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# **The Confessions of Young Nero**

Written by Margaret George

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THE  
CONFESSIONS  
OF  
YOUNG NERO

ALSO BY MARGARET GEORGE

*Elizabeth I*


*Helen of Troy*

*Mary, Called Magdalene*

*The Memoirs of Cleopatra*

*Mary Queen of Scotland and the Isles*

*The Autobiography of Henry VIII*



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CONFESSIONS  
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MARGARET  
GEORGE



MACMILLAN



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*To my granddaughter*

*Lydia Margaret*

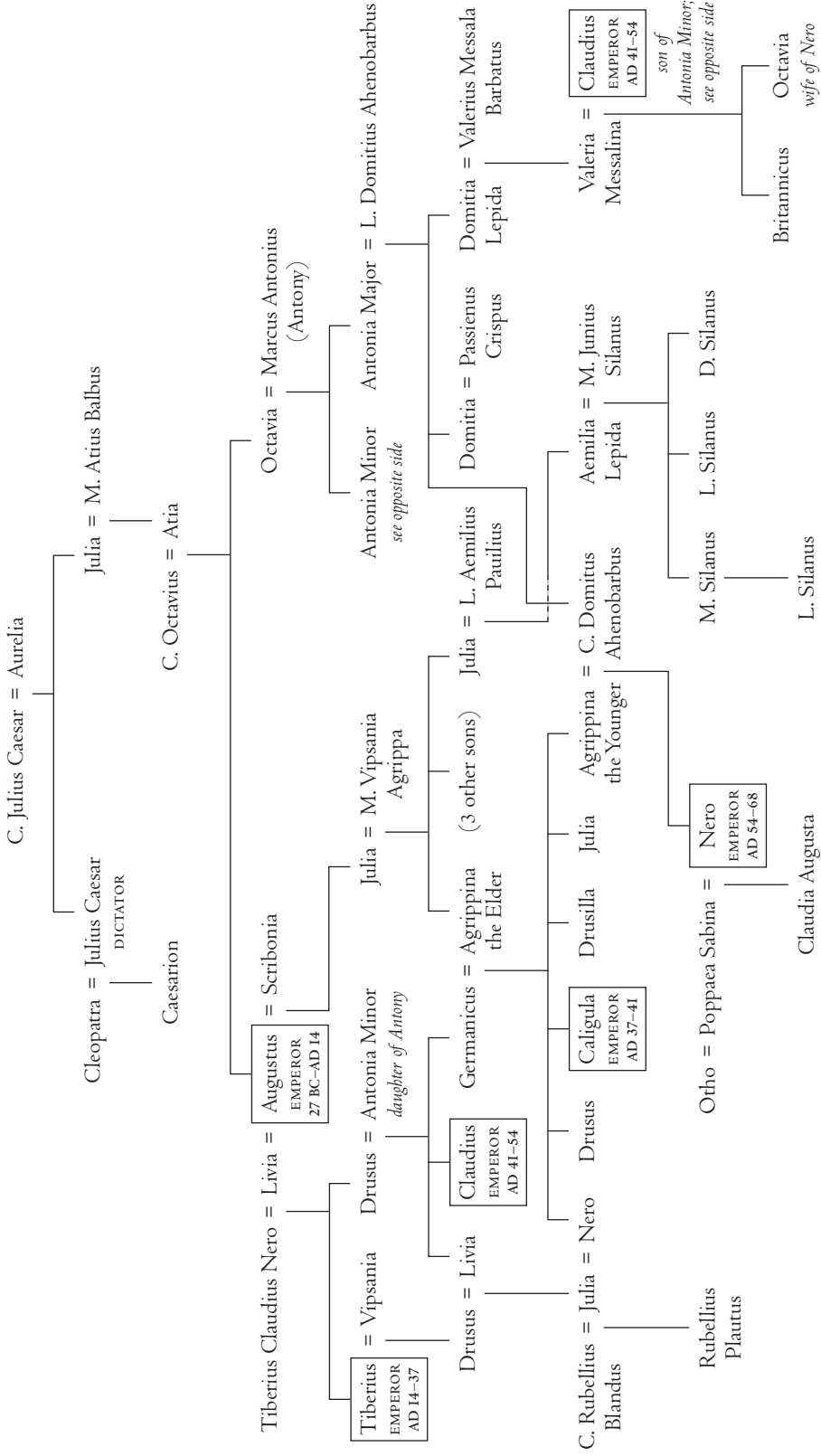
*who is (I like to believe) descended from the great warrior queen Boudicca*

## MY THANKS

To Bob Feibel, who many years ago made a suggestion: “Have you thought about the emperor Nero?” and to classics professors Barry B. Powell and William Aylward at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, who translate, advise, and help me keep company with Nero.

