

# *The Lesson*

by  
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**S**MELLING OF MUSK and olive oil, the young man sat in the market square. Old men wandered around him, beards bobbing around their yapping jaws. Too old to wrestle, they spent their time cruising the baths for boys.

Aristodemus shrugged his broad shoulders. He was young, handsome, well built—he could feel their eyes on him, touching him, tasting him. He enjoyed the attention, the longing of their wrinkled hands, dried-up mouths. But they were disgusting. He looked around him, quietly grimacing at the landmarks and faces. Luminescent above him was the old Parthenon. How typical of this race of old women—a temple to a virginal, celibate sky-gazer. Still, she did help that cunning old bastard, Odysseus. She wasn't all bad.

He ran his fingers over his chest. His biceps swelled, forearms tensed—and more looks of longing. Aristodemus revelled in this distance, in the human span that cut him from his admirers. Being beautiful was easy enough—there were plenty of handsome young epheboi. His exquisiteness was his discipline: he knew with precision how to approach and withdraw, how to mix tenderness with cruelty.

He drummed his fingers on his thigh, watching the muscles dance. Hypnotised, he turned as he heard footsteps behind him—but he kept up the cadence on his skin. It was his brother.

‘Plato, you little oik. Father wants you.’

The young noble looked Glaucon up and down. The heavy set eyes, the high

forehead, the sensual lips—all from the same stock. But the smile was all mother’s, all snobbery and misplaced conceit. Aristodemus smiled as he let his eyes play over his brother’s thin, folded arms and flat chest. All too easy, he thought. There his brother stood, his feet close together, back askew. Grinning quietly, Plato imagined Glaucon yelping as he knocked him onto the sand, smothering his face, and pinning his arm over his head. Glaucon would tap before the pain set in—coward. And here he was, the little princess, ordering him around.

‘He’s not my father,’ said Aristodemus, his eyes on his own calloused hands. ‘Is he yours? For shame—mother never told me.’

‘Don’t be obtuse. He’s father enough to pay for your slaves and oils. Now come on,’ he waved his hand. ‘Home.’

He sighed. ‘What for?’

‘He . . . It’s important.’

‘It’s always important, isn’t it?’ laughed Plato. ‘Tell him I’ll be along.’

Glaucon pursed his lips. ‘Tell him yourself. I’m serious, Aristodemus.’ Glaucon was used to these moods. He just wanted to avoid yet another public scene.

Aristodemus looked up without a smile. ‘Perhaps, big brother,’ he said slowly, ‘you would like to drag me there.’ He stretched his thick wrists, turning them in circles. Glaucon knew what that would mean. He turned in silence and walked home, furious.

Plato waited a little while, enjoying the blue and heat of day. Then he slipped on his sandals.

When he entered the cool of the house, there was weeping. It didn’t surprise him. With women, there was always weeping. But there was something in the tone, something unsettling. He took off his sandals.

Without a smile or a word, he brushed past his mother in the hallway. She was instructing a servant in whispers. The slave brushed her tears with his sleeve. Well worth what father paid, he thought absent-mindedly.

He walked straight through the hall to the interior garden. Rows of neatly clipped, redolent rosemary surrounded a small fountain. The pool was still. His uncle lay on a short couch in the darkened porch, sipping water from a large black bowl with a fluted handle. Around the rim, Odysseus made love to Circe. You again, thought Plato to himself. Well, be careful, you old goat—she might get you this time.

He cleared his throat, and Pylampes looked up.

‘Plato,’ he said cautiously, ‘that’s what they call you, isn’t it?’ When Aristodemus said nothing, Pylampes narrowed his eyes, putting his cup down. ‘Fine. Just listen, boy. Things are about to change.’

‘Oh really?’ Plato suddenly burst out. ‘You’re going to furnish the dining room in scarlet instead of crimson? Is that a Persian trick? Oh, how the neighbours will talk. Lucky Pericles got the pox—he’d be mortified.’

