Romanitas

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Extract

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EMBALMED

Marcus' parents had been embalmed for eight days, but though their eyes were closed and their injuries invisible, they did not look asleep, as they were presumably meant to. Their veins were plump with wax, and the clear light lit up a kind of translucent yellowness under the heavy make-up on their skin. The air was syrupy with incense, which successfully masked the scent of the chemicals keeping their tissues moist. Still, Marcus knew the smell was there. The grey had vanished from his father's brown hair, and his mother's lips were painted a russet shade she had never worn in life, although one could now see it suited her. They looked as peaceful as artificial fruit.

There were long black flags hanging between roofs and upper windows in all the streets, but above Leo and Clodia the light pulsed between the basilicas' marble and mirrored walls and the silvered panels on the temple of Saturn, burned in the many lenses and leapt, piercingly, to the east, from the Colosseum's glass roof. But the glaring buildings and statues seemed to be planted deep in a heavy soil of black-dressed people, weighted down, wading. From above, the buildings and the people would look like one static mat, so densely and so nearly motionlessly were the streets filled. The Sacred Way, cleared for the procession to pass, closed inexorably behind it, like a syringe filling with black ink.

The people were not all from Rome or even from Italy: everywhere, over the eight days – right at the Empire's edges – Mexica, India, Gothia, Gaetulia – they must have

been struggling for time, and the cost of travel, and beds in Rome, so that they could cut themselves free to be sucked here as on an inward tide. Here, at the very centre of it, Leo and Clodia lay now before the rostra in a kind of wide bay framed with people, and on the empty ground, in the light, the scattered rose petals still showed very white, like shells. From this bare core, held back by the Praetorians, the people brimmed outward a long way, around the Colosseum, into the other Forums, as far as the Pantheon, just to know they were close, although there was nothing to see there except longvision screens, which could have been anywhere.

From the rostra, Marcus Novius Faustus Leo looked down into the cameras. He was squinting because of the light, and he was enough of a Novian – and, therefore, enough of an actor – to hope for a guilty flutter of a second that the effect might be mistaken for blinking back tears. He was instantly disgusted with himself, and he forced himself to forget that he had thought it.

He could not dispel an uneasy awareness of how badly he was handling the speech. The oration he was reading was by one of his uncle's speechwriters, and he had scanned it over only once before. He had meant to do better, and even told himself he would learn it off by heart, but the days had gone by and he had barely been able to bring himself to touch the thing. He could see now that a touching youthful inarticulacy had been written into it. He could feel places where he should stammer, where he shouldn't be able to go on, where there ought to be a poignant tremble in his voice; but he kept reading blandly about his father's selflessness and patriotism. He was delivering it badly because he was not delivering it badly enough.

'My father loved three things more than his own life,' he said. 'My mother, myself, and above all his country.'

There was a slow swell of applause and some sobs, but Marcus simply read through them. The mourners missed some of what he said next, which was anyway only more of the same. He was becoming faintly sickened by it, not least

because his father would never have spoken so of himself or anyone else; he would have written the speech himself, and every phrase he spoke would have been perfectly weighted with calculated and irresistible sincerity. Marcus went on, almost in a monotone now, marvelling to himself at how hurt the mourners looked, and how many of the people packed below him were in tears. There could not possibly be so many real tears for his parents, he decided. They had to be crying for themselves, even if they didn't know it. Why were they all so unhappy then? There were two women straining against the cordon: a pretty girl not much older than himself resting her head on her mother's shoulder. They held limp blue flowers, and they were clutching each other and shuddering with such sharp, raw sobs he thought they could barely breathe. They bothered him somehow, and although he went on reading he kept forgetting the sense of what he was saying to look at them. He felt as if they were abusing his own lungs and eyes, as if they were weeping out any ability he might have had to cry himself.

