

Madeleine
Monette

Doubly Suspect

NOVEL

(translated by Luise von Flotow)

Rome, June 8

Rome, a morning in early June. We were having coffee on the patio of a bar just a few steps from the Piazza Navona, our eyes still puffy with sleep. Workers were stopping by to toss back a syrupy espresso. From the patio we could only see their soft, curved outlines, but when the bartender slid one porcelain cup after the next along the counter, it was easy to imagine their eyes mechanically following every movement he made. Leaning on the bar, they seemed hypnotized by this fleshy red-faced man with his slick hair and face covered with sweat even this early in the morning.

It was the time of day when the merchants have just opened up their shops and pause a moment with their hands on their hips to say hello to the occasional neighbour hurrying off to work. It was also the time when strong, round women, scarves knotted around their heads, push open the shutters of their somber apartments to let in a tender grey light, already heavy with humidity. After this brief appearance you sometimes see them come out and with a determined circular gesture spill the contents of a bucket over the dusty paving stones outside.

Manon had just come out of the shower, and her damp hair clung to her neck, tangling on her rather slender shoulders. The sun made her tanned skin look elastic. She was wearing the same clothes she'd had on since she arrived in Rome, a pair of beige jeans, a white tank top and a roomy blue shirt that she wore off her shoulders letting it drape down her back. In her thirties, Manon gave the impression of a relaxed young traveler, but her fingers nervously knotted and unknotted the long necklace that was wrapped once around her neck and hung to her waist. Stretching out her foot for one of her sandals that had slipped out of reach under the table, she spoke softly, the tone of her voice giving the conversation the intimacy of a murmur. Her lips hardly moved and the rest of her face was fixed in a strange suspended smile that looked as though it were attached by mistake. At the corners of her eyes, crows feet drew tiny white lines into her tan, delicately etched folds that were touching.

I hadn't known her long, but I suspected there was something wrong.

Manon was about to leave. She was going to Munich to meet a man for whom she claimed to have new feelings that were as uplifting as they were worrying. But there was no joy in her voice, no excitement, nothing but controlled affability, which gave the impression that she was finding it hard to take the risky step toward another liaison.

This was not her first lover or her first love. She was normally very discreet, but she had told me a few things, let them slip, and I knew there had been several men in her life. They'd gone almost as soon as they arrived, probably closing the door gently behind them. I was sure Manon would inspire such goodwill.

So while she sat there on her little folding chair, with her legs extended under the table, I was sorry she hadn't been more willing to confide in me. Manon was not the type to tell all, and ever since I'd met her I'd discovered nothing but unimportant details. Now we were about to separate and I was sad. I could not really reproach her for having kept me at a distance, since in spite of her reticence she had lifted a corner of the veil and let me in on her occasional love affairs, the nights she'd spent here or there, the disappointments of the eternal single, but I had the impression that none of that was important to her, which was precisely why she'd told me as much as she had.

This time, however, Manon seemed to be engaged in a different kind of affair.

She'd met Hans on a beach in Yugoslavia. They'd spent two weeks looking into each other's eyes under one of these constant suns of early summer. Then Hans went back to Germany and Manon came to Rome to meet me on the day we'd agreed.

We were supposed to stay at a hotel on the Via Veneto, but had agreed to meet in a little restaurant I'd discovered on my first visit to Rome. When I realized that the hotel had unfortunately responded to inflation and was no longer within my budget, I took a room a few streets away in the Pension Walder, with two old ladies who were a little senile but charming. Manon had dropped off her bags in the foyer of the hotel and taken a room there, with a view of the plane trees and the shops of the Via Veneto. So we were not living under the same roof, but this was not really important since we'd planned only a short stay in Rome. A few days, and we'd be on the train to Naples to get a boat from there to Palermo. We were planning to head for the African coast after Sicily, but our itinerary beyond that was still quite vague.

I had to recognize however that something had upset our plans. I was not yet sure what had happened between

Manon and Hans, but I knew that she was not in her normal state when she got to Rome.

Every time I tried to set a date for our trip to Naples she would get awkwardly evasive. And whenever I asked her about Yugoslavia her answers were so contorted that I would have felt she were lying if I'd had any doubts about her sincerity.

Later, I thought her blurry answers were simply designed to hide the details of the affair she'd had with the German for as long as possible.

I decided that one day or another I would discover the reason for her hedging and her reticence, and so I stopped asking questions. We spent all day walking the streets of Rome as though nothing were wrong, then we'd go our own ways, completely exhausted. Less than a week had gone by in this way, when to my great surprise, Manon told me she intended to go to Munich.

