

# Privilege

by [Edward Tyndall](#) (April 2026)



Achelous and Hercules, detail (Thomas Hart Benton, 1947)

**When I got the call from my mom, I'd been out doing some high-altitude trail running in the Enchantments. I was chasing that endorphin rush after weeks of six-by-tens at my tech startup. Asgard Pass has this gnarly stretch, almost pure boulder, really pop-eye in sections. I was grinding up that, feeling alive, when my cell rang. It really killed my vibe to look at my phone and see my mom's photo come up. In it, she's sitting in the living room of our family brownstone in Greenwich Village, holding a giant glass of sweet tea toward the camera in a ridiculous sort of forced perspective. Her obsession with sweet tea is some kind of homage to her Southern roots. Personally, I never cared for either—sweet tea or her Southern roots.**

“Hello,” I said, trying to sound as out of breath as possible.

“Hey honey,” she said. “Did I interrupt you?”

Honestly, I knew she really didn't care because she immediately dropped the neutron bomb on me before I could answer, reminding me that my great-grandmother, GG, desperately needed to see me, and that I was the last of the great-grandchildren to visit her to receive my share of the family heirlooms she was giving away. I told my mom that I was grinding hard at work, and that I was just now getting my condo together in Capitol Hill, and that everything was really ragged-out for me, but she reminded me that GG was one hundred and five, and this really was her last wish, so I conceded. I hung up, and I was filled with dread. The Enchantments lost their majesty, and I didn't even finish the run. I slunk back down Asgard Pass and crawled into my Tesla, crushed by the thought of setting foot in the South Carolina Lowcountry for the first time since I was a child.

My mother's family had lived in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina, since the late 1600s and were once the owners of a rice and indigo plantation until Union naval raids destroyed most of it during the Civil War. GG still lived there, the last of the line to cling to the land. My father, on the other hand, was the heir of a Manhattan shipbuilding dynasty. His family fortune had evolved into finance, and now my father mostly spent his time giving to charitable causes and attended social events with my mother. I knew my mom secretly looked at my father's money as vulgar, and her own legacy as aristocratic. You could just tell by her demeanor, like she was French royalty forced to concede to the Jacobins. I guess that's one way to look at the legacy of the South—the wrong way, if you ask me: moonlight, magnolias, and brutal oppression.

I sat in the Tesla for an hour looking at South Carolina on the car's giant display. I know what you're thinking, but I

had gotten the Tesla before Elon went fascist, and it really is good for the environment—which is a primary concern of mine and should be for everyone. After a lot of soul-searching, I decided that I was going to take two weeks off and drive to South Carolina through the American Southwest, just try and find myself and maybe find America along the way.

I drove back to my place in Seattle and planned out my route: Oregon, California, Arizona, New Mexico, and then Texas before heading into the Southeast. The charging stations were reliable until Texas, but then it was anybody's guess. That's me, though. If you want to change the world, you have to take risks. I sent my employee Cadence an explanation for my departure and instructed her to keep things moving forward while I was gone. Then I hopped in the Tesla and put Rain City in my rearview.

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Texas—my God. I had cut down to Highway 90 through a terrible hellscape of heat and barren rock. I could see dead mules laying out by the distant railroad tracks in places, refugees from the long-forgotten pack mule days. Everywhere I stopped, the people were so fat, and the food was awful. I'd been driving through that barren land for hours when I finally ran out of electric charge and coasted into the Teepee Motel off Highway 90. At the Teepee Motel all the rooms are shaped like Native American housing. I'm not kidding. This exists. The logo is a racist trope of a Native person in a full war bonnet. I almost barfed in my mouth when I realized there were no charging stations within 100 miles of the place, and that I would have to stay there while I figured out what to do next.

I stepped out of the car into the blazing heat. I usually don't run the AC in my car, but out in Texas I had to make an exception. In truth, I almost felt like my subconscious was trying to keep the vibe of Texas out. I surveyed the surroundings. Across the street was a Hispanic restaurant run

out of an old adobe house, and next to that, a used car lot with five or six piece-of-shit trucks in a dirt lot. Real gas guzzlers. I worked up my courage and walked into the motel office, shocked to see a young Indigenous woman at the check-in counter.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said. "Checking in?"

"I think so," I said.

"How many nights?" she asked.

"I'm thinking two. I need to figure out how to get my car charged, and I don't have any cell service."

