

PRIVATE LESSONS

Written by

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Based on the short story, "Teacher's Pet"

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FADE IN:

INT. PRINCE DE GALLES HOTEL BAR, PARIS - NIGHT

JEB WINE, 30-ish, nurses a whiskey neat as he sits at a stool alone at the bar. The top button of his shirt is open and his tie sags at half mast.

In the background, 80's DANCE MUSIC attempts at a party atmosphere on a dead night where nothing is happening, and the booths and tables sit mostly empty.

The BARTENDER'S gaze shifts to the door. He pulls a cold Heineken from beneath the bar, deftly pops off the cap, and hurries across the bar carrying the beer and a chilled glass.

Jeb watches him go.

A tall COWBOY, fifties, slender, silver-haired, wearing black Tony Lama's, black jeans and a black leather vest over a black turtleneck saunters in. Around his neck, a bolo tie with silver tips jigs with his stride. Gaudy turquoise rings grace all eight fingers, with a matching earring in his earlobe. And under the broad brim of his black Stetson, he wears a pair of Ray-Ban's in a room dimly lit for ambiance.

Cowboy walks confidently without turning his head, as if he knows even without checking that every eye in the place is on him. He sits at a corner booth and the waiter pours his beer.

Jeb watches as the first beer disappears before he tentatively approaches the cowboy.

JEB

Hi, my name is Jeb Wine. Pardon my intrusion, but it's been such a long time since I've had a decent conversation in English. I hope you can forgive me. Would it be okay if I joined you?

Jeb smiles weakly.

The cowboy gazes around the bar, then studies Jeb. His jaw juts forward in annoyance. After a moment, the cowboy reluctantly raises an arm toward the opposite side of the booth in a *help yourself* gesture.

Jeb slides in and the cowboy extends his hand across the table.

COWBOY

(Germanic accent)

I am Karl. You are American, ja?

Jeb freezes and stares at Karl for a moment before answering.

JEB

Yes, sir.

KARL

I don't know if I am what you expected, but my English is not bad and it is good to practice.

An awkward second passes before Jeb notices Karl's hand waiting to be shaken. He forces a smile and obliges. Afterward, he settles across from Karl.

JEB

Your accent, are you German?

KARL

Dutch. Ah, my clothes. You thought I was American. I have always loved American westerns. How about you?

JEB

Westerns? Yeah, they're okay I guess.

KARL

My favorite are Clint Eastwood movies. He is so ambiguous. He is not all good, not all bad. He is what he needs to be at any particular moment, does what he needs to do, and feels no guilt about it. Don't you agree?

Karl eyes bore in on Jeb.

JEB

Uh, sure, I guess. I don't know that I've ever put that much thought into it.

KARL

Did I say that properly, ambiguous?

Jeb nods. Karl leans back into the banquette and studies Jeb for a moment.

KARL (CONT'D)

So what brings you to Paris, Mr. Wine?

JEB

I'm here on business.

KARL
And what business is that?

JEB
I'm in sales. I work for a
commercial avionics company.

Karl raises his eyebrows and nods as if impressed.

JEB (CONT'D)
I've been in Paris for almost a
month trying to get a French
airline to buy our latest
equipment.

KARL
Are you good at what you do?

JEB
(slightly taken aback)
My company thinks so or they
wouldn't have sent me.

Karl's lips curl into a smug smile.

KARL
Please forgive me. I did not mean
to offend you. I sometimes forget
that the boundaries for cordial
conversation are different in our
two cultures. It is just that a
month seems rather excessive for
a...
(Karl makes air quotes)
... good salesman.

Jeb takes a sip of his whiskey.

JEB
It's political. Their current
supplier is French. Our stuff is
better and cheaper, but still...

Karl gives an understanding nod.

KARL
I see you are married. Did you
bring your wife with you?

Jeb glances at his wedding band and lowers his hand below
table level where he absently spins the ring on his finger.

JEB
Uh, not this time.

KARL

I detect problems. Am I right? I credit myself as being a good judge of body language.

Jeb clears his throat and downs the remainder of his whiskey, but doesn't answer.

Karl leans back and sighs.

KARL (CONT'D)

Again I fear I have gotten too personal. I apologize. Perhaps I can make it up to you.

Karl whistles to catch the bartender's attention, holds up two fingers and twirls them in a circle above his head.

