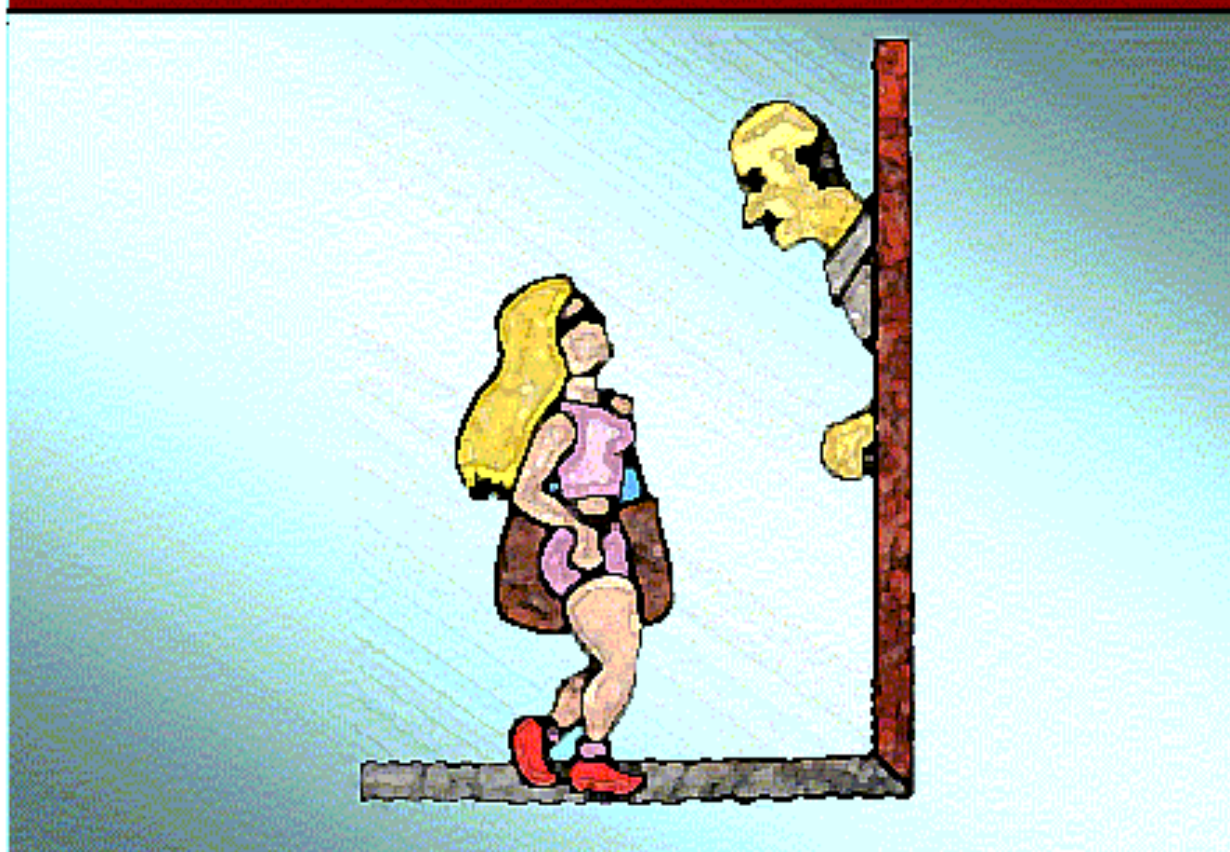


# ***SKEETER KITEFLY'S*** **SUGARDADDY CONFESSOR**



*a disturbingly hilarious sequel*

**by P. S. Ehrlich**

*author of The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly*



# ***SKEETER KITEFLY'S*** **SUGARDADDY CONFESSOR**

a novel

*by*

**P. S. EHRLICH**



[www.skeeterkitefly.com](http://www.skeeterkitefly.com)

**2004**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly*

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living and dead, is entirely coincidental.

Portions of this book have appeared, in somewhat different form, in *The Duckabush Journal*, *Spindrift*, *The Lithic Review*, *Wilmington Blues*, *Ten Thousand Monkeys*, *Unlikely Stories*, *The Sidewalk's End*, *Organic Literature Experiment*, *Rhapsodia*, *Entropic Desires*, *Pulse Literary Magazine*, *Bastard Fiction*, and *The Swamp*.

*Cover design and artwork by the author*

*Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor*

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*Split Infinitive Edition January 2004*

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TO THE COMPACT

*whose enormous strength is collected and condensed*

*within a*

*narrow*

*compass*





*Indeed, indeed, Repentance oft before  
I swore—but was I sober when I swore?  
And then and then came Spring, and Rose-in-hand  
My thread-bare Penitence a-pieces tore.*

—THE RUBÁIYÁT OF OMAR KHAYYÁM

*A good listener is far more rare than an adequate lover.*

—JOHN D. MACDONALD



## One

### THE CONNECTIONS



## Chapter I

### *Merely SAD*

"It smells in here," said Desirée.

"That's art for you," said Skeeter Kitefly, snuffing the mingled aromas of oil paint and India ink and airborne charcoal and unsettled chalkdust and "...floor wax! I smell floor wax! Somebody's waxing the floors! Come on—"

Down the hall the two girls ran, and there—around the corner and beyond a yellow

CAUTION  
WET FLOOR

sign—they goggled at a wide-open corridor, buffed and pomaded to a glossy sheen! The sort of passageway every true slider-on-wax waits her life to find, and gloat over, and toss yanked-off sneakers to the side of, and prepare to launch herself into—

"Do me Skeeter do meeee!" yelled Desi, her laces one big snarl. In a trice Skeeter had her sockfooted and putting on an improv Wax Capades act, hand in hand: "We *whoop* and we *whoop* and we *wheweee...*" Twist, twirl, catch hold of the antique water fountain at the hall's far end and push off again, sailing back through this unoccupied hooky-playing school building—

—till a door opened and out came a tall bald man with a double armload of catalogs that got scattered all the hell over as their carrier was barreled into WHUMP and bowled over WHUMP and sent skidding a good three feet WHOAAAA with an even better hundred-and-one pounds of Skeeter Kitefly atop him.

And there matters sprawled for a brief stunned while.

The man on the floor took in a breath through a sizable nose that began to bleed at its edges. And he said:

*"Scheiss de la merde!"*

"Oh my God are you okay?" demanded Skeeter. "Are you broken anywhere? Your NOSE is bleeding! Oh Jeez your poor nose! Did you bust it? I'll nurse it back to health. Be calm now; don't panic. Tilt your head back so the blood'll run down your throat. Ice! We need ice and a washcloth—I think there's some bandaids in my poke—I'll pinch your nose shut till you start to clot—can you hear me? Hello? Are you a foreigner? *Sprechen sie Deutsch? ¿Habla Español? Parlez—*"

"Young woman," said the man on the floor in a deep Midwestern wheeze, further nasalized by Skeeter's pinchgrip. "If you want me to blow, you might provide a handkerchief."

Up Skeeter zooped to where she'd left her oversized saddlebag of a purse, grabbing from it a couple of bandaids and a wad of kleenex. Another bound and she was back atop Mr. Nosebleeder, out of whom all the breath again went *whoosh*.

"Oops sorry!" said Skeeter, climbing off his chest. "Force of habit, I guess. Here—bleed into this till I get these unwrapped. And hey! what were you talking about just now, when you said you-know-what if you said what I think you were talking about just now?"

A tiny set of venetian blinds went up inside each of the man on the floor's eyes.

"Ah... that was me being crude, in a polite sort of way."

Skeeter, wrestling with the bandaid packaging, kept looking at the bald man's nose. Not that it was grotesque or elephant-manly or anything; it was simply—unmistakable. Even obscured by kleenex, you could tell that it was what it was. Broad. Blunt. Banked. Below it a meager smudge of moustache, such as can be found in photos of Orwell or Thurber or Edgar Allan Poe. And above it, on either side, behind those heavylidded venetians...

At twenty-four, Skeeter was quite used to being ogled and leered at and mentally undressed; but never before—except maybe once—had she felt this sort of sense of shrouded

observation: measuring up and reckoning down. *Weird*. And faintly creepy. Or so at least it ought to feel.

“Are you a priest?” she heard herself asking.

The venetians inched higher.

“Ah... what am I? Am I a what?”

And maybe Skeeter would have told him never-mind-forget-it, had Desirée not broken her unaccustomed silence. “How can he have a nosebleed when he got knocked on his butt?”

“Good question, little girl,” said the man on the floor. “Many thanks,” he added as Skeeter applied the bandaids. “Let’s hope I have no need to sneeze.”

“*There* you two are!” said another young woman who appeared just then, tallish-wiry and redheaded and toting a portfolio. PUT IT IN WRITING read her T-shirt in splattery fluorescent neon. Off-one-shoulder designs were all the rage that *Flashdance* summer, and even five-year-old Desirée wore such a top. Hers said AWESOME, while Skeeter’s sported a hot-pink-on-bright-blue DELIRIOUS.

“Hey Mommy! how’d it go?” said AWESOME.

“Hey Sadie! how’d it go?” said DELIRIOUS.

“Hay is for horses,” PUT IT IN WRITING informed them. “God what happened here??—God I don’t believe it!!—well, I was wondering when I’d run into somebody I know!”

“In this case,” said the man still on the floor, “mine was the body and *she* did the running into.”

“So what happened?”

“We were only skating and *he* got in the way,” explained Desirée.

“And having a stack of catalogs jammed up one’s nose can result in paper cuts,” added the man. “I take it these two belong to you, Mercedes? All makes perfect sense now.”

“You haven’t changed a bit!” laughed Sadie.

“You say that after your friends did me the favor of tearing me a spare nostril.”

“Well, I said I was sorry,” Skeeter mumped. “Or did I? Well, I was—I mean I am—sorry, that is—so—”

"You're not still taking classes, are you?" Sadie asked the man on the floor.

"No. I teach them now."

"You're kidding! You're on the faculty?"

"No kidding matter. And where I really am is here on the floor. Ladies, if you will—"

Together they hauled him to his substantial feet. Standing up, he looked rather like Egghead from the old *Batman* TV show. It was a massive egghead too, shaved clean on top, with a cropped fringe left around the back to match the smudge-moustache. Squared-off brow, squared-off chin; that unmistakable nose; and those dark saturnine eyes.

Sadie began to give him her old-acquaintance half-hug but pulled back, saying she was wrong, he *had* changed and more than just a bit; she didn't remember him as ever being *thin*.

"Dropped some weight awhile back," said the man. "Broke it, what's more."

"...well anyway, this is my old pal Peyton Derente. He's from Demortuis too, so that makes all of us 'paisans' except for my baby here."

"I'm not a baby!"

"No," said Peyton, "I expect you must be Desirée."

"How'd he know my name?" asked the indignant child.

"I was on hand at the Mercury Theater the night your mother commenced being your mother."

"Hunh?"

"Went into labor," Sadie interpreted. "Right in the middle of that horrible movie they made of *A Little Night Music*—God do I remember. Elizabeth Taylor sang 'Send in the Clowns' and, bang! there came Desirée... And this is my sister Skeeter."

"Hi! We've met," said Skeeter. "So do you forgive me so far?"

Again that dark proportionate glance.

"Absolutely. Sisters, did you say?"

"*Stepsisters*," she demonstrated, dancing a little cakewalk.

"Ah... yes. Your name is Skeeter, then? I presume you sing country-western music?"



“Yuggh! no way!... So Sadie, how *did* it go?”

“God I almost forgot—I’m back in! Yes! *At* senior level, *with* all my studio credits in good standing, and did I ever have to beat the Dean’s Office over the head about that too. Six months I was after them—you’d think motherhood wasn’t—”

“—reason enough to take a few years off,” Skeeter harmonized, this being Sadie’s stock-argument punchline.

“Don’t feel too put upon,” said Peyton. “We go through much the same routine whenever the Liberal Studies copy machine breaks down. I take it you’ve been readmitted, Mercedes?”

“You betcha! I’m finally going to complete my Graphic Design degree, so I can finally get myself a worthwhile job.”

“Congratulations. Which reminds me.” He looked down at the mess of scattered catalogs. “So much for my trying to act useful. Increasingly less-likely that we’ll be shipshape in time for registration. But them’s the breaks.” He opened the same door he’d come out of and began to toe the catalogs over its threshold. “I’ll help!” said Skeeter, and slid around scooping up debris.

So center stage was cleared and relinquished to Sadie, while Skeeter got resneakered and helped Desi with her snarls. Sadie meanwhile turned a critical eye on Peyton, saying the least they could do after bloodying his nose was fatten him up again. “I’m starving anyway, I was too tense to eat breakfast, what say we go for burgers and beer? Is Marr’s Bar still on the Milky Way?”

You could hardly take minors there, Peyton pointed out (“Is he talking about me?” bridled Desi) and it was rather early for lunch anywhere, being barely ten o’clock. But if they were truly hungry there was always the Student Union. Its cafeteria wouldn’t reopen till next week, but vending machine victuals were available if you didn’t mind your food tasting like saranwrap.

Before they took a dozen steps down the gleaming corridor, Sadie brought them to a sudden halt. “Wait a minute... what do they think they’re doing, waxing the floors at this time of day anyway?”

"For the same reason They bulldoze enormous holes in the middle of campus right before classes start," said Peyton. "Go take a look at the West Quad; there's one there now. A few semesters back They closed off half the Glazier Street parking lot just in time for finals. I don't doubt this is the first time They've laundered this linoleum for five years or more."

"Not since I pooped off," said Sadie.

"Not since then, or before."

So they bade cheerio to ivy-throttled Brecknock Hall (where your neck might easily get broken) and ventured out into swoggling August swelter. Good Old Heartland USA: managing, in true Middle Western fashion, to combine high humidity with extreme drought. Going to hit a hundred again today too, after getting barely below eighty last night.

"God!" went Sadie. "If I didn't feel so good right now, I don't think I could stand it. I've spent half the summer burning and the other half peeling."

Peyton on the other hand had this weird pallor about him. His sallow waxen complexion reminded Skeeter of... of grilled cheese; *yuggh*. Gross and creepy. (Or so at least it ought to be.)

"This place!" Sadie was carrying on. "It was just a blur to me, coming in. But aw reeeet—it hasn't changed a bit."

If so, the Merely School of Art & Design must have always had burnt-out brown patches and a barricaded hole in its West Quad. Oh well: it *was* August, after all. And yet, despite the horrendous climate, the campus retained some semblance of greenery. There were lots of shrubs and bushes and shady trees; it was probably a really pretty place when it wasn't like it was now. And out of everything came the same whiff of mingled arty odors.

Now Sadie was blowing kisses at an odd black-magical sort of building: HALLER HALL read its sign. "That's the Design Studios, *my* studios—they're mine again," she crowed, and went on to greet the more ordinary-looking structures opposite: the Amphitheater, the New Library, the Book & Supply Store.

"Isn't this a beautiful place, Desi?"

"It sucks."

"Desi! You were practically born here!"

"I don't care..."

Now Peyton was mopping his brow with a black bandanna, dabbing the bandaid-bound tip of his decisive nose. Skeeter wondered if that little moustache tickled. She pegged him as being past youth, in his middle thirties perhaps, and maybe he'd been portly or rotund before but right now his britches were too big for him.

They passed an outdoor sculpture-thing like soundless amplifiers, then one like unwound windchimes. Skeeter briefly envied artists (or was it artistes?) their ability to create things that would last, although these weren't exactly examples of what she might have had in mind.

"What happened to the fountain?" asked Sadie, nodding at a pile of rocks.

"They shut it off. To save water, They said."

"Because of the drought?"

"I shouldn't think so. They make us save string, too."

"Mommy..."

"What, Desi?"

"...Mommy..."

"*What*, Desi?"

"...carry me..."

"You're too big."

"...I'm so hotttt..."

"We're all so hot, Desirée."

Desi dropped back and trailed behind, letting out an occasional *hunnnnhh*. Skeeter dropped back too and tried to take the child's hand; when Desi wouldn't let her, she began cutting ninety-degree capers. Jump, skip, hop. Pop, crackle, snap. And after awhile the *hunnnnhhs* ceased and Desi allowed Skeeter to give her hand a pinky-finger tickle-squeeze.

Up ahead Sadie was asking about various Merely students from the Seventies, and Peyton was filling her in:

"Gone."

"Gone."

"Gone crazy."

And don't forget that kid who'd gone so far with his Van Gogh emulation as to commit botched-but-terminal suicide by shooting himself in the stomach. Quickest way to a man's heart, after all.

"You serious?" said Sadie. "That one I don't remember."

"Mmph. I think you were away that semester. In Italy was it? Or Australia?"

"God don't ask me. I've been all the hell over. I suppose you're still living in that place with the colonnade, on Saturn Street?"

"No."

"No? I thought you swore they'd have to carry you out of there feet first."

(Silence.)

"So where then?"

"The Cheval," said Peyton. One of the gone-condo apartment buildings on Dee Ridge: conveniently near campus, but far out of the student-housing league.

They reached a pond, shrunken by the summer dry spell. Peyton paused to pick up a stone and skip it across what remained of the water. Skeeter heard him mention the Megrims, whom she took to be a family of his and Sadie's old acquaintance, till he added that sometimes a body just gets into the dumps, that's all. And Sadie, God love her, was starting in with one of her slate-smashing Anne-of-Green-Gables pep-type-talks, when Skeeter dropped Desi's hand and came running up.

"When you're depressed you know the best thing you ought to do?" she asked.

His venetians twitched, and turned to her.

"Go see a scary movie."

\*

BOOM goes the door.

Here she comes in all her oblivion, as though behind glass or under a belljar or maybe just saranwrapped: a cellophane innocent on a winding decline as she undergoes another cataclysm, another upheaval as the glass cracks from Bartlett's Familiar side to side with a scratching and crosshatching and a CLUMP CLUMP CLUMP: entreat all the entrance you

damn well please says the Third Little Piggy 'cause I went to market for to buy *roast beef*—  
—on which note Peyton awoke.

Lying on his deep-pile carpet. Feet up on the sofa. Rattly fans bringing small relief to the muted diluted dim.

*Scheiss de la merde.*

Two, three years now, and hardly a week without that particular feverdream coming in some form or other.

But there resumed a genuine clump-clump on the actual door; a voice calling out Peyton's name. He tried to get up—felt his stomach twist and twirl—slumped back down again. *Gag...* have to be more careful what you mix with those little yellow pills.

"Jussa minute!"

Pull yourself together now. Unclench your jaws, wipe your face, check your clock—barely 7 PM; oh these summer evenings. Up and over and through the security peephole, to find a diminutive vision mugging up at you from the other side.

Damnation! What have you let yourself in for this time?

"Hi! Remember me?" said Skeeter Kitefly. "I'm the one who swept you off your feet this morning. Are you ready to go? Here, these are for you—Sadie said you used to throw raspberries at your parties, or was it bury them? ANYway, I thought you could use some tonight. Whoooo it's like an oven in here, how can you stand it? Is your air conditioner busted?... You don't *have* one?"

"Not since I was involved in an air conditioner à trois," he said, not thinking.

"A what?"

"Where's Mercedes?"

"She and Desi went to see our neighbors's new puppy litter. Ten itty-bitty basset hounds worth a hundred bucks each; I sure wish I was them. The neighbors, I mean. So Peyton, it's just you and me tonight (nudge nudge wink wink)."

Her face, like Scarlett O'Hara's, might not be beautiful, but it could seldom fail to impress. Small and round and winsomely pink. Pointed chin, pointed buttony nose. Great big whomp of hair, the color and fuzziness of a prime-time peach. Glasses wide as coffee

mugmouths, making her minuscule eyes appear even tinier. And those eyes: like baby-blue M&M's set afire by some confectionery pyrotechnic.

"I thought you were delirious," he said, looking down her perky upper deck.

"I was what?" she asked, sounding flustered.

Again with the round pink and winsome. Upheld by strapless lace and clad in a fresh neon splattershirt, this one fluorescent lavender and saying MANIAC. From its contents rose a cloud of spice.

"Opium," Skeeter explained.

"Pardon me?"

"I got a bottle for my birthday. Actually it's Imitation Opium; I have cheap friends. *Perfume*, not the puffy stuff—I don't do drugs, I don't need 'em. I can get high on an Eskimo Pie."

She chugged on past him into the hushed red gloom created, in part, by wine-colored curtains drawn against the sunset. The living room (if you could call it that) had a cathedral ceiling and walnut-panelled walls; it was dominated by the immense sofa and a highbacked swivel chair, each of which had a great **D** embroidered upon it. Dust lay on everything in various degrees of filminess.

"You've sure got a lot of books," said Skeeter, running a finger up and down one shelf. "Nice apartment—or should I say nice condo? Even if you don't have air conditioning—oh cuuuute little staircase! Where's it lead?"

"Up, if you're facing that direc—be careful up there! Don't go touching anything!"

"Jeez I'm not about to trash the place; calm down. So what's this supposed to be, an indoor balcony?"

"A 'miniloft.'"

"Full of drawing stuff. What're all these dusty papers for?"

"I'm a cartoonist."

"A cartoonist! You told Sadie you're a teacher."

"Same thing. You draw out the history of art for college-level students, and when you get back *their* papers the result, often as not, is laughably grotesque... I draw on the side."

"Really? I sleep on my back," said Skeeter. "What a coincidence. So why teach at all?"

"It pays the bills. Art adds to them."

"A cartoonist! That is so cool. Come up here and draw me a squirrel."

"A what? Not right now."

"Aw please! Just a squirrel, and then a duck and a parrot and maybe a penguin."

He demurred, unfazed by her "Well *when* then?" and "Oh you meanie, you sadist," and eventually Skeeter came galloping back down.

There were bookcases against every available surface in the apartment, and between them hung a variety of framed prints: some fine-arty—Goya, Grosz, Daumier—and some of old-time comic strip characters. Skeeter romped through the rooms exclaiming at these—the Yellow Kid, Happy Hooligan, Little Nemo, Krazy Kat—and paused beside a tubby little man in a fedora and overcoat, sporting what appeared to be moth wings: *Cushlamochree!* read his speech balloon.

"Who's this?"

"Mr. O'Malley," said Peyton, coming up behind her. "Barnaby's Fairy Godfather."

"Oh yes?"

"Not like that. *Barnaby* was perhaps the finest comic strip of the Forties. It had—"

"Was Mr. O'Malley that good a Fairy Godfather?"

"No, he was something of a humbug."

"Like the Wizard of Oz!"

"To a certain extent, yes. He kept having to refer to his *Fairy Godfather's Handy Pocket Guide*... See that mushroom in the corner? There's an invisible leprechaun sitting on it. His name is McSnoyd."

"Riiiiight," said Skeeter, and flung her headlong self onto the living room sofa. "He layudd me down upon his bayudd 'n' mayudd this girl a WOEmunn."

"Pardon me?"

"Pardon *me*. Country-western music. Actually I haven't seen a bed anywhere in this place. Is *this* your bed? Is this where you sleep? Oh, you've got me in your bed, you rascal!"

And here I lie all bashful and defenseless—”

“You,” Peyton told her, “are about as bashful as an earthquake.”

Which caused a horizontal fissure to spread across Skeeter’s face; and out of that came a laugh—a cacklelaugh—a stuPENdous cacklelaugh, turning cartwheels like a zootsuited rugcutter gone high on an Eskimo Pie.

“Are you okay?” she asked Peyton afterwards. “You look awful pale.”

“My snoot has stopped bleeding, if that’s what you mean.”

“Your *snoot*? I noticed you took off the bandaids. No, I mean you’ve been acting kind of quiet and Sadie said you always used to be full of—”

Peyton informed her that things had changed since Mercedes had left Merely SAD, “and I’m not exactly institutionalized—you needn’t order me a straitjacket yet!”

“Well,” said Skeeter, “we don’t have to go out if you’re not feeling well.”

“I expect I shall do, thank you.”

“...shall you? That’s good. I’m glad. And like I say, there’s no better cure for the blues than to see a scary movie.”