'Poor boy, poor boy!' someone had called at him, as with his uncle and cousins he led the procession through the streets of Rome. He had provided no reason for anyone to shout that, he had been concentrating on keeping in step with his cousins, Drusus and Makaria, and his uncle. In so far as he was thinking anything, he was listening to the choir of women and boys lamenting behind him, and looking at the white petals scattered on the road in front of him, the gold leaf on his parents' bier. He was quietly amazed how much melancholy splendour had been conjured up in so little time – only eight days! Someone had been working very hard.

He had braced himself a little when he came to the section of the speech about his mother, wondering half-excitedly if here the dull, drifting feeling would evaporate at last. As it turned out he had nothing to worry about. The writer had made his mother quite lovely, but even more unrecognisable than the placid figure lying in the Nionian

silk dress in the centre of the Forum. In any case, the focus of the speech was squarely on his father. Of course, he knew it would be; his father was the most popular of the Novii, he was a war hero, and he would have been— but Marcus would not think about that yet. But he knew in a tired way that part of the reason it all seemed so unreal – all the tears and incense and flowers and music and the ridiculous archaic black togas he and his family were wearing – was that it was all for his father. And although he felt as if he had been knocked half out of consciousness, or suddenly gone deaf, he knew that sooner or later the feel of things would come back, and then it would be his mother's death that would hurt him most.

He rushed through to the end now, which was about how much his father loved and admired Titus Novius Faustus Augustus, who was Marcus' uncle and the Emperor. Then there was something to do with the gods, and that, mercifully, was it. He took the pages of the oration with him off the podium, realising too late that it would have looked better to have left them there. He slid into place beside Drusus, who wordlessly pulled the speech out of Marcus' hands – just the faintest contraction of disapproval on his forehead. It was not a moment for a member of the Imperial family to be clutching bits of paper. When Marcus looked again the speech had vanished. His cousin must have passed it silently backwards into the hands of a slave. He had done it as deftly as a conjuror. In any case, Marcus never saw it again.

The Emperor was heading for the podium steps. He was a tall, ponderous man of sixty-one with soft heavy hair and handsome features blurred by fat. As he passed his nephews, he patted Marcus kindly on the shoulder, and then touched Drusus' arm and whispered a word in his ear. A spasm of exasperation twisted Drusus' face.

'What is it?' whispered Marcus, barely moving his lips, as Faustus began his own speech with a promise to love Marcus like a son. Marcus found the words 'I want to go home, I want to go home' were repeating wretchedly in his

head. He looked at Drusus. He didn't know him well or like him much, but of all the Novii, his cousin was the closest to him in age, and it was strange to see the length and breadth of his own face there beside him, a straightness and symmetry, except for the deep curve over the eyelids, the slight crookedness at the mouth which they all seemed to have on one side or the other. But Drusus' hair was hazel and his eyes green, and Marcus' colouring was his mother's.

'My father,' answered Drusus in the same way, and 'Don't look, don't draw attention,' as Marcus turned curiously to see what Uncle Lucius was doing. But almost as he said it, someone pushed between them and ran right up to Leo and Clodia's bier. Faustus stopped reading and looked unhappy and uncertain for a moment. He said 'Lucius . . .' almost imploringly, but then, after glancing a furtive command or plea at the attendants on either side of the rostra, he gave up, or decided to wait, composing his face and looking outward with grave authority, as if this was a pause he'd chosen to make.

Leaning over the bier, Uncle Lucius was gnawing at his drooping lips and wringing his hands – something Marcus had never seen anyone do before. He was as tall as Faustus but somehow he didn't look it – he looked shrunken and crouching and pitiful. His white hair stood up in tufts, as though he'd cut it himself. He laid a hand on Marcus' father's calm face and said 'Leo!' once, in an awful splintered old voice.

'Come on,' said Drusus. 'It'll look better if we do it.' Marcus didn't know how to say he didn't want to get any closer either to Uncle Lucius or to the bodies of his parents, and already Drusus was leading him forward into the centre of the forum. He heard a kind of soft sighing from the crowd – and knew that it meant encouragement and approval.