Moments later the waiter appears at their table balancing a fresh whiskey and Heineken on his tray. He sets them down and moves off.

JEB

What is it you do, Karl?

Karl leans close and smiles, exposing a set of yellowed, uneven teeth.

KARL

I could tell you, but then I would have to kill you.

Jeb snorts out a laugh.

JEB

You certainly know your American catch phrases.

Karl smiles proudly.

JEB (CONT'D)

But really, what is it you do?

Karl tips back his glass and takes another swig of beer. He signals the waiter for another round though not finished with his last beer. After the waiter leaves, Karl leans across the table.

KARL

A proficient salesman must be perceptive and possess a talent for reading people, ja?

Jeb nods.

KARL (CONT'D)

In America you have a game called twenty questions. Since you are a salesman and more perceptive than most, I will grant you ten. Ten yes or no questions to determine my profession.

JEB

Okay, I'm game.

Jeb sits back and scrutinizes the Dutchman.

JEB (CONT'D)

You strike me as an individualist. I assume you work for yourself rather than for a company?

KARL

Ja. See, you are good at this.

Karl holds up his hand and raises his index finger.

KARL (CONT'D)

Nine left.

Jeb's eyes settle on Karl's rings.

JEB

You also seem confident and don't mind drawing attention to yourself. Are you in the entertainment business?

KARL

Nay.

Karl extends another finger.

Jeb stares at the rings again.

JEB

You appear wealthy, like you might have all the money you need.

KARL

Ja.

Karl flashes Jeb three fingers.

JEB

Are you retired?

KARL
Close, but nay.

Jeb sipped his whiskey while considering his next question.

JEB
Would you say that what you do
helps people?

KARL
Nay. By people, I assume you mean
all people. Only those I work for
are helped. Any other benefits are
merely coincidental.

The Dutchman waggles the fingers of his right hand.

KARL (CONT'D)
Five to go.

Karl downs a swig of his beer and settles back for the next question, a small smile on his face.

JEB
Does what you do require you to use
tools?

KARL
Ja.

Karl extends the index finger of his left hand holding it next to his right.

JEB
Are the tools specialized to your
trade?

KARL
(shakes his head)
Nay. I use various tools and they
can be used for other things.

Another finger rises.

JEB
May I see your hands?

Karl, an amused expression on his face, raises them palms out. Jeb examines them.

JEB (CONT'D)
No callouses. If you use tools,
it's not for hard labor.

Karl grins.

JEB (CONT'D)
Is what you do a creative endeavor?

Karl flashes eight fingers.

KARL
Creativity is definitely a part of
it.

JEB
Does your profession require
specialized training or schooling?

KARL
There are no classes for what I do?

Karl holds up nine fingers.

KARL (CONT'D)
Only one question left.

JEB
Do you enjoy your work?

Karl props his chin in his hand and strums his fingers against his lips making a popping noise. When he stops, his mouth is set in a tight line.

KARL
Nay. I have never enjoyed it, but I
do take the satisfaction any man
would for a job well done. I am
very good at what I do and it pays
very well. That was your last
question. Do you have a guess?

JEB
I think all I did was muddy the
waters. Are you an artist?

Karl hisses out a long laugh and covers his mouth. His sallow skin reddens as he seems unable to stop, even to breathe. After finally regaining control, a case of the giggles still lingers.

KARL
Excuse me, but that was a good one.
In America you would say, not even
close. I thought you would be good
at this game, but I was mistaken.

Jeb looks around the bar selfconsciously. Patrons are watching them.

JEB
So what is it you do?

Karl leans in uncomfortably close. Jeb winces at the scent of half metabolized alcohol.

KARL
I am a contract assassin, what you
Americans call a hit man.

Karl rights himself, a pleased smirk on his face, and takes another swig of beer.

Jeb rolls his eyes.

JEB
I apologize for being a nuisance.

He scoots to the edge of the booth and stands.

JEB (CONT'D)
It was nice to meet you.

Jeb turns to go.

Karl shoots out a hand and clamps onto Jeb's wrist.

KARL
Don't be that way. Sit. We were
just starting to enjoy each other's
company and have a little friendly
conversation.

JEB
(confused)
But I thought...

Karl's eyes harden into an accusing glare.

