

The Passion of New Eve

Angela Carter

"In the beginning all the world was *America*."

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ANGELA CARTER

was born in 1940. She read English at Bristol University, spent two years living in Japan and from 1976–8 was Fellow in Creative Writing at Sheffield University. She was visiting professor in the Writing Program at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, 1980–1. One of Britain's most original and disturbing writers, she published her first novel, *Shadow Dance* in 1965. Her second novel, *The Magic Toyshop* (published by Virago), won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1967 and her third, *Several Perceptions* won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1968. *Heroes and Villains* was published in 1969, *Love* in 1971, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* in 1972 and her most recent novel, *The Passion of New Eve* in 1977. She has translated the fairy stories of Charles Perrault, and has published two collections of short stories, *Fireworks* 1974 and *The Bloody Chamber* which was received with great acclaim in 1979 and won the Cheltenham Festival of Literature Award. *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, her first work of non-fiction, was published by Virago in 1979.

Her journalism has appeared in almost every major British publication; her poetry has been published in the *Listener* and *London Magazine* and she was a major contributor to *Arts in Society*. Her selected writings, *Nothing Sacred*, are published by Virago. Angela Carter lives in London.

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One

THE LAST NIGHT I spent in London, I took some girl or other to the movies and, through her mediation, I paid you a little tribute of spermatozoa, Tristessa.

A late show, a crowded cinema. The drunks all stubbornly remained unmoved and jeered, laughed and catcalled throughout your film though sibilantly hushed by pairs of sentimental queers who, hand in hand, had come to pay homage to the one woman in the world who most perfectly expressed a particular pain they felt as deeply as, more deeply than, any woman, a pain whose nature I could not then define although it was the very essence of your magic. The film stock was old and scratched, as if the desolating passage of time were made visible in the rain upon the screen, audible in the worn stuttering of the sound track, yet these erosions of temporality only enhanced your luminous presence since they made it all the more forlorn, the more precarious your specious triumph over time. For you were just as beautiful as you had been twenty years before, would always be so beautiful as long as celluloid remained in complicity with the phenomenon of persistence of vision; but that triumph would die of duration in the end, and the surfaces that preserved your appearance were already wearing away.

But oh, how beautiful she had been and was, Tristessa de St Ange, billed (do you remember?) as "The most beautiful woman in the world", who executed her symbolic autobiography in arabesques of kitsch and hyperbole yet transcended the rhetoric of vulgarity by exemplifying it with a heroic lack of compromise.

I think it was Rilke who so lamented the inadequacy of our symbolism—regretted so bitterly we cannot, unlike the (was

it?) Ancient Greeks, find adequate external symbols for the life within us—yes, that's the quotation. But, no. He was wrong. Our external symbols must always express the life within us with absolute precision; how could they do otherwise, since that life has generated them? Therefore we must not blame our poor symbols if they take forms that seem trivial to us, or absurd, for the symbols themselves have no control over their own fleshly manifestations, however paltry they may be; the nature of our life alone has determined their forms.

A critique of these symbols is a critique of our lives.

Tristessa. Enigma. Illusion. Woman? Ah!

And all you signified was false! Your existence was only notional; you were a piece of pure mystification, Tristessa. Nevertheless, as beautiful as only things that don't exist can be, most haunting of paradoxes, that recipe for perennial dissatisfaction.

Both memory and prescience were at work in me when I and a girl whose name I don't remember went to see Tristessa in *Wuthering Heights* the last night I was ever in London.

Tristessa had long since joined Billie Holliday and Judy Garland in the queenly pantheon of women who expose their scars with pride, pointing to their emblematic despair just as a medieval saint points to the wounds of his martyrdom, and no drag-artiste felt his repertoire complete without a personation of her magic and passionate sorrow. Her stills became posters; she inspired a style for one season, they named a discotheque after her, and a chain of boutiques. But I myself had loved Tristessa out of pure innocence when I was a little boy and the sculptural flare of her nostrils haunted my pubescent dreams. The wall of my cubicle at school had been plated with her photographs. I even wrote to MGM and received, in return for my ink-stained, ill-spelt love-letter, a still from *The Fall of the House of Usher*, she, ethereal in her shroud, just risen from her coffin to the manner born.

