

The English Lesson

by

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EXT. AMERICAN SUBURBS - EVENING - ESTABLISHING (PRESENT DAY)

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING

A large pad of paper on an easel, inscribed in bold felt marker: "THE ENGLISH LESSON." Tracking away, we see first a TEACHER in his forties - buttoned into a shirt and tie that seem borrowed from a school uniform. Then, THE ROOM, expensive but tacky, stuffed with foreign bric-a-brac. We land on OTAR MOSHFEGH, a 60-something Croatian gangster with bushy eyebrows and the wild presence of a violent alcoholic. The Teacher and Mr. Moshfegh look O.S. expectantly.

ANGLE ON: INNA MOSHFEGH, Otar's wife, 30's. Potato-shaped and wearing a colorful and too-revealing cocktail dress. She looks back at the pad of paper, nervously mouthing the words. Finally, she speaks the title of the film, in a thick Croatian accent:

INNA
The English Lesson.

The men shake their heads.

OTAR MOSHFEGH
A month of lessons and we have only
this. Can the woman be taught?

THE TEACHER
It's not an easy tongue to master,
Mr. Mosfegh, but she's full of
potential.

INT. DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY - DAY

A muscular YOUNG TONGAN stands in front of a curtain. He covers one eye, making a face. His UNCLE enters the frame.

TONGAN UNCLE
(in Tongan, no subtitles)
Well, read it.

YOUNG TONGAN
(in Tongan, no subtitles)
It's a "Q" - how do you say it in
English?

TONGAN UNCLE
(in English)
He say "Q".

ANGLE ON: The Teacher, barely visible behind the D.P.S. counter, an EYE CHART mounted on the wall behind him.

THE TEACHER

No, sir, you said "Q". I didn't understand what he said.

TONGAN UNCLE

He say "Q"!

THE TEACHER

We don't issue licenses to families, sir. If I can't understand his answers to my questions, I can't expect him to read traffic signs, can I?

TONGAN UNCLE

Yeah, man, you bet you can. Ask him other question.

THE TEACHER

(reluctantly)

The letter after the "Q".

The uncle starts to translate.

THE TEACHER

Shhh! I'm asking him. (to young man) WHAT'S THE LETTER AFTER "Q"?

YOUNG TONGAN

(in Tongan, no subtitles)

Aw, man. Fuck this.

TONGAN UNCLE

Give me break, buddy. We come three times so far, okay? I don't translate, man. We not cheating!

THE TEACHER

Sir, this is not my problem.

YOUNG TONGAN

(in Tongan, no subtitles; getting angry)

Tell him to give me a damn license!

The Tongans lean over the counter. The young man is enormous. He wrings his massive hands.

TONGAN UNCLE

Look, buddy! This bullshit! He need license! What we supposed do?

(MORE)

TONGAN UNCLE (cont'd)
 We come three damn time so far!
 What we supposed do?

The Teacher, not intimidated, turns to the young Tongan.

THE TEACHER
 I suggest that you learn English.

YOUNG TONGAN
 (in English)
 I fuck your mother.

THE TEACHER
 See? You're off to a brilliant
 start. (to line) Next, please!

EXT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - MIDDAY

The Teacher posts flyers for his course by the library door.
 Inna exits the library, holding a copy of "Dirty Dancing."
 Again she's overdressed and showing too much skin.

THE TEACHER
 Inna. Hello.

INNA
 (surprised and looking for
 the words)
 Good -- day!

THE TEACHER
 How are you?

INNA
 I am *good*.

THE TEACHER
 (correcting her)
 You are well?

Inna twists her face and mumbles in English and Croatian.

THE TEACHER
 What is it, Inna?

INNA
 You...

THE TEACHER
 Yes?

INNA

You are... Um. You. You are looking lov-eh-ly today.

THE TEACHER

No, Inna. I'm looking "handsome," because I'm a man. You, as a woman, are looking "lovely."

Inna giggles.

INNA

Oh! Really! Thank you so very much. You are so nice. Then, you are handsome. You *handsome man*.

THE TEACHER

Thank you.

Inna approaches, rolling lustfully towards him. She's instantly full of confidence.

INNA

In the class. I like very much the looking at you.