KARL
Thought what?

JEB
Look, you've been jerking my chain
since I sat down. I get it. You
want to be alone. I'm sorry for
intruding.

KARL
You don't believe me?

JEB

Maybe I've had a little too much to drink, but not that much.

Karl releases Jeb's wrist and removes his sun glasses. A small smile crosses his face, but something in his eyes is serious as a tumor.

KARL

I don't lie, Mr. Wine. Please sit a while longer. I am enjoying our exchange.

JEB

(skeptical)

So are you telling me it's true?

Karl raises his brows and nods.

KARL

Now sit. Finish your whiskey.

Jeb eases back down into the banquette.

JEB

How did you get into the business, if I might ask?

Karl lowers his voice.

KARL

Many years ago, when I was done with the army and in search of work, a friend who knew I was good with guns approached me with a proposition on behalf of a third party. The money was good, and I was broke. I took the job and was successful. A few months later there was another request, and then another. Over time, I got better and increased my rates. It became too lucrative to stop.

JEB

Have you killed anyone I've heard of?

KARL

Probably not. Most of my targets are businessmen. Some are government officials, though not high enough in rank to make world news.

(MORE)

KARL (CONT'D)

No, the problem is that if I target someone too famous, I would likely be in hiding the rest of my life. And no one pays well enough for that. Because of this, I say no to those jobs.

Jeb's astonishment registers on his face.

JEB

Have you ever worked in the U.S.?

KARL

Ja, but not much.

JEB

Are you working now?

Karl tsks and wags his head.

KARL

That question is out of bounds. Did I say that correctly?

JEB

You said it right. But from your answer, I'm going to assume the answer is yes.

KARL

(wearily)

Assume what you wish.

JEB

How much do you charge?

Karl sighs as if growing annoyed.

KARL

Always with you Americans, money, money, money. I will say that you couldn't afford me.

JEB

Say I wanted someone in the States taken care of, could you recommend someone?

Karl tips his mug up and finishes his beer. He wipes his mouth with a napkin before bringing his cold eyes down on Jeb.

KARL

There is no assassins union, Mr. Wine. I know of no one else in my profession, and they know nothing about me. It is safer for everyone that way.

JEB

I didn't mean to upset you.

KARL

I am not upset.

Karl signals the waiter.

KARL (CONT'D)

Charge the drinks to my room.

The waiter nods and moves off.

JEB

What is it like?

Karl collects his sunglasses and puts them on.

KARL

I grow tired, Mr. Wine. If you are still curious, perhaps we could discuss it over lunch tomorrow, ja?

Karl stands unsteadily.

JEB

Yeah, that would be great.

Karl nods and shambles toward the door, his balance a bit shaky, as if walking the deck of a boat on choppy water.

INT. PRINCE DE GALLES HOTEL ROOM - DAY

Jeb reads e-mails in bed, dressed in khakis and a short sleeved shirt, when a KNOCK on the door startles him. He closes his laptop, crosses the room to the door, and peers through the peephole.

Outside stands a WAITER dressed in a black tux.

Jeb opens the door and the little man wheels in a trolley bearing a pair cloches and a vase holding a single iris.

WAITER

Compliments of Monsieur Van Gelder.

JEB
Monsieur Van Gelder?

WAITER
Oui.

The waiter wheels the trolley through the room and out onto the balcony. He draws a tablecloth from a shelf under the cart and drapes it over a small bistro table. His slender hands quickly lay down napkins, a pair of plates, and two place settings of silverware.

JEB
There's been some sort of mistake.

WAITER
There is no mistake. Mr. Van Gelder has already paid the bill.

JEB
But I don't know a Mr. Van Gelder.

WAITER
Evidently he knows you. Bon
appétit.

The waiter leaves and quietly closes the door after him.

MOMENTS LATER

Another KNOCK draws Jeb to the door.

THROUGH THE PEEPHOLE, Jeb sees Karl the Dutch hit man. He opens the door. Karl, dressed in a gray suit, stands erect, legs straight, chin high and cocked to one side like a military officer posing for a photograph. In his hand he holds a leash tethered to a golden lab puppy.

JEB
Mr. Van Gelder I presume.

Karl's eyes flit about the hotel room. A smile spreads across his face when he spots the trolley on the veranda.