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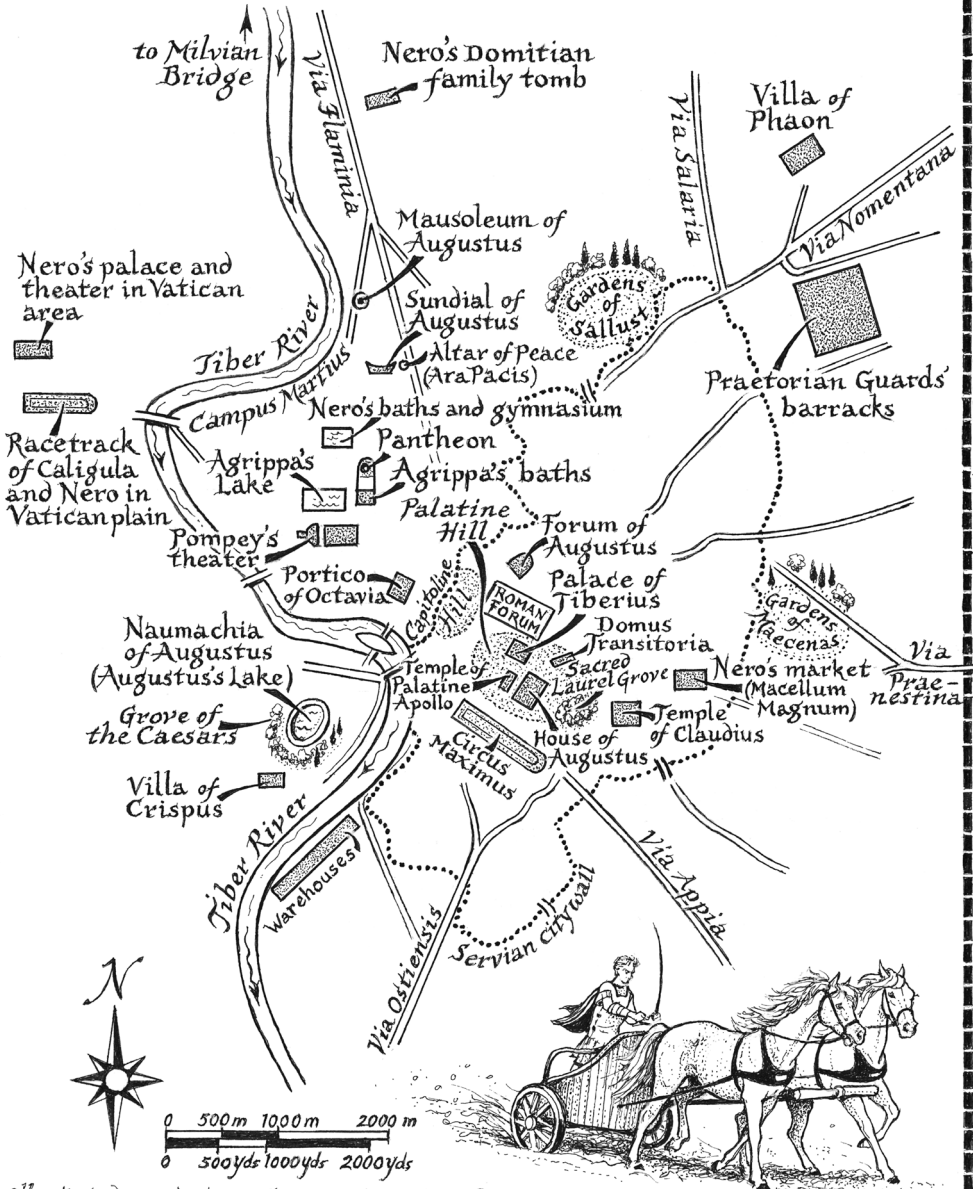
# THE GENEALOGY OF THE IMPERIAL HOUSE





