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I

Two days before the inauguration of Marcus Tullius Cicero as consul of Rome, the body of a child was pulled from the River Tiber, close to the boat sheds of the republican war fleet.

Such a discovery, though tragic, would not normally have warranted the attention of a consul-elect. But there was something so grotesque about this particular corpse, and so threatening to civic peace, that the magistrate responsible for keeping order in the city, C. Octavius, sent word to Cicero asking him to come at once.

Cicero at first was reluctant to go, pleading pressure of work. As the consular candidate who had topped the poll, it fell to him, rather than his colleague, to preside over the opening session of the senate, and he was writing his inaugural address. But I knew there was more to it than that. He had an unusual squeamishness about death. Even the killing of animals in the games disturbed him, and this weakness – for alas in politics a soft heart is always perceived as a weakness – had started to be noticed. His immediate instinct was to send me in his place.

‘Of course I shall go,’ I replied carefully. ‘But . . .’ I let my sentence trail away.

‘But?’ he said sharply. ‘But what? You think it will look bad?’

I held my tongue and continued transcribing his speech. The silence lengthened.

‘Oh, very well,’ he groaned at last. He heaved himself to his feet. ‘Octavius is a dull dog, but steady enough. He wouldn’t summon me unless it was important. In any case I need to clear my head.’

It was late December and from a dark grey sky blew a wind that was quick enough and sharp enough to steal your breath. Outside in the street a dozen petitioners were huddled, hoping for a word, and as soon as they saw the consul-elect stepping through his front door they ran across the road towards him. ‘Not now,’ I said, pushing them back. ‘Not today.’ Cicero threw the edge of his cloak over his shoulder, tucked his chin down on to his chest and set off briskly down the hill.

We must have walked about a mile, I suppose, crossing the forum at an angle and leaving the city by the river gate. The waters of the Tiber were fast and high, flexed by yellowish-brown whirlpools and writhing currents. Up ahead, opposite Tiber Island, amid the wharfs and cranes of the *Navalia*, we could see a large crowd milling around. (You will get a sense of how long ago all this happened by the way – more than half a century – when I tell you that the Island was not yet linked by its bridges to either bank.) As we drew closer, many of the onlookers recognised Cicero, and there was a stir of curiosity as they parted to let us through. A cordon of legionaries from the marine barracks was protecting the scene. Octavius was waiting.

‘My apologies for disturbing you,’ said Octavius, shaking my master’s hand. ‘I know how busy you must be, so close to your inauguration.’

‘My dear Octavius, it is a pleasure to see you at any time. You know my secretary, Tiro?’

Octavius glanced at me without interest. Although he is remembered today only as the father of Augustus, he was at this time aedile of the plebs and very much the coming man. He would probably have made consul himself had he not died prematurely of a fever some four years after this encounter. He led us out of the wind and into one of the great military boat-houses, where the skeleton of a liburnian, stripped for repair, sat on huge wooden rollers. Next to it on the earth floor an object lay shrouded in sailcloth. Without pausing for ceremony, Octavius threw aside the material to show us the naked body of a boy.

He was about twelve, as I remember. His face was beautiful and serene, quite feminine in its delicacy, with traces of gold paint glinting on the nose and cheeks, and with a bit of red ribbon tied in his damp brown curls. His throat had been cut. His body had been slashed open all the way down to the groin and emptied of its organs. There was no blood, only that dark, elongated cavity, like a gutted fish, filled with river mud. How Cicero managed to contemplate the sight and maintain his composure, I do not know, but he swallowed hard and kept on looking. Eventually he said hoarsely, 'This is an outrage.'

'And that's not all,' said Octavius. He squatted on his haunches, took hold of the lad's skull between his hands and turned it to the left. As the head moved, the gaping wound in the neck opened and closed obscenely, as if it were a second mouth trying to whisper a warning to us. Octavius seemed entirely indifferent to this, but then of course he was a military man and no doubt used to such sights. He pulled back the hair to reveal a deep indentation just above the boy's right ear, and pressed his thumb into it. 'Do you see? It looks as if he was felled from behind. I'd say by a hammer.'

‘His face painted. His hair beribboned. Felled from behind by a hammer,’ repeated Cicero, his words slowing as he realised where his logic was leading him. ‘Then his throat cut. And finally his body . . . eviscerated.’

‘Exactly,’ said Octavius. ‘His killers must have wanted to inspect his entrails. He was a sacrifice – a human sacrifice.’

At those words, in that cold, dim place, the hairs on the nape of my neck stirred and spiked, and I knew myself to be in the presence of Evil – Evil as a palpable force, as potent as lightning.

Cicero said, ‘Are there any cults in the city you have heard of that might practise such an abomination?’

‘None. There are always the Gauls, of course – they are said to do such things. But there aren’t many of them in town at the moment, and those that are here are well behaved.’

‘And who is the victim? Has anyone claimed him?’

‘That’s another reason I wanted you to come and see for yourself.’ Octavius rolled the body over on to its stomach. ‘There’s a small owner’s tattoo just above his backside, do you see? Those who dumped the body may have missed it. “C.Ant.M.f.C.n.” Caius Antonius, son of Marcus, grandson of Caius. There’s a famous family for you! He was a slave of your consular colleague, Antonius Hybrida.’ He stood and wiped his hands on the sailcloth, then casually threw the cover back over the body. ‘What do you want to do?’

