

Beti smokes near  
the window in  
her room, which  
overlooks an alley.



Being a woman  
means much  
more, for these  
three people,  
than the skin  
into which  
you were born.  
Here William  
T. Vollmann  
discusses  
with them a  
process of  
self-possession,

through the wonderful and the terrible,

which led them to where they are today



1

If you believe that we might as well become what we dream ourselves to be, then perhaps you will endorse the lives of the three women I met the other day in San Francisco. Truth to tell, I have sometimes found the construction and exploration of myself to be a lonely and even painful business, but as Blake once wrote, *he who desires and acts not breeds pestilence*. The ones whom I will now portray cannot be accused of inaction. Reader, could you live upon your own allure? These three women capitalise upon themselves in good American style; yes, they've made careers out of being desirable. In their autobiographies I perceive a faltering, fallible strength blossoming into triumph. They have not only transformed themselves, but made do with who they are.

2

One of them, not the youngest, was Gustavo sometimes and Donna Persona at various shows, revues and community parades. — When I turn into Donna, I am Donna. Some of the other performers, backstage, they're George. Some of the other queens, they tell me, oh, you can take off those heels now. And I tell them, no, Donna does it her way. We all have our own way. — Gustavo had large brown tendonated hands. Although gravity had slewed his cheeks forward and down, the effect was not displeasing. He could have been a *vaquero* engraved by sunlight and the winds of desert mountains. (In fact he held a degree in English literature.) Even the lines on his forehead were somehow vigorous; and the brilliant liquid darkness's of Donna's eyes lived all the lovelier thus framed in rugged flesh, like jewels set in heavy rings of hand-hammered silver. That evening the Virgin of Guadalupe's image hung against his naked chest. He commuted between his hairdresser job in Cupertino and this other life as a caregiver in the apartment building for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender AIDS patients — a place taller, wider and cleaner than the residential hotels where my other two heroines lived, although in all three cases the visitor must show identification to a man behind a window. Were you to ask me what form Gustavo's womanhood took, I would answer that he was most definitely a performer, a cross-dresser, although perhaps this might fail to reach the heart of anything. About his alter ego he said:

I keep her compartmentalised; I *don a persona*. I'm so egotistical; my ego is too big to tell someone I wish I was someone else.

**Beti**  
 “I have my own mantra: Do what you want, fuck what you want, eat what you want. I already told gravity, kiss my ass. At my age, I'm glad to be breathing”

Beti was the second; she was a wide-shouldered wry transwoman with shoulder-length nearly magenta hair and that wide, sad, alert face that so many queens and T-girls have. I remember her for those heavy dark lashes and half opened dark eyes and the big breasts, the muscular yet not unfeminine form of her. Her greeting sometimes went as follows: *Hey, how are you? I'm delicious; wanna lick?* On the day I met her, she was vacating her small, crowded orange-lit room in that hotel so conveniently close to the T-girl bar called Lipstick; she philosophically referred to this quotidian departure as “taking her vacation”. The hotel (best known for its grubby carpeted stairs) required it of her every 20-odd days, to prevent her from achieving legal residency, which would have put the management to greater trouble should they ever wish to evict her. Such practices, not uncommon among this class of lodging, have always struck me as heartless; but on the credit side, the hotel refrained from charging Beti's daytime visitors any fee, although the man behind the grating did keep one of our identification cards for the duration. Whereas the sentinel at Gustavo's residence laid them on some scanner or copier, then immediately returned them.

The way Beti half-closed one eye when she smiled was charming; she often laughed at herself, dreaming down toward the mattress of the single bed on which she sat or lay sideways, her wide dark triple-tongued belt cinched moderately tight across her striped top, her breasts as impressive as those of a sailing-ship's most voluptuous figurehead. Sometimes her face was hawk-like; then it softened into something more introspective but still strongly built. That deep voice, long bright red hair and heavy, seamed face made her unforgettable. She said:

I was born with this face. I'm six foot one, tits like this, so I could already be a cartoon character. What takes me the longest is my foundation. I use the Zylon brand. The other stuff, some of it greases up so much you could fry sweet potatoes in it. In the daytime, it makes me look orange.

