

TWO LITTLE LESSONS

By Jeff Dunne

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CHARACTERS

ALEX	Any gender, old friend of Chris
CHRIS	Any gender, old friend of Alex

SETTING

Sitting out under the stars.

SCENE

(Alex and Chris are lying out under the stars.)

ALEX

Damn.

CHRIS

Yeah. The stars are so beautiful. *(Pause...)* I can't remember the last time I just... stopped. Really stopped.

ALEX

Yep. It's always rush, rush, rush.

CHRIS

I used to sit out and gaze at the stars all the time when I was a kid.

ALEX

Not me. Too cold.

CHRIS

Well, no one told you to go live in Montana.

ALEX

Actually, they did. That's what parents do.

CHRIS

When I was young I could name so many constellations...

ALEX

I always liked O'Brien.

CHRIS

Come again?

ALEX

O'Brien the Hunter. That's what I used to call it when I was little. My parents thought it was so cute they never corrected me. I thought it was O'Brien until I was in fourth grade.

CHRIS

That's adorable.

ALEX

You think so? I got teased like a sonofabitch for weeks.

CHRIS

Kids can be cruel.

ALEX

Would have been better if I could have laughed about it with them. Didn't learn that trick until ten years later.

CHRIS

Hey, we're supposed to be out here relaxing.

ALEX

Sorry. Right. You're right. Why don't I ever come out and just look at the stars? It's always work, or... some other kind of work. Or just stressing out about the state of the world, or...

CHRIS

All the more reason to come out here. Kind of puts things in perspective.

ALEX

I suppose.

(There's a long pause as they gaze.)

Does it ever get to you, all the lies?

CHRIS

Oh yeah. A lot, actually. I mean, it's not like I expect the leaders to tell us the truth. I know there are things that we shouldn't know. National security and all that, or maybe just stuff that would be too easily misunderstood and cause a panic. I get that. But at some point the whole thing has just gotten crazy. Nowadays it seems that people will lie about anything, for any reason. If something doesn't fit their personal needs, they'll lie about it. But the thing that drives me the craziest is that it's like there's no repercussions anymore, you know? They lie, and then five minutes later someone else lies, and people don't even remember the first one. I mean, I'm not saying that we have to all believe that there's some objective truth out there, and I get that people have different perspectives and things look different to different people, but Jesus, I mean some things are so fucking obviously lies. And there's just no accountability.

ALEX

You could have just said 'yes'.

Sorry.

CHRIS

But that's not what I meant. Not those lies.

ALEX

Then what?

CHRIS

You ever take calculus?

ALEX

Like, math calculus? A long time ago.

CHRIS

Do you remember how to take a derivative?

ALEX

Vaguely, I guess.

CHRIS

Like the derivative of x -squared is two x —

ALEX

Plus a constant.

CHRIS

No, that's integrals. Just two x .

ALEX

Oh, right.

CHRIS

It's a lie. Did you know that?

ALEX

Derivatives?

CHRIS

The one's we're taught. The derivative of x -squared is only two x in very special circumstances. The true derivative has cross terms that make it more complicated, but since the cross terms all cancel themselves out in flat spacetime nobody ever talks about them.

CHRIS

Oookay.

ALEX

But they're there. But no one ever tells you that.

CHRIS

Then how do you know?

ALEX

They covered it in Mathematical Methods for Physicists. When you start doing relativistic stuff, it matters. So we learn it, but the rest of the world just trots along in blissful ignorance that what they think is true is just one tiny little conditional sliver of something bigger. The 'usual' derivative is basically just 'good enough for you'.

(Pause.)

I hate that.

CHRIS

Okay...

ALEX

How other people tell you things that are just 'good enough for you'. Just conditional little slivers of reality that they decide are all you need to know.

CHRIS

I bet there's a reason they don't do relativistic calculus in high school.

ALEX

Sure. It's complex. Way too complex for most teenagers to do the math.

CHRIS

Well, there you have it.

ALEX

But you see, we're conditioned like that. As kids, we're perfectly capable of understanding that we're only being told a little bit of the truth, but we don't say that, do we? We present things like they're the only truth. And then one day it breaks, and you find out that it was a lie. And then what can you trust? If the derivative of x-squared isn't always two x, then is one plus one always two?