But also, unexpectedly, quite unsolicited by me, they sent

me a shot of her in trousers and sweater, swinging, of all things, a golf club. A long, lean, flat-chested woman in an attitude of posed spontaneity who showed her teeth in a grin that did not come naturally to her, for when she was in sole charge of issuing her rare smiles, they came in a code that signified nothing to do with joy. I was shocked and bewildered by this photograph. This photograph marked the beginning of my disillusion with Tristessa.

And, just at that time, she herself began to go out of fashion for, however hard they tried to force her into the mold, she had nothing whatever in common with the girl next door. There had been a baleful vogue for romanticism in the late forties; when it flickered out, health and efficiency became the motto. Strong-women with bulging pectorals were the new stars; bread, rather than dreams. Body, all body, to hell with the soul. MGM's publicity department sent me this photograph to show Tristessa was only human, a girl like any other girl, since they had lost confidence in the mythology they had created for her. The "princess lointaine" now, must learn to ride a bicycle and so forth. But Tristessa could make only the most perfunctory gestures towards real life, even if her life depended on it. And, besides, nobody had ever loved her for anything as commonplace as humanity; her allure had lain in the tragic and absurd heroism with which she had denied real life.

Tristessa, the very type of romantic dissolution, necrophilia incarnate, pretending to be a *sportswoman*? Although both photographs were signed, "loving you always, Tristessa de St A," in a strange, spiky hand, I did not bother to pin either of them up on my wall, for the one outfaced the other ... how could I ever envisage Madeline Usher playing golf? I'd dreamed of meeting Tristessa, she stark naked, tied, perhaps to a tree in a midnight forest under the wheeling stars. To have encountered her on a suburban golf-course? Or Dido in the laundromat. Or Desdemona at the ante-natal clinic. Never!

She had been the dream itself made flesh though the flesh I

knew her in was not flesh itself but only a moving picture of flesh, real but not substantial.

I only loved her because she was not of this world and now I was disillusioned with her when I discovered she could stoop to a pretence of humanity. I therefore abandoned her. I took up rugby football and fornication. Puberty stormed me. I grew up.

Still, now she was having a little camp renaissance at midnight movie festivals and she had inspired a style that spring so I took a girl whose name I forget to see Tristessa subjugate her agonised line to that of Catherine Earnshaw. For old times' sake at the cinema, I bought myself an ice-cream, since my nanny, another true fan, had taken me to watch Tristessa when I was a child and we'd always had a choc-ice apiece so that the crackle of the coat of bitter chocolate under the teeth and the sharp, sweet sting of the ice against my gums were intimately associated with my flaming, pre-adolescent heart and the twitch in my budding groin the spectacle of Tristessa's suffering always aroused in me.

For Tristessa's speciality had been suffering. Suffering was her vocation. She suffered exquisitely until suffering became demoded; then she retired to, I read somewhere, a hermit-like seclusion in Southern California, she put herself away tidily in a store-house for worn-out dreams. But by the time I read that in an abandoned magazine I picked up and flipped through on a train, I had only a retrospective, academic interest in Tristessa—I'd thought, so she's still alive, is she; she must be old as the hills.

I had a choc-ice and my companion a strawberry sundae. We sat and ate our ice-creams under the flickering blessings of the divine Tristessa. I abandoned myself to nostalgia, to the ironic appreciation of the revisited excesses of her beauty. I thought I was bidding a last goodbye to the iconography of adolescence; tomorrow, I would fly to a new place, another country, and never imagined I might find her there, waiting for revivification, for the kiss of a lover who would rouse her from her

perpetual reverie, she, fleshy synthesis of the dream, both dreamed and dreamer. I never imagined, never.

When she perceived how Tristessa's crucifixion by brain fever moved me, the girl who was with me got to her knees in the dark on the dirty floor of the cinema, among the cigarette ends and empty potato crisp bags and trodden orangeade containers, and sucked me off. My gasps were drowned by the cheers and applause of the unruly section of the audience as Tyrone Power, in too much hair-cream for a convincing Heathcliff, roared his grief over the cardboard moor in a torrent of studio rain.

