

# House of Apollo

Maxwell Olin Massa

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'M.O.M.' or a stylized version of the author's name.



# HOUSE OF APOLLO

Maxwell Olin Massa

Whisk(e)y Tit

VT \* NYC

This is total and complete fiction, even if every word is true. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and should not be confused with your idea of reality. Resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*For my mother,  
who would have loved an author son*



# PROLOGUE

*“Have a seat. Yes, make yourself comfortable... Before we begin, I just want to confirm: is your name spelled with a ‘C’ or a ‘K’?”*

*“A ‘C’, sir.”*

*“Very good. Now, tell me about yourself: why did you choose this line of work?”*

*“Images communicate, sir. I want to be a communicator.”*

*“I see.”*

*“If you can provide the message, I’ll get it out there.”*

*“You seem eager about this.”*

*“I am very eager, sir.”*

*“That is good.”*

\*

*“I’ve been through your portfolio. Technically, it’s quite accomplished.”*

*“Thank you, sir. Unity, technique, and form are all critical to me.”*

*“Describe your process.”*

*“I like specifications. When I receive the design document, I don’t try to fight against it. Instead, I like to... it’s as if I let my mind empty into it, as if the requirements were a mold, and I had to take on their shape.”*

*“And your vision comes from that?”*

*"Yes, sir."*

*"What about when you are working on your own?"*

*"Why would I do that, sir? Without an assignment, there wouldn't be any point."*

*"It's just another question on my list. I have to ask everyone."*

\*

*"Well, I'd say that wraps it up! I think you'll be hearing from us... anything further? Final questions, final thoughts?"*

*"Yes, my contact information has changed. My new number is on my card."*

*"Say, that's a handsome case!"*

*"Thank you. I find it keeps them clean."*

*"What a satisfying click it has too!"*

*"I like a good, satisfying click."*

*"Let me see here – yes, we can make these changes."*

*"Please keep the card; I designed it myself."*

*"And to my own specifications, I suppose? Somehow, I could tell... I think Longshot will welcome you, young Caleb. You could go far with us."*

*"I hope to shine like the sun Himself, sir."*





# 1

Caleb was not beautiful at table. Inclined by nature to view food solely as a source of sustenance and not of pleasure, he had developed a series of time-saving procedures to reduce the daily commitment to feeding, none of which was pleasant to behold. The meal arriving, he was wont to pare the larger chunks on his plate down to a small enough size so that they did not present a choking hazard and then simply slurry everything into a uniform, readily-consumable paste, stopping only when the separate nature of no component part was discernible. By this act he saved much time that would otherwise have been wasted on the delicate but superfluous matter of tailoring every bite and weighing how to pace his meal so as to deliver a maximum of flavor. He would then lower his head directly over the now featureless victuals – his face in perfect parallel to the dining surface, the distance between its receiving port and the goods to be delivered narrowed to its minimum – and shovel. He would not actually see most of what he ate, but there was always a great deal of noise, sort of like a parched animal quenching her

thirst at a muddy watering hole. It was a very aggressive snorking, though oddly clean as efficiency was also among his desires. Waste bothered him. After the primary process of becoming fed was accomplished, the serving platter needed to be scraped with programmatic ruthlessness so that no scampering scrap remained; he would then lick the utensils to a gleaming, unsanitary finish. Satiated, his shirtfront remained immaculate.

He ate never at home. This seemed the most logical choice as he need expend no time in food prep, which he found tedious, or in cleaning up, which was beneath him, and he liked to keep his kitchenette factory fresh. He was also relatively well-monied and never obliged to break his bread in the company of anyone, so the economic burden of taking breakfast, lunch, and supper in the eatery was noticeable but not crushing to him. It also provided the perfect conditions for engaging in his favorite post-prandial activity to assist the digestion: staring. He would sit before the devastated table and openly ogle whoever came readily to hand: women for their value as objects of his discerning and frustrated lust and men as specimens for study, as he did so wish to improve himself to the point where his own terrible condition of singlehood might be dissolved.

Yesterday, he had been staring at one of the company auditors.

“Ooooh,” the internal monologue had run. “Ooooh, yes. She is an optimal one. Most optimal. My eye observes her curves, takes in with readiness the contours of this broad-faced specimen. She clearly gets good nutrition. I see already in her spending patterns a heavy preference for hygiene and fitness-related products and services. Look how the perfect whiteness of that upper set stands out at almost military attention against the inviting, walnut ruddiness of her skin. Does she frequent the appropriate *couture* sites and pepper her correspondence with quotations therefrom derived? Ooooh, yes. I am certain she does. Optimal, indeed.”

