

# Let's Drink to That

by Roland Foster

Chuck Hendricks limped onto the outdoor patio of the restaurant. He leaned on his cane, looked around, and his heart sank. Every table was occupied. There was one table with a single occupant, an attractive woman, probably a few years older than he was. She was looking at the sunset. He started to retreat to the indoor bar, but she suddenly looked right at him. She smiled, and inclined her head in a way that might have signaled, "Join me?"

He approached the table, and she said, "Marlene's is crowded this evening. Come, sit down and enjoy this magnificent sunset with me. Have you ever seen a sky so beautiful?"

He smiled. "I've seen many sunsets in many places, but maybe none quite as extravagant as this one. So many colors, so vibrant. And they go clear around the sky." He eased carefully into the chair opposite her, keeping his cane between his knees. "Thank you for inviting me to join you. My name is Charles, but please call me 'Chuck'."

"Hello, Chuck. My name is Amanda, but please do not call me 'Mandy'."

He laughed. "Do you have a nickname you prefer, Amanda?"

"I've had nicknames, but none that I liked. 'Mandy' is one that I find especially odious."

"Why is that?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "I don't remember. Some trauma or offense from my childhood, perhaps. Or maybe just because it sounds childish."

A waiter appeared at Chuck's elbow. "Good evening, sir. May I get you something?"

Chuck smiled. "I think, in honor of the sunset, I'll have a Bloody Mary. Spicy, with a wedge of lime. May I get you something, Amanda?" He indicated her almost-empty glass.

She hesitated. "I usually have only one, but all right. Another Mai Tai, please, Jeff." Jeff nodded and left. Amanda smiled at Chuck. "Thank you, kind sir." She finished her drink.

"My pleasure," he said. "This lovely sky deserves a toast, don't you think?"

"Yes, but a quick one. The colors are starting to fade."

"They always do, don't they? But that's both good and bad, isn't it? If this level of splendor wasn't rare and fleeting, we wouldn't appreciate it as much."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right."

Chuck shifted in his chair, and an unmistakable grimace of pain came and went on his face.

"Are you all right, Chuck? You look as if you're hurting."

"It comes and goes. I have to be careful how I move ..."

"I thought so. I'm a physical therapist, and I know pain when I see it. Are you doing something for it?"

"I have some pain meds, which I did *not* take this afternoon because I decided I would have a drink instead. I limit myself to one kind of poison at a time."

"That's wise." She hesitated. "I know I'm intruding, but have you been injured?"

"Injured. Wounded. Whatever you want to call it. I was too close to a roadside bomb when it went off. And, so that you don't have to drag it out of me, it did a number on my right side — knee, ankle, muscles here and there. I'm healing, but it's turned into a long, slow process."

"Roadside bomb. Were there others with you ..."

"Yeah." He paused for what seemed like a long time. "Joe and Mickey didn't make it. Alan lost an arm and a leg. I was pretty lucky."

The waiter returned with their drinks. After he left, Chuck continued. "It happened a year ago today. That's why I'm having a drink today. After we toast the sunset, I'll drink to the three guys who were with me. I wish they could be here to lift a glass, too." He raised his drink. "Here's to the amazing beauty that comes and goes in the sky. Let's be thankful."

Amanda held her glass toward him, and they clinked, then each drank. Chuck held his glass aloft again and said, "And here's to three guys who I didn't know long enough that we could get to be friends, but they were my brothers, fellow jarheads, and I salute them — and all the others who've suffered and died as they did, most of them without knowing why." He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice as he spoke the last words.

They touched glasses and drank again, and Chuck set down his glass. Then he picked it up and drained it. "If you can have another, so can I." Amanda didn't reply. He looked around for Jeff, caught his eye, and held up his empty glass. The waiter nodded and turned to go inside.

When Chuck turned back, Amanda was looking at him. "Afghanistan?" she asked.

He was silent for a bit, remembering. Then he said, "Yeah."

"Marines?"

"Yeah. Semper Fi." And again there was anger in his voice.

"Are you mad at the Marine Corps?"

"No. I guess I'm mad at myself. I thought about enlisting in the Air Force, even though my favorite uncle was a Marine. I probably should have done that. The fly boys do get killed, but they don't often get maimed."

"Are you saying that you'd rather be dead than alive and hurting?"

After a moment, Chuck replied, "I definitely feel that way sometimes."

The waiter set the new drink down before Chuck, then went away.

"Excuse me for being blunt, but are you suicidal?" Amanda asked.

"No. Not now or ever. That's not my style." He took a swallow of his drink.

They sat quiet for a while, then He said, "You know, Amanda, choices that seem simple at the time can make a huge difference in your life."

She nodded. "Mmm hmmm."

"I was just thinking ... if I had joined the Air Force, I would probably be healthy and pain-free right now." He shrugged. "Or dead, maybe. But something else occurs to me."

"What's that?"

"I wouldn't be sitting here having a drink with you. And that would be a real shame."

She smiled. "Ah, yes, that's the 'Law of Unintended Consequences.' I came across that in a book recently." She nodded and gestured with her glass. "Why don't we drink to that?"

"Yes, why don't we?" They raised their glasses.