

Marcus Aurelius

Maslow is taking an early morning ramble around the small New England college town where he grew up. He's surrounded by students on their way to class. They seem impossibly young. But when he was a *child*, they seemed enviably mature. He yearned to be a member of their tribe, not just another faculty brat.

Every morning, Maslow would walk through the campus on his way to elementary school. The memories are visceral:

The students are on their way to class.

He's on his way to third grade.

They carry thick textbooks under their arms or in green canvas bags.

He carries a spelling primer wotj a red plaid lunchbox.

They will soon be sitting around big tables, smoking cigarettes, and having deep conversations, maybe with his dad.

He'll be chained to a tiny maple desk, wrestling with smudgy penmanship (the curse of all lefties), crayons that refuse to draw the pictures in his mind's eye, and teachers who seem oblivious to the grown-up thoughts swirling inside his head.

After school, Maslow would often sit on the hill overlooking the practice fields, watching the lacrosse team scrimmage. The coach, a family friend, had found a kid-sized stick, and a few of the guys would toss the ball back and forth with him while they warmed up.

As he approaches that hill decades later, Maslow feels as if he's walking in his own footsteps. He pauses before a familiar statue—a man riding a horse with its right front leg raised. The man holds the reins with his left hand while his right reaches out, palm down, not a single tremor—the commander of an invisible army about to swarm across the fields below. The statue's distinctive gray-green coloring keeps Maslow shimmering

between past and present. He used to puzzle over the inscription, wondering why the “U’s” were “V’s,”: *Marcvs Avrelivs Antoninvs*.

Now he knows that color is called *verdigris*...the patina of weathered bronze. Now he knows that the statue isn’t of just any old guy on a horse, it’s the Roman Emperor and brilliant stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius. *Now* he knows that it was not miraculously carved right on the spot, but is a casting—the original is in Rome. *Now* he knows that there were no capital “u’s” in the Roman alphabet. They used “V” instead.

Still, he has to wonder if the knowledge he’s gained is anywhere near as valuable as the curiosity he’s lost.

Maslow walks around the base of the statue, examining details of construction, balance, proportion, and light that he wouldn’t have noticed as a kid. Back then he wouldn’t have been able to look away from the immovable face of the emperor, and the nobility of his horse, perfectly poised in mid canter.

He wishes he had a cigarette even though he no longer smokes. He wishes he had a cup of coffee although he’s already had two. He wishes he had a pen and paper to write down the memories that are racing past his mind’s eye:

Like the time he ran down this hill so fast he face-planted at the bottom and ended up in the Emergency Room with a nosebleed that just wouldn’t quit. Or the time he walked here after school with his 6th grade girlfriend so she could watch him tossing a lacrosse ball with the big guys. Or when he smoked his first joint here a few years later, different girl, staring up at the stars, overwhelmed by deep insights into the mysteries of the universe.

“Steady. Steady yourself.” The voice comes from above him as if it’s commanding the horse.

Maslow looks around, but there’s nobody nearby. An auditory hallucination. Unmistakable. As if spoken by someone right next to him. Not at all like a voice in his head.

In Aurelius's day he might have been considered an oracle. Today he might be considered mad.

“Doubt is truly a luxury you can ill afford.” The voice is rueful. A statement of fact. Not a warning.

Maslow stands by the side of the base and the familiar inscription—cool and gritty. His sense of time and space is growing increasingly fragile.

“Steady yourself...” the voice repeats.

Maslow takes a deep breath and looks around to get his bearings. The line of equally spaced trees that form an arc behind the statue? They were saplings when he was a kid. The statue's long sunrise shadow stretching across the field below? Sometimes he'd race his friend Peter to the end of it on their way to school. The bell that just started ringing at College Hall? That means classes will end in five minutes, just as they had ended with five minutes left fifty years before. He's marooned on timeless island in the midst of the here and now.

Maslow sits down on the pedestal and puts his head in his hands, hoping he looks more Socratic than psychotic. Aurelius comes into focus. They are sitting on their weary horses on the Palatine Hill at sunrise, surrounded by the mansions of Rome's elite. Just back from another campaign against the barbarian warriors sweeping down from the north and east. They contemplate the proud temples, monuments, and endless porticoes of Aurelius's falling empire, alone in the knowledge of just how fragile they are...and the cost of protecting them from their inevitable fate. To Maslow, it feels unspeakably tragic.

“No drama, my friend. It would be a distraction.”

Maslow no longer needs to suspend disbelief. The voice is simply stronger than his capacity to doubt.

“Good. We begin.”

Aurelius has the tonal range of an experienced orator—authoritative, but not pompous. And he’s talking not only to Maslow, but to the ages.

“Imagine as a young man you set out on a long journey, filled with dreams of mystery and adventure. You return years later. Wiser, more compassionate, eager to share your discoveries, curious to see how your city has changed. But nobody cares about your adventures. And nothing has changed at all.”

He sounds more wistful than bitter. Maslow feels an ancient scrim of sadness settle in his throat.

“Hold fast to your senses. At school, they teach the same subjects, in the same way, from the same texts. In the forum, they have the same arguments, about the same issues, with the same results. In the temples, they worship the same gods, with the same prayers, and the same intolerance for all who believe otherwise.”

The emperor lowers his voice to a sandy whisper: “So I gaze upon humanity today. The faces, costumes, weapons have changed. But the stories are all the same.”

Maslow sits up even straighter, making fine adjustments to the frequency so he can catch every word...*and* the ones not being said.

“I see the same ceaseless chasing after vanity and pride that drove my people mad with power. I see the same exaltation in others’ suffering that made our coliseums roar with bloodlust. I see the same insistence on putting personal gain before common good that brought down the many with the few.”

The images cascade past Maslow’s inner eye as if it were his own life passing before him.

“Indeed, I see your world through the spectral remains of my own profound melancholia...”

The words trigger a vivid memory. Maslow is in his thirties, pulling Aurelius’s *Meditations* at destiny’s random from a bookcase. Wrapped around dark thoughts, irrational resentments, and sobering cognac, he is unceremoniously dragged from his

brooding by the eloquent stoicism of this philosopher-king: “Let the harm done by another stay where the harm is done...” the historical Aurelius had written. And: “Men will keep doing the same things even if you burst in protest.”

“Yes. My words.” Aurelius acknowledges them with neither pride nor regret.

Maslow begins to nod his head and feels a tremor of anticipation and realization. The emperor’s words may still be brilliant and profound. But they are old. Aurelius is as stuck as the masses he has assailed for two thousand years. He has the same old complaints, the same old philosophy.

“Yes.” The emperor says the word as if admitting to a crime he’s been waiting to be accused of. “That is why we are here. It is time to move on.”

“We?” Maslow asks. “Who’s we?” He speaks the words out loud and quickly looks up to see if anyone is listening.

But Aurelius is gone. A thread falling out of a needle that’s punctured another realm. Maslow waits. His mind starts speculating. So he opens his eyes and returns to the world he’s known since a child. Buildings of brick, stone, and marble. Geometric walkways. Perfectly tended lawns with patches worn brown by impromptu sports and spontaneous protests.

His senses have a long history with this campus. But now it looks very, very unfamiliar.

There’s no time to wonder how the water becomes wine. We drink it.

There’s no time to figure out why the seas have parted. We cross them.