But then I heard this otherwise forgotten girl murmur my name, "Evelyn" and to my surprise, to my furious embarrassment, I discovered she was crying for I felt her tears leak on to my knees. Crying, perhaps, to lose me, was she? How cruel I felt, when I thought that! She kept a hieroglyph of plastic in the neck of her womb, to prevent conception; the black lady never advised me on those techniques when she fitted me up with a uterus of my own, that was not part of her intention.

As far as I can remember, this girl had grey eyes and a certain air of childlike hesitancy. I always liked that particular quality in a woman for my nanny, although sentimental, had had a marked sadistic streak and I suppose I must have acquired an ambivalent attitude towards women from her. Sometimes I'd amuse myself by tying a girl to the bed before I copulated with her. Apart from that, I was perfectly normal.

A schoolteacher from New Jersey sat next to me on the plane. In her handbag she kept a card with, printed on one side, a prayer for taking off and, on the other, a prayer for landing. Her lips moved silently. She took us into the air without incident at Heathrow and prayed us down safely at Kennedy.

Then I, tender little milk-fed English lamb that I was, landed, plop! heels first in the midst of the slaughter.

Two

NOTHING IN MY experience had prepared me for the city. American friends, colleagues, had tried to scare me with tales of muggings and mayhem but I had not believed them, not for a moment; I'd been hooked on a particular dream, all manner of old movies ran through my head when I first heard I'd got the job there—hadn't Tristessa herself conquered New York in *The Lights of Broadway* before she died of, that time, leukaemia? I imagined a clean, hard, bright city where towers reared to the sky in a paradigm of technological aspiration and all would be peopled by loquacious cab-drivers, black but beaming chambermaids and a special kind of crisp-edged girl with apple-crunching incisors and long, gleaming legs like lascivious scissors—the shadowless inhabitants of a finite and succinct city where the ghosts who haunt the cities of Europe could have found no cobweb corners to roost in. But in New York I found, instead of hard edges and clean colours, a lurid, Gothic darkness that closed over my head entirely and became my world.

The first thing I saw when I came out of the Air Terminal was, in a shop window, an obese plaster gnome squatly perched on a plaster toadstool as it gnawed a giant plaster pie. Welcome to the country where Mouth is King, the land of comestibles! The next thing I saw were rats, black as buboes, gnawing at a heap of garbage. And the third thing was a black man running down the middle of the road as fast as he could go, screaming and clutching his throat; an unstoppable cravat, red in colour and sticky, mortal, flowed out from beneath his fingers. A burst of gunfire; he falls on his face. The rats abandon their feast and scamper towards him, squeaking.

That night, I stayed in a hotel that caught fire in the early

hours of the morning—or, rather, seemed to have caught fire, for there was all the appearance of fire; dense clouds of smoke billowed out through the air-conditioning system. They promptly evacuated all the rooms. The lobby filled with firemen, policemen and disaster-loving night-walkers who drifted in through the glass doors while the roused guests in their pyjamas wandered about like somnambulists, wringing their hands. Beneath a crystal chandelier, a woman vomited into a paper bag.

And yet it seemed that nobody knew how to express panic, in spite of an overwhelming sense of catastrophe; the victims seemed estranged even from their own fear. There was a general incuriosity, almost a dazed acquiescence in disaster; though the lobby buzzed with guesses at its cause, these seemed no more nor less than conversational gambits, not attempts to define the nature of the emergency, and nobody left the building. Was it arson? Were the blacks responsible, or the Women? The Women? What did they mean? Seeing my stranger's bewilderment, a cop pointed out to me, inscribed on a wall, the female circle—thus: ♀ with, inside it, a set of bared teeth. Women are angry. Beware Women! Goodness me!

