Winter 1992

Her Alabaster Skin

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Recommended Citation
DeMarinis, Rick (1992) "Her Alabaster Skin," CutBank: Vol. 1 : Iss. 37 , Article 38.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss37/38

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This is my study, there is my desk, and that is my chair, and on the desk is my manuscript, the great yawning bulk of it, waiting for me, but I am not ready. I’m not Veronica LaMonica yet. I need one more can of Jolt, one more stroll through the rooms of my house, one more argument with myself about my life and the dead end it has stumbled into.

I need another fifteen minutes to project myself into Veronica. It is 9:00 A.M., and I need to get twenty rough-draft pages of *Moist Days, Dry Nights* written today. My editor, Cadmus Xenedes, is getting nervous about me. “You’re slowing down, you’re losing RPMs, Gregory,” he says. “We have a schedule for Veronica. You are off the schedule, Gregory.”

I write three Veronica LaMonicas a year. It’s October and I’ve turned in only two. *Heart Murmurs* and *Savage in My Bed*. Cadmus sent me a Macintosh to speed things along but I haven’t uncrated it yet. Veronica, a true Victorian, doesn’t understand, or approve of, high technology. And there’s no need for her understanding or approval. *Rough Hands* sold ninety-five thousand copies in six months. Veronica is a star visible to the naked eye in the romantic universe.

“*Rough Hands* has torque,” Cadmus said when he read it in manuscript. “Torque, and high compression. Subtlety too, you know? Like you can’t hear the valve lifters. I read some of these junkers and by God you can hear the valve lifters, Gregory. Once you hear the lifters, you begin to hear everything—tappets, timing gear, piston slap, the works. You can hear the carbon chipping
off the cylinder walls. And then the suspension goes. I mean suspension of disbelief, right down the old grease hole.”

Before he became a top romance fiction editor, Cadmus was a mechanic. A literate mechanic who got tired of black fingernails, split knuckles, and coveralls. Now he wears laid-back unconstructed double-breasted suits by Ronaldus Shamask at a thousand dollars a copy, and gets his nails done twice a week.

Poached eggs, bacon, toast, and Jolt—my breakfast. Jolt gets Veronica into high gear. A second or third can flips her into overdrive. Carlo, my son, says I’ve ruined my talent and now I’m killing myself. Carlo won’t eat the food I cook. He eats poached fish for breakfast. Clean protein sources and Omega-3 are his obsessions. He has grown up fearing cholesterol and the triglycerides. He belongs to the Overinformed Generation. Educated daily by Donahue, Oprah, the evening news, and weekly by 20/20, 60 Minutes, and the network specials designed to alarm and depress, the Overinformed Generation know the thousand paths to personal and collective catastrophe. They know who is poisoning the air, what they are poisoning it with, and they know the economic downside of cleanup. They are privy to the timetable for the destruction of the ozone layer. They understand the global tragedy the elimination of the Brazilian rain forests will produce. Alzheimer’s, AIDS, acid rain, the Greenhouse Effect, the poisoning of the aquifers, and the extinction of humpback whales, rhinos, elephants, and the California condor define their future. Even so, they tend to be a cheerful lot who cling to the hopeful notion that we have not floundered past the point of no return, an optimism I don’t share.
Carlo jogs to school wearing a smog mask. He buys expensive, organically grown vegetables with his allowance. He puts a tablespoon of cider vinegar into every glass of water he drinks—water that has been filtered by reverse osmosis—to enhance digestion. He reads excerpts to me from articles in Organic Living Now, his favorite magazine. He wants to discourage me away from eggs, red meat, French fries, whole milk, cheese, butter, caffeine, and white bread. Which is to say, my generation’s notion of real food. He’s a bore, but a beautifully healthy bore. His mother moved out a year and a half ago, unable to put up with his organic-living extremism and my sad-sack end-of-the-road pessimism.

Veronica won’t come again today. I hope she’s only being moody. I fiddle with Moist Days, Dry Nights for an hour, trying to trick some life into it while fighting off a caffeine-fueled headache. “Her alabaster skin seemed cool as rare porcelain to Victor Carrenga,” I write, trying to get the first love scene into gear. But once in gear, the engine dies. Could be a fuel problem, could be the electrical system. Could be both. Out of gas, out of juice. (Cadmus’s lingo is catchy.) “Palpitating in the delirium of anticipation . . .” Jesus. These Latinate multisyllabics are like sugar in the gas tank. The engine gets gummed up and freezes, the plugs fouled with smarm. Carlo comes into my office, eating yogurt. “Stuck, huh, Dad?” he says.