The auditor had been blithely unaware. She toyed with her handheld and appeared to receive information that was of mixed value, unwelcome but unimportant. Then she frowned with her brow and her lip, finishing with the kiss of a pout. Caleb saw it all. With a directed gesture, she signaled to the kitchen that preparations for her first course could commence. Briefly, dimly, she had seemed conscious of being the object of some sort of social attention, perhaps from the well-dressed gentleman in the tight-fitting slacks, there in the corner? She had looked about nervously and re-crossed her legs. Then she returned her attention to her device and remained buried in consultation of it as Caleb’s eyes remained upon her.

“Optimal. A perfect fit,” the monologue continued. Caleb was, in fact, a well-dressed man and lavished much of the time saved in nourishing his body on clothing it. His shirt was tailored and his buttons shone. “And a breeding one, too. The indicators are obvious, even from her commercial behavior: look at the brands, the labeling. All of it from the finer shops, but not this season’s offerings, and her bag is screaming at its seams that it was last year’s hottest pattern. This is a woman who is saving, a woman who plans. And planning is these days, as we well know, strongly correlated with the willingness for children in females. It is the wastrel woman who is wanton, it is she who delights in having those terrible, infant-preventing things implanted – the spend-crazy twenty-nothing. They are sterile. But not you, dear thing.” He had adjusted a cuff to display the warmth of his tan to greater effect, for he was toned all over to the burnish of a coffee diamond. “This woman’s data, her patterns,” he smoothly mused, “delight.” At this point, dwelling on the potentials of the young employee’s browsing history and word-use frequencies, he had become audibly aroused.

“Caleb? Caleb!”

What was this? He started from his reverie, his cerebration. He found that he was in a place of dining, but apparently not alone tonight. He had forgotten. The meal was not yet begun.

In a long, low hall, under shimmering

geometric lights and before a virgin tablecloth, he sat. The table was circular, one of many in the same chamber. Before him, all the utensils of food-taking glittered in fine array: the silver was ornate with tame flourishes. He held his space at board like a flea at the edge of an immense button. To his left, a co-worker was murmuring dyspeptically, anonymously.

“Caleb!”

It was Mona, another graphic artist from the workshop. His colleague. To his right. They were all here; almost everyone from the company was. He did not recall having ordered a meal. His lips and tongue felt somewhat used and tired, as if he had been speaking. What had he said? She was whispering insistently to him.

“...whatsoever, and I don’t see how anyone could say otherwise. Anyone can see it. Particularly you. Or you should. Don’t be *childish*. I’m certain this will all lead to the best possible end-state. It’s efficient and it’s necessary. And it’s necessary because it’s efficient. Nature’s like that. Do you remember last time with the payroll people, the fuss? That woman made such a scene. Petty. Irrational. And blind! She just couldn’t see...”

In the middle of the table a vase of flowers stood, chromatic. The static blooms yearned upward, out of a wicker vase, empty and with no space for water at the bottom – more of a sconce, Caleb thought – and scented the air with light

polymer notes. The colors were immense, very saturated, while the blossoms themselves opened upward, straining at him like plastic lips, eager for kisses. Very accessible. He liked it.

“...where are they all now? Hmmm? Well, I told you it would be better this way and I was right because you just have to let them do their job, make their choices, and everything will turn out well in the end. It’s all about utility. Everything maximizes utility, as long as you let it. It can look bad at the time, in the little world, but in the big world it only gets better and – hey, hey you – it always gets better and I’ve seen it and you’ve seen it, so I wish you wouldn’t say such awful trash or ask such silly questions. It gives me a headache and I wanted to enjoy myself tonight. I *dressed* for this,” and then she raised her hands to her temples. All her bracelets clattered, cluttered down to her elbows and she made little medicinal circles with her fingertips.

“Of course,” said Caleb, turning so that he could be better seen as he gradually recalled why they were there that night, what he had just said. “Getting rid of all of them seemed simply immoderate to me, that is all. Doing it all at once? We naturally have to modernize, automate, find ways to simplify where we can. It’s just...”

“What?”

He shrugged. He looked good when he did it, too, glistening with fine oils. “An insurance firm should have an actuary or two on staff, I feel.

Even if the predictions have gotten that good. Just in case.”

“Why?”

“I only think that...”

“Huh!” she proclaimed and made a great show of not caring what he said next. Caleb’s attention drifted to an overweight Asian seated meditatively across the table from them. He appeared to be dozing, but could have been simply lost in thought. Did he look upset at all? This man was among the staff that had been made redundant by a new algorithm and whose severance was to be commemorated tonight. Caleb recalled with uncertainty that his position had been surprisingly senior. Further, that he was known for his fondness for paper and would print documents with a will, stacking them in high, harmonious piles, indexed, on his desks and cabinets. The company had otherwise eliminated material records long ago and there was no means of processing this waste, and he had for years made use of a personal shredder to dispose of his unwanted files, surreptitiously tipping the refuse into his office’s ventilation shaft and who knew where it went after that? His eyes were closed serenely and his mouth shut in a tiny upward pout, like a pensive mackerel’s. Mona had diverted her attention to her compact, where she busied herself for a few moments with primping. The Asian, a Korean, remained inert.