As for Classy, the most conventionally beautiful of the three — a fetching smooth-skinned black woman with bedroom lips and long-lashed eyes (she could be demure with her eyes wide and her curly hair just so and her half-smile just slightly elsewhere as she stood with her hand on her hip, or she could do seductive all the way to the fleshy hilt, or switch to gloriously hard and mean), I incompletely comprehended how she defined herself. The first time I met her, a year or two before, she'd called herself a female impersonator, but evidently she liked to leave the issue open; anyhow, we can easily err in asserting that any human being's personality, in which I include gender, must be this or that. On this subject Classy said:

A transgender female is really a girl who has altered their body but they don't specify how. With hormones, they don't just alter the physical, they also affect the mental. Now if you're a guy, you stay a guy. Pointing to the photographer, she said: James would still be James with tits. I've gone to Lipstick on a Saturday night, and you'll be surprised at how many of the girls who've had the work done, they're still standing at the urinals. It's what I call a prosthetic female. You have some who are lesbians, you have some who are just here to make money off men and you have some who are here for other reasons. I have seen girls who only bottom, because otherwise they're not a woman. \* Some others, they're only tops when they're prostituting, because they don't want to give up the butt, which is just for the one they love.

Beti in the hallway of her hotel. A John (a client) waits patiently for her as this photograph is taken.

\* This verb (and noun: “she bottoms” and “she is a bottom”) is in common use in the S & M community, and means to be a submissive. In Classy's circle it means to be the receiving sexual partner; that is, to be penetrated. (When I asked how many of her T-girl acquaintances lived the S & M life, Classy could think of only two; she thought it more common among cross-dressers.) To top is the opposite of to bottom.



**Donna**  
“I keep her compartmentalised;  
I don a persona. I’m so  
egotistical; my ego is too big  
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someone else”

so that he could reload his film, here strode Beti, towering over everybody half a block away, on the hunt or maybe even approaching a sure thing. She was active, all right. Perhaps it derived from her childhood, for she said:

As kids we played hard. We had to play outside. And if you sit around and wait to listen to a radio programme, good luck. You sit around in the house; you’re gonna clean the toilet. Get your ass outside; you’re going to be outside until the streetlights go down.

There was Beti sitting on the bed, hourglassed in by her black leather belt with three rows of holes and three metal tongues in it, grinningly explaining:

I was always a spoiled child, so I would always stomp my foot and shake my fist until I got what I wanted. I was born March 31st 1940. When you get my age, birthday candles are like horseflies. I have my own mantra: Do what you want, fuck what you want, eat what you want. I already told gravity, kiss my ass. At my age, I’m glad to be breathing.

I was raised in New Orleans, in a house with five sisters. I am the fourth of eight children. My sister Harriet was 10 years older, and I was her birth control. I used to go on her dates as a chaperone, and she used to dress me up as a little girl. My family was so anal; the boys had crew cuts and the girls had pixies. Do you know how easy it was for a girl with a pixie in the 50s? If your hair wasn’t slicked back and greased, it was a crew cut. Well, I played along. Running around the house in my older sister’s bra and slip, I had a grand old time, but when I got about eight or nine it stopped, because my sister got married, and I missed it so much. We had this woman who was our Avon lady, and she would sit at the kitchen table with my mother and we used to sit under the table, and I remember sitting under there and looking, because she would sit with her legs open and I remember thinking that wasn’t right, because my mother always sat with her legs crossed. My mother was an English teacher. She was the sort of the mother who, if you would say, *what does ‘acclaimed’ mean?* she would make you write it down, and go look it up in the dictionary, and then you completely knew it and never forgot it.

Why did Harriet dress you up?

Who knows? Maybe she was fucking crazy.

Did you keep in touch with her?

Yes. She died in my arms. Harriet would be 83 now. She was a drinker. She married Dave, then she married Red ... Five husbands in all. And they call me a slut!

How did your mother treat you?

