

Maniac Drifter



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L a u r a M a r e l l o



**GUERNICA
EDITIONS**

TORONTO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)
2016

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Cover design and interior layout: David Moratto
Guernica Editions Inc.
1569 Heritage Way, Oakville, (ON), Canada L6M 2Z7
2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.
www.guernicaeditions.com

Distributors:
University of Toronto Press Distribution,
5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8
Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town,
Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.
Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—Third Quarter
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2016938890
Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
Marelo, Laura, author
Maniac drifter / Laura Marelo. -- First edition.

(Essential prose series ; 125)
Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-1-77183-065-2 (paperback).--ISBN 978-1-77183-066-9 (epub).
--ISBN 978-1-77183-067-6 (mobi)

I. Title. II. Series: Essential prose series ; 125

PS3613.A7397M36 2016 813'.6 C2016-902166-1 C2016-902167-X

for my mother



Provincetown,
Cape Cod,
Summer 1985



Chapter One



Friday

I woke up Friday morning in bed with a man I didn't know. Of course I had seen him around town. His name was Getz. He was thin and muscular, had fine features and a sexy, angular face that promised mystery. When I had asked about him, everyone in town had warned me that Getz was a coke dealer. Almost everyone who had been in Provincetown for more than ten years had dealt drugs at one time or another. They were just mad at Getz because the Zanzibar had been the best hangout in town in the seventies; he had been the manager and bartender. They blamed him for it closing down. They said he skimmed money, embezzled it, lost it, mismanaged everything. Now he was a lobsterman.

But a lot of people had done that. The scenario went like this: a guy came to town, dealt dope until he had enough money to start a restaurant, made a lot of money at the restaurant, but got greedy and kept dealing. Then he began to

throw his weight around in town politics, leaning on people, making them mad. That was usually when the Feds came in, shut his place down until he paid his taxes, or indicted him on a drug traffic charge. Provincetown was like an ongoing B-movie; the restaurant owners, bar owners and bartenders were the movie stars. One star got indicted about every five years or so, always through a similar chain of events. This raised him from star status to Town Hero.

I'm in a movie, I thought as I sat up in bed. *This town's a goddamn movie*. That's when I looked around the room and realized I wasn't at home.

I walked out onto the porch and saw that a flying but-tress in the shape of a voluptuous woman was nailed above the door lintel. I knew right away that I was at the Figure-head House. I could see the bay on the other side of Commercial Street, the gutted Ice House down the hill on the water side. It was sunny, and a slight breeze blew off the water. No one was awake yet; the tourists had not come in from up-Cape. I walked down the hill toward home.

I lived on the top floor of a white house on Bradford Street that had been converted into apartments. It would have been impertinent to lock the door. A black leather jacket and felt fedora were hanging on the crank handle to the skylight. Harper Martin, the owner of these sartorial gems, was asleep on the day bed in the kitchen. I had never woken up in the morning and found myself in bed with Harper Martin. I wondered if it would be different with him, if I would be able to remember.

Harper always played the part of the friendly sleuth, with his jacket and fedora, his jaunty walk and manner. But was he really a sleuth or just acting one? I could never

determine. He drove a silver Corvette that said *Maniac Drifter* on the bumper, and had wooed his last girlfriend by singing her rock songs across the parking lot of Days Studios, where they were both painters-in-residence. He wrote the tunes himself. "Is-a-bel-la! The stock market crumbles when I speak your name!" was the chorus to one.

The skylight was cranked all the way open; I stuck my head out and looked at the bay. I had a view of the water between the Ice House and the neighboring roof. A few lobster boats and trawlers headed toward the breakwater. The gulls whizzed past my head. This apartment was in the gull zone, intruding on their airspace. They liked to dive-bomb anyone who stood under the skylight, and then pull out at the last minute.

"Hey," Harper said. The noise of the gulls must have woken him up.

"French toast?"

Harper climbed out of the day bed and slipped his chinos on, then his white shirt and string tie, then he sat on the bed and put on his black socks and wing tips.

I grilled the French toast while he set the table, humming as he walked around the kitchen. Suddenly, as he was folding a napkin, he belted out: "Romance without finance is a nuisance (you ain't kiddin' brother!). Mama, Mama, please give up that gold." He came up behind me at the stove and looked over my shoulder. "Wanna come to El Salvador with me and break up marriages? You can chase after the husband; I'll go for the wife."

For a moment I thought he knew about my trouble and was making light of it, but he couldn't know. I hadn't told him, and it wasn't simple enough to guess.

“See what I care,” he said. “Wanna be the lead singer in my New Wave band?”

“Bring me the plates,” I said. He brought them. I slid the French toast on to them. I asked him why he smelled like a lobsterman.

“I was sitting next to one last night,” he said. “The lobsterman’s name was Getz.”