# NERO'S ROME

Prior to the Great Fire, in AD 64



Illustrated map by Laura Hartman Maestro © 2016

# GREATER ROMAN AREA



The Alps

River Po

Venetia



0 25 50 75 100  
Scale of miles

Corsica

Sardinia

Rome

ostia

Tibur

Sublaqueum

Velitrae

Antium

Naples

Vesuvius

Pompeii

Villa of Poppaea

Pandateria

Naples

Vesuvius

Brundisium

Tarentum

Tyrrhenian Sea



Cumae

Lake Lucrine

Phlegraean Fields

Baiae

Cape of Misenum

Gulf of Naples

Capri

Mediterranean Sea

Sicily

Ionian Sea

Illustrated map by Laura Hartman Maestro ©2016



## I



# LOCUSTA

This is not the first time I have been imprisoned. So I am hopeful that this is a sham and that the new emperor, Galba, will soon need my unique services and quietly send for me and once again I shall be treading the palace halls. I feel at home there, and why shouldn't I? I have provided my timely services for those in power for many years.

By trade I am a poisoner. There, why not say it? And not any old poisoner, but the acknowledged expert and leader in my profession. So many others want to be another Locusta, another me. So I founded an academy to pass on my knowledge and train the next generation, for Rome will always be in need of poisoners. I should lament that, should say what a pity that Rome must descend to that, but that would be hypocritical of me. Besides, I am not convinced that poison is not the best way to die. Think of all the other ways a person may die at the hands of Rome: being torn by beasts in the arena, being strangled in the Tullianum prison, and, most insipid of all, being ordered to open your veins and bleed yourself to death, like a sacrificial animal. Bah. Give me a good poison anytime. Did not Cleopatra embrace the asp and its poison, leaving her beautiful and stretched out upon her couch?

I first met the late emperor Nero when he was still a child, still Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, the name he was born with. I saw him at the low point in his life, when he was an abandoned child at the mercy

of his uncle Caligula. (Now, that was someone who gave me a lively string of business!) His father was dead, his mother, Agrippina, had been banished when he was not even three years old, and his uncle liked to toy with him.

I remember he was a likable child—well, he remained likable all his life; it was a gift—but timorous. Many things frightened him, especially loud noises and being sent for unexpectedly. Caligula had a habit of that—sending for people in the middle of the night. He once forced me to watch a nocturnal theatrical performance in the palace, featuring himself as Jupiter. Sometimes it was harmless, like the playacting; other times it ended with the death of the helpless person he had sent for. So, Nero—let us call him that to avoid confusion, just as I call Caligula Caligula rather than Gaius Caesar Germanicus—was precocious in recognizing the danger of the serpent in his uncle.

Ah, such memories! Here in my cell I find myself returning to them, helping the hours to pass, until that moment when Galba sends for me with a task. I know he will!



## II



# NERO

The moon was round and full. It shone on the flat surface of the lake, which was also round, making it appear that the moon itself had expanded and enlarged itself there. It rose golden from the encircling hills but soon was a bright white ball high above.

It illuminated the wide deck of the ship. I was to sit beside my uncle and listen to him intoning praise to the goddess Diana, whose sanctuary was on the shore of the lake and to whom the lake itself was sacred.

I remember the flame of the torches that threw a flickering red light on the faces around me, in contrast to the clear bluish-white moonlight bathing the wider scene. My uncle's face looked not like a human's but like a demon's, with a burning hue.

These are all impressions, memories that swirl without being attached to anything. The reflection on the water—the torches—the thin, reedy voice of my uncle—the nervous laughter around me—the chill in the air—

I was only three years old, so it is no wonder my memories are disconnected.

Then his face shoved up into mine, his silky voice saying, "What shall I do with the bitch's whelp?"

More nervous laughter. His rough hands grabbed my shoulders and hauled me up, my legs dangling helplessly.