I felt like the centre of attention, and she created the monster in me. I pestered the shit out of them. They had no peace out of me. I did torment her some. I always wanted to be in the centre ring. I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’ve kept that way of living all my life. My mother always told me, you are a child of God, you can be anything you want. When I tried to convince her she had six girls and two boys, she came around eventually. But I do mean eventually.

How did you feel then?

Miserable. I’m 13 years old, and it’s 1953. I have a crew cut, no access to wigs, and I had to paint my face, using my sis-

ter and my mother as a guide, and they wore little to no makeup. And my beard was coming in already, and I was getting bald on the top. My father was very hairy. I remember at 15 trying to make an appointment in Florida, to get castrated, and doctors were saying, what are you talking about? You really want to be castrated? I said, that’s right; I’m tired of being hairy.

I didn’t get my first hormones until 1965 or 1966. The doctor was a client of mine. I was working the street and, after dating him seven or eight times, I convinced him that just being a weekend warrior wasn’t right for me; I wanted to go all the way. The agreement was, don’t tell anyone, because this was the South, the dirty South. The first effects I felt, I began to feel a tenderness. Back then it was oestrogen. Later the influx of German and Russian hormones brought in more choices.

I never really identified as a gay male. My friends, a couple of them were effeminate, but it was taboo enough that they had sexual feelings for another man. We were all vilified, because in those days gays were considered straight crazy.

My father was a straight man, couldn’t deal with it, couldn’t hang. But if I had a child like me, I would have killed it. You know how kids say nowadays – call the police, go ahead and fuck with me. My father would have called the police himself, had me arrested, given me a suitcase and said, here you go, when you get out, you’re on your own.

How many priests have you had?

I got thrown out for drinking the altar wine. That’s the only reason I was an altar boy: got to wear the cute black and white dress, and got to drink the wine. Mass was in Latin. And I spoke French before I spoke English. Going to church, we earned our prayers from our grandmother, who spoke Latin. My grandmother, when she got older, had the priest come every day to say Mass at her house. She had money, but no mobility. Every morning we spent at her house she got us up for Mass between four and five.

My parents punished me. When I was finished, I had to kneel in the corner, on the hardwood floor, with my hands struck up behind my back, for hours. I learned something. I learned how to toughen my back, straighten my back. I was real defiant.

How old were you when you first had sex?

It happened before I was 10. It was some old man on Bourbon Street, and he said: Come here, can you help me find my dog? I love animals, all animals, except mice.

So he forced you?

Yes. I told no one. It took about a year to process it. I felt dirty. If I mentioned it to my mother, I would have no longer been the golden child. I didn’t understand that we were all the golden child. She treated all of us like we were more important than oxygen. As many times as she’d warned us about this — don’t talk to strangers — I’d say to myself, I know it, I heard it, I heard it, I heard. Dirty old man. I wasn’t afraid that my mother would say, boy, I told you so, but I was afraid that she would say nothing at all, but give me that indescribable look that cut you to the quick. So it took me a while, took me a year; it took that whole school year when I couldn’t dress up for phys. ed., and I didn’t want to take my clothes off in front of anybody else.

I didn’t completely understand the whole thing until I was about 15. It was a horrible experience, but that was when I decided I would be a hooker, and to prove that,

I would go out and solicit, so those motherfuckers could never again get it for nothing. Before I was 10, I was running to the store getting my mother cigarettes, so the mechanics of it were easy. I first solicited when I was 12.

When I was 13, neighbourhood boys, they would line up. We were all young kids, we were like jump on and jump off. I would feel – you liked me yesterday when I sucked your dick, so why don’t you like me today? When I dressed that way, the majority of them would want to fight me. That’s what gave me the notion to be a prostitute on Bourbon Street. In the South we have a lot of girls that look like boys. You give ’em lip-gloss; they probably put it on their butt. So why shouldn’t I be a boy that looked like a girl?

