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Sex Wars

Marge Piercy

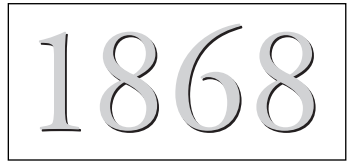
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Extract

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1868

ONE



ICTORIA WAS READING the enormous book their landlady on Greene Street kept in her parlor. She was lying in bed with her temporary lover, Charlie, who was sleeping in on his back, snoring lightly. She doubted anybody else had bothered with the book, for some pages were still uncut—the Orations of Demosthenes, a great Greek speaker Victoria had begun to dream about since she and her sister arrived in New York. She could see him clearly at times and once in a while she began to hear his voice addressing her, a deep, resonant voice that thrilled her. She had seen visions and heard voices since she was a child. The same was true of her sister Tennessee, but Tennie was willing to fake it on demand, while Victoria refused. She considered herself chosen for some high magnificent fate. If life so far had been hard and sordid at times, she knew it was all about to change. She could feel it. Her voices strengthened her. They made her special in spite of her troubles.

A telegram from her husband Colonel James Blood lay on the night table. In two days, he was joining the sisters in New York. She knew it was only a matter of time before the rest of her Claflin clan found them. Money, they always needed money. Her father Buck had taken her on the

revival circuit since she was old enough to stand, project her voice and fascinate a crowd; then Tennie with her clairvoyant act had taken over. The family cooked up patent medicines and practiced magnetic healing. Both sisters were good at the laying on of hands, which might prove useful if their plans, worked out in the Midwest, came to fruition—as they must. The sisters and James had carefully studied Cornelius Vanderbilt, as much as they could learn from a distance. He was their best hope.

Charlie was stirring. She put the leather-bound book beside the bed, half pushing it under. He was a reporter on the *Sun* whom she had run into at a spiritualist meeting. He was a good informant on the city—the Tweed ring, the flavor of the different newspapers, the scandals, where the wealthy lived, rode in their carriages, ate. He had served as a correspondent the last year of the Civil War, but now he reported on politics. His limp ginger hair falling over his high forehead, he snuggled into the pillows with a wide yawn that showed his plentiful gold teeth. She was not tremendously moved by Charlie—as a lover he lacked talent—but he had much to teach her. She wanted to keep him as a friend. When she was sure she had his attention, she touched the telegram and sighed heavily.

"What's wrong? Bad news in the telegram?"

She handed it to Charlie, saying nothing.

"Oh, rot. That is bad news. But maybe you can get away sometimes? There are some very pleasant houses of assignation I use sometimes."

"Let me see how things work out. Perhaps after a while. Especially if I introduce you as a friend, or as someone interested in Tennessee. That would make things easier for us."

She had not lied. If she told the truth, that she and James believed in free love, her lack of sexual interest might hurt Charlie's feelings. She genuinely liked him, but there was no spark. He was too plodding a lover, with—as was the case with so many men—no understanding of a woman's body. They did not know how to find, let alone stimulate, a woman's spot for pleasure.

Fortunately, he had to run off to work. Tennie was waiting in the hall for him to leave. "Listen, I met the most wonderful woman last night." Tennie looked absolutely radiant. Her beauty was quite different from Victoria's own—not that she was vain, but being beautiful had clear advantages. Victoria's face was chiseled, refined. Her hair was dark and her complexion fair. Tennie was voluptuous and high-colored, with auburn hair and a figure men always wanted to get their hands on. All seven Claflin children had different appearances, although there was no doubt

with their hyperreligious mother Roxanne that Buck was the father. He wasn't faithful, but Victoria was certain their mother was. Roxanne might be considered touched, as people said, but she had managed to feed them all under hellish circumstances, and she had loved them in her own way. She had never denied their gifts. Nor had Buck. He simply exploited them.

