DRAYTON AND MACKENZIE

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ALEXANDER STARRITT

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To Stella

"There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune"

I

All his life, James had found things too easy. So far, he'd only really known one thing: the arbitrary, rule-bounded competition for grades. Before his A-levels, he trained with the total absorption of an elite athlete. In the maths papers, he even ratcheted the bar a few notches higher: the rules said you weren't allowed to leave the exam room in the first twenty minutes, so he tried to finish by that mark. In the first of these maths papers, he reached his personal finish line with eighteen seconds to spare. There was a moment of exhilaration. But as the pleasure and tunnel vision of racing receded, he suddenly understood that he would now have to leave the exam room alone, while the rest of his class stayed inside together.

Each time he hit this mark in the subsequent exams, it made him sadder. At least after the summer there would be Oxford. The big league. He deferred the disappointment of the present by looking ahead. And he arrived there assuming he would have to sprint constantly just to keep up. But in tutorials he watched other students admit they hadn't read "that particular chapter" or just look blank and terrified when the tutor was talking. Others confidently embarked on theories that quickly leaked and foundered, or they just kept clinging to the last idea they'd read about.

Practically no one, not even those struggling, seemed to simply put in the forty hours of weekly study that the tutors recommended. From the snatches of their conver-

sation he overheard, they were using that time for club nights and sports matches. James couldn't understand them. He found that forty hours was hardly enough to master the basics.

But most bemusing were those who seemed to intentionally trip themselves up – because it showed that they were a free spirit, or glamorously troubled, or too popular for secondary reading. They seemed to think it was interesting to be bad at things. They didn't seem to understand that being bad at things was the default. Almost everyone since the dawn of time had been bad at almost everything. It was simply the world operating as expected. It was like if you let go of an object and all it did was drop inertly to the ground. Far more remarkable if, when you let go, it began to fly.

His tutorial partners found him aloof, stand-offish, arrogant. His tutors thought him enigmatic: usually a student this brilliant would eagerly accept their invitations to join the little informal gatherings they hosted with interesting alumni. James said he couldn't spare the time from working. But surely – *surely* – that was a lie. Meanwhile, James lived in fear. Because the only students he knew were the handful that the timetable paired him with, it was entirely possible that in other tutorials there would be dozens of people far better than him. He studied like he had for A-levels, as if pursued by a rival who had no weaknesses and never tired.

The only extra-curricular activity he tried – just for the first term – was rowing, since it was a bona fide irreplicable Oxford experience and not, like the student newspapers and debating societies, just a sandpit version of real things for grown-ups. In later years, when he was the subject of articles and interviews, he was often asked whether it was true that one of the others in the boat with

him was Roland Mackenzie. Yes, it was true. James didn't notice him at the time.

Instead, he was thinking about undergrad essays, which he'd realised with a sense of disillusionment were merely a technique, a form to be learned like Shakespeare learned the sonnet. All you needed was three facts and confidence. Point, counterpoint, conclusion. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. It was very Hegel. And once he saw this, he saw it everywhere: Parliament, the law courts, Newsnight. The two raucous sides of the House; the two sharply antagonistic barristers; prosecution, defence, judgment; one side, other side, vote.

He supposed he'd been naive to think of university as concerned with intellect. Maybe it was different at postgrad, but at this level, Oxford was just an elementary course in information-processing, a training school for Britain's future lawyers, politicians and administrators. You skim-read the sources and hastily produced an opinionated synopsis. Of course, it made sense. Society needed administrators far more than what his tutor had called "a rare original response" to Spinoza. It didn't occur to him that since he'd quickly learned the essay form, he could have tried to employ it for something with value of its own. He could only see the test and not what lay behind it.

In the end-of-year exams, he came first by miles, his result an outlier in the distribution, far above the girl in second. His beefy imagined opponent, up close, turned out to be stuffed with straw. It hurt so much he had to lie on the carpet of his childhood bedroom, gritting his teeth until it passed.

He fell into a lethargic slump. After the summer, his essays became perfunctory. His Comparative Government tutor asked if he was alright. He stayed in bed all

morning eating Jaffa Cakes and reading sports biographies. So as not to have to keep renewing it, he stole from the library a life of the Czechoslovakian distance runner Emil Zátopek. At the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, Zátopek won gold in the 5,000 metres, the 10,000 metres and the marathon – a feat unlikely ever to be equalled.

