

Passion Victim

Once upon a time I was a romance novelist—until I realized that writing about doing what comes naturally doesn't come naturally.



At times I've been invited to speak to aspiring writers about my “career path.” This always seemed on a par with asking Hannibal for tips on mountain travel. Yeah, he did cross the Alps, but, damn, it would have been a heck of a lot easier without all those elephants.

¶ Let's say you're attending one of our more prestigious writing programs, dreaming of that Nobel prize in literature, those handsome boxed sets, the dazzling soirees, clinking glasses with Morgan, Sonny, and other literary luminaries. Should you be taking advice from someone who got her start writing pesticide brochures, true-confession stories, and romance novels? Is this route going to lead you to Guggenheim grants? Yaddo fellowships? ¶ Probably not. But since most of our career paths start in the enchanted little village of Paying the Rent, I like to go public about my wanderings through the land of romance, with emphasis on a particularly excru-

ciating stop at the Five-Page First Kiss.

No job counselor pointed my way to the first-ever Romance Writers of America Conference, held in the Woodlands in the summer of 1980. Romance novels had just come out of the Harlequin closet and were emerging as a publishing phenomenon. Intrepid young freelance journalist that I was, I thought I'd be able to write a story out of this burgeoning new genre, or “John-ray,” as some of the fans in attendance would have it, a pronunciation that called to mind either a serial killer or a porn star. So I cornered one of the many real-life New York editors who'd flocked to the conference to recruit authors. What she had to say stunned me. She spoke of translations into dozens of languages. Of print runs in the hundreds of thousands. Of advances in equally enticing figures.

I swapped my official cub reporter notebook for an armful of the samples publishers were giving away and started reading. I went to bed that night a girl and got up a woman. A woman who knew a thing or two about “shuddering fulfillment” and “aching chasms yearning to be filled.” Shoot, I'd written about pesticide runoff for the EPA; surely I could churn out a few thousand words on the “throbbing evidence of male desire.”

I left the conference with a nom de whoopee, Tory Cates, and a contract to write a novel for a new line to be called Silhouette Special Edition. *Handful of Sky* would be set in the “glamorous” world of rodeo. Yes, I actually convinced a New York editor that rodeos were glamorous. After only one night in the Pink Ghetto, I knew that Silhouette was not going to be interested in a novel set in the manure-stinking, pill-throttled world of real rodeo. Yee-haw! Write 'em, cowgirl!

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PULPY LOVE: Actually, my most soul-stirring inspiration was the monthly rent.

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few years, Tory Cates paid my rent and supported my "serious" writing habit by penning four more Silhouette Special Editions. These editions were special in the way that education can sometimes be. They covered the basics. And the most basic of all basics was the first kiss. Romance editors have specific requirements for what kids at movies used to call "the mushy parts." But editors know that, rather than hiding their eyes and groaning, readers want the hot and heavy stuff strung out for as long as possible. They think five pages is a good length for a

first kiss. I think five pages is a good length for a first conquest of Mount Everest.

As I cranked out those first books, I happily, then increasingly not so happily, arranged and rearranged romance boilerplate. On Tory's watch, "knees turned to jelly," "touches trailed liquid fire," "secret inner cores of womanhood moistened," "deltas dampened," "groins surged," the blind saw, and the lame walked.

As tedious as romance-speak became, I did like the guys in these books. Gone were the bodice-ripping pirates of old-school romances. The heroes of "contemporaries," the subgenre Tory specialized in, cared. These fierce yet lov-

ing, hard yet soft Treys and Lincs, Derricks and Forrests really, really cared. Tory's heroes spent their every waking hour tormented by visions of the heroine. They ached for her bewitching body while puzzling over her tantalizing psyche. They bought her expensive presents. Often in colors that matched her eyes, such as the ever-popular cornflower blue.

I guess the problems started on book four of the Cates quintet. Around this time, Silhouette discovered oral sex, and my editor ordered me to insert three such scenes into the manuscript. Set at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, this airy little confection was titled *Cloud Waltzer*. I came to think of it as "Blown in a Balloon" as I worked in tedious variations of the newest phrase to be added to the romance writer's lexicon: "She tasted the sea." *Ewww*.