THE TEACHER

That's nice, but a little much. We don't want to be too familiar.

INNA

But I want to get familiar. The life is lonely and cold.

THE TEACHER

Enough.

INNA

My husband has nothing for me in his pants... You know what it means to be man.

The Teacher retreats from Inna, terrified.

INNA

Everything is okay?

The Teacher looks at a BROWN BUICK idling in the parking lot.

THE TEACHER

No! No - Inna, it's about your husband.

INNA

Forget him.

THE TEACHER

He isn't paying me. We've had seven weeks of classes and I haven't seen a penny. I'm going to have to cancel.

INNA

No!

THE TEACHER

Yes. Absolutely yes. And now? Now, with these... advances. Advances I have no idea what to do with?

Inna presses against The Teacher.

INNA

You don't worry a second. I tell him pay you, he pay you.

THE TEACHER

Yes, I must be paid...

INNA

You don't worry about my... What you call?

THE TEACHER

Advances?

INNA

Inna make you happy, baby!

Inna touches The Teacher on the nose. He scrambles from beneath her and runs towards the waiting Buick.

I/E. - BUICK SKYLARK - CONTINUOUS

The Teacher's elderly FATHER and MOTHER wait for him. His father, small-eyed and mole-ish, is behind the wheel. His mother, rigid and skeletal, sits in the back seat.

TEACHER'S FATHER

Who was the young woman?

THE TEACHER

My lunch break's almost over, take me back to work.

TEACHER'S FATHER

A friend?

THE TEACHER

Father! I said drive the car.

The Teacher's mother looks out the window at Inna, still standing in front of the library.

TEACHER'S MOTHER

Is *that* the Croat's wife?

THE TEACHER

I'm sorry?

TEACHER'S MOTHER

The Croat entrepreneur, owner of the video store. Is the woman at the library door his wife?

THE TEACHER

Yes.

TEACHER'S MOTHER

Has the Croat paid you? Did you broach the issue with the woman?

THE TEACHER

I did. I told her that I intend to terminate the class.

TEACHER'S MOTHER

How very brave to walk away without your money.

THE TEACHER

It's not important.

TEACHER'S MOTHER

Thirty dollars twice a week for seven weeks. Four-hundred and twenty dollars. And you consider it just for the Croat to withhold this money from you, when it could be applied towards the food that you eat, or the roof over your head? She must be quite a woman.

The Teacher looks at Inna, who waves.

THE TEACHER

Drive the car.

INT. HOME OFFICE - AFTERNOON

An model ship, three feet long, and perplexingly intricate lies in near completion on Otar's desk. Inna sits next to the model, casting agitated glances at the model cars, planes, and boats that fill the room. Otar enters.

INNA

Why did you not pay him?

OTAR MOSHFEGH

So, now you speak English?

INNA

I never ask for nothing at all, and you still don't pay him. It makes thirty dollars only and you don't pay. You act like some big shot.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

Thirty dollars plus thirty dollars makes thousands, woman. I did not become what I am by throwing out thirty dollars to every asshole.

INNA

I see him today. He says he doesn't come anymore.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

Ha! We find another.

INNA

I don't want another.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

Why so much love for this teacher?

INNA

Pay him.

Inna grabs a mast of the model ship.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

Who you talk to anyway with all your fancy English?

INNA

I tell you, pay him!

Inna snaps the mast off of the model.

OTAR MOSHFEGH
 (in Croatian)
 Stop it, woman!

INNA
 Pay him!

She snaps off another mast.

OTAR MOSHFEGH
 (in Croatian)
 I won't tell you again!

INNA
 Pay him!

Otar slaps Inna across the face. Inna looks at him and knocks the model to the floor. It breaks into pieces.

INT. DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY - AFTERNOON

An attractive blonde YOUNG MAN steps up to The Teacher's counter. Good looks don't conceal that he's mentally slow.

YOUNG MAN
 My mom told me I had to take these papers here, so I could drive.

The Teacher looks up at him, cracking a rare smile.

THE TEACHER
 Well, let me take a look.

The young man hands The Teacher some papers. The Teacher rifles through the papers. They are BLANK.

THE TEACHER
 (handing back the papers)
 Okay, I'm going to need you to fill these out.

YOUNG MAN
 Oh... I fill them out?

