On Hills Like Gods Together

by

Jay Ivey
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

Committee:

[Signatures]

Director

Department Chairperson

Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Date: May 21, 2013

Spring Semester 2013
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
On Hills Like Gods Together
A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Jay Ivey
Bachelor of Arts
The University of Georgia, 2010

Director: Susan Shreve, Professor
Department of Creative Writing

Fall Semester 2013
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
This work is licensed under a creative commons attribution-noderivs 3.0 unported license.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. vi

The Life of Tyler: Liber I (Athens, January 2008 CE) ....................................................... 3
1. A Venerable Tradition ............................................................................................... 3
2. Spare Some Change for Belisarius ......................................................................... 6
3. Locrian Love Song .................................................................................................... 9
4. Popping the Bubble ................................................................................................. 13
5. Chicken Shit, Chicken Salad ................................................................................... 15
6. Stability Is Happiness .............................................................................................. 21
7. The Buckhead House .............................................................................................. 24
8. It Takes Money to Make Money ............................................................................. 26
9. A Digression on the Caprices of Memory ............................................................... 28

The Life of Tiberius Gracchus: Liber I (Roma, 152 BCE) ............................................. 33

Life of Tyler: Liber II (Athens, February 2008 CE) ......................................................... 49
1. Curiouser and Curiouser ......................................................................................... 49
2. An Athenian Afternoon ........................................................................................... 51
3. Ozymandias, King of Kings .................................................................................... 64
4. Furor ........................................................................................................................ 73

The Life of Tiberius Gracchus: Liber II (Hispania, 139 BCE) ......................................... 78

Life of Tyler: Liber III (Athens, April 2008 CE) .............................................................. 95
1. Omens and Auguries ............................................................................................... 95
2. Albatross .................................................................................................................. 99
3. Why Ramsey Left .................................................................................................. 109
4. Land of the Free Market ........................................................................................ 111
5. On the Difficulties of Putting Stoic Philosophy into Practice ............................... 116
6. Cowboy vs. Captain Subtlety ................................................................................ 121
7. Rogues Gallery...................................................................................................... 129
8. The Obligatory Icarus Moment............................................................................. 131
9. The Augury ........................................................................................................... 137

The Life of Tiberius Gracchus: Liber III (Roma, 134 BCE) .......................................... 141

Life of Tyler: Liber IV (Atlanta, August 2008 CE) ........................................................ 164
1. What a Slave Is...................................................................................................... 164
2. Going to Seed........................................................................................................ 167
3. The Myth of Sisyphus ........................................................................................... 172
4. Scylla and Charybdis............................................................................................. 178
5. Hazards of the Trade ............................................................................................. 182
6. Panem et Circenses................................................................................................ 190
7. On Nostalgia and the Potency of Whale Penises .................................................. 193
8. Mammon Ruled America...................................................................................... 197
9. Castlebrook Homicide........................................................................................... 198
10. Pedagogy............................................................................................................. 203

The Life of Tiberius Gracchus: Liber IV (Roma, 134 BCE) .......................................... 209

Life of Tyler: Liber V (Atlanta, September 2008 CE) .................................................... 225
1. Simple, Fumbling Creatures.................................................................................. 225
2. Family Dinner ....................................................................................................... 233
3. On the Bondage of Trophy Wives......................................................................... 238
4. Plato’s Cave a
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. A Shadow Is Cast Wherever He Stands</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Conjugation</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. No Longer a Jawless Fish</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Life of Tiberius Gracchus: Liber VI (Roma, 133 BCE)</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Life of Tyler: Liber VII (Atlanta, November 2008 CE)</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Change</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Keys to the Castle</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. In the Shadow of the Palace of the Sun</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Eunomia, Goddess of Good Regulations</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Thing We All Wanted</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Phaethon’s Ride</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. A Tale of Two Foreclosures</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The Techwood Diaspora</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. A Deity for Every Occasion</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. House(less) Party</td>
<td>403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. An Honest Country Face</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Questions</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. What Real People Do</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Stone Lasts Forever</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This thesis is a novel concerning the disappearance of a prominent Atlanta real estate czar during the 2008 financial meltdown. His privileged Classicist stepson, Tyler, embarks on a quest to learn the truth about why this man married his mother, why he left, and where he’s gone; as a result, Tyler is unwittingly embroiled in the intrigue of calculating hedge fund managers, corrupt bankers, and bumbling federal regulators, even as his affluent lifestyle falls apart. Mimicking Plutarch’s Parallel Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans, Tyler interweaves his account with a historical story about Tiberius Gracchus, the fatherless heir to a wealthy family, who grows to reject the values of his own class and fights for the rights of the poor during Rome’s greatest crisis of land speculation. Together, these juxtaposed narratives explore such themes as the dangers of deluding ourselves during times of ostensible prosperity and the destructive potential of systemic heedlessness.
Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,
In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined
On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind.
For they lie beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurl’d
Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly curl’d
Round their golden houses, girdled with the gleaming world;
Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Lotos-Eaters*, 153-162
1. A Venerable Tradition

All the ancient historians were noblemen killing time—idlers reclining on divans, sipping wine and trying to make sense of things. Slaves brought them little plates of pickled asparagus while they stroked their chins and considered why emperors stab their mothers, why they bang their sisters, why they level city blocks to make room for their golden palaces. After dinner parties, men like Tacitus, and Plutarch put pen to parchment, they made their monuments, and when their lamps grew dim they had servants to bring them more oil. That’s why we know anything at all about the Romans: bored aristocrats with nothing better to do.

I am, therefore, carrying on a venerable tradition of wealthy slackers. Reclining on a leather couch, sipping a Belgian abbey ale, and trying to make sense of things.

For three months I have searched for my stepfather. I see him, Ramsey Mansfield, looking my mother in the eye, speaking his wedding vows with calculated poise. In profile, he belonged on an Imperial coin: the beaky nose, the cleft chin, the widow’s peak, his hair sweeping behind his ears down to his shoulders, forever frozen in the nineties, dark with dye though you would never have guessed it. I see a man I knew primarily from Christmas parties and family vacations. A man who allayed my resentment with an easy smile and a hand mussing my hair. A man who golfed with
governors at Augusta National and shaped the fate of city blocks, raising mixed-use
developments from the rubble of Atlanta’s slums. I see this man, I consider the facts of
his disappearance, and I can only conclude that his presence in my life has (for better or
worse) embroiled me in the affairs of bankers, federal agents, and real estate czars, even
as the supposedly unsinkable housing market has begun to take on water.

Yes, it seems my stepfather has entangled me in history itself; and history must be
recorded; history must be wrung like a laden sponge; history must be allowed to sit on
your tongue until you can describe its flavor profile in precise detail.

So here I sit, like Emperor Claudius in the old Robert Graves book, about to write
the strange history of my life. Ramsey bought me this cozy townhouse when I first
moved to Athens, GA to pursue my MA—a two bedroom investment and a playground
for his idle son—but Mom had to put it on the market last week, and there’s no telling
how much longer I might enjoy the luxuries of time to which I’ve grown so accustomed.

Every Tuesday night Ramsey used to take her to Chops. He wore Brooks Brothers
shirts and jeans and filigreed boots. No one bothered him about the dress code. Mom
wore long dresses and always preferred clear diamonds to large ones. She drank
Chardonnay, and while her taste wasn’t cheap, it was impossible to top Ramsey. A
moment after they were seated, the manager would approach cradling a bottle of Louis
XIII, swaddled in silk cloth like an emperor’s infant son. Two ounces of this amber fluid
might have paid someone’s rent, and Ramsey couldn’t distinguish cognac from scotch—
but it was the best, and you can’t put a price tag on that. Anyway, this was their ritual.
It’s what they did instead of going to church.
“Have a look at that marbling,” he’d say when his filet came out, bloody and raw. Mom would smile and sip her wine. Every week she would ask how the companies were doing; a mortgage broker and a once-single-mother, she had a shrewd, protective instinct when it came to money. Ramsey would raise a chunk of meat on his fork, inspecting the fatty tendrils snaking through the cool flesh. He’d hoist his morsel and say, “It’s real-estate, Susan. There’s only one way to go, and that’s up.”

Here I see little red drops splashing upon the chaste white plate. But that’s my historian’s intuition filling in the blanks.

“He always knew how to calm me down,” Mom told me later. “One Tuesday, he brought an enormous ream of paper under his arm. People stared, even the waiters, and you know how tactful they are at Chops. After we sat down, he slid it across the table: a printout of the companies’ weekly earnings.”

I myself never had to fret over money. I began a tiny fetal mooch, was born a squalling pooping mooch, matured into a bewildered prepubescent mooch, and then Mom married Ramsey, which ensured I could go on mooching until my children paid for my funeral. When someone asked me, “Tyler, what exactly is it that you do?” I was quick to reply: “I’m a terminal scholar. A dilettante. A twenty-first century dandy in the nineteenth century sense of the word, although I’m more into music and fencing than hunting and falconing.” If they stared at me blankly, I might add that I have a trust fund. My stepdad is a famous builder.

As a man of average size and only moderately attractive features—big brown eyes, a slightly bulbous nose, dark wavy hair—my accidental wealth has long been my
most distinguishing feature, no matter how skilled I become with a pen or a guitar or a foil or a chef’s knife. And twenty-five, I have found, is an age when everyone looks to decide once and for all whether a person will live the rest of their life as (i) a successful contributor to society or (ii) a wretched, bloodsucking parasite. I have lived with the guilt of the very lucky. And yet, in this machine we’ve made of the world, a trust fund is a dependable companion (at least under normal operating conditions). Mine was only the last in a long series of debts I owe to Ramsey. He bought me three cars, taught me to ski, put me through college (twice), and contributed an older sister to instruct me by bad example. He filled in, to some extent, for whoever knocked up my mother. I grew my pubic hair under his roof, in the Buckhead house—that renovated palace of the 1920’s.

And it was he who explained to me the great bargain of foppery: “I’m giving you the keys to the castle, buddy. The chance to do what you want with the time you have, for the rest of your life. So don’t fuck it up.”

2. **Spare Some Change for Belisarius**

One night, over a week after Ramsey’s disappearance, Mom called to break the news. She had to ring seven times before I answered. I’ll admit to being preoccupied with my own melodrama.

It had been four months since I finished my History MA, and I’d been living aimlessly, even by my standards. There was half a case of beer in the fridge: twelve brown hefeweizens, parting gifts from Aiko, who’d left them the day she left me. I sipped one on the couch, tasting wheat and banana and clove, surrounded by the unearned trophies of my life, which hung like the heads of game animals, the mounted flatscreen
TV, a 19th century vellum map of the Roman Empire under Claudius, some neoclassical prints, and a series of dangling guitars—mostly birthday swag from Ramsey—that aligned nicely with my coming of age, from my seventh-grade Fender Squire, which sounded like a Happy Meal toy, to a Paul Reed Smith Custom 24 that once belonged to Santana.

That’s the horror of growing up rich: you develop a fondness for finery. It’s contagious.

My phone sat on the coffee table, its little red light blinking on, blinking off. At some point, I knew, I’d have to return Mom’s call. She would tell me to get a job or to transmute my Master’s degree into a PhD, or to at least do something.

But I was doing something! I bought my own groceries. I cooked twice a week from online recipes. In the morning I ran guitar scales to a metronome and recorded my times on a spreadsheet. After lunch I’d put on a symphony and read novels in English, poetry in Latin, histories about the “true personalities” of the Caesars, and scholarly articles about coins excavated at Pompeii. Reclining on my couch, I’d underline striking passages and ask myself little graphite questions in the margins. Yes, I admit, in the evenings I would reward myself after a hard day’s self betterment, indulging in the soft laughter of brewpubs, the ecstatic tinnitus of Bangkok Blues, the stumbling hilarity of downtown Athens in the lamplight. My friends and I would sit around my living room playing video games and sobering up as we dissected the evening’s merrymaking: flavor profiles and hop content, the effectiveness of creative time signatures, the narrative
potential of digital media. But it’s important for a dilettante to engage with life, lest boredom swindle you into productivity.

Mom grew up poor in the country. She wouldn’t understand, just like Aiko hadn’t. All the great thinkers of Rome—Julius Caesar, Seneca, Virgil, you ever heard of them, Mom?—they spent their twenties abroad, walking the streets of another Athens, drinking from wine skins, letting their minds wander among the great Doric porches, and watching the clouds roll behind the Parthenon. Is taking advantage of one’s privilege really such a miserable sin?

After finishing my hefeweizen I exchanged the empty bottle for my PRS. But blues guitar begs for accompaniment. Aiko was always a wicked bassist. Slouching, doodling lonely riffs across the fretboard, I studied a print on the wall: Jacques-Louis David’s Belisarius Begging for Alms. Emperor Justinian’s mightiest general, blind and old with his wispy grey hair and his rusted armor, huddled at the base of a column. An inscribed stone block reads, “DATE OBOLUM BELISARIO.” A child in his lap, pure and white, holds out her father’s helmet, upside down. A hero’s helmet. A robed woman deposits a coin, and a soldier steps back, shaken to see his old commander—a man who once led all the armies of Byzantium, a man who doubled the size of the empire, a man who became the last on Earth to earn a Roman Triumph—begging on the streets of Constantinople.

Fickle, fickle fortune. Fickle Aiko. I held a long high bend before dragging the note down along the rosewood neck to the head of the guitar. A sweet, plummeting glissando. An important reminder. The TV was on mute: subtitles prophesied doom for
the Dow Jones. Bad mortgages were going sour. Voiceless pundits flapped their jaws about Senator Barack Obama’s surprising triumph in the Iowa caucus. My phone blinked red on the table.

Ignoring these silent intrusions from the outside world, I clutched the PRS to my chest. How long had it been? Two weeks? Just like Aiko to leave me during a jam session.

3. **Locrian Love Song**

Aiko, Aiko, there we were, fondling our guitars. Ai-Ko. Love-Child. Lovechild, like me. Lovely child, lips pursed, legs crossed. Your heartshaped face, far too appropriate for your name. Your black bangs, your body, your Japanese boobs—they bobbed to the beat of your mumbling electric bass. You plunged into the Locrian mode, that disfigured stepchild of diatonic scales, and it was clear from your sinister tone that you intended to break it off. Two years of jazz improv, of craft beer, of affectionate conversation. Six months of sex. But still the Locrian was virgin territory. Ever the perfectionist, you meant to round out our jam sessions and our relationship in a single grand finale. Bravo, Aiko, bravo!

But I see it in historical, rather than musical, terms. Underlying socioeconomic tensions that bubbled in your reasonable soul. Me, a grown man sucking at the swollen teat of a trust fund. Your attempts to enact peaceful reform proved futile; what came next was the inevitable coup d’état.

I groped for unfamiliar shapes, my fingers fumbling to find chords with minor sevenths and diminished fifths. Your pale, slender hands ran up and down the bass
guitar’s neck, hammering on and pulling off, plucking and slapping with erotic precision. And the fringe of your bra, the same red pushup you wore the first time I saw you shirtless, after an afternoon drinking beer and writing songs, when you suggested we jam out naked and giggled because your bass was cold against your thighs—the fringe of this same bra peaked from behind your purple tank top. A setting sun. Despairing, I shifted my own guitar to hide the bulge in my jeans. Six months were too few, sleeping with you. Two years too few to love you. I descended the seven jarring steps of the scale.

Your bass strings quivered to a halt, thick and still like power lines. I noticed your grandmother’s lovely 19th century comb perched just over your right ear—a Meiji-era relic, gold lacquered wood with a purple flower of folded silk, which you always wear when you know you need to project confidence. Your bangs hung over eyes. You always brush them from your face after a good jam session. Also after sex. You’re self-conscious of disheveled passions.

“Poor unloved Locrian.”

“It has an interesting sound,” I said. “But the harmony is a bitch.” Aiko, Aiko. Like you, like you. I really liked you, as it turns out. History is hindsight.

“Well, you won’t have to finger those chords anymore.” You stood from the armchair and the red fringe disappeared behind your tank top. “At least not with me.”

“And why not?”

“I have a rule against dating losers. I gave it a six-month moratorium just for you. But time’s up.”
“If it weren’t for the losers, we’d still be finger-painting on cave walls. While the other guys hunted buffalo and planted beans, idlers invented civilization.”

“Potters and blacksmiths invented civilization. They contributed to society.”

“I beat BioShock today.” I accompanied this remark with a comical guitar riff on a major scale. Sometimes I can’t help myself.

“You’re a bum, Tyler.”

“I prefer ‘dandy’.”

“Romanticize it all you want.”

“You used to like that about me,” I said, bitterly conscious of verb tenses and their inescapable decay. There was a time when you indulged me, Aiko. A time when I showed up at your apartment and said, “Let’s hop a plane to Rome,” and you would grin, you’d take my hand, and you wouldn’t give a damn where the money was coming from. Or, to be thorough in my methodology, let’s go back to the beginning, before our fateful naked jam session: I would buy everyone drinks at Bangkok Blues and you would lean so close I could smell your floral perfume over the smell of sweat, over the smell of booze, and you would giggle your thanks. You would tell me I was a nice guy.

“You’re living on a different planet. What is it your stepdad always says? Work hard, play hard?” You unplugged the quarter-inch cable from my amp and began to coil it around your arm. The golden comb shined in your hair. “With you, it’s play hard, play hard.”

“I aim to enjoy my good fortune. To better myself.”
“You’re smart for a bum. And you’re rich for a bum. But you’re still a bum.” You finished coiling your cable and something cracked inside me, like the sickening steel twang of a G-string snapping.

“It’s the silver spoon up my ass. I’m not happy with it, Aiko. I didn’t stick it up there.”

“I know you’re not a bad guy. But you’re not the right one.”

“I do want something.” I locked in on your deep, dark eyes. “I want to be more than Ramsey Mansfield’s slacker son who likes Roman shit and plays guitar.” Bending close, clutching your knee, I could see something twist across your face. Pain? Pity?

“You’re serious.”

“I am.”

“Hardship suits you. Maybe that’s what you need.”

“I know hardship better than you think.”

“Do you really?”

“My life wasn’t always like this,” I said, gesturing to include the bookshelves, the map, the TV, the guitar and remembering (though vaguely) the days before Ramsey, days in a cramped suburban apartment, kneeling alone on the carpet, playing The Legend of Zelda until midnight when Mom finished her work and tucked me into bed.

You waited for me to elaborate. But I couldn’t put it into words.

You stood from the couch, grasping your instrument by the neck.


“See you around, Tyler.”
Your nylon case enveloped the electric bass, zipper teeth clenching shut one by one.

4. Popping the Bubble

On the coffee table, my cellphone blinked on and off, full of wrath. On my wall, Belisarius stretched out his hand in supplication. Had it been two weeks or three? How long had those hefeweisens been sitting in the fridge, dwindling one by one? Keeping track of time is not the layabout’s strongest suit. Clutching the guitar to my chest, stroking its cool, polished body, I was seized first by a vision of the red pushup bra followed by, I admit, a powerful urge to masturbate. I swapped my guitar for my computer. It was warm, like having a cat in my lap. The old pornographic regiment paraded across the screen: false breasts, false hair, false sighing. I wasn’t in the mood for their theatrics. Some things can’t be faked.

Aiko, heartfaced Aiko. Your small Japanese smile, your pale ass, your unrestrained pubic hair. You trotted around the real world in high heels, setting alarms on your phone, making spreadsheets of internship opportunities, measuring sugar in teaspoons, clipping your nails over trashcans, filling orderly columns of Japanese writing paper with kanji—but once you strapped a bass guitar over your shoulders and put a beer in her hand, your eyes would grow big and bright and mischievous. I closed the internet browser and, in its place, conjured a folder christened with your name. I eased the laptop down my thighs to give myself some room. Thumbnail photos blanketed the screen in a grid—you on a beach towel, you under Trajan’s Column, you at the Georgia Aquarium, you onstage at Bangkok Blues.
A thorough history: the rise and fall of us.

With a hefeweizen in my free hand, I was unzipped and ready to debase myself. But before I could begin, the phone rang. Mom again. Swearing to myself, I put the beer on the coffee table and answered. A long silence greeted me.

“Hello?” I said. A deep breath on the other end. Then:

“Tyler, something’s happened.”

She said this in the same tone she used when I was a kid, when she had to explain she was getting married and that our lives were about to change forever. She wasn’t calling to criticize my lack of employment. She was calling because Ramsey had vanished. His brand new truck was gone, his office had been closed for over a week, the secretaries wouldn’t return Mom’s calls, and Ramsey’s father, Gus, had no idea where he’d disappeared to.

I zipped my jeans. I closed my laptop and a hundred little squares of Aiko smiled, waving goodbye. I promised Mom I’d drive out first thing in the morning to see her and make sure she was okay.

Planets were aligning, history was in the making, the gods were laughing—developers, politicians, hedge fund managers—and here I was inside my comfortable bubble of preoccupations, pining for Aiko and fondling myself because I had nothing better to do. I remember draining the rest of the hefeweisens that night and studying the print of Belisarius: it was no longer the pitiful ex-general that moved me, but the shock on the face of his former soldier as he came to understand just how far the mighty had fallen.
In retrospect, the signs were clear. Not only the auguries of macroeconomic tumult, but those of Ramsey’s flight, which over the course of my investigation have grown stranger and more troubling with each new discovery.

5. **Chicken Shit, Chicken Salad**

They say half the roads in Atlanta are called Peachtree. There are actually seventy-one: West Peachtree, East Peachtree, Old Peachtree, New Peachtree; Peachtree Lane, Circle, Parkway, and Boulevard. But there’s only one *true* Peachtree Street. The rest are sad imitators, hoping to reproduce that special ebullience of the real deal—the way boutiques, steakhouses, theatres, museums and luxury condos spring up from its curbs like vegetation from the fertile banks of the Nile. On one side of Peachtree Street was grey suburban squalor; on the other side stretched the country clubs and estates nestled among ancient oaks and willows, untouched by the city’s expansion.

I recall one of Ramsey’s favorite aphorisms: there’s chicken shit, and there’s chicken salad.

Though it was a short, easy drive from Athens, I hadn’t been home for nine months. There were the same parades of stone mailboxes, the same luxury sedans, the same early morning joggers with their reflective vests, and through the trees I could make out the gentle curves of the golf course. But every sixth or seventh house, little wooden signs now sprouted from the grass. Most were white and featured wide triangular roofs painted in over the lettering; some had little compartments stuffed full of brochures no one wanted. The names and numbers differed, but each sign extended the same desperate offer: FOR SALE.
When I pulled up to Mom’s driveway, I half expected to find one in our yard.

There, past the stone gate I used to climb when I was a kid, up through the orderly rows of oaks (these I was too craven to assail), up, up, up the grassy slope, sat our house like a Greek temple. Its antebellum-style porch reinforced this impression; although it had no pediment, no metopes or triglyph friezes, the fluted columns and curlicue cornices were more than enough to give one the sense that somewhere within that sprawling stucco manor there might sit a bearded statue of Zeus.

The moment I let myself inside, the competing odors of new-house-smell and antique timbers roused in me a cloying, syrupy nostalgia for my adolescence. From upstairs came the faint clopping of footsteps. Sitting on a side table in the breakfast room was a photograph of me and Ramsey holding snow skis against a backdrop of distant, washed-out mountains. I picked it up. Was it Vail? Aspen? Deer Valley? They all ran together. I was maybe fifteen when the picture was taken: goofy, smiling, and red-faced in the wind. Ramsey held both skis in one gloved hand. The other rested on my head in a theatrical display of fatherly pride.

“Hello, darling.” Mom stood at the threshold, watching me. In one hand she held an open bottle of Chardonnay; in the other she grasped a pair of white wine glasses by the stems. The careful way she’d put up her hair made her look like a patrician noblewoman. It was hard to tell how much of that auburn sheen she won in the genetic lottery and how much she owed to a thousand dollar salon visit, but her figure she earned without a doubt: there was an elliptical in the workout room, and she ran every morning at 5:30. Mom
would have made a model Roman matriarch: dignified, pragmatic, well-educated, and fiercely protective. It was just like her to put her hair up in the wake of a crisis.

I put down the skiing photograph (which now sits on my desk in Athens) and took a seat at the breakfast table. Mom joined me. Leaning closer and propping up her elbow with regal poise, she rested her cheek on her fist.

“No one’s seen him in ten days?” I asked.

“First the wine,” she said. With disturbing efficiency, she poured two glasses, slid me one across the table, and began working on the second.

“It’s nine in the morning.”

“As if that’s ever stopped you before.”

“Fair enough.”

“To your stepfather, wherever he may be.”

“To Ramsey.” We clinked glasses. One wall of the breakfast room was all glass, looking out onto a small courtyard where a stone cherub had stood taking a leak since the early 1920’s. Now his pool was festering with black-green standing water. I wondered how long the kid had been standing there in his angelic whizzing stance, all dried up like an old man.

In calm, practiced tones, Mom told me that Ramsey’s companies had both filed for bankruptcy that week. Details were vague. Every realtor and contractor in Atlanta whispered of fraud and misappropriated investments, but one thing, at least, was certain: Ramsey had owned a sizeable percentage of Atlanta real estate, and as thousands of home-owners defaulted on their subprime mortgages, prices were plummeting faster than
even the dourest Wall Street analyst thought possible. In the space of three weeks, Mansfield Reality’s portfolio had lost half its value, and Mom lost her husband.

“Do you think he’s in trouble?” I asked.

“I think we’re in trouble,” said Mom.

“Us?”

“Ramsey’s partners and clients are already coming out of the woodwork. I’ve already heard from four lawyers looking for money.”

“You think he threw us under the bus,” I said in quiet disbelief.

“I think you need to watch what you spend,” she said. I took a swig of wine and tried not to make a face. Mom always drank the driest shit she could find.

“I’ve still got my trust fund.”

“A revocable trust. And who do you think the trustee is? Who do you think funnels money into your bank account every month?” Mom sighed and shook her head. I admit that my understanding of trust law was shockingly limited, considering its relevance to my life.

“Shit,” I said, and for a good while we drank in silence. I thought about what it took to sustain my lifestyle. There was the beer to consider. The fine dining. The games and guitars. There was gas and insurance and water and power. My peculiar skillset—fencing, conjugating Latin verbs, guitar improv, research methodology—would be underappreciated in the contemporary job market. Deprived of funds, the antiquarian finds himself transformed into, of all things, a bohemian (or whatever they’re call bohemians these days—beatniks? hipsters?), and I definitely wasn’t ready to be one of
those. Bohemians get syphilis, drink whatever miserable swill they can scrounge up, and
die of tuberculosis.

Sitting there, I realized my glass was empty.

“I’ll give you some money for now,” said Mom. I looked outside at the
constipated statue, all covered in moss. A neighbor’s roof peaked over the iron fence. The
house to which it belonged had been rotting on the market for over two years. They paid
four million for it and were now only asking—pleading—for three. That’s what poverty
looks like in Buckhead.

“This could be a good thing for you in the end,” she said. “It’s about time you
learn to take care of yourself.”

“Practical thinking is like a drug habit. If I start now, I might never shake it.”

“God bless America,” she swore. “I don’t know how I let Ramsey talk me into
that trust fund.”

“We can’t all be lucky enough to grow up poor.”

“You don’t know what poor is. If you did, you’d understand.”

“Understand what? Please, Mater, enlighten me.”

“That you’ve got to be self-sufficient,” she said, slamming her glass on the
breakfast table. “That you can’t trust anyone to look out for you but you.”

Watching her nostrils flare and the corners of her mouth twitch as she struggled to
stay composed, I realized what a colossal asshole I was. I hadn’t even asked her how she
was holding up.

“You’re right, Mom, I’m sorry. Are you okay?” I reached across the table to her.
“When I married Ramsey, I swore to myself I wouldn’t let it change me. I swore I’d never be dependent on him.” She quaffed the rest of her wine.

“You’ve got your own work.”

“My real estate connections, my friends in Buckhead, all the parties, the country clubs, the company trips—I’ve let him lead me by the hand for fourteen years.”

“You love him.”

“Well,” she said, pursing her lips and pouring another glass. She stood from the table. “I want to show you something.”

She led me through the living room, down the narrow stairs to the basement, and into her studio. On canvas, stretched taut across a tall wooden easel, Ramsey stood in a tuxedo, younger than I remembered him, leaning against a lotus column, smiling a rakish smile and holding a glass of what could only be scotch. The background details were unfinished, smears of blue and gold, but it was enough to identify the scene: the Fox Theatre’s Egyptian Ballroom, where Ramsey had received Atlanta’s Developer of the Year Award in 2001.

“The first night he didn’t come home, I called AT&T. They told me he cancelled his cell phone plan. Then I came down here and started this.”

“Pretty damn good for an amateur.”

It really was. There were technical flaws—some strangely canting shadows, some lines gone slightly askew—but the spirit of the tableau was perfect: in Ramsey’s half smile, in the jaunty angle of his slouch, in the way his bowtie still looked classy hanging undone around his neck, in the jutting of his chin you could see he was at his most
charming in moments of triumph. And from the little white glint of light reflected off his pupil, you got the feeling that there was something beneath the surface. You got the feeling that this was a man of inscrutable intentions.

6. Stability Is Happiness

By noon, Mom and I were considerably drunk, and this, perhaps, was the true beginning of my investigation. We sat in the living room under the elk-antler chandelier, contributing empty wine bottles to the coffee table. I asked about how she and Ramsey got together, what they talked about over dinner at Chops, what kind of fights they had. Perhaps it was dunderheaded to pick at the wound, but once she got started, she couldn’t stop, and the more she drank the angrier she became.

They met at a banker’s Christmas party, but of course she’d heard about him long before: Ramsey T. Mansfield, son and heir to the legendary Gus Mansfield (who not only recovered his family fortune after the Depression, but grew it into one of greatest real estate empires in the South). Rumor had it that Ramsey began building houses with his father’s money at sixteen and had been womanizing ever since, right up to (and apparently through) the failed marriage that produced my stepsister. So when he approached Mom to offer her a pink peppermint cocktail, she gave him the cold shoulder. It’s true she was a country girl in the big city, but she was a thirty-eight year old single mother, not some wide-eyed virgin. Still, Ramsey was persistent. He caught her under a sprig of mistletoe and, with half the partygoers watching, asked for an early Christmas present. It made her furious, him putting her on the spot, as if that might bend her. But then, feeling all those eyes on her—the eyes of big-time contractors, realtors, and
competing mortgage brokers—she understood *visceral*ly that the man in front of her was a Big Fucking Deal. “You can’t understand what a powerful man is until you’ve been close enough to one to smell his cologne,” Mom told me, describing this moment between sips of Chardonnay.

To expound on her point: it’s the difference between knowing that there is, in theory, such a place as the Grand Canyon—versus being there in the flesh, feeling the arid heat warm your shoulders and the dust swirl up against your face, itching the follicles of your nose-hair as you stand nervously positioning your feet and peering down into the impossible painted-orange abyss.

So what the hell, she thought. Leaning forward on her tiptoes, she pecked Ramsey on his scruffy cheek, and everyone clapped politely.

Then he invited Mom to dinner at Chops, which is how that little ritual began. To her surprise, he mostly talked shop: he had a lot of respect for her reputation as a broker. In three months, not once did he try and get into her pants, although he admitted he wanted to. That this man would be patient for her—Ramsey Mansfield, who always got what he wanted right when he wanted it—proved to her that he was, if not sincere, at least more complicated than she initially assumed.

In the end, it was she who invited him to bed. Afterward, he told her he wanted to “turn over a new leaf.” (My pseudofather deployed clichés like a poet arranging a particularly witty construction of chiasmus or zeugma.) Mom turned away, pulling the sheets around her shoulders. She couldn’t help but remember the rumors she had heard about the man beside her. That he had neglected his daughter. That he inspected the
breasts of prospective secretaries like a breeder inspecting the teeth of a horse. That certain affiliates of his took to the streets with crowbars, busting in the downstairs windows of home-owners who refused to sell their property.

“How do I know you really can change?” she asked

“You’ll have to find out for yourself,” he said.

“I bet you say that to all your women.”

“You’re nothing like the other women I’ve been with.” He reached around her to stroke her cheek—a tender gesture that’s difficult for me to imagine Ramsey performing—and said, “That’s how you can tell.”

It was true. Slutty secretaries, desperate divorcees, and eager daughters of clients constituted the list of his previous conquests, and I think it’s safe to say he didn’t pursue a three month courtship before he had his way with them. Mom, on other hand, was a Vanderbilt graduate with conservative country values, well respected in her industry (though occasionally thought a lunatic) for her blanket refusal to give loans to borrowers with low credit, and it was widely known among Atlanta realtors and brokers that she refused several marriage proposals in the nineties because she wanted to focus on work and raising her little boy, which is to say raising me; in fact, my very existence complicated Ramsey’s choice even further, but still he married my mother.

So he did change, at least ostensibly. But why?

Mom’s decision I understand. Stability is happiness—that was the story she told herself. The opportunity to gaze into the mirror each morning, see the wife of Ramsey T.
Mansfield gazing back, and think to herself, “Susan, just look how far you’ve come”—well, that was also an attractive perk.

But why should Ramsey settle down? Why then? Why Mom? I can only imagine that to understand the mechanics of this decision would be to understand why, fourteen years later, he has left us.

7. The Buckhead House

I was ten when they got married. Too innocent to understand why they got a hotel room in Atlanta for the wedding night. Too naïve to understand how this powerful stranger slipping a ring on Mom’s finger would define my life. On the day they got back from their Fiji honeymoon, we moved into the Buckhead house.

Ramsey had overseen the renovations himself. The original house was a classic Southern manor from the roaring twenties built by a Coca-Cola executive who’d apparently preferred booze to soda, because he installed a secret cellar under the living room floor where I used to take my girlfriends when Mom was home. But the house was better suited to handle Prohibition than the Great Depression: the first owner lost his shirt on the stock market and they foreclosed. The deed passed through the hands of various Atlanta robber barons and captains of industry until at last it fell to Ramsey, who swiftly concluded that the house was too small for him; and so he rolled up his shirtsleeves and drew up his own plan—a task that had been beneath him for decades. He aimed to create a palace to rival Nero’s Domus Aurea, an estate that would demonstrate to family, friends, and clientele (not to mention the rest of Atlanta) just the caliber of person he was.

That is to say, a lord of men.
When Mom and I spent the night at his Midtown penthouse, I would catch him in his study, hunched over his desk, guiding an artisan’s pencil along the edge of his gleaming architect’s scale. I remember the way he smiled. A smile without pretense. With each new line that stretched across the page, he could see the world reconfiguring itself, adjusting physical space until it conformed to his ideals.

For himself, his wife, his daughter, and his adopted son, he provided seven bedrooms, two home-theatre rooms, and a basement that rivaled any exclusive Buckhead sports bar in size, in the quantity of liquor, and in the craftsmanship of its pool tables. When it came to decor, he deferred to Mom—antique clocks, marble statuettes, and oil paintings on every wall, paintings from local boutiques, paintings from auctions in New York. A portrait of an elegant woman reclining on a divan; a drunken, impressionistic cocktail party on a steamboat; a young man coming home penniless to the family farm, defeated by the sinister complexities of the big city. Of course, Ramsey couldn’t help but take over every now and then. The chandelier in our living room (over the secret cellar) was made entirely from elk antlers.

It was through these rooms Ramsey arranged for us that we drifted, largely indifferent to the low probability of our encountering each other, like particles of a diffuse gas.

My drunken interview with Mom under the antler chandelier got me all worked up. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know, and soon I found myself wandering from room to room, picking up knickknacks from the shelves, leaning forward to scrutinize photographs, browsing Ramsey’s rudimentary film collection, riffling through
his sock drawer, his medicine cabinet, his toiletry bag until finally I had arrayed a regiment of meaningful items upon the coffee table in the living room.

These included:

The photograph of me and Ramsey skiing; a green bottle of cologne whose fragrance of oaky, leathery masculinity conjured a memory of Ramsey hugging me after my high school graduation; a DVD copy of the movie *Die Hard*, which he and I watched together every Christmas; a plaster statue of Emperor Augustus I brought him from Rome the previous year; and a pencil sketch of Ramsey that Mom had drawn in their cabin last year when we all went on a Caribbean cruise.

But soon these relics struck me as ancillary. Ramsey’s story was in his business; his home life was an afterthought. As it occurred to me just how little I truly knew about this man who was a father to me, I came to understand that even though he’d only been missing a few days, it was a real possibility he wouldn’t come back.

The corollary was that I had to find him.

8. **It Takes Money to Make Money**

By late afternoon, the sun bled orange through the bay windows and Mom lay on the couch slumped in a Chardonnay stupor. From there I went to pillage the home office. Ramsey did most of his work in Midtown, so I didn’t expect to find much. The filing cabinets were empty, and the big mahogany desk was bare except for a single framed picture of him and Mom at Caesar’s in Vegas. A premeditated escape.

I decided to check his email. Ramsey was a busy, impatient man and, therefore, hopelessly inept when it came to technology. Like so many of his generation, he relied on
his children to navigate any device with a backlit screen, so you might guess to whom he
turned when it came time to set up a new e-mail account for his business. After three
failed attempts to set up a password sophisticated enough to satisfy the program’s
security standards, he turned to me, saying, “Fuck it, you put something in.”

As far as I know, I’m still the only one who knows his password.

Sitting in the living room across from Mom (who snored like a drunken
legionnaire) I cranked up her laptop and typed it in: AugTibCla123. The inbox was
cleaned out, including the Trash folder. However, just when I was about to log out, the
computer speakers gave a bright little chirp. A new message appeared at the top of the
screen. Only then—sensing another human being sitting crouched somewhere over a
different laptop at that very moment—did I remember I was trespassing.

I took a deep breath and opened the message. It was from Jim Tappman, a
longtime family friend who worked as an accountant for a bank Ramsey did business
with.

His e-mail had no subject.

I’ve taken care of everything just liked you asked. Now I want out. And it’s not
just because the shit’s hitting the fan. You always said, ‘It takes money to make money.’
But it takes a lot more than that. Not even Augusta’s worth this.

But don’t worry, I won’t make any trouble. You know I’ve got my family to think
about. -Jim.
I read it six times before realizing that Mom was sitting awake, watching me. Her napping had frizzed her patrician hair. I closed the laptop before she could ask what I was doing. For the moment, my investigation remained my little secret.

“I think it’s about time for me to head back,” I said. “Take care of yourself.”

“I’ll be fine. Your mom’s a survivor, you know that.”

“Yeah,” I said, struggling to recall those fuzzy days in cramped apartments when it was still just the two of us. “And we’ve got each other.”

“Of course we do,” she said, rising from the couch and smoothing back her hair.

“Oh, and Tyler?”

“Yeah?”

“Watch it with those credit cards.”

“I know.” We hugged, and she kissed me on the cheek. I was about to step out the door when I remembered all the crap I’d left out on the coffee table—the skiing photo, cologne, etc.—and, on a whim, I decided to bring it all back with me to Athens.

9. A Digression on the Caprices of Memory

Having just gone over these pages concerning the Buckhead House, it strikes me as very curious that I should hardly remember my life before Ramsey barreled into it. Though I clearly recall the day Mom took me to meet my future stepfather for the first time—the absent-minded weight of that stranger’s hand rustling my hair, the clamor and dust of construction crews renovating the Buckhead House, the excitement of tearing through plastic wrap to get at the Lion King Gameboy cartridge he brought me as a taste of his generosity—nearly everything before the wedding is lost to me. The dim, cramped
apartment years, when it was just me and Mom. All that remains is a patch of blank plaster in the corner of a fresco, where the paint has long since cracked and fallen from the wall. Only scattered flecks of faded color remain. Snatches of banter from super hero cartoons. Blue plastic chairs with aluminum legs. The sound of Mom’s voice on late-night business calls, leaking under my bedroom door as I lay tucked in bed with my book.

My book! My first scholarly pursuit. That, at least, I have not forgotten. A battered hardcover copy of d’Aubusson’s Book of Greco-Roman Myths from the seventies, as wide and thick as a modern laptop, with a smiling Phoebus Apollo driving his sun chariot across the faded yellow cover. I knew every glossy page, every god and goddess from Hades to Hestia, every hero from Ajax to Odysseus. I’d reread the Phaethon story so many times, I could recite the whole thing from memory.

A parent-teacher conference. Yes, that’s how I came to possess the yellow book. Mom was there, looking concerned but also impatient, eager to resolve things and get home to finish her own work; I sat small and ashamed, fidgeting quietly as I looked around the empty classroom; and Mr. S, my third-grade teacher, a young man in an argyle sweater vest, held in his hand stack of lined notebook paper, twenty or thirty sheets featuring pencil sketches of Iron Man in various poses (soaring through the air with his jet boots, firing his repulsor beams, etc). The two of them spoke as if I was not there:

“Tyler’s a bright student, Ms. Cloff, and a great reader. But he doesn’t do his homework. He daydreams and doodles through class.”

“I try and keep on him. Most nights I’m just so busy with work.”
“He won’t participate in group activities. At recess, he sits alone on the bench until it’s time to come inside.”

“He’s always had problems making friends.”

“Has he ever mentioned anything about his peers mistreating him?”

“You think he’s being bullied?”

“It’s hard to say. I asked him about the drawings. Do you know what he told me?”

“What?”

“He likes Iron Man because he’s smart, he’s rich, and he ‘has a famous father who died in a car crash’.”

“God bless America,” she swore.

They began to speak more quietly. Even so, I caught a few obscure adult phrases: *Atypical home life. Disappointing academic performance.* Mom looked wearier and wearier, nodding her head. At last, they called me over. They made me say I’d stop drawing when I should be listening. They made me promise that I’d do my homework and work with the other students. At the end, Mr. S bent down on his knee so that the two of us could speak on the same level.

“You like superheroes, right Tyler?”

I nodded, my voice in my throat.

“Check this out.” He produced the faded d’Aubusson book. “It’s got stories about Theseus, Atalanta, even Hercules.”

“Who’s Hercules?”
“You’ve never heard of Hercules?” said Mr. S with feigned disbelief. “These guys were the very first super heroes.”

“Like, ever?” I asked mistrustfully.

“Ever. This guy Daedalus, he’s a super-smart inventor. He built a flying suit, just like Iron Man. Except his had wings and the Greeks made him up thousands of years ago. Doesn’t that sound cool?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said, which really meant holy crap, it so totally does. Then Mr. S held out the d’Aubusson and put his other hand flat on the cover.

“This is a very special book,” he said, smiling sadly. “My dad used to read it to me when I was a little boy just like you. And I’ll make you a deal. If you keep all those promises you made me, I’ll give it to you just like he gave it to me.”

“To keep?”

“To keep,” he said. Mr. S would never have his own son. He was gay.

“Okay,” I said, and he put the book in my chubby little hands. After examining the cover and the worn, slightly mushy spine, I flipped it over to find another picture. “Is that a superhero too?”

“That’s Homer, a great poet. And those two are Muses. They give all great writers their inspiration.”

“Thanks,” I said, pretending to understand and clutching the book protectively to my little chest.

That night, tucked in bed, even as Mom’s voice came muffled through the door (struggling to explain to homebuyers why her competitor’s teaser rates sounded
promising, but would end up screwing them in the end), I flipped through the pages, appraising the colorful pictures.

Yes, memory is indeed a funny thing. The historian’s most inconstant primary source. Though sleepovers, playground debacles, and lazy Saturday mornings have all been consigned to oblivion, I can still picture that parent-teacher conference with Mr. S. The next thing I remember clearly is the drive to Buckhead a year later to see Ramsey for the first time, gazing out the window and pretending I was Phaethon from my yellow book, traveling to the Palace of the Sun to meet Phoebus Apollo, god of poetry, prophecy, music, and healing—the boy’s father by birth, or so his mother had always promised him.
THE LIFE OF TIBERIUS GRACCHUS: LIBER I (ROMA, 152 BCE)

The boy pulls gently at the end of the scroll, tugging the story forward into the future, sealing away what has already passed for his brother to discover one day, when he too is old enough to read. The boy’s mother is calling him, but he doesn’t care. Like the limbs of a spider scrabbling, tugging silken strands from its spinneret, the boy’s thumbs and fingers at once furl and unfurl the fine velum. Again his mother calls, again her voice fills the villa—filling the atrium, the courtyard, the lounges and bedrooms—and again, the boy ignores her. Slanted beams of light stab down from the high windows, hazy with dust, illuminating the room just enough that the boy can read without straining his eyes. Just how he likes it. He is too close to the end. He has to finish.

His father’s book1 has a certain leathery softness, an organic pliancy that pleases him. He knows the word velum comes from vitellus, because such parchment is often made from the flayed skin of newborn calves, stretched taut and cured under the sun. Some bleating infant thing (not so different from his brother) had its throat slit to bring him this story, and for that he gives thanks. It is a good story:

_The doors of the senate house burst open, and a one-eyed man steps forward, followed by the other senators. The Etruscans surround the city in precise ranks, their_
horses kicking up dirt, their banners flapping in the wind, and no one is so terrified as the poor, the hungry, the unwashed of Rome, those driven from the farmlands who have retreated inside the walls. Lofty morals and traditions mean little in the face of more basic instincts; should it come to a choice between slavery and death, the weak will side with the invaders. The one-eyed man must remind the people why their fledgling Republic is worth defending, or they will be torn from within and without. He remembers the story of Solon, a hero of Athens. “My friends,” he says, “Rome has neglected you for too long.” He promises them grain and lower taxes and cheaper salt for their meat.

In the following days, the Etruscans hoot from their camps and hurl boulders, hurl the carcasses of Roman livestock over the walls. The people inside are still afraid, but now they are angry. This is their city.

Yes, it is a good story, even if the bit about taxes and salt is a little confusing. The boy unwinds the scroll faster now, sensing that the good part, the part with the battle and the bridge—it’s right there in the next few inches of vellum. But hurried footsteps echo just outside his room, growing louder.

“There you are.” His mother looms in the doorway, beautiful in her frustration, crossing her arms and looking down at the boy, who sits on the tile floor with his book. “It’s time for your lesson. Blossius has been waiting for you in the atrium.” The boy does not look up; his eyes flit back and forth across the unbroken wall of text. “Now, Tiberius.”

“Blossius talks too much and he has hair on his face like a beggar.”
“I have invited Blossius for the very purpose of talking to you, and he wears a beard because he is a Greek. A Greek learned in the wisdom of his venerable people. Learned as you too must be if you want to bring honor to this family.”

“I want to finish my book.”

“You’ve only had one lesson with him. Give him a chance.”

“One lesson was too many.”

“Blossius is your third tutor this year. These scholars, the way they drink and conspire—if you run him off like the others, I’ll never find you a fourth. Then when you’re grown, your own slaves will outsmart you. Look at me when I’m talking to you, Tiberius. Tiberius!” She bends over, ruffles his hair with her willowy fingers, and inspects the scroll he is reading. A tunic under her stola conceals her pale arms. She wears only a bronze serpent bracelet and a simple cameo broach. She takes a long time looking over the scroll. Then the boy sees something funny on her face. “This was your father’s,” she says.

“I know.”

“Well,” she says, gently removing the boy’s fingers and rolling the scroll shut, careful to not to lose her son’s place. “Perhaps you can discuss this with Blossius today. Instead of the Lotus Eaters.”

“Really?”

“Really. But just this once.” She takes him by the hand, helping him to his feet and returning his book.

“Mother, do you think I will be a hero of the Republic?”
“Not unless you know your Homer.”

Together, they pass through the bright courtyard, walking along the shaded colonnade. A slave is pruning the hedges; two slaves are carrying amphorae of olive oil to the kitchen; another is polishing a marble statue besmirched with bird droppings. A freedwoman approaches cradling his brother, gently, firmly, just as the boy cradles his book, clutching the twin cylinders against his chest, impatient to finish his story.

His mother takes the baby and thanks the woman.

In the atrium, Blossius is sipping a cup of water, careful that it does not run down his beard. A pillar of sunlight comes down through the compluvium, illuminating the small pool in the center of the room.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” says the boy’s mother. The philosopher leans forward to inspect the infant. “He’s got those Sempronius eyes, just like his brother. But he has your nose, Cornelia, don’t you think?”

The boy does not like Blossius’s accent. He does not like the way Blossius picks at little things as if they’re full of secret meaning. His mother repositions the bundled child in her arms and sighs.

“I don’t care about his nose,” she says, “so long as he has strength enough to see another summer. I am weary with dead babes and dead husbands.”

There is only the sound of birds chirping, of water sloshing in the atrium’s basin; the boy watches their faces as the silence drags on.
“Of course it is difficult, managing things on your own.” The philosopher gestures to include the estate with all its slaves and unlit lamps and tile mosaics. “But you must thank the gods that your husband left you well provided for.”

“I am not ungrateful. I am simply weary.”

“Weary, perhaps, but lovely nonetheless. It seems women these days are all studded with garnet, as if they fancy themselves chalices or broaches.”

“These are my jewels.” She holds the infant with her left arm and ruffles the boy’s hair with her right. She’s always so rough it hurts his scalp. He tugs on her stola.

“If you’re just going to talk,” he says, “why can’t I finish my book?”

She doesn’t hear him. She and Blossius discuss Rome’s many troubles: the rising price of grain, the disproportion of slaves to citizens, the Iberians stirring up trouble again in the west. Something about Publius Octavius—the boy listens at first because that’s Marcus’s father, and Marcus is his best friend—buying up more than the legal 500 iugera of public land, which before had been set aside for poor farmers to work. Boring, boring, boring. The boy steps back into the corner of the atrium and unrolls his scroll, skipping forward several pages, getting right to the good part.

_The Etruscan invaders know: it is not the walls that protect the city, but the broad river. They have taken the hill, and now they surge down toward the bridge, three hundred strong men with shields and ashwood spears. For a moment, two Roman officers stand trembling beside the one-eyed man—second sons of senators, frozen in shame, strangling the gilded hilt of decorative swords—and now they turn their backs to the enemy and run. The enlisted men follow, fleeing to the riverbank, awkward in their_
slatted armor. The one-eyed man rebukes them over the roar of the Tiber. But it is too late. He stands alone now, though in the distance two peasants are running to the bridge with torches. He plants his feet, bends his knees, and readies his shield.

“Come, Tiberius,” says Blossius. Sitting in the corner with the book taut across his lap, the boy looks up and sees the philosopher standing there, lanky and gaunt in a plain toga; his mother and brother are gone. He rises, reluctant to furl the scroll, to shut up the one-eyed man into a calfskin tube there at the critical moment with the fate of the city hanging in the balance.

Nothing is so infuriating as an interrupted story.

The boy leads Blossius to the study, dim with small windows; the philosopher drags two wooden chairs to the middle of the room and opposes them a foot apart. He and the boy sit, two slaves begin to light oil lamps, and as the flames ignite one by one around the room, the light flickers across their faces, across the floor mosaic’s infinite geometric patterns within patterns, across the fresco on the wall of Homer listening to the Muse of History whispering in one ear, the Muse of Poetry whispering in the other.

Blossius beckons a slave girl, sends for a jug of wine, and asks to see the boy’s book. He unfurls it and studies the text for several moments before looking up. The boy is rigid in his chair, squirming his toes against the thongs of his sandals.

“Horatius Cocles at the bridge,” says Blossius at last. “It is good for a young Roman to be interested in the stories of the past. So many boys these days spend their hours in complete idleness. Or perhaps they compose effeminate love letters.”
The boy looks down at the clay tiles, washed in firelight. He has never written a love letter. He has seen only ten summers. The slave girl comes in with the wine, pouring from the clay jug as the boy eyes Blossius’s skeletal fingers curling around his father’s book.

“Pour one for the boy as well,” says Blossius.

“I do not drink wine,” says the boy. “Mother says it makes men into monkeys.”

“You will be a man soon, and you must learn to do as men do. Your grandfather Scipio, you know, even in his old age he drinks wine by the skin.”

The boy scowls as the girl pours the wine. Everyone always talks about his mother’s father\(^2\)—grandfather saved Rome, grandfather conquered Africa—but his own father won triumphs too. His father built the greatest basilica in the city—why does no one talk about that?

Now the boy peers over the rim of his silver goblet. The wine’s dark, immaculate surface curls slightly against the edges of the cup, forming tiny purple bubbles. It smells like blood—the boy is both disgusted and curious, unsure whether he should disobey his mother or his magister, whether he wants to taste the grape or let it rot, whether he will be whipped if he disobeys or if he yields. He should refuse. It would make Blossius angry. Then again, his father too must have drunk wine, and the one-eyed man from the story, and besides, maybe if he goes along with it Blossius will return his book. The boy takes a deep throatful. It tastes more like spoiled meat than fruit, but he does not cough or flinch.

\(^2\) Scipio Africanus, of course, who defeated Hannibal
“There’s a good lad,” says Blossius, smiling. “Next time you’d do better to savor it. Your mother grows very fine grapes, you know.” He strokes his beard and lifts the boy’s scroll closer to the lamplight. “This is an instructive story. Courage, patriotism, et cetera, et cetera, an example for any good Roman schoolboy. But what is it that makes Cocles a hero?”

“I haven’t finished it yet,” says the boy. His eyes never leave the book, caged within the Greek’s spindly fingers. Maybe he has to drink the whole cup before Blossius will give it back. “He fights the Etruscans. He saves Rome.”

“Countless men have lost their lives defending bridges, defending mountain passes, defending citadel gates, and yet their names are lost to us. We remember Cocles not for what he does at the end of the story, but for what he does at the beginning.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” says the boy, flushing. “I just want to read it.” A dark thimbleful of wine swishes back and forth in the bell of his silver goblet. Blossius laughs, noticing now how keenly the boy’s eyes follow the movement of the scroll in his hands.

“I’ll make you a deal, boy. You tell me what really makes Horatius Cocles a hero, and I’ll let you read your book in peace.”

The boy glowers. What could be more heroic than the one-eyed man’s stand at the bridge? The wine is funny in the boy’s belly, like when he drinks too much goat’s milk, and the little clay tiles on the floor are all running together. He is tired of games.

“I drank the wine. Give me my book.”

“First you must think. You must struggle.”
“It’s mine,” shouts the boy, slamming down his cup and standing from the wooden chair. Who is this Greek to touch his father’s favorite book? An alien citizen, no better than a freedman. And he is a Sempronius! His friend Marcus would laugh at him. And what would his father think, if he could see his son being ordered about by a foreigner?

“You will give me my book,” says the boy with strange authority—the authority of a master over his slave. He steps closer. The story is there, waiting, fingerlengths from his nose. Blossius sits back and sighs, holding the scroll with one hand as he takes a drink of wine, as if intentionally ignoring the indisputable fact that Tiberius Gracchus is a Roman male of noble blood.

The boy slaps the goblet from the philosopher’s hand. It clatters across the floor, spilling out wine, which pools and seeps between the clay tiles of the mosaic. For a moment Blossius sits as still as the image of Homer on the wall. It is so quiet, the boy can hear the little flames flicker. “I want my book,” he says again, but this time quietly, gazing down at the mess. He remembers his mother looking very tired, rubbing her temples, saying “Please don’t waste his time, Tiberius.” He remembers the time Marcus ordered one of his slaves to beat another for taking away a jar of honey before he had finished with it. The boy saw this second slave afterward. One of the man’s dusky Punic lids was swollen shut. The other was heavy with tears, not from the pain, it seemed, but from the humiliation of being so utterly at the mercy of a child. Now the look on Blossius’s gaunt face is not so different, though his eyes are dry. It is the boy who is in
danger of weeping. He sits back down, breathing fast like a little bird. The pool of wine
dimly reflects the wavering lamplight.

“It is true, your people have conquered my people,” says Blossius at last, as if
responding directly to the boy’s earlier thoughts. “But you Latins have much to learn
from the Greeks. You call *us* barbarians, but there is more to being civilized than
marching about in straight lines. I first met your father after he gave a speech in Rhodes.
He may not have conquered Africa, but he was a great man. He gave us a library.” The
old man leans back in his wooden chair, tired out. The boy looks up from the floor to the
scroll, still in Blossius’s hand. And he remembers, there was a part, a pretty good part
with a speech on the hill, a speech on the Capitoline.

“The one-eyed man calmed the poor people down,” says the boy. “That way, they
could help against the Etruscans.” Blossius raises his bushy graying eyebrows and strokes
his beard.

“That’s good,” he says. “Very good. But how?

“He lowered the taxes and bought grain for them to eat,” says the boy. “Grain
from your fatherland, Magister. From Cumae.” He shouldn’t speak so fast but he cannot
help it. He is happy because knows he is right. Maybe the wine has made him into a
monkey. Maybe it is because he has never talked to anyone about his father’s books; he
didn’t think he would like to talk about them, but maybe now he does.

“But there was something else. Cocles overcame another adversary besides the
Etruscans. An adversary without swords or spears.”
“The salt merchants,” says the boy. “They were greedy and they made the price of salt too high. The people’s meat got spoiled.”

Blossius smiles and ruffles the boy’s hair—not too hard like his mother always does. He feels bad about the wine and worse about talking the way he did. A slave girl comes in to clean up the mess. “Our session will resume in half an hour,” says Blossius, handing over the soft vellum book, which the boy unfurls at once. “Remember this lesson, Tiberius Gracchus, and history may remember you.”

The one-eyed man hunches down and raises his shield. Five bleeding Etruscans lay at his feet, but the next drives a spear through his side, through his thigh—the one-eyed man pushes him over the bridge’s railing with his shield, over and down into the thundering river—and, looking back, he sees the peasants have done their work with the torches. His side burns, his thigh burns, and he already feels the flames licking his boots, licking his ankles. It is time to jump.

But first he says a prayer: oh Father Tiber, ye who waters my home on the Palatine, who sustains my wife and my children and my city, please don’t drown me, please don’t drown your faithful son. The fire crackles and the river roars and the bridge shudders, sinking downward, and the Etruscans are screaming, retreating, sliding into the river below. The one-eyed man grips the railing and hurtles over, and his stomach turns—he is falling, falling—and then the impact, the icy water, and his armor, the same steel carapace that seconds ago turned a spear from his guts is now intent to kill him. It tugs him, it wants to drag him to the slimy bottom. The one-eyed man wriggles and kicks
and pulls at the water, fighting the weight, stretching toward the rippling light above, toward air and life and the city of his people.

The boy rolls the left end of the scroll, concealing the previous vertical page and revealing the next. The lamps flicker, the clay tiles swim in the periphery of his vision, and he hears Blossius’s footsteps growing louder. He drinks in the final block of text: the river-god Tiber’s divine intervention, the one-eyed man’s triumph, his statue erected in the Forum, a grant of public land—as much moist Latin soil as he could plow round in a single day—and on behalf of the city’s grateful poor, a contribution of grain (despite its scarcity) from each citizen’s private store. The boy rolls up the book, sated, feeling the smooth calfskin, sensing the ghostly fingers of his father’s hands which must have furled this scroll in the same way many years before.

“You’ve finished,” says Blossius in his bouncy Greek accent, standing in the doorway. He sits down in the empty wooden chair opposite the boy, their knees almost knocking. The boy feels a little better. It as if the earlier incident never happened. “Yes, an instructive story,” Blossius continues, “for those reasons we discussed, even though very little of it may be true.”

“Very little may be true?” This is a fresh betrayal. He takes a new cup of wine and looks up at the wall, trying to stay calm, but his tongue is dry and numb and his face slackens and maybe he doesn’t care anyway. The two fresco Muses continue their battle for Homer’s attention.

3 cf. Livy 2.10: “rem ausus plus famae habituram ad posteros quam fidei”
“There is no doubt that Horatius Cocles existed, and there are several reliable accounts concerning his leadership at the Sublatican Bridge. But the first source we have about his miraculous survival is Publius Nascio, nearly a century after the fact, and there are no records of Cocles after the battle.”

“I don’t care if it happened or not,” he says. “I like it.”

“There is nothing wrong with a good story. How do you think Thucydides composed those lovely battle speeches in his History of the Peloponnesian War? He invented them, of course. He wasn’t there.”

“It could have really been like that.”

“True. But we can’t be sure. The writer of your book here must have known the Cocles story to be of questionable accuracy. So why do you think he included it?”

“Because it shows a great Roman man.”

“That’s right. It’s a moral example. However, if it were factual, we might read it quite differently. We could take it as evidence of a causal pattern from which we might learn to imitate certain behavior or else to avoid it.” The Greek’s voice trails off. He is no longer speaking to the boy, but to the fresco on the wall, to Calliope, Clio, and Homer. He raises his cup. “For instance, if Cocles did survive, we see that civil piety may earn a man riches and long life. If he drowned, squirming in his heavy armor, filling his lungs with filthy riverwater, then we see that the gods reward martyrdom quite differently. Such is the value of history, as Herodotus teaches us.”

The boy is silent. He thinks he maybe understands the part about examples and patterns. Again he peers into the dark recesses of his wine and then at the floor where all
the colored tiles—so many squares within squares, they make his head hurt, and the slave
girl missed a little spot of wine—they’re all blurred now, smeared together. Maybe
Blossius is different than the other tutors after all.

“Magister,” he ventures, “you said you knew my father. What kind of man was
he? Was he a hero like Horatius Cocles?”

“You have asked the wrong question, boy.” Blossius does not turn his gaze from
the fresco. “Ask instead, what kind of man will you be?”

The lesson is over, and the sun is setting. The boy sits in the grass outside the
villa, leaning from the steep slope, holding the furled vellum scroll. He wonders what
Blossius is saying to his mother. If he will ever come back again. Below in the vineyard,
three slaves in wide straw hats are pruning with short sickles. From above, the boy can
only see the tops of their hats—little yellow circles drifting among the rows of tall trees
hung with vines. The slaves hack and hack and hack, they expose the young grapes to the
sun so that they may produce the best wine, all of which his mother will sell or save for
guests, and yes, the boy is sure now, he is properly drunk.

He hears his mother coming from behind.

“How was the lesson? Were you good?” she asks, smiling. She never smiles. The
philosopher must not have told her about the wine cup.

“I like Blossius,” he replies, conscious of his red cheeks the taste of wine in his
dry mouth. “Will he come back?”
“I think so. Maybe next time, your friend Marcus can join you.” She leans down and kisses the boy’s cheek. His brother is crying somewhere inside the villa behind them.

“Aren’t you coming inside?” asks his mother.

“Soon,” he says. She ruffles his hair before returning to see about the baby.

The boy runs his hand over the grass. The seven hills are before him, not so far away, only half a day’s ride, and the boy can make out the Servian Wall bending, slithering, curving to contain the madness of the city. The city of Rome—faded and soft in the distance, like an aging fresco—the city which, as Blossius told him, would be a province of Carthage if his mother’s father hadn’t stopped Hannibal. Tomorrow they will return to their estate there.

The boy can pick out the Palatine Hill from the others (the houses and gardens are biggest), and he imagines he has found his family manor among the many red-tiled roofs. And there in the valley below is the Forum Romanum, there are the white marble temples of Saturn, of the brothers Castor and Pollux, of the Goddess Concordia, who restrains the city’s children from slandering their neighbors, from cheating them, from stabbing them or clubbing them to death and appropriating their worldly goods. Snaking between the stone monuments are the four-story tenement houses with ground-floor shops, the endless rows of shabby wooden stalls where merchants shout at anyone who will listen and hold up strings of half-rotten fish or jars of olive oil. Seeing it all at once from above, the boy cannot conceive of them, even though he has seen the markets many times, even though he can remember the stink and the roar of so many muddled voices, he cannot conceive of so many people, so many human beings, good and bad, coming and going.
There, towering among the stalls, is the gleaming roof of the Basilica Sempronia, named in honor of the boy’s family. Commissioned by his father. This is his favorite building in the city. When his mother takes him there, he sits on the cool stone floor and stares silently up at the impossible ceiling, the ceiling supported by three tiers of enormous columns too wide for him to wrap his arms around even halfway—the ceiling so high and vast that it might as well be the sky.

The boy’s brother is still crying. With the wine in him, the itchy grass feels different against his ankles. He opens the scroll, holding it up against the strange light of the sinking sun so the taut vellum glows orange, nearly translucent. He too will build a great marble hall for his people. He will be like the one-eyed man and fight the bad men, the greedy men, and he will help the citizens—even if there really are no river gods that save heroes at the last minute—and Rome will not forget his name, which is also the name of his father. Breathing hard, feeling a little sick, the boy falls back against the hard slope of the hill, and the slaves with the straw hats, the tall trees draped with grapevines, the distant sprawl of the city all careen out of his view. He lifts the glowing book up with both hands and, closing his eyes, begins to roll it shut.
1. Curiouser and Curiouser

Although it became increasingly apparent that Ramsey wouldn’t be coming back, things continued more or less as they had before. Yes, there was some chatter on the news about financial derivatives and subprime loans. But my townhouse was still standing. My guitars still hung on the walls. My Dryden translation of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* was still waiting for me on my bedside table. The only discernible difference was the quantity of cash flowing through my coffers—that it came from Mom’s personal bank account rather than the trust fund was effectively moot—and the presence of those objects I took from the Buckhead house. The sketch of Ramsey went next to the poster of *Belisarius Begging for Alms*; the cologne, on my bathroom counter; the copy of *Die Hard*, into an empty sleeve of my DVD binder; and the skiing photograph, on a shelf here in my office.

In those early days, I devoted my energies to the investigative methodologies most familiar to me, which is to say that I spent a great deal of time University of Georgia library surrounded by grad students slaving away on theses dissertations while I trawled through old editions of the Atlanta Journal Constitution. There was a story mentioning Ramsey’s companies was entitled “Urban Renewal: Where’s the Money Coming From?” Another, “City Officials Deny Bribery Charges,” was about a handful of
politicians who redistricted four Midtown blocks for residential development in 2004. I found several articles by a sociologist named Maurice Eris published between 1999 to 2003 about Atlanta residents who claimed hired muscle had forced them to sell their property.

An older story, “Phoenix City on the Rise,” described the success of a bank that worked with Ramsey very closely, run by a sweaty mole rat of a man named Timothy Gaffer. It was there that Ramsey’s accountant, Jim Tappman, was employed. This article paired quite nicely with another published just a few weeks ago called “Phoenix City Bank Goes Up in Flames.” At first it was essentially the same story you might see anywhere these days: bank takes on subprime mortgages, people can’t make payments, the FDIC forecloses on their houses, bank goes under, et cetera, et cetera, tough titty, said the kitty. But according to the paper’s investigation, Phoenix City had been making enormous loans to “undisclosed real estate developers.” Millions of dollars were unaccounted for, though none of the government agencies seemed to notice. Curiouser and curiouser. The overall impression of this article was like someone grasping at straws. Like the writer smelled that something was rotten in Denmark, but hadn’t yet discovered the source of decay—or else, didn’t have the stones to piss off the wrong people.

Sometimes Mom would call, interrupting my research, desperate for human conversation. She had bought a Pomeranian puppy to keep her company now that she was alone in the Buckhead House, and I would patiently listen as she told me how it pissed puddles all over the hardwood floors and cried if she wouldn’t let it sleep in the bed with her. She e-mailed me a photo of the thing, looking for a good name for her. We
called her Lupa, owing her oddly long muzzle. I failed to mention that the word *lupa*
refers to harlots in addition to she-wolves. Then I’d hang up and get back to work.

On one occasion, I tried to access Ramsey’s email again. I typed in the password,
AugTibClau123, and an error message came up. Incorrect password. I retyped it, more
carefully this time, but with the same result. Ramsey had changed it. He must have
checked his inbox to find that the message from Jim was grayed out. Slowly, the gears
would have turned in his head, processing what little he knew about computers, until at
last he raised his thick, precisely groomed eyebrows. If the message is grayed out, then
someone has already viewed it. I imagine Ramsey leaning back with a glass of scotch,
swirling it, clinking the ice around as it dawns on him that his tech-savvy son, the
harmless dilettante Tyler Cloff, is the only one who knows his password.

2. **An Athenian Afternoon**

One afternoon I walked a couple of blocks to Jittery Joe’s and sat outside reading
all day and drinking coffee. I did not think of my defunct trust fund. Nor did I wonder
how much longer Mom could (or would) funnel money into my checking account. It was
freakishly warm for late February, and students filled the streets. Occasionally, feeling
wistful, I’d put my book down and watch the parade of pretty young women in skirts and
short shorts. Birds chirped. A black pickup truck passed. The waiter brought me a fourth
coffee and then a fifth and a sixth. Then I would go back to reading Conan Doyle, or
maybe articles for a paper I had been hoping to publish in Classics Quarterly about the
structure of *Parallel Lives*. 
It’s a comforting thought, that one can still enjoy good literature and good coffee and lovely white ankles—the pleasures of an Athenian afternoon—even as everything falls to pieces.

When I returned home, I discovered a note slid beneath my front door, printed on expensive stationary. The letterhead read, “Crassus and Moore LLP.”