"Oh, there's no cell service out here. No internet either," she said with a wry smile.

"Do you have a landline?" I asked.

"Sure," she said.

She craned her neck and looked at my car through the front window.

"Can't you just plug it into an outlet?"

"It would take days," I said.

She was kind enough to let me use the landline, and I called the nearest mechanic, who was about two hours away in Del Rio, Texas. I was hoping he could tow me to a charging station there. I got voicemail and left a message. Then I asked the girl behind the counter what her name was, and she told me it was Priscilla. I guess my face must have registered surprise.

"Did you think it'd be Running Bear or something?" she asked.

"No," I said, embarrassed.

We looked at each other for an uncomfortable moment.

“Look, Priscilla, I appreciate your help. I also just want to acknowledge that I’m on the ancestral, traditional, and unceded lands of whatever Native tribes lived here. These tribes have called this landscape home for countless generations before the arrival of white settler colonialists—”

“What do you want me to do with that?” she said, interrupting.

“I don’t know,” I said. I was beginning to sweat.

“Look, do you own a house?” she asked.

“I have a condo in Capitol Hill in Seattle,” I said. “It’s in an amazing neighborhood, really walkable with a ton of diversity.”

“Why don’t you just give me that and we’ll call it even?” she said.

I shook my head laughing as I picked up the keys to teepee number six.

“You’re too much, Priscilla,” I said. “Let me know if you want to grab something to eat later. My treat.”

When I opened the door to teepee number six, there was a heart-shaped bed in the middle of the room covered in what I prayed was faux buffalo hide, but when I touched it, it was real. The walls were decorated with garish oil paintings of western scenes—cowboys, Native Americans—all doing stereotypical western things. In the corner, on a beat-up wooden nightstand, a black-and-white TV was playing old westerns.

I lay on the bed and ran my hands over the buffalo hide, thinking about Ken Burns’s series on the extermination of the American bison. I was haunted by the images of all those buffalo skulls piled up on the prairie—thousands of them.

After a while I realized the TV was on some kind of loop. I could turn it down but not off, and the plug was hardwired into the wall, so I was basically stuck with it. It felt like I was being punished for something. It was hot as hell, and I tried to crank up the AC, but only warm air blew weakly from the vents.

I lay there for a few hours—no internet connection, no books, nothing, just raw-dogging it. I honestly thought I was going to cry. I began to wonder who I was, and what, in the existential sense, I was doing. Around five o'clock I was startled by a knock at my door, and when I opened it, Priscilla was standing there holding a bottle of tequila and a rifle in a leather-fringed case.

"You bored?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Any word from the mechanic in Del Rio?"

"Not yet," she said. "Want to go shoot stuff and eat tamales?"

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Priscilla led me out into the desert, and we passed the bottle of tequila back and forth. It was the worst thing I'd ever tasted. Cheap, biting, soul-eviscerating. Finally, we reached what looked to be the remnants of a ghost town, a few dilapidated shacks. The one we stopped in front of was super creepy. It had dismembered baby dolls all over the porch. Some were peeking out of the windows; others stuffed in 1930s-style suitcases in the yard. There were decaying parasols scattered around, their metal frames twisted and bent. I was really freaked out, and it did occur to me that Priscilla was going to murder me—which, honestly, I wouldn't have blamed her for, given how things had gone down over the past hundred and fifty years.

BANG.

She fired the rifle and blew a baby doll's head to smithereens.

POW. POW. POW.

Every time she fired, I flinched. I just kept taking swigs of the tequila to calm my nerves. Finally, she passed the rifle to me.

"Do it!" she said. "You're a killer!"

I hesitated.

"We're all just killers!" she screamed.

"I don't know how. I've never fired a gun," I said.

Priscilla moved behind me and helped me shoulder the rifle. I could feel her body pressing against me. She moved her finger over mine on the trigger.

KAPOW! A baby doll's torso shattered into a million pieces.

"Fuck you, baby doll!" Priscilla screamed.

POW!

I was drunk and laughing. I could hardly aim.

"Just shoot," she said.

POW!

The muzzle flashed, rocking into my arm, as warped antique windows exploded. I was confused and hot and scared. To my horror, I could tell I was getting aroused.

POW, POW, POW, POW! CLICK. CLICK.