THE TEACHER
 Uh-huh.... I have a pen if you need one.

The Teacher hands the young man a pen. With some effort, he sets to filling out his forms. Smiling, the Teacher watches him write for a moment before DIALING HIS PHONE.

OTAR MOSHFEGH (O.S.)

Hello?

THE TEACHER

Mr. Moshfegh?

OTAR MOSHFEGH (O.S.)

Who is this?

THE TEACHER

It's the English teacher.

OTAR MOSHFEGH (O.S.)

Ah, yes. Inna tells me you've decided to terminate her lessons.

THE TEACHER

Terminate? I don't think I used that word. I'm worried about the bill.

OTAR MOSHFEGH (O.S.)

So, we're having a money problem?

THE TEACHER

You haven't paid at all, sir.

OTAR MOSHFEGH (O.S.)

I am a man of many concerns. Small matters occasionally escape me. Your check is in my desk.

THE TEACHER

Really? Oh.

OTAR MOSHFEGH (O.S.)

So, you come. You take your money, you leave? You don't teach my wife English?

The Teacher looks up at the young man. He has put on a pair of ugly plastic glasses that erase his good looks.

THE TEACHER

If there isn't a problem over the bill, there's no reason I can't teach your wife.

The phone clicks.

THE TEACHER

Hello? Goodbye, Mr. Moshfegh.

The teenager hands him the forms, incomplete and illegible.

INT. GARAGE - NIGHT

Three of Moshfegh's HEAVIES work with women's hair dryers, shrink-wrapping bootlegged DVD copies of "Dirty Dancing." There is a knock on the metal garage door. The door opens, revealing The Teacher holding his over-sized pad of paper and his easel. The three heavies stare at him, icily.

THE TEACHER

I am here to teach Mrs. Moshfegh English.

One of the heavies gestures towards the back door.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

Inna and The Teacher sit alone in the room, opposite from each other, across a coffee table. The easel is set up, displaying a stick figure of a man. Beneath the drawing are the words: "Handsome" and "Good-looking." Under these words, there is a stick figure of a woman. Beneath this second drawing are the words: "Lovely," "Pretty," and "Beautiful."

There is a stack of flashcards in front of The Teacher.

INNA

I'm happy you come back.

THE TEACHER

Mr. Moshfegh told me he intends to pay me. I'd prefer to have the check before we begin.

INNA

He busy! He pay you! No problem!

THE TEACHER

No problem?

INNA

Yeah... Okay.

THE TEACHER

I've made flashcards of problem words from last time. Say them, then use them in a sentence.

INNA

Sure, sure.

The Teacher holds up a card. It reads: "Drink."

INNA
Drink.

THE TEACHER
Yes.

INNA
Otar drink a beer.

THE TEACHER
Otar *drinks* a beer. *I drink* a beer. *We drink* a beer.

INNA
Otar drinks.

The teacher holds up the next card. It reads: "Deep."

INNA
Deep... The swimming pool is deep. The ocean is deep. Deep.

The next card. It reads: "This."

THE TEACHER
This is an important word. *This* word on *this* card is important.

INNA
This card.

THE TEACHER
I used *that* example. Try another with *this* word.

INNA
This word is *this*.

THE TEACHER
No, I used *that* one, too.

INNA
This table!

THE TEACHER
Now, in a sentence.

INNA
This swimming pool is deep.

The Teacher is flustered. The next card reads: "Forbidden."

INNA

Yeah, yeah. Smoking is forbidden.
Cell phone is forbidden.

THE TEACHER

Cell phones are forbidden.

INNA

Okay!

The Teacher looks through the stack.

THE TEACHER

Oh, *this* one, *this* one you must
have heard on television.

He holds up the card. It reads: "Passion."

INNA

(trying to sound like an
announcer.)

I have a passion for weather. I am
passion about coffee. Yes, it
comes from the TV.

THE TEACHER

Well, in the real world, we don't
use that word very often.

INNA

Oh, no?

THE TEACHER

That's a television word. People
don't have passions for coffee or
weather. It's a little too much.

INNA

Too much.

THE TEACHER

Which is a mistake you make over
and over again. You use words that
mean *too much*. When you talk like
a television, Inna, you sound
ignorant.

