

How she got to the top - reader renga

By openDemocracy readers,
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It was too easy for an ambitious tea-lady to exploit the indecisive MD at The Lemon Press. He could always be found by the photocopier, comforting the work experience girl. As she cried, he murmured: "stick with it, something will come up..."

Rattling her trolley along, Ms Slivovitz noticed the lump straining in the pleats of Maxwell Wynne's yellow corduroy trousers. His face remained softly sympathetic as he handed the girl a bundle of paper. "We need ten of these for the meeting. It's the new Armaminta Clark gardening novel. We're getting nibbles from Japan."

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Author renga: "How she got to the top [0]"

"Any buns?" Slivovitz, who had a sneaking respect for Tito and was in London studying the iconography of the Virgin, found the English peculiar. Though shy and sheep-faced, they could really surprise you: one acquaintance had married a prostitute and the company Rights Manager was trekking through the Gobi desert, raising money for testicle awareness week. However they always denied they were competitive. Back home, her dad had taught her the value of winning. As Max left for his four o'clock, Slivovitz moved into the alcove. "I take over, you go and refresh yourself."

Camilla was touched: it was true - people who had been traumatized were so calming. She walked off past the window framing the pigeon-blood sunset dripping over the city.

Ms Slivovitz removed the manuscript from the photocopier. She placed it on the bottom tier of her tray, covered it with a checked cloth, and bit hard into a digestive.

Back in her cubicle, Camilla closed her eyes, the sunset still etched on her retina, her mind drifting off to another landscape, a week ago in Venice, where she had escaped to finish her Julia Tintoretto novel. Why had everyone crowded around the photocopier the one day she needed to copy her own manuscript as inconspicuously as possible?

Michaela Forte, the editor of Torpedo Press, thought that the first two chapters 'showed promise' and had asked for two copies of the completed manuscript by six o'clock today. No one argued with Michaela's deadlines. Dark, curly-haired and feisty, Julia Tintoretto was everything 'Camilla the meek' wasn't. A specialist in art historical espionage and literary mysteries, Julia had the erudition of an AS Byatt heroine and the spunk of Sophie Kinsella's irrepressible shopaholic protagonist.

At five thirty, Camilla tidied up her cubicle, took a deep breath and smiled. She was ready to face Torpedo Press and its formidable editor. She checked her bag one more time - and let out a small cry.

"Not again!?" she yelped, recalling the twitch she had felt in her right eyelid as she let the tea-lady relieve her at the photocopier. She knew that twitch. She'd figured out from a free, online class she took last summer on "The body in psychoanalysis" that whenever she was about to spoil something good in her life, her right eyelid would quiver. Was she trying to screw things up with Torpedo, with Madame Forte, with herself? "How could I be so daft?" Camilla mulled it over as she pressed the "on" button to reboot her computer.

Just last week she'd had that damn twitch while checking in at Heathrow. Turns out, she booked the fare under the first name 'Julia' and had to plead her way onto a flight - some three hours later. Trip herself up she sure did. But this wouldn't have been nearly as mortifying had Max - or as she had taken to calling him, 'Wynnie' - not been waiting at the other end with a reservation at Antic Martini by the Rialto Bridge.

As the file "Chapter Two: On the Loose" loaded onto the flat screen, Camilla could hear the wobbly wheels of Slivovitz's cart turn the corner.

Slivovitz was pushing her trolley in a strange lop-sided way. Camilla looked at her more carefully. At about 35 years old, she was not unattractive. Her black hair already had some white in it, but her face was round and unlined. She wore what looked like cheap pink lipstick, and her hair seemed cut at a cheap barber's, not by a proper hairdresser. As she leaned over the misshapen buns with white glaze on them, spread out on the linen napkin on top of the trolley, she looked as if she was practicing showing her cleavage. Unfortunately, she had no cleavage to show. Hmm, she must make a note of that, Camilla thought. Look at tea ladies more carefully. They aren't wallpaper. She thought something was wrong around Slivovitz's mouth - something overly sensual and vulgar. Camilla wondered what kind of career plans a tea lady could have.

