

## Places · *Lois Elaine Griffith*

THE GIRLS FROM the alternative annex hung out in the dining area after school. The boys from vocational engineering would already be there since they got out at 2:00. Everything was plastic and chrome-lit under fluorescent light. Orange bang and coconut frost. While the boys sat around sipping sodas, the Challenger and Honey Bun girls had their afternoon fight. There were a few drops of nose blood and part of a sleeve from a floral printed blouse on the floor when security came. The best punches had already been thrown. Maintenance was quick to follow and clean up the wet spots. Someone might slip and fall and sue.

Marsha watched the whole scene over Gussie's shoulder. They took their coffee break time to make out in the stairwell of the emergency exit.

"Give it to me, baby. Spread out."

Marsha obeyed and opened her legs a little wider.

"Come on, let me make you feel good. Let me give you some tongue."

"Augustina, are you crazy. Not here."

"Come on, baby, I need you."

Marsha's pants were already around her knees. Why not she thought. She watched the girls get the fight on in the plastic eating area. Everybody's got to get their rocks off somehow.

When Gussie finally made her come, she adjusted her clothes and the two women started making their way back to work along the indoor avenues of the shopping mall.

"Relax next time. Then I won't have to work so hard," Gussie said.

"Someone's going to catch us one of these days, you know."

"Admit it. That black beefeating dick you go out with doesn't turn you on half as much as I do."

"Tony's O.K. You're just jealous. He has his good points."

"So do I," Gussie reminded her, "otherwise you wouldn't be out there in the emergency exit." She laughed.

"You want some ice cream. My treat." Marsha stopped at the slush stand between Wendy's and Italian Blimpy's.

"I wish that Tech HiFi would get it together with their system."

Gussie watched the workmen in the space allocated for sound trying to hook up the pre-amps to the power-amps. "I can't eat all this. You take some."

"Just a little." Marsha licked away all the swirls the machine had made pumping out the chocolate cone. "It's definitely not Häagen Dazs," she said, returning it half eaten.

"Baby, for not being good, you sure like how it tastes." Gussie pulls at the fly of her pants like a man. She spreads her legs a little as she walks, as if hiking up something that might get caught in the crotch.

"Will you stop that. . . . O look at that dress. It's on sale. They must have changed their windows last night. Have you ever worn a dress, Gussie?"

"What for."

"Just for the hell of it."

"It's not my style."

"O come on. . . ."

"You come on. I'm not so stupid that I fall for amateur hype."

"Well, if I'm so stupid why do you bother with me."

"I didn't say you were stupid, Marsha. You just never let on how freaky you are. It has to be sucked out of you." Gussie had her arm linked through Marsha's as the two stood in front of the Phase III window. She gently rubbed the back of her hand on the side of Marsha's breast.

"Cut it. Someone's going to see." The two started walking again.

"Why do you care?"

"I hate gossip."

"You talk about people you don't know." Gussie laughed and her chest started to jiggle under the tight-fitting red T-shirt that had Puerto Rico written on it in italic script.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Como sentimentos, bochinchera." Gussie squeezed Marsha's arm again.

"Cut it out. Why do you like to tease me. You want to be so superior."

"Me tease you," Gussie backed away. "You can't give me anything more than the back of your tit."

"O come on, I give you a lot. You don't know how to take me. But you always manage to get what you want, anyway. It comes around you."

“Like what. . . . O stop. Now I don’t want to be talking like a kid. . . .  
What about tomorrow.”

“What about it.”

“Same time, same place.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe. Maybe tease.”

“Mañana, chica.”

They had come to the foot of the main escalator and Marsha stepped on to make that climb to the third balcony. She worked as a salesgirl in the Flash and Funk Boutique. The clothes were hot and stylish sweat-shop productions of a Jamaican designer, working for a Seventh Avenue import company, receiving fabrics from India and the Philippines for pennies a yard, from merchants who could hire whole villages to weave for food. The job was never very taxing except on Monday and Thursday nights when the shopping crowd was out till ten. The mall was a new three-level structure, like a big store whose departments were open, circling and overlooking a promenade and dining area decorated with plastic potted palms and tall dried birch tree limbs. There was no connection between the shops except they had space and paid rent. It was government subsidy’s way of encouraging small business.

Gussie worked in the drug store on the main level. She was a cashier. She didn’t especially like the job, making change, stocking cigarettes and cosmetics, but she had her own space behind the counter. Gussie always looked for her own place within the maze of wherever she found herself.