He felt that the quiet of half the world had fallen respectfully still around this space, and, although he had not felt so on the podium, he was horribly conscious of being looked at, not only by the hundreds packed into the forum

of course, but by invisible millions; the funeral was the only thing showing on longvision.

Drusus slid an arm round his father's shoulders and said, 'Come on, Dad', as gently as he could, although there was a sawing note of resentment in his voice. 'Yes, come on, Uncle Lucius,' agreed Marcus miserably. Lucius would not even look at Drusus directly. Marcus tried to concentrate on the unusual sympathy and admiration he found himself feeling for his cousin, half-shutting his eyes so he wouldn't have to look at a strand of his mother's fair hair blowing unchecked across her mouth.

Lucius' weak green eyes were wavering and scared. If he didn't recognise Marcus it wasn't surprising; Marcus had seen him perhaps three times before in all his life.

Of course, neither Faustus' oration nor his own had mentioned Lucius, although this was the first time in years he'd been allowed out in public. He was supposed to be having a good spell, and Marcus' father was his brother, after all, just as much as Faustus was.

'No,' said Uncle Lucius. 'Leo!'

Drusus nodded at Marcus and reluctantly he took hold of his uncle's arm, and they tried to chivvy him away from the bier. Oh, I wish I were at home, thought Marcus, tugging at a fold of his uncle's sleeve. Then Drusus must have pushed Lucius too hard, for he stumbled sideways, and leant heavily and unexpectedly against Marcus. Marcus staggered, uselessly put out a hand. He felt thin and futile with obscure shame. He was going to fall over like a little boy, there in front of everybody.

Then, to his amazement, Uncle Lucius' hand closed around his wrist and hauled him upright, so that for a moment after all the loose, weak-eyed face was turned to his, staring at him, the features, under the tremulous lines and the wavering expression, painfully more like his father's face than Drusus' was like his own, the blood of course being that much closer.

Marcus could clearly remember a time before he had known about Uncle Lucius, before having to think about

it. He could remember Leo explaining, but he was less sure of why and how it had begun – had he seen Uncle Lucius chewing his lip and refusing to look at people, and asked his father, 'What's wrong with him?' No, he did not have that impression. It had been deliberate, his father had decided to tell him for his own reasons, without prompting and without warning.

First of all, Tertius Novius Faustus Leo told his son about the wars that slowly prised the southern half of Africa out of Rome's hold, especially about the first and bloodiest phase. He said there was a besieged town, near the Congo. There was a Roman battalion sent to relieve it. This was more than two hundred years ago, and the family went into the Senate then, or into the army. They were not Emperors. One of them was there, in Africa, a general; Somebody Novius Something.

So it began as a story, and Marcus thought he could remember listening with interest but also with politely masked strain, even suspecting, already, that his father had some ulterior motive, that the story might be some sort of trap. Perhaps he thought it was going to turn suddenly into a test of history or geography. When Leo mentioned the Congo, Marcus nodded wisely, fumbling through his memory in silent agony to be sure he knew where that was. Had his father really forgotten the full name of this ancestor, or would he be asked to supply it? Was he supposed to work out why they'd lost southern Africa, how they could have kept it? He was eight. He felt ashamed that they hadn't got to this war at school yet.

Anyway, said Leo, the African mutineers had the Roman troops and a pack of civilians holed up in the town, starving and dying of one disease and another. Partly because he really cared for his men, and partly deliberately, to make them love him so that he could get more from them, this Novian had always lived as much like them as possible, eating the same food, taking more than the same risks. And all the time, except during the most acute moments of battle, he was as aware of Rome as if the Senate and the

court and his family were ranked around him in a weightless auditorium, in which, at the centre, he was brave almost without remembering that he could really die. It didn't matter; the soldiers did love him, because, as well as everything else, he knew what he was doing. They believed him when he told them they would break the siege quickly, and they did.