I had my first sugar daddy when I was 16. A man owned the soda store on the corner and he was my special friend. Every week he would give me money for lunch, and my parents would never know. The whole time I was hooking and cross-dressing, my parents never knew. I would hide the money and sneak back before dawn, and they never found out. They had to know something was going on, but they never said anything, and I am talking *the entire time*. My mother would have been the one to say: Where the hell do you think you’re going at 11:30 at night? But I would do it, and then go to school in the morning. It was exhilarating, because I was doing something and getting away with it, like robbing a bank. That was my first drug.

I really didn’t know what a sugar daddy was. He would give me whatever out of his store, and he would give me money every two weeks.

So you didn’t feel anything special for him?

I already felt I was the most special person in the world. Us Cajuns, we love hard and hate hard. My mother, she would make us children feel we would get the sun up and moon up. And I would feel that if I’m not treated special, I’m mad. And my sugar daddy, he would treat his own kids like crap. They would want candy, and he would say – no, I have to make a living. So he would give me whatever I asked for, and then I would give it to his kids.

I was with him off and on until I was 16 or 17. But by then the glamour of it was gone. So if I really needed something like books or paper and pens, cigarettes, soda, shit that my parents wouldn’t allow me to have, I’d see him, but I didn’t push it like I used to. I remember one time getting a box of cigars from him so I could get the cigar box, after which I threw the cigars out on the street and kept the box, and I would keep my money in it. But I never got it full up to the top, because I would take all my friends out to the show, and if I wanted a cheeseburger, I would take everybody else out for a cheeseburger. My parents would never discuss finances in front of us. Nobody taught me the value of a dollar. And even today, I really should know it, but I don’t. That’s one of my regrets.

My longest relationship was 11 years. He was murdered. Instead of taking the bus home one night, he allowed a van to take him home, and there were eight guys in the van and they sodomized him with a baseball bat, pushed him out of the van, and he was found on the sidewalk, with the baseball bat halfway out of him. He was the love of my life. I am still affected by that.

The longest relationship after that lasted maybe six or seven months. After that it was all me me me. No one can see my heart, touch it, smell it. That was the biggest mistake I ever made. All the opportunities I had, I chose to piss them away. I would never allow men to prove to me that they were with me for me. Since I no longer have these feelings, why should anyone else?

Donna wears her homemade facelift. The process of becoming Donna can take more than two hours.

Next spread:  
In his bedroom, Gustavo transforms into Donna. That night he performs at Aunt Charlie’s Lounge, a drag bar in San Francisco’s Tenderloin.



Gustavo holds an early photo of himself as Donna. In the beginning of his drag career, he studied it when applying makeup.

Hooking was a means to pay my bills. I never had me much education. I quit high school. Like fuck this shit. Broke my mother's heart, but I never felt like I needed school. It was more like an irritation. I don't remember any particular bullies in school. They were all assholes. The harder they would terrorize me, the grander it would make me feel. But eventually I realized that I was on the wrong planet, or else they were on the wrong planet. The other kids didn't accept me, and I didn't give a fuck about them, because my mother told me I was special. Every day an affirmation. Every morning at breakfast she would kiss each of us and tell us all how special we were.

At 15 I thought of myself as female. By the time I was 17 I had eyeliner, and they would send me to the principal's office and tell me how embarrassed I was going to be when my parents came back, and I'd say: Are you serious? My mother told the school, I don't care what he's doing. I'm not going to let you tell me my child is a juvenile delinquent. He's not fighting; he's not getting bad grades. Is anybody bleeding over there? Then, click, she would hang up the phone. And when she accepted me unconditionally, that was bliss. When she took me shopping and she brought me a bra, she said, I've done this for all my other girls.

What is a woman to you?

When I think of a woman, the only woman would be my mother. A woman is a nurturer, someone who is complete and does not have to prove anything to anyone. A woman does not have to have a vagina. A female has to have a vagina. You can easier tell the sex of an oyster than you can define a real woman, because an oyster is sexless, although they do multiply. They do create pearls and so do the drag queens. A woman doesn't look at something and address it by the negativity. A woman looks at something and pulls the positives out of it.

Why was your mother such a fine woman?

I think it was because her mother was such a bitch.

Did you ever raise any children yourself?

I did have children. I ate them. The afterbirth was quite tasty.

