

THREE GLASSES OF WINE

HAVE BEEN REMOVED
FROM THIS
STORY

A

NOVEL

MARIAN MICHENER

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*To Jean,
who fights
with me*

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CHAPTER ONE

The fedora Brooke had given me, still crusted with volcanic dust, hung on the mirror. Neither of us would touch it after the summer night we'd come home laughing through the blizzard of ash, bandanas over our noses like outlaws. If something had melted and moved through us that night, it had hardened to moonscape by morning. She was sulking by then and said I hadn't cared for her gift. I asked wasn't my head more important than a thirty-dollar hat, and she said I'd missed the point. I guess she was right about that. I still don't get it. But the fate of the slouch hat reminds me that we were between disasters in Portland that October of 1980. The mountain was quiet, the plague undreamed of. Reagan was gaining in the polls; and we exchanged understanding looks with faggots, witches and Jews on the street about how bad things could get. It was an uneasy time.

And something different was happening inside my life, the kind of change that has so much to get around, it has to start quietly, like the end of a romance, or the beginning. It's hard to say where the first shift of feeling comes, but one thing leads to another and by the time you're ready to make your declaration, you're just catching up with what's already been settled. And you're standing there like a fool thinking you get to decide whether to stay or go, when in fact your baggage is already checked.

At the time, I didn't see how things would ever be different. On the contrary I felt set back every morning. That particular Sunday, for example, I'd been dreaming under a ton of lizards. And when I popped up in the thin air of white sheets, it looked like I was going to have to evolve all over again. My feet were primordial ooze. If I could blaze a path from there to my faithful head, I could invent civilization and get a cup of coffee. But I was stuck in the jurassic swamp somewhere around my knees and I didn't think I was ever going to make it home.

I took heart when I recognized the painting on the wall, a woman with a piece of fruit in her hand. It suggested that we were up past Genesis, a couple of millenia further along than I had thought at first.

Still, I told myself, this really wasn't going to do. I couldn't keep taking myself apart and putting myself back together again. One of these days all the king's horses and all the king's men were going to meet their match.

I swore off drinking. As always. Not in search of luxuries like clarity or self-knowledge, but from the cold certainty I'd be brain dead in another year if I didn't. In fact the mausoleum ceiling trim of the white victorian bedroom made me wonder briefly whether I might be dead already. My hair smelled ashy and everything tasted of ripe formaldehyde. But with a headache like I had, you know you're not dead. You just wish you were.

It was going to take me some time to reconstruct where I was and who I was with. But even then I knew she was mad.

Our bodies were back to back like a pair of plucked swans, her worn rayon nightgown clammy against my skin in a familiar way. Her spine had turned to concrete in the night. My eyes hurt. But the thin light reassured me that I was still in Portland with the Willamette throwing gray sun into the gray sky outside Brooke's polished windows.

Which brought me to the provocative question of how I came to be there. Hadn't I been about to die on the Hawthorne bridge in the middle of the night? Alone because we fought and I left her downtown. Walking across the bridge where anything could happen, so high above so much nothing, it was enough work just keeping the dark water in its place. Red lights, bells and barriers fell in front of me and it seemed I'd wandered hapless and drunk into the teeth of the drawbridge. It had taken all I could muster to run under the flimsy wooden arm. I walked on as relieved as a smuggler safe across the border, only to be surrounded again by lights and bells and the cranking mechanism. What I had passed was just the first barrier. I was on the tilting center. Well, I couldn't really tell if it was tilting yet or not, but I was too messed up to turn around, so I had to run on yelling, "stop," like a flea on a camel's back. The night and the city pounded even after I made it across the moving plates and under the gate to the solid side. I touched my chest then and blinked at the tear smeared sidewalk. But my grateful manner faded to casual in the few blocks between there and the tavern, The Other Side of Midnight.

The Other Side, that's where Brooke had come back in. She said she'd come to drown her own sorrows and she looked at everything except me at first. But after ruffling and pouting a bit, we wound up dancing and melting back together again. She danced with a hot formality that always made me laugh and want to take her home. She could be so tender when the music was slow and my aching ribs were the only ones close enough to hear. And she still had the longest shoulder blades I had ever run my hands down. I felt her heart beating under my face. Or

was it my heart? She didn't want to let me go. I hadn't wanted to resist in the first place. We must have called a cab.