Zátopek had never run a marathon before and didn't know how to pace himself, so he ran next to the world record holder, Jim Peters. After a pitilessly quick first nine miles in which Peters tried to break him, Zátopek turned to Peters and asked how the race was going. Peters, in astonishment, tried to trick Zátopek by saying the pace was too slow. Zátopek accelerated and was gone. Peters didn't finish.

James loved that Zátopek had been born with less raw speed than his rivals. And he was born poor. So he worked harder than anyone before him had realised was humanly possible. He ran in snowstorms to toughen himself; he ran carrying his wife on his back. When his day job as a conscript in the Czechoslovakian army prevented him running his sets, he climbed the fence into Prague's athletics stadium and ran at night. Performance-enhancing drugs were invented to let other athletes survive training like Zátopek.

There was a quote in the book from Christopher Chataway, an Olympian himself and one of Roger Bannister's pace runners for the four-minute mile, who said, "For me and many others, it was simply more than we could stand." Sometimes this floated up to James's conscious mind when he was buying a sandwich or walking to the library – "simply more than we could stand" – and he smiled with joy. Imagine what Zátopek could have achieved if he'd been born with first-class talent *and* worked that hard.

He climbed out of his despond by imagining that he was competing not against the students around him but against the best student from every cohort back through Oxford's nine centuries. No one could ever know how well he scored against them, but that only made the contest all the purer.

Then it was James's final year. A job fair on a drizzly November afternoon. It was 2004, and the financial crisis hadn't happened yet. Companies had come to offer a ladder up into the decision-making class, the top ten thousand who collectively made history rather than having it inflicted upon them. The talk among the students was about how much more competition there was than in their parents' time. After the crisis, they would consider themselves lucky for having made this leap before it hit.

James went to the job fair expecting each recruiter to pitch the merits of Zátopekian devotion to his particular calling. He wanted to ask the civil servants how many years it took to become head of a proper department like the Treasury or the Foreign Office. And how would they compare the deep background power of the bureaucracy with the trivial attention-seeking but ultimate say-so of the politician? Was it better to be cabinet secretary for fifteen years or prime minister for five?

But the fair wasn't like that. It was in a big bare room, like a school assembly hall, that was used for conferences. They'd set up two rows of desks facing each other to make an avenue of high-paying jobs. Each desk had company-branded pens and USB sticks. They had tall, free-standing posters, like Japanese battle flags, with pictures of smiling models pretending to be account managers and investment analysts. There were some

noticeably less glossy stands for the graduate fast track at Tesco's, the police and the NHS.

A hundred years earlier, the jobs might have been to administer part of a West African country or help run one of the great concerns – jute, shipbuilding – that catered to the Empire. But now most were for the professional services that since the 1980s had proliferated from the margins to the centre of the economy. Asset managers, consultants, lawyers, PR, a discreet caste of British men in blue suits, who, rather than attempt the risk, heartbreak and occasional glory of trade or industry, lived safe and comfortable on the steady flow of fees. For them, London was a kind of Switzerland, except with better restaurants.

The students meandered around these displays in sports kit or pyjamas. To James, it looked more like a Home Counties labour exchange than a search for vocation. He examined leaflets hamming up the exclusivity of joining the "Magic Circle" or the "Big Four". The only one that appealed was a KPMG poster that exclaimed "Tax needn't be taxing!" It had a picture of what looked like real accountants white-water rafting in brightly coloured helmets. At least they were honest that accountancy was dorkish. He took a brochure. Perhaps tax *would* be an interesting window into the nature of things.

As he ambled around, he said hi to people he'd seen in college, and they said hi back. But he didn't know anyone at the fair or beyond it who he could be sure he'd see again after graduation. He was explicit to himself about this failing. He diagnosed that it was partly because he hadn't joined the extra-curricular clubs. Of course he'd rowed in the first term, just to know what it was like, but that was it.

Partly also, he assessed, the problem was his personal-

ity. His younger sister Cleo, who was in her first year at Cambridge, knew how to talk to people at parties without turning it into a seminar. James didn't. This was a weakness he intended to work on, because it sometimes allowed a pale rind of loneliness to grow around his days. He had some ideas for how to become a charming raconteur, along with getting a six-pack and learning either Russian or Arabic.