"So tell me about this woman." Victoria sat on her bed, mending a peacock blue frock of Tennie's. Victoria liked to wear black while her sister went in for vivid colors. Victoria sewed well—in fact she had tried to make a living at it in San Francisco, but it paid so poorly, she had gone on the stage instead. Tennie paced back and forth in her chemise, crinoline and corset that pushed her breasts high—up and out.

"Annie Wood. She runs an elegant whorehouse on Thirty-fourth Street. Only the real toffs go there. She's getting rich fast, because the toffs talk about the stocks and their investments. Annie chats them up and has her girls do the same, then she invests. It's a place the girls are treated swell, Vickie. You have to meet her. She's sharp."

"Maybe today. The Colonel is coming tomorrow." Victoria's second husband had been a real colonel in the Union army during the Civil War, and he had the wounds to show for it. He had returned from the wars scarred both inwardly and outwardly, uncomfortable in his life and no longer able to enjoy sex with his wife. He had come to see Victoria in her professional capacity as a magnetic healer about his headaches and had confessed his problems to her. The moment he had walked into the parlor where she was receiving patients, she had jumped as if something hot had been driven into her spine. It's the man, she thought. She wanted him at once. She felt the spirits within her commanding, Yes! Tennie and she both had a healing touch in more ways than one, and on that very first visit she had taken care of his sexual problem. He could not always perform, but he was satisfied now. He encouraged her to take lovers, but he did not trust himself with any other woman unless there was some clear advantage—perhaps a woman who might back a scheme of his. He had left his conventional marriage and gone off with her.

He was a bright man with radical ideas. It was a time of ferment for many. She had missed him while he was clearing up financial matters in St. Louis, but now they would be together. He had spent considerable time polishing her manners and appearance as they had journeyed around the Midwest giving séances and healing the sick and troubled. She could pass as a lady now.

"Yes, this morning on the latish side," Victoria said musingly. "I'll

meet your Annie Wood. Bring some of our medical items. Perhaps the ladies of the house would like to try them. We could deal with some of the better houses. James can handle the business end if the contact works out."

Tennie nodded. "If all else fails, it wouldn't be a bad place to work. It's done up like a mansion in New Orleans, where Annie comes from. The food is real Creole cooking, and the furnishings are plain elegant, Vickie. Even to the paintings on the walls. Not your barroom nudes but tasteful, everything first-class. Her clientele includes bankers, stockbrokers, doctors, lawyers, judges, politicians, you name it. . . ."

"Cornelius Vanderbilt? Does he go there?"

"As far as I can learn, he doesn't go for prostitutes. He used to chase governesses. He doesn't pay, although he can be generous. They say he's worth at least ninety-five million."

Among their aims in coming to New York was meeting Cornelius Vanderbilt—meeting and conquering. They had certain advantages that might pique his interest. His power and money certainly intrigued them. "Charlie says he has the manners of a pig. He spits tobacco on the floor. He eats enough for an elephant, very rich food that's shortening his life. He likes women but he's having some problems now. He's eighty. And he's still trying to contact the spirit of his mother."

"I'll see what I can do," Tennie promised. "I bet I can move the old geezer."

Victoria shook out the dress she had mended. Her sewing was excellent, tiny stitches no one would be able to see. "I'm sure his mother is eager to communicate with him. We'll have to see what we can do. By the way, from what Charlie told me, the gossip is that he likes full-bodied women."

"Okay. Then it's up to me." Tennie shook her loose auburn hair. "Let's try it."

"James won't be here until tomorrow evening. His train gets in around eight. Vanderbilt has his open office hour at five. We'll get there by four to be sure we can see him." She had pumped Charlie on everything he knew about Commodore Vanderbilt. "He'll only give us five minutes. So if we can't hook him in five, we're out the door." Victoria let herself fall back on the chenille bedspread. "I do so hope we can seize his attention. We need him, but we have to persuade him that he needs us."

