

Lindsay T., Age 14, School 10

Marcus Claudius, Aged 14 years, born in Rome in 370 AD

Stroking the purple stripe of his toga praetexta, Marcus traced the line of his childhood. He wrapped his toga around himself for the last time and was immediately comforted by the smooth fabric of his youth. Finally, Marcus slid his bulla over his head before making his way into the cubiculum. It has hardly day break and already the slaves were running frantically throughout the house finishing last minute preparations for his coming of age ceremony. As the sun began to rise, so did the energy level in the household. Friends, relatives, and hospes flooded the house bearing abundant gifts and words of wisdom.

Soon it came time for Marcus to offer his bulla, toga praetexta, and the first scrapings of his beard as a sacrifice to the Lares and Penates of the house. His bulla was hung while Marcus dressed himself in a white tunic. Over Marcus' plain tunic, his father Augustus draped the toga virilis to signify Marcus' newfound status as a man. Marcus, daunted by the impending responsibilities of manhood, was apprehensive as he led the procession to the Forum. Marcus shuddered, for already he was expected to lead his people.

Once his name had been added to the list of citizens, Augustus finally approached his son. "Marcus," his father whispered forebodingly, "when we return home, we must speak. Meet me in the tabellarium before the celebration begins."

Marcus nodded meekly, a less than noble expression from a newly appointed Roman citizen. He knew just what was in store for him, and as he embarked on the journey home, Marcus was pursued by a troubling presentiment.

"Let me just say it, Marcus," his father stated emphatically as Marcus entered the tabellarium. "Tomorrow, you will enroll in the army. You are now a man, and these are desperate times. It is your responsibility to fight for the empire." In fact, since the devastation at Adrianople, the emperor Theodosius had been in desperate need of troops. The Goths and their allies were already wreaking destruction and the empire was lacking in soldiers. Theodosius had even begun to recruit troops from among the barbarians. Though he fully understood the urgency of the situation, Marcus could not help his indignation. How could his father just expect to send him off like that!

Emboldened by his toga virilis, Marcus' stared at his father with impudence. "I cannot let you send me away...it's a death sentence. Please father, I beg you. I feel great pride for the Empire, yet there is no need for me to sacrifice myself."

Marcus' father clenched the arms of his chair. He looked at Marcus with remorse and tentatively removed a silver coin from his pocket. It had already been weathered from his own years in the service.

"I know you're afraid Marcus, and your apprehensions most certainly are justified. However, I have a gift which I am sure will assuage your fear. This coin was given to me by my father when I was your age. It depicts Persephone, the daughter of Ceres."

Marcus held the coin and traced the rim with his finger. Though it had been minted in 323 B.C. under Alexander the Great, the coin still gleamed with optimism. Marcus noticed Persephone's delicate features which had been engraved in silver. Wearing a pendant earring and a necklace, she looked almost regal. Flipping the coin over to its reverse side, Marcus noticed a horse being crowned by a Nike flying above. The beauty of his newfound treasure entranced him, yet many questions remained for Marcus.

Incredulous, Marcus looked at his father and asked him to tell the story of Persephone. What good was this coin if he didn't even know what it signified?

"Oh, Marcus!" his father exclaimed, his guffaw echoing throughout the tabellarium, "I must teach you the story of Persephone. For a young man of your stature, it is certainly an important story to know."

Augustus proceeded to tell the Marcus the story of Persephone, a young women who was abducted by Pluto and forced to live with him in Hades. Persephone became the Queen of the Underworld while her mother Ceres, the goddess of grain, searched desperately for her daughter. While Ceres' mourned, the crops died and fruit and vegetables no longer grew. Finally, Jupiter sent Mercury to order Pluto to free Persephone. Though Pluto obeyed, Persephone, having eaten six pomegranate seeds, was condemned to staying in Hades for six months of the year.

"I will miss you, Marcus." Augustus said. "Like Ceres, my world will be nothing but darkness while you are away. However, when Persephone returns to her mother each year, Ceres rejoices, marking the beginning of spring. As you know, Ceres never lost hope when Persephone was gone, and neither will I in your absence. When you return, we will celebrate together."

However, Marcus was adamant that he would not allow his father to enroll him in the army. Only today had he become a man; why must he surrender his life to the cause when he hadn't even had a chance to live? Shielded by the cloak of night, Marcus knew he must run away in order to find himself. Wearing nothing but his toga virilis and solae on his feet, Marcus collected the little money he had saved as well as the coin his father had given to him, and ran away from his insulae in Rome. Subsisting on his own money and the kindness of strangers, Marcus crossed the Appian Way and sailed across the Ionian Sea. Though he had very little money and no destination in mind, Marcus was assured that he was saving himself nonetheless. Exhausted from his journey, Marcus settled in an inn located just outside of Athens. It is there that he met a group of people who would change his fate.

Standing outside the inn, Marcus was surrounded by a mysterious group of people who appeared to be sacrificing a pig. "What is this?" Marcus whispered with trepidation, addressing no one in particular.

"Today is the beginning of the Eleusinian Mysteries," answered Celeus, the priest standing beside him. Seeing the confusion on Marcus' face, Celeus began to explain. "This is the initiation ceremony for the cult of Demeter and Persephone. Each spring we celebrate Persephone's return."

Immediately, Marcus recognized he name. Reaching his hand in his pocket, he traced Persephone's face on his coin. After all of his searching, Marcus knew that this was where he truly belonged.

In the following days Marcus became an official initiate of the Eleusinian Mysteries. He participated in ceremonies signifying the beginning of springtime and the rebirth of all creatures. Led by the priests and priestesses, Marcus partook in the procession to Eleusis beginning at Kerameikos, the Athenian cemetery. Walking along the Sacred Way, Marcus' feet throbbed from his endless journey, yet with each step he took the closer he felt to his true self. Upon reaching Eleusis there was a day of fasting in commemoration of Demeter's hunger while searching for Persephone. His stomach was empty, though Marcus wanted for nothing.

Grabbing him by the hand, Celeus escorted Marcus into the Telesterion, an ornate hall designated to the ceremony each year. There, Marcus was shown the sacred relics of Demeter while the priestess revealed their visions of the holy night, speaking of the rebirth and redemption of all creatures.

"Celeus," Marcus prodded gently, "why is it that Persephone is able to be start anew each spring when mortals are never reborn?"

"Oh Marcus!" Celeus exclaimed. "You wouldn't believe it, but people are constantly being reborn whether they know it or not." Marcus looked perplexed. "Endings often mark new beginnings in one's life. As a matter of fact, as each phase of one's life draws to a close, it is replaced by new opportunities for the future."

"I'm still confused," Marcus lamented, looking at Celeus in search of answers.

Celeus explained, "Actually, it seems that fate has brought you to Eleusis. Here we are, honoring Persephone's return, yet you are not able to move on with your own life. Though your childhood has ended, a new beginning a waits you in Rome."

Inspired by Celeus' words of wisdom, Marcus set off toward Rome to embark on his future. Marcus knew he must return in order to defend his empire and preserve his honor. As he began his journey home, in his hand Marcus held the coin engraved with Persephone's depiction, his own future reflected in her image.

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