‘He was twice the man you are, Aristodemus,’ said his uncle, shifting angrily on his couch. ‘Twice the man. He made Athens great—in spirit as well as state. He was the last, great . . .’ Ppyrilampes’ voice trailed off as he saw Plato’s eyes glaze over. ‘Forget it. It’s beyond you.’

‘Yes, it is,’ said Plato, coolly. ‘If you want to celebrate an age of garlic-breathed rowers and silver-tongued demagogues, be my guest. But just remember, dear uncle: you and your democrats made our city an eromenos.’ He spat the last word—it meant ‘beloved’, but in Plato’s mouth it had all the overtones of faggot, bitch, whore.

Ppyrilampes shook his head and coughed. ‘I’m not here to teach you politics, boy. There’s no point, anyway—you’re too young to remember, and too thick to understand. There’s something you need to know, and’—he pointed his ringed finger—‘I want you to listen for once.’

Plato was silent. He’d said his piece. And silence was always more frustrating to others than talk; it was the great withdrawal, the perfect flight. He looked into his uncle’s eyes, and waited for the boredom to set in.

The old man sipped his water and cleared his throat. ‘I’m dying, Plato,’ he said. In the silence, Plato heard the weeping again.

He wasn’t expecting this—Ppyrilampes was strong, healthy. He looked at his uncle’s angular jaw and nose, muscular arms, thick hair—these weren’t the features of a dead man. ‘It’s my heart,’ the old man said. Plato looked past the fine clothes, the skin, the bones, and saw the heart slowing, stopping, rotting. He shivered imperceptibly, shifting his swaggering contrapposto.

Ppyrilampes saw this and smiled. ‘Don’t worry, little man. You won’t have to lift a finger. Your brothers will manage the estates, and my wife will take care of the household. All you have to do is find an erastes for yourself.’ He used the word for ‘lover’, which also meant mentor, teacher, carer. In Ppyrilampes’ mouth, it seemed noble, manly—part of an old, dusty tradition. ‘Your mother’s spoken to her brother, Charmides,’ said the old man. ‘You’ve a meeting with him tonight.’

‘Who?’ said his nephew, who already knew. There was only one choice, particularly for his mother and uncle.

‘Socrates,’ replied Ppyrilampes, sipping his water. ‘Now get out of my sight. Life’s too short to spoil it with your company.’

In the evening, Plato walked to the school alone. The palaestra was his tiny kingdom—his prized dominion. It was where his nickname, ‘Broad Shouldered’,

meant something. In military training he'd be invisible, just another foil for his elders and the older boys. But in the wrestling arena, he was hard, strong—real.

He stepped lightly through the gloom of the doorway and into the main courtyard. On the dirt, groups of naked, oiled young men wrestled. He paid them no heed. They were young or weak, and didn't exist. On the benches beyond them sat the old brute, Socrates. As usual, he was surrounded by acolytes, toadying to his famous intelligence. He looked up, saw Plato, and smiled.

The old man was ugly. Monstrously ugly. While well made, his face was repulsive: bulging eyes, porcine nose, sensuous lips and crooked, yellow teeth. Even his beard was unsightly—patches of curling black and red scattered among the white and brown. He wore filthy, cheaply made rags, and bare feet. He was disgusting. And yet there was something beautiful in the old buffoon; something that danced, that gleamed.

Plato breathed deeply, slowed his step. As he neared the benches, the young men around Socrates dispersed. They must have known about Pyrilampes—probably everyone knew. Athens was a big city, but there were only so many aristocratic families—bored, idle, gossiping families.

The acolytes went back to their sports: undressing, oiling, stretching, fighting, laughing. Every now and then, they gazed back at the strange pairing: beautiful Plato and his hideous erastes. The two men sat beside one another, talking softly towards the arena.

'I'm sorry to hear about your uncle, Plato. He's a good man.'

'Oh, absolutely,' said the youth with a smirk. 'Some say he's pompous, self-satisfied and pretentious, but I'm sure they're just jealous.'

Socrates laughed. It was a hoarse, wet-sounding laugh—but a genuine one.

'I know, I'm wonderfully amusing,' said Plato. 'Lucky you—I'm to be your pet boy, yes?'