Cicero was staring at the pathetic bundle on the floor as if mesmerised. ‘Who knows about this?’

‘Nobody.’

‘Hybrida?’

‘No.’

‘What about the crowd outside?’

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‘There’s a rumour going round that there’s been some kind of ritual killing. You above all know what crowds are like. They’re saying it’s a bad omen on the eve of your consulship.’

‘They may be right.’

‘It’s been a hard winter. They could do with calming down. I thought we might send word to the College of Priests and ask them to perform some kind of ceremony of purification—’

‘No, no,’ said Cicero quickly, pulling his gaze away from the body. ‘No priests. Priests will only make it worse.’

‘So what shall we do?’

‘Tell no one else. Burn the remains as quickly as possible. Don’t let anyone see them. Forbid anyone who has seen them from disclosing the details, on pain of imprisonment.’

‘And the crowd?’

‘You deal with the body. I’ll deal with the crowd.’

Octavius shrugged. ‘As you wish.’ He sounded unconcerned. He had only one day left in office – I should imagine he was glad to be rid of the problem.

Cicero went over to the door and inhaled a few deep breaths, bringing some colour back to his cheeks. Then I saw him, as I had so often, square his shoulders and clamp a confident expression on his face. He stepped outside and clambered up on to a stack of timber to address the crowd.

‘People of Rome, I have satisfied myself that the dark rumours running through the city are false!’ He had to bellow into that biting wind to make himself heard. ‘Go home to your families and enjoy the rest of the festival.’

‘But I saw the body!’ shouted a man. ‘It was a human sacrifice, to call down a curse on the republic.’

The cry was taken up by others: ‘The city is cursed!’ ‘Your consulship is cursed!’ ‘Fetch the priests!’

Cicero raised his hands. ‘Yes, the corpse was in a dreadful state. But what do you expect? The poor lad had been in the water a long time. The fish are hungry. They take their food where they can. You really want me to bring a priest? To do what? To curse the fish? To *bless* the fish?’ A few people began to laugh. ‘Since when did Romans become frightened of *fish*? Go home. Enjoy yourselves. The day after tomorrow there will be a new year, with a new consul – one who you can be sure will always guard your welfare!’

It was no great oration by his standards but it did what was required. There were even a few cheers. He jumped down. The legionaries cleared a path for us through the mob and we retreated quickly towards the city. As we neared the gate, I glanced back. At the fringes of the crowd people were already beginning to wander away in search of fresh diversions. I turned to Cicero to congratulate him on the effectiveness of his remarks, but he was leaning over the roadside ditch, vomiting.

Such was the state of the city on the eve of Cicero’s consulship – a vortex of hunger, rumour and anxiety; of crippled veterans and bankrupt farmers begging at every corner; of roistering bands of drunken young men terrorising shopkeepers; of women from good families openly prostituting themselves outside the taverns; of sudden conflagrations, violent tempests, moonless nights and scavenging dogs; of fanatics, soothsayers, beggars, fights. Pompey was still away commanding the legions in the East, and in his absence an uneasy, shifting mood swirled around the streets like river fog, giving everyone the jitters. There was a sense that some huge event was impending, but no clear idea what it might be. The new tribunes were said to be working with Caesar and

Crassus on a vast and secret scheme for giving away public land to the urban poor. Cicero had tried to find out more about it but had been rebuffed. The patricians were certain to resist it, whatever it was. Goods were scarce, food hoarded, shops empty. Even the moneylenders had stopped making loans.

As for Cicero's colleague as consul, Antonius Hybrida – Antonius the Half-Breed: Half-Man, Half-Beast – he was both wild and stupid, as befitted a candidate who had run for office on a joint ticket with Cicero's sworn enemy, Catilina. Nevertheless, knowing the perils they would face, and feeling the need for allies, Cicero had made strenuous efforts to get on good terms with him. Unfortunately his approaches had come to nothing, and I shall say why. It was the custom for the two consuls-elect to draw lots in October to decide which province each would govern after his year in office. Hybrida, who was steeped in debt, had set his heart on the rebellious but lucrative lands of Macedonia, where a vast fortune was waiting to be made. However to his dismay he drew instead the peaceful pastures of Nearer Gaul, where not even a field mouse was stirring. It was Cicero who drew Macedonia, and when the result was announced in the senate, Hybrida's face had assumed such a picture of childish resentment and surprise that the entire chamber had been convulsed by laughter. He and Cicero had not spoken since.

Little wonder then that Cicero was finding it so hard to compose his inaugural address, and that when we returned to his house from the river and he tried to resume his dictation his voice kept on trailing off. He would stare into the distance with a look of abstraction on his face and repeatedly wonder aloud why the boy had been killed in such a manner, and of what significance it was that he belonged to Hybrida. He agreed with Octavius: the likeliest culprits were the Gauls. Human sacrifice

was certainly one of their cults. He sent a message to a friend of his, Q. Fabius Sanga, who was the Gauls' principal patron in the senate, asking in confidence if he thought such an outrage was possible. But Sanga sent rather a huffy letter back within the hour saying of course not, and that the Gauls would be gravely offended if the consul-elect persisted in such damaging speculation. Cicero sighed, threw the letter aside, and attempted to pick up the threads of his thoughts. But he could not weave them together into anything coherent, and shortly before sunset he called again for his cloak and boots.