That's when I thought I understood what was going on. Manon had met someone, and when she came to meet me in Rome, she was torn between going to Germany and travelling with me. Afraid to disappoint me, and even more afraid of entering into a new relationship, she'd taken time to make up her mind. And while she was wavering, she'd preferred not to say anything so as not to upset me, even if it meant exposing me to the sometimes unpleasant effects of her indecision.

In some ways I'd been competing with Hans. But there had been dozens of affairs before him, all of which had ended exactly the same way. Manon quickly grew tired, and quietly retired from the game. No crisis, no break-up scenes. A sudden end, each time. She claimed she wasn't suited for long-lasting relationships and didn't complain. Hans had had to go back to Munich without a promise from her that she would follow, and once in Italy she'd got lost in her dilemma. Unaware of what was on her mind, I'd accompanied her through the streets of Rome, a map of the city in hand, alternating between impatience and anxiety. We did Rome like real tourists, but I might just as well have been a guide. I walked through the gardens of the Villa Borghese with her, went to museums and restaurants with her, with the constant and disagreeable feeling that I was just an escort, following on her heels and subject to her mood swings, both indifferent and necessary to her, as though she couldn't stand being alone but couldn't say what was on her mind either. Finally, with all the politeness she could muster and asking forgiveness for not having let me in on things earlier, she announced her decision the night before she planned to leave. Hans had won out over her apprehensions and over our plans. Manon would be leaving for Munich.

And there we were, having a last coffee on the patio of a bar, filled with the affection we had for each other, which suddenly seemed embarrassing. Manon was still reaching for her sandal under the table, and I couldn't help but compare our situation to that of new lovers who only find inconsequential things to say to each other when the time comes to separate, still too full of fresh memories that lump in their throats. I would make the trip without her. And there was nothing tragic about that. I was used to travelling alone.

She'd arrived at the hotel on the Via Veneto and met me the following evening at Alfredo's, Via della Scrofa. Sipping a glass of red wine, one arm outstretched on the table, holding a cigarette, she'd jumped up when she saw me. Her face had lit up instantly. She'd come to the door to greet me, hugged me, then stepped back to inspect me from head to foot, and exclaimed that I was looking better than ever, that she was happy to see me, and that this needed celebrating. Her eyes were too shiny, her cheeks too pink, her breath heavy with wine. Taking me by the shoulder, she pulled me over to her table and immediately ordered a second glass. Not a word about her trip to Greece and Yugoslavia; instead a flood of questions about me, about Montreal, about the latest novels I'd reviewed, and so on. Wearing a black dress I hadn't seen on her before that fit her tall shape snugly, she was drunk and radiant, her drunkenness giving her a confidence that made her even more beautiful. I was happy to finally be in Rome, and to know that we would soon be going south.

We left Alfredo's that night in a state of serious inebriation. As we walked along the deserted streets, we fell silent. We were just in sight of the sign of the hotel when I told Manon I'd rented a room in a pension about ten minutes by foot from the Via Veneto. I'd expected her to be disappointed but she seemed relieved.

And now we were about ready to say goodbye to each other. Manon had already reached for the bill, and then she slipped the key to her hotel room into my hand saying she'd paid the bill for the whole week and absolutely wanted me to take it over. I could just move in until I left for Naples; the owner knew I was coming and was expecting me that evening. Manon must have assumed I wouldn't refuse; disconcerted by my silence, she began to describe the room which was doubtless more comfortable than my maid's room at the Pension Walder. Feeling that we were wasting precious moments, I couldn't concentrate on the trifling details of the decor. When she stopped talking, I had a vague impression of an old-fashioned place that had dusty pink walls with cream stripes, a French door that opened onto a cast-iron

balcony, and a copper chandelier that would shed, over a feather bed, a pale warm glow reminiscent of Venice nights.

Manon was biting her lips, and looking intense.

"So will you take it?"

She was visibly, and oddly, agitated. I had the impression that she was upset over ruining our plans and was offering me a kind of compensation in return for forgiveness. Seeing the imploring look in her eyes, I agreed.

Satisfied, she placed her hands in her lap, straightened up in her chair, and took a last sip of coffee.

Pinching her lips in an expression of regret, she closed my fingers tightly around the key, then slung her small red leather bag, reminiscent of a school bag, across her shoulder. When she was ready to leave she hugged me so long that I felt her warm breath in my hair.

After Manon had gone, I stood there, the taste of coffee in my mouth and a key in my hand.

I would never see her again, or rather I would never see her again alive.