4

Classy (who signed her model release with a different female name) generalised less about feelings than Beti and more about procedures. Whatever those were, she had mastered them – being so black and beautiful, graced with smooth arms and chest, perfectly dressed with her sparkling choker, her dot-in-diamond patterned skirt and her sandals which spelled out BABE. I asked whether she found pleasure in gazing in the mirror, and she replied:

Actually, I'm more happy at the fact that I'm a 54 year old transgender and I look in my late 30s. I really look at my face and gag at how it changes over the years, but thank God I still look young enough to pass it off. I believe it's the way I live my life. I try not to let things stress me out. If there's too much drama, I try to do my best to resolve it or else leave it alone.

When did you first begin to dress up?

Well, I've always had that desire because of my mom.

My mom was a very elegant woman. She used to model and to watch her, I used to play in my sister's clothes, and do my runway walking and actually performing with a brush in my hand. I didn't know that what I was actually doing was training myself to be a transgender performer.

Classy was born in Pontiac, Michigan. When she actually turned into a woman is unclear to me, because first she said:

In 1984, I'm in the Blue and Gold bar on Turk and Taylor, I'm watching the show with the boyfriend at the time, and I'm being a little bitch and heckling the DJ, and I said I seen a better show in a circus act, and she said, come on up here, so I said, give me two weeks. I was just a drunken gay boy. Oh my god, I did say that, hah! So I went down to Macy's and had that makeover for 25 dollars, had my hair done, went to Neiman Marcus and bought two gowns on my credit card so I could take 'em back the next day.

But, as Classy had already explained, as a child she used to dress up in her sister's clothes, and long before her debut as a performer at the Blue and Gold bar she had begun to go down the feminine road. She said:

For the most part, my mother thought it was a phase I was going through. Now, when I came out, it bothered her. But when she seen the hormones taking effect and so on, she actually started sharing feminine secrets of a woman going through puberty. Hormones, mood swings. At the beginning I was very agitated, and my mother said that's just hormones; that helped me.

My father, being Cuban I assumed he would really have a problem with it. But he gave me some of the best advice I ever heard. Dying is the only thing you can do by yourself, he said. But live your life: no one else can. When he got sick and the doctors told him, it doesn't look good, something told me, you'd better come clean, and he was very supportive. He said: you're the only one who can live your own life.

I was 14 or 15 and then I started hanging out with the other girls who were on 'mones. At that time most of the girls was getting it on the streets. I went to the first transgender clinic that opened in San Francisco. When I transitioned, I was 17. My mother signed for my first hormone treatment.

So who is Classy, and what makes her who she is? Perhaps her oestrogen and testosterone blocker pills deserve some credit, and her wardrobe certainly projects a certain effect. But as she said:

The clothes themselves don't make me a woman. It's more me and my attitude. I still feel like me, whether I'm in or out. I don't even know what it would feel like to put on male clothes again. 36 years! But, as far as being a gay man, hormone therapy and all that, I can't speak for every transsexual, but either the guys see us as sex objects and nothing else, or else they have secret lives, baby mamas and so on, so it's hard for trannies to find commitment. Most of the guys, they only wanna do this secret thing. Whereas, gay men, they don't give a damn. Trans are open, gay guys are open, but trans attract guys who are not open. It's easier to live hidden than be open with some guys. But it will be done in the dark. And it will be always be very violent when it comes out into the light.

Despite, or on account of, Classy's cynicism, she took pride in her power over men. I saw her turn heads even in the hallway of that hotel where she lived (a place, by the



Classy in the dressing room at Aunt Charlie's Lounge. She prepares to perform Diana Ross's "Muscles".

way, less grubby than Beti's, but still armoured by a grating at the top of the stairs and watched over by the man behind the little window who checked identification cards). So I asked her: How many sex partners have you had?

Over 5000 in my life. But even when prostituting, I was well liked and I felt like I was in control. I could turn down some guy that didn't meet my criteria. I would only pick the guy if he was sexually meeting my criteria.