I had assumed his intention was to take a turn in the public gardens not far from the house, where he often went when he was composing a speech. But as we reached the brow of the hill, instead of turning right he pressed on towards the Esquiline Gate, and I realised to my amazement that he intended to go outside the sacred boundary to the place where the corpses were burned – a spot he usually avoided at all costs. We passed the porters with their handcarts waiting for work just beyond the gate, and the squat official residence of the carnifex, who, as public executioner, was forbidden to live within the precincts of the city. Finally we entered the sacred grove of Libitina, filled with cawing crows, and approached the temple. In those days this was the headquarters of the undertakers' guild: the place where one could buy all that was needed for a funeral, from the utensils with which to anoint a body to the bed on which the corpse was cremated. Cicero asked me for some money and went ahead and spoke to a priest. He handed him the purse, and a couple of official mourners appeared. Cicero beckoned me over. 'We are just in time,' he said.

What a curious party we must have made as we crossed the Esquiline Field in single file, the mourners first, carrying jars

of incense, then the consul-elect, then me. All around us in the dusk were the dancing flames of funeral pyres, the cries of the bereaved, and the sickly smell of incense – strong, yet not quite strong enough to disguise the stink of burning death. The mourners led us to the public *ustrina*, where a pile of corpses on a handcart were waiting to be thrown on to the flames. Devoid of clothes and shoes, these unclaimed bodies were as destitute in death as they had been in life. Only the murdered boy's was covered: I recognised it by the sailcloth shroud into which it had now been tightly sewn. As a couple of attendants tossed it easily on to the metal grille, Cicero bowed his head and the hired mourners set up a particularly noisy lamentation, no doubt in the hope of a good tip. The flames roared and flattened in the wind, and very quickly that was it: he had gone to whatever fate awaits us all.

It was a scene I have never forgotten.

Surely the greatest mercy granted us by Providence is our ignorance of the future. Imagine if we knew the outcome of our hopes and plans, or could see the manner in which we are doomed to die – how ruined our lives would be! Instead we live on dumbly from day to day as happily as animals. But all things must come to dust eventually. No human being, no system, no age is impervious to this law; everything beneath the stars will perish; the hardest rock will be worn away. Nothing endures but words.

And with this in mind, and in the renewed hope that I may live long enough to see the task through, I shall now relate the extraordinary story of Cicero's year in office as consul of the Roman republic, and what befell him in the four years afterwards – a span of time we mortals call a *lustrum*, but which to the gods is no more than the blinking of an eye.

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II

The following day, inaugural eve, it snowed – a heavy fall, of the sort one normally sees only in the mountains. It clad the temples of the Capitol in soft white marble and laid a shroud as thick as a man’s hand across the whole of the city. I had never witnessed such a phenomenon before, and nor, despite my great age, have I heard of the like again. Snow in Rome? This surely had to be an omen. But of what?

Cicero stayed firmly in his study, beside a small coal fire, and continued to work on his speech. He placed no faith in portents. When I burst in and told him of the snow, he merely shrugged, ‘What of it?’ and when tentatively I began to advance the argument of the stoics in defence of augury – that if there are gods, they must care for men, and that if they care for men, they must send us signs of their will – he cut me off with a laugh: ‘Surely the gods, given their immortal powers, should be able to find more articulate means of communication than snowflakes. Why not send us a letter?’ He turned back to his desk, shaking his head and chuckling at my credulity. ‘Really, go and attend to your duties, Tiro, and make sure no one else bothers me.’

Chastened, I went away and checked the arrangements for the inaugural procession, and then made a start on his correspondence. I had been his secretary for sixteen years by this time

and there was no aspect of his life, public or private, with which I was not familiar. My habit in those days was to work at a folding table just outside his study, fending off unwanted visitors and keeping an ear open for his summons. It was from this position that I could hear the noises of the household that morning: Terentia marching in and out of the dining room, snapping at the maids that the winter flowers were not good enough for her husband's new status, and berating the cook about the quality of that night's menu; little Marcus, now well into his second year, toddling unsteadily after her, and shouting in delight at the snow; and darling Tullia, thirteen and due to be married in the autumn, practising her Greek hexameters with her tutor.

Such was the extent of my work, it was not until after noon that I was able to put my head out of doors again. Despite the hour, the street for once was empty. The city felt muffled, ominous; as still as midnight. The sky was pale, the snowfall had stopped, and frost had formed a glittering white crust over the surface. Even now – for such are the peculiarities of memory in the very old – I can recall the sensation of breaking it with the tip of my shoe. I took a last breath of that freezing air and was just turning to go back in to the warmth when I heard, very faint in the hush, the crack of a whip and the sound of men crying and groaning. A few moments later a litter borne by four liveried slaves came swaying around the corner. An overseer trotting alongside waved his whip in my direction.

'Hey, you!' he shouted. 'Is that Cicero's house?'

When I replied that it was, he called over his shoulder – 'This is the street!' – and lashed out at the slave nearest him with such force the poor fellow nearly stumbled. To get through the snow he had to pull his knees up high to his waist, and in this way he floundered on towards me. Behind him a second litter appeared,

then a third, and a fourth. They drew up outside the house, and the instant they had set down their burdens the porters all sank down in the snow, collapsing over the shafts like exhausted rowers at their oars. I did not care for the look of this at all.

‘It may be Cicero’s house,’ I protested, ‘but he is not receiving visitors.’