Mr. Croff:

I am inquiring about a sum of money owed to me by your stepfather re: the swap we drew up on a CDO backed by mortgages in Virginia Highlands, which have since defaulted. As Mr. Mansfield’s whereabouts are currently unknown, I may be forced to take legal action against your mother to recover the bond; therefore, if you become aware of any information pertinent to his location, it is in both of our interests for you to inform me at the soonest opportunity. -M

At the time, that first sentence might as well have been in Sanskrit (though I admitto knowing more Sanskrit than Finantuguese). So I did a little cursory internet research. “M” was apparently a Ms. Livia Moore, daughter of Mickey Moore, the famous mustached real estate mogul who transformed LA in the fifties and sixties, scouring the Southland and hungrily snapping up everything along the fertile banks of Eisenhower’s interstate highways. He built an empire of green hills above the beaches, where he replaced the tenement housing with orderly suburban lawns and ejected Latinos, blacks, and hippies in favor of WWII veterans and housewives newly addicted to homeowner debt, convenience stores, and the gasoline fragrance of carbon emissions. As I recall,
Ramsey would occasionally speak fondly of Mickey Moore: “A red-blooded American, but with real class. They don’t make’em like that anymore.”

Perhaps this explains how Ramsey came to do business with the man’s daughter. According to the Crassus & Moore website, Livia spent her twenties under her father’s wing, making a name for herself in the cutthroat LA housing market. It seemed strange, then, her suddenly packing up and leaving sunny California for Coca-Cola city to start an investment banking firm. Although she had dipped her little toe into the waters of Atlanta real estate, she now specialized in trading mortgage-backed credit default swaps, futures, and other convoluted derivative products well beyond my limited understanding of finance.

By this point, the Jittery Joe’s coffee buzz had worn off, along with my hopeful mood. I walked home, took the fancy stationary and slipped it under the skiing photograph on my desk. Then I called Mom to tell her about it. But before I could get a word in, she went off about the newest member of our family, the Pomeranian puppy, Lupa. How Lupa had already learned to piss on her cloth Pee-Pee Pad. How Lupa followed her around the house all day and her collar jingled. How Lupa slept in bed under the sheets. After a few minutes of this, I interrupted her to read Moore’s letter. Perhaps I sounded rather nervous; vengeance isn’t exactly part of my everyday vocabulary.

“Is that all?” she said. “I was worried it was something serious. Darling, I have two file cabinets full of veiled threats.”

This did little to reassure me.
3. Cabras y Cabrones

Though it contradicted a lifetime of conditioning as a dilettante, an academic, and a member of the so-called Millennial Generation, I made an effort, in the days following Ramsey’s disappearance, to think of my mother. One day I even drove back out to visit her. I tried to let myself in, but my key wouldn’t fit. It took three full minutes of futile shoving, jerking, and swearing before it occurred to me that Mom had changed the locks.

I knocked, and at last the door swung open to reveal not Mom, but Luz.

“Ay, nene!” she said, beaming.

In one sense, she was the same old Luz. Same round, Columbian cheeks. Same dark, lustrous hair. Yes, she’d put on a little weight, but she hadn’t aged a day since taking me to the hospital at fifteen to reassemble my shattered tibia. Lovely, stern-browed Luz who had stalked the Buckhead House’s shadows for half of my life, dusting shelves and turning off lights and attending to other practical matters beyond my comprehension—it occurred to me then that she might be an excellent source for my investigation. But something was off: the bright cotton dress with the palm fronds, the extra splash of blue mascara, the cheerful lack of reserve. She pressed me in for a prolonged hug, and after catching a whiff of her breath, I realized what seemed so strange.

She was off duty. And she was drunk.

Luz led me into the living room where Mom sat sprawled on the claw-footed couch beneath Ramsey’s virile elk-antler chandelier, holding (predictably) a glass of white wine that could only be Chardonnay.
“My son, he lives!” she said. I slumped down in a plush old leather armchair.

Strangely, Luz took a seat on the couch with Mom.

“I had some trouble with the door.”

“The one to Aiko’s bedroom?” Mom asked, raising an eyebrow.”

“No. That particular portal doesn’t give me much trouble.”

“That’s not what Aiko told me.”

“What?”

“Tyler, no say lies for you
The scrappy little Pomeranian pup, Lupa, skittered around the living room, alternating between Mom and Luz, nuzzling against their leg and licking their shoes.

“Tyler, did you know Luz grew up on a farm in Columbia?” asked Mom.

“I did, actually.”

“Not many people in Buckhead grew up on farms.”

“She doesn’t actually live in Buckhead.”

“My

“*Capra* in Latin,” I said. “Goat.”

“We had a baby goat once. But a coyote got it,” said Mom. This went on for some time. They compared the degrees of their childhood poverty. Mom didn’t have heat, Luz didn’t have power, Mom went two years without running water, et cetera. Then Mom said, “With the way the market’s going and all the property we’re tied up in, I’ll be going without running water again before too long.” To change the subject, I asked Luz (for the hundredth time) why she left Columbia. All she would say was, “Many bad people in Columbia.”

“Many bad people everywhere,” said Mom. “Tell Tyler what you told me about Cowboy.”

“I remember Cowboy,” I said. He’d worked for Ramsey, even before Ramsey married my mom, primarily as a “Team Leader.” That is, he would take charge of the largely Hispanic construction crews Ramsey contracted to build beautiful gabled Atlanta houses. Once, I asked Ramsey why he made Cowboy Team Leader, since he couldn’t even speak Spanish. Ramsey laughed. He motivates them, he told me.

“He is not good man, Tyler,” she said.

“He grew up in the country too,” said Mom. “Under dreadful circumstances, or so Ramsey used to tell me. Something about his father.”

We all poured another round of drinks. Then, in her lyrically halting English, Luz told about two brothers who re-shingled the Buckhead House’s roof a few years ago. After hours in the sun, kneeling on smoking hot clay tiles, they’d climb down and sneak
inside to enjoy a few minutes of air-conditioning and, if Luz was feeling generous, a beer from the basement refrigerator. Despite making a few comments that might have angered Luz’s husband, and despite her longstanding Columbian wariness of Mexicans, these guys seemed nice enough, and it was refreshing to have someone to talk to in Spanish.

Then, one day, Cowboy came to check on them. He asked Luz, “Those boys putting in a good days work?”

“Yes,” she said.

“It sure is taking some time to finish this roof, ain’t it? Mr. Mansfield, he’s starting to get impatient.”

“Is very hot.”

“You sure them motherfuckers ain’t scamp’rin down for no extended break time?” he asked. The hint of menace in his voice was no longer a hint.

“They working. All day,” she said.

“That’s your word I’m taking,” said Cowboy. When he left, Luz went outside and called out to the brothers, joking about how their boss was a tightass. But the two men didn’t find it very funny. In fact, they didn’t want to talk to her at all. They knelt on the roof, carefully aligning shingles and staring at their hands. Luz was persistent. Cowboy was gone, she said, and they were welcome to come down and have a beer if they liked. They said nothing. They said nothing to her or to each other until they finished the job late in the evening. When they climbed down the ladder, they found Luz waiting at the bottom with two open beers in her hand. They thanked her, exhausted, and drank. She
asked the twins what had happened with Cowboy, and they exchanged glances. Finally, one of them spoke up:

“*Vaquero* says do something, you don’t mess around.”

“We saw him stick a shotgun in a guy’s mouth,” said the second brother.

“Thing was loaded,” said the first. “Safety was off.”

“My God,” said Luz.

“My friend Pablo was painting a house in Sandy Springs,” said the first brother.

“Belonged to some politico friend of Mr. Mansfield. Got caught stealing a jewelry box.”

“So *Vaquero*,” said the other, “he pulls Pablo’s front teeth out with a claw hammer.”

“And that was after he got the box back.”

“Yeah, now Pablo talks with a lisp.”

“Sounds like a homo. Poor bastard.”

“Yeah, poor bastard.”

Needless to say, some years later, when Luz’s nephew wanted to lay bricks for Ramsey to earn some cash, she forbade it. And that was the end of the story. Reclining in Mom’s plush armchair, I asked Luz why Pablo-with-the-lisp didn’t go to the cops or something. She laughed softly and shook her head. Apparently I have a lot to learn about immigrant labor.

Before long I’d gotten tipsy and fallen asleep. When I woke up, shaking off a horrific dream about claw hammers, it was late afternoon and I was alone in the living room. Alone, except for Lupa, who had curled up in my lap. When I sat up, she stirred
and stupidly thrust her wolfy snout up to lick my chin until I pushed her down. A half-empty glass of wine sat on the coffee table. I finished it off and went around the house calling for Mom before Luz came trotting down the stairs to stop me.

"You
"she said, clutching the railing and gazing down into the filthy pool of standing water where the little stone cherub stood pissing."

A little help from the Spanish-English dictionary Luz gave me for my fifteenth birthday:

m (plural, cabrones) From Latin, caper.
1. he-goat.
2. (vulgar, pejorative) bastard, motherfucker

"He want this," said Luz, making an obscene gesture, "for me." 

"Jesus," I said, rubbing my raw knuckles.
its 9% ABV). Sat on the couch for several minutes scrutinizing my print of “Belisarius Begging for Alms,” and drinking straight from my 750ml bottle of beer.

Just as the oil began to crackle in the pan, the Philharmonic’s bassoonist gave way to the quiet intensity of strings, introducing the first movement’s primary theme. To accompany this delightfully depressing melody, I contributed the searing of raw meat. Flecks of oil danced in the pan, hopping up like flees, and with the surge of angry London brass came a tangy olfactory crescendo of lamb that made my mouth water. I waited until the trombones began to echo the violins to flip the chops. What’s a little extra browning for the sake of symmetry? I threw the whole pan in the oven, mixed up a parsley-orange zest gremolata, and found my way back to the couch to finish my beer and enjoy the symphony.

So Ramsey had been less than faithful, perhaps from the first—from the dreary October Saturday when I (at ten years old, in my miniature Armani tux) proffered him and Mom their wedding bands on a silk cushion. This wasn’t surprising in itself. But it only exacerbated the question: why marry a straight-laced mortgage broker from the country? Not to mention one saddled with a kid?

I finished the “Fin Du Monde” and switched to an IPA. The hoppy bitterness better complimented my mood. Then I took down my ’69 Les Paul and doodled around, finding Tchaikovsky’s key signature (mostly B minor) and trying to follow along before giving up and tossing the guitar on a chair. I tried reading a few scholarly articles for my project on Plutarch’s Parallel Lives, but nothing held my interest. This restlessness is for the dilettante like the first faint pulses of an ankle injury for the hopeful Olympian track.
runner. And I suppose it’s true, what I told Luz. If it weren’t for Ramsey and the trust fund, I wouldn’t have to deal with malcontented intellectual ADD because I wouldn’t be a malcontented intellectual.

I don’t know what I’d be.

In any case, I simply lay on the couch listening to the symphony until the oven timer beeped. I pulled out the pan, plated the lamb with the gremolata, and grabbed another IPA. I sat staring at the empty chair from which Aiko used to compliment my cooking and listening to the last work of a (possibly) suicidal genius. The finale’s eerie, jazz-like harmony; its wild climax; its long decrescendo punctuated by fleeting bursts of passion, like the intermittent kicking of a man being strangled—it’s no wonder the composer died nine days after its premier.

Remembering Jim’s email and Luz’s confession, a thought struck me—an idea, crystalline, irrefutable, and damning, like an epigram. It stemmed from a conversation I had with Jim Tappman in the Fox Theatre’s Egyptian Ballroom on the night they named Ramsey the 2001 Atlanta Developer of the Year. A night (I see now) of historical significance. Ramsey’s Actium.

I tried to picture Jim as I remembered him last. A skinny guy with sensitive blue eyes and an honest smile. Not much of a chin. Balding, with wispy blond hair. Nervous and overdressed at cocktail parties. Would rather drink cheap beer than good beer. Loved to watch football, but preferred to play golf. Quiet, but when he spoke up, he always had something to say. Despite his years in the city, he still hadn’t shaken that South Georgia accent; he favored words like ain’t, y’all, and perhaps, after a couple of drinks, reckon.
Since I was twelve years old, the Tappman family had attended the Christmas party we threw at the Buckhead house. Jim would jostle through our crowded living room wearing jeans and a floppy Santa hat. He and Mom would talk about growing up in the boonies. He’d say things to me like, “I always knew you were a smart kid,” or “You’re going to do great, just like your dad.” Sometimes Jim would go on to talk about his own son: “I hope Travis ends up like you. I hope he gets a better shot than his old man.” Year after year, these conversations seemed to grow sadder and sadder.

Now I begin to suspect the reason why.

5. **Ozymandias, King of Kings**

A brief note on the setting:

The Fox Theatre. One of the most badass locales in Atlanta. An unabashedly gaudy monument to the opulence of the Roaring Twenties, which happened to open, unfortunately, on Christmas 1929, two months after Black Tuesday. Queue the sad trombone. It was originally designed as a Shrine Temple, which explains the onion domes, minarets, and alternating stripes of shaded stone. But when the Shriners couldn’t pay, the famous film exec William Fox took over and erected a marquis out front, spangled with electric bulbs. Soon the Fox was the finest movie palace in Atlanta, and the Egyptian Ballroom was the city’s most popular dance hall. In the 70’s, though, all those old movie halls went down in flames. BellSouth Telecommunications would have demolished the place if it weren’t for the outcry of (charmingly) impractical citizens who preferred throwback ticket booths and velvet curtains to antennae and office space. But these days rather than *Gone with the Wind*, the theatre hosts mediocre Christmas
performances of Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker ballet. Last year they couldn’t even afford a live orchestra. So it goes.

But on the night Ramsey won his award, the Egyptian Ballroom buzzed as it must have buzzed in years of post-WW2 boom when it resounded with brass horns and the vibrato crooning of men in tuxedos and women in sequined gowns. They even had the décor restored for the occasion: the Shriners had modeled the room after the temple at Karnak for Ramses II, whom the Greeks called Ozymandias. High ceilings with latticed crossbeams, sculpted scarabs, cornices painted with blue and gold, mighty columns with lotus capitals (Egyptian precursors to the Corinthian style favored by the Romans).

Guests milled around high-tops and sipped from martini glasses as they waited for the award to be presented. At the time it seemed like a scene right out of one of those old movies that made the Fox famous in the first place.

Back then I didn’t mind the paper-mache, trompe-l’oeil, theme park feel. I remember standing close to the stage, and (because I was only eighteen) Ramsey snuck me a drink while Mom was in the bathroom. A dry martini.

“Drink up, buddy,” he said. “It’s my ass in the fire if your Mom catches you.”

I put it down before she came back, ditching the evidence of my crime on a passing tray of empty glasses. She had her hair up in a bun, and the absence of ostentatious jewelry separated her from the other women there: she wore only two small diamond studs of near perfect quality, sparkling in the dim light cast by the faux Egyptian torches. What really glowed was her face. There stood Ramsey, readjusting his bowtie, calmly practicing lines for his acceptance speech, and every time he glanced over at
Mom, she swooned like a schoolgirl. It was embarrassing. “I’m very proud of you, darling,” she told him every three minutes. “I’m very proud of you.”

After another drink, Ramsey excused himself to have a few words with the mayor before the ceremony. That was when I noticed Jim Tappman, who stood leaning against the wall and drinking from a flask, which he proceeded to tuck back inside his tuxedo jacket. His cheeks were sweaty and flushed.

“Cool place, huh?” I said, coming up to him, gesturing to a gold leaf mural of Ra.

“Fit for a pharaoh,” he said with a nervous laugh, looking right past me.

“Excited for the main event?”

“Fucking thrilled. Couldn’t be happening to a nicer guy.”

“You okay, Jim?”

“I’m doing alright. Just fighting this damn diabetes.” His accent was slipping more than usual, and his icy blue eyes lolled from left to right, following something behind me.

“The booze can’t be too good for your blood sugar.”

“Yeah, well,” he said, taking another swig from the flask. I turned, and when I saw what he’d been staring at, I couldn’t blame him: a tall blond in a short red dress, maybe three or four years older than me at the time. She had a nice body, although her boobs looked too good to be true, and her eyes were glossy and lusterless. Not my type, but to each his own. Then I saw something in Jim’s face. He was staring at her, but it wasn’t your standard half-concealed masculine leer. There was nothing lascivious there. In fact, he looked like he was about to puke all over the hokey blue and gold carpet.
“Well, hope you feel better,” I said, and for the first time he blinked and looked me.

“Thanks,” he said. His little chin was almost shaking. “Tell your mother I said hey.”

I left Jim to his flask. Before going back to find Mom, I snuck another martini from the tray of a passing waiter. The girl in the red dress was laughing, clearly drunk, chatting in a circle of important looking older men. I recognized among them only the mole rat, Timothy Gaffer, president of the venerable, wildly successful (and now defunct) Phoenix City Bank, known for buying up mortgages and packaging them into Collateralized Debt Obligations. Watching that girl titter and jostle her considerable cleavage right at the eyelevel of squat old Timothy Gaffer was like coming upon a nymph in a secret glade, cock-teasing a satyr.

Just as I finished my second drink, someone came to the microphone to announce the presentation of the award. I jostled my way to the front of the Egyptian Ballroom, standing between Mom and Ramsey’s father Gus, who, despite matching Gaffer in height and approximate age (80? 81?), far outclassed him in intelligence and good old-fashioned gentility. My stepsister Julie—whose relationship with her father could be graphed as a sine curve ranging from “Spoiled Daddy’s Girl” to “Angry Prodigal Druggy”—was having a rough patch with Ramsey and was therefore absent.

I stood feeling slightly tipsy, excited to see my pseudofather take the stage and bathe in the ballroom’s antique spotlight. Two tree-trunk lotus columns flanked the stage, and little painted slaves in headdresses did the “Walk Like an Egyptian” dance around
their shafts. A cornice connected their capitals, with a huge red circle in the center. From this bloody sun extended wings feathered with ornate blue tiles, stretching out over the stage. This, presumably, was to remind those in attendance that they were drinking martinis at the center of the world.

When it came time for the speech, twenty foot high velvet curtains parted to reveal a lone microphone and an enormous mural painted on the stage’s back wall: on the left side, a pharaoh in profile, decked out in a blue and gold striped headdress. Ozymandias, presumably. King of kings. Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair! Et cetera, et cetera. To his right, a procession of ten prostrate followers with their palms pressed to the ground and their asses jutting up in the air.

The mayor of Atlanta, Bill Campbell, came up to the microphone to introduce Ramsey. I never met the guy, but any careful historian will note that although the court mysteriously acquitted Mr. Campbell of racketeering, bribery, and wire fraud in 2004, he was eventually disbarred and convicted of tax evasion. Ramsey came onstage, Campbell handed him a plaque, and they shook hands like old friends, mouthing inaudible pleasantries. Then Ramsey stepped up to the microphone. His thick dark hair swooped back from the widow’s peak to his shoulders: the lion’s mane, right out of an early nineties commercial for men’s shampoo. Not a strand out of place. And his eight-thousand dollar Brioni tux looked just right on him. In fact, he wore it far more easily than he wore his Hawaiian swim trunks or his denim jacket that Mom bought for him or the pajama pants he only wore on Christmas when we watched Die Hard together.
There on that stage, standing in the painted shadow of Ozymandias, king of kings, king of megalomaniacs, and before the crowd milling about below—Mayor Campbell and Ted Turner and his own secretaries, accountants, partners (id est, underlings) and his defeated competitors and his very respectable wife and his intelligent but harmless stepson—Ramsey was right in his fucking element.

“First, I want to thank all the great people at Castlebrook Homes and Mansfield Reality. Keep doing what you’re doing.” The microphone amplified his raspy, booming voice to fill the Fox. It came from every corner at once. Ramsey went on to thank Phoenix City Bank and Timothy Gaffer and Jim Tappman. The latter shuddered visibly upon the mention of his name, as if this numinous voice spoke to scold him rather than to offer praise.

Then Ramsey thanked us: “I want to thank my beautiful wife. My son, Tyler. And my daughter, Julie, who, sadly, couldn’t make it tonight. Without their support, without all those family dinners and Sundays at church, I’d never be able to do what I do.” Of course, we never had family dinners and we only went to church on Easter, but it sounded so nice and he smiled so warmly that I couldn’t help but grin and feel wonderful and clap politely along with everyone else. When he thanked his father, saying, “Dad, you taught me everything I know,” Gus laughed softly, clutching my wrist, and his face went red as his squinting eyes pinched out tears that zigzagged down along the creek bed wrinkles of his face.

Ramsey proceeded to the meat and potatoes of his speech:
“It’s my thinking that Atlanta is the greatest city in the South. But don’t think for a minute that we can’t do better. I remember my dad here driving me around Georgia Tech as a kid in the sixties and we’d go through Techwood, which, as you may know, was the first public housing project in the country. That was my first look at honest-to-God poverty. Drunks on every curb in the middle of the day. Glass and graffiti everywhere. Kids walking around swinging chains. And although I was just a boy, I remember thinking, ‘My town is too good for this.’ So when me and a couple other guys here tonight finally demolished the Techwood projects for the Olympics in ‘96, that was a personal milestone for me. Standing here tonight is another.

“I’m here because there’s a vision in my head. A vision of an Atlanta freed from urban blight. A vision where we’re no longer topping the urban crime-rate lists every year. A vision where people think of us as more than that city where you always have a goddamn layover. And I want to thank everyone here for helping me make that vision a reality.”

He paused to let the applause die down. Even then, I admit, the undertones of this speech did not escape me. A city without poverty sounded lovely, but where did the impoverished people go? Would they be handed deeds to the brand-new homes with those beautiful gables? Or would they vanish from the Earth? Thinking back on Jim Tappman’s reaction—lips trembling, sweat dripping down his little nubbin of a chin, unable to fake the meagerest of smiles—it occurs to me that he himself was raised poor. And urban or rural, black or white, poverty is poverty.
The applause continued for a full minute. Beneath the red painted sun, Ramsey stood unsmiling, slowly scanning the faces in the crowd.

“Now, I consider myself a bold man,” he continued. “There’s not much I can say that I truly fear. But there is one question that gets at me, especially on nights like this, surrounded by nice folks like you all. Is this it? Is this as high as we’ll get?” (Here he paused for dramatic effect.) “Tonight I’m here to tell you that I’m just getting started. We’re going to make this town great again, one block at a time. So if you’re asking me, ‘is it all downhill from here,’ the answer is no.” He raised the plaque. “Hell no.”

The Egyptian Ballroom burst into applause. Ramsey came down from the stage (back to the mortal realm) and loosened his bowtie. He put his arm around his red-faced, teary-eyed father. They whispered something back and forth, grinning. Then Ramsey rustled my hair and said I ought to filch another drink somewhere. He kissed Mom on the cheek.

“There’s my husband,” she said, flush with wine and adulation.

“You look gorgeous,” he said, grasping the lobe of her ear between his thumb and forefinger, slightly shifting the position of a diamond stud. Ramsey in turn flashed his easy half-smile, leaning against a lotus column, and this is precisely how Mom captured Ramsey, seven years later, in the portrait she painted after his disappearance—just as I am now piecing together the same moment for this account.

Ramsey spent maybe twenty minutes milling around, shaking hands with contractors, chatting with Ted Turner, slapping Mayor Campbell on the back. Then he disappeared. Since I was one of the only people there under thirty, I didn’t have much to
do after the speech except hang back, sneak dry martinis, and scan the crowd for famous faces and attractive older women. I found both in abundance, to be sure, but it wasn’t long before I realized Ramsey was not among them.

Instead I came across Jim Tappman, who looked even more miserable than before.

“How about that speech,” he said with little enthusiasm. He was drinking a martini; his flask, presumably, had run dry.

“Have you seen my stepdad?” I asked, and Jim looked immediately across the ballroom to Timothy Gaffer. The sweaty old satyr stood drinking alone; his large-chested nymph in the red dress had apparently deserted him.

“He’s probably taking a leak.”

“He’s been gone for like twenty minutes.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I’m sure he’s fine, I’m just bored.”

“Makes me sick.”

“That would be the liquor.”

“This place, these people. It ain’t right.” He drained his martini glass. “One big goddamn circle-jerk. Well I ain’t proud of it, and that’s a fact. I ain’t proud of shit.”

“Is Mrs. Tappman around here somewhere?” I asked. Someone had to take care of the poor bastard.

“She’s home with Travis, and thank God he ain’t here to see this.” Jim clapped his hand on my shoulder. His breath was positively foul. Big tears jiggled in his eyes.
One ran down his face, over the hump of his upper lip, and into his mouth. It must have tasted of whiskey. I stood frozen in place. Nothing worse than seeing a drunk man cry.

“Tyler,” he said. “you ain’t going to get mixed up in this shit, are you?”

“What?”

“This fucking business, that’s what.”

“I’m afraid I’m not the business type.”

“Damn right,” he said, smiling for the first time and sighing with relief, as if it were a question of his own son’s future. “Always knew you were a smart kid.” Then Mom came over, wading through the crowded ballroom, still aglow with marital admiration. When Jim saw her, he glanced again over at Scot Gaffer, who was drinking alone by the stage. Indicating Jim with a jerk of the head, I attempted to send Mom a look that said, “By everything good and sacred, please get this guy some help.” She didn’t get the message.

“Hello, darling,” she said. “I hope you’re not bored.”

“Hey Mom, have you seen Ramsey?”

“Jesus Christ,” mumbled Jim.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s around here somewhere,” said Mom. “Why?”

“I gotta get out of here,” said Jim, looking at Mom with what could only be classified as abject pity. “I’m sorry, Susan.” And with that he stumbled off into the crowd.

6. Furor
By the time I finished my third IPA, I knew for certain where Ramsey had gone that evening: the Fox Theatre’s Grand Auditorium, built to evoke the courtyard of some Abbasid caliph’s palace. I could see him up in one of the balconies overlooking the stage. I saw him with his bowtie slung around his shoulders (like in Mom’s painting), but also with his tuxedo trousers pooled around his ankles. I saw him gazing up to the vaulted ceiling—the painted Arabian sky, midnight blue, spangled with stars fashioned from the shards of ancient Coca-Cola bottles—or down upon the girl’s back—the blond who’d been giggling with Timothy Gaffer, bent forward and clutching the balcony’s railing, her short red dress hiked up above her ass cheeks, pale and plump, shuddering with each new violent jerk—or out across the empty theatre seats below to survey his phantom audience, even as my mater milled about the adjacent room, shaking people’s hands and crooning, “I’m just so proud of all he’s accomplished.”

I popped open another Tripel. After so many years of dilettantism, my tolerance for emotional dissonance had atrophied like a seldom-used muscle.

Several hours later, I lay drunk, squirming, cradling the ’69 Les Paul (gold finish, cream pickguard, white P-90 pickups), running my hands up and down the neck and wishing Aiko were there so I could tell her about Jim Tappman and the Egyptian Ballroom. How this shapely instrument and I found ourselves in such an intimate situation is hard to say—I remember trying to pick out a melody from Tchaikovsky’s sixth—but as I reached over with my free hand for the 750 ml bottle of Fin Du Monde, I lost balance and tumbled off the couch, falling hard on the guitar, which at once gave a heart-wrenching wooden crack. I pulled myself up, staggered a few steps, and looked
down on the shattered instrument. It lay with its neck slightly askew in a pool of expensive, high-gravity Belgian beer. Like a beautiful girl in a pool of blood. A thunderbolt fracture ran from the eighteenth fret down to the sensuously curved body, exposing the wood beneath metallic finish. A work of art, a vintage artifact of rock and roll history that belonged in a museum, entrusted to me because my stepfather built houses and because I wanted it.

Among various Athens scholars, stoners, and musicians, I’m well known for keeping my cool—an important quality for any hippy rich-boy pseudointellectual. But standing drunk over the fractured ’69 Les Paul, I found myself possessed by what Virgil would have called furor. I kicked the guitar so hard it bent my toenail. It slid across the carpet and bumped into the table. I took a shot of Johnnie Walker Blue, grabbed the red plastic grill lighter from a drawer, and found the sketch Mom had drawn of Ramsey on the Caribbean cruise. Grasping it by the top left corner, dangling it over the kitchen sink, I watched the plague of black ash creep up across Ramsey’s boxy graphite chin, across the Roman nose, until the flames licked against my thumb and, cursing, I flung the cinders to smolder for several seconds before washing them down the drain. Then I cranked up my laptop and opened this document containing all I’d compiled so far re: my investigation. I took another shot of Blue Label. My finger hovered over the delete button for several minutes as I thought of Virgil ordering his unedited draft of the Aeneid to be burned after his death.

Instead, I shut my laptop closed and picked up my phone, fumbling through my address book. It rang once. Twice. Three times.
“Tyler?” It was Aiko, raising her voice over the energized murmur of some bar. It gratified me to hear her sounding slightly worried about me.

“Can we talk?”

“This isn’t a good time. And you’re drunk.”

“Give me a second.”

“You’re smart, you’re sensitive, and you have money. Go find some other girl to complain to.”

“I want to complain to you. You understand me.”

“Yes, and that’s exactly why I left you. Goodnight, Tyler.”

“Wait. I busted the Les Paul.” There was a long pause filled with faint bar chatter.

“The ’69?” she asked.

“The ’69,” I said.

“Shit.”

“And my stepfather’s not who I thought he was. Who I wanted him to be.”

“Tyler…”

“Meet me for dinner, please. I need someone to talk to.” Another long pause.

Some mediocre acoustic cover band. Girls laughing. A distant male voice asking for Aiko. I could hear her talking to him, asking him to give her a second.

“Lunch,” said Aiko at last. “But only because I’m worried about you.”

“Thanks,” I said, sighing in relief.

“One more thing.”

“Yeah?”
“Stop drinking alone.”

And before I could defend myself, she’d hung up.

Stumbling around the living room, I collected empty beer bottles and put them in the recycling bin. I put my dishes in the dishwasher, scraped brown bits of lamb from a pan, and scrubbed tenacious shreds of orange zest and parsley from the sides of my food processor. I proceeded to lay my golden Les Paul in its case, feeling what undertakers must feel when they lay another human being down in a casket. That night I lay awake thinking of Mom, who had always remembered Ramsey’s reception in the Egyptian Ballroom very fondly. I am beginning to understand how we tell certain stories to ourselves, over and over like politicians, soldiers, historians, et cetera, dressing up reality into the deceptively elegant three-piece suit of some convenient preconceived narrative.
Tiberius and his escort wait alongside the narrow rode as the slaves pass one-by-one. Two feet of chain join each man’s right ankle to the right ankles of the next, and their Numantine bodies drip with quivering beads of sweat. From behind, Marcus Octavius gives a bawdy whistle. A few of the slaves cover their genitals, somewhat awkwardly since the manacles force their palms together, as if in pitiful supplication to their gods. Peasants who became soldiers who became prisoners-of-war who have now become the property of the Roman consul, doomed—at least until they become corpses—to toil in the far-flung fields of their conquerors. In the way the slaves hang their heads, in the way they sneer at the sight of Roman officers, they are hardly any different than the many people Tiberius came across in Italia—those farmers and soldiers’ widows on the road with their hordes of sheep and their backs bowed crooked with sacks or with small children too tired to walk, slung over their parents’ shoulders like goats. People torn from their ancestral homes.

Tiberius feels their eyes on him as they shuffle by, brimming with animal hatred and human intelligence. And he feels the eyes of his own men on his back; the weight of his father’s sword on his hip; the alien sun on his face, on his shoulders, heating his breastplate until it cooks the flesh inside. Still, though he has been riding hard for three weeks, he refuses to slouch in the saddle. Before him sprawls the grassy Iberian plains.
Behind the procession of slaves come two Roman soldiers with spears. Triarii on strong black horses.

“Where are you taking these men?” asks Tiberius.

“The consul wants them brought to his farm outside Pompeii,” responds the senior triarius. He continues walking as he speaks, absentmindedly nudging the point of his spear into the rearmost slave’s fleshy left buttock like a swineherd prodding a hog.

“I hope they last longer than the last bunch my father sent back,” says Marcus. “These Numantines are a rather feeble race. Don’t you think so?” Tiberius ignores him, straining to sit up straight on his horse. It is very hot. Tiberius instead addresses the two triarii:

“How goes the siege? Any progress?”

“Numantia is like Troy—tall, solid walls and a stubborn old king. We’ve lost a lot of men trying to open up a breach. And have you heard what they caught that lecherous old quaestor doing?”

“I’m his replacement,” says Tiberius. Marcus laughs merrily, and the enlisted men exchange looks. Tiberius urges his escort on down the road (four soldiers and six horses), leaving the procession of slaves behind. One packhorse trots along more slowly, loaded down with arms and provisions, while the other carries only blank ledgers and Tiberius’s personal documents. A bundle of letters and several of his fathers’ old vellum books.4 From Rome they rode up through the vast estates of senators and retired consuls, then westward along the white beaches of Gaul, breathing the salty air of mare nostrum, until

---

4 Including, I might speculate, the account of Horatius Cocles defending the Subltician Bridge.
they turned north into Hispania—into spiteful territories new to the Republic, peopled
with orphans—and now finally they come to the outskirts of Numantia where the main
Roman army camps outside the city, firing ballista bolts against the gates and catapulting
boulders over the walls. There the consul, Publius Octavius, awaits Tiberius’s arrival.

Marcus trots alongside him, swaying in the saddle and singing profane songs,
tapping elegiac couplets against his horse’s harness with a dagger—an heirloom dagger
with golden lotus flowers engraved along the hilt. A dagger that has often impressed
women at banquets. Far off down the road, a figure appears. Hazy in the distance, but
drifting steadily closer

“A messenger,” says Marcus. “It seems my father simply couldn’t wait to greet
us,”

“Look how fast he’s riding. Whoever he is, he’s not coming to kiss our cheeks.”

Tiberius glances back to the packhorse carrying his effects—always taking care to
sit up straight in the saddle. Always feeling the eyes of the older men on his back. He
thinks of his mother’s most recent letter, bundled up now and tucked in a sidebag: My
son. You are a man now and I am an old woman. Why then, in the Forum or at the baths,
do they still fawn and call me “daughter of Scipio” rather than “mother of Tiberius”? 
Looking back down the road, Tiberius sees the far-off figure has doubled in size.

“How about another song?” asks Marcus.

“Can there really still be voice left in you?” asks Tiberius, smiling despite
himself.
“Quaestor, Quaestor,” Marcus sings, throwing back his head, tapping his dagger against the harness. Although it’s a song he has been singing for days, tweaking and adding new lines as the party crossed into Hispania, it still takes Tiberius a moment to remember that Marcus is singing not about him, but about his predecessor, the old quartermaster. Marcus sings high and clear as he sways to the clopping of hooves against the glossy, untrammeled stones:

Quaestor, open up your purse;
The men have sticks for swords, and worse.
Our horses starve, our cots are poor.
Can’t you spare a little more?
He drops to an oafish baritone:
Sorry, boys, but funds are tight.
Soldier on; you’ll be alright.
I’ve never slept so well before,
Myself—nor with so many whores.\(^5\)
For a moment, his voice hangs in the air above the plains.

“Well?” says Marcus. “What do you think of the new verse?”

“Aren’t the quaestor’s financial indiscretions getting to be a tired subject?”

“Thank your ancestors for those indiscretions, Tiberius. They won you an enviable promotion.”

“Managing a bundle of ledgers does not strike me as enviable.”

\(^5\) Latin verse, of course, avoids the use of puerile end rhyme; this is simply my feeble attempt to capture the jaunty quality of M’s elegiac couplets.
“Come now. Rome takes nothing so seriously as money, and she’s entrusted you to sort out how badly she’s been swindled.” Marcus holds his reigns in one hand; in the other, he fidgets with his dagger, running his fingers along the gilded hilt.

“It is a great honor. That does please me. But I’d rather be a military tribune than a military banker.”

“You’re twenty three, second in command, and still you complain. How old was your father when he made quaestor?”

“Thirty,” says Tiberius. He looks to the clouds, and to the stone gash that snakes through the grass and disappears somewhere between the plains and the sky. His back aches. The party pushes onward, onward down that freshly paved road where, before nightfall, Tiberius will find the army, a chest bursting with falsified documents, and Marcus’s father, the consul. All waiting for him—but in what state? Perhaps he will find himself the bookkeeper of an army that has spent itself completely crashing again and again against the walls of an alien city.

Marcus sidles up and taps the blade of his dagger against Tiberius’s cuirass.

“You were in good spirits when we left Rome. What happened?”

“Maybe it was your singing.”

“I’m serious.”

“I’ve never known you to be serious once in your life.”

“My father’s better off in the senate house than on the battlefield, I won’t deny it.” Tiberius says nothing. The rider in the distance, who before was a vague particle drifting down from the horizon, has now taken the unmistakable shape of a man on
horseback; the hooves of his mount crackle against the stone at full gallop. “That’s not it then?” asks Marcus. “Jove’s beard, Tiberius. Don’t tell me you’re still fretting about those peasants on the road.”

“It’s not about the people on the road.” Tiberius cranes his neck back toward Rome. Off in the distance, the procession of slaves slinks, their heads stooped, their backs gleaming with perspiration. One of the triarii is again nudging his spear into the last one’s buttock. “But I admit it doesn’t sit well with me. Roman citizens wandering the countryside like beggars. And it’s the fault of our class.”

“Our class?” Marcus laughs, shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

“Your father, for instance, has bought up far more than the legal 500 iugera of land from these penniless war widows.”

“I never knew a man to be so sentimental,” says Marcus. “You’ve been spending too much time with Blossius.”

“Blossius is a good man.”

“I agree, Tiberius, but he’s a Greek. And you’re beginning to sound like a Greek yourself.”

“In any case, I told you, it’s not about the farmers.” Tiberius glances at the packhorse carrying his father’s books.

“Good. Because people in Rome are beginning to talk.”

“Let them talk. I’m not ashamed to have ideas.”

“Ideas are wonderful, and I highly encourage them,” says Marcus, raising his heirloom dagger up into the sunlight. “So long as they’re your ideas and not Blossius’s.”
Tiberius tugs on his reins and signals his escort to halt. At last the messenger rides up to meet them, exhausted and soaked in sweat. Clearly, he is not there to relay cheerful greetings from the consul.

“You are the new quaestor, Tiberius Gracchus?”

“I am.”

“Blessed be the gods,” the messenger sighs, breathing hard and slouching forward in the saddle.

“What’s happened?”

“The Numantine king refuses to speak with anyone else.”

“Where’s the consul?” asks Marcus. “Where’s my father?”

“We made another push at the walls. Cowardly barbarians. They had men in the grass, flat on their bellies like snakes. Maybe four or five hundred. After we left to attack the city, they slunk out and took over our empty camp. We turned to make chase, but more came pouring out the city gates, and there were others still sprouting up from the grass.”

“So Publius Octavius is surrounded.” Tiberius’s stomach sinks. Encircled, the consul will sit helpless while the Numantine scouts plunder his vacant camp. They will seize the rations, the arms, the spare horses; they will seize the standards crowned with golden eagles; and they will seize the chest of muddled military ledgers. The chest which the senate has charged Tiberius to return discretely to Rome. The profligate old quaestor will stand before the people, and there will be no evidence to condemn him.
The messenger reaches into his saddle pouch, produces a small wax tablet, and begins to read in a slow, weary voice: “A message from the enemy king: ‘We are willing to consider your suite for peace, but will only speak with Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, whose father brought our neighbors under the yoke of Roman subjugation, but granted peace to Numantia, thereby forging between our peoples a lasting friendship: a friendship only recently fractured by such would-be-conquerors as Publius Octavius, who now turns on his heels looking every which way, but still cannot avoid the sight of our spears.’” The messenger returns the tablet to his pouch.

Tiberius sits tall on his horse, but his back aches and it is exceedingly hot and he feels all their eyes on him, and he knows that his hair is soaked through under his helmet and that his face is dripping with sweat, dripping like the backs of those Numantine slaves.

“Cheeky barbarians,” says Marcus, but his dagger trembles in his hand. “We can’t surrender. You know what the Senate will do to my father if we go home empty-handed.”

“We don’t have a choice. They’ve got us surrounded.”

“We can fight our way through. Losses will be heavy, but the officers will make it out on horseback.”

“The infantry will be massacred,” says Tiberius. “Even if some manage to get through, the Numantine cavalry will hunt them down like beasts.” He grips the reigns and spurs his horse into a gallop. The others follow. Pounding hooves fill his head, run up his spine, and disturb his stomach. The wind cools his face, and the sun, which has tormented the party all day, is setting at last. It sinks before them slow and strange and orange at the
end of the road—the road they have ridden from the center of the world to its farthest fringe. Hunching forward against his horse's neck, he looks to see Marcus riding up alongside him.

“No good soldier would scoff at an honorable death,” Marcus shouts. Only the golden hilt of his dagger is visible, jangling against his leg in its filigreed sheath.

“You’re not thinking of the soldiers.”

“Didn’t darling Blossius teach you,” shouts Marcus, bouncing in the saddle, pausing to breathe, “what the senate did”—his dark hair flickers out from under his helmet—“to those officers”—his scarlet cape flutters wildly behind him—“who surrendered at the Caudine Forks?”

“There are ten thousand Roman lives in the balance. We must sign a surrender.”

The words come hoarse and loud, leaving Tiberius’s throat raw. They sound like something from one of his father’s books. Foolish words, and he knows it. The enormous forked veins on his horse’s neck throb with blood. Tiberius can no longer distinguish individual blades of the tall Iberian grass; it all coalesces into a golden blur of light streaming beneath him. First his sudden promotion, and now this negotiation, this moment that should belong to Marcus’s father, thrust in his lap—the gods have brought him to this point as a man might move a bone piece across a gaming table. The gods? No, Blossius would laugh at him and thump him on the forehead. His father. The deeds of his father here on these same foreign plains, many years before his birth, before Roman engineers laid down their glossy stones in the ground.
At last Tiberius can make out the walls of Numantia, hazy against the sinking orange sun, rippling faintly in the summer heat, and as the city’s silhouette becomes more defined, his meeting with the enemy king looms closer. He glances back at his packhorse. Now is the time to remember his education—the long debates with Blossius; his years in Athens, reading Aristotle beneath the Lyceum’s shaded colonnade, feeling the philosopher’s ghost looking over his shoulder. Tiberius turns to his stories. The “examples of history,” as Blossius would call them—Solon, who stood between the rich and the poor with outstretched hands, enduring the wrath of both; Horatius Cocles, who soothed the rioting people and rallied them against the Etruscans—would they accept the ignominy of defeat to save their men?

Perhaps not. But Marcus was right nonetheless: if Tiberius were to sign a surrender, they would return from the edge of the world to find the gates of their city shut. Men in togas fringed with proud, purple stripes would climb the steps of the Rostrum, high above the mob, and declaim sentences of damnation filigreed with ingenious rhetorical devices. The Roman Senate would send them back to the Numantines in chains, naked like slaves. Tiberius’s mother would finally get her wish—people at the baths would finally think of her as “Mother of Tiberius” rather than “Daughter of Scipio”—but not in the way she hoped. She would be Mother of Tiberius the Coward. Tiberius who kissed the filthy boots of Rome’s enemies and pissed on his dead father’s name.

6 Unlike Plutarch, who appended each pair of his biographies with an analysis connecting the patterns that connect and define their subjects’ lives, I have chosen to couple these accounts without comment. However, writing here of T’s nostalgia for Athens, I must allow myself a simple remark: i.e. one sympathizes.
The sun is half set. On the horizon, the Numantine walls shift and shimmer, and now Tiberius can see that it isn’t only because of the heat. A haze of dust has settled over the city, dust kicked up by countless hooves. He can hear the familiar murmuring of armies across the plain. The muddled hum of thirty thousand bored young men.

Clutching the reins, drenched in sweat, feeling the weight of his family sword on his hip, Tiberius sighs, leans back in the saddle, and slows to a trot. Marcus rides up beside him and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s too bad the last quaestor spent half the army’s money on she-wolves and Spanish wine. Otherwise, we’d be in Rome arguing with Blossius about Homer.”

“The Lotus Eaters,” says Tiberius, “that was always your favorite, wasn’t it?”

They both smile, but only for a moment.

“I’m sorry about before, Tiberius.”

“It’s fine.”

“My father’s an ass, it’s true, but he is my father, nonetheless.”

“I understand,” says Tiberius, though he does not.

The murmur of voices is now a violent din. Against the city walls, which before seemed to shimmer in the heat, Tiberius can now discern a sprawling, shifting mass of human forms and spears. Publius Octavius and his cowed, encircled legion wait somewhere beyond.

“It’s time to cross the River of Hate,” says Marcus. “Old Charon’s waiting with his pole in the water. Maybe I can sing them all to sleep. Then our men can escape.”
“Perhaps you were right the first time, Marcus. Perhaps we should fight our way out.”

As these words leave Tiberius’s lips, the relief he feels is like the giddiness induced by a particularly potent Falernian wine. It would make for a great story, he thinks. The kind of story that the historians love to tell at excessive length. He would sit with the enemy king and say something witty and brave: “Roman men will never lay down our arms on Numantine grass,” or “Beware the cornered lion, your eminence,” or “When it comes time to bed your daughters—only then will we sheathe our swords.” Of course there would be a heavy cost. But Tiberius wouldn’t ride safely in the center of the force with the Octavii and the other noblemen. He would be like Leonidas at Thermopylae, like Horatius Cocles at the bridge. He would march among the enlisted men with his feet on the ground.

Would that be enough? Would that please his father?

When they arrive outside the city, an envoy from the enemy camp comes to guide them through the Numantine ranks so that they may join up with the encircled Roman army.

Slowly they trot behind their guide down a corridor of trampled grass, hedged in by walls of hostile soldiers. The air smells of smoke and perspiring men. Men on all sides, like stalks of wheat in an endless field, stretching across the earth, from Asia Minor to Hisperia. Tiberius looks straight ahead, careful not to meet their eyes. These bronze people are the friends, the cousins, the brothers and fathers of those slaves destined to

7 The kind of story we love to tell to ourselves.
work Octavius’s estate in Pompeii. He expects them to shout and jeer, to at least mutter
curses. But they stand frozen with discipline, even when one of the Roman horses
defecates on the grass and Marcus, gesturing down at the fresh droppings, says in Greek:
“Something to remember us by.”

The sun is nearly gone now. Little sparks of torchlight appear flickering one by
one along the walls of Numantia. They come through the enemy frontlines into the open
air, and there, a hundred paces away, are the Romans—a sprawling, gangly phalanx of
soldiers brandishing their shields, like a dying animal curled in a ball. The enemy envoy
grants Tiberius a few moments to rest before his meeting with the king. As the party
crosses the blank, golden space between the two armies, Marcus rides up.

“Have you decided to fight?” he asks.

“I need another moment to consider,” says Tiberius, tasting bile in his throat.

“Think about it. The officers in the center will make it through. When the
reinforcements arrive, we’ll bring back this Numantine king to Rome all tied up and
naked like a naughty servant boy. The Senate will grant us a triumph. You’ll be Tiberius
Hispanicus, just like your father.”

Marcus grins and slaps Tiberius on the shoulder before splitting off with the other
men in the escort and disappearing deep within the ranks to find the consul. The filigreed
hilt of his dagger glints in the day’s dying light. Slinging a leg over the saddle, Tiberius
dismounts and an attendant takes his horses. His sandals press down the yellow grass, his
ankles tingle, and he sways drunkenly for a moment; he has been on horseback all day.
Thousands of eyes follow him from both sides.
Tiberius walks down the line. The Roman soldiers stand arrayed at attention, upright and still with their javelins and their tall, curved shields planted in the earth. Their short swords hang from their belts, and the simple, wooden hilts came poking up under each man’s right arm. Everything about them is in order except for their faces: faces caked with dust and dried blood; faces with tired, nervous eyes and quivering lips; the faces of men trained to fight in three lines, surrounded and corralled instead into an awkward phalanx. A phalanx of men with swords instead of spears. A phalanx like a lame, toothless beast. When they push into the Numantine ranks, maybe one in ten will make it through. Tiberius stops. He chooses one among them with a pale, smooth face. The boy stares solemnly ahead just like he’s been taught, but his ankles tremble so wildly, his sword clatters against his armor.

“How long have you been waiting at attention?” asks Tiberius.

“Six hours, Quaestor,” says the boy, his voice high and quavering.

“Relax, soldier. What is your name?”

“Gaius Accius.”

“My brother is also called Gaius. Your family owns farmland?”

“They used to.”

“Your father perished in the army?”

“Yes, Quaestor.”

“You honor him. I never knew my own father.” Then, leaning close, Tiberius cocks an eyebrow. “It wasn’t the consul who bought you out, was it?”
“No, Quaestor.” The boy laughs nervously, his eyes bright with embarrassed tears. They shift to look over Tiberius’s shoulder where the Numantine envoy is waiting.

“I want to tell you something, Gaius.”

“Yes, Quaestor.”

“Riding up from Rome, I saw perhaps twenty families here and there on the road, farmers carrying everything they owned on their backs. They were going to the city to sell their belongs and scrounge up new lives. Perhaps it is not a manly sentiment, but I confess to you that I was greatly moved.”

Tiberius wants to say something more. He looks down the Roman line, but he can’t take in all the faces. Yes, he can see the face of this one boy, Gaius, and he can see the soul swimming behind pale blue eyes, and he can see the eyes of the next man down and the next man after him, but soon the features blur and run together. All these men with their faces and eyes and souls—they will be perforated and drained of blood.

Tiberius recalls his earlier daydream about bravely confronting the Numantine kings, and it makes him sick, his easy willingness to accept this deceit he spun for himself. Now Tiberius confronts the truth: Publius Octavius and the other officers will escape safe on horseback, and they will buy up the ancestral lands of the dead from widows and children. They will replace these families, Roman citizens who want nothing more than to keep their homes, with slaves who want nothing more than to return to theirs. For this his career will advance. For this, instead of exile and shame, the senate will rain accolades on the Gracchi.

Is this what Blossius taught him?
The boy, Gaius, stands trembling, waiting for Tiberius to continue about the families on the road.

“Quaestor!” someone calls. “Or should I say, Tiberius Hispanicus?”

Tiberius turns to see Marcus and his father coming up through the ranks. The consul, Publius Octavius, looks very much like his son, with the exception of his stately greying hair and the four deep furrows that crease his brow. He takes measured orator’s steps. Everything about him glitters in the torchlight: The golden pin that secures his cape. His helm with its scarlet horsehair plume and its filigreed cheek guards. His sword, with its hilt gilded, like Marcus’s dagger. He wears an old-fashioned bronze breastplate, skillfully engraved with a scene of Rome’s birth: Romulus standing with his feet spread apart, his chin jutting proudly, his sword dripping with minutely carved droplets of bronze blood. Beneath him, along the bottom of the breastplate, Remus lies clutching his opened belly, his arm slung over the incomplete foundations of the city’s first wall, which he stepped over as a practical joke.

“Have you come to a decision?” asks the consul, who likewise stands with his feet spread apart. Tiberius nods.

“You’ve made the braver choice, I trust?” asks Marcus, smiling a half smile.

“I have,” says Tiberius.

“You have my blessing, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus.” The consul’s voice is hoarse with age and heavy with significance. “Go. Show them what Rome thinks of cowardice.”
Up behind the enemy ranks is a large military tent. There on a simple wooden stool sits the Numantine king, an elderly bearded man with skin like cowhide. Tiberius enters. They exchange greetings and clasp each other’s arm. Soon they are speaking like old friends; soon Tiberius asks if the king remembers his father; soon they call for ink and parchment to sign the surrender, which stipulates that all munitions, coinage, and documents are to be returned to the Roman army. Afterward, they drink wine and discuss Homer until the sun goes down. Braziers are lit. Torchlight flickers off the canvas walls of the tent. At last Tiberius stands to leave.

“I pray that you will not regret your mercy here tonight,” says Tiberius.

“I spare you now as your father once spared us.”

“We may meet again. When my countrymen march me back to Numantia, naked, in chains.”

“Then I shall clothe you. I shall free you from your bonds. You shall marry my daughter and be my son.”

Again they clasp arms. In the corner, behind the king’s stool, ornate golden eagles perch atop the captive Roman standards, and at the feet of these standards is the old quaestor’s chest, and inside, Tiberius is sure, is a bundle of scrolls teeming with twisted numbers and fallacious expenditures. Yes, perhaps the senate will disgrace him; perhaps his mother will not understand; perhaps history will remember him a coward. But he has been true to himself. The following day, he will again take to the road, marching alongside the many men whose lives he has saved, and he will bear this chest all the way back to his city, where he will spill its contents on the senate floor.
1. Omens and Auguries

The novelty of my investigation is fading fast. At first it seemed the perfect enterprise, the perfect new adventure to keep me occupied after bagging my History MA. It was supposed to be like a riveting case would be for Holmes: problems, brainwork, mental exaltation administered at one’s own leisure in measured doses so that one might dispense with injections of cocaine (or six-packs of craft beer). So that one might tolerate the frank reality that greed is commonplace, crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth.

But I haven’t particularly liked what I’ve found. The 21st century dandy doesn’t meddle in affairs of state. He doesn’t get mired down in court politics, conspiracies, or royal controversies. Exhibit A: some believe Augustus Caesar’s nephew exaggerated his stammer, drew out his limp, and feigned stupidity. Everyone called him Claudius the Idiot. Claudius the Lame. Clau-clau-claudius. But while his sisters and cousins and uncles were found naked, stabbed to death in their tubs or slumped forward on couches with empty cups of poisoned wine at their feet, Clau-clau-claudius lived on. He was harmless. He sat in his study in peace and wrote histories of the Etruscans, histories of Carthage, and biographies of his murderous kin.
So what the hell do I think I’m doing, poking into the affairs of real estate moguls? Why should I care about banking fraud? What do I know about derivative trading? And do I really know any more about Ramsey? “*How come we only hang out on vacations,*” asked the goofy red-faced kid in the puffy ski jacket to the millionaire developer. Ha! Aiko, if you were to read this—Ai-Ko, Love-Child, lovechild like me—you’d say it’s my Daddy Issues. Poor little rich boy grew up without a pater. Now he’s been abandoned all over again. Well, Aiko, maybe that’s why I’m the sensitive academic type. *Hic sunt lacrimae rerum.* Tough titty, said the kitty.

In any case, Ramsey’s been gone for over five months now, and Mom’s found a buyer for my Athens townhouse. I came home one afternoon after auditing a university class on Plutarch to find the little FOR SALE sign in my yard obscured by a bright yellow decal that proclaimed to all the world: SOLD. Sold! Huzzah! It’s real-estate, baby! Nowhere to go but up! (Though we sold it for a considerable loss.) I move out next month. Yes, the panic is setting in. My guitars are collecting dust on the wall, with one tragically fractured exception. And there have been distressing signs. Omens in the Classical sense:

1. Vague threats from both government agents and snubbed investors.

2. The recurring appearance of Cowboy, a somber 250 pound titan of a man, formerly in Ramsey’s employ.

3. A precipitous decline in global wealth, already being dubbed “The Great Recession,” which before seemed very bad but very temporary, yet has recently proven to be getting worse instead of getting better.
4. The bizarre death of Mom’s new dog, Lupa, which the Romans would have called an augury rather than an omen because it involved the strange behavior of a bird.

In antiquity, soothsayers would tailor their interpretations to please their patrons: Oh, Caesar, that lightning bolt that blew off the head of your statue in the Forum Romanum? It must mean you’ll be energized with the divine power of Jove! You will live a long, virile life! This is a trap that commonly ensnares not only priests, but also scholars and overly contemplative dilettantes like myself, and anyone else who strains to impart meaning to events they don’t understand—be they Acts of God or the obscure machinations of Business with a capital B. And yet no matter how you look at it, it’s hard to read any of these particular omens as anything but shit, shit, and more shit.

Having grown certain that he had somehow known about Ramsey’s infidelity for many years, I decided to interview family-friend and former Phoenix City Bank accountant Jim Tappman, whose furtive e-mail I had discovered in Ramsey’s inbox. His phone number was unlisted, so I visited his home in Decatur. I’d been there a few times for dinner with my parents. A relatively new construction: stonework, slate roofing, wrought iron mailbox, all that. A basketball hoop for Travis Tappman. Little purple flowers planted in beds around the front of the house, presumably by Glenda Tappman. A big porch swing, which reminded me that Jim, like my own mother, was country born and bred.

But there was a new addition, a rather popular one, as I’ve mentioned: a white wooden FOR SALE sign.
I parked on the curb and got out to have a look. It was a nice, cloudless April day, and the flowerbeds smelt of fertilizer, stained damp and dark by a recent watering. I rang the doorbell and waited for a minute. I heard some stomping around inside, but no one came to the door. A black pickup truck passed. I rang again. Soon the same truck came back down the road, going the other way. I rang a third time. At last the door swung open.

It was Jim, unshaven, unsteady on his feet. What little hair remained to him was disheveled. He invited me inside, and I followed him to the kitchen, where a half-full glass of whiskey waited for him on the counter. Glenda was at work, Travis at school.

“Why didn’t you answer the door?” I asked.

“Cause I’m drunk and I got a damn albatross hanging from my neck.” There was a pause, punctuated by the clinking of ice. “Funny saying, that one. You shoot an albatross in golf, you count yourself a lucky bastard.”

“Not a poetry fan?”

“Was always more of a math guy,” he said, slow and sad.

“That’s a shame,” I said.

“Hey, how’s your mamma holding up?”

“Not bad, all things considered. Enamored with her new dog.”

“A good woman, Susan. She don’t deserve this.”

“Do you know where Ramsey’s gone?”

“Nobody does…”

“But?”
“I got a good idea why he picked up and left.”

“You do?” I asked. A wave of apprehension washed over me. Finally, I was getting somewhere. But was it a place I really wanted to go?

2. **Albatross**

Things had been going well for Jim. He’d made enough that year to send his son Travis to Chase Academy in Buckhead, which, incidentally, is where I had gone to school after Mom married Ramsey. You start somewhere like Chase, Jim told me, you end up somewhere like Harvard, and Harvard men don’t need to rely on blind chance to be successful the way he had. They don’t have to rely on anyone or anything.

Jim hadn’t gone to a school like Chase. He’d gone to a recently desegregated public school in the country where the cocaine was of higher quality than the teachers, and where white people tended to stab black people with hunting knives and black people tended to stab white people with broken whiskey bottles. He wanted out, but his grades were nothing special. By seventeen, Jim figured he’d spend the rest of his life working for the power company, living down the gravel road from his parents.

A scholarship for tall people (called Reach for the Stars) was his *deus ex machina*. In college, he decided that hard work would be his path to success. Jim studied for Business Communication tests while his friends went out drinking, but he struggled anyway, until one of his professors, for no discernable reason, took him under his wing. Then, just when Jim was getting depressed about his choice of major (Accounting) toward the end of his senior year, he happened to meet Glenda at a football game.
After they graduated and got married, things were okay. He got a job at a local bank. They didn’t pay as much as the big accounting firms, but the hours were reasonable. Jim liked it. Then came the mortgage, then came the baby, then the Civic broke down, then came his father’s funeral—something was always coming—and Glenda grew depressed. She said if Travis grew up in the suburbs, he’d have all the personality of a Walmart parking lot. She was sick of having their weekly dates at Applebee’s; Jim couldn’t blame her, and as a hopeless Romantic, an amateur food critic, and a career Epicurean, neither can I.

So when Phoenix City Bank bought out the little operation where Jim worked, he shook the president’s hand and said, “You need someone to work late, work weekends, get things done—I’m your man.” But what he really wanted was to quit. He wanted to find a local accounting firm or another small bank. Phoenix City’s president, Timothy Gaffer, had the smiling, sweaty red face of a glutton or a pervert, and Jim heard he made a lot of bad loans.

It paid off though. Four months later, Gaffer invited Jim to a golf retreat in Augusta, home of the Masters Tournament, where the membership list read like a catalogue of former Georgia governors and Time Magazine Persons of the Year, where all the caddies and waiters (read: servants) were black, but the first black member wasn’t admitted until 1990. In front of the clubhouse, Gaffer introduced Jim to his bank’s biggest client: “Ramsey, this is the new accountant I was telling you about.”

“I’ve heard good things,” said Ramsey. His skin was rough, his handshake just a little too firm for Jim’s taste, but he wasn’t fat or toad-faced like Gaffer. Jim recognized
him from a cover of *Atlanta Magazine*: the sweeping dark hair, the hawk nose, the cleft chin. Unlike Gaffer, he looked you straight in the eyes. He wore a shamrock green sports coat with embossed brass buttons, perfectly tailored to fit his broad shoulders. Jim knew the thing at once for one of the mythical jackets worn only by the winner of the previous year’s Masters Tournament and by the 300 or so members of Augusta National. So it was Ramsey who had invited him to the most exclusive golf club in the world. And the jacket looked good on him.

As Jim’s caddy ferried him along the scenic cart paths lined with blooming African flowers, he watched the back of Ramsey’s head bob up and down in the golf cart ahead. Playing this course was a wetdream of his. Since he was a boy, Jim had watched the Masters on TV religiously, and he knew every pond, every sand trap, every devious dip of every green as if he’d spend his youth roaming the grounds. His father used to promise him they’d go together one day. They’d get a spot alongside the 15th hole where the rolling green hill suddenly sank down from the tee. Of course, in those days they never had the money for tickets; now his father was dead.

But here he was, Jim Tappman, plucked from suburban obscurity, sipping expensive scotch from the bottle like a giddy teenager, looking over the surreal fairways and brooks of his childhood fantasies—landscapes that seemed too perfect to exist outside the pages of Golf Magazine—and not only *watching*, but teeing up at Augusta National.

Even though he played better than most of the other guys in their party, he couldn’t keep up with Ramsey. Knowing the holes from TV wasn’t the same as knowing
them from experience. They stood around eighteen, drunk, laughing, shaking hands.

Everyone was slapping Ramsey on the back and congratulating him.

“I’ve seen pros shoot higher,” said Jim, earnestly impressed.

“You did good for your first time,” Ramsey told him. “You’ll have to come back with us next month.”

“I’d like that,” said Jim. Then Ramsey called for his caddie to bring over a bottle of cognac. Jim noticed the caddy was wearing a nicer polo than he was.

“A consolation prize, Jim. You ever heard of Louis XIII? You’ll like it. Two hundred bucks a shot. Three hundred just for the empty bottle.”

“Now you know I can’t accept that.”

“Fucking take it. I don’t give gifts lightly.” Jim fingered carved crystal nubbins along the bottle’s sides. The sun was setting behind the perfect green hills, charging the sloshing amber liquid with light. “The guy handling my accounts has been a real asshole to deal with lately. I’ve been talking with Gaffer, and he thinks you’re the man for the job.”

When they shook hands, Jim tightened his grip. He didn’t want to look like a pussy.

So Jim Tappman lucked out yet again. He and Glenda escaped the burbs; they bought a house in Buckhead and got an employee rate on a mortgage from Phoenix City Bank. Jim paid off the rest of his student loans. Glenda quit her job teaching Kindergarten. No more Honda Civic. No more dates at Applebee’s. Soon they started a
college fund for the wee baby Travis and began collecting information pamphlets from elite preschools.

Handling Ramsey’s accounts was a huge job for one man, but Ramsey preferred to have as few people involved as possible. “Keep things simple,” he’d say. There were two companies: Castlebrook Homes for developments, and Mansfield Real Estate for property acquisition. Any given month, he was buying up dozens of metro Atlanta lots, and for every purchase there was a clinking of glasses, there was a lighting of cigars, there was a Phoenix City loan, and for every loan there was interest to be made. Running the numbers on all these loans kept Jim late in the office most nights, but he drove home in a nice car to a happy wife.

Soon he fell into what I always thought of as Ramsey’s orbit. Along with Timothy Gaffer, he was one of the guys I’d always see hanging out in the living room, drinking Scotch, waiting for the limo to park on the curb and ferry them to the airport where Ramsey’s jet was waiting to take them to Augusta National. Every time he played the course, Jim remembered his father’s broken promise. He also shot better and better until finally Ramsey began to pick him for a partner. Sitting next to Ramsey in the golf cart, Jim would run his eyes up and down the shamrock green wool of the fabled member’s jacket. Sometimes before they went out on the course, when they were drinking in the clubhouse dining room, Ramsey would introduce Jim to other members: former CEO’s of Bank of America, American Express, Ford Motor Company.

“Jim, meet Jimmy,” he said one time. The second Jim was Jimmy Carter.
It was around this period that Jim began attending Ramsey’s grandiose Christmas parties. Before long, he and his family accompanied us on vacations. I remember the first time he and Glenda came on a ski trip with us, when Travis was maybe four years old. He had skis the length of my arm and wore one of those marshmallow coats that was so poufy he couldn’t put his arms down. Jim had never skied before in his life. He joked about how much better I was than him even though I was just a kid.

A couple years into his partnership with Ramsey, Jim was going over Mansfield Real Estate’s books and noticed my mom had signed a three-hundred thousand dollar guarantee on a loan. He called up Ramsey about it.

“It shows that Susan signed it on January 2nd,” he said.

“Yeah?” said Ramsey.

“That can’t be right. We were all up at Tahoe over New Year’s, remember?”

“Jim,” said Ramsey, “how much have you guys loaned me over the years? How much have you guys made off me?”

“A lot.”

“And you’re worried I can’t cover three-hundred grand? I have a car worth three hundred grand.”

Jim sat at his desk, listening to Ramsey breathing heavily into the receiver.

“I guess it’s alright,” he said at last.

“Good,” said Ramsey. “Give Glenda my best.” Then he hung up.

This was the first of many small discrepancies Jim turned a blind eye to. But Ramsey had a point; what was three hundred thousand dollars to a man like that? A thorn
in his big toe, at worst. As time went on, Ramsey entrusted Jim with more work, and with
more work came more “discrepancies.” More forged loan guarantees from my mom.
Misallocated capital from various investors. Income from mysterious hedge funds. But
things had been going well, especially with Travis, and Jim sure as shit wasn’t about to
rock the boat.

In the summer of 1999, Ramsey invited Jim and Timothy Gaffer on a trip to
Augusta. During the flight, Ramsey and Gaffer laughed and drank scotch and talked
business. Jim spent the trip in silence, watching the suburban shopping centers pass
below until they became landfills which in turn became quilted swaths of farmland. But
not the kind of farmland where he grew up. He knew that if the jet were to sink down
under the clouds, if it were to dive like a crop duster, he’d see rows and rows of uniform
irrigation pipes, all owned by Bob Ranger Southland Company.

Jim tried to get more in the spirit of things once they were on the links. It was a
something about the suddenness of the trip, about the way the other two kept looking at
him—it felt calculated, just like the very first time Gaffer brought him here to meet
Ramsey. Riding shotgun in Ramsey’s golf cart, Jim looked down the path across the
sweeping hills of manicured grass, so green it seemed otherworldly; he knew that at 4:00
AM that morning, a squadron of twelve black men on industrial riding lawnmowers had
scoured the entire course in tight formation so that the fairways would be extra crisp
under the patent leather golf shoes of one man in a green jacket and his two companions.
Yes, as Jim teed up at the first hole, setting his feet and adjusting his grip and looking over the Arcadian landscape, a familiar thrill seized him.

To play Augusta National, he told me, is an indescribable feeling. It has nothing to do with wealth or even power. It’s like walking on the moon. But instead of barren expanses of grey dust, it’s the Elysium Fields. It’s Shangri-La. And with booze! The caddies poured the trio little crystal glasses of scotch. Ramsey kept shooting looks at Timothy Gaffer and turning to say things like, “This is living,” or “Glad to have you along, Jim.”

By time they reached the 15th hole (nickname: “Firethorn”), it was past mid-afternoon. Jim stood at the tee, looking down the steep slope, remembering his father’s broken promise. He gripped his club more tightly and swung a little too hard, but when the head connected, sending a shudder up the shaft, Jim felt great. When they found the ball, Ramsey laughed and slapped his back. He’d managed to land it on a little hillock, setting him up for a long shot to the green. Firethorn was a par 5. If he could manage to get it over the pond and make a good putt, he’d have his first ever Eagle at Augusta. Jim closed his eyes and thought again of his father, then of Travis, then of Ramsey and his work and the perfect grass and the little discrepancies in the book, and right as he opened his eyes and swung, his stomach turned over. Watching the ball sail up into the sky, disappearing into the sun, Jim was no longer sure if he was doing what he was doing for his family or for himself. Then he saw the ball arc over the little pond, and bounce across the green before disappearing into the ground. For a solid minute the three of them stood
in dumb amazement. Finally, a caddie approached, a black man in his fifties, looking very serious. The caddie extended his hand for Jim to shake.

“Congratulations, sir,” he said. “You’re one of perhaps ten men in history to shoot an Albatross at Augusta National.”

Staring into the pocket at the dimpled white sphere, Jim didn’t know what to feel. Again he had swung much harder than he’d intended. It was dumb luck. Psychotic dumb luck.

When they arrived at the clubhouse, it was late, so the three of them went up to their small clubhouse guestroom, where they sat in leather chairs drinking scotch. All day, despite the usual excitement of walking the grass of Augusta National and the small miracle of the Albatross, Jim felt uneasy.