“Aren’t you going to be late for yoga practice?” I say. Among other things, Carlo is a kibbitzer. When Veronica is here and cooking I don’t mind. But when she’s on the rag, dismal in old bathrobe and carpet slippers, hiding from the world, every interference is a major roadblock with no detours.
“Why don’t you write a real novel sometime, Dad?” Carlo asks.

“I mean, isn’t that what you set out to do twenty years ago?”

I swivel around and regard this yogurt-slurping teenaged hypochondriacal repository of moral wisdom. “You’ve got a complaint, Carlo? Correct me if I overstate the case, son, but didn’t Veronica just buy you a three-year-old Celica? Doesn’t she provide you with a steady supply of wheat-germ oil, oat bran, pesticide-free fruits and vegetables, organically grown rice? Are you sure you want me to fire Veronica? Do you really want me to join the mainstream of starving writers who drag Integrity around with them like dead whales? ‘I’m poor, but I’m clean,’ they say. ‘Nobody fucks with my dead whale,’ they say.”

During this speech, Carlo has been scraping the bottom of his yogurt container. “I think you protest too much, Pop,” he finally says. “I think there’s a real novel in you dying to get out and that’s why Veronica is out of town.”

“Bullshit.”

“Veronica would never use three multisyllable words in one sentence,” he says, peering at the page in my ancient Smith Corona. “She may write hog slop but she’s still a pro.”

“Carlo?”

“What, Dad?”

“Get out.”

He ignores me, caresses the uncrated computer. “If you’re not going to use this Mac Cadmus sent you, how about giving it to me?”

Two hours later and the first love scene is still parked at the curb. Victor Carrenga is the biggest tongue-tied klutz when it comes to seduction since Miles Standish. “Oh, my dearest Flavia,” Vic says,
stroking her hand or arm or shoulder. He wraps his sinewed arm around her waist—they are in Flavia's [  ] (plug in: garden, drawing room, studio, etc.), the moon is full and partially shrouded in clouds—night-blooming jasmine wounds the air with sweetness—in the middle distance the sound of a [  ] (plug in: cello, violin, harp, etc.) can be heard. His arm is steel, her will is weak, her cool alabaster skin in the moonlight stirs his manhood. She feels something move within her, something warm and [  ] (plug in the euphemized bodily secretions).

Where the hell are you, Veronica?

The thunk of mail falling from the slot in the front door gives me an excuse to bail out of my office. A fat letter from Cadmus plus a thin letter from my ex-wife’s lawyer.

“Gregory, for Christ’s sakes,” Cadmus begins, “what is going on here? I read the crankcase sludge you sent me. I’m asking you this—who wrote them for you, Fulton Foulbreath Muffdiver? It reads like something out of the *Journal for the Society of Pudpounders, Dingleberries, and Buttpoppers*. Where did you pick up all those lacy words and pussywhipped sentence structures, from Henry Hollownuts James? Where is my ballsy Veronica? Look, Gregory, I’m telling you as a friend, not just as your editor and spiritual mechanic, this lemon has no torque. You’ve blown your head gaskets, hombre. Also, your timing gear is stripped. If you had made it to the top of the hill you could coast home, but you’re still in the parking lot, kid. Okay, never mind. You’ll come through. You always do, don’t you? Especially when the mortgage payment comes due. This is just a rough spot in the road. Take a detour, or go back and start over. I like your first sentence. Start from there, throw the other ninety pages into the dumpster. ‘Flavia Lockridge decided once and for all to leave Plainfield, New
Saturday at the mall is like medieval Budapest. A covered street of shops, throngs of shoppers and idlers, street performers—mimes, jugglers, string quartets, beggars in the guise of fundraisers for worthy causes—becomes a thriving example of human commerce at its cheeriest. I love the damn places, but regret that they have sucked the life out of the city center. But the city is a dinosaur, grown too large and inefficient and dangerous for sur-
vival. The mall is the return to safe and colorful village life. Artificial? You bet, like everything else the hairless big-brained congenitally moody bipeds do. The mall is one of our little last gasps, a quaint invention, much like the romance novels of Veronica LaMonica.

“Veronica” is on time, seated at her card table in front of B. Dalton’s, a stack of Rough Hands in front of her. She is stunning. Literally. I carry a mental image of Veronica that has evolved over the years since her first book. She defined herself gradually for me, moving from the generalities of cliché (tall, willowy, full-breasted, chestnut hair cascading down her splendid Sigourney Weaver shoulders, her alabaster skin seemingly illuminated from the interior by moonlight, and so on) to the specifics that imply an individual (intelligent eyes the gray-green of the sea under a bright overcast, eyes that often have a slightly self-deprecating smile in them; the prominent aquiline nose of old Florentine aristocracy; a generous but not foolish mouth implying a sensuality that is sophisticated yet childlike in its ability to appreciate every experience as new and original). And so when I saw her—the woman hired to play her on this book-signing tour—and saw that she conformed almost exactly to the ghost I’d been carrying around in my head for six years, I was stunned. I knew my publisher, Candelabra Romances Inc., had been sending surrogate Veronicas out on signing tours for several years, but I’d never been interested enough in the scheme to go check one of them out.