Food then came. “I love how you don’t even

have to order anymore!” Mona enthused, reengaging in conversation, and she gave her hands a crisp, little clap, fingertips to palm. “They just *know* what you want.” The waiter silently settled her meal in the middle of a ring of silverware. Bright vegetables steamed on her plate, clustered close as hedgehogs, warm and inviting. She chirped in appreciation. Caleb considered his own food: a poorly-executed steak held center stage, dyes leeching out of it to pollute what appeared to be potatoes and other, less certain offerings. He inhaled deeply over it and took in the smell of some sort of chemical, fennel-like flavoring. Fork in hand, he tapped the ribeye experimentally, as if it were the surface of a tambourine. It was all synthetic, but still managed to look somehow undercooked. He duly pared his meats down to size and began to stir everything together.

“Oh, I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

He looked up. Mona had already subtracted two little puffs of color from her platter. The Asian, meanwhile, had bowed his head to say grace over a platter of gelatinous forms. Other diners busied themselves in their own ways.

“What?”

“That.”

“This?”

“That.” She indicated his plate.

“I eat like this.”

“I know. There’s something wrong with it. It doesn’t make sense. I don’t like that you do it.”

“It’s just food. I can do what I like with it.” He continued to circulate the tines of his fork around his meal, homogenizing. Mona lunged forward and made an urgent flutter at him to get him to stop. He persisted. She made a squeak.

“I think it’s obscene!” she hissed. “Obscene!” His blessing finished, the Korean – Yoon? Possibly. Maybe Moon? – righted himself and began to lovingly consume what he had been daily given. He murmured low and to himself. Mona pivoted back so that her head sat with its chin slightly inclined into her neck and eyed Caleb with disdain, while her silver glinted. “I’m not surprised they can’t find anyone for you. You’re vulgar.”

“Oh, I need no help. In fact, I enjoyed a lovely evening with a lady I met on my own, just last night. We had quite the experience.”

“No, you didn’t. And everyone needs help these days.” She grimaced as Caleb took nourishment. “Oh good God.”

“Her name is Lisa,” Caleb smacked, lying. In a trice, a quarter of his platter had been suctioned. “She works at the ice rink. I made an impression as I rented skates from her and we started talking. She is new to the building and very lonely.”

“I hate it when you do this,” Mona countered. “I hate your stupid little stories.”

“We went to the cinema after she finished at

work and then took an intimate walk up on the roof. Such stars... I caressed her by moonlight and she is desperate to see me again." His mouth was completely full of food. "We will tryst anon, tonight, as soon as our meal here is concluded." He swallowed and tapped his fingers on the tabletop, chanting quietly "Lee-sa! Lee-sa! Lee-sa!" and his face did not change.

"What, and I suspect her parents are from Neptune and own a methane ranch?"

"Why, how did you know? Yes, they are from Neptune and own a methane ranch. I've seen pictures. And they –"

"That is so inappropriate! Stop it! I want you to stop! *Stop* before I..." and she was cut off. The flower arrangement in the middle of the table began suddenly to huff. Caleb and Mona both turned; from the base of the bouquet, a faint, regular breathing came forth to touch the ear. Other diners at the table took notice as well and paused to listen. It was the heavy respiration of an elderly man, high and low, irregular in pitch, but with a tempo like a metronome. For a moment it ceased and Caleb lifted his rear from the seat to look among the stalks, at their base.

"Friends!" a voice came, unexpected. "Friends, I apologize for interrupting you. I need but a moment of your time."

"Look!" hissed Mona and pointed, again. At the far end of the hall, Caleb could discern the executive, Old George, risen from his chair to

speaking, microphone in hand. He was but a portly blob, floating above the heads of other attendees in a different field of focus.

“The boss!”

Caleb remained silent. He lowered himself into his seat.

“Friends, I want ... you all for ... being here today. It is important for Longshot Insurance and also ... your own lives. As it is for me, myself. And as we, we move forward, into tomorrow, into next year, it is important to remember ... role you have played, and ... even now, in our development.” The connection was horrible and chunks of George’s speech were gapping out. None of Caleb’s co-workers seemed much to care, though they paused in their chewing and smacking while the voice continued.

At the table’s far end, the Possible Yoon nodded, as if in appreciation.