She suggested *Jaws 3-D* (The Third Dimension is Terror) but Peyton said if they were going to do this they might as well do it properly, and the Mercury Theater—“Where Desi was born!” “To a certain extent, yes”—was showing Zanzara’s latest aberration: *Si Comporti da Essere Umano*.

“Say what?”

“*Act Like a Human Being.*”

“I thought you’d never ask. May I use your potty?”

“Ah... are you referring to my fixings, or my facilities? The one’s through there; I don’t have any of the other.”

Off she went cackling, saddlebag in hand; and *Not again* thought Peyton. *Never again*. Once burnt, twice fried. Once wept, twice cried.

And especially not with this antic cutiepie, this miniature chatterbrain who looked and talked and acted like she’d been zapped by some mad scientist’s compactifying ray gun.

He refrigerated her basket of raspberries, then went about reassembling himself for a



Friday night out. Wallet, notebook, black pen, red pen. Keys, change, bandanna dry and folded, and—no—well, one—well, a couple—of little yellow pills.

That was it in an aptly-named nutshell: first one, then a couple. Promise of joy followed by grief and pain. The best-laid schemes, the best-schemed lays. Hearts broken, spindled, shredded, mulched. And it was the beady-eyed bombshells to be most on your guard against: the ones with attractivity.

She reappeared, smacking new lipgloss, trailing a fresh wave of Imitation Opium.

"Excuse my asking," he said, "but why 'Skeeter'?"

"It's short for Kelly Rebecca. 'Cause *I'm* short for Kelly Rebecca. Are we ready to go?"

"You are old enough to see this film, aren't you?"

"Hey! I turned twenty-four last month! Three weeks and two days ago, to be precise, and yes I am still accepting birthday presents—"

"No offense. You don't look twenty-four."

"Tell me about it. I've been carded all my life. Exactly how old are you?... Twenty-seven? Jeez, I'd've said thirty-five at least. Maybe everybody'll think you're my dad. Where is this Mercury Theater, anyway? I can drive us, my car's downstairs."

"No need. It's just across campus. We can walk there in fifteen minutes."

"What! Walk? On my li'l flat feet? Well, whatever fries your bacon. Oh wait a sec—"

She dug through her humongous "poke," produced a hairbrush, flopped her whomp bodily over, and vigorously assaulted it. In the process a fair number of fair hairs sprang loose to drift downward.

"Look at that," Skeeter remarked with evident satisfaction. "Winkle winkle winkle. *I'm* going to be bald too, by the time I'm an old lady." With a bright blue ribbon she tied her remaining opulence into a quasiponytail. "How do I look?"

"Very nice," Peyton heard himself say.

"Well of course. But sometimes my 'appearance' puts people off. I've actually had people tell me I'm funny-looking, just because I make faces at 'em like this—"

She ran through a repertoire of gapes and grimaces, expressing mock horror, faux rapture, coy astonishment, hammy dismay.

"But when I want to," she assured him, "I can look like an angel."

\*

In the elevator Skeeter extracted a pack of Pall Mall Lights from her bottomless bag. "Oh—you mind if I smoke?"

"I thought you said you didn't 'do' drugs."

"This isn't a drug, this is recreation."

"Go on then."

She dangled a cigarette from her lower lip, then detached it. "You're sure it won't bother you?"

"Go on, I said."

She replaced the Pall Mall, got out a Bic lighter, but didn't flick it. "No, I can see you're just being polite—"

"Smoke the damn cigarette if you freaking well please!"

"Oh you're so *insistent*," said Skeeter, striking up in earnest. "Stay that way, too. You can't be gloomy when you're with *me*. I won't let you. I don't allow it. Being with me's got to be a nonstop all-night belly laugh."

On the way down to the parking lot she went *cuuuute* at all the Cheval's horsehead embellishments.

"What a neat building. There ought to be an awning, though, over this door, and a big fat doorman in a long red coat with a lot of brass buttons instead of those security buzzers, standing right about here."

"I don't remember buzzing you in."

"You didn't. I had to buzz the whole bunch."

"My apologies. I was—napping."

"Truly my forgiveness you implore, but the fact is you were napping, and so gently I came rapping'—*damn!* I'm clever... That's my car," she added, pointing to a DeSoto Firesweep the exact shade of Pepto-Bismol. "Sure you don't want me to drive us?"

“Good God, not in that circus wagon.”

“Hey! You’ll hurt Floyd’s feelings!”

“‘Floyd’?”

“That’s right. Now I’ve got to insult your car. Which one is it?”

“I don’t own one anymore.”

“What? No car, no air conditioner—aren’t you rich?”

“Not from teaching at Merely I’m not.”

“You must be sort of rich if you’re one of the Derentes. Everybody in Demortuis knows how sort of rich the Derentes are. Did your parents disown you for being a cartoonist?”

“No.”

“...I’m sorry. I’m just a curious person. Don’t be mad... but you must have a trust fund or something, right? To live in that nice condo?”

Perhaps half a guffaw burbled out of him, with all the embarrassment of unrehearsal. “Or something. Yes.”

Crossing Frise Street, they cut through Brecknock Park and the deserted campus. Down and up as the landscape rolled, past the Union and skirting the pond—that body of water that had been sketched and painted by entire student generations, and into which those same generations had jumped or been thrown. Here Peyton again stopped, stooped, and threw in a ritual pebble. On down, on up, past the New Library and the Amphitheater, Haller Hall and Brecknock Hall; on through the semibarricaded West Quad, empty even of frisbee-tossers.

“Three months I’ve lived around here,” said Skeeter between smoke rings, “but I never saw this place till today. With Sadie readmitted I might come visit all the time. How would you like that? I could knock you down every Tuesday and Thursday.”

On up to Merely Way, the “Milky Way” to those pond-doused student generations, with its lights and sights and shops and stops and coffeehouses and then-and-nowses, not to mention Marr’s Bar; and there too was the Mercury Theater of song and subtitled legend.

With a regular appetite-ruining snack display, to Skeeter’s audible relief. She had

Peyton play packmule to a large Dr. Pepper, box of Milk Duds, roll of SweetTarts, and family-size popcorn with double-extra butter; and thus provisioned went in to *Act Like a Human Being*.

Whose concubine heroine managed to earn Skeeter's immediate dislike ("What a bitch, I hate her") despite her sinister fancy man's losing his mind during a thunderstorm, and their remote-to-begin-with bagnio's getting cut off from civilization by floods and mudslides. Unless it was all a dream; you could never be sure in a Zanzara film.

Nightmare or not, Skeeter kept up a constant yakkety gabble, pausing only to clutch Peyton's arm and shriek on dutiful cue.

"What happened to the old butler guy? Did he get killed or just disappear? They never keep the subtitles on long enough to *yeeeeeeek!*... well, so much for the butler. My friend RoBynne would just love this; she's writing a smutnovel—oh my God!—don't go in there, fool! She could've climbed out the window and escaped. *What* a bitch. *Oh* I hate her. Now he's got her trapped and—wait a minute—where'd the butler's body go?"

*"Quando l'hanno lasciato uscire dalla gabbia?"*

"What'd he say?"

"When did they let you out of your cage?" Peyton translated. He watched the picture unmoving, hardly blinking, nose motionless as he gave Skeeter a sidelong once-over.

"That doesn't make sense. What cage? How'd she get back in the boudoir? *Jeez* what a weird movie. Pass me the Milk Duds."

"Please."

"Please'... you turk." (Munch.)

"French Huguenot, actually."

"Not 'turk' as from Turkey! You know, 'turk' as in *turkey*."

"Ah yes," he said, and getting out his pocket notebook, began to draw in the minimal cinema light.

"What are you doing? Are you taking notes, or what? I wanna see!"

*"Sssshhhh!"* from the row behind.

"Oh shhhh yourself and watch the movie," the row behind got told.

Peyton continued his covert penmanship while Skeeter chafed and the concubine heroine sent her predator to an implausible death—tricked into impaling himself on a broken balustrade. The audience cheered, the Mercury's lights went up, and Skeeter was handed a little cartoon squirrel drawn in red and black, its paws full of popcorn and a babblement-balloon coming out of its mouth.

“CHECK THIS OUT! THIS IS SOOOO COO-WULL!!”

\*

All the way back to the Cheval she frisked squirrelly about.

“You'll have to come see our place. We'll have to have you over, once we get it cleaned up. *If* we get it cleaned up—I bet you anything Desi's talked Sadie into buying one of those hundred-dollar basset pups.”

It was dark now if not noticeably cooler. In the lamplight Merely SAD lost its burnt-out browns, looked almost sylvan again; the campus pond seemed replenished, and this time Skeeter ran ahead to throw in the requisite pebble.

She stood there staring out over the pond awhile, as though lost in thought.

Peyton came up alongside; there was a spectacular view from the pondbrink, looking across the East Quad to a starry haze on the horizon, ten or twelve miles distant, that was the city of Elsew.

Skeeter stirred. “Got any good booze? We could have a nightcap. I can make a mean Freddie Fudpucker if you've got Galliano.”

So they were headed Back To His Place, he and this MANIAC in the shrinking-violet short-shorts; on a hot summer night in the Year of Oh Lord Nineteen Hundred and Eighty-Three. Which future idiots would doubtless write off as a simpler-more-natural time, a wholesomer-more-innocent era, thanks to the Trickle-down Mummer in the White House. Forget the inability to distinguish between actualities and play-acting. Forget the heedless drift toward Global Thermonuclear War (only a video game away!) and the sexual revolution left stranded by latter-day poxes that make old-fashioned clap seem like a day on the beach.

Even so: routines abandoned for two, three years shifted gears in Peyton's memory as he eyed the shrinking violet's lilting bounce.

But remember: compact implies impact. Keep in mind that jagged balustrade.

They reached the Cheval, the lobby, the elevator, the top floor, and apartment #809—where Skeeter pushed in first, shutting the door in Peyton's face; he heard the lock go snickersnack. And by the time he got the door reopened she had flipped on every light in every room, turned on all the fans, and was busy spreading paper towels over the carpet.

"No telling if you might have to barf after seeing a movie like that. After I saw *The Shining* this guy I was with dreamed these bugs were crawling all over him all night long. (Yugggh.) Do you moan in your sleep? My Grampa Otto used to have these moaning nightmares and go *Oooohhhh* in the middle of the night. One time he did it when I'd snuck out of bed to watch a scary movie on TV. I bet that ceiling still has popcorn-butterstains on it."

She flung wide his wine-colored curtains, yanked up the shades, let in—what? No poetic sweetbreezes anyway, welcome as cool air would have been. Nothing entered other than the sound of cicadas going rikki-tikki-tavi, out in the trees or the shrubs or the bushes or wherever it was cicadas broadcast from. Small matter; Skeeter had discovered his incense, and Gonesh Spring Mist was wafting through the living room.

"You can see the whole Milky Way from up here," she observed from the kitchen. "Look, there's the Mercury; I can see its sign... You must not do a lot of home cooking, that's for sure. Oog! cobwebs! and there's the spider. Want me to knock it down for you?"

"Leave it be," called Peyton from his **D**-embossed swivel chair. "Dead already."

"GROHsss!"

"Not at all. It's up there serving as a kind of scarecrow."

"A shoofly, you mean. Where do you keep your yummy stuff?" He directed her to a cabinet above the sink, and Skeeter fell momentarily silent among the bottlenecks. Then:

"No tequila? Oh Peyton, *what* you are missing! But here's Gilbey's, that's good—okay! I'll make you a genuine Pink Gin. Slosh a dash of bitters in, then you slosh it out again, then pour in your Gilbey's."

She brought forth two vaguely rosy mixtures, one at low ebb for Peyton and a heftier

pouring for herself, together with the basket of raspberries. “Looky what I found! Someone with a kind warm loving heart and a really dynamite bod must’ve got you these. (Cackle.)

Well, she won’t mind if I have just a few.”

Back onto the sofa she hopped, basket and badly-balanced drink in hand. Out reached her glass; Peyton looked at it, then allowed it to be clinked against his own. Out reached the raspberry basket; Peyton waved it off.

“You’re being gloomy again,” Skeeter told him, as she hitched up her MANIAC top and did something extraordinary with her trim little midriff.

Again he burbled a half-guffaw.

“That’s better. Now stay that way. It’s not just anybody, you know, who can make their belly button wink.”

“Learned that in the Orient, did you?”

“‘I’m an Occidental woman in an O-ree-ent-al mood for lovvvve,’” Skeeter sang. “Actually I learned how to do that when I was in the Brownies back in Marble Orchard. Our troop leader became a professional belly dancer and taught us all how to bump ‘n’ grind. I learned *other* things in the Orient. (Cackle.) Hey I really did, that’s where I learned how to make Pink Gins: from a steward on a steamer with a Chinese head chef. You’re not married, are you? Or engaged, or ‘involved,’ or gay?”

“No.”

“Well don’t have a spaz, I was only making sure. It’s fine by me; you know what they say about men with big noses. And men with big Adam’s apples, and men who grow cucumbers—”

“Which I don’t,” Peyton informed her, the grating note still in his voice. “So finish your drink and—”

“Yeah I noticed you don’t have any plants or flowers around here or a cat or a bird or goldfish or anything.” (Swallow.) “I mean you’re straight and single and kind of rich and not bad looking and have these really Byzantine eyes and that really smooth scalp and obviously adore being ridden down waxed floors by knockdown-gorgeous women—”

“You’re right about the knockdown part, anyway.”

"Well then," said Skeeter, "wouldn't you love to be my sugardaddy?"

(Silence.)

"My own personal Last Tycoon?"

(Silence.)

"Um—you could feed me and dress me and take me for drinks, and since you're going to dress me ANYway you might as well know I always wear bright red underwear, summer and winter, so lay in a good stock of it, and if you're the sort of nasty-nasty man who goes wild over black undies I'm sorry but black just isn't my color at *all*, or brown either so forget about leather too, but red? ooh la LA, believe me, I'd give you a sample glimpse but you might faint from lust and crack your nose wide open this time, so whaddaya say? Is it a deal?"

(Silence.)

"...don't you know how many men would kill themselves to get such an offer?"

"Why aren't you making it to them, then?" said Peyton.

She looked down at the raspberries being rolled between her thumbs and index fingers: red in the left hand, black in the right.

"Well... 'cause you—listen, you—pay attention, you—I bet if I said 'What did I say just now?' you could tell me exACTly. I mean, Sadie and Desi and my friend RoBynne—I talk to them, and they talk to me, but they don't listen either. You see?"

"Do you listen to them?"

"That's not the point," Skeeter said with dignity. "Look: I love Sadie, but she's so busy putting on her goddam Pippi Longstocking act, and Desi's a sweetie but she's only five and wants to watch *I Love Lucy* all the time 'cause she's got this thing for Ricky Ricardo, Junior and Senior. Me, I prefer the Fred Mertz type. (Cackle.) Actually what happens is I keep falling for these strange-eyed Sven-types and I'm sick to death of it. Them. Yeah. I mean, Jeez: I've got more ex-boyfriends than Sadie and she's five years older than me."

Peyton's venetians twitched a bit at that and with a trace of impatience Skeeter added, "This isn't *Educating Rita*, you know—I don't want a 'tutor,' I don't need a 'tutor,' I've been going to college for the last six years off and on. And I don't want to learn how to talk



like a lady so I can work in a flower shop, either. Understand? I don't expect you to *teach* me anything—”

“Mmph. You and a hundred others each semester.”

“What I want is, is, is—like a *confessor*. Yeah! What a shame your name's not Edward—see, that's an educated kind of joke, right? An ignoramus wouldn't have made a joke like that. And before you say what I really need is a minister-priest-or-rabbi you should know I'm not that kind of girl, I mean I was a Chinese Communist for awhile but other than that I'm not that religious. What I really need—”

“Is for me to be your own personal sugardaddy confessor.”

“ExACTly! You got it, Peyton! Ooh I can't wait to spill my guts and tell you all about my hard, hard life, and we can stuff cottonballs in your mouth and you can make like Brando and put Cheval horseheads in my enemies's beds—”

“And what enemies might you have, may I ask?”

“Well, do creditors count? There's a couple of department stores I'm not on too friendly terms with at the moment—”

She stopped then.

Put down what was left of the rolled-around raspberries.

Smoothed herself visibly out.

For a moment Peyton feared this might be the prelude to some unguessable paroxysm—speaking in tongues or spontaneous combustion.

But no, her face remained tranquil, all gapes and grimaces set aside. O angelface! With eyes not squintsome but perfectly round, perfectly clear, gleamily piercing as a pair of China-blue javelins—

“So,” she said, “is it a deal?”

Peyton sat back and picked up his tumbler. “Good question, little girl.”

A very good joke, an excellent jest; we will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo—he! he! he!—over our Amontillado.

Take on Skeeter Kitefly, be her Padre Warbucks for better or for worse, a blessing or a curse? And all he'd have to do, no matter what she did or said or thought or felt, was...

And in return...

Mmph.

That's artful of her.

The man in the chair took in a breath through his unbandaged nose, inhaling the mingled aromas of gin and bitters, incense and raspberries, Imitation Opium and the outer August evening.

Then he cleared his throat and said, "Go on."

"Where?" asked Skeeter.

"Not where," said Peyton.

"But I don't want to go yet."

"Not yet," he sighed, and finished his drink.

"What then? What? *Wha*-utt? TELLLL me!"

He put down his glass and folded his hands. "You tell me," he clarified. "Your hard, hard life. All nine thousand and one nights of it. From sperm-and-egg conception to this very day, in this very room. I'm all ears. Except for the rest of me."

*WHEEEEE* went the fissure across Skeeter's face in a flashdancy way he would never forget—as if there were anything about Kelly Rebecca Kitefly, of course, that he was ever *likely* to forget.

"I jump around a lot," she warned him.

"I'll take that into consideration," he replied.

"All right! Get comfy now." She plumped down onto the papertoweled carpet and stuck out one wellshaped wellshaven leg. "Pretty nice, right? Well, there ought to be this terrible scar here. Picture me about Desi's age. When I was *little*. Okay! Now we are not-quite-six, and if you think hiding Christmas presents from a six-year-old is hard you should try hiding Fourth of July fireworks from the same six-year-old, especially one who's already a natural-born *arsonist*...."



## Two

### THE CONFESSIONS

(a selection)



## Chapter II

### *Proud to Be Short*

So bless us and splash us, as Gollum would say. (You do know *The Hobbit*, don't you? Good; I loved *The Hobbit*.)

I really ought to start at the beginning, oughtn't I? Okay then—I mean I *will* be jumping around a lot, but don't get the idea I'm out of order right here at the very beginning, or that we'll get ahead of ourselves or even end up *lapping* ourselves, if you'll pardon the expression. (Cackle.) I've always been pretty fast—um—should I rephrase that? I've always been quick on my *feet*, a pretty good *runner*, you know: ZAP! FLASH! here I go! there I am! But in gym there were always these giraffe girls who could take one slow step and be twenty yards ahead of me, the bitches. (Should I say bitches? I mean I'm not sure what a female giraffe is called—not a “cow” or “sow,” I hope; that'd make things too confusing.)

So anyway: here goes: “Chapter One—I Am Born.” And at government expense, thanks to my pahpah being in the military at the time. I was what they call a Marine brat, meaning that my father was a jet jockey for the Semper Fi and we were all the time moving from one air station to another. Just think! Little old me got born at the biggest one in the whole wide world: Cherry Point, Nawth Caylina. Which I reckon is jes' down the road from Mayberry and Mount Pilot and My What Tarry Heels You've Got. Hence my occasional natural-born drawlin' 'n' twangin' 'n' pickin' 'n' grinnin'.

Born to do nothing but laugh!—that's what they said about me, when I was little. They were right, too; I was always the giggliest one in class. Used to tick off my grade

school teachers something fierce. Miss Gibson (second grade: she was a pig woman) even made me go stand by myself in the cloakroom—to *no avail!* They could all still hear me in there, tee-heeing away. I could turn that cloakroom into a regular Gigglesville. Poor Miss Gibson.

What was I talking about? Oh right, being born. “Natural-born”—that’s how they phrase it where I grew up. Or did some of my growing up, anyhoo. (As you can see, I grew up only just so far.) “That’s a natural-born whopper,” my Grampa Otto might say about a fish he caught, and go on to tell more whoppers about how he caught it. Or, “*She’s* hardly a natural-born blonde,” all the ladies might say about one of their friends on her way back from the beauty parlor. (I myself, let me emphasize, have always been a genuine original member of the Natural-Born Blonde party. *Strawberry* blonde, by heck. Red-gold! Texas tea!)

Actually I’ve never been to Texas. Lots of other places (including Greece and Istanbul and Hoboken, New Jersey, all last spring) but not Texas. And only briefly North Carolina—I certainly didn’t do much growing up there. Marine brat, remember. *Look Homeward, Angel*, ‘Cause You Can’t Go There Again. (See? Told you I’ve been to college.)

I don’t remember places too distinctly before I came to live with Gramma and Grampa in Marble Orchard, when I was not-quite-six; but I have this constant image of heatwaves rising over tarmac, with planes roaring overhead. (Ooh! always loved that sound—heavy metal boffola! You ever want to get me superexcited, just let me hear a sonic boom.)

Well anyway: we moved around a lot, and it was always someplace *hot*—Arizona, Hawaii, southern California. I never got to wade chin-deep through snow till I was going-on-seven, and you know that’s a crucial milestone of any kid’s childhood—something to hold over your *own* kids’s heads. “I had to wade forty-seven miles to school chin-deep through snow and with a milestone around my neck; so just count your blessings, young lady!”

It wouldn’t take much of a snowfall for me to be chin-deep *in*, obviously. But my idea is that I was intended to be a Big Girl—not a *giraffe* girl, nor a fatty either, but regular Amazon material—oh about six foot THREE, say, with boobies out to *there* instead of out to *here*, and iron-pumping biceps and triceps and thigh muscles that could crack walnuts instead

of pistachios, and I'd be the Central States champeen of the lady-wrassler circuit. You know: *vast*. But Mother Nature had other ideas. Cost me a lucrative wrestling career, but made up for that by giving me a permanent case of the leapin' jumpies. Hyperactive, you know: superexcitable! (Ever been around anybody with a case of the leapin' jumpies? Well honey, you have got yourself a TREAT in store.)

I once saw this old movie with Betty Hutton (and boy was *she* a loudmouth) called *Incendiary Blonde*, which I figure they'll have to remake about me one of these days. I mean, who more fitting? I'm telling you I was *born* to be explosive—in a good way; not like “Beans beans the musical fruit.” My Grampa Otto told me I was really a great big amazing colossal girl that'd been scrunched down into “a little ole bitty Skeeter-type doll.” Concentrated, you understand. Like a firecracker! Or, better still, like a *skyrocket*—SHWEEEEEE-OOOOP! I always wanted to have Roman candles on my birthday cakes, and twice as many as I am years old. (Did I mention I turned twenty-four last month? And that I'm willing to overlook your being late with the gifties, this year? Well I did. And I am. So make a note of it.)

Being all compactified like this, I just can't help but be extra-intensively *alive*. Which explains how come I've got these sunspot-baby-blue eyes and this incendiary blonde hair, and all this pixie dust in my brainpan and this bounce bounce bounce in my zap! flash! step—and why it's my duty to be *cute*. Buttoncute, that is. A cuuutie-pie, as they say. Which has a particular aura of its own, you know, bold as whizbang whirligig brass:

CUTIEPIETY.

Va-va-vamoose!

(As long as I'm making these confessions, I better 'fess up to one horribly cutesy sin. As a kid, I doted on Harvey comic books. You know, Li'l Dot and Li'l Lotta and Li'l Hot Stuff and Li'l Richie Rich and Diamond Li'l—even Baby *Huey*, for crying out loud. Isn't that awful? Aren't I ashamed? The only one of that bunch I couldn't stand was Clasper, the Personal-Space-Violating Ghost. Sure, he claimed to be friendly; but I could see right through him...)