The Teacher takes the pad off of the easel.

THE TEACHER (CONT'D)

For example, earlier today, you
sounded ignorant when you tried to
pay a simple compliment.

INNA

Sorry.

THE TEACHER

Nothing to apologize for, we're fixing it. First of all, you said I looked "lovely". "Lovely" is a word to describe a woman. I told you, to describe a man, you say "handsome".

He points to the pad.

THE TEACHER (CONT'D)

Or even, "good-looking." But all of these words are... Well, they're too much. People don't tell people that they're "handsome" - they say "You look nice."

INNA

You look nice.

THE TEACHER

The same is true for women. I *could* tell you that you look "lovely" or "pretty" or "beautiful" but that would be too much. It's more likely that I'd say "you look nice."

INNA

You look nice.

THE TEACHER

Because, if I called you "beautiful", it would mean something. It would mean too much.

INNA

You think so?

THE TEACHER

Yes.

INNA

Hey. Don't worry.

THE TEACHER

It isn't a worry, Inna. Or even a rule. This is how people talk.

INNA

So, you wouldn't call me beautiful?

THE TEACHER
Beautiful.

INNA
Yes, veautiful.

THE TEACHER
No "v". It's a "b". Beautiful.

INNA
Veautiful.

THE TEACHER
Buh. Buh. Buh. It's a "b".

INNA
Veautiful.

THE TEACHER
You're biting your lip. Let go.
Pout. Beautiful.

INNA
Pout?

THE TEACHER
Just put your lips together, don't
bite them. Like the beginning of a
kiss.
(exaggerating the gesture)
Buh... Buh... Buh...

INNA
Veautiful.

The Teacher leans across the coffee table, and roughly pulls
Inna's bottom lip out from under her teeth.

INNA
Beautiful.

She looks at his fingers, resting on her face, rises, and
kisses him, vicious and slobbering. He is petrified.

INT. HOME OFFICE - SIMULTANEOUS

Moshfegh is rebuilding his model ship with tweezers and
plastic cement. Near him, A HEAVY reads a paperback.

THE TEACHER (O.S.)
Mrs. Moshfegh!

The two men look up when they HEAR the shout. The heavy looks at Moshfegh for an order. Moshfegh shrugs.

THE LIVING ROOM - THE LAST FEW MINUTES OF THE LESSON

The Teacher is flustered, but recovering. Inna seems at least momentarily tamed. The two are conjugating.

THE TEACHER

Run.

INNA

I run. You run. He... runs. We run. They run.

THE TEACHER

And yesterday.

INNA

Yesterday, I am running?

THE TEACHER

I ran.

INNA

I ran. You ran. He?

THE TEACHER

Ran.

INNA

For all. He ran. We ran. They ran.

THE TEACHER

I *ran* from trouble. I *run* when chased. I *am running* right now.

Inna stands. The Teacher eyes her nervously. She thinks for a moment, then she dashes towards him, straddling him in the chair, burying his face in her chest. The Teacher stammers, but is paralyzed. She kisses him, again and again.

The door opens. The heavy from Moshfegh's office enters. Inna stops kissing The Teacher. The three of them eye each other, unsure of what to do next.

INT. HOME OFFICE - LATER

Moshfegh sits at his desk. The Teacher stands near the door. The model boat forces The Teacher to tiptoe and contort to

see Moshfegh. Moshfegh repairs a tiny rope with plastic cement on the tip of a paperclip.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

A moment please.

Moshfegh works on the model for a while. The moment grows and grows until The Teacher is forced to speak.

THE TEACHER

If you'd prefer, Mr. Moshfegh, I could simply take my check and leave you to concentrate.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

I'm sorry.

An awkward silence.

THE TEACHER

I said, we could settle the bill, and I could leave you alone.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

Sorry, when you get to be my age...

THE TEACHER

The bill. You said you would pay me.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

Your check, yes. Please, take a seat, there.

Moshfegh ceases work on the boat. The Teacher sits. Moshfegh fishes in a drawer, emerging with a check. He starts to hand the check to The Teacher, but stops.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

My wife. She is very happy with your lessons.

THE TEACHER

She's a very good study.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

She is in love with you, of course. It breaks my heart. But, you love my wife, she loves you. (Switching into a sing-song) You are young, you have everything...

