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Carlotta's vinyl skin

Sheila Roberts
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Abstract
My friend David, a successful lawyer who helped me with my immigration papers for this country, is unhappy in a niggled, half-tortured sort of way because of the unimpressive salary I earn as an English professor. Once a month regularly he will phone me to beg me to write a lurid romantic novel that might get on the best-seller list and enable me to buy the house and car he thinks I owe it to myself to own. I have told him over and over again that I cannot write such a novel — I would become immobilized with ennui and self-disgust at my very typewriter. I would waste my time trying, and simply be inserting my hands and head into a stocklike writer’s block.

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My friend David, a successful lawyer who helped me with my immigration papers for this country, is unhappy in a niggled, half-tortured sort of way because of the unimpressive salary I earn as an English professor. Once a month regularly he will phone me to beg me to write a lurid romantic novel that might get on the best-seller list and enable me to buy the house and car he thinks I owe it to myself to own. I have told him over and over again that I cannot write such a novel — I would become immobilized with ennui and self-disgust at my very typewriter. I would waste my time trying, and simply be inserting my hands and head into a stocklike writer’s block.

‘Sheila, can’t you just prostitute yourself for once?’ he pleads. ‘Just once. Then you could keep writing the egghead stuff no-one wants to read in comfort, at least.’

Sometimes a little inner voice joins its harangue with his. If I have endurance and energy (which perhaps I don’t have and am therefore lacking the essentials of a full human being) I could indeed write a money-bringing book, the voice insists. Think up a simple plot, set it in a foreign country during a time of turmoil. Be prepared to write six hundred pages. Create a beautiful heroine who falls in love with a rebel/renegade/revolutionary/freedom fighter/innocent fugitive from justice/political activist/disinherited son later to be re-inherited/wildcat unionist/or even a handsome Dracula-like fellow, eyes heavy-lidded, soul possessed. Or she could be torn between her love for more than one of the above and the wishes of her father. Or she could be in search of a lost father. Contrive to have the lovers separated and then bring them together in a grand finale. They are both, or all three, hot-blooded. Here’s your chance, Sheila, to portray the sex act from the woman’s point-of-view. You could do a service to womankind while making money.

Weaving, weaving, I stick a sheet of paper in the typewriter. A foreign country? The only country I know well, whose landscape forms part of my own mental baggage, is South Africa. My setting will have to be
South Africa — it’s foreign enough to most Americans and it’s their money I’m after. I couldn’t presume to write about America: I know too little about American turmoil and even less about the various historic sites. I have no doubt that I could recreate in words the look of the Cape coast, the Karroo, the Bushveld, the Highveld, the Natal highlands, the Drakensberge. In fact, if I invented a country, calling it something like Sylvanvakia or Prinsenmanibia or Eendt-sur-Mer, I would only end up describing either the Cape coast, the Karroo, the Bushveld, the Highveld, the Natal highlands, or the Drakensberge. Geography is destiny.

Turmoil? If I want this book to sell, I have to keep all racial discrimination or conflict out of it, except for a bit of jungle-enshrouded sex to the beat of tom-toms, but that could come into the subplot. So I could go along with the myth of the ‘white man’s’ war and set my story in South Africa on the eve of Anglo-Boer hostilities. My heroine will be a peaches-and-cream English girl who comes out with her wealthy father to visit the mines and falls in love with ... an Afrikaner? No, no. A descendent of the 1820 Settlers? A South African English Gentleman and a Rebel. How about that?

I visualize delicate Victorian blouses, thick blond hair done up in a chignon, large hats, many petticoats, soft white hands, large blue eyes, a vulnerable but brave mouth. Oh no, I am regurgitating memories of Bo Derek starring in *Tarzan the Ape Man*. Why does schlock always stick? I must start afresh. I must start afresh. The image of one of my best-looking writing students comes to mind. She has slightly curly, untidy brown hair, a thin face, and slanting catlike eyes. She usually wears long peasant skirts or calf-length tight trousers in Hot Pink or Luminous Blue, and soft suede boots with a foldover at the ankle, such as medieval pages must have worn, three earrings in one ear and none in the other, oversized T-shirts or fifties blouses. I try dressing her in a Victorian outfit. She looks okay although her shoulders are a bit broad and she stands rather sardonically and firmly on the ground surveying the desolation of a burnt-down Free State farm. Allie, get those boots off, and for God’s sake, wilt a little!

Get her off that farm. I’ll send her in a donkey cart with her wealthy but dying father into the interior. They are on their way to Kimberley. But the father dies on the road and she is left a pile of money. I love bumping fathers off in my stories: like other egghead writers, I am haunted by Oedipus, Electra, and Jocasta.