'Absolutely,' said Socrates dryly. 'Once you're spayed and toilet trained you'll be perfect.'

'Don't blaspheme,' was the quick reply. 'Only the gods are perfect. And Pericles, of course—if you believe my uncle.'

Socrates laughed softly and rose. Without a word, he unfastened his tunic, kicked off his sandals, and waved for a slave with oil. 'Enough. It's time for you to teach me a lesson.'

'You're joking,' said Plato, looking the old man up and down. For an ugly mutt, he had a beautiful physique—muscular, well proportioned, relaxed. He looked like a nobleman, except for his horrid mien.

'Why does everyone', laughed Socrates, 'say that when I'm naked? No, I'm

serious. You're not afraid of a little wrestling, are you? What a shame, Plato. I think your uncle's Persian perfumes have made you into a sissy.'

Plato shook his head and stripped. The slave oiled Socrates first, and then the younger man. They stepped into the arena. As they stretched, Plato enjoyed the soft sand, still warm on his feet. The evening breeze from Piraeus was perfect.

A little while later, they both rose, shook hands and crouched in readiness. Plato wasted no time. He shot in for the old man's legs, picked him up and dumped him on the sand. Socrates grunted. All over, thought Plato, as he put his weight on the man's chest. He quickly manoeuvred between the old man's thighs, looking to establish dominance and lock his arm. Socrates struggled, but couldn't move—Plato was too heavy, too strong. But the older man wasn't finished. He let his opponent in between his thighs, and then wrapped his legs around him. At the same time, he pulled his face close by gripping his neck and head. Plato tried to rise, but was stuck—he had no leverage. Stupid, stupid, he thought. This is wasting my time. He managed to get a hand on Socrates' face, pushing down while his other hand worked at the old man's fingers. It worked—Socrates let go of his head. Gotcha. He dove in to lock the old man's arm, bending it into his grip, and then: You sneaky old bugger. In a moment, he was on his back. Socrates had used the moment of freedom to sweep him over, locking his arm around his neck, and putting his weight on his chest. He couldn't move, and Socrates could easily win with strikes or submissions.

As he lay there, trying to keep the man down, Plato's mind was running through tactics. He was also aware of the hardness of Socrates' muscles, the wetness and smell of his sweat. He realised he was tense. He breathed slowly, and relaxed. Minute by minute, he brought his knees up, and brought himself up onto his elbows. Yes, yes, thought Plato. Just a few more minutes.

He was ready. To the astonishment of the enthralled onlookers, Aristodemus stood up, his opponent still clinging to him. It was rapid and painful. Matter-of-factly, Plato raised Socrates into the air, and then slammed him into the sand. The audience groaned, and then were silent. The old man was limp for a little while—all the time Plato needed to lock his arm. Socrates came to, and weakly tapped.

Without a sound, Plato rolled away, stood up and sipped a cup of water. Socrates lay there, breathing. He then opened his eyes, chuckled to himself and took Plato's cup, drinking from it heartily.

'Well, Aristodemus,' he panted, rubbing his back. 'I hope you've learned your lesson.'

Aristodemus laughed at his obstinacy and good humour. 'This should be good. I was under the impression I won. And decisively.'

‘You won the strongman competition,’ said Socrates. ‘But I won the wrestling bout.’

‘Of course,’ Plato replied, pouring another cup of water, and offering it to his opponent. ‘Because strength is absolutely irrelevant to grappling. All grapplers should be frail old men—then it’d be a real competition of skill.’

‘Beautiful Plato,’ said Socrates, taking the cup in one hand and gently touching the young man’s face with the other. ‘In the gods’ eyes, you’re already frail—your perfect body stinks with decay. When it’s rotted away, I hope you’re not still imprisoned in it.’

Blinking, Plato shrugged off the man’s hand and left the sand. While the acolytes gossiped about him, he quietly bathed, dressed and walked home.

He had won. There was no doubt about it. Only a fool would fault his victory.