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The brothel was one of those newish brownstones speculators were building on block after block. It looked much like every other house in the row—none of the posters of whores or the ladies hanging their titties out the window Victoria had noticed farther downtown. A hefty butler who probably doubled as bouncer answered the door, then passed them on to a colored maid in pristine starched apron who grilled them on their purpose. Finally they were led to Annie Wood.

"Yes, I'm Louisiana born and bred," Annie said. She was a slender blonde in her thirties with a low sweet voice. She wore white lawn with a cashmere paisley shawl thrown round her shoulders. "I grew up on a plantation up the Mississippi from New Orleans about forty miles. We had a magnificent house, but it was burned in the War Between the States."

They were sipping coffee with chicory in the conservatory, a pleasant room with a glass dome and tropical plants, banana trees, orange trees, oleanders, azaleas. There were small brightly colored birds in cages among the greenery. They sat among the flowering plants sipping café au lait from fine china cups with a design of peacocks.

"Is that what brought you into the business?"

"Have you ever sold your body, Mrs. Blood?"

Sold? she thought. Lent, perhaps. "Call me Victoria. And I kept my first husband's name, Woodhull. I think 'Blood' has certain connotations that aren't appropriate for me."

"You didn't answer my question."

She decided to be truthful, for Annie interested her. "When I was an actress, we were expected to permit liberties from well-to-do gentlemen after the performances."

Tennie said, "My daddy Buck used to have me take men to bed, and then he would bust in and blackmail them. We must have done it a hundred times. He'd be swearing I was a virgin and all. Sometimes we'd get run out of town."

Annie nodded, her blond curls bouncing. "The old badger game. There's houses here where that's the real source of income."

Victoria said, "Now I prefer to select my lovers, but sometimes a woman has no choice. I don't judge prostitutes and I'm not out to save them. If I had my way, they'd make a good living and so would every other working woman."

"Are you for woman's rights, then?"

"Of course I am. Aren't you?"

Annie smiled and offered more coffee. "I know the chicory is an acquired taste. I like coffee with warm milk and lots of dark sugar."

Victoria found the chicory bitter but decided against saying so. She liked this woman, this madam. She wanted her as an ally. "It's delicious. . . . I answered your question but you ignored mine."

"I always say, when I have to tell men anything, that my family lost their money in the war and that my parents were killed. But the truth is I was seduced the year I came out and my lover abandoned me, my father disowned me."

How she had wished at times that her parents had disowned her. The very word itself reeked of privilege. Did the poor ever "disown" anyone or anything? "A madam has much more power than a working girl does."

"And a house is much healthier and safer than working the streets. Try the dark sugar. I'm fond of it. I don't like overrefined white sugar. It has no flavor."

"So your gentlemen like the mulatto girls?"

"I have ten of them and ten white girls. I dress them as Southern belles. They all bring in good money."

Victoria pointed to a statue, the only one in the conservatory. It depicted Daphne struggling to escape from Apollo and turning into a laurel tree to avoid rape. "That's an unusual subject for a brothel."

"Some of the men consider it stimulating."

Victoria tapped the table. "That's not why it's here, is it?"

"You have brains as well as beauty. I rarely meet women with such an edge. . . . That's sex to me. No romance. Just rape or escape."

"You don't take lovers any longer?"

"Lovers?" Annie laughed shortly. "There's no love in men. But there certainly is profit."

"I think we're going to be friends, Annie. I find your company very satisfying."

"We're both businesswomen, I declare. We can be friends and we can share a common interest in making ourselves secure in our finances, Victoria. We've both been poor, and neither of us would care to be so again."

That afternoon Victoria had a vision as she lay in her bath. Having grown up without indoor plumbing, with a falling-down outhouse and a rusty pump at which to fill a bucket for every watery need, she loved long hot soaking baths, scented oils and thick bath cloths and thicker towels.

She loved steam rising to the mirror and a shelf of fine lotions for afterward. But at the moment they were living in a boardinghouse, and they were only allowed to bathe on alternate days.