“How do you know he is a lobsterman?”

He poured a dollop of syrup on his French toast. “Hey, babe, I may be from Los Angeles, but after two years in this joint I can tell the Yankees, Portuguese, lobstermen, artists, hippies and gays apart.”

When we had finished eating, Harper took the empty plates to the sink and ran water over them. He bellowed: “You’re so good and you’re so fine, you ain’t got no money you can’t be mine, it ain’t no joke to be stone broke, Baby, Baby, I’m not lying when I say that—”

“Why’d you spend the night on the day bed?”

“I’m running from the law.” He put on his jacket and fedora, tipped his hat, bowed graciously, and shut himself in the bathroom. I licked the rim of the syrup bottle. I could hear the shower running and Harper singing, “You must remember this, a kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh. The fundamental things apply as time goes by.”

Harper was right about his categories: Yankees, Portuguese, fishermen, artists, hippies and gays—that was Provincetown. The Pilgrims landed first, and settled out on Long Point, a spit of sand that curled to a tip out past the edge of town. You would have to walk through marshes or over a breakwater to get to it now. It was too cold and windy for them there, so eventually they went to Plymouth. But

people kept coming and settled out on Long Point, to fish mainly, and eventually some moved into town. When no one lived out on the Point anymore, they brought the houses into town and affixed blue historical plaques to them.

After the Yankees, the Portuguese came over, also to fish, and they had been here ever since. Now they lived on the northwest side of town, behind all the tourist traffic on Bradford Street, just beyond Shankpainter Pond, in modest houses where no one would bother them.

The artists first came in the 1880s; Charles Hawthorne was the most famous of the group. They came again in the 1920s, among them were Edwin Dickinson, Eugene O'Neill and the Provincetown Players. Dickinson lived in Days Studios; the Art Association and Beachcombers were formed. In the thirties and forties the Abstract Expressionists came from New York; Motherwell and Frankenthaler used the barn at Days Studios. Cosmo and his group of Rhode Island painters joined the Art Association and Beachcombers. Galleries sprung up, each with its allegiances and rivalries. Now, in the eighties, Cosmo and his circle remained in town, while most of the Abstract Expressionists summered in the Hamptons, except for Motherwell, who had stayed in Provincetown and moved his studio from Days into his home on the East End. Days Studios was now used by the young up-and-coming painters like Harper Martin, most of whom came in from New York for winter residencies. Some stayed on when summer came.

The hippies came over in the sixties and they were the attraction for that time, Provincetown being prone to fads, being Mecca for whatever fad came. But some of them stayed and now they did things around town that suited

again. He had just returned from a trip to Nicaragua. When I had asked him why he went there, he said because it was “the happening thing.” I figured he would go to Poland or Lebanon or South Africa next, but El Salvador sounded practical.

“You never told me why you slept on the day bed last night,” I said. He would not ask me where I had slept, but it wasn’t out of a sense of propriety. It was as if he knew it was a dangerous subject, and should not be broached.

“I told you, I’m a fugitive from the law.” He opened the door. “Well I’m off. See you in a few minutes.” He bowed, and shut the door behind him.

On the way to the law office I wondered if Harper were just kidding, or really in trouble, wondered if he were acting the part of the sleuth or was really the sleuth, wondered if he were pretending to be in a movie or if he really was the movie. “This town is a movie,” I said out loud. “I’m in a goddamn movie.”

There were two law offices in town, but since I worked at the one which belonged to Ruth Allen Esquire, I called it by its generic name, *the law office*, as if it were the only law office in town, the way I referred to Cosmo’s as *the restaurant* and men referred to their wives as *the wife*. Ruth Allen had her offices on the bottom floor of her big white house on Commercial Street on the east end of town, near Getz’s Figurehead House.

Ruth was a small, robust woman with curly brown hair and sparkly black eyes. She had a keen intellect and a devilish

—only the cigars he and Tommy smoked ruined the image. But the locals didn't care about the martyr status, they were in love with the idea that this family was Provincetown's version of the Kennedys. They were handsome, glamorous, Catholic and doomed. Didn't a suicide, murder and fatal accident compare to assassinations, plane crashes on the Riviera and Chappaquiddick? The glamor of the Souzas was smaller scale certainly, they were not rich and the brothers were not Presidents, but the Provincetown locals liked to imagine that the big white house with the cupola, the pristine lawn with its statues, was like the Kennedy compound at Hyannis Port; and the brave, handsome brothers who were plagued with accidents and tragedies, due in part to their own weaknesses, were simultaneously charmed and hexed the way the Kennedy brothers had been.

"Sorry I'm late," I said when I entered the investors' meeting. Ruth was ensconced behind her desk, talking on the telephone, presiding over the movie stars. She always felt magnanimous toward me at these moments, when large groups of people were watching. She waved her free hand in the air as if to say, *No problem*, and pointed to the empty chair where she meant for me to sit down.