There had to be a corner she could claim as her own. She made herself at ease. People would mill and seethe around her, demanding Natural Wonder make-up and Sugar Daddy caramel candy sucker sticks. Sometimes she had to wash her hands after handling a couple hours’ worth of money when things were busy. None of it touched her in her place, not even the comment that big gorilla Tony made, the time Marsha brought him down to buy cigarettes after work. Gussie was beyond the point of embarrassment at comments about the fuzzy shadow on her upper lip. “You know what they say about women with mustaches. . . .” and she clicked the heel of her red jazz shoes as she gave him her back to kiss Marsha good night. “Mañana.”

Marsha liked working around clothes. She got a discount and first pick of all the new things that came in. She liked to think of herself as stylish, with her processed frizz hairdo, since the Rasta look had played out. Cocoa and plum were the make-up colors she wore these days. They complemented the dark rum tone of her skin. She was the girl who made a leap when *Cosmopolitan Magazine* said take a giant step and look sexy. She was made to be made up. If asked she'd show you her before and after pictures. She valued comments about her looks, especially when they compared her to images of famous personalities. "O you look just like a black Bette Midler," was her favorite.

She had met Gussie one day on her break, buying cosmetics at the drug store. She was taken by the look in the eyes. When she asked what kind of mascara she used, Gussie laughed and said she wasn't into it.

"You should try it. You'd be surprised what it can do."

"It's not my thing. I'm butch," said Gussie still laughing.

Marsha heard that last comment, but didn't let it register. She was too fascinated by the possibility of seeing this woman all done in make-up.

"Why don't you let me do you sometime?"

The eyes and the coloring intrigued her. Gussie's were almond-shaped light brown with thick black lashes and brows. The skin was smooth and seemingly transparent in the evenness of rich copper brown. The downy hair on the upper lip put the full soft mouth at the petulant extreme of sensuousity. When Gussie laughed she showed her even teeth and cut her eyes to Chinese slits. Her hair was short and naturally curly, except when she put olive oil on it and slicked it back in a D.A.

"You've got the kind of hair I wish I'd been born with," Marsha said one day as she combed it in the bathroom mirror. "Let me try this lipstick on you." It was a cocoa plum color, *Born to Sin Plum*.

"Now this is you," said Marsha, studying the effect of the color. "A dark crease in the eyefold . . . there."

"You want to smoke a 'J'? It's cool. I do it in here all the time. It makes the day fly." Gussie reached into her clutch bag for a small manila envelope. She pulled out one of the hand-rolled cigarettes, lit it and passed it to Marsha.

"I used to want to be a beautician," said Marsha, not giving up smoke to breathe in speaking. She savored the first rush.

"Fume, fume."

“I really want to take some courses and get a license.”

“It’s nice you know what you want to do. I only know what I don’t want.” Gussie watched herself in the mirror killing the roach. “This is me, after ‘the before,’ ” and she laughed.

“You’re gorgeous,” said Marsha. “Every morning you walk out of your house you say, this is the first day of spring. No matter what.”

Gussie looked skeptical. “Is that what you do?”

“No, I just give advice,” and they both laughed and looked into each other’s eyes. Then Gussie gently touched her lips to Marsha’s and pulled back to see if there were some mistake.

“Why’d you do that?”

“I wanted to see something.”

“Don’t you like men?”

“Not too often. . . . That has nothing to do with it. . . . Did you mind?”

Marsha didn’t speak, but continued to look at this beautiful face before hers. Gussie kissed her again. This time she allowed herself to let go a soft sweet juice of feeling that started to warm Marsha’s blood.

“Let’s get out of here before we start something we can’t finish,” said Marsha.

“I told you I was butch, so watch it, baby,” and they laughed again as they returned to walking through the indoor avenues of the mall, back to their respective jobs.

It was after they discovered “the place” in the hallway of the emergency exit that Gussie asked Marsha if she believed in love.

“Sure I do. Someday I’ll probably marry Tony and settle down and have kids.”

“You don’t have to feel anything to do that.”

“We get along. That’s more important.”

“I want to feel easy,” and she put her head on Marsha’s shoulder and stroked her breast.