Finally, we were out of bullets. Priscilla took the rifle from me and ran up to the house and started crushing baby doll skulls with the rifle butt. Secretly, and I'm ashamed to admit

this, I was hoping she'd scalp one, but she didn't. I followed and ripped off little heads, wishing I could light the parasols on fire. Finally, we collapsed in a heap—drunk and laughing and exhausted.

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We sat in the Mexican restaurant staring at Highway 90 and trying to keep the flies off our tortilla chips. When the obese Hispanic lady took our order, I had no idea what she was saying. I don't speak Spanish, which was embarrassing for me. Priscilla ordered for us both and when the tamales arrived, I made the mistake of trying to eat mine with the corn husk still on. Priscilla laughed and then all the other people in the restaurant started laughing so hard I thought they'd piss themselves. How was I to know? I'd never had a tamale with a corn husk before. Priscilla then asked if I wanted sour cream to dip it in.

"Sure," I said, and everyone laughed even harder.

We sat there for a while, half-drunk, eating our tamales when two giant pickup trucks pulled up and six men got out, all covered in dust. They had goggles dangling around their necks and looked like something out of a Mad Max movie.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Roughnecks," she said.

"What's a Roughneck?"

"Oilfield workers."

"Oh my God," I said. "Oh my God." I could feel my hands shaking.

We finished our tamales while the Roughnecks got drunk on Modelo beer and polished off vulgar plates of nachos stacked with greasy beef. The more they drank, the louder they got,

and I felt compelled to confront them for what they were doing to the planet. At one point I swear they looked at my Tesla across the street and started laughing. I just felt so humiliated and disgusted.

Finally, I went into the bathroom, looked at myself in the mirror, and teared up. There was a sign in there that said: No washing engine parts in the sink. I felt so small, lost on Highway 90 with Priscilla and the blown-apart baby dolls and the Roughnecks—I wanted to go back out there and stand up to them, to make them see what they were doing to the earth and to everyone around them, but I couldn't. Instead, I just walked back and sat down quietly while coming to terms with the fact that deep down inside, I was probably a coward.

The next day I walked across the street and sold my Tesla for pennies on the dollar to the man who owned the squalid used car lot. He said he had no way of knowing if the Tesla would run, and that there wasn't much of a market out there for a Tesla even if it did, and in fact, a person might get an ass-whipping for driving a Tesla out there. I didn't care—I just had to get out of there. I told him I'd take whatever he'd offer, and we had a deal.

I thanked Priscilla for everything and used the landline to order an Uber to drive me from West Texas to Murrells Inlet. When the driver showed up, he was an Iranian man named Omid who hardly spoke any English. I didn't care. I needed the silence to think and to heal from whatever had just happened to me. As we pulled away, I looked back and could see Priscilla cleaning the dust-covered windows of the Teepee Motel, and the Native American head staring off over the West Texas desert.

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I slept on and off over the course of the drive—through Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and on and on—like I was trapped in a

lard-soaked fever dream. We stopped in diners sometimes and ate fried food with salt and more salt. Omid had kind eyes and tried to make friendly expressions at me, but I just felt so bad about everything, I could hardly reciprocate. I imagined how hard it must have been for him, a stranger in a strange land with all the nativism and Islamophobia, and now he had to drive this depressed white man a thousand miles through the armpit of America.

Finally, I woke, and we were pulling up the long, sandy driveway to the ruins of GG's plantation home. Off to the left I could see the marshes and the abandoned rice fields where the slaves had worked among the alligators and yellow fever. The live oaks that once lined the drive were mostly dead now, cut to rotting stumps. Some remained, but they looked sick, like they would topple over with the next hurricane and decay into that guilt-sewn soil.

I thanked Omid and was sure to give him as big a tip as I could afford, which I'm sure he must have been happy with. I watched him for a long time as his car drove away and disappeared around the bend, and I was left to stand amidst the ghostly Spanish moss dangling from the trees. I looked up at the crumbling Doric columns that had once adorned the sprawling façade of the plantation home before it had fallen into a mangled heap. Beyond the ruins I could see the modest home that GG now lived in, its windows looking out at the destroyed mansion. I made my way around the ruins to her front door. I stood on her little porch and summoned all my courage before knocking.

For a while, I heard someone rummaging around inside, which made the anticipation even worse. Finally, the door opened, and I was met with a burst of stale air. GG stood before me. She was about four foot nine, her back so hunched she had to crane her neck up to see me, like some sort of ghoulish animal. She wore a tobacco-colored shawl, and her skin looked paper-thin, almost opaque.