So there she is alone, on her way to Kimberley. She will have to have picked up some passengers, though. Poor girl. Look, I’m sorry, but I have to think about these things: how will she wash properly on the road?
Wonderful complexions don’t stay that way without cleansing. How will she be able to urinate and move her bowels out in the bush with all those skirts on? Just bundle them up? But won’t they still get splashed and stained? How much toilet paper does her party have? Did they have toilet paper in those days? Did they have toothbrushes? When was the first toothbrush marketed, hey you Popular Culturists? What if she gets her period? Of course she’ll get her period, unless she’s anorexic. But an anorexic girl won’t be able to handle the boisterous sex scenes in the book. And what about mosquitoes? I mean, have you ever spent a night out of doors in the summer without netting and that new insecticide you rub on hands, face, and feet, or whatever parts of the body are exposed? The perspiration! The food going bad!

Let me tell you, I know from experience that when my skin breaks out, I lose all sense of the romantic occasion. I don’t feel like going to bed with some guy whose skin is fine and who’ll want to leave the light on while we make love. I don’t like making love when I’m sweaty or dirty. I don’t fancy sweaty or dirty men. Also, I find it excruciating to be ‘confined’ with a man in bed, or even in a car, when I’m suffering from flatulence. Yes, contrary to masculine belief, women do fart. Over the centuries we’ve worked hard to establish the conviction of our continence. But out in the bush the pretence would have to go. I simply cannot muster up enthusiasm for Romance as I regard Carlotta, my beautiful heroine, waddling like a duck as she squats, searching for a place to hold steady where the tough grass won’t prick her bare butt.

In my imagination my student Allie walks into my office. Today she is sporting an old stained braided coat of the kind Majordomos of hotels wear, a limp mini skirt and army boots. I know that she (like many other students these days) buys her clothes from a popular second-hand clothing store that sometimes stocks astonishing antique garments, things people have stolen out of their grandparents’ attics, or defunct theatre companies have hawked. Allie has on bottlegreen tights and a little head-hugging hat from the twenties.

‘Why do you want to write that trash?’ she asks me.

‘To make money.’

‘Then you’ve got to stop thinking about physical discomfort. Your heroine has to have skin of vinyl, teeth of white stainless steel (if that is possible), her polyfibrous hair does not grow damp and scraggly, and her crystalline eyes have the three or four necessary expressions, depending on the light, for your purposes: joy, indignation, love, and sorrow. She doesn’t have periods, or perspiration, or pee, or poo!’
‘I can’t write about a vinyl dummy,’ I say, my own eyes flashing indig-nantly.

‘What is the least you can write about?’

‘Well, to begin with, I need to see real people in my mind’s eye, a woman like you, for instance. Say, what does your boyfriend do?’ Deep down in me a little hope is born that she will say he is completing training as an officer in the Air Force Academy. A shadowy Richard Gere starts forming. Would such a gorgeous thing date Allie the Punk in her tights and boots?

‘My boyfriend has a degree in Agriculture, but because of the recession he can’t find a job in his field, no pun, so he’s working as a male nurse at Hannah Hospital. Oh boy, you wouldn’t believe the kinds of things he’s learned to do! Give people enemas, stick catheters into them, give them shots in the bee-hind, and hold pans for them when they want to throw up. But it’s done him good, especially seeing old people naked and having to wash the shit off them and all that. He’s much more sympathetic toward people these days. He never criticizes women for their bodies the way most guys do.’

‘What does he look like?’ I ask, a bit disconsolately, pulling the paper out of the machine.

‘He’s no Mister Universe. He’s okay. He’s going to have to go on a bit of a diet because of the tummy he’s getting. Twenty-five’s too young to get a tummy. Not that I mind. He’s got a sweet face, but his skin is very pale. He can’t suntan at all: he just goes red, mostly his nose, and he was never good at sports at school because of his flat feet. Would you listen to this: no-one realized that he was flat-footed until he was about fourteen? He got out of the swimming pool at school and by chance the coach noticed his wet foot-print. As flat as a fish.’

‘What will he do? Keep looking for a job in his «field» or settle for nursing?’

‘Naa ... he’s decided to go on to grad school next year. He may as well. He’s saved enough to put himself through, and he still wants to get into some branch of agricultural science, maybe at a higher level.’

‘And you?’

‘I’ll keep on with my studio art. Though I wouldn’t mind farming. I’ve always wanted to farm. That’s why Percy and I get on so well.’ She settles herself on the corner of my desk, running one hand over a pile of books. I see that each finger-nail is painted a different colour. She looks at me confidentially. ‘You know, Percy my boyfriend, had a terrible time as a kid. His mom used to dominate him totally. Even when he was in
highschool she'd clean his room and go through all his things. She'd even examine the underclothes he'd thrown in the wash. He had no privacy whatsoever. And the one time he came home a little drunk, both his parents created such a scene, even though he was already twenty-one, that now he simply can't, he can't drink in front of them. Now his dad offers him beers and beers and beers, but he can't accept them. I've had a lot of trouble getting him to loosen up with me, you know. Do you know he stayed a virgin until he was twenty-four?