“How’s Travis?” Ramsey asked, breaking a long silence. “He liking that swing set I got him?” It had been Travis’s sixth birthday that week.

“We can’t get him off the damn thing,” said Jim, smiling.

“He’s a good kid. And you’re a good guy, Jim. How long has it been since we met?”

“Four years. I still got that bottle scotch you gave me.”

“Four years,” said Ramsey, sipping his scotch. “I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but I consider you a close friend. Do you consider me a close friend, Jim?”

“You bought my kid a swing set. And you don’t give gifts lightly, I remember.” They all laughed and drank. As usual, Scot Gaffer sat sweating and smiling his silent toady smile. It made Jim nervous, even now.
“I want to share a secret with you, a secret I learned from my father.” Ramsey said, putting his hand on Jim’s shoulder. “It takes money to make money.”

“Simple as that,” Timothy chimed in, his voice high and reedy. “It’s why the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”

“Damn right,” said Ramsey, raising his glass. “And I don’t know about you, but given the choice, I’d rather be rich getting richer.”

“It takes money to make money,” said Jim, trying out the words for himself. The didn’t sound quite the same in his slow country drawl.

Ramsey stood from his chair and began to pace around the guestroom. He always had a flair for oratory:

“I’ve done well for myself because I move quick. Atlanta is changing. You’ve got to see every opportunity, and you’ve got to have the balls to move on it. I buy fast, I build fast, I sell fast. But when it comes to borrowing cash for an acquisition, when it comes time to reinvest our profits—the secret ingredient, using money to make money—there’s a lot of red-tape that slows us down. It’s bad for business. Now, Jim. I know you’ve noticed some irregularities in our books, and you’ve been very discrete. Because you’re a smart guy. So I want to make you an offer.”

“What kind of offer?

“I like you. I want you to do well. I want your kid to go to a top college. I want to make you a very rich man.” Ramsey gestured out the window. The perfect green hills Jim had studied as a boy in magazines rose and fell in the starlight. “And not just rich. I want you to get your own membership so we can play the Augusta National together well into
our old fucking age.” He offered his hand to Jim. “All I’m asking is you move a few numbers around for me. Cut the red tape. Lubricate the flow of business. What do you say?”

His whole life, Jim had depended on acts of serendipity. On the patronage of great men. So what was moving a few numbers around, if it meant there was even the slightest chance his son could one day walk his own path? If Travis could be his own man? Jim took Ramsey’s hand. His palm was just as rough as Jim remembered, and his grip was just as firm. Jim breathed a sigh of relief. He felt like he’d just confessed something terrible to a priest, like a murder or a rape. Everything was out in the open.

There in the Augusta National clubhouse, Jim and Ramsey shook hands, and it was, I suppose, from then on that the conversations Jim and I had at Christmas parties grew sadder and sadder; from that moment, it was inevitable that he would find himself, years later, drinking from a flask in the Egyptian Ballroom of the Fox Theatre, unable to look my Mom in the eyes.

3. Why Ramsey Left

It took money to make money, and Ramsey intended to make a lot of it. Following the Theorem of Nineties Real Estate (Land + Time = Profit), he put everything into property acquisition, and when he ran out of capital, he got creative. Enormous loans from Phoenix City with no proof of collateral. Investments with hedge-funds that made credit default swaps on mortgages. Advance payments from hopeful would-be homeowners that were ostensibly intended to cover construction costs. Mansfield Reality swelled like a zygote replicating itself, making new cells that made new cells that made
new cells. It developed specialized organs. It swelled—a compulsive, organic growth—until the thing seemed like it might start walking around under its own power. Like it might open its toothless mouth to speak.

This is how Ramsey came to own a sizeable portion of Atlanta’s sprawling metro-area. And for every coin of questionable origin that found its way (however briefly) into his companies’ coffers, there was poor Jim Tappman, pretending he hadn’t heard it clink.

“Ramsey might look bullheaded, and maybe he is, but I’ve never seen a man so careful in all my life. He knew when he was beat, and he knew folks would come asking where their money went,” he told me, sitting across from me at his kitchen table. “He didn’t want to wind up in a courtroom answering a mess of awkward questions. Not yet, anyhow.”

“You think he might come back?

“Only once he’s set things up with all the right people. Once he’s sure nobody can touch him. But Tyler, just because he’s coming back to Atlanta don’t mean he’s coming back to your mamma.”

“How do you know?”

“Let’s just put it this way. I’ve seen some things I ain’t proud of.”

“Then make up for it. Help me find him.”

“I can’t,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked. He shook his head and pointed to the kitchen window.

“Cause I got my family to think of. I ain’t about to go making trouble for Ramsey Mansfield.”

110
“How much trouble could you possibly make?”

“Doesn’t matter. I plan to let him be, and from now on I recommend you do the same.”

That afternoon I came home to find another letter slipped under my door, again printed on Crassus & Moore LLP stationary: *Mr. Croff, it has come to my attention that you have been gathering information re: your stepfather’s business and disappearance. I wish to remind you that it is in your interest (and your mother’s) to inform me of any details that may be relevant to his present whereabouts.* This time I tossed the message in the garbage and flopped back down on my couch, trying not to notice the black plastic case where the remains of my Les Paul were interred. I meant to find Ramey—or at least understand him—regardless of what Jim Tappman said.

4. Land of the Free Market

The day before my date with Aiko, a man from the SEC stopped by my house; but that wasn’t the only strange thing to happen. Around noon, I had decided to venture back out into the world, heading down the street to Jittery Joes in order to do a little writing. I stood waiting for the light at Clayton and Broad St, which divides the landscaped greenery of UGA’s campus from the nexus of vice that is downtown Athens. Just before the light turned from WAIT to WALK, a black truck revved its engine, made a jerky left turn, and gunned it down Broad. From some subconscious bank of trivial visual stimuli, a dozen images of this same vehicle in other contexts—passing down Peachtree St, pulled over on I-85, parked on the curb by my townhouse—overlaid themselves upon the black truck’s shrinking form, like tracing paper copies sliding over the illustration from which
they were drawn. By the time it occurred to me to get the license plate number or to chase the truck, it was long gone.

I sat several minutes later at a café table and sipped ice coffee, remembering the recent letter from Moore. It seemed unlikely that some slighted investment banker would send someone to tail me around Athens, GA while I lounged around at bottle shops and audited Latin literature classes. If she thought I was going to lead them anywhere useful, they were doomed to disappointment.

I worked for a few hours. At one point, I remember Mom calling to chat. She told me about how she was working on a new painting of Lupa, the puppy, and how our new financial limitations had rekindled her love for cooking. Luz had taught her several Columbian dishes, including her lentil soup recipe, which had been known to cure severe cases of influenza and serve as an impromptu antidepressant. Later, after a few more hours of work, I packed up my laptop and left Jittery Joes, crossing back over Clayton St and making my way back home, where I found a beat-up Ford coup parked on the street. The driver watched me as I unlocked my front door. A minute later, the doorbell rang.

At first I was a touch intimidated. Here was a man on my front step: a big white guy in his fifties, maybe six foot three with a lumpy simian face, close-cropped hair (mostly grey) and a sizable beer belly. And he was holding a very official looking federal ID card. Then again, there was something about his brown suit and the cheap gold tie—not your garden-variety clean-shaven, black sunglasses, creepy translucent earpiece kind of fed.

“Bob Lyttelton with the SEC,” he said. “You must be Tyler.”
“Sorry to disappoint, but I’ve never been much of an athlete.”


“I’m even worse at finance than I am at sports.”

“Look, are you Ramsey Mansfield’s son or not?”

“In a sense.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” he said softly, laughing to himself.

“It’s complicated. But you can still come in, if you want.” I felt a bit more relaxed. I didn’t have to tell him anything I didn’t want to. So why not?

“I just have a couple of questions for you.” As he crossed the threshold into my house, I noticed a small stain on his brown trousers and smelled the faintest whiff of cannabis—not the pungent just-smoked-a-bowl kind, but the kind that gets into your clothes and never comes out no matter what you do—and by the time slouched down on the couch, I was more curious than threatened.

“Smells good in here,” he said, propping his legs up on my coffee table and crossing one foot over the other. A telltale symptom of lifelong indolence. I would know.

He looked around the room, up at the big vellum map of the Roman Empire, at the plaster busts atop my bookshelf, at the Jacques-Louis David prints, giving particular attention to Mars Being Disarmed by Venus. “You got some pretty old-fashioned taste for a kid. That one’s pretty sexy though. And I dig the guitars.”

“No offense. But this doesn’t exactly seem like an official inquiry.”
“Tyler, you know what we do at the SEC? Or did you really think I was a damn football recruiter.”

“You regulate and enforce the trade of securities, bonds, et cetera.”

“So you’re just a smartass.”

“You must be pretty busy these days,” I said.

“Well, there’s blood in the water. Or something.”

“Again, sorry to disappoint, but I don’t have any stocks or bonds.”

“I’m not here for you,” he said. Of course he wasn’t. But at this point I realized I could learn more from Bob Lyttelton than he could learn from me. So I grabbed an IPA and an American Lager from the fridge and popped them open.

“Want a drink?” I asked.

“Sure, what the hell,” he said. I handed him the lager, which I only kept around for guests with bad taste. He got started on it right away.

“Ramsey’s been gone for almost four months,” I said.

“You know where he might be?”

“Do you?”

“I fucking wish,” said Lyttelton, taking a long pull from the bottle.

“He’s been gaming the stock market?”

“Sorry, that’s confidential.” He took another drink. The tragically ill manners, the funny smell of his clothes, the half lackadaisical eyes—I would have been 100% certain he was a fraud, if those qualities didn’t also scream, “lifelong passenger on the Gravy Train of government employment.” So it was fifty-fifty.
“How about a little quid pro quo?” I asked.

“What pro who?”

“I scratch your back, you scratch mine.”

“With an artsy-fartsy trustafarian type? You don’t know shit. No point wasting any more time.” He finished the lager and slammed the empty bottle on the coffee table. Then he stood up and scratched his ass. “Thanks for the beer though. And it’s a shame about your dad.”

“I know Ramsey bribed Atlanta officials to redistrict zones,” I said. Lyttelton stopped buttoning his coat. “I know that when Phoenix City Bank went down, a bunch of his cash went missing. Just for starters.”

“Well fuck me,” he said, sitting back down.

“So, Mr. Lyttelton. What do you know?”

“Alright, kid. You understand what a derivative is?”

“The rate of change at any given point on a mathematical function.”

“A goddamn financial derivative.”

“No clue. But I’m a quick learner.”

“In this case, imagine a guy takes out a mortgage on a new house. Then your dad places a million dollar bet on whether this guy can or can’t pay off his mortgage. Just like betting on a horse or a dog or a football team.”

“I can see why that’d get him in trouble.”

“That’s the legal part.”

“Legal to put up million dollar bets on insolvency?”
“This is America. Land of the free market. Problem is, your dad lost a bet and he hasn’t paid up.”

“Why do you care?” I asked.

“This is an official investigation.”

“You have a fascinating professional methodology.”

“That’s what my wife tells me.”

“Was it Livia Moore who tipped you off, Mr. Lyttelton?”

“That’s all I can say, kid. But you hear anything new, you let me know.” He reached into his wallet and tossed down a business card on the coffee table. As he stood to leave, I checked it out: ROBERT BRADOCK, Securities and Exchange Commission. But underneath was a curious subheading.

“Office of the Ethics Counsel?” I asked.

“Don’t I seem ethical to you?” he said, opening the front door. Then he stepped out and slammed it behind him.

5. On the Difficulties of Putting Stoic Philosophy into Practice

Friday came at last, and I went to meet Aiko downtown at Edozushi, a traditional Japanese restaurant right by her apartment. Blue noren curtains with simple, white lotus flowers hung over the door, and stepping through was like stepping into another world. A quieter, more restrained world. An ideal setting for our conversation, really, since I’d resolved (with the iron calm of a Zen monk or a Roman Stoic) to keep things strictly business, to resist libidinous temptation, to oblivate all hope for tender feelings, and through these measures of austerity—the proffered olive branch of strictly Platonic
dealings—to rescue my friendship with Aiko from post-breakup purgatory. Paper walls divided the restaurant into little rooms, and a middle aged woman in a kimono stood at the front, gently plucking a jangly shamisen. I found myself greeted by a faint fishy smell and a hearty chorus of waitresses and sushi chefs turning to shout, “irasshaimase.” A waitress led me past professors chatting in booths and undergraduates taking sake bombs in between classes, back to the traditional dining areas where I kicked off my shoes beside a pair of familiar, floppy black leather boots. I took a deep breath, stepped across squishy straw tatami mats, and stooped to sit on a floor cushion at the lacquered wood table where Aiko knelt, waiting for me.

“There you are,” she said.

“I thought we said two?”

“It’s two fifteen,” she said.

Ah, the slight note of playfulness that spoiled this reprimand, the perfect slope of her perfect thighs, the little pairs of eighth notes knit into her socks, and (most of all!) the way her heels dug into the plump curve of her ass—my resolve began to fracture.

“Point taken,” I said, leaning forward to rest my elbows on the table. Forget Zen gardens and Stoic academies. My apologies, Aurelius. Maybe allowing our reactions to our fellow man to overpower us is what causes us to feel pain; but it’s the only way we feel goddamn anything. Aiko, you can overpower me any time. That would be fine.

“So. You going to make it?” she asked.

“Well,” I said, stroking my chin for a moment, until the waitress came tiptoeing to the table in silk slippers, and I chose, instead of answering the question, to order us a
couple of Sapporo Premiums. Aiko cocked her head and raised her eyebrows—a classic, adorably Japanese way of saying, *No, you asshole, I’m not letting you off the hook.* So I relented. And not once during the following tirade did Aiko—one of my ADD hyperdigital generation’s few great listeners—break eye contact with me: “Still no clue where Ramsey is. Half of Atlanta’s looking for him, making threats, et cetera. I think someone’s following me around town. I took the ’69 Les Paul to Doug at Strings and Things, and he said I might as well sell it for parts. Mom’s running out of money, and I’m latched onto her like one of those jawless fish. You know, the ones with concentric circles of razor-sharp teeth?”

“You’re always so melodramatic,” said Aiko. Her smile—a nearly imperceptible canting of the lips, carried a cargo of compassion that seemed impossibly heavy for such a small movement.

“Their heads are like suction cups,” I continued. “They create a vacuum.”

“Tyler,” she said, very slowly.

“They secrete this horrible enzyme to prevent their victim’s blood from clotting.”

“Tyler,” she said again, more insistently. “You’re not a jawless fish.” Just then the waitress, who’d been stooping over our table to deliver the beer, stood flushed with embarrassment. Turning to her, Aiko said something in Japanese that defused the tension. The waitress gave me a look that convinced me she understood not only everything about the situation, but everything about me as a person. Aiko ordered a mixed plate of *nigiri* pieces. In fitting with our earlier conversation, I went for a plate of *unagi-don*—barbequed eel on rice.
The waitress bowed and shuffled away in her slippers, leaving me and Aiko alone in our tranquil, hypothetically desexualized, rice paper sanctuary. I asked her how her PR internship was going and she told me about promoting shows at the Georgia Theatre and meeting Michael Stipe from R.E.M. The blend of pragmatic businessity (my word) with artistic problem solving, alcohol, and sweet, sweet music would be right up my alley, she said, if I’d only give it a chance. This implication I deflected with a new line of questioning: did she still read a lot of Murakami? (Yes.) Was she seeing anyone? (Kind of.) Was it that blond guitarist who liked to play shirtless? (Maybe.) Did he make her laugh, think, feel, et cetera? (Sometimes.) Was he better than me in bed. (None of my business.)

The waitress returned with our food and a couple more Sapporo Premiums. Before me stretched a sinuous browned flank of eel over a bed of rice, sliced into bite sized pieces, steaming stickily sweet with soy-based barbeque sauce. Leering over her own rainbow assortment of sushi, Aiko clicked her chopsticks together in anticipation.

“This place always reminds me of an old-fashioned restaurant in Kyoto where my grandmother always used to bring me,” said Aiko, carefully muddling a dob of wasabi into a tiny bowl of soy sauce. “You know, this whole Great Recession thing is a lot like the Japanese bubble in the nineties.”

“Yeah?” I said, although I was more interested in watching her eat sushi than in comparative economic history; delicately clasping a fatty pink morsel of tuna with her chopsticks, she raised it to her mouth, licking her lips (really!) before taking the whole thing in a single erotic motion.
“Every time I go to visit,” she said, after she finished chewing, “it’s like, ‘oh my god, every one of these buildings was built in the eighties when real estate was going crazy. Especially in Tokyo.’

Now, as a historian myself and, in particular, as an ardent admirer of epochal parallels and patterns, I really did find this whole socioeconomic paradox fascinating. But that didn’t stop me, the entire time Aiko had been talking, from staring, transfixed, at the shadowy line of cleavage trailing up from her low-buttoned shirt and magnified intensely by the way her arm, resting on the lacquered table to support her adorable chin, pushed one pale breast up against the other. I desperately wanted something to happen. It was a bad sign, I knew, that she had chosen not to wear her grandmother’s ornamental comb, a treasure of golden lacquered wood which never failed to perch over her ear when she knew she needed to bolster her confidence (the night of our first date, for instance, or that of our final jam session). But by the time we finished our meal and put away four beers apiece, it felt as if we’d never split in the first place. As if Aiko hadn’t (yet) decided I was “a good guy, but not the right one.” From the main room with the western style booths, soft metallic shamisen notes came through the rice paper walls, slowly winding up and down pentatonic scales. Our waitress brought the check, which I quickly snagged before Aiko could protest; when I saw the total, I had to restrain myself from wincing. Signing at the bottom, feeling again like a jawless fish, I felt her eyes on me.

“Thanks,” she said. “I had a nice time.”

“Could I tempt you to do it again sometime?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Do you feel better now?”
Somewhere, a wind chime clinked some hollow tones. What I wanted to say was, Aiko, you’re the antidote to what ails me—this sickness brought on by toxic traces of silver from the various spoons (and other cutlery) that have tainted my food since I was ten years old and have apparently deteriorated my brain cells, bringing about, perhaps, this prolonged, unbroken, semi-syphilitic nightmare from which I’ve yet to untangle myself.

Instead I simply nodded.

“Good. So, I’m going to reach across the table now,” she said, giving me a serious look. “Okay?”

“Okay.”

“And I’m going to put my hand on yours.”

“I’m following so far.”

“But that doesn’t mean I’m ever going to let you touch my boobs again. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Okay,” she said, shifting forward on her knees and reaching to me. Resisting the sudden urge to stroke her soft white upper arm, I gave her my hand. My fingers brushed over her palm, and I felt that tingling thrill of touching another human being as if for the first time. The two of us knelt like that on the soft tatami for several moments, forming a bridge across the squat table.

6. Cowboy vs. Captain Subtlety
Pushing through the *noren* curtains, back into the sunny glare of the real world, I followed Aiko down the sidewalk to her apartment and considered how to say goodbye. Should I go in for the hug? Do it with oldschool class and kiss her hand? Or just play it cool, with a quick upward nod? See you around, kid. Happy trails.

It was getting toward that late-afternoon tipping point, when the university students escape their final classes and drift across Broad St, drawn inexorably downtown by the gravitational force of bars, pubs, and clubs. Aiko and I found ourselves shuffling among diverse subspecies of undergraduate students, many of which might be considered close cousins to the 21st century dandy: alcoholic fraternity brothers, sousaphonists, slacker savants, cute bookworm girls, quiz team heroes, and Dungeons and Dragons enthusiasts. Soon we came to Aiko’s building. For a moment we locked eyes and I stood paralyzed struggling to choose from my catalog of possible valedictions until finally Aiko put me out of my misery.

“So,” she said. “Thanks for walking me home.” Aiko, Aiko. Polite yet unfailingly cool. Dignified yet unflinchingly sexy. She opened the door before I could decide on the hug or the hand-kiss, and that would have been the end of it except that as she stepped across the threshold, I happened to see a black pickup truck parked on the curb back toward Edozushi.

“Aiko, wait,” I said. “That’s the truck that’s been tailing me.”

“How can you tell?” she asked, stepping back out into the street with me.

“I don’t know.”

“There’s no one in it,” she said. “You should go take a look.”
“I could be wrong. Maybe all that Sapporo’s gone to my head.”

“What if it’s Ramsey?” For a moment this rang infallibly true. The slighted investors had hounded him into exile; but, fearful for the safety of his beloved stepson, real estate tycoon Ramsey T. Mansfield had been keeping tabs on me. My guardian angel. Like an Olympian god in the *Iliad*, gazing down on the little insects that skittered around the walls of Troy and rooting for his favorite. This delusion persisted for several breathless seconds before I remembered that, according to Mom, his new truck was red.

“Can’t be. It’s probably this pissed off investment banker I told you about. Or the feds.”

“Thinking about it all afternoon’s not going to do any good,” she said, and with that she was off, stomping across the street in her ankle-high black leather boots, her ass pivoting left, right, left right, while I stood transfixed both by her decisiveness, by the elegance of her movement, but also by terror. Google searching fraud and writing a Plutarchian profile of my stepfather was one thing. Confronting a living, breathing human being was another. This was acknowledging that, yes, I, Tyler Mansfield, have somehow managed to make an enemy. This was the overcurious court noble asking his uncle who poisoned his father. This was Clau-clau-claudius espousing his dangerously pro-Republican sentiments at a dinner party.

But there went Aiko across the street, practically catching sparks against the asphalt. Fine. Before I could talk myself down, I found myself rushing across the street just as the light turned, stumbling a little because the beer *had* gone to my head, pushing off the hood of an SUV that had pulled up into the intersection, feeling the dragonbreath
of its engine on my legs, and hustling onward, navigating this nightmare Frogger stage to
the unbroken accompaniment of two car horns whose pitches happened to form a
diminished fifth, a John Cage symphony, until at last, I found the opposite curb. Aiko
stood crouched behind the black truck, photographing the license plate with her smart
phone.

“Don’t attract any attention or anything,” she said. The way she was crouching
stretched her jeans taut.

“You know me. Captain Subtlety.”

“You were staring at my ass,” she said, standing back up.

“Guilty,” I said, not without some bitterness.

“Don’t get any funny ideas, Captain Subtlety.” Even as she issued this reprimand,
she moved around the side of the truck, looking in through the windows.

“Should we be snooping around like this?”

“You can’t complain about your dad’s disappearance if you’re not going to even
look.”

“Point taken,” I said, joining her at the side of the truck. The license plate was a
Polk County tag. A wave of tipsy panic swept over me. But if I wanted to impress Aiko, I
had to man up. We weren’t spying. We weren’t getting in too deep. We were excavating.
We were archeology grad students at a Pompeii dig site, sifting through shards of broken
pottery, brushing away volcanic ash from a wall to reveal some phallic graffiti. We’d
laugh to diffuse the sexual tension. It was all fine.
I admit, our research methodology was rudimentary: peering over into truck bed, I found an enormous shovel caked with dried mud and several wicked looking saw blades, about the size of car tires, with strange, blocky teeth. Siege weaponry? Torture devices? I imagined their owner fossilized in a cocoon of ash, dead for two millennia.

“Hen da naa,” murmured Aiko. “This guy really likes hats.” Sure enough, eight or nine Stetsons and ten gallon hats of varying shapes and sizes sat arrayed across the backseat of the cab, organized by color, from black felt to brown leather to finely woven straw. Beside them lay a bundle of filthy quilts, stretching across length of the cab. I moved around to the front of the truck, pushing through a gaggle of vociferous sorority girls in short dresses, pretending they were obnoxious American tourists walking the streets of Pompeii. Distracting me from my dig. When they were gone, I looked in through the passenger side window.

“Check this out,” I said, turning back to Aiko, who was taking pictures of the saw blades with her phone. She came over. Tucked in the driver side door’s compartment was a half empty bottle of Jack Daniels. A squat can of chewing tobacco sat in the cup holder, tilted askew. But what really got my attention were the five spent shotgun shells in the floorboard. Five perfect little cylinders with heads of greasy brass and butts of scarlet plastic, all emptied of shot and blown open into wriggly hexagram stars like the ends of Chinese finger traps. I tried not to think about why someone might take the time to retrieve their spent shotgun shells. From an archeological perspective, it was kind of cool. Like finding a tarnished gladius with some barbarian’s dried blood staining the blade. But
before I could tell Aiko my new guess about what was bundled in those dirty quilts, I felt a presence looming behind us. A voice came loud and almost comically deep:

“Didn’t your Mama ever tell you to respect another man’s private property?” It was not a long-dead Pompeian ash-mummy. Nor was it a vengeful hedge fund manager or chubby Bob Lyttelton from the SEC. It was Cowboy, whose true name, if he has one, remains a mystery still. Six foot four, 250 pounds of muscle stuffed into a pair of dirty blue jeans and scuffed leather boots. He wore a white Stetson with a filigreed black leather hat band, and the brim cast a shadow over face—he could have been 25 or 55, you couldn’t tell. His stubbly jaw worked a wad of chewing tobacco while he waited for me to finish defecating my pants.

“You shouldn’t be following me around,” I managed to say.

“You shouldn’t be poking into your Daddy’s e-mail.”

“Do you know where he is?” I asked. Aiko moved to my side and took my hand.

“He ain’t coming back.” He stepped to me, towering over me, and poked me in the chest with a single meaty finger, so hard I fell back against his truck. Then he spit a big putrid wad of dip at my feet. “So you best mind your own goddamn business. And don’t go fucking around with Mr. Tappman.”

“What does he know that’s so horrible?”

“He don’t want to be bothered.”

“All I want is to talk with my stepdad.” My fear had boiled over into anger.

“Tough shit. Get your dumbass off my truck.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me where Ramsey is.”
“I *said*, move your ass.”

“What’s he up to?”

“I ain’t going to ask nicely again.”

“Has he run off to some tropical island?”

“Tyler, let it go,” said Aiko, tugging at my arm, glancing rapidly between me and Cowboy. Part of me loved that she cared so much. The rest of me wanted her to stay the hell out of it.

“Laying around with his concubines?” I asked, so loudly that people on the sidewalk turned their heads. “Living out his days like a retired emperor?” And with that, Cowboy spat another wad of dip, calmly reached out his hand, and coiled his massive digits around my skull. I could smell his sweaty armpits. It was a curious sensation: like Ramsey was reaching out to me through this terrible golem, that it was Ramsey himself clutching me, the way he used to put his big gloved hand on my head when we took skiing pictures. Then Cowboy squeezed me like an orange. With a single jerky motion, he slammed the back of my head against the side of his truck.

I found myself on my back, lying on the gritty sidewalk, my head resting on a girl’s leather purse. The black truck was gone. Five or six concerned Athenians stood over me, including Aiko, who was particularly sexy from my perspective, looking up her legs, past the pale streaks of skin glinting through the tear in her jeans, up her slender arms, her pale neck, to her heartshaped face and those dark liquid eyes, brimming with intelligence and concern.

“Some date,” I said.
“It wasn’t a date,” she said, grasping my hand and helping me to my feet. “You okay?”

“I think so.”

“Your head put a ding in his truck.”

“My strategy from the very beginning.”

She bent down to pick up her purse. “Who was that guy, anyway?”

Aiko insisted she take me to the hospital in case I’d suffered a concussion, and I told her what I knew about Cowboy along the way. How no one knew where he came from. How he used to keep Ramsey’s construction teams in line before the company went under. How he (supposedly) took out a guy’s teeth using a claw hammer. After I checked myself into the Emergency Room, the two of us sat together on pale green plastic chairs next to a girl our age cradling a purple-faced baby. Every few minutes Aiko’d reach over and pinch me to make sure I wouldn’t fall asleep. I found myself pretending to nod off so she’d pinch me again—the simplest deceptions are the most gratifying—until a nurse called my name. Aiko asked if they could take care of me from here.

“Wait, you’re not going to stick around?” I asked.

“I’ve got plans. Sorry.”

“Plans?”

“I’m playing a show.”

“I thought you were going to drive me home?”

“You can afford a cab, Tyler. Even after everything that’s happened, it’s not like you’re impoverished.”
“Not yet,” I said. She tilted her head, looking sad.

“I hate to admit it, but I’m proud of you.”

“For getting my shit kicked in?”

“For being persistent about something. For once.” Aiko stepped close to me, and yes, there was the floral perfume, there was the wetness of her lips on my cheek, and there was the sound of her boots against cheap hospital linoleum as she left.

Afterward, the nurse led me to an examination room where everything was, likewise, pale green and smelt pungently of iodine. An overly affable country doctor soon entered the room and paraded me around like a dancing bear. Mind if you try and walk a straight line for me? Mind if we play a little memory game with these here playing cards? Mind if I shine this here light in your eye real quick? Mind if I tap you with this here rubber hammer?

I was, in the end, diagnosed with a concussion and asked to remain overnight for observation. Looking back on it, I’m not sure if my cranium’s collision with the black truck really had shaken something loose, or if I was simply preoccupied with thoughts of the quilted bundle in Cowboy’s backseat, by Egyptian Ballroom flashbacks, by visions of Aiko’s legs in those tight black jeans.

7. Rogues Gallery

Ah, the dreariness of palace politics! The clichéd tedium of family strife! And the great bore of financial malfeasance, of court intrigue, of the rogues gallery and old fashioned, pulp fiction danger! The muscle. The guilt-stricken accountant. The vengeful businesswoman. The slovenly fed. All groping in the dark, following the scent of their
own self interest, and I’m right there with them. I couldn’t sort it out in the hospital and I can’t sort it out now, sitting on my couch, a little drunk, yes, perhaps quite drunk, and hammering away at my keyboard in the vain hope that this family-saga-cum-detective-story might distract me from the depressing bareness of my walls and the many ramparts and parapets of cardboard boxes that surround me on all sides, containing the various trophies of foppery, from the map of Rome under Claudius to the print of Belisarius Begging Alms. A historical inquiry? Hah! A riveting case? This was the opiate that stilled Holmes’s restless mind? Intravenous cocaine begins to seem the more elegant solution after all.

But it was too late for that. The money wouldn’t last forever. My days as a carefree dilettante were numbered, just as my time in the Athens Hobby House is coming to an end this weekend. If I was to find Ramsey, it had to be soon. So I spent my night in the hospital leaning over a small plastic table beside my bed, scribbling notes to myself on a stack of neon pink PostIt notes that I pilfered from the Emergency Room’s front desk. A good historian must sift through endless data, through hundreds of scholarly articles, and through innumerable tomes in forgotten tongues. That’s what it takes to corroborate a new idea, to contribute to the conversation of human knowledge. Ramsey’s kissing Mom under the mistletoe, his indiscretions in the Egyptian Ballroom, his roping Jim Tappman into this mess—these were key details.

I felt I was getting somewhere. I felt I knew my stepfather better than ever before. But finding him was another matter. Bob Lyttelton and Livia Moore were more like competing historians than primary or secondary sources. Racing me to publication. If
anyone could lead me to my stepfather, it would be those implicated in his crimes. By the
time I checked out of the Emergency Room, I’d accumulated a crumpled pile of sticky
notes. Questions and bullet points about Cowboy and Jim Tappman. I sorted them in the
backseat of the cab on the way home from the hospital.

The next day I cranked up my car, dialed up Strange Days by the Doors, and set
out down State Route 316 for Decatur. But Jim Tappman his family are no longer living
at their house there. The golf clubs and the little stone bulldog have vanished, though the
basketball goal, the purple flowers, and the FOR SALE sign remained.

Poor bastard. Forced to leave his own home. One can sympathize.

8. The Obligatory Icarus Moment

Today I found myself distracted from my work. I sit on my couch holding the
framed skiing picture of me and Ramsey, which I had brought back from Mom’s house.
As I mentioned before, I knew my stepfather only from our brief family vacations over
the years. Skiing in Colorado, touring ruins in Rome, sunbathing on the deck of a
Caribbean cruise line. Trips which I now suspect Ramsey undertook only to placate my
mother. But only then—sipping scotch in first-class airplane cabins, in mahogany-
paneled hotel lobbies, while gazing out the portholes of luxury staterooms—only then did
Ramsey speak to me as a father:

“Work hard, play harder,” he’d say. “Make the best of what you got.”

Holding the picture of the two of us with our skis, I could practically feel his
gloved fingers curling around my skull.
I remember snapping the buckles of my ski boots. I remember how the lining squeezed around my ankle, and blood vessels tightened, spreading warmth all the way up my leg.

“Perfect,” I said to Ramsey, wiggling my toes inside thick socks.

“See, you’ve got to get the lining custom made,” he said. “You can already tell the difference, can’t you?”

“Thanks man.” I ran my fingers down the cool plastic. They were like a centurion’s boots. You could buy a used car for the same price.

“A man ought to be properly equipped. Hit the slopes in those and the ski bunnies will be all over you.”

“Whatever,” I said. My cheeks were almost as warm as my constricted ankles.

Later, hopping off the ski lift, I already felt lighter on my feet. The boots glinted scarlet in the sunlight. Ramsey and I stood at the brink looking over our run: steep even for a Black Diamond, latticed with dunes of packed snow. For a moment, a strange look came across his face, cold and inscrutable as he peered out to take in the timeless, distant mountaintops, and I remember wondering: what goes through this man’s mind? Then he turned to me, his face changing at once, as if a switch had been flipped, into a cheerful expression of perfect sitcom fatherly pride.

“Ready for this, buddy?” he asked. I nodded, looking back to the run before us.

Skiing is like chess. You have to think four or five moves in advance. You have to plot out every turn as you go, you have to outwit the snow so you can slow your ass down and stay in control—but surveying this slope, trying to see the forest from the trees, it
was like an anagram I couldn’t unscramble, and the abyssal drop didn’t make things any easier.

Ramsey placed a gloved hand on my shoulder. “Follow me,” he said, and there he went, faster and faster, pivoting with grace, navigating a minefield of moguls, shifting his weight back and forth, choreographing a dance to some silent music, and every time he stabbed a pole into the snow it was like he was reminding the mountain who was boss. He had a certain aristocratic confidence. Five star lodges, helicopter rides, mountaintop lobster dinners, high-performance transalpine equipment—it was in his blood. If I’d stood there gawking for another five seconds, I’d have lost track of his path and then I’d have never gotten down.

I leaned forward an inch and gravity did the rest, gripping me by the stomach. Trees on either side of the hill coalesced into dark, flickering bands. A gust prickled my bare cheeks and ahead of me, Ramsey’s mane fluttered madly in the frigid air. His skis plowed parallel furrows into the snow, ruler-straight lines that suddenly bent and wove between the moguls and then straightened again. I followed this path first with my eyes and then with my hips, my ankles, my feet, and I too planted my poles in the icy humps, pushing off like he taught me, readjusting my momentum to match the new direction of my skis. The twin grooves he left me at first seemed to snake haphazardly down the hill, but after a while I began to see how they worked from one side of the run to the other, how they twisted sharply when the elevation leveled out. They traced geometric patterns through the moguls, leaving a mosaic in the snow. Cut left, cut right. Cut left, cut right. My new boots clutched my ankles so tightly, my skis became indistinguishable from my
feet, and I felt the lacquered wood brushing across the mountain as with the soles of my feet. The two of us were jamming out to the same riffs, the same furious beat, the same ups and downs, crescendos and decrescendos. Paganini, Chopin, Eddie Van Halen, Steve Vai. Music made visceral by the pumping of adrenaline, by the madness of unchecked speed.

Then the bumps were gone and the pristine white plane heaved downward so fiercely that if it were any steeper we’d have been in free-fall. Ramsey’s tracks oscillated back and forth, back and forth, and he wasn’t so far ahead anymore—I thought maybe I could still pass him before the end of the run, before the last drop leveled out flat and the trail curved safely away from the solid wall of pines at the bottom.

I peeled away from the perfect, parallel lines Ramsey left me, hunching my back, bending my knees, and tucking my poles under my arms. I was an X-Wing pilot. I was Iron Man, with my jet boots. He yelled something, but I could barely hear him over the wind. The rush of gravity had a narcotic effect. Thirty two feet per second per second—as it turns out, exponents make things big \textit{real} fast—and sure enough, there was the bottom, there was the fatal wall of trees, and I shifted my feet (too slow!), and I was horizontal, I was airborne, I was shutting my eyes and waiting for the impact.

It was nothing at first. Like falling into a feather mattress. But then I slid backward, picking up speed down the steep slope as icy shivs pierced my nylon armor and nettled my skin, before jerking around and tumbling hard on my side, twisting my left ski at a funny angle that sent a spike of agony up my ankle. I howled, addressing my shiny new boot aloud in epic apostrophe: \textit{pop off you horrible piece of shit. Pop off, pop...}
off, pop off. But it didn’t, and soon I found myself on my back, at rest with the left ski still attached. Its counterpart had properly detached way back up the hill. My ankle throbbed and I was miserably wet: snow in my gloves and on my neck and down in the lining of my fancy boots. Green needles carpeted the snow around me, branches loomed overhead, and the odor of conifers overpowered everything. A few more feet, and I wouldn’t have been standing with Ramsey the next day taking pictures; I wouldn’t have found that overpriced souvenir photograph in the Buckhead house; and I wouldn’t be around now to write this sentence.

Scrabbling, slipping, half submerged in powder, I grasped tree bark and managed to pull myself upright, balancing awkwardly on one heavy boot, and there was Ramsey, laughing his boisterous laugh, holding my errant ski all caked with ice.

We made it down to the bottom of the run despite my leg killing me the whole way.

“Maybe I should get it checked out,” I said.

“You’re fine,” said Ramsey after inspecting the injury for perhaps two seconds.

“It really hurts.”

“Builds character.” At the lodge he bought a hot chocolate for me and a coffee for himself. We found a table by the fireplace so I could warm up.

“How’d you learn to ski?” I asked.

“My father taught me.”
For a while we sat listening to the flames crackle. Even through the Styrofoam, the hot chocolate was nice against my fingers, still tingly from the snow. I rubbed my knee with my free hand.

“How come we only hang out on vacations?”

“I’m working, buddy. I’ve got to take care of you and Cassie and your Mom.”

“Money can’t buy happiness,” I said, pleased with this maxim’s irrefutable profundity.

“But it can buy you some damn nice boots. Try to frown next time you fly down the mountain. I dare you.” He sipped his coffee. “Work hard, play hard.”

“How can I work hard if I don’t even know what I want to do?”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“What if I don’t?”

“Then it’s a good thing you got me to foot your bills,” he said, tussling my hair as the firelight washed his face.

The pain in my leg turned to numbness, and I proceeded to ski for two full days. Only after flying home did the soreness return. I’d apparently suffered a stress fracture in my ankle, which eventually broke as I ran across the school parking lot (late for class); since I didn’t get it checked out for some time, they had to cut open my leg and scrape away the excess calcium deposits before re-breaking and resetting the bone. Because Ramsey and Mom were busy with work, it was Luz (saintly Luz!) who drove me to the hospital and stood by the bedside as a nurse held down my arms to the side of the metal bed and the doctor grasped my left ankle. I remember she was crying. *Dios mio,* she kept
saying. I too wanted to cry, especially seeing as how they offered me only a weak local anesthetic. Builds character! Tough titty, said the kitty. It seemed that I heard the arboreal crack of my tibia snapping before I felt the pain. For six months I wore a metal clamp around my leg with pins lancing right through the flesh because the bone fragments were too small to be held in place by a traditional cast. The skin pulled up taut where the pins went in, and I had to clean each of these areas twice a day with an iodine-soaked cotton swab. And even then, I got five infections.

Then again, perhaps I hadn’t asked Ramsey to have my leg looked at. Perhaps I kept my mouth shut so he wouldn’t think me womanly. But those words, “builds character,” I remember them quite clearly. An arrow from his quiver of paternal platitudes. And I remember him waving a gloved hand in dismissal. Yes, I must have complained. But even so, the careful historian must be especially dubious of impressions that seem too fresh, of memories that seem too recent, too immediate, too faithful to the event.

9. The Augury

The Hobby House’s new owners come tomorrow. For the past three weeks, I have sat on my couch surrounded by packed boxes, alternatively staring at the newly bare walls and working at my laptop to compile this account. But now there are no more boxes. There is not even the couch. I sit on the floor. I type within a vacuum. A void of white walls, white carpet, white ceiling.

But there is one more crucial event to relate.
No doubt the suspicious reader will question my veracity here. Even to me, it reads like one of those outlandish omens you find in Tacitus: oh, and then calves with three heads were born all around Italia, or a woman crawled to the emperor’s door with goat hoofs for hands. It’s difficult to refrain from suspecting even the most thorough historians of inventing certain passages to serve their purposes. And admittedly, the classical historian writes not only to relay events as they happened, but to teach. So please, by all means, read with healthy skepticism, although I did witness the incident with my own two eyes. Derive from it whatever meaning you will.

To take our minds off the threat of looming destitution, Mom arranged for us to rent an expensive McMansion in Longboat Key, FL where she, Luz, and I stayed for a week, enjoying the beach and the lovely subtropical June weather. I asked Aiko to come along, but she thought it might invite social awkwardness. Too much like old times, she said. In any case, it was, at first, a welcome escape, reclining on a pool chair on the edge of a sea wall, looking out over the cerulean bay to the silhouette of Sarasota. Mom would stand at an easel, painting the skyline. Luz would lay at the pool reading crime thrillers in Spanish. And all the while little Lupa would trot back and forth between us, looking miserable in the heat. She seemed to envy us our iced mojitos and frozen margaritas.

One day I sat at a little table by the pool working on an outline for my Plutarch article and idly watching the dog scamper along the sea wall. Lupa was pretty clumsy. I thought she might slip and fall down three or four feet into the water, which wasn’t very deep, but was filled with rocks and razor sharp barnacles. It would be up to me to rescue her from drowning. But there she went, surprisingly fast for having such stubby little
legs. Yipping gleefully, her collar jingling with every tiny step, her tongue flapping up and down, about the size and color my thumbnail.

A shadow came over her, moving steadily with him as she ran. An ominous spotlight. I can only imagine from Lupa’s perspective, it was a solar eclipse. One moment there’s the bright Florida sky. The next there’s total darkness. I stood from my chair, squinting up into the sun until I found a dark speck. Before I could put two and two together, the thing came down. The approach was so fast, I didn’t see any more than a blur of brown and white. Lupa gave a horrible squeal as it took her. By the time my eyes caught up, she was perhaps twenty feet off the ground, squirming in the talons of an enormous eagle. A drifting lump of black fluff. The bird slowed, canting its splayed wing and arcing back around with its squalling rodentine prey in tow.

“Mom,” I cried out stupidly, pointing up into the ether. She and Adrianna both looked, and then, through some accident of aquiline indecision, Lupa came free. The little dog fell into the open air, plummeting and rotating strangely for what seemed like an eternity until, at last, a green plastic pool chair interrupted her descent. There she lay twitching wretchedly, her fur matted in blood, her back left leg sticking out at an unnatural angle. I was close enough to see where a hooked claw had punctured flesh. Close enough to see her beady little eyes blinking in bafflement. We were all hurrying over when a shriek split the air, so loud and horrible we all three stopped in our tracks and looked up to see the eagle’s broad wingspan against the sky. It came down again. In a way, it was amazing—that is, in the biblical sense of the word. Numinous. When the bird grasped Lupa’s flailing body, I was perhaps six feet away. Its long meaty legs looked
oddly like human arms. Human arms ending in scaly alien hands with wicked hooks for fingers. The creature’s tail splayed out, gleaming white. As it lifted away for the second time, its eye turned to meet mine. I see you, it seemed to say. Yes, you.

Only after it was gone did Mom and Luz begin to cry. I inspected the pool chair. There were tufts of bloody hair pasted to the plastic. The impact left a long crack down the seat, and I couldn’t help but wonder if the damage would come out of our security deposit.

Thinking back on it now, I’m more curious about the symbolic implications of the event than the financial repercussions. The *aquila*, symbol of Roman *imperium*. Lupa, the she-wolf. But I suppose these are asinine musings, considering how the puppy’s gruesome end has devastated Mom, who has called crying every day since I returned to Athens last week. Now she’s by herself in that big empty house. Now she has to sleep alone. Now she goes down to the basement in the dark of morning to paint, but feels so lonely, she goes back upstairs to bed.

“It was so violent,” she said over one particularly lugubrious phone call.

“It was natural selection,” I replied. “Don’t take it personally.” But this did little to console her. In the end, I decided to bid farewell to Athens; I’m going to stay with Mom in Buckhead, at least for the time being. Perhaps she can help me in my investigation. Perhaps I can be of some comfort to her. In any case, it’s not as if I have anywhere else to go.
Tiberius palms a pomegranate, judges its heft, thumbs its waxy skin, and explores its bulbous circumference as he glances around the triclinium, waiting for the right moment to tell his guests the true reason he has invited them to his villa. Three wide dining couches run along the walls, ringing the room like a horseshoe. The ex-consul Publius Octavius reclines sober and stern-faced at the place of honor on the east side; Marcus and his corpulent friend Titus Annius sprawl diagonally across the velvet cushions of the north couch, where they laugh and toss grapes into the air before catching them in their mouths; and along the west wall Tiberius leans on his left elbow with his pomegranate in his right hand as he carefully observes them.

An unreceptive audience. They sip watered wine from crystal cups. They discuss the profitability of growing olives over grapes. They bemoan the rising cost of slaves.

Oil lamps flicker, sending shadows across their faces. On round wooden tables rest plates piled with dates, pears, figs, and other fruits of purple and gold. A freedwoman stands in the shadows, picking a Dorian melody on her lute. On the walls behind each of the three dining couches is a fresco describing the deeds of Horatius Cocles, commissioned by Tiberius after he came of age and took over the villa from his mother. On the west wall, Horatius defends the bridge; on the east, he sinks, fully armored, down to the riverbed, with fish nipping at his helm as he pleads to the God of the Tiber; in
between the two, featured prominently above Marcus and Titus, Horatius stands outside the senate house extending his hand to the mob of starving refugees.

“Are you going to eat that pomegranate,” says Marcus, interrupting Tiberius’s thoughts. “Or will you continue to fondle it like an eager breast?”

“Marcus,” says Publius, giving his son a sharp look and gesturing to indicate the presence of Tiberius’s mother, Cornelia. In an upright chair she sits adorned in a green stola fastened by a simple bronze brooch, her skin remarkably smooth for a woman of fifty years.

“Please,” she says. “I have known Marcus since he was himself feeding from teats. I am accustomed to his bawdy tongue.”

“How very kind of you to tolerate such a sickening serpent in your home,” says Marcus, raising his cup. Drink has painted his cheeks pink, intensifying the boyish quality of his round, handsome face. His eyes lull out of focus. As if by their own volition, the first two fingers of his left hand, upon which he rests his head, drum against his skull and rustle his dark curls in time with the lute. A habit, Tiberius knows, of relaxed rumination, though it is difficult to say what this portends for the evening’s success. Marcus is a Tribune of the Plebs, like Tiberius himself, with full veto power. His support is especially critical.

Cornelia gives her son a stern look—one Tiberius remembers well from boyhood—that says, get on with it already. Even now, after so many years, she is beautiful in her frustration. So he sends the musician girl away and calls for his mentor, Blossius of Cumae, to give a recitation. With luck, this performance should make the
other men more pliable to his cause, just as a light gustatio of Egyptian lentils and salted snails had, earlier in the evening, whetted their appetites for the main course of rabbit shoulder with fish sauce.

Blossius steps into the triclinium. Wearing a plain Greek *chiton*, he takes his place, standing before the five diners.

“Be well, Magister,” says Tiberius, raising his pomegranate in greeting.

“You speak with curious reverence to your inferiors,” says Titus with a sneer.

“An old custom of his, I’m afraid,” says Marcus, grinning, leaning over the arm of his couch and thumping Tiberius on the arm.

With trembling fingers, the old philosopher strokes his beard. He clears his voice, which has grown hoarser since Tiberius first came under his tutelage some twenty years before.

“I will tell tonight the tale of Midas, King of Phrygia.”

“How drearily Greek of you,” says Marcus, laughing.

“Listen well, Marcus. You may learn something,” says Tiberius.

“I confess, as dear Blossius will surely recall, I have never been a very good listener.”

“Go on, Magister.”

“You must know,” begins Blossius in measured, raspy Greek, “how the grateful god of the grape offered King Midas a single wish in return for aiding his drunken disciple Silenus. Name what you desire, he said, and it will be yours. And so the king considered: he imagined an entire palace hewn of ivory. But then what? He would want
to add new wings, new rooms, new spires and turrets, for such is the nature of man. After much deliberation, thinking himself very sly, Midas wished that whatever he might touch would turn to gold. Upon his return to Phrygia, he changed his wooden cups to gilded challises, his beloved rose gardens to vast floral statuaries.”

“But everything he tries to eat turns to metal in his mouth and the stupid bastard starves to death.” says Marcus, rolling his eyes and draining his cup of wine. “We all know the story.” Titus Annius lies with his arm slung over the back of the dining couch, falling asleep. Publius strokes his bare chin, his brow furrowed. Tiberius fingers his waxy fruit. He watches his guests and grows nervous. But Blossius goes on unperturbed:

“You dismiss the account at the most instructive moment, Marcus. Upon learning that his gift is a curse, that he shall perish from thirst, that he shall never again enjoy the taste of a grape—a sensation you all have enjoyed tonight at some length—King Midas resolved to leave some lasting trace of himself on the world. He wandered the wilds of Phrygia, pressing palms to birch bark, tickling spider webs, cupping sparrows, until the forests resembled a sculptor’s studio. At his touch, his palace glinted, then scintillated, and the citizens regarded it squinting, shielding their eyes as if beholding a second sun, even as the true sun heated the halls until Midas’s son, casually resting against the south wall, suffered severe burns.

“Midas grew malodorous, unable to bathe. Midas grew emaciated, unable to eat. He turned his hunting dogs to footstools. He turned his slaves to statues. He ordered that they be interred with him, that they might continue to serve him in Hades. On his deathbed, Midas called for his son and instructed him on how to perpetuate his father’s
memory: The Phrygian armies should henceforth bare standards of gold. All bronze and silver coinage should be replaced with gold. A colossus of gold should be fashioned in my likeness and erected in the city square. The prince protested. Midas wept. The prince was disgusted by his father's hubris and unclean odor. The king was simply disgusted. He understood then that fathers do not live on through their sons; they are simply replaced. And so he reached out his hand, trembling, and grasped his son's skull, his skeletal fingertips sliding between wisps of hair, which changed at once into metallic filaments. Stepping back, wheezing laughter—giddy that his heir might remain forever a man in his image—Midas drew his sword, leveraged the golden hilt against the golden tile floor, and lurched forward upon the golden blade.”

Blossius clasps his hands together, listening to his words echo around the triclinium. The listeners are silent for several beats.

“Well told, old man, I grant you that,” says Marcus.

“Falling on one’s sword is a Roman custom, not a Greek one,” says Titus, having apparently roused himself.

“How very perceptive of you,” says Blossius, smiling shrewdly.

“And if I recall correctly, Midas had a daughter, not a son,” says Publius. “Poetic license,” says Tiberius.

“In any case, Midas was a fool,” says Marcus. “He should have wished for one of his slaves to gain the golden touch. Then he might have acquired all of the benefits without suffering the unfortunate side effects.”

“How clever!” says Titus.
“The slave would have approached his master in his sleep and turned him to a statue,” says Blossius. “An equally instructive story.”

Tiberius places the pomegranate on a plate, stands from his couch, and puts his arm around the old philosopher and escorts him from the room. When they are out of earshot of the other diners, he leans in close:

“I fear they will never come around.”

“You must try,” whispers Blossius.

“And if I fail?”

“Things will become untidy. But we will press on.”

“It was an excellent recitation, Magister. Whether it had the desired effect, we shall see.” Blossius nods, then takes his leave. Tiberius returns to the triclinium, where his mother again eyes him with impatience. His guests pick leisurely from a newly delivered plate of honeyed wheat cakes. Soon they will be too drunk and drowsy to hear what he has to say. Climbing back onto his dining couch, Tiberius takes up once more his waxy-skinned fruit. “Consider the pomegranate,” he says, as if to himself. “A sphere, more or less. A thing so whole, so singular, and yet bursting with many handfuls of ruby seeds. The fruit itself is inedible. The seeds constitute its value, just as it is the people who constitute the Public Matter.”

“Ye gods, Tiberius, let’s not talk politics,” says Marcus.

“I could eat a hundred of these,” mumbles Titus, his mouth half full of cake, crumbs falling from his lips to tumble down from his jiggling chins.

---

8 *res publica* in Latin, from which we derive the English word “republic.”
“Is this meal too rude for you, Marcus?” asks Tiberius.

“I’m afraid I’m too rude for it.”

“Is this wine too poor?”

“Your mother grows wonderful grapes, as everyone knows,” says Publius.

“You’re too kind,” says Cornelia, but she is looking instead to her son, who has stood from his couch.

“Are these couches too simple?” he says. “These lamps too dim? These slaves too plain faced?”

“What are you getting at?” asks Marcus.

“My mother and I own property within the legal limits, and we live very well, even by your own estimation. I have invited you here tonight to emphasize exactly this point. And to tell you that tomorrow I mean to introduce a law in the Senate on the matter of land ownership.”

“Come now. Don’t spoil the evening,” says Marcus, finishing a cup of wine, smiling and shaking his head.

“Your views are well known to us,” says his father. “And ours are well known to you.”

“I propose only to enforce regulations which already exist.”

“Regulations which been widely ignored for decades.”

“Forgetten for decades.”

“Yes, forgotten by everyone, or at least by everyone with sense,” says Marcus.
“And for good reason,” says Publius. “If I offer to pay a higher rent for a plot of public land than some farmhand, why shouldn’t the treasury lease it to me? Does my more generous contribution to the civic coffers not benefit the state?”

“Not if we create a citizenry of vagrants,” says Tiberius. “We will have no one left to tax.”

“Isn’t it amusing, father, how our gracious host—so renowned for his gentle, composed temperament—hurts headlong into histrionics at the first mention of civic injustice.”

“Cornelia, you can’t possibly condone this nonsense.”

“I’m afraid we have rather different ideas when it comes to bringing up children, Publius.”

“Already more slaves than citizens till our lands,” says Tiberius. “Soon one hundred men will own all of Italy, while one hundred thousand flock to the city.”

“It is not for you or anyone else to tell me how to spend my own coin,” says Publius. Titus Annius rubs his belly and belches in assent.

“Bad talk spoils good wine,” says Marcus, sighing and holding up his crystal cup for a slave to refill. Tiberius puts down his pomegranate. In his peripheral vision, behind the couches, Horatius Cocles stands painted in plaster, watching Tiberius with wide eyes of blue and white pigment.

“Tomorrow I intend to put forth a law, with or without your support. A policy favored by the Plebian Council and by a significant faction in the Senate, as you well know: any man who possesses more than the legal 500 iugera of land shall have those
superfluous lands appropriated by the state and distributed to the citizens for rent or for sale.”

“Jove’s beard. You’re serious.”

“I am.”

“That’s quite enough,” says Publius, his face reddening despite his sobriety.

“Will you consider it?”

“I worry for you, my friend.”

“You know me, Marcus. Would I act so boldly without good reason?”

“You put too much stock in Blossius’s stories, I’ve always said so. Now I fear these fables of foolish Phrygians have filled your head with ideas that may prove unlucky indeed.”

“You Octavii care more for your estates than for Rome.”

“I do care for Rome,” says Marcus, looking truly hurt.

“You care for banquets and music and chariot races.”

“I remember those people too. The ones we met on the road to Hispania.”

“I think I’ve had quite enough food. And quite enough of this.” Publius stands from his couch and thrusts a finger at Tiberius. “It is bad hospitality to lecture one’s guests. And I warn you: do not press this matter with the senate. Already a large faction wants to see you exiled for your cowardice in Numantia.”

“Count yourself lucky that rabble came to your rescue,” Titus adds.

“By ‘rabble,’ you refer to the soldiers of Rome, and their wives, their friends,” says Tiberius.
“They saved us too, father.”
“A disgrace that pains me even now. We should have fought like men.”
“Come on, Marcus,” says Titus, lumbering unsteadily to his feet.
“It grows late,” says Publius. He calls for his own slaves to grab their cloaks and prepare the horses. One by one, the guests leave the triclinium. Only Marcus turns his face to Tiberius. His flushed cheeks—normally so cheerful—seem now to burn with shame, and then he too is gone without a word.

Cornelia leans forward in her stiff wooden chair, her olive skin smooth, her dark hair put up in ornate coils, shiny in the lamplight though it is shot through with gray. Tiberius falls back upon the velvet cushion. His mother purses her lips and raises her sharp chin.

“It was not the disaster you feared,” she said, gesturing to the newly vacated dining couches. Tiberius says nothing. Instead he takes up a small dagger from one of the tables and, holding the bottom of the pomegranate, slices through the flesh to remove first the crown and then the bottom. After discarding these scraps, he works the knife again into the fruit, sawing through the waxy red exterior up to the white pith, scoring several long cuts running up and down the fruit, as he has seen servants do many times before. A young man in a slave’s tunic steps out from the shadows.

“My lord, please allow me,” he says. But Tiberius turns the pomegranate about in his hand as if he has heard nothing and begins cutting another seam into the skin. He then puts down the dagger. Focusing intently, he begins to pull at the fruit until a section comes neatly away to reveal dozens of teardrop seeds enmeshed in innards of pith.
Tiberius pauses—the seeds are like rubies glinting from dull gray ore—and his hand comes away sticky with deep red droplets.

“You knew Publius Octavius was a lost cause,” says Cornelia with stern persistence. Her emerald eyes, it seems, have not left her son’s face. “And Marcus may still come around.”

Perplexed, Tiberius sighs, picking at the pomegranate with his thumb and index finger. The seeds are rooted firmly in the pulpy white web. Though he longs to crush one between his teeth, to feel it burst, to taste the rich juice running down his tongue, he cannot bear to ask a slave to help him break the fruit apart. He has grown sick of being waited on. In the city, Tiberius knows, displaced farmers sit drinking in taverns, urchins sit on temple steps, whores lean gossiping over balcony rails, all whispering his name, calling him a hero of the plebs, a man of the people—but in truth he is no different from those who oppress them.

Tiberius digs his fingers hard beneath a fat clump of seeds. He clenches his teeth. He gives a sharp tug. At once he can feel the sticky juice, he can the fleshy pith tearing from the fruit to dangle in pale shreds, and in his hands he finds only five fractured, crumpled shells, all dark and lusterless now that they have been drained of liquid.

“Have you finished with your stage prop, Tiberius? You’ve gone and soiled your tunic,” Cornelia points, shaking her head. It’s true. A deep red stain swells across the folds of wool, just under his breast. If Marcus were to return, he would think that his warning about the law had come too late. Tiberius discards the half-mangled
pomegranate. He feels at his tunic, and it pains him to think how many silver coins the wool had cost, all perfect and white, now marred by his carelessness.

Hurried footsteps echo from outside. Tiberius looks up from his tunic to see Blossius panting in the doorway, his back slightly bowed with age.

“They linger outside preparing the horses.” He says in Latin tinged with the lilting melodic pitches of Greek. “You can hear them from the study.” Tiberius stands at once and hurries to the door, but the philosopher stops him, placing one slender, shaking hand firmly on his shoulder. “No matter what comes, you cannot despair.”

“What about Marcus? We can do nothing against the veto.”

“Remember: he is a Tribune of the Plebs, not a Lapdog of the Senate.” With this, Blossius releases his pupil, and Tiberius hurries from the triclinium, out through the open courtyard, where the moon, glowing softly between drifts of gray clouds, casts shifting shadows of statues and olive trees even as it illuminates the rippling waters of the central fountain, and up to the dark room at the back of the villa where he had his lessons as a small boy.

The lamps here are dark. There is only the light of night sky to splash, deep shades of blue splashing across the old fresco of Homer and the Muses, filtering in through the open-air window, accompanied by a cool breeze and by a drifting murmur of deep, quiet voices:

“You know Caius Laelius, don’t you?” says one, rather louder than the others, perhaps Titus Annius. Tiberius creeps closer to the window.

“Yes, old Caius the Prudent,” says Marcus.
“How do you think he got such a pretty name? He was pushing for a very similar motion some years ago, but when he saw how the *optimates*[^1] were taking it, Caius had enough brains to back down.”

“That’s precisely what I was trying to tell him in there. I am always fond of a good joke, it is true, but I meant what I said. I fear for him.” Marcus sighs, and Tiberius crouches at the window, his heart beating, trying to still his breathing. He knows Marcus is quite drunk.

“It was in very bad taste to bring it up,” says Publius, his voice low and hoarse.

“As if we’d lay down and deed away all our lands to the rabble,” says Titus.

“Imagine!”

“Don’t sneer. This is grave business.”

“Surely you don’t think such a law could pass in the Senate?”

“He has won over many of the lesser families. And his influence among the rabble is considerable.”

“Especially after Numantia,” says Marcus.

“He will be stopped, one way or the other,” says Publius, his voice full of gravity.

Under the window, Tiberius feels an icy knife in his guts.

“What are you implying, Father?”

[^1]: “The Best Men.” A traditionalist faction of noblemen in the mid-to-late Republic whose power derived from the strength of their bloodlines and the support of patrician senators and knights—as opposed to the *populares*, or “People’s Men,” who gained the support of the Plebs and, on extreme occasions, the mob.
“I say only that you must stand tomorrow before the Plebian Council. You must stand as his co-Tribune and veto the law before it can reach the Senate floor. For the good of Rome, but for his own good too.”

“Of course he will veto,” says Titus, with a drunken hiccup. “Won’t you Marcus?” Tiberius closes his eyes and waits in silence, feeling the chill air rushing down into the room and across his cheeks. Leaning against the wall, he listens as the three men shuffle up onto their mounts. He waits for Marcus’s response. Somewhere beyond the study, reins jangle and hooves clop against the ground. “It’s about time,” Titus mutters, presumably to the stable boy. Marcus remains silent.

“You will veto the law,” says Publius. It is difficult to know whether or not it is not a question. There is a long pause. Tiberius can hear the horses trotting along the other side of the wall, growing louder and louder as their weight pounds against the earth.

“Of course,” says Marcus at last. “Do you think me mad?” His voice is in Tiberius’s ear. Drunk but earnest. Tiberius knows if he were to stand from his crouch he would see his friend’s slender legs in the window, dangling from the saddle.

In this moment, despite having imbibed very little, Tiberius feels drunk. He shuts his eyes and slouches down onto his buttocks, his fingers brushing along the cracks between the cold clay tiles of the floor mosaic.

It is a bright afternoon, and the city’s stench, the city’s sounds, the city’s red clay bricks are all around them. Rotting fish and horse shit. Shabby wooden wheels knocking against poorly paved alleyways. Murmuring, giggling, chattering, weeping, boasting, cursing, praying—and at every corner, some butcher or cobbler quoting prices and
shouting slogans: *Cheapest papyrus north of Alexandria! Lovely white ewes, tied up and ready for sacrifice!*

They walk together side by side, the two co-Tribunes, Tiberius and Marcus. Eyes follow them as they pass, drawn to ornate hems of their togas. A circle of laughing children falls silent and scatters before them. A potter stops to stare at them, his hands caked with dry orange clay, carrying under his arm a hefty amphora hastily painted with smudgy black geometric patterns. There is nothing, in the early afternoon light, to conceal the filth and grime of this place. A cadre of flies orbits a shank of lamb; a slave boy’s urine trickles between the rough cobblestones; and the bright blue eyes of a blacksmith look out from a face like a bust made entirely of soot.

Normally Tiberius would never dream of taking Marcus here. But Blossius was right: he has to try something.

“Quite the detour,” says Marcus. “It looks very different in the light.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“Once or twice. But a real gentleman only visits this street in the dead of night, and even then only to access his favorite brothel.”

“I want to show you something.”

“Not another lesson in ethics, Tiberius. Last night was quite enough, thank you very much. My father wouldn’t let me hear the end of it.”

“It won’t be long.”

“It can’t be. The Council meets in two hours.” The street begins to narrow, winding steeply downhill between two towering constructions of mud brick tenements.
Cracks run up and down the walls, and pigeons perch up on the roofs, bleating like distant sheep. Tiberius watches Marcus count the seven rows of small open windows stacked one upon the other.

“They live like hive insects,” he says with some mixture of pity and disgust, craning his neck to see.

“They are lucky to have roofs over their head,” says Tiberius. Up ahead, an old woman in a dirty brown tunic leans out of a window on the fifth story holding what at first appears to be a boulder of some considerable size but soon—as she extends the object out over the street, grasping it by handles on either side, and overturns it—reveals itself to be a chamber pot. The warm putrid contents splatter upon the pavement. As the two friends pass the point of impact, they cannot but overhear a heated argument that has erupted between the woman and an old freedman on the street about the proper disposal of waste. Marcus looks uneasy. His golden heirloom dagger glints in the sunlight.

“As thrilling as it’s been to roam the slums like Jove and Mercury in mortal guise, why don’t we—” Marcus stops, noticing something on the side of the tenement wall. “Look,” he says, pointing to a rude, jagged inscription scratched into the crumbling bricks: *T GRACCHUS WILL RETURN US OUR LANDS*. Embarrassed, Tiberius takes his friend’s arm and guides him away from the wall. But the bottom of the hill they come to a cramped plaza where a modest statue of the Scipio Nasica Serapio—the new High Priest, widely known for his interest in land speculation—stands on pedestal with a wax tablet hanging about his marble neck by a cord of sheep intestines. Marcus and Tiberius approach to see the words written down in the wax: *500 IUGERA IS PLENTY ENOUGH.*
“I’m afraid you have more support in the back alleys than you do in the Senate,” says Marcus. Still, Tiberius thinks he sees something like fear in Marcus’s eyes.

“Almost there,” he says as he leads his friend down another side street. They have wandered far from the Forum, out toward the fringes of the city. The noise fades, and there is a long silence between them.

“I can’t support it,” says Marcus as they come into the shadow of another tenement construction. “But I know that you mean well.” Tiberius sighs. To their left, on a clay brick wall covered in graffiti, among an array of phallic sketches and profanity, he notices yet a second instance of his name: HELP US, T GRACCHUS.

“You said something last night,” he says, turning from the wall.

“Yes, something about fondling breasts, wasn’t it?”

“You said you said you remembered the refugees we met on the road.”

“That was after quite a few cups, if I recall.”

“Be serious, Marcus.”

“I thought you never knew me to be serious.”

“You meant what you said.” They continue down the narrow street. Marcus fingers the hilt of his dagger and says nothing. After several blocks, hey come around the corner of a fishmonger’s shop and out into another plaza, and though this one is larger the last by far, it seems there is less space, less light, less air because everywhere there people and shabby patchwork tents fashioned from cowhide or old tunic scraps or torn wineskins. Some of these structures are supported by ropes tied to statues and signposts. Others are staked in places where paving stones have been pried up to expose the earth.
Within the tents Tiberius can make out shapes moving: the shadows of women slicing fennel bulbs, men rolling cheap wooden dice, sick old men dying on cots. These sad little dwellings obstruct storefronts and apartment entryways all the way around the plaza. Several feet from the two noblemen, a crowd of noisy vagrants swarms around an aqueduct fountain filling rude pots and waterskins. Many of them would have been farmers once, Tiberius thinks. Their arms are lean and muscular. The sun has weathered and bronzed their faces. Farther down around the edge of the plaza, another mass of people is gathering, lining up to enter a modest Temple to Vesta hewn from dull, rugged stone; smoke rises from the hearth, escaping from some opening to funnel up into the blue afternoon sky into a bulbous black vine that looms over the strange little city-within-a-city. At each of the junctures where a street meets the plaza, two city guards stand armed with spears.

“A barbarian military camp in the middle of the city,” says Marcus, shouting to be heard over the din of so many human voices.

“More come every day,” says Tiberius. Pushing through the crowded spaces between campsites and carefully stepping over staked ropes, they begin to make their way toward the center of the square where a white marble statue of Brutus10 can be seen towering over the tents. Marcus looks around, taking it all in, chewing on his bottom lip and fingering his dagger.

---

10 This would be Brutus the first consul, of course, who overthrew King Tarquinius Superbus to end the monarchy and establish the Roman Republic. Not to be confused with that other Brutus who stabbed T Gracchus’s spiritual successor some 476 years later.
“It is rather unseemly, I admit, to see so many Roman citizens living like barbarians.”

“It’s up to us to do something, Marcus.”

“Who are we to say how much land a man of respectable birth should own?”

“The old laws were written for good reason. To stymie the caprices of avaricious men.”

“You ask me to betray my family.”

“I do.”

“My own father.”

“This is bigger than us,” Tiberius shouts over the crowd, gesturing to include the tents and makeshift hovels on every side. “Can’t you see that?”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that if you had a father yourself, you’d understand.” Tiberius stops.