She saw herself addressing a great crowd in an auditorium. She could see the oak lectern before her, people cramming every seat and leaning out of the balcony that ran across the back. She could feel herself straightening her notes and her heart beating on her breastbone in fear, but when she began to speak, her voice filled the space. In the vision men threw their top hats and derbies in the air and women applauded and wept—for her, Victoria Woodhull. For her.

Even in the vision, she was only the messenger. Demosthenes taught her to speak, but the spirits spoke through her. Yes, she had to make money, she had to support her family and her children, who were coming with James, poor broken Byron and dear Zulu Maud, her children from her disastrous first marriage. But beyond making money and taking care of those for whom she was responsible, she had a further calling, a duty to the voices who spoke through her. She was more than the sum of her parts. She was the portal for powerful voices from beyond who were calling for a new world, new freedom, an opening for light and hope, for women, for children, yes, for men who cared also. She had certainly experienced man troubles, but unlike Annie, she was not embittered. The sexual act committed in freedom and loving-kindness sustained her, gave her strength and tapped energies most women were not lucky enough to enjoy in these silly times. She wanted to bring that freedom and joy to other women. She had never let herself be debased as their daddy Buck had debased Tennie. No, her sexuality was her power because it was in her control.

Someone was tapping on the door and she rose from her bath, thinking herself like Venus rising from the sea. "Just a moment, please." Botticelli's Venus, a reproduction Annie Wood had hung in the parlor where gentlemen were first received and shared champagne with the ladies of the house while a stately gentleman played softly on the piano. That Venus was fair-haired, unlike her. Soon she would have a magnificent house for herself, her sister, husband, children and whomever else she needed to take in and provide for—there would be others, there were always others. She had been making a living for herself and others since she was eight.

Victoria dressed with care in ladylike black silk with touches of white lace, Tennessee more flamboyantly in magenta silk with a turquoise shawl. Victoria disliked very tight lacing, but today they helped each other pull the corsets in and in. They examined each other with a critical eye. "We'll

do," Tennie said. "Too bad we don't have some jewels. Ladies always have jewels."

"Soon we will. They mean nothing to me, but they're a sign, as you say. An emblem of status."

The flunky ushered them into Vanderbilt's inner office. "What can I do for you, ladies?" The portly old man was stuffed into a chair that barely fit him. He was a big man still, with a high forehead where his hair had receded and a penetrating dark gaze. He sat in his chair like a bear brought into the parlor, his shoulders and arms those of a man who had done hard work in his time. He wore old-fashioned clothes, a dark and rumpled suit coat and white cravat. Victoria doubted he had thought twice about his clothing in the last forty years. He still made a powerful presence. In his prime, she might have found him attractive. Tennie still would. The smell of money and power would work for her, as it didn't for Victoria.

"We've come," Victoria said in her clear contralto voice, "to offer our help to you. We are both spiritual adepts who have had great success over the years in putting people into communication with their loved ones who have passed over. We are also magnetic healers, again with years of successful practice. I want to put you in communication with your mother, and my sister is going to ease some of your physical problems. You'll tell us when you want us to start."

They both beamed at him and Tennessee leaned a little forward, flashing him some cleavage.

"That's quite a tall order, my dears. Quite a tall order. I've gone through forty mediums over the decade since my mother passed on, and I've had paltry success. Most mediums are scallywags and frauds. And the same with healers."

"Therefore, if we can't help you, you can say goodbye. We won't charge you."

"Everybody charges. What's your racket?"

"If we help you, you'll help us. If we can't help you, then we're off and you're none the worse for it. But if we do assist you in the spiritual and physical ways I've mentioned, then you can decide what you want to do for us. How's that for a bargain? No risk to you."

"What about you, the redhead? You haven't got much to say for yourself." He inserted a wad of chewing tobacco into his jowly cheek.

