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Xanthippe to her Mother

[The following is a translation of an ancient manuscript, presumably a late-Hellenistic school exercise, recovered from the so-called Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum, which was entombed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 BCE. The library was well-stocked with philosophical works, mostly of an Epicurean bent, but with a variety of other traditions represented as well. The text below is the result of the editorial work and translation of the Italo-British philosophical eccentric Michael Tommasi, completed presumably in Cambridge in the 1940s, but never published; his literary executors discovered the manuscript among his posthumous papers. Several revisions to Tommasi's original have been made by Ginger Osborn.]

Dear Mother,

I am approaching you through this letter on my knees to seek your forgiveness and to admit that you were right about this marriage from the beginning. It has been a nightmare the shadows of which do not lift even at noon.

Everything you warned me about has come to pass, and then some. If it were not for the children—three beautiful boys, Mother, blonde and dimpled like you and Grandmother—and utterly unlike their father—I should have left weeks, no, years ago.

I cannot stay here another day, Mother. Please let me come home. I promise I will earn my keep and that I will be no trouble. We will get a place of our own just as soon as we can, I swear this to you. I have to get away from here, away from these fawning, supercilious idlers who keep coming by to say “how sorry” they are and to see whether there is “anything, anything at all” they can do for “the poor widow” and the “poor children.”

Yes, Mother. He is dead and I am “poor widow” now. Except that I blame these sniveling friends of his for all of it. ALL OF IT! They can neither see the rage in my eyes, nor feel the heat of the anger boiling in my heart. They are deaf to everything except their own big talk. They are laying plans for my boys, for me, for us—as though I am incapable of making decisions of my own now that the whole charade is finally over. You cannot imagine the magnitude of their self-importance.

Of course that is the first thing you warned me about, remember? Why didn't I listen to you, Mother? After he boasted of his former position on the city council and “let slip” the mention of his war decorations and his inheritance, you took me aside and said, “Be careful, daughter. This man has an inflated sense of his own importance.” How I scorned you! I think I even accused you of being jealous because Daddy had never held any kind of political distinction. Why, he was a “hero,” he was educated, he knew poetry, he was from the big leagues, not the Flatbush we called home; and didn't everyone know that he had even been the subject of an award-winning play? And when

you tried to warn me of the age difference between us, I sharply replied that his “maturity” would help guarantee his “fidelity”—unlike Daddy, whose affairs and liaisons were as regular and common as sundown.

Oh, Mother, please forgive me. My words hurt you, I know. My tongue swells in my mouth as I recall them. I beg you to soften your heart to me, a proud woman whose life is miserable and who admits that she was a fool.

The big inheritance was not enough to keep us in decent clothing. I regularly begged him to get a job, ANY JOB, but he was too good for that. Too good for honest work! The children used to ask what their daddy did for a living. How could I tell them that he “hung out” for a living? That he had a gift for gab and that flapping his jaws every day and every night meant more to him than replacing their worn-out shoes? That he would rather spend his time with those good-for-nothing idlers who fancy themselves the gentry, than sit down with us for dinner? That he got his kicks from rubbing elbows with the glitzy Might-a-Beens? Thank God children cannot discriminate between the popularity of being esteemed and the popularity of a clown.

One night my sweet youngest looked up at me and said shyly and proudly, “Everyone knows Daddy, don’t they, Mama? They even write plays about him, don’t they?” Should I have said, “Yesindeedy, they know him, dear heart, he is the town buffoon and no comedy is complete without a reference to him!” I could not. I remember only too well my own failure to distinguish “famous” from “infamous.” Ignorance was my ally then, and she will be the shield I use to spare my boys for as long as I can. They will not discover soon that their father was a laughing stock. I will come home, away from here, and they will dodge the red hot cheeks of shame—for a little while at least! Do you understand, Mother? I have to get away.

I warned him over and over that those “friends” of his were just using him. That they enjoyed seeing him get the best of some petty bureaucrat and they loved watching him berate and belittle decent folk. Did he listen? He so loved being the center of their elitist attentions that he would ridicule anyone and anything just to get an “attaboy” or “that’s tellin’ ‘im” from one of his buddies. But they were always real careful to see the fellow later and make sure there were no hard feelings for THEM. After all, THEY hadn’t said a word! Oh, it was pathetic. Really pathetic.

