

Goodnight, Angélique

Grace Andreacchi

When she was quite certain that she was dying, Angélique sent for us. There were just the three of us: the two sons, Lucien and Jean-Marc, and I. Jean-Marc and I had married the previous spring in Paris, without telling her. Angélique was notoriously hard to please. Now she lay in the big oak bed gasping in pain, dying of stomach cancer, and she wanted to see me before she died. So here I am. Make of me what you will. She lay propped up on three pillows – burning eyes, a thin feverish hand in mine. What a sharp look she gave me! Nobody's fool, even if she was about to die. She asked to see me alone. Now that we were face to face she made pleasant small talk, something of an accomplishment, given the situation. What do you say to someone who's about to die? I'd no idea; I was practically mute. She asked for a drink of water and I gave it to her, holding the glass to her thin firm mouth. She drank carefully, elegantly, despite the obvious pain. Then she asked for Jean-Marc. He came in looking embarrassed, childish. She spoke to him as though I were not present. 'She's a nice girl, but too tall,' she said. Jean-Marc looked angry but didn't say anything. 'You can go now,' she said to me, so I went.

Down the steep staircase, into the large salon that looked on to the garden. It was September and the hydrangeas were heavy with purple blooms, the grass, thick and wet, needed cutting, and the room was grandiose and moist with its neglected piano, silver ornaments, brittle chandelier. Lucien stood uneasily at the window, had the air of a prowling cat. I'd not met him before this trip to Normandy, although I'd heard of him, the adored older brother and acknowledged black sheep. Supposedly he'd made a fortune in dealing cocaine; supposedly he had a taste for dodgy real estate deals and sex with underage girls. Supposedly, allegedly. He turned and stared at me when I came in, then came up to me and pulled me into a corner and began kissing me, wordlessly, urgently, and I felt myself go weak at the knees, I felt myself go, go ... I began to tremble all over with desire and my heart ached with fear as I knew he could only cause me grief and pain. He tasted of whiskey, acutely desirable. Reluctantly I tore myself from his embrace. I stood there shaking, cheeks burning, eyes filling up with tears, he stood there smiling at me, unperturbed. Just then Jean-Marc came downstairs and said the old lady was asking for me.

When I went into her room she looked up at me sharply and asked what had I been doing? I didn't know how to answer her. Then Jean-Marc came in and slipped his arm around me, cradling my shoulders gently. 'How are you feeling now, Maman?' he said. She pretended not to hear him. Lucien came into the room, slouching, smiling his casual grin, looking as if nothing in the world could ever disturb his equilibrium. I couldn't stop looking at him. His dark, curly hair and beautiful face, his small elegant hands very much like Angélique's. 'I don't like your tie,' she said suddenly, looking at Jean-Marc. He was wearing a navy tie with small animals printed in diagonals; giraffes, I think it was. Sighing, he took off the tie, rolled it up and put it in his pocket. Lucien began to talk about a new foal he had been to see that morning and Angélique lit up briefly. 'Legs like matchsticks and already he's got the fire in his belly!' he said. 'You should see him go, Maman.' Me too, I thought, I've got fire in my belly.

That night I lay in bed staring up into the perfect country darkness. I thought how easy it would be, how easy to abandon everything, to give up everything – Jean-Marc, and the new apartment in the *sixième*, and the whole life I'd built up painstakingly out of love and trust and blue silk curtains and white china and a little grey-haired dog and little everyday happinesses. How easy to abandon everything, to run off with him, to throw myself at his feet and say, 'Oh take me with you, brother, take me with you! Away from all this, away into that darkness and confusion where alone my heart is at rest.'

Jean-Marc was profoundly asleep beside me. An owl was calling somewhere out there in the darkness. Then I heard a low moan coming from across the landing, Angélique's room. It gradually grew louder and louder. I got up and put on my dressing gown, went and knocked at her door. Sudden silence. 'Angélique?' I said, experimentally. No answer. 'Angélique? Are you all right?' Another long silence. Then, 'Come in,' she said.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, bolt upright, long white hair streaming over her shoulders.

'Come here,' she said, holding out her arms.

When I came up to her she grasped me in a tight embrace.

'Help me,' she said. 'I want to see the horses one more time. They won't let me see the horses.'

‘There, Maman, it’s the middle of the night,’ I said. ‘You can see the horses in the morning.’

I thought she must be wandering in her mind.

She pulled back and looked at me imperiously. ‘I am not your Maman,’ she said. ‘I don’t even know who you are. And I will be dead before morning. Now, are you going to take me to see my horses once last time or aren’t you?’

Her skinny hands were digging into the flesh of my arms – she had amazing strength. I said I would take her.

I got her fur coat from the wardrobe and put it on her. I put a pair of shoes on her feet. ‘Not those,’ she said. ‘The boots, you stupid girl.’ I fetched the boots and she struggled into them. We staggered down the stairs, she leaning heavily on my shoulder, gripping my arm with those thin hands. ‘You’re too tall,’ she said. ‘Bend down a little so I can reach your shoulder.’ I stood crookedly, trying to make a crutch for her with my body. At the bottom of the stairs she paused, out of breath. Moonlight was streaming in through the windows and the whole lawn was bathed in silvery light. I thought perhaps she was about to give up but no, she soon grasped my arm again and propelled me towards the door.

The stables were not far from the house. Our footsteps crunched over the gravel, one painful step at a time. I got the door open and we stepped into the warm scented darkness. Angélique reached for something beside the door and staggered, almost fell but I caught her. ‘There’s a torch,’ she said. ‘There.’ I found the torch and switched it on. The horses will be asleep, I thought, but then I saw the new foal wide-awake, staring at us with curious eyes, not at all frightened.

‘Ah, there he is, the little beauty,’ she said. ‘Closer!’ I helped her up to the stall and she stood there, leaning on the wooden frame, breathing noisily, laughing, and there were tears in her eyes as well. ‘Look at him, how beautiful! Look at those legs! If I had legs like that you know what I’d do? I’d run away from here, I’d run right off into the sky! I’d run and run and never look back! That’s what I’d do!’ she said, talking not to me but to the little foal. He was watching her curiously all the time, his ears laid back and his velvety muzzle twitching. ‘Run away, run away!’ she began to shout. ‘Before it’s too late!’ She waved her arms and then fell over and was quiet. I caught her on the way down and we lay together in the fragrant, prickly hay.

Above us the light from the fallen torch shone a pale circle on the ceiling. The horses shifted uneasily in their stalls and again I heard an owl calling somewhere far away.