Marcus looks him boldly in the eyes. From open tent flaps, grimy woman and children peer out to watch the two of them. It is obvious to everyone in the plaza that they don’t belong in this place. They begin walking again, silently, until they come to the pedestal where Brutus stands, twenty feet tall, brandishing a short sword and lifting his cleft chin defiantly. His eyes seem to follow Tiberius in the way the eyes of statues sometimes do. Around his neck hangs another writing tablet inscribed with the words, *FINISH WHAT I BEGAN, T GRACCHUS*. Marcus walks up, climbs the pedestal, stretching to reach the
tablet and smearing wax with the palm of his hand until the jagged imprecation has vanished entirely.

“You owe them nothing,” he says. Tiberius is about to respond, but a cry rings out from behind.

“Look!” A skinny young man approaches, thrusting out his finger. Marcus steps down from the pedestal only to find that the man is not pointing at him. “It’s him. It’s Tiberius Gracchus.” At once a murmur passes through the camp. Tiberius looks around to see refugees crawling out from their tents, merchants abandoning their stalls, and soldiers leaving their posts to come see. Soon there is a constellation of human eyes on him—those of Brutus were only the first—and he is reminded of Numantia, treading the yellow grass, crossing the open space between the two armies. He suddenly feels that the afternoon has grown very hot. Marcus shuffles closer to him until they stand shoulder to shoulder with their backs against the base of the statue, even as the crowd circles them. Dirty people in ragged tunics. Their emaciated arms like spider limbs. Many have no shoes. Others seem to have more shoes than teeth. A deep voice carries over the crowd: “That’s him all right. Served under him in Carthage.” Tiberius scans the faces. There are perhaps fifty or sixty. And sure enough, he recognizes many of the refugees from his days in the army. Many of them are still young. Farmer’s sons. He remembers nights drinking wine with them and playing knucklebones by torchlight. He remembers walking down through the ranks before a battle and seeing these very same faces staring sternly ahead awaiting the order to attack.

And here they are now. This is what they fought for.
A boy of perhaps sixteen summers pushes through to the front of the crowd. His cheeks are gaunt, his eyes are blue, and his hair is dull blond.

“Gaius,” mumbles Tiberius, remembering the boy’s name, which his little brother happens to share.

“It’s him,” the boy says quietly. “He saved my life in Numantia.”

“He saved my husband,” says someone else.

“He saved us all.”

“They worship you as a god,” Marcus mutters, shaking his head.

“Why have you come, Tribune?”

“Are you going to give those bastards in the senate a piece of our mind?” someone cries. Tiberius raises a hand to quiet the crowd.

“I’ve come to show my friend here your troubles,” he says, and this brings another round of shouting and questioning.

“We are honored by your visit,” says Gaius.

“Look here,” Tiberius says to Marcus, gesturing to the boy. “Gaius’s father fell in the service of Rome, and how do we reward his sacrifice? We snatch away his home. We leave his widow and his son with nowhere to go.” A troubled expression crosses Marcus’s normally cheerful face.

“You’ve made your point,” he says.

“You’ll reconsider?”

“I can’t say.”
“If you veto this bill, you condemn these people to vagrancy and worse.” At this, another murmur passes among the people. Marcus looks about nervously.

“Let’s go,” he says.

“Not until you give me an answer.”

“You’ll pardon me if I have a little trouble thinking under the present circumstances.” By now the crowd has grown to two or three hundred. Some call out their thanks. Others shout, “Save us, Tribune.” Again Tiberius raises his hand and at once the commotion subsides into a smattering of whispers and murmurs.

“You have all suffered long enough,” he says, placing his hand gently on the sandy blond head of Gaius, the boy from Numantia. “From here my friend and I go to the Plebian Council where this matter of land ownership shall be decided once and for all. May the gods look favorably on us.” Tiberius steps out from under the statue of Brutus the Consul and, with Marcus close behind, begins to make his way through the mob of refugees, who have begun to cheer and howl and pump their fists in the air so that a forest of sunbaked skeletal limbs springs up amongst the tent city. All around them is the stench of peasants, worse even than that of soldiers. And though the people part for Tiberius to allow him passage, the pressing together of so many bodies under the afternoon sun has him perspiring so heavily that moisture from his sweat-stained tunic begins to bleed through to his toga. He feels a hand on his shoulder. It belongs to Marcus, struggling not to get separated amid the chaos of the crowd. As they shuffle forward, the jumbled cheering and hollering congeals into a single two-word chant, like wisps of vapor joining to take the shape of a cloud:
It fills the plaza, *Tiberius Rex, Tiberius Rex*, pounding with enough force, it seems, to rip the tents from their stakes and send them to join the smoke from the Temple of Vesta, billowing up into the afternoon sky. Tiberius shouts for them to stop, crying out that Rome needs no king, only justice. But it is too late. Even as the two Tribunes escape the camp, exiting the plaza down another narrow street that leads back toward the Forum, the chant continues to grow louder behind them:

*Tiberius Rex! Tiberius Rex!*

After walking several blocks, Tiberius stops for a moment and turns to Marcus, who looks sullen and pale, even despite the tinge of pink in his cheeks.

“Don’t judge them too harshly,” says Tiberius.


“You can see what this means to them. They’ve only grown overexcited.” The two men continue walking until the graffiti-scratched walls of tenement buildings give way to the comforting parade of row-houses, with their engaged Corinthian columns and their painted pediments hanging over the doorways. Every few moments Tiberius notices Marcus looking back the way they came, his handsome, boyish face flushed with heat, his full dark hair matted down his brow with sweat. He clutches the gilded hilt of his family dagger so tightly, Tiberius can see the blue veins forking across his pallid left hand.
1. What a Slave Is

It’s getting toward the end of August now, and the past three months spent beneath the roof of my childhood home have proven more difficult than I might have guessed. Whenever I sat working at the big mahogany banquet table or fooling around on my guitar or gazing down from the balcony upon the little courtyard with its stone cherub, Mom would tap me on the shoulder and, as casually as if she were commenting on the grey weather, utter the most abhorrent phrase in the English language (at least to a dilettante):

“No you make yourself useful?”

“Why don’t scholars set fire to libraries?” I once replied.

“Tyler,” she said, “you’re depressed. You’ll feel better if you keep busy.”

“I am not depressed. And even if I were—which I am not—just because it works for you doesn’t mean it would work for me.”

It’s been a long couple of months. Much has happened. Much has changed. But until recently, this nagging remained a maddening constant. At first I thought it was her way of distracting herself from her grief over Lupa’s demise; but now I see that my presence in her house reminds her each and every day of her failure to raise me the way she wanted. To make me adaptable like her, as she likes to put it.
More than once I have crept into the living room with my laptop and stood beneath Ramsey’s elk-antler chandelier where a Persian carpet covers the hardwood floor: a 19th century piece purchased at an auction in New York, dyed the burgundy of some Qajar Shah’s noble blood and filigreed with flowers of golden thread. Flowers within flowers within flowers. I would glance nervously about the big open room to make sure I was alone. Then I’d peel up the rug to expose the secret door to the hidden cellar, which I’d proceed to lift by a tarnished brass ring. I’d creep down into the darkness and carefully adjust the rug above me before pulling the door shut so that the glow of my computer screen bathed the damp wood space with faint blue light. There, in this repository of a Coca-Cola czar’s illicit Roaring Twenties booze—the very same asylum where I first mustered the courage to slip my hand under a girl’s cotton T-shirt—I would work on my Plutarch article undisturbed.

One night I took Mom to Chops. She hadn’t been since Ramsey left, and I worried that going back might dredge up some pretty dark feelings; but when I asked where I might take her to distract her from thoughts of fluffy little Lupa, she insisted on it. She wore a long black dress and pearl earrings. It gave me the impression she was in mourning, and not just about the dog. After we were seated, Mom gave me a long, cool look.

“Why don’t you clean the kitchen,” she said. “Or at least organize the books in the study.”

“I wouldn’t want to put Luz out of a job.”

“Better to get used to taking care of yourself now while we can still afford her.”
“You said we had plenty of money left. What about the cash from my house in Athens?”

“It was barely enough to feed the lawyers.”

“What lawyers?”

“Ramsey didn’t leave us much, darling. But what little remains is like a deer carcass left out to bake in the sun. These are hard times. People are hungry.”

“What people?” I asked, but Mom looked past me to our silver-haired waiter and asked for a bottle of fine Chardonnay. By the time I saw that she wasn’t going to answer, the waiter was back to pour the wine. I leaned forward and tapped her glass. “Then shouldn’t we be cutting back?” She smiled weakly and took a long sip.

“We are cutting back,” she said, folding her silk napkin in her lap. “But I can’t support you forever. Things have changed, like it or not, and you’re going to have to work.” Mom stared into my eyes so intently, she didn’t even notice the waiter passing by to see if we needed more wine. I wanted badly to defend my dilettantism. But looking into Mom’s eyes, large and dull and quivering with long wrinkles at the corners, it struck me how much older she had grown. She had always sworn she’d never dye her hair, but her precisely shaped auburn curls shone just a little too brightly in the flickering light from the candle on our table. I sighed and finished the last of the wine.

“All I wanted was to take advantage of my good fortune,” I said

“You don’t have to work in a cubicle farm. Why don’t you do something you like? What ever happened to academia?”
“Timetables, wages, managerial bureaucracy—industry spoils even the most rewarding of pursuits.”

“I’ve worked since I was fourteen. It hasn’t been all that bad.”

“But it must be. Look at the waiters here, sorry shades of the European servant class. You spend your day attending to the frivolous needs of other men. You have to be polite about it.” I’m afraid I may have raised my voice. Behind me, our gentlemanly waiter gave a tactful cough, covering his mouth with one gloved hand and bearing a tray of plates with the other. Mom had the pork-chops, crowned with a dollop of cinnamon pear and a smattering of sugared cranberries. I went with a dramatically seasoned filet of beef drowning in one of those demi-glace sauces that require hours of reduction. The first bite was so rich it shocked my palette. As I continued to saw my knife through the flubbery lump of flesh, I thought of Ramsey. I couldn’t help it.

“Maybe you think leading this bohemian life makes you the captain of your own ship,” Mom said at last, looking up from her plate. Then, as if reading my mind: “But you have Ramsey to thank for the way you think. Ramsey and that damn trust fund. It’s depending on somebody else to nourish your body and put a roof over your head—that’s what a slave is.”

2. Going to Seed

Then there was the matter of the lawn. Since Ramsey’s disappearance, no one had paid the landscaping company, and the grass had gone to seed, sprouting six-inch stalks like tiny green heads of wheat so that our front yard looked rather like an abandoned field alongside some major interstate. It was one thing for the residents of Buckhead to know
that the once-mighty Ramsey Mansfield had abandoned both his empire and his wife. But for Mom to suffer this blemish on the honor of her house, this flagrant weed-ridden signum of poverty that would soon yellow as the weather grew cooler—that was quite another matter entirely.

“Everyone around here charges an arm and a leg,” she complained one afternoon when she came home from the office. It made sense. There was an infinite demand, even with so many houses on the market, and employing pedigreed landscapers was a matter of local pride. Bankers would boast over happy hour drinks that the man who snipped their hedges was the same fellow who mowed the greens down at the country club. “The lawyers are bad enough,” said Mom. “Bring the gardeners into the mix, and we’ll be ruined within the year.”

“Why not cut our losses? Who cares what the neighbors think?”

“You’ve got to keep up appearances,” she said. “These people are like country gossips. When my Aunt Rosamund was in her bloom, just before the war, it came out that she committed an indiscretion with a black farmhand. Word went around the Baptist sewing circles. When the men went off to France, not one asked for her picture, and fifty years later she died an old maid.”

“Did she really do it?”

“In the loft of a barn apparently.”

“A literal roll in the hay,” I said. “Very saucy.”

“The truth has nothing to do with it. Not once people get to talking.” She sighed, raising her hand to her temple, and again it struck me how old she looked these days.
“I’ll do it.”

“Find a gardener? That’s sweet, but it’s the expense that’s the problem.”

“No, I’ll mow the grass.” This at least dispelled her gloomy expression. She laughed in my face. “How hard can it be? Maybe I won’t win any neighborhood prizes, but I’ll shut people up.” Her sad smile fell from her lips. She gave me a long, discerning look. Then she embraced me, overwhelming me with floral perfume, and though her composure never cracked, I knew her eyes were filling with tears. Only then did I realize how brazenly my offer flew in the face of my own philosophy.

But what the hell. One must make exceptions in times of crisis.

So I went to buy a lawnmower. I would have preferred a family store run by some lovable red-faced fellow in overalls, assisted by his beautiful Southern Bell daughter. But there was only Home Depot. Upon entering this cavern of brown cement, I found myself assaulted by the smell of sawdust and brushed steel, and it occurred to me that I had never before set foot in a hardware store. It was a weekday. More employees stood around chatting in bright orange aprons than customers perusing shelves for obscure breeds of light bulb. I found myself in strange country. No place for aristocratic pseudointellectuals. I wandered around baffled for nearly a half-hour, like a monk lost in a foreign library of heretical texts, navigating the labyrinth of numbered aisles, hemmed in by shelves of pliers, claw hammers, trowels, nails, dimmers, switches, plywood, laminate flooring, buckets of paint, and buckets of plaster—vast, towering reliquaries of pragmatism—until at last a tall black girl in an orange apron found me in the tools aisle, paralyzed by the staggering variety of Allen wrenches and socket head screws.
“You need help,” she said.

“What?” It took a few seconds to realize that she meant it as a question.

She led me back across the store. Right by the entrance, I found a menagerie of lawn equipment. Weed whackers, leaf blowers, push mowers, and riding vehicles of all shapes and sizes, painted in shiny bright reds and greens. One caught my fancy: a riding lawnmower with two cup holders, whose plush leather seat rivaled the most luxurious of armchairs. To do practical work while with my legs crossed, sipping a beer in the sun, rolling up and down Mom’s yard like a patrician in his sedan chair, born on the backs of slaves, only without the dirty business of human oppression—an elegant compromise.

I stooped to inspect the laminated placard for the price. Over double the budget Mom had given me.

“You alright?” asked the girl in the orange apron.

“Well,” I said, groping for the words. But I thought better of it. I looked ridiculous enough as it was. No need to tell her that this was the first time since I was ten years old that I wanted something I couldn’t afford to buy.

In the end, I came home with a red push mower and an orange plastic jug of gasoline. I suppose I should have been happy that it had a motor. The sun had nearly set, and it was getting cool. Mom stood on the colonnaded porch looking out over the country club with her sketching easel propped on the railing. When I got out of the car, she put down her pencil and joined me. Together we went to hoist the mower down from the car. We each gripped one side of the greasy undercarriage, heaving with both hands, clenching our teeth and grunting as we set the machine down roughly on the driveway. I
must confess, Mom could lift almost as much as I could: the antiquarian favors the mind over the body.

“One of those investment bankers that’s suing me called the house,” said Mom. “Livia Moore.”

“What did she want?”

“She wouldn’t say. She wanted you.”

“Me?” I couldn’t help but laugh and shake my head.

“She wouldn’t say. But she sounded relatively young.”

“Maybe I should tell Aiko. Then she’d know how I feel when she plays shows with that blond guitarist.”

“They’re just friends,” said Mom.

“Who?”

“Aiko and Dennis”

“How would you know?”

“I asked her on the internet.”

“Of course you did.” I shook my head, pacing around the new mower, sizing up the beast. Thought it was too late in the day to attack the lawn, I wanted to play with my new toy. The white plastic wheels reminded me of a red and yellow Fischer Price car I had when I was a toddler, back when it was just me and Mom. The kind with no floor that you sit in and propel by kicking your feet against the ground. My new mower’s motor would have looked more appropriate on a speed boat, and a white canvas bag
jutted from the rear like a goiter. Perhaps if I poke it with a stick, I thought, it will spring to life.

“I’m a grown ass man,” I said under my breath. A pull-chord extended from the mower’s body up to the aluminum handle. Grasping a plastic grip, I gave the chord a few good tugs. But the beast remained dormant.

“Darling, do you not know how to crank a lawnmower?”

“Do you?”

“Who do you think mowed the grass when I was on my own? You haven’t even filled the tank.” She laughed gently, patting me on the shoulder. Then she showed me where the gas cap was. I retrieved the heavy plastic jug from my car, holding it above the mower and canting it slightly so that a stream of gasoline flowed down from the nozzle like amber bourbon to splash at the bottom of the tank, filling my head with petroleum fumes. She showed me how to prime the carburetor by pressing a rubber button three times and how to operate the crank. Holding the mower’s metal clutch firmly to the main grip with one I hand, I grabbed the chord with the other and gave it a couple of yanks. The engine shuddered to life. The beast awoke.


I had to admit, I was impressed. How easily I forgot that the woman who raised me—the refined patrician socialite with a love of Russian literature and a knack for pencil drawing—was no stranger to the coarse nobility of manual labor.

3. The Myth of Sisyphus
The next day I rummaged through the ancillary artifacts I had brought back with me from Athens: the skiing photo, the Die Hard DVD, the SEC investigator’s business card, and yes, the veiled threat from Livia Moore. “If you become aware of any information pertinent to his location,” she wrote, “it is in both of our interests for you to inform me at the soonest opportunity.” At the top of the fine cottony paper was the embossed letterhead with her office phone number. When I called, a girl answered in a loud peppy voice, and my first thought was that Mom was right. She was young. Then she asked for my name, and I realized that I was speaking to a secretary.

“This is Tyler Cloff,” I said. “I’m returning Ms. Moore’s call from yesterday.”

“One moment please,” said the secretary with far more cheerfulness than the situation warranted. I was beginning to think she’d hung up on me when she came back on the line. “Mr. Cloff, due to the sensitive nature of your business, Mrs. Moore would prefer to speak with you in person. She can send a car for you around 3:30 this afternoon.”

“That would be fine. Do I need to give you my address?”

“That won’t be necessary, Mr. Cloff. Thank you for your time!”

That afternoon I sparred with the lawnmower. In one corner, a twenty-six year old human male—an enthusiast of Latin grammar, lover of history, and proud 21st century court dandy. In the other, an assemblage of steel, plastic, and rubber, optimally arranged for the manicuring of unruly grass—the mechanical manifestation of mundane toil.

I pushed the mower out onto the lawn. It was a bright August day. Clutching the machine’s metal handle, which had already grown quite hot in the sun, I felt myself on
the precipice of a new life. The Hobby House in Athens was gone. The trust fund that had
defined the trajectory of my ambitions was closed to me. Before I had lived like the
second son of a great lord, a man with a bottomless purse and limitless time to kill,
leading a life of infinite possibility and negligible responsibility. Now I was a
disinherited. Here I was grasping the greasy handle of a lawnmower. There was no
denying it now. My habit of cheerful indolence, if left unchecked, would ruin my family.

Blades of grass came up to my ankle, punctuated by stalks with nubbiny
flowering heads. A tilted green expanse. Because our house sat, as I have mentioned, like
a Greek temple atop a hill, the entire yard was on a steep incline, and I cursed my new
pecuniary limitations for saddling me with the push mower rather than the gleaming
behemoth with the plush leather chair and the cup holders. Clutching the starter bar, I
gave the crank two hard tugs, and the machine revved to life. The vibrations of the motor
sent tremors up my arms. They caused my teeth to chatter. Birds chirped. Sports cars and
sedans glided up and down the street. Buckhead trophy-wives in tight shorts jogged past,
whipping their (predominately blond) ponytails back and forth across their lithe, sweaty
shoulders. Already the odor of gasoline made my eyes water.

Tyler Cloff, mowing the lawn. Tough titty, said the kitty.

Gripping the handle, I reached my right thumb down and curled around a second
protruding metal bar, the drive lever. I pulled it up, and the mower’s wheels began to
turn. The contraption puttered forward, taking me with it like a horse drawing a buggy.
Whirring blades concealed in its undercarriage thwacked against riotous herbage,
muscling through the suburban wilderness and leaving behind a wide swath of
orderliness. Machine crept forward. Man followed, with comically slow steps. Up the hill we went together until we came to a bed of multihued flowers Mom had planted below the front porch. I tugged weakly at the mower, but to no avail. On we went, surging forward to sate the metal beast’s hunger for hybridized tulips. I pulled again, putting my back into it, swearing to myself. No, horse, I’m afraid the coachman is in charge here. The thing began to curve away from the flowerbed, but the arc was too broad. I unclenched my thumb, letting the drive lever fall back down. The wheels slowed, and the mower came to a stop just before plowing into the mulch.

I struggled to maneuver the contraption back around until I managed to turn 90 degrees. Again I engaged the drive and again we lurched forward, mowing along the edge of the flowerbed. It was then I noticed the two grinning Hispanic teens watching me from the next yard over. They wore matching green-t shirts emblazoned with the phrase “Arcadia Landscaping” and soaked dark with sweat. One had a weed whacker; the other a leaf blower. They held these instruments idly with one hand, like bored legionnaires on guard duty, propping themselves up against their spears.

“You shouldn’t go that way,” called weed whacker, raising his free hand to his mouth.

“And don’t try big turns,” said leaf blower. Neither had much of an accent. I stopped in my tracks. They probably attended (or were supposed to attend) the public high school by the Latino strip mall across Peachtree St.

“You need a pattern,” said weed whacker.
“Go up to the edge,” said leaf blower. “Then spin the mower around and come straight back.”

“Up and down, up and down.”

“Like painting a house.”

“If you’ve ever painted a house.” They both laughed, and I felt myself reddening.

“And you might want to take off that fancy shirt,” called leaf blower. “You’ll have a heat stroke.”

Despite my embarrassment, I couldn’t help but smile. With the mower’s engine still running, I unbuttoned my shirt and tossed it up onto the edge of the porch. Underneath, I wore a white undershirt, already graying with perspiration. Then I manhandled the mower back around away from the flower bed and started back down the hill. Step by step. One foot in front of the other. When I reached the curb at the bottom of the hill I spun around, a little more fluidly this time, and repeated my initial ascent. So it went, up and down the hill, like Sisyphus. A mindless occupation, as I had feared. But after a few circuits I had forgotten the trembling grip of the mower in my hand. I had forgotten chirping of birds and the heat on my back and the strange looks that the jogging trophy wives cast in my direction. My mind was on Aiko, on the way she used to look in bed with her lacy red underwear, lying on her stomach and reading a novel propped against her pillow; my mind was on Plutarch’s Tiberius Gracchus, sitting at a sumptuous banquet, bemoaning the plight of peasants kicked off their own land and battling senators—his dearest friends, his own class—fighting them tooth-and-nail over plates of asparagus and goblets of expensive wine; my mind was on Jim Tappman and his son,
little Travis, and whether or not they remained in Georgia; and on Ramsey, my errant substitute father, skiing ahead of me, weaving twin furrows to guide me down the frigid slope, like the trail of neatness in the wake of my mower.

At last, laughter from the neighbor’s yard brought me back to the world of August heat and petroleum fumes.

“Hey, he’s got it,” called the kid with the weed whacker.

“Dios mio, es un milagro,” called leaf blower.

“Muchas gracias,” called Tyler Cloff, mower of lawns. I was over halfway done, and I couldn’t help but smile at the plane of tamed grass, exactly two inches tall, that I had shaped. The pleasures of simple labor. I had always dismissed them as fictions propagated by idlers lounging on cushions and sipping good wine, invented to placate the working classes. After all, someone had to keep the aqueducts running and the roads from crumbling and the bread from running out. But perhaps Camus was right. Perhaps we must imagine that Sisyphus is happy, though he toils in the black pit of Tartarus. That the struggle toward the summit itself is enough to fill a man’s heart.

Then, as I came back up to the front porch, a black sedan pulled into our driveway: Livia Moore’s gofer. I pulled out my phone from my pocket to check the time: three thirty on the nose. Something about the car struck me as ominous—the black tinted windows, the hearse-like design of the cab. The sky shone blue; the newly mowed grass, a vibrant green. Et in Arcadio ego.
I killed the lawnmowers engine and grabbed my button-down shirt. The driver stepped out of the car and opened the rear door with a black gloved hand, waiting for me to step inside.

4. Scylla and Charybdis

The driver was a black man wearing sunglasses and a black suit. Charon, I called him in my mind. His head was so perfectly bald, it reflected what little light invaded the black sedan. Sitting in the tenebrous back seat, it took me quite some time to adjust my eyes from the midday sun. I slipped on my button down. My undershirt was still soaked with sweat.

“Any idea why your employer wants to see me?” I asked him.

“Sorry sir,” he said in a deep baritone without glancing back. “I have instructions to refrain from conversation.” So, Hades had cut out his ferryman’s tongue. I crossed my arms and looked out the tinted window, watching the green woods and stone manors of Buckhead pass. Off we went down Peachtree Street, making our way downtown. Soon country club fairways gave way to towering Catholic churches and luxury apartments; then to expensive bars and music venues where I used to take Aiko; and then to the Woodruff art center, the Margaret Mitchell house, and the arabesque Fox Theatre, whose marquis advertised a moderately well-known rap artist. At some point I texted Mom, letting her know where I was going.

Our destination, as it turned out, was 191 Peachtree Tower—one of the more interesting buildings in the city, largely thanks to its twin crowns of enormous columns, which from the sidewalk looked like temples in the sky. Charon directed me to the
express elevator, activated it with some sort of special key, and left me to my own
devices.

Moore’s office was on the 45th floor. I’d expected something spare. A space
where everything was ovular, postmodern, and made of glass. But as it turned out, the
tastes of my host were more old fashioned: oak paneled walls, recessed lighting, Winslow
Homer knockoffs with little boats tossed about on stormy seas, and a shelf of whiskey
bottles, jiggers, and glassware. Four armchairs sat arrayed around an unlit stone fireplace.
In keeping with the theme, Moore’s desk was oak and unabashedly masculine, all the
way down to its huge clawed feet. The desk chair faced away from the desk toward an
enormous window. Although the chair’s back was to me as I came in, I could see
Moore’s bony elbows protruding out onto the leather arms and bending at a sharp angle,
as if her hands were clasped in prayer. Even as I made my way forward, she remained
gazing out over the sprawl of midtown Atlanta.

“Ms. Moore?” I said, approaching her desk. I wondered if I stank from mowing
the lawn. The chair swiveled around. Livia Moore was a tall, bony woman in her early
thirties. She wore an androgynous black suit, and was indeed sitting with her hands
together. But not in prayer. Rather, she steepled her long, spindly digits together in
rumination, balancing her sharp chin on the tips of her thumbs. Her eyes were beady. Her
short, straight hair was the color of dead grass. But what struck me most was the bone
structure of her face: angular, gaunt, with sockets too big for her eyes. Like a cobra skull
I once saw at the Museum of Natural History in D.C. Her absurdly long, slender neck
reinforced this impression. Even so, she was almost beautiful, in an ice queen sort of way.

“Mr. Cloff, I hear that you have been looking for your father,” she said.

“I hear that you’re suing my mother.” I took a seat across from her.

“There are documents signed with your mother’s name, implicating her in fraud. But let’s not get things off on the wrong foot,” she said. Her pronunciation was impeccable. I could see her tongue clicking t’s against the roof her mouth, and with every other syllable, veins bulged slightly against the taut, half-translucent skin of her neck.

“We share a similar goal.”

“I thought your goal was to bleed my family dry.”

“I simply want my money back. I will admit, the authenticity of your mother’s signatures is uncertain.”

“Because she’s innocent.”

“Her innocence is immaterial. The point is, a legal battle to recover my investment would be long and costly. By the time we win a judgment—if we win—it seems unlikely that she would still have the means to pay.” Her eyes followed my every movement. I could see where she was going with this.

“You want me to help you find Ramsey.”

“It would save you and your mother a lot of unnecessary pain.”

“What happens to him if you do catch up to him?” Something in the way I posed this question prompted Moore to raise her chin from her steepled fingers and laugh softly to herself. A chilling tableau.
“Mr. Cloff, I’m an investment banker, not a James Bond villain. I mean simply to prosecute him in court,” she said, producing a long cigarette, which she lit with a gold lighter and held between her bony first and second fingers.

“If you convict him, you get your money back. But misappropriating a multimillion dollar investment—that sounds like a lot of jail time.”

“A possible secondary outcome, yes.”

“Sending one’s own father up the river. Sounds almost like patricide.”

“Perhaps that depends on the father in question. Still, it’s a highly unlikely outcome.”

“It doesn’t seem highly unlikely to me.”

“He and I will work something out before taking the matter to court,” she said, smiling in her peculiarly calculated manner. “A gentleman’s agreement, he would call it.”

“Let me think about it.”

“Please, Mr. Cloff. Perhaps Bond villains have the time to furnish secret volcano laboratories, to vet, hire, and onboard henchmen, to affix laser beams and manacles to dentist chairs—but investment bankers do not. Will you help me or not?” Her beady eyes fixed on me, reflecting the embers of her cigarette and reading my face as I considered her offer. Perhaps Ramsey had neglected me as a boy. Perhaps he had been unfaithful to Mom. Perhaps he had swindled elderly white millionaires and ejected poor black families from their homes. But this very same cheating, duplicitous megalomaniac had provided me with food and shelter. He gave me an education. He placed his big gruff hand on my shoulder and told me how to be my own man. He was the only father I had. I wasn’t any
more eager to sick Moore on him than I was to stand by while she and the other slighted investors picked my mother apart like crows tugging elastic strings of flesh from a carcass.

     Still. I had to choose.

     “I’ll do what I can,” I said. “But I have a few questions of my own.”

     “Excellent,” she said, snuffing her cigarette in a brass tray, though she had barely smoked it. She smiled a thin smile, stood from the claw-footed desk, and went to the liquor shelf where she poured two glasses of bourbon to inaugurate or partnership. Seeing her up on her feet, I was again struck by her sharp jaw, her slender neck, and her long bony ankles. She was elegant. But it was an unsettling, serpentine elegance. We clinked glasses, I took a long sip, and though the whiskey was excellent—oaky with a hint of vanilla; at once smooth yet fiery—a sickening feeling washed over me. I felt I had made a mistake. Thinking back on it, an old Roman proverb comes to mind: *incidunt in Scyllam cupiens vitare Charybdim*. Out of the frying pan, and into the fire.

5. Hazards of the Trade

     Moore guided me to the fireplace, and we sat in opposite armchairs.

     “I find it curious that your father never mentioned you,” she said.

     “Step-father,” I said.

     “You’re an academic?”

     “Something like that,” I said. Despite the bourbon, I was in no hurry to get personal.
“I almost went down that path myself. I wanted to be a sociologist.” She laughed darkly and drummed her skeletal fingers against her armrest.

“Yet here you are.”

“Yes, here I am.”

I asked about her how she got tangled up with Ramsey. Her father, the famous LA land baron, gave her a few million dollars in fun money for her to follow in his footsteps, buying and selling real estate. So in her late twenties she made her own little fortune. Alexander the Great conquered Persia at 22, I told her. But she dismissed her early success; the line back then was that property was like the RE/MAX balloon; it just went up, up, up. Any orangutan with enough capital to buy land could turn a profit.

All the old mustached men that ruled California real estate—her father’s peers, who joked about her boney buttocks at dinner parties, but never took her seriously as a professional—were content to keep on buying up everything in sight. But Moore was young and sharp. She saw the writing on the wall. She knew these homeowners, these pot-smoking, football loving, lower middle class dreamers. They couldn’t pay their credit card bills, much less their mortgages. Last year she cashed in all her LA investments. She moved to Atlanta to start her hedge fund with one of her father’s old investment banker friends, Timothy Crassus. Although she continued to invest conservatively in real estate, she specialized in mortgage backed securities and arcane derivative instruments tied to real estate ventures.

“Are you familiar with derivative products?” she asked.

“Like betting on a horse,” I said, remembering Bob Lyttelton from the SEC.
“Something like that. And when the horses are sick and lame, it’s an easy bet.”

Soon after coming to the east coast, she learned of Ramsey. She knew he had a hand in the demolition of the Techwood projects before the 1996 Olympics. She knew he built housing for athletes there which GA Tech and GA State later converted into student apartments. She knew he was sitting on a lot of real estate whose value was doomed to decline.

They first met at a party at the governor’s mansion. A bright spring afternoon. Pecan trees in neatly spaced rows fragmented the sunlight. Ramsey stood on the neoclassical back porch surrounded by politicians and other developers. Orbiting satellites. He was telling an anecdote about meeting Ronald Reagan. He had a gravitational pull, Moore told me. She introduced herself.

“So, you’re the California daddy’s girl who bought those College Park lots out from under me,” he said, to a chorus of masculine guffaws. “Welcome to Atlanta.”

“This is your famous Southern hospitality?”

“That’s for friends and family and strangers passing through town. For west coast competition, it’s Southern hostility.”

But soon he saw she wasn’t much of a threat. Whereas Ramsey snapped up every available lot on the market within city limits, Moore bought only a few, and she always unloaded them quickly for only a small profit. I knew what Ramsey would have said about her, maybe to Mom, over steaks at Chops: she didn’t have the stones for it. And when she stopped buying land all together, focusing entirely on her burgeoning
investment firm, Ramsey would have snapped up a succulent morsel of beef, masticating the chewy, half-raw flesh, savoring his victory.

One day he swaggered in to see Moore in her office at 191 Peachtree. He sat in the same chair, she told me, where I sat drinking bourbon and watching the vein in her neck swell as she pronounced rounded vowels.

“My banker friend Timothy Gaffer tells me you’ve been a busy girl. Taking out credit default swaps on a shitload of mortgages,” he told her.

“That’s right,” she said.

“Wasting perfectly good money to insure a surefire investment in mortgage-backed CDO’s.”

“It’s not an insurance policy. It’s a wager,” she said. “I’ve no interest in mortgage backed CDO’s.”

“A hedge fund that won’t put a stake in the golden goose? You Cali girls are crazy.”

“What happens when the goose comes down with bird flu?” she asked. Ramsey laughed his deep raspy laugh.

“She may lay a few silver eggs mixed in with the gold, but she’s still hearty as an ox. Maybe a few dumb bastards default on their mortgage. The bank gets the house. The house’s value goes up. Everybody still gets paid.”

“That’s assuming the value of land continues to rise.”

“Didn’t your father teach you anything?” he said, gesturing out the window, out over the grey streets, past the boxy Bauhaus banks and hotels, out past the six-lane
conjunction of I-75 and I-85 where flighty little scarabs did battle for every millimeter of progress, out past the train tracks where a pleasant arboreal blanket hid nests of dilapidated apartments and abandoned homes. “Look at them out there. The day I was born, there lived three billion men. Now there’s damn near seven, all scrabbling for a piece of the same damn rock. Demand increases, supply stays constant, what do you thinks going to happen to the price?”

“Do you have business with me, Mr. Mansfield, or have you come simply to criticize my investment strategies?”

“I want to take your bet,” he said. “I just developed a nice little community of townhouses in Virginia Highlands. Lots of happy new homeowners with shiny new mortgages, all bundled up in a big fat CDO.”

“It’s risky to stuff a CDO with mortgages from the same part of the country, much less from the same development.”

“Is that a problem?”

“You want to draw up an over-the-counter credit default swap on them.” Here I imagine Moore steepling her fingers.

“You make quarterly payments to Phoenix City Bank, and we’ll pay out a percentage on the loans that default.”

“I know how a credit default swap works, Mr. Mansfield.”

“Well, how about it?”

“It’s a deal,” said Moore.
“You’ll be hearing from my accountant about drawing up the paperwork. Guy by the name of Jim Tappman.” They stood and shook on it. I can see Ramsey’s big hairy knuckles, his meaty fingers curling around Moore’s slender hand, squeezing just a little too hard.

So, this was how Ramsey and his pet bank came to owe Livia Moore four million dollars. If she enjoyed telling the tale of his downfall—or her role in it—she didn’t let it show. It wasn’t until I made my way to the bottom of my lowball glass that I noticed she’d hardly touched her bourbon.

“The Man Who Believed in the Golden Goose,” I said, shaking my head. “Queue the sad trombone.”

“Delusions of invulnerability. A hazard of the trade.”

“For emperors, land barons, and steamship engineers,” I said. Perhaps if I’d had another whiskey, I’d have described the scene in the BBC I, Claudius where the conspirators corner Caligula—played by gaunt faced John Hurt, with his fair blond curls and his eyes like tiny black coals—and they pull the emperor to the ground by his sleeve, plunging their daggers into his belly again and again, as he flails his pale skeletal arms and his tunic turns from white to red and blood sputtering from his mouth even as he gurgles, choking, wailing pitifully, “You can’t kill a God! You can’t kill a God! You can’t kill a God!”

But I thought better of it. Instead I asked Moore what she could tell me about Ramsey’s recent activity.
“Wherever he’s hiding, he’s been busy,” she said. “Calling in favors, blackmailing officials. The feds know those defunct companies have millions unaccounted for, but they’ve closed their investigation. No doubt he’s set someone up to take the fall for the misappropriated investments.”

“Trying to make a clean getaway to some private island?”

“I thought you’d know your own father a little better.”

“What? Tiberius retired to Capri and lived out his old age in paradise. Drinking wine. Copulating with beautiful girls and handsome young boys.”

“Not Ramsey,” she said.

“I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“He’s paving the way for his return.”

“Licking his wounds?”

“Biding his time. Reminding people that this mess is interconnected. That if he goes down, he’ll take them with him.”

“Why not wait for him to come to you, if you’re so sure?”

“By then he will have made it impossible to follow the money trail from his defunct companies. There won’t be enough evidence to convict.”

“You want to catch him with his pants down.”

“Yes. And you said you would help.” She poured me another glass of whiskey. Though she raised her own glass to her lips, I couldn’t discern whether the amber meniscus had lowered or not. At first I thought I better not have any more to drink. But even though my life as a dilettante was in jeopardy, I had to retain certain core principles.
To abandon a glass of good bourbon was unthinkable. I closed my eyes and let it linger on my tongue, all oak and fire and vanilla, until my entire mouth tingled with anticipation. I swallowed, sending it down inside me like an electron hopping atoms. There in my belly the physical sensation became a feeling, or a fair simulacrum of a feeling nearly indistinguishable from contentment.

I told her what I knew about Timothy Gaffer and Ramsey’s father, Gus. I told her how Cowboy was riding around north Georgia in his black pickup truck, performing his master’s will like one of Tolkein’s ringwraiths. I told her about Jim Tappman.

“I’d like to speak to the accountant,” she said.

“What for?” I asked. Something about her tone was a little too eager.

“We made the trade through his bank, which went under last month. He may be able to help me collect what I am owed once we find Ramsey,” she said, annunciating very carefully. At the word *collect*, I could see her tongue flicker against the roof of her mouth.

“Ramsey scared him out of town. I’ve been trying to find out where he went, but he covered his tracks.”

“A shame,” said Moore.

As I drained the last of my whiskey, she told me she had another meeting soon. We stood and she moved back toward her desk. But she didn’t sit. She went to the window and put her hand on the glass, looking down on the city. A grey landscape of rectangular prisms—hives, really, swarming with humanity. Her expression was cold but almost childishly wistful, perhaps as it was when I first came into her office.
“It’s a great pity,” she said without turning, stopping me from leaving.

“What is?”

“My own father greatly admires Ramsey.”

“What about you?”

“How could I not? He transformed this city into what it is today.”

“He screwed over a lot of people.”

“Grifters would call them suckers,” she said. “Investment bankers call them muppets.”

“Then I’m a muppet and you’re a sucker.”

“As I said, Mr. Cloff, I intend to collect what I am owed. Still, however things turn out, I want you to understand. This is a business matter.” She turned from the window and looked me in the eyes. “I have nothing against you. We’re cut of the same cloth, you and I.”

“I don’t know about that. ‘Business matter’ isn’t even part of my vocabulary, and neither is muppet. How do you know you’re any better than the guy who screwed you?”

“How do you? Hole up in a university. Study moral philosophy. Volunteer at homeless shelters. Dedicate yourself to art if it suits you. Perhaps you and your mother will find yourself in financial ruin within the year. But I’m afraid it’s too late. No matter how poor you become, you will always be like me. A child of privilege.”

6. **Panem et Circenses**

Charon waited in the lobby of 191 Peachtree to ferry me back to Buckhead. After I stepped into his stygian sedan, we pulled onto Peachtree Street and stopped at a red
light. Slumped in the backseat, I thought about what Moore had said and looked down the cross street through the tinted window. The Westin’s glossy cylindrical tower loomed above us, the Sundial Bar revolving imperceptibly at its zenith. Several blocks down, the urban corridor opened up into open grass, trees and red brick pavement. I could make out a slender steel torch, rising to a height of maybe five stories. Centennial Olympic Park. I remember Ramsey and Mom took me there after the ’96 games.

“Excuse me,” I said, leaning forward to address Charon just as the light turned green. “Take a left please.” He hesitated, unsure whether altering his course might upset his mistress. The car behind us laid on the horn, a long unbroken wail, and we swerved onto Andrew Young International Blvd. “You can just drop me off at the park,” I said.

“Yes sir,” said the ferryman, and though his stony expression did not crack, I knew he was glad to be rid of me. And so, ahead of schedule, I stepped out of the sedan into the light of early evening.

To quote from the park’s website:

Less than two decades ago, Centennial Olympic Park's neighborhood was a run-down part of town. That all began to change on the day Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games CEO Billy Payne gazed out his office window and a brilliant inspiration came to him - to convert a multi-block eyesore into a glorious gathering spot for visitors and residents to enjoy during the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games and for years to come.

Well, thank God for Willy Layne! Willy Layne, who gazed down upon the ramshackle rooftops between the commercialized Georgia Dome neighborhood and the lucrative hotel district, and who saw the unsightly manifestation of poverty—what
Tacitus called *turba incondita* and what Willy Lane called *urban blight*—just as I had gazed down from the summit of 191 Peachtree. But we must also thank Ramsey Mansfield, who likewise served on the Atlanta games committee, where he had leveraged his considerable influence lobbying for Atlanta to host the games in the first place. It was he who organized over 80 subcontractors to demolish the rundown warehouses and abandoned storefronts south of Techwood. They cleared the rubble and laid twenty-one acres of smooth red brick. Teams of landscapers spattered this blank canvas with orderly swaths of deciduous trees; sculptors erected postmodern abstractions beside classic Doric columns; and technicians installed a series of five interlocking silver circles set into the brick—in the style of the Olympic logo, perhaps 80 feet from one end to the other—to launch twelve foot jets of water into the sky, illuminated at night by bulbs hidden in the base. The whimsically dubbed “Fountain of Rings,” where even today children may traipse through the spray, unaware that they step upon the foundations of forgotten tenement houses.

To fund the “glorious” venture, Willy Layne and Ramsey enlisted an army of corporate sponsors, and so many of the statues bear the names of investment bankers and CEOs. *The competitive spirit of international camaraderie: brought to you by Coca Cola!* Layne even invited the middle class to the party. Nearly half a million eager Americans shelled out $35, over the mail or at participating Home Depots, to have their name engraved in one of the paving bricks, and I’ll even admit that somewhere there rests a brick marred by the name of a goofy preteen named Tyler Cloff. For who can resist the lure of immortality? To carve their name in marble? The *populi civitatis* banded together.
They spoke with one voice: let it be recorded that the city of Atlanta, once dismissed as an airline hub and nothing more, hosted the 100th anniversary of the Olympic Games. Let our ancestors behold this “glorious gathering spot for visitors and residents,” and let them remember that the entire world once turned on their television sets, and we appeared on their screens.

A monument in the oldest sense of the word.

The simplest of architectural expressions: “See how much we mattered!”

7. On Nostalgia and the Potency of Whale Penises

The park hadn’t changed much since the fall of 1996. I tramped across plots of manicured grass, remembering my new companion, the red push lawn mower from Home Depot, and how the two of us had abandoned Mom’s lawn like a half-shaven head.

Before me stood the largest statue in the park, where I had stood with my family twelve years before: two sets of two Doric columns stood atop marble plinth, joined at the capitals by the five interlocking Olympic rings, each accompanied by a fluttering brass dove frozen in flight. A tall bronze aristocrat with a jolly late-nineteenth century mustache climbed three marble steps to pass beneath the rings, his pant leg creased with wrinkles that would never come out right where he bent his knee. A plaque was embedded in the pedestal:

PIERRE DE COUBERTIN, FATHER OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

WITH THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF RAMSEY T. MANSFIELD

I remembered Ramsey calmly hunching down to read this same inscription, like a golfer judging the incline of a putting green.
“It’s going to do the city good,” he’d said. “Now everybody in town wants to build here. Museums, aquariums, you name it. And guess who owns half the lots around the park?”

Now, a grown man, I reached up to the statue’s whiskers, running my fingers along the phony bristles. Ah, the waxed mustache! The quintessence of 19th century aristocracy. I’ve come to rather like Monsieur de Coubertin. A scholar of literature, pedagogy, and history. A classicist, obviously, even if he preferred the Greeks to the Romans. From a book entitled *Olympic Politics*: "Coubertin was an aristocrat, who could have taken to formal politics or to the army, but who decided to become an intellectual. In those days it was still possible for a man to be expert in a great variety of fields.” Yes, Monsieur Coubertin, we could have been senators, captains of industry, real estate czars like the great Ramsey Mansfield, but instead we chose a life of dilettantism. Perhaps in your time, Pierre, you too came across a sentence like, “In those days it was still possible for a man to be expert in a great variety of fields,” and, faced with the finality of that dread phrase, *in those days*, your face inflamed with color, your mustache quivered, you said, “In *these* days, by God! Long live the present tense!”

But in the end, Livia Moore was right. No matter how we struggled against the current—flailing like Horatius Cocles in his heavy armor, kicking toward the Tiber’s surface—we all the same. Children of privilege. The arbitrary inheritors of opportunity.

I continued up through the park, following the same general route I’d taken with my family, passing the Fountain of Rings and the bombing memorial, watching the sun begin to set over Bankhead, noticing Ramsey’s name on another statue, crossing Baker St
and leaving the deciduous trees and engraved bricks behind. I came to an open plaza, which connected the newly relocated World of Coca Cola to the Georgia Aquarium. The former was a sleek, disk-shaped construction crowned with a seven-story coke bottle suspended within a glass prism, illuminated with blue electric light against the darkening sky; the latter, a sprawl of aluminum alloy panels distinguished by a jutting atrium, fashioned entirely of glass, shaped like the prow of ship. From my perspective, the overall impression was of a flying saucer on a collision course with an ocean liner.

I once took Aiko to both attractions in the same day, crossing this same plaza. We drank strange Swedish sodas flavored with lingonberries and saw an eight foot long whale penis suspended in a glass display case. A golden calf if there ever was one.

“That’s imperium, right there,” I joked, squeezing her hand. “Build as many obelisks as you like, but you’ll never top the blue whale.” In the atria of both the aquarium and the World of Coke, I’d stopped to show her plaques engraved with the names of prominent donors; the name RAMSEY T. MANSFIELD sat proudly at the summit of both lists.

I passed between them—again, between Scylla and Charybdis—and made my way north, up through the apartments of Centennial Place, a high-end development originally built to house Olympic athletes. Ramsey had taken me and Mom to see it back in 96. The residents milled about, despite the cold. A jovial black man in a spattered KISS THE COOK apron flipped burgers on a gas grill; two little white boys sat on the curb playing with a grasshopper; a young married couple watched over them from a balcony, laughing and sipping wine, perhaps feeling lucky that they hadn’t been duped into taking out a mortgage they couldn’t afford like so many of their kind.
I passed the leasing office, where a brass plaque hung beside the door: A CASTLEBROOK HOMES DEVELOPMENT. A memory came back to me from my previous visit: a vision of a heavy, ancient black woman sitting on a bench. Her breasts sagged frumpily, outlined clearly against a sweaty gray Coca Cola t-shirt, and a thousand intricate wrinkles crisscrossed her chin, which seemed strangely separate from the rest of her face, like that of a ventriloquist puppet. In her lap she held a plastic Wal-Mart bag full of value brand hotdog buns, though there was no Wal-Mart for fifteen miles. At the time, her presence had annoyed me slightly. She incongruous with the cloudless sky, the happy burger flipper, the merry Fountain of Rings, and with father-son bonding—that is, with the post-Olympics, post-coital bliss that had settled over the Centennial Park neighborhood. Now I understand that she was a holdout from Techwood. “Housing projects,” FDR called them. The Romans, who invented them, called them *insulae*. Perhaps the woman spent her housing voucher and the sad sum of her life savings to afford rent at Centennial Place so that she could at least die where she felt at home. A starving doe in a forest fire’s aftermath, clopping around the black stumps, a victim of forces she didn’t understand, tracking ash with her hesitant hoofs, baffled, looking for the woods she remembers from the day before.

Until that day, I had forgotten entirely about the old woman on the bench. In fact, for years I remembered that visit to Centennial Place very fondly. The park. The sky. My stepfather.

Now I badly wanted a drink. So I made may way up toward GA Tech because, of course, where there’s an institution of higher knowledge, there’s booze.
8. Mammon Ruled America

Before me stood yet another monument: Bobby Dodd stadium, which many called “the coliseum,” although in reality it resembled the Circus Maximus, stretched as it was to accommodate Hail Mary’s and 99 yard punt returns. Back in 1935, when the stadium was called Grant Field, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wheeled his chair onto that same field of play and addressed the indigent citizenry of Atlanta. He called for them, in his Ciceronian radio voice, to condemn the heady daydream of the 1920’s:

“In that orgy of ‘prosperity’ a wild speculation was building speculative profits for the speculators and preparing the way for you, the public, to be left ‘holding the bag.’ In that orgy of ‘prosperity,’ banks, individually and by chains, were closing their doors at the expense of the depositors. In that orgy of ‘prosperity’ the farmers of the South had become involuntary speculators themselves, never certain when they planted their cotton whether it would bring twenty-five cents or fifteen cents or a nickel. In that orgy of ‘prosperity’ the poorest vied with the richest in throwing their earnings and their savings into a cauldron of land and stock speculation. In that orgy of ‘prosperity’ slum conditions went unheeded, better education was neglected, usurious interest charges mounted, child labor continued, starvation wages were too often the rule instead of the exception.

“Yes, in those days Mammon ruled America. That is why we are not going back to them…”

Delano, Delano, you philosopher king. You noble old tyrant, you. You always had the best of intentions. But some diseases are easier to diagnose than to cure. And
there too, all over Bobby Dodd Stadium, I found Ramsey’s name inscribed on plaques and pediments and pedestals.

At last I wandered into a bar called The Rambling Wreck. For perhaps three hours, I sat between a lonely gamer with frizzy red hair and an attractive Pakistani girl patiently waiting for her date, sipping the dregs of a Cosmo and tapping her long azure nails across the bar with the misplaced hope of an abandoned child. By the end, I’d put back perhaps five Terrapin brown ales, won a bet with the gamer about Final Fantasy VII’s music owing a debt to Orff’s Carmina Burana, and told the poor Pakistani girl all about how my father forced thousands of people from their homes and tried to fuck our maid, while she sat looking to the door, sadly swirling the base of her empty martini glass against the counter. Finally, I stood from my barstool and stepped—or rather staggered—out of the Rambling Wreck, out into the humid evening air. The sun had set. If I’d known what was good for me, I’d have taken a cab back to Buckhead. But I was buzzed on brown ale, baffled by thoughts of Moore, of Cowboy, of property values, and so instead I blundered onward, away from the stadium, and straight into an Atlanta police report, as well as the third page of Technique, GA Tech’s moronically named student newspaper.

9. Castlebrook Homicide

Everywhere I turned there loomed luxury student apartments developed by Castlebrook Homes, and as I stumbled north along Techwood Drive, past the baseball field and tennis courts, I saw Ramsey in the gables of townhouses, in the onyx windows of Turner Broadcasting, and in the tectonic movements of tower cranes. He’d strewn the city with obelisks and plinths inscribed with his name, from the statue of Pierre de
Coubertin to Centennial Place apartments, from the Georgia Aquarium to Bobby Dodd Stadium. I could sense him on every block. Absent, yet present, just like when I was a boy living with him in the Buckhead House.

I walked fast, though I forgot where I was going. Cars came and went, ferrying drunks home, and every time a black truck passed my heart stopped. Occasionally the brown ale would catch up to me and I’d bump into a student or stumble up against a streetlight. Soon I found myself in an unfamiliar neighborhood. At some point, the student housing had given way to parking lots and sad single-story buildings with metal bars over their windows. Places like Leroy’s Chicken and Waffles, Atlanta Plaques and Monuments, and, most decrepit of all, Madame Carlisha’s Used Books and Performance Dance. A cheerful multiracial herd of drunk girls trotted by in their heels, clustered together for safety. An old vagrant sat asleep on the curb, still clutching his empty coffee mug like Belisarius from my Jean Louis David print. Some black kids slouched against the side of a defunct McDonald’s, eyeing my leather shoes and my pinstripe summer blazer. They laughed and shook their heads as I staggered along the sidewalk and clutched my smartphone like a talisman. Numbers glowed in the corner of the LCD screen. 11:45. I thought to call Mom, but couldn’t bear to admit I hadn’t finished mowing the lawn. Instead I called Aiko and asked her to pick me up.

“I’m in Athens,” she said.

“Oh. I’m drunk.”

“It’s Wednesday. You said you were going to take it easy.”

“In vino, veritas, Aiko.”
“You sound like something’s wrong.”

“I’m a child of privilege,” I said mournfully.

“Where are you?”

“I don’t know.” I came to an intersection and gawked up at the street signs until at last the white letters came into focus. “11th and Howell Mill Rd.”

“I’m calling you a cab. But you’re paying.”

“Don’t hang up,” I said, sitting down on the curb. Behind me there ran a chain-link fence erected to protect an abandoned construction project. Heaping mounds of dirt surrounded a tower of concrete landings, pipes, and steel beams that had already begun to rust—the skeleton of an aborted titan. Had the markets not crashed, it would have become a mixed use apartment complex with ground floor storefronts. A vanguard of urban renewal. On the fence hung a sign, barely readable in the dark. Castlebrook Homes, of course. Requiescat in pace. But some vandal had sprayed over it with black paint so that it now read, Castlebrook Homicide.

Under the words, the graffiti artist had painted a familiar figure: a hulking man with a beard and a Stetson hat. At his feet lay stick-figures with flailing stick-limbs, x’s for eyes, and cartoon tongues lolling from their mouths.

I wanted to tell Aiko about the cartoon cowboy, but I lost my train of thought and ended up babbling loudly about FDR, The Lion King, Coca Cola Olympic City, et cetera, clutching the phone to my ear as the occasional passerby stepped around me and gave me funny looks.
And here my troubles began. I sat asking Aiko if she remembered the day I took her to the aquarium.

“The whale penis,” I said, practically screaming into the phone. “Don’t you remember the whale penis?”

“Yes, the whale penis. Wonderful. I’m going to call you a cab.”

“Eight feet long, pink and—”

A man stood over me. A black guy in his thirties, stooping down with his hands on his knees, canting his head to the left and raising a curious eyebrow as if to question how a creature such as myself could possibly exist in this world. His T-Shirt featured Atlanta rapper Ludacris fist bumping an old white man with a massive gray beard, whom I took initially, in my inebriated state, for Kris Kringle, but whom I eventually recognized as Karl Marx. The shirt’s owner had a neatly trimmed goatee and eyes that flashed with shrewd intelligence. He leaned so close, I felt his breath on my face.

“Go on,” he said. “Long and pink and what?”

“Muscular,” I obliged, still holding the phone to my ear.

“Tyler, who’s that,” asked Aiko. But before I could open my mouth, the man snatched the phone from my hand, filling me at once with drunken indignation. For a moment, I could hear Aiko’s sweet, bright voice, yapping incoherently, muffled within the thief’s grip. He tapped the screen and she went silent.

“Damn, son. This is a smart phone,” he said.

“True,” I said. “My smartphone.” From the shadows stepped another guy, a kid really, maybe 15, smelling of hair product and rising only to the lamentable height of five
feet even. His T-Shirt espoused a simpler philosophy than that of his compatriot’s (DON’T HATE THE PLAYA, HATE THE GAME), and it hung from his shoulders like a circus tent from a slender titanium pole. I tried to scoot away but backed up against the chain-link fence, which sent a metallic rattle into the night.

“Bennie, what makes a phone smart?” asked the first guy.

“They got GPS,” squeaked the kid.

“That’s right, Bennie. They got G-P-S,” he said, savoring each letter as it rolled off his tongue. “And what does that mean?”

“Mean’s they know where they is.”

“ Fucking precisely. They know where they is. And they’ve got clocks too.”

“They do got clocks.”

“They’re smart ‘cause they know where they are and when they are. Ain’t that right Bennie?”

“That’s right.”

“So what the fuck do you think that makes you?” The guy in the Marxist shirt loomed above me. He was no longer smiling. I began to stand, pushing my back up against the fence, but he raised his right leg, placed his black leather boot on my chest, and slammed my ass down on the concrete hard enough, as it turned out, that I bruised my coccyx. It dimly occurred to me that I should be crying for help. You’re in danger, shrieked my amygdala. Do something! But this plea came distorted, without urgency, as if from a great distance through a tank of water. I was drunk, tired, emotionally exhausted. All I could do was sit dumb and limp against the fence.
“I’m a fool,” I said absently, to no one, thinking of Claudius.

“Fucking A,” said Bennie.

“Here you are at midnight,” said the first guy, “just across the tracks from Bankhead, all alone, white boy in a fucking pinstripe coat, talking on a five hundred dollar cell phone, going off about whale cocks and shit at the top of your lungs.”

“In vino veritas,” I said again.

“You a stuck up Georgia Tech motherfucker?”

“Just a fool,” I said. Moore’s voice rang in my ears, each word perfectly formed, a glittering crystal, solid and cold: Child of privilege. Child of privilege.

“What you need is a life lesson,” said the Luda-Marx guy, looking down on me with pity and disgust. “Stand up. Go ahead.” I got to my feet, wiping dust off the seat of my jeans. Then, frowning like a disappointed father, he reached into the pocket of his baggy shorts and produced a wicked switchblade. My circuits reset at once. With a flick of the wrist, the blade swung out and clicked into place, glinting in the lamplight.

10. Pedagogy

“That’s a nice blazer,” said Luda-Marx, touching the flat of his blade against my shoulder, running it along sleeve, enjoying the fine cotton fabric as if through his own fingertips. I stood petrified, afraid that my slightest movement might rouse the knife like a yellow jacket. He slid it back up to the collar so that the hairs on my neck could sense the cool metal, the cruel edge. My neck. A lump of flesh crisscrossed with vulnerable supply lines transporting precious oxygen. “I said I like your blazer. Take a fucking compliment.”
“Thanks,” I whimpered. “You can have it.” The contrived Arcadia of Centennial Olympic Park felt a million miles away.

“He going to pee himself,” said Bennie, cackling with adolescent delight. The older guy made a “hurry the fuck up” gesture with the knife. I slipped my arms out from the sleeves, took the jacket from my shoulders, and held it out to him. Behold, the sacrificial lamb. My assailant then pulled the jacket—a birthday gift from Ramsey—over his provocative T-shirt so that the lapels framed Karl Marx’s grave Teutonic face. I could see from the mugger’s smile that the irony was not lost on him. He reached again with the blade, gently nudging its tip into my breastbone.

“What’s that, Egyptian cotton? That shit is nice.”

So I began to wrestle with my shirt buttons, one by one until finally I came to the bottom, opened the shirt, and peeled myself like a chocolate bar.

“How about them shoes?” Bennie suggested, and soon I stood in the shadow of Ramsey’s forgotten cranes in my socks wriggling my toes against the gritty concrete. My terror began to soften into red-faced embarrassment. I could see where things were going. I removed my leather belt, my undershirt, my socks, my black designer jeans, until all I had on were my boxers, and Bennie stood holding a stack of badly folded garments that seemed half as tall as he was. Luda-Marx leafed through my wallet, counting the bills, inspecting my driver’s license.

“Eighteen hundred dollars, goddamn.” He shook his head, again with a mixed expression of pity and disgust. “That’s a lot of cash to carry around, Mr. Tyler Cloff.”

“I thought you’d be pleased,” I said.
“I’ll be happy when I’m finished with your dumb ass,” he said. Then he pointed the tip of his knife at my crotch. “Go on, now. Don’t be shy.”

“Come on, you’ve got the money

“Excuse me?”

“He thinks you playing,” said Bennie to his master. The hint of amused pity in Luda-Marx’s expression was gone. His big squat nostrils flared. With his left hand he grabbed my bare shoulder, shoved my back against the fence so I could feel the warm links digging into my skin, and he pressed the flat of his knife blade firmly up against my mentula.

“I’m on a pedagogical crusade, motherfucker. You don’t give me those boxers, I’m going to slash them open with this switchblade, and I can’t make any promises, Tyler Cloff, that I won’t knick your scrotum and spill your balls all over the street.” He pushed harder. To be frank, I have never in my life been so lucidly conscious of my vas deferens. Again I felt his breath on my face.

“Okay,” I sniveled, hooking my thumbs around the elastic band of my boxers. He stepped back and removed the blade. I freed myself from the fence, shaking postmodern music from the jingling links. My fingers trembled. I glanced to the side, to the cartoon cowboy and the hanging words, Castlebrook Homicide. With a deep breath, I jerked my boxer shorts down around my ankles, exposing my flaccid mentula to the warm August air, and freed my feet from the pooled cloth one step at a time. I then handed the dejected rag to Bennie and covered myself with my hands.
“Ain’t no whale cock, that’s for damn sure,” said Luda-Marx, flicking the switchblade shut.

“You soft,” said Bennie.

“Motherfucking Venus d’Urbino.” Maybe they were done with me, maybe they weren’t. But the danger seemed to have passed.

“You’re well educated for a mugger,” I said as I cupped my mentula and eyed the older guy adjusting my jacket over his shirt. He raised the closed switchblade like a professor raising his pointer:

“Mugger? Just because you occasionally play the flute, that doesn’t make you a motherfucking flautist. And there’s more to education than—” His mouth hung open. The penumbral scene exploded with light, exposing the parking lots, busted lampposts, and failed fast food chains, filling my vision with spots. A vehicle came down the street, a shadow, a silhouette, its headlights right in our faces. We all turned. Atop the car sat the rectangular outline of a police siren. Dim and silent. For the moment.

“Five-o, man,” Bennie shouted. They both turned and ran. But as I watched them flee down the sidewalk, the older guy slowed, craned his neck to look back, and raised his hand to his mouth.

“I hope you learned something, Tyler Cloff.” Then he and Bennie vanished between two storefronts.

The vehicle pulled up beside me and stopped. It wasn’t a cop car. The siren-silhouette was a roof sign that read: TAXI. Aiko must have called it for me when they snatched my phone. The entire incident, though it seemed to have lasted for hours, had
taken only fifteen minutes. Despite everything, it was almost nice standing there naked in evening heat, feeling the summer breeze on my skin, rustling my hair. Emotion overcame me, something very difficult to describe, not antipathy toward my assailants, but something like relief, strange as it may sound, as if a great debt had been settled.

There is, after all, nothing more instructive, more necessary, than humiliation.

I looked up to the sky, and while nimbuses of Atlanta smog blotted out the stars, I could still make out the dim glow of the moon. I must have apologized to the cabby for my nudity. I must have explained my predicament, sworn that I could pay him when he dropped me off at home. But all I remember clearly was the way the headlamps hit the construction site, fragmented through the chain link fence, illuminating the abandoned the grids of cement pillars and crossbeams.

I wrote before that if I’d known what was good for me, I would have had Moore’s driver ferry my back to Buckhead. Now, having given it more thought, I’m not so sure.

I returned to the Buckhead house naked, but wiser. It was nearly pitch black when I stepped out of the cab to make my way up the hill, the newly sheared blades of grass prickling the soles of my feet as I scaled the groomed side of the half-mown lawn. I could only hope that Mom wouldn’t catch me slipping in the backdoor. That would raise all sorts of awkward questions.

But it was a different woman who caught me with pants down.

“Nice ass,” came a voice from the bottom of the hill. I turned, covering my mentula, to see three wisps of white light, one hovering over the other two, glowing eerily in the dark across the street from the parked taxi. They began to move, the bottom
two bobbing up and down, jovial spirits of the yuppie wood, while the third drifted solemnly above, guiding its fellows down the sidewalk. Squinting, I was able to make out a shape among the spirits: the dim form of a woman’s body, which connected the three lights like the lines in a constellation map, with two stars on her ankles and one on her chest, dwindling in the distance.

A trophy wife decked out in reflectors, jogging at 1 AM. Such is Buckhead.

In the end, I was able to sneak into the house, get dressed, find some cash, and pay the driver. I stood there in the darkness watching. I remember wondering if Livia Moore was right about Ramsey biding his time. Maybe he really would come back on his own. And what then? Would a cab pull up to the curb in the middle of the night and drop him off into the darkness? Would he sneak in through the back door? Would he crawl into bed with Mom as if nothing had happened? And if he really could slip though the fingers of the feds, the lawyers, the investors—not to mention the spindly fingers of Moore herself—what then? Would I get the Hobby House back? The trust fund? What if things could go back to the way they were?

For some reason, this thought made me uneasy. I suppose I was exhausted from my ordeal. But when I climbed back up the hill, I didn’t go inside to sleep. I turned on the glaring porch lights and cranked up the lawn mower.

It was time for me to finish what I’d started.
Thirty minutes before the Plebian Council is to convene, Tiberius and Blossius sit together on the steps of the Basilica Sempronia, escaping the afternoon sun in the shade of tiered columns while they discuss what recent celestial signs might portend for their legislation: A woman in the city had reportedly given birth to centaur foal with intelligent blue eyes and thrashing little hooves. In Athens, a dusky skinned giant appeared, towering over the olive trees; he reached down to pluck the bronze head from a statue of Epicurus before vanishing into the hills. And just that morning, an augur reported that an eagle, soaring over the courtyard of some notable gentleman’s estate, had dropped a wolf cub right into the courtyard’s central fountain so that the trickling waters clouded scarlet with gore.

“Superstitions,” says Blossius, gesturing with his withered old hand as if to shoo them away into the air.

“Several priests confirmed the eagle sighting.”

“Yes, and Publius Octavius happens to be the College of Augurs’ most generous patron.”

“Even then, it does not bode well.”

---

11 An enormous public building commissioned by Tiberius Gracchus the Elder, used as a meeting place for business and as a venue for certain law courts to convene. Replaced by the Basilica Julia in 46 BCE.
“I thought better of you,” says Blossius, frowning and stroking his beard. “You grow distracted in the final hour.”

“Just because you keep no gods, Magister—”

“The fate of this law will not be decided by the flight patterns of pigeons or by the consistency of sheep entrails. It will be decided by Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, and it will be decided today.”

At this, Tiberius slouches forward to prop his elbow upon his knee and rest his chin in the palm of his hand. The Forum Romanum sprawls before him: an open space that could conceivably contain twenty of the tent cities he had shown Marcus earlier that afternoon. It too teems with people; yet there is an orderliness here. The entire city center gleams white and shiny in the sun. Across the paved square stand the Novae Tabernae, a row of storefronts where well-groomed slaves stand in neat lines to buy olive oil, wine, and expensive spices for their masters; behind Tiberius, the Palatine rises, studded with lavish manors which overlook the valley. Directly to his right stands the city’s primary Temple of Vesta. Its form has little in common with the dilapidated shrine he saw with Marcus. It is a circular building ringed with elegant fluted columns and crowned with a domed ceiling. Even the smoke escaping the roof’s oculus takes the form of an attractive, cohesive pillar that rises into the sky as if to support a slab of cumulous clouds. And everywhere, from the Temple of Vesta to the far west end of the forum, statues, arches, and triumphal columns sprout from the pavement like weeds in an ill-tended garden. Monuments hewn from stone, molded from molten bronze, fashioned into various shapes and embellished with a series of initials and cognomens. Already a crowd gathers among
them, eager to watch the coming debates, filling the space between stone heroes with live bodies that push slowly toward the Senate House.

Tiberius has so far averted his gaze from the Rostra. But now, with the audience of citizens gathering there, he cannot help but look. From where he sits on the south side of the forum, Tiberius can see only the back side. Wide marble steps lead up to the enormous stage where he can make out the four free-standing columns. If he were standing on the other side, between the Rostra and the Senate House, he would see the platform’s façade, adorned with the six wooden prows taken from shattered enemy ships.

He knows it is time to go. Time to scale those steps and stand with Marcus among those mighty Corinthian columns.

“I am afraid,” he says, breaking a long silence.

“Good,” says Blossius, stroking his beard.

“It doesn’t feel good.”

“Oratory is a noble occupation. But only tyrants and narcissists enjoy putting it into practice.”

“You were right, Magister. Everything depends on today.”

“You father also grew nervous before speeches. And he was always very good.”

Wheezing with effort, Blossius pulls himself to his feet and descends the steps of the Basilica Sempronia. Tiberius follows close behind.