CHRIS

You're taking it to an extreme, Alex. Calculus is one thing, but I think you can count on... counting.

ALEX

But actually, that's a lie too, isn't it? In curved geometry, one plus one isn't always two. I go north one mile, west one mile, and I'm only one point four miles from where I started. Or what about more esoteric concepts. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts...

CHRIS

It's a complex world.

ALEX

It's not the world's fault. It's people that are the problem. Why is it so hard to get someone to tell you the truth? Why is it so unacceptable to even ask someone for the truth? Why can't I walk up to someone and say, "Lynn, why did you stop being my friend?" I mean, I'm not talking about telling someone how to behave or who to like or what to believe, but why is it so damn hard to just get honesty from people? But instead, you just walk past and watch them put on some bullshit smile that you know is a façade, and you each wave like everything's sunshine and gumdrops when what you really want to do is grab them by the shoulders and say "Why? What happened? What did I do? Is it something I can apologize for?" But you don't. You can't. You just wave and walk past.

CHRIS

Maybe you can.

ALEX

No, because then you're an asshole for putting someone on the spot by asking them to say something they didn't want to say. It's a whole system that's designed to support the obfuscation of the truth. We want to preserve the space for lies. It's like hoping some congressman will put forth a bill to limit the degree to which congressmen can abuse the system for their own benefit. No one wants to eliminate the ability to tell a lie because they might need that option themselves at some point.

CHRIS

You really think people are that knowingly cruel?

ALEX

It's not cruelty. Well, congressional corruption is, but we know they're all crooks. But for the average Joe, it's self-preservation. And conflict avoidance. And the fear of being wrong. Which is the dumbest thing in the universe, because we all know that we're all wrong about all kinds of things. Not malicious, not cruel, just mistakes. But the idea of it is just too awful to accept.

CHRIS

And here I thought you were getting pessimistic about your fellow humans.

ALEX

Oh, I am. Don't worry. There's still lots of ugliness there. Here's my favorite. Alice tells Bob that Charlie's an asshole, or makes up some bullshit lie about him, right? So what does Bob do? Bob believes her, of course, because we're all addicted to rumors and gossip. Now Bob thinks Charlie's an asshole.

CHRIS

What can I say? It sucks.

ALEX

Oh, no. It's far worse than that. So Bob thinks Charlie's an asshole because Alice told him that. Now Bob finds out that Alice is an asshole who makes shit up for her own personal reasons. They part ways. Now, what does Bob think of Charlie?

CHRIS

Well, logically, wouldn't he think Charlie's okay? Or at least not be sure?

ALEX

Logically, yes. But that's not human nature. Rather than admit that Bob was wrong – not through any fault of his own, mind you – Bob continues to think Charlie's an asshole. In fact, Bob may very well tell others that Charlie's an asshole, even if Bob never met Charlie.

(Chris goes to say something, but Alex ploughs forward.)

You see, deep down, it's easier for Bob to remain convinced that Charlie's an ass than to admit that he, Bob, was wrong about something. The embarrassment of having made a mistake, even one that was totally not his fault at all, is too overwhelming. Any way you look at it, Charlie's fucked.

CHRIS

Jesus, Alex.

ALEX

Is it any wonder that we've gotten to where we are? And you see, it's because we're constantly too short-sighted to just insert a little honesty and humility into raising our kids. If we'd just tell them, "hey, it's alright to be wrong, to make mistakes. Mistakes are good, mistakes are how you learn. Look back on your mistakes so you can make things right and do better the next time..." Can you imagine how much better our world would be if we could just get that one little message across? And then if you combine that with letting kids know that nothing in life is certain, that the best they can do is to think about things, recognize that they might not know the whole truth, and just keep an open mind that there might be a little more to the situation than they currently can see... Two things, Chris. Two fucking things. Two little lessons that could change the world if people would just teach it to their kids before they get all... human.

(Pause.)

You still there?

CHRIS

Yeah. Just a lot to think about.

ALEX

Yeah.

CHRIS

Damn.

ALEX

Yeah. The stars are so beautiful. I can't remember the last time I just... stopped. You know, really stopped.

CHRIS

Yep. It's always rush, rush, rush.

(Lights out.)