“I shall sacrifice him to the goddess!” He strode over to the rail and held me over the rippling water. I can still see the undulation of the reflected moonlight, waiting for me. “She wants a human sacrifice, and what more worthy than this kin of mine, descendant of the divine Augustus? Only the best for Diana, and perhaps a propitiation for the lapse of Augustus, who preferred to worship her brother Apollo. There you go!”

And I was flung out over the water, landing with a splash, cold, cold, and I sank, unable to swim or even cry out. Then strong hands grasped me, pulled me mercifully out of the water, and I could breathe. I was hauled onto the deck, where my uncle stood, hands on hips, laughing.

“Better luck next time, eh, Chaerea? You are too softhearted, to rescue such flotsam. Anything born of my sister can come to no good.”



### III



As I sat shivering next to Chaerea I could see down the whole length of the huge boat, see the light dancing on the mosaic-covered deck, the moonlight shining on the white marble cabin. The madman who had thrown me in the water now paced up and down, laughing. Not until I was older did I hear such a laugh again, and it was from a captive hyena, whining and mewling in its cage.

Let me off, let me off, let me off this boat, I prayed, to what god I knew not, just whatever god was listening.

“Come, lad,” said Chaerea, putting his huge arm around my shoulders. “You should walk, warm up.” He pulled me up and marched me up and down the deck, until feeling returned to my numb feet. We passed the rowers, whose heads turned as if on stalks to see us as we passed. One or two smiled. The others looked like the statues that were placed here and there on the deck.

“The shore is close,” said Chaerea, holding me up and pointing to it. “Soon we will be back on it.”

How I got back and when I got back I do not know. I have told you, my memories are wispy from this early age and do not join together to make a whole; rather, they are like pieces of cloud drifting

through the sky of my mind, each portion separate and contained. But the horrible memory of the boat ride is burned into my mind.

My little bed in my aunt's home, where I lived, was narrow and hard; I can feel the rough linen when I think about it, but cannot see what else is in the room. I know the place was in the country because I heard roosters crow in the morning and I remember gathering eggs, still warm, from a bed of straw. I also remember many kinds of butterflies, and flowers on tall stalks, although I know now those were weeds.

I called my aunt Butterfly because one of her names was Lepida, which means elegant and graceful, and she was very pretty. Her hair was the reddish color of copper with a bit of dust on it, not the bright shiny copper that has just been polished. She was my father's younger sister and told me stories about him—he who had died before I could know him—and about their ancestors. When I told her how the sun made her hair glow, she laughed and said, "Bronze hair is in our family. I can see little glints of it in yours, too, even though it's mainly blond. Shall I tell you the story about how it came to be that color?"

"Oh, yes!" I settled in next to her, hoping it would be a long story.

"Well, long ago one of our ancestors saw two tall and handsome young men standing in the road."

"Were they gods?" I guessed. Whenever tall strangers appeared out of nowhere, they were gods.

"Indeed they were—the twin gods Castor and Pollux. They told our ancestor that the Romans had won a great battle, and to go to Rome and tell everyone. To prove that they were gods and telling the truth, they reached out and touched his beard, and it turned instantly from black to red. So from then on the family was called Ahenobarbus—Bronze Beard."

"Did my father have a red beard?" I wanted to know more about him. I wanted to hear that he was a hero and famous and that his death had been tragic. I later found out he was none of the above.

"Oh, yes. He was a true Ahenobarbus. Another unusual thing about



our family is that all the men have only two personal names—Lucius and Gnaeus. Your father was a Gnaeus and you are a Lucius. Your grandfather, also a Lucius, was a consul but also a chariot racer. A famous one, too.”

I had little ivory play chariots, and I loved racing them against one another on the floor. “When can I drive a chariot?”

Aunt Butterfly cocked her head, smiling. “Not for a while yet. You have to be very strong to race chariots. The horses pull the reins from your hands unless you hold very tight, and the chariot bounces and you have to be careful not to fall out, which is very dangerous.”

“Maybe I could have a little chariot, pulled by ponies?”

“Perhaps,” she said. “But you are still too young even for that.”

I do remember this conversation about the chariots and the red beards. But why I was living with Aunt Butterfly, and what had happened to my mother and father, I still did not know. I knew my father was dead, but I did not know about my mother. All I knew was that she was not there.