Six weeks ago he comes home and announces that he is in “a little trouble.” It “isn’t anything,” the “guys” will “tend to it” and not to “fret” and on and on and on and on...talking and talking. “A little trouble” turned out to be going on trial for his life. But “no sweat” because this one has “connections” and that one is a “pillar of the community” and after all, his friends aren’t some bunch of hick red-necks, they’re the goddam “Who’s Who” of the whole city, and they have CLOUT! They’ve fucking assured him that everything is “under control.” (I apologize for using that word, Mother. The delicacy and class of this place leaves a lot to be desired. All their

elegance is in their monuments, their statues, their scenic skyline of lifeless stones. Such a veneer they erect for themselves! The hammering never rests.)

The morning of the trial they were all here plotting strategy and boasting that the “fix” was in and when it came time for him to have his say, he should just “let it rip.” He should shame them for even dreaming of bringing him to court. He refused to listen to any advice of mine, which was to remember who he was, tone it down, and let the four of us, the boys and me, sit in a prominent position down front. He scoffed at me. What did a woman know of such things? He had all the influence he needed. Look around the room. Why, they had the jury “in their pockets.” I did not tell him that their influence was as out of date as last year’s beans—that his pals didn’t have pockets that deep. What did I, a mere woman, know, after all?

Well, they strutted out together arm-in-arm in a noisy confusion like a fraternity headed to a festival. I made my way up the hill alone under a cloudless sky. The stones shimmered in the heat and the white glare made my eyes water. I felt an eerie kinship with those silent, stony, lifeless things.

Somehow I arrived at the court before them. I found a seat near the rear. It was steamy and close what with all the weekend warriors, the jurors, the curiosity seekers, but I could not see him anywhere. Just then, he made a belated grand entrance with his crew sweeping in two-by-two behind him, and in that split-second, Mother, I knew all was lost. That they had set him up. Not one juror seemed the least bit aware of who they even were. If you’ve got a jury “in your pocket,” they can’t help but squirm a little when you walk in. I watched with care. Every single face was blank. Bored and blank. After they found him “guilty,” there was a brief recess. His entourage huddled around him, coaching, urging, and whispering. I never caught his eye, much less his ear. He never once looked away from their faces. When it came time for him to propose a counter-punishment to the death penalty, do you know what the damn fool did? He offered the taxpayers of this city the privilege of supporting him for life!

All hell broke loose. I watched the faces of his noble friends, Mother. They weren’t just snickering, they were laughing. Like it was some sort of huge joke. I left before they pronounced the sentence. I heard later that those who had voted for his innocence in the first phase of the trial had voted to execute him in the penalty phase. I was not surprised.

It took me a while to find the jail. By the time I arrived, they were all there in high dudgeon and had already convinced him that they had been “swindled” and “double crossed,” but not to worry because a pardon was the “easiest thing in the world to arrange” and they would see to it “immediately.” He believed them, Mother. The fool had just been condemned to death for their entertainment, and he still believed that their “clout” meant something. In fact, he was consoling THEM, telling THEM not to worry, as if their egos needed mending now that the strings they had tried to pull had flown apart in their dainty hands. It was obscene.

What does he see in them? Why was being in with them so goddam important?

Four weeks, Mother. Every night for four weeks I listened to them telling him, and telling themselves, that there were just a “few more details” to work out. Just a couple more people to “speak to” and the pardon would magically arrive and we’d all have a good laugh about all of this then, wouldn’t we? They were so earnest and sober, so intense and convincing, that even I halfway believed them. I almost forgot the rule, Mother, the cardinal rule of existence:

DON’T GET NOTICED

Don’t get noticed by the crowd, or the gods, or the enemy, or the sycophants, the sophists or the boss. But most of all don’t get noticed by the GOVERNMENT. EVER.

One night we were alone for just a little while. I suppose the strain of waiting and hoping had shifted me into a mental twilight. I must have breathed the rule in a sigh, in a whisper to myself, because he startled me when he asked what I meant. After I told him he laughed and said it was a good rule, but he had a better one: BE THE NOTICER. (So that was it. All along, that was it.) Then the gaggle began to dribble in. As they arrived, I searched each face with care, Mother, and I suddenly knew they were cowards living by my rule, but they had convinced him that they were incarnations of his rule. It was pathetic. As I left, I realized that if we waited for them, he would die. He had to escape.