Together they pass the expensive shops at the base of the stairs and make their way through the heart of the Forum, their sandals clacking against the pavement. It could almost be any other afternoon in the city. Two men in purple striped togas lean against
the base of a column upon whose capital there perches a bronze statue of Nike, her wings flashing in the daylight. Tiberius can hear them discussing the sale of a slave. Farther on, a younger nobleman with dark curly hair stands on the edge of a fountain, surrounded by a ring of friends who listen as he recites a raunchy poem about the going price of a prostitute. Near the Novae Tabernae, a fruit vendor loads a crate of pomegranates while some pigeons hop around nearby, cooing and pecking for errant seeds among a pile of discarded rinds.

But as Tiberius approaches the Rostra, he finds more and more commoners wandering from their storefronts or emerging from alleyways to join the crowd that has amassed behind the steps of the stage. He turns to Blossius.

“Would that my father were here now.”

“I cannot not tell you that he looks down upon us from the heavens, if that’s what you wish to hear.”

“I know.”

“I knew the man well. Without a doubt, he would have been the first to stand beside you and fight for this particular cause.” Blossius smiles, his lower lip quivering. They say their farewells, and the old Greek disappears into the crowd. Tiberius begins to push around toward the steps. A hush falls around him as the people recognize him. As before, they part to let him pass. A retired soldier breaks the silence, calling out, “Give’em Hell, Tribune!” There is some laughter, some cheering, but many of the faces in the crowd watch Tiberius with quiet, concerned expressions. As if he were walking up the steps to be hanged.
He arrives at the marble steps of the Rostra to see several senators already up on the stage, and with each step he takes, he cannot but think of the many eyes on his back. There, standing off to the side, is Marcus Octavius.

“Be well, my friend,” says Tiberius.

“I’ll be well when all this is over,” says Marcus. Tiberius searches his face—the flushed red cheeks, the handsome jaw, the curls of hair falling across his brow—but can find no sign of how he will vote.

A trumpet rings out, drawing their attention. A balding man with a hooked nose takes the center stage—the High Priest, Scipio Nascia Serapio—and in a stern, absurdly well-annunciated voice, he calls to begin debate over the Law of Sempronian Land Reform. While Scipio Nascia recites the preliminary introductions, Tiberius glances first over the various noblemen standing before the podium’s six prows. They huddle shoulder to shoulder, a sea of togas with purple stripes. There are good men among them. There are friends. But there are those there between the Senate House and the Rostra who would rather see Tiberius nailed to a wooden cross than to have their farms and country estates reduced to 500 iugera of land. Upon seeing the snide, corpulent face of Titus Annius, whom he entertained at dinner the previous night, Tiberius knows that this man too is among the latter group. It seems absurd that he must go to the middle of the platform and speak with his back toward his true audience. Looking back over his shoulder, he sees tailors, weavers, fishermen, and soldiers. He sees foreigners from the provinces: scholars, merchants, dancers, and philosophers like Blossius. The wealthy landowners of more distinguished plebian families, including some of his most trusted
allies and some of his most determined opponents, such as Marcus’s father. And scattered everywhere among them are men who were once farmers, pruners, wine growers, and ranchers but who now claim only the name refugee. Tiberius scans their faces, looking for the scrawny blond boy, Gaius. Several have hoisted their young sons to sit on statue pedestals so that they will be able to see over people’s heads, and when he looks their way, the children wave wildly. But there are too many in the crowd to find one fatherless young soldier.

Then it is time. Scipio Nascia turns to descend the stairs of the Rostra, while Tiberius steps to take his place at the center of the platform. On each side of him, the massive columns cast shadows that stretch over the crowd. That the city could fall silent so quickly seems mad to him. Seconds draw out into minutes as he paces about the marble tiles, crossing his arms and looking down upon his peers, who wait quietly for him to begin. At last, he musters the courage to speak.¹²

"The savage beasts in Italy have their particular dens. They have their places of repose and refuge. But the men who bear arms and expose their lives for the safety of their country enjoy, in the meantime, nothing more in it but the air and light and

¹² I have borrowed—or rather stolen—the following speech directly from Dryden’s translation of the Plutarch. Of T. Gracchus’s rhetorical style, Plutarch has this to say: “Tiberius, in the form and expression of his countenance, and in his gesture and motion, was gentle and composed...[speaking] in a quiet, orderly manner, standing throughout on the same spot...[his oratory] was gentle and persuasive, awakening emotions of pity. His diction was pure and carefully correct.”
having no houses or settlements of their own, are constrained to wander from place to place with their wives and children.

“As the leaders of the people and as commanders of the army, we are guilty of ridiculous error when, at the head of our legions, we exhort our common soldiers to fight for their sepulchers and altars—when not any amongst so many Romans is possessed of either altar or monument, and neither have they any houses of their own, or hearths of their ancestors to defend. They fight, indeed, and are slain, but only to maintain the luxury and wealth of other men. They are styled the masters of the world, but in the meantime have not one foot of ground which they can call their own.”

“Many among you have grown exceedingly rich from the rapid accumulation of property. I congratulate you. But consider: the fields of Italy are tilled by slaves. What happens when there are ten for every Roman citizen? And who will raise sword and shield to put down a revolt, now that so many have been reduced to homelessness? How will these refugees educate their children? How will they teach them to love and protect a fatherland that cast them from the very homes they spilt their blood to defend?”

“Let there be no doubt: if Rome is to flourish, the days of reckless speculation must come to end. Now is the time for restraint.” With this Tiberius moves from the center of the Rostra to the fringe. The crowd—both the patricians before him and the plebs behind—are so silent, he can hear his steps ring against the shining marble tiles. Finding a place in the shadow of an outside column, he wipes the sweat from his brow and tries to slow his breathing.
Meanwhile, Marcus takes the stage. He speaks in a strong, cultivated accent with little trace of his characteristic mirth:

“As a young man, I was lucky enough to receive my education alongside my fellow Tribune; and now, as before, I admire his great skill as an orator, even as I feel so keenly my own deficiencies in that venerable art. Indeed, since I was old enough to conjugate a verb, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus has been my truest friend. You might say that I know his many virtuous qualities better than anyone.

“Every day in Athens he would stand around the Stoa Poikile admiring the paintings and listening to recitations even as his companions, including myself, whittled away our time at the baths. And in the army, as I’m sure the veterans among you will remember, he spent more hours visiting the wounded or drinking conservatively with the enlisted men than he spent in the comfort of his own tent, so that by the end of a campaign he seemed to know every name and face in the entire legion. Though I implored him not to sign the surrender in Numantia, I know he did it not out of cowardice, as his enemies suggest, but out of concern for his soldiers, whose lives he resolved to save even at the expense of his own honor.

“But no man is without imperfections. Tiberius, my dear fellow—just as you know of my many vanities and frivolous habits, so too have I discerned the single greatest flaw in your character. Since you were a boy, reading those fanciful books of yours, you have been writhing in the throes of a dreadfully excessive idealism. You yearn so fervently to make Rome the perfect city from your stories, you would forget our most deeply held values and act against our oldest traditions. I acknowledge the plight of our
homeless farmers, which you have just put so eloquently,” says Marcus, pausing and gesturing to include members of the crowd, his eyes lingering on his stern-faced father near the steps of the Rostra. “But you would tell these men here today—men of good character and distinguished families—how to spend their own coin. You would go as far as to deprive them of what property they have already purchased and fling the deeds to their land upon the pavement like a hound-master casting scraps of meat to a pack of dogs.

“Yes, your law may mitigate certain difficulties of the moment. But it would do so at the expense of the timeless liberty and the dignity of our citizens, and for this reason I must exercise my right as Tribune of the People to hinder the Law of Sempronian Land Reform.” Marcus then walks to the other side of the stage, choking visibly with emotion. He looks to Tiberius beseeching.ly. Before them and behind, the crowd has been stunned into silence. Tiberius delivers his response, speaking calmly and quickly, beginning this time with no hesitation:

“You accuse me, my friend, of forsaking ancient and venerable traditions, when, in fact, it is you and the other speculators who have ignored the old land laws and have thereby thrust our city into upheaval. It is a unique hypocrisy of the avaricious, this talk of tradition, ignoring or championing various archaic customs according only to your own selfish interests.”

Tiberius turns to allow his co-Tribune the stage, but as they pass one another, Marcus pulls Tiberius in close by the sleeve of his toga to whisper in his ear. The crowd is so silent, Tiberius can make out each and every word: “I begged you not to do this
Tiberius. You put me in this damnable position.” Releasing his friend’s arm, Marcus retakes his place at the center of the Rostra.

“You think of yourself as Solon, joining the hands of the rich and the poor. But are you acting as mediator or instigator? Tell them, Tiberius, about our trip to the plaza near the prostitute’s quarters. Tell them how the beggars and urchins filled the streets crying, ‘Tiberius Rex! Tiberius Rex’”

At this, a commotion sweeps at once across the crowd—whispering, mumbling, shouting—first among the patricians with their purple stripes, and then among the wealthy plebs behind the rostra. Tiberius feels the familiar weight of despair swelling, weighing him down, even as Marcus raises his hand to call for order. “You have let the graffiti prayers of these commoners rule your heart. But it is for men of respectable birth to guide our city. I pity the plight of these peasants and swineherds, but if they had their own way, we’d be right back to the monarchy, and then, inevitably, to the old tyrannies of Tullus Hostilius and Tarquinius the Haughty. Is that what you want, Tiberius? To wake up one morning and find yourself made a despot?”

The murmur of the crowd swells. From the front of the Rostra, a man calls shrilly over the noise, “Keep your hands off my coin-purse, Tyrant!” “You should have fallen on your sword in Hispania!” calls a second. This, in turn, incenses the mob on the other side of the stage. One of the coarser veterans raises his ragged voice to the air: “He’s a better man than you’ll ever be, you pampered boylover!” Now shouts and obscenities fill the Forum Romanum as a scuffle breaks out between one of the landowning plebs and a burly old farmer. Tiberius can take no more. He joins Marcus between the towering
columns and, abandoning all pretensions that he is addressing the crowd, looks his friend right in the eyes, knowing that they cannot be heard over the din of so many voices.

“I never yearned for a crown. All I ask for is sanity.”

“Sanity would be letting the matter drop. The law has been vetoed.”

“I’ll personally recompense your family for the lands you forfeit, if that’s what it takes.”

“You’ll what?”

“I’m not jesting, Marcus. If I must beggar my family to pass this law, then so be it.”

“You’re mad.”

“They’re the ones who are mad,” says Tiberius, thrusting a finger toward the crowd at the rear of the Rostra.

“I’m trying to save your life!”

“Don’t hide behind me, Marcus Octavius.”

“The Old Families—the Annii, the Pompeii, the Cornelii—do you think they will let you get away with this? What do you think will happen to your precious law when you’re laying dead in some gutter with a dagger in your back?”

“Even more reason for us to stand together.”

“I’m too young and pretty to die, Tiberius.”

“And they call me the Coward of Numantia.”

“If you want to martyr yourself, go ahead. I’ll be choosing my own death, thank you very much.”
“Then you must step down.”

“Step down?”

“Relinquish the office of Tribune. Give up the power of veto.”

“Gracefully abstain? You think that will stop them from coming after me? Jove’s beard, you truly have no idea who you’re dealing with.” Tiberius turns from Marcus to face the rear side of Rostra and the crowd of Plebeians that stretches now all the way back to the Basilica Sempronia. He knows the Senate House and its members are now at his back. At this breach of ancient tradition, the crowd forgets their jeering. They fall utterly silent—the patricians from fear, the plebeians from mute excitement.

“Who here among the Plebian Council favors this law?” he asks. The crowd roars its ascent, drowning out all other sounds. A forest of fists rise to meet the bright sky (though a clearing opens where the cluster of landowners stand with Publius Octavius) and Tiberius suddenly feels ridiculous, having compared his people to some many-seeded fruit, when really they resemble nothing more than a single monstrous creature, like the Hundred-Handed Ones who helped Jupiter and his siblings cast the Titans down from Olympus, casting innumerable boulders up through the clouds to crash against the walls of heaven. “And who among you opposes it?” There is silence. Not even the most powerful among the plebs dares to raise his voice now. Tiberius turns to Marcus. “You can see, my friend, that this measure is the will of the that Council. How, then, can you hinder its passage?”

With these words the wrath of the mob focuses upon a single object. Tiberius can feel their eyes, glowing with hatred, as they pass over him to rest on Marcus Octavius.
“Don’t do this,” Marcus pleads, his eyes shifting nervously. But it is too late.

Tiberius goes on.

“A Tribune of the Plebs who obstructs the will of the Plebian Council is no Tribune at all. And so I now move that Marcus Octavius be removed from his office.” A stunned silence falls over the Forum. Then, one by one, the tribes of the Council voice their assent. With each cry of approval, Tiberius struggles to hide the giddiness swelling in him. The thing is done. The law will be passed. When he came across those wandering farmers on the road to Numantia, all those long years ago, such a change seemed impossible. Now the refugees will pack their shabby tents. They will file out through the city gate and return to sleep beneath the roofs of their fathers. Young soldiers like Gaius will finally have something worth fighting for. Although Tiberius cannot remember his father’s face, he can sense him now beside him on the Rostra, as he sometimes does when fingering the weathered vellum of a book his father has passed down. When the last tribe cries out to support the motion, a cheer goes up among the Plebs, and Tiberius feels that his giddy heart might burst like an overfilled wineskin if he does not join in. But he must remain composed. For the sake of his friend, if not for the sake of dignity. Marcus kneels at the stairs, talking heatedly with his father and a group of their friends, his face twisted into an expression of petulant outrage that Tiberius remembers well from their childhoods. Scipio Nasica Serapio, who is among this group, moves to approach the prow of the Rostra.

“I will not step down,” Marcus says hotly.
“It can’t be done,” yells Scipio Nasica, each precise syllable cracking like a bullwhip. “There’s no precedent.”

“Let’s set one!” yells a commoner from the rear of the stage. And now cries come from everywhere, from partisans on both sides:

“String the dandy up from the Rostra!”

“They’ll sit Gracchus on a throne!”

“Do something!”

“Tiberius Tyrannus!”

“Come on, lads!”

Soon there is such shouting and wailing that not a single word can be discerned among the chaos, and as Tiberius turns to see Marcus hurrying down the marble steps of the Rostra, a throng of perhaps twenty men in ragged tunics surges forward to the front of the crowd. Marcus stops and steps back, screaming for his slaves and drawing his dagger from its filigreed sheath. It is the first time Tiberius has seen the blade bared outside of a banquet hall. He knows he must act. He must say something. But his tongue is lead in his mouth. An enormous Numidian slave—one of Marcus’s most loyal—has made his way to the steps and put himself between his master and the mob. The man crouches and makes two muscular fists the size of hound skulls.

“Tiberius, please,” cries Marcus, his voice cracking with desperation.

“Stop!” shouts Tiberius, finding his voice at last. “Stop!” But they do not stop. A ragged old veteran approaches the African, flexing his sinewy arms. He whirls a makeshift sling. Round and round spins the stone. Then, in the space of a second, the
giant lays crumpled at the foot of the Rostra, blood pooling around his hairless head as
the dirty men hurry up the steps, fifteen or twenty of them. As they trample the enormous
body, Tiberius teeters on the edge of the platform, waving his arms, screaming from them
to see reason. Marcus brandishes the dagger, pointing it now at the assailants on his left,
now at those on his right, even as he steps back toward the edge of the stage behind him,
and as the blade slashes the empty air, its hilt flashing gold in the dying afternoon light,
Tiberius rushes across the marble tiles to throw himself between the mob. But he is too
late. They are nearly upon the ex-Tribune. Marcus turns to jump down from the front of
the high stage, reaching out with his free hand. But a lanky young man grabs his tunic,
spinning him around.

“Tiberius!” he cries once more, struggling to break free. For a brief second,
Tiberius can see the agony and terror in his large, bright eyes. Then the mob is on him,
and the eyes are gone. They pull and tear at his arms, his toga, his dark lustrous curls. The
terrible Hundred-Handed Ones. Somewhere among them, Marcus screams. A pitiful,
broken sound. Even so, Tiberius can make out the heirloom dagger’s jangling as it
clatters across the stone. He shouts and shoves all the while through the frenzied mob,
until finally they seem to remember who he is. The men slink away like sullen children
captured in a schoolyard brawl, even as more men climb the Rostra’s stairs to join them.
And there is Marcus, his toga dusty and shredded, his hair tousled, kneeling slumped,
crumpled, and clutching his hands to cover his boyish face. Blood streams between the
fingers, trickling and forking down his forearms, bright as fresh paint. Tiberius wants to
go to him, to sling his arm around his shoulder and carry him down, away from the
Rostra, away from the thousands of eyes that follow them. He wants to take him to his row-house on the Palatine, where they will jest and drink wine as they always have. But first there is one thing left to do:

“Citizens,” he says, addressing the crowd, “let it be recorded that, seeing no further motions to hinder it, the Law of Sempronian Land Reform shall be adopted as law by the state of Rome.”

A cheer goes up. Suddenly Tiberius finds himself surrounded by the same men who had moved to cast Marcus from the stage. They are laughing, crying joyful tears, and shouting his name. Perhaps imagining what it will be like to once more tread the soft earth of their own land. A familiar looking veteran takes Tiberius’s hand and raises it in triumph.

It is done, Tiberius says to himself again. It is done. It is done. It is done.

But looking over the heads of these men, he sees Marcus staggering down the stairs of the Rostra, stepping over the body of his fallen slave, supported by his father and Titus Annius. Tiberius waits for him to look over in his direction. He wants him to see that it’s over. That he is sorry it had to happen like this. But when Marcus finally turns, Tiberius recoils in horror. The bright, mirthful eyes he remembers so well are gone. In their place: two mangled masses of flesh. Shriveled and spent, like the scarlet skins of burst cherry tomatoes. Useless bloody tissue that will never again behold the blueness of the sky or the gleaming white marbles of Rome.
LIFE OF TYLER: LIBER V (ATLANTA, SEPTEMBER 2008 CE)

1. Simple, Fumbling Creatures

After the mugging, I took to reading as much financial news as I could get my hands on, looking for some clue as to what Ramsey was up to. But it was all national doom-and-gloom. More failing banks. More foreclosures. More talk of a federal bailout. When I finally stumbled upon something useful in the New York Times, it was not in the Business pages, but in the Justice section:

A cleaning lady found Scot Gaffer, president of the now-defunct Phoenix City Bank, naked, half submerged in his clawfoot bathtub, the water clouded scarlet with blood. Even now, I can see his sweaty, mole rat face, drained of its ruddiness. Seneca had died the same way (though for better reasons). Gaffer had always struck me as an avaricious pervert; Mom said he strung Ramsey like a dealer baiting a junky. And yet, as I read the story about him in the paper—acquaintances and relatives claim Mr. Gaffer took his bank’s demise quite badly—I couldn’t help but feel sorry for the man.

A victim of the times, perhaps, and a victim of his own shortcomings. Greed reduces us to simple, fumbling creatures.

It frustrated me that Gaffer shuffled off his mortal coil before I got off my ass to question him. He’d moved to Manhattan after everything fell apart. He never took my calls or replied to my e-mails. I had planned to fly up there at some point, but now it was
too late. Whatever the old satyr had known about Ramsey, he’d taken with him. Mom was less concerned. Good riddance, she told me, sipping Chardonnay on the balcony overhanging the courtyard in the Buckhead House. Just thank god he never had the opportunity to procreate (that we know of). How difficult it would be to mourn a father like him, she said. I told her I wouldn’t know. She smiled sadly and clinked her glass with mine.

In any case, the banker’s inconvenient demise made me even more determined to follow up on what few leads I had left. So I called Livia Moore and produced the business card given to me by the Securities and Exchange Commission officer who had paid me a visit in Athens a couple months before. Thinking back on the portly middle-aged man with his stained trousers and shirt smelling of pot, I knew he was a long-shot—but there was no time like the present. You never knew if he might turn up in a tub with his wrists slit.

“Do you remember a guy named Bob Lyttelton?” I asked.

“I don’t,” said Moore. “And I have an excellent memory.”

“But you did file a complaint with the SEC about the money Ramsey owed you?”

“Just before Phoenix City went under. A fool’s hope.” Her voice was icy, her words careful; I imagined her up in her 45th floor office, gazing out over the grey Atlantan cityscape. But when I began to tell her about how Lyttelton came to the Athens Hobby House in person to ask about my stepfather, she urged me to go on.

“The SEC isn’t the FBI,” she said. “They don’t make house calls, they serve subpoenas. It’s highly unusual.”
“Lyttelton was highly unusual himself.”

“You’re certain he was from the Office of the Ethics Counsel?”

“I’m holding his card right here.”

“Curious.”

“Is it? Ramsey’s guilty of all sorts of ethical infractions, I’m sorry to say.”

“The Ethics Counsel is a self-regulatory department,” she said after a long, calculated pause. I got the feeling she was weighing how much to tell me.

“And that means?”

“It means that Lyttelton took advantage of your naiveté to pump you for information, I’m sorry to say. His job is to weed out those among his SEC co-workers who take bribes from investment bankers and slap them on the wrist. The Ethics Council has nothing to do with lawbreakers outside their own agency.”

“If he didn’t come asking about Ramsey for the feds, he must have had his own reasons.”

“Or he’s in the employ of someone else. Perhaps you should make time in your busy schedule to figure it out?”

And so I found myself in the bland, beige lobby of the SEC’s Atlanta Regional office. The man at the front desk didn’t even look up from his computer monitor to glance at my ID badge (actually my old student ID, clipped to my jacket in a clear plastic sleeve) as I waited for the elevator. I rode up to Lyttelton’s floor beside a man wearing jeans and red polo shirt. He eyed me up and down, from my slick, shiny lace-up shoes to my hand folded silk tie. I coughed politely, clasping my hands together and pretending
not to notice him staring. Though I’ve had experience blending into a wide range of social settings—craft beer tastings, meet-and-greets at Classics Department conferences, Ramsey’s bombastic Christmas parties, underground alt-rock shows at the Georgia Theatre—the professional workplace scene has always daunted me. For a moment I thought my cover was blown before I even got off the elevator.

Of course, this was not precisely the professional workplace scene.

“Interns,” said the man, shaking his head and gesturing to my tie. “You take this shit too seriously.” The elevator stopped, and the doors slid open. When he was gone, I unclipped my ID and slipped it in my coat pocket.

The SEC Office of the Ethics Counsel had a small cubicle farm on the fifth floor, a grid of gray half-walls, ancient CRT computer monitors, and cheap desk-chairs, half of which sat empty. Here and there, men and women slumped half-asleep, checking on Braves scores, social media feeds, their personal stock portfolios, etc. One man had cornered an attractive young intern (a real intern, presumably) against the bubbling water cooler, bragging about the invasive questions he’d answered to win his Top Secret security clearance

I found Bob Lyttelton on the far side of the office, tilted way back in his chair with his feet propped up on his desk, his shirt stretched over the rising hill of his belly to expose the sliver of hairy flesh just above his (obviously fake) alligator belt, his right hand now on his computer mouse, now scratching his stubby round nose, his left hand holding a phone to his ear, his eyes half-fixed on his bulky monitor, lulling with sleepy
An earbud dangled from his free ear, connected to his computer speakers. All the cubes around him were unoccupied. Who could imagine why.

My historian’s instincts kicked in; it was time to gather some hard data. I produced my new smartphone, a replacement Mom had bought for me after the mugging, though she shouldn’t have. After pulling up the camera application, I slipped it back into my slacks, angling it so the lens came just above the edge of the pocket.

“I’m telling you not to worry,” Lyttelton mumbled into his phone. “Those e-mails aren’t going to see the light of day…No, we’ll never go after Moody’s…What do you mean, ‘why not’? Because if we stick it to the ratings agencies, investors will fucking lose it. Even the suits at Goldman need somebody to believe in.” Slowly, I approached his desk. On his monitor, a bald man in his fifties bent a lusty, topless red-head over a pool table, her pig-tails and fake boobs bouncing energetically as she clutched at the table’s side pockets. I stood right behind Lyttelton’s chair, but Lyttelton kept on, oblivious, speaking and watching his screen with equal disinterest: “No, being dumb as shit isn’t the same as fraud…Okay, fine, so a few guys over there knew they were rubber-stamping turds, but how would anyone expect us to…Yeah, I know it’s your job…Just play it off like you thought the CDO’s were a sure thing. Not like you were the only one.” As he hung up the phone, Lyttelton finally noticed me standing there.

“You like red-heads, intern?”

“I prefer brains in a girl’s head to plastic in her chest.”

“Your loss,” he said, looking back to the action on the screen. “Grab me a cup of coffee, would you. Lots of cream, lots of sugar.”
“I’m a bit hurt. Don’t you remember me, Mr. Lyttelton?” At that he kicked his feet off the desk, removed the dangling headphone from his ear, and spun around to give me a good look.

“Fuck a duck,” he said, eyes widening. “Must be you look different somehow in that fancy tie.”

“That’s probably true,” I said, clandestinely adjusting the phone in my pocket.

“I got a feeling you didn’t come here asking for a job.”

“Why did you really come asking about Ramsey Mansfield? Athens isn’t exactly in the neighborhood. And don’t tell me it had anything to do with the SEC.”

“Just wanted an excuse to sip on that fancy beer of you Athens kids like to drink.”

On the screen, the porn star pleasured herself silently with an 8-ball while the bald man slid a wooden cue up and down between her breasts. An idea came to me. I slipped between Lyttelton and his desk, placing my hand on 1/8-inch headphone cable where it entered the computer speakers.

“Even the most apathetic manager would have to take action if he found out one of his employees was raking in taxpayer money to sit all day and watch mediocre porn.”

“Stop fooling around, kid.” He reached lazily for my arm, but I kicked against his desk chair, sending him rolling away. I jerked the cable from the jack.

“UHHHHH,” shrieked the redhead from the speakers. But only for a fraction of a second. I silenced her by reuniting the male connector with its female counterpart.

“Might as well tell me what I want to know,” I said. Lyttelton’s eyes grew wide, looking across the cubicle farm to see if anyone had heard the cry of phony ecstasy.
Remembering that Mr. Lyttelton was a slacker (not unlike my old self), I delivered the coup de grâce:

“It’ll be easier.”

“Jesus, fine. Relax, will you?” When I lowered my hand from the speaker jack, he gave an audible sigh of relief. “Your asshole dad owes me three-hundred grand, okay?”

“Asshole stepdad.”

“Whatever. Things started going well for me, and when things go well, it gets to your head. He talked me into the deal. Said I’d pissed away enough of my hard-earned money on landlords”—I couldn’t help but glance to the redhead riding her happy victim on the green felt tabletop—“and it was time me and the missus jumped on the Landwagon, as they used to say. ‘Proud homeowners,’ that’s what we were supposed to be.”

“A sweet thought,” I said, thinking of how I lost the Hobby House.

“We all got hopes and dreams.”

“How’d you meet Ramsey?”

“Around, you know?” He shrugged nervously. “I spotted him the cash upfront, but my house never got built. And just like that it was gone. Poof.”

“Castlebrook Homes declared bankruptcy.”

“We made the deal just before. He played me for a sucker.”

“How can you be sure he knew the company was going down?”

“I hear things.” He gave me a wary look. “Last time we met, you said you knew about the money that went missing after Phoenix City Bank bit the big one. Lots of
people in this building are looking for that money. Let’s just say I got good reason to think your dad tucked it away and some of it belongs to yours truly. When I found out it was gone, I got a little unhinged. Thought if I could find him, maybe I could talk him into getting my money back.”

“How?”

“Threaten to put my buddies here at the SEC on his trail for real.”

“They weren’t already on his trail for real?” I asked. Lyttelton shrugged ambivalently.

“Anyway, the whole scheme was a pipe-dream,” he said.

“Seems to me like it could have worked.”

“It’s complicated, kid. Lot of ins, lot of outs.” He sighed and shook his head. “A friend tipped me off that Livia Moore filed a complaint against Phoenix City. I went around town for a while telling everybody I was investigating her claim, trying to figure out where the hell he’d disappeared to. Waste of goddamn energy.”

“Some people say he’s biding his time. That he’ll be back.”

“Word is he’s getting it fixed with all the right people. Setting up some dumb fuck from Phoenix City to take the fall for that missing cash. Castlebrook and Mansfield Reality will stay dead; everyone who got screwed will stay screwed. But he’ll start up new companies. He’ll go on like nothing happened.”

As I left the SEC regional office, I stood in the elevator wondering about Timothy Gaffer, worrying about Jim Tappman, and looking over the video I’d taken on my
smartphone from the pocket of my slacks, hoping that I’d gotten some footage of the pornography playing on Bob Lyttelton’s monitor.

Livia Moore called me on my cell-phone the next day, and though I immediately regretted having given her my number, I nonetheless related to her the details of my encounter with Lyttelton, hoping that she might be able to make something of it.

“Did he say how he came to earn enough to put money up for a house?”

“Sounded like he and his wife had been saving up.”

“I see,” said Moore, her voice trailing off.

“You do?” I asked. An irritating inequity characterized our partnership.

“It’s simply curious. The way you described Mr. Lyttelton, he did not strike me as a particularly frugal man.”

2. Family Dinner

Our financial situation grew more desperate by the day. As the leaves began to fall and the foreclosure signs sprouted from the pristine lawns of Metro Atlanta—poisoning neighborhood home values like shabby alcoholic uncles crashing glitzy weddings—fewer and fewer clients stepped into Mom’s office looking for a mortgage. And fewer clients meant fewer commissions. Fewer commissions commission meant she could barely pay her lawyers to fend off Ramsey’s ravenous ex-investors (not even counting Moore, who had backed off, at least for the moment), much less pay her own mortgage on a multimillion-dollar home. Before long, the proceeds from selling my beloved Hobby House would dry up. And where would that leave us?
“Your Mom’s a fighter,” she would say, or, after a particularly slow day at the office, “I’ve been poor before, I can be poor again.”

But oddly enough, after my midnight run-in with Bennie and Luda-Marx, I had an easier time adjusting than she did. Though Mom no longer frequented Chops, she ate out three nights a week. She refused to stoop to “greasy fast food” or “soulless chain restaurants.” Occasionally I’d catch her in the master bedroom closet—a mahogany-walled cavern the size of my old guest bedroom in Athens—trying on a new evening gown.

“Another one?” I asked once, mustering my courage.

“I used to buy a new dress every week.”

“I used to have a trust fund.”

“Do you like it?”

“Where are you going to wear it?”

“A Christmas party, maybe.”

“We’re not having one this year, remember?”

“Ramsey Mansfield wasn’t the only man in Atlanta to throw a Christmas party.”

“We need to cut back. That’s what you keep telling me, remember?”

“I keep telling you to get a job. That’s what I remember.”

“Touché,” I said before fleeing up to my room, where I took up a guitar and ran my scales as fast as my fingers could fly.

But even though I had no income to speak of, I was doing better. Earning my keep, as it were.
Every other day I drove to my beloved seedy Mexican grocery on the other side of Peachtree St. for fresh produce and meat. Then I would make my rounds around the yard, climbing up and down the hill, trimming the edges, raking the first autumn leaves, watering the flowers, exchanging banter with the two young Latino landscaper kids who took care of the neighbor’s lawn (Weed Whacker and Leaf Blower), and watching the lovely trophy wives bob their way down the sidewalk in their sports bras and neon jogging shorts. I would take time in the afternoon to read a bit of secondary scholarship for the Plutarch article I would probably never write, to research financial ratings agencies (Moody’s, Standard & Poor’s, etc.), and to continue looking into Ramsey’s past: in particular, his pre-’96-Olympics “revitalization” of the Techwood area and the history of Mansfield Reality, which he had started, it turned out, with his father’s capital after his old business, Mansfield Real Estate, crashed during the recession of the early 1980s.

Afterward, around two in the afternoon I would put away my research materials and take to the kitchen. There I made castles of flour on the granite countertop. Look on my works, ye mighty! I would then crack a few eggs and annihilate the central keep with a bombardment of yokes, gradually crumbling the outer walls until they sank into the runny center until at last the little castle was no more—so it goes—and I had something before me resembling pasta dough, which I would proceed to knead and knuckling and rolling it across the dusty granite. Other days I made homemade demi-glace, roasting veal marrow bones in the oven with onions, carrots, and celery before throwing the whole mess in a pot, which I filled with water, seasoned with salt, and put to boil for four hours.
while I prepared the rest of whatever meal I’d settled on for the night: racks of lamb, risottos, roasted chickens with mushrooms and figs.

It was nice to cook for two again, even though it made me miss Aiko. The first time Mom came home to such a feast (pork chops with cinnamon-pear chutney), she put her hands on her hips, raised an eyebrow, and asked what I was trying to get out of her. But once she saw that my culinary initiative was more than a fluke, she agreed to cut back her takeout Italian and dine-in sushi spending. It took us twenty-six years, but we were finally sitting down together for family dinners.

And before long they were the best part of the day. For both of us. The dining room was too big, too stuffy, so we’d sit instead at the breakfast table, Mom drinking cheap Chardonnay, me drinking over-carbonated homebrewed IPA’s. Quite a couple, we made: the cynical mortgage broker and the idealistic young dilettante, bemoaning our love lives and our newfound poverty. She’d tell me that any girl would be lucky to end up with me, whether I was a rich academic or a grown-ass man living with his Mom, and if Aiko couldn’t see that, well, that was her loss. Let her run off with Dennis the blond guitarist with his stupid adamantium abs. Let the young lay on their backs, she said, gazing up at the stars and whispering lugubrious poems to themselves, enjoying the drama of pain. True loneliness is for middle-aged divorcees. And so I’d tell her—over lasagna with homemade béchamel sauce—that she did look good in those dresses she shouldn’t have bought, that she deserved a better man than Ramsey anyways, an honest man, and also that we needed to go to the store because we’d drank up all the wine.
Whenever Mom wasn’t working or talking on the phone with a lawyer or eating with me, she was painting, and sometimes after dinner she’d take me down to the basement to show me her newest project. Her work had changed considerably since Ramsey had left. The portrait of him leaning against a lotus column in the Egyptian Ballroom stood stacked back to back with her other old canvases, crammed up in the corner like dominos packed away in their box. Instead Mom painted sickly cows loitering around shacks with walls of rotting gray wood. She painted a school with its windows boarded up, standing alone in a field with nothing to see across the horizon but dead grass. She painted a middle-aged farmer wearing a green John Deere hat, the kind with mesh on the sides. The man sat on a front porch swing, holding the rusty chain with one hand, and stuffing the other into the front pocket of his filthy overalls.

“I know him,” I said when I saw that one. Stepping closer to the easel, I noticed a photograph laying on the table beside her oil paints: she and Jim Tappman wearing Santa hat, holding martini glasses garnished with sticks of peppermint.

“He has an honest country face,” said Mom. “Don’t you think so?” I smiled, but really I couldn’t help wondering just where he and his family had gone off to. If they could ever run far enough to escape what had happened.

Some nights Luz and her husband Cesar would join us for dinner with their nine-year-old twin daughters. I’d stand beside her in the kitchen, helping her dice onions for her famed lentil stew.

“You are good cook now,” she’d say, and I’d say, “Gracias, Mami.”
Then the six of us would sit around the breakfast table, Luz in her floral printed
cotton dresses and crucifix necklaces, Cesar with his plaid flannel shirts and his
admirable mustache, and the two little girls talking over each other as they fought to
translate for their parents. One night after a few bottles of white, Luz grabbed my Mom’s
hand across the table. And said something that sounded very serious in Spanish.

“Mami says sometimes she’s glad Ramsey’s gone because now we can all be
friends and have dinners like this one.”

Smiling gracefully, Mom stood from the table to give Luz a hug. Several minutes
later, they left, waiving goodbye and the moment the door closed behind them, Mom
slumped against it, inky black tears running down her cheeks.

“What happened?” I said, kneeling to her.

“We can’t afford to keep her.”

“We can’t?”

“Cesar hasn’t had work in six months. And those poor girls…I don’t know what
are they’re going to do.”

“First let’s cut the fancy dresses and get me a job flipping burgers. Then we’ll talk
about Luz.”

She nodded, wiping the mascara from her face. But I could tell from the look in
her eyes: it was already too late.

3. On the Bondage of Trophy Wives

One windy day in October, I found myself donning an old ski jacket and wielding
a rake purchased at the recommendation of the very same Home Depot attendant who had
assisted me with the lawn mower. While the rake was, on some levels, the less baffling of these two manly implements—its successful operation requiring, for instance, neither gasoline nor a doorstopper instruction manual—the agony it inflicted upon the user’s spine (at least over prolonged use) had me yearning for pull-chords and starter levers. But there was no going back. Rake these leaves, I told myself, or bring shame upon my family.

And so when the sultry voice drifted up from the street, I was leaning exhausted on the wooden haft of my rake:

“Nice ass.” At the foot of the hill was a black woman in her late thirties jogging vigorously in place. Her ponytail whipped back and forth across her shoulders, lustrous, capricious. I could see the muscles working in her thighs, even through the tight black nylon of her sweatpants.

“I could say the same about yours,” I said, gasping for air.

“Could you?”

“Sorry, but I don’t think we’ve met.”

“I remember you. And your ass.” A mischievous smile crept across her face, somehow making the crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes look girlish. Looking closer—maybe too close—I saw that she wore a grey reflector vest over her taut windbreaker. My face grew hot as the memory came back to me.

“I got mugged that night. They took my clothes.”
“You poor dear,” said the woman mockingly, also out of breath. With every step she swung her arms, and her breasts bobbed up and down, flashing light across the vest.

“We’re neighbors, you know. I live just next-door.”

“Really?” Across the yard stood a stucco and stone house, huge, but not as grandiose as Ramsey’s magnum opus. And in the front yard sprouted a white wooden sign. “Moving out?”

“My husband’s an insurance executive,” she said as if that explained it. And when I saw the rock glinting on her finger, my heart sank.

“That must be hard for you.”

“Moving?”

“Sleeping with an insurance executive.”

“It would be if we slept together.”

“I’m Tyler.” Abandoning my rake in the yellow grass, I made my way down the hill.

“You smoke, Tyler?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Marijuana. Do. You. Smoke it?”

She tilted her head, even as her ponytail hung straight down. Her name, I learned, was Carmen.

From there I found myself perched upon a wooden barstool in Carmen’s kitchen, listening to Tears for Fears and blowing twin plumes of cannabis fumes from my nostrils while I searched the glossy blue backsplash tiles over her sink for some hidden meaning.
She sat perched on the granite countertop like a tropical bird, playfully kicking her feed as she drank a vodka tonic and told me how the meltdown was ruining her life. Her husband had been the head of Financial Products at Damisking Insurance in New York, where he made a name for himself drawing up credit default swaps on bundles of crappy mortgages.

“Muppets, he called them,” she said of her husband’s business partners. The ones who sent him millions in quarterly payments betting that folks would default on their mortgages. She smiled wickedly as she set her vodka down on the counter beside her and took the joint from me. Her jogging vest hung draped over one of the barstools.

Underneath she wore a tight purple top with long sleeves, and the way she sat on the counter—leaning forward, arms dangling lazily with her hands clasped between her thighs—caused her sizable breasts to press together. Now, let it be said that I’ve always taken a fancy to ladies with chests of more reasonable proportions; and yet no matter how hard I tried to focus my attention on the stainless steel refrigerator or the midnight blue backsplash, the window of her cleavage drew my eye again and again, like an oil painting hanging from a blank white wall.

Her husband, she said, flew to Manhattan on Monday mornings and came back on Friday evenings.

“And what do you do?” I asked.

“I jog. I rearrange the furniture. I pretend to enjoy playing bridge with high-and-mighty white women.”

“And smoke pot?”
“Yes, that too.”

“And does your husband know?” I asked, taking the joint.

“He wouldn’t care even if he did.”

“I imagine he’d care that you invite strange men into his house.”

“Strange men, yes. Strange boys, I’m not so sure.”

“Hey, I’m twenty-five.”

“Is that supposed to impress me, Tyler?”

“In ancient Rome, you became a man at 14,” I said. Sometimes I just can’t help myself. But she only laughed:

“You wouldn’t last a day in ancient Rome.”

“True,” I admitted, disheartened. So I proceeded to tell her about my MA in History. About how Aiko left me. About how, only a few months before, I’d thought of myself as a 21st century court noble.

We had something in common, she told me. We had both discovered that money is the same thing as freedom.

“I used to think so,” I said, sucking on the joint until my throat itched. “Now I don’t know.”

“Of course it is. Why do you think I married a man who treats me like a cat?”

“A cat?” I said, laughing and coughing all at once so that tears streamed down my cheeks.
“Yes, a cat. Every Monday morning he fills up my litter box and leaves out an extra bowl of water. And it’s better that way. The second he shuts the front door, I’m a free woman.”

“Are you a happy woman?”

“I’m bored. That’s a close second to happy. Maybe one day you’ll find that out for yourself.” She slumped sideways along the countertop to lean on my shoulder. She smelled different than younger girls. Not bad. Just different. The Smiths came on her iPod speakers (“There is a Light That Never Goes Out”), and I sat on the bar stool finishing the joint and trying to follow Morrison’s lyrics. At some point I asked her again why she was moving. When the teaser rates ran out on all the shittiest subprime mortgages, she said, houses foreclosed across the country, and all her husband’s bets went sour. A familiar story. And because the ratings agencies had labeled his credit default swaps with a AAA risk-free rating, his company hadn’t needed to put up any collateral. Within a month, Damisking Insurance found itself on the line with savvy speculators like Livia Moore to the tune of 200 billion dollars. They died choking on the eggs of their own golden goose.

“Imagine,” said Carmen, “a 50 billion dollar multinational corporation brought to its knees by a single fucking moron. The same blowhard who flies down to Hartsfield International every other weekend expecting me to give him head.”

“You can’t afford the house because he lost his job?”
“God no, he can still afford it. He walked away from Damisking with 150 million. Only now some new gang of morons in London wants to bring him on as an outside consultant, and he’s dragging me with him.”

“Interesting,” I said. “Timothy Gaffer winds up dead in a bathtub, your husband winds up buying a townhouse next-door to Harrod’s.”

“Who?”

“Timothy Gaffer.”

“You’re high,” said Carmen, and ye gods, that woman had a wicked smile. I opened my mouth to protest. Instead I forgot what I was going to say and slumped down to rest my chin on the counter, trying to imagine spineless old Gaffer mustering the courage to off himself. The next thing I knew I was drifting asleep.

I woke up to find Carmen soaking wet and naked except for a short cotton bathrobe that failed pitifully in its attempt to constrain her cleavage. In her hand she had another vodka tonic.

“You took a shower?” I was too stoned to play it cool.

“I hate feeling gross after I work out,” she said, her dark hair dripping all over the kitchen floor. I could see the droplets of water making their way down her legs. “You’re a strange kid,” she said, sitting beside me at the counter and sipping from her drink. “Not like the other spoiled brats around here.”

“Do you smoke with them too?”

“Sometimes. But they’re phonies. Just like their phony parents.”

“Still, you keep having them over?”
“I told you, I’m a free woman.”

“A bored free woman. And there’s nothing more boring than loneliness.” Carmen thought about this for a moment. Her lowball glass, I noticed, was empty except for a few cubes of melting ice.

“Maybe you’re a little more grown up than I gave you credit for.” Standing from her barstool, she spun around, turning her back to me, her bathrobe barely covering the curve of her ass. “If I let my robe drop, we’d be on even footing.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“In my experience, you can’t have a normal conversation with another human being if you’ve seen them naked but not the other way around.”

“Haven’t we had a normal conversation?” I asked. Turning back to me, she raised her eyebrow and moved her hand to the sash of her robe. An inexplicable dread filled my lungs, even as I repositioned my leg to hide the bulge in my jean. All I could think about was how I hadn’t finished raking the damn lawn. All the Buckhead gossips—Carmen’s fellow trophy wives—would sit around playing bridge, laughing about how Ramsey left Mom so poor she couldn’t afford her housekeeper, much less her gardener, and taking bets on when the bank would foreclose on our renovated hilltop estate. At last Carmen crossed her arms and interrupted my train of thought:

“Your phone’s ringing,” she said, clearly annoyed. And it was. It vibrated against my thigh to the muffled tune of “People Are Strange.” Blinking, I stood from the kitchen stool and decided (after a moment of consideration) that I wasn’t too high to fake sobriety.
“Hello?”

“Hey there Tyler.” It was a familiar voice. Slow, quiet, and unmistakably country.

“Jim?” Beside me Carmen stood, still dripping water all over the floor, curiosity written plainly on her face.

“We need to talk.”

“Now?”

“Not on the phone.”

“Why not?” I asked, feeling stupid even as the words came out of my mouth.

“In person, tomorrow. You know the Sundial?”

“In the Westin, right?”

“Be there at 9:30.”

Jim hung up, and I knew it was time to go.

“We should do this again sometime.” Carmen stood there in her bathrobe with a joint in her hand, dripping all over her foyer as I awkwardly made for the door.

4. **Plato’s Cave a**
uneasy. Frantic dissonant piano chords. The mad whispering sax. It occurred to me that the meeting might be a set up. I hadn’t seen anyone tailing me down Peachtree, but someone really could have tapped Jim’s phone. Or mine.

It was nearly ten and I badly wanted a drink. I seated myself at a hightop by the big glass wall that wrapped around the lounge and ordered a gin and tonic. The pianist continued to pound chromatic progressions up and down, up and down, jerky and fleet. I couldn’t get the image of a black pickup truck out of my head.

So instead I downed my drink and stared out over the rotating skyline. In the blackness of night, Atlanta was almost beautiful: a pointillist constellation against a dark canvas, where every infinitesimal square of light implied the reflection of a soul and the towers implied a convergence of these souls into singular beings. Proud SunTrust Plaza with its summit of ascending cubist steps; mighty Bank of America Plaza, the tallest, crowned with a luminous golden pyramid; and noble 191 Peachtree, whose peristyle peaks glowed like twin Greek temples suspended in the clouds, emanating rays of light between the columns from the goddesses within—Livia Moore, in this case. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, they drifted past. Titans walking the earth. There I sat high above the streets, a fallen demigod among Olympians, nervously drinking a twelve dollar cocktail I could no longer afford. Chicken shit or chicken salad.

Mercifully, the band moved on to “Take Five,” and the gin calmed me down. Relax, I told myself. You’re not worth wiretapping. No one is going to lure you to a rotating bar in an Atlanta hotel. No one is going to put a shotgun in your mouth.
At 10:15, as I was finishing my second G&T, a pretty waitress in a white jacket approached my table. It seemed that a patron in the VIP section had requested my company. I followed the waitress around toward the elevators, tucked away in the center of the circular lounge. She pointed me to a staircase by the entrance, so dark and narrow I hadn’t noticed it on my way in. Alone I climbed until I came to the summit, where a bouncer stood with his arms crossed, sizing me up. A gentleman with long frizzy heavy metal hair, a bushy orange beard and a tuxedo skillfully tailored to his nose tackle shoulders as if intentionally for comic effect.

“Gentleman in the golf shirt’s waiting for you,” he said. I nodded and made my way inside. The VIP section was roped off into several private lounge areas, each with couches and tables oriented to face the glass wall. The music was much quieter and the lights were dimmer. The couches were most populated by old white men with their arms around beautiful young women. No tourists here. These were the kinds of guys Ramsey invited to our Christmas party: real estate moguls and state senators. Guys like Carmen’s husband. Their sunken eyes seemed to glitter with ancient power. And there, in a section roped off all to himself with his arms slung over the back of a couch, looking out of place in a casual green polo and a baseball cap, sat skinny Jim Tappman.

“VIP section,” I said, taking a seat opposite him. “Very classy.”

“The owner started this place up with a Phoenix City loan. Back in the day,” said Jim.

“Nice to have friends in high places.”
“Should be private up here,” he said, pouring himself a glass of bourbon from a bottle he had on ice in the middle of the table. “Sorry about all the fuss. Go ahead and have yourself a drink.” As I poured the bourbon, Jim watched, unblinking, with his big sensitive blue eyes. He had a long, sad face, a receding hairline under his cap, and a little nubbin of fat below his lips that didn’t quite qualify as a chin.

“I thought Ramsey scared you off for good.”

“I thought so too.”

“What brings you back?”

“Timothy Gaffer.”

“He killed himself. Or haven’t you heard?”

“Horse shit. Bastard walked away from Phoenix City a wealthy man. And a wealthy Timothy Gaffer was a happy Timothy Gaffer.”

“You think Ramsey did it?”

“Cowboy.”

“I find that hard to believe. Rough up some illegal immigrants, maybe. But kill a prominent old white guy? Why risk it? Besides, Gaffer would go along with anything Ramsey said.”

“He was a coward, and a selfish coward at that. If it ever came down to it, he’d have spilled his guts so fast it’d make your head spin.”

“And you?”

“I’ve got my family to think of, Ramsey knows that. What’s left of it, anyway.”

“What’s left of it?”
“Glenda filed for divorce. But I still got my little boy.” I didn’t know what to say to this, so I took a long swallow of bourbon. “Times like these,” said Jim, “people show their true stripes.”

“That’s why you came back.”

“What?”

“You’re showing your true stripes.”

“If I got a pelt, it’s the motley kind a fool wears,” he said laughing softly. “But here I am.” We clinked glasses and drank the rest of our bourbon. Then we poured more, and Jim asked how Mom was holding up.

“Getting by,” I said. “She’s been painting a lot of rural scenes lately. Stuff she remembers from growing up.”

“What about all the folks coming after her?”

“She doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“Poor woman,” he said, shaking his head. “Makes me feel like dirt,”

“There’s nothing you could have done.”

“I knew the whole time. Deep down, I knew. And it only gets worse.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. Jim crossed his arms and leaned back into the chic leather couch. Behind him stood the titans glowing faintly—SunTrust, Bank of America, Peachtree 191—drifting almost imperceptibly, around and around, whispering reassurances to all of us that we patrons of the Sundial sat motionless at the center of things while Atlanta revolved around us. A pre-Copernican worldview.

“Let Ramsey be. That’s what I came to tell you.”
“What did you mean before, Jim? About it getting worse?”

“You’ve got to promise me you’ll let him be.”

“You know I can’t.” Jim nodded slowly, shaking the ice in his glass.

“When I heard about Gaffer, I thought, shit, I could be next. But then I thought about you. Poking around the city, asking all these awkward questions. And it hit me like a sack of bricks. What would happen if you really did find something? Who could say what he might do? God knows what goes on in that man’s head. He could do a thing like that. And it would be on my hands.”

The thing he meant was filicide.

A wave of sadness came over me. A cloying pity like over-sweetened tea.

“I think you’ve had a little too much to drink,” I said delicately. “The bank going under, you leaving Atlanta, the whole thing with Glenda—it’s a lot to handle.” He shook his head and set his empty glass on the table between us.

“I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this.”

“Come to what?”

“It ain’t pretty, but you’ve got to know, for your own good, and your Mama’s too.”

I waited expectantly. He shoveled some fresh ice into his glass before pouring another round, and for a long time he just sat there with his arm slung over the couch, looking back over his shoulder through the floor to ceiling window, watching the city spin sluggish circles around us.
He’d never told anyone before, he said. Never. And when you have everything to tell—as I myself have come to learn—it’s hard to know where to start.

But all you need is a little distance, a little remove, a little historical perspective. Then these moments—the ones that change everything—they come into focus like ____ in a painting.

5. **Supremacy of the Seas**

The Caribbean cruise we took in June 2001. The summer I graduated from high school—the ultimate limbo between adolescence and adulthood, or at least between traditional adolescence and that new, early-21st-century adolescence we have invented for college students and freshly-minted unemployed university graduates. The same year Ramsey accepted Atlanta’s Developer of the Year Award in the Egyptian Ballroom. The moment Jim Tappman truly understood what it was he’d gotten himself into.

He and his family came with us on Ramsey’s invitation, along with a few other “family friends” (cf. “business associates”). To commemorate our vessel’s maiden voyage, the owner of the cruise line smashed his bottle of Champaign against her pristine hull, christening her ever-so-modestly, *MS Supremacy of the Seas*. Even today she remains the largest cruise ship in the world. Tall as a twenty story building, long as four football fields, she boasted an aquiline prow like the cowcatcher of some titanic steam engine; a stern strewn with swimming pools, ice-skating rinks, minigolf courses, rock-climbing walls, basketball courts, open-air amphitheaters in the classic Greek style; and sides like sheer alabaster cliffs with orderly rows of portholes hewn into virgin stone. She swam slow circles around the Caribbean, stopping only to tower over sad little
postcolonial port towns, to cast shadows over the tallest buildings of St. Thomas, over the squalid back alleys of Nassau, and to discharge her cargo of 7,000 bored Westerners. We clomped and clanged over aluminum gangplanks. We descended on these places like a host of locusts, consumers consuming everything in our path: buying t-shirts, petting stingrays, getting our hair braided, zip-lining, drinking rum. And when the sun-went down and our 8:00 PM boarding time loomed near, we closed out our tabs at and hurried back to the dock, hungry for the air-conditioned comfort of our cabins, anxious not to be left behind in one of these beautiful third-world backwaters. And *Supremacy of the Seas* was always there, waiting for her charges to return a. A silent, mouthless leviathan. A white whale. A floating Tower of Babel.

This particular cruise was Ramsey’s idea, of course. Ticket prices for *Supremacy*’s inaugural voyage were laughably inflated, but that only doubled the allure. As we boarded the ship in Fort Lauderdale, Mom mentioned that she wouldn’t have minded picking a smaller boat. Ramsey just laughed and said, “It’s our last trip with Tyler in the house, Susan. Size matters.”

On the first night of the voyage, we all had dinner together. Though we could have eaten for free in one of the five main dining rooms, Ramsey took us instead to a restaurant on one of the upper decks where the entrée prices were in the triple digits and where, looking out the tall windows, you could gaze over the Caribbean and perhaps, if you squinted hard enough, discern the curvature of the earth.

There we sat in chairs with scarlet cushions, swaying imperceptibly with the rise and fall of the sea, at an ebony banquet table nearly as long as the one in the Buckhead
House. Ramsey Mansfield and company. His wife in a sleek black dress, her hair carefully supported by an infrastructure of bobby pins, the vigor of happiness not yet drained from her cheeks. His stepson (your humble historian) babyfaced even at seventeen, needing a haircut, looking awkward in a tuxedo rented from the cruise line. His daughter Julie, tripping on mushrooms, her elbows on the table as she leaned lazily forward in a low-cut dress that matched the upholstery and attracted the attention of his impish banker, the late Mr. Timothy Gaffer, from across the table. His accountant, underdressed in a powder blue button-down shirt, swirling the ice around his empty lowball glass; his accountant’s wife, laughably overdressed in a gown of flashy green sequins, examining her own fingernails and looking (somehow) even more bored than Julie; his accountant’s son, Travis, three years old and three feet tall, cute and chubby in his miniscule tux. And toward the other end of the table: his lawyers, his subcontractors, his commissioner of urban planning, his building inspector, his city councilman and their respective families, none of whom I recognized. I remember Julie and Mom both ordered some kind of fish, I had a rack of lamb crusted with rosemary and fennel pollen, and Ramsey had the steak tartar. He never could resist raw meat.

Everyone was laughing and clinking glasses except for Mom, who’d been sulky the whole trip. Ramsey ordered me a glass of scotch, and the waiter didn’t blink twice, he just brought it. I was embarrassed to drink it because I knew Julie would watch to see if I made a face. Still, I couldn’t complain. When you’re seventeen, you don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, especially when the horse in question comes bearing booze. The men talked business. Things were going well—land was money, Ramsey was conjuring
country clubs from the slums of Atlanta, and everyone wanted a slice. This was at the peak of things.

By then they all seemed to have forgotten that the occasion for the entire cruise was my graduation. But that was okay. It didn’t surprise me. I took tentative sips of scotch while stealing looks at the face-meltingly lovely girl seated at the opposite end of the table, who, in her azure cocktail dress, stood out among the flock of tuxedoed tycoons like a jay flitting among a cluster of crows. She was, apparently, the dark-haired niece of Ramsey’s lawyer. And with each clandestine glance I grew more and more convinced: she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Meanwhile, beside me, Mom was chatting with the Tappman’s.

“I’m just so glad we got him into Chase,” said Glenda, patting her son on the head. “My sister told me the situation at Decatur Elementary has been getting darker and darker, if you know what I mean.”

“I went to public school, I didn’t turn out too bad,” said Jim.

“So did I,” said Mom.

“But you sent Tyler to Chase,” said Glenda.

“Ramsey insisted. He thought it would look better, for whatever that’s worth.”

“It’s worth every penny. Don’t you think so, darling?”

“I sure hope so,” said Jim. “It’s a lot of pennies.”

“Stop it,” she said, laughing and slapping him on the knee (only half in jest).

“Susan will think we’re stingy.”
“Since when is parsimony a sin?” said Mom, gesturing around to include the ebony table, the scarlet upholstered chairs, the chandeliers, the multinational waiters in their tuxedos, the floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the moonlit ocean, all shimmering and evanescent. “Who knows how long all this will last?”

“Here’s to hoping,” said Jim, smiling and raising his glass of bourbon. Reaching across the table, Mom clinked her white wine glass against Jim’s lowball. By the time Glenda raised hers, the toast was over. At this point the conversation had caught my attention—before, I’d been more interested in the girl in the blue dress.

“What was that line from Hardy?” I asked. (I suffered, during this period of my life, from a propensity to boastfully quote from my AP English Literature readings.) “Over the mirrors meant / to glass the opulent / the sea-worm crawls—grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.”

“Sounds like your face,” said Julie.

Everyone laughed, myself included, echoing the masculine chortling that came from the other end of the table—all except for Mom, who sat moodily chewing her fish and sipping her Chardonnay. For dessert the waiters brought trays of custards, cheesecakes, and cobblers. I had a Grand Mariner soufflé, all warmth and alcohol and sugary orange.

Afterward something unexpected happened. Ramsey stood from his throne chair at the head of the table and clinked his fork against his glass. The notes rang out down the length of the table until even Mr. Lars Klein, the boisterous city councilman, fell silent. Ramsey smiled his strangely charming half smile, and when he spoke, it was with the
same measured, calculated charisma he would speak with six months later in the Egyptian Ballroom:

“Is this a boat, or is this a boat? [Polite chuckling; some earnest, drunken laughter.] I’d like to thank everybody for enduring the Ft. Lauderdale airport just so you could share this week with me and my family. Atlanta’s a great city. Even greater, thanks to many of you here. But it sure is fucking nice to get away, am I right? [Applause, hooting.] Now, we’ve all got a lot to celebrate on this trip. First year of a new millennium. Another four years of smart, business-friendly government. The maiden voyage of the world’s largest cruise liner—and no icebergs in the Caribbean, thank God. But for me and Susan there’s something just as special, and that’s our son Tyler. Seems just yesterday he was standing there in his little tux watching us get married, not too much older than Travis here. But in just a couple of months, he’ll be going off to school. Knowing how tough it’s been to get a hold of Julie after she left home, this may be the last family vacation we have with everybody all together. [Sympathetic sighs.] Buddy, I’ve been blessed to watch you grow into a sensitive, intelligent young man, and I know you’ve got what it takes to do anything you put your mind to. So if everyone would please raise a glass. [They do.] A toast to Tyler.”

Up and down the table, from Mom to the pretty girl in the blue dress, crystal goblets clinked and chimed. I sat staring at Ramsey, dumbstruck, looking for something in that captivating Roman-coin face, and despite his chronic absence in my life, I couldn’t shake the feeling that it was true. I had never been the focus of his attention before. Not
like that. And the pride in his smile, I decided, it could only be genuine. If it was a script, then it was a brilliant script, and I loved it. I loved every line.

As we left the restaurant, Ramsey took me aside, slung his arm around my shoulder, and explained for the first time the logistics of my trust fund, freeing me (or so I came to imagine) from the shackles of practical modern life: “You’re the best son a guy could ask for,” he said. “I’m giving you the keys to the castle—the chance to do exactly what you want with the time you have. For the rest of your entire life. So don’t fuck it up.”

Later that night I found a dark piano bar on one of the middle decks called The Keys where an old guy sat pleasing a gorgeous baby grand piano and singing “Anything Goes” by Cole Porter. I found a barstool and asked for a beer. When the bartender asked for my ID, raising a skeptical eyebrow, I handed him my learner’s license wrapped in a hundred dollar bill. Maybe I should have tried a twenty first, but I’d just been told that I would never have to worry about money for the rest of my life, and in any case, it was the first time I’d ever bribed anyone for anything.

Afterward, half drunk on scotch and lager—unlike Julie, I hardly drank in high school,—I found myself in Central Park, a space in the center of the ship, 50 yards long, open to the sky, and teeming with brazen, seafaring greenery. Rows of tropical trees, shrubbery, flowers lining cobblestone paths, surrounded on every side by six decks stacked with stateroom balconies. Above, the moon and stars drifted idly by as the MS Supremacy of the Seas ferried us across the Caribbean (not unlike the luminous windows
of Atlanta skyscrapers orbiting the Sundial Bar). I sat on a bench, smelling the nautical grass, swaying gently with the ship, and thinking about Ramsey’s toast.

That year in my high school Latin class we had read Ovid’s account of Phaethon, a fatherless boy whom everyone mocked for a bastard. Other boys beat him, called his mother a whore. He would try to fight back, yelling that he did have a father, and not just any father, but Phoebus Apollo, who drove the sun chariot across the heavens each day to warm the earth and light the sky—which is what his mother had whispered to him since he was an infant—but this only made his tormentors laugh harder. “Look,” they would say, “here comes the Mighty Prince of Light.” I remembered, sitting on that bench, how when I myself was a boy, I would read this same story again and again in my battered yellow copy of d’Aubusson’s Book of Greco-Roman Myths. My favorite part was when Phaethon came to the Palace of the Sun, with its fluted columns of solid gold and its ivory roof and its polished silver doors radiating light. In the accompanying illustration, the boy stood tiny and trembling before the majesty of that great house, holding his hand over his eyes to shield them from the light reflected from every surface. Doubt filled his heart. The whispers of those other boys filled his head. But when Phaethon came before the throne, Apollo placed his hand on the boy’s head and said, “You are my son, and let no man deny that you are worthy to be mine.”

This is how I felt after Ramsey’s toast. I could believe for the first time that this god of Atlanta real estate truly was my father in more than name.

And now there was this gift. The trust fund. The reigns to the Sun Chariot.
Sitting on the bench, half drunk, I thought of little Phaethon losing control of Apollo’s horses, careening through the heavens, screaming in terror, and tugging pathetically at the reigns as the fiery car swept down to the earth and set fire to forests, boiled oceans, made molten lakes of mountains, until Atlas himself could hardly bear the white-hot sky on his shoulders and Mother Earth, weeping rivers that hissed up at once into clouds of steam, begged Jupiter to save her from the inferno—even as Phaethon collapsed in his seat and relinquished the reigns, overwhelmed by the smoke searing his eyes and the smoldering ash filling his lungs, no longer understanding where he was or where he was going, only praying for his father to save him—and at last the father of the gods balanced in his right hand a slender bolt of lighting and in a single flashing motion hurled it at the half-unconscious driver, removing the boy at once from the chariot and from life, so that he fell headlong toward the earth, flames streaming from his hair, like a falling star.

Don’t fuck it up. Yes, that’s what he said. Perhaps all he really meant was, “Don’t embarrass me like my druggy daughter.” But I took it very seriously. I stood from the bench and walked among the planted Cuban laurels, wondering how best to take advantage of my privilege.

I could be a guitarist, a video game designer, a classicist, a novelist, a celebrity chef. All those silly dreams I had when I was a quiet, fatherless boy—the ones Mom rolled her eyes at and said, “Darling, you’ll never make a living”—the trust fund made them real.

I could do anything, be anyone.
These were the thoughts going through my head as I left the Central Park, as I slumped against the walls of an elevator, as I took a leak at a urinal, as I stumbled out on the upper deck and came upon the girl from dinner that night, the girl in the blue dress, leaning madly over the black ocean below, perched on the railing, her bare feet curling over the bottom rung, pale as ivory. Her black hair and her deep blue evening gown billowed wildly behind her in the wind. Slowly, her left leg rose until it met the second rung. She pulled herself up. Her long white fingers curled around the top rail, which now only came to her waist. It was maybe three in the morning, and the moon hung nearly full over the Caribbean. There was no one else on deck.

Thoughts of my trust fund vaporized. For a long while I stood there, dumb with surprise and alcohol. Finally I stepped forward.

“Don’t do it,” I said, trying to sound suave like the guy from *Titanic*. When she turned, eyes wide, I was surprised to see she was only slightly younger than me—only fifteen or sixteen.

“I do not mean to jump,” she said in a faint Slavic accent. “I want to see what it feels like.”

For a moment she turned to see me. Her eyes flickered with recognition. They were big, sad eyes, blue like her dress, which seemed too low cut, too expensive, too evanescent to be worn by a teenager. I had been right before, at dinner: she was the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen. The cruise liner’s engines filled the silence, and the air smelled like salt water. Below the girl, two glistening silver shoes lay askew on the deck.

“Are you a model or something?” I asked.
“Something like that,” she said.

“A famous ballerina?”

“No,” she said, laughing sadly.

“Well, if you’re not a ballerina, you should probably come down. You’ll fall.”

“I told you, I do not mean to jump. It’s an experiment.” She pulled herself up to the third rung. Her experiment was about to turn into a physics equation—where 32 feet per second per second quantifies the acceleration due to gravity and gamma stands for the surface tension of seawater. Her body was long and lithe. The way she trembled on the metal rungs was like the quivering of a flower that might blow away in a stiff breeze, and I felt a mad urge to just stand there and watch her dangle over the back of the ship, to watch her fancy dress ripple over her thighs. But instead I said, “It’s getting a bit late for experiments. Why don’t you come down?”

I approached the railing, but not so close to her that she might think I was coming to pull her away. Looking over the side of the boat was like looking down from the top of a building. The ship’s wake cut a foamy white swath in the water that seemed to run for miles. Our boat was so enormous, it seemed as if it were tearing the fabric of existence.

“It’s a strange feeling,” she said. “A few more inches, I’d be dead.”

“That’d be a shame,” I said, which was true. But I also meant, You’re like Greek statue with a cute accent.

“You are the son of Mr. Mansfield. He gave a speech for you.” She said this with something strange in her voice, something almost like anger. I blushed, remembering
how happy I’d felt just a few hours before when Ramsey gave his toast to me; and here was this poor confused girl teetering over the edge of a cruise liner.

“Those were the nicest things he’s ever said about me.”

“Yes, he is a man who can say nice things.”

“You know him?” Instead of answering, she leaned farther over the top rung, which now came only to her thighs. She grasped the rail and her arms trembled under the weight of her body, barely stabilizing her. It seemed that any moment a gust would blow her tumbling forward into the dark waters. Taking slow, careful steps, I moved behind her.

“Please come down,” I said.

Slowly, grasping the rail with long fingers of ivory, she turned. She wasn’t crying, but she looked like she wanted to. She held out her hand for me to take. Her skin was soft and warm in the cold night air. Carefully, rung by rung, she stepped down. Then she bent over without a word and began putting on her shoes, and I thought maybe she really had climbed up there just to feel the wind in her hair. The expensive looking fabric of her dress stretched taught around the supple curve of her ass.

“I wish I could be a ballerina. I wish I could dance all day and not have to worry,” she said. She looked sixteen, but she sounded much older. Then she turned dark and spiteful, speaking in a rush: “When you have no money, you don’t think straight. You are like a starving person. You do things you shouldn’t.”

To this day, I have never seen a girl so beautiful. Sorry, Aiko, but it’s true. I told her my name and asked for hers. I asked about her uncle, the lawyer. I asked what
country she was from. I asked why she had performed her experiment leaning over the back railing of the *MS Supremacy of the Seas*.

“I apologize,” she said. “There’s somewhere I have to go.”

“Somewhere you have to go? It’s three in the morning.”

She leaned over and gave me kiss on the cheek. If I smelled her perfume again I’m sure I’d recognize it. But before I could say anything, she was rushing across the deck, her heels clacking against the lacquered wood, her hair swaying back and forth across her pale, slender neck.

I was so surprised I just stood there for a good thirty seconds, watching her disappear. Then I took off after her, my heart pounding, my mouth tasting of beer even though by this point I felt nearly sober. Across the windy deck, past rows of empty deck chairs, through a pair of glass double doors, down two flights of carpeted stairs, down a long hallway—she was walking fast, only twenty feet ahead. I wanted to tell her about my new trust fund. I wanted to tell her she could be a dancer. I could be her patron. She wouldn’t have to worry about money. She could do whatever she wanted.

Stateroom doors rushed by on either side of the hallway, large and imposing, made from shiny dark wood. Suite doors like the one Ramsey was sharing with Mom. The girl disappeared into a room at the end of the hallway. Running up, I read the golden nameplate next to the door: THE SUPREMACY SUITE. Classic rock bled into the hallway, sounding far away. I pulled on the silver handle, but it was locked, so I gave the door three hard knocks.
The door swung open to reveal a small entryway, separated from the rest of the suite by a second set of doors and also by two very large men with military haircuts and tight black shirts bulging with ab muscles. “Satisfaction” by the Rolling Stones blared from inside the stateroom. The girl in the blue dress was already inside.