‘He will receive us!’ came a familiar voice from inside the first litter, and a bony hand clawed back the curtain to reveal the leader of the patrician faction in the senate, Q. Lutatius Catulus. He was wrapped in animal skins right up to his pointed chin, giving him the appearance of a large and malevolent weasel.

‘Senator,’ I said, bowing, ‘I shall tell him you’re here.’

‘And not just I,’ said Catulus.

I looked along the street. Clambering stiffly out of the next litter, and cursing his old soldier’s bones, was the conqueror of Olympus and father of the senate, Vatia Isauricus, while nearby stood Cicero’s great rival in the law courts, the patricians’ favourite advocate, Q. Hortensius. He in turn was holding out his hand to a fourth senator, whose shrivelled, nut-brown, toothless face I could not place. He looked very decrepit. I guessed he must have stopped attending debates a long while ago.

‘Distinguished gentlemen,’ I said, in my most unctuous manner, ‘please follow me and I shall inform the consul-elect.’

I whispered to the porter to show them into the tablinum and hurried towards Cicero’s study. As I drew close, I could hear his voice in full declamatory flow – ‘To the Roman people I say, enough!’ – and when I opened the door I found him standing with his back to me, addressing my two junior secretaries, Sositheus and Laurea, his hand outstretched, his thumb and middle finger formed into a circle. ‘And to you, Tiro,’ he

continued, without turning round, 'I say: not another damned interruption! What sign have the gods sent us now? A shower of frogs?'

The secretaries sniggered. On the brink of achieving his life's ambition, he had put the perturbations of the previous day out of his mind and was in a great good humour.

'There's a delegation from the senate to see you.'

'Now that's what I call an ominous portent. Who's in it?'

'Catulus, Isauricus, Hortensius, and another I don't recognise.'

'The cream of the aristocracy? Here?' He gave me a sharp look over his shoulder. 'And in this weather? It must be the smallest house they've ever set foot in! What do they want?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, be sure you make a thorough note.' He gathered his toga around him and stuck out his chin. 'How do I look?'

'Consular,' I assured him.

He stepped over the discarded drafts of his speech and made his way into the tablinum. The porter had fetched chairs for our visitors but only one was seated – the trembling old senator I did not recognise. The others stood together, each with his own attendant close at hand, clearly uncomfortable at finding themselves on the premises of this low-born 'new man' they had so reluctantly backed for consul. Hortensius actually had a handkerchief pressed to his nose, as if Cicero's lack of breeding might be catching.

'Catulus,' said Cicero affably, as he came into the room. 'Isauricus. Hortensius. I'm honoured.' He nodded to each of the former consuls, but when he reached the fourth senator I could see even his prodigious memory temporarily fail him. 'Rabirius,' he concluded after a brief struggle. 'Gaius Rabirius, isn't it?' He held out his hand but the old man did not react and Cicero

smoothly turned the gesture into a sweeping indication of the room. 'Welcome to my home. This is a pleasure.'

'There's no pleasure in it,' said Catulus.

'It's an outrage,' said Hortensius.

'It's war,' asserted Isauricus, 'that's what it is.'

'Well, I'm very sorry to hear it,' replied Cicero pleasantly. He did not always take them seriously. Like many rich old men they tended to regard the slightest personal inconvenience as proof of the end of the world.

Hortensius clicked his fingers, and his attendant handed Cicero a legal document with a heavy seal. 'Yesterday the Board of Tribunes served this writ on Rabirius.'

At the mention of his name, Rabirius looked up. 'Can I go home?' he asked plaintively.

'Later,' said Hortensius in a stern voice, and the old man bowed his head.

'A writ on Rabirius?' repeated Cicero, looking at him with bemusement. 'And what conceivable crime is he capable of?' He read the writ aloud so I could make a note of it. "'The accused is herein charged with the murder of the tribune L. Saturninus and the violation of the sacred precincts of the senate house.'" He looked up in puzzlement. 'Saturninus? It must be – what? – forty years since he was killed.'

'Thirty-six,' corrected Catulus.

'And Catulus should know,' said Isauricus, 'because he was there. As was I.'

Catulus spat out his name as if it were poison. 'Saturninus! What a rogue! Killing him wasn't a crime – it was a public service.' He gazed into the distance as if surveying some grand historical mural on the wall of a temple: *The Murder of Saturninus in the Senate House*. 'I see him as plainly as I see you, Cicero. A

rabble-rousing tribune of the very worst kind. He murdered our candidate for consul and the senate declared him a public enemy. After that, even the plebs deserted him. But before we could lay our hands on him, he and some of his gang barricaded themselves up on the Capitol. So we blocked the water pipes! That was your idea, Vatia.'

'It was.' The old general's eyes gleamed at the memory. 'I knew how to conduct a siege, even then.'

'Of course they surrendered after a couple of days, and were lodged in the senate house till their trial. But we didn't trust them not to escape again, so we got up on the roof and tore off the tiles and pelted them. There was no hiding place. They ran to and fro squealing like rats in a ditch. By the time Saturninus stopped twitching, you could barely tell who he was.'

'And Rabirius was with you both on the roof?' asked Cicero. Glancing up from my notes at the old man – his expression vacant, his head trembling slightly – it was impossible to imagine him involved in such an action.

'Oh yes, he was there,' confirmed Isauricus. 'There must have been about thirty of us. Those were the days,' he added, bunching his fingers into a gnarled fist, 'when we still had some juice in us!'