Slivovitz had been also been thinking, though not about Camilla.

She had been pondering her latest essay, "Reverence and Irreverence in the Portrayal of the Madonna" and noticing certain parallels between the Virgin's position two thousand years ago and her own. She had been struck since starting at the press that whilst she was clearly regarded as less important than even the least effective and most temporary work experience person, she was addressed formally, as Ms Slivovitz, whilst all the non-cleaning and non-catering staff were addressed by their first names.

And what would they say if she responded "Oh, please, call me by my Christian name"? They might have been as surprised as the angel Gabriel had Mary said, "No thanks, err, can't you choose someone else to give birth to our saviour? I've got plans for the next nine months." But her annoyance wasn't unmixed with amusement.

She could revere any woman who got away with claiming a virgin birth and thus being worshipped for centuries. It was then she remembered the papers the boss had asked that girl to copy.

Svjetlana Slivovitz allowed herself a small smile. She had always wanted to 'go places', as they say over here. But someone had to look after the house after mother vanished; of course it was not going to be her brother. And there was the war. And eventually she just got used to it. But then she stumbled upon that woman Forte's involvement in the business of her uncle, the defrocked priest and the "cargo". A little thinking and a few phone calls later, and she had a visa, a ticket, and a job in London. And all the abandoned dreams of her girlhood were before her again.

Since then, she had held tea lady positions in several publishing houses. Most of them did not habitually employ tea ladies - it was just that Svjetlana insisted. Tea ladies find out all sorts of things, and she always left with generous severance pay and a glowing reference. Indeed, a few jobs into her career, she did not really need to work. But she liked it. Observing the interplay between managing directors and work experience girls shed such light on her academic work.

As she browsed Maxwell's "Personal" in-tray, she heard a soft sob from Camilla's cubicle. The printer was making unpleasant noises, as though someone had fed their knitting into it.

She dropped the stained photocopy of *The Female Eunuch* she had lifted from among his papers, and went to investigate.

A choking printer gave her no fear. Education had taught her much more besides reading and writing.

During school breaks she would secretly escape to the small engineering yards behind the headmaster's office. There she watched the men care for the mangled and dying Yugos. She laughed when she heard the pathetic gasps of their engines. She knew even at that age they could never take her where she wanted to go. On the greasy floors she could see the borderlines of their narrowing horizons take form and shape. It was in this world that she had also seen the first of her many Maxwells.

"Yes," she thought, "give me a trolley and I can handle his type. Given the tools I can handle them all."

She found Camilla struggling to wrest handfuls of twisted paper from the printer. As she bent over to help, a set of blueprints dropped between the desk and the paper cupboard caught her eye. Sneaking a closer look as she opened the groaning machine, she seemed to make out that they were the plans for the MD's safe.

"I've been known to know my way around those things."

Camilla's pride had to decide quickly whether to admit defeat or keep on struggling to win the satisfaction of knowing that she was conquering the world thanks to no one else than herself. Her thirst for showing Torpedo who their next best selling author was, right this afternoon, made

her cave in and turn around.

"Oh. It's you..." The sight of the tea lady (what was her name? Silvo...something...) almost made her regret the decision.

"Slivovitz."

"Slivovitz! Well, eerh..." (Did the tea lady hear the mixed sentiments of disappointment and shame in her voice?)

"Come on. Move over and let me show that pesky apparatus the meaning of Balkan spirits."

Camilla watched in awe as Slivovitz grabbed the jammed paper and released it from its chip-controlled torture like a ta-daahing illusionist.

"There you go."

"Th...thanks."

"Any other stubborn-minded devices you need help with?"

A sharp sting hit Camilla. The teasing look in Slivovitz's eyes made her glance, just a bit too obviously, in the direction of the blueprints. Did she notice?

"No. Thanks again, though."

"Are you sure?"

Camilla hesitated.