Aunt gave me two teachers. One was named Paris and he was an actor and a dancer. The other was named Castor and he was a barber. He shaved the beard of Aunt’s husband (who did not have a bronze beard but a regular brown one) and sewed up cuts and did other handy things. Paris was only for fun. I could not see that he did anything but act and pretend to be someone else. First he would tell a story—usually it was about a Greek, because they seemed to have the best stories—and then he would pretend to be those people. In real life, he was dark and not very tall. But when he played Apollo, I swear he grew tall before my eyes and his hair lightened.

“No, little one,” he would say, laughing. “That is only your imagination. It is the actor’s job to make you see and hear things inside your own head.”

“Does an actor do magic?”

He glanced around; a frightened look flitted over his eyes. “Of course not! The magic happens only in your own thoughts.”

It was not long before I learned that practicing magic was forbidden, and that there was just such practice going on in that household.

In some ways it was odd to be the only child in the household. I did not have anyone to play with except Paris—who was childlike in many ways but still an adult—and the children who were slaves. Aunt did not like my playing with them but she could not be watching all the time, and what did she expect me to do? Let me say it: I was lonely. Lonely as in alone, as in solitary, as in set apart. Aunt kept stressing that being set apart was a special thing, a glorious thing, but it only felt like a punishment to me. So I found freedom in playing with the slave children my own age, and freedom in acting out the parts Paris taught me. Sometimes I was a god; sometimes I was a girl (I would be Persephone to his Hades—and we always used the proper Greek names, not the Roman ones of Proserpine and Pluto); sometimes I was an adult. On the stage—in actuality just the courtyard—I could be anyone. In real life, as Aunt kept reminding me, I was the descendant of the divine Augustus and must remember this at all times. But, as Paris informed me, I was also the descendant of his adversary Marc Antony, and Marc Antony was a lot more fun than the stolid and dull divine Augustus.

“Antony went to the east, to the lands that speak Greek, and to Egypt, and reveled in music, flowers, wine, and the Mysteries of Dionysus. He commanded a great fleet of ships and had a wife named Cleopatra, queen of Egypt. He—”

“Ruined himself, and disgraced himself as a Roman,” cut in a sharp voice. We turned to see Aunt’s husband, Silanus, standing in the doorway. It was doubly frightening because he was rarely at home. He stepped over to me, bent down, and looked me in the eyes. “Let Paris tell you

the whole story, then. Go on, Paris!” He jerked his head up toward the trembling tutor.

“Uhh . . . he fought a great sea battle against Augustus, at Actium, and he lost.”

“More than that, he fled back to Egypt, rather than falling on his sword as any self-respecting Roman general should do,” finished Silanus. “Before he had defected to the east, he had married Augustus’s sister. He left two fine daughters behind, Antonia the Elder and Antonia the Younger. You are descended from both of them. Never forget you are the heir of the *Roman* Marc Antony, not the debauched and debased Greek one.”

He was so fierce about it I nodded just to get him to look away. Finally he did, standing up and telling Paris to get back to his regular lessons with me, and none of that Greek nonsense.

After he was safely gone, I said, “But what happened to Marc Antony back in Egypt?”

“Augustus pursued him there and he died. He is buried in Egypt, not in Rome. Now, Egypt is a very interesting place—there are ancient ruins and huge pyramids—many tombs—and all in all, not a bad place to lie for eternity.” He whispered to me, “Antony had other children in Egypt; Augustus brought them back here and raised them as Romans.”

“Did it work? Were they good Romans?”

“As far as anyone could tell. The girl grew up to be queen of Mauretania, and her son came to Rome later. He would have been your cousin.”

“What happened to him?”

“Caligula had him executed—because he dared to wear royal purple in the emperor’s presence. Now do you see how lucky you were that he only threw you overboard? And that he let someone rescue you? And only laughed about it?”

Aunt Lepida fetched me from my room one blustery day, beaming and carrying a child in her arms. She put the little creature down, where it teetered and took halting little steps, burbling and speaking nonsense.