\*

Dammit! Where's my lighter? Always keep your lighter near at hand: you never



know when you might be called on to set the world on fire, or something. Hand me my poke, wouldja please? My *poke*. No, my POKE—that thing there! No, I do not mean “my purse”; purses are for picklefaced old ladies. This, my friend, is a POKE... Okay: *here* we go:

(Flick; drag.)

I started smoking when I was eight-and-a-half years old. Well obviously I've been *smokin'* all my life; but I mean cigarettes. Pall Malls, that is—“Pell-Mells.” So I guess there's no doubt as to what's kept *me* as tall as I got. But I'm perfectly happy being four-foot-eleven in my stocking feet: I hate wearing heels. Needless to say I look plenty *hot* in them, but let me go on permanent record as being goddam PROUD to be short.

Who was it?—Nikita Khrushchev?—who said, “Life is short; live it up.” One of those old Russian guys, anyway, Trotsky or Tolstoy or Rasputin or Rachmaninoff. That's my mantra, anyway: live it up! Seize that moment! Get that lead out! Put that butt in gear! Otherwise you're gonna go nowhere fast, and I do mean nowhere. And I do mean fast.

Hey! You being one of the Derentes and all, I bet you went to Cornwall High School, right? Did you know a girl there named Sally Whistletoe? She was probably my all-time idol. Hardly any taller than me, but I think a double-D bra would've been too tight on her. Gorgeous, she was. When I first got involved with stage stuff and Drama Club—I didn't go to Cornwall, of course, with you fancy suburban folks; I went to Bonum High [*clap clap clap clap*] deep in the heart of Demortuis, Nilnisi—

Anyway, I got coached by Sally Whistletoe on how to project myself. Not my *chest*, my *self*—voice, presence, aura. Sally tutored kids from all over town about all sorts of things: cheerleading, gymnastics, jujitsu, Being a Good Citizen. She told me, “You've gotta be a Hype if you don't wanna be a Ciphe, so go out there and *carpe* that *diem*!” I said, “MA'AM YES MA'AM!” and tore out of her rumpus room like a regular Roger Ramjet: YEAAAAAH!!!

I swear, she was the ultimate role model. And boy did she have big boobs—all that lung capacity, you see. Never had to use the phone; just opened a window and spoke right at you, clear across town, clear as a bell. That's what positive projection can do for you. It gives you *aplomb* (hee hee! love that word). Helps you get through things, make the best of things, overcome things. Survive things. When I was a kid in Marble Orchard I had the most

hair-raising escapades, and never once got hurt—not so much as an owwie. (I was going to say “as a booboo,” but I’ve talked quite enough about *those* for one night.)

Come to think of it, I did fracture a collarbone this one time, falling out of a cottonwood tree; but it wasn’t my bone. Or my tree.

There are, I must admit, a few drawbacks to being short. Like my attention span isn’t always quite as long as I’d like it to be. Intense, though, while it lasts. (Again like fireworks.) And even *aplomb*, you know, kind of starts to lose its elasticity after awhile. You may not believe it to look at me now, all trim and toned and tidy—if I do boast so myself—but not so very long ago I used to be a lot plumper. Especially on the rumper. Last New Year’s Eve I weighed in at 132 pounds, which may not sound like much to a big lug like you, but sure as hell *looked* roly-damn-poly on me. And it’s not like I was a fat little kid or anything, either; I never used to gain an ounce no matter how much I ate (or drank).

Well now I’m back down to 101 and can browse through the junior-misses again, though these days I’m more into what you might call Vintage Nouveau. And just in case anybody’s wondering, I wear a size 3 (sometimes 4) and you can thank Richard Simmons for that: it took a helluva lotta shake-shake-shake /shake-shake-shake /shakin’ my booty to get there, believe me. To a size 3 (sometimes 4). Now with shoes, such as you might happen to buy at a shoe-type store, it’d be more like a size 6 or 5 or even a 4, depending on how much of my li’l flat feet actually have to fit inside them. But with dresses and such—especially those meant to be worn *snugly*—aim for a 3. As in one-two-*three*. (You might want to jot that down.)

Now when it comes to swimwear or lingerie, you’d better take me along when you go shopping: all bets are off. Of course it’s a sexist insulting cliché to equate a woman’s cup size with her grade-point-average—I mean, Sally Whistletoe was an honor student!—but in *my* case, they’re both B+. Well, depending on the bra. And the phase of the moon. And whether I can avoid taking science classes. Any of which can suddenly turn a B+ into a C-.

Just the other day I put on my first bikini in three whole summers. Then I had to try on a dozen others till I found the right combination of top and bottom (in lobster-red: soooo cute!) that could bring back my True Bod exactly like it used to look before its blunder into

plumpitude.

My friend RoBynne (have I told you yet about RoBynne O'Ring? she's writing a smutnovel) went on sunbathing display the other day in this set of leopardskin thongs and rhinestone suspenders; and she's only nineteen and maybe six feet tall and completely olivaceous to boot—but even *she* allowed that, standing next to me and my True Bod, she looked like “a foggin’ giraffe.” That’s an exact quote, too. (Actually RoBynne’s terrifically attractive. For a giraffe girl, that is.)

So yessir! Li'l Miss Whuddababe is *back*. You can hardly tell I'd ever been anything otherwise. No way; unh-unh.

There's a dwarf-woman in—which Dickens novel?—*David Copperfield*, I think, who keeps saying “Ain't I volatile?” This guy I knew in college at Keening told me that “volatile” originally meant “able to fly.” And that “risible” means “able to laugh.” (Boy was that guy creepy—he used to send me bunches of flowers, but with these wacko *mea culpa* notes enclosed. Yughh.)

Anyway, you see what I mean. Volatility—risibility. Indivisible, you see. Like projection and pyromania!

Maybe I haven't yet managed to set the world on fire, but hey! the night is young...

### Chapter III

#### *The Center of All Eyes*

Whoooo it's STILL like an oven in here; I thought maybe I'd just imagined it before.

Guess what: you're taking me out to dinner and it better be somewhere ultra-air-conditioned and the drinks better have plenty of ice. I'm in the mood for Mediterranean tonight, but not the usual pasta-with-cheese-on-top. Anyplace around here sell gyros? Those are *so* good, I love lamb and pita bread though I prefer to call it "pocket bread" 'cause that sounds cuter—like it's made from nuts dug up by little squirrels. I love squirrels too, but would *never ever* eat one so don't even think of suggesting we go to a Creole restaurant, even if you ARE French—

*Wha-utt?* Why are you staring at me like that? Oh, the outfit. Well I had to keep cool *somehow*; it's a real barnslurper out there. Soooo humid, and that on top of the usual Monday megaslop. (C'mon, you can gawk at me just as easily in the elevator.) And then it was frantic all day at work; at least that made the time go by fast. Have I even mentioned where I work? I'm one of the counter people ("open the doors and count all the people!") at the Women's Clinic at SMECK. That is, the St. Mintred Medical Center or S.M.M.C. We insiders call it "SMECK." As in [*Julia Child voice*:] "Before you cook that leg of lamb, add a SMECK of marjoram."

(I'll drive—you can navigate. And before we get started, you should beg Floyd's pardon for calling him a circus wagon the other day.)

When I say Women's Clinic I should add that most of the docs there are men, which really isn't fair when you think about it. Some are *old* men too, and let me tell you: when you're up in the stirrups undergoing inspection, it could at least be by somebody who looks like, oh, I don't know—*Richard Gere*, say. (Did you see *Breathless*? I did, and boy WAS I!)

Believe it or not, we have this one gynecologist named Dr. Primm. And an obstetrician named Dr. Truelove: isn't that sweet? He's old but really nice, and polite even to us on the counter. Just don't ask me to need his professional services anytime soon. The only time I've ever truly wanted to be a mommy (turn where? turn here? and go down to 131st Street? yes, boss) was when I first saw *E.T.* and just fell completely in love with little blonde Gertie. *OH* my God. I wanted to run right out and kidnap and adopt her, and give her a different name—*anything* but "Gertie." I mean, how lame! They could've called her "Ethel" after her aunt—she's the littlest Barrymore, you know, in real life. *So* adorable.

Where AM I driving us, anyway? Where?... the Addis Ababa? [*Ned Beatty voice:*] "Are we going to Addis Ababa, Mr. Luthor?" Ethiopian cuisine! COOwull! And aren't I clever, to be dressed so right for it? I got this outfit at the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul. Okay, I got the *idea* for this outfit in Istanbul; actually I found the harem pants at Navels Ahoy! and the batik vest at Liquid Skyjack, both down on the St. Mintred waterfront. The bandeau started out as a K-Mart blue-light special, but I added sequins till it looked like something Barbara Eden might've worn.

Mmm! Whoa! Inhale those aromas! (Two, please, smoking section. Could I have a couple extra ice waters, and—let's see—a big tall glass of mango juice, and bring us a bottle of anything really cold that's got lots of alcohol in it. Thanks!) Well this is cozy. Do you eat here often? What's on the menu? Oh, lookit! "*Yebeg wot*"—lamb in red pepper sauce! Why, this is like a dream come true, isn't it? Say the secret word, and I'll add seven veils to this outfit and dance 'em off for you sometime. Hee hee!

Have you ever seen that Busby Berkeley movie with the song "She's the Girlfriend of the Whirling Dervish?" Well you're looking at the Dervish's whirling daughter. My dad had me doing flips and handstands and somersaults practically before I could even walk. The other Marine-brat babies would be toddling around, and here I'd come cart cart cart wheel

wheel wheeling right through 'em. (Yum! This mango juice tastes fresh-squeezed.)

Gower (my dad, and by the way that's *Gower*, NOT "Gomer")—he wanted to be an astronaut, and it wasn't such a way-out ambition; I mean he *was* a military jet pilot, and space was all the rage back then. He tried to get picked two or three times, and I think made the first cut once or twice, but NASA kept turning him down. I forget why.

Anyway, he was also kind of an acrobat—could do anything do-able on a trampoline. One of my earliest memories is of him flinging me up in the air, and catching me about an hour later. *One-handed* too, honest to God; it was like being part of the Wallenda family.

So you see I was never intended to get lost in the crowd—not unless everybody else in the crowd is *tall*, you know. Otherwise I'm always immediately noticeable. Look at any group picture ever taken with me in it—grade school, high school, summer camp, crime scene, whatever—you can always pick ME out without any doubt, by cracky! *There I am—there I am—there I am*—struttin' my stuff! Lookin' sharp! Daughter of the Whirling Dervish, and center of all eyes.

Oh the lamb, the lamb! I bet this is exactly what Ethiopia's Bo-Peep did to her sheep when they finally came home. WHOOOO—*spicy!* Wow! Good thing I asked for the extra ice water. They aren't kidding when they call it red pepper sauce. Never mind—just pour me a little more of that Sheba honey wine, *s'il vous* whatever-they-say-wherever-it-comes-from.

"Abyssinia!"

(Clink.)

Hee hee!...

\*

Now don't get me wrong. I don't think I'm *inordinately* egotistical. There may have been a time when I'd brazenly admire myself in every passing plate glass window, but hey—what can I say? Who am I to deny 24-carat cutiepiety?

'Course, that has its drawbacks too. Even now, when I'm practically a quarter-century old, these big fat matron-types go out of their way to squinch hell out of my face. They take it like this, in their big fat matron-paw, and go [*nutcracker sound effect*] to it. And then they always say, "What a PRECIOUS little face!" And every time I want to tell them,

“Well no wonder, there’s PRECIOUS little face left when you get done squunching it!” (I mean I *want* to say that, but it comes out “*Mrmph glub shmug.*”) And swear to God! it happened again just a week ago, at the clinic: I rescheduled appointments for this humongous big fat matron, and she thanked me by saying, “Such a *grin* you’ve got on you, dollink”—then again with the face-squunch! Right on goddam cue!

(Is there anything left in that doggie bag from the Addis Ababa? We’ll have to go back there sometime soon.)

I always try to put the best face on things. And if those squunchy matrons leave any big fat fingerprints on my best face, I just call ‘em “marks of character.” I’ve even added a couple myself—not so much to my face, as lower down. Got my first tattoo when I was fifteen; it was an absolute necessity at the time. Distinction, you know—stand out from that crowd of wissy-wusses! So: one tattooed patootie. (Bet you can’t guess which cheek. Or what I got put there. Or what I was *going* to get put there, before I decided it might be *too* provocative “after all.”)

Yessir! Stand out! Sometimes it’s gotta be about ME ME ME the One and Only, out there in a cone of cosmic light, with the rest of the world just an oyster on my exclusive half-shell. So what’s so inordinate about that?

Okay: part of it’s due, I admit, to me being such a natural-born ham. I’ve always had this affinity for ham—even more than lamb, which let us remember is basically sheepish. But ham is standout awesome, and so are pigs in general; *Charlotte’s Web* made perfect sense to me. I mean, what little girl *wouldn’t* want a pet piggy? For years people would give me piggy banks as presents, and it always broke my heart when I had to bust them open a few weeks later. (But I always had to.) So no slurs about piggies, IF you please.

“What about Miss Gibson?” You mean my second grade teacher? What about her?... Oh. Well, it was my friend Janey who always called her a pig woman. I’ll say one thing for Miss Gibson: she cast me as the duck in *Peter in the Wolf*, and boy was I the hit of that show. Do you know that you can *taste* applause? It can be intoxicating, like Ethiopian honey wine! (You might want to import a carafe or two of that, by the way.)

So I took to the stage, as they say. My Uncle Buddy-Buzz was determined to put me

there; he's a—*was* a set designer, in Chicago. "Hanging paper moons over cardboard seas." He financed my series of lessons at the Dittwilmer Dance Studio—not in Chicago, but at the corner of 6th and Sycamore in uptown Marble Orchard. They thought with me being so hyper I'd be a smash hit at tap dancing. And was I ever! I put my li'l dancin' feet right *through* Mrs. Dittwilmer's floor, practically. Sammy Davis Jr. had nothing on me—here look, I'll demonstrate:

*Where have you been, Bill Bailey?  
Where have you been?  
Where've you been, charming Billy?  
I've been t'see m'wife bake  
a cherry pie!  
She cannot leave her mother!  
(yeah!)*

Thank you! Too bad I didn't have those seven veils on me, har har. Hey! Imagine an all-tap production of *Salomé*! "I hoff kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan!" (Tappity-tappity-tap.)

ANYway, that Bill Bailey bit was one of my famous improv ditties. (No, I said *ditties*, Mr. Funny Guy.) I got into improv because—well, I was clever and brilliant and a treat to see onstage, needless to go on and on about—and a treat to *hear*, too, once Sally Whistletoe tutored me on projection. INhale, EXhale, OOO-WEE-OOO: every syllable perfectly audible. So I was a drama major my two years at Nilnisi U., and took a bunch of classes on speech and movement and lighting and costumes—and *fencing*! that was fun—all the fundamentals, but hardly me-alone-in-a-cone-of-cosmic-light. But to get that, I'd've had to go through the same old motions again and again and *again*: con your lines, block your scenes, wait for cues, enter HERE and exit THERE, rehearse rehearse rehearse. BO-ring. The only good thing about it were the cast parties.

So then I tried improv comedy—we had our own Second City-type troupe at Nilnisi, the "Nothingbutt Theater"—but I kept getting the fall-down-giggles at what my partners were up to. I could ad-lib, understand, as spur-of-the-momently as any of them; it was the *interacting* that was the problem. So I tried standup for awhile (Tuesday nights were open-mike) and did just fine as a solo act, but GEE ZUSS: every audience had at least two clowns



with wet T-shirts on the brain, hollering at you to “Take off your top!” (Well maybe not at *you*, but sure as hell at *me*; the turks!) And that was just the college crowd; imagine trying to play nightclubs full of drunk hecklers like that.

So I dropped out and went to work at a bank. Buddy-Buzz tried to talk me out of it, going on about my undeniable stage presence and making the greasepaint roar and all. My mom on the other hand just called me “flighty.” And *she*’s one to talk: my mother’s never been sure what direction she’s heading in for more than a couple of minutes at any moment. Not that she’s a ding-a-ling—she was the first in her family to get a college education; wanted to be Brenda Starr Girl Reporter and scoop the world, but got tied up instead with this Jimmy Cagney look-alike who turned out to be my dad-to-be. And my mom—well I got my eyes and boobs and blonditude from her, so BAM! ‘Nuff said. Whirlwind courtship. And Mom went on to be a “military spouse” for the next eight, nine years. Then a cocktail waitress for, what?—about five more.

So maybe I’m still waiting for my cosmic follow-spot to come along, but *she* sure never got to be Brenda Starr. About all she got out of it (besides me of course) was that year we were stationed in Hawaii. Mom thought Oahu was paradise on roller skates. Not least because I was old enough by then for nursery school, and she could get out of the house. I kind of think she might’ve forgiven my dad for everything—his becoming-an-astronaut obsession, even the occasional extramarital fling—if they just could’ve stayed in Hawaii.

Oh hey! While we were there I got babysat this one time by teenaged Bette Midler! No one *ever* believes me but I swear to God it’s true. I know for a goddam fact that the sitter wore harlequin glasses, smelled like pineapple and had bazooms to spare; so who else COULD it have been?

I’ve always liked her, anyway. Pineapple too. (Ham that I am...)

## Chapter IV

*Lustdaze*

Hi there! How are you tonight? “Mmmm-wah!” (Word of advice: when somebody blows you a kiss, you’re supposed to catch it like a falling star and put it in your pocket.)

Tsk tsK tsK. After that *lapse* in etiquette, I better not find this fridge empty... A full jug! Of sangria! Ooh luscious! All right then, you’re forgiven for muffing my blow-kiss. If you’ll pardon my expressing it that way. (Cackle.)

*¡Arriba arriba!*

(Clink.)

Hee hee! (Slurp.) Speaking of blows and the Nothingbutt Theater, this really ugly but supertalented guy named Joe Biggins and I once did that wonderful sex scene from *Jane Eyre* for them. You know: “I’ve got a blow—I’ve got a blow, Jane!” “Oh, lean on me, sir!” So here I am staggering around under Joe, who goes and *drapes* himself over me; it was disgusting but hilarious. Hee hee hee! “My little friend!” sighs Joe. “Thank you, sir!” gasps me. “Tell me what to do, I’ll try at least to do it!” *Hee hee hee hee hee!*...

[CLUMP]

‘Scuse me. Hee hee! Sorry. Sometimes I’ve just gotta roll around on the floor, in *utter ecstasy*. (And dust bunnies. Have you got a vacuum cleaner? Remind me and I’ll apply it to this nice grey carpet sometime.) Lucky I didn’t spill my drink. But Jeez, that was funny. Joe Biggins! Too bad he was so repulsive. (Cackle.) I think I saw him once years later on *The Merv Griffin Show*, but that was during my margarita phase so who can be sure.

(Slurp.)

That scene from *Jane Eyre*, by the way, is the *second* most romantic one in world literature. The MOST romantic scene is the one in *Tom Sawyer*, where he asks Becky Thatcher if she loves rats and she says no, she hates them! and he says no, he means dead ones you can twirl around on the end of a string, and she says what *she* likes is chewing gum and Tom can chew hers for awhile if he'll give it back to her afterward.

You can't get much more romantic than that.

Or can you? Pour me a little more sangria, and we'll *scrutinize* the situation...

¡Gracias! (Slurp.)

Soooo for instance, I like to take these romantic drip-dry showers. Hop in, scrub-a-glub-dub, hop out—no turning pruny (yuggh)—and let Mother Nature take care of the drying part. 'Cept for my hair; absolutely need a blowdryer for that. (There I go coming to *blows* again, har har.) But I don't believe in towels anymore—can't find any good ones, towels with a RASP to them, that can put roses in all your cheeks.

(Slurp.) I believe I've already mentioned my preference for red lingerie. *Bright* red; the color of your true heart's blood. Though, when I'm feeling demure, I'll unbend far enough to wear shocking pink. Right now I'm in more of a magenta mood. As you can spy for yourself... if I just kind of *loosen*... this one li'l button here. See? Magenta. Goes so well with my blooming complexion, AND I could spill a whole glass of sangria down my front and it wouldn't leave a stain—

Why, may I ask, are you scowling like that?

Oh yes you are! (Slurp.) And yet the very first time I came over here, the very first thing you did was look *right* down my front. Oh yes you did! For which I really ought to have slapped your face (you cad!) except that I'd already bloodied your nose earlier that day.

Maybe you were just staring at the floor, and my boobies kind of *impeded* your viewpoint. Men, of course, always tend to zero in on the boobs or the buns or the legs. And since I'm way down here to begin with, and the boobs and the buns and the legs are all even *further* down, you men can give yourselves a regular neckache doing the zeroing in. Serves you right, too! (Cads!)

So let's change the subject, why don't we?—say, to kissing. (Slurp.)

First guy I ever kissed for real was Jeff Scolley. *No*, not “Jeff's collie!” Oog! I'll have you know the Scolleys were a very crème-de-la-crème family in Marble Orchard. And that, mind you, is the *county seat*—it's not all frog-gigging and sorghum festivals out there, nossir. Jeff's dad was a bigwig buyer at Winslow's Department Store and drove a Buick Riviera, and they lived in a fancy house on Locust Street with lawn flamingoes and everything. Jeff looked exactly like Jonny Quest, only with brown hair and an overbite. Which I got thoroughly acquainted with, har har. No, it was all very innocent, mostly 'cause I left town before my eleventh birthday. (Just as well too, 'cause Jeff was getting fitted for braces at the time.)

So then I moved to the big city Demortuis and “took a shine” to this Cool Boy named Troy Janssen, who was a Laplander through and through. I mean he had a chin-dimple and hair like flax and these tell-tale empty-bedroom eyes—the whole Nordic smörgåsbord. Don't even get me STARTED on Sven-types, those goddam slalom-instructors—I've had my ever-lovin' finger-lickin' fill of them. And Troy Janssen was the very first one.

Well, not my very first one in *that* sense. Not that he didn't *try*—and not just with me by myself: he tried to seduce me AND this friend of mine, simultaneously! But we (um—was it Natalie? no—*Ginny*, that's right, it was Ginny Kirschwasser—boy, talk about your virgins) Ginny and I were too crafty for him, even if he *was* practically a teenager. We allowed ourselves to be lured up to his bedroom, where Troy started taking off his clothes—and how typical! absolutely *tip o' the pickle* that he'd start with his OWN clothes! But we tangled him up in his own shirt and pants before piling on top of him and pinning him down and spanking and tickling him till the bastard hollered Uncle. Or should I say Auntie, since after that encounter he wasn't worth half a damn buck. Never did ask either of us out. Complete waste of chin-dimple talent. Oh, that's a Sven for you, all right.

(Grrrr.)

I think maybe I'll just refasten this button. The late-night buffet is no longer open for your sampling pleasure, and you can lay the blame for that on all those Cool Boys from Scandinavia. So nyaah to them and nyaah to you too, Mister Monsieur...

\*

Um, that was the sangria talking last night.

Also that was me flirting, sort of, in case you missed my drift. I'm a wee bit out of practice. At *flirting*, that is, NOT teasing—I'll own up to being a Flirty Gertie (there's that name again!) but I'd take a heap of offense at being labeled a tease. Maybe you don't think there's a significant difference but I'm here to tell you there *is*, with a big old capital S.

I know what I'm talking about 'cause the Totalbitch Queen of the Teases was a personal acquaintance of mine, back in high school. Her name was Pamela Pillsbury and some cockeyed idiots were stupid enough to say we looked a lot alike. Untrue! There's more to "looking alike" than both of us being blonde and short. (And built; I'll grant you that.) But Pam was a downright trifler when it came to guys, and a Blue-eyed Meanie too: I remember her making this one guy Mike (or was it Mark? or maybe Malcolm? probably all three) break down and *cry* at some dance or other, right there in the gym in front of everybody. Betcha some shrink's gotten rich off *that* little incident.