Panic, however, seized the occupants of the hotel eventually—but only after the all-clear was sounded, and only then when it was broad daylight and therefore safe to panic, as if the terrors of the night could only be acknowledged in the day, when they did not exist. Then the elevator, which, even in this pricey place, was scribbled all over with the graffiti that also decorated the walls of the lobby, filled with wailing and expositulating men and women who had scrambled on their clothes, seized their bags and now checked out, white-faced and shaking. Strange.

It was July and the city shimmered and stank. I was half-fainting with exhaustion by noon and my shirt was sodden with sweat. I was astonished to see so many beggars in the rank, disordered streets, where crones and drunkards disputed with the rats for possession of the choicest morsels of garbage.

It was hot weather the rats loved. I could not slip down to the corner to buy a pack of cigarettes from the kiosk without kicking aside half a dozen of the sleek, black monsters as they came snapping round my ankles. They would line the staircase like a guard of honour to greet me when I came home to the walk-up, cold-water apartment I soon rented on the lower East Side from a young man who then went off to India to save his soul. Before he left, he warned me of the imminent heat-death of the universe and advised me to concern myself with spiritual matters, since time was short.

The old soldier who lived on the floor above me would shoot at the rats with his revolver; the walls of the stairway were pitted with bullet holes. Since the staircase was never cleaned, his trophies rotted there until they decomposed; he was not the man to clean them up himself.

The skies were of strange, bright, artificial colours—acid yellow, a certain bitter orange that looked as if it would taste of metal, a dreadful, sharp, pale, mineral green—lancinating shades that made the eye wince. From these unnatural skies fell rains of gelatinous matter, reeking of decay. One day, there was a rain of, I think, sulphur, that overcame in rottenness all the other stench of the streets. That was the day a man in a stained raincoat approached me in a delicatessen as I was buying a carton of delicious mushroom and sour cream salad and assured me, in a voice of perfect, logical calm, that, on a trip to Coney Island, whilst picking his way across the crowded and excrement-littered beach, he had observed luminous wheels in the sea, which proved that God had arrived on a celestial bicycle to proclaim the last Judgement was at hand.

Groups of proselytisers roamed the streets, chanting psalms and prayers, selling a thousand conflicting salvations. The city was scribbled all over with graffiti in a hundred languages expressing a thousand griefs and lusts and furies and often I saw, in virulent dayglo red, the insignia of the angry women, the bared teeth in the female circle. One day, a woman in black leather trousers who wore a red armband printed with

this symbol came up to me in the street, shook back her rug of brown curls, reached out a strong, gnarled hand, coarsely mouthing obscenities as she did so, handled my cock with contemptuous dexterity, sneered at the sight of my helpless erection, spat in my face, turned on her booted heel and stalked scornfully away.

My dazed innocence proved, in itself, to be some protection. When I presented myself at the university where I had been engaged to teach, the combat-suited blacks who mounted guard with machine-guns at every door and window laughed uproariously at me when they heard my cut-glass vowels and prissy English accent and let me go. So now I had no job; and my reason told me to scurry back, quick as I could, to festering yet familiar London, the devil I knew.

But: "The age of reason is over," said the old soldier, the Czech who lived on the floor above me. He was, God help us all, an alchemist and distilled a demented logic in his attic in stills of his own devising. "In this city, you will meet immortality, evil and death," he assured me with prophetic exhilaration. His protuberant eyeballs were veined with red like certain kinds of rare marble. He urged me to meditate upon the virid line of the whirling universe. He made me dark, bitter coffee and would invite me to share his borsch and black bread in a room such as I had never seen before, with its crucibles and alembics and strange charts and pictures of bleeding white birds in bottles. There was a seventeenth-century print, tinted by hand, of a hermaphrodite carrying a golden egg that exercised a curious fascination upon me, the dual form with its breasts and its cock, its calm, comprehensive face. (Coming events? ...) I fingered his leather-bound books—the six volumes of Manget's *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, the *Splendor Solis* of Saloman Trismosin, and Michael Maier's wonderfully illustrated *Atalanta Fugiens*. The police car wailed in the street below; a loudhailer advised a number of unknown persons in an adjacent ruin to come out, since they were all surrounded. Then the sound of guns.