“Hi,” I say, approaching her card table and picking up one of the gaudily illustrated paperbacks. “Selling many books?”

She smiles up at me, and her Veronica LaMonica teeth are just as I had envisioned them. “Oh, yes. Quite a few, in fact. Rough
Hands has been one of my most successful efforts."

For her sake, I don't want to let this go too far. "Look," I say, "I'm Gregory Pastori."

She gives me a blank look, her smile still in place, and I realize that she hasn't been told who writes these trashy teasers. "I'm the real . . . ."

But I'm cut off by a customer, a woman in her forties, hausfrau all the way, who sweeps up an armload of the luridly illustrated paperbacks and says, "I'm getting six for some friends, and another one for me. I'm afraid my copy is worn out—I've read it at least a dozen times!" The woman, humble and tongue-tied before celebrity, is silent as the books are signed. She practically genuflects when she leaves. "Veronica" looks up at me with those incomparable eyes and says, "I'm sorry, you were saying?"

"I was just going to say that I'm a writer, too."

This doesn't interest her. Her eyes become horizon-gray. "I'm sorry," she says. "I am unable to help you."

"I . . . ." My jaw hangs agape. I hadn't expected pity. It's as if I'd told her I had some incurable skin fungus.

"Writing is a difficult, solitary profession," she says, touching my wrist, a nurselike gesture. "Most fail. I do not recommend it. On the other hand, if you feel you must write, then, by all means, write. But do not ask other writers to provide shortcuts for you. If you have real talent, then your work will eventually be published. And even then you may find your work does not appeal to a large audience. No, it is a difficult, solitary profession, and I do not recommend it."

She has not only learned her speech well, she has the acting ability to give it authenticity. She looks world-weary and jaded now, as she lights up a Pall Mall and blows smoke into my chest.
The cigarette is a prop—she doesn’t inhale and she stubs it out after two more frowning puffs. “Well,” I say, “I only do it as a hobby. I hardly ever send my little stories out to publishers and such.”

“There are more satisfying hobbies,” she says, “than cooping yourself up in a little room typing prose fiction all day long. Why don’t you take up golf or fly fishing? It’s much healthier.”

It’s easy for writers to be cruel. We live in a constant state of self-doubt. We carry an unborn twin next to our spleens, a sneering monster who lets us know how elegantly or comically we fail. Sometimes we can let this monster twin speak for us. I’m a little surprised that Candelabra Romances Inc. coached her in that little-known peculiarity of the trade.

“Though I regard writing as my hobby, I am a published author,” I let my snotty twin say, his words friendly as honed steel. “I’ve had work in Over the Edge and in New Age Cannibal.”

“Really?” she says, her writerly veneer mottling. “I didn’t realize, Mr. . . . I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your . . .” She’s all goofy and out of synch. I can hear her valve lifters kissing her rocker arms. She’s losing manifold pressure.

“Pastori,” I say, extending a coolly elegant but forgiving hand. “Gregory Pastori.”

“It is always a pleasant surprise to encounter another published author while out in the field,” she says, reading her invisible cue card.

“Isn’t it?” I say. I decide to strike while her timing gear has jumped its grooves. “How about lunch, Miss LaMonica?”

For an instant I can see behind the mask—the cool, evaluating eyes, the full lips pursed in judgment. She could be an executive secretary at Candelabra, which would make her a boss without
portfolio or the power to kick ass. Responsibility without authority. One of the civilized world's best-kept secrets is that nothing in it works without executive secretaries or administrative assistants, also known as Girl Fridays back in the primitive days of unashamed sexism. "Why not?" she says gamely. "I've just got one condition—no shoptalk, okay?"

"There's a great Thai joint upstairs," I say. "My treat."

"The signing is over at three. How about an early supper?" she says, her sea-gray eyes pulling me in like a friendly riptide.

