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THIRD IN THE GREAT AMERICAN TRILOGY
THAT BEGAN WITH BURR AND 1876

GORE VIDAL

WASHINGTON, D.C.



Ballantine
Novel
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**WASHINGTON,
D.C.**

A Novel

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

"A SERIOUS NOVEL, WRITTEN BY A MAN WHO UNDERSTANDS WHAT POLITICS IS ABOUT . . . If Mr. Vidal had only nerve one might dismiss him. But when nerve is combined with talent and intellect, one must take notice. One must applaud—with vigor."

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One

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THE STORM BROKE over the house. Rain fell in dark diagonals across the summer lawn. An abrupt wind bent willow trees, tore sumac, shook elms. The storm's center was now so near that the flash of lightning and the sound of thunder almost coincided, ending darkness, shattering stillness. At rapid intervals, spears and tridents and serpents' tongues of blue fire showed trees bending, rain falling, and the black rush of the river at the foot of the hill on which the house stood.

Peter Sanford took cover beneath an elm, and wondered what the odds were of being hit by lightning. Excellent, he decided, as three snakes of fire intertwined, vanished among the trees at the far end of the lawn, and a heartbeat later thunder sounded. Too late he clapped hands to ears; his head rang painfully from the sound.

Then the wind shifted. Rain splattered his face. He pressed hard against the bole of the tree and through narrowed eyes watched the mock-Georgian façade of the house appear and disappear in rapid flashes like an old movie print, jerky and overexposed. Within the house, the party continued, unaware of the beautiful chaos outside.

"Go on!" he shouted to the sky. "Go on!" The storm went on. Excited by this obedience, he stepped out of the shelter of the tree and, opening wide his arms, threw back his head and let the rain fill his face. At last he was nature, and a thing to be feared in the night.

Suddenly with a sound like an ax splintering wood,

blue lightning shattered the sky, setting his teeth on edge, enveloping flesh in a vast tingling web. Then he smelled sulphur. A tree had been struck nearby.

"Come on!" he roared into the next roll of thunder. "I dare you! Here I am! *Strike!*" But this time there was only darkness for answer, and a dropping of the wind.

The circuit of power broken, he ceased to be a god and so, like Lucifer before the dreaded hordes of Light, he ran across the lawn. But shoes filled with water slowed his progress, like the dream in which he knew that he could never outdistance pursuers. Breathing hard, he galloped slowly past a marble Venus and a plaster Pan; then down a flight of shallow steps to the swimming pool, where he stopped and took off his shoes.

Barefoot, he crossed to the poolhouse. The door to the men's changing room was open and in the darkness music sounded: someone had left the radio on. As he started to go inside, lightning revealed a man and a woman making love on a rubber mattress. The man wore nothing except shoes and socks and garters that hung half on and half off as he went about his single-minded work between long legs which circled him like those of a wrestler in the terminal bout. No faces were visible, only the necessary bodies. Then lightning ceased, and the revelation ended.

He stood in the rain, unable to move, not knowing if the lovers were real or simply creations of the lightning and when it stopped, they stopped; unless of course he was dreaming one of those dreams from which he would awaken in that pain which is also sharpest pleasure, having loved in sleep. But the cold rain was real; and so was the sudden soft moan from the poolhouse. He fled.

He entered the big house through the back door. At the far end of a dim corridor that smelled of beef stock, he could see the kitchen, a square white room full of light and heat and the sound of the French cook raging at his Swedish helper. Unobserved, Peter climbed the back stairs to the second floor where, like a thief, he opened the soundproofed door which

separated the servants' quarters from the main house and darted across the landing to his own room at the head of the staircase. Then he paused, perversely hoping that someone might see him: *Where have you been? You're soaked!* But there was no one in sight and so, unchallenged, he stepped into the bedroom, shut the door, and turned the key; safe at last.

Pulling off wet clothes, he rubbed himself with a towel, in front of the mirrored bathroom door. There was no getting around the fact that he was sixteen and not yet old enough to begin a grownup life. He had been a child forever, an intolerable state of affairs that could not last much longer. Rough towel on skin together with the memory of what he had seen excited him. Should he or should he not? Deciding not, he did pushups until the moment passed. Martyred daily by the flesh, he knew that if he did not soon hold another body in his arms, he would explode, like one of those white novae whose final starry burst destroys a thousand worlds, just as he in his solitary state would like to do. Sometimes at night he would strike the pillow again and again with the force that kills, all the while knowing that there was as yet no one anywhere on earth for him to love, or to murder.