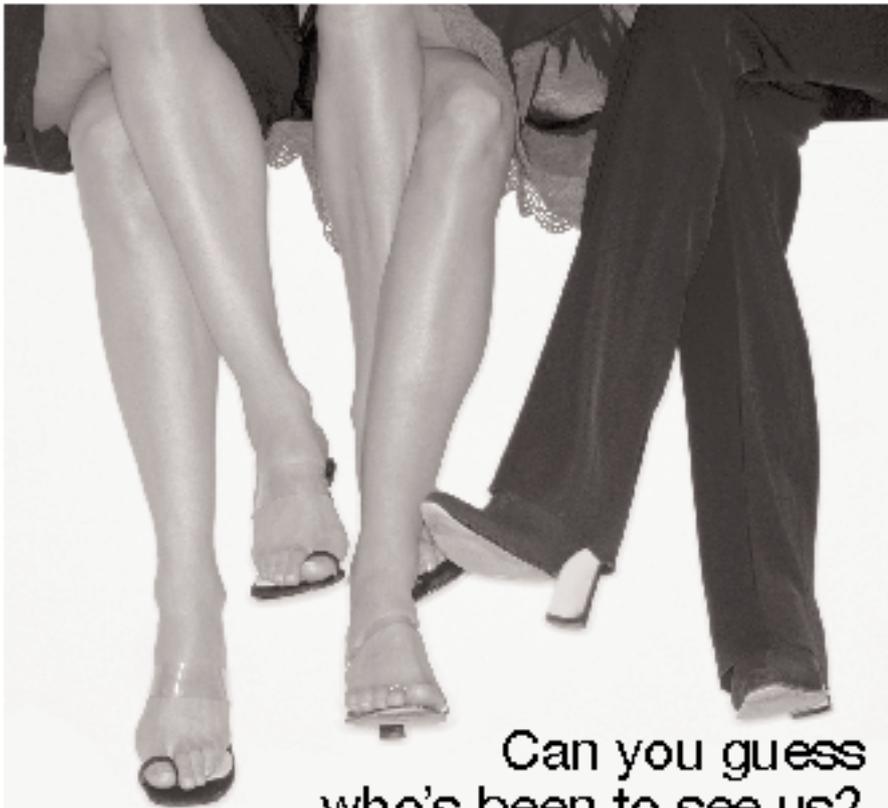
Ewww, indeed, I tell idealistic young students. No one said torturing the alphabet for a living was going to be pretty.

By numero cinco I knew I wasn't long for the Pink Ghetto. I winced when strangers, upon discovering how I paid the rent, joked about the nudge nudge, wink wink "research." Truth be told, I had become as detached as a gynecologist in the face of reproductive details. The moment of truth came with that first kiss, when I found I couldn't pencil in so much as a pucker. Couldn't conjure up a single tingle aside from a vague numbness in my butt from sitting too long. Couldn't, as I'd once heard a frenzied patron at a male strip club yell, "put the meat on the table!"

Far worse, I realized that it wasn't less sex I wanted; it was more real life. I wanted to write love stories that didn't have to end happily and might not even always involve the more popular gender and species configurations. I wanted to concoct plot complications that couldn't be resolved with the words "She's my sister." I wanted to create messy characters with messy lives and "problems" far, far messier than a heroine cursed with "boyishly slender hips."

Over the course of four books, I had come to understand and appreciate the comforts John-ray fiction had to offer. Who among us has led such a golden life that we can afford to sneer at the guarantee of a happy ending? I, and my landlord, had also come to understand and appreciate the comforts of my paying the rent on time. Like so many writers before me, and so many to follow, I had drawn from that especially deep well of inspiration, reached way down into the moist secret core of my own womanhood, and started typing.

But this time, as my lovers began their long windup, I knew it would be the first kiss for Lacey and Dru, but it would be a long kiss good-bye for Tory Cates. ♣



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