The chairs were arranged in a half-moon shape facing Ruth's desk. It looked like a United Nations meeting, or a panel of experts. Each investor had a black vinyl three-ring binder in his lap. I sat down next to Harper. While Ruth talked into the phone and tapped numbers into her adding machine, Harper bounced one leg up and down, causing his fedora to jump in his lap. Ruth hung up the phone. "Okay," she said, "the bank's confirmed my figures." She rummaged through some papers.

Chapter Two



Monday — one week later

All of Provincetown was in an uproar. The Law Offices of Ruth Allen Esq. had established the *Harper Martin Defense Fund*, and everyone in town was planning benefits or parties, contests or shows, to raise money for the Fund. Raphael Souza had announced a costume party at the White Sands, all proceeds from liquor sales and cover charges would go to the Harper Martin Defense Fund. Paradiso's was sponsoring a New Wave Night for Harper; Paula and Christianne's show that evening would also be a benefit for the Fund. Dominic was planning to stage a windsurfing regatta off the wharf at Cosmo's restaurant; all entry fees and liquor sales that afternoon would be donated to the Harper Martin Defense Fund. Antaeus had authorized Joe Houston to give a benefit screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the Bad Attitude Cinema. Edward the real estate agent planned to give a tour of all the Historical

“Temple of the Jaguars Report.” Cosmo had brought his own TV into the front dining room of the restaurant, because the customers wanted to watch the news. All the bars and restaurants in town had their TVs tuned to the *CBS Evening News* for the Temple of the Jaguars Report. The bars were getting more and more crowded every day, as people got hooked on the story and wanted to hear his report. The Happy Hour business was booming. It seemed the entire nation was addicted to the daily updates, and the *CBS Evening News* ratings were skyrocketing.

Everyone in Provincetown had watched the very first broadcast, when Dan Rather had read Harper’s statement. The locals had been waiting for the broadcast for 24 hours, ever since an anonymous caller had tipped off the *Provincetown Express*. Gabe and I were relieved, since we wanted everyone to watch the broadcast, but did not want me to be revealed as the Informant.

The delivery had come off without a hitch. Harper’s art dealer contacted Gabe and me when the Federal agents took possession of the crates. Gabe drove me to the CBS offices in midtown Manhattan; somehow I convinced the front desk of the urgency and secrecy of the information, and I had been granted an audience with Dan Rather himself. I could not believe it.

Now I was the Informant. I was the *Anonymous Source who had informed CBS News* etc., etc. I tried not to smile whenever I heard Mr. Rather use that expression. All the television viewers, in Provincetown and around the nation, and sometimes in magazine and newspaper editorials on the story, were calling the informant *Deep Throat* after the informant in the Watergate Scandal. Deep Throat’s identity

had never been revealed, even though the government had asked journalists over and over through the years to reveal their sources, had their papers, tapes and filed subpoenaed, held them in contempt of court, and even thrown them in jail. But nobody in the Federal Government had asked Dan Rather to identify his informant. Everybody said Dan would never reveal his sources. He was the American Journalist of the Hour, like Cronkite during Vietnam, like Woodard and Bernstein during Watergate, like I.F. Stone and Walter Lippmann in their day. He was a National Hero.

On the very first broadcast, Dan Rather had read Harper's letter on the national news. It had started out, *Dear Mr. Dan Rather*, and had gone on to explain that Harper was a painter who showed his work frequently in Manhattan, and had recently gone into business as an art dealer who specialized in Ancient Art, rare or precious art objects from ancient cultures in Africa, Egypt, Greece, Asia, Oceania, Central and South America. The reaction in Provincetown was: "Since when did he become an art dealer?" And: "Where's Oceania?"

The letter went on to say that Harper had made a trip to Nicaragua the previous winter, and during his stay there had purchased the moveable remains of a recently excavated Classic Mayan temple called *The Temple of the Jaguars*. The objects included: stone stela depicting the ruler-deities Jaguar Snake, Bird Jaguar, Shield Jaguar and other god impersonators; door lintels—limestone relief carving depicting visionary and penitential rites including bloodletting, rites of fertility and mythical events, rattlesnakes swallowing human skeletons; a serpent mask doorway that had teeth lining the sill, fangs protruding from the jambs, and the serpent's nose and eyes above—(the doorway was

