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# Reading Between the Sheets

*Karen Rosenbaum*

YOU KNOW, WHAT CONSTIPATES HER, REALLY, is all those folks peering over her shoulder, not only looking for their names or themselves on her Mac screen or on the pages between the grainy covers of the books, but searching for *her* secrets as well. Looking for the Definitive, Unexpurgated Autobiography of Noreen Lucile de Camp. They have to wonder about her, the oldest de Camp sister, the tall, unmarried one, the one who at thirty-three moved to California where she spies on families for the Department of Social Services by day and writes and lives lurid, they hear tell, romances by night.

Last week cousin Wesley bought one of her books in St. George. At least he *thought* it was one of her books—the author’s name was Nancy Latour de Coeur, note those initials, and the title was a giveaway too: *Raspberry Hill Rendezvous*. Wasn’t that where they went for all those family reunions way back when Grandma was alive, Raspberry Hill, up in Utah County? So Wesley read part of the book, it was trash, but he felt obligated, and though he couldn’t tell that *this* Raspberry Hill was the one with the nettles and the broken picnic tables, he noticed that his own car, an ancient brown Studebaker, appeared on page 73 and that the heroine’s older sister had an illegitimate daughter named Delphinia, and wasn’t that an obvious enough reference to *his* daughter, Delpha? He wrote to Noreen’s mother in Fairview that if Noreen insisted on dragging the family’s reputation through the cow dung, he’d appreciate it if *his* branch was left out. Also Noreen had better be careful—had anyone mentioned the possibility of a bishop’s court? A person doesn’t write things like this without some *experience*. Noreen’s mother had put Wesley’s whole letter, envelope and all and a sigh of her own, into a bigger envelope and sent it off to Sacramento.

Noreen laughs a little and tosses the letter in the wastebasket beside the desk, but the letter slides off the mound of cellophane cinnamon bear wrappers and wadded Kleenexes onto the floor. She retrieves it, unfolds it again, and holds it up in front of the computer screen.

Of course, Noreen has never written under the name Nancy Latour

de Coeur, but she likes the idea of the old Raspberry Hill picnic place, so she scrolls back to the last romantic tryst, adds a little nettle, and calls the place Boysenberry Basin. She'll stick cousin Wesley in too—there is always room in a novel for one more obstacle to the heroine's happiness. Uncle—she'll christen him Uncle Ame. Even if Wesley *does* pick up this book, he probably won't recognize his self-righteous self. Delpha now, Delpha is a little retarded, and she feels guilty about using Delpha. But Delpha will fit in, rather nicely too, as the minister's simple daughter, Amanda, she'll call her, in the next chapter. Noreen always has Protestant ministers in her books, never Mormon bishops. Mormon bishops take too much explaining. The working title of the new book is *Polkadot Pillows*. The previous one was *Under the Sheets*.

Noreen doesn't know Nancy Latour de Coeur. She's met other romance writers at the Affairs of the Heart convention, and they address each other by their pseudonyms. For two years now Noreen has been Marigold McCann. She doesn't regard the name as one of her better creations, but Darla likes it, and so does Gwen, and a number of readers apparently have no serious objections. Darla is her agent and Gwen her editor. Before Darla, Noreen wrote under the name Laurel Birch, but Darla had scoffed at that, and Noreen had to admit that the only time she saw a Laurel Birch book at a bookstore of any kind was in the 25-cent bin at Chandler's. Marigold hasn't made any really big sales, but she's had enough medium-sized ones so that her second bedroom (a.k.a. her office), her postage, paper, and maybe even her new computer are, this year, tax-deductible. Darla keeps suggesting that Noreen give up the social work and churn out romances full time, but Noreen isn't ready yet. She's not optimistic about her own romances, especially the one that might lead to jobless security—health benefits and mortgage insurance. Marriage.

"I'm not brave enough to quit," she said when Darla phoned last week. "I'd eat at the computer all day. I'd be size 18 before summer. Besides, I need my sources." She had met Darla at her first Affairs of the Heart convention, and though most of her subsequent contact with Darla had been on the telephone, she always pictured Darla the way she was when they first met—a smashing, substantial blond woman in a crimson, silky pantsuit and strawberry earrings. Darla lived in Los Angeles, Malibu really, the setting of some modern American romances. Noreen prefers to set her romances in the South—not the south of California, but in cities with wonderful names like Charlotte and Marietta. She's never been to Marietta or Charlotte—in fact, she's only been east of Laramie twice, once when she rewarded herself for graduating cum laude with a trip to Washington and once when she flew to New York to meet Gwen. And she's never bought herself a silky pantsuit. Everything she wears is

washable except her shoes.