I'm a very complicated person, very deep person, very caring person, but I am also a no nonsense kind of person. I've been in the game too long not to know bull crap. A two-faced person, I will totally ignore them.

Her hotel was a cut up from Beti's, the carpet's smell of sweat, mildew, cigarettes and age was mitigated by the fresh white paint on the walls, and while Beti's hotel was dark and nearly silent, at least in that time of day, Classy's seemed almost vibrant on account of those half-heard lives behind doors, the sounds of television dialogues, the sound of a fire siren nearby and cool San Francisco air blowing in. When all my other memories of Classy devolve into glossy lips, the smell of marijuana and long eyelashes, I will still keep hold of how alluring she was.

5

Meanwhile Gustavo was exactly Gustavo with the hoarse voice and male face and his hairy knees crossed, but that was Gustavo on the outside, and how can I say who was inside? Before long – in another small bright yellow room where a wig head presided on the top shelf, other heads watching here and there, while in the corner a sparkling sequin purse and a sequin dress awaited – Gustavo would be activating the glowing ring on the makeup mirror. Then, opening and closing plastic boxes looking for his facelift, which he found, accordingly tacking down the adhesive on his temples by his ears, with the long sprocketed parts hanging down, he said:

I'm in a period where I like to do things that scare me. Shows, the tranny thing, getting on that stage. It forces me to be in the moment. The first time I got made up, I was scared out of my mind.

When precisely does day become night, or a man become a woman? He applied the pan stick foundation so that his face was a white mask, and I glimpsed a giant eye in that mirror. Then came the box of expensive contour powder that one of his boys had given him. Gustavo said:

You want a matte look; never wanna look shiny, or at least I don't. They say *blend, blend, blend*. This is all just trial and error. I'll be backstage and someone will give me tips. I'll say one thing about this industry; they bring people along. One woman, now she's a friend, but she used to tell me: You've got no talent, your face is a mess, you can't do makeup – and she's saying this right before I went on stage! And I put up with her arrows. Later she told me: I cursed the day you walked into our crowd. You're popular! – She says to me: I worked hard, I worked hard! – Well, we're friends now, and she's given me more than 30 dresses.

And Gustavo (or Donna) said:

Sometimes men ask me to go off with them, and I say: I'm too good for that. I have made this decision that Donna is unattainable. As soon as I give in to something like that,

I have ruined it for that person. And also, I'm a big scaredy-cat.

And Donna (or maybe Gustavo) said:

I don't feel beautiful at all. I'm a nice person. People tell me I'm beautiful and gorgeous all the time, but I say to myself, I know what's real. Yeah, sometimes I do feel gorgeous, but when I say that, my mind is always the whole thing, the presence of who I am makes me not in there. I have fans, and they only see gorgeous.

Who do you feel like when you dress up?

I feel the same, but I exaggerate everything. Donna Persona is more sassy. I don't permit myself, Gustavo, to say the things that she would. Donna Persona is – and he shook his hips – *highfalutin and unattainable*.

What if Gustavo said the things that Donna does?

Oh, he would get in trouble for being rude and mean.

Are there things about being Gustavo that aren't available to Donna?

Well, I'd say that I'm optimistic and happy; I'm a really happy person and I'm interested in many things and love to laugh. But I'm desperately serious, too. If you're talking about differences, Gustavo went through big things in life that Donna didn't. I was sexually abused as a child. I was eight years old. Donna doesn't know anything about that. I don't like words like victim or even survivor; the last word I would use is victim! I want everyone to want me, but I don't want to give it up. There's someone I want to punish. It's easy for me to be kind of mean, but I'm not mean at all. I think I'm punishing that person every time I don't let them have what they want. Somebody used to take things from me and now they can't. In showbiz, I get to control everything. I jump on somebody who says I'm a prick teaser. Everything I do, I do just for me. Like when I pick a dress, I do it just for me. At the club, quite often the bartender will say, oh, there are some gentlemen who would like to speak with you, Donna, and I say: Okay, I have language skills. And they want to be with me. I'm never with them anywhere but in a public spot. My thought is: I'm not a teaser; this man wanted to speak with me! I think – if I spend three minutes talking to him, I've given him something. He can go back to France; I got everything I want out of him; he sang French in my ear; he said I was superlative.