Tony was in training at the police academy. The professors from John Jay College of Criminal Justice would come over starting at 7:30 A.M. to begin classes. He was earning sixty college credits and getting paid for it. He was twenty-four and had avoided being “serious” with women. He’d

known a few but always preferred sleeping out rather than having sleep-over company. He lived in a small garage converted to a basement apartment in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn, close to the Rockaways, close to the sea. A small yellow Ford Pinto was all paid for, but sometimes he liked to travel on foot. He would walk to the sea and study the waves. Sometimes rushing out of work he told his buddies he had an appointment with the devil. He would drive to the beach in winter and walk along the edge of the sea.

In the six months he'd known Marsha, he'd never explained these appointments he kept after work when he said he couldn't meet her. He didn't know if she'd understand. She'd probably want to come along when he wanted to be in his place alone with the sea.

He enjoyed the sensation of making love with her, but there was something inside her that wasn't full. Thinking maybe he could take her by surprise, he would rush in like the sea, trying to make the rhythm of a wave wash over the silence of that place inside her where she allowed him to wander alone, exploring his own skin on the walls of her womb.

"Why don't you give me a ring, Tony," Marsha said to him one day after he picked her up from work. They were driving at the edge of night in the cold before spring.

"What for? I can always pull you by the hair," and he laughed.

"As a sign of our feelings about each other."

"I told you how I feel, didn't I?"

"It would mean that we're engaged."

"Engaged for what?"

"Engaged to be married, of course."

"Why do you want to marry me?"

"I think we'd be good for each other, don't you?"

"I never thought about it."

"I'd like to have kids."

"Why, what's the rush?"

"I'm a year older than you."

"There's plenty of time."

"Maybe we should live together."

"You're talking about settling down?"

"In a way . . . getting closer."

"I thought we understood each other."

"We do."

"Well, that means we take things a step at a time."

"I'm going too fast for you?"

"You spend too much time comparing notes."

"I just want what any woman wants."

"What's that?"

"A place for myself."

Tony didn't answer. He kept his eyes straight ahead on the road and his two hands on the steering wheel. Marsha watched him drive the little Pinto over a series of treacherous potholes. Bronco style.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I thought we'd get some Chinese take-out and go up to your place."

Marsha's place was a fourth-floor walk-up in an old brownstone near Prospect Park in Brooklyn. There were two apartments on the floor. Her one-and-a-half rooms overlooked the backyard where an old tree grew tall and pushed its branches to scrape her windows when the winds were strong. When she opened the couch there wasn't much room to do anything else but lie in bed. She kept the couch open most of the time. She'd found this place a few years ago after she moved out of grandmother's apartment. Until then she'd always slept in a twin bed with the old woman on the other side of the room.

Pink with white trim. Red shag rug. Marsha had a habit of turning on the T.V. or radio as soon as she came in. Even with Tony the silence was too loud. Greasy brown sauce drying in plastic-coated containers. Floral sheets. In the dark there was silence even with the radio as she took off her clothes and felt him already hard without preliminaries. Silence as he shoved himself inside her.

"How was it, baby," he said after he came all over her, leaving her crotch soaking wet and feeling a draught.

"Mmmmmmm."

"Nothing special," said Gussie. She and Marsha were sitting in the stairwell of the emergency exit. "Just a plain ordinary life, only with too many people." Gussie lived with her sister and her sister's two boys.

"So why don't you move out. You've got a job."

"Millie and I, we help each other. You know her oldest kid was born

the day abortions got legal. It freaked me when she said she was having a kid. I was small but we hung out sometimes. There was my big sister ready to be someone's mother. She thinks I'm a fast girl. I had to tell her I'm gay, and then all she could say was she used to feel uncomfortable when she first started being around men. But then you get used to it."

Gussie kept her friends away from the apartment she shared with her family. It was so crowded already, and then everyone always ended up around the dining room table looking in each other's faces and talking about what Tito did in school and how Laverne and Shirley would eventually find husbands.

"Do you ever go cruising, Marsha?"

"I don't like clubs by myself."

"There's this place called Serena's I go sometimes. You can go in the video room and make out. It's definitely class action. I always have a good time when I go. I'll take you there."

"Tony would dig it."

"Great, the three of us sitting around making wedding plans," and they both laughed. "You break my heart."

Heartbreak is a wild orchid crushed under heels in the night of a wet street. Lemon oil becomes musk on the skin. Compress the petals so there is no air for definition. Marsha opened a small vial of scent. She touched it to her throat, behind her ears, then put some at the nape of Gussie's neck. They were cuddled on the stairwell of the emergency exit. They smelled sweet in the dark.