Pamela Pillsbury—I called her The Dough Girl, partly 'cause I'm so clever-brilliant and partly 'cause her folks had a lot of money but lost most of it, so they ended up in dear old Demortuis where poor Pammy had to snippy-drip to the hoi polloi. And her *voice*! She had the nerve to say I sound like a cartoon chipmunk and maybe I do, but SHE talked like a big bowl of marshmallow fluff left out in a hailstorm.

The funny thing is we actually got to be almost friends (for want of a better word) our senior year, when we ran the Drama Club and wanted to do *Candide* for Operetta, with Pam as Cunegonde and me as Paquette. But of course it was hopeless, what with "Glitter and Be Gay" and the Old Lady's cannibalized buttock and whatnot. They made us put on *Flower Drum Song* instead, for crying out loud! I mean "I Enjoy Being a Girl," but come *on*.

(Cackle.) I *do* enjoy it, you know—being short and cute and built and all. I don't suppose Pam ever did—not among the hoi polloi, anyway. So she ended up a totalbitch tease while *I* got to play Wonderflirt. But even *I* wasn't all that thrilled Being a Girl the first time I "did the deed," which was (cough) with this second-string basketball player named Punchy Frid. His real name was Christopher Robin Frid, but he got called "Punchy" by people who

called him “Christopher Robin” first, and he was all the time fouling out on the basketball court. And not just there, either.

Punchy Frid—no relation to the *Dark Shadows* Barnabas actor, I’m sorry to say. No, he was another slip-sliding Swede. Don’t know if my first time was his too, but he sure didn’t seem to know which end of the rubber went on where. For a week or so afterward I was absolutely convinced I was carrying around Punchy Jr. An empty threat as it turned out (THANK YOU JESUS!) but, to avenge my virtue, I kept old Christopher Robin convinced of it for the *entire goddam winter*. Every time I saw him I’d double over and go “OHHHhhhhh, I think I felt the baby kick!”

(You should’ve seen Punchy try to sink free throws that season, with me in the bleachers clutching my tummy.)

(No, I would *not* call that “teasing.”)

Needless to say, I’ve done a lot better since. Although there’s a helluva lot of Punchy Frids in the world. Not to mention Troy Janssens. And I’m afraid I’m a bit elderly for the Jeff Scolleys and their overbites, nowadays. Not to mention nowanights. A couple weeks ago my friend RoBynne got me into the BoogaBloo Angel, this breakers club downtown, and I found myself spinning round the dance floor with these inner-city *boyhunks* who definitely weren’t Sven-types, fer shure fer shure. But we’re talking beardless fake-I.D. expecting-me-to-drool-over-their-flaunted-lack-of-chest-hair *kiddies* here! Sorry, I don’t feel qualified yet to play the role of Experienced Older Woman They’ll Remember Fondly After They’ve Grown Up À La *Summer of ’42*.

So, like I said, I’m a teensy bit rusty at flirting.

But every once in awhile...

Um. Well. How do I describe this, without getting too naughty or racy or anything? Not that it’s X-rated subject matter, necessarily; just sort of—“intimate.”

Okay. Let’s see. You head out someplace. It could be to a party, or taking a walk in the park, or—or dropping by the corner Pizza Hut, maybe. Whatever. Anyway, you’re alone, by yourself, and then OOH: suddenly you look, and you see, and you *need*—

—and it's like it's meant to *be*. Know what I mean? Like you're singling each other out. So then you touch, and you hold, and you *feel*—

—and it's such a feeling you can't hide it, with your heart going bing-bang-zoom and the rest of you not-to-get-graphic but turning all-sort-of-melty, like the very best butter (as the Dormouse said). All creepy-crawl and goosey-bump and deeLISHusly lavishful—

—but it's not just your ordinary everyday lustdaze. You know? 'Cause it's *romantic*, it's SO romantic and some kind of magical. Right? And then—

—this'll sound sappy but it really DOES get all Rodgers & Hammersteinish. Like some enchanted evening followed by oh what a beautiful morning after a hundred million miracles happ'ning ev'ry day!

(I can't believe I just said that.)

(But it's the *truth*.)

(Hee hee hee!)

Wanna know a secret? A beep-beep toot-toot Bad Girl secret? Lemme whisper in your ear—

When it's good for me, I laugh my fool head off. I go from grins to giggles to guffaws and finally outright *peals* of laughter, the more “intimate” and “lavishful” it gets.

My face feels all tingly. Am I blushing? Oh my God, you've got me *blushing*! Holy Baloney—I haven't had anything to blush about for years and years. Or months and months, anyway.

I forgot how sort of glowy it makes you feel.

Um—

Anything left in that jug of sangria?...

## Chapter V

*The Quicker to Anger*

[CLUMP CLUMP CLUMP]

Peyton? Peyton!!

Jeez, you *would* be slow opening the door the one time I've got my hands full of hot stuff. Lookee here: T G it's F pizza delivery! Provided to you fancy-free by Gimme-a-Tip Express! I've had pizza on my mind all day long. I wanted to start devouring this one in the elevator on the way up here. Sure hope you like sausage 'n' onions 'n' mushrooms 'n' olives 'n' peppers—'n' Heineken! Lookee *here!* I got a taste for Heinies (the drinkable kind) during my tour of duty on the "Belgian Bulge." You're a hands-on pizza eater, I hope? Thank God—this guy I was once with would only eat pizza with a *knife and fork*. That should've tipped me off right there about that guy and his serious problems.

*Skoal!*

(Chomp. Chomp. Chomp. Swig.)

Boy this is fine pizza! Nothing like burnt cheese to put the "yum" in your tummy.

So: here we are, after one complete week of sugardaddyish confessionalizing. You'll notice that *I* brought *you* this fine pizza and this nice six-pack; so you see I'm not a complete freeloading deadbeat. Who'da thunk it? RoBynne O'Ring—have I told you yet about her? that's right, she *is* writing a smutnovel—RoBynne has these wickedly elegant earrings, one saying *Hoodah* and the other *Thawtit*? Now if I had a set like that, I wouldn't have to talk with my mouth full—just point at my earlobes.



(Chomp. Chomp. Chomp. Swig.)

I especially dote on the mushrooms. Guess there's a little hobbit in me. (And boy does he wriggle around!)

So what shall you listen about tonight? Sadie keeps wanting to know why I keep coming over here, and what I'm up to and what you're up to, and getting all exasperated when I act hush-hush secretive about it just to gnarl her. Sadie being a redhead, you see, she's extra gnarlable; the redder the hair the quicker to anger, in my experience. (Being strawberry blonde myself, I have a perfectly serene disposition.)

Yessir! I've been playing dodgeball with Mercedes Benison's temper since I was ten years old. Desi knows how to bounce it around too, and she's only *five*. For instance she had her heart set on buying one of those basset pups next door and Sadie told her forget it, no way we're spending money on "something that craps in the yard," so of course they're over there picking out a puppy *even as I speak*. Gotta hand it to Desi—she can play her mother like a coppertop piccolo. 'Course, she's had a lot of pointers from me: *I can play Ms. Sadie like a carrot-haired concertina*.

(Chomp. Chomp. Swig. Belch.)

Oops! Sorry. And here I've been eating very genteelly too, not glopping all over the floor or anything. (Remind me that I still need to deal with those dust bunnies under your sofa.) When I was in the Brownies back in Marble Orchard, we used to have these burping *contests*—and we were pretty good at it too, for a bunch of well-bred small-town girls. Anyway: ready for another bottle 'n' slice? No? Don't mind watching me have another of each, do you? Attaboy! Okay, ladylike now:

(Nibble. Nibble. Nibble. Sip.)

How's that for demure? Remind me to change into pink undies, next chance I get.

Where was I? Oh right. So what else can I tell you about Sadie that you probably don't already know? She's told me all about *you*—or at least what you were like when she was first here: how you could always be found at Marr's Bar on the Milky Way, at a corner table that no one but your gang of "Dilated Nostrils" was allowed to sit at unless they were hotsy young chiclets which I'm guessing must've included Sadie 'cause she was pretty hotsy

*way back then* (JUST KIDDING, SADIE!). She says you were all the time throwing these “raspberry parties” where everybody had to make up drinking chants on the spot like Cyrano de Bergerac, except that she suspected you made all *yours* up ahead of time; and how you were absolutely larger than life from being so full of yourself (her words, not mine) and how you used to be known as “The Wizard of Schnoz” and could make the walls rattle with your Rabelaisian laughter and would get so damned French (again quoting Sadie) with the hotsy young chiclets, but only for nine days before you’d pay no more attention to whoever the latest one was. Why only nine days?...

Jeez, don’t get sore!

Oh come on, don’t you know me by now? A curious person, remember? Never mind. Simmer down. Have another beer. Think of all those poor folks in the Low Countries, working their behinds off to brew us these Heinies.

*That’s* better. That’s what I call a good Rabelaisian guffaw!

(Clink.)

(Swig.)

So enough about you. Back to *me*, where we belong.

I first got to know Sadie when I went to her sister Alexis’s wedding—*my* sister Alexis I should say, since of course she’s my stepsister too; except that Alexis shuffled straight off to Buffalo where she’s been having babies every other year like obstetrical clockwork, so I don’t really know her that well. Not like Sadie: we really *are* sisters, at least I’ve always thought so and so has she. I mean it was her idea in the first place, that her dad—that’s *AR*nold—and my mom should get together. So the very first time I clap eyes on Sadie, she’s all eager smiles *and* plotting *and* scheming to turn innocent ME into her own little sister. And here’s ME rolling around in hysterics when she introduces herself as “Mercedes Benison.” (Hee hee hee! That name *still* cracks me up.)

I’ve been tagging around after her ever since.

Weirdly enough it’s exactly the same with my mother—I mean you’d think Sadie was Mom’s own blood daughter, and me the wicked but oh-so-cute stepchild. Many’s the time

I've seen them standing side by side, with the exact same pissed-off expression on their faces. "Carrie, can't you DO something about her?" Sadie'd say, and "Don't you think I WOULD if I COULD?" Mom'd say back at her. And there I'd be, going giggle-iggle-iggle at them both. They'd breathe fire and threaten me with everything on the laundry list (especially when I'd throw my red things in with their whites) but it only made me laugh harder.

Jeez. Poor Mom. (Flick; drag.) She *never* knew what to do with me, and I could rile her *so* easy. For example she got herself a nose job, after she left my dad; I couldn't see any difference then and still can't. Pisses her off every time I mention it. "Kelly RebecCA!" she'll say; "Yes ma'am!" I'll say. That's the usual gist of our conversations.

Anyway: she did marry ARnold, who's a big old sweetie (always blushes when I kiss him) and I did come to Demortuis to live with them and Sadie. And then we all took a trip together to Fort Lauderdale, where Sadie and I had an outright fistfight one night when we had to share a motel bed and she kicked me with her big old giraffe-girl feet and then had the *gall* to claim that *I* started it, even though it was blatantly obvious that *she* 'd been born first (the gun-jumping weisenheimer) and so started EVERYTHING.

And then the very next day we all trooped out to breakfast and ran into GOWER, of all people! You know, my dad—just back from Vietnam, too. Well, my mom had a hissyfit like you wouldn't believe: she and Gower went off a little ways and yelled at each other for fifteen minutes or so. Poor ARnold was so embarrassed, and—get this!—Sadie wrapped her arms around me the whole time, as if I were going to be traumatized or something. But it was all just a bore. Proved they were right to split up, I guess. They must've had fights like that when I was little, but I never remember any.

You know, I can't imagine actually growing up in the same house with the two of them. I mean they're my parents and it's not like I don't love them or whatever, but Jeez—I couldn't've done without Sadie and Desi and ARnold and all.

Just like I can't do without this last slice of pizza!

But—I'm willing to share it with *you*.

Attaboy.

(Chomp.)

\*

So what are we going to see tonight? *Never Cry Wolf*? Who's in that? Charles Martin Smith? Oh sure, the Toad nerd from *American Graffiti*. Do you mind if I talk all through the picture? "No more than usual," yeah right...

Not too many people here. Goody! Maybe this time I won't get shushed by a bunch of busybodies. So anyway: I had a weird dream last night. *No*, not from eating too much pizza. It was sort of about Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and my first Halloween dance in high school—HEY! that was the dance where Stuck-Uppity Pillsbury made that guy cry! I just remembered! By golly, it *is* a small world after all.

(Is that supposed to be the Yukon? Sure looks cold. Too bad it's not Antarctica and there won't be any penguins.)

Anyway I went to that dance as a vampire, in chalk-white fright makeup and a long black wig; "Miniature Morticia" they called me. That was the same week I realized I could never be a nurse like Gramma Otto'd been. And I'd wanted to be one, too, till I found out in Freshman Biology you had to chop open a perfectly good worm and check out its *insides*. I mean, GROHsss. You've probably realized by now that I'm no veggie, but I sure might become one if I had to actually wring a chicken's neck and pluck out its feathers and disembowel it from scratch and so on. Which might be handy skills to have if you worked as a *taxidermist*, say, instead of nursing sick people.

(What's Toad doing up there? Is he—oog! He's eating MICE! *Bleahhhhhhh*. Here, take this popcorn; I don't think I'll be wanting any more...)

Well thanks a lot for picking the "unusual" movie. I suppose now I'll dream about running naked through the snow with a pack of hungry wolves after me—nothing symbolic about *that*, of course. Or about snacking on rodents!—I'll never be able to watch Tom & Jerry again, or Pixie & Dixie or Speedy Gonzales, without losing my appetite.

My roommate at Nilnisi U. was a reincarnated fieldmouse. Missy Trace! She wasn't bad-looking, just sort of mousily nondescript. And nervous and timid and shy and naïve. So naturally Joe Biggins tormented her every chance he got—hiding behind curtains or around corners and then leaping out at her, putting her in headlocks and half-nelsons—"C'mon,

Missy!” he’d say, “Two falls outta three! Winner has to give the loser a sponge bath!” I thought Missy was literally going to FAINT. One night I heard her squeaking in her sleep: “No, Joe! Don’t, Joe!”—but she acted annoyed when I woke her up, so maybe Joe Biggins was the sum total of her erotic fantasies. (Yuggh.)

Um—do you think we could go back to your place for awhile? I’m all spookacified...

I still haven’t told you about my dream last night—how Lonnie Fesso went to that Halloween dance half as Dr. Jekyll and half as Mr. Hyde, and monopolized me between them. Boy, could they shake it—which Lonnie made awfully clear when he took a swing at this Jack-o’-lantern piñata, busting it open and starting a riot by clouting all the candy-grabbers with his piñata stick. I mean, police cars came and everything. I’m surprised I don’t dream about that dance more often.

I’ve had some *really* weird dreams about some of the hotshots I’ve been out with. Lonnie Fesso wasn’t the ultimate hotshot, not by a longshot. Some of my weirder dreams are like scary movies, and I just love scary movies, but some of the dreams—

I think I told you that after I saw *The Shining*, this guy I was with dreamed these bugs were—yeah, crawling all over him all night long. Well, that was the same guy who’d only eat pizza with a knife and fork. I met him while I was working at the bank in Demortuis, and they told me to get a batch of logsheets copied at the corner Kinko’s. And there he was, this Viking god with curly golden locks and jutjawed chin-cleavage—like Siegfried Do-Right of the Nibelung Mounties. Guess what his name was? Okay, brace yourself:

JIM MIDGE.

Now if that isn’t a bass-ackwards tip-off, I don’t know what is.

But oh my God—

—he had the COOwullest smile—

—his hands were cool too, downright cold in fact, but it was summertime so they felt amazing, and he could use them like a Swedish masseur. He was rigidly muscular from head to toe and everything he wore was always spotless, he had a thing about sanitation and was always emptying my ashtrays, wiping them clean, wherever we went. He himself didn’t smoke and mostly drank ice water (and would *chew* the ice) but he did introduce me to

zombies that summer. You know: rum and apricot brandy. And every time we had one he'd say "Bottoms up!" and sweep me off my feet and out of my *shoes*, even, when we kissed—Jim being so tall, you see, and my arms around his Nordic neck till he'd turn me into molten oleo with his Iceman Cometh hands and lips and...

...I thought he was *so* romantic...

...I thought he might be THE one AND only...

That bit about being alone-in-a-cone-of-cosmic-light? I thought that was going to be US. Alone together, forever and ever...

Even though he had these teensy-tiny tattoos on his fingertips, spelling out some ex-girlfriend's name forwards and backwards; I was willing to overlook that. I mean, he could make my heart *squeal*...

(Um—would you pour me another one, please? This next part gets kind of dry.)

Okay. Jim claimed he was from this shrunken old ghost town out west. He wanted me to go out there with him, not to visit anybody or anything, but (I thought) to come to grips with his inner self or whatever. And I was all supportive and couldn't *wait* to go. So we headed way out west, to this place straight out of *The Last Picture Show*: all shades of grey and dry as dust, like some Nowhere Land. And there I was with my Nowhere Man.

He took me to this abandoned-looking motel, and I don't know if Norman Bates was the manager or if in fact anyone else was around. So, um, we went to the room at the end and Jim took the bed apart till he found these mattress handles and smiled that COOwull smile of his and meanwhile I'm unpacking his bag and I find four silk neckties and I'd never seen him wearing *any* kind of tie and, um, there was also this black nylon stocking, just the one, and I, um, I wrapped it around my neck like a goddam *scarf* after undressing for him, and don't ask me what he may have had in mind when we got there, but—

—anyway. We just went to bed, as per usual.

But then he woke me up at some godawful hour and said we had to get out of there right away, so I went to wash up 'cause I couldn't see straight and he came into the bathroom with me and watched me wash and then I put on my glasses and saw him in the mirror and he looked all ashenfaced like he'd lost something he'd wanted and I was going to ask him what

but it was 2 AM and I just had to yawn and then he grabbed me and shouted “WAKE UP!!” at me, “*WAKE UP!!*” and, and, he, um, well, he sort of—“hit me upside the head,” as the saying goes. Two or three times, or maybe it was four—I wasn’t exactly keeping score. It broke my glasses but not my skull—too thick-headed, you know. Ha ha. And I’m kind of used to bouncing off walls, you know, without anybody’s help. But...

...I don’t know if he felt sorry about it. ‘Cause, um, we didn’t have a whole lot of conversation afterwards. ‘Cause he started throwing up bigtime, see, and then he sort of stopped and I, um, I sort of left him there, in that bathroom, with, um, with his head, well, in the, down the, you know...

I’ve never told anyone any of this before. Not even Sadie.

I don’t want to talk about it anymore.

But I will say this.

It hurt, it hurt like hell, but it could’ve been a lot, lot worse. Right? So no tears shed. See? No tears. I swore I’d never cry about him. And I haven’t, ever. Not once.

## Chapter VI

### *Like a Couple of Horses*

Hi. Figured I'd find you at home on a Sunday morning. Here: I baked you some brownies. Peanut butter swirls.

You know those people who say if you get something really weird off your chest, you'll quit dreaming about it? Those people are *wrong*. So I got out of bed and headed for the oven—not to stick my head in it, but to bake swirls. My first in months; it's been too hot out to be baking in. Wasn't so bad in the wee hours. I shocked the beejeebers out of Sadie, though; she thought wacky burglars had got into the kitchen.

Don't mind me dropping by this early, do you? Well I should hope not. Got any coffee? Want me to make some, then? I make a *darn* good cup of coffee. Learned how from my Gramma Otto, who learned from her Grandma Wunderlich; so that's *darn* good cups of coffee unto the fourth generation. Let me at that percolator.

The trick is to never let your raw ingredients forget who's boss, right up to the point where you transform them into coffee or brownies or whatever. Keep the upper hand, every step of the way. Gramma started me off with the fine arts of Stirring and Tasting, back when I was so little I had to use a footstool to reach the top of the stove. I had my own personal potholder with my name on it, and my own wooden spoon and everything; so I was the little big cheese of *that* kitchen, and everything I Stirred and Tasted knew it.

Gramma Otto was one hell of a cook—*heck* of a cook; sorry, Gramma. (Sunday, you know.) She could do things with parts of a chicken I don't think were intended to be edible.



I have all her recipes, so if you ever want Fried Gizzards à la Marble Orchard, just let me know. Back before I was born they kept their own flock of live chickens, and Gramma got to do all the wringing and plucking and beheading and so forth. THANK GOD that was passé by the time I showed up, 'cause *I* would've had to help her.

You know something? I've never been with you in the morning before—'cept that first day sliding down the corridor. I've never seen you drink a cup of coffee. I don't know if you take cream or sugar or stir it with a cinnamon stick or *anything*... Black? Really? Me too. 'Cept I add a ton of Sweet 'n' Low. Lucky I always carry a ton of it in my poke.

So—good to the last drop—

(Clink.)

What was I talking about? Oh, chickens. All we had to do was go down to Market Square and buy poultry that was already headless and featherless—raw stuff for a master chef to work her abracadabra on. (Including the gizzards.) In Marble Orchard we had these *chowdowns*, let me tell you: eggs-over-easy and biscuits-and-gravy and ham loaf and meat loaf and pot roast and croquettes and apple brown Betty. Not all at one meal, but Gramma always put plenty on the table and I was taught to clean my plate. And I always did and Gramma'd say I had an appetite like a couple of horses, but with me being a hyperactive energy bundle it all got burned off right away, and I was always ready for second helpings.

Speaking of which, those peanut butter swirls look soooo yummy... I think I might just nibble on the outer edge of one... Oh God—oh Jeez—oh *bliss!* I can't believe I used to chainscarf these, and not stop to savor each 'n' every crumb!

*Away in a cage eating sunflower seeds  
The little brown gerbil has all that he needs  
But gerbils have appetites vaster than vast—  
No way that my gerbil can make those seeds last!*

See what a brownie can DO for you? Give your tongue wings!

(Don't let me eat another one, please.)

Anyway: "family" was a big thing with Gramma Otto. She kept harping on about it, probably 'cause Mom was off in Demortuis being a cocktail waitress and having nose jobs.

Meanwhile here's me in Marble Orchard with these old family pictures all over the house, and a double extra helping in my room—up high where I couldn't get at them. I mean here I am sitting at my desk, pretending to do my arithmetic homework or whatever, and if I glance up there's someone like "Aunt Claudia" or "Uncle Stanley" glaring down at me. We're talking Gramma's aunts and uncles here, the Wunderlichs; it was their house originally. Every darn one of them had an abruptly-pointed chin.

They also had a professional family quartet back in the olden days, and would sing things like "Go Tell Aunt Rhody Her Old Grey Goose Is Cooked" at funerals all over Booth County. Their leader was Uncle Willie Wunderlich, the one I wish I'd known; they say he was a real charmer. Taught himself to play the piano and mandolin and saxophone, and wore boutonnieres in the Lutheran church on Sundays *that weren't Easter*, and belonged to every social club in town and escorted lots of eligible widows around, but never married any of them so got chalked up as a "fickle lazybones"—all this while running a grocery store by day and singing "Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie" with his barbershop cronies by night. A real charmer!

He died the year I was born but I think a lot of him lived on in my Uncle Buddy-Buzz, who certainly cornered the charm market so far as *my* male relatives are concerned. He didn't have any competition from my Hungerford cousins, Aunt Ollie's boys. One of my truly deep regrets is that the Hungerfords never cherry-bombed the old chicken coop at Gramma and Grampa's—they were forever *saying* they were going to, but never got around to *doing* it. (Is that a distillation of men, or what? No offense.) *I'd* have done it, if they'd've let me. Ha! I pleaded just to be allowed to set fire to the trash in the *incinerator*, for crying out loud. Finally Gramma let me, and a week later Booth County BANNED outdoor burning! (What a bunch of spoilsports.)

Those Hungerfords. They convinced me that a little girl who "looked just like me" had coughed herself to death in Gramma's bedroom closet, years ago, and that her ghost would swoop out around midnight and smell like rotten eggs and so on. I tried to catch her doing it a bunch of times, but never managed once.

Actually I think the first part was true—what with all the TB and typhoid fever and foot-and-mouth disease, way back when. There were all these Wunderlich markers at Rosewood Cemetery saying Taken from us too soon Alas and the like. I only went to two funerals there: Grampa's during a blizzard, and Gramma's during a heatwave. Oh and my cousin Mickey Hungerford's, who "bought the farm in Cambodia" as his charming brothers always put it.