I've been on over 50 stages. I don't feel talented; I don't feel pretty, but I just know that I want them to let me go out there. I think they like that I'm not perfect; they accept me for what I am. There's always something wrong with my outfit. I feel like a mess, but I'm the best mess. I'm new to the craft, but I'm learning.

I was born at McAllen, Texas. At one year old, my parents moved to California. My father was a Baptist minister, and my childhood was one of religion. My father was born in Monterrey, Mexico; he came over here and then he met my mother. My mother was a Christian lady. I was never told by them that I was no good and there was something wrong with me and that really informs who I am today. I think the confidence I have now comes from my parents and my mother especially. And my mother was the type that, her children were the greatest thing on the planet. But it was the outside world that told me, you're a dirty Mexican and a faggot, but I didn't care too much;



**Classy**  
“I was never told by them that I was no good and there was something wrong with me and that really informs who I am today. I think the confidence I have now comes from my parents and my mother especially”

I could beat 'em up; my brothers were boxers. So my childhood was fun, except for the abuse. I want to be kind.

Did your parents express disapproval of your sexuality? They didn't convey anything to me, and they didn't send me somewhere to get fixed. But I do say that in my grammar school and other schools, they did send me to see someone. But I felt it was something to do with the abuse. The perpetrator told me that if I told someone, it would change everything; I would be sent to reform school and all that. I think happiness happens in a gene pool. What is happiness to me? Wanting to burst because it's so good.

He said:

Donna Persona, she's a wild, feral creature, animal. I say this to myself: I wanna scare them, the way I come on. It's bigger than life. In my love situations, I used to tell men, you may not want to take me out, because I'm deep; I want to tell you now, so you can still walk away.

He said:

I think people like to see vulnerability. I hear a lot, they want to hear something passionate. And I am that. Passionate.

Classy in her hotel room. She shares the small space with Nefertiti, her miniature German shepherd.



6

These three women, they are simply three people, not metonyms for anybody. In boyhood both Gustavo and Beti were violated by adults; from this one cannot infer that most transwomen were molested as children. All three gratefully remembered their mothers. Well, girls, no doubt, do tend to model themselves after their mothers – but since none of our three women began life as girls, what is there to say about that? I decline to pretend I know what their lives represent. But this I will say: the notion that, say, an old street prostitute is necessarily more sad than any other person is false. Beti once described her childhood neighbourhood in New Orleans as a place where *you work, you drink beer, you go home and listen to your wife bitch, have dinner, fuck your wife, and go to work again. No aspirations? Not for me.* She achieved her aspirations. — I am special, she said, nodding, lowering her eyelids.

And Gustavo said:

Oh, I do like the bobbing heads. People are saying they're looking at a miracle, and I like that. They're always saying I love you, and for a couple of years I didn't like that, but now, well, I say, they've got their endorphins going. And I make them happy for a while. But I am on this thing of attention. You ain't blind. Look at me. I usually start with

these one-liners. I say things so I can laugh. You know, another thing I think: Donna's acting but everyone else is acting; it's all a conspiracy; they wanna pretend they want me and I wanna pretend that pleases me.

As for Classy, she smilingly said:

Used to be, when I'm walking down the street toward a couple of guys and a woman, the guys didn't look and the woman was like: *who is that?* Now, the woman gives me a dirty look, and the man keeps eyeing me.

All three of them took joy in being noticed, to be sure, but don't many of us? Perhaps their display-pleasure was the more overt because they had toiled to make themselves.

Many of this world's commodities are not worth the owning, but among genuine treasures shines one which all these three have won, and are the better for its keeping: self-possession. As Beti said, sitting side-saddle on her bed, with one big arm on the counterpane:

I might have 10 or 15 minutes left on this planet, I want to dance and enjoy myself. I think I earned it. Not gonna take six of these 15 minutes asking why I need to do what I do.

The names of Lipstick bar and Zylon makeup brand have been changed