Glaring at himself in the mirror, he let loose a long harsh Tarzan roar that hurt the throat but soothed the spirit. And as he did, with a stranger's detachment, he watched the veins knot at the temples, while neck and cheeks turned scarlet. For an instant he and the thunder sounded together. Then he stopped; the thunder went on.

Relieved, he dressed in a white suit identical with the one he had worn earlier at dinner. No one must know that he had been out of doors, least of all the lovers, who had been, he was convinced, if not at dinner, among those who had come in after. In any case, he must now track them down ruthlessly, like the inspector in *Les Misérables*. And when at last he found them . . . He paused in his reverie, wondering just what he would do. But of course he did not have to *do* anything. It was enough that two new images could be added to his gallery of phantom lov-

ers, substitutes for what surely must soon materialize as solid flesh.

Peter Sanford entered the drawing room, just as his father was about to propose a toast.

"All right now. Quiet everybody! This is a victory toast." Blaise Delacroix (pronounced "Della Crow") Sanford was swarthy and fierce with a harsh New England accent dissonant not only to Southern ears but to those of his own son Peter who spoke the soft speech of Washington, D.C., with its slow long vowels and quick slurred consonants. But Blaise Sanford could have spoken Latin and been listened to respectfully, for he was uniquely rich. His grandfather had clothed the women of the West in gingham, making it possible for him to leave a fortune to Blaise's father, an indolent and melancholic man who had doubled his inheritance by accidentally investing in the right railroad. Unnerved by this coup, he forsook America for France, settling at Saint Cloud where he did his best to enjoy the Belle Epoque; but not for long: one day while riding, he was thrown from his horse onto a railroad track just as the Blue Train hurtled past, giving, wits said, added significance to the stylized locomotive he had incorporated into the Sanford coat of arms. As soon as Blaise inherited the fortune, he returned to the United States with every intention of dominating that easygoing if somewhat out-of-the-way Republic (the First War had not yet happened and Americans abroad were still a novelty and source of amusement). But as a family friend had once observed to Peter, though his father had the ambition of Caesar his political style was unfortunately that of Coriolanus. Too fierce and proud to show his wounds in the marketplace, he was forced to seek the same world elsewhere.

Blaise bought a moribund newspaper, the *Washington Tribune*, and made it a success, largely because he was fearless where those of less income tend to be timid. He became a power in politics. On the Virginia side of the Potomac he built a mansion in the Georgian style, and named it Laurel House. Here he received Senators and Cabinet members, Justices and diplomats; the great and the rich, the quick and,

had he the power, he would have summoned the dead as well. Even the powerful backwoods politicians, proudly uncouth (red suspenders, collarless shirts, cowboy boots: each had his folksy trademark), gladly discarded demotic trappings in order to go to Laurel House and become, if briefly, a part of that magic circle which was true center. If Paris was worth a mass, Laurel House was worth a dinner jacket.

Peter admired his father without liking him, just as he liked his mother without admiring her. But then, ever since June when school let out, he had been playing god, studying those about him as if through the wrong end of a telescope. But though they were properly diminished by his scrutiny, he still found the adult world puzzling; he was particularly confused by those who gathered in his father's drawing room. They seemed to be engaged in some sort of charade, known to them but not to him, and though there were times when he thought he knew what they were up to, something odd would happen and the mystery would resume. Yet he was confident that one day it would all be plain to him. When it was, he would call out across the room to the players, "All right! I've got it. I know the game. I win! You can all go home!" But for now he was back at "Go," and the game would obviously be a long time playing before yielding him its secret.

At the room's center, Blaise stood short and straight beneath the chandelier with its three crystal feathers, emblem of the Prince Regent, Mrs. Sanford always remarked to those visitors who admired it.

Peter joined the group that had gathered about his father like wolves circling a sheep. No, he decided, like sheep circling a wolf, eager to serve the carnivore. That was the one aspect of the game Peter had always understood. Blaise was rich, others were not. Yet money in itself did not impress Peter as much as what he had seen at the poolhouse. Unbidden, the vision returned and he was forced to put a hand in his trousers pocket. As he did, he looked about the room, wondering whether or not the lovers had returned. If not, who was missing?

There had been a dinner for twenty; afterwards another dozen couples had arrived. It was the usual Laurel House mingling of politicians and diplomats and visitors from the distant world of New York. The mood was high and some of the most dignified of the men and the most glittering of the women were talking and laughing much too loudly; his father, however, made silence.