'The crucial point,' said Hortensius wearily – he was younger than his companions and obviously bored of hearing the same old story – 'is not whether Rabirius was there or not. It's the crime with which he is being charged.'

'Which is what? Murder?'

'*Perduellio*.'

I must confess I had never even heard of it, and Cicero had to spell it out for me. '*Perduellio*,' he explained, 'is what the ancients called treason.' He turned to Hortensius. 'Why use such

an obsolete law? Why not just prosecute him with treason, pure and simple, and have done with it?’

‘Because the sentence for treason is exile, whereas for *perduellio* it’s death – and not by hanging, either.’ Hortensius leaned forward to emphasise his words. ‘If they find him guilty, Rabirius will be crucified.’

‘What is this place?’ demanded Rabirius, getting to his feet. ‘Where am I?’

Catulus gently pressed him down into his seat. ‘Calm yourself, Gaius. We’re your friends.’

‘But no jury is going to find *him* guilty,’ objected Cicero quietly. ‘The poor fellow’s clearly lost his brains.’

‘*Perduellio* isn’t heard before a jury. That’s what’s so cunning. It’s heard before two judges, specially appointed for the purpose.’

‘Appointed by whom?’

‘Our new urban praetor, Lentulus Sura.’

Cicero grimaced at the name. Sura was a former consul, a man of great ambition and boundless stupidity, two qualities which in politics often go together.

‘And whom has Old Sleepy-Head chosen as judges? Do we know?’

‘Caesar is one. And Caesar is the other.’

‘What?’

‘Gaius Julius Caesar and his cousin Lucius are to be selected to hear the case.’

‘*Caesar* is behind this?’

‘Naturally the verdict is a foregone conclusion.’

‘But there must be a right of appeal,’ insisted Cicero, now thoroughly alarmed. ‘A Roman citizen cannot be executed without a proper trial.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Hortensius bitterly. ‘If Rabirius is found guilty,

of course he has the right of appeal. But here's the catch. Not to a court – only to the entire people, drawn up in full assembly, on the Field of Mars.'

'And what a spectacle that will be!' broke in Catulus. 'Can you imagine it? A Roman senator on trial for his life in front of the mob? They'll never vote to acquit him – it would rob them of their entertainment.'

'It will mean civil war,' said Isauricus flatly, 'because we won't stand for it, Cicero. D'you hear us?'

'I hear you,' he replied, his eyes rapidly scanning the writ. 'Which of the tribunes has laid the charge?' He found the name at the foot of the document. 'Labienus? He's one of Pompey's men. He's not normally a troublemaker. What's he playing at?'

'Apparently his uncle was killed alongside Saturninus,' said Hortensius with great contempt, 'and his family honour demands vengeance. It's nonsense. The whole thing is just a pretext for Caesar and his gang to attack the senate.'

'So what do you propose to do?' said Catulus. 'We voted for you, remember? Against the better judgement of some of us.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'What do you think? Fight for Rabirius's life! Denounce this wickedness in public, then join Hortensius as his defence counsel when the case comes before the people.'

'Well, that would be a novelty,' said Cicero, eyeing his great rival, 'the two of us appearing together.'

'The prospect is no more appealing to me than it is to you,' rejoined Hortensius coldly.

'Now, now, Hortensius, don't take offence. I'd be honoured to act as your colleague in court. But let's not rush into their trap. Let's try to see if we can settle this matter without a trial.'

'How can it be avoided?'

‘I’ll go and talk to Caesar. Discover what he wants. See if we can reach a compromise.’ At the mere mention of the word ‘compromise’, the three ex-consuls all started to object at once. Cicero held up his hands. ‘He must want something. It will do us no harm at least to hear his terms. We owe it to the republic. We owe it to Rabirius.’

‘I want to go home,’ said Rabirius plaintively. ‘Please can I go home now?’

Cicero and I left the house less than an hour later, the unfamiliar snow crunching and squeaking beneath our boots as we descended the empty street towards the city. Once again we went alone, which I now find remarkable to contemplate – this must have been one of the last occasions when Cicero was able to venture out in Rome without a bodyguard. He did however pull up the hood of his cloak to avoid being recognised. Even the busiest thoroughfares in daylight could not be counted safe that winter.

‘They will have to compromise,’ he said. ‘They may not like it, but they have no choice.’ He suddenly swore, and kicked at the snow in his frustration. ‘Is this what my consulship is going to consist of, Tiro? A year spent running back and forth between the patricians and the populists, trying to stop them tearing one another to pieces?’ I could think of no hopeful reply, so we trudged on in silence.

Caesar’s home at this time stood some way beneath Cicero’s, in Subura. The building had been in his family for at least a century and had no doubt been fine enough in its day. But by the time Caesar had come to inherit it, the neighbourhood was impoverished. Even the virginal snow, smudged with the soot of burned-out fires and dotted with human shit thrown from

the tenement windows, somehow served only to emphasise the squalor of the narrow streets. Beggars held out trembling hands for money, but I had brought none with me. I recall urchins pelting an elderly, shrieking whore with snowballs, and twice we saw fingers and feet poking out from beneath the icy mounds that marked where some poor wretch had frozen to death in the night.