So what was I doing Sunday morning still lying there wondering what to apologize for? I looked through the tendrils of the asparagus fern. The green eye of the elephant plant stand stared back. I liked Brooke's quirky furniture, though for myself I preferred mobility, which she would call downward mobility and claim she was not impressed. Still, I figured she must have liked my style; she'd stayed, hadn't she? But what good was staying if she was only going to hold herself away from me?

I reached back for her hip. It froze like a hunted rabbit. I let my fingers fall along the smooth top of her leg. At this point, I would always wish we could skip the argument and let the storm break into sex instead. But she contracted a breath further. And all I could think of to do was to lie there and count how many Sunday mornings I had spent trying to remember what I'd done Saturday night.

My first lover, Alison, used to wake up angry because I'd thrown up when things got twirly. Or I'd fallen asleep in the middle of things. I'd say I'd fallen asleep. She'd say I passed out. Alison had not been a drinker, bless her. Brooke was as likely to wind up under the table as I was. My hand spanned Brooke's muscled thigh, half the size of Alison's. I took into account the PreRaphaelites hanging on the wall, tasted my teeth and reminded myself that this was a different time.

With Brooke I was usually in trouble for flirting. Things offended her that used to just make Alison laugh. But this particular morning I was sure I hadn't touched or even looked at anyone else. It was the one thing I'd kept track of. Because we'd argued that afternoon in the light that swayed over the pool table, her saying I couldn't help myself and me saying I could. Though I had to admit that I sometimes found myself in the middle of a longing look not knowing how I got there. I assured her I could take care of myself.

She rested her chin on her cue and said she hoped so because she was running out of faith. That made me stand up and look at her. Those were not words Brooke used lightly. She was an ex-nun, with traces of neat creases even in her jeans. I'd never had much faith to lose. But I knew it was a pretty big deal with her. I mean, if she would leave God over this thing, she could damn well leave me.

The soft grin she gave me when she saw I understood threw the rest of my game off. But she got my attention. And she turned out to be the most interesting woman wherever it was that we went that night. I pretended I'd never heard her stories before and found her really quite charming.

If I hadn't had a point to prove, I might have flirted anyway. Because it turned us both on. Flirting and brandy were my favorite things because of the way they clear your head and veins and soul of anything else in no time.

Of course, Brooke was supposed to be the most important thing. And she hated it when I'd lean back in my chair and say it was cold ale and a card game that made life worthwhile. It reminded her of her Polish uncles whom we were supposed to be better than. I had always hoped not to have to be as good as my Quaker aunts. Brooke and I were different that way, among others.

What really troubled her about my libations to good friends and good times was that I lacked the proper sense of urgency about us shackling ourselves to our desks and earning our immortality.

Still, I didn't think that was what had pissed her off somewhere between Saturday night and Sunday morning. I pressed on in my investigation. I sat myself down in the bentwood rocker and cross examined myself:

"Can you account for your movements last night?"

"No."

"Did you discuss anything sensitive with the plaintiff?"

"I don't know. It seems like everything is sensitive these days."

I didn't have a clue what it was this time. So I gave up and got up even though my bones ached and I felt like I was bumping my head on something that wasn't even there. In the kitchen, I found to my relief that the marigold wallpaper had calmed down the crazy flickering dance it had been doing the night before. My eyes still crinkled. I scraped the pot across the burner loudly enough to let her know I was there. I warmed up some coffee to pour brandy in. I wanted to steel my nerves in case I was forced to leave her in self-defense.

Brooke had a skinny body, thick wire rimmed glasses and the face of a Raggedy Ann doll. But sometimes she moved like a dove taking flight. Church, school and the convent combined had failed to teach her humility, thank god. When she entered the kitchen, hipbones first, in her red satin dressing gown, she was all tall grace and obstinance, and I fell for her all over again.

But she startled a roach and her first words were, "Kill it."

That imperious tone of hers always made me go slack. The roach ran between my rooted feet. And my first words were, "It won't make any difference."

I hadn't wanted to start out this way.

She said, "You're on their side," with a petulant face that made me want to shake her. But it was safer to take it as a joke, pour brandy into her cup to sweeten her up, and wave my fingers as antennae in agreement with her.

She said, "Don't you care about anything?"

I stopped myself from saying, "What does that mean?" Because I knew she'd only say, "What do you think it means?" And I'd be back where I'd started, which come to think of it I was anyway, trying to figure out what was really bothering her. I was afraid I'd compound the offense if I admitted I didn't even know what it was.

I gave up looking for a response because she'd gone back to the bedroom where she was putting on her good blue jeans and a gray cashmere sweater so soft it could evaporate. Or maybe I got the feeling something was about to evaporate from my own