“We move ... ever forward, all of us,” continued Old George, who, with this speech, was marking the severance of much of the company’s remaining staff. “And we move along trajectories marked off before us which we are obliged to follow. For whatever happens ... as it was to happen, and we know it ... that way.” More breathing followed and Yoon – yes, Caleb was certain of it now – nodded his approval again, showing signs of rising animacy. He straightened, unfolded his arms and laid his hands on his

thighs, palms upward, bracketing his pelvis. His eyes were opened; he seemed attentive.

“Friends, let us remember ... something must happen. Something always happens, though ... not apparent at the moment.” Mona dove into the plastic canopy, her fingers piloting into the foliage like the delicate, sensitive beak of an exotic water fowl, dipping into a stream to murder snails. The connection improved. “We move, we live not at random. And as one object, cast, collides with another, let us not see it as two bodies crushing into conflict, but as one rushing into the waiting embrace of a welcoming partner.” He breathed again. “It is not strange. It is natural. Very natural. It is good that the river empties into the sea. It is good that the sea gives its water to the cloud, it is good, too, for the rain to fall in the meadow, and it is good for the water of the plain to gather, pool, and feed the river that will find the ocean again, though the ocean be different from what it once was, it is still good. And today is good, as well.”

Yoon lowered his head, as if in receipt of sacrament. Caleb felt that if he were to speak at this moment, raise his voice, the Korean might cast something violently at him. Mona fidgeted.

“Now, don’t you remember the motto for our gay little company, Longshot? It’s so simple. Here.” And he intoned:

High though the sky is and wide...

“Come now, finish it with me,” he called and Caleb could see him raise his arms in the distance. A shuffling chorus came up as the assembled employees droned at their plates in unison:

...it's ours for today and tomorrow.

“You’ve all made me happy. I am so happy,” Old George continued colorlessly, “today. I am very happy. Tomorrow, there is a new initiative for our corporation, a new product that Longshot will unveil. But that is not for now. You should be here now, as you are. Enjoy. Eat as you will... Dine. It is very pleasing.” Breathing. “Let us think of tomorrow: it will be as today, but broader, wider. Wherever you are.”

Far off, the rotund figure raised a speck in his hand. Muffled applause followed. Yoon’s face showed with contentment, delight, his eyes charged with tears. And then he fell on his meal, devouring in a pious snarf the three remaining cubes that lay on his plate. He leaned back and the water streamed down the sides of his face, wetted his cheeks. He seemed so happy. Mona chattered her way through the remains of her repast, abstracting morsels from the whole until nothing remained.

Caleb looked down to face his orts. Chunks of muted color, screwed together, gazed up upon him. Expectation. He took up again the fork and

laid it into the mashed pabulum, circling the plate with it in a practiced motion. He took up his bites, took in the mash, and, by degrees, the residue of his repast was diminished. With intimate care he supped upon the scraps, made them of his Self. The confused pap curled in his belly and gradually diffused. He was sated. And, though he had taken it into his digestion, nestled it in his innards, his unstained shell had remained stainless, again. He laid his fork down and listened to the sound around him for a while, as the meal drew to its natural close. He stared at Mona a little. Then he rose and left with the rest.

## 2

Coming to a halt outside Old George's office the next day, Caleb thought to himself. "Lee-sa!" he thought, standing expressionlessly. "Lee-sa! Methane ranch! Nep-tune!" and he raised a hand to touch the knot of his handsome cravat, sensing its alignment, which was perfect. It bisected his shirtfront, lying along the line that divided his mirror eyebrows, his finely finished shoes. He stared down at the toe-tips and tried to discern his face in the polished leather. Found he couldn't. "Lee-sa!" Everyone needs help these days? He raised his hand to the boss's door and knocked, then suffered a full-body fidget; he recovered and held himself smart and secure. He was the image of rectitude and self-restraint. There was a buzz, the lock lifted, and the door swung.

The high office of the CEO, Longshot Insurance, was of a unique design, centered around the innovative heating system. White columns of patterned ceramic stood at patient intervals in parallel rows to the right and to the left, punctuating the length of the room. They

were hollow; inside were ducts that communicated with the server rooms deep in the basement. The operation of these computers warmed the air about them, which rose and was conveyed from that space, as exhaust, through channels that made a network through the building's whole height, linking at last to Old George's chambers at the apex.

Around the base of each column ran a ring of little pores, ever so small, and also around the base of the dynast's chair (mounted on a little silver belly-button that permitted him to swivel about as he engaged in his office). The vault's temperature was regulated through the modulation of these ports, which would dilate to permit air to diffuse with a sibilant *hiss* into the office, while the rest was expelled through vents on the roof. The pillars were load-bearing and sustained the weight of the ceiling above, so the walls were given over entirely to clear glass, ribboned with faint seams, and the sun gave a glorious, purifying light, all very pleasing to someone.