“You Mr. Klein’s boy?” asked one of the men. The laughter of older men rang in time to a droning kick drum, punctuating the fuzzy guitar line.

“Are you high?” said the other guy. “Klein’s boy is way prettier.”

They both crossed their arms and frowned.

“Fuck off, kid,” said the first one.

“Don’t make him say it again,” said the other.

I wanted to lie, I wanted to tell them I was Mr. Klein’s boy, I wanted to follow the girl in the blue dress and maybe see if she would give me another kiss, but before I could open my mouth, one of the men stepped forward, shoved me out into the hallway, and slammed the heavy wooden door in my face.

6. Supremacy of the Seas II

Jim Tappman had his own adventure that night.

By this point, he knew that Ramsey had been less than faithful to Mom. In recent years, when he and Ramsey stayed at the Augusta National, Ramsey would bring a girl with him. A blond in her twenties named Tina with long legs, doe eyes, and big fake boobs. (The one who would later attend Ramsey’s gala that night in the Egyptian Ballroom.) One time Jim had been alone with her while Ramsey went to take a piss and, in vain attempt to ease the ensuing awkward silence, he made the mistake of starting a
conversation. He asked her if she worked or if she was a student. She laughed and said, “When you look this good, it’s all you need to pay the bills.”

So when Mom cornered him in the cruise ship’s piano bar and grilled him about Ramsey’s various spending sprees, all he could think about was how he had seen this girl Tina playing tennis on the ship’s sports deck, her plastic tits bouncing all over the damn place every time she swung her racket. For all he knew, while they sat there drinking wine, listening to “Anything Goes,” Ramsey was giving this girl the works in the same bed he shared with his wife.

“It’s like Ramsey’s a junky and Timothy’s his dealer,” said Mom. Her southern accent always came out when she talked to Jim. He guessed it was because they were both from the country, so she wasn’t afraid to sound uncultured. “Every time he sees a lot he likes, he’s got a loan drafted the next day, and the deed to the land the day after that. It’s never enough.”

“And then he develops it and makes a damn killing, right?”

“It seems too good to be true.”

“Maybe.”

“And he insisted on setting up a trust fund for Tyler.”

“That’s a bad thing?”

“For Tyler it is. He’s never had a single responsibility in his life, and now he never will.”

“But Ramsey talked you into it?” Mom sighed and rubbed her temples.
“It’s not that I don’t want stability for my son. But one of these days I’m afraid Ramsey is going to bite off more than he can chew.”

“Yeah,” said Jim absently. He downed the remainder of his whiskey. He didn’t used to drink so much. But he was remembering the sound of Tina’s shrill lovemaking, which got her thrown out of the Augusta clubhouse one time. It would have cost even Ramsey his membership, but the governor stood up for him, and he got off with a warning. He looked up from his glass: “It’s nearly midnight. We been here for two hours, Susan.”

“I know, I’m keeping you from Glenda.”

“Don’t you worry. It’ll be alright.”

“Thanks for meeting me, Jim. You’re a good man.”

She stood from the table and gave him a hug. It seemed to last forever. Never in his life had Jim felt so tender toward someone, and never in his life had he felt so wretched toward himself. He tried to pay for her tab, but she was too damn stubborn. After she left the piano bar Jim knew he ought to go back to his cabin, but he ordered another whisky anyway. He was almost grateful to have been distracted by the visions of Tina’s huge breasts. They kept him from thinking about Mom’s questions. They kept him from thinking about all the times he’d seen Timothy Gaffer’s secretary forge her name. It all happened so fast. One day you were just a business partner, and a handshake later you were a fucking coconspirator. Jim had been having nightmares: IRS agents pulling up his Buckhead driveway in a long black sedan. Men in suits dragging him in handcuffs across
the tenth hole in Augusta. Feds marching down the halls of Chase Academy to inform
Travis of his father’s arrest.

His own role in the machine was minor. He turned a blind eye to a few
discrepancies. He moved the occasional numbers around. Every time, he told himself the
same thing, again and again like a Buddhist mantra:

It ain’t hurting nobody. It ain’t hurting nobody. It ain’t hurting nobody.

What was wrong with making a little money, so long as it wasn’t hurting nobody?
Interest on Ramsey’s loans was paying for Travis’s school. It had paid for their mortgage.
It had paid for Glenda to stay at home and raise her son so he would grow up right, so he
wouldn’t be screwed up like Jim, whose mother foisted him off on his old redneck
grandparents.

But he was hurting somebody. Here he was on a beautiful Caribbean cruise with
Susan Mansfield, a perfectly nice lady, old friends on vacation; Ramsey was fucking her
on one deck, and fucking Tina on another. And who knew how much money Susan was
on the hook for with Phoenix City Bank? She sure didn’t, he understood that much.

Draining his scotch, Jim had a vision. It was the kind of vision that could have
been a dream or it could have been a lost snatch of memory floating back from the haze
of a late night’s heavy drinking: he was waking up in a hotel room at Caesar’s in Vegas.
Someone was knocking at the door. He was stumbling out of bed, still black-out drunk,
pulling his pants on on. There was Ramsey at the door with Tina. Tina was naked except
for a lacy scarlet thong. Her breasts were too big and her nipples too small to be natural.
Then, Ramsey’s voice, loud and drunk:
“You want to give it a go?”

Jim lost track of how long he’d been at the piano bar. Five or six overpriced cruise whiskeys worth. The pianist was playing “Anything Goes” for the third time, and Jim figured Glenda had been asleep for a couple of hours already. Then who should walk in but me, Tyler, Susan’s underage son, wearing a rented tuxedo and a white tie. As I went up to the bar, Jim thought about approaching me, about asking if my Mom knew where I was right now. For whatever reason, he’d always liked me. Instead he just watched me order beer after beer at the bar. Whenever I did, he’d raise his glass as if I knew he was there. As if we were toasting my Mom together.

To Susan Mansfield! A perfectly nice lady!

A few minutes after I left the bar, Timothy Gaffer came in and found Jim still awake at his table, surrounded by empty glasses.

“There you are,” he said. His toady face was flush with alcohol, his hairline damp with sweat, and he stood in the dark grinning with perverse excitement. “Been looking all over the fucking boat for you.”

Gaffer led Jim out of the bar. He could stand okay, but walking gave him trouble. Soon he found himself slumped against the walls of an elevator, just as I was slumped in an elevator car on my way to the top deck—maybe at the same moment—where I would find the girl in the blue dress.

“Wait. Where we going?” he asked. He was so drunk, he couldn’t tell if the elevator had stopped moving or not.
“You’ll see,” said Gaffer. “But you better sober up. You’re not going to want to forget this.”

The elevator doors opened. Jim stumbled down carpeted hallways. Every time the ship listed one way or the other, he had to brace himself against the walls with his hands. Then he was at a tall set of mahogany doors. Squinting, he could read the gold plate beside the doorframe: THE SUPREMACY SUITE.

Inside there was an entryway and another set of doors, guarded by two big guys who looked like club bouncers. Gaffer was saying something to them. They opened the doors, and music flooded the entryway—wasted as he was, Jim could still recognize the Stones—and in they went, through the darkened common room, which was bigger than Jim’s living room in Buckhead, up a spiral staircase, through a large bedroom, through a sliding glass door and out into the open air. There were speakers in every room, and there were speakers out on the balcony too. There were couches and chairs arranged around a large, steaming hot tub. There was a man Jim didn’t know in the hot tub, and there were four girls in bikinis, all surrounding Ramsey, who sat enthroned holding a half empty bottle of Louis XIII.

Then Jim was in his boxers, shirtless, submerged in scalding water, a bubbling jet under his ass. He and Gaffer and Ramsey and the other guy, whose name was Lars Klein, talked about business while the girls silently rubbed their shoulders and drank cognac. Jim wanted to leave. The music was too loud and he thought he was going to be sick.

But he didn’t get sick. They were in there for a long time, but he wasn’t sure how long. All he knew was that they’d made it through most of the Stones discography and
that he was sobering up. He felt the cool sea breeze on his shoulders and the heat of the water below. He looked out over the railing, over the dark water, watching the moon, which was not quite full. Across from him, Ramsey was running his hand up and down a girl’s back, and only then did Jim realize it was Tina. He had to double check to make sure the other girl next to Ramsey—the one with her hand in his swim trunks—wasn’t my Mom.

She wasn’t. She was a Latina girl in her twenties.

Now Jim started thinking of Glenda and Travis asleep in his stateroom. He started to think of Susan. He started thinking of ways to excuse himself. But before he could come up with something, the glass doors opened and one of the two bouncers stepped onto the balcony.

“They’re all here.”

“Send them out then,” said Ramsey. The stereo was blaring the fuzzy guitar riff from “Satisfaction.” Five more girls came out onto the patio, followed by a boy. They were not wearing bikinis and they were not in their twenties; they were decked out in glistening evening gowns and cocktail dresses, except for the boy, who wore a tuxedo. And they were teenagers. The boy was no older than fourteen.

“Maybe you’ve had two at one time before,” said Ramsey. “But this is something else, I guarantee you.”

Horror replaced Jim’s drunken apprehension. He got out of the tub and peered over the railing to see if there were any neighboring balconies. There weren’t.

“Don’t worry, Glenda can’t see you out here,” said Ramsey.
“So, nine for us, and Marco here for Mr. Klein,” said Gaffer, still slouched in the tub. He spoke in the same tone he used to tally up accounts at the bank. “Three of us, that makes it six tits apiece. One mouth for your cock and one for each of your balls.”

The new girls lined up along the balcony rail. Three Slavic looking blonds, a redhead, and a Brunette—all tall and gorgeous with their dangling earrings and glittering tennis bracelets, with the dark eyeliner accenting their bright, promising eyes, and with their hair carefully styled, curls and buns like flower arrangements, shining youthfully in the moonlight.

Jim stood squirming his ass against the balcony railing, ashamed and terrified that he had a hard-on. *It ain’t hurting nobody. It ain’t hurting nobody.*

“Use your imagination,” said Ramsey. “Kalyna, tell Mr. Tappman how you like it.”

A pale, stunning girl in a dark blue cocktail dress approached Jim. He recognized her from dinner that night. *She’s younger than Ramsey’s boy,* he thought with a start. She leaned in close, and he noticed that she wore the same expensive perfume his wife liked. When she spoke, her lips nearly brushed against his ear:

“Have you ever experienced anal sex, Mr. Tappman?” Her accent sounded Russian, but she sure didn’t sound like a kid. There was something coy, something sly about her half smile, some spark that made Jim think it might be more than a sales pitch—as if she really wanted it.

“How old are you?” Jim asked, breathing heavy. He was sobering up quick.
“Jim, you’re only as old as the girls you fuck,” said Ramsey. “You wanna feel sixteen again?”

“What about Susan?”

“What she don’t know won’t hurt her.”

*It ain’t hurting nobody. It ain’t hurting nobody.*

By then the other girls had found places around the hot tub. Two knelt on the deck behind Gaffer, their dresses hiked up over their knees. The other two stood behind Ramsey sliding out of their dresses, pulling the expensive fabric down with slow, sensuous movements, down across their pale breasts, their taut bellies, their slender thighs. For a brief moment they stood there together, two nameless nymphs, before sliding down into the milky hot water.

“It ain’t right,” said Jim at last. He knew he was shaking, but he couldn’t stop. Beside him, the girl, Kalyna, stepped back, pretending to look hurt that he might not accept her (or was she pretending?). The other men exchanged glances.

“Never knew you were such a puritan,” said Gaffer, all red faced in the hot tub like a boiling lobster.

“It’s a new millennium, Mr. Tappman,” said Lars Klein. “Come, join the 21st century.”

“Every man’s entitled to his opinion, gentlemen.” Ramsey poured a glass of Louis XIII for one of the naked girls. “But let me ask you something, Jim. Do you have a happy marriage? Be honest.”

“We love our son,” said Jim, trying not to sound evasive.
“How’s the sex?”

“With his son?” asked Klein, giggling.

“With Glenda,” said Ramsey. One of the girls in the hot tub was reaching around Tina to run a hand through his long thick hair while using the other fondle Tina’s oversized silicon boobs.

“It is what it is,” said Jim, sighing. He was trapped. There was no way out.

“I had another wife before Susan, did you know that? Julie’s mother. Eleven years, I was married to that woman. Eleven long years. And you know what I learned in all that time?”

“What?”

“It isn’t in man’s nature to fuck just one woman for eleven years, that’s what.” Ramsey said this softly, his expression blank, inscrutable. Gaffer and Klein laughed and raised their glasses, but Ramsey raised his hand to quiet them. “I’m being serious here. No one can go against his nature. Why do you like spending time with your son, Jim? Why do you prefer to fuck boys, Lars? Why does my stepson sit around all day reading books when he could be learning to run two of the greatest companies in Atlanta? Why do I knock down shitty buildings and build new ones? It’s my nature.”

“Then I figure your nature and mine don’t got a whole lot in common,” said Jim.

“That’s where you’re wrong. Yeah, we’ve all got our own peculiar natures as individuals, but we’ve also got our universal nature as men. And monogamy isn’t part of it.”

“If you learned all that, why do it all over again? Why marry Susan?”
“You really want to know?”

“I do,” said Jim. It tore him up, thinking about her. Remembering the way she’d held onto him earlier that night in the piano bar, all earnest and concerned for her family’s future. That poor woman.

“I build houses for families,” said Ramsey, “and families like a family man with a family business. Makes them feel like I understand them. Like I know what it means for a family to buy their first house. You know how much business came in after Susan and I tied the knot?”

“You never loved her?”

“Love? I love that she’s an honest, respectable mortgage broker, which happens to make me look honest and respectable.”

“You are honest and respectable,” said Gaffer, speaking somewhat absently. The redhead girl had stripped nude and submerged herself between his thighs.

“What about your boy?” asked Jim. “That toast you gave him…”

(At that moment, his boy sat alone in his cabin thinking about how lucky he was to have such an important, generous man for a stepfather; planning out what he would do with his trust fund, with his life; remembering the beautiful girl in the blue dress, what she said about being a ballerina, about getting to dance all day, about being lucky enough to do whatever you want with the time you have.)

“In my line of work, it pays to keep the people around you happy,” said Ramsey, gesturing to include the girls in the tub, “and that goes for children as well as business associates. I learned that with Jullie. Pissed off kids make trouble later, believe me.
Clients find out your daughter’s in rehab, it raises a lot of awkward questions. Easier to say a few words, pat ‘em on the head, throw some money at them, nip it in the bud. But that speech tonight was really more for Thomas Fain, down at the end of the table. The commissioner of urban planning? He’s a sentimental old man with a kid of his own, can’t get enough of that shit.”

Jim was a tall guy, but Ramsey was heavier. Otherwise he could have dragged him from the hot tub and thrown him over the railing into the Caribbean. He would go to the cops, he decided. He would tell them about these poor kids—Kalyna, Marco, Jesus Christ!—these poor kids from who knows what kind of shitholes. He’d tell them everything: about the forged signatures, the bad loans, the misallocated investments. The list went on and on.

It was a brave thought. How nice, to think one man’s martyrdom might bring justice to the world.

But it was then, standing there in nothing but his wet boxers with those men watching him, and all those girls, all nine of them, all sensing that he wasn’t going to partake in the festivities—his friends and their expensive menagerie of seafaring prostitutes—it was only then that Jim Tappman finally understood. Or maybe he’d always known, but he’d kept that knowledge suppressed, like the memory of Tina’s too-good-to-be-true tits that night at Caesar’s. The second Ramsey went down, Jim would go down with him. Hell, he and Gaffer had done most of the dirty work. For all he knew, Ramsey could pin the whole thing on him, leaving Travis to grow up without a daddy.
Ramsey owned him. Ramsey had owned him since the day they met, when they shook hands on the eighteenth hole of the world’s most exclusive golf course.

So all Jim could say was, “Sorry fellas, but I just ain’t in the mood tonight. Think I’ve had too much to drink.” Then he started to pull on his trousers.

“That’s a shame. They didn’t come cheap.” Ramsey pulled the girl in the deep blue dress to him—Kalyna, Kalyna, for years I wondered what her name might be—and reached his hand up her ankle. “Sure you don’t want to stay and watch?” he asked.

“I’m alright,” said Jim, feeling sick to his stomach. He stepped back inside, closing the sliding glass door behind him. Walking back through the dark rooms of the suite, down the spiral staircase, out past the bouncers into the carpeted corridor, all Jim could think about was how much of the money Ramsey spent on those whores had come from something he had done, and how Mom was asleep, alone in her own luxury suite just four doors down the hall.

7. Minotaur

It was getting past midnight and most of the lights—the souls, the titans, the shadows on the cave wall—had gone out. With the exception of the very rich and the very poor, Atlanta is a city with an early bedtime, even on a Saturday night. I had been typing notes into my smartphone as Jim told me everything he knew about my stepfather. Eventually, he grew quiet. He sat leaning forward, nervously fingerling his empty glass as he tried to judge my reaction.

I thought of Ramsey skiing in front of me, cutting twin trails into fresh powdery snow. Putting his gloved hand on my shoulder. The grand gestures. The platitudinous
paternal wisdom. All a pantomime. A heartless, calculated farce. Just going through the motions. Say a few words, pat’em on the head, throw some money at them. And what he did to those poor kids on that balcony—was this the man who took my mother down the aisle? Was he the Phoebus Apollo to my Phaethon? The man who called me son? I catalogued the evidence, the primary and secondary sources: his absence in our lives; his reluctance to speak of Julie; his confessions to Mom during their courtship (cheating on his ex-wife, evading court judgments); his organizing the destruction of old Techwood; his hitting on Luz; his disappearance after giving his speech in the Egyptian Ballroom; his abandoning his family.

It could have been true, I admitted, though I remained unconvinced. It never ceases to amaze, how we fail to recognize the very simplest patterns when we stand too damn close to the thing.

“It feels good to have finally told someone,” said Jim.

“Nine girls,” I said, shaking my head.

“Nine teenage girls.”

“Not to mention Marco. Strange, that these things still happen.”

“So you understand about Ramsey? There’s no point in poking around his business.”

“He’s still my father.”

“He’s no more your father than I am.”

“I’m a hopeless academic, Jim. I can’t stand unanswered questions.”

“Learn to keep your fingers off a sore. There ain’t no point in it.”
“We’ll see.”

“Look. I don’t want to read about you or your Mama in the newspaper like I did Gaffer.”

For several minutes we sat together in silence and sipped our drinks. A horrible thud came from the staircase, followed by a series of gasps and murmurs that came from closer and closer, like ripples echoing across the surface of a pond. I turned to see several groups of diners standing from their couches and making their way out around the lounge. “No,” said Jim, abandoning his bourbon, standing from the couch. Never have I seen a pair of eyes reflect such hopeless, bottomless dread. And there came Cowboy, towering over us and scratching his scraggly beard. He wore black leather boots, black pants, a black jacket, and a sharp black Stetson hat. Blood streamed between the beefy knuckles of his right hand, presumably belonging to the gentleman at the stairs with the tux and the bushy red hair.

What happened next happened very quickly:

“Never been a fan of these VIP rooms. Always make me feel left out.”

“Look,” said Jim, but Cowboy cut him off. Meanwhile I frantically pulled up my phone’s e-mail application.

“You said you wouldn’t be trouble. You gave Mr. Mansfield your word. But here you is.” At this point, all the state senators and trophy wives who hadn’t shuffled back downstairs were openly staring.
“I didn’t tell him about the money,” said Jim, stepping up boldly. Tall and lanky though he was, he only came up to Cowboy’s nose. “I was only trying to convince him to leave your boss alone.”

“And why should I believe a lying son-of-a-bitch like you?”

“You know why. I’ve got my boy to think of.”

“You better think about your boy when I break your arm.”

“What?”

“Are you deaf? Said I’m going to break your arm. And when I do, you be thinking about your boy. Because if you show your face in Atlanta again, it’ll be his arm.”

“This whole thing is my fault,” I said, standing up, tapping in smartphone commands with my left hand.

“You damn right it is,” said Cowboy, coming up to me, so close I could smell him. “And I’m talking to you, boy. What the fuck you think you doing?” He gestured toward my phone, his nostrils flaring. He was a minotaur. Behind him, an older woman thrust her finger at us and spoke rapidly to a manager in a white tuxedo.

“You know my generation,” I said. “We can’t keep our fingers off our cell phones.” Cowboy didn’t find this very amusing. He reached out to me, as if again to brain my head against some nearby object, perhaps even harder this time so I’d not be getting up to write about it. To describe his hands—mitts? paws? dukes?—and the effects of their presence on my fragile, aristocratic digestive system would be an exercise in futility. I can say only that they bulged with veins and tiny muscles. That they were the size of grapefruits. That light from the revolving Atlanta skyline glistened along the
contours of the right one, slickened with freshly spilt blood. I remember thinking, I can’t
die, I have a lunch date with Aiko. But Cowboy didn’t grab my skull. He wrenched my
phone away.

“I been wanting me one of these,” said Cowboy, adjusting the wide brim of his
hat.

“Check please,” said Jim.

“Where you think you’re going? You want to make a liar of me too?” Cowboy
turned from me and before Jim could react, he grabbed him by the shirt and shoved him
down to the floor. The ensuing tussle lasted only five or six seconds. Cowboy fell upon
him like an enormous cat suppressing its prey—he was shockingly fast for such a big
man—and while Jim’s lanky legs wriggled from underneath, Cowboy pulled an arm into
a lock, pinned it to himself with an elbow, and jerked it back with a single swift motion.
You could hear it crack. And just like that, he disentangled himself from the accountant,
stood up, brushed off his pants, and readjusted his Stetson. Jim was screaming and
writhing around. Those Sundial patrons in their white ties and evening gowns, who
before had observed the spectacle with amused curiosity, were now shrieking and calling
the cops even as Cowboy marched back toward the stairs with my smartphone, the
second I’d lost in a month. No one stood in his way. I rushed over to Jim. He rolled away,
turning his back to me, and pushed himself up to his knees with his good arm. He’d
stopped screaming, but he was still red-faced and gasping. There was whiskey on his
breath. Perhaps that made it easier for him. I held out my hand and helped him to his feet.
His other arm dangled behind him at an unnatural angle.
“Let’s get you to a hospital,” I said weakly.

“I’ve got to get out of this city.”

“You need to get that looked at.”

“I know what to do about a broken arm,” he snapped. I could see he still was afraid, even more afraid than when Cowboy came into the bar. Now I understand, he was thinking about Travis. He turned and began to make his way out of the lounge with surprising speed. People gave him room as he went.

“Jim, please,” I called, pushing past a baffled pair of gorgeous women who’d been watching the scene. “Jim!” All I could do was follow, apologizing and begging him to stop, to help put things right. I sidled past a circle of waiters tending to the big red-bearded bouncer and hurried down the dark, narrow stairs to the Sundial’s entrance, but by the time I reached the landing, the elevator was shutting on Jim Tappman, depriving him of his arms, reducing him to a sliver, destroying his image in my memory so that all I can recall now is a single sapphire eye framed by brass doors, the pupil dilating as it adjusted from the dimness of the lounge to the bright light inside the carriage, and the feel of cold metal sliding under my fingertips.
THE LIFE OF TIBERIUS GRACCHUS: LIBER V (ROMA, 133 BCE)

The heavy bronze doors of the Senate House\textsuperscript{13} slammed at Tiberius’s back as he stepped into the cool autumn air of the Forum, still holding the sliver of expensive parchment on which his summons had been penned in sooty ink. An urge came over him, and he nearly crushed the thing in his hand. But, thinking better of the waste, he handed it instead to one of his freedman so that the cold words could be scratched away and the parchment reused. He rushed down the stairs, his sandals clacking against the stone, eager to carry him away from this solemn brick hall raised to house weasels, vultures, and hogs in purple stripes. His house guards followed closely behind—six veterans in scale mail who had served under him in Numantia.

But before Tiberius came to the bottom step, he heard once more the creaking of hinges, followed by the crashing of the mighty door. He turned to find Fulvius Claudius Pulcher. Fulvius had the thin dark hair, slightly bulbous nose, and small ears of the Claudian house, and he was one of the few members of the senate whom Tiberius trusted, even among his allies. Although Fulvius was one of the youngest members, having seen only 25 summers, Tiberius knew him to be a serious, thoughtful man.

“You offended them even further, storming out like that,” said Fulvius.

“Our business was finished.”

\textsuperscript{13} The Curia Hostilia, named for King Tullus Hostilius; perhaps the modern reader will find it amusing that T. should have met the senate in a building with such an unfriendly epithet.
“You can’t let the insinuations of men like Pompeius and Nascia Serapio rile you so easily.” They began to walk down from the Senate House, accompanied by their freedmen, their slaves, and their guardsmen. As they passed the raised marble stage of the Rostra with its front adorned with the prows of conquered vessels, Tiberius lowered his head, thinking of the day he shouted down Marcus Octavius and passed the law that has since gotten him in such trouble.

“I don’t give a fig what they say about me,” Tiberius said at last. “It’s the way they sulk and whine like children deprived of their playthings.”

“They are not children, but men. Fiercely possessive men. You take what they see as theirs.”

“They see all of Rome as theirs.”

“Without friends in the senate, everything you have accomplished will come undone the instant you fall down dead, and that is liable to be sooner rather than later if the Old Families have their way. You must be patient with us, my friend.”

“You’re right, of course,” said Tiberius, sighing. “But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Come, let us go to the baths. Let your anger rise out with the bubbling water.” At this Tiberius pursed his lips. He was not usually one for public baths, crowded as they were with laughing red-faced men shouting profanities over one another. His idea of relaxation was a quiet study, a lamp with plenty of oil, and the feel of a fine vellum book in his hand. But he liked Fulvius, and it was an unusually cold day. Perhaps filling his head with steam would take his mind off what had happened in the senate house.
Earlier that morning, Tiberius had come beneath the high ceiling with its timber rafters; he had walked the open floor inlaid with tiles cut into Horns of Plenty from deep purple porphyry stone; and he had stood between the wide marble steps, three on each side, crowded with noblemen looking down upon him—opportunistic friends and bitter enemies, perhaps two hundred in all, with perfume on their cheeks and flamboyant gold signet rings on their pale fingers. They sat upon stools veneered with ivory from Africa and topped with soft velvet cushions to welcome their buttocks. Tiberius approached the end of the hall, opposite the doors, standing before the ancient stone shrine to Vulcan. It was there they confronted him about the bequest of Attalus I, the late king of Pergamum. One after one, they stood from their plush seats:

“I wonder, by what authority have you seized the riches of Pergamum?” said the first.

“I supported your land law,” said another, “but even you must admit that you have overstretched the powers of your office here.”

“He has kissed Attalus’s feet, just as he bowed before the old barbarian lord in Numantia.”

“I beheld the envoy of the deceased king when he entered the city gates,” Quintus Pompeius had said, his thin upper lip curling into a sneer. “He presented Gracchus with a diadem and a purple robe, thinking him the king of Rome.”

“That’s a lie, and you know it,” said Fulvius Claudius Pulcher with icy calm.

Only after an hour of shouting and bickering did they finally allowed Tiberius to speak: Their ally King Attalus had made the citizens of Rome his heirs, he said, not the
senate, and as the Tribune of the Plebs, protector of the people, it fell to him to allocate that wealth. And so he had chosen to distribute the monies to those poor men and women who were now returning to the public lands so that they could replace the livestock, tools, and vehicles they had been forced to sell after becoming refugees, which would in turn allow them to better stock and cultivate their grounds.

As soon as Tiberius had finished, Scipio Nascia Serapio stood from his stool and clasped his hands together. The morning light streaming in from the chamber’s high windows gleamed across his hairless head as he spoke his sharp, well-annunciated Latin: “If we continue to allow the Tribune to cast scraps of meat before his hounds, we will awake one morning with jaws around our throats. Let us not forget what happened to Marcus Octavius. If that is how he treats his friends, I should not like to see what he might do to his enemies. Mark my words: he will persist in this madness until the mob puts a crown on his head.”

“I have fought only for the benefit of my countrymen,” said Tiberius, struggling to control his voice. “I grow sick of being called self-interested by men who would hoard all the riches, lands, and imperium of Rome for themselves and their sniveling heirs.” Tiberius might have drawn his sword in that moment, had he been allowed to wear one in the Senate House. It was then, as the perfumed men began to chant “Tiberius the Pander!” from their ivory stools, that he strode hotly across the ornate senate floor and flung open the great bronze doors

It had been the mention of Marcus that had upset him. He saw that now, making his way across to the south side of the Forum toward the baths. The autumn wind blew
strong enough to rustle the heavy folds of his toga. He could feel the goosebumps rise along his ankles as he and Fulvius passed the many arches of the Basillica Sempronia. The great public hall never failed to make him think of his father, who had commissioned it before his birth. At length Tiberius and Fulvius arrived at the bathhouse, an enormous complex of clay brick with high ceilings and few windows. People came and went freely—senators, knights, plebs, and freedmen alike. Four marble statues of Venus framed the bustling entrance, and among those loitering under the great arch was a brown-skinned foreigner in Syrian garb, handsome and fit, despite having come well into middle-age.

“That man is staring at you,” Fulvius noted.

“A slave of Marcus Octavius’s household,” said Tiberius glumly. “His family loves me not.”

“You shouldn’t blame yourself.”

“He was my oldest friend, Fulvius.”

“Come, let’s go. We’re here to forget our cares, not to remember them.” He led Tiberius past the foreigner, through the high, open door, and into the open-air atrium where doors led to various changing rooms. Slaves and freedmen sat on benches, waiting for their masters to emerge from the baths. Some boys ran about the grass throwing a discus, two in plain, coarse tunics and one stumbling about in his purple boyhood toga. Posters woven from slender reeds covered the walls with advertisements for chariot races, plays, and poetry readings. One depicted a helmeted, bare-chested man fending off a tiger with a short sword, and beneath the image were the words:
EIGHT CONTESTS WITH MAN AGAINST BEAST, FIVE WITH MAN AGAINST MAN, GENEROUSLY PAID FOR BY THE HONROABLE EX-CONSUL PUBLIUS OCTAVIUS.

“It seems you are not the only one vying for the love of the mob,” said Fulvius. Tiberius shook his head. They entered a changing room dimly lit by high, small windows. The house guardsmen were required to stay behind with the slaves. Tiberius raised his arms as a bath slave unwound his toga, carefully folding the heavy cloth over his arms to keep it from touching the floor. He was glad to be rid of the weight. He was also glad to be out of the autumn breeze and gladder still to be far from the white and purple tiled floor of the senate house.

When the two men finished disrobing, a skinny blond slave took their clothing to hang on wooden pegs. They made their way straight to the caldarium after deciding that the day was too chilly for the cold-plunge bath. The moment Tiberius entered the room, the heat enfolded him, warming his lungs. The voices of men rose over the gentle sloshing of water that echoed through the chamber, and dusty beams of light poured down from openings in the high barrel-vaulted ceiling to illuminate the curtains of steam rising from the water. Ahead of them, a plump little boy followed his father, glancing around and nervously covering himself with his hands. Tiberius stepped down into the pool and sank slowly down, savoring the touch of liquid fire as it crept up his ankle, up over his manhood, and up his stomach.

“It’s difficult to remember the last time I saw you smiling,” said Fulvius solemnly as he came into the water beside his companion. The water was opaque and milky with
the heat so that Tiberius had difficulty making out the colorful mosaic on the floor of the bath. They sat together on a step beside the father and his timid young boy; across the pool from them were four middle-aged men laughing about old times in the army together. At first touch, Tiberius’s feet recoiled from the searing clay-tiled floor, which was directly warmed by furnaces below the bath; but soon he grew accustomed to the heat.

“Perhaps you were right about coming here,” he said to Fulvius.

“Campaigning with the army last year, I yearned more for the bath than I did for any woman.”

“Those men could be anyone. Farmers or senators.” Tiberius nodded toward the veterans. “And so could we. Without signet rings, without plain togas or those with purple stripes, we are all simply Romans. That’s what I like about the baths.”

“I myself prefer the water to the patrons.”

“I’ve noticed you keep to yourself in the senate as well.”

“You’re quietly charismatic, Tiberius, whereas I am only quiet. I have no love for people, and they have no love for me.”

“The senators, you mean?”

“I mean everyone. I understand my colleagues exactly, and for that reason I dislike them. I understand the common folk not at all, and therefore could not like them even if I tried.”

“You have no sympathy for the refugees, then?”
“In vain does one try to comprehend the suffering of the lobster boiling in his pot,” said Fluvius.

“Yet you risk the ire of the Old Families,” said Tiberius.

“Duty,” said Fulvius sinking deeper into the milky hot water and closing his eyes.

“If I cannot love people, at least I have it in me to love Rome. A curse of the Claudian house, perhaps. And without a roof to keep them dry, a hearth to warm their hands in winter, a small bit of damp earth to call their own, the people will make better deserters than soldiers. Even I could see that you were right about that.”

“You speak like an old man, Fluvius.”

“My wife says the same.”

“And can you find it in your iron Claudian heart to love her at least?”

“She is a good woman,” admitted Fulvius. “I count myself fortunate in that.”

The two of them sat in the hot bath saying nothing for half an hour more. For a while Tiberius watched the other bathers. Fulvius, slightly pudgy with his eyes serenely closed, looked very much like a napping dog. Beside them, the father never took his eyes of his little boy, who, having forgotten to be embarrassed for his little floating penis, was now happily splashing about the pool with a bronze strigil in each hand, playing at naval combat, clashing them together as if they were war galleys so that the clang of metal occasionally echoed through the chamber. Meanwhile the four men across the pool had grown sober, speaking now of a shared comrade who had perished in Hispania.

---

14 A metal tool the size of a chef’s knife, used to scrape dirt and sweat from the bather’s body. They were curved like little crowbars so that the bather might reach over his shoulder and clean his own back.
The heat made Tiberius short of breath, but in a good way. In fact, he felt almost drunk. It was as if the water had seeped inside him, through his intestines, into his heart, which pumped it out through his veins to the tips of his toes. Looking down, he found that he could now make out the tile picture on the floor of the bath, even through the soupy water: a scene from Homer, with a ship passing a craggy rock where three beautiful women reclined, singing.

He closed his eyes and drifted to sleep for a few moments, just long enough to slip into a dream. He dreamt he was a quastor in the army again, back in Hispania, in the war tent of the old Numantine king, who sat scratching at his long white beard (as Tiberius’s mentor, Blossius, was wont to do) and saying, I spare you now as your father once spared us. Tiberius told the king he never really had a father. The king waved it all away and said, I shall clothe you, I shall free you from your bonds, you shall marry my daughter and be my son. The senator Quintus Pompeius burst into the tent, waving his finger furiously and shrieking that he was right, he knew it all along, Tiberius really did want a crown on his head. But before the little man could say another word, the tent lifted and billowed away into the sky. Tiberius realized that the flapping canvas had taken the other men with it. He was all alone. For some time, he wandered the high yellow grass, calling aloud for the king. Then he remembered. The old man had been dead for several months.15

---

15 The previous year, 134 BC, the optimates majority in the Roman senate voted to ignore Tiberius’s peace treaty with Numantia and sent 60,000 soldiers to besiege the city. The Numantines chose suicide over surrender, including the women, the children, and the elderly king. *Hic sunt lacrimae rerum.*
Tiberius awoke with a start, half submerged and half sticky with sweat. If he stayed in the stifling heat another minute, he felt he might become sick. The four friends across the bath were still there, but the father and his son had left. Fulvius was awake beside him, watching him calmly.

“YOU LOOK RATHER LIKE A LOBSTER YOURSELF, TIBERIUS, ALL NAKED AND RED-FACED.”

“I THINK I’LL TAKE A QUICK DIP IN THE COLD PLUNGE BATH.”

“I’LL BE HERE WAITING.” Nodding, Tiberius stood and stepped from the water. He passed back through the changing room on his way to the frigidarium, and the moment he crossed the threshold, the colder air raised the hairs along his bare legs. In the corner of the changing room, he noticed the Octavian slave who had stared at him before. The dark-skinned foreigner stood whispering secretively with the skinny blond bathhouse slave. When he noticed Tiberius, he looked him in the eyes and grinned. There was something about the man’s smile—perhaps the way his huge, crooked, yellowed teeth marred his handsomeness, or perhaps the mocking glint in his dark eyes—that struck Tiberius as sinister. He felt inexplicably apprehensive as he passed the slave and made his way to the frigidarium door.

Then, when he passed into the circular room with its ceiling dome of clay bricks, Tiberius understood. There in the cold-plunge bath sat a cluster of wealthy Plebian landowners, and among them in the icy water was Marcus Octavius, a strip of shiny black silk tied around his face to cover the ghastly nothingness where his eyes used to be.

Tiberius thought to turn around and leave. Marcus would not see him, after all, and he didn’t think he could bear a confrontation. Ever since that day at the Rostra, he
had walked the streets of Rome afraid that he would come across his old friend and be called to answer for what had happened. It had been nearly a month now. Though Tiberius had not seen him once in that time, he thought of Marcus every night as he lay in bed, struggling to convince himself that it was the mob, not Tiberius Gracchus, who put out those affable blue eyes.

But it was too late. The men in the bath had grown silent, looking at him standing there on the threshold, and one of them—plump young Titus Annius—was pulling at Marcus’s arm and whispering in his ear. There was nothing to do but enter. Tiberius approached the edge of the pool, strangely conscious of his manhood dangling before these unfriendly eyes. He stepped into the frigid bath, easing down reluctantly, inch by inch.

“The Tribune of the People honors us with his presence,” mocked Titus in his wheedling high voice. His enormous belly swelled over his thighs, hiding his penis.

“Be well,” said Tiberius in quiet greeting. He could not help but look at Marcus. His body had grown gaunt, his lustrous brown curls long and dull. Four long scars raked down his rosy cheek, starting just beneath the black silk and ending at his jawline.

“It is impolite to stare,” said Titus.

“Forgive me, but I have not looked upon my friend in too long. How are you, Marcus?”

“They call me Caecus Octavius16 now, or haven’t you heard?”

“I prefer Marcus.”

---

16 Caec- us, -a, -um. adj. blind
“I am told you did not visit me after my injury.” His voice was as chill as the water. And it was strange how he seemed to be looking Tiberius right in the eyes, somehow peering through the rich black cloth.

“Your father wouldn’t let me see you,” said Tiberius. This was true, though it was little comfort.

“You may see me now, though I may not see you.”

“Do you no longer smile when you jest?”

“They tell me I no longer smile at all.”

“Thanks to you,” said Titus, leering at Tiberius. Around them, other groups of bathers had turned to listen in. “Tell us, how was your meeting with the senate this morning? Did they chide you for filching their sweet Pergamene treasure chest?”

“King Attalus willed his fortune to the people of Rome.”

“First you take their property, now you take the keys to the treasury.”

“I did not come here to argue with you, Titus Annius. I came to relax. And having found Marcus, I mean to ask his forgiveness for what the mob did to him. My friend, if I had known…”

“Save your apologies,” said Marcus, slumping deeper into the cold bathwater.

“I do not appreciate being silenced,” said Titus. “I have a right to speak my opinions in a public space. Would you shout me down and cast me from the baths as you cast poor Marcus from the Rostra?”

Tiberius could take no more. Rising from the bath, he stood for several seconds, feeling the icy drops fall from his skin. Again he felt everyone in the frigidarium looking
on his naked body—only now even more spitefully than before—and he knew that the
moment he left, they would speak of nothing but him. Before turning to leave, he gave
Marcus one last sad look. There was something pathetic about the way his dark curls fell
over the band of black silk.

On his way to the hot baths, Tiberius noticed that the Octavian slave with the
crooked yellow smile was gone. He found Fulvius still in the steaming caldarium and
brusquely announced that he wished to leave. Back in the changing room, the two men
sat on benches waiting for the bathhouse slaves to clean their skin. Tiberius, shivering
and cold; Fulvius, red-faced and sweating. The father and his little son had come back
with them as well, only this time the boy was too busy playing imaginary ships to worry
about covering himself.

“Go on, give them back,” said the father. With a pout, the boy found a small
wooden table and put his war galleys to rest with two other strigils laying there. The boy
asked to be scraped clean, but the father shook his head, saying they didn’t have any coin
for a tip. As they left, Tiberius saw the skinny blond bathhouse slave leaning over the pile
of strigils. A strange passion had come over his face. He picked up one of the tools and
examined it closely, his eyes wide, as if considering whether it might be fashioned from
gold rather than bronze.

“Are you going to keep us waiting all day?” said Fulvius. The slave murmured an
apology and grabbed two of the strigils from the bottom of the pile. After handing one to
a second slave boy with ebony skin, he began scraping Tiberius’s back while the other
did Fulvius’s. Together, the two men stood naked together, facing the wall where all the
bathers’ clothes hung from wooden pegs. Tiberius closed his eyes. He had always
disliked the feel of a cold strigil tugging across his tingling skin after a bath.

“I saw Marcus Octavius,” he said without looking away from the wall.

“I’m sorry,” said Fulvius.

“All I ever wanted was to do right by my father’s name. And now this…”

“I hope Octavius hasn’t spoiled our outing.”

“Far from it. Thank you for inviting me, Fulvius, you’re a good friend. I only
hope I never cause you to be maimed.” Tiberius turned to see that the stern young man
had allowed himself the tiniest of smiles. He was about to say more, but the slave
scraping his back dropped his strigil. The hooked thing rattled and clanged loudly against
the stone floor of the changing room. At this clumsiness, the dark-skinned slave gave the
blond boy a dirty look.

“Are you alright?” asked Tiberius. The blond slave nodded, clearly scared out of
his wits. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell your master.” The boy picked up the implement and
finished his work with great haste. After the boy finished wrapping Tiberius up once
more in the heavy toga, Tiberius reached into the folds of his garment, found his soft,
sheepskin coin-purse, and gave the boy an especially large tip. Meanwhile, Fulvius stood
in silence, holding his stomach.

From there, they passed through the open atrium with all the advertisements.
Once Tiberius’s house guard rejoined them, they made their way back to the entrance of
the bathhouse where the four statues of Venus stood in their various poses. Tiberius and
Fulvius loitered for several minutes, in no hurry to rejoin the bustling world of the city.
For some time, Fulvius spoke quietly about bathhouses in Alexandria, but Tiberius was still thinking of Marcus Octavius with his black silk blindfold. Then, glancing up, he noticed a strange expression his companion’s face.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I’m afraid I’m not much for conversation at the moment.”

“It’s not you, Tiberius. I stayed in the hot baths too long, that’s all.”

“Well, I go now to meet with the Committee of Property Allocation.”

“Make sure to keep your guards close,” said Fulvius, smiling weakly.

“You should come. We could use your council.”

“I’m honored, truly, but it seems the vapors have rather upset my constitution. I’d better go home and lay down.” And indeed, he did look rather pallid and sallow in the face. Tiberius said his farewells and left the grandeur of the bathhouse behind him, walking back toward the Forum with his small retinue of servants and soldiers, while Fulvius sauntered off the other way holding his stomach.

Along the way, Tiberius spoke of his encounter with Marcus to his friend Gaius, the youngest of his guard, who had been there the day he surrendered to the Numantine king—forever ago, it seemed. Though he was still small of stature, Gaius had grown from a trembling, anxious boy into a quick, skillful swordsman. He had begged weeping on his knees to enter Tiberius’s service.

“He’s right to hate me,” said Tiberius as they passed the Temple of Vesta. He could smell the acrid smoke that escaped the opening in the domed roof.

“You yelled for them to stop,” said Gaius, as if to himself. “I heard you.”
They came to the Basilica Sempronia, towering over the Old Shops. A long series of marble arches constituted face of the building. Passing under one of these, Tiberius entered the great hall, which was bustling with bankers, bureaucrats, and merchants. Light poured in through the two tiers of arches, making it seem as if he was still outside under the sun. As he made his way through to the government office on the third floor, Tiberius remembered how he would come here as a boy and sit leaning against one of the engaged columns while he read an old book or day dreamed about his father.

The office was as stuffy and dim as the main hall was open and bright. Tiberius’s house guard waited outside the door, but there were two city guards with scarlet cloaks standing quietly inside. He sat on the committee with two other men selected by the Council of the Plebs on simple wooden stools, waiting for their first case. To them had fallen the painstaking task of identifying who among Rome’s wealthy landholders had amassed more than the legal limit of 500 iugera of land and distributing those excess lands appropriated by the state.

First was the senator Quintus Pompeius, a balding man of thirty years with a thin, sneering upper lip. He stood before the committee members in the center of the room crossing his arms.

“It’s a pity, Tribune, that you had to leave the meeting this morning on such short notice,” he said.

“With luck, my time in your company today will be equally brief.”

“It must, thank the gods, for it is plain that I fall within the requirements of your foolish new law.”
“Is it, now?”

“I have my villa outside the city, my olive grove in Pisa, and my vineyard in Pompeii. That’s a total of 450 iugera. Or can you not count?”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” asked Tiberius, examining a scroll of property documentation by the faint light coming in through the room’s little window.

“I think not.”

“You swear by the gods, and by the senate and people of Rome?”

“I do,” said Pompeius, reddening, glancing to the faces of the other committee members and staff in witness.

“This morning you claimed I was offered a purple robe and a golden diadem. Now I offer you a prisoners tunic and a set of iron manacles.”

“On what charge?”

“Lying under oath, of course, and intentionally deceiving authorized magistrates appointed by the people of Rome.”

“You say you own 450 iugera of property,” said one of the committee members.

“But what of the four farms you own outside Pisa? Those bring you to a total of 900 iugera.”

“Those lands belong to my nephew.”

“Yes, your nephew the notorious gambler, whose insolvency is well known throughout Rome as well as Pisa,” said Tiberius. “Just how did he come up with the capital to purchase those properties?”
“This is circumstantial proof,” said Pompeius, growing pale. Tiberius produced a document from a pile of similar scrolls resting on a table beside him.

“OWhat of this letter from your nephew swearing that he has never even heard of those farms? And why do you receive the revenues from those lands and supply them with slaves from your own household, while your poor kinsman stalks the taverns of Pisa night after night in the same ragged brown woolen tunic?”

“My friends, this is a misunderstanding. I was simply not made aware that the new law prohibited—”

“You know full well that the law contains measures to stop this exact sort of fraud because you yourself came before the senate no less than seven times trying to strike them down.” Tiberius raised his hand, and the two city guardsman grabbed Pompeius by the wrists and took him from the room kicking and weeping.

When they returned, another wealthy landowner was led into the chamber, and so proceeded Tiberius’s afternoon. Soon he had convicted three patricians and two plebs of violating the Law of Sempronian Land Reform, although Pompeius was the only one arrested for perjury—the rest were merely stripped of their excess lands.

The distribution of the appropriated lands was more pleasant business. Veterans, widows, and dispossessed farmers stepped tentatively into the office bearing family swords and rude signet rings to verify their identities. If these objects proved authentic and matched up with the city’s records to demonstrate that their owners were indeed the previous tenants of property illegally purchased from the state, the committee returned to them the rights to those lands. There were, of course, a few instances of fraud. One
rugged young man who came requesting rights to a farm in Tuscany turned out to be the slave of Titus Annius; his corpulent master had promised him freedom if he succeeded in saving the farm from the city’s ministers. But more often than not, Tiberius and his colleagues awarded the claimant rights to their former homes. In these cases, grizzled old farmers with knotted muscles and bronze skin wept like children, and beautiful young mothers fell to their knees and kissed his sandaled feet.

By that point, Tiberius felt much better. He had forgotten all about his morning in the senate house. He had forgotten about Marcus. It was true, as Fulvius said, that commoners were strange creatures leading inscrutable lives. But after he told them that they could leave the filthy refugee tent-cities of Rome and return home—when they wept and laughed and embraced one another—Tiberius knew them for good, true Roman people. This is what he had fought for since that scalding afternoon in Numantia so long ago.

Tiberius was hearing the plea of a burly middle-aged shepherd when his own man Gaius barged into the small, dim room unannounced.

“Pardon me, Tribune, but the philosopher Blossius of Cumae wishes an audience at once,” he said nervously, glancing back and forth among the committee members with his big blue eyes.

“Tell the old Greek his personal business may wait,” said one of the ministers.

“Blossius would not interrupt us for nothing,” said Tiberius. “See him in.” Gaius bowed, left the room, and came back with the philosopher hobbling behind on a gnarled wooden cane, his back bent forward like an old strigil. He had grown smaller and gaunter
than Tiberius remembered, even as his beard had grown longer and whiter. But his eyes still brimmed with intelligence—and something darker, sadder. The ministers stood in awkward silence, waiting for him to crutch his way to the center of the room, his stick echoing against the stone floor. At last he turned to face them. Straining visibly, he placed both hands firmly on the grip of his cane and straightened his spine.

“What troubles you, Magister?” said Tiberius.

“Ill news, my son.”

“Go on.”

“Fulvius Claudius Pulcher is dead.” For several long seconds, there was only the raspy wheezing of Blossius’s lungs.

“I saw him only two hours ago,” said Tiberius.

“The cause is yet unknown,” said the Greek carefully, eyeing the other men in the room. “But it is not thought to have been a natural death.”

Tiberius felt the familiar weight of fear swelling in him. He remembered Fulvius’s warnings well, and those of Marcus Octavius, when they had still been friends. Without a word to the committee members or the burly shepherd, he left the office with Blossius, his house guard following closely behind with their hands nervously resting on the pommels of their swords. As the party exited the crowded basilica and found their way across the bustling forum, it felt as though the eyes of every senator, merchant, and slave followed them the moment they passed. It had rained a little while the committee had been inside hearing cases. The cobbles were now dark and slick with water, and a
blanket of grey clouds unfurled across the sky. They came to a street of affluent houses at
the bottom of the Capitoline hill, and Tiberius found Fulvius’s row house.

Though the body was fresh, the smell overwhelmed Tiberius the moment he
crossed the threshold. The house servants and freedmen had gathered in the atrium,
waiting somberly around the impluvium. They had dispatched a rider to notify Fulvius’s
father, Appius Claudius Pulcher, but he was seeing to business in the port of Brundisium,
several days from Rome. Another had been sent to notify the city guard. Standing there in
the quiet room, listening to the excess rainwater trickle down from the opening in the roof
to splash quietly in the little pool, Tiberius remembered other days when he had taken
shelter from foul weather under this same roof. How many times in the last year had he
dined at Fulvius’s table?

Struggling to remain composed, Tiberius followed a trembling young slave girl to
his friend’s private chambers. The stench was unbearable—not the familiar rotten-meat
smell of a battlefield death, but the rancid putrefaction of some long sickness. As he
entered the small, orderly room, it was difficult to differentiate his nausea from his
despair.

“This is how I found him, my lord,” said the girl, with fearful tears in her eyes.
The body lay tunic-less, curled on the bed like a dead spider in a pool of pale green vomit
that had soaked through the wool coverlets. The eyes bulged from their sockets, and the
mouth hung slack-jawed at an unnatural angle with the red tongue lulling out over the
bottom lip, robbing the young Claudian face of the dignity it had had in life. The stomach
looked oddly distended, like that of a woman newly pregnant. But what appalled Tiberius
most about the corpse was the skin: an angry scarlet rash slashed across the pale flesh of his back, a grim sigil in uniform lines—like paint applied by the strokes of a brush.

Soon the captain of the guard arrived, a fit older man with short gray hair who had served with Tiberius’s father in Hispania some thirty years past. He stood in the chamber beside Tiberius, peering down at the corpse in silence for several minutes.

“A quick, virulent poison,” he said, stooping over the stinking corpse to examine the rash. “There is no doubt.”

“Did he take any food when he returned this afternoon?” Tiberius asked the slave girl.

“None, my lord.”

“We were together since the senate convened this morning. He has eaten nothing. He left the baths complaining of his stomach.”

“The rash is new?” asked the captain.

“It is.”

“It covers his front as well, and runs down his limbs. I have never seen such a pattern. But the coloration speaks of a poison administered through the skin. Aconitum, perhaps. That would be consistent with the stomach pain and nausea.”

“Through the skin…” Tiberius felt his hands trembling. Slowly, he told the captain about his visit to the bath with Fulvius. He described the two slaves from the changing room, as well as the grinning Syrian slave of Marcus Octavius’s household. It had been the one with ebony skin who’d scraped Fulvius’s back, but Tiberius told how the strigils had gotten mixed up on the table, how the skinny blond boy hesitated and
trembled with fear as he reached for his tool. “I would have that bathhouse searched, Captain, and those three men detained for questioning.”

“I’ll see that it’s done. The two bath slaves will give us no trouble, though we’ll have to draw up a warrant to seize the one owned by Octavius. That may take ‘till the morrow.”

“You have my thanks.”

“Begging your pardon, Tribune, but I should be thanking you. Got my little brother his dairy farm back, you did.” The older man smiled sadly and left to make arrangements. Tiberius remained in the cramped little room for nearly half an hour, so long he nearly forgot the stench, leaning against a wall, clutching the left side of his face with a trembling hand, and looking down on the corpse in the vomit-soaked bed. This fate was meant for him. He knew it from the moment he heard the news, and the injustice of it nearly threatened to choke him. The more he struggled to bring fairness to the world, the more unfairness the world brought on itself. Marcus blinded, the king of Numantia dead by his own hand, and now poor Fluvius. All Fulvius had wanted was a good hot bath after a long, trying morning. The baths had been his favorite refuge from the world. Now he lay dead in his own pale green filth.

At last Tiberius composed himself and left the chamber. He found Gaius waiting for him at the threshold, regarding him with concern, the sorrow plain on his young, smooth face.

“It was you they meant to kill, wasn’t it, my lord?”

“I believe so.”
“I’ll protect you. Before all the gods, I swear it.” Fire filled those big blue eyes of his. Tiberius smiled sadly. He knew that all the swords in Rome could not have saved Fulvius Claudius Pulcher, and he doubted whether they could save him either. But he did not voice these fears to Gaius.

By the time Tiberius took his supper, word had gotten out about the murder. A mob had amassed around the entrance to his row house—several hundred townsmen wielding butcher knives, staves, clubs, and rusty heirloom swords, calling themselves the Custodians of the Tribune and making boisterous oaths to protect him from the assassins and mercenaries hired by the Old Families—and so many carried torches that Tiberius had found his darkened home alive with flickering orange light that bled in from the streets.

He lay in bed clutching his coverlets, listening to the clamor outside, and remembering the Syrian with his hideous grin, the grin that split his otherwise handsome face like a scar and how he had whispered to the scrawny blond boy who kept the strigils. A slave of Marcus’s house. Marcus who had sat with Tiberius in his mother’s villa, listening to Blossius in the study before the painted fresco of Homer and the muses. Marcus who had shared his tent and ridden with him to Numantia, to the edge of the world. Marcus who had come with him to see the refugee tents sprouting up all around the plazas of Rome like fungus.

It was this thought that kept him awake, not the clamor of voices or the flickering of torchlight.
1. Who is Tiberius Gracchus?

I lay awake that night for hours in the Buckhead house, in the room Ramsey made for me. The sound of bone cracking, the pain in Jim’s voice, the fear in his eyes—it was my fault. He knew coming into the city was trouble, but he did it anyway. He was trying to look out for me.

Why? What use was I? Who looks out for a jawless fish?

And when I finally did drift off to sleep I dreamt of Plutarch. I dreamt I was Tiberius Gracchus, watching from the Rostra as the mob tore at my friend’s face, only it was Jim clutching his bloody sockets. Then something in my brain clicked and reconfigured the scenario, as happens sometimes in dreams. Remembering some previously internalized logic, it recognized that I couldn’t be Tiberius Gracchus. That was all wrong. I was the pampered, insecure dandy, quick with a jest, inclined to preserve the status quo, to sit around reclining on divans and sipping wine, enjoying my good fortune—not the stoic hero, ready to sacrifice everything for some ideal of social justice. But if I was Marcus, then who was Tiberius? I pushed through the mob and saw him standing there, looking out over the Forum. But I couldn’t see his face. Why couldn’t I see his face?
Then it occurred to me: I can’t see his face because I can’t see anything. My eyes have been torn out.

And with this realization, I snapped awake. I awoke in the king sized bed where I used to masturbate when I was in high school. And when I could no longer bear the white noise of my own miserable thoughts, I did the only thing I could, which was read. I read Dryden’s Plutarch until the sun rose high over Atlanta and Luz came knocking on my door because a woman had called the house asking for me. She handed me a cordless phone, and I sank back into bed.

It was Livia Moore. She did not sound happy.

“My secretary has been trying to reach you all morning, Mr. Cloff.”

“Cowboy stole my cellphone.”

“Cowboy, your father’s henchman?”

“My stepfather’s henchman.”

“I see. Was that before or after he broke the accountant’s arm?” As much as it agitated me to picture Moore, all sinuous elegance in her plush leather chair, it was even worse to imagine those bankers and Buckhead bimbos who had huddled around Jim, whispering scandals to their friends between sets of tennis.

“Rumor,” I said, paraphrasing Virgil. “The report of evil things, than which nothing is faster, a huge and horrendous feathered monster with an eye and a biting tongue for every plume.”

“Are you finished? Do you have any idea what you did last night?”

“Yeah, I ruined Jim Tappman’s golf game.”
“And now he’s disappeared again. The accountant is a key player, I thought I made that clear.”

“He doesn’t know where Ramsey is anymore than we do,” I said. But as soon as the words left my mouth, I remembered something Jim had said to Cowboy: I didn’t tell him about the money.

“You should have contacted me the moment you knew his whereabouts.”

“I agreed to share what I knew to find my stepfather, not to enlist as your personal errand boy.”

“The agreement was, you help me recover my investment from, and I refrain from taking further legal action against your mother. I would not ask you to take a course of action if I did not have good reason, and in the future I must insist that you take my suggestions more seriously. Otherwise you leave me no choice but to terminate our agreement.”

She hung up. I went back to sleep.

That night I was in no mood to cook, but Luz stayed for dinner and threw together some seasoned chicken. She and Mom discussed the possibility of getting a new dog to replace poor Lupa while I quietly poked at my food. After the first bottle of Chardonnay, Mom stopped mid sentence and cocked her head at me.

“Darling, is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“Where did you go last night?”

“Athens,” I lied.
“And you’re sure you’re alright? Was it Aiko?”

“No,” I said, looking morosely to Luz, who seemed to see right through me. “I just don’t know if we have money right now to throw around on another dog, that’s all.”

“Some things you can’t put a pricetag on,” said Mom. I shrugged. Soon the conversation turned to the looming presidential election:

“Believe it or not, Luz has just about talked me into voting the other way.” This, I admit, was surprising enough to shake me from my black mood.

“Really?”

“I thought you’d be impressed?”

“Just in shock, that’s all.”

“These immigration policies, they’re unconscionable. Do you know much we had to spend on attorney fees to get Luz and her family green cards?”

“You Mama help me,” said Luz. “Ramsey, nada.”

“Besides,” Mom continued, “I’ve worked since I was thirteen years old stocking shelves down at the country store, and except for Ramsey talking me into some bad decisions, including but not limited to wedlock, I’ve made my own way in this world. I’ve never asked anything from anybody. When everybody else in my business made millions throwing subprime loans around to anything with two legs and a pulse, I didn’t. I never took the easy way out. Not once. Now I’m fifty and going broke. That’s what all my hard work got me. Meanwhile these kids your age come out of Harvard business school, go off to work at Goldman Sachs or Damasking Insurance, think up some convoluted financial product that makes money from nowhere, taking out swaps behind
closed doors on whatever they can think up with nobody keeping track until the break the whole damn economy—they come out fatter than hogs.”

“Men, always wanting more,” said Luz, throwing her arms in the air to demonstrate.

“Banking deregulation,” I said, “that’s the problem. You can’t blame Wall Street guys for trying to get rich. A dog’s going to eat.”

“Well, whoever is going to put a leash on them, that’s who I want in office. God knows, they should have kept Ramsey in a damn kennel.”

“Not to mention Cowboy,” I said under my breath, remembering Jim.

“What would your granny say if she knew her daughter were voting for a Chicago Democrat, and a black man on top of that?”

“A Negro for president?” I shouted, imitating Granny. I pretended to choke on a chicken bone. “Heaven’s to Betsy!” Even Luz laughed, though I’m not sure she understood. After dinner, once she left, I asked Mom to help me write a résumé so we could afford to keep her employed, at least for a few more months.

Over the next few days, as I was reading or daydreaming about my upcoming date with Aiko or e-mailing half-forgotten professors for job references (since I had no previous employers) or practicing a cover I’d written of Nick Cave’s “Red Right Hand,” I would stop, suddenly overwhelmed by remorse for everything that had happened to Jim. It seemed that “the guilt of the very lucky,” which I was well accustomed to, was nothing compared to actual guilt, which I was not. Soon after feeling these pangs, I’d find myself next door at Carmen’s, taking long hits from her little glass pipe. I reclined on her couch
and tried to clear my head while she complained about her husband or about the
upcoming move to London. Then she and I would indulge in an old favorite from my
retired repertoire of intellectual slacker pursuits, which was watching arbitrarily chosen
films while under the influence of marijuana. The first day we watched *Network* on her
husband’s brand new 60 inch flat screen TV. She sat beside me on the couch.

“I’m not going to doze off and wake up to find you here naked am I?” I asked.

“You know, so we’d be on ‘even footing,’ as you put it last time?”

“Maybe I like having an advantage over you.”

“More’s the pity,” I said, though in truth I was relieved.

We took another drag and settled in to watch the movie. Soon I’d forgotten about
Jim. And about Aiko, with her sexy blond guitarist friend. When it got to Peter Finch’s
“I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore” speech, we both went out onto
her patio and screamed into the street for all the trophy wives and late night joggers to
hear. We screamed until our throats were hoarse and one of the neighbors (Mom?) called
in a noise complaint. The next time Carmen suggested Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street*, but I
said we couldn’t have two topical movies back-to-back because that spoiled the
randomness of the selection process. So instead we got stoned and watched the musical
*1776*, which, I thought, should appeal to my tastes both as a historian and as a
connoisseur of the absurd. But even that hit close to home. When John Dickenson
pranced around in his powdered wig slamming his cane against the floor of the
Continental Congress singing “Cool, Cool Considerate Men”—*Mr. Hancock, you’re a
man of property. One of us. Why don’t you join us in our minuet? Why do you persist in
— I laughed until my eyes hurt and Carmen stared at me with her eyebrow raised, saying, “You’re high again.”

It was like old times, killing time that way.

2. Sushi Reunion

The following Saturday, I drove out to Athens and met Aiko for lunch at Edozushi. We hadn’t spoken since the end of summer, just before I got mugged. It warm for late October, and to take advantage she wore a lacy black top, a light leather jacket, and a purple pleated skirt that flared out just above her knees. In her hair, I was pleased to note, was her grandmother’s ornamental comb,

Again I knelt across from her in the back room, filling a little porcelain dish with soy sauce and swooning at every little click and clack of her disposable chopsticks. Seeing her across the squat table as she smiled her quiet smile, I felt for the first time since the Sundial Bar that something good might happen, and though I was nervous, it wasn’t the visceral uneasiness I felt when Carmen inched closer to me on her couch.

“I’m glad you came out,” she said.

“Only because I need your help.”

“Oh no, here it comes,” she said. I told her that I was writing a résumé. Hilarity ensued. When she managed to contain her laughter, I continued:

“I need you to look it over before I send the poor thing out into the world of serious people, like a stony Spartan mother exposing her deformed infant child to the elements.”

“Melodramatic as ever, I see.”
“You missed me.” She snorted, pretending to be unimpressed.

“You already owe me, you know.”

“I do?”

“For the cab, remember?”

“More than you know.”

“Ehhh?” She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows. So (after a moment of hesitation) I swallowed my pride and told her about my instructive encounter with Bennie and Ludamarx, and how they’d mistaken the cab for a police car. Then, over a round of Hitachino Nest white ales, I filled her in on my life. I explained the uncomfortable arrangement I shared with Livia Moore; my conversation with Bob Lyttelton while his porn continued playing on the computer monitor behind him; and the unfortunate reality that Mom would probably have to sack Luz. When I brought up my recently kindled friendship with Carmen, she listened even more intently than usual (or so I prefer to think). Twangy shamisen plucking filled the gaps in the conversation.

“What was it you said she did?”

“Nothing. She’s a house wife.”

“She has kids?”

“Nope. She mostly just jogs and smokes weed.” At this, Aiko’s eyes, amazingly enough, grew even wider than usual.

“And she’s almost forty?:

“She’s married, remember.”

“You can do better.”
“You know I don’t like to make trouble.”

“Still, you’ve grown up a lot over the last few months. The last thing you need is some woman tempting you back into your old ways.”

“Sometimes I miss my old ways.” She rolled her eyes and slurped down a bundle of udon noodles. “Can we change the subject?” I said. “What about you and that guitarist? Dennis?”

“Can we change it back?”

“What?”

“Dennis didn’t work out.”

“Creative differences?”

“After we broke up, I was looking for someone a little more Type A.”

“And?”

“I overcompensated.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know.” We both looked down to our plates. She sipped spoonfuls of dashi broth while I stuffed my mouth with morsel after morsel of sticky sweet eel nigiri, struggling to conceal the crescendo of hope this news engendered. Her long bangs fall down across her face as she leaned over her bowl. I wanted to tell her everything. The evils I’d uncovered, the shame that was eating at me, my uncertainty about the future (my future, Mom’s future, Jim’s future, everyone’s future). I wanted to tell her the things I’d found resolve enough to put into this account, to share with history, but not with another human being. It was a dangerous whim. A whim I wouldn’t have heeded back in January. But I told her anyway. I told her about meeting Jim at the Sundial. About how Cowboy
broke his arm because of me. About Ramsey’s seafaring crew of underage prostitutes and the things he’d said about his marriage.

Afterward I knelt shifting my weight from knee to knee and tapping my chopsticks against the table. I was a Zelda boss: a giant, hideous arachnid with its carapace blown off by a well-thrown bomb, my weak point exposed, flashing red and yellow, as I waited for the coup de grace. She reached over the table and put her hands on my wrist, her eyes all bright and adorable with concern. Then, abruptly, she cocked her head and smiled.

“Remember what I said when we broke up?”

“‘Tyler, you’re a bum?’”

“Hardship suits you.” She squeezed my hand. I would later understand that this was meant to be the part where I went in for a kiss. Instead I sat there dumbstruck, soaking in her affection until finally, unable to bear any more—like Semele in the presence of Jove’s true form—I leaned back and released her hand to finish my glass of Sapporo. She followed suit and ordered another round. Then she asked, “Will you take Jim’s advice? Will you give up on Ramsey?”

“If I never see him again, I’ll never be rid of him. It’s already impossible to walk around Atlanta without seeing his name chiseled into every block of stone.”

“But now you know, he’s not coming back, he doesn’t love you. Is it really worth getting your arm broken? Or worse?

“Of course it won’t end well. But I’m a historian. And history requires closure.”

“Okay, well, I have a lead for you.”
“You do?”

“You asked me to look into the pictures we took of Cowboy’s truck, remember?”

“It’s been a long couple of months.”

“Well, we know he lives on a farm.”

“We do?”

“Cowboy hats. Dirt everywhere. Polk County tags. And you remember those saw things?”

“Torture implements. Right out of a splatter film.”

“Tractor blades. I ran the picture through an image search.”

“Well, there can’t be many Stetsonophile giants working farms in Polk County.”

“I talked to your Mom. She said Ramsey owned a farm out there, or at least he used to.”

“Guess I’ll be paying him a visit.”

“Think about what you just said,” said Aiko, smiling again. “What do you think you’re going to do when you get there?”

“Stake the place out until I know he’s gone.”

“You’re going to break into Cowboy’s house?” When she saw that I meant it, the smile fell right off her lovely face. “As in, the same Cowboy who gave you a concussion, knocked out a bouncer, and broke your friend’s arm?”

“I thought you wanted me to be a man of action.”

“I want you to be a man who doesn’t have to eat through a straw.”
“He’s the only one I know who’s still in direct contact with Ramsey.” I looked down to my plate, clasped a piece of salmon nigiri between my chopsticks, dipped it into the little dish to wet the sticky vinegared rice with sauce, and stuffed the entire package into my mouth. Fresh, bright fish. Salty soy. It took a long time to chew. But even after I swallowed, Aiko was still staring at me quizzically.

“I’m coming with you,” she said.

“What?”

“You can’t go alone. Someone will find you in a cow pasture with a hole through your torso.”

“You’d miss me?”

“I never said that,” she said, pushing her bangs out of her face. “Your Mom and I are Facebook friends. I’d never hear the end of it.”

3. Arcadian Crossing

It was a two-and-a-half hour drive to Polk County. Aiko rode shotgun with a map splayed out over her purple skirt, following our progress with her finger while I talked to Mom on the phone. Apparently Ramsey had owned a small farm outside Cedartown. She thought it had been sold. Luckily, though, she still had the address on file; Mom was nothing if not a meticulous keeper of records.