"What do you mean, your sources?" asked Darla last week. "You aren't writing about your clients." She paused for Noreen's confirmation and, when she didn't get it, went on. "And even if you were, you could remember enough about the ones you've already met to last a lifetime."

Noreen is still trying to figure out how to work Darla into a novel without Darla suspecting. Darla's face, wrinkles removed, has already appeared on Noreen's next-to-last heroine, Babs Bremlington—and Darla hasn't noticed that. Noreen would like to do something with Darla's life—left by her husband with four little girls, she had started writing true confessions and had progressed to agenting romances. Darla wouldn't be the main character, of course. Maybe the main character's mother. In the book she could sell real estate instead of romances and her husband could die of brain cancer instead of running off with another man. "Men!" Darla had said, and Noreen had echoed, "Men!" as if she really knew some.

The lives of other people almost always have what Darla calls pen-life possibilities. Only Noreen's own life is sterile, like the spade-stumping soil in the Utah desert. "We made it bloom," Uncle Uban crowed at family reunions, "just like Brigham said." And Noreen makes her barren plains bloom too. She doesn't fool herself into thinking her books are roses. Turnips maybe. But turnips have a purpose. "They make me purty," Gramp used to say when Grandma would bring out her casserole of turnips in soup sauce. They didn't make Noreen purty.

Some of Noreen's relatives—her brothers, for example—know the name she writes under, and their wives read her books when their kids are down for naps or off at school, and they buzz among themselves at Christmas about any people or places they think they can recognize, never themselves or their husbands or children, Noreen would never do that to *them*. What they want to know is how can Noreen write this kind of stuff if she doesn't have a boyfriend? "Who says she doesn't have a boyfriend?" Patty might say. "Just because she didn't have one in Fairview doesn't mean she doesn't have one out there in California."

"But all the sex and stuff," Marvina answers. "I mean it's not described in any great detail, but wouldn't she have to have some experience to do that?"

"So maybe she has some experience." Lucy Rae pulls the darned needle through the sock.

Noreen knows all this because Marvina, her favorite sister-in-law, her friend since junior high school, has confided in her. Noreen can't confide in Marvina though. Not since Marvina married Ed, and that's been eight years. Noreen has been itching to put Marvina's name at least in a story, but she doesn't dare. Last Christmas Marvina asked her point

blank how she could live all alone in a big old house (Noreen had sent a picture of herself on the porch). *Was* she living, she'd narrowed her eyes, with a man? Noreen felt the familiar revulsion at the probing, the shame of her celibacy even in a house where sex outside of marriage was a sin. Somehow it was important that Marvina wonder. "You'll be the first to know if I have anything to announce," she said and patted Marvina on the baby that was strapped to her chest.

Marvina was persistent. "You still go to church?"

"Sometimes." Noreen had pulled on her down jacket, mouthed a kiss at the baby, and slipped outside. Sometimes she *does* go to church—sometimes she feels the need. She makes a few unpredictable appearances each year, so no one there can look very familiar and so she won't look familiar to them. She isn't shocking, she thinks sourly. She's not brave enough to shock them. The fantasies that she writes about aren't even her own fantasies.

Church almost always gives her some new story ideas. It's a place to go *back* to. That's one reason she tries to make Christmas each year at Gramp's Sanpete County place, divided up, since Gramp is gone, by two of Noreen's brothers and her brother-in-law and unofficially designated as the de Camp holiday meeting place. It's nice to have something to come back to. She has to field the personal questions, of course, and ignore the exchanged looks, but she's gotten better at that, and she likes to sit around with the children—they don't mumble about how she's getting along in years and getting set in her ways—and she likes to imagine her fans are like Marvina reading on the old plaid couch, nursing the current baby, and sipping Ovaltine. It's kind of comforting.

Most of her South Sacramento clients don't know what she does in her spare time, and most don't care. They just care that she doesn't cut any of their welfare payments. Not one of them has ever inquired about her ... well, libidinal experience. They make certain assumptions about men in her life, and she discourages none of the conjectures. Some of the women do read romances though, and once she saw one of her own books lying face down and open on a coffee table. When the woman, Dee, spilled her Pepsi, Noreen grabbed the book before the brown liquid could seep onto the pages, and then after Dee sopped up the mess, she handed the book to her. "I'm afraid I lost your place," she said. "Is it any good?"

Dee shrugged. "It's better than *my* life," she said.