One time we buried a guinea pig in a shoebox in the back yard—oh don't look like that, we *had* to. Though I'll admit he was so dull you could hardly tell he'd died. And my old cat Whippy ended up in honest-to-goodness Kitty Heaven, which is a pet plot over by Welmer's Lake. I had to leave Whippy behind when I moved to Demortuis 'cause she was a country cat and didn't care for city life. Gramma renamed her "Margaret," which incidentally was her mother's name (Gramma's, that is; Whippy's mother was named "Puff"). Originally I'd called Whippy "Ann-Margret" 'cause she was so orange, but then Buddy-Buzz made all these wisecracks about kittens with a whip...

Jeez, this has gotten to be a *cheerful* conversation. Pretty soon you'll have me singing about old grey cooked geese. So let's change the subject. And have another brownie...

\*

It was nice of you to take me out to dinner. Though I'll appreciate it even more if you'll "regulate" me when dessert comes; there's this little item (with spaghetti straps!) on a hanger at home that I hope I'll still be able to fit inside, if you ever want to take me somewhere dressy-up sometime.

But I like this place! This "trattoria"—rolls right off the tongue, doesn't it? So *Italiano*-ey. Puts me in mind of when I was allowed to add my first "soup-song" of garlic in Gramma's kitchen:

*Sing me a soup-song of garlicky cloves  
that season ev'rything from pickles to loaves  
of bread fit for I-tal-i-an eating—  
(best avoided at vampire meetings).*

Can I have a bite of your manicotti? The one on your plate, har har. I always swipe a bite from the plate of whoever buys me dinner. And by "bite" I do mean "half." Thanks... ooh tasty! deeLISHus! Where would we be without tomato sauce, I ask you? Bereft and bereaved, believe me. Breaking bread with the bleached bones of brute beasts, "you better you better you bet." (Hee hee! Sorry. When my stomach's full of good food, I tend to get a bit silly.)

Okay! To cap it off, I think I'll order some spumoni—oh all right, gelato then—oh come *on!* Regulate shmegulate—what's the matter with one tiny dish of gelato? Are you hinting maybe you think I look *fat*? You better not (better not bet). Now that I'm on the Sweet 'n' Low chariot, those nasty calories sizzle away with a ZAP and a FLASH, just like my li'l flat feet used to do when I was a kid, wherever they set me down on them—PX, County Courthouse, downtown Honolulu. I never knocked anything over (till I met you) but a lot of stuff did tend to *totter* as I went galloping past it.

That's what got Gramma started on her Absolutely Not, Young Lady! list. In extreme cases she'd even make me "take my oath," which is to say I'd have to swear I wouldn't do something on the family Bible. (Well you know what I mean.)

(Why yes, I *would* like a lemon sorbet, thank you kindly.)

My Absolutely Not list got pretty elaborate, but nothing like my friend Janey Orrick's. She was the *intensest* person I've ever known, even more than Sadie; always blurting out things the rest of us barely dared to say under our breath—this at the age of seven, eight, nine.

(Hey, this sorbet isn't half bad. Maybe it's really gelato in disguise.)

Janey's folks were all the time grounding her for "sassing back." Then they forbade her to watch some TV show ever again—*Laugh-in* or *The Smothers Brothers*—so she went and swallowed an entire bottle of Bufferin after writing this dramatic suicide note: "If that's the way it's going to be, what's the point of being alive?" Janey was an existentialist before we even knew there were such things.

Got her stomach pumped, too. The Orricks pretended it was due to food poisoning but the whole town knew the truth, and a couple months later they moved away to Utah. Janey wrote me one postcard about how much life sucked in Salt Lake City. I kept that

postcard for the longest time; it had a picture of the Fifth Dimension on it. You know, as in “Up Up and Away in My Beautiful, My Beautiful Bal-looon...”

Her leaving really did suck ‘cause I finally got my two ponies shortly afterward and Janey would’ve been a blast to go riding with—hurdling fences and chasing steeples.

I’d been lobbying for a horse ever since I first came to live with Gramma and Grampa. Make that *two* horses, so the first one wouldn’t get lonesome. And why stop at two? Why not a whole barnful, like Ruthie Mundt had? Ruthie was the coolest girl in Marble Orchard—the first one I knew personally who got talked about for “putting out,” which Janey and I thought meant French-kissing.

(Well it involves putting out your *tongue*, doesn’t it?)

ANYway, my standard demand every birthday and Christmas was for a couple of ponies, but it took years to get them and I had to make do with the Two Timmys. Real Life Timmy was a stuffed horsie—half-stuffed, actually; I’ve still got him—while Invisible Timmy was a magnificent bucking bronco that only I could see, of course. (Don’t ask me why I named them after the kid on *Lassie*. Probably ‘cause he looked Scandinavian.)

Finally everybody chipped in—this was after Grampa died, and Gramma went back to work part-time at the County Hospital, and Buddy-Buzz began to hit it big as a set designer—and they bought me a couple of beauties: a pinto I named Supertimmy and a sorrel we called New Junebug, since Mom and Aunt Ollie’d had one named Junebug when they were kids. I loved them both so much, those ponies, and I got to be a pretty fair equestrienne despite a whole slew of additions to my Absolutely Not list. But, you know, you have to *clean up* after genuine hossflesh. And that kind of loses its novelty-charm after the third or fourth time.

Obviously they got left behind too when I moved to Demortuis, and after awhile they were sold to the Hooplemans. Talk about dumbfounding! Cathy Sue Hoopleman was such a drip. I mean literally: she had this constant case of the sniffles, every type of allergy and hay fever you could think of. Plus she was completely suggestible: when we’d play with her Barbie dolls I could remark that Ken looked like his *brain* was exposed, and Cathy Sue would choke right up and start dripping like an open faucet. I’m sure if she ever tried to ride a horse, she’d’ve sneezed herself right out of the saddle.

Her nose was as red as a Borscht Belt beet. I always envied that about her...



## Chapter VII

*The Envy of the Neighborhood*

They say it's supposed to be cooler tomorrow. But like Orphan Annie put it, that's always a day away. (And the goblins'll get ya if ya don't watch out.)

What makes it doubly frustrating is the idea that there's people out there cooler off than *we* are, RIGHT NOW. And I don't just mean wolves in the Yukon or Eskimo Piemakers. Is there some *religious* reason why you object to having an air conditioner?

All right, all right, don't have a spaz; it was just a suggestion. Quit being such a grouch.

I mean, it's not like I'm some pampered la-de-da debutante who's never been *un*-air-conditioned. We didn't have one in Marble Orchard; we had porches instead. Front porch, side porch, back porch—all full of gliders and rockers and suchlike. We'd sit out there to catch the breeze and swat the bugs and gulp lemonade and so on.

(I'm going to make myself a little drink. You want anything? Did you get more Gilbey's? Hey, this is *vodka*! Oog! Don't you know how they *make* vodka? They pour rubbing alcohol over a peck of Polish potatoes! Oh well—thank God for V-8 juice, at least. Two Bloody Marys coming up—oops—um, make that one Bloody and one Hemophiliac.)

So anyhoo... what was I talking about? What do you mean, "when?" All the time! Oh right, the House With All the Porches. It wasn't that enormous indoors, but we had all those porches plus a treehouse out back and four acres of yard, including this big honking vegetable garden. Flowers too, but mostly veggies and berries and other edibobbles. For the longest time they had me convinced it was *fun* to work in that garden, pulling weeds and stuff.



It even had a scarecrow called Clem, but he was mostly decorative so there was also this bell on a pole you could ring to send the crows packing. At family get-togethers I always got to ring the bell to signal dinnertime, 'cause I was the youngest one there. And every time it just tore up Jerry-the-Creep Hungerford's jealous guts, 'cause he'd've been the youngest if I hadn't happened along.

(Slurp.)

That garden. The stuff we grew—everything imaginable, right down to sprigs of parsley. Grampa Otto used to spend hours tending it and winning prizes for it and calling it “the envy of the neighborhood,” before he got sick. We didn't grow it just to make the neighbors green-eyed, or even just to save money; Gramma'd say you could “taste the goodness” when something was homegrown. But then she always insisted on storebought potato salad, too; so there you are.

(Slurp.)

There was a brook out back that was too shallow for doing anything really adventurous, but you could paddle your feet in it on hot days. It was out along the railroad tracks. I got so used to hearing trains go by at night that I had a hard time falling asleep after I moved to Demortuis. We'd put pennies on the tracks, 'cause Dougie-the-Kook Hungerford claimed you could derail a train that way; but none ever did. (Doug's spent a few years in rehab, though.)

(Want a refill? These V-8 Marys kind of grow on you. Must be my green thumb.)

Have I told you yet about the treehouse? It was an actual sure-enough House in the Trees, straddling these colossal twin oaks I forget how many feet high, with real shingles on the roof and real glass in the window frames, and this real long rope to swing from. I remember the first time the Hungerfords took me up there, to show me the swing and where to jump from and so forth. “You've got to hold on tight, with both hands,” Mickey's saying (he hadn't bought the farm yet) when Jerry the Creep butts in: “Yeah! Otherwise you'll wrap the rope around your neck and *hang* yourself!”

“Like Uncle Murgatroyd?” I say, and ad-lib this neat-o story about a mythical uncle who *had* hanged himself on the treehouse rope after getting jilted by a cruel figure skater

named Heidi. Boy, did I lay it on—even had the Creep half-believing it, till I went “Heavens to Murgatroyd” in a Snagglepuss voice, and then he got mad and broke every commandment in the book by *shoving* me (the bastard!) so I stomped on his creepy bastard foot, and while he was hopping around it was easy to trip him and knock him on his sorry ass.

I learned some *good* cusswords that day.

(Slurp.)

(Thirsty tonight.)

I spent a lot of time up in that treehouse by myself. As much or more than in my regular bedroom, which was the little one back by the linen cupboard. It had this bitesized four-poster bed, just right for somebody my height but with the noisiest springs you ever did hear. Luckily this was ages before I started doing any serious bed-squoinketing. (I did lure Jeff Scolley up to the treehouse once or twice, but nothing happened—unless you count “overbite exploration.”)

The bed had a velveteen patchwork quilt and these enormous feather pillows from which tiny wisps of fluff kept escaping, tra la, off to Feather Adventureland. I inherited them all—bed, quilt, pillowfluff—from Gramma Otto's Aunt Livy. Who would be my great-great- (or maybe it's great-*great*-great-) aunt, if you're still trying to follow this. Everything in that room, practically, had been hers. And as I was reminded umpty times, “Aunt Livy kept it in apple-pie order every day of her life, even when she was over eighty.”

(I didn't, when I was eight.)

(Slurp.)

I guess I can be a little homesick about the place, now. But GEE ZUSS it got to be boring. Not a whole lot ever happened in Marble Orchard. I'm not saying it was a bad place to live; just that it was so DEADLY DULL. My mom fell into the nostalgia trap a few years ago and made ARnold move back there with her after Gramma died. And now Mom's stuck out there, in the house she grew up in, bored out of her skull.

(Slurp.)

You know what that's like? Always feeling restless? At loose ends? Like you're wasting your life? Despite knowing, deep down in your heart of hearts, that you're *better*

than well-adjusted? And uniquely unforgettable? Except that other people have somehow lost sight of that fact—lost you in the crowd, and your name from their brains—despite your being the Onliest One of a Kind of Distinct Significance?

(Do I have a way with words, or what?)

Told you I wasn't any ignoramus. You may not think it to look at me, but *I* am a voracious reader. Been one all my life. Even when I was little, I collected hilarious vocabulary words like "voracious" and "obsession"—and "sotto voice," which I thought was the way you talk when you get drunk.

(Har har.)

I read this book once that had a character who was a "B-girl." I thought that meant she dressed up in a little bumblebee outfit—a striped teddy with a stinger on her tush instead of a Playboy cottontail, and spring-antennas instead of rabbit ears.

But it's not like that, not at all. It's just lame and bleak and nothing but near dowels. That's how I thought "ne'er-do-wells" was pronounced, when I was a kid and didn't realize how goddam accurate I was. "Near dowels" is right, all right; as near as you can get. Till you think there's nothing left for you but Chinese Communism: no more pretty clothes, no more steppin' out, no more parties or clubs or fun of any kind. Spend New Year's Eve alone in some crummy hole with a leaky ceiling and a bottle of tequila but not enough lime so that next morning you feel like molten lava laced with barbed wire is pouring in through your eyeballs but even *that's* better than, than—than ending up a raddled old callous old star attraction at some, some—some Ramada Inn when you're forty and feeble-minded and fat as a goddam sumo wrestler while everybody else *STILL* think they're cooler off than you are, right now, all the time, summer and winter, and you wanna know something I don't care I don't CARE I don't GIVE a good goddam *I don't* it makes no diff to ME—

Wha'?

Oh. Kleenex. Thanks.

(—*phonk*—)

(Shniff.)

(By the way, you're almost out of vodka...)

\*

I'm sorry I called you a grouch last night. And got so hotheaded. And soppy-sad and everything; I'm not usually like that. I should've told you about Mao, the cat I adopted in Mount Oriela. After I had him fixed he'd still chase all the unspayed pudgytats, but when he caught them he'd get this baffled-looking "What do I do *next*?" expression on his face.

Near dowel!

Anyway, I sure hope Gramma Otto wasn't listening last night. Though if there really is a Heaven Hereafterthis, I'd expect her to be watching nonstop episodes of her "stories"—*The Edge of Night* and *As the World Turns*, that is. When I was a drama major her fondest wish was that I'd get cast someday on one of those soaps—playing some diabolical temptress with a name like "Margo" or "Serena." (Though if I know casting agents, they'd've made me the *femme fatale's* zany little henchgirl.)

Gramma had other stories too, ones she made up and told me at bedtime. Most were about my dolls—well I didn't have *dolls*, as such, unlike Cathy Sue Hoopleman and her hundreds of Barbies; I had a Raggedy Ann and Timmy the half-stuffed horse. And Rusty Bugs, who started off as a white rabbit, but got more and more oxidated-looking.

Finally Gramma said, "Hawney" (that's me) "it's high time Bugs went back to being a white rabbit." So she put him in the washing machine and then hung him out on the clothesline by his ears—it looked kind of painful but so *cute*. Then suddenly this windstorm came out of nowhere and blew most of the laundry into the garden. Not Rusty Bugs, though; we never found any trace of him except his ears—still pinned to the clothesline.

Boy did I have hysterics. It was SO ridiculous. Poor Gramma, of course, thought my pore heart must be busted; so she started telling me these bedtime stories about all the adventures Bugs was having in Whiskaway. He was known as "Fearless Earless," never paid any attention to what grown-ups told him, and ran around Feather Adventureland with a pack of wild dust bunnies.

(I keep forgetting about the ones under your sofabed.)

(What's in this pitcher? Lemonade? *Country Time*! Did you mix this with your own hands, just for me? How thoughtful of you! Not to mention atmospheric! And much more

wholesome than potato drippings.)

I wish Gramma'd written down her Whiskaway stories. Or that I had, instead of all those dumb haikus and book reports and how-I-spent-my-summer-vacation assignments. What do you teachers *do* with those things, anyway? And how come they were always due on rainy days? No matter how carefully I took them to school, the ink would always run.

Actually I liked going to school, even in the rain, 'cause there were lots of other kids around; I don't do "alone" too well, outside of treehouses. Sure been to a *lot* of schools, though. Let's see: nursery school on Oahu, kindergarten in Santa Ana, first through fifth grades in Marble Orchard, sixth at Oswald Elementary in Demortuis, then Whitman Junior High and Bonum High School—hey ray Bonum Vivants!—then two years in Keening at the University of Nilnisi, then awhile at the School of Hard Knocks—I'm running out of fingers here—then off and on as a philosophy major then a poli sci major then a psych major then a sociology major at Windohwa U. down in Mount Oriela!

(Whew!)

"So what have I learned?"

What to watch out for, if nothing else.

The good and the bad; the ups and the downs; your haves and your wants. How to count your blessings if you want to be able to count *on* them. Keep one eye out for pitfalls and drawbacks and mousetraps; and the other eye open for...

...well...

...for Power and Light, I guess.

Like the first time I saw Chicago by night, when I was only nine and Buddy-Buzz drove me around and around the Loop—all these palace-like cathedral-type towering electric infernos were blazing away at me on every side: neon and freon and shivaree bewitchery. Sweet Jesus! It never got like that in Marble Orchard or Demortuis. Or Keening or Mount Oriela or even *Istanbul*, for crying out loud.

That was the first time I experienced Power and Light like that; the first and only time, for years and years. Till you know what? Just a couple weeks ago my friend RoBynne—I *still* haven't told you about her, have I? Well, I'm not going to try to describe RoBynne

O'Ring; nothing I could say would give you an idea anywhere *near* what she's like. Suffice it to say (hee hee! "suffice") that when I went to work at SMECK in my dowdy little duds, and caught sight of RoBynne boppin' around doin' her thing (she's an X-ray courier) wearing the very *heighth* of New Wave fashion—well, I was so sick with envy I just about ate my own pea-green liver. Seriously!

But it was open-and-shut obvious we were meant to be kindred spirits. So I staged this little routine about my shoes being stolen by a medical foot-fetishist, and before you knew it RoBynne was showing me where to shop and what to buy and how to wear it, in Elsew after dark—going to breakers clubs like the BoogaBloo Angel, where you spin and you soar and you're in the very heart of the hub, surrounded by Power and Light, outRAYgeously specTACuular to the bitchen twitchen max! And not just to be trendy, either—

—but To Be.

And *How* To Be.

*That* is refreshing.

When you can stand in front of a mirror again, staring yourself square in that eye you're keeping open; and it doesn't really matter what you've got on (it can be nothing at all!) so long as you can say *and* think *and* feel *and* mean:

GETTA LOADA ME NOW!

'Cause then you can quit your yappin' and MAKE it happen, any old how...



## Chapter VIII

### *Lapsing into Indolence*

Hi there. Hold still a sec—

[WHUMP]

*That's* for being a man and not having cramps!

Oh, have I not mentioned my habit of clueing in guys about the joys of womanhood, using my fist and your stomachs? Well consider yourself warned.

(Oh please, it was just a love tap.)

Urggh... If it's all the same to you, I'm gonna curl up here in a little ball. And no it's not a fetal position—faaaar from it. Tip-o'-the-pickle, though, that the moment it *finally* starts cooling off outside, *I* should get the Nuisance. I used to collect names for it—like ragtime, Holy Week, and “red sails in the sunset.” Now I just call it the Nuisance.

(Goddam cramps.)

But better, I suppose, than the alternative. Be just my puddleducking luck to have Punchy Frid Jr. show up now, eight years late.

Peyton? I didn't hurt you too much when I tapped you, did I? Oh good. Got any of that lemonade left?... Thanks. (Slurp.)

I really do like this big old sofabed of yours; it's so comfy. 'Member the first time I flung myself onto it and said here I lie, all bashful and defenseless, and you said I was about as bashful as an earthquake? Jeez, that seems like long ago. Instead of—what?—two weeks? 'N' then I said something about always sleeping on my back, didn't I? Boy, *that*



was real demure. Must've had on scarlet skivvies that night for sure.

(Did you just laugh at me?)

(Well, you better not.)

Actually when I do sleep on my back is when I have those really weird dreams. That one in particular about being in a bed like a drawer that gets hauled open, rolling forward, and there's this spotlight shining down on me. (My "cosmic cone of light" at last, har har.) And it's almost like a molten-lava hangover, though I don't feel it; but I can't close my eyes either. I try to blink, and there's that light and those faces up above, all around, staring down at me, their mouths hanging open. *Oh no* they say, *Oh no*, but I can't hear the words.

(Maybe they think I'm Yoko.)

(Slurp.)

When we went to see Gramma Otto for the last time, me and Mom and Aunt Ollie, we were chatting about this and that, the goings-on at the Booth County Hospital—which was Gramma's second home anyway, she being an ex-RN and knowing half the docs there when they were just medical students—all of a sudden Gramma turned to me and squeeze my hand, squeeze it so tight I can still feel it, and started jabbering about this dresser in her sewing room. "The third drawer from the top, toward the back—"

We never did figure out what she was talking about. There was nothing in that drawer but a bunch of bobbins and safety pins.

(Hunh.)

With Grampa it'd been different; he was bedridden at home for a long time. At first he could move around using a walker, doing the *whump!-tump-shuffa* up and down the hall. All the floorboards in that house creaked anyway, so it was quite processional-sounding: "here comes Grampa"—"there goes Grampa." He'd *whump!-tump* into my room and we'd play indoor basketball, tossing papercrumps into a wastebasket up on top of a bureau. Everything had to be just so: the crumps had to be regulation size, and you could only throw them in certain ways, and the wastebasket had to be set at a precise distance. It was a lot of fun.

But then he had the second stroke and got bedridden. Though he claimed he was just

“loafing” like in a hammock, and would be up by-and-by—would definitely escort Gramma and me to church on Sunday. He’d have me polishing his best wingtips over and over, week after week, but he never put them on.

When I was little he looked like a giant: big arms, big hands, big stomach, big lap. When that man hugged you, brother, you were *hugged*. And boy could he sweat—have to change his shirt three or four times on a summer day. The clothesline would be full of them, all a-flap, and I’d sit underneath in a box and pretend it was a full-rigged schooner.

(Yawn.)

‘Scuse me. Grampa gave me my very first taste of beer, when I wasn’t even six yet. *Falstaff* beer, I’m sorry to say; but you gotta start someplace. He drank it out of bottles, never from cans, and he’d let me finish the last few drops. “Now it’s a dead soldier,” he’d call the empty bottle. Emptied quite a few of ‘em, too; killed off a whole Falstaff army. There on the side of the big silver mailbox out front, in gigantic black letters for all the world to see, was B.L.OTTO. For Bertram L. Otto, Sr.

(Yawn.)

It was when he found out his only son, Bertram L. Jr. (that’s Buddy-Buzz) was more than just roommates with a guy called Gig in Chicago, that Grampa had his first stroke. And Buddy-Buzz never came back to Marble Orchard again, ‘cept for funerals. So Gramma moved across the hall into his room, ‘cause Grampa started going *Oooohhhh* in the middle of the night. “Snoring something fierce,” Gramma called it.

(Yawn.)

Course, if you listen to my cousin Jerry, he’ll try to convince you it wasn’t about Buddy-Buzz at all, but ‘cause I almost had that accident with the skyrockets that one Fourth of July. When I should’ve ended up with a terrible legscar but didn’t, but Grampa—

Hunh. That’s Jerry-the-Creep Hungerford for you. Being his usual sicko crybaby creepazoid self. Last I heard, he’d become *a lawyer in Cleveland*. So ‘nuff said about him.

(YAWN.)

‘Scuse me.

That guy called Gig—he and Buddy-Buzz were both “husky” fellows. I stayed with them the first time I saw Chicago by night ‘n’ everything. Now I’m pretty petite, y’know, and was even petiter then, but there was barely enough room for me at their place—what with their personal heftiness, ‘n’ all those sideboards ‘n’ breakfronts full of knickknacks ‘n’ paddywhacks. “That’s what you get when you’re a crackerjack,” Buddy-Buzz said.

Always had to have nothing but the best—first class all the way. In his apartments, at restaurants, on his stage sets. “True Effect,” he called it. That first trip to Chicago, he took me to gape at the fancy highrises on Lake Shore Drive. “You wait and see,” he said, “we’ll end up there someday, ‘n’ have the lights at our feet.” That’s what he said—‘n’ he did, too, for awhile. Not on the Gold Coast, but ritzy enough for him to say it was “undeniably chic.” Which he did. ‘Cause it was. ‘Cause he wouldn’t settle for anything less.

‘N’ now he’s in a hospice.

“Why?” Why do you *think*?

God knows I don’t know what to think. ‘Cept it’s incomprehensibubble. I mean, if that’s the way things can turn out, how can you *cope*?