To fill the time, we updated one another as our accomplishments as practical young people developing the skills needed to make it in the world. She told me she had been promoted to assistant director at Athens’s best independent recording studio; I told her I had mastered the operation and maintenance of motorized push mowers. She told
me she was a semester away from graduating with her MBA; I told her I had learned how
to manage my own online bank account. We were headed through the heart of downtown
Atlanta, and as the highway curved past GA Tech, I could see Peachtree 191’s twin
temples looming off to our right, the Sundial spinning atop the Westin, and the torches of
Ramsey’s Centennial Park. Beyond them, I knew, was the ramshackle sprawl of
Bankhead and The Bluff. I grew quiet, thinking about Jim.

“Let’s put on some music,” Aiko suggested. So I threw some Simon and
Garfunkel on my iPod, filling the car with acoustic arpeggios and angelic harmonies. We
listened in reverence through “Sounds of Silence” as the city sank away behind us, but I
couldn’t help but sing along through “Patterns.” We merged onto I-20. Aiko watched me
from the passenger seat, her arms crossed over the map in her lap.

“I remember you always used to sing in the car.”

“An old habit, I’m afraid.” Soon gospel piano chords were ringing from my car
speakers: the intro to “Bridge Over Troubled Water. I went through the first few bars
alone, but by the second refrain Aiko joined in, her voice clear and strong, and when Art
came in for the third verse, she hit the high notes and I sang the low harmony, building
into the climax, louder and higher as the strings layered thicker and thicker, until the two
of us were singing like we meant it, like we needed it, our heads canted back, our mouths
stretched wide, our Adam’s apples bulging , our lungs burning, before halfway through
that last, long, beautiful note, we drifted off the highway, we crossed the solid white
line—my eyes had been on her—and the rumble strip shook the car for several seconds
while I spun the wheel and righted the ship, me swearing the whole time, Aiko laughing.
A few miles down the road, “Richard Corey” came on. I skipped to the next track.

We left the interstate, and found ourselves in the suburbs, fighting through a gauntlet of stoplights. Drumming my fingers along the steering wheel, I got to thinking:

“If Cowboy’s at home, we may have to wait a long time before he leaves. It could be a day or two.”

“Too late to turn back now.”

“I guess we’ll have no choice but to put the seats down and sleep together in the back.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” she said, her expression perfectly sphinxlike. Things got rural fast. Walmarts yielded to gas stations, which yielded to cow pastures and distractingly phallic grain silos even as Aiko found some old Robert Johnson on my iPod.

No more stoplights here. And no rolling green Arcadian hills. No artists on their stomachs painting lazy landscapes. No Virgilian shepherds singing songs or playing reed pipes back and forth in idle competition. Instead we found dirt roads, dead leaves, wire fences, high scraggly yellow grass, ancient shacks of rotten wood, and abandoned fruit stands with roofs of rusty corrugated steel. All around there ran mangy dogs of every shape, size, and hue—strays with dull black eyes and patchy fur that failed to conceal the diseased pink flesh beneath. And churches stood (the most stable looking structures for miles around) whose signs bore misspelled quotations from Leviticus (Aiko pointed to one that read: SOME QUESTIONS CANT BE ANSWERED ON THE INTERNET.) Occasionally we’d see people walking around or sitting on sagging front porches. White men in cheap pastel blue jeans. Women in plain cotton dresses. Some looked happy,
especially those watching their children running around improvised baseball diamonds or
climbing oak trees. Others sat scruffy and still, watching the filthy dogs hobble by while
they drank from bottles in brown paper bags, heedless of any judgmental Baptists who
might happen to pass by, like statues waiting patiently for the world to end. I thought of
Mom and Jim Tappman, who both grew up in places like this. And suddenly I felt
ashamed to have been singing cheerful songs just twenty miles back down the road. I felt
ashamed to be sitting next to a beautiful girl. I felt ashamed to have ever heard of Virgil.

We drove over a set of train tracks. They were as tarnished as any Roman gladius,
as if they’d been recovered from an excavation, from another age, and our crossing made
me a nervous. There was no sign, no gate, no lights, no bell. According to the directions
Mom had given me over the phone, we were getting very close to Cowboy’s farm. So we
stopped at an old country store nearby to pick up drinks and snacks, just in case the
afternoon evolved into a prolonged stakeout. It was a grungy place, buzzing with flies.
Half the shelves were empty, though there was an entire shelf dedicated to various jams,
jellies, and preserves, and another stocked with nothing but chewing tobacco. A bored
looking kid slouched over the counter, resting his goateed chin on his enormous hands.
He was probably the owner’s son, but he wore a black and red hat that said “Cedartown
High School Football,” which in these parts marked him as a local demigod, like Father
Tiber or the goddess of Mount Etna. A wide receiver or a safety, perhaps, tall and lithe as
he was. When we came up to the register bearing bottles of water and bags of potato
chips, I decided to seek his council:

“Do you happen to know Cowboy? Big guy, really likes hats?”
“Just by reputation, same as everybody,” he said, regarding me with suspicion. But he continued regardless, prompted by boredom, perhaps, or conditioned politeness: “He come through once in a blue moon for dip, cans of soup, you know. Meat for them nasty dogs.”

“Any chance you know if he’s home today?”

“Can’t say, been a while since he stopped by. Y’all friends of his?”

“That’s right.”

“They say Cowboy ain’t got no friends.”

“We’re more like business partners,” Aiko amended helpfully.

“Alright, well, y’all watch out for them dogs of his, they mean as sin

“How many does he keep?” I asked.

“Three. He beats them. Least that’s what people say.”

“What else do they say?” Aiko asked.

“You know how people is. They still talk about what happened with his daddy and everything. Folks like to think up stories ‘bout how he got that place of his, the one used to belong to Dr. Jackson. I remember boys saying he used to be a Green Beret or a gang leader in the city. In fact, y’all mind if I ask what he do?”

“Construction,” I said, which was true enough. I tried not to think of kicking some poor Hispanic workman in the stomach. Meanwhile, the kid at the counter raised an eyebrow, like he was trying to imagine the two of us with yellow hardhats.

“What happened to his father?” Aiko asked. The kid’s eyes widened. He looked at us as if we’d asked him what country we were in or what year it was. It clearly baffled
him at first, that a human adult could possibly fail to possess this basic, fundamental knowledge. Then his surprise shifted to renewed mistrust as he scratched his nascent goatee.

“Don’t think that’s for me to say. And I wouldn’t go asking him, neither, not if you fond of the teeth in your mouth.”

4. Captain Subtlety vs. Redneck Cerberus

At Cowboy’s address we found a rusted steel mailbox and a dirt road that wound through a field of weeds and tall yellow grass. We left the car alongside the main road a little ways off and began walking up the long unpaved driveway before coming to a gate whose faded blue paint had nearly peeled away. Thankfully, there was no lock. Aiko raised the latch, and the thing swung open. It creaked loudly enough to scare a cluster of crows from a nearby tree and also one heedless first-world antiquarian from his own skin. Turning around, Aiko raised an eyebrow at me. I shrugged, struggling to play it cool. But what we were doing was objectively moronic. I understood that keenly as we crept up the gently sloping path with nothing to conceal us but the scraggly grass that came to our shins or, if we were lucky, a nearby cow. The dandy, the idler, even the trained historian in me (having observed many times how such brash gambles tended to work out)—they all screamed for me to take Aiko’s hand and turn back down the path. Don’t go eavesdropping behind curtains, they said, that will get you stabbed to death before the end of Act III. Remember Claudius.
Keep your head down, mind your own business, play the harmless fool. That’s how a gentle, intellectual soul must survive in a world characterized by tyrannical violence.

And yet my legs continued to carry me forward. Maybe I didn’t want to look like a coward in front of Aiko. We came to the top of the hill, and there was the house, fifty yards away. I suppose I expected Ramsey to supply a more fearsome lair for his minotaur: a citadel, a labyrinth, or at the very least a creepy old plantation house all covered in ivy, surrounded by wrought iron fences. But there was nothing particularly ominous about it. Just a small white farmhouse, two stories tall, with an old brick chimney and red exterior shutters over the windows. Inside we would find the key to finding my stepfather. That was my hope. As we approached, we nervously looked around for signs of a garage or of Cowboy’s gargantuan black pickup truck. Some more cows milled about, stupidly chewing hay. An old stable stood in the back. It smelled, and it was getting colder. Getting toward sunset.

“I think he’s gone,” Aiko whispered.

“We should check around back to be sure.” She nodded, and we continued up to the front porch. Then we heard the dogs. It started with one, a single, outraged bark followed by a furious staccato triplet that shattered the quiet of our approach. Aiko and I exchanged panicked glances. There was nothing we could do. The other dogs took up the melody for a moment, lost it just as quickly, and soon they were like three off-key trombones blasting over one another, competing for both volume and savagery. It sounded as if the baying came from outside, behind the house. But anyone inside would
hear. I imagined Cowboy appearing in one of those windows, propping his shotgun on the sill.

Again I wanted to flee. The dogs were deafeningly loud. Aiko gave me another look, and this time there was a question in her eyes: Should we make a break for it? I saw that she would not judge me if I said yes. She wanted me to get my life together, not get us both shot. But I was tired of playing the fool. I thought of Mom fending off flocks of lawyers looking for scraps of Ramsey’s empire, letting Luz go, losing the house. I thought of Jim Tappman driving north up I-85, grasping the steering wheel with his good hand while the other arm lay crooked and useless in his lap as the Atlanta skyline receded behind him. I remembered my dream, the one where I couldn’t be Tiberius Gracchus.

“Come on,” I said. “It’ll only take a few minutes.” The barking continued. As we hurried around the building, I couldn’t help but imagine, instead of three angry dogs, one angry three-headed dog, a salivating redneck Cerberus to guard Ramsey’s secrets. Like the windows in the front, those along the side of the house were shuttered; beneath them was a well-used shovel propped against the wall and an old steel trashcan overflowing with empty bottles of rye whiskey and a plastic crate full of broken glass. There was no truck around back.

“He’s away,” I said, speaking loudly to be heard over the barking. “That’s a relief.”

“Look,” said Aiko, eyes wide, pointing across the yard to a large chain-link cage, five feet tall with a heavy latch securing the door, but no lock. Within were the dogs: three rotweiler-looking mutts, lean and muscular, filthy from rolling around in the dirt,
circling the confines of their pen, their yellow teeth all eager and sharp, their swollen lids hanging over dark eyes that shone dark with a lust for violence. They bayed even louder as we approached. Occasionally one would throw itself against the walls with a dumb fury that jangled the links and shook the entire cage. And among the dogs were strewn several long, well masticated bones belonging once (I hoped) to some cousin of the cows that roamed the grounds behind us.

“Maybe there’s a way to shut them up?” I suggested.

“You’d have to shoot them. Come on, let’s get this over with.” Aiko pulled me away, back toward the house. We tried the backdoor, but the knob wouldn’t turn. “Who locks their backdoor out in the country?”

“People with something to hide,” I said.

“How are we going to get inside? Did you ever learn to pick locks, Mr. Dilettante?”

“We’ll have to break a window.” Aiko’s eyes widened.

“Remember what I said about Dennis being too Type A?”

“We’ve got to get in somehow. Have any other ideas?”

“I do.”

“Like what?”

“We should leave. This was a bad idea.”

“You didn’t have to come.”

“I came because I wanted to keep you from doing anything stupid. Especially just to impress me. Breaking and Entering definitely qualifies.”
“This isn’t about you. It’s about Ramsey.” I began walking quickly around the side of the house. Aiko followed, keeping pace with me.

“Then it’s not worth it,” she said. I couldn’t tell if she were screaming to be heard over the dogs or screaming to scream. “Before, you were looking for him to get him back. But now it’s different. It’s not worth going to jail, and it’s not worth getting shot. I understand you want closure, Tyler. We all have issues to deal with. But you’ve got to be practical. You don’t solve this by committing larceny. You go see a therapist.”

“Since when have I ever been practical?” I grabbed the shovel leaning beside the trashcan, its blade all crusted with dirt. Again, I felt the furor rising. I felt it burn away my practiced nonchalance. Shovel in hand, I returned to the back door, trying to keep ahead of Aiko so she wouldn’t see my face. Of course she wouldn’t understand. It was about principle. Justice. I had to tell Ramsey to his face: I know now that you are not a benevolent deity; I know you are not a good man; I know you are not my father. Even Claudius, who kept his mouth shut when his friends were murdered or when his family withheld grain from the poor, Claudius who holed up harmlessly in his room writing treatises on wars long past—even that Claudius eventually stood up for something. He hid his traitor cousin from the palace guards. He sent volumes of his History of Carthage to the emperor, with dangerous secret messages bundled up with the scrolls. Aiko should have been proud of me, risking my neck for something I believed in. Cowboy’s back door was set with glass panes. Raising the shovel with both hands, I slung it over my shoulder like a baseball bat.

“Tyler, please.” Aiko was at my side, her eyes pleading. “I’m scared.”
“Everything will be fine. It’ll only take a few minutes, remember?”

“We don’t know that,” she said. I lowered the shovel, feeling the furor beginning to subside and the guilt seeping in to take its place. It was strange to see her like that. I was supposed to be the diffident one; she was supposed to be the one who took charge.

“You can go back to the car and wait. It was never my idea to drag you into this.”

“I won’t.” She shook her head to emphasize her resolve, like a little girl, her hair swinging back and forth.

“Okay.” Turning from her, I raised the shovel and swung. I swung hard. I felt the broad of the blade strike the window pane, sending tremors up the wooden shaft, and the cymbal crash of shattering glass rang out to accompany the dogs, who continued to circle and snap and throw themselves against the cage behind us, even as I careful extended my arm through the jagged opening, carefully stretching, reaching around until my hand found the doorknob on the other side.

5. **B and E**

What struck me first was the décor. The door opened into a small country sitting room. We stepped carefully over shards of glass to find a carpet covering the floorboards (19th century Persian?) all filigreed flowers within flowers within flowers. On side tables sat green marble vases and designer lamps carved with laughing monkeys; two classic leather armchairs studded with brass flanked the fireplace; and a large oil painting hung from the adjacent wall, depicting a bowl of oranges beside a coffee carafe. Each object gave the impression of elegance that hinted at its expensiveness without flaunting it.

While I hesitated to speculate on Cowboy’s taste in home furnishings, I had a fairly
strong feeling that oil paintings of fruit bowls wouldn’t have been his first choice. No, this was the work of Janine, Ramsey’s interior decorator.

Meanwhile the dogs continued to bark. Their voices came through the walls (muffled but full of wrath) even after we closed the door. We moved onto the kitchen, which happened to feature the same high-end stainless steel appliances I used back in the Buckhead House. On a whim I opened the double-door refrigerator. It was empty save for a half-drained bottle of rye whiskey in the freezer.

“Stop screwing around.”

“Fine, let’s start with the bedroom,” I said. “Or the office, if there is one.”

“We should split up.”

“I thought you were scared.”

“I am scared. But there’s no going back now.” She pointed back to the sitting room and the door with its shattered panes. “We might as well work efficiently.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you because of me.”

“I’ll be fine. Now stop wasting time so we can get out of here.” I wanted to object further—it hurt, her eagerness to get away from me—but she had that stubborn Japanese look, her eyes smoldering with adorable defiance, and I knew it was pointless. Sighing, I watched her hurry from the kitchen. I wandered down a narrow adjacent hallway, passed a staircase (I could hear her clomping up the steps), and stopped to peek into a small dining room, admiring the chandelier before continuing to a larger living area furnished with matching sofas, a flat screen TV, and a large varnished wood chest (all very tasteful, Janine) upon which rested a coffee table book about home design. In nooks and on side
I found photographs of exuberant couples and single women of various ethnicities; it took me several seconds to identify them as the placeholder pictures that come in the picture frames. There were three other doors in the room: one was clearly the front door to the house; the other opened up to a second set of stairs; and the last led to Cowboy’s office.

I chose door number three and turned on the lights.

At last I came upon some evidence of human habitation: empty cans of chewing tobacco in the trashcan; a worn leather office chair; a Styrofoam to-go box containing three cold French fries and the remains of a barbeque sandwich. In an alcove built into the underside of the desk was an old computer tower, and a file cabinet stood in the corner of the room beside a window that looked out over the winding unpaved driveway from which Aiko and I had come. For a moment I stood in the doorway wondering where to begin. I remembered going through Ramsey’s home office shortly after his disappearance, where I’d found the specious printout of his company earnings. It seemed so long ago. Pre-Sundial-Bar, Pre-Lawnmowers, Pre-Cowboy, Pre-Selling-The-Hobby-House, Pre-Moore, Pre-Great-Recessions. Another epoch of history. The Age of the Trust Fund. But History has much to teach us; I remembered how Ramsey’s laptop had proved to be the most valuable artifact that day. It led me to my very first clue, the e-mail from Jim Tappman (You always said, ‘It takes money to make money.’ But it takes a lot more than that).

I made myself comfortable in Cowboy’s desk chair and booted up his computer. Outside, the dogs barked and barked and barked. As I waited for the operating system to
load, I tried to imagine him sitting where I sat, staring at a backlit screen, resting his sausage fingers on the little plastic keys. The thought was absurd. But I supposed that even minotaurs must need the internet. And sure enough, when I loaded the browser, I found that his e-mail login information had been saved (username: CountryCretin—Ramsey’s invention?). A series of eight black dots filled the password entry field; all I had to do was hit “enter.” A thrill went through me. Maybe this really would be as easy as I’d promised Aiko. There would be some correspondence between employer and employee, some trail leading back to Ramsey, a phone number, an e-mail address. Something.

But there were only two messages in Cowboy’s inbox, and neither was from my stepfather. Deflated, I slumped down into the chair, remembering another line from that e-mail of Jim Tappman’s: I know you don’t like to talk shop via email. The messages were, rather, from Delta Airlines. Digital receipts for plane tickets. The first confirmed a morning flight to New York City on September 28th—there was something familiar about that date, I was sure of it—and a return flight back to Atlanta that same evening. The second email was more recent, having been received only the day before. Apparently Cowboy had plans to fly to Las Vegas early New Year’s Eve and to return on January 2nd. Even under the circumstances—with the barking dogs and the possibility of Cowboy’s return and my fear for Aiko wherever she was at the moment—even then, I couldn’t help but laugh. Did minotaurs have gambling addictions in addition to tobacco habits? After forwarding the Delta messages to one of my old email addresses (and
deleting the “Sent” file records just in case), I turned to the file cabinets, but they were mostly full of crumpled old tax forms and repair bills for his truck.

The desk drawers turned out to be more fruitful. Upon opening the top one, I was greeted by a gleam of light that flashed across the slender chrome-plated barrel of a pistol, which lay nested in the drawer like a scorpion. A Desert Eagle, I knew from first-person shooters and British gangster movies. Engraved along the lethal snout of this thing were the words, MADE IN ISREAL, and below these words was the safety, which was off. My classicist’s Geiger-counter was going off the charts: here was an object with a story to tell. But I was afraid to touch it. I shouldn’t leave my fingerprints to smudge the pristine reflective metal, that’s what I told myself, but really I was afraid that it might whisper to me the places it had been and the things it had done. Beside the pistol in the drawer were a red pen and a folded piece of paper. I took the paper on a whim (perhaps making up for my reluctance to examine the gun) and unfolded it to find what appeared to be the printed transcript of a speech. Glancing it over, several phrases jumped out at me: honest-to-God poverty; my town is too good for this; personal milestone; I’m here because there’s a vision in my head. At the very bottom letters in scarlet ink leapt from the page, scrawled in a haphazard hand: THE BASTARDS STILL NEED ME. I folded the transcript and slipped it back in the desk with the oversized pistol. Seeing these two objects alongside one another, I knew suddenly that both belonged to Ramsey, not to Cowboy.

In the next drawer a familiar shape greeted me, all aluminum and shiny black glass: a smartphone. My smartphone. Relief washed over me, not only because I could
hardly afford to buy a second replacement for the damn thing, but because the phone contained those notes I had taken while listening to Jim at the Sundial. I picked it up, stood from the desk chair, and looked back out to the living room. Aiko and I had been separated for some ten minutes now. Though I was still annoyed with her, I felt an urge to check up on her, to see what she had found. To make sure she was alright. But before I put the phone in my pocket, I happened to notice an icon on the screen indicating an unopened voice message. After bringing up the call log, I found one outgoing call to and one missed call from another party listed as UNKNOWN NUMBER. Both had taken place three days before. Curious now, I decided to check my voicemail. A pleasant, female recording came on the line:

“You have…one…new voice message,” she said. I pressed a button to hear it. And suddenly there he was on the line, his low, raspy voice coming fast and pragmatic to the muffled accompaniment of barking dogs—I had conjured him somehow, like a heedless archeologist blundering into a cursed tomb—and I missed most of his long, impassive message (though I did recognize the sound of my name) before I could process that yes, it really was him, Ramsey T. Mansfield, my stepfather. And suddenly I could feel him with me, and I was sure that he could feel me too, that wherever he was he knew I was here on his property, in this office where he had, sometime before, placed his pistol and his speech in a desk drawer. I lowered the phone from my ear, more nervous now than I had been in Cowboy’s driveway, even more nervous than after I shattered the glass pane with the shovel and stepped into the sitting room. For a moment I delayed, listening
to the dogs and staring dumbly at my phone as if it were a scroll recovered from an emperor’s sepulcher. Then I gathered myself and listened to the message again:

“It’s me. First thing’s first. Don’t use this phone again until you get another data. Randy down at APD told me they’re putting together a database of call logs from stolen phones—last thing we need are cops snooping around the farm just because you had to have a new toy. I’ve sent you a little money, but it’ll be a few more months before the big bucks start coming in. But don’t worry, you know I want to keep you happy, alright? I had Jim move Phoenix City cash to Tyler’s trust; it’ll look funny if I liquidate right before we start the new companies. But it won’t be long now. As for the other thing, you don’t need to worry about Mo Eris being back in town. He’s teaching sociology to future dropouts down at Georgia State. Most of the Techwood punks he used run around with are in their thirties now anyway, cracked out in Bankhead or overrunning the suburbs with their wives and kids, bringing all the property values down out there, scaring all the white Baptists away. You did good work on them, buddy. Their days making trouble for us are long gone. Alright, one last thing. Tina got us both rooms at Caesar’s for the 31st, so go ahead and book a flight. And set up a couple girls for me, would you, plus a fairy for Klein. He’ll like that. The others are pretty straight-laced, but they should have enough sense to take the deal. But it might help to have you around. Just in case. Remember, nine o’clock in the Capri Room at The Palatine. Everything goes well, we’ll be back on top by this time next year.”

Again I stood for several long seconds staring at the phone before replaying the message. And again, there was Ramsey’s voice in my ear. This time, however, I only
made it to the part about Mo Eris, Techwood punks, and property values. From outside there came the angry roar of an engine. It rose for a moment above the baying of the dogs. The noise was close now, incredibly close, it seemed, as I rushed to the office window only to find the green wooden slats of the shutters. Still, I knew. It was the big black truck. Then, abruptly, the noise was gone, replaced once more by the dogs barking, working themselves even further into frenzy.

I heard the front door slam.

Only then did I remember Aiko, upstairs alone.

6. The Revenge of Redneck Cerberus

Two differences between history and life: with the former, you know how things turn out; with the latter you never do. And in history, moments of crisis feel sequential, comprehensible, real; in life, they do not.

I glanced at the desk, thinking to open the drawer which contained the Desert Eagle before realizing that in my diffident hands, a pistol of that caliber would be no more help than a feather quill, and in any case I didn’t have the testiculi to pull the trigger. Instead I ran through the living room, back down the hall toward the back door, calling Aiko’s name, hoping she had heard the truck pull in, and as I passed the Janine’s tastefully decorated dining room I heard the front door swing open and bang against the wall. And there was Cowboy’s voice shaking the farmhouse from behind, low and savage like the voices of his dogs:

“Boy down at the store says I have some company.”
Quick footsteps sounded down from the ceiling, and I could hear Cowboy stomp up the living room staircase in pursuit. Stupidly enough, all I could think of was the fight Aiko and I had before breaking into the house. *I came because I wanted to keep you from doing anything stupid*, and, *Tyler, please. I’m scared.* Now the voice came from upstairs:

“Got my shotgun here. Last motherfucker I caught in this house got it in the stomach. Fed him to the dogs.”

I’m a jawless fish, I thought. I’m a sea cucumber and Aiko is going to die. She’s going to find herself trapped in a stranger’s bedroom and she is going to be killed with a shotgun while I tremble in a corner like Claudius when the palace guards dragged his wife away screaming, “Do something, Claudius! Do something, do something, do something!”

But I’ll survive. I’ll live to play guitar and drink beer and write my histories.

Something shattered upstairs, a lamp perhaps, followed by a heavy thud and more pounding footsteps. At last I unfroze and rushed to the second set of stairs, the one by the kitchen, but even as I climbed the first step I spun back around because there came Aiko in her purple skirt, terror in her big sweet eyes, sweaty bangs pasted across her face, and then we were running through the kitchen with the familiar steel appliances, through Janine’s lovely sitting room and out the back door, hearing Cowboy behind us but never stopping to look back. Even as it seemed we might escape, my stomach churned with despair. The despair of a man who has learned definitively that he is a coward. It was dark now, just past sunset. We started to run around the house, ignoring the dogs going berserk in their cage. But Aiko slowed for half a second, sobbing and reaching up to her
disheveled hair, patting the top of her head like a blind woman searching for an object on
the ground.

“My comb. My grandmother’s comb.”

“Get to the car,” I said. Before she could respond I turned back. And there was the
door of the farmhouse with its shattered pane of glass, swung open. I could see Cowboy
barreling through the kitchen, his shotgun looking almost small in his massive arms. I ran
to the cage and fumbled with the heavy latch while one of the dogs shoved his snout into
the chain links, snapping at me, his wet breath on my hand. Up that close, I could see that
he’d been beaten so badly, one of his eyes was swollen over entirely with a red, infected
flesh.

At last I freed the latch, and the door swung open. I ran, the dogs chased me—so
much for gratitude—and behind the dogs came Cowboy who burst out the backdoor even
as I sprinted around the side of the house, my heart pounding, past the old steel trashcan
full of whiskey bottles, around to the front door, which hung open, through the living
room, and up the stairs where I found myself in another hallway hung with Janine’s
fruitbowl paintings. To my left was a bedroom within which stood a dresser with the
drawers still flung open; ahead was an upstairs sitting area with more leather couches,
 lamps, and ottomans, beyond which, I could see, was the staircase that led to the kitchen
area. By the time I made it to the second room and saw the shattered vase, the dogs were
upstairs barking and galloping down the hall. I ran, bending forward to the scan carpet
and crunching shards beneath my shoes. And there it was, the gold lacquered wood
shining among the jagged green fragments of pottery. Aiko’s comb. By the time I picked
it up, the dogs were on me. Some distraction. The first leaped forward, eager to sink its yellow fangs into my throat, but I managed to flip up a small wooden table on its side, crouching behind it like a legionnaire behind his shield just before the dog crashed against the hard surface, whimpering as it fell. After scuttling backwards, I got to my feet, ready to make a break for it. But the dogs were no longer interested in me. They’d turned to their owner, who loomed smiling in the doorway like a cyclops before a sumptuous meal of human brains.

“You got more balls than I figured. I’ll give you that.” He wore a black Stetson that clocked the top half of his face in shadow. In his meaty hands he held his black double barrel shotgun; in mine, I held Aiko’s 19th century ornamental comb. Something in my brain clicked, registering the fact that Cowboy could turn and fire before I could possibly make it to the stairs; that I could dive or juke or tumble, but the spread of shot would catch me either way; and that Aiko wouldn’t be getting her family heirloom back after all, and I wouldn’t be finishing this history. Jim was right: I should have let Ramsey go. That would be my last thought. Meanwhile the dogs growled and looked to one another, then to Cowboy, then to me, then back to one another, their swollen eyes twitching stupidly. “All the balls in the world won’t do you no good now,” he continued. “Mama ain’t here to save you, and your bigshot Daddy don’t much care whether you alive or dead.”

He began to lift the gun; I raised my hand over my face, as if that might protect me; and one of the dogs lunged, grabbing Cowboy’s leg in its jaws. He howled, staggering backwards as the second dog leapt for his throat. Reflexively, he swung his
gun like a club to bat it away. Something inside the dog snapped like a tree branch. He hit it so hard, it slid across the carpet to my feet, even as I turned to the stairs. Then there came the sound of ripping fabric. Again Cowboy cried out in pain, even louder this time, and I stomped down the stairs.

A shotgun blast sounded, close enough to leave my ears ringing. A whimper followed. There was no time for pity (although I’ve thought about those poor dogs many times since). I ran back through the house, out the front door, and down the gravel driveway. I ran faster than I ever dreamed I might run. I flew on wings of adrenaline. Away from the unassuming house with the red shutters. Past the faded blue gate. Down the main road in the dark to the place where we’d left my car. There it was, and there was Aiko with her hand already clutching the passenger door handle.

It was a beautiful sight.

I unlocked the car, we scrambled in, I put the key in the ignition, I turned it, the engine started, Robert Johnson sang “Crossroads” on the stereo, the wheels started rolling, the headlights shone, and we were driving fast away from both Cowboy and his double barrel shotgun. I placed the comb in Aiko’s lap. She was still crying—I was crying too, to be completely accurate—and she continued to cry, saying nothing, until we left the silos and rusted shacks behind, until we were in the land of Walmarts and Burger Kings:

“When I heard the gun, I thought…” I put my right hand on her knee and steered with the left. At last she stopped sobbing, and we rode in silence, thinking back on our
escape. Then, as we passed through Atlanta, she started laughing and I laughed too, and the two of us laughed all the way back to her apartment in Athens.

7. A Shadow Is Cast Wherever He Stands

“Do you want to stay for dinner?” Aiko asked, pretending it was a question. So that night I found myself sautéing onions and red peppers in the cramped kitchen of her Broad Street studio apartment. They hissed in the pan. They smelled delicious.

Meanwhile, Aiko dumped a pound of shrimp in a bowl to chop their tails off, and as she worked, she shared her opinion regarding my performance back at Cowboy’s farm:

“You’re an idiot.”

“I’m cooking you fajitas,” I said defensively.

“You’re still an idiot.” She crossed her arms as if the matter were settled. The lacquered comb sat in her hair like a flower from Midas’s garden. Not the gaudy gold of coinage, but the gold of something higher. Something more perfect.

“On what grounds?” I asked.

“On the grounds that you went back into that house for a comb.”

“I knew it meant the world to you.”

“Even if it does, it’s still just a comb.” Even as she said this, she raised her hand unconsciously to touch it.

“A comb from the Meiji period,” I said, leaning over the mixing bowl to season the shrimp. “You know my weakness for historical objets d’art. She huffed and raised a tall, shapely hefeweizen glass to her lips. I tossed the onions and peppers, and smoke rose from the pan. An urge had come over me to tell her about the message Ramsey left on my
cellphone and to explain that breaking into the farmhouse had been worth it because I’d finally found him. I wanted to tell her I was going to Vegas in January. But remembering the terror I’d felt for her only hours before as her footsteps pounded above my head and the vase she’d bumped against crashed against the floor like a gunshot, I chose to remain silent. Instead I threw the shrimp in to sear with the onions and asked what she found upstairs in the farmhouse. In one of Cowboy’s sock drawer, she said, behind bundles of enormous socks, were eight enormous rolls of hundred dollar bills and a large plastic baggie of cocaine. She also found a note nestled in his nightstand among receipts for cattle feed, but she couldn’t make heads or tails of it, so she decided to take it. From her jacket pocket she produced a folded piece of white copy paper. Leaving the shrimp to their own devices for a moment, I unfolded the note to find a list scribbled sloppily in blue ink:

FOR CAESAR’S JAN. 1-4
CASSIE
SASHA
NATASHA
AYEN
JADE
TINA
ESTEBAN
MANUEL

“Prostitutes,” I said. “Lovely.”
“I’m sorry,” said Aiko.

“Be sorry for them,” I said, handing the note back to her.

“I am. But I’m sorry for you too. It must be hard.” I shook my head and returned to toss the shrimp. Afterwards we sat at Aiko’s breakfast table shoveling chopped bell peppers and steaming pink question marks onto tortillas. We drank hefeweissens and forgot about the farm. Aiko made fun of me every time a stray shrimp fell from my poorly constructed tacos. I kept looking around her apartment, amazed to have been invited back. Before dinner, I’d conducted a more extensive survey, sensitive to all the little changes that had occurred since I’d last been welcome here, nearly a year before. Everything was still clean and precisely ordered. Pillows arranged just so on her couch. Bookshelves organized by genre and author’s last name. Some modern ukiyo-e prints of geisha eating McDonald’s burgers, 40-story banks towering over Osaka castle, etc. A shelf of neatly arrayed tea pots, sake cups, and lacquered wood boxes. Picture frames here and there (several of her grandmother, but none, I noticed, of me or Dennis the well-muscled guitarist).

As I finished off the last of the fajitas, I noticed her bass amp in the corner of the apartment, all the cords neatly coiled.

“Do you still have that old Mexican Fender?” I asked.

“I do.”

“Want to fool around? For old times sake.” She smiled and brushed her bangs from her face, having chosen to ignore my phrasing. After we finished our beers (and refreshed our glasses), Aiko dug out a black nylon case from under her bed and unzipped
it to reveal her red Stratocaster, which she handed to me before reaching to plug in her bass. My first reaction was disdain. The guitar felt light and cheap in my hands, and I couldn’t help but yearn for the ’69 Les Paul I’d destroyed back in April. But when I looked up to see Aiko on the couch with that in her hair, her bass resting on her lap, creasing her pleated purple skirt, these misgivings flew from my head. In that moment I would have played a $99 Walmart Squire without complaint.

There we were, fondling our guitars. Aiko’s nimble fingers pleasured the strings of her bass, leaving the sinister Locrian mode in the past, selecting instead the relaxed ambiguous rambling of something Mixolydian, something from The Dead, perhaps, or The Doors, and where once I would have jumped in with flashy filigreed runs full of hammer-on’s and high bends intended to impress, I chose now simply to listen. I tapped my foot to her rhythm and sipped my hefeweissen until I knew I had a handle on the progression. Then I set my glass down and joined her, soft and simple at first, little jazzy accents and sharp, bright chords. We made eye contact. She smiled. We bobbed our heads to the beat of her mumbling bass, the heirloom comb shining her hair. I grew more adventurous, my fingers finding new melodies as they explored various Mixolydian shapes—music and history, patterns and repetition—and Aiko followed me, shadowing my clean crystal riffs with sleek rumbling counterpoint. This went on for twenty minutes

Afterward we sat in electric silence like exhausted lovers. A feeling came over me.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you today. You were right, the whole idea was idiotic. I knew you were scared and I went ahead anyway.”
“I’m sorry too. I thought this whole thing with Ramsey was still a game to you. Just your newest hobby, like that journal you used to talk about.”

“It’s not a journal,” I mumbled.

“Well, now I know I was wrong. Even if you are still an idiot.” I nodded, drained my hefeweissen glass, and took up the Strat again. On a whim, I started playing the cover of “Red Right Hand” that I’d been writing, all moody syncopated chords. Aiko joined in, her bass giving body to the song, breathing life into it. At four beers deep, I couldn’t help but sing the lyrics, dropping my voice as throaty and menacing as I could manage:

He'll wrap you in his arms,
tell you that you've been a good boy.
He'll rekindle all the dreams
it took you a lifetime to destroy.
He'll reach deep into the hole,
heal your shrinking soul—
hey buddy, you know you're
never ever coming back.
He's a god, he's a man, he's a ghost, he's a guru.
They're whispering his name
through this disappearing land;
but hidden in his coat is a red right hand
You ain't got no money?
He'll get you some.
You ain't got no car?
He'll get you one
You ain't got no self-respect,

you feel like an insect,

Well don't you worry buddy,
cause here he comes.

Through the ghettos and the barrio
and the bowery and the slum.

A shadow is cast wherever he stands:

stacks of green paper in his red right hand.

(Here Aiko got into a groove and I went for a solo in the style of Dick Dale, my

hand fluttering madly, tremolo picking like my life depended on it.)

You'll see him in your nightmares,

you'll see him in your dreams.

He'll appear out of nowhere

but he ain't what he seems.

You'll see him in your head,

on the TV screen, and hey buddy,

I'm warning you to turn it off.

He's a ghost, he's a god, he's a man, he's a guru.

You're one microscopic cog

in his catastrophic plan
designed and directed by his red right hand.

We struck the final chord and held it for what seemed like a full minute, listening to the long, dissonant reverberations. Gently, Aiko set her base on the couch beside her and cocked her head at me.

“You wrote that?”

“Just the guitar arrangement. It’s a Nick Cave song from the 90’s.”

“It’s funny.”

“It’s depressing.”

“No, I mean it’s funny hearing you sing something so serious.”

She was looking into my eyes. Perhaps she was imagining me as I listened to the original again and again to figure out the chords, as I tweaked my amplifier settings to get the sound just right, as I got emotional every time I practiced the solo. It was clear from her expression that she understood what had drawn me to this song. I suddenly felt very self conscious of my own breathing, but as soon as I noticed, I saw that Aiko was breathing equally hard. Peeking just above her lacy black top was the scarlet fringe of a familiar red pushup bra, and above, her slender white neck—you’ve never known beautiful skin until you’ve sidled up close to a pretty Japanese girl.

Her bangs hung down over her face. I sat with her guitar in my lap waiting for her to brush them out of her eyes. But she never did. This time I knew it was time for me to lean forward and kiss her.

8. Conjugation
Human history is a repeating sequence of fragmentation and synthesis, of empires that rise from conquered cities before dissolving into scattered provinces that coalesce into kingdoms that fall apart into principalities that unite to form nation states and so on, back and forth, back and forth. That night in your apartment, Aiko, we were the chief participants in the reunification of us. We engaged in commerce; we embraced globalization; and when you climbed on top, we challenged preexisting gender roles. As with any cultural exchange, there were moments of awkward miscommunication: knees knocking, weight poorly distributed, teeth clenching too tight. But we only laughed. We cultivated a spirit of reconciliation. And as so frequently happens, we were not aware we were making history until well after we made it, thinking that we were making something quite different, or rather not thinking at all, but only breathing and grasping for each other.

But no, such events are never so simple. There was a good deal of thinking. A good deal of analysis on both sides. Perhaps a little compare-and-contrast (my soft belly, Dennis’s stone abs; the paleness of your breasts, a statue of Diana I saw in Rome), perhaps a little change-over-time (had you always guided my hand down your thigh? had I always liked to whisper your name?). The smell of your hair, the shape of your ears, the way you stretched across the bed like a cat—your body came back to me like a favorite passage I’d forgotten I had memorized. A passage I then reread with slow, meticulous care. I savored each sibilant phrase, studied each new stylistic variation, conjugated your principle parts, and like any careful reader, paid particular attention to the details of the text—the length of a muscle contraction, the pace of your movements, the interval
between sighs, the force of your fingers digging into my skin—and from these explicit signs I understood inferentially your initiatives and reticences, your curiosities and skepticisms, even as I myself was being parsed and decoded.

Like scholars we forgot the world of the present—the practical world of investment bankers and real estate developers—and lost ourselves in another world, a world no one gave a shit about but us. The two of us lay tangled together, two disparate texts juxtaposed, and from two parallel lives placed side-by-side, we drew inferences, we took pleasure in interpretation, we savored the thematic resonances and reconciled the seemingly unrelated features, until at last we synthesized a single, meaningful reading and lay there perfectly still in each other’s arms. With my…. faces buried in the hollow of each other’s shoulder. I grew hopeful. Despite the endless repetition of human idiocy and megalomania that dooms us to relive the mistakes of previous millennia, it seemed possible that we might still achieve something like progress. After all, Aiko, in your bed we exchanged kisses and whispered complements, our minds far from Cowboy’s farm and the Sundial Bar and the Great Recession and the differences that drove us apart earlier that year. Just as I began to drift asleep, you pulled me to you and said something in my ear. Then, eager to conform to the cyclical character of history, we began the entire process a second time, and in the morning a third and a forth.

9. No Longer a Jawless Fish

In the afternoon, once we finally got out of bed, I got on Aiko’s laptop and bought airplane ticket to Vegas. She stood in her underwear looming over me, her skin perfectly smooth, her thong lacy and red, her hands on her hips.
“What are you up to?”

“Just trawling the internet,” I lied. I adjusted her computer in my lap, filled my names in the proper blanks, and clicked the big green button to authorize payment, draining in the space of an earnest, protracted sneeze what little of Mom’s money that remained in my bank account. Because the flight was for New Year’s, it was even more expensive than usual; only after paying did it occur to me to check my balance. The number on the screen read like a Ciceronian attack on my character, stylistically nuanced in its conservative font choice and damning in its brevity.

“It’s official,” I said. “I’m broke.” Aiko sidled up beside me on her couch and consoled me with a kiss on the neck.

“Let’s get you a job,” she said. “Don’t make that face. We can work on your résumé together, it won’t be so bad.”

“Have you seen my résumé?”

“You should show it to me. Don’t be embarrassed.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“You won’t want to sleep with me anymore.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” she said, leaning close and sliding her hand up my thigh. “Quid pro quo, isn’t that what you always say?” She spoke a soft string of mellifluous words in my ear. I agreed to revise my résumé at the soonest possible opportunity.

As I drove back to Buckhead that evening, still wearing the same clothes I’d worn the day before when I broke into Cowboy’s house, I grinned and sang and tasted Aiko’s
cherry chapstick while pounding the ceiling with the palm of my hand to the beat of Queen from my stereo, the volume up just loud enough to hurt my ears. Ai-ko, Ai-ko, Love-Child, lovechild like me. If I could only continue to convince her to tolerate me—perhaps poverty and pragmatism might be bearable after all. A teaching job, maybe. I had a Master’s degree in history and some limited pedagogical training. It was conceivable. Athens was cheap. We could find a place together, drink Belgian beer on happy hour prices, jam in the evenings and play shows on the weekends.

All I had to do was settle things with Ramsey.

When I got home, I looked back over the e-mails I’d forwarded myself from Cowboy’s account and listened to Ramsey’s voicemail on my phone until I had most of it memorized. Four things occurred to me:

1. I was technically obligated to let Moore know that my stepfather would be staying at Caesar’s for the New Year. (I didn’t. Our last conversation had left a bitter taste in my mouth, and there was no way for her to know I’d found any new information.)

2. The date for that first flight confirmation, the one to NYC, was familiar for good reason: it matched the date of Timothy Gaffer’s bathtub suicide.

3. The missing assets which had remained to Mansfield Reality, Castlebrook Homes, and Phoenix City Bank after the crash—tens of millions of dollars, much of which belonged to hopeful home owners like Bob Lyttelton and business partners like Moore—it had all been
laundered somehow into the same revocable trust fund that had until recently sustained my adult existence.

4. It was Jim Tappman who made it happen.

These new facts nearly discouraged me, lying in bed alone that night and missing Aiko. Ramsey would dissolve my trust, return to Atlanta, buy back those properties lost in the fire sale (whose prices had since dropped even further), and reestablish his empire. Jim, wherever he was, would keep his mouth shut for the sake of his son. There would be more teeth pried loose with claw hammers. More licentious cruises. More Phaethons idolizing false gods.

History would repeat itself.

But eventually my despair at this thought gave way to a feeling of tranquility. True, there was nothing I could do. But I was no longer part of it, no longer a jawless fish, no longer a microscopic cog in Ramsey’s catastrophic plan. What more could you ask from a child of privilege? I had Aiko. Soon I’d have a job. All that remained was a need for closure (and an ending for my history). Thinking in this vein, I drifted into a deep, untroubled sleep.
The funeral was held the following day. It had grown even colder, unseasonably cold, people said. Furls of gray clouds continued to obscure the sky, swelling with soft, weak light where the sun struggled to break through.

Tiberius had hoped to wait for Appius Claudius to return to Rome, but his son’s corpse was decaying in such a foul and unnatural manner that the family soon had no other choice but to burn it at the first opportunity. And so a great procession of proud Claudian kinsmen and poor residents of the city—for Fulvius, despite never having been fond of them, had always enjoyed great popularity among the common people—accompanied the great wooden bier through the streets of the city as four strong young slaves bore it to the Rostra in the Forum. His wife had begged for them to cover her husband’s body with a silk sheet, but Tiberius convinced her otherwise. Let the people see, he had told her. Let the people see what they did to Fulvius Claudius Pulcher. Though Tiberius himself had closed the mouth, the corpse seemed just as grotesque as the day before; the skin had grown a sickly pale green, the same color as the filth they had found the body lying in.

Townsmen crowded the streets, leaving their homes and shops to see the procession. Already word of the bathhouse investigation had spread through the ranks of the city guard, and the word poison was on everyone’s lips.
In the absence of the father, it fell to Tiberius to deliver the funereal oration on the Rostra. He climbed the steps to the high marble platform and stood beside the bier among ranks of columns whose ornate Corinthian capitals bore only the weight of the gray morning sky. For several minutes he waited for the crowd to amass, watching the people below as they wept and whispered and comforted one another. Tiberius was weary with giving speeches—though he had spoke on the Rostra many times since, he still could not help but think of the day Marcus Octavius lost his sight—and he had not slept the previous night.

But when it was time to deliver the eulogy, Tiberius swallowed his fear, concealed his anger, and ignored his exhaustion. In his quiet way, he mentioned only the accomplishments and admirable qualities of the deceased: Fulvius’s service in the military, his prodigious acquisition of respectable offices, and his supporting the Law of Sempronian Land Reform in spite of pressure from his fellow patrician senators. With every word, Tiberius knew, the distraught crowd thought more and more about what was left unsaid.

Everyone waited in silence as Fulvius’s widow doused the timbers below the bier with oil. She wept bitterly all the while. Every few seconds she paused, trembling, so that it seemed she might drop her clay amphora and spill its flammable contents across the Rostra’s sacred marble floor. The cold wind swept straight through Tiberius’s heavy toga. The ruffled gray cloud cover drifted solemnly above, and he could almost believe that the earth moved below their feet, rather than the sky over their heads. Pulling his arms in close to his body, he scanned the hundreds of grim faces before the stage, looking for
Marcus in the dim morning light. If this truly was his work—Tiberius didn’t want to think about it. But after the funeral, he knew, the captain of the city guard would return with his report from the bathhouse, along for the warrant authorizing the arrest of the Octavian’s smiling Syrian slave.

When the timbers were ready, four servants climbed up to the stage bearing torches. Carefully, they each lowered them to kiss the bier. The crowd was so quiet, Tiberius could hear the rush of wood taking fire as the flames crept up to lick at the corpse. He stepped closer—close enough to feel the heat warming his cold face, watching as the white tunic began to burn, and then the hair, determined to watch his friend’s final moments in this world. He owed Fulvius that much. A foul smoke rose curling into the gray sky, carrying with it the mingled scents of fire and corruption. As the conflagration grew, the pale Claudian face rippled hazily before him.

But before the bier could fully catch ablaze, the rising heat shredded away the flesh of Fulvius’s swollen stomach, which in turn expelled a surge of putrid liquid in the manner of afterbirth expelled from a mother’s womb, and as gallons of the red-green fluid splashed down upon the bier, extinguishing the light and silencing the crackle of the nascent pyre, trickling along the cracks between the Rostra’s marble tiles, a new odor issued forth, an odor far more terrible even than that which the corpse had emitted before. A great cry went up among the crowd. Despite himself, Tiberius stepped back, turning away in horror. He could feel his sandals squeaking against the newly slickened stone. Beside him on the stage, Fulvius’s wife was vomiting and weeping all at once, pulling at her hair the way actors did at the theatre.
He knew what would come next: chaos, madness, and violence.

Tiberius grabbed the amphora of oil and heaved it up over the corpse. Though he tried to avert his gaze, he could not help but see the scorched, hairless scalp, the blackened fingers, and, worst of all, the torso rent asunder, a huge cavity empty of its liquefied bowels. He doused the body until it was soaked through. Grabbing a torch from one of the terrified servants, he touched its flame to the body, jumped back, and dropped it to clatter across the floor as the entire bier went up all at once, a small inferno raging there on the Rostra, blackening the white marble tiles. In an instant the cold left his bones. The flames washed his face in dancing orange warmth, and an immense pillar of black smoke rose to meet the blanket of clouds, a twin to the plume that rose from the Temple of Vesta across the Forum. The fire had found a trickle of oil, snaking merrily down to the edge of the platform where it ignited one of the ornamental prows jutting from the front of the stage.

Tiberius stood on the Rostra beside the weeping widow for nearly an hour as he waited for the fire to die down. The crowd dispersed, speaking brazenly of poisoners, traitors, and revenge. At last he stepped down to find Gaius and the grey-haired captain of the city guard.

“The murderer must have been desperate,” said the captain, his eyes watering from the lingering stench, “to choose such a hasty, obvious poison as this.”

“Did you find anything in the bathhouse?” asked Tiberius.

“Beneath a stone tile in the slave’s quarters, my men discovered a purse full of silver.”
“And the men you questioned?”

“You were right about the black-skinned fellow. We whipped him half the night, but he just sputtered on about was what a good, loyal servant he was. He blamed the other one, and he was right.”

“The blond boy?”

“That’s the one. Once the whip came out he told his tale quick enough. Claims a foreigner came to him, offered him that sack of silver, and handed him a strigil like the ones they have there at the bathhouse. All he had to do to earn his coin was clean a certain customer with the strigil in question and make sure not to use the thing on anyone else.”

“I was meant to be that customer.”

“You were,” said the captain. “Leave it to a pup to botch a perfectly well-planned murder.”

“And the foreigner? He matched my description of the Syrian?”

“Handsome, bronzed skin, dark eyes, crooked yellow teeth.”

“Indeed,” said Tiberius, feeling sick. Smoke and putrescence had filled his lungs; anger and despair had clouded his mind.

“I’ve drawn up the warrant for his arrest. We will need him to implicate Octavius.”

“I would accompany you, captain, if I may.”

Tiberius and his personal guard left Fulvius’s smoldering pyre, following the captain out of the Forum and into the streets below the Palatine hill. Huge row houses
surrounded them on every side with elegant vestibules. Senators and wealthy merchants eyed them warily as they passed. When they reached the house of the Octavii, they found four city guardsmen waiting. A stern looking Numantian slave came to answer the door, nonplussed by the soldiers. After recognizing Tiberius, he explained that the master of the house was away bringing business before the senate. But when the captain produced his warrant, the slave led them inside to the atrium. It was a palatial estate, especially for a row house, with dozens of private chambers, two peristyle courtyards, and a garden. The captain and his men split up to find the smiling Syrian; meanwhile, Tiberius took Gaius through the familiar rooms to the back of the house, far from the main street. As he made his way through the first chilly courtyard, he felt even more apprehensive than he had the day before as he entered the cold-plunge bath.

He came to the triclinium. There he found Marcus Octavius reclining alone on a wide dining couch with gilded bronze legs and purple cushions. Nearly everything in the room was purple and gold from the alternating purple and gold mosaic tiles to the gold and purple wall fresco depicting the wanderings of Oedipus; from the purple grapes to the golden plates; from the purple wine to the golden goblets. Nearly everything but Marcus and the strip of black silk fastened around his head above the nose. Strangely enough, he seemed to be dining alone, attended only by a single slave, a beautiful dark haired girl of perhaps twenty years who also defied the room’s color scheme, wearing a tunic of black wool to match her master’s silk bandana. She stood silently behind his couch as he ate his grapes and sipped his wine.
An unbidden thought came to Tiberius: the image of Fulvius, contorted, swollen, curled in his foul, sopping bed. Had it really been Marcus? It seemed impossible, even now.

As Tiberius entered, Marcus looked up, having sensed his presence. The girl leaned over the back of the couch to whisper in her master’s ear, so close that her pale pink lips nearly brushed against his ears.

“So, Tiberius, you’ve joined the city guards to share the pleasure of plundering my home? And here I thought your silly law did that well enough on its own.” As in the bathhouse, he delivered his barbs with a derisive sneer where once he would have delivered them with a smile.

“The captain doesn’t need my help to arrest a single slave,” said Tiberius.

“Yet here you are.”

“I would speak with you, Marcus.”

“The beneficent Tiberius Gracchus, hero of the people, come to sup at my humble table? Jove’s beard, give me a moment to perfume my hair and fetch my good blindfold.”

“I’m in no mood for your childishness. Fulvius Claudius Pulcher is dead.”

“Truly?” he said, mocking. “Was it the rioters who informed you, shrieking his name up and down the streets last night? Or the endless parade of weeping hags this morning?”

“He was your friend too,” said Tiberius, struggling to contain his bitterness.

“He was a cold fish like you. Even colder now, I’d warrant.”

“He was a nobler man than you’ve become.”
“And a lot of good it did him.”

“Did you lose your heart with your eyes? The man was murdered by your slave! And in the most craven, despicable—”

“What did you think was going to happen, Tiberius? Did you think the Old Families were going to sit idly by and let the Plebian Council grow more powerful than the Senate? Did you think they’d let your ridiculous committee strip them of their lands?”

Marcus stood suddenly from his couch, his face nearly as purple as the wine in his cup. “I warned you. By all the gods, I warned you that day on the Rostra and other days besides. You brought this doom upon yourself and upon Fulvius too.” With this he slumped back down on his dining couch, breathing furiously. Tiberius was stunned. The truth was upon him now, staring him in the face, eyes or no eyes, he couldn’t deny it now.

“You meant it for me,” he said, trembling.

“Meant what?”

“I loved you like a brother, Marcus.”

“You think I poisoned Fulvius?” said Marcus, reddening even further and raising his hand to his breast.

“You meant it to be me on that bier.”

“Listen—”

“Gods, the smell, for hours the thing—”

“It wasn’t me, Tiberius!” he shouted. “I’m a cripple, not a monster.” He sighed, taking another drink of wine, and for a moment there was silence. There had been sorrow
and earnest indignation in his voice. Tiberius had known him long enough to recognize that much. But his anger simmered nonetheless.

“You knew. You knew it was your slave.”

“Last night was the first I learned of it. They were here in the triclinium talking about the investigation, about the poisoning, about how that idiot Syrian bungled the job. I heard them. They’re terrified of you. Terrified of the mob.”

“They?”

“Ah, Tiberius, still the hopeless idealist. Who do you think?”

And of course he knew. The same men who had come before the committee in the Basilica, lying about how much land they owned. The men who called him Tiberius Tyrannus when he took the floor of the senate.

“Your father is one of them.”

“Of course he is,” said Marcus. It should have come as no surprise. Publius Octavius had been among the most vocal opponents of the land reform from the very first. A proud, serious man, fiercely devoted to increasing the wealth and prestige of his house. A man who prized tradition and order above all else. Tiberius remembered the way he had looked that day in Numantia, back when he was still Consul. Tall, stately, and noble, standing there in his glittering gilded helmet with his glittering gilded sword, wearing a cuirass intricately engraved with the scene of Romulus slaying his twin brother to found his city. He might have seemed every inch a hero. A paragon of Roman virtues.

“I used to play at swords in his courtyard when I was a boy,” Tiberius said sadly.

“Yes, I was your sparring mate, remember? But Father is not a sentimental man.”
“He is a murderer.”

“If it wasn’t him, it would have been one of the others.”

“He will answer before the people. We’ll have justice for Fulvius..”

“Even now, you still think this is one of your stories.” Marcus smiled and shook his head, even as he groped for a grape to pop in his mouth. Tiberius gave him one last look, his heart heavy. Marcus thought they would kill him before he could lift a finger.

That much was plain. But Tiberius now had a food taster in his employ; he had Gaius and the other house guards; and he had the people themselves, the self-proclaimed Custodians of the Tribune, even if their protection afforded him little sleep. Once they convicted Publius Octavius, it would send a message to the Old Families: even a man of the most respected, powerful family must abide by the laws, whether they agreed with them or not, and to do violence upon the city’s ministers was not only murder, but treason. Sacks of gold and togas with purple stripes would not save them from hanging on a cross.

And yet looking on Marcus’s cold, knowing smile—a smile made all the colder by the black silk—Tiberius could not help but feel a twinge of fear. He had his mother and younger brother to look after, not to mention the refugees seeking restitution from his law. He had seen only 34 summers. He was not ready to die. And they slew Fulvius in the place where he felt most comfortable in all the world.

He left with his wine and his slave girl. Back in the atrium, he saw that the city guard had found their man. The Syrian stood dark and handsome as before, his long black hair falling halfway down his slave’s tunic. Though iron manacles bound his wrist, he
seemed just as relaxed as he had outside the bathhouse the day before, and as soon as he laid eyes on Tiberius, he bared his crooked yellow teeth in a wicked grin.

“He’s half-mad, this one,” said the captain of the guard. “But he confessed readily enough. Learned the poisoner’s trade in the east, he says, which is where Octavius bought him.”

“Publius Octavius?”

“The very same, Tribune. Octavius ordered him to do you in and to make it quick, subtlety be damned.”

“You will speak against your master? You will tell your tale before the senate?” asked Tiberius.

“Would any man prefer to testify under torture?” the Syrian asked, grinning.

“We found this on his person,” said the captain, producing a leather satchel. He loosened the drawstring and opened it so that Tiberius could peer inside. A sickly sweet smell emanated from within. “Aconitum,17 and some other foul herbs I don’t know.” As the captain closed the little bag, Tiberius felt a sudden swelling of hope surging over the fear in his stomach.

“We have the poison, the poisoner, the bathhouse slaves, the testimony of those at the funeral who witnessed the humors and odors released by the corpse.”

“Enough to convict even an ex-consul. We will send these stinking grasses to an apothecary for identification and notify the praetors of the judges. It should only take a few days before—”

17 More commonly known as wolfsbane or monkshood these days. And such a lovely blue flower it is.
“We will make our charges within the hour.”

“I beg your pardon, Tribune?”

“The senate is in session as we speak.”

“Some will not take the interruption kindly. And we need time to prepare our case.”

“Octavius is a powerful man with many friends in the senate. If we do not act now, he will have time to whisper in the right ears, to put purses into the right palms. He will slip through our fingers.” Tiberius hoped that his bold words concealed his apprehension. The old captain hesitated, stroking his rough, stubbly chin. But eventually he agreed and sent a man to summon the two bath slaves; in the meantime, he would go on ahead with Tiberius and the Syrian.

Though it had been nearly four hours since the funeral, the odor of Fulvius’s corpse still hung heavy in the air. Four slaves knelt on the Rostra beside a stack of heavy marble slabs, replacing the tiles that had been charred by the impromptu pyre. A blackened hulk lay askew on the ground, a misshapen lump that had yesterday been one of the prows jutting from the stage. As the party approached the Senate House, the lingering foulness turned Tiberius’s stomach, mingling with his anxiety. Young Gaius had grown pale, his brow drenched with sweat despite the cold, and even the grizzled captain looked unsettled, although the Syrian only grinned and tittered quietly to himself. When they came to entrance, the captain ordered his men to wait outside with Tiberius’s house guardsmen. He then unfastened his sword-belt, handing the scabbarded blade to
one of the soldiers stationed at the doors so that he might be permitted to enter the chamber.

At Tiberius’s polite command, the guards heaved the huge bronze doors open. A voice echoed faintly against the high timbered ceiling, but now the Senate House fell silent. Tiberius and the captain entered the great hall with the Syrian, striding across the purple porphyry tiles cut like Horns of Plenty. On either side of them rose the wide steps where the senators sat on their ivory stools, looking down on them. Their signet rings glittered in the light streaming in from the hall’s high windows, and Tiberius felt their eyes follow his every step. How many of these well-bred men were in league with the poisoner? How many wanted to see him choke on his own vomit? He resisted the urge to look around and judge their faces.

Behind him, the doors shuddered close. Publius Octavius stood at the end of the hall before the ancient shrine to Vulcan, looking distinguished and handsome in his toga, though his hair had gone grayer since Tiberius saw him last. He seemed not at all surprised to see Tiberius, nor did he spare his own captive slave a second look. Beside him was Titus Annius, fat and young and sneering. It was then Tiberius noticed balding Quintus Pompeius sitting on the lower left stair near the floor. Only yesterday the Committee of Property Allocation had him arrested—could he already have bribed his way out of the city prison? And now that Tiberius had turned to look, he did not like what he saw in the eyes of the senators. It was not only disdain, but solemn, unblinking fascination. Something was not right. Even his own allies looked down on him as they might look on a sow before the slaughter.
Still, he must stand firm. He must be like Horatius Cocles on the bridge. He must see justice done for his friend, and he must protect Rome, even from herself.

“You interrupt our business, Tribune,” said Scipio Nascia Serapio, who was even balder than Pompeius.

“I have good reason.”

“Let him speak,” said Octavius coolly.

“I’m afraid you will not like what I have to say,” said Tiberius. It infuriated Tiberius that the old man could be so composed even now, knowing that he had been caught at his despicable game. The manacled slave burst into a fit of wheezing laughter. Tiberius ignored him, turning instead to the two hundred men in purple stripes. If they were with Octavius, then so be it. He had the right of the law on his side. If the senate would not see justice done, the people of Rome would. Let the guilty taste the wrath of the mob they so feared.

“Distinguished members of the senate,” he said, “you sit today on those pretty purple cushions because you were born among the oldest, most venerable families of Rome. Your deeds have won you high offices and great honors, but it was the accident of your blood that gave you the chance to win them. You ignored the laws of your city. You made vagrants of orphans and widows. And now you have slain your own colleague. This is how you have used your privilege. And for what? To draw income from 700 iugera rather than 500? To dedicate temples and put on games in your name?”

“When I proposed the land reform, I asked you to restrain yourselves for the greater good of Rome. I am no longer asking. Whether you support them or not, the
regulations are now law. And so I must bring before the senate evidence that Publius Octavius, who stands here before us, conspired to have me poisoned. I charge him with murder, attempted murder, and high treason against the state for plotting to obstruct Roman law by doing harm to the city’s ministers. Should you find him guilty, I ask that he be interrogated in order to expose his coconspirators. Subsequently, I propose that he be crucified rather than exiled, and that he be exposed along the Appian Way so he might serve as a lesson for any others who should forget that their privilege entails both responsibility for the people and obedience to the law.” Though he had spoken coolly, he was breathing hard by the end of his accusation. Beads of perspiration trickled from his eyebrows. Looking around, he saw only outrage, rancor, and fear in the many faces peering down at him. He didn’t care. He had spoken like Horatius Cocles chastising the salt merchants. It would have made old Blossius proud, maybe even his father, had he still been alive. Tiberius looked defiantly to Serapio Nascio, waiting for him to ask what proof he had. But it was Publius Octavius who spoke next, his words dripping with theatrical disappointment:

“You see, my friends? It is just as I have told you.”

“The Tribune would get rid of Octavius,” said Quintus Pompeius, “just as he got rid of his son, just as he tried to get rid of me, and just as he would get rid of any of us should we dare to oppose him.”

“You must act now, or cower forever,” said Octavius.

“Tiberius Tyrannus.”
“Tiberius Tyrannus!” The cry went up around the senate house. They began to stand from their stools. On the senate floor, the Syrian laughed and laughed. Everywhere purple stripes were flashing. Tiberius stepped back in horror. What could Octavius have said to them?

“Hear my evidence,” he cried. “Judge for yourself.”

“Let it be now!” said Octavius, raising a fist and looking very much like a statue.

All at once, senators scattered throughout the hall reached down, grasped their ivory-varnished stools by the legs, and cracked them hard against the stone, spilling purple cushions and splinters down the steps. Suddenly one in every four men was armed with a club or a jagged wooden knife and shoving his way forward to the Senate House floor. Among them, Tiberius saw Serapio Nascia, Sextus Pompeius, and Marcus Octavius. Even the obese Titus Annius had snatched some senator’s chair. Tiberius and the captain hurried back to the door, even as everywhere shouts rang against the walls, shouts of “Tiberius Tyrannus!” or “Stop! Treason! Treason!” and the Syrian laughed loudly enough to be heard over them all. An elderly senator stood at the shrine to Vulcan trying to remind everyone that the office of Tribune granted its holder sacrosanctity before the gods and men. That the Tribune’s body was inviolable. No one paid him any mind.

The door loomed above Tiberius, twelve feet tall. He grabbed the cold, metal handles, but it wouldn’t give. He shoved as hard as he could. He slammed his shoulder against the bronze, putting all his weight behind him. The hinges shuddered only slightly; at last he understood, someone had barred it from the outside. Gaius was out there, he remembered, numb with horror. What had happened to Gaius? But there was nothing he
could do. And when he turned back around, the senators were nearly upon him, waving
their ivory clubs in the air, and the captain of the guard sprawled on the floor, blood
pooling around his head, a brighter red than the porphyry tiles.

Tiberius backed up against the door. He raised his hands to protect his face. They
were all around him, flowing togas and purple stripes and hateful eyes. The first blow
took him in the ribs. He couldn’t help but cry out. A bald man swung a chair leg down at
his head—Pompeius? Serapio Nascia?—but Tiberius grabbed the man’s arm and
managed to ward the blow. Someone plunged a wooden shard into his stomach. Another
blow took him in the shoulder. Then another. Then another.

With a great shudder, Tiberius slid down cold metal door, slumping to the floor
and clutching himself as the blood soaked through his tunic and then his toga. Marcus
was right. He was an idealist and a fool. A fool who read too many books, too many of
his father’s old books, and anyways, the river god hadn’t really been there to save
Horatius Cocles when he jumped into the Tiber wearing all his heavy armor, Tiberius
saw that now, and perhaps he had always seen it. Still, his law might endure. The people
might keep their homes. Was that foolish idealism too? He didn’t know. But soon his
little brother would be back from the war. Perhaps he would take over where Tiberius left
off. And if not him, then another.

Tiberius tried to tell them. He tried to tell the fat red-faced man who kept putting
the big splintery shard into his stomach and pulling it out again. He tried to tell Publius
Octavius. He tried to tell Blossius and Marcus and his mother and the father he never
knew. All that came out was a long, trailing gurgle.
It didn’t matter. Those cowards with their damned stripes. They wouldn’t get their way forever. If Tiberius couldn’t change things, someone else would. Someone would make it right. They would see.
1. Change

There had sprung up among the FOR SALE signs of Buckhead a new breed: signs of red, white, and blue that read VOTE or COUNTRY FIRST or MCCAIN/PALIN; but across Peachtree St. by the Pawn Shop and the excellent Mexican grocery store, they all shared the same urgent message, which was this:

CHANGE.

Still, the weekdays came and went in the same manner as before, writing, reading, shopping, cooking, job hunting, and raking the last dead leaves of autumn, although I did watch the trophy wives jog by (now bundled up with windbreakers and thick socks) with diminished interest, and when Carmen passed to invite me over for a toke, I always made up an excuse. Eager to avoid embarrassment, I thought to conceal my rekindled romance from Mom; but one evening over a meal of coq au vin she tapped her fingers along the rim of her wine glass and asked if I would be staying with Aiko again that weekend, having learned already of our relationship uncomfortable detail from Aiko herself.

“We’re internet friends,” Mom reminded me. “Now answer the question.” I blushingly obliged, and from then on, I spent my Fridays and Saturdays in Athens where Aiko and I would tweak my résumé, drink beer with her friends, work on a bass arrangement for my “Red Right Hand” cover, and fall laughing into bed together like
new lovers (even though we weren’t). Sometimes she would choose instead to come out
to Buckhead and I’d cook dinner while she and Mom huddled together in the breakfast
room giggling and whispering conspiratorially. She came over for election night, along
with Luz, Cesar, and their two daughters. We all sat around the TV together and drank
wine while the results came in. When the newscasters officially called the race, we all
cried and jumped up and down—Luz and Cesar because they wanted to raise their
daughters in this country; the daughters because they enjoyed imitating their parents;
Aiko and I because we were young and idealistic and, in my case, appreciated the chance
to see history in the making—all except for Mom, who never would tell us one way or
the other whom she voted for. She sipped her wine and shook her head, an enigmatic
smile on her tired face as she wondered, I presume, what Granny would think about a
black president.

Soon the first strings of tasteful Christmas lights crept like ivy up the sides of
Buckhead manors and the trophy wives bobbed by wearing earmuffs and peppermint
striped scarves. One day Carmen caught me hanging a wreath on our door and called up
from the bottom of the hill to ask if I’d be interested in watching a few episodes of I,
Claudius.

“You always used to talk about it,” she said, her breath puffing up into icy smoke.

“Tempting,” I said. “But I’ve got to finish helping Mom with these decorations.”

“What’s with you?” she asked, the bitterness clear in her voice. “Too good now to
spend time with sad old ladies like me?”

“That’s not it. And you’re not a sad old lady.”
“It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m leaving for London tomorrow.”