"Everybody got a glass? You, Burden? No? Damn it! Give Senator Day a glass. He's why we're celebrating!" The butler poured Senator Day a glass of champagne.

Of all the Senators, James Burden Day most resembled Peter's ideal of the classic Roman Senator. White-haired and stately, Burden Day moved with a conscious dignity that beguiled rather than appalled. With a flourish, the Senator held his glass high. But though he smiled a politician's smile, his eyes were those of a man who has just seen the hour and date of his death written upon a wall, a somberness of expression Peter found most attractive for he too was something of a melodramatist, having read Poe the previous winter.

"I won't give Burden all the credit . . ." began Blaise.

"Naturally," said his wife. Frederika Sanford's fair hair and gentle expression put new acquaintances so much at their ease that they were quite overwhelmed when they discovered that not only did Frederika have a sharp tongue but that she was also quite unable to permit a silence or even a pause in someone else's speech to go unfilled. She was a mistress of the sudden interjection; the small hard word, delivered like a stone from a slingshot. As a result, those who lived with her had become powerful conversationalists, never pausing for a word in terror that she might give them the wrong one.

Blaise spoke through his wife's "naturally." "The distinguished Senator from the American heartland, helped by the *Washington Tribune*!" Mock applause and hooting as Blaise indicated himself.

Peter looked about the room to see who was miss-

ing. On a sofa sat Diana Day, the Senator's daughter, whose legs he had for one moment thought he recognized in the lightning's flash. But it was unthinkable. Diana was far too shy to give herself to a man with falling garters in a strange house, during a party. Besides, she was plain, with no makeup, and her hair was like the feathers of a brown hen. But though she dressed in clothes too old for her, Peter was aware of a good body beneath dull cloth.

"But Burden and I and a few other men of principle . . ."

"Hear! Hear!" from the room.

"We managed to stop our distinguished President, the *dis*-Honorable Franklin Delano Roosevelt!" Boos and cheers from the room. Most of those present were enemies of the Administration, although, as usual, there were a few New Dealers in attendance, eager to show Blaise Sanford that their horns were detachable, their hooves hearsay, and their need for publicity as poignant as any man's.

"This is a big day for us. For the country. For our kind of government. We must all remember it. July twenty-third, 1937." Having blundered, Blaise was forced to contend with his wife's uncanny memory for dates and numbers.

"July twenty-second, dear." Frederika came in hard on "1937," abandoning her usual policy of waiting for the natural pause.

For an instant Blaise scowled; then he laughed. As always, others laughed, too. "And here I was about to inscribe the wrong date on everyone's heart. All right, July twenty-second, 1937, in the Senate of the United States the President's bill to pack the Supreme Court and subvert the Constitution was buried for all time. Which means that the dictatorship Mr. Roosevelt dreams of has been at least delayed. And for this respite, we have to thank Burden Day and his Judiciary subcommittee. Ladies and gentlemen, Senator Day!"

The toast was drunk seriously because politics was taken seriously at Laurel House. Peter knew that his father believed everything that he said for the simple reason that he himself believed the same things. Not

once had Peter even questioned the wickedness of the President or the virtue of his enemies, of whom James Burden Day was now the most conspicuous.

Senator Day responded to the toast, affecting a diffidence which did not strike Peter as altogether satisfactory in one who only this morning had humiliated a President in full view of the world. "Blaise, friends . . . I won't say 'my friends.'" He mimicked the President with startling exactness and everyone laughed. "We have done good work today. According to the papers, I was out to 'get' the President because I don't like him. Well, I don't like him. But that wasn't what was at stake. And even though I'm a good Democrat . . ."

The Senator paused and got his reward. "No such thing," said Mrs. Sanford. The guests laughed again. The Senator smiled tolerantly. Then, unexpectedly, he spoke of the recent death of his friend Joe Robinson, the majority leader of the Senate. He described how he had helped Joe off the floor of the Senate when he had felt the beginning of the heart attack which was to kill him later that night. He described sitting beside Joe in the cloakroom, and as his friend rocked back and forth, struggling for breath, they spoke of the Court bill which Robinson had sworn to deliver to the President. He believed he had a majority. Burden Day knew for certain that he had not; but suspecting that Joe was dying, he assured him that the bill's passage was certain because "I loved Joe Robinson. We all did."