Years later, when journalists asked him for the story of his life, his memories of university would feel constrictive, as if he were thinking himself back into a too-small jacket. Not particularly dreamy Oxford days. But since these interviews were just a way of broadcasting his messages, he didn't mention it.

He was looking for the Civil Service desk when someone politely touched his elbow. It was a recruiter, only a few years older than him, maybe twenty-six, quite short, with a slight paunch already. He was dressed as an Oxford type, in a midnight-blue velvet jacket and a bow tie striped in the college colours, with gold cufflinks in the shape of his employer's initials, an A and an O. James didn't imagine this guy had been wearing velvet jackets before he got to Oxford. It was a persona handed down by institutional tradition, like slang in the army. Now he was peacocking with it to draw in fresh graduates. He had a friend with him, another recruiter, more normally dressed in a grey suit. Evidently the straight man in the relationship.

The first recruiter shook James's hand and said, "Hello there. James, isn't it? I'm Will, from Allen & Overy, the top firm in the Magic Circle. And this is Hatch, who's doing really well at a plucky outfit called – what's it called again, Hatch? Freshwater?"

A handshake from Hatch. "Hi, James. Steve Hatchett.

I can tell you that at Freshfields we do a lot more business than they do at A&O. If you like the sound of three years writing gas contracts from a satellite office in Uzbekistan, Will's your guy. But I can't imagine you want to go to Uzbekistan, do you?"

Hatch had teed it up for him to say something like "Not if I come back dressed like that" or "I hear Freshfields would be lucky to get some business in Uzbekistan."

But James didn't have the knack of banter. And actually he would quite like to go to Samarkand, to see the tomb of Tamerlane. He said, "Sorry, but why are you talking to me? I mean, out of everyone?"

"Right, right," said Will. "Good question. Well, this isn't my first rodeo, you know, so I just asked Big Eddie: who's the number one student you've got in this cohort, because that's all I'm here for."

James glanced around and spotted his tutor, Professor Lawton – Big Eddie – who was worldlier than most of his colleagues and had come to the recruitment fair to make sure the right people met each other. He was loitering on the edge of the room, leaning against the wall with his gorilla's shoulders straining against his hairy tweed blazer. His fists were in the blazer's pockets, jingling whatever he kept in there.

Big Eddie was one of the ideas men behind the early years of the Blair government. Recalibrating the engines of capitalism to drive social justice, like motors driving a flywheel, was the subject of his books. No more violent, twentieth-century-style ideological conflict, no more class war, capital versus labour, left versus right – but a third way. It was said in college that he'd run out of new thoughts to feed into the insatiable political machine and was hardly ever in Number 10 any more. But he knew what it was to sit on those sofas in Downing Street with

Blair, Brown and Alastair Campbell, and decide the fate of the country. James hoovered up whatever he could glean from him.

Will said, "He was our tutor, too, oh, a fair few years ago now. Hatch and I were tute partners back then. Eddie says you're a shoo-in to come first in the year for PPE. Is that right?"

In the way they ogled him, James thought he detected, beneath the pleasant smiles, a tinge of hostility. He'd noticed before that people who considered themselves high achievers could turn lumpen and resentful around him.

He said, "Someone always comes first. If you got the fifty stupidest people in Britain to sit the exams, one would come first. The only thing you're beating is other people."

They laughed as if he'd joined in. Will said, "Too true. Most of the profession are utter buffoons. Like this one right here." The two of them laughed again, very happy to be together on this jaunt to the old alma mater. They felt very grown up. "But that naturally makes it all the easier for a clever chap like you to get ahead. For clever chaps, it's easy-peasy."

James, feeling that familiar disillusionment, said, "I'm not really interested in a walkover."

The recruiters glanced at each other, clearly both deciding at the same time that he was a bit of a dick. But Will didn't let his bonhomie falter. He wholeheartedly agreed: "Of course! You wouldn't want to be bored. And it's not boring, is it, Hatch?"

"Course not." Hatch judiciously wobbled his head from side to side. "To be fair, you obviously have to do some legwork at the beginning, same as everywhere."