“Hey, wait,” I called, but she was already jogging down the street, her ponytail whipping back and forth across her back. I sighed and finished hanging the wreath. That night, I got into a fight with Aiko on the phone. There was apparently going to be a big New Year’s party at Bangkok Blues. The manager called her to ask if she’d be interested in playing a few sets in exchange for free booze, and she wanted me to accompany her.

“It’ll be like old times. But better. Plus we can introduce the world to ‘Red Right Hand’.” She had worked herself up into an adorable frenzy. My stomach dropped.

“It sounds awesome. But I can’t, I’ve already got plans.”

“What’s better than jazz and unlimited craft beer?”

“I’m doing something with Mom.”

“No you’re not, I already talked to her.”

“Don’t get upset.”

“I am upset. Why don’t you want to spend New Year’s with me?”

“Look, do you trust me?”

“Am I supposed to? You just lied to my face.”

“It’s something I’ve got to do. I don’t want you to have to worry about me.”

“How do I know you’re not going to go party with that woman next door?”

“Because I’m in love with you.” Aiko was silent for a long time.

“I guess you are in love with me,” she said reluctantly.

“I almost got shot for you over a comb,” I reminded her.

“Don’t think that means I can’t be mad at you.”
2. Keys to the Castle

Several days later I received a call from Livia Moore:

“I’ve something to ask of you.”

“Happy Holidays,” I said dryly, wondering if she had somehow learned about the visit to Cedartown.

“Are you aware that Gus Mansfield is in hospice?”

“I am now.”

“It’s uncertain how long he will last.”

“That’s too bad. He was a good man.”

“Yes, well, his situation presents us with an opportunity.”

“You think Ramsey will visit him?”

“No, he wouldn’t be so rash. But his father may speak more openly now. And you are his grandson, in a fashion.”

“Only in a fashion.”

“Nevertheless, he will have to see you. Call me if you can glean something useful.” Exploiting a dying old man to betray his only son didn’t sound like my idea of a pleasant weekend trip; but if Moore chose to pursue legal action against Mom to recover her bond, it would ruin us. In any case, I already knew how to find Ramsey. There was no need to pump his father for information. I would go simply to pay my respects; if I should happen to learn something that might help me in Vegas, then so be it.
Despite his legendary fortune (which may or may not have survived the housing bubble and Ramsey’s flight), Gus had always lived in a small, simply furnished house in Decatur. I wasn’t sure what to expect. My only impressions of him were from Christmas dinners and parties honoring his son. I remembered him as a jovial, gentile, red-faced, sentimental old man. A nurse led me into his bedroom where he lay tucked beneath a plaid comforter, his skin sagging, all his ruddy color drained from his cheeks. An IV ran from his arm to a medical cart by his bedside table. The air was stuffy, sickly sweet with the slightest hint of urine.

“Who’s that?” he said, his head not so much turning under its own power as drooping down his pillow.

“It’s me. Tyler.”

“Oh. Is Ramsey coming?”

“I don’t know. I just wanted to stop by.”

“Good. I’m glad you did. I thought for sure, though, that he’d be coming. Did something happen?”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure he’s okay.”

“True, he made it through okay the last time, but I was there for him then, you see.”

“The last time?”

“Yeah, the last time. All he needed was a little help to get back on his feet. Just a little help from his old man, that was all.”

“In the eighties, you mean?”
“He wasn’t bad at it, the boy built his first house by sixteen years old for God’s sake, learned everything he knew from his old man, you see, said so himself. He’s headstrong, that’s all. Did whatever came into his head to do. That’s how he was. Boys like that get into trouble, is that a surprise? People like to talk, that’s all. Lot of talkers out there, Tyler. Bah!” I couldn’t bring myself to respond. The old man reached a trembling hand to take my wrist, and it was all I could do not to recoil from his cold, dry touch. “He’ll come, though, won’t he? We used to go driving together, looking at lots. I gave him the keys to the castle, you see, that’s how I used to put it to him. Just a little help from his old man.”

I stepped back and withdrew my wrist from his grasp. His arm fell limp, his beady little eyes squinting out at me inscrutably as his lips worked open and close like a goldfish’s.

3. In the Shadow of the Palace of the Sun

On the morning of New Year’s Eve, I took my seat near the back of the plane, flying Coach for the first time since Mom married Ramsey. We took off. Atlanta shrank below, 191 Peachtree, Bank of America, and the Westin, slightly hazy through the smog and the thick plastic window.

It was 4 PM by the time my shuttle arrived at Caesar’s Palace: a city in itself, a city of white towers set farther from the Strip than the other Vegas hotels, as if to distance themselves in place and time. On a pedestal by the sidewalk stood Augustus Caesar (a Prima Porta replica, all youth and charisma and implied divinity) raising his hand to the tourists passing by, commanding them gently, benevolently to turn their backs on the
Flamingo’s gaudy neon pink and venture down the path lined with slender pines to a more dignified period of human history—as if the marbles of Rome could shelter us from our own heedless stupidity. This city’s Forum was a shopping mall; its triumphal arches, electric billboards; its Coliseum, a stage for aging pop stars; and its temples, gateways to the casino floor—all adorned with plaster pediments and concrete columns. Imitative American opulence. I stood in the shadow of these buildings with my suitcase in hand. I looked up to the penthouse windows.

This was Ramsey’s Palace of the Sun.

I was Phaethon. I was a terrified, fatherless child.

After checking in at the front desk, I wandered through the casino, hoping a drink might calm me down. All around me college students, government contractors, retired salesmen, elementary school teachers, and investment bankers compulsively stuffed coins into slot machines or pushed piles of chips across green felt tables, oblivious to the smiling caryatids who looked on and kept the ceiling from crashing down on their heads. Glasses were clinking, bells were ringing, people were laughing, quarters were jangling enticingly into silver trays. How many of their houses were underwater? How many had lost their retirement funds when the markets crashed?

I no longer wanted a drink. Instead I found an elevator and killed the time alone in my room trying to think of anything but Ramsey. I imagined Aiko strumming her bass onstage at Bangkok Blues, perhaps three beers deep, the lights flashing across her sweaty skin as the patrons bobbed their heads and threw up their fists in the dark. Who would she ask to take my place with her on stage? Dennis? I’d only seen her twice since our fight.
Though she never asked again where I was going, she remained cold, remote, and I never could bring myself to tell her about the conversation with Ramsey’s father.

For a moment I regretted hiding my trip from her. I wanted her to be there with me when the time came. She always knew what to say.

At eight o’clock I went down to The Palatine, one of the restaurants within the Caesar’s Palace complex. Here I found more engaged columns, more coffered ceilings, more purple and gold décor. In tastefully lit alcoves stood five enormous statues. I was likely the only one in the hotel who could identify them on sight as the first emperors of Rome, the Julio-Claudians: from well-meaning Augustus to Nero, the matricidal arsonist. An arched doorway led to the Capri Room, but the way was barred by a purple velvet rope and a sign that read PRIVATE in gilded letters. According to Ramsey’s voicemail, I still had an hour before whatever was going to happen happened, so I found myself a chair at the bar and watched the door for familiar faces. It was a nice place and I was underdressed. The bartender kept shooting me skeptical glances; to placate her I ordered a Midas Touch, the most expensive beer on the menu.

It was complex, strong, and sweet. I drank it too quickly.

A group of well-attired men entered the restaurant. Something about them caught my attention: the boisterous way they addressed the hostess, perhaps, or their confident mannerisms, the way they did not stop for a single second to take in the contrived grandeur of their surroundings. They were six in number, all white, all well into middle age, and there among them was my stepfather. Ramsey Mansfield, in the flesh, looking just as I remembered him, not a pound lighter, not a shade grayer. The aquiline nose, the
slightly cleft chin, the widow’s peak—he belonged up on a pedestal with the other imperial statues. Fear shot through me, and I turned back to the bar, hunching forward so he wouldn’t see my face. The bartender raised an eyebrow.

“Another Midas Touch?” she asked. I shook my head. She gave me a contemptuous look, but I didn’t care. Behind me, I knew, a waitress was leading the well-dressed men through the restaurant and pulling back the purple velvet rope. I would sit at the bar and wait until they finished. Maybe I could catch Ramsey going to the bathroom. Otherwise I’d corner them on the way out, introduce myself as Ramsey’s son, and ask to speak with him alone. He’d have to agree. He wouldn’t want to look bad.

It was as good a plan as any, but I was unable to put it into practice. A hand fell on my shoulder. My heart sunk. I turned, certain that I would find Cowboy towering over me, smiling horribly beneath the brim of his most sinister Stetson hat. But I was mistaken. Behind me stood two exceedingly handsome Hispanic men, identical twins in white tuxedos. They were young, clean-shaven, each strand of hair gelled precisely into place.

“Tyler Cloff?” asked one.

“That’s right.”

“I’m Esteban.”

“I’m Manuel.”

“Your dad thought we might find you here,” said Esteban. Both brothers spoke very good English, but with strong accents.

“He’s not my dad,” I said.
“Touchy, touchy.”

“He asked us to invite to dinner.” This came as a surprise. After some hesitation, I stood from the bar. They guided me back through the restaurant toward the Capri Room.

“You’re prostitutes?” I asked.

“And you’re what,” said Manuel, “the Pope?”

“I’m nothing. I was just wondering if you knew a Ukrainian girl who used to work for Ramsey. A girl named Kalyna.” The two brothers exchanged a long, meaningful look.

“She OD’d,” said Manuel.

“Buzz killllll,” said Esteban theatrically. In that moment, I didn’t think I could possibly feel any lower. I don’t know why I had to ask. We came to gilded sign that said PRIVATE, and Manuel lifted the purple rope, or maybe it was Esteban.

“You’re not coming?” I asked. They laughed.

“We’re just the entertainment.”

“Bon appetite.” They left me to my own devices, and I crossed beneath the arch alone.

4. **Eunomia, Goddess of Good Regulations**

The scene was perfectly surreal.

The Capri Room had been modeled after the *triclinium* of some great Pompeian villa and was probably the only authentic part of the entire hotel complex. All around the room there flickered little flames from the spouts of clay oil lamps, perhaps thirty of them, lamps on tables, lamps on ledges, lamps dangling from tall brass stands. Even so, it
was very dim. Shadows danced across the mosaic that stretched along the walls (a semi-pornographic interpretation of Homer’s Lotus Eaters) so that it was never clear just where the tile figures were touching one another. Three long, wide dining couches dominated the space, ringing the room like a horseshoe; two men sprawled diagonally on each couch. They all looked absurd in their slacks and dinner jackets, most of them on their bellies like floundering fish—all except Ramsey, who reclined easily on his side, a goblet in his hand. He set it down on one of the larger tables that sat in the center between the three couches and raised his arm to beckon me forward.

The noise coming from the main restaurant was strangely faint. Echoes from another world.

“Everybody, this is my son, Tyler.”

“Hey there,” said one of the men.

“Your dad was just talking about you.”

“Come on and have some of this funny wine.”

“Good to see you again, Tyler.” This last was Lars Klein, the heavy-set city councilman, whom I remembered from the cruise in 2001. I stood stupidly for several seconds, unsure what to say or what to do next. At last a waitress stepped forward from the dark corner of the room, guided me to an empty spot on the left couch, and poured wine into a crystal cup. She was dressed in a stola, her hair pulled back into an elaborate bun in the Roman style. I leaned forward across a purple cushion, took my cup, and looked around the room from couch to couch as the shadows played across the faces of
these six powerful men. Immediately beside me, like a walrus on an ice floe, lay a fat
mustached gentleman in his sixties.

It was all wrong. I wasn’t meant to be there.

The waitress or liberta or whatever she was receded into the shadows.

“Talk about commitment to a theme,” I said, if only to break the tension.

“Takes some getting used to, don’t it?” said the walrus, his accent rural and thick.

“You got to sit back and appreciate the experience,” said Ramsey. “The Caesars
knew a thing or two about class, ain’t that right buddy?” The men all looked to me; it was
obvious that Ramsey had told them about my academic background.

“The Caesars knew a thing or two about draining the treasury and fucking their
sisters,” I replied, watching him there on the opposite couch, poised naturally on his
elbow as if nothing about this situation were amiss. Never in my life had I felt such
contempt for another human being. But the men only laughed and raised their glasses,
thinking I’d made some witty intellectual joke. Soon they forgot me completely. Our two
costumed waitresses left the room, returning several moments later with platters of roast
rabbits with pork sausage and fermented fish sauce—a recipe which, they assured us, was
derived from a 4th century cookbook and modified only slightly to suit our modern
American tastes, just as the grapes had been grown and aged to imitate the most prized
wine of ancient Rome. Fauxlernian wine, that’s how I thought of it.

The food was wonderful; the drink was strong enough to catch fire; and soon the
men got to talking. I listened silently and was promptly ignored. To them, I was another
prop on the set. I existed to lend the scene additional authenticity, whether because I was
a classicist or because they thought I was Ramsey’s son. They were more interested in the
future than the past. Besides Ramsey and Klein, one of the men was with Damisking
insurance, one with the Atlanta mayor’s office, one with the SEC, and one with a hedge
fund like Livia Moore’s. A good deal had been decided even before I’d entered the room.
All five men agreed that it would be best for everyone to ignore the legal and financial
consequences related to the demise of Phoenix City Bank, Castlebrook Homes, and
Mansfield Real Estate; Ramsey would be allowed to begin new companies (with what
capital, no one said), and these new companies would be instrumental to Atlanta’s
recovery. The gentleman from the SEC assured us, lamplight playing across his face, that
the transfer of certain moneys to my trust fund would go unnoticed, provided that
Ramsey build a house for a certain disgruntled man on the Ethics Council, Bob Lyttelton.
The biggest remaining question was how long to wait out the recession before making a
move on the beleaguered housing sector. There would be some limited regulation of
derivative trading for a time, just for show; then Damisking would have to decide how to
best reenter the swaps market. Because they went bankrupt alongside AIG in October,
they needed to be fastidious in their lobbying efforts if they wanted to sidestep the
restrictions imposed when the Federal Reserve bailed them out. The genteel walrus
beside me was the one with Damisking. He raised his glass of Fauxlernian wine and
laughed, his cheeks ruddy, his eyes small and black:

“Lord knows the Troubled Asset Relief Program is going to get my ass into
trouble tonight down at the blackjack table.” The other men laughed. He turned to the
gentleman from the SEC and said, “You ain’t going to turn me in now, are you?” Then they laughed even harder.

“Eunomia would,” I said to myself, shaking my head.

“You know me what, son?”

“Eunomia. The Goddess of Good Regulations.” The Damisking walrus looked like I had said something terrifically mad. Perhaps I had. The drink, as I said, was very strong, and it was very dark. It all felt so real. The food. The wine. The lamps swaying from bronze chains. The women on the walls made of little clay tiles. I had to keep looking to Ramsey and his compatriots, to their vests and lapels, to remind myself I was reclining on a soft purple cushion not in the triclinium of some villa suburbana, but in the private dining room of a gaudy Vegas hotel.

Over the course of this meal, I spent most of my time watching Ramsey, wondering if he could guess how much I’d learned about him. I waited for some hint of apprehension, frustration, or, at the very least, recognition. It had been over a year since I’d seen him last. Why avoid me for so long only to send for me now? But I was disappointed. He ignored me even more completely than the others. Instead he’d listened to the discussion with unflagging interest, nodding seriously when someone suggested a course of action, laughing charismatically when someone made a joke. So it came to me as a great surprise when he suddenly stood from the dining couch and said, “Alright, I got the tab. You boys go on down to the casino, and I’ll see you in a few minutes.” It was not a suggestion, but a command. Then Ramsey turned to me and raised his glass:

“I’d like to have a few words with my son.”
5. The Thing We All Wanted

I had often imagined, reading Petronius or Plutarch, what it must have been like to recline on a Roman dining couch. To rest your weight on your elbow. To discuss politics, literature, history, humanity over an idle glass of Falernian wine even as your servants rekindled your oil lamps.

To make sense of things from a supine position.

But in that moment, alone with Ramsey in the Capri room, I couldn’t have conceived of a less comfortable way to drink and talk. I lay on the Vegas dining couch acutely self-conscious, like a virgin bride in her nuptial bed, waiting for something terrible to take place. Now that there was space, I sidled over to the central divan and sat on my ass like a proper American. Ramsey stayed where he was. He reclined on his side as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The lamps swayed all around us, and for a brief moment, on the wall mosaic behind him, I could make out a nude figure biting into a lotus fruit. Then there was darkness.

“Lot of people been looking for me,” said Ramsey. “People with resources. People with resolve.”

“People you hurt.”

“Some I did. Some I didn’t.” In the dim glow I saw the charming hint of a smile; the rest of his face was in shadow. “But it was you that found me. Got to say, I’m impressed.”

“You always told me I was a smart kid.”
“Smart only gets a man so far. But tenacity…well, I didn’t think that was in your nature.”

“Neither did I.”

“If I’d have known you had it in you to kill a man, maybe things would have been different.”

“Kill a man?”

“You haven’t heard,” said Ramsey, laughing softly. “Cowboy. Those dogs of his got loose, tore up his legs. One got to his face before he could put’em down. Poor bastard bled out.”

“He’s dead?”

“Tenacity. Maybe you and I could have worked together. I won’t be around forever, you know.”

I was stultified. It seemed a certain thing that he would be around forever. And Cowboy was dead…

“But I got tenacity too,” continued Ramsey (and I would have sworn by the River Styx there was true heartbreak in his voice). “I haven’t given up on Atlanta, I haven’t given up on your mom, and I haven’t given up on you.”

“I know all about what you’ve done,” I said, standing abruptly from the dining couch. “And it kills me, that I ever believed you were a great man. That’s what I came to tell you.” Ramsey too rose to his feet. I’d forgotten how much taller he was than me.

“I did what I was born to do, I did what I pleased, and it got my name in the history books. I laid the world at your feet. Now what are you going to do with it, buddy?
Why do you think I asked you here? You heard them talking a minute ago: I’m coming back. And I want you with me. Put 2008 behind us, things will go back to how they were, trust fund and everything, except now I know what you’re made of. You can learn the ropes from me just like I learned from my old man, it’s never too late.”

“He’s dying,” I said, trembling.

“Of course he’s dying, and I’ll be dying too before long. Somebody’s got to keep this thing going.”

This was an unexpected turn. I’d come to Vegas with the certainty that Ramsey had never cared for me, that he had brought me into his sphere of influence because families prefer to buy houses from family men. Could Jim have been wrong about him? He was offering me the opportunity to take over his companies, to inherit his legacy, to succeed him as the Lord of Atlanta Real Estate.

How could he fake that?

And yet…

The two of us stood there between the three couches, drunk on strong wine, lamplight washing over our faces. Down a narrow hallway, through the arch, past the purple rope, diners were dining, gamblers were gambling, strippers were stripping—but the Capri Room was a world unto itself.

Now that I’d found my stepfather, I’d forgotten what to say. But it didn’t matter. Ramsey understood perfectly:
“I see,” he said with a meaningful sigh. “That’s a disappointment, buddy. A real 
disappointment. But it’s my fault for second guessing myself, you can’t change who you 
are. Tiger’s got to hunt.”

“Bird’s got to fly,” I quoted. “Man’s got to sit and wonder why, why, why.”

“That sounds like you. I like that.” He smiled gently. It shocked me, that he could 
smile like that. “You’re still my stepson, even if you can’t take over for me when I’m 
gone. And your Mom’s a practical woman. It’s getting rough out there, especially in 
Atlanta. She’ll be looking for stability. You haven’t told her everything, now, have you?”

I knew what he meant. I said I hadn’t told her.

“Better keep it that way. Go back to how things were before. It’d be best for all of 
us.”

Only then did I realize how drunk I’d gotten. The room spun: the amphorae of 
wine and fish sauce, the bowls of grapes, the flickering oil lamps, the cushions all 
purplish red like they were dyed with murex, the thousands of little clay tiles that 
constituted the mosaic on the wall, blurred and turning about, the trappings of a bygone 
age.

I wanted more than anything for it to be real. That’s all I’d ever wanted, all any of 
us then had wanted. For it to be real.

I turned back to Ramsey. He stood looking sharp and easy in his tux, a goblet of 
Fauxlernian wine in his hand. In that moment I considered Mom, abandoned, exhausted, 
sliding back into poverty after a lifetime struggling to claw her way out; I considered Jim 
in exile, a terrified, newly divorced single-father; I considered Gus, waiting in his final
hours for his son to walk through the door. I considered the displaced families of
Techwood Homes. I considered Luz and Kalyna and Manuel and Esteban. I considered
Cowboy, Livia Moore, even poor dumb Bob Lyttelton, who had only dared to want a
house for himself.

“No,” I said, turning to face Ramsey. “It’s not best for all of us.”

“You think things are bad now? Ask your mom, she’ll tell you what bad is, and
that’s where you’re heading, buddy. The mortgage business is screwed, the feds have
seen to that, and you aren’t exactly the professional type. I’m given you a choice between
chicken shit and chicken salad.”

“If you’re chicken salad, I’ll take chicken shit.” Stupidly enough, these were to be
my final words to my stepfather. He stood for a moment, carefully taking them in.

Then something strange happened.

Ramsey’s face, which only seconds before had been emotive, sensitive, even
tender, now held all the warmth and humanity of the Prima Porta statue that stood on Las
Vegas Blvd. His eyes too were like stone, inscrutable in the dim light, eyes without irises
or pupils. He stepped forward and crossed his arms behind his back. His voice was like
the voice of another man, a man I’d never heard. It came clear, calm, and even from the
shadows:

“Cowboy could have called an ambulance, I imagine, but he didn’t want to draw
attention to the farmhouse. He was loyal. Of course, loyalty doesn’t mean shit. Still, he
was more my son than you.”
The voice sounded only faintly interested, as if considering an idle problem of geometry or physics.

I turned and hurried for the door.

“There’s one more thing,” said the voice. “I wanted you here for dinner tonight so you could hear for yourself. I’m coming back to Atlanta in a big way. Nothing can change that now, so you might as well get used to the idea. Be sure to tell your friend Moore.”

6. Phaethon’s Ride

It was an uncommonly bright New Year’s morning. The reverse-engineered Falernian wine had not agreed with me, and the light from the airplane windows only aggravated my condition. Nonetheless, as we lifted up over Las Vegas, I couldn’t help but look down on the gaudy little monuments: the pyramid of Luxor, the Coliseum of Caesar’s Palace, the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, growing smaller and smaller below. Sighing, I settled back into my seat and closed my eyes.

Ramsey was right, of course. I had heard it with my own ears: the entire city of Atlanta was conspiring to ensure his successful return. Things would start up again, just as before. Perhaps for the first time in my life, I understood injustice in something more than historical, theoretical terms. I understood injustice as an acute, persistent nausea, a disease you wake to every single day.

We rose over the dusty grids of foreclosed houses. The sun was unbearably bright through the window. As I rose higher and higher above the earth—bitter, hung-over, fatherless—I made a resolution:
Fine, I thought. If no one else is going to act, let it be the layabout.

I’d take the reigns of Ramsey’s horses and drive his Sun Chariot across the firmament of Atlanta real estate and finance, leaving a trail of fire in my wake. The constellations would scatter. The forests would burn, and the oceans would boil. Ramsey Mansfield, Damisking Insurance, Lars Klein and the city council, Bob Lyttelton and the SEC, maybe it’d even go as far as the subprime lenders, the ratings agencies, the investment bankers. Yes, it gave me pause to think of Jim Tappman caught up in the firestorm. He was a good man. But he was guilty too; I had hope that someone would cut him a deal in exchange for his testimony.

I stewed in this manner for the duration of the flight, remembering all that had been said the night before, until out the window I could make out the green and gray suburban sprawl of Metro Atlanta. My headache was gone. By the time we landed at Hartsfield-Jackson, I had come up with a plan.

In light of how things turned out, I can’t be sure that it was the right thing to do. Only history can judge me now.

But everyone knows Phaethon was a fool to think he could hang onto those fiery horses. You can’t stop a conflagration once you’ve started one, and in the end, when things got out of control, Jupiter had no choice but to strike the poor bastard down.

That evening I found myself in Athens knocking on the door of Aiko’s studio apartment. Standing there at the threshold, she crossed her arms and shot me a look that might have slain me on the spot had I not been expecting it.
“How’d your set go at Bangkok Blues?” I asked weakly.

“I hooked up with Dennis.” She smiled savagely. After everything that had happened in Vegas, this was too much. She allowed me to flounder for several seconds, groping pathetically for words, before she cocked her head and said, “See? That’s how it feels to be lied to.”

I deflated like a balloon. In truth, I have never wished so badly to hit a girl. Instead I stepped forward and took her in my arms. I told her where I’d been, what I’d been up to. Her eyes grew larger and more adorable. I loved them for that. She pushed me away, but only a little.

“I didn’t want you to worry,” I said.

“What would have happened if you found Cowboy there waiting for you?”

“He wasn’t.” Trembling now, I told her what had happened to Cowboy. Slowly, as she processed this new information, the anger left her eyes, replaced by a look of intense sympathy. She took my hands. I told her what I’d heard in the Capri Room over goblets of reengineered Falernian wine. I repeated the things Ramsey had said to me.

She invited me inside.

The next morning, the two of us lay in bed. Staring up at her bedroom ceiling, I told her about my plan. I was worried she would say it wasn’t practical, that it was time for me to let things go, focus on getting my own life together. Instead she turned and looked at me very seriously.

“It could work,” she said quietly, as if to herself. “How can I help?”
A Tale of Two Foreclosures

Aiko had a friend through the UGA journalism program who’d gone on to work at the Atlanta Journal Constitution. After editing the video from my phone to remove the sound and to feature the most absurd, graphic segments, I sent it over to his office. It took only three days for reporters to verify its authenticity and conduct their own follow-up investigation.

In the Sunday newspaper, buried in the Nation and World section, there appeared an article with the headline: *FEDS MISSED CRISIS DUE TO PORN ADDICTION?*

Beneath was a still from the video I took featuring Bob Lyttelton’s computer monitor and, by extension, a pool table, a very happy gentleman in his fifties, and the bare back of a sultry young red-head woman. Upon request, the SEC inspector general’s office had been forced to provide the newspaper with 150 pages of records and transcripts regarding internal investigations into dozens of employees who had been caught surfing porn, some for periods of eight hours a day. None were fired. According to the article, the work computer of one Atlanta office employee showed more than 4,000 attempts to view “old man, young lady” videos in a two week span. One offender was quoted as saying, “They told us, don’t follow up on tips, don’t ask any awkward questions, don’t forget to get rid of any troubling documents when you’re through pretending to go through them. What was I supposed to do all day, read *Moby Dick*?” When reached for comment about how these over stimulated regulators might be punished, the inspector general replied, “Yes, some may receive a reprimand.”
Aiko and I read this article over brunch, and though we found it entertaining, it became clear by the end that we needed to take more drastic measures. So I posted the entire video online, enabling the audio only when Lyttelton said things like, “Threaten to put my buddies here at the SEC on his trail for real” or “Lots of people in this building are looking for that money. Let’s just say I got good reason to think your dad tucked it away and some of it belongs to yours truly.” The internet took over from there. Soon Bob Lyttelton’s plain, middle aged face was all over the big video sites; the phrase, “It belongs to yours truly,” became a meme; and the Pool Hall Porno went on to become the most popular genre of smut in 2009. It wasn’t long before search engine sleuths deduced Lyttelton’s identity and doctored photos of his face on the male porn star’s body to appear under captions like “SEC Ethics” or “How the government treats taxpayers.” Suddenly, the media was very interested in the story, and by mid January, Lyttelton and the other SEC porn addicts were front-page news.

There came a statement from the inspector general: “As a regulatory body itself, the SEC is especially committed to ensuring the principled conduct of its employees. Those individuals who were particularly egregious in their viewing of pornography during working hours are under further investigation.”

In other words, they would present Lyttelton as a sacrificial offering.

Perhaps I should have felt guilty, ruining a man’s life. But I didn’t, not at the time. Poor dumb Bob Lyttelton was kindling to start the fire.

In the following weeks, I paid careful attention to the local business news, looking for any information about his downfall. Instead I came across an article in the AJC

393
Business section under the headline, RESPECTED DEVELOPER RISES FROM THE ASHES. The story detailed a new start-up, Eternity Real Estate. Even as property values continued to plunge around the city, Eternity founder and “longtime Atlanta property icon,” Ramsey Mansfield had begun to purchase foreclosed properties, which would pave the way, the article said, to “the city’s eventual recovery.” I remember reading this article and feeling reassured; I was doing the right thing.

Then, toward the end of January, things began to happen very quickly. I was invited to interview for a teaching job Aiko helped me applied for. Mom told Luz we had to let her go. And just as abruptly, the kindling caught fire: the SEC inspector general, under pressure from a certain US senator, released a statement acknowledging that information had come to light during the investigation of one Mr. Bob Lyttelton to suggest the possibility that regulators in the Atlanta office had knowingly allowed several banks and real estate companies to conduct illegal transactions over the span of several years, including the surreptitious transferring assets to tax havens and offshore accounts in the weeks preceding declarations of bankruptcy.

In light of this information, certain parties would be called in for questioning, including the accountant of now-defunct Phoenix City Bank, Mr. Jim Tappman, who, if he were to confess to his own role in the fraud, I knew, would eventually lead to the arrest of Ramsey T. Mansfield.

When Luz learned she was losing her job, she nodded slowly, mumbling, “I know, I know,” her big wet eyes trained on the floor, until finally Mom stepped forward and took her hand:
“If there was any way…”

“Ayy, Susan, I know,” she said fiercely, tilting her chin up to look her friend in the eye. It was a strange sight, even then, over a year after Ramsey’s disappearance, to see these two incongruous women standing there and holding hands, Luz in simple cotton dress, Mom in white designer pants she’d bought on the internet. I stood in the corner of the foyer, arms crossed, barely able to watch. Mom asked what Luz planned to do. In mournful, broken English, she explained that she had known since her husband went out of work—no one in their right mind was doing construction anymore—that the bank would eventually foreclose on their house, even if she had kept her job with us. For a brief moment, Mom looked older than I’d ever seen her look. She inhaled deeply, her eyes fluttering, a move she referred to as “steeling herself,” and by the time she exhaled, she had composed herself.

“I’m afraid you’re not the only one losing a house.” She gestured to include our surroundings, from the half-spiral staircase to the wrought iron chandelier hanging over our heads.

“Que?”

“Yeah,” I said, “what is that supposed to mean?”

“Either we sell this house in the next few months, or the bank forecloses on it.”

“Ramsey’s investors are still coming after you?” The thought infuriated me; Ramsey himself was back in town, and I’d received an email recently from Livia Moore, who had seen the SEC inspector general’s statement about Jim Tappman. I must say that I’m surprised, it read. Very well done.
“No. Still, the damage is done.”

“But I got a job interview. Mom laughed sadly at this.

“Darling, do you have any idea how much the taxes and mortgage payments are on a house like this?” I confessed that I did not. I still had much to learn about the affairs of practical people.

“What are we going to do?”

“We’ll figure something out,” Mom said wearily.

“We have party,” interrupted Luz, her face brightening. “We having big big party on mi casa.” I couldn’t help but laugh.

“A dual foreclosure party? I like it.”

And, incredibly, all three of us were smiling in spite of ourselves. All that remained was to settle the details.

8. The Techwood Diaspora

Before I come to the foreclosure party, before I come to Jim Tappman’s reappearance and all that followed, I hope the reader will allow me one final digression:

I felt nearly as nervous, walking into Georgia State’s College of Arts and Sciences, as I had on New Years Eve approaching my ersatz stepfather in the Capri Room. I had never been interviewed for anything in my life. Eventually I found myself sitting across a table from two older women who seemed to spend nearly fifteen minutes scrutinizing my résumé, passing the pathetic thing back and forth between themselves, and making disapproving faces. I had chosen a very expensive (albeit slightly worn) suit
and was very conscious that my interviewers came dressed casually in blouses and skirts. It seemed the encounter would draw out interminably.

But, to my surprise, it was over before I knew it. The two women were kind, shrewd, and exceedingly patient with me as I answered their questions about the two paltry articles I’d published, the single pedagogy course I’d taken during my MA program, and the book I was writing about T. Gracchus, and they took notes as I attempted to communicate my fetishism with the great Latin historians without making an ass of myself. Soon all three of us were shaking hands and smiling. As I left the room I felt absurdly hopeful for several seconds before remembering that no self-respecting Classics department would hire an entitled Buckhead kid in his twenties with no professional experience whatsoever, even as a lowly, underpaid adjunct instructor.

Disappointed in myself, I made my way down the hall and boarded the elevator, which stopped on the third floor. The doors opened. A man got on, a familiar looking black guy in his thirties with a neatly groomed goatee.

He wore an expensive pinstriped blazer.

“Tyler Cloff, my man,” he said, shaking his head and laughing.

“You remember my name. I’m touched.” But I wasn’t touched. I was terrified. Options were running through my head: stop the elevator? Call out for the university police? Do nothing?

“Hey, relax, I don’t bite.”

“Facta, non verba,” I muttered.
“Look at you, Magister, shit.” He laughed. He was enjoying this. I noticed he was carrying a black leather satchel, and from a side pocket peeked the tops of a dry-erase marker and an eraser.

“You work here?”

“Sociology department,” he said. “Got teaching in my blood, couldn’t you see that last time we met?”

“I definitely learned a lesson. Not so sure about your methods though.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures, man. Now, what brings you to our humble urban campus this afternoon?” I explained that I’d just applied for an adjunct job teaching Latin. He laughed. “We could be colleagues. Ain’t life a sassy lady.” A bell rang and the elevator doors slid open. After we exited, he extended his free hand for me to shake. I took it. “I’m Sam,” he said. Behind us, the elevator doors were closing. My mouth must have been hanging open, and I still hadn’t let go of Sam’s hand. “What’s the matter,” he said, “this the first time you shaken hands with a black man?”

“Mo Eris,” I said. He raised a curious eyebrow. How could I explain? I’d listened to Ramsey’s cell phone message a hundred times. How many other guys named Mo could there possibly be teaching Sociology at Georgia State?

And so I invited this man who had once held a knife to my scrotum to get a cup of coffee.

As it happened, Mo Eris had published several articles in the AJC which I had read the year before, all concerning Atlanta residents who’d been pressured (some by force, some by other means) to sell their homes. The oldest of six siblings, he had left
home to attend Morehouse College on a full scholarship, the first in his family to go to university, only to learn a year later that his father, mother, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins were all being forced to leave their apartments. Ramsey Mansfield and other Atlanta luminaries had decreed that the old projects of Techwood would be destroyed for the 1996 Olympics to make way for the fountains of Centennial Park and (eventually) the Aquarium, the Coke Museum, etc., scattering Sam’s friends and families around the metro area.

In the ensuing years, high on the rush of the real estate boom, developers scrambled to snap up anything they could in up-and-coming neighborhoods, and anyone who wouldn’t sell would soon find city health inspectors stopping by to look for any excuse to shut a restaurant down, cops whispering veiled threats, and, if you were too stubborn for your own good, guys like Cowboy waiting for you in back alley. Sam’s father was one of these. After the city kicked him out of Techwood, he had started a small barbeque joint in Cabbagetown, and he’d be damned if he was going to be pushed out of his home a second time. They found his body in a commercial meat smoker.

“It was then I became what you might call a ‘community organizer,’” Mo told me over coffee. What he meant was “gang leader.” He and some of his friends from Techwood would patrol the neighborhood, vandalizing construction equipment and renovated loft apartments, setting fire to parked cruisers thought to belong to crooked cops, and getting into fights with rival gangs who accepted money or drugs to pressure local residents to leave their homes. He volunteered to tutor neighborhood kids (it turned
out that Bennie, the other mugger, one of these) and tried to keep them in school. But still the city was changing. Try as he might, Mo couldn’t stop the inevitable.

To illustrate this point, he told me a story. One evening two of his friends happened across Cowboy wrenching out the teeth of an elderly black man with his claw hammer; according to local legend, they shot Cowboy four times before he closed the distance and crushed their skulls with the hammer’s business end.

Mo realized that a few gangly kids from Techwood spray-painting over advertisements for new high-rises (Castlebrook Homicide) weren’t going to change things. The best he could do would be to shout from the mountaintops, to try and get the world to see and face his situation. So he spent a few years at Georgetown, got a graduate degree in Public Policy, and returned to Atlanta to teach, to write articles about “urban revitalization,” and to start a local nonprofit dedicated to helping displaced Atlanta residents find housing. Apparently, it was to this organization he had given the eighteen hundred dollars he’d found in my wallet the summer before.

And as Mo told me his story, I told him mine. I told him about my scheme to derail Ramsey’s return. And I told him what happened to Cowboy.

“Ding dong, the witch is dead. And of all the people, it was Tyler Cloff, fucking David and Goliath.”

“The dogs did it, not me.”

“We always bite the hand that feeds, particularly when it’s the same hand that routinely beats the shit out of us.” By then we had finished our coffee. We stood and
shook hands. Then, slowly, Mo slid one arm out from the sleeve of the pinstriped jacket, then the other, and carefully folded it over his arm before handing it to me.

“Here,” he said, “I think you’ve learned your lesson. Good luck with the job thing. I’ll put in a good word for you upstairs.”

“I appreciate it.” I took the blazer and slid it on under my heavier wool coat.

“By the way, from one academic to another,” he said (not without some hint of irony), “you’ve got an intellectual obligation.”

“I do?”

“Fucking A, you do. Even if you can’t stop your stepdad, you sure as hell better bring his stupid shit to light.”

“I’m working on it,” I said.

“Good. Well. Whether or not anybody will give a damn, that’s a whole ‘nother matter entirely.”

9. A Deity for Every Occasion

I spent the next few days nervously waiting any news about the events set in motion by the SEC porn scandal. Though the AJC published several articles about the continuing decline in housing prices, there was no more speculation about “the city’s eventual recovery.” There were no further mentions of Eternity Real Estate, Ramsey’s new company. And there was nothing new about Jim, no indication whether or not he had yet been brought in for questioning. I couldn’t help but wonder if he would know if it was I who started the whole mess. Would he hate me for it? And once the feds brought him in for questioning, what would he tell them?
Jim was an honest man. I knew this to be true. And yet there was his son to consider. I’d have to have a drink whenever I thought about it. It was the only thing that would keep me from reasoning myself in circles, again and again, until I found myself out on the courtyard balcony reeling over the stupid stone cherub and the pool of standing water below, feeling like I might vomit from the nausea.

There was little to do around the house. Though the trophy wives continued to bob past in their chicest cold-weather exercise apparel, there was no more lawn to mow, no more leaves to rake. Besides, what would have been the point? At the bottom of the hill, in the shadow of the Buckhead house, there now sprouted from the dead yellow grass a FOR SALE sign of our very own, though no one had yet come to see the place. (As shockingly modest as it seemed, Mom’s list price, it turned out, was far too high; we had yet to comprehend just how bad things had gotten, just how bad they would get, just how deep rock bottom truly was). Mom continued to go into the office that week, even though no one in their right mind was looking for a mortgage and the tide of refinances had not yet begun; in the evenings she ate quickly and holed up in her office, just as she would when I was a kid, making phone calls to antique dealers, jewelers, interior decorators, pawn shop owners, and realtors she’d worked with in the past, doing anything she could to sell the house, the furniture, the miscellaneous trinkets that littered the shelves of the Buckhead house. Even Aiko was busy with work. So I spent the time reading the news, waiting to hear back from Georgia State about the teaching job, and worrying about Jim, with nothing to distract me from my anxiety but this account. That, and my excitement for Luz’s foreclosure party.
I was right to worry, of course.

In times like these, the Romans had their marble steps, their priests with pointy hats, their codified systems to make meaning from the flight patterns of birds or the length and consistency of sheep intestines. They had their stories, their statues, their cults of colorful characters, a deity for every occasion.

What gods are there, in moments like these, for such stupid children as myself? Who is there to damn or to forgive an entitled American classicist? History? Posterity? Have I nothing left to pray to?

10. House(less) Party

It was cold and dark, but after the first few rounds no one seemed to care. Cesar had started a bonfire in the backyard, and we all stood around in our heavy coats, drinking and watching our breath as we leaned in close to the flames, me and Mom and Aiko, Cesar, Luz, their daughters and siblings, their nieces and nephews. We drank beer, cheap yellow American swill, but no one cared, not even me. Salsa music played from the stereo, all quick syncopated chords, percussion and trumpets and guitars with nylon strings. The conversation too was musical, though I understood little of it, and Mom and Aiko understood even less. We’d lean close to each other, whether because we were eager for warmth or because it was hard to hear over the music, the voices, the roar of the fire. When I saw how the firelight played across our faces in the shadows, I shuddered, thinking of Vegas, the Capri Room, the little flickering flames of oil lamps, but then
someone called for a toast, everyone raised their bottles, a great cry went around the yard, “Salud!” and I remembered that this was different. This was real. There were perhaps thirty of us, a few friends, but mostly Luz’s immediate family; it made me feel better, seeing that they’d take good care of her.

And whenever we shivered, we only laughed. We could have gone inside, of course, where it was warm. But we didn’t need the damn house. That was the point.

Sometimes Luz or Cesar would attempt a phrase in English; other times, they’d have their daughters translate:

“You see it?” said Luz, pointing to a box of documents one of the nephews was emptying into the fire pit.

“Yes?” I said.

“Recibos de pago de la hipoteca,” she said.

“Records of mortgage payments,” said one of the older daughters. By then everyone was good and drunk, everyone but the children and myself, since I’d volunteered to drive back to Buckhead. Instead I enjoyed several cups of strong, black Columbian coffee and felt fortunate to be warmed from the inside out. Aiko looked particularly good that night. She wore a puffy white nylon coat and a hat made to look like a cheerful anime penguin, and every time her bangs fell across her face she brushed them away with a bright green mitten. She huddled conspiratorially with Mom and Luz. They’d steal a furtive look at my across the fire before bursting into laughter, and occasionally I’d catch snatches of their conversation:

“Lord knows it’s about time,” said Mom. “I just hope he gets it.”
“If he does, he’ll probably bore his poor students to death,” Aiko said playful.

“Noooooo, Tyler always loving the books,” said Luz. “He is good teacher!”

“Will be, Mami,” one of the daughters corrected. “He will be a good teacher.”

“Sí, Tyler is will be good teacher,” she said, and all the others laughed.

Eventually, after all the younger children had been taken inside and put to bed, I saw Mom and Luz, two middle-aged women sitting together on the same plastic chest, leaning close to each other, their expressions very serious as they whispered like schoolgirls negotiating some important bylaw of their friendship. Mom would nod her head vigorously for a moment, then Luz would do the same, back and forth. Meanwhile, Aiko had sidled back around the fire, next to me.

“They’re having a moment,” she said, as if that explained everything. Then she rested her head on my shoulder to watch. After a moment, Mom and Luz stood from their makeshift bench. They embraced. It lasted a long time. Even in the dark, it was plain that they were both crying, and all Luz’s relatives stared openly. When they separated, Luz turned, wiped a tear from her eye, laid a hand on Mom’s shoulder, and said something loudly in Spanish. Everyone laughed and cheered, including me and Aiko, even though we had no idea what had happened. Cesar approached Mom and kissed her twice, once on each cheek, first leaving her stultified, then grinning and embarrassed. Then Cesar got everyone’s attention and made a long speech in Spanish, gesturing several times toward Mom, myself, and his wife. Several times I thought I caught Ramsey’s name. It was then I remembered how it was actually Ramsey who had brought Luz into our house; Cesar, along with many of the men there around the campfire, had worked on Castlebrook
Homes construction teams or other crews, back when there were still construction jobs to be had. By the end of the speech, the yard had fallen silent, angry. Someone had turned off the music.

“Cabrones,” said Caesar, raising his beer for a toast, a very different sort of toast. Everyone else followed suit, even me with my coffee. Then, loudly, in his best cowboy English:

“Fuck’em!”

“Fuck’em!” we cried.

Our voices rang up over the fire. We took a long, solemn drink The coffee was rich, complex, bitter, and I felt good for the first time in a long time, maybe the first time since New Years. I felt foolishly powerful, as if we’d forever banished some great evil from the world. The music came back on, a Columbian pop rock song, and before I knew it Aiko had dragged me around the bonfire to dance alongside some of Luz’s nieces and nephews.

If there lives today somewhere in this world a classicist who can dance, it’s not one from any Latin conference I’ve ever attended. And yet, despite the awkward confusion of my limbs, despite my crippling sobriety, despite my acute consciousness of the beautiful, lithe Columbian adolescents moving easily, perfectly all around us, I danced. I danced the best I could, and I was happy. I forgot all about the cold. Because there in my arms was Aiko, her penguin hat bobbing around to the beat, her eyes smiling in light from the fire, her bangs swaying across her face, forgotten. To describe a young woman’s body is simple unless 1) it is pressed against you and 2) you love her, in which
case it is becomes possible only in the most abstract terms (timeless? empathetic?
undone?).

“Thanks,” she said afterward.

“For what?” In reply she threw her arms around me and kissed me.

“You taste like coffee.”

“You smell like beer. Crappy beer.”

“Shut up.” She put her finger over my lips and kissed me again. I pulled away
feeling breathless, fragile.

“You’re not going to run off on me again, are you?” I whispered.

“Depends. Have you figured it out yet?”

“Figured out what?”


“Rome wasn’t built in a day,” I said. She groaned and rolled her eyes.

“You’ll have to do better than that.”

“I’m trying. I need all the help I can get.”

“You’re supposed to be the teacher, not me.”

“I know.” She sighed, shook her head, and pulled me in for a longer, deeper kiss.

“Ay, nene!” said Luz, feigning shock. We broke apart laughing, our breath
puffing up into the darkness. It was then that Mom came over, unsmiling, her phone in
her hand. She pulled me aside.

“It’s Jim,” she said, clearly a little drunk.

“Is he okay?”
“He’s going in for questioning tomorrow. He says he has something to tell us, so I asked him over.”

“Now?”

“He made it sound important,” she said. I nodded, sighing. We said our goodbyes.

I hugged Luz and shook hands with Cesar. Aiko, Mom, and I waved to the rest of the family and left the bonfire behind, walking together back out into the cold night, looking for my car in the dark.

11. An Honest Country Face

Aiko and Mom were still somewhat drunk when we passed the FOR SALE sign and pulled up our steep driveway. The two of them had sat in the back whispering, with me up front like a chauffer. But I didn’t mind. I was more concerned about Jim, whose Jeep we found parked at the top of the hill with the lights on. He’d been waiting for us in his car. Mom knocked on his window and invited him inside.

It had already gotten past midnight. The four of us sat around the breakfast table, which looked out on the darkened courtyard. I’d never seen Jim look so bad. He wore a shabby flannel shirt, blue jeans, and a green hat with the Masters insignia. His stubble was long and unkempt, his hair greasy, his eyes red. Mom brought us a bottle of Chardonnay and, seeing him there nervously tapping his fingers, asked if he might care for something stronger.

“Whiskey, if you have it.” Mom nodded and came back with a silver tray, upon which sat a little ice bucket, some tongs, glasses, and a bottle of high dollar bourbon from
what once had been Ramsey’s liquor cabinet. As she poured one for him, she looked up from the glass with great concern.

“How’s Glenda holding up through all this?” she asked. Jim glanced to me and slowly shook his head. He’d taken off his hat.

“She filed for divorce back in November.”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.”

“That’s the least of my worries, if you want to know the truth.” He drained his glass. I poured him another and one for myself as well. Beside me, Aiko gently squeezed my thigh under the table. She knew it was my fault, dragging Jim into this. She knew I was in agony. It was plain to all of us—seeing him hunched over his whiskey and staring down into the table like he was trying to read the patterns of lines and whorls in the wood grain—that he was going to admit his guilt.

“I don’t care what happens tomorrow,” said Mom. “You’re a good man.” He laughed bitterly.

“I deserve what’s coming to me. Tyler will tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

“You wrote it all down, didn’t you? You’ve got to show her,” said Jim.

“Later.”

“Show me what, Tyler?”

“Later, Mom.”

“Susan, there’s something I came to tell you,” said Jim.
“I can go,” said Aiko, who had never met Jim in her life, and was feeling the embarrassment of inadvertently partaking in a stranger’s problems as only the Japanese can feel it.

“It’s alright,” said Jim. “Stay.”

“I don’t care what all you did for Timothy and Ramsey,” said Mom. “You were just doing as you were told.”

“It’s not just the money. Tyler will tell you. I know it’s late, I’ll get going soon, I just wanted to see you before tomorrow. I wanted to say to you both, especially you Susan, that I’m sorry for being a part of all this. For letting it happen. You’re a nice lady and you deserve better, I’ve told Tyler as much.”

“You’re not the only one who hid it from me, that Ramsey was running around on me. Even poor Luz knew. She was afraid to lose her job, she told me just tonight.”

“It’s worse than all that,” he said. I know he was remembering the Supremacy of the Seas, Gaffer and Laars Klein and Marco and Kalyna.

“Did you…did you do it too? With them?”

“No,” he said, startled. “It was never like that.”

“Well then. It’s alright. I forgive you.”

“We’ll see how you feel after you’ve heard the whole story.”

“Do you have to tell them everything?” I said abruptly, the words catching in my throat. “Have you talked to a lawyer?”

“I’ve been running from this for too long. Besides, it’s about time somebody fessed up for what they done. I just don’t know what Glenda’s going to tell Travis about
me. All I ever wanted was for him to have a shot,” he said, choking up. “I just worry. I just worry. I just worry he won’t come out right. Living with her, you know.” He stood from the table and put his hat back on, tears in his eyes. I sighed, trembling, shutting my eyes. Aiko squeezed my thigh.

“Wait,” said Mom. “I want to show you something, before you go.”

“I ought to

Mom took us down to her art studio in the basement, she and Jim in front, Aiko and I following behind. There on her easel was the oil painting of the farmer sitting on a front porch swing, a rusty black chain in one hand—she’d been touching it up recently, too busy to work on anything new. It was Jim in the painting, looking just as disheveled as he did standing there in the flesh. Even the green hat in the painting with its yellow John Deere logo seemed a reflection of his Masters hat.

“Ain’t that something,” Jim mumbled, obviously taken aback.

“You’ve got an honest, country face. That’s what I told Tyler, isn’t that right darling?” It was. The two of them stood there for some time, taking in the picture, and a series of emotions passed over Jim’s honest, country face as he struggled to work out just what the thing on the easel meant. Aiko and I exchanged glances.

“Kawaii,” she whispered, laughing softly, sweetly.

“Makes me think of home,” said Jim after a while. “You know, I think once I get out, maybe I’ll settle back down in the country. I think I’d like that.”

“You know what I was thinking tonight at Luz’s party?” asked Mom.

“What were you thinking?”
“I’ve been in Atlanta so long, I’d forgotten, it’s really not so terrible. Being poor.”

Jim smiled sadly at this. Mom turned to him, looking into his eyes. Suddenly Aiko and I both felt we were intruding; again, we exchanged looks. The two of them stood very close together, almost touching, Mom slightly taller because Jim was on the shorter side.

“Why don’t you stay,” said Mom. “We have plenty of rooms free.”

“I shouldn’t. All my stuff’s at the hotel.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive?”

“I’m okay. Only had two.”

“It’d be nice, having you, Jim.” He paused, looking to the easel, then back to Mom, pain in his eyes.

“No need to make things harder than they are, Susan.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Please,” she said, and for a long moment Jim sucked in his breath considering it.

“You know you want to,” I said, laughing awkwardly.

“Yeah, that makes it worse. I’ve caused you enough grief, Susan.” He made his way back up the stairs and we followed. At the front door, he turned back to Mom. “I just hope you really can forgive me. Once you know.”

“I told you, I already have.” She hugged him. He smiled, looking genuinely happy for the first time I could remember.

“There is at least something good to come of this.”

“There is?”
“Yeah,” he said, grinning. “That asshole husband of your is finally going to get what’s coming to him.”

12. Questions

CROOKED ACCOUNTAINT SHOOTS SELF IN HOTEL ROOM.

So the newspapers were supposed to read.

Curious, how the most revealing moments in history are often left to the imaginations of historians. Plutarch puts words in the mouths of men like Tiberius Gracchus (The savage beasts in Italy have their particular dens, they have their places of repose and refuge). Tacitus tells us that Nero, after having his mother assassinated, gazed down on her corpse and shook his head in wonder, whispering how beautiful she was, and that he spent the night in silence, dumbstruck, alone, unable to sleep, often jumping in terror at the slightest noise, awaiting the dawn as if it would bring with it his doom.

The historians weren’t there. They weren’t born. Or if they were, they were at home writing or reading or drinking wine, even as I myself began to fall asleep, half drunk on Ramsey’s bourbon while Jim cranked up his Jeep and left for his hotel.

And yet, if we hadn’t reconstructed these moments, what would be left of them? It would be as if they had never happened at all.

Was Jim still a little drunk as he hurtled down Peachtree Street in the dark? Did he occasionally swerve over the white painted lines? Did he have the road to himself? Did he put some music on? He loved classic rock, we had that in common—was he listening to Pink Floyd? The Stones? “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”? Or was he driving in silence, lost in thought? Was he speeding? Was he clutching his steering
wheel? Was he thinking of Mom? Her constructed elegance? Her weary, intelligent eyes? Her painting of him on the porch swing? Her offer to stay? What might have happened if he’d accepted? Did he imagine what it would be like, to sleep with her? Did he regret leaving? Or did he feel guilt? Did he think about Glenda, his estranged wife? About what Travis would feel, having another woman in his dad’s life? Or did he think it wouldn’t matter because soon, perhaps tomorrow, he’d be in prison? Did he wait in the hotel parking lot with the engine running (in silence or with the Stones filling his Jeep)? Did he think about turning around, driving back to us? Or was he resolute? Was he truly that good of a man? Did he scale a set of stained carpeted stairs? Did he take an elevator? What did he think about, listening to the bell ring at every floor? Or was his room on the first floor? Did he simply walk around the corner from the front desk and put his key in the door? When he stepped inside his room, did he sense that something was wrong? Did he have time for fear? Was Ramsey sitting on his bed, on a coarse, floral printed hotel comforter, nonchalant, his legs crossed, the gun already in his hand—the Desert Eagle he’d given Jim as a gift at Augusta National, many years before. Was Ramsey desperate? Or was he calm, collected, charismatic even then? Did he feel in that moment that everything was still perfectly in his control? Did he speak? If so, was it the voice of the Ramsey I knew, or the voice of the second man, the stranger I heard in the Capri Room?

“Good to see you, Jim.” Is that what he said? Could he be so wheedling even then?

“Sorry it had to happen like this”? “You can thank Tyler”?
Would Jim have screamed? If so, why did no one hear him? Or did he respond to Ramsey? Did he beg? Did he say he had a son to think of? Did he offer to make a deal, to lie, perhaps, when the feds questioned him the next day? Did Ramsey rationalize? Did he say Atlanta needed him? Or did he say, “This is my nature, to pull the trigger of a gun; this is your nature, to be shot in the head”? Or did Ramsey say nothing at all? Was he waiting beside the door instead of on the bed? Did he simply wait for Jim to step into the room, slam the door shut, grab him from behind, shove the gun against his temple, and fire? Or did they stand together for a moment, these two men, Jim baffled, stunned, or perhaps struggling to free himself as Ramsey adjusted the angle of the barrel so it would look more like a suicide? Was he still wearing his Masters hat? Did the shot wake the people in the hotel? Were there those who slept soundly through it? Did Jim feel pain? Or was it instant? Did Ramsey smile? Did he tremble? Was this his first time, now that he didn’t have Cowboy to do it for him? Or did he step away calmly, dispassionate, releasing the corpse, letting it fall to the drab bloodstained carpet like a sack? Wouldn’t he have found himself covered in gore? Did he clean himself in the bathroom? Did it take them so long to investigate? Why did no one see him exit the hotel? A balcony? Or did he simply walk out through the lobby as if nothing was out of the ordinary? Where did he go? Did he spend the night pacing his bedroom, wherever he was staying, peeking through the blinds, or did he sleep peacefully, comfortable?

How do we let these things happen?

We don’t know. We’ll never know.
But we do know Jim Tappman is dead. We know the hotel manager called the police twenty minutes after the gunshot was fired. We know Ramsey was arrested, charged with murder and attempting to coerce a police officer. According to the reports, an hour after the incident, he contacted the Atlanta police commissioner, a man Ramsey knew well because he had been one of the biggest donors to the APD for years and had always attended the annual policemen’s ball. According to the reports, the commissioner, outraged, hung up the phone and demanded a thorough investigation of the crime scene.

According to the reports.

In reality, Ramsey had arranged the whole thing in advance. I understood that at once. I thought of Jim, quiet, drunk, disheveled, depressive, waiting to be questioned the next day about his role in the fraud—no one would have batted an eye if he’d killed himself. Indeed, the same trick had worked perfectly with Gaffer. Ramsey would have proposed his plan to the police commissioner, with some additional pressure perhaps from the gentlemen I met in the Capri Room. The police must have promised to go along with it, to make sure the particulars weren’t scrutinized too closely. Without that security, Ramsey would have never gone through with it. That was how he was.

Which left one final question:

Why did Atlanta betray him?

13. What Real People Do

I won’t bore the reader with the procedural details of Ramsey’s conviction or of my own grief. I will only note that he negotiated a plea bargain to allow the possibility of
his parole in thirty years and that he spoke movingly before the judge, contritely and, despite his guilt, evoked a great deal of sympathy. Or so I am told.

If he lives long enough to get out, I imagine the first thing he’ll do is to retrieve the hidden money and start another company.

The Buckhead House sold on the day of Jim’s funeral. A representative came from a real estate company, Echidna Management Group, to find Mom in the living room, still in her long, tasteful black dress, her eyes red and raw. The representative handed her a card with a number on it. The number was picayune, insulting. They shook hands under the elk-antler chandelier. In the following weeks, trucks would pull up the steep hill and strong young men would enter the house through the columned porch and exit carrying vases, paintings, china settings, Persian rugs, 18th century clocks, crystal decanters, marble statues of hunting dogs, art supplies, fencing equipment, computers, TVs, treadmills, game consoles, claw footed armchairs, segments of the banquet table, my guitars, all but one, a humble (but playable) Mexican Strat much like Aiko’s. Even so, it wasn’t enough to pay off both the divorce attorney and all the debt Mom had incurred over the past year trying to fend off Ramsey’s investors while maintaining the house.

So we did what real people do. We got by. We made do.

By that time some homeowners were taking advantage of the low federal interest rates to refinance their homes, which gave Mom a little business. And, perhaps thanks to Mo Eris, I got the job teaching low-level Latin at Georgia State, which, as Aiko was quick to snarkily point out, satisfied my previous ideas about a life of culture with no
practical purpose. Though it was thankless, Sisyphean work, it was noble work, an
deedor of preservation, and the students, so many of whom idled in the thrall of
glowing LCD screens of various sizes, they needed me. I walked in on the first day and
wrote on the board: NOLITE TE BASTARDES CARBORUNDORUM. It’s a joke, I told
them, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true. After class I would meet up with Sam, and we’d
grade papers over coffee. We’d have long conversations about class structure, urban
demographic trends, historical patterns of socioeconomic oppression, looking forward vs.
remembering the past. I’d tell him stories about Ramsey; he’d tell me about his days
making trouble with his old Techwood friends. “You need to get your ass published,”
he’d say, “get yourself a real job,” and I’d say, “Easier said than done.”

Sometimes I’d catch myself wondering why the police commissioner chose not to
help Ramsey. Other times I thought maybe that wasn’t it at all. Maybe it was a fluke of
chance. Maybe there was some justice in the world.

In March, Mom moved into the suburbs, almost the country, where she had taken
out a mortgage on a modest, two-bedroom affair in a sprawling Levittown-esque
development called Rivercastleton Mill. I steered the rented moving van through the
neighborhood, navigating down streets with names like Wintergate Court and Babbling
Brook Bend, struggling not to sink into a foul mood, while Aiko gazed out the passenger
side window, watching the ranks of homogenous homes pass by. It was a bright day. But
there were no children to be seen playing in the cul-de-sacs, no women to be seen
exercising through the windows of the small community clubhouse, no men to be seen
scrubbing the various breeds of newish SUV’s (purchased just before the crash) that sat
in the orderly white driveways. There were, as far as I could tell, no signs of life in this place. Only the signs could take root in Rivercastleton Mill: an identical sign in every other yard, one slender wooden tine stabbing upward, another jutting out at a right angle, the beam of a miniature gallows, from which dangled a scarlet square emblazoned with that now all-to-familiar message, FOR SALE, and upon which perched, like a superscription, like a footnote in a particularly depressing history, a slender plastic panel that read, FORECLOSURE. As we made our way deeper into the heart of the development and the signs continued to sprout from the uniform yellow lawns under the angular shadows of gables, there was an impression of cheerful desolation, and we began to feel as if we were witnessing the aftermath of a monumental catastrophe—New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina; Indonesia or Sri Lanka in the wake of the 2004 tsunami; Pompeii after Vesuvius. No, I thought, not a natural disaster, but a historical one. A human one. It was like driving through the empty ruins of Hiroshima, Dresden, Carthage, Troy. I remember thinking, if this is the bottom for us, if this is how far we’ve fallen, where is there for these people to fall to, the one’s who used to live here? It was as if a Neutron bomb had gone off, leaving unscathed the systematic ranks of gabled houses but vaporizing the residents (and their retirement accounts), leaving, perhaps, only ashy silhouettes on the walls of bedrooms and home offices, a detonation whose blast radius, I knew, had touched even the country clubs and sacred hills of Buckhead. But ground zero was right here in Rivercastleton Mill.

It was little comfort that Ramsey was in jail. Jim was dead. Codified, systemic heedlessness lived on.
At last we arrived at our new house, which was identical to the others in every respect save for one. Slapped over the sign in the yard was a blue sticker with white letters: SOLD. Mom pulled in behind us, and I opened the sliding metal door on the back of the truck to reveal our lives compressed into boxes, marked with black ink, bathroom, kitchen, books, labels to connect boxes from the back of the truck with boxes from the front, like the endings of corresponding words in a Latin poem; Aiko and I unloaded the heavy stuff, the mattresses from guest rooms of the Buckhead House, the couches and tables from what had been the upstairs drawing room—all the nicest furniture had been sold—while Mom handled plastic crates of clothes and bed sheets, until all we had left were odds and ends, my Mexican Strat, my practice amp, Mom’s easel, her art supplies, her painting of Jim on the porch swing, boxes of our most treasured books, the ones we couldn’t bare to part with (including a worn edition of d’Aubusson’s Book of Greco-Roman Myths), all of which we passed along in assembly line fashion, Mom crouching in the dim cab of the truck and handing a box down to Aiko who would bring it just inside the front door for me to take to its appropriate destination within the house. It wasn’t until the truck was empty that I realized how little there had been. How we had filled this house—as small as it was, as little character as it had, situated as it was in this dreary suburban ghost town—how we had filled it with only things that were truly important. It wasn’t all bad, I thought. I remember sitting beside Aiko, our legs dangling over the back of the truck, our t-shirt’s soaked through with sweat. Through the windows of the house, we watched Mom in her new living room, slumped down on the couch fast asleep.
The arrangement was that I would pay for a share of the monthly payments until Aiko got a job in Atlanta and we found a place together downtown. I was busy in those days, perhaps for the first time in my life, unpacking, lesson planning, grading papers, commuting, editing my own writings, apartment hunting. Still, I kept up my old habit of checking the AJC business news. I wanted to follow the fallout of Ramsey’s arrest. It interested me to note, for instance, several stories about the death of Eternity Real Estate, or another that mentioned the death of legendary real estate czar, Gus Mansfield, in his Decatur home by natural causes, in which the author noted that it remained uncertain whether or not the father ever learned that his son was a convicted murderer. One day, I happened to notice an article about how a new start-up in Atlanta real estate, Echidna Management Group. They seemed to be the only major player in the current market who weren’t content to sit on their hands until the market showed signs of life. In fact, according to the story, they began picking up exactly where Eternity left off. Curious now, I pulled up their website and went to the “ABOUT” link. Next to the title, “CEO” was a photograph.

There, smiling coolly back at me, was Livia Moore.

According to her profile page, her hedge fund had netted gains of 2.1 billion for her investors betting against the market by shorting subprime mortgage CDO’s, including $450 million in personal profit, which she had poured into this new company with aims to strategically snap up beleaguered real estate. As I recalled, it had been a paltry four million that Ramsey owed her, for which she’d sent me running around Atlanta. On another website I found the transcription of an interview. The interviewer
mentioned that many leading investors and real estate experts he’d talked to thought she was crazy. Apparently Moore smiled at this:

“I’m young, relatively speaking,” she said. “I can afford to play the long game.”

14. Stone Lasts Forever

The elevator opened onto the 45th floor of Peachtree 191. Everything was how I remembered it from the year before, only now the plaque beside the door read “Echidna Management Group” rather than “Crassus & Moore LLP.” And there she was behind her massive oak desk, tall, slender, her face gaunt, her bone structure serpentine. Her eyes passed over me, dark and shrewd in their deep sockets. The window loomed behind her, bright and gray, perhaps ten feet high, overlooking downtown.

“Here he is, the son of the Man Who Believed in the Golden Goose.”

“Not for much longer,” I said.

“Of course, the divorce would be well underway by now I imagine.”

“You never cared about the money. You wanted to put Ramsey behind bars from the very beginning.”

“Yes, well, I am very grateful, Tyler, for how you handled the Lyttelton situation. Rather ingenious, I thought, using the pornography angle, like tossing chum in the water, though it really is too bad about Mr. Tappman. Sit down, please. Would you care for a drink?” She gestured over to where the liquor shelf sat stocked with whisky, jiggers, and glassware by the fireplace.

“I won’t be staying long. I just want to ask you one thing.”

“Of course.” She leaned across the desk and steepled her long, slender fingers.
“It was you, wasn’t it? You talked them into it, the police commissioner, Laars Klein, the mayor, I don’t know who, but you convinced them to let Ramsey fry.”

“He was becoming quite the liability for them, thanks to you. Had Mr. Tappman testified, Ramsey would have had to answer to the FBI, and who knows what names he might have mentioned. Staging the suicide was a workable plan, of course, but there were variables involved; Ramsey’s friends are the sort of men who always prefer to minimize risk, even if they were somewhat reluctant to let a woman take his seat at the table.”

“You knew he would go after Jim,” I said, unable to conceal my hatred. “You could have warned him, you still would have gotten what you wanted.”

“Please, white-collar crime is a joke. Six years later Ramsey would have gotten out, recovered the missing money, and gone after me just like he did Mr. Tappman. Three decades without parole is much more reassuring.”

“You’re as guilty as he is.”

“And here I thought you’d finally grown up.” She shook her head sadly as I turned to leave. She called after me: “Remember, Tyler, you’re the one who started the fire. I only allowed it to run its course.”

That day, after leaving Moore’s office, I took another walk around Centennial Park while I waited for Aiko to pick me up, and I found that Ramsey’s name was still there, inscribed into the pedestal of the statue of Pierre de Coubertin, into the wall the World of Coke’s atrium, into the donors’ plaque at the Aquarium, and in other places besides. I suppose I thought that after his fall from grace, someone would have sent a cleanup crew to scour the city for any mentions of him. I thought they’d buff out the
letters, take a blowtorch to them, order new donors’ plaques. But such revisions cost money, and besides, in twenty years, no one will remember enough to register the irony. Sometimes I fear that Ramsey got what he wanted. Stone lasts forever. Perhaps one day archeologists will excavate the ruins of Atlanta and sweep away the dust with little brushes to reveal the bold Latin characters. Perhaps they will write papers about him. Perhaps they will say he found Atlanta a city of bricks and left it a city of marble.

I don’t know what all I will leave behind, but let me start here, with this account. I can only pray (to posterity, my deaf god) that these same scholars will discover it and read it and have the wisdom to doubt the more durable words scratched across plaques and pediments.

My days as a 21st century aristocrat are now behind me, though I will always be a child of privilege. Perhaps I was a fool when I first began compiling this history, perhaps I am still a fool, and though I have done much reclining and much drinking, I cannot say whether or not I have made sense of a damn thing. I do prefer to believe I have carried on a venerable tradition. But even the names of Tacitus, Livy, Suetonius, and Plutarch are fading into obscurity, along with the names of their subjects, Solon, Horatius Cocles, Tiberius Gracchus, et cetera, and not only their names, but their deeds. Their lives. It never ceases to amaze, our terrible propensity to forget.
Jay Ivey graduated from Grayson High School, Loganville, Georgia, in 2006 and received his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Georgia in 2010. He served for one year as Assistant Editor and one year as Editor-in-chief at Phoebe: A Journal of Literature and Art. As a Teaching Assistant at George Mason University, he worked for one year as a Writing Center Tutor and one year as an instructor teaching English Composition and English Literature. He is a two-time recipient of George Mason’s Dan Rudy Fiction Award (2011, 2013).