THE TEACHER

You have entirely the wrong
impression.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

... If only I could fly like the
butterfly, spoke the caterpillar...

THE TEACHER

No. Mr...

OTAR MOSHFEGH

Maybe she is too coarse for you?
The travel and hardship has made
her like animal? Wild and ugly?

THE TEACHER

Absolutely not!

OTAR MOSHFEGH

(sing song)
Sweet love...

THE TEACHER

Mr. Moshfegh. Your wife is one of
my... My favorite pupils. She
has a passion for...

OTAR MOSHFEGH

(deadly serious)
Listen, English teacher. You think
you can be better for her? You
think you can treat her like she
should be treated? You think I'm
sleeping giant, some fool who
doesn't see what happens? You
think I allow some fancy young man
to steal off with my most precious
treasure now that I am old and too
tired to give her the things that
she needs?

THE TEACHER

You couldn't be more wrong.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

These are questions. I can't be
wrong while asking questions. An
English teacher should know this.

THE TEACHER

Please, just give me my check.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

Maybe you're right, you know?
(sing-song) Who am I to stand in
the way of young love? Look at you
- you're flying!

THE TEACHER

I'm not interested in your wife,
sir. Not one bit. I'm happy to be
her teacher, but that's all there
is...

OTAR MOSHFEGH

A low woman. You think she is low.
You think I am low.

THE TEACHER

The check. All I want is the
check. I swear to God I'll never
come back here.

The Teacher stands.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

(sing song)
Easy, sweet lover, easy. A man
says things about his wife, they
sound hard, I think. Harder to
your ears than mine.

THE TEACHER

Can't you hear me? I want the
check.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

(sing song)
It *is* spring...

THE TEACHER

(shouting)
THE CHECK!

Moshfegh looks up. A heavy sticks his head into the room,
but Moshfegh waves him away. He leans back in his chair.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

Your check is on the desk.

The Teacher approaches the desk, sizing up Moshfegh,
nervously. He snatches the check, quickly.

THE TEACHER

Thank you.

The Teacher starts to back towards the door, edging around furniture, threatening to topple the miniatures that fill the room. At the door, he turns his back on Moshfegh.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

(shouting)

YOU SON OF A BITCH! DO YOU KNOW WHO
I AM?

The Teacher turns, frozen in fear. His lip trembles. Moshfegh rises, swiping the model ship from the desk with a broad gesture. He crosses towards The Teacher.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

We find a paper at the library. My wife wants to speak English. You promise to help us. I let you into my home. And you - you make romance. You play every one of us against the other. Week and then week, you play your game. You walk through our back door, like family. Do you see where you are? Do you know these men around you? Do you know the things we have done in the places we came from? And you, you treat us like fools? You fuck my wife and come to me for money?

The Teacher recoils.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

What will you do with that check?

The Teacher shreds the check.

THE TEACHER

I promise, you'll never see me
again. Never.

He looks up at Moshfegh, whose violent rage slowly fades.

OTAR MOSHFEGH

(sing song again)

I hope that is not true. A lonely
woman needs something to look
forward to. Someone to teach her.

Moshfegh smiles, a grandfatherly smile. The Teacher, bewildered and now crying, turns and exits.

INT. GARAGE - MOMENTS LATER

A heavy opens the garage door to let The Teacher exit. The Teacher covers his face to hide his tears from the men.

INT. HOME OFFICE - LATER

Two heavies clean up the wreck of the model ship, salvaging what they can. Moshfegh stands over them, fretting.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

Inna sits in a chair, doing light aerobics in front of the television, following a show intended for geriatrics.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

The teacher's mother sits in her twin bed watching the aerobics show we saw at the Moshfegh's. The teacher's father sleeps in his own bed. There's a SOFT KNOCK on the door.

TEACHER'S MOTHER

Come in.

The Teacher enters. He's a mess.

THE TEACHER

Hello, mother. I just wanted to tell you I'm home. I hope... I hope I didn't wake you.

Slowly, mother turns to look at son, with spite in her eyes. The Teacher's eyes are pleading, begging her not to ask.

TEACHER'S MOTHER

Did you get the money?

CUT TO BLACK.