"Come in, come in," she said in her Lowcountry drawl, and I reluctantly entered the dark house.

Soon we were both sitting at a giant mahogany table, as black as cypress water, that filled the dining room, a relic of the old plantation house. It dominated the room with its heavy black wood, and only the chairs at one side could be pulled out because the others were hemmed in by the room's white walls. The table was covered with chipped china and tarnished silver.

"This china and silver were purchased in 1861 by your great-great-great-grandfather, Captain Hampton Beauregard Murrell," she said, "just before the start of the War Between the States. He gave it as a present to his daughter Augusta on her wedding day, and it has been a treasure of our family ever since."

I looked at the china and silver and couldn't help but feel sorry for GG—for how sad her treasure really looked to an outsider, especially one with a master's degree.

"This is but a small part of the original pattern," she explained, "because I've divided it up among the great-grandchildren, and some has been broken over the years, and much of the best silver was taken by the Yankee raiders," she said.

"Well, thank you," I said. "I'll cherish my small part of it."

"You were always my favorite of the great-grandchildren, ever since you came to visit as a young boy and threatened Mr. Vandrose with a tiny toy hatchet I gave you. I was so proud of you. I remember thinking, *It's good to have a man around to drive off the speculators,*" she said.

"I don't remember that," I said, "but I'm glad I could help."

"There's something else," she said.

"Oh?" She picked up a tarnished silver service bell and rang it. A moment later, a very dark-complexioned black man in his thirties walked through the door from the kitchen. He carried what looked to be an antique false leg, the cotton around the top where it fitted to the nub a sickly yellow.

*Oh, dear God, I thought.*

"This leg has been passed down from generation to generation. It was the leg of Captain Hampton Beauregard Murrell himself after he lost his God-given leg at the battle of Cold Harbor. It's the custom of the family to drink from it—champagne in particular—whenever one of our line is married," she said. "I want you to have it as I'm almost positive the rest of the great-grandchildren are homosexuals."

The thought of drinking from the leg made me feel incredibly sick, but what came next was even sicker.

"And this is Jasper, the last of the Murrell family slaves, and he's yours now, along with the leg."

I began to see spots.

"You look as though you're about to faint, boy," GG said. "Jasper, help him to the couch."

Jasper did, and I lay there for a long time in total disbelief as Jasper sat in a chair next to me carving intricate designs into a walking stick. I thought of saying something to GG, about how insane and wrong it was that she still had a slave. How many had there been over the years? I wanted to ask, but you really can't change a person's mind from that generation, you know? You just have to accept that that's the way they are. It's so terrible, but that's reality.

I said goodbye to GG on the porch with a long hug, knowing I'd never see her again. Jasper and I took a Lyft to the airport to catch a flight back to Seattle. The first thing I did in

the airport was free Jasper. I got him a big Subway sandwich to commemorate the occasion, which he ate with great delight, and I'm sure the fact that he was finally free made it taste even better. I got a stranger to take a picture of us with our arms around each other to commemorate the occasion, and I thought about getting it printed and framed for him, but I could see that false leg off to the side in the photo, which kind of ruined it.

On the plane I had a first-class ticket, and I got Jasper a seat right behind me in business class so we could still talk, and I could see how he was doing. I can't deal with the tight seats in coach, you know? Otherwise, I would have sat right there with him. He was kind enough to offer to hold the false leg for me, since I really didn't want to check it and it wouldn't fit in the overhead. It was kind of funny to see his reaction when we first took off—a mixture of terror and amazement, and him holding the leg was funny in a weird sort of way.

The flight was uneventful. Jasper and I talked a little, and I told him he was totally welcome to stay with me for a while, since he'd just gotten out of slavery and all. We took an Uber from the airport to Capitol Hill, and I was totally fine with paying for the whole thing. When we got back to my place, I showed Jasper the guest bedroom and told him to make himself at home.

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The days and weeks went by, and Jasper was just hanging around, almost like he was bewildered or something. Finally, I told him that if he was going to live with me for free, he'd at least need to do some work around the condo. He agreed to cook all the meals and clean up, but it wasn't a week before I couldn't deal with the food he was making. It was all fried stuff and starches, and I figured I'd weigh 400 pounds if I kept eating like that. I tried to get Jasper into some healthy

activities. I paid for him to come to hot yoga with me, which he absolutely hated. I even brought him up to Aasgard Pass so he could try high-altitude trail running, but he could hardly make it the first quarter mile. I was surprised, since I figured all that slave work would have kept him in shape, but maybe he wasn't really doing that much after all.

