

GISÈLE MERLET

Gisèle Merlet was born Gisèle Fournier in 1934 in Chambly, Quebec. She grew up in Montreal, where (as Carmen does in “Only Angels Roamed”) she attended a convent school, but longed to escape conventions—religious and otherwise.

With her second husband, Jean, Merlet moved to British Columbia. For sixteen years the two ran a restaurant in Parksville on Vancouver Island; Merlet’s urge to travel was fulfilled through involvement in a second venture, an import business that entailed travel through much of Central and South America.

When Merlet retired she enrolled in the Liberal Studies program at Malaspina University College (now Vancouver Island University) in Nanaimo; she completed her first university essay at the age of 65, and graduated in 2005 with a Bachelor’s Degree in Liberal Studies. Since then she has continued at Vancouver Island University, in English and Creative Writing.

Several of Merlet’s short stories have been published in the literary magazine *Portal*; her collection of fifteen linked stories, *As I Rise*, was published in 2015.

Only Angels Roamed

GISÈLE MERLET

Carmen can’t remember if her mother held her hand the day she brought her to the boarding school in 1939 to be educated in the Catholic faith. She was not yet six years old. The girls’ private school, which had excellent standing within the community, was situated on Church Street in a working class district of Montréal and was a dignified grey stone building. The scent of wax and the brightness of the glossy floors distracted her and she did not see her mother

leave. The nun who walked with her did not hold her hand. They walked up the stairs together—so many stairs! Except for the swishing of the nun’s skirt and the clicking of the rosary hanging from her waist, silence. The tranquillity of the hallways did not trouble Carmen until she walked into a room in which what seemed like a hundred girls were getting ready for bed in total silence. At the foot of one of the beds, her suitcase waited. “This is the dormitory,” said the nun. In her head Carmen sang a refrain her mother had taught her.

*Au clair de la lune
Mon ami Pierrot, Prête-moi ta plume
Pour écrire un mot. Ma chandelle est morte,
Je n’ai plus de feu, Ouvre-moi ta porte,
Pour l’amour de Dieu.*

She was a petite girl whose sallow complexion and dark straight hair revealed her Métis origin. She looked fragile in the dim light. Thrilled by the newness of the flowery nightgown, she peeled off the itchy, black wool dress that reached to her ankles. The stiffness of the white collar felt scratchy on her neck. She could feel the soreness but not see it. Mirrors were forbidden until modesty had been learned. It took her a long time to untie her boots. She had not quite mastered knotting and unknotting the laces. Carmen grimaced again at the sight of the ugly footwear. “Boots will hold your ankles better than shoes,” she had been told. The garters holding up the black stockings were also new. Her delicate fingers manipulated the clips with difficulty. She looked forward to wearing the black veil during the daily morning mass. But the white embroidered one, reserved for Sunday, would become her favourite. Filling the water jug for ritual evening ablutions would have to wait. Just getting decently into bed after a communal prayer was complicated enough. “Only your face, hands, and feet may be seen. Undress under your nightgown,” the nun had said.

At first, the nuns’ floor-length habits, the wimples that framed their faces, and the veils that concealed their hair seemed especially severe to Carmen. Eventually, she saw the white coiffe and the metal flashing cross as romantic. The sisters swooshed and pirouetted along the corridors like black ghosts. In the chapel the clay statue of the Holy Virgin, set on a pedestal surrounded by votive candles, was dressed the same way, except in white and blue. Mère Sainte-Cécile did not display a starry halo like the Virgin, but her angelic demeanour impressed Carmen so much that she decided, right then and there, to pursue a pathway to sainthood. But first, she needed to learn and follow the rules, all the rules.

Right from the start, Carmen discovered the pleasure of running as fast as she could up and down the imposing wooden staircase that joined the five floors of the convent.

“Mademoiselle Nadeau, do not run on the staircase,” said the teacher who was waiting downstairs with her arms firmly planted on her hips. “Go back up and come down again, in silence this time.”

The rule of silence would prove the most difficult for Carmen. Too many rules: do not laugh loudly; do not touch any of your classmates—no hugging, no hand holding. Do not cry when you hurt yourself; offer your pain to Jesus for the suffering he endured on the Cross. Do not ask to see your mother. You will see her at the end of each week during Sunday afternoon’s parlour hour. And, should you deserve to go home, you will see her one Sunday afternoon a month after the eleven o’clock mass. Carmen, who loved to talk, to laugh, to sing, to dance, and wanted to see her mother even more often, quickly understood that it would prove impossible to reach heaven as St. Carmen.

At six years old, Carmen already knew that she would become a famous singer. She could sing and dance, so, at home, every time she found herself in front of a mirror, it was practice time. But, her dancing career would have to wait; there were no ballet classes included in the convent’s academic or artistic curriculum. A singing future was much more accessible. After all, she had talent. No classes needed. The convent choir would be the perfect vehicle to propel her to fame. Mère Sainte-Cécile, the music teacher, held auditions. The parents expected all of them to make the cut, so this was just a formality.

“Mademoiselle Nadeau, Mère Sainte-Cécile would like to see you in the music room.”

I made it. I knew it!

“Mademoiselle, you will be part of the choir. You are to stand to the right in the last row, so your parents can see you on stage.”

“Thank you Mère,” said Carmen, leaving the music room with a spring in her step.

This is where it all begins.

“Oh, Mademoiselle,” added the teacher, “please do not sing aloud, just move your lips.”