*He* still insists it’s just a bad case of flu. What Gramma used to call “the grippe.” Sounds like a good name for it, if you ask me. Better than having to avoid all mention of braids or grades or parades or arcades, or—or lemonades. Or the ace of spades.

(Yawn.)

I called the hospice on my birthday. Asked him how he was doing. Buddy-Buzz says, “I’m lapsing into indolence.” So then I asked, more or less, how to come to grips with The Grippe. And he says, “No regrets, darling. Give me half a chance ‘n’ I’ll do it all over again, just the same.”

Jeez. I mean—

(Yawn.)

Sufferin’ Sisyphus...

\*

Nguh—

Wha'...? Did I drift off? What time is it? Eleven-*thirty*? Not in the morning?!... oh thank God. Sadie would've had kittens. And that on top of our just getting that puppy... Where's my poke? There's my poke. Point us in the direction of the potty, willya please?...

(*Mrmph glub shmug.*)

(PATOOEY!)

Good thing I always pack my toothbrush wherever I go. I always brush my teeth, first thing in the morning—*then* eat breakfast. I'm not awake till my teeth are brushed, and I sure can't enjoy breakfast if I'm not awake. (Do I brush them again after breakfast? No, then I smoke a cigarette.)

Whoooo! You sure it's only 11:30? Okay, 11:45? I feel like I got a whole night's sleep. Course I'm a night person anyway, but this is almost like gaining an entire extra night to play with. Thanks for letting me nap. Tell you what—I'll come back on Saturday and give this place the cleaning of a lifetime! You won't recognize it when I get through with it.

So howzabout I take you out, right now, and you treat me to midnight ham 'n' eggs? Ooh and some poppyseed muffins! Aw c'mon—so what if it is a "school night," or that we have to be at work in eight-or-so hours? It's not like I'm asking for breakfast in bed or anything. Let's have a bit of fun! *That's* a practical ambition, isn't it? I mean, without practical ambition we'd just be stumblebums and doodlesquats, right?

Attaboy! Let's go. I hope you know some good all-night eateries around here.

Know what? Every morning I wake up and throw back the covers and there I am and I say to myself, "*So this is reality!*" (Oh don't shush me; the night's still young.)

Reality shmee-ality—my Uncle Buddy-Buzz would be the first in line to give a cheer for good old-fashioned just-imagine make-believe. He did it all the time, designing his stage sets, and some of them were pretty avant-garde—you should've seen the one he did for this Off-Loop production of *Toys in the Attic*. (I parked over here.) They were always unreal—"Scenery, not Reality," Buddy-Buzz'd say. "Maybe it *is* only a paper moon sailing over a cardboard sea, but that's where the magic comes in. Do it right, and you can MAKE people make-believe."

And if you're able to do a thing like *that*, why should you ever feel perplexed or

dumbfounded?

I mean, look at *Flashdance*. Have you ever heard of a blue-collar beer joint with swanky dance routines like that? In Vegas, maybe, but not Pittsburgh. Same thing goes for Jennifer Beals's loft and her audition for the ballet company and that handsome hunk who falls for her being the owner of the steel mill and all the rest of it. I mean, she didn't even do her own flashdancing.

But so what? It's not supposed to be Real Life—it's MAKE-BELIEVE. It's "Let's Pretend." Jennifer Beals is really cute and has frizzy hair and speaking as a really cute frizzyhaired girl myself, I thought it was a *wonderful* movie. It made ME make-believe, all right; to the point that I started working out after I saw it. And getta loada me now! But I didn't go off the deep end and apply for any exotic ballet troupes; I went to work at SMECK.

Course, I'd just come back from having a spring fling overseas.

"Why wait for your ship to come in," I said, "when you can meet it halfway?" So I got myself shanghaied as assistant chef for a bunch of missionaries on the good ship *Van Vooren*, or the "Belgian Bulge" as we on the crew called her. *That* was a challenge: those missionaries belonged to a chain of missions called Hall o' the Hearth™, which turned out to mean "All You Can Scarf"—they could pack away groceries like there was no tomorrow. I lived in constant fear of falling into one of the galley's pressure cookers and being dished up as a between-meals snack.

Mr. Wong would've done it, too. He was the head chef and big as a mammoth and had it in for me, most of the trip—"YOU, KI-FI! YOU, LUBBERGIRL!" (For a moment I was afraid he'd said "lovergirl.") "YOU NOT ON DRY LAND ANYMORE, LUBBERGIRL! BETTER LOOK SHARP!"

He made me study the thickest cookbook ever imported to the Western Hemisphere. Did you know some people eat *calf's brains* with their eggs? You sauté them (the brains) and pour on your eggs, scramble them together, then sprinkle it with paprika. We didn't have any calf's brains onboard, which was just as well 'cause some Scarfer would've ordered them, and Mr. Wong would've made me do the scrambling. "NOW THEY MATCH *YOUR* BRAINS, HEY KI-FI?"

But when we docked in Greece and I left the “Bulge,” he presented me with a ceremonial jackknife; so you see even hostile ship’s chefs can’t resist my frolicsome charm...

Turn in here? What a cute little diner! “Papavero’s?” You think he and Mamavero and all the little Veros are here tonight?

(Hey there! Is it too late for us to get any ham ‘n’ eggs?... Oh I *luvya*!)

You too, Bald Man—bend down here a sec—

(Smooch.)

Now you’ve got a tattletale smoochmark on the crown of your head, and I hope it’ll make all your other sugarbaby confesseees hotsy-jealous. And don’t let me catch you wiping it off, either. (Couple of over-easies, please, with that ham, and have you got any poppyseed muffins? *Yay!* I may just have to move *in* here. Oh and can I have an OJ too, and maybe a cup of cocoa also? Thank you muchly! You’ll be getting a whopper tip.)

What are you grinning at? Are you grinning at *me*? Okay, you have my permission. I told you being with me’s got to be a nonstop all-night belly laugh. And you ain’t heard *nothing* yet—

Ooh that was fast with the cocoa! Lookit the size of this mug! Need both hands to pick it up—

(Slurp.)

Ahhhhhhh...

You know, for a girl who’s still pestered with the Nuisance, I sure feel good about now. Good ‘n’ *lazy*. I don’t think I’ll ever set foot outside this diner. No more plunging into the glooms again, or the bitters—keep those for Pink Gins! And don’t ever let me end up like my Great-Aunt Emmy, who’s blind and mad (not insane, just mad) or Sadie’s Nana Gubel, who’s a villainous old hag with the *gall* to not accept Desirée as her great-granddaughter—for having been “born out of wedlock” or something. Well it’s her loss, the preposterous old bat.

My ham ‘n’ eggs!!...

(Chomp. Chomp. Chomp. Gulp.)

...what’s that? You want to hear about me in grease? Don’t let Papavero hear you

impugning his cooking. Oh, *Greece*. The country, not the musical comedy? Well, Greece is about as far away as you can get from places like Demortuis, Nilnisi. All that sea, and all those islands and that sand. They have a different kind of sun out there, too: it turns the sky an entirely different shade of blue. It gets into your eyes, if you're already a blue-eyed person. Or if you drink *retsina*—THAT'LL put the sun into your ever-loving blue eyes, let me tell you.

So I left the "Bulge" and backpacked my way through the Length and Breadth of Asia Minor, by bus and boat and on my own li'l flat feet. And I saw this inscription outside Istanbul (hey! say *that* five times fast!) which got translated for me by a fleabitten amateur tour guide. It said:

*There are sixteen types of grief  
But only one of relief.*

He might have been making it up, but it sounds true as true to me.

I think it means the same thing as make-believe. Relief from Real Life.

The good times never do keep on keeping on, not for keeps. Not in this diner; not in Asia Minor. But so what?

"So this is reality?"

Let's improve on it, then.

Okay? Okay. "S'allright? S'allright." Okay.

## Three

### THE CONDITIONS





## Chapter IX

*Since My Last Confession*

“...so ANYway they’d just waxed the halls, so Desi and I took our shoes off and started skating up and down and I ran into you—”

“—bowled me over—”

“—swept you off your feet, and your *nose* started bleeding so I bandaged it and then Sadie came by and introduced us and we were going to eat vending machine food at the Student Union, but you kept being gloomy so *I* said ‘Let’s go see a scary movie,’ and I picked you up that night and we went to that weird thing with the subtitles, *Act Like an Italian—*”

“—*Like a Human Being—*”

“—right, at the Mercury, and then we came back here and I fixed us a couple of Pink Gins and asked if you wouldn’t love to be my sugardaddy confessor and you said, ‘Go on,’ that I should tell you all about my hard, hard life” (*splish splash gurgle*) “so I did—and I have—and here we are. You with a thoroughly clean apartment AND a bare naked girl in your bathtub, cleaning herself! Boy have you got it made!”

Skeeter had arrived at the Cheval that morning fully clothed, in junior-miss overalls and painter’s cap, to refurbish Peyton’s perfunctory housekeeping. “Unless you’d rather I dressed like a charwoman—an old Cockney charwoman—‘It’s Mrs. ‘Iggins ‘ere, Perfesser, come to do for you! *Well* I never lawksamercy my my, I’m sure I shouldn’t wonder *wot* you won’t get up to next’—oh YUHhhh-uck!!”

“Do Cockney charwomen’s vocabularies run to the word ‘yuhhh-uck’?”

"They'd run if they took a look behind these cabinet doors—there's a bunch of *toadstools* growing out of the formica! And don't play Owl and say it's your sponge, even if you *can* spell 'Tuesday.' Oh no—here's another clump of cobwebs—"

"Stop knocking those cobwebs. Where else do you expect me to keep dead spiders?"

"*Oog!* And when was the last time you had these curtains washed?"

"You're supposed to *wash* curtains?"

"JEEZ, Peyton! No wonder you look so sallow!"

Stepping out of the kitchen to scowl up at him, indignant fists on indignant hips: Skeeter the Heartstring-Tuggable. Who'd made a valiant effort to cram her entire blonde whomp into the painter's cap, but might as well have tried restoring a bag of Jiffy-Pop to its original flat pan.

BOP-budda-bop-budda-bop-budda-BOP: in one daylong torrent she scrubbed and brushed and mopped and vacuumed the entire apartment—except for the miniloft, which had been placed strictly off limits.

"Are you sure? What about all these *heaps* and *heaps* of dusty paper?"

"Yes I am sure and leave them as is, please. They happen to be my monograph."

"Your monograph, hunh? Which heap's the turntable?"

A monograph, Peyton explained, was a scholarly treatise on a specified subject.

"Oh. Looks like yours is about rummage sales."

"No. APE."

"Apes?"

"A.P.E. Asa Pursch Ewell. A Post-Expressionist cartoonist. Completely forgotten today, of course."

"As Per Usual... Well, *I'm* going to go shpritz your complete downstairs with Lemon Pledge."

"I'm sure my complete downstairs can use it."

"Then I'm going to polish my patoot off—and if you say you're sure my patoot can use it *too*, you can just stay up there with your scholarly old APEograph."

And up here he had remained. Through Skeeter's polishing song ("We *rub* and we

*rub* and we *wheweee...*”) and her asking if it was okay for her to put a stack of records on his newly-tidied stereo, and whether Peyton had any objection to her taking a bubblebath in his newly-scoured tub, and would there be a problem if Skeeter left the bathroom door ajar so she could (a) “hear the monograph music” and (b) continue to gabble at Peyton up the cuuuute little staircase, unless (c) he wanted to bring his ears *down* the staircase and (d) closer to Skeeter’s cuuuute little mouth, (e) nudge nudge wink wink.

It wasn’t every day nowadays that Peyton Derente could find a nude cuuuutie occupying his bathtub.

But he lingered in the miniloft, engaged in a life-or-death struggle to balance the bather’s checkbook.

“Is it impossible for you to be more explicit?”

“Did you say something?”

“Yes! Could you be more precise?!”

“Did... you... say... something—how’s that?”

“There is a perfectly good, practically blank register in this checkbook. Now, here’s an idea: when you write your next check—”

“You talking to *me*?”

“No, I was addressing your rubber duck.”

“Well, be gentle when you drop him in the mailbox.”

“The next time you write a check,” Peyton persisted, “why not go crazy and jot down the date? And what it’s for? And exactly how much—”

“On the *nose*, you mean?” (*Gurgle-urgle.*)

“Mmph... And when are you going to deal with these credit card bills?”

“Quack?”

“Visa, Macy’s, Penney’s, Sears—if you keep letting the finance charges accumulate, you’ll have to—”

“—pay through the *nose*?... Sorry. Didn’t mean to put your *nose* out of joint.”

Peyton struck a match. Counted to ten. Blew it out. Then struck another, and lit the

long wooden pipe he still took occasional solace in; though these days he filled it with tobacco. Even so, sprouting out from under his smudgestache, it gave him the same old sorcerous air. There in the mirror over the drawing table, back by discombobular demand: the Wizard of Schnoz!

Glad to see you again, Schnoz. How's it been hanging?

Funny you should ask...

Downstairs the Police were on the stereo and Skeeter was singing along with "Every Breath You Take," adding a reverberative INhale EXhale between each line.

"How much longer are you going to be in there?"

"... 'keep calling baby baby pleeeeeze' ... hmmmm. I thought Cousin Flo might've headed home early, but no such luck."

"What?"

"You know—'my friend from Red Gap.' She's still visiting me."

"What friend is that?"

"(Oh, brother!) You sure can be lovably ignorant sometimes."

"Thank you. How much longer—"

"—I'm just drying myself off."

"I thought you said you don't believe in towels."

"No, I *do* believe in towels, I do I do I do I DO—and I'm using lots of them this very minute. The floor in here's gotten kind of floaty."

"Good God, woman!"

"—with *bathwater*. You know, the stuff you don't throw babies out with. So quit making gross insinuations. And don't call me 'woman' either—I'm just a baby myself, a growing child, I need my milk. But I'll settle for wine. Hey! You didn't sneak down and open the bottle yet, did you?"

"I'll go do it now—"

"Nooooo! I wanna do it, I love popping corks. And corn. And eyes—wait'll you see what I'm putting on—no more overalls tonight!"

*Be out in a minutch—*

*Don't uncork the spinach!*  
*Says Skeeter the grohhhhwing child*  
*(toot toot!)*

After which fanfare, the bathroom door snicked shut.

\*

Measuring up and reckoning down.

Here he remained, left in the miniloft like an egghead on a wall. And not much of a wall: just some extra square footage tucked atop the broom closet and water heater. More like a sill. Or a cell. Or a scaffold, taken to extremes. Egghead on a scaffold, just before they spring the trap.

Thinking about polishing Skeeter's patoot off.

*Rrr rrr rrrumble* from Peyton's own personal downstairs.

Not enough to anticipate shpritzability, though. None such for two, three years now.

So here he remained, under the banshee's whammy, left where God or Fate or Chance had struck him dumb (shall we say) only to compound the condition by dropping Skeeter Kitefly into his bowled-over lap. And GoFoC spoke, saying:

*Thou shalt look after Our bounceable beloved Kelly Rebecca, a succulent morsel by any measure; yea, and even shouldst We suddenly lift the banshee's anathema and restore thy tongue (shall We say) thou'lt damn well remain dumbstruck insofar as your galvanic little charge is concerned.*

Like it or lump it. 'Cause ne'er-do-wells are never more than near dowels; and ne'er your twain shall meet.

Unlike Mao the cat, he knew very well what-did-you-do-next; but his expression was just as baffled. Stymied. Obstructed.

So how many true priests, clothbound by abstinence, have pressed their noses to the grille and gazed at a fair young confessee baring her soul, her infringements, her delicate frailties—and longed to haul the confessee right through the screen, into their austere cloister?

How many true priests took such a one to the Mercury Theater last night, this time to

see *Koyaanisqatsi* (“that weird thing WITHOUT subtitles”) and find their arm being treated like an airline pillow, placed behind a fair young neck and punched—playfully, but *punched*—by the same fair young fist used to clue them in about the joys of womanhood?

“One! two! three! a leery postman!”

Whereupon she’d snuggled down and started popping SweetTarts. Seeming at first to enjoy *Koyaanisqatsi*’s out-of-balance lightshow, but soon bored by the lack of narrative and announcing this with a monumental yawn.

“Am I supposed to sing you a lullaby now?”

“*Croon* me a lullaby now.”

So up from nursery depths he’d dredged *On the Coast of Coromandel /where the early pumpkins blow, /in the middle of the woods /lived the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò*—duly crooning this into the top of the frizzy head resting on his shoulder.

“Well that was certainly LUGUBRIOUS,” she’d remarked at the end.

“*Sssshhhh!*”

“Oh shhhh yourself already!” to the row behind, and “Talk about where the early pumpkins blow!” to Peyton. With a jocose twinkle-eyed glance he could see (*and feel and savor*) even in the minimal cinema light. And he might have hauled her right over the armrest, into his cloisterized lap—

—but what would have been the point?

And there you had it. In another aptly-named nutshell.

Going round and round before coming to abrupt points: that was Skeeter Kitefly all over. The tips of her nose and chin and perky maracas; the corners of her elastic mouth, the ruby-glitter nails on her fingers and toes. But most of all The Story of Her Hard, Hard Life, as related to him over the past couple of weeks: hopping back and forth through time and space, sidetracking into vagaries, insisting every word was unvarnished truth.

(How much of it had been fact and how much fantasy? Which parts were Real Life and which parts make-believe?)

(Had she done her own flashdancing?)

Skeeter sitting very still at times, but never very long before another bout of the

leapin' jumpies, and there she'd go again—

—in all her oblivion—

—another see-through ingénue on a winding, twining, spiraling decline.

So hurry up and spring the trap. Down the little staircase at last, to take a somber look-see.

Door ajar again. Bathroom unoccupied, except by perfumed steam. Fog on the mirror. And more soppy towels than Peyton would have guessed he possessed, all spread out to dry. Along with a jumble of T-shirt, overalls, sandals and cap; above which dangled a matching set of rinsed-out dainties. Bright red, as advertised. Hanging there like the frill-trimmed entrails of some small creature (Valentine lamb or Easter dust bunny) extracted for soothsaying purposes.

Such as to figure out where Skeeter had gone. And what she might be wearing at the moment.

*Rrr rrr rrrumble...*

Then: commotion in the kitchen. Where Peyton found a miniature monk trying to reach the upper shelves of the glassware cabinet.

"I need you to come be *tall!*"

She had helped herself to Peyton's big brown robe with the big wide hood, which flapped vacantly since her hair was beturbaned in yet another towel—this one a colorful Carmen Miranda-colored huckaback.

"What are you looking for?" he asked. "The wine's above the sink."

"I know that! But what are you supposed to drink sherry out of? An old sack? Oh, those tulippy things. 'I took a corkscrew from the shelf, I went to wake them up myself'—something a little fishy about *that* poem, if you ask me—"

She attacked the bottle of Findlater's Amontillado with more enthusiasm than dexterity, but got it passably open.

"It didn't pop! Am I supposed to sniff the cork now?... 'Mmmmm.' Kind of reminds me of that fancy expensive stuff Sadie smuggled out of Portugal, what was it called? 'Fonzieca?' You were supposed to drink it with walnuts—good crunchy wine. Me, I've



always preferred sangria—”

“—because it helps you scrutinize situations?”

“That’s right! Aw-reet Peyton, you’ve been paying attention! Be prepared for a pop quiz.”

“I shall drop everything.”

Her face lit up. “I just love that word, ‘shall.’ Does that makes me a shallow person? I love your towels too, they’re so rough ‘n’ scratchy. And what can I say about this bearskin robe of yours? Except I am SO FREAKING GLAD it’s finally cool at night, ‘cause I’ve been wanting to climb into this robe ever since I first saw it hanging on the bathroom door. Betcha I could disappear inside it altogether *in* the altogether which could lead to who-knows-what if I got lost and you had to send in a search party maybe of teenage Boy Scouts hold the Cubs... Am I talking too much?”

“No more than usual.”

“Well nyaah back at you! And bear in mind that I’m literally cutting the cheese here: Cheddar for you, Cheddar for me, Gouda for you, Betta for me, Gjetost for you, Gesundheit for me—”

She led the way back to the living room, Peyton’s robe sweeping the carpet behind her, and hopped onto the sofa in a flurry of brown chenille and Imitiation Opium.

“You smell clean, anyway.”

“Hey! I’ll have you know I am *immaculate*. No flies on me! Or on this condo either, don’t you agree? I think compliments are in order ahem-ahem.”

The place, to be blunt, looked like the Widow Douglas’s front parlor: stripped of every sympathetic spot and stain, tidified out of all recognition. Not what you’d expect from Miss Happyhazard here—or rather there, galloping around the room again, lighting a dozen scented tapers.

“Friar friar pants on fire!” she said, curling back up on the sofa. “Now isn’t this romantic?”

“Looks very purged.”

“Well of course. Cheerios!—” (Clink.) “—ooh this *is* good. Yum! So, let’s see:

I've done the scrubbing and brushing and mopping and vacuuming, and what with it being Saturday night I christened your sparkling tub with my exquisite young BAHdee, and the floor got kind of floaty and I towed it dry despite your gross insinuations, and then I rinsed out my undies and got swallowed by your big old robe and now we're swallowing wine and cheese but enough about that."

(Pause for breath. Gulp of sherry.)

"So... what do you think?"

"About the wine? It has a certain deep-down nuttiness—"

"Not the wine, you turk! What do you *think*?"

"Well, I'm not that fond of cheese as cheese—so curdled, you know—"

"Will you *shut* UP?? Jeez, not the cheese!"

"What, then?" he asked. "Or should I say: *Wha*-utt? TELLLL me!"

Skeeter put down glass and plate and crossed her legs. The upper knee's dimpled dome peeked out of the chenille like a tonsured scalp; she clasped her hands around it.

"I have been," she said. "Telling you. About me. Myself. My life. Right up to this very day, in this very room. And you've been listening. And paying attention. So what I need to know now is... what do you think?"

\*

*Pop goes the quizzle.*

He had undertaken this role with the presumption of having to do no more than listen to nonstop chitchat and pay for a few indulgences—in exchange for Skeeter Kitefly's presence and (GoFoC willing) her winsome pink person. An artful bargain, he'd thought at the time; nor had he changed his mind even when she'd spilled her entire life into his confounded lap.

But now—

You couldn't help but feel sorry for the little girl clutching her knee in the candlelight, sitting on your sofa, in your bathrobe, looking at *you* to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of Her Story So Far, where she'd been and where she was headed and what she could expect there and why. Or, perhaps, to diagnose whether she'd mislaid her heart's desire by following

its devices outside her own backyard.

“Bear with me a moment,” he said.

What could he tell her? What answer could he give? What *did* It All mean? (*Must* It All mean something? Of course It must. Did you think I didn’t know the answer to that one? Ask me another...)

Poor little penitent, already on record as having been deceived by a bass-ackwards hoodwinker, having no one better to tell her troubles to than the Wizard of Schnoz. Himself a a charlatan, a mountebank, “something of a humbug”—*pay no attention to that man behind the venetians!* Instead of Don Corleone, she had only Mr. O’Malley, without even a Handy Pocket Guide for referential assistance.

And Skeeter Kitefly was waiting for him to provide her with the Meaning and Purpose of Life.

*Scheiss de la merde:* what else could he say? When he knew for DAMN certain that Life, in fact, had None.

Yet it still had to be seen through, faced up to, whatever scrambled eggs might result from his falling off the flying trapeze.

But how would she react? What would happen to her chickadee face all bright and shining, her eyes like two blue magic campfires? One fumbling false move and out that light would go—extinguished like a match struck for no reason.

He had seen that happen before to a woman’s eyes.

He had sworn *Not again—never again.*

Yet here he was and there she waited and how that “bear with me” pause was lengthening, and pretty soon he would have to look away—pretend to take no more notice of her. And that would be all: a sudden goodbye, a strong hint that she ought to depart, a few last words of godfatherly advice. “Watch your step as you hit the road.” “Never give a sucker an even break—”

A hand reached up.

Unfurled that Copacabana huckaback turban.

