

House of Apollo

Maxwell Olin Massa





House of Apollo

Maxwell Olin Massa

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'M.O.M.' or a similar stylized representation 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.

Published in the United States by Whisk(e)y Tit:
www.whiskeytit.com. If you wish to use or reproduce all or part of this book for any means, please let the author and publisher know. You're pretty much required to, legally.

ISBN 978-1-7329596-4-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019953584

Copyright ©2019, the author. All rights reserved.

Cover design by Alice Bedard-Voorhees.

Frostispiece by Ivana.

First Whisk(e)y Tit paperback edition.

*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 matter of choosing what to eat with every bite and 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 eat in the company of anyone, so the economic burden of taking breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the eatery was noticeable but not crushing to him. It also provided the perfect conditions for engaging in his favorite after-dining 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 Asian. 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’s 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 actuarial 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 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 glistened. “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 speak, 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.

END CHAPTER 1

Order now at whiskeytit.com or email miette@whiskeytit.com for review copies.