KARL
Ah good, our food is here.

Karl walks into the room. As he passes, he pushes the leash into Jeb's hand. The pup follows Karl, and as the leash comes taut, the animal tumbles clumsily onto the carpet.

KARL (CONT'D)

I hope you don't mind that I took the liberty to order. I pray my choices are to your taste.

He raises one of the cloches on the trolley.

KARL (CONT'D)

Lobster salad...

He raises the other.

KARL (CONT'D)

... and cheeseburgers. Nothing could be more American, ja? I thought by now you might miss them. I'll have you know I gave special instructions to the chef. I made sure he added no French flourishes. They think they know everything about food and can make a better burger. But in fact, their fanciful techniques kill the simplicity that makes a burger so good. Don't you agree?

Jeb follows Karl onto the balcony, the pup straining at the leash having caught the scent of food.

JEB

All I know is I've never had a decent burger in this town, so thank you.

KARL

Please, sit.

Jeb sits in the chair opposite Karl with the sun in his face. The dog jumps into his lap and curls into a ball while Karl prepares Jeb a plate.

Karl's gaze fixes on the pup.

KARL (CONT'D)

What do you think of him? Isn't he beautiful?

JEB

He's a fine looking animal.

KARL

You should feel his coat.

Jeb strokes behind the pup's ears. The pup licks his hand.

Karl sets Jeb's plate before him and sits in the other chair.

KARL (CONT'D)

So why do you want to kill your wife, Mr. Wine?

Jeb's eyes jump from the pup to Karl.

JEB

What?

KARL

Men like you only ever want three people killed; a business rival, a troublesome or wealthy relative, or your wife. And last night I sensed something about your wife troubled you. I understand American divorces can be very expensive.

JEB

But I never said --

Karl cut him off with a wave of his hand.

KARL

Last night you were curious about how I do what I do, and what it is like. There are so many misconceptions. Most people imagine I sit high in a tower with a telescopic sight waiting for my target to come into view. Nothing could be further from the truth. I excel at what I do because I get close to my target. Close enough to make sure I have the right man. Close enough not to miss. To do this takes great skill. You must first put the target at ease and establish a relationship, much as I have with you.

Karl pulls a pistol from his jacket and levels it at Jeb's chest.

KARL (CONT'D)

From this range, I cannot miss.

Karl smiles.

KARL (CONT'D)

This is the secret to my success.

He screws a silencer onto the barrel of the pistol.

KARL (CONT'D)

With traffic noise, no one will hear a thing. And if I flip the *do not disturb* sign on my way out, your body won't be discovered until the day you are scheduled to check out. A successful assassin must think of these things. There are so many details.

Jeb can see the look of terror on his face reflected in Karl's glasses.

JEB

(voice cracks)

Please don't. I'll give you everything I have.

KARL

(smiles)

You wouldn't believe how often I hear that. Unfortunately, failure to fulfill a contract would place my life in jeopardy.

Liquid SPLATTERS on concrete as Jeb pisses his pants. The pup scrambles off his lap. Karl leans to the side to observe the puddle spreading beneath Jeb's chair and grins.

JEB

Please, I'm begging you.

Tears stream down his cheeks.

JEB (CONT'D)

I have a wife and a daughter.

KARL

Everyone has someone. Last night you asked what it is like to kill someone. It is an odd sensation to take the life of someone who has never done anything to you, a person who now trusts you. It is a feeling that cannot be put into words, so I thought I should show you firsthand.

Karl sets the gun on the table.

KARL (CONT'D)

Now you know what it feels like to be on the wrong end of the gun. To know what it is like to kill someone who has never wronged you, who may not deserve it, you should shoot the dog. That is what it is like. If you can do that, then maybe you can kill your wife. But know that unlike the dog, she will feel exactly what you felt a moment ago.

Karl stands and steps into the shade of the room. He turns to face Jeb who is still frozen in his chair.

KARL (CONT'D)

That gun is clean and untraceable. It is made of plastic and ceramic and won't show on airport x-ray. It is my gift to you. Good luck in whatever you decide.

At the door, Karl turns and gives a final wave.

KARL (CONT'D)

Hasta la vista, baby. I do so love American movies.

After the door CLAPS shut, Jeb still sits with his hands gripping the edge of the table, staring at the gun.

FADE OUT.