Then he crucified as many of the mutineers as were still alive. He was only doing what anyone else would have done. Perhaps he could have spared some of the younger rebels, but Rome had been badly shocked by the siege and Novius knew he had to set an example. So he set rows of crucifixes on the banks of the Congo. Nailed to one of them – this was back when they still used hammers and nails – was a boy of twelve. If Novius thought about this, he might have told himself that the boy had been old enough to kill Roman citizens, or to help kill Roman citizens, or at least to be present when Romans were killed. Or, if someone had forced him really to imagine and understand it, he might have wept for pity and shame. He wasn't a bad man. Or at least, he didn't feel like a bad man to himself. He was kind to his own children. Most likely he didn't think about it at all.

Leo had said this all quite slowly and simply. Often he would stop, almost at the end of every sentence, and look at Marcus, to be sure he had understood it, but not merely checking, trying to push the words further.

That night, though he was exhausted, Novius couldn't sleep in the town he'd saved, but not because he was thinking about the boy – who was still alive, perhaps, dangling from his twisted arms out there in the dark – but because he was grieving for the soldiers he'd lost, because he was homesick for Italy, because he could never get used to the African heat. He had a morbid terror of tropical illnesses, so although a mosquito net was draped over his bed, he couldn't believe it would protect him. The slightest fluting of an insect went through his head like a shriek, and each time that happened he'd have to begin the terrible work of trying to get to sleep all over again.

(Marcus knew his father must be making some of this up – he couldn't know about the mosquitoes and not remember this Novian's name.)

The sound Novius heard next was far worse than the insects. At first it was easy to believe the sound was only in his aching brain. Soon, though, he had to admit to himself the footsteps he could just hear, were really moving slowly across the wooden floor. It should have been impossible for anyone to get into his room, and he had not heard the door open. He should have been able to reach out for the pistol in the drawer of the table by his bed, but he couldn't move. It was not that he was paralysed with terror – although he was more afraid than he could understand – he truly was physically powerless to make the least movement. Then suddenly there was silence again, except for the spiralling moan of the mosquitoes, and the silence went on so long that Novius might have dared to hope the footsteps had been a dream after all, except for the fact that he still couldn't stir.

Then there was a whisking sound that seemed to scrape the very breath out of him – and the mosquito net collapsed around him like the end of the world. The wooden hoop that had supported it crashed onto his chest. He lay there, the hoop framing his head and shoulders, his terrified breath sucking the white fabric in and out, and he felt the bed shift and the net tighten as someone lay down beside him.

Through the milkiness of the net he could just make out a woman's silhouette. And his heart clamoured with horror, because although he could not see her features, and although she had not yet spoken, he could feel somehow that she hated him with more force and intent than he had known was possible, and still he could not move.

She was the boy's mother.

He waited for a knife to puncture his chest or to race across his throat, but instead she took his head in her hands, and it seemed that heat struck out from the ten

points of her fingers, and swelled through his skull. And he heard a low, susurrating hiss as she began to whisper softly and steadily in his ear. At first he thought he understood the words, and then that he didn't, and then he could no longer hear her because his head was flooding and bubbling with heat, and his pulse roared in his ears like the sea. And he forgot all about her as the bed began to tip and wheel and he was past understanding anything.

In the morning Novius' slaves found him still lying under the net, which was now heavy and transparent with his sweat, his body juddering and trembling underneath it. The woman they found on the floor. She had stabbed herself.

After a day or two, his temperature went down and he explained what he could; he said a witch had put a curse on him in the night. He felt better, and he even laughed weakly about what had happened. But then the heat surged through him again, and his skin went yellow and he began to vomit blood. His doctors were sure he would die. Then suddenly the fever broke again, and this time his body recovered quickly. The jaundice faded from his skin and the hollow shadows between his ribs softened and disappeared. But he dribbled and cried like a child for no reason anyone could understand. Sometimes he attacked his attendants and sometimes he shouted obscenities and exposed himself. The illness had inflamed his brain and damaged it forever, they said. They sent him home to his wife, who looked after him for the rest of her life, poor thing, because every now and then he would get a little better and seem to recognise her.

