

Plays Well with Others

by Marilyn Campbell

“Why do you live in a basement?” Angelique asks the next day when I report for work.

“Because it’s affordable. You do know what the word *affordable* means don’t you?”

“Of course I do.” Angelique screws up her face.

I guess she doesn’t think much of my digs—a world apart from the mansion overlooking San Francisco she and her family occupy. After our outing yesterday I missed my bus. The family’s chauffer drove me home, giving Angelique a chance to look things over.

“Who lives upstairs?”

“My landlady, Belle.”

“How much money do you make? Is it enough for clothes and stuff?”

“It’s impolite to ask a person about their finances, Angelique.”

“Sorry.”

I don’t think she’s sorry at all. However, she’s probably as sorry as a thirteen year old can be. Before I can change the subject, Angelique informs me that her allowance is probably more than my salary. Like I hadn’t figured that out already.

I had been hired by her father to be Angelique’s companion. I figured the job was a reward for befriending his daughter during those grueling charm school lessons at the department store where I worked. It didn’t matter why. It was a paying job and the working conditions were better than those at the store.

We decide to stretch our legs with a walk through the estate gardens. I’d seen the formal gardens near the house, but not the natural areas on the perimeter. We come to the end of a large

expanse of lawn towards the edge of the property overlooking coastal Highway One along the Pacific shoreline. Eucalyptus trees shedding their bark and large Yews dissolve into an area of ornamental grasses being whipped by the salt-laden wind.

Angelique is becoming skilled at worming information out of me on delicate topics as a prelude to discussing her own fragile life, fraught with the usual pre-pubescent concerns.

“When do you think I’ll get breasts?” she asks.

“I have no idea. No one knows when they’re going to start developing,” I say absent mindedly. “Why, are you worried about it?”

“Not exactly. But Lila Ann Lemieux says that if you don’t start growing them by thirteen, you’ll be flat the rest of your life.”

“Is Lila Ann Lemieux a doctor or something?”

“No silly!” Angelique giggles. “But she’s already wearing a bra.”

“Good for her. I grab Angelique’s arms and lift them even with her shoulders to make the letter ‘T.’ “You look fine to me. And you have the rest of your life to wear a bra.” I drop her arms. “Enjoy the time you’re unfettered with all that stuff.”

“Unfettered?” She looks puzzled.

“Unfettered is kind of an archaic word used in a lot of the Victorian novels I read. It means unbothered. Unhampered. You know?”

“What about you Polly? When did you start wearing a bra?”

“God, I don’t remember. But I know it was sometime in the fifth grade. You see, I was over-developed and tried to hide it.”

“You did?” A look of disbelief passes over Angelique’s face.

“Sure. Those things just got in the way when I played baseball. You know how boys in the fifth grade can be merciless. They wouldn’t leave it alone. Kept drawing attention to the way I—jiggled—when I ran.”

Angelique laughs and falls into silence while we continue our walk around the grounds. We come to a rise on the western edge of the property and watch the sun going down.

“Do you have a boyfriend, Poly?”

“Yes. Do you?”

“Oh no.” She blushes a deep crimson. “I know several boys from the prep school. One or two of them might take me to a school dance if I wanted to go, but they’re not really boyfriends.”

“Well, that’s nice. To have friends—who are boys. You should have some of each. Girls *and* boys, I mean.”

“Is he the man I see you talking to at the store?”

“Yes. Darryl. How did you know?”

“I noticed the way you look at each other sometimes.” Angelique shrugs. “I wasn’t spying on you or anything.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t think that.” I smile at Angelique as I wonder how many other people at Klein’s Department Store have noticed Darryl and me. I didn’t think we were that obvious.

“What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“You know. Having someone to always be with and to take you fun places.”

“Well, it’s not always like that, you know. Darryl is busy with working and going to school. So we’re not together all the time.”

“Sometimes mother and Uncle Charles go places together when father is too busy.” She looks down at her shoes. “Mother tells me not to mention it to father because he might feel bad about not being able to spend more time with us.”

“It sounds like you love your father very much.”

“I do. When I was little, all three of us—father, mother and I—went everywhere together. But, then I got sick. Things changed. Mother and Uncle Charles never ask me to go along with them,” she rushes on. I see dangerous ground ahead and decide to change the subject.

“Let’s head back, Angelique before it gets too dark to see.”

“How does he kiss?”

“With two lips, like everyone else.” I make a puckering noise.

“No, silly.” Angelique laughs. “I mean, how does it feel?”

“Darryl’s okay in that department.” I stop short and turn to Angelique. “What are you trying to ask me?”

“I was just wondering if you ever had sex with him.” Angelique’s eyes are bright with curiosity.

“Angelique! That’s a much too personal question.”

“I was just wondering what it was like.” She walks ahead of me.

“Don’t you have someone to talk to about these things?” I catch up to her, easily.

“Not really. Since I’m home schooled I don’t see my friends as often. But they wouldn’t know anything about sex.” Angelique stops and looks at me. “They’re like me.”

“I meant your mother or perhaps your aunt. Someone in the family?”

“I couldn’t ask mother. She still treats me like a little girl and my aunt is—too nervous—
or something.”

“Maybe your mother doesn’t know you’re ready to have a little talk. You might just have to ask her. You sound ready to me.” We walk a little further in silence.

“You must think I’m *so* stupid,” she complains.

“No. I don’t. Of course I don’t, Angelique.” I throw an arm around her shoulder and she falls against my side. Her prominent hip bone juts out and stabs me in the upper thigh. She feels as light as paper. “I think you’re just worried about what the act of making love will involve and how you’ll feel about it. Believe me, when the time is right, it’s going to happen for you and it will be wonderful.”

Angelique and I returned to the house without further discussion of personal matters, but on the bus ride home I can’t help but think of my talk with my mother, Catherine, about the birds and the bees. Apparently she explored the subject more thoroughly than the mothers of my friends because during a slumber party we compared notes. Catherine had explained not only where babies came from, but provided their exact route with correct anatomical names. My friends were amazed as I filled in the blanks their mothers left. I smile at the recollection. There really had been no need for the mother—daughter talk in our house since I knew most everything already.

An older girl in the neighborhood had taken me aside one day to show me a copy of the *Kama Sutra* her parents had hidden. It was gloriously illustrated with all the possible coital positions and we memorized every last one of them. We pored over that book whenever we were bored—which was fairly often—for a full year.

With all the obvious advantages Angelique has as the daughter of wealthy parents, I feel sorry for her. She should have friends her own age spending time with her in the afternoons instead of me, a poor substitute for a budding thirteen year old girl.

I am soon lulled by the motion of the bus ride as the driver makes frequent starts and stops and those wide loopy turns. I lean back against the seat and close my eyes. *If the fetus had been further along, I think, would it have been a girl or a boy?* I didn't get the chance to find out if I would have been a good mother. *Spending time with Angelique may be as close as I get to...*

My eyes pop open as I slide across the slick seat and slam my right shoulder against the bus window. I stare down at a man whose shopping cart has been hit by the bus. It has overturned and his belongings fill the gutter. The man raises his fist at the bus driver and yells an obscenity. I stand up unsteadily and make my way to the exit. The next stop is mine.