Ten minutes later, the two women were staring at a manuscript in disbelief.

Opening the safe had been unexpectedly simple. 666666 was the number on the blueprints together with the instruction "On first using the vault, make sure to replace this number with your own secret code". It seems that Max or more likely his mother, the Lemon Press founder, had never taken the trouble. The door opened easily but the safe seemed to contain nothing other than old invoices and tax returns. Until, that is, at the bottom of a pile of yellowed papers their eyes met the carefully wrapped package.

There was no sign that the manuscript had been opened, let alone read, since it had been deposited there. The paper was thin and brittle, the text written on an uneven old type-writer in Cyrillic script. On the cover page, the title was underlined. But it was on the name of the author that their eyes were fixed.

Svjetlana Slivovitz sighed deeply. A wide smile spread all over her face. Camilla looked transfixed as Svjetlana's hands firmly untied the ribbon that held the package together. She read aloud the first lines of the text.

"You know what this means?"

Camilla shook her head. "No, not really ... I mean, I don't understand the language."

"It means..." She took a deep breath. "It means they were wrong ... Wrong all along." Her slow speech exaggerated her foreign accent and demeanour. "This is another Genesis ... where Eve

is created before Adam. It changes everything - from the smallest gestures to the whole picture. Small gestures ... like Mr Wynne's trousers bulging in a certain place when he stands next to you. From the old point of view he was the stronger because he - no, He with a capital H - would act on it. According to this text you are the stronger because you are actually the instigator, you cause the bulge. If you see what I mean ..."

Camilla blushed. Not only was this strange dark lady standing too close for comfort but she was also invading her personal life. "And ... and the bigger picture?"

"The female sex is the founder of humanity."

"But that's only ... only religion, myth."

"There is no such thing as 'only' here. Genesis is the cornerstone of our patriarchal world. And yes ... just imagine what it will mean to us, us two, to publish this..."

"Really? Golly... Do you think..."

"For god's sake Camilla! Wake up. This is a two bit Dan Brown knockoff. You've written a real novel, a good one, and while Michaela strings you along as a favour to midriff Max you go..."

"How? How dare you. How do you know about..."

"Never mind how I know. I want to make you an offer."

"An offer?" This was almost as bizarre as the plot of her novel.

"I get around publishing houses, and I've put together a small authors' cooperative to publish promising work that mainstream publishers miss...and Julia Tintoretto is very promising indeed..."

Camilla felt a wave of anger...or was it excitement? Whatever it was, its crest was pure adrenaline. Had she been violated, or finally, discovered? Or was this just another wild donkey ride? And just who exactly was this 'tea lady'? "Say more", Camilla cautiously invited.

Svjetlana enjoyed the confusion her revelations created. It opened up a world of possibilities for authors lost in the mists of others' self-importance. Tea ladies were not supposed to have their own agenda. "Get your coat Camilla, it's time to let you into a little secret."

It was past seven. Early drinkers from nearby offices watched curiously as Slivovitz and Camilla sealed their friendship over glazed buns, double vodkas, a gardening novel, Julia Tintoretto, Maxwell Wynne's safe plans, and a heretical Biblical blockbuster in badly-typed Cyrillic. The table was awash with documents.

"Have a bun," Slivovitz suggested.

"I can't. We stole them," Camilla pointed out. Her eyelid was twitching again.

"We socialised them," Slivovitz corrected her confidently. "From Maxwell Wynne."

"Wynnie," Camilla muttered unhappily, lowering her head despairingly to her hands, and catching sight of her wristwatch. She started up, distraught.

"And I've missed my meeting at Torpedo!"

Slivovitz shot Camilla an unconcerned glance. She sat down meekly and decided to recap.

"So your uncle wrote this Russian book..."

"Not Russian. And not my uncle. The priest. The ex-priest." Slivovitz blew smoke towards the ceiling. "The metropolitan read it and fired him on the spot. So he came here and started looking for a deal. Eventually with Torpedo. Just like you," she added.