No one would remember this (said Leo), but then fifteen years later one of his sons fell ill, and when he recovered he was just the same as his father. Even that might have been a terrible coincidence, but nearly thirty years after that, the daughter of the other son went mad, too. Sometimes it seems to lie quiet for a generation or even longer. But it has always come back. Until he was thirty-five, your Uncle Lucius was all right – a shy man, perhaps, he used to say

he'd been born into the wrong family. But there was nothing wrong with him. He had a wife and your cousin Drusus, who was just a baby back then. But seven years before you were born, he started to say odd things under his breath, and to look at the ground or the sky when people spoke to him. When one day he began to be ill, he locked himself up in his bedroom and for two days and nights his slaves and his family heard him chattering and laughing and screaming to himself. When at last they broke down the door they found he was as he is now. It all happened just as it has for the last two hundred years.

The crucifixion of the boy and the suicide of his mother were horrible and frightening in a way Marcus could not understand at first, for, of course, he had heard of such things before. Slowly he realised that he was frightened simply because his father had intended him to be. He had not meant Marcus to be merely pleasurably chilled, he had wanted the story to grow indelibly into him, so that no amount of comforting could get it out again, and this was what happened. And over the next few nights, which Marcus had stopped sleeping through, Marcus decided his father had wanted him to feel not only frightened but guilty, and not only guilty but angry. But he didn't see what he had done for his father to want him to feel like that. But the other part of the story was worse, because it wasn't finished and it was to do with him. Soon Marcus began to turn his every thought over and over, looking for anything abnormal or misshapen. He started to force himself to stay awake at nights because he was afraid of his dreams. Dreams seemed real and weren't, and Marcus could see that they were pretty close to madness.

He still remembered the fight his parents had over this: his mother Clodia suddenly tipping a heap of papers onto the floor and shouting, 'You want everyone around you to be miserable.'

'I want him always to remember it,' his father had said. 'In any case, he had to know about Lucius at some point.'

'In that way? At this age?'

'It's a warning. It is a metaphor for Rome,' said Leo, with a grave, noble note in his voice.

'Don't you *attempt* to patronise me. You know I think the same as you. I don't know why you have to force it on a little boy, that's all.'

'If you understood what I'm trying to do, you'd see why.'

'I do understand it, and I can see that you're trying to be self-righteous and sadistic. You always are.'

Later Clodia had come to Marcus and hugged him so that he could feel her body was rigid with anger. She said, 'Your Uncle Lucius is the first case of whatever-it-is anyone can remember. And you're just as much my son as your father's, and there's no curse on my family.'

Marcus let himself sleep again, but he knew, really, that this was no reassurance. He never quite lost the habit of watching his own thoughts and wondering how he would tell if there was anything wrong with them. It was an induction; in the following years he realised gradually that everyone else in the family did the same thing, that his uncle and grandfather and all of them must have clung desperately to their power, in spite of it. And that they all watched each other, too. To accuse someone, to hiss, 'It's you. It's already happening to you. You will be next.' Sometimes it hovered between them, unspeakable and tempting. His mother, not bound by the family contract, must surely have said it to his father at some point.

Now he was sixteen, and his parents' car had ripped free of a road in the Gallic Alps, leaped like a fish and then slithered down sideways onto the rocks. But it wasn't true that he would never see them again. After Faustus' speech, they would be carried to the tomb of the Novii and lie there in state and under glass. He could go and see them whenever he liked.

Even when they got Uncle Lucius back to the ranks of the family, he wouldn't let go of Marcus' wrist, and evidently he did know him after all:

'Do you want to be Emperor now?' he said, or sobbed in his thin ruined voice.

Tears stirred finally in Marcus' own eyes, and, as Faustus began to speak again, they would not stop coming.