Marsha liked being around Gussie. They had fun. Tony was picking her up and they were all going to meet at Serena's Palace on Flatbush Avenue. She was a little nervous. She wanted to look good. Gussie was so beautiful without even being interested in herself. Marsha didn't want Tony getting any ideas. She stood in her little pink bathroom and picked out her hair. She thought about the time they spent together in the emergency exit, hanging out. She didn't know why she talked Tony into going out tonight with her and Gussie.

When she and Tony got inside she saw it was a big place. They all wouldn't have to stick to each other. Gussie was standing at the semi-circular bar against the mirrored wall under the balcony. The music made the free-form crystal chandelier vibrate.

“Isn’t that your friend?” Tony saw her first.

Gussie was wearing a straight black satin skirt slit up the thigh, high-heeled black suede pumps and a gold sequined tube top under a black blazer. She was talking with a tall black woman in a man’s tuxedo and a long red wig.

“Well, you’re certainly dressed to kill.” Marsha took Gussie apart with her eyes and put her back together again.

“You look great.” Tony was smiling. His teeth were very white against his dark skin. “I hope you feel as good as you look.” He was flirting.

“I figured since I’d be with friends, I’d be safe to feel anything.” Gussie smiled back and turned to the woman at her side. “This is Haze. Marsha. Tony.”

“How you all doing? Listen Gussie I got to split. Business uptown. Bye honey. Nice meeting you all.” Haze rubbed cheeks with Gussie so as not to smear her with heavy red lipstick and was gone.

“Who was that?” Marsha watched her disappear through the exit marked Exit.

“An old friend who used to look out for me. She’s really good people.”

“Sure, as long as I don’t find her working my streets. Everything in its place you know.” Tony was laughing but no one joined him so he stopped. The music was thumping, but in the place where they stood together there was only silence.

“Let’s get a drink.” Marsha motioned the bartender and ordered a rum and coke.

“You can hold up the bar, but I’m going to dance.” Gussie moved to the rhythm of the funky disco beat onto the color-lit Lucite floor. She didn’t need a partner.

“Do you ever do that?” Tony kept his eyes on Gussie.

“Do what?” Marsha sipped her drink through a straw.

“Dance by yourself.”

“Why should I dance by myself when I have you?”

“Just because you like dancing.” Tony walked across the main room of Serena’s Palace, crystal and deep red except for the dance floor that was rainbow lighted from beneath the surface. He brushed past Gussie who was feeling the funk and giving no mind to anything else. There were carpet-covered low benches around the edge of the room and exits with neon signs. He pushed open the black vinyl-padded and silver-studded

door marked Gents in iridescent blue.

Marsha stood at the bar in her pink high-front, low-back jumpsuit. She sipped at the drink and chewed on the straw. Gussie had to touch the back of her neck with the coolness of a water glass to get her attention. Marsha's eyes were all over the room.

"You know how to hustle?" Gussie had to raise her voice in Marsha's ear.

"Can you lead?"

The two moved onto the dance floor and started doing some basic steps, getting into the groove of things. When he came out, Tony stood against the wall next to the Gents' door. He watched the women cut their turns hard. They did some spin-offs that sparked. The fever made their dancing speak. He wanted to be in the place where they moved, but he was too far away from delighting in the motion of sound. He watched them from his place. Running water and flushing toilet from behind the swinging door were sounds that mingled with the music.

Girls say they dance together for practice.

Women need the familiarity of sharing what is common among them.

He wanted to step back. Let it go for being a strange intruder, but the locker room isn't an easy place. Tony pulled out a cigarette and lit it. He smoked in the shadows, watching the two women dance.

The crowd started to sing along with the record:

Put your hands up in the air.  
Shake it like you just don't care . . .  
Ain't nothing to it  
you got to do it . . .

Frenzy was building. It was almost 1:00 A.M. Marsha caught Tony's eyes through the dark and smoke as the D.J. did a mix. She came over and Gussie followed.

"Having a good time?" His expression was hidden. The air was thick.

"Let's check out the buffet," Gussie suggested. They made their way through one of the exits marked Buffet. Inside the redwood picnic tables were set up around a food bar with a red awning.

"How about an ice cream soda," said Gussie. "Chocolate works you up, right?" Marsha smiled and nodded.

"I'll get them. You girls grab a table cause I want a hamburger."