And exuberant Jiffy-Pop came bursting forth, spilling out, frizzying and flickering

away anew.

*Little Nancy Etticote  
in a white petticoat  
and a red nose;  
the longer she stands  
the shorter she grows.*

Or so Peyton heard himself say aloud.

Keep the magic campfires burning.

For better or for worse, a blessing or a curse or a very good joke, an excellent jest; we will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo—he! he! he!—over our Findlater.

As Skeeter, with a *tsk*, reached out and started tugging at Peyton's collar.



## Chapter X

*Shivaree Bewitchery*

TSK it a tasket and somewhere the uninvolved are truckin' on down the avenue, not being figuratively unfrocked and literally depantsed here. *Jangle* go the pants (keys, coins, belt buckle) and *pluff* goes another record onto the stereo stack. *Click crackle hiss* and then the latest from Stevie Nicks singing *La la la la la, la la*, in the wildhearted twilight dreamtime. Stand Back. I Will Run to You. Nothing Ever Changes.

Break out the belladonna, lady: here and now it's no shirt, no shoes, no service.

How would the old you be handling this?

Well, for one thing it'd be YOU doing the handling, the unfrocking and depantsing, the managing of buttons and zippers and such. Hamhandedly perhaps, but at any rate upperhandedly; taking and having the advantage instead of being taken and had. So this is what passive compliance is like, as seen from the inside: stretched out here on the discarded huckaback like a neck-wrung feather-plucked cold dead rooster. With the Lady of the House standing over you, preparing to perform nameless kitchen abracadabra.

(Not among your top-forty adolescent fantasies.)

Brace yourself for the final phase—the chicken-choking *coup de grâce*. She reaching in, wrenching out your heart and holding it aloft before your very eyes, still beating, still beating like the proverbial bat out of hell! Exposure; immolation; obliteration—all thanks to the banshee's malediction. And this at the hands of one who's already knocked you down, sat on your chest, proven you can bleed. She laying you out (again) spreading your eagle (again)

surveying you through lenses glinting green and yellow in the candlelight from those many-scented tapers, so there's even a fresh-wax aroma (again)—

ZAP.

FLASH.

(Are you ready to *rrr rrr rrrumble?*)

She shrugging off your bearskin. Tossing it aside like a seventh veil.

So this is what compactification is like, as seen from the outside: bare essentials exemplified. Yes, it stands to reason that a worthwhile angel would *not* be some long-waisted flat-bottomed no-bosomed fashion model, nossir—an *authentic* angel would have (as she herself phrased it) the Boobs and the Buns and the Legs. All scrunched down into a trim little tight little NIFTY little package: the Cutiepie Manifesto!

Some might claim the exact opposite—who else but a she-devil, a babe of Babylon, would be so fittingly arrayed? Complete with Li'l Hot Stuff exaggerations hither and thither that, if anything, only make you gape the more?

Same difference. Stripped to her be-all and end-all, she is (in short) a spellbinder—an enchantress, like the sweet Welsh witch singing now about seeing shadows against the back of your mind oh baby.

Yes, curtains and casements left open to the night air, to admit the gloaming breeze that causes candlelight to oscillate and frizzy hair to undulate—oh my God she HAS come to do for you! Not as old Mrs. 'Iggins but Circe, Medusa, an Aztec executrix with an obsidian knife! Her colorful huckaback serving as a slightly damp altar cloth—absorbent, you see, to soak up the bloodletting! Let your teeth start to chatter for it's not early September anymore but late February again, for a few more hours anyway: Leap Night in another clime and place and there SHE stands, rosy mantle fading, pallid-wan and all a-shiver, hair and eyes resuming their shiny blackness, their brittle fragility, and her touch—

—her touch—

—*click crackle hiss*—

—is like static electricity, but more fluid; shiver-me-timbersy, double-dash-of-liquorish. Calling to mind that tipling hodcarrier who fell down and broke his crown but had

a noggin of poteen scattered over his corpse:

*Tim revives! see how he rises!*  
*Finnegan rising from the bed*  
*Says "Whirl your whiskey around like blazes—*  
*"Cushlamochree! d'ye think I'm DEAD?!"*

As your own *rrr rrr rrrumble* gives sudden way to a whinker WHINKER BONK like an old steam radiator after a long summer hiatus, or an out-to-pasture man-o'-war hearing the bugle sounding chaaaarrrrge—

So this is what engorgement feels like, from the inside, on the outside, after two, three years. (Who says you don't grow cucumbers?)

It stands to reason and up she looks with the triumphant delight of a co-ed who's singlehandedly unclogged a dorm drain for the very first time. Zootsuited flashdancy facefissure WHEEEEE; gone is the guise of the muted banshee. Undo the hoodoo, nullify the hex; be dumbstruck no more.

Kiss the one-eyed frog. Restore him to royal membership. Ensheathe him in full latex panoply.

With a flourish she doffs her glasses then, revealing a luminous sky-blue regard.

More discreetly shedding her Holy Week padding, not entirely finished with but hey! you gotta clear the way if you wanna serve the consommé. Bottom line? A slight timely trickledown, petite like everything else about her, but more than enough to transfuse you—

—as she hops aboard—

—Beauty astride the Beast—

—down and down she goes, round

and round she goes; and here come the black magic giggles, felt before heard:

HEY PEYTON! WATCH ME PULL A RABBIT OUT OF YOUR LAP!

"Again?"

(And again, *and* again—)





## Chapter XI

*If I Fell*

"...mmph..."

"...hjckrrh?..."

"...well. Hello there."

"H'lo yourself. (Yawn.) 'Scuse me—I always fall asleep afterward. Not very ladylike."

"Rather after than beforehand. Or during—"

"Please! No chance of that, smart guy. (Yawn.) Told you this'd be romantic."

"As I recall, you said 'Now *isn't* this romantic?'"

"Well *isn't* it? Falling asleep in each other's arms?"

"I suppose."

"You suppose right. Me, I feel like a song coming on: 'If I fell asleep with you /would you promise not to sue /and put meeee on the stand?' (Cackle.)"

"Rather keep you here in bed."

"Why thank you, sir!" (Smooch.)

"Thank *you*, ma'am."

"Hey! Who're you calling a ma'am?"

"Miss, then. As good as a smile."

"(Cackle.) So. Go on. Tell me I'm scrumptious. Say I'm the best you've ever had."

"Certainly superlative."

"You betcha! I'm a *good* li'l girl. I bet I could open a School of Boinkology. Oh quit laughing."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Yeah well I can *feel* you laughing. Mock me, will you?"

"Mock you?"

"Mock me..."

"You mean like this?"

"*Yeeeeeek!* That tickles!"

"—sorry. Sorry. Sorry—"

"No no no, in a *good* way, honey, you just surprised me is all—c'mon, try it again. Right there... a little lower... a little *slower*... ooh yass... hee hee hee *hee hee*—keep doing that!"

"Ma'am yes ma'am!"

"Hee hee hee who're you *hee hee calling* MAA'AAMmmmm... hoo! Hunh?"

"Ah... miss, then."

"Good as a smile, all right! C'mere—" (Smooch.) "Hee hee hee—" (Smooch.)

"Just as well you clued me in ahead of time about all this giggling."

"Hee *hee!* Throws a few guys for a loop, lemme tell you." (Smooch.) "They expect sobs and moans and *oh God oh Gods*. But when I'm having a good time I'm happy, and when I'm happy I just gotta laugh."

"Glad to hear it."

"...I haven't had a whole lot to laugh about lately, though."

"No. I suppose not. Nor have I."

"No?"

"No. Not for two, three years."

"Jeez..."

"Just so..."

"...I hate sleeping alone. All by myself."

"Not alone here."

"No."

"Sorry it took me so long, though—"

"Sweetie, that's something you *never* have to apologize to a woman for—"

"Not once you're under way, maybe. But I should have *set sail* a lot sooner."

"Hey, remember who you're talking to—a veteran of the 'Belgian Bulge' here! In fact you can consider yourself seduced by an able-bodied sailor-girl on shore leave. I'll jot you down in my little black book, and next time I heave into port I'll wheedle you up."

"Well, you wheedle superlatively."

"Do I? Really? Wheedle wheedle wheedle, coax coax coax—CAJOLE! *There's* a good word. Allow me to *cajole* you a little... and feel free to *coax* me back... okay! I'M all the way waked up! What time is it? Never mind, it's the weekend. I need a cigarette. Mind if I smoke in bed? (Silly question.) Where'd I leave my poke? You'll have to start keeping a humidor for me, here on this end table... Can you see me? I wish the moon was out tonight—"

"Yours is, anyway—"

"You *can* see me! But I've been told I look *especially* cute by moonlight. Like something out of an R-rated *Midsummer Night's Dream*—"

"Titania, I presume."

"Oh funny! Just mock me all over, why don't you? (Here's my poke.) Well, better Titania than Moth or Mustardseed. Hey wait a sec—how'd that act begin? The fourth act... oh yeah! (I'm striking a pose here, if you can't tell.)

*Come sit thee down upon this flowery bed  
While I thy amiable cheeks do coy,  
And stick musk-roses in thy—HEE HEE HEE!—thy sleek smooth head,  
And kiss thy fair large ears, my gentle joy.*

—boy is *that* ever on target!"

"Well, bring on your musk-roses."

"Will do. I'm also getting a few more love gloves."

"Love gloves?"

“Well what do you call them? Candy wrappers? Spanky hankies? Wienerhosen?”

“Good God... How about ‘dunce caps?’”

“(Cackle.) I’ll buy that! I bought *these* at a drugstore on my way over here. You should’ve seen the cashier’s face; she obviously thought I was up to no good... Permission to come back aboard, Cap’n!”

“Permission granted.”

“—BELLY FLOP!—”

[WHUMP]

“MMPH!!!”

“*Hee hee hee hee hee!*—I just couldn’t resist—*hee hee hee hee hee!*... Oh, boy. Oh, wow. Did I hurt you?”

“No more than usual.”

“Awww.” (Smooch.) “‘My gentle joy!’ I promise to kiss you all better—after I finish my smoke.” (Flick; drag.) “Want a puff?”

“Still recovering from the last one, thank you.”

“Well, I said I was sorry. Or did I? Well, I... does this sound familiar?”

“Mmph.”

“Um... it doesn’t bother you that I brought the rubbers, does it?”

“Only if I couldn’t make use of them.”

“It’s just that ever since, you know, Buddy-Buzz...”

“Say no more. Best to be careful.”

“That’s why I spread out the towel first, too. Just as well I didn’t do your laundry yesterday. Are you *sure* you don’t mind—”

“Speaking of careful, watch where you drop that ash!”

“Ve haff vays uff vheedling you, Yankee dog.” (Drag; snuff.) “All right, it’s out. I may be a natural-born arsonist but I wouldn’t set your chest hair on fire—not with a *cigarette*, anyway. Kind of reminds me of this shag carpet I had in my place on Garfield Street, back in Demortuis—except *that* was lime-green. And less curly.” (Nibble nibble nibble.) “Making love on that carpet was like doing it outdoors, in a field or meadow. I sure have missed that

carpet. Till tonight, that is.” (Nibble nibble nibble.) “Am I talking too much again? I do make you listen a hell of a lot. Away ve’ll go to Der Mutterland, where ve’ll mumble und mutter to vun anutter...” (Smoooooch.) “I’m not too heavy, am I? I keep thinking I *feel* heavy.”

“Ah... no. Just... right.”

“Really? Call me Baby-bear Goldilocks!” (Smooch. Smeerp.) “Let’s see how long we can hold on being jussst riiiiight...”

“Hold *out*... you mean...”

“Oh you’re such a stickler.” (Smoooooch. Smeeeeerp.)

“Uhhhh—I will be pretty damn soon, if you keep doing that.”

“Okay, Cap’n, simmer down; we’ll just snuggle for awhile... like this:

*N-E-S-T-L-I-‘ng’  
nestling makes my heart go ‘bing’  
(chawww-clutt)  
(hee hee!)*

...so ANYway, I’ve told you all about *my* love life. What about yours? When’d you go all the way for the first time?”

“The first time? All the way? That would be the summer I was sixteen. On a road trip outside Rapid City, South Dakota.”

“You’re kidding! How rapid was it?”

“Pretty damn. They don’t call it Mount Rushmore for nothing.”

“(Cackle.) So who with?”

“A lapsed Catholic girl I found in my cousin Jazzbo’s sleeping bag.”

“Your cousin *Jazzbo!*”

“That’s Jacques Derente VI—eventual heir to the family bonanza.”

“He wasn’t there in the sleeping bag *with* you and the Catholic girl, was he?”

“No—Jazzbo was busy with a Carly Simon lookalike who had a waterbed in the back of her Jeep Wagoneer.”

“You’re making this up!”

"Not at all. It was definitely a Jeep Wagoneer."

"Uh huh. So what was her name, this Catholic girl?"

"*Lapsed* Catholic. Something redundant—Donna O'Donoghue or Sheila O'Shea, something like that."

"A Jeep Wagoneer you can remember, but not your First Time's *name*? How do you know she was a lapsed Catholic?"

"She told me so. Said the nuns would 'drop their teeth' if they could see her now. And assured me the next morning that she didn't feel pregnant."

"Worse and worse!"

"Ah... regarding *your* cousin—"

"Which one?"

"Ah... 'Cousin Flo'—"

"Um—yes?"

"She won't mind our... 'nestling' and so forth—will she?"

"Oh sweetie! Oh honey, *believe* me, she is tickled piggly-wiggly PINK! I mean we could've maybe waited a couple more days, but..."

"But what?"

"...I didn't want to wait. I'd rather have to do your laundry. Oh quit laughing, you *know* what I mean. Does it bother you?"

"At the moment I don't think there's anything you could say that would bother me."

"Really? How about 'You've got a big nose!'"

"Why thank you miss!"

"*Hee hee hee!*" (Smooch.)

"—providing that there aren't, in fact, any 'Red Gap' consequences."

"Well you do know what these rubber thingies are *for*, right? Plus I'm a Pill-popper besides. So don't be nervous; relax..." (Smooch.) "Okay then: did you ever go to bed with Sadie?"

"...well, *that's* a floopmaking question."

"She claims she can't remember, 'after all these years.'"

"Mmph. I think I made a pass at Mercedes when she first came to campus. After all, a red-headed woman makes a choo-choo jump its track—"

"HEY! You're saying that with the redhead's blonde little sister lying here *naked* on TOP of you!"

"—let me finish—she paid no attention to my pass, and we settled for being friends. Then *you* came along, Blonde Little Sister, and derailed me completely."

"Is that right?"

"On several occasions."

"Okay then. Howzabout another glass of that yummy Amontillado? I'll go get it and you can admire me from every angle... There! Aren't I jiffy-quick? Here's your glass. Where's your hand? *Don't*, you'll make me drop it! (Turk!) All right, no sudden moves now—nice and gentle—lift your arm—help me down... and here we are. Isn't this cozy? Not to say romantic? What'd you do with your glass? Cheerios, deario!" (Clink. Gulp. Smooch.) "Bet you didn't see that one coming." (Smooch.) "Or that one either! This sure is a really *fine* wine."

"And truly you are a feast for all senses."

"What a sweet and accurate way you have of putting things! Hee hee—of putting *Thing*, that is—"

"Love Addams Family Style."

"Hey I loved that show! When I was little I made up jump-rope routines about it:

*Who do we find when we make our search?*

*Wednesday, Pugsley, Itt and Lurch!*

*Who do we find when we want to pester?*

*Gomez, Morticia, and Uncle Fester!*

—but I never worked Thing into it. That had to wait till my teenage years—"

"No Uncle Fester jokes, now."

"(Cackle.) Hey feel that—you've gotten all bristly up there! See, being with me's even making your *hair* grow! I've gotten 'beard burn' from making out with unshaven guys, but never 'scalp scrape' before."



"A memorable night all around."

"...Peyton?"

"...Skeeter?"

"Could I shave it for you?"

"Are we still talking about my head?"

"Yes, your head! Don't spoil the moment! So can I? Please? I'll be really, really careful—"

"Let's talk about it in the morning."

"It *is* morning."

"After *daybreak* then."

"It'd mean a lot to me. It'd be like we're sealing our deal."

"Our deal?"

"You know—our *pact*."

"Our compact?"

"ExACTly!"

"*You're* compact, anyway."

"Ooh I can hardly wait! I'm so excited—gimme your glass—"

"You're wheedling again—"

"Superlatively, too! The best you've ever had, right? C'mere—" (Smooch. Smeerp.) "DAMN, I'm good!"

"(Guffaw.)"

"See that? Just gotta laugh! I'm your good li'l acorn and I make you grow into a mighty oak. See? See that? *My* mighty oak. *I* make it, so it belongs to *me*. And *I* get to put on its 'pocket protector.' So you just forget about those other girls—hee hee! those lapsed girls—and get downright with me. I'm... all... yourrrrsss..."

"—you're right (*huff*) about the downright (*huff*) anyway—"

"—always! (*Hee hee hee hee hee!*) Always!—"

## Chapter XII

*Oranges and Lemons*

The shaving took place later that Sunday, well after daybreak.

See Peyton in the bathtub, squatting on the mat with scalp coated in foam, pillowed upon Skeeter's rosy snorbs. See her perched behind him on the tub-edge, armed with a Derente™ brand safety razor, singing variations on *Sweeney Todd* as she scraped merrily away:

*Attend the tale of Peyton D.'s,  
his skin was pale and looked like grilled cheese  
till he teamed up with a babydoll  
who shaved off the cheese and left nothing at all  
but Peeyyyton  
but Peyton D.—  
the demon baldy perfesser!*

“Or ‘sugardaddy confessor’—that scans fine too,” she added. “Hey, this IS a little like *Educating Rita*, isn't it? Call me Rita the undressed hairdresser!”

“Lovely Skeeter meter maid.”

“Aw! ‘Nothing will come between us.’” (Smooch.) “Ooh—you sure have got a kissable-smooth head now, thanks to me.”

“And you, I see” (said he, turning around) “are strawberry blonde both high and low.”

“Natural-born!” she boasted, sliding down to meet him.

“Like oranges and lemons—”

“—say the bells of St. Clement’s—”

“—put down the razor—”

“—say the bells of St. Blazer (cackle!)—”

“—here comes a candle to light us to bed—”

“—now that the chopper has smoothed out your head (ya HAAA!)—”

*Splish splash gurgle.*

Thus did they spend the Sabbath; and no Philistines took Peyton, or put out his eyes, or bound him with fetters of brass.

\*

A fretful Sadie telephoned that evening, though, wondering where the hell Skeeter had gotten to. Skeeter took the call and answered at considerable length, sprawling tummy-down on the carpet with all the citrines and tangerines in her bare-naked meter-maid complexion set off by the carpet’s charcoal-grey.

After Sadie finished going AWK at Skeeter’s glad tidings, they drew up plans for everyone to spend tomorrow together—having a Labor Day picnic, perhaps, at Lake Windohwa, where they could maybe rent a boat—but no, Peyton took emphatic exception to the idea of going boating, even with an able-bodied sailor-girl aboard. So they scheduled a cookout instead, out behind the triplex whose ground floor Skeeter shared with Sadie and Desi and Desi’s hundred-dollar basset pup that she’d named after Brooke Shields.

(Because of the amazing facial resemblance, according to Skeeter.)

Come Monday she climbed back into her overalls, loaded Peyton into her DeSoto, and headed for the nearest Safeway. “You *know* Sadie won’t have a thing in the fridge—not fit for grilling, anyway. What we ought to get is a nice tenderloin” (leer at Peyton) “but there’s no time to marinate it properly. I’ll be FAMISHED by the time we get to Wheeville, and Sadie’s always starving except when she’s stressed out and forgets to eat. So in a way we’re saving her life, and you can be sure I won’t let *that* slip her mind... I always swear by porkchops, dammit to sumbitch,” she added at the Safeway meat counter. “We can do ‘em up country-style—my Gramma made this surefire sauce from apple cider and German mustard. Or we could go Mediterranean: on the ‘Belgian Bulge’ Mr. Wong used capers and

artichoke hearts. Hmmm... lemme see your wallet a sec—”

Whereupon she filled their cart with half-a-dozen chops and a bag of briquettes and a can of lighter fluid and a box of matches and a jar of mustard and a jug of cider and a vial of capers and a quartet of artichokes and some six-packs of beer and pop and seltzer and a styrofoam cooler to put them in and a sack of ice to chill them with. Peyton was allowed to pay for these and lug them out to the car.

“Well, you can’t expect poor little ME to hoist all that cargo into the hold, can you?”

Laden with booty, the pink sloop Floyd set forth and went barreling down the Dee Ridge Expressway, dodging and darting through the holiday traffic.

“*Soooo hungry,*” Skeeter seethed at intervals. “My appetite’s just about ready to stand up and *stomp*—”

—as they reached the Edward Claredon Hynde Bridge, that grisly bottleneck spanning the River Dee, whose stranglehold causes even the most foolhardy speedracer to blanch (or blinch, if piglet-sized). Northbound motorists have been known to make it halfway across the Hynde Bridge, only to find themselves all at once in a southbound lane heading back to St. Mintred.

But did Skeeter blinch? Or did she let out a COWABUNGA as she zigged and zagged and cannonballed between a pair of massive RVs, leaving them a-tremble in her ravenous chopminded wake?

Could there be any doubt? Certainly Peyton had none.

“Just in case we survive this trip intact,” he said, “I presume you’ll be wanting me to man the grill—”

“Well you presume in vain!” said Skeeter. “You forget you’re talking to a professional veteran ship’s chef’s assistant here! Do I assign homework in *your* presence? *I’ll grill the chops. You can scrape the grate. After we’ve eaten. (SOOOO hungry!)*”

With a final zigzag flourish they soared off the bridge and landed in Deasil, a secondhand community midway between Elsew and St. Mintred, where locomotives had once been turned out like clockwork. Later Deasil had served as a disposable ghetto, to be largely set on fire by its agitated occupants during the “Time Has Come Today” riots of 1968. But

from the ashes emerged a measure of redress—some slum clearance, some urban renewal, and the first stirrings of gentrification: hence, “Wheeville.”

*Screeee-jerk-thump*: thence, arrival.

Skeeter marched into the triplex with a *Hey Sadie!* and a *Hey Dizzyree!* and a *Hey Leland!* (to Desi's smitten kindergarten suitor, who lived upstairs) and a *Hey Brooke Shields!* (to the basset pup, tarryhooting round the back yard).

Peyton meanwhile hauled in the first double-armful of Safeway booty, edging past Sadie who stood by the door with arms akimbo and eyes snapping now at her stepsister, now at her old art school chum, now at them both for choosing this of ALL days to distract her with their private affairs.

Skeeter, taking no notice of Sadie's snaps, disappeared into the bedroom she shared with Desi to change out of her overalls and twice-rinsed underwear. Sadie pursued her offstage and the two had muffled words, none of them distinct except for Skeeter's “No I'm *not* moving out! Get a grip, Mercedes!”

Back then to the kitchen, Skeeter twirling in with a ginger-peachy grin to show off her snugly-shirted/shortly-shortsed ensemble. And ginger-peachily did she marshal the troops for cookout battle: Sadie rinsing and chopping and mixing with peevish finesse, Leland packing the cooler, Desirée setting the patio table with paper plates for the wind to whisk away and a frenzied Brooke to scamper after—“Lookit, Mommy! She thinks they're rabbits!” “Desi, get that mutt to *lie still!*”

Peyton was entrusted with mowing “our third of the yard,” which had recovered somewhat from the summer drought. There was an old-fashioned motorless lawnmower in the triplex's communal garage, as well as a shovel that Peyton used to shift the numerous Brooke-mementos dotting the landscape.

To herself Skeeter reserved the inflammable task of laying and lighting the fire. This she did with many gleeful chortles that redoubled in volume when Sadie brought out the seasoned meat: “*Hee hee!*—lemme at those porkchops! THIS little piggy's for Skeeter!”

Sadie lingered at grillside, speaking in her plucked-banjo-string attempt at an undertone; so Peyton moved discreetly away, though not shifting wholly out of earshot.