Otherwise, the room was sparse and contained little; Caleb could not make himself enter without first washing his hands. The ablutions... The columns were hydrophobic and always gleamed – bright, white, and antiseptic – cool to the touch.

Caleb walked the length of the space and paused to stand before the table while the old man played solitaire; there were many cards

already on the table in front of him. It was something he did often, and Caleb had witnessed the practice before. With technique, George drew, considered, placed, discarded, drew, considered, placed, discarded, drew, considered... and the little cavalcades on the desktop lengthened until he had found a way to arrange the entire deck. The thing done, he would lean back and draw his mouth across his face into a tight line, like a smile, as he considered the order he had made. Then he would slurry the cards together into a chaos again, assemble a little pile on the broad, executive mahogany, and begin the exercise afresh. He could do it for hours and he was doing it now. Caleb stood and waited for the boss to bring his attention forward. There was a strange smell in the room, almost mineral, and he found it disconcerting. The center of his gravity started to drift in a lazy, languid loop while he waited, and his eyes unfocused, slightly. He huffed in a deep breath of it, whatever it was. The atmosphere, its vapors, made him feel dreamy-weamsy and yet very wide awake.

George inhaled deeply, flexed his hands. Laid his hands in his lap, tongued at his teeth, stretched his neck. Adjusted his glasses. He laid his hands now on the table, balled them into fists, and laid them on the table again, flat. Caleb wondered if he intended to discuss the new initiative, revealed last night.

“We had a payout, Caleb,” Old George announced.

“A payout?”

“Mm-hmm. A payout.”

“A big one?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“What do we do?”

“Mm-hmm. A payout. Big one. Cashing in.”

The last time a policy-holder had actually been able to collect on their plan had been years ago. Caleb’s bowels contorted and the juices of his recent meal squelched. His hackles raised. Trying to attract little attention to the motion, he raised a hand to his abdomen and gave his tum-tum a stealthy pat. Under his breath, he belched.

“Sir, what do we do?”

George had been staring at the cards before him as if trying to tell a fortune. He looked up now and gave Caleb the full moon of his face, round as a clock and no hands at all.

“I’m not entirely certain, to be honest.”

“What did we do last time?”

“I don’t remember. That was years ago.”

“Years?” Caleb played dumb, politely.

“Six years? I think. The one at the airport.”

“The heiress?” Caleb offered. The heiress had been demented. An elderly lady, very much attached to animals, she was gibbering on the tarmac waiting to board a domestic flight when her pet carrier had come open and the occupant, a young goat, had capered out. She’d pursued it

to her misfortune as first the kid and then she herself had been sucked into the red-hot intake port of the craft, carbonized, and pulsed out the rear as dehydrated exhaust. She had been *very* deceased. Her death was unfortunate and the damage to the plane was horrific, but Longshot had been liable for neither of them. Unfortunately and however, half of her organs had been metallic transplants used in a course of scientific study and insured by the parent company, which sought damages. Once her blackened residue had been suctioned from the apron and proven to be of zero research value, payment was made; it had been painful to the insurer. After a thorough review, the company's risk-assessing mechanisms had been updated and there had been no further claims. Caleb doubted her half-remembered experience would serve as much of a guide here, if it had been repeated. "Yes, her," he confirmed. "The heiress."

Old George seemed to receive this information but did not offer a response. His attention was engaged with something in the distance. There was a pause. Caleb waited, holding himself tight. The pause lengthened.

"You've been producing recently?" George questioned, in a tone that did not perceive any change in topic. He had lifted his head so that their eyes met.

"Of course, sir," Caleb responded. "Haven't missed in months and averaging twelve-point-

four finished pieces a week with an impact ratio of seven-to-two." *Exact!* "Market variance is scheduled to be about 3.2% again this quarter, and I've been able to regularly hit about five-out-of-seven suggested elements, now that we've improved the queries."

"Excellent numbers, Caleb."

"Thank you, sir," he said with a little preen and a puff, haunches clenched tight. "I know their importance in evaluating my portfolio." And he did.

"Caleb, I..."

"Yes?"

"Hold on. Let me show you this. I..."

"Sir?"

George was fumbling with something below the surface of the table. "I can't find it."

"Sir, if you were to let me..."

"No."

"Sir, but I could just..."

"Stop. Wait. Here it is."

And he lifted up into Caleb's view a still image, on glossy stock and cut to standard size. It was grubby and horribly, horribly rumped, almost mauled. He held it gingerly with a cocked, grimacing pinky.