"I loved Joe Robinson. We all did." Peter repeated this to himself in his own inner voice. Some words sounded in his head; others turned to script; many translated to pictures. But whenever he tried to decide exactly how it was that his mind worked, he lost all sense of himself, the way he did on those clear nights when, staring at the sky, he was overwhelmed by the thought of an infinitude of suns and nonhuman worlds. Sky. Night. Stars. Mars. Tars Tarkas of Thark, the green giant, was beside him, as they crossed the red desert of ancient Mars to the place where cowered the beautiful Princess Thuvia. Red dust appeared

on the horizon. "Here they come," he muttered grimly to his green comrade-in-arms. "We're ready for them, O Peter," said Tars Tarkas, and with his four arms he removed four swords from their scabbards.

"We buried Joe last week in Little Rock. I don't think I give away any secrets when I say that on the train back to Washington, the Vice President turned to me and said, 'Well, that's the end of Franklin. And I hope you boys find some decent way of layin' this bill to rest.' We did. Today. And I have a hunch that the President may have learned a lesson he won't soon forget. That not even he can upset the system of checks and balances which our forefathers . . ." But Burden Day, obviously aware that his voice had gone from that of drawing room guest to politician, abruptly finished with a few muttered words that without the *Washington Tribune* and Blaise Sanford there might be at this very moment thirteen rather than nine Justices of the Supreme Court. After a round of applause, the talk became general.

Alone beside the fireplace, Peter drank sarsaparilla and ate potato chips while killing the last of the white-wigged Martian Priests. Then he turned to Thuvia, who lay among the red dunes of Mars, waiting for him with parted lips and silver legs spread wide . . . He knew whose legs those were.

In a jonquil yellow dress his sister Enid materialized in the room, pale face flushed, eyes huge from pleasure, hair still full of rain despite a recent combing. Her return had gone unnoticed, a fact unusual in itself since the whole point to Enid was that she was always noticed, with no effort on her part. She glided to the bar and poured herself whisky, again unusual: Enid seldom drank. Peter looked toward the hall to see who it was she had been with. But the man with the garters had either gone home or would reappear later, to avoid suspicion. Fiercely, Peter tried to recall who had been at dinner. He shut his eyes, the better to concentrate.

Enid twirled his hair against the central cowlick, causing sudden tears of pain.

"Stop it!" He struck away the hand. Each was ex-

perienced in the torturing of the other. Although she had the advantage of being older than he by three years, his biological age had now made him physically stronger than she but to no purpose, since in the process he was now no more able to touch her physically than he could hold fire in his hand. It was too dangerous, as they both knew well.

"Where have you been?"

"At the poolhouse." He was startled by her candor, and then by the swift serenity with which she lied. "I took a walk after dinner and got caught in the storm. My hair's still wet. Listen to that thunder." But Peter could hear nothing but the dull rapid thud of his own pulse beat.

"Who'd you go with?"

"My lover, who else?"

Against his will, Peter found her unexpectedly impressive. "You have a lover? Here?"

Enid laughed and twisted the cowlick right way round, a not unpleasant sensation. But he could not bear to have her touch him. He leaped from the chair. "Which one is he?"

But Enid merely smiled and stretched languorously before the fire and Peter, confronted by the fact of her body, was furious. "Who?" He could barely get the word out.

Enid looked at him hard, no longer smiling, more puzzled than suspicious. "Who do you think I was with, you idiot? I was alone."

"Were you?" His tone was so inquisitorial that Enid laughed at him. "All right. I wasn't alone. I was with Harold Griffiths. We made love on a rubber mattress in the poolhouse, in the men's dressing room, while listening to the radio. I forget which station. Are you satisfied?"

Peter looked past her at Harold Griffiths who was short and barrel-chested with a great lion's head and pale agate eyes. He was a poet from New York who worked as critic for the *Tribune*. He almost never stopped talking and Peter thought him the most brilliant man in Washington. But he was certain that Harold had not left the house. In any case, those short

bowed legs were not the ones he had seen in the poolhouse.

Peter shook his head. "It wasn't Harold."

"But it was. And I'm going to marry him, too. He's got to make an honest woman of me, after what we did."

Peter turned from her. "Go to hell," he murmured, suddenly neutral. He selected and ate the largest of the potato chips. After all, it was no business of his.

