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Here's the Tax Beat broadcast for July 29

Subject Line: Spoils Alert

Here's a spoiler that's been public for about 2,800 years, so I feel okay sharing it: Odysseus makes it home. Christopher Nolan's version opened two weeks ago, and Matt Damon spends most of it soaked, stabbed, and yelling at the sky. But he gets to Ithaca. What most people forget is how long the getting-home part takes. The Trojan War lasted ten years. The trip home from the war lasted another ten.

Think about that ratio. The part everybody remembers, with the wooden horse and the clash of heroes, was only half the story. The other half, the part Homer named the poem after, is just one exhausted guy trying to carry his winnings home without losing them to a storm, a whirlpool, or a one-eyed giant with anger management issues.

And here's the part that should make every successful person sit up: Odysseus is the only member of his crew who makes it back. Every last one of his men dies on the voyage home. They survived the war just fine. But they made terrible decisions on the way back. They opened a bag of winds looking for gold and got blown out to sea. They ate the wrong cattle and got vaporized by Zeus. (Homer wasn’t subtle.) They won the hard part and then fumbled the trip home.

If you own a business or earn a serious income, you already won your war. You built the thing. You closed the deals. You survived the ten years of eighty-hour weeks nobody claps for. That was Troy. The problem is that almost nobody plans the trip home. And the trip home, in your world, is taxes.

Here's what that voyage really costs. The top federal bracket is 37%. Add the 3.8% net investment income tax. Add a state that wants its cut. In plenty of places, the next dollar you earn is a coin flip between you and the government. Win the war, hand back half the loot on the way home. And most people do it without a map, because they treat taxes like weather: something that happens to you every April, that you can only stand out in and endure.

That's the difference between tax preparation and tax planning, and it's the whole ballgame. Preparation is the ship's log — an accurate, honest record of a voyage that already happened. It can't change your route, because you've already sailed it. Planning is the map you read before you leave the harbor: which island to skip, which strait to thread, how to get your fortune home with the fleet still floating. Odysseus didn't wander home by luck. In the underworld, the prophet Tiresias handed him the itinerary. He got a plan from someone who'd seen the whole route.

Picture the business owner who spends thirty years building a company and finally sells it for $10 million. He fights his war and wins. Then the feds and maybe a state government show up with their hands out, and a chunk of that hard-won treasure never makes it up the driveway. The ones who saw it coming — who set the course a few years early with the right structure, the right timing, the right charitable or deferral tools — sail home with dramatically more of it. Same sale. Same ship. The difference was the map.

We can't promise your voyage will be free of monsters. The IRS makes a very persuasive Cyclops (and you can't sign "Nobody" at the bottom of your return). But we can hand you the map that gets you to Ithaca with your fortune still aboard, which is more than Odysseus managed for anybody but himself. Consider us the one crew member who actually read it.

Kevin