



If you love reading, you will love the unique services offered by lovereading.co.uk. You can download and print off the opening extracts of books, be guided by our exclusive author recommendation service and receive regular email updates of new books in your favourite genres. And it's all completely free. **Just turn to lovereading.co.uk today!**



Odd One Out

Lissa Evans

There were only two bedrooms in the flat. They were almost identical, but one had a picture of a flock of sheep on the wall so Paul chose the other one. He looked briefly at the view from the window (sky, treetops, back of Tesco), admired the poster on the back of the door (a lion disembowelling a gazelle, with the words 'Meet Mr Gorman' handwritten underneath), bounced on the bed a couple of times, lay down, closed his eyes for a few seconds, and then sat up again, unable to keep still. A soda stream of nervous excitement was beginning to fizz through him and he felt as if he could bounce across the room like a moon-walker. He'd done it, he was here. For once in his life he was in the right place at the right time, fully qualified, kitted out, official, bona fide and poised to begin; the moment was real, and yet completely unbelievable. He wanted to pin it on a card and re-examine it at regular intervals; he wanted to wear it next to his skin, like a vest.

He began to unpack, feverishly, stacking his textbooks by the bed, draping his lucky tie around the dressing-table mirror and throwing his shoes into the bottom of the wardrobe. He had packed his white coats first, as a measure of their status, and they were therefore right at the bottom of the bag, crushed beneath his trainers. He shook them out, tried to scratch what looked like a smear of tar from one of the pockets and then hung them reverently on the rail. Finally he coiled his stethoscope on the bedside table, placed the 'Good Luck' cards from his parents and his grandmother beside it and removed from his coat pocket the envelope that had arrived in the post a couple of mornings before, and which was now flaccid with handling. It contained his contract, a letter about accommodation and a rectangular white plastic name badge. He took out the badge and gazed at it: 'Dr Paul Gooding'.

Dr Gooding.

Paul.

Those, and only those, were to be his names from now on. Or Dr Paul, possibly - that had a friendly yet dignified ring to it. That Dr Paul, he's superb. Was he a high-flyer, do you know?' 'No, actually, he had to retake his first year exams and repeat his entire third year and resit his . . .' He mentally revised the conversation. 'No, he was academically average.' 'Shows you can't tell, doesn't it? Because he's superb now.'

That's right, but you often find the exam successes can't cut it when it comes to the everyday work of the wards.' 'And they tend to lack innate sympathy.' 'Yes. Whereas Dr Gooding -' 'Dr Paul, we always call him . . .'

He put the badge down next to the stethoscope and went back to the wardrobe. Selecting the least crumpled of the new white coats, he tried it on and stepped back to examine himself in the full-length mirror. He had done the same thing on a visit home, yesterday, at his mother's insistence, but since her verdict had consisted of a wordless clutching of his hand accompanied by simultaneous dabbing of the eyes, he felt that a cooler appraisal was needed. The shorter version of the coat, as worn by medical students, had not suited him. The back of the jacket had rested just on the shelf of his buttocks, making him look (as an ex-girlfriend had noted) as if he were wearing a bustle. He had hoped that the extra length would add a certain dignity, perhaps even shave off a pound or two. ('You wouldn't call Dr Paul overweight, would you?' 'No, he's more beefy, isn't he?' 'Or chunky.' 'Yes. Either way, it gives him a reassuring presence.') The result, now he was able to give himself a long, critical, private assessment, was unsatisfactory. The bustle effect had gone but instead he looked pear-shaped. He undid the buttons and let the sides swish loosely. Better. He viewed his side elevation, and was reminded of a milk bottle. He turned his back on the mirror and looked at himself over one shoulder, and decided to try to erase that particular image from his mind altogether. Perhaps there was a gym in Shadley Oak. Slightly disappointed, he returned the coat to the hanger and shoved the suitcase under the bed.

It took him about two minutes to explore the rest of the flat. It appeared to have been recently cleaned, and was neat, cheaply furnished and almost devoid of decoration or frippery. There was a video player but no videos, a magazine rack but no magazines, a kettle but no tea, coffee, squash or milk, and no food at all, apart from a single hamburger of indeterminable age, iced immovably into the bottom of the freezer. Paul made himself a mug of hot water, stirred in the contents of a sachet of tomato sauce that he'd found in a drawer and wandered across to the kitchen window, where a faded orange blind was obscuring most of the view. He gave the cord a gentle tug and the blind, instead of briskly snapping upwards, unrolled as far as the windowsill. He gave another, sharper tug and a further length of material bellied across the sink. He tried a slow pull and then a fast pull and then a series of delicate twitches, and ended up standing halfway across the kitchen with seven feet of canvas stretched between himself and the window frame.

In the end the simplest solution was to climb onto the draining board and remove the blind from its moorings altogether. The view, suddenly revealed, was vertiginous and Paul hesitated with one foot in the sink before carefully leaning forward to take a look.

The most noticeable feature was the chimney of the hospital incinerator, directly ahead and so close to the window that the maintenance ladder looked almost within reach, but to the left was a bird's-eye view of the jumble of buildings that comprised the hospital, and to the right, across the perimeter fence, a street of picturesque houses, mainly converted into shops. He'd driven along it on the way to the hospital and had passed the market square and the Woolworths and the Ryman's and the - he

caught his breath and then craned as far to the left as the kitchen cupboard would allow; just visible at the very edge of the window was a tall terraced building, the brickwork between the upper windows adorned with a large white cut-out of a leaping figure in a winged hat. He scrambled off the draining board and hurried through to the living room; from there the view was uncluttered and panoramic and the frontage of the Shadley Oak Mercury was clearly visible.

He had passed it earlier - he had slowed his car and gawped and imagined Marianne stepping through the door, camera around her neck, the fine strands of her pale hair soft-lifted by the breeze, her grey eyes rising to meet his, her cushioned lips curving into a - and then someone had sounded their horn and he'd had to concentrate on driving again. And now, in a fantastic and completely unexpected bonus, he'd been granted his very own, private view. He'd be able to watch Marianne going to work! Grinning, he slapped his chest in a brief, happy tattoo, and wondered what to do with the rest of the afternoon. Explore the town? Drive to Tesco and stock up? Have a wander round the hospital to orientate himself? Phone his parents? Read 'Essentials for House Officers'. Check the view from the other bedroom, just in case it was possible to see the Mercury office from there?

He checked the view from the other bedroom; the office was out of sight, hidden behind a row of evergreens. In front of these was the staff car park, across which an oddly dressed man was pushing a supermarket shopping trolley full of bottles. Somewhere a church clock struck four, and as the final stroke sounded there was a thunderous hammering on the door of the flat.