The magicians who keep Candelabra Inc. at the top of the pulp-romance field know what they are doing. "Veronica" not only looks the part, she has the qualities of mind and heart of someone who might have written *Firestorms in the Blood* (Veronica's first effort, written with the innocent joy of a beginner), and we hit it off instantly. After our early supper we get slightly bombed at a place that hires old gray-haired rhythm-and-blues artists of the forties and fifties. We dance to the mellow numbers, the Ivory Joe Hunter-style tunes, and even though our era was the sixties, we get sentimental and misty-eyed and we hold that mood all the way home to my bed, where

Plug in one of the following:

1. Her alabaster skin, in the soft glow of moonlight that fell through the casement, inspired his urgent manhood to complete the bonding of kindred souls.

2. He hadn't felt this hot for a woman since the night his ex got loose on Pernod and wanted to do it standing up in a Parisian pissoir, front to rear.

3. His crankshaft never knew such RPMs. His super-charged turbine was a tornado of power. She opened her throttle wide and

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her engine roared, putting out almost more torque than he could handle.

(4) All of the above.

I wake up alone the next day and am tempted to believe the worst: schizophrenic breakdown. Daylight dreaming in 3D. Brain-cell fission. The Veronica I have been piecing together all these years has reached critical mass and has come to life, a Frankenstein creature of the half-real world of psychotic delusion. I pull the blanket over my head to shield myself from this line of thought, then I hear her voice, laughing in the kitchen.

Veronica and Carlo are having a breakfast of sliced mango and yogurt. Carlo is enjoying himself immensely. The sappy grin on his face is not typical. Usually, at this time of the morning, he's brooding over the newspaper, collecting more evidence of mankind's dark fate.

"Dad!" he says. "Veronica's terrific!"

"I know," I mumble, exchanging a quick glance with Veronica, who is wearing—appropriately for an alter ego—a pair of my pajamas.

If Carlo picks up my meaning, he's playing innocent. "She's into organics," he says. "Not just superficially, either. She knows her nutrient chemistry!"

"I know," I mumble again, the taste of her chemistry still with me.

Veronica pushes a bowl of yogurt-buried mangoes in front of me. "Have some of this," she says. "It will start to clear your system."

"I believe my system is clear, thank you," I say significantly. "I'd rather have eggs and bacon, if it won't make you two gag."

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"That's the sort of diet that will guarantee you'll be spending the last ten years or so of your life in and out of hospitals," she says. "Eating properly won't necessarily extend your life, but it will improve its quality. You'll die healthy."

"I've got no complaints about quality," I mumble.

Veronica excuses herself then from the table to get dressed. She has to catch a ten-o'clock plane. When she's gone, Carlo leans toward me and whispers, "Dad, she's sensational. Are you going to marry her?"

It is not a recommended feature of quality parenting to tell your teenage son that he has his head up his ass. I dip into my yogurt, giving myself time to restructure my response. "Carlo, do you know who she is?"

"Sure, Dad! She told me. She's Veronica LaMonica, the real one. I mean, the fake real one. The public one. The one that doesn't write soft porn, and you've got to give her credit for that."

"Did you tell her, wiseass, that I am Veronica LaMonica?"

"No way! You can do that later. But that's no big deal. No one takes that garbage seriously anyway. What difference could it make to her, or to anyone, who actually writes the fluff? The whole series could be done by a computer. Why do you think Cadmus sent you the Mac? They've probably got software now that can do three-quarters of the work."

In spite of my own misgivings about what I do for a living, Carlo's little demonstration of ingratitude annoys me. "I am an artist," I say, mustering dignity. "Oh, not a great artist, not even a mediocre one, but I am an artist just the same. Words, Carlo, don't come that easy, even the old worn-out ones."

Carlo, by way of apology, waves an impatient hand across the table a few times. "Okay, okay. But think of the advantages, Dad."

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I mean, you could write the books, and Veronica—or whatever her real name is—as your wife could do the interviews and signings and such. You guys could get supercoordinated.”

I head for the fridge for my morning can of Jolt. My brain isn’t working fast enough to keep up with Carlo’s hyperactive nervous system, which he must have inherited from his mother. Why is he suddenly playing the marriage broker? Because she knows her nutrient chemistry?

“Are you feeling all right, son?” I say.

“Dad, I like her. She’s the neatest lady you’ve brought home since you and Mom split.” His impassioned, clear-eyed face makes me wonder if I, as a child, ever had such intensity, such belief. I decide, no, nothing approaching Carlo’s directness and honesty ever troubled my sly, trouble-dodging path through life. I am a professional taker of the Easy Way, and have been ever since I learned that my parents, my teachers, and most adults gave you what you wanted once you gave them what they wanted. This matured into a Philosophy of Life. Some call it Pragmatism, such as our current leaders. It is sold to the world, these days, as Virtue. Why else did I allow myself to become Veronica? Why did I give up my small but impractical dream of writing from the heart? The sigh I release has more meaning in it than I want Carlo to grasp, and I cover it with a phlegmy fit of romantically tubercular coughing.