And it was down here in Subura, like some great shark attended by shoals of minnows hoping for his scraps, that Caesar lurked and awaited his chance. His house was at the end of a street of shoemakers, flanked by two tottering apartment blocks, seven or eight storeys high. The frozen washing strung between them made it seem as though a pair of drunks with torn sleeves were embracing above his roof. Outside the entrance a dozen rough-looking fellows stamped their feet around an iron brazier. I felt their hungry, crafty eyes stripping the clothes from my back even as we waited to be admitted.

‘Those are the citizens who will be judging Rabirius,’ muttered Cicero. ‘The old fool doesn’t stand a chance.’

The steward took our cloaks and showed us into the atrium, then went to tell his master of Cicero’s arrival, leaving us to inspect the death masks of Caesar’s ancestors. Strangely, there were only three consuls in Caesar’s direct line, a thin tally for a family that claimed to go back to the foundation of Rome and to have its origins in the womb of Venus. The goddess herself was represented by a small bronze. The statue was exquisite but scratched and shabby, as were the carpets, the frescoes, the faded tapestries and the furniture: all told a story of a proud family fallen on hard days. We had plenty of leisure to appreciate these heirlooms as time passed and still Caesar did not appear.

‘You can’t help but admire the fellow,’ said Cicero, after he

had paced around the room three or four times. ‘Here am I, about to become the pre-eminent man in Rome, while he hasn’t even made it to praetor yet. But I am the one who must dance attendance on him!’

After a while I became aware that we were being watched from behind a door by a solemn-faced girl of about ten who must have been Caesar’s daughter, Julia. I smiled at her and she darted away. A little while later, Caesar’s mother, Aurelia, emerged from the same room. Her narrow, dark-eyed, watchful face, like Caesar’s, had something of the bird of prey about it, and she exuded a similar air of chilly cordiality. Cicero had been acquainted with her for many years. All three of her brothers, the Cottas, had been consul, and if Aurelia had been born a man, she would certainly have achieved the rank herself, for she was shrewder and braver than any of them. As it was, she had to content herself with furthering the career of her son, and when her eldest brother died she fixed it so that Caesar would take his place as one of the fifteen members of the College of Priests – a brilliant move, as I shall soon describe.

‘Forgive him, Cicero, for his rudeness,’ she said. ‘I’ve reminded him you’re here, but you know how he is.’ There was a footstep and we glanced behind us to see a woman in the passage leading to the door. No doubt she had hoped to slip past unnoticed, but one of her shoes must have come undone. Leaning against the wall to refasten it, her auburn hair awry, she glanced guiltily in our direction, and I do not know who was the more embarrassed: Postumia – which was the woman’s name – or Cicero, for he knew her very well as the wife of his great friend the jurist and senator Servius Sulpicius. Indeed, she was due to have dinner with Cicero that very evening.

He quickly turned his attention back to the bronze of Venus

and pretended to be in the middle of a conversation – ‘This is very fine: is it a Myron?’ – and did not look up until she had gone.

‘That was tactfully done,’ said Aurelia approvingly, then her expression darkened and she shook her head. ‘I don’t reproach my son for his liaisons – men will be men – but some of these modern women are shameless beyond belief.’

‘What are you two gossiping about?’

It was a trick of Caesar’s, in both war and peace, to appear unexpectedly from the rear, and at the sound of that flint-dry voice we all three turned. I can see him now, his large head looming skull-like in the dimming afternoon light. People ask me about him all the time: ‘You met Caesar? What was he like? Tell us what he was like – the great god Caesar!’ Well, I remember him most as a curious combination of hard and soft – the muscles of a soldier within the loosely belted tunic of an effete dandy; the sharp sweat of the exercise yard laid over by the sweet scent of crocus oil; pitiless ambition sheathed in honeyed charm. ‘Be wary of her, Cicero,’ he continued, emerging from the shadows. ‘She’s twice the politician we are, aren’t you, Mama?’ He caught her by the waist from behind and kissed her beneath her ear.

‘Now stop that,’ she said, freeing herself and pretending to be annoyed. ‘I’ve played the hostess long enough. Where’s your wife? It’s not seemly for her to be out unaccompanied all the time. Send her to me the moment she returns.’ She inclined her head graciously towards Cicero. ‘My best wishes to you for tomorrow. It’s a remarkable achievement to be the first in one’s family to achieve the consulship.’

Caesar watched her go admiringly. ‘Seriously, Cicero,’ he said, ‘the women in this city are far more formidable than the men, your own wife being a fine example.’

Was Caesar hinting by this remark that he desired to seduce Terentia? I doubt it. The most hostile tribe of Gaul would have been a less gruelling conquest. But I could see Cicero bristling. ‘I’m not here to discuss the women of Rome,’ he said, ‘expert though you may be.’

‘Then why have you come?’

Cicero nodded to me. I opened my document case and handed Caesar the writ.

‘Are you trying to corrupt me?’ responded Caesar with a smile, handing it straight back to me. ‘I can’t discuss this. I’m to be a judge.’

‘I want you to acquit Rabirius of these charges.’

Caesar chuckled in that mirthless way of his, and tucked a thin strand of hair behind his ear. ‘No doubt you do.’

‘Now, Caesar,’ said Cicero with an edge of impatience in his voice, ‘let’s speak plainly. Everyone knows that you and Crassus give the tribunes their orders. I doubt whether Labienus even knew the name of this wretched uncle of his until you put it into his head. As for Sura – he would have thought *perduellio* was a fish unless someone told him otherwise. This is yet another of your designs.’