the serpent's gullet, and a line of human heads decorated the cornice); a jaguar throne made of painted red stone inlaid with jade; an illustrated screenfold manuscript, similar to the ones displayed in Paris, Dresden and Madrid, on paper made from wild fig bark and sealed with lime coating, depicting the passage into the underworld of the twin deities of the Popol Vuh; clay and stone figurines (including replicas of the fertility god Xipe Totec, earth Goddess Catlicue, figures representing the prankster-spirit chanenques; a representation of Tlacolteotl, Goddess of Dirt, stegapygous figures; shell, spider and turtle shell men; a spider monkey dancing on a human head, and other figures); painted clay pottery mixed with volcanic ash, and painted with orange or white slip, depicting bat gods, desert foxes, and the three headed crocodile deity; a detailed plan of the designs on the hieroglyphic stairway leading to the Temple of the Jaguars, the general layout of the buildings around the temple including the Steam Bath, Ball Court, Pyramid of the Magician, House of the Governor, High Priest's Grave, Skull Platform, Castille, Mercado and Akab Dzib, and a complete outline of the Jaguar Mural; full round free-standing stucco portrait heads; jade carvings; effigy pendants of condors, pumas, armadillos, lobsters and monsters with crocodile heads on human bodies; funerary masks made from pottery, basalt, onyx, jadeite and obsidian; small hematite mirrors; stone vessels made in the shape of a hyena, and an organ cactus, killer whale, coyote; effigy vessels depicting iguanas, crustaceans, and molluscs.

Harper had said in his statement that he had purchased the pieces from the Temple of the Jaguars from the Nicaraguan government, after having agreed to certain terms.

The terms were that a replica of the temple would be erected to house the art objects and artifacts, that all the art objects would be housed in the temple replica, that no objects would be sold or distributed separately. It was also stipulated that Harper Martin himself would recreate the great Jaguar Mural, similar to the twelve-wall mural that covered three rooms in the famous Bonampak Temple in Guatemala. The Nicaraguan government agreed that the purchaser of the temple art objects would not be obliged to recreate the pyramid that supported the temple, nor the series of shafts, vaults, tombs, and crypts inside the pyramid, but a diagram of the pyramid, and a sketch of the surrounding buildings, should be made available to the visitors of the temple replica.

The statement went on to say that Harper had purchased the temple art objects with a down payment of IBM computers, which were shipped to Nicaragua by private boat from California, in order to avoid possible federal intervention through U.S. Customs Inspection. Here, Dan interrupted his reading to explain that since we were aiding rebels fighting the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, the U.S.A. had instituted trade sanctions against Nicaragua, and U.S. citizens were not allowed any commerce with them. The statement went on to say that Harper had paid the balance of the purchase price upon receipt of the merchandise in Provincetown.

After purchasing the temple art objects, Harper shipped the artifacts to Provincetown, again avoiding U.S. Customs for the same reasons, and stored the artifacts in Provincetown until his dealer in Manhattan sold them to the new J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California. The Getty Museum purchased the art objects for an undisclosed price, and

large. His subpoena was still out for questioning regarding U.S. Customs violations. The Federal government had not responded to Harper's statement, and refused to comment. Then Dan promised to have a complete update on the government position as soon as it was forthcoming, complete coverage of Benefit Week in Provincetown, and a profile of Harper Martin in upcoming reports. Gabe and I were getting along much better since our trip to New York. Gabe forgave me for the nights when I slept with Getz, and Joe, and the night I had driven Mary to Boston. Since he had driven me to New York we had not been apart. Now it was Monday, and the week of benefit parties, races, tournaments, fashion shows and cabarets for the Harper Martin Defense Fund was about to begin.

The bouncer for the Harper Martin Defense Fund Benefit Costume Ball at the White Sands was dressed as a giant squid. The costume consisted of a flesh colored leotard with lavender blotches on it. The tentacles emerged at his shoulders—big, stuffed arms made of the same pinkish fabric and painted with blotches, like a rag doll gone berserk. He wore a hood over his head, with bug eyes made of balls that were covered with silver glitter and stuck out from the hood, and in his hand, hidden under the tentacles, he held a squirt gun that let loose an indigo fluid.

I walked into the party singing "*Romance Without Finance is a Nuisance.*" I was dressed very simply in a pair of beige chinos, a white tailored shirt, black string tie, leather jacket, black socks and wing tips, with my long blond hair

A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

This novel was written with the assistance of a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, a Wallace E. Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, a Grace Foundation Fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center Provincetown, and artist residencies at Yaddo, Millay and Montalvo Center for the Arts. Special thanks to Paul Nelson and Michael Mirolla.

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Laura Marello is the author of *Claiming Kin*, *The Tenants of the Hotel Biron*, *Balzac's Robe*, *The Gender of Inanimate Objects and Other Stories*, and several other books. She is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, a Wallace E. Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University, a Fine Arts Work Center fellowship, a Vogelstein Grant and a Deming grant. She has enjoyed writer's residencies at Yaddo, MacDowell Colony, Millay Colony, Montalvo Center for the Arts, and the Djerassi Foundation.