But the next morning in his mathematics lesson, Aristodemus was distracted. He sat with the slave at a low table in the garden, the sun just creeping over the raised portico. The morning warmth on his face and hands, he calculated distances and angles, but his mind was elsewhere. He felt like he was translucent—soft, hazy, unreal. You old woman, he thought, spinning metaphors instead of yarn. He laughed at his own seriousness, and gave the slave his answer.

‘Ninety-three degrees.’

‘Yes,’ said the slave, smiling genuinely. ‘What head for figures you have.’

‘A childhood spent wrestling,’ Plato said quickly. ‘They’re even better when they’re oiled. Have we finished?’

Laughing, the slave nodded, and the lesson was over.

Plato quickly put on his sandals, and set off.

Socrates was at the baths. Plato found him alone for once, his throng of sycophants off doing schoolwork and military training. The old man spent a long time lathering himself and washing, staring up through the pillars to the blue. Despite his filthy rags, he was clean. He smiled when he saw Plato, scrubbing his balding head and beard as he spoke.

‘Aristodemus. Still licking your wounds, puppy?’ There was no malice in the words.

‘Not at all. My whole body is a wound, Socrates,’ said Plato, smirking.

The old man stopped scrubbing and looked up. Soap dripped in his eye, and it reddened as he replied. ‘Beautifully put. I see you have your uncle’s talent for rhetoric.’

Plato rolled his eyes. ‘Pyrilampes would’ve spoken about the harmony between

the body and the mind. You know,' he twirled his finger derisively, 'beauty and bravery, from old grizzle-guts' funeral speech.'

Socrates said nothing, and mopped his hair. As he dried his testicles, he looked up. 'Care for another bout, Plato? I think I can finish you this time.'

'No, thank you,' he replied quietly. 'I just came to ask you a question.'

'I'm usually the one asking the questions,' Socrates chuckled. 'But why not? You can be my midwife for a change.'

They sat on the edge of the small bath, Socrates naked and Plato clothed. The fountain in the forecourt splashed and gurgled softly. The room echoed with conversations; all around their room were seminars and lectures, arguments and fights. Plato took a breath. Socrates looked him calmly in the eye.

'Yesterday you lost a wrestling match. I know I won. You know I won. Yes?'

'Yes.'

'And you knew you'd lose?'

When Socrates nodded, Plato sighed. 'This is what I can't grasp. You knew what would happen when you pinned me.' The old man nodded again. 'Of all the ways to lose, you chose the most painful. I could have paralysed you.'

'My leg's tingling now. It'll pass.'

'Well, this is my question, old man. You could've taught your lesson in a thousand ways. Why that way? Why did you do that to yourself?'

Socrates put his hand on Aristodemus's shoulder. The hand was warm, but the young man shivered a little.

'I didn't do it to my self—I did it to my body. That's what the body's for, Plato. And you still haven't learned this lesson. You're disgusted by age, infirmity, by the cripples you see from Syracuse. And you know you're rotting, too—abstractly. But you still want to keep your beautiful body alive. You think it's real. But it's not. It's nothing. It's there to be annihilated in the name of spirit. That's what I was doing—destroying my flesh.'

As the old man spoke, Aristodemus watched the thick veins on the old man's chest and arms. They were so full of life, so rich with wine and olives, lovemaking and song. He felt Socrates' fingers on his shoulder. He shivered again, his head down.

'I know,' said the old man.

Plato looked up at him.

'I know,' Socrates said again. 'You want me to live. You don't want another carcass, like your father and unc—'

'I don't care about them,' Plato cut in. 'They're nothing to me.'

'And I'm different?' Socrates gently touched his soft cheek.

'Don't be such an old woman,' Plato replied, slapping his hand away. 'You don't

have to seduce me. It's obvious I'll love you eventually.'

'Yes,' said Socrates. 'That's the easy bit.'

Plato looked up, hoping to see Socrates smiling. He wasn't.

'The hard bit,' said the old man, looking through Plato to the sky, 'will be loving me, and then watching me die.'

Plato didn't understand. But suddenly he wanted the sunlight to save itself, to stop before it touched his skin.