

Laocoön at Dinner - Amira, Year 12, NSW

It's like a museum. The portraits lining the entrance stare down at the living with discerning eyes. He is eight years old in one of them, watching as he, now twenty-two, holds my hand. His eyes, brighter than they are now, examine me as though I were the one trapped behind the glass.

His mother has made a lovely home, lovelier than my own, with its warm, honeyed accents. We exchange pleasantries, our words carefully wrapped in light self-deprecation. All the while, his hands grip onto mine so tightly, the whites of his knuckles strain through skin.

Everyone loves their mother, I ignorantly assumed. This conception was shaped by my own reality: a mother who dotes but doesn't expect.

It was an afternoon made memorable by a smattering of clouds set against a lavender haze. We sat on a hilltop with the city restlessly lying at our feet. With a long sigh, he spoke of his mother—a woman who was her father's daughter before she married and who remained in chrysalis through wifedom and motherhood. After her husband, his father, had died, she latched onto him; needy, anxious, possessive.

"You don't eat enough," she observes.

"I'm fine, Mum," he sighs.

There's a discomfort both of us feel, but she is oblivious to. He is unraveling—thread by thread, his composure fraying, his silence pooling like ink between us. He is nervous, and it vibrates between us.

How will she react when he tells her he's moving out?

"He's always been like this," she continues, turning to me now, her smile suggesting that I should grasp the depth of her words. "So responsible. Even as a boy, he never complained or asked for anything. I suppose I've always leaned on him, trusting him to handle things I should have taken on myself."

I think of a child I once saw in a supermarket, red-faced and wailing, his small fists slamming against the tile as his mother, exasperated, sighed and knelt to console him. She did not berate him for his outburst, nor did she demand his composure—she simply let him feel. A flicker of something foreign twists in my chest as I glance at him now, jaw locked, shoulders squared.

He has never known that kind of permission.

He stiffens, his fork wavering in his grip, the tines scraping against the porcelain with a sound too sharp, too strained. His mother's smile flickers, a hairline fracture forming in its polished surface, as if the very fabric of their carefully constructed facade is beginning to unravel.

"What do you mean?" she asks, her voice clipped, the warmth draining from it like cooling embers. It's the kind of tone that brooks no uncertainty, one that masks vulnerability beneath a veneer of control. But the tension is there, coiling beneath her words, tightening its hold.

She exhales, shaking her head with an indulgent chuckle, as if to dismiss the moment entirely.

"You don't know him like I do. He's always been strong. Reliable. He's never let anything break him." There's pride in her voice, but something else lingers beneath it, a quiet assertion, a claim she has no intention of surrendering. His strength is not his own. It is hers, shaped by her need, wielded as proof that he has never faltered, never strayed, never belonged to himself.

A muscle in his jaw ticks, the only betrayal of the conflict beneath his carefully composed exterior. Beneath the table, his leg presses against mine, subtle yet insistent, a warning meant to tether me to silence. But the words are already rising in me, sharp-edged and unyielding, threatening to fracture the fragile equilibrium.

His mother blinks, her expression flickering through emotions too rapid to name. And then, like a child denied what she believes is rightfully hers, her face crumples. A breath shudders through her, and suddenly, the room tilts under the weight of something vast and petulant, something wholly unmotherly.

"I don't understand," she says, her voice breaking, brittle with disbelief. "After everything..."

The silence stretches, thick and suffocating. He exhales sharply, the scrape of his chair against the floor slicing through the charged air as he pushes back from the table.

"Enough," he mutters, his voice hoarse, strained. But there's no finality to it, only resignation. His plans for independence, for autonomy, wither in the face of the grief she has so effortlessly weaponised.

He won't leave. He never could.

He drives me home in silence. The road stretches ahead, dark and empty, the hum of the engine the only sound between us. His grip on the wheel is tight, knuckles pale against the leather, but his face is unreadable, a mask perfected over years of quiet submission.

I glance at him, searching for some sign that tonight has changed something, that he has loosened the binds that hold him. But as the streetlights flicker across his face, I see it, the weight settling back onto his shoulders, the invisible tether drawing him home.

When he pulls up outside my house, he exhales, a breath that carries no relief, only inevitability.

He will go back. He will always go back.

As I step out, the realisation lands heavy in my chest. The futility was never in his escape but in us. Because one day, the chain wrapped around his ankle will find its way around mine.