

TRIMALCHIO'S DIET

Talan Memmott

"Thanks for the light."

The restaurant is too crowded for a Wednesday. I don't see anyone I know.

We will, I will have to wait for the large round table, our table to be cleared. The party seated there is either finished with dessert or hasn't even ordered yet. They're drinking coffee.

Cloud will show up any second now and we will order beers at the bar. I'll order vodka-soda and Cloud will have an American beer. We will discuss what we will discuss tonight. I'll buy the first round, and the second and our conversation will drift toward women, girls on campus, in our classes, in the restaurant. It was Cloud who told me, "We make art to get laid." He's a mathematician... He's an Artist... After making this statement Cloud always goes on to describe his latest project, explaining how he expects to "make some art chick" through his labors, to seduce through the produced object, through the act of producing it - the spectacle, the labor. (He wants to be Schnabel because this is '87 and he's a big *)

Minutes later, Mimi and Dug will arrive. Cloud and I will hear them approaching the restaurant from many blocks away -- Mimi's Volkswagen has seen better days -- it sputters and pings like a remote control airplane and leaves plumes of rich blue smoke in its wake. Cloud and I look at each other, take a swig from our drinks, and simultaneously say, "Mimi."

Dug is not Cloud's type so he's trying to keep his attraction, his affair with her secret. Dug threatens Cloud's identity, rehabilitates his history. Cloud has usually been attracted to women on the verge of bursting, so filled with anticipation of abandon they seem beyond. Dug's demure behavior, her near invisibility at social events is more along the lines of what you might think I would find attractive -- rodent wallflower- thin and smallish, with overbite and squeaky voice, she smells clean but her hair lacks luster. The librarian - with a brain organized like Midwest farmland

seen from an airplane window at 30,000 feet. But now they are together, Cloud and Dug, and these fields are left untended.

She's here now. Dug taps me on the shoulder and quietly says, "Hi." When I turn to face her, she is already looking at the floor.

"Where's Cloud." Dug asks, and I fumble for a second thinking he is here beside me because of what I had just been writing. Petrol is standing behind her, hiding. She's with Petrol? He's never been to any of these gatherings... As a student he's certainly never shown any hint of brilliance... He's dark in a goofy "Goth" way, and he draws quite well, I'll give him that... With Dug? How do they know each other? I'll ignore this. Looking at them together is like looking into a dark and silent night and an equally silent day. Dug says, "Let's go find Mimi. Bye snob." And this day and night disappear.

I turn away from the bar to get-up and join the others. Looking around the room, I don't see them. Maybe they are outside smoking, or have gone to use the restroom?.. All of them?

I walk around the restaurant and cannot spot them anywhere so I go back to the bar, returning to the same seat. There's no one here but strangers. My drink is gone so I order a glass of red wine, Pinot Noir.

The party seated at the large round table was either finished when I began this story, or an hour or two has passed because they are gone. Our table is clear and I am ushered to it. Seated. Alone. Still waiting.

"Where have you been?" I know what this skip means for the future.

The table is cluttered with bottles, glasses half-empty-half-full. The group is larger than normal, with Petrol crashing the party and, now, a surprise visit by the Dean of Humanities. The Dean, whom can be nothing but an interloper in this "youth" scene, assumes the

authoritarian position at the table -- seated at, becoming the head of the table. The big roundtable is now rectangular in shape -- square, perfectly square. I fill my glass with some red wine to match the droplets at the bottom of my empty glass and peruse the half-eaten tid-bits and finger-foods spread about the table...

Things are louder. Mimi is laughing at some rude joke the Dean has just barked in her ear. Cloud and Dug are trading spit and sucking down gin and tonics, Dug's drinking a gin and tonic and Cloud is having an American beer. It is usually Cloud who sets the tone for these events, but tonight he is quiet, has deferred to the Dean, to the color gray, to the ruin at the head. Through this portal we have all entered a hazy (square) garden of sorts -- insulated, isolated from the other patrons, the surroundings of the restaurant. Somehow transported through our enchantment with the "credentialed", to hope -- choosing to look back toward a golden age and pretend at its liberties. My head is pounding from the wine, already.

I think to myself, the moment I recognize this aspect, that in this scenario, in our adoration of the Dean there is a displacement and confusion of terms - credential with classical... The garden we have entered, for sure, is that of Epicurus; but we enter through the desperate sublimation of this 64 year old fat guy, twice divorced, alcoholic - namely the Dean. I question the fantasy.

Stealing another's nostalgia...

KOMOS : 1

(The setting should be blue of sky and the air should be filled with the sound of bees... Oddly set columns teeter out of balance, crumbling around the scene... The stage is strewn with bunches of grapes, ivy vines and concrete... Center stage there is, of course, a chalkboard and a podium...)