"You didn't do this one, did you?" he asked, levelly, extending it towards Caleb, across the wood. "Records show you did." The surface finish was peeling off at the corners and the undertones were visible peeping through, incomplete.

“Sir!” he affirmed. He had. It was a piece from one of their homeowners’ packages, a bundle of policies offered together at a calculated rate. The name of the package stood dominant at the top, dressed in comely serifs and arrayed in balanced proportion to the company logo at the bottom. Policy information followed: fire, lightning strike, earthquake, etc., framed in compartments placed here, here, and here. There were bullets that gave particulars. Fine print. Good. All good. In the middle of all the disaster words and figures stood a representation of a quaint, cadmium yellow house, the thing protected. He remembered designing it. It was done in simple lines, an unimpressive structure with white trim. Squinting a little, he saw that there were soft grasses bowing in the warm wind; he could feel the wetness of the dew tingling in his palms, and when the flowers opened it was very special. The structure and its grounds were ornamented with fruit – little fruits that shone in the spring rain as if enameled – elm, and vines, and the place had a particular fragrance. Out of sight, beyond the hill, there was a small lake where silver fish shimmered, under the sun.

“Caleb, take your hands off my table.”

Caleb took his hands off his table.

“Is this your work? Did you do this?”

“Yes, sir. I did. Of course I did. Natural disasters were high that week, I remember. So was danger to the home. I could have gotten more ‘nest’

imagery in there if I'd wrapped the house in ivy, which I probably should have. But it's mine, either way."

"Then she's yours, too."

"Who?"

"The lady, the payout. Caleb, you need to do something about this woman," George said. "This is the piece she responded to when she came in and you're the one who generated it. So it follows, Caleb, that you're the one who will find a way to fix her. We don't have accountants anymore, not since the payroll system went in. We have no lawyers, not since we automated compliance. There is no staff to handle the situation and I know we don't have the institutional memory needed to make this happen on our own anymore. I don't know how to do it. This wasn't supposed to happen, Caleb. I don't see how it could have, not since the changes we made after your heiress." *His* heiress? Had Caleb somehow owned her? Procured her? "But it's obvious that all this goes back to you. Therefore, you're the one who will find us a way out." He made no real attempt to persuade, nor was he overtly aggressive. He seemed to think instead that, one thing implying another, Caleb would just pick up on what he needed to do. It was warm in the room and his skin showed with a light, dry sweat. "You will do this. You *will* find a way to deal with this situation, this customer. And if this somehow becomes a serious issue, it may imperil the future

of Longshot's next project." He was very compelling. "Our reputation must remain unassailable, you understand? Intact."

"Who is it?" Caleb pushed, staying on target. He was very professional. "The claimant, what's her name?"

"Vera."

Vera?

"I've taken her on as a janitor; we can still hire those. But her claim is large and she'll need to be on payroll, for six hundred and twenty-eight years before it's paid in full. That doesn't work. I'll have information on the situation and the client forwarded to your account."

"And you want me to find a way to take care of her?"

"You will find a way to take care of her." Caleb considered. He thought he saw an opportunity to get something he wanted. What was that thing? He wasn't certain, didn't know, but saw the opening to pursue it anyway. He wanted to speak, gently at first, about his needs. He would layer one sentence upon another, mortaring them together with his pathos. Lathering up his emotions, he would let the words slide out, let everything flow. "Direct access!" he would say. "Meaningful contact!" His tone would rise; he would continue to speak. His rhythm and tone could then heighten and his throat and lips work. He might importune. Leaning forward, he would reach in,

looking for a link, a bridge into the “yes”. His desire, ill-formed and resistant to crisp articulation, rose in him to a vague, commanding presence. He sensed himself wandering, not on the same line as George and not able to get on it. “This is vital!” he wanted to insist, qualifying whatever would have just come before. It would be nice if George agreed, wouldn’t it? Maybe he might. He was impressed with himself.

“Caleb.”

Caleb?

“Take your hands off my table.”

Caleb removed his hands again. If he had been less fastidious about himself, his grooming, he might have left prints.

“Look. Caleb. You. Will do. This. And. This. Is how. It will. Be.” Tick. Tock. His face was a clock. Tickery. Tockery. Caleb felt denial and pressure to comply. He nodded and smoothed over a portion of his cuff, eliminating wrinkles.