"Well!" went the banjo string. "I don't understand your relationship *at all*. I suppose it's probably a good thing—for him, at least—but what about you? What are you getting out of it?"

"What do you *think* I'm 'getting out of it'?"

"Well I mean do you love him?"

"Sure!"

"God that doesn't mean anything. You love everybody."

"Do *not*."

"Do *so*! You were in love with Gilbert O'Sullivan! You were even in love with *Tony Orlando*—"

"You better take that back, Sadie—"

"Ow! Stop it—I've got enough on my mind without you splattering me, squirt!"

"*Squirt!* Them's fighting words!—"

Fortunately the chops became medium-done at that precise moment, so further mayhem was postponed for the time being, and Sadie changed the subject to school. Seven-and-a-half years had passed since her first arrival at Merely SAD, yet her goal now was unchanged from her goal then: to get a Real Job, a Worthwhile and Fulfilling Job where she could *do* things, her *own* thing, making things *happen* in graphic design (as opposed to the gopher position she currently held with Wilde & D'Annunzio, an Elsew ad agency that thought "scruples" were a type of antique punctuation mark).

But first Sadie had to complete her college education—starting *tomorrow*—a few scant *hours* away—after having been gone for *years*—since before *Desi* was born—and she could really use a hug right now, plus another beer and maybe half a pack of cigarettes. God! Did you still have only the first week of term to change classes? Did you still have to get approval from the Dean's Office to withdraw from a course? Was the Graphic Communication teacher as demanding as Sadie'd heard? What about the Environmental Design teacher?

"Dead jellyfish, compared to me," said Peyton. "Like comparing lemons to oranges."

(Cackle from Skeeter as she gnawed her pork bone with another ginger-peachy grin.)

\*

All grinning aside, Peyton entered the Amphitheater lecture hall on Wednesday morning and stepped behind the lectern, preparing to shovel another load of puppypoop.

Here we go—brand new litter of whelps out there—Brooke probably sharper-witted than any of them. So drop the shovel and roll out the backhoe: time to start expounding on the Nature & Necessity of Art History to the callow, the somnolent, the philosophically indifferent or outright hostile—

“Is this Room 110?” from a straggling.

“This is *Art* 110,” Peyton thundered.

“What *room* is this?”

“Step outside and look to the left of the door.”

“(Oh. Room 110.) Will all the class numbers match the room numbers?”

“When you know the answer to that question,” said Peyton, “you will have earned your Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.”

To the hall at large he formally identified the course and himself; distributed copies of the Art 110 syllabus; announced his office location in the Old Library and the hours he could be found there; held up a copy of Janson’s *Basic History of Art* and remarked that it had not been written in order to gather dust beneath student daybeds.

“Nor is the program of study here at Merely SAD intended to develop only the technical skills you will need to be a professional artist or designer. There is also the ability to analyze and solve problems; to expand and refine your critical vocabularies; and to express yourselves more effectively through written, verbal, and visual communication.”

Out went all the lights.

[CHA-CHOCK]

An anguished specter appeared overhead, its mouth torn open in a gaping soundless howl, as it sat trapped in a dark abattoir between two butchered carcasses.

[Group inhalation from those students sufficiently awake at 9 AM, plus an audible “Cool” or two]

"This, by the way, is a *slide*. Be prepared to look at a multitude more of them this semester. We begin with Francis Bacon's *Figure with Meat*. This was painted in 1954, the same year that William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* was published. NOTE RIGHT NOW: I do not cite this as a 'fact' for you to memorize and regurgitate on some test or in some paper. Whenever I mention a name or place or date, it is to help strengthen the individual strands that make up the Web, as it were, of Art History, as it is."

[CHA-CHOCK: Garth Williams illustration from *Charlotte's Web*]

[Laughter]

"So if I say that Bacon's *Figure with Meat*" [CHA-CHOCK] "was painted in 1954, the same year that Golding's *Lord of the Flies* was published, it is to evoke thematic similarities between the two—motifs that they share—*things they seem to have in common*. Such as what? Such as isolation! Distortion! A sense of lamentation! Rapid reversion to savagery and brutality! 'The end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart,' the whole time-honored undergraduate schmeer—"

[CHA-CHOCK: pen-and-wash drawing of a pig's head on a stick]

"I drew that, as it happens, when *I* was an undergraduate."

[Smattering of ironic applause]

"If you're happy and you know it—"

[Laughter]

Strands in a web (says the spider to the flies). Let's ring the CHA-CHOCK changes as we illustrate a trail of webstrands from *Figure with Meat* back to Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X, done in what the Spanish call *la manera abreviada*—can anyone here translate that for us? No one? What, NOBODY?! Velázquez would look at you people and *smile*... Yes, you there— [Um... the, um, abbreviated manner?] Close enough! Buy yourself a beer after class. What is *la manera abreviada*? Bold brushstrokes! Brisk treatment! Uncompromising insight! What other painter was directly, overtly influenced by Velázquez? His future fellow Spaniard, Goya CHA-CHOCK who decorated his own dining room with this "Black Painting" of Saturn devouring his children. And who besides Velázquez did Goya acknowledge as a master? Two only: "Nature above all," and



Rembrandt under that. Like Goya, Rembrandt turned from fashionable portrait painting to grimmer subject matter, such as this CHA-CHOCK slaughtered ox which brings us back CHA-CHOCK to Bacon—

—this little piggy went to market to buy *roast beef*—

—so to speak.

Before concluding the slideshow (with a frame of the shattered-glasses nanny from *Battleship Potemkin*: on behalf of all of us here at Art 110, HAVE A NICE DAY!) Peyton delivered his opening-day disclaimer:

“Every artistic effort has a connection to that which has preceded it. When you know what has *been* done, you can know better what can *be* done—and better what you yourself can do, or attempt to do. Be better equipped to deal with your chosen medium, and make your own contribution to the Great Scheme of Things.

“Talent you bring here, if you have any; training in technique you pay us for, and we try to provide it. Art History will furnish you with examples to follow or avoid or subvert, as you may see fit.

“If, however, raw unadulterated *spontaneity* is what you value, you can avoid formal art education altogether. Change your major to business administration, become a stockbroker, and spontaneize-on-the-side like the early Gauguin. But if that’s your choice, you’d better hurry over to Brecknock Hall and withdraw right now, before They decide to keep your tuition.”

Nobody stirred, other than to utter more polite [laughter].

What a bunch of whelps.

No, hold that thought as the lights come up in the lecture hall. There in the front row, directly before the lectern, sat a girl who took evident pride in her thighs. No whelp she; nor was the girl sitting beside her. Nor any of the girls in that row, nor the row behind them, nor the rest of the Amphitheater so far as Peyton could see as they all came into sudden! sharp! focus! and his own personal horn section began sounding brassily forth.

(Just as well he wore baggy pants.)

No whelps they, but hardly a trace of comprehension showing on their flowerlike faces. Nor was that a sexist slur—the grubbier, hairier male visages out there looked equally blank. Not one in ten of them would ever give a damn much less understand the relationship *at all* (thank you Mercedes Benison) of Art to its History. Thus today's gruesome slideshow: blood 'n' guts always draw more flies than honey OR vinegar.

Draw butterflies, if you can catch them.

*Cherchez-ing les femmes* in their skimpy summergarb—an old old habit, from long long before that never-to-be-forgotten moment a decade ago when the little Orange Girls (squeamishly resistant to Cyrano's charms) had suddenly begun to cluster round, proffering their clustery-round macaroony selves (stick a feather in your cap!) and life had become a happy Apache dance without let or end... for awhile.

Not to say that he now felt wholly unchastened—not after two, three chastified years.

But who among the stragglings out there could ever hope to draw a Kitefly into their parlor?

Monday night she'd remained in Wheeville, for Sadie's banjo-plucking sake; but on Tuesday she'd shown up at the Cheval again, importing a bulky pokeful of what she called nature's necessities.

"Now don't spaz out, I'm not moving *in*; just making my presence *felt*. (You don't mind if I take over this chest of drawers, do you? I've had my eye on it.) Oh and by the way—we need to go out and buy you a blowdryer."

"*We* need to go out and buy *me* a blowdryer?"

"Yes *we* need to, and I'll hide when we get to the register—can't wait to see that cashier's face when you plonk down a blowdryer (hey! and a big old tube of Brylcream! don't let me forget) saying it's for *you* in that belligerent voice of yours. I'll show *her* who's up to no good! I always used to play Who Can You Freak Out? when *I* was a drugstore cashier—now we gotta teach the new breed a lesson or two. (There's nothing in this perfectly good closet but MORE boxes of old paper! I'm commandeering it. Don't worry, I'll fill it up jiffy-quick—)"

And so Skeeter unpacked and Skeeter undressed and Skeeter turned cartwheels (keeping her bra on, lest breakables be imperiled) through a Cheval condo that had borne the gloomy aura of a horse in a funeral cortège—but now found Li'l Lady Godiva in the wellshaped saddle, putting it through giddyap buckaroo paces as though they'd been apart for weeks instead of a single night, clamping down with thighs that at first glance might seem a bit stubby but are in fact so tautly! ripely! scrumptillyumptious! they make Front-Row Phoebe's look like a pair of toothpicks by comparison, clamping down TIGHT as she shouts inventive encouragement ("Use your nose! use your *nose!* OOOHHHH—") herself getting carried away in the process, bringing you up to add other halves to the wraparound, bra popping off so here come Pinky 'n' Perky and that chestnut about letting her babies play in your grass if you'll park your car in her garage (cackle) so she does and you do and she gallops past her usual *hee hee hees* to chant *LUVYA LUVYA LUVYA* in your ear like she's dictating yearbook inscriptions but with fevered breath like a furnace bellows, *this* is the way a cutiepie rides: BOP-budda-bop! bop-budda-BOP! and so you end up falling asleep in each other's arms all over again.

Romantic...

Awaking to a small-scale (but still pretty loud) *bzzzzz* like a dollhouse fire alarm, coming from the double-armful of Skeeter-booty lying partly on her stomach but mostly across yours. Not heavily so, but enough to impede your own snores that would be shaking the ceiling under ordinary circumstances. And might yet, despite the featherweight impediment. So rather than disturb Miss I-Sleep-On-My-Back's slumber, let us try turning, very gradually, onto our sides...

"Ngh?"

(Dammit.) "Shhhh. S'allright."

"Don' go."

"I won't... I don't have to; this is my place."

"Oh—right... Y'know I hate t'sleep alone."

"You get used to it."

"Don' wanna," she says, burrowing her face into your chest as if to plumb the depths of your sour-lemon heart.

So stroke her back toward Slumberland to rejoin Little Nemo. Stroke the finespun smoothness that fits her more snugly than any ensemble. Press the flesh, cup and squeeze and fondle—no no no send her to *sleep*, to sleep, perchance to get some more shuteye yourself. Thaaaat's right, get some more, cup and squeeze and NO just stroke and hold her, hold her, resume your crooning as you hold her, find her ear inside this frizzy whomp and yonghy-bonghy-bò her—no no no, sleep and dream, where's that ear, all this hair, makes the rest of her seem even petiter, "especially cute by moonlight"—aha. Nemo, meet Little Titania.

*Weaving spiders, come not here; hence, you long-legg'd spinners, hence! Beetles black, approach not near; worm nor snail, do no offence. Never harm nor spell nor charm come our lovely lady nigh; so good night, with lullaby. Lulla, lulla, lullaby—*

—till from deep within her foreshortened body, beneath the superficial *bzzzzz* 'g and slow steady pulse-thump, you can hear the unmistakable sound of Skeeter Kitefly laughing in her sleep.

(Whew.)

Suppose I'll have to start buying her flowers now, flowers and candy and greeting cards for every occasion, keep her picture on my desk, on my walls, and not stuck in any readymade frame from K-Mart either, nothing less than handfinished hardwood goldleaf molding will do, "if it's good enough for Botticelli—" so off to the races again, spend spend spend, still: doesn't she give give give in return? though putting it like that makes it sound like I *am* paying for it, playing sugardaddy after all, but still: isn't that the way it always goes? "girls don't pay, *guys* pay" and so we do, but even if I *AM* isn't she worth it? "say I'm the best you've ever had" and what did I answer? ask me again I'll say yes in a second yes just like I always do yes whatever she asks me dammit I've gone and let an angelfaced honeymuffin turn me into her exclusive boinktoy haw! weep for me! "open a School of Boinkology" I'll enroll ma'am yes ma'am and be teacher's pet bring her an apple a day no make that an orange no make it roses she'd like roses think of the stunts she could pull with a dozen red roses oops better get ones without thorns damnation! now she's got me buying her roses! "never again" I

said but “consider yourself seduced” she said and why just then I wonder did I need to hear the story of her life first then one welltimed nursery rhyme and off comes the robe and stick that feather back in my cap as Little Miss Muffet makes it with Lucky Jack Horner what a good boy am I buying muskroses for our lovely lady nigh and now she’s enamor’d of an ass “alas” just call me Nick Bottom in the same league as Gilbert O’Sullivan not to mention Tony Orlando soon comes the Dawn too soon no chance for shuteye nor spiders beetles worms snails better recheck that carousel before the slideshow can’t kick off with *Charlotte’s Web* would ruin the mood so will the clock striking six-thirty I can see her now clinging to the covers “just five more minutes” I’ll have to haul her right out of my? our? *the* sofabed into the bathroom her eyes shut tight but baby-bird tongue wagging “Wash me Dry me Brush me Bless me” and I’ll say yes of course yes small wonder always soooo hungry and thirsty and frisky eating at my table drinking from my cup “you’d think an egghead would know something about ovulation” at least this one won’t cry all the time just *bzzzzz* through the night while I jabber away to myself ridiculous habit result of sleeping alone these two three years still: I listened to her monologues these two three weeks though never in bed unless she does it while I’m asleep there’s role reversal for you lying on top of me from that very first bowl-over “force of habit I guess” what a work of art she is elbowing me away from the bathroom mirror after the washing and drying and brushing and blessing “you’ll need more practice getting me dressed” she’ll say “in case I ever pass out on you” she’ll grin gingerpeachily looking not a day over sixteen flowerlike without a trace of makeup then opening the medicine cabinet and my God every shelf crammed with nature’s necessities “making my presence *felt*” I guess mmph! again with the elbow! “one side sweetie” she’ll say “stand back and gimme room it’s Maybelline time” *la manera abreviada* bold brushstrokes brisk treatment Little Artful Antics more sure to follow on behalf of all of us here at Art 110 HAVE A NICE DAY—

[CHA-CHOCK]

## Chapter XIII

### *Pandora's Bop*

"So what do you *think*?"

"I wasn't aware that the Army made camouflage prom dresses."

"This isn't an *Army* prom dress, you turk! It's perfectly obviously a Marine Corps original! I found it down on the waterfront, at Wretched Wrefuse—we really need to take you and your bank balance there sometime. They've got these really cool bandoliers that were made to go with this dress, and wouldn't clash with the spaghetti straps *at all*. Hey watch this!—"

Saluting him, Skeeter executed a Marine-clean 'bout-face and nearly fell off her higher-than-usual heels. Peyton, lunging forward, caught her arm and yanked her back to the vertical.

"YEEK!" went Skeeter. "Darn these heels, they nearly made me go splat. Good save there, partner! We absolutely ought to go dancin' after the movie. Why haven't we ever gone dancin'? You *never* take me dancin'!"

"Dancing?"

"No—*dancin'*. There's a significant difference. Disco may be dead but *I* intend to keep Stayin' Alive, thank you kindly. And T G it's F, after all."

T G it's quitting time on a Friday afternoon in the grim grimy city of St. Mintred. At such a time, the safest place for a vintage DeSoto to be is in the SMECK parking structure atop Widdershins Hill. So Skeeter and Peyton left Floyd there and hiked down the Hill on

precarious foot—a descent not made any less hazardous by Skeeter's intermittent attempts at dancin'.

Not that level ground was any bowl of cherries either, down around Pabst Street: home to the dilapidated, the ramshackle, the fossilized. Where names of 19th Century proprietors were still faintly visible high up the sides of buildings, above (or between) the spraypaint of latter-day graffiti. Cars inched along Pabst toward freeway onramps, to join the factory workers streaming out of Prithee Motors, Importune Transport, Point Beseechment Shipping, Cadger Cargo Delivery, and Panhandle-Grattiss Aerospace.

The city of Elsew was a national conveyance center, but foisted all the resulting toil and travail onto St. Mintred. Where TGIF was nowhere in the atmosphere—displaced, perhaps, by the sour metallic whiff known as “St. Minnie's Bouquet,” that intensifies throughout the week and is especially foul during Friday rush hour. The drivers got to inhale it (along with a hundred unfiltered Marlboros) while they idled at stoplights, hurling honkish remarks at each other and passers-by. A bile-green Subaru blocked one intersection; from its occupant came a whistle as Skeeter went hightailing past.

“Ahoy there!” she waved at the Subaru, smirking at Peyton. “Did you hear *that*? Aren't you going to run after him and challenge the guy to a duel?”

“Maybe after the picture, before we go dancin'...”

Then a piercing shriek tore through the Bouquet, followed by a prolonged howl from further down the block.

Peyton lunged forward again, only to find Skeeter (the shrieker) already in the arms of another (the howler). Who emerged from the embrace to reveal a lofty olivaceous girl in Ray-Bans, tinfoil haltertop, plaid Bermuda shorts, and stiletto-pointed footwear such as a James Bond villainess might use to bedevil 007.

“When'd you get back?!” Skeeter was demanding.

“Like about three this morning—too pooped to call ya,” said the prolonged howler. “I only got up just now so's I could like go over to Turbo's 'n' get my 'do made over. Whaddaya think?”

To Peyton, the 'do resembled a Toni home permanent sent through a wind tunnel after a burgundy streak job, with one side draped over the other and held in place by an enormous feathered roach clip; but Skeeter exclaimed admiringly.

"So how was the trip?" she wanted to know.

"Aay y'know—love 'em 'n' dump 'em."

It seemed that the howler and one of her loftmates (Crispy J.? no, Muchacha) had planned to motorcycle clear around the Gulf of Mexico to Club Med in Cancún; but got no further than the Rio Grande.

"Like I dunno *where* exactly we ended up, but 'Chacha's still down there, I guess—"

"You *left* her there?"

"To get the bike fixed! Anyway she's got like these cousins or uncles in Matamoros or, y'know, someplace like that."

"So how'd *you* get home?"

"Hitched! It was toTALly awesome, Skee, I did it topless a lotta the way—went through like six cases o' sungoop, 'n' had those foggin' truckers eating outta my hand. Aay, I almost forgot—I boosted ya some awesome bracelets, they're back at the loft—I think they might be rully bronze."

"You *robbed* some poor Mexican peddler?"

"Hell no!—got 'em outta Nieman-Marcus. Y'need to use like *finesse* in a store like that—"

"HarrumMPH," went Peyton.

The howler slid her shades down a long narrow snoot to inspect him through eyes adorned by a quarter-pound of purple makeup. They were very young eyes but immediately recognizable as belonging to a tough chick, an *urban* girl, the kind Peyton had first marveled at from Jazzbo's car on inner-city road trips: eyes that looked coolly knowing, sharply appraising, insolently challenging, and provocative beyond the dreams of mortal man.

The tough chick eyes widened; the urban girl mouth opened.

"Oh m'Gahd, is this *him*? He's so BAWLD!"

Skeeter, beaming elatedly: "Peyton Derente, meet my friend RoBynne O'Ring."



"Like *¡buenas tardes!*" said RoBynne, extending a hand festooned with gewgaws on fingers and wrist. Before Peyton could clasp it, she reached up to run it over his scalp ("Y'gotta excuse my doing this") and then moved very close, treating him to a heady teenage compound of Giorgio, Aquanet, Tropical Blend tanning oil, and Bazooka bubble gum.

"Yer like taller than I thought, y'know? Whatcha doing with Li'l Bit here? Tall dudes need tall women—"

"Hey! Who are you referring to as a 'bit,' Miss Turketta?"

"WAUGH!!" went RoBynne, prolongedly, as Skeeter used both hands to pinch plaid Bermuda patootie. "Aaaayyyy, I was just fooling arowwwnd!"

"So I *saw*."

"And I just got back 'n' had my hair done 'n' everything!"

"So consider that your welcome-home-I-love-your-new-'do *tweak*."

RoBynne, pouting and massaging her rump, stumbled over Skeeter's poke lying unattended on the gritty dusty sidewalk. "*Aay!* Now yer trying to tweak my *neck*, are ya?"

"I didn't ask you to trip over my poke with those dominatrix booties of yours!"

"No, and y'weren't paying any attention to this 'poke' thing o' *yers!* Oh m'Gahd, whaddaya GOT in this thing? It weighs like a cow!"

"Well I guess *you'd* know what a cow weighs like—"

"Shaddup, I'm being like serious here! These're like mean streets, y'can't be leaving yer stuff wherever y'feel like—even if it *would* give a pursesnatching dude a hernia!" To Peyton: "Y'gotta keep yer eye out for this one every minute, else she gets into all sorta kindsa trouble!"

"Thank you, *Mommy*," said Skeeter, as RoBynne rehung the poke over her shoulder with many scolding tuts and clucks. (RoBynne herself carried a purse no bigger than a sandwich baggie, attached to what appeared to be a strand of dental floss.)

"So whatcha two doing around here anyway? Looks like yer dressed to go dancin'."

"Maybe after the movie—hey Ro, c'mon with us, we're going to the Rialto! You know, the one that's closing tonight."

"Closing! The Rialto? Y'mean like for always? No way!"

St. Mintred's Rialto Theater was not some common fleapit, nor a collegiate art house like the Mercury, but a downtown picture palace where three generations of friends-and-relations would go to behold Hollywood extravagance. Offering both a Wurlitzer and a five-piece orchestra in silent days, providing lavish intermissions in a lobby decked with gilt mirrors and crystal chandeliers, the Rialto had enjoyed nothing but the best for half a century. Recent years, however, had seen nothing more than tits 'n' laffs of the *Porky's* ilk. Where once *The Sound of Music* had played, the likes of *Screwballs* now held sway.

Though not after tonight. Preservationists were intent on preventing the Rialto's demolition; its exterior was a prime example of what Peyton called "Renaissance Revival, or terra cotta a-go-go"—façades encrusted with all manner of cartouches and filigrees, pilasters and architraves and caryatids with arms outflung. But even if the landmark folk could save it from the wrecking ball, the Rialto might never be more than an ornate ghost looming over the corner of 5th and Pabst—a baroque derelict, like so much else in St. Mintred.

For its last picture show, a final vulgarity appeared to be on the marquee:

"*Risky Business!*" squawked RoBynne. "But we seen this already, like twice."

"Hey!" said Skeeter, "you can't get too much of that Tom Cruise kid dancin' in his jockeys."

"Oh yeah! (heh heh)—" snortled Ms. O'Ring.

So Peyton forked over for three tickets instead of two.

Inside, the girls went bopping off to check out the Ladies and find even the toilet paper dispensers on the verge of shutdown: nothing available but single-ply, and that only one square at a time.

The famous Rialto lobby was already partly dismantled, though some of this was masked by blowup photos of the theater in its heyday, or stills from movies celebrated in bygone times. Beside a classic shot of W. C. Fields they found Peyton chatting with an elderly man in a creaky tuxedo.

"You shouldn't've had to pay your way in, Mr. Peyton. I want you to be my guest."

"Nonsense, Mr. Lombardi; it's matinee pricing."

"That's so. That's so. No more than it should be for such a picture—boys turning their family home into a bordello, while their parents are out of town! You got to wonder what sort of people make films like that."

"Fiends in human form, Mr. Lombardi."

"I'd say you're right, Mr. Peyton. Yes, I'd say you're right. Even so, I'm sorry you can't stay for the 10:15 show, I've planned a little ceremony... but I know you're busy. You're busy. At least allow me to offer you refreshments. Whatever you like, on the house—and your young friends too, of course," he added as the girls joined them.