

Palimpsest

by Venita Coelho

Young authors will do anything to get published. Anything at all to get their manuscripts read. I had this story from an agent, supposed to be the best in her business. She's discovered no less than three Booker winners and one Nobel Laureate. – and *she* swears it's true. It began when a young man walked into her office in the middle of summer wearing a fur coat. He was an aspiring author, he said, with a manuscript that had to be seen to be believed.

The agent edged towards the button that summoned a well muscled secretary to throw out the throngs of aspiring authors who regularly tried to waylay her. The young man headed her off. 'Just take one look at it!' he pleaded 'I promise you won't be disappointed. Just one peek!' And to her horror, he flung off his coat. Underneath he wasn't wearing a stitch. But he *was* covered. From head to toe fine squiggly lines undulated over every square inch of him.

'What is the meaning of this?!' cried the agent desperately trying to get to the button. 'Nothing less than my masterpiece!' cried the young man. 'It is my novel. My life's work! Written on my body!' He thumped his chest resoundingly. The agent peered closer – and the lines were indeed writing... thousands of words... sprinklings of commas... large dollops of semicolons ... from head to toe, the man was etched with them. When he smiled, an exclamation mark on his chin dimpled charmingly. At this point, the agent says, she was hooked. She reached for a cigar and said 'Tell me all about it.'

The boy told her a fantastic tale of how the Caribbean holiday that he had signed up for was scuppered when the

cruise ship suddenly sprang a leak and sank. When he battled his way through shark infested water to a nearby island, he discovered there was one more survivor. One evening, scraping the last of their fried fish from the bottom of coconut shells, they began sharing dreams. The boy sighed over how he could never now write the novel he had been planning for years. He was a couple of hundred miles distant from pen paper or laptop. His fellow mate sat up suddenly and said 'hold it - of course you can!' By a quirk of fate he had been marooned with a tattoo artist. The next day they laid a trap for a porcupine, improvised with the juice of certain berries, and he took a deep breath and started dictating.

The boy waxed poetic as he described his creation 'There on the island with nothing but the sun, sand, and my faithful scribe, I began. I dictated and he wrote. Ah what ecstasy it was! I sweated blood as thought after thought fell from me. The agony of creation! Every full stop, every comma was a twinge. Every sentence a line of pure fire. The extremes a long paragraph could send me into. How I suffered! And how it poured from me! I had scarcely dictated the last full stop when we spied a sail on the horizon. It was a ship! We were saved! My first act on touching land was to fall on my knees in thankfulness. My second was to purchase a coat and hurry over here. Say you will read it!'

'It will wreak havoc with my schedule' said the agent 'but yes, I will.' Fascinated, she approached and fixed her prince nez firmly on her nose. The story, she tells me, started from his left breast and worked it's way into his armpit. It was an adventure thriller.

By the lower torso the hero escaped three attempts to kill him. Somewhere across the right elbow, a beautiful mysterious veiled girl came into his life. By the small of his back, he had a series of hair raising adventures and had a new and dashing scar across his eyebrow. To get to some of

the less accessible bits of the story, she had to get on her knees, and the young man went through a series of contortions that suggested he was a yogi in his previous birth. But search as she might (and the agent assures me that she did so *thoroughly*) she could not find the end of the story. The youth stopped her as she made yet another hopeless scrutiny of his gluteus maximus.

'By the time we got to the climax' he said 'There was no place left. None whatever. Except...er...except...' here words failed him and he gestured manfully.

The agent wiped her glasses that were beginning to mist up, and peered closely.

'It may not look like much' said the young man, blushing, 'but the Theme does Expand. And it reaches rather an exciting Climax.'

The agent assured me that it did.

The agent said it was the most exciting manuscript she had ever seen. Unfortunately it wasn't the most exciting manuscript she had *read*. She staggered to her feet and reached in her drawers for the last weapon she had against the onslaught of hopeful writers with hopeless manuscripts.

Here she faced a problem. Every inch of the boy was covered. Only one place remained – his broad forehead, shining with a combination of sweat and hope. She swung her stamp. 'REJECTED' it said, right between his eyes.

'Though' she told me thoughtfully 'I did send the text around to a few of my friends to read. I believe that young man made quite a living off his manuscript. And not one word published.'