“Good. Get to it then. I have a teleconference about the new ‘Microinsurance’ effort in five.” And then the meeting was over: George made a small sign, touched himself, and that concluded everything. Caleb took his leave and walked a straight line, back to the door that had admitted him. It closed now, after his passage, pressing carefully shut and him secure without. For a moment he stood with his gaze directed down the corridor. The lines to his left, right, top, and bottom all cambered forward to a point, training

him onward. Doors peeped at shrinking intervals, waiting to enlarge at his approach. One gaped beside him and he turned to read the plaque beside the door beside his person:

### C. Ezekiel Yoon

And below that:

#### Senior Executive Actuary

Looking in, Caleb could see that it was all bare; nothing personal remained. Pieces of office furniture roamed, cropping at the gray carpet about a box of administrative supplies, and a portrait of the radiant Founder stared out from the wall, seeing nothing of the little there was to see. Caleb's eyes flicked about the room, appraising, cataloging its contents, and then he checked an urge to rummage. Instead, he pirouetted back to the hallway and permitted himself to be funneled down it.

He walked down the hall, turned a corner. Walked. Walkery. Tickery. Tockery. Talkery. The white, white walls surrounded, arounded him and the floor near the ceiling of the near-empty building as he walked with the tread of a man so soon dead and his feet were like lead as he one two one two one. He realized he was raising his knees a little high in his gait, pointing his hoofs a little. No one had seen him. He was on his way to do something that made sense, George's bidding,

as he bid. It was a sober task and he would do it. Sober, yes, oh so very sober. He adjusted himself, over-corrected, toe-to-heel, heel-to-toe, toe and heel slowly forward... Except for George's office, the entire upper floor was empty; any mosquito trapped up there was doomed to slow starvation. Buzzzzzz... he was ringing for the elevator. It came and he rode it down, straight down, floors and floors down, down to the level where he worked. He walked out, into another passageway, then to his studio.

Inside the workspace, everything was dressed in cool shades. Five design stations were spaced equidistantly, around an empty center: his, those of three absent coworkers, the manager's (elevated), and Mona's. She was present, attired in frosted gray silk, upright, and intently drawing circles. Her right elbow chicken-winged up and down in repetitive industry.

She heard his heel click on the threshold. With a push, she turned. "You!" she cried. "Oh, thank goodness it's you!"

Caleb stopped short; the response was not typical. Mentally, he pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes, gathering inner order.

"I thought *she* might have come back!" Mona grimaced horribly, baring most of her upper gum area in an attitude that implied, simultaneously, nausea and fear, as if she'd been visited by a banshee, bearing dead fish. "She touched

*everything!* She put her *hands* on everything!” Her little nostrils pulsed.

“Excuse me?” He was guarded. “I do not know what you are talking about.”

“Look!” she commanded. “See?” she inquired, and straightened an arm and finger to indicate his carrel. About her wrist a fine, golden bangle, much larger in diameter than her forearm, rocked as she pointed.

He looked. His workspace was plain: just a lamp, a stand, and the design surface. He saw now that it was horribly smeared, as if a riot of school children gone off their medication had all seen puppies on the inside and crowded over at once, in a rush of noses, lips, and puffy, huffy breath. It was unsanitary. He drew a disinfectant wipe and briskly sterilized the whole thing. His own reflection emerged, looking back at him from an angle, below. He powered up the screen and it was lost in a block of light.

“Vera!”

“Vera?”

“Yes! She came by, half an hour ago. Said she was the new janitor, come to the see the place. Then she, she...” Mona’s words, drawn out, failed, then returned to her as rush of physical energy. She drew her hands in almost-fists up to the spaces near her cheeks and her face paled. In the air about her, her polished fingernails floated like a manicured constellation, Agittarius. Breathing became difficult and she expelled righteous

bursts of hateful air through her teeth and nose. The motion overflowed and involved her shoulders. “She touched *everything!*”

“Mona. It can’t have been that bad.”

“She said she was going to the third floor. Do you even *know* what’s down there? Want to see what she’s up to? I bet we can find her. I have access to the cameras. Let’s see what’s going on!” She turned face-to-face with her interface and smiled in the spin. The chicken wing reappeared.

“What’s on the third floor?”

“Nothing. Does it matter? Where is she?”

“I thought accounting used to be down there or something. It’s an awfully long ways down from here.”

“Accounting? Probably. Or something like it.”

“Look!” and she recoiled from the display, pointing like a proud Retriever. A figure had appeared onscreen.

“That’s her?”

“Yep. The hair. I’m certain. Perfect match.”

He looked. The third story had not seen maintenance in a long time, as it had been one of the first to be emptied. But it had been opulent once, sporting a balcony that let out into the atrium, which was open to the two floors below. He remembered small string ensembles playing there at company functions under a mist of promise, during events years ago. That area, partially visible from the street, was probably still given an auto-brush every now and again, but

Caleb was looking into a different room entirely: the reception hall. It, too, had once been grand. Through the dusty aperture he could see the parquet: rich, Semitic curls of woods, delicately mated. There was no furniture. A single female figure stood near the middle of the room, a little off-center, her back facing the lens. Mona put the focus on her.