Gussie and Marsha faced each other across a table. Marsha kept her eyes on Tony.

“What’s the matter with your boyfriend?” Gussie took off her jacket and exposed her bare shoulders.

“What’s with you, dressing all sexy in front of him?”

“I’m not doing anything. You’re telling me to look at him. You wanted to bring him.”

“He’s not having a good time. I can tell.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know, maybe we should leave.”

“Let him work it out. It’s still early for bed.” Gussie nudged Marsha’s calf as she crossed her legs under the table. “Maybe we should both show him a good time.”

“He’s not into that.”

“He’s not into what?” Tony slid onto the bench next to Marsha and put the tray on the table. “Well, what am I not into?”

“Marsha doesn’t think you’d dig making it with both of us together.”

“Why not?”

“She thinks you’re too straight but won’t admit it.”

“Since when are you into men, Gussie.” Marsha chopped up the whipped cream on top of her soda before taking a sip. She rolled her eyes and started making footprints on Gussie’s suede shoes.

Tony opened a packet of ketchup and fixed his cheeseburger. “You see, I’d get all the play. The question is could you two girls handle it?” His cheeks bulged out when he talked with a full mouth.

“Yea, I dig women. Marsha knows.”

Marsha sat chewing her straw and watching Tony gulp down the burger in three bites. “You eat too fast.”

Tony: “My mother doesn’t even nag me.”

Gussie: “That’s cause he’s such an industrious boy.”

Tony: “Your friend here talks with a lot of experience.”

Gussie: “I’m a fresh girl. Marsha knows how fresh I am.”

Tony: “How fresh is she, Marsha?”

Gussie: “He thinks he can handle it. You don’t know anything about women.”

Tony: “I know when they hide.”

Marsha sat chewing her straw in that place where silence is louder than words.

"I think I'm being had. You asked me out to play a bitches' game?" He wiped his mouth.

"I'm not playing. I'm serious about the three of us," said Gussie. "We'll take you someplace you've never been."

"Don't let's get into this." Marsha's eyes were swimming.

"We'll take you to the emergency exit."

"You are serious." Tony put his hands under the table between his legs as if to protect his balls, but they were in the way there too.

A tear rolled down from under the heavy mascara lashes and hung at the corner of Marsha's nose. Sometimes she can't help being shaken by how outside affects her insides. She heard Gussie's voice coming at her from beyond the place they had shared.

"You only get into it when there's nothing else. You take me, but that doesn't count for much." Gussie doesn't like to look at tears.

"I don't know what's going on. You two want to cut me up and play games. Well, it's late, I really didn't want to come out tonight, so you all can stay and enjoy your fun."

"Tony, I. . . ." Marsha didn't know what else to say, so she watched him walk away.

When Tony got home he realized he wasn't tired. He didn't know what to think about Serena's Palace, only that the music was too loud and the decor too red. Not his kind of place. He got back in his car and drove all the way out to Jones Beach. A solitary car on the expressway breaks the wind on a cold, clear night. He sat in the empty parking lot and watched the sun come up, seeing Marsha's face in all that pink. And the other one trying to tease him. Smart he hadn't taken her seriously. Smart he hadn't stayed. They probably had a good laugh anyway. Bitches' games. And then they want to hide. That Marsha, playing a full house.

It was Sunday and the mall didn't open up till noon. Gussie got there about 11:30 and went straight up to Funk and Flash. The young Pakistani manager was tripping over his platform shoes trying to be arty in setting out a display of some new T-shirts.

"She won't be in. She called in sick. You tell your friend if she leaves me short again, she's had it."

“You tell her yourself.” Gussie went down the escalator. She was tired. She punched the time clock in the supply room of the drug store and took her place behind the cash register. Super slicker stick. Strawberry and champagne-flavored douche. Roulette red.

“Where are the Wipe and Dries?” The woman wore oversized tinted glasses and carried an oversized canvas bag. She made her purchase and was gone.

“Hey, your flowers.” Gussie picked up the single tea rose, nestled in fern, haloed in baby’s breath and wrapped around with florist paper. She made no further effort to go after the woman. Already she was intoxicated by the fragrance of the flower. Throughout the rest of the day she kept finding space to refresh herself with its scent. She told herself the flower wasn’t hers. It would be retrieved. So, there was no thought given to possession, no thought to care. By closing time the rosebud had become a lifeless thing, wilted and unopened.