James was becoming very aware of the room around him, the milling students, the musty smell of rain-dampened hoodies. Outside, the sun had sunk below the ceil-

ing of cloud, and there was an orangey-red glow on the windows. He felt that if he moved at all, even just his finger, the whole room would stop and turn towards him, and he would be at the centre of a silent ring of masks. He could hear himself getting haughty as he said, "So what you're saying is I should choose the law because the competition are idiots and the work isn't more boring than anything else?"

Will said, "No, no, no," and the jovial expression dropped from his face. "I can see we've come at this from entirely the wrong angle. I apologise. Hatch and I have probably known each other too long to be allowed to talk to other people. So let me give you the brass tacks: we'll pay for your law conversion, and we'll match any salary here."

Hatch broke in: "We'll give you that, plus BUPA and a relocation bonus for moving to London."

Will countered: "We don't do health insurance until you're a bit more senior. But someone like you'll be up there in no time. And you're not going to need it, are you, until you're older. Hatch, be honest, have you ever actually used it once, apart from your annual check-up?"

Hatch couldn't help smiling just a little. He said, "It's the peace of mind. I might develop something."

Will couldn't help himself either: "Like what? Crotch rot? Your chat'll have to get a hell of a lot better for that to happen."

They both disintegrated into laughter again, and James thought: Maybe it's time to get out of this smug little country and go to America. He tightened with the perennial fear that he should have studied computer science.

Will was saying, "Sorry, James, sorry. That was childish. Now, we're having a little invite-only soirée this evening. Why –"

Hatch interrupted again: "We've laid on a much better

spread than they have. If you go to –"

James held up a hand to stop him. He had to get away. "Listen. Thanks." He inadvertently turned down his mouth as if giving them bad news. "But, well, no thanks. Good luck with the law." He gave them a nod and walked away.

Will came a few steps after him and threw his final hook: "If you're thinking you should shop around for a better offer, there isn't one. We'll match any salary here. Once you've done the round of the others, come back and talk to me. Will Cambourne, Allen & Overy!"

The idea that there was nothing more than this – that the best England had to offer was Will Cambourne – drove James out onto the drizzly street. The last of the daylight was going out overhead, and he stamped along with his thoughts in a jangle. The wet roads were hissing with passing cars. Small-town rush hour in narrow streets. Everyone hurrying to get out of the rain. A few postgrads huddled together outside the cinema, their umbrellas a multicoloured testudo. Some homeless men were taking shelter under the high portico of the Taylorian library, like primitives living among the ruins of ancient Rome.

As his thoughts began to cohere, he cheered himself up by imagining that he would dedicate every minute of the rest of his life to a single sacred cause: the downfall of Will Cambourne. He'd join Allen & Overy and quickly become Cambourne's boss. He'd pretend to be Cambourne's friend, feeding him enough titbits to keep him walking deeper into James's maze. Then he'd have Cambourne's promotions be passed over, his raises be meagre, his every project inexplicably fail. And finally, when Cambourne was broken, held together only by dependence on his loyal friend James, now head of the company, James would bring him into his enormous office at

the top of a skyscraper and say, "Will, I am the architect of your destruction." In that moment it would be revealed that all his seemingly random and disconnected actions had actually served one sole purpose.

Having reached that pinnacle, James's mind started to wander back down towards its everyday paths. The rain had saturated his curling black hair, and dirty rainwater trickled down past his ears. His dad claimed that the hair was the genetic legacy of a Spanish sailor cast ashore from the Armada. It wasn't impossible. In winter his skin went grey rather than white. And his dad's family was from East Anglia, so… maybe.

For now, however, he was wet, his woolly jumper was damp and he wanted to sit down. He trudged towards college. The way back felt much longer. He let himself in through the door cut into the big front gate.

As he stepped through, he saw Cambourne on the quad. He was standing under an arch beside the college bar, regaling some undergrads whether they wanted to be regaled or not. Alert despite his apparent easy-breeziness, he spotted James and saluted him with a plastic tumbler. He broke away from the group, walking backwards to finish what he was saying, then swivelled and headed for James.

By a decade later, when many people wanted James's attention, he'd learned how to give a frictionless brush-off. For now, his impulse was to flee. He could reach his door, punch in the key code and be gone. But with his young person's self-importance, he decided that running was beneath him. So he gave a reluctant wave and let their paths cross.

Cambourne hailed him as soon as his voice could reach. "James! Good to see you again, old man. Let me shake your hand."