He was about to leave the room when his mother motioned for him to join her and Senator Day and Diana. All three were lined up side by side on a sofa, like rifle targets at Glen Echo Amusement Park. Peter wished suddenly that he had a gun. Bang bang bang, down they would go. One two three, and he would win a stuffed bear. But then they would pop right up again, ready for the next customer.

He sat down opposite them, and looked attentive. He knew that whenever his mother summoned him to join the grownups it was because Important Things Were Being Said.

The Senator was speaking of the President. Peter had seldom heard him speak on any other subject. The President was the Senator's white whale, to be pursued to the death and after. "It's too simple to say that he wants to be a dictator. Actually, I don't think he knows what he wants. He has no master plan, thank God. But all his improvisations, all his gestures are those of a man who wants to center in himself all power."

"But why?" Diana Day, who seldom spoke, blushed; obviously she had startled herself, while delighting her father, who beamed at her as Mrs. Sanford said, "Because he's that sort of man!"

"What I meant was," and Peter noticed that Diana spoke with a slight stammer, "perhaps he thinks it right, what he's doing, the way it was in 1933 when he had to create jobs."

"Conceited!" exclaimed Mrs. Sanford, linking her new interjection with the last as if Diana had not spoken at all. "The way he throws his head back, and that horrible grin! It's all because he's a cripple," she

added with finality. "*The brain was affected.* Everyone knows."

"That's too easy." Senator Day twirled his highball glass first clockwise then counterclockwise. Peter's cowlick hurt. "Diana," and the Senator gave his daughter a curious smile, "I suspect you of being a secret New Dealer."

The girl turned a deeper red; tears came to her eyes. Though Peter had known her all his life, he had seldom heard her say more than a conventional phrase or two. He had always thought her dull as well as plain. But now that she was grown up he decided that she was not really plain, only shy, and grimly turned out. Under one arm he saw the fastener of a zipper, and mentally he gave it a tug. The cloth parted, to reveal . . . With an effort he recalled himself. It was plain that he was going mad. He could think of nothing but rape.

The Senator said, "I don't see Roosevelt himself as bad . . ."

"Bad!" One of Mrs. Sanford's best effects was the repetition, in a different key—and often meaning—of a single word.

But the Senator knew his competition. He continued. "Good and bad are relative, of course. But I do see him as more helpless than most people think. I see him riding the whirlwind." Peter thought of lightning; thought he heard thunder beyond heavy curtains and rose-red brick; thought of the pool-house. . . . Desperately he concentrated on the Senator's words. "Since then the Executive has grown stronger, while the Legislature and the Judiciary grow weaker."

"Which is their own fault, isn't it, Father?" Diana stammered on the first syllable of "Father."

The Senator nodded. "To a degree. We don't have the leaders we used to have when I first came to the Senate. And though in some ways, I'm glad the Aldriches are gone . . ."

"I love Senator Borah." Mrs. Sanford looked absently about the room to see if the guests were mingling, laughing, gossiping, as they ought.

"Now there are those who think this process is inevitable in our form of government. I don't." Peter was aware that since his mother's attention had strayed to the room, the Senator was speaking directly to him and he was embarrassed to find himself the sole recipient of so much wisdom and courtesy.

"You see, I think our kind of government is the best ever devised. At least originally. So whenever a President draws too much power to himself, the Congress must stop him by restoring the balance. Let him reach too far and . . ." The long white hand moved abruptly toward Peter who gave a start as though the hand were indeed a tyrant's, grasping power. "We shall . . ." The Senator's other hand, rigid as a knife, made as if to chop the tyrant's hand from its wrist. *That* was power, thought Peter, chilled. Fortunately the Senator was far too skillful a performer to end on too high a note. He broke the tension with a laugh. "On the other hand, no pun intended, F.D.R. has a lot more tricks up that sleeve of his. I just hope we can always manage him as well as we did today."

Across the room someone struck a chord on the grand piano. The room was silent. As in most Washington drawing rooms, the piano's essential function was to serve as an altar on which to display in silver frames the household gods: photographs of famous people known to the family. The Sanford deities were suitably impressive, consisting mostly of royalties whose signatures slanted in bold letters from lower left to ascending right, unlike those of presidents and other democratic figures who favored long inscriptions suggesting intimacy.

But now the Washington correspondent of a London newspaper had seated himself at the altar, and others gathered around him. In honor of the day's victory, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" was played, though none but the Englishman was certain of the words. This was followed by a powerful rendering of "Old Man River," the Englishman's party piece, in which even the lowest notes were accurate. Half the group was now gathered about the piano, propos-