(Dean Silenos enters dragging a rope behind him, Once Dean Silenos reaches center stage, he begins tugging at the rope, pulling it toward him. The rope begins to tighten - the rope becomes tauter as Silenos pulls - there is something pulling against him...)

DEAN SILENOS: I am your master. I am your master

(stomping his feet, repeating this again and again in the manner of a protesting 4 year old. The columns are shaking.)

(Dean Silenos continues pulling at the rope dragging onstage the wrangled Zagreus, Persephone, Dionysos, and Ariadne. This bound group is followed by a satyr, kicking at their feet, grunting and making animal sounds..)

(notes:

1.the Dean should be costumed to replicate the Sileni depicted on Ancient Greek kraters and vases...

2.the captive "retinue" should be dressed in contemporary youth fashions...

3.the satyr must be small in stature, no more than 5 foot 3, and be fashioned with a necktie...

4.the satyr could be more than one...)

The Dean has bought another round and is telling us a story -- teaching, lecturing, the unstoppable authority... He is orating upon his philosophy of education which he prefaces with the ridiculous statement, "Live and learn..." I'm thinking -DUH... What else is there? The he says, "...save..." I'm thinking, while the Dean is speaking, bellied up to the table, I'm listening and thinking so I am thinking more of this effort than of what I am thinking...

To clarify -- I am scanning the scene with my eyes, looking directly into the faces of each and every person at the table -- I am thinking; first, I should be listening to the Dean; second, I will listen to the Dean and critique his words as they fall out of his mouth, let them hit as they may and see what sort of shrapnel they produce; third, drink more of his wine eat more of his food...

As I am thinking this, I am thinking; first, I must organize this process, this simultaneity of thought; second, I consider the metaphor of the CPU for a moment, the future as acceleration, multi-tasking, processing everything, then abandon this as silly and move back into critiquing the Dean's words. His story...

I'm looking at his hands, pudgy fingers, and their movement as he speaks. The Dean sees me doing this and hides his hands beneath the big round (square) table. He's looking at me now, as he speaks, and seems distracted, self-conscious... He is telling his story to Mimi. She is the reason he is at the table. I look away and reach for the glass of wine before me. As I put it to my mouth Dug screams, "Hey, that's mine."

KOMOS : 2

DEAN SILENOS: Blah, blah blah blah blah... Right? Blah, blah blah blah
blah... And, again...

(The Dean repeats this phrase at least twenty times, wasting everyone's time. Between repetitions the Dean releases the rope, walks over to the chalkboard and marks it with a simple vertical line. Ideally these acts are repeated until there is some protestation from the audience.)

DEAN SILENOS: The problem of the Sophomore is that they have too much, know too much, are too free... Cynical... This puts higher education at risk. We are risking the loss of institutional values - the college torn apart and set adrift. I don't think that if you think you have a future as an academic you can ignore this problem. If you think you're going to become some kind of star --you're heading for dis-aster.

(Meanwhile, the captive retinue drinks, eats, nods, and shakes their heads. More and more they listen less and less...)

Everyone is drunk and trying to look as if they are not... Cloud is squinting as he considers everything (nothing) the Dean is saying. He's putting his hand to his chin to stroke his beard... Cloud looks serious, like he's thinking hard about the issue at hand, the Dean's statement about our threatened future. I'm thinking that Cloud is about to say something. His lips are parted and he is no longer looking toward the Dean; rather, he is scanning the tabletop writing the speech he is about to make, organizing his rebuttal (But, but, but...). I'm waiting, looking at Cloud rather than the Dean, listening to the Dean who is now asking Mimi a personal question. I can wait no longer for Cloud to begin his speech and turn my attention toward Mimi in anticipation of her response to the Dean's question. It is unclear to me what the Dean has asked and I am waiting for Mimi's answer so I can know the question. Mimi's lips are parted and she is no longer looking at the Dean; rather, she is scanning the tabletop writing the speech she is about to make, organizing her response.(pounce...)

"Well... Ya know..." Mimi answers. The waitress is walking by and Mimi flags her down. "Can we get some desserts here. And, some coffee."

The waitress starts naming off the available desserts, "chocolate-macadamia torte, raspberry-vanilla cheesecake, strawberry-banana spumoni..." Mimi orders one of each. "We'll share..." All the desserts are hyphenated -- chocolate-macadamia, raspberry-vanilla, strawberry-banana -- and I start to think, in my current state, that I should write a paper on this phenomenon - The Flavor Complex, then abandon the concept as silly and move back into observing the people at the table.

