

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Silk Purse

by Lou Beckerman

Part Two

Initially she thought he might be making fun of her. A model! His muse! Absurd! She almost cried – the unaccustomed laughter hurt. Long ago Candice might have just about fitted a mainstream model template: five foot seven; 36-24-35. Once. She stood erect then.

She'd married early to a husband who grew increasingly possessive of his trophy. He'd required her to be sexy and exciting but modest too. She remembered the finest of invisible lines which she could too often inadvertently cross, then be sent back to change her outfit. So she'd ended up playing safe and dumbing-down.

Now at seventy-eight she'd lost some height with a minor but irksome spinal curvature. Her neck wasn't quite strong enough for her to be able to look straight ahead without slightly arching her lower back. But she was still reasonably well proportioned. And until not long ago, fit enough to swim alongside ducks in the Heath's natural pools. She still had a certain way of walking with purpose.

Simon allowed no-one but Candice to call him 'Ossie', having reclaimed his birth name, Osvaldo Dos Santos. 'Simon' belonged to the past and his huge efforts to fit in, following his family's relocation from Portugal. Later, with flair, and an ability to flatter and play the game, he'd successfully conformed to whatever was expected of him in the fashion industry. He wasn't proud of who he had become and, more than anything, craved authenticity - to make a difference to somebody - or to contribute something of importance to the world.

Candice cut through the myth that women in their twilight are uninterested in sensuality and beauty; no longer a creative life force.

His resolve strengthened to dress and empower the invisibles like her - the marginalised and disenfranchised. Already guessing her penchant for adventure he bargained this could be a route to them both finding their real selves. A perfect ploy. She acquiesced.

Having never been able to justify animals being slaughtered for fashion, he wanted to create a collection using the softest, most sumptuous and sustainable faux leathers, furs and feathers in an explosive, multi-coloured menagerie of stunning animal prints. Garments were to be outrageously wild to make the point.

Around Candice fabrics were adorned, draped, folded and pleated. There were swathes and swirls, props and accessories. Heeled zebra boots. To signify speed a cheetah-ornamented walking cane. They made placards for the catwalk: 'Happy in my OWN skin'. 'Growing old at full pelt - in MY skin.' 'Nobody else's skin but MINE!' Makeup was glorious and generous. A lioness tattoo on her shoulder had the advantage of her skin now being unlikely to sag any further. Clothed in his exotic, edgy creations, a half-remembered feral fearlessness in her was re-awakened. She felt invincible.

Emerging for the launch, as if from a cultural wasteland, an older generation of shelved, sat-upon, spirit-subdued souls (who, it seemed, had only been waiting in the wings for permission) joined them, unearthing their vigour and voices. This opportunity for self-realisation and protest through fashion touched, excited and energised. Whatever had happened to them in those intervening years since Greenham Common and 'Ban the Bomb' was irrelevant - they were formidable now.

The beige 'tut-tut' brigade came out in force. 'Hideous!' they brayed in monotone. One editorial, Candice's favourite, read 'We now have the horror of Halloween all year round.' 'Sweet old ladies becoming power-crazy she-devils!' was among others.

Simon (*shall we also call him 'Ossie' now?*) had some transient misgivings. He hadn't ever wanted to make grotesque clowns of them, but Candice, the public face of '*Purses of Silk*', became a treasured icon. Over five years of campaigning, and inspiring the old and young alike, male and female, the label grew and flourished. At its core, an awareness and respect for the value of older people and exotic creatures.

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She's eighty-three and fading, at home. He sees her every day. This day, the last, he is made to wait until she's ready for him.

'Ossie you old devil you!' she drawls teasingly, looking up at him through her slightly askew fake caked lashes, attached - tenuously - by Mary, her carer.

'You're looking lovely.' He means it, gently reaching for her hand under the sheet - it feels cool and clammy.

'Darling, I won't be seen *dead* without my greasepaint - especially by you. You know that.' She pauses for air - every molecule precious. 'A hell-of-a dreamy ride it's been eh?'

Dreams are what you wake up from. Candice would never have to do that.

'I'm lucky.' She pauses again. 'Thank you.' She rests and a few moments pass. Ironically she has never felt so alive. 'Don't look at me so gloomily - now let's plan my final runway attire.'

He toasts her with his Waitrose Americano in the blue refillable.