“Someone for you to play with!” she announced. As if I could play with this baby, who could barely walk and could not talk. “My granddaughter Octavia!”

So this was what she preferred for me rather than the slave children? What was I supposed to do with her? I bent down to look closely at her, and she reached out and pulled my hair. Then she started crying. An unpleasant little bundle she was. Then I saw another woman behind Aunt, peering over her shoulder.

“Is this your little cousin?” she asked the baby, as though she actually expected it to respond. When it didn’t, she addressed me. “Why, little Lucius, I do believe you have the family wavy hair! Very desirable! As do I,” she said, fluffing up her curls. “We are first cousins, you know—very close!” She bent over and kissed my cheek. The deep fragrance of crushed iris wafted from her. Her voice was low and warm. “I am Octavia’s mother. I hope you will grow fond of one another.”

Aunt Lepida looked on possessively. “My daughter, Messalina. Although she is married and a mother, there are only seventeen years between you.”

“I envy you, out here in the country,” Messalina said, with her syrupy-slow voice. “I miss it.”

“She lives in Rome with her husband, Claudius—the brother of your illustrious grandfather Germanicus.”

“He must be very old, then,” I blurted out.

Messalina laughed, and her laugh was as enchanting as her voice. “If you meet him, you must never say so!” Even as young as I was, it did not escape me that she didn’t argue the fact.

“Well, so we have visitors—family visitors?” said Silanus, striding into the room.

“Yes, family visitors,” purred Messalina.

“Family visitors are the best kind,” Silanus said. Why did they keep repeating “family”? And why did the proper and self-disciplined consul seem flustered? “It has been a while—too long—since you have visited us. But it is hard to extricate oneself from Rome. I understand.”

“Not so hard if one truly wants to.” She moved closer to him. Only I saw it, because her feet were right beside mine. It was only a minute move.

“I am sure that Claudius appreciates having you nearby,” said Silanus, moving almost imperceptibly back. Why were these adults scuttling about like crabs, albeit slow-moving ones?

Octavia let out a wail and a slave came to pick her up.

“Let us share some heated wine,” said Silanus. “These days we crave warmth.”

They retired to another room, and left me to myself.

It was hard to keep the family—to use Silanus’s seemingly favorite word—straight. There was so much intermarrying that everyone seemed related to everyone else. One of my favorite rooms housed a number of busts of ancestors and I liked to study them, so I could link a face with a name. Since they were all dead, I would never meet them, but at the same time they seemed as alive as anyone else, since they popped up in conversation all the time. “The great Germanicus”—“Antonia the Elder”—“Marc Antony”—“Octavia the Younger”—you would have thought they lived down the road.

In the hushed shadows of that room, which seemed seasonless to me—the marble floor was always warm in winter, and slippery-cool in summer, but the air was always the same—the busts presided over that little kingdom. They were all of white marble, except the one of Marc Antony, which was a dark purply-red porphyry. He had a lot of tousled curly hair and a thick neck and I imagined the rest of his body to be stocky. He looked different enough, in his dishevelment, that I would never mistake him for anyone else. His daughter Antonia the Elder was on a nearby stand. He had never seen her as an adult; the last time he had seen her she was a baby like Octavia. The busts were immobile, forever apart.

I studied her face carefully. I wish I could say that my grandmother had been beautiful, but she was plain and forgettable. It would be hard

to remember her no matter how many times you met her. They say her younger sister, my great-grandmother on the other side, was much prettier. She died just around the time I was born. Perhaps someday I would see a bust of her and I could compare them.

The family god, Germanicus, had a larger bust set apart from the others. He was handsome and youthful, and youthful he would remain in our stories, dying while he was governing far from Rome. Like all people who die before they have fulfilled their promise, high achievement was bestowed upon him as if he had actually earned it. I heard people lamenting the death of the noble Germanicus and bemoaning that he was cheated of his destiny to become a great emperor. But who knows, really, what sort of emperor he would have been? Promises turn sour and watched buds do not always open to reveal a lovely flower. Death saved him from being found out.

There were many others, going further back—several Luciiuses and Gnaeuses of the Ahenobarbus tribe, and their wives who had left little imprint on their descendants. As they seemed to belong to the very misty past, I did not trouble myself to study them.