give anti-lymphoma treatment early and extend normal life by months, years, maybe.'

'What about our normal lives?'

Our lives weren't normal, but one of us was around, at least for part of the time, and the au pair filled in the rest. We took turns to be on call. Last weekend I'd done four Caesareans while Adam held the fort at home. I often did my research in the evenings while he read stories to the children. I took them to school in the mornings. With Adam in Botswana, I would be responsible for everything; the girls, the school run, supervising homework, the house; on my own there would be no time for research as well as clinical work. He would be free to work as hard as he wanted. He'd publish new work. I'd achieve nothing.

He'd win. Though he always denied it was like that, I didn't believe him. My eyes burnt with tiredness and in that moment I was back at school, pulling through the pool, watching rivals, eyes stinging with chlorine, on fire to touch first. How could anyone not want to win?

Adam's chair grated against the slate floor as he

stood up. Next to him was the silver-framed photograph of my father on the windowsill. White-haired, high cheekbones, deep-set eyes behind half-moon glasses. The picture didn't show his hands, which had been tough-skinned, broad as spades. Warm. Because he was an obstetrician, people said they were surgeon's hands, skilled at saving life. It hadn't seemed like that to me in the quarry. *You can sink or you can swim*, he'd said. I was five years old.

*The quarry is silent. Secret.*

*The lake is a deep scoop of shadowed green between cliffs. We are together in his boat.*

*It's a hot day but I'm cold. I'm wearing a swimming costume. I don't know why, I can't swim. We usually come to fish but today he hasn't brought the rods.*

*'You can sink or you can swim.'*

*I don't know what he means but I feel frightened.*

*'It's up to you,' he says. He bends to me; his hands fit round my waist. He picks me up, holds me over the edge of the boat and then, very carefully, drops me in.*

*I hit stones at the bottom, mud soft as flesh, like Mum's grave. I open my mouth to scream and gag on water.*

*Thin yellow light comes down though the green above me. Bubbles stream upwards.*

*A voice shouts my name.*

*I lunge to the surface, reeds scraping my legs as I rise.*

*

Adam began to pace a few steps, turning back and forth as he gesticulated. His words fitted smoothly together, as though he'd been practising what to say out loud in the car coming home. '. . . good for both of them. It wouldn't matter if Zoë skipped Reception – in Scandinavia, five-year-old kids wouldn't even be at school; Alice is so far ahead she could take the rest of year five off and it would make no difference at all.' He sat down again and opened his hands as if offering me a gift. 'You could take a sabbatical, do any research you liked.'

So he wanted us in Botswana with him. I stared across the table but didn't see him. I was back in the dark early-morning kitchen ten years ago, downing coffee and writing papers while Adam and baby Alice slept. It was the same when Zoë was born. Since I'd been made consultant, life had been a constant round of clinical work and research. I hardly took a day off – how could I go away for a year? Adam had published more than me but I was younger. I'd catch up. None of it was easy, time was still scavenged. Family flowed into every gap there was, buoying me up, weighing me down.

'Please, Em?'

Across the table Adam was leaning forward, waiting for me to agree. Two years back he'd wanted a third baby. He'd begged just like this, but I was new to my post and responsible for a team. The timing

wasn't right. We had Alice and Zoë; everything balanced. Just. I'd said no. I'd say no to this. Adam's research in Botswana would take longer than a pregnancy. I'd sooner have a baby than spend a year abroad: babies slotted in. It was Adam's turn to give something up.

'When is all this supposed to happen?' I asked.

I had to marshal my thoughts but I needed sleep. If this had been a normal evening, like any other, the kitchen would be peaceful by now. The main light would be turned off and the room lit by the glow from side lamps. Adam would be reading through a paper with his feet up, sipping tea, while I glanced through the girls' work. The only sounds would be the clock ticking and the pages turning, maybe Adam's favourite Mozart quartet playing quietly as the day knitted together.

'It will take a little while to set up, confirm funding, and organize the team.'

His voice was quieter. He thought he'd won.

'Megan said she'd help.' He was smiling now. 'Her parents used to work in a mission centre out there. It's where she grew up. It'll take nine months to organize the research, starting from now. Ten tops. We could be there around Christmas time.' His eyes shone. 'It would be chance to help people, get some real meaning in our lives.'

But we helped people already. Our lives were full

of meaning. I pushed myself up and, ignoring the dishwasher, ran the tap over the pile of cutlery and plates in the sink, splashing water on my clothes. Megan, his loyal secretary. She'd do anything she could to help him achieve what he wanted. She didn't have children, though: she might not realize the effect Adam's plan would have on ours. They were doing well, but what would happen if we pulled them away from their routines? They deserved the choices I'd had. That meant keeping pace, working hard.

Adam's arms slid round me from behind. 'It would be an adventure,' he said.

I used to love that word. It meant bicycling across Europe with tents or hitching through America, rucksacks on our backs. I scraped a smear of pesto off a dish with a knife; I didn't need that kind of adventure now. Everything I wanted was here, in London. Adam's arms were pressing into the skin of my pelvis. Despite the tiredness, I felt desire heat my face.

'What d'you think?' His lips were on my neck.

I turned to face him. His mouth was slightly open and I could smell the wine on his breath. My head was swimming with alcohol. He'd said nine months, starting from now: that gave me time. I'd work something out; I knew about survival. I'd survive this.

'Let's not deal with it now.' I kissed him. 'We're too tired. There'll be time to go over it tomorrow or at the weekend. Come to bed.'

I took his hand; I could look through the paintings and homework tomorrow. As we turned to go, I heard light footsteps scurrying up the stairs ahead us, then a door closing quietly. Sofia must have crept in unnoticed. She was on the top landing in the room next to Alice. Alice had been so tired recently – I hoped Sofia hadn't woken her up.

We closed our bedroom door and leant against it in the dark, out of breath and clinging to each other, wine and exhaustion loosening the moment. Adam started pulling off my jersey. I unbuckled his belt. We were laughing.

He pushed me back onto the bed, sliding his hands under my skirt. We needed to stop. He'd forgotten I wasn't taking the pill any more – and he'd never felt the tiny cap over my cervix anyway.

I unbuttoned his shirt with trembling fingers; my heart was beating very fast, the thoughts coming faster. To an obstetrician like me, nine months meant heart formation, brain enlargement, facial elements coming together, the laying down of bones and fingernails. I smiled and reached up to him. He'd kept his own plans secret until tonight; that gave me the right to have a secret plan too, one that could trump his, if only I could think more clearly. I shouldn't have drunk so much wine.

He pushed inside me and began to move. His mouth lowered to mine. It was already becoming too

late, I began to let go. Nothing would happen, it had taken months to conceive Alice and over a year for Zoë. I was older now, less fertile. Besides, I'd forgotten the cap several times before now and my period had always arrived exactly on time. In a few moments my body was moving with his and my last conscious thoughts dissolved.