It's better than her own life too. She folds up Wesley's letter and slips it back into its envelope. Two Christmases ago cousin Wesley came to Sanpete County, and he took off his shirt and pulled aside his underwear so that they could all see his bypass surgery scar. Noreen had been as revolted as her sisters-in-law, but she made herself look. You can never tell

when you'll need to know what a bypass surgery scar looks like.

Her neighbors, now, know the answers to the questions Wesley and Lucy Rae would like to ask, the questions Marvina *does* ask. They know the ludicrousness of her clients' speculations. The houses on this block are close together, and especially when it isn't cold enough for the furnace or hot enough for the air conditioning or fans, they all leave their windows open. She absorbs all the sounds—Maria screaming at her kids to stop screaming, Raymond stumbling over beer cans on his back porch, Dorothy listening to *Perry Mason* reruns. They know that no one, man or woman, ever comes to the house with the big porch. And *they* can hear *her* tap tap tapping away on her keyboard. Ernesto, who is five and fascinated by the computer and printer, drops over every weekend and many week nights. He stands, his brown elbow on her chair arm, and watches the screen as if it were Saturday morning cartoons. When he asks her if she is a nun, she gets up and reaches him a Popsicle out of the freezer and sends him home.

"Is that my name?" he asked once, and she swallowed and looked. It wasn't. He'd spotted the name Eugene, but she *had* used Ernesto's name in another chapter and in fact had used several manifestations of Ernesto himself.

She is sitting at her computer now, and nothing at all is coming out. She has jotted down on Wesley's envelope some details about Dee's daughter, and she has made several attempts to start the story in which Darla, cleverly disguised, appears as mother of the bride-to-be. A name has even grown out of Marvina's name. She'll bestow it on a baby—the only way she gets to name babies, she often thinks—Merveilleuse.

The phone rings. It's 9 a.m. in Fairview. It's not easy for Mom to wait till 9 a.m. to call, Saturdays or any other day. By 9 a.m. she has probably done two batches of laundry, weeded her tomatoes, and made soup for every widow on the block. She gets mixed up on the time zones and always thinks it is 10 a.m. in Sacramento. She thinks she should let Noreen sleep in on Saturdays. Maybe she had a hot date the night before. Noreen doesn't answer the phone Friday nights so they will think that.

"Hi, Mom," she says into the receiver.

"How'd you know it was me?"

"Lucky guess. How's everybody?"

"Everybody's fine. Well. Except Adam." Adam is Patty's youngest. "He's got asthma or something. They got him one of them inhalers. And Dad's fussing about them cherries. Hail ruined 'em."

"Aw," says Noreen sympathetically. "Aw" is a safe response to almost anything Mom says. She just changes her intonation slightly. Neither one mentions cousin Wesley or his letter.

"I'll send Adam a book," Noreen says when it's almost time to hang

up. Mom sets an oven timer for fifteen minutes when she calls. "A book with dragons."

Back at the computer, Noreen sighs. Something wants to come out. Something deep down is banging against her inside walls. She stuffs cousin Wesley's letter into the wastebasket under the cellophane and Kleenex. Should she be writing about *their* secrets? If she were a photographer, she muses as she unwraps a cinnamon bear and bites off its feet, she would take pictures of those around her and wouldn't feel she was using them, compromising them. If she were a painter, she would use models. But, of course, she might do self-portraits too.

She clicks closed her document, opens a new one. A fresh, clean screen. The right place for a self-portrait. Is that the ultimate betrayal? Can she write about herself? Ah, the secret would be out. But what is the secret? She is not even sure herself. She laughs at the family fears, the dark male things that bump in the bed. They would be more afraid if they suspected what she suspects. The books she has read, the movies she has seen, the tears they evoked—when has she seen herself in the place of that fragile or robust or constant or restless or virginal or voluptuous romantic heroine? They were none of them right. But to open herself up to—some part of her screams against it.

Can she write then about herself, her own nightmares, her own dreams? Can she disguise herself, give herself a nose job, put herself on a diet, and use herself as the maid-of-dishonor? She rests her chin in her cupped palms—she's made of herself a kind of tripod. A kind of easel.

She can do it. But she can't put to use the old formula. This will have to be a story that Darla and Gwen will never see, that Marvinna and Patty will never read. She doesn't have to use her real name. She starts typing, experimenting. How about Nadine? The name looks right on the gray screen. Nadine LaRue de Carlo.

She closes her eyes so she can see inside. There the screen is deliciously, terrifyingly empty and waiting. What will she discover as she writes? She is at last ready to begin.