She was a stocky woman: pale, big, and round of body. Heavy, in an energetic way. Her shoulders curved in powerful, downward slopes. Dressed in some sort of custodial uniform, the canvas stretched taut across the upper back with wide legs that hung loose around her sneakers. Mona had been honest about the hair; from underneath a tight-fitting cap, it issued in a pale, buoyant cloud. She was vigorously manipulating a mop in a bucket of cleanser and as she went up-down-up-down-up-down with the rhythm of the work, the mane bouncing behind her, half a step off. This agitation was so violent that she had worked a good deal of solution free of the container, and she now stood in an irregular pool of it, which spread in all directions. With a jerk she pulled the mop-head clear of the bucket and then held it in suspense, dripping just inches above the ground, before carefully lowering it onto the woodwork. She began pushing it about with meditated care, feet planted, in gradually widening circles.

“Can we get audio? Can we hear her?”

“Sure! No mysteries *here...*” Mona punched and jabbed. “Can you hear that? How about now?” And there was sound. They could hear Vera crooning.

She was making a modulating sort of moaning noise that pitched higher and lower with the motion of her staff. The radius of the work soon widened so that she was mopping about herself, making dynamic, purposeful spins on silent feet. Then she stops, draws herself upright, and holds the thing close to her. The sensitivity of the microphone is such that the murmur of language registers, but neither of them can make out what is said. There are muscles working there, under the tunic.

“Yes, oh yes,” she coos, her voice rising just enough to be intelligible. She has an accent? “Splooshy-sploosh with the kindly-whooh and who’s the dancing dandy? With the drums? Hmmm...? Has somebody hurt you, O my dear?” She draws the rod closer, letting it pucker into the fabric of her garb. “Hmmm...?” She extends an arm to hold her partner at an angle, then cups her other beneath it in support. They move together, inscribing a small clover in the dust beneath them. The tempo quickens as they widen their arc again, Vera’s hands gripping, moving, sliding, everywhere.

“Hah!” she calls out. “Hah!” Mona grimaces and raises her hands halfway to stop her ears.

They are prancing very quickly now, the two

of them, the intent of cleaning the room – if ever it existed – completely forgotten. Vera spins and drops down low, very low, supporting her companion only a few inches from the ground. Her footwork shows mindless dexterity, her soles pulse up and down in a rapturous rapping. In the pooled cleanser, her feet squeak and flash, faster yet and faster still, until finally...

“No!” she calls out, separating. She falls!

The mop flies free, free from her grasp. Sailing beyond the camera’s frame, Caleb hears it concuss and clatter artless on the ground. “Oh, no! No! Nonononono!” Vera’s body sagged, heavier than a moment ago as she surged to hurry over, her broad white face wrought with woe. She ran, ducking briefly off-screen, and then returned with the mop cradled senseless in her arms.

Caleb followed her, his eyes fixed. She trailed her own ponderous feet back to the bucket and stared down into the dirty water. With gravity, she held the lifeless object forward with one heavy arm, parallel to the surface of the earth. The thick, tangled strands of the mop-head hung just above the fluid, touched it, and were then submerged as she lowered it in. She then crouched over the pail and seemed to work it with her hands, but her form interposed between the camera and the action, so Caleb could not see what she was doing.

She held the squat for a while and all that could be heard was the play of liquids in motion. Then

she raised her voice and they heard her speaking, dolefully:

We strut beneath the wave and dance on sand  
 Earth rising where we stand;  
 Fish titter as we race,  
 And coral part apace  
 Shrinking at His command,  
 As on we go. The marlin gapes  
 In worship as he sees our forms, our shapes  
 Incise, cut through the waving drapes  
 Of seaweed on the ocean floor.  
 Above, the basking seals roar;  
 The otters keen, upon the shore.  
 “Your goading wounds the sea will tend  
 “O, Grace to Man,  
 “O, Grace to Man,  
 “Your bones will knit, Your flesh will mend.”

“Oh goodness, this is terrible,” said Mona. “Oh this is bad. You don’t do that with a mop, that’s not what it’s *for*. And if you’d seen her when she as up here... Do you see what I mean now that you’ve –” but she was interrupted. The audio link was still open and Vera repeated again the final four lines,

*“Your goading wounds the sea will tend  
 “O, Grace to Man,  
 “O, Grace to Man,  
 “Your bones will knit, Your flesh will mend.”*

This was Vera.

END OF PREVIEW  
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Maxwell Massa spent five years in China (including a year-long stint as a Mandarin TV star), only to return to the U.S. and find that — surprise! — intellectualism isn't really a thing here.



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