“Well, hell, I like her too, Carlo—”

“Besides, Dad,” he says, blurting out the secret of his attraction, “she’s a professional accupressurist! She’s actually studied holistic healing techniques. You’d never have a caffeine headache again! And don’t tell me you don’t get them. You’ve got one right now.”
I am relieved as well as saddened by this. Carlo's budding pragmatism will diminish him a bit, but it will also secure the quality of his life just as effectively as nutritive responsibility. "Jesus, Carlo," I say. "What did you do, interview her for the job?"

"Talking about me?" Veronica says, dressed and stunning in the doorway.

"Dad has a caffeine headache," Carlo announces.

"Poor baby," Veronica says. She stands behind me and touches my temples with her fingertips. She finds the hard, choppy pulse there, and applies a slowly rotating pressure that seems to siphon off pain instantly. She slides her fingertips to the back of my skull, then down my neck to my shoulders, the dull ache trailing after them like the brats of Hamlin after the Piper. She picks up my hand and squeezes the pad of flesh between thumb and forefinger and a bolt of pure pleasure passes through me, as if all my endorphins have been dumped into my bloodstream. Orgasm without friction, sweat, sticky residue, or romance. There might be a market for it.

"Don't stop, Veronica," I beg, without shame, when she returns my hand to my lap.

"I've got to get to the airport," she says. "I've got a signing and a couple of personal appearances in L.A. tomorrow. This may surprise you two, but it isn't easy being Veronica LaMonica."

Not much surprises me these days. The nation is shocked to learn that the captains of oil tankers will lie drunk in their cabins as their ships drift toward the gutting reef, or that airline crews often get hammered in an airport bar before takeoff. But the suicidal irresponsibility of those charged with guiding our delicately structured world seems entirely reasonable to me. Oh, our

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postmodern devices are indeed the wonders the technocrats make them out to be. Unfortunately, the hairless, big-brained, congenitally moody biped is always behind the wheel—drunk, below or above deck, distracted, poorly trained, recently divorced or two-timed, underfucked, overdrawn, doped, delusional, or just sleepy. Eventually, in one way or another, he’ll allow the front tires to hit the soft shoulder and we’ll all go screaming over the cliff.

I want to be wrong about this. But the caveman who invented the ax probably dropped his first redwood on his family. When I think of Carlo and his Overinformed Generation, I get mildly optimistic. Generally inept as parents, we have nonetheless raised a generation of kids—with excellent surrogate parenting from Donahue, Oprah, Geraldo, 60 Minutes, 20/20, etc.—who are too scared to go to sleep at the wheel. I would trust Carlo at the helm of the Exxon Valdez, or in front of the control panel at Three Mile Island. I just don’t want to sit in a bar with him for the greater part of an afternoon.

Carlo is behind the wheel now in fact, taking me to the airport. I don’t know whether he talked me into this or whether I’m just escaping his nonstop, logically impeccable harangue, which has gone on now for two days.

“I can’t just go to L.A.,” I told him. “I don’t even know her itinerary.”

“You wily devil,” Cadmus said, when I asked for “Veronica’s” schedule. “Mr. Goodwrench to the rescue, eh? You won’t regret it, Gregory. The lady—Paula Voorhees—has great torque, even in overdrive. Measurable in foot-pounds, buddy. That’s what they say around the shop. Fantastic gear ratios. And if that isn’t enough, she’s also got the classic lines of an XKE Jag. But listen,
you’d better keep both hands on the wheel with one eye on the tachometer and the other eye on the road, if you follow me.”

I didn’t follow him at all, but then I hardly ever did. Cadmus can be as arcane as a Zimbabwean diviner of chicken entrails. Besides, I wasn’t looking for anything that needed a lot of long-range planning, Carlo’s arguments notwithstanding. Even with a thing as predictable as a romance novel, I advance the plot one day at a time, hoping for little surprises that make the morning’s work fun in spite of the fact that I’m following a road map. You take what you get, and sometimes what you get is not a poke in the eye with a sharp stick. Which is my humble hope for the world.

Carlo wants to carry my bag into the terminal—to make sure I get on the plane—but I tell him, “Don’t worry, be happy, we’re all going to fall off the edge of the world anyway,” which makes him frown because he knows better than I do how close we are to the brink. I give him a bear hug and a kiss, for he is my son and I love him more than Donahue and Oprah do and he needs to know it. He wants me and the planet to have a second chance. And a second chance is the sweetest blessing any of us can hope for.