'Allie, you don't have to tell me all this stuff.'
'I know you'll keep it to yourself.'
'Of course.'
'I had to teach him a lot,' she says coolly, getting off the desk and clumping to the door, her boots heavy against the floorboards. 'I hope you can write your Romance and make some big bucks,' she adds, but without much interest. She wiggles her painted nails at me and leaves. I put the paper back into the typewriter.

My story begins to take form. Percy, my male protagonist (I dare not call him a hero, which is not to say he isn’t heroic) will be a civilian helper in the military hospital at Bloemfontein where more British soldiers are dying of diarrhea than are being killed by the Boers. But I won’t go into details that will nauseate the reader. I might draw a Daumieresque picture of grey skeletal bodies with sombre young faces in overcrowded wards. But Percy is a short, shy, pink-faced fellow with not too noticeably flat feet and a deep desire to be a farmer. He has never known a woman (in the biblical sense) until he meets Petronella, a farm girl who has had to take on many of the chores at ‘Bloustroom’ because the men are away fighting in the Transvaal. She wears army boots and hitched up her skirts for ease of movement by means of an old cartridge belt. She ties her hair up in pony tails with string, which causes her cotton sunbonet to sit oddly on her head. The neighbours think she is eccentric if not mad (The Mad Woman of Africa — cliché alert!) and no young man comes riding up to ‘Bloustroom’ to court her when the farmer-fighters are on leave. But Percy doesn’t notice anything out of the ordinary about Petronella. Besides, he is lonely. His widowed mother, who wielded inflexible control over his life, has herself passed on to the Fathers as a result of a stray shell crashing through Percy’s suburban bedroom just as she was about to riffle through the things her son stores in his tin trunk. (Am I killing Mothers off too now?)

Petronella has great trouble with stomach wind, mostly because of the high-starch diet forced on all the population, but Percy is unaware of her sneaky farts — because of his job, his hair and clothes are infused with
excremental and medicinal smells. One afternoon in the barn, she shows him how to make love (this will be my main sexual scene, putting male readers straight about female arousal once and for all), whereafter he becomes insatiably attracted toward her. He nearly gets shot by the British at one point because they suspect that he is consorting with the enemy, but Petronella is not the enemy nor do any of the enemy come near her. But Percy goes to jail (SAD scene), and the British burn Petronella's farm (TRAGIC scene, Petronella's unusual silhouette seen against the brilliant orange and blues of the fire). But after the war Percy marries Petronella and takes up farming with her — her father and brother died in prison camps set up by the British for Boer prisoners in the West Indies. This information is conveyed to Petronella in a letter written by General de Wet, a letter which she frames.

My telephone rings. 'Sheila, honey...' (it is David, my lawyer-friend), 'I've just been reading in the Free Press about a housewife in Troy, Michigan, I mean Troy, Michigan! And she's making plenty of money writing these novels to a formula. Apparently her publishers supply her with an outline which she merely fleshes out. Now you could do that!' The strong picture I have of Petronella and Percy clearing away the debris of the burnt-down farm house begins to dissipate. Behind them I see beautiful Carlotta, her blond hair wisping the sides of her lovely vinyl skin, her lacy petticoats caught up against the breeze in one small hand, her lips pursed redly in anticipation. She waves. At a handsome horseman? No, at me. I am surprised. I see that she wants me to bring her to life, rescue her from that vinyl skin, allow her to experience hot tearful afternoons of toothache, days when she can't get a comb through her sweating hair, the bloated feeling of food moving through her digestive system, messy periods at the wrong time, just when she wanted to wear a white gown to the officers' dinner, and she wants me to give her the good sense to guide her lover's hand and penis so that they move in ways she wants, instead of having to submit to one of those writhing, grunting, quick, harsh sex acts always inflicted on Romantic heroines. I hesitate. I do pity her. Mmm ... Carlotta could be Petronella's cousin from overseas. Percy introduces her to Captain Coningham, the Chief Surgeon. Carlotta uses part of her fortune to rebuild Petronella's farm.

'Look, David, I don't think I want some publisher's outline. I can think up my own outline,' I say.

'Don't tell me I've persuaded you to do it?'

'I am thinking about ... the project ... very seriously.'

'I mean, if someone in Troy, Michigan, can do it, so can you.'

'Ja, ja, I'm thinking about it,' I say, beckoning to Carlotta.