"So how did Wynnie get hold of..."

"The priest's book? From Torpedo."

"But Maxwell hates Michaela!"

Slivovitz merely snorted.

"How come you write such great books when you're so stupid?"

"How come you are a tea lady if you are so smart?"

Camilla replied, feeling anger riding up the nape of her neck. She didn't need this woman who looked like she was the creation of some incoherent detective story bullying her too.

Feeling stupid was probably the leitmotif of her life. Stupid was how she felt when she had come home eight months ago to find her boyfriend in bed with that gorgeous red-head from his office. Standing outside the abortion clinic by herself a week later she swore she would not let anyone make her feel so stupid again.

Svjetlana Slivovitz looked at Camilla and felt guilt. She was so surprised at this realization she nearly panicked. She had not felt guilt since the year her mother left. Taking on herself the twisted image of the virgin, this emotion was discarded from her arsenal. This was probably not the way to go.

"I know you have no reason to trust me but you have to. If you want me to help you get to the top that is."

Slivovitz smiled, and though her teeth were crooked and stained with the pink lipstick, Camilla thought it was surely a beautiful smile. She felt hope.

Playing for time, Camilla picked up the Cyrillic manuscript and its unfinished translation, and tried a few of the foreign words before reading.

"Тыс ыс вһат ыс фоготтән:
This is what is forgotten:

Part of us once existed inside our Grandmother's womb, inside our mother's ovaries as she readied for the trauma of birth. As our Grandmother was once inside her Grandmother, as was our Grandfather, as was our Father, your brother, my sister, the stranger seated four tables across.

Upon our first cell dividing, a choice made to co-create the Universe with our senses recording living a life in trade for understanding the mystery of the moment before our existence. Here, in this moment, we are the eyes, you are the ears, I am the touch, you are the taste, we are the breath in and out of Spirit experiencing itself."

"Svjetlana, how are you sure this is a hoax?" she asked.

"It was a poor priest's route to millions. A way out of a country and a church he no longer believed in."

"Why didn't Torpedo or Lemon just publish it then? Why keep it in the safe?"

Svjetlana smiled. "You aren't serious." But there was a professor from her iconography course who could analyse the text... "The words do have power," she conceded. "But-Camilla, what is it you must say?"

Dear Ms Markovic,

Thank you for sending us the manuscript of your first novella 'How she got to the top'. We get many unsolicited texts these days, most of which show little or no literary promise. A cursory glance through your story suggested that it might easily fall into this category. It is full of non-sequiturs, red herrings and implausibilities. You cannot seriously expect readers to believe in Slivovitz as a tea lady, even if such jobs existed in publishing companies like ours. The story becomes so confusing that everyone eventually loses the plot, even if we assume there is one. Above all, you never seem to make up your mind whether it is Svjetlana or Camilla who is destined for the top.

I was preparing a polite rejection letter when a colleague chanced to look at the manuscript. Natasha Pavlic, the head of our television drama department, noticed your name on the cover and must have been intrigued to see what a writer from her parents' native country might deliver. Well, Natasha was captivated by your story. She insists that it would make the perfect episode for her 5-part mini-series 'From bottom to top - Refugees who make it in their adopted lands'. She is convinced that your story is made for the screen. 'A picture tells more than ten thousand words' is Natasha's motto - she is confident that all the contradictions and non-sequiturs will melt away as soon as her expert editor, Emma Kay, adapts the story for the screen. We are therefore delighted to offer you an advance of £50,000 for your story, plus a share of future royalties. We also hope that you will give us first refusal on your future work. As the editor of Print and Vision International, I am delighted to welcome you on our team of writers.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Shoman

Reader names: Peter Andreas, Eleni Bastea, Paul Cutler, Sigrún Davídsdóttir, Mary Dow, Yiannis Gabriel, Mary Harrington, Simon Heywood, Daniel Jeffreys, Kyi May Kaung, Erin Leonard, Yael Litmanovitz, Bonnie Oglensky, Gavin Preuss

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