"I'm more of a physical worker," Tennie said, imbuing the statement with innuendo. "I can help you, but not sitting across a desk."

He spat on the floor, watching their reaction. Victoria allowed none

to show. She had grown up around enough taverns to be used to men spitting tobacco juice wherever they felt like it, in a spittoon, often on the floor or whatever else got in their way. Charlie had warned her about the Commodore's less genteel habits, so they were prepared. Neither of them was put off by rough males; their father Buck was a tough rascal and a hard-drinking man. Nothing that Vanderbilt, who had a reputation for chasing servant girls around his mansion, was likely to pull would shock either of them.

The factotum who ushered the visitors in and out appeared, but the Commodore waved him away. The man backed out of the room like a courtier in the royal presence.

"If you'll appoint a time," Victoria said while Tennie was giving him the eye, "we'll come to you at your home. You'll see exactly what we can do."

"Next Monday at nine in the evening. Do you know where I live?"

Of course they did, but Victoria shook her head. "We've only just arrived in the city. Do you have a card?"

"Write it down, dear. Ten Washington Place. This office backs onto my house."

Victoria had been looking around the office. A large stuffed tabby cat stood on top of a row of cabinets. Vanderbilt was not known as a kind or sentimental man. He had grown up on a Staten Island farm, and farmers saw cats as barn animals. But he had been a sailing and then a steamship captain. Captains often had cats. To have a cat stuffed he must have regarded it highly. "Even your ship's cat has a presence here. A very benign one."

"Pouncer. Sailed with me to Nicaragua and up the river they said I couldn't navigate in a steamship. During the gold rush. Best damned cat for ratting I ever knew."

"A handsome animal." Victoria rose and motioned to Tennie to do the same. "We'll see you then. Thank you for your time. Next time we meet, you'll thank us." They swept out in a rustling of skirts.

She would have liked to take a horse cab but it would cost. They sat on a stoop to put on more sensible shoes from Victoria's commodious bag, then walked downtown toward their boardinghouse. Victoria could walk miles when necessary. It was a dry mild evening with a hint of freshness in the rank smoky air, perhaps coming off the river. Victoria took Tennie's arm as they strolled. The smells of roasting corn and frying oysters and sausage made her mouth fill with saliva, but there would be some kind of food back in the boardinghouse. Watery stew with a few pieces of leathery

something. Times were hard, but Victoria was convinced they would soon be less lean. Like so many others, she had come to New York to make her fortune, but she had the wherewithal to succeed. Her voices had told her she was to lead a great crusade, but she would need money to do that. And money to keep them out of the stinking warrens of poverty. They would not only survive in this hard place, they would thrive.

They picked their way through the teeming streets, lifting their skirts carefully to avoid the offal and horse shit. As they walked downtown, the sidewalks grew crowded with men shouldering each other returning from work, whores accosting them, pickpockets working the crowd, carts loading and unloading, vendors selling oranges, hot corn, oysters, coffee and chestnuts, girls crying their wares of matches or flowers, street musicans tootling or sawing away or loudly singing. They ducked out of the way of carriages and once a thundering water cart from a company rushing to claim a fire. Twice sporting men accosted them—young men on the prowl—but Victoria clutched Tennie and they slipped away. Arm in arm, she and her favorite sister marched on. She had stolen Tennie away from Buck to save her—the other sane and bright member of their family. Together with her husband James, they would be formidable.

TWO



REYDEH GOT UP before dawn as usual. The Silvermans always woke her, even on the rare morning when she might have slept in. She had a straw mattress in the windowless kitchen, three dollars a week. The baby was already crying to be fed. The girls and Mrs. Silverman had to get breakfast for everyone before they started making paper flowers in the front room, the only room with windows and some natural light and ventilation, where the boys and male boarder slept. Freydeh washed quickly in a basin she filled a third full from the bucket hauled up the night before from the pump in the yard behind the tenement—to finish before the men rose. It was always a race because