* * *

At least in piano lessons and in art classes, Carmen found escape. “You have talent,” said the teacher glancing at her attempts at pastoral landscapes. In theatre classes, the long black pinafore, borrowed from Mère Sainte-Cécile, transformed Carmen into a ballerina as she performed what she perceived as a delicate pas-de-deux. But, there were some setbacks. Madame Saulnier, a lay teacher who came to the convent once a week to teach diction, chose her to recite Emile Verhaeren’s poem titled “The Wind” in front of Mère Supérieure, the assembly, and the parents—a real honour.

“That will not do,” said Mère Supérieure, “Mademoiselle Nadeau’s behaviour does not warrant such an honour. Mademoiselle Perron will recite the poem, ‘The Wind,’ not Mademoiselle Nadeau.” That day Carmen stepped, for the first time, onto the path of defiance.

* * *

But there were good days; November 25th, was one of them. On St. Catherine’s day the sweet smell of taffy permeated the halls. This tradition, initiated by the founder of the order, elated Carmen and her friends. First, lucky students prepared the sticky mixture; then came the stretching. When it had cooled enough, other students picked up the taffy with buttered hands and began to stretch and fold it in half and then stretched it again. Eventually the golden taffy faded into a sugary delight!

During the winter months, the skating rink also offered a reprieve. Toques, mittens, and skates replaced irregular verbs, double multiplications, and memorized poems. Skating, especially the fancy variety, took over recess. The nuns played “The Skaters’ Waltz” on a phonograph to accompany their artless arabesques on ice. Tomboys formed into teams and pretended to be Maurice Richard, brooms as hockey sticks and a tennis ball for the puck.

Christmas’ Advent activities filled the early days of December. The crèche made up of life-sized statues adorned the chapel. Of course, baby Jesus did not appear in the manger until midnight on December 25th. The scent of real pine trees surrounding the Nativity promised good days ahead. Carmen’s rendition of a frisky elf in the Christmas pageant delighted the audience. Carols meant they would soon go home. Joyeux Noël!

Easter Sunday offered Carmen the opportunity to go home and wear a new *chapeau*. A few weeks later on First Communion Day she wore a white embroidered dress, a white long veil, white stockings, shoes, and gloves to hold the new rosary and prayer book. Her pure white soul was cleansed of all sins after confession—only angels roamed the hallways of the convent.

In May, the month of Mary, Carmen had to join the congregation to recite the daily rosary. Fortunately, recess occurred twice a day. In springtime, she hung up her skates and took out her tennis racquet and baseball bat instead.

When Carmen became a teenager, things started to change at the convent. Mère Supérieure announced, “From now on, the visit to your families will be extended from an afternoon to a full Sunday. Your parents will pick you up at 9:00 a.m. and bring you back at 8:00 p.m.” Carmen was thrilled.

* * *

Eventually, rebellion turned out to be a lot more fun than sainthood. Books smuggled from the local library, totally forbidden in the convent, made their way to her bed and she read them, with a flashlight, under her mother's quilt. She also tried smoking. What Carmen considered the worst of all was that she had not yet been kissed. She had her eyes on the altar boy who served mass every morning. His blue eyes, blond hair, and his special way of waving the incense-boat filled her dreams every night. She did not know his name, so she named him Michel. He was the José to her Carmen. But it was not Michel who eventually kissed Carmen. Roger did, but much later.

When Carmen was thirteen years old, she woke up and felt dampness between her legs. Blood! The worst of the worst had happened.

"Do you know what it is?" The nun asked, handing her the necessary supplies.

What she knew about it came from rumours and forbidden readings. She knew enough to realize that her life was over. That day, she sat alone in the rose garden contemplating her fate, when summoned by Mère Supérieure.

"Mademoiselle Nadeau, at three o'clock, Monsieur le Curé will see you in his office," said the Superior her eyes downcast.

Five hundred steps separated the back door of the convent from the front door of the presbytery. She counted them, hoping they would go on forever. A board representing a woman's insides loomed in the priest's office. Carmen sat down wishing the floor would open up and swallow her entirely. "Mademoiselle Nadeau, this is a very important day in your life," the priest said picking up a pointer. The rest was lost on her.

* * *

By fifteen, Carmen had her eyes on graduation. Besides studying French grammar and composition, Latin versification and translation, geometry theorems, algebra formulas, and the dreaded English language, she daily coped with three-hour study sessions. But nothing was as tedious as the religious studies and the sacred ritual of morning prayers, grace three times a day, recitation of the rosary, evening prayers, all preceded or followed by Mass and Vespers. At sixteen, Carmen accepted with pride the blue sash; she was proclaimed "Child of Mary." Now, she could join in the processions made up of dignitaries into the church—she had arrived! At each visit to the chapel, she kneeled in front of the Blessed Virgin's statue, crossed herself, kissed Mary's clay feet and, if she had a penny hidden in the folds of her petticoat, she lit a votive candle and made a wish and recited a Pater Noster followed by three Ave Marias. Her grades in Latin classes were dismal, but she knew all the prayers in Latin. She even confessed to the priest that she had stolen a girl's change purse containing one

dollar. As penance, he made her give it back, even though it was empty now. But this spiritual interlude did not last.

After almost eleven years of oppression, the convent's routines, and the demands of Science and Letters, Carmen graduated—finally liberated from one institution, ready to enter another: university. In her graduation picture, Carmen stands in her black dress; her straight black hair frames a young, unsmiling face. She looks older than seventeen, more of a woman. No one was holding her hand now.