The table is silent. The Dean has finished. There is nothing so I know what everyone is thinking... Reversing positions on our shared future -- the possibility of becoming that Academic Shining Star... A constellation... To rise above all the obvious rubble, not to rebuild and re-establish, not to claim victory, but to move all, everything at once into the future... When this happens, everyone in the world knows it... And, some even study this future origin, the original big bang of the next big idea... In this anxious moment there is only one perfectly social and agreeable action -- deflect. Sinking privately...

The coffees are here but no one is drinking them. I can't resist, so I reach for the cup of chicory enriched brew. It's too hot and tastes the way wet cardboard smells. The Dean leans over toward Mimi and asks her if he can get a cigarette. I take another sip. Mimi doesn't smoke, but surprisingly she pulls a pack of cigarettes from her purse, grabs two, raising both of them to her mouth. The Dean fumbles for a book of matches, feeling at every pocket, but he is too late and Mimi is already handing him the lit cigarette. Dug's half-asleep, in a drunken trance where everything is sexy and blurry. She's resting her head on Cloud's arm while he strokes her cheek. Cloud pushes her hair away from her face and I am amused by the stupid grin she wears - as if about to drool.

I start feeling queasy from the crappy coffee. The desserts arrive and this is too much for me. The mounds of sugar... The idea of chocolate... I take another sip of coffee and its bitter-stale flavor of makes me gag. Dug wakes up and is looking at the array of desserts before her. She

grabs a fork and divides a rather large mouthful from the chocolate-macadamia torte. The sight of this almost black cake entering her pink mouth makes my head spin. Petrol is digging into the spumoni. The cheesecake remains untouched.

This nauseating spectacle, and it's absolutely too-sweet-too-rich objects sends shooting pains directly to my right temple. I do not have to ingest these sweet frosted cakes; imagining me eating them is enough for me to feel their effects. And, beyond the consideration of the hyphenation of these desserts -- chocolate-macadamia, strawberry-banana -- I am now overwhelmed by the evening seen in retrospect - the hyphenated glory of tonight's Trimalchian diet, the strand produced by the presence of the Dean.

*Vodka-Soda-Vodka-Soda-pretzel-Vodka-Soda-
Peanut-Garlic Bread-Pinot Noir-Prawn Cocktail-
Pinot Noir(?) -Hummus-Black Bean Chili-
Duck Sausage-Pinot Noir(?) -Smoked Salmon-
Waterzooi-Pinot Noir(?) -Grapes and Cheese-Coffee*

At first, like an earthquake, I feel it coming in an awkward warm surge, pressure building in my ears, behind my eyes. Then, a thunderous metallic crash from deep within my skull, as if my head's been rung - struck with a hammer, lightly with a wooden mallet. The pounding continues, gets stronger, reverberating throughout my body.

What gastronomical resources I have provided... The wealth is too much -- as Hephaestus returns the surplus, I am washed over by the elemental.

Waves of nauseating smoke spin, rising from Hephaestus' deepest kilns - sending seasick signals to destinations beyond.

Migraine and Bad Digestion are siblings.

I try to hold these negative life-threatening signals back -- plugging the volcano with clenched fists. I do not want to make anyone have to see what is happening... There are

choices to be made immediately! Progressively condensed - tightening my arms, my shoulders, my back to meet at the base of my neck... With the plud-plud-plud of cracking vertebra, I tilt my head to vent this building agony.

My face sizzles from this action and I free my fingers to rub my forehead. With my head bent forward, I look-up around the Restaurant to observe the many anonymous witnesses to my episode and there before my throbbing eyes stands Lolli -- looking at me that way - the way that sends stars shooting. My pulse begins to race and the deep thunderous pounding resumes within my skull. Though my pulse is quickened, the actual shockwave from seeing Lolli starts so low in frequency it takes time to fully form. I try to smile because I think I might need help.

Lolli's face is changing at the sight of me. I can almost see concern there, pity or something -- like she might be driven to action. It is a phenomenal site to witness the submissive's discovery of weakness in authority. A chance. I press my fist into my gut, just below my sternum, to push back the chaos -- invisible. Lolli walks quickly toward the table, sits down and introduces herself to everyone as, "Lolli, Fred's new friend." (the spot at which the back becomes the neck, becomes the sun) She rubs my leg and reaches her arm around my shoulders. (touching the sun with cool hands) She's looking at me that way and everyone is at a loss, excluded from this convalescence - silent. Lolli looks across the table and everyone looks back as if ghouls in the shadows. Her presence and my condition have inhibited these experts and now they look as old as the Dean, like doctors, or priests waiting to administer the last rites, waiting for it to be over so they can act.