As time passed, I started getting frustrated with the entire arrangement. One day I was checking my account balance online, and I could feel that Jasper was behind me. I turned around and he was looking over my shoulder at the screen. I could see by his face he was surprised at how much money I had in my accounts. It's not like I have millions or anything, but I still felt weird about the whole thing. It just made me nervous for some reason.

That night I lay in bed and thought about giving Jasper a little nest egg to get him going, but then I thought, *What kind of lesson would that be for him about the world? Everyone has struggles and hard times, and it doesn't mean your roommate should just give you a handout.* I felt like that would only set him up for dependency. So instead, I called up a friend of mine who owned an exotic plant nursery, and he agreed to let Jasper work there moving dirt for him. Well, Jasper showed up like five times and then just stopped coming, which was extremely embarrassing for me. When I asked him why he didn't want to work there, he told me he didn't want to move dirt around as a job, but I was like, *You HAVE to start somewhere!*

Finally, I decided I was going to confront him about how things were going. I got us Thai takeout and a couple of bottles of booze, and I invited him to make a night of it with me. He agreed, and we got pretty wasted, and at some point, we were drinking out of that false leg. I don't know what came over me, but I kind of forced him to drink out of it. Afterward I came really close to just laying it all out there, telling him how I was really feeling, but I couldn't. To tell

you the truth, I was afraid he'd think I was racist or something. This is an ongoing problem for me, even though I'm not a racist, I'm always afraid that people will think I am and it results in me getting taken advantage of. This is something I've discussed with my therapist, and they've agreed that it's better for everyone, especially the marginalized person, to just treat them like anyone else.

A few weeks went by, and Jasper was making custom walking sticks that were actually pretty cool. He was using my computer to sell them online. I didn't ask him how much he was making, but I'm sure he was making enough that he didn't need to be living rent-free in a nice condo in Capitol Hill. Every time I'd come home, he'd be there working on his walking stick business—day and night. Before I knew it, the whole place was filled with walking sticks carved with intricate scenes from the South, and let's just say some of them had rather violent and disturbing images on them. That's not something I want to see when I come home after a long day and want to relax.

I can't say exactly when I finally snapped, but I think it was when I came home after an intense day of grinding at my tech startup and he hadn't made dinner, which was what he'd agreed to do. I'd already eaten, but it was the principle of the thing. The next day I had a guy come over and change the locks while Jasper was out meeting with a wholesaler for his walking sticks. I put all his walking sticks in the false leg and set them outside with the rest of his stuff.

That evening, I sat in the dark with the blinds closed scrolling on Tinder, which is something that calms me down for some reason. When Jasper came back, I could hear him trying the door with his key. When it wouldn't work, he banged on the door and started yelling "Let me in! Let me in!" Truthfully, I was scared. It was like he was going to confront me or something. Where was all this rage coming from? Finally, I heard him pick up his stuff and he was gone. When I opened the door, he had left the false leg and a single walking stick in

it. I'm not going to even tell you what was carved on it, but let's just say it was a scene of horror.

A few months later, my tech startup failed. I blame a lot of that on the stress Jasper put me through. I just couldn't focus on things the way I needed to with him stalking around the place and all the energy he gave off, like I was guilty of some huge transgression when in fact all I did was try to help him. I ended up selling my place in Capitol Hill, which really hurt me. I'll probably never get another place that great again. That's me, though—I take risks, and sometimes they don't pan out. If you want to change the world, sometimes you suffer. I thought about that a lot after I moved back into my parents' place in Greenwich Village, and I never could get rid of that false leg—just didn't know how to unload it.

The day before I moved back to New York, I saw Jasper coming out of my neighborhood Whole Foods. I quickly hid behind a big brick column and peeked around it as he passed. He didn't see me, but his cart was full of expensive food, kombucha, pasture-raised elk, an assortment of brie. I hate to be suspicious, but it does make you think. I mean, I'm pretty sure it'd be hard for him to afford all that stuff from his walking stick business—but who knows? If so, good for him, I really mean that, but it really does make you wonder. I just kept thinking, *What's he up to? What's he up to? What IS he up to?*

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