‘Really, I cannot speak about a case I have to judge.’

‘Admit it: the true purpose of this prosecution is to intimidate the senate.’

‘You must direct your questions to Labienus.’

‘I’m directing them to you.’

‘Very well, since you press me, I’d rather call it a reminder to the senate that if they trample on the dignity of the people by killing their representatives, the people will have their vengeance, however long it takes.’

‘And you really think you’ll enhance the dignity of the people

by terrorising a helpless old man? I've just come from Rabirius. His wits have been entirely withered by age. He has no idea what's going on.'

'If he's no idea what's going on, how can he be terrorised?'

There was quite a long pause, then Cicero said, in a different tone, 'Listen, my dear Gaius, we've been good friends for many years.' (This was putting it a bit strong, I thought.) 'May I give you some friendly advice, in the manner of an older brother to his junior? A glittering career lies ahead of you. You're young—'

'Not that young! I'm already three years older than Alexander the Great was when he died.'

Cicero laughed politely; he thought Caesar was joking. 'You're young,' he repeated. 'You have a powerful reputation. Why jeopardise it by provoking such a confrontation? Killing Rabirius will not only set the people against the senate, it will be a stain on your honour. It might play well with the mob today, but it will count against you tomorrow with all the sensible men.'

'I'll take the risk.'

'You do realise that as consul I'll be obliged to defend him?'

'Well, that would be a grave error, Marcus – if I may respond with equal friendliness? Consider the balance of forces that will be ranged against you. We have the support of the people, the tribunes, half the praetors – why, even Antonius Hybrida, your own consular colleague, is on our side! Who does that leave you with? The patricians? But they despise you. They'll throw you over the moment you're of no use to them. As I see it, you have only one choice.'

'Which is?'

'To join us.'

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'Ah.' Cicero had a habit when he was weighing someone up of resting his chin in the palm of his hand. He contemplated Caesar in this way for a while. 'And what would that entail?'

'Support for our bill.'

'And in return?'

'I dare say my cousin and I can find it in our hearts to show some compassion to poor Rabirius, on the grounds of his impaired mind.' Caesar's thin lips smiled but his dark eyes stayed fixed on Cicero. 'What do you say?'

Before Cicero could respond, we were interrupted by the arrival home of Caesar's wife. Some say that Caesar married this woman, whose name was Pompeia, purely at the urging of his mother, for the girl had useful family connections in the senate. But on the basis of what I saw that afternoon, I should say her attractions belonged to a more obvious sphere. She was much younger than he, barely twenty, and the cold had imparted a pretty blush to her creamy throat and cheeks, and a sparkle to her large grey eyes. She embraced her husband, arching against him like a cat, and then made an almost equal fuss of Cicero, flattering him for his speeches and even a volume of his poetry she claimed to have read. It occurred to me that she was drunk. Caesar regarded her with amusement.

'Mama wants to see you,' he said, at which she pouted like a girl. 'Well, go on,' he commanded, 'don't make a sour face. You know what she's like,' and he gave her a pat on her rear to send her on her way.

'So many women, Caesar,' observed Cicero drily. 'Where will they emerge from next?'

Caesar laughed. 'I fear you'll take away a bad impression of me.'

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'My impression is quite unchanged, I assure you.'

‘So, then: do we have a bargain?’

‘It depends on what your bill contains. All we have so far are election slogans. “Land for the landless.” “Food for the hungry.” I’ll need a few more details than that. And also perhaps some concessions.’ But Caesar did not respond. His expression was blank. After a while the silence became embarrassing, and it was Cicero who ended it by grunting and turning aside. ‘Well, it’s getting dark,’ he said to me. ‘We should go.’

‘So soon? You’ll take no refreshment? Then let me show you out.’ Caesar was entirely affable: his manners were always impeccable, even when he was condemning a man to death. ‘Think of it,’ he continued, as he led us down the shabby passage. ‘If you join us, how easy your term of office will be. This time next year your consulship will be over. You’ll leave Rome. Live in a governor’s palace. Make enough money in Macedonia to set you up for life. Come home. Buy a house on the Bay of Naples. Study philosophy. Write your memoirs. Whereas—’

The doorkeeper stepped forward to help Cicero on with his cloak, but Cicero waved him away and turned on Caesar. ‘Whereas? Whereas what? If I don’t join you? What then?’

Caesar put on an expression of pained surprise. ‘None of this is aimed at you personally. I hope you understand that. We mean you no harm. In fact I want you to know that if ever you find yourself in personal danger, you can always rely on my protection.’

‘I can always rely on *your* protection?’ Seldom did I see Cicero at a loss for words. But on that freezing day, in that cramped and faded house, in that scruffy neighbourhood, I watched him struggle to find the language that would adequately convey his feelings. In the end he couldn’t manage it. Draping his cloak over his shoulders, he stepped out into the snow, and under the sullen

gaze of the band of ruffians still lingering in the street, he bade Caesar a curt farewell.

'I can always rely on *his* protection?' repeated Cicero as we trudged back up the hill. 'Who is he to talk to me in such a way?'

'He's very confident,' I ventured.

'Confident? He treats me as if I were his client!'

The day was ending, and with it the year, fading swiftly in that way of winter afternoons. In the windows of the tenements lamps were being lit. People were shouting to one another above our heads. There was a lot of smoke from the fires, and I could smell food cooking. At the street corners the pious had put out little dishes of honey cakes as new-year offerings to the neighbourhood gods – for we worshipped the spirits of the crossroads in those days rather than the great god Augustus – and the hungry birds were pecking at them, rising and fluttering and settling again as we hurried past.