It is late. I'm going blind and must leave. I drink some ice water, and Lolli is looking at me that way. She is so sad, feeling so sorry for me and I am feeling sorry for her for being so sad - sick. I say my goodnights and get up from the table. Everyone seems to follow, packing their notebooks and precious journals into their bookbags.

We're in the parking lot, Lolli's on my arm. It's a warm night and there are lots of people out. Still, I manage to get a chill and Lolli notices this, giving an "oooh" that says, "poor Fred." She's rubbing my arm now and I realize that we are walking toward her car. I can hear the voices of my colleagues behind me, laughing and chattering away.

I am in no state to say no to a ride. I'd rather not drive. I can get my car later. I don't have a car. Lolli will take me straight home, yes. My reasoning is fuzzy as I belch the nauseating flavor of coffee mixed with garlic, sending an acidic vapor clear into my sinuses. I sit down in Lolli's car and before she shuts the door I'm already rolling down the window. She says she'll be right back, she's going to get me some water. I say fine. Leaning back in the seat, I close my eyes.

I can hear the voices of my colleagues getting louder, closer to the car.

"She's cute." I don't even open my eyes.

"Where'd you meet her?" Lolli is a mystery. I'd like to keep it that way for the moment and just say, "Uhhh errr."

"We're all going to the Big Bed. Come. Both of you." I'm thinking "No!" and then Lolli walks up to the car.

"Hi Lolli, I was just telling dead Fred here that we're heading over to Mimi's for a nightcap. You should come." Lolli's saying "Yes!" and now I'm opening my eyes. Lolli's smiling like she's just won the lottery. My head is pounding at the prospect, at what will happen next. I know how these things go...

Candles are lit in the tiny attic apartment, the sharp angles of the ceiling cast shadows with abrupt edges cutting off halves of faces and bodies. The Big Bed is placed in the alcove, under a circular window and is lit by three halogen desk lamps.

The Bed sticks out into the middle of the room and is the primary focus of the space - covered over with comforters, blankets and pillows. Ten, fifteen students gather for Mimi's little seminars, jumping in to the Big Bed as soon as they arrive... When Mimi gives the go-ahead the class starts touching one another... Believing creative energy is activated by the exchange... Mimi insists all action in the Big Bed be focused on the end-object, to exact from the entire spectrum of consciousness what it was they wished to make.

The seminars are silly -- everyone doe-eyed, caressing one another, feeling fabric more than flesh. Wool sweaters, cotton T-shirts, denim, polyester... All these stand between, so stimulation is directed elsewhere.- toward the objet d'art. The idea is that creative sparks and charges are somehow transmitted one to the other through these fondlings, opening ideas to collision for the benefit of all.... Mimi claims that the creative charge is conducted into, and held at the body in the static electricity of the participants' clothing.

The truth is, that although Mimi pretends at being worldly her seminars and her small apartment defy her. The Big Bed is actually rather small and nothing ever does get made. Everyone gets drowsy and falls asleep or gets over-stimulated and is asked to leave.

As we drive, Lolli laughs quietly and at every stoplight gives me a deep, open mouth kiss. The kisses are more resuscitative than romantic. When the light turns green, she resumes driving, licking her lips, and complaining I taste like raspberry, coffee and garlic. I tell her she tastes like cigarettes and vanilla and she smiles. I am sure that she is thinking the Big Bed

to be this horizon from which anything can appear, a plane from which anything could spring, that when Mimi said "come over" she was implying some sort of crossing. A crossing into a space of open ended potential... Lolli is open. I'm just nauseous. I stick my head out the window to let the warm wind blow in my face but it doesn't help.

We pull up in front of Mimi's building. It's easy to find parking because this is a rental neighborhood, a student ghetto near the campus -- students can't afford cars. Lolli takes a deep breath, smiles and looks me in the eye... She is overflowing with anticipation, anticipating going under, sensing beyond sense in the Big Bed. She has heard of these seminars, from friends and initiates, and its suspect exclusivity makes her want it all the more... She's seeing everyone touching everyone, everything connected, the winds of the world filled with creative bliss, free and lazy concepts, she won't have to do anything, just touch and be touched... Her eyes are watering and her smile is huge...

I say, "you know, these things, there's no nudity. No sex - if that's what you're thinking." She looks straight ahead and loses her smile. She's thinking -- I can tell because I am trying to think what she's thinking.

"I know."

Lolli opens the car door, jumps out and slams the door behind her. I shudder and my head begins to throb. She looks back through the windshield and yells, "What are you waiting for?" I open the car door, wondering where this is going and more importantly why...

As I exit the car I notice my shoe is untied.