The next morning I waylaid one of the worst of the lot of them in the alley behind the jail. His name is Crito. He’d laughed the loudest at the trial, and he’d been the one babbling about “imminent release” and “total vindication” for weeks. I simply told him that if he could not convince my husband to be on a certain hay wagon that would be parked outside the jail at moonrise tonight, then I would expose his part in the vandalism of the public statues here a few years ago. He was furious and demanded to know where I had heard such an outrageous lie. I didn’t tell him that he himself was the drunken source of the information; I just warned him that if he didn’t want to join my husband, he had better have him outside and on that wagon tonight.

When I arrived that night, I could hear them arguing. I have to hand it to old Crito, the goddam coward, he tried. But there was no convincing him. The “official discharge” was on the ship just outside the harbor. He would be released in three day’s time! Escape now was “out of the question.” As I eavesdropped the deep hopelessness of it all sank in. I turned the wagon around and went home. The boys thought they had had a grand adventure hiding under all that hay. I can still smell the sweetness of that wagon full of hay and the promise it held.

I did not make good my threats against Crito, Mother. They care too much about their damn statues here. They care more for them in their lifelessness than they do for the living. Crito tried. That was enough. I still care for the living, even if they are swine.

So: the next day came. The sun came up. The sun went down. The swarm arrived as I was saying goodbye to him. I refused to cry. Not one tear for the benefit of men whose sole ambition was to watch an old man die for their amusement. The only one who didn't rush right over to tell me how disconsolate, how outraged, how bereaved he was, was old Crito. I haven't seen hide nor hair of that one since our little chat that morning in the alley. Thank God.

They commenced to tell me how bravely he died. How he drank the hemlock without a shudder. I laughed out loud. I fed this man for fourteen years and they are telling me, ME, that he swallowed that disgusting brew with a "smile on his face." Why, he couldn't even chew willow bark for his arthritis without gagging and retching. I have seen him dry heave from the smell of moldy bread. Who do they think they are kidding here? I was his WIFE!

So now I am the "poor widow" and the riff-raff that did him in are showing up daily to see if they can "help." They figure I am their charge, so to speak. That the boys are their "responsibility," so to speak. I keep the boys away from them as best I can, for I do not intend them to listen to the revisionist history these devious scholars are already crafting. The boys are much too young to realize that their "uncles" are busy fabricating a host of good intentions to conceal their part in their father's death.

I should have driven that hay wagon straight to Thessaly from the jail that night. I know it would have been a shock to open the door and find four waifs standing there, one of whom has hurt you to the quick, but it would have spared me and the boys the incessant fawning we have had to endure from these "fine citizens." The charade continues to play itself out. For them. One of them, a young arrogant pimple-faced slacker had the gall to tell me he plans to "memorialize the life and death and times of" and to submit it in next year's festival of poets. And would I be so kind as to relate, say, the "gist" of our last hours together? I THREW HIM OUT. He complained to others of my "curtness." I can just hear them clucking and cooing over his wounded pride at the hands of the harpy-widow. Oh, the pains and trouble these liars will go through to preserve their "dignity."

And for what? For what, Mother? Another husband, another father, another clown goes to the gallows for ...what?

I am thirty-one. No longer young. I have three children to rear and protect and I am not going to play the part of the "poor widow" in their ever growing tissue of lies. No one will remember this fiasco in a year, but it has well-nigh ruined my life.

The writing of this letter has taken me longer than I intended. It is well past midday. I have neither food, nor a plan, for supper; the heat has probably wilted all the produce at the market. I dread the dusty, rocky climb to the Acropolis under the dead,

fixed stares of their abominable statues. But all the messengers leave from there and I must hire one today.

Please let me come home to Thessaly, Mother. My heart aches for honest affection and yearns to be rid of this city of statues whose eyes are glazed and lifeless from listening to men talking and talking and talking to no purpose, no end, without cease.

Let me come home, please, to you.

Your daughter,

Xanthippe

[Editor's note: The introductory note to this piece is integral to the work. In fact, the entire letter is the original creation of Ginger Osborn.]