'Do you want me to send a message to Catulus and the others?' I asked.

'And tell them what? That Caesar has undertaken to spare Rabirius if I betray them behind their backs, and that I'm going away to consider his proposal?' He was striding ahead, his irritation lending strength to his legs. I was sweating to keep up. 'I noticed you weren't making a note of what he said.'

'It didn't seem appropriate.'

'You must always make a note. From now on, everything is to be written down.'

'Yes, Senator.'

'We're heading into dangerous waters, Tiro. Every reef and current must be charted.'

‘Yes, Senator.’

‘Can you remember the conversation?’

‘I think so. Most of it.’

‘Good. Write it all down as soon as we get back. I want to keep a record by me. But don’t say a word to anyone – especially not in front of Postumia.’

‘Do you think she’ll still come to dinner?’

‘Oh yes, she’ll come – if only to report back to her lover. She’s quite without shame. Poor Servius. He’s so proud of her.’

As soon as we reached the house, Cicero went upstairs to change while I retired to my little room to write down everything I could remember. I have that roll here now as I compose my memoir: Cicero preserved it among his secret papers. Like me it has become yellowish and brittle and faded with age. But again, like me, it is still comprehensible, just about, and when I hold it up close to my eyes I hear again Caesar’s rasping voice in my ear. *‘You can always rely on my protection . . .’*

It took me an hour or more to finish my account by which time Cicero’s guests had arrived and gone in for dinner. After I had done I lay down on my narrow cot and thought of all I had witnessed. I do not mind admitting I was uneasy, for Nature had not equipped me with the nerves for public life. I would have been happy to have stayed on the family estate: my dream was always to have a small farm of my own, to which I could retire and write. I had some money saved up, and secretly I had been hoping Cicero might give me my freedom when he won the consulship. But the months had gone by and he had never mentioned it, and now I was past forty and beginning to worry that I might die in servitude. The last night of the year is often a melancholy time. Janus looks backward as well as forward, and sometimes each

prospect seems equally unappealing. But that evening I felt particularly sorry for myself.

Anyway, I kept out of Cicero's way until very late, when I reasoned the meal must be close to finishing, then went to the dining room and stood beside the door where Cicero could see me. It was a small but pretty room, freshly decorated with frescoes designed to give the diners the impression that they were in Cicero's garden at Tusculum. There were nine around the table, three to a couch – the perfect number. Postumia had turned up, exactly as Cicero had predicted. She was in a loose-necked gown and looked serene, as if the embarrassment of the afternoon had never occurred. Next to her reclined her husband Servius, one of Cicero's oldest friends and the most eminent jurist in Rome: no mean achievement in that city full of lawyers. But immersing oneself in the law is a little like bathing in freezing water – bracing in moderation, shrivelling in excess – and Servius over the years had become ever more hunched and cautious, whereas Postumia remained a beauty. Still, he had a following in the senate, and his ambition – and hers – burned strong. He planned to stand for consul himself in the summer, and Cicero had promised to support him.

The only friend of Cicero's of longer standing than Servius was Atticus. He was lying beside his sister, Pomponia, who was married – unhappily, alas – to Cicero's younger brother, Quintus. Poor Quintus: he looked as if he had taken refuge from her shrewish taunts in the wine as usual. The final guest was young Marcus Caelius Rufus, who had been Cicero's pupil, and who kept up a stream of jokes and stories. As for Cicero, he reclined between Terentia and his beloved Tullia and was putting on a show of such nonchalance, laughing at Rufus's gossip, you would never have guessed he had a care. But it is one of the tricks of

the successful politician, to be able to hold many things in mind at once and to switch between them as the need arises, otherwise life would be insupportable. After a while he glanced towards me and nodded. ‘Friends,’ he said, loudly enough to cut through the general chatter, ‘it is getting late, and Tiro has come to remind me I have an inaugural address to make in the morning. Sometimes I think he should be the consul and I the secretary.’ There was laughter, and I felt the gaze of everyone turn on me. ‘Ladies,’ he continued, ‘if you would forgive me, I wonder if the gentlemen might join me in my study for a moment.’

He dabbed the corners of his mouth with his napkin and threw it on to the table, then stood and offered his hand to Terentia. She took it with a smile all the more striking because it was so rare. She was like some twiggy winter plant that had suddenly put forth a bloom, warmed by the sun of Cicero’s success – so much so that she had actually set aside her lifelong parsimony and dressed herself in a manner befitting the wife of a consul and future governor of Macedonia. Her brand-new gown was sewn with pearls, and other newly purchased jewels glinted all about her: at her narrow throat and thin bosom, at her wrists and on her fingers, even woven into her short dark curls.

The guests filed out, the women turning towards the tablinum, the men moving into the study. Cicero told me to close the door. Immediately the pleasure drained from his face.

‘What’s all this about, brother?’ asked Quintus, who was still holding his wine glass. ‘You look as if you’ve eaten a bad oyster.’

‘I hate to spoil a pleasant evening, but a problem has arisen.’ Grimly Cicero produced the writ that had been served on Rabirius, then described the afternoon’s delegation from the senate and his subsequent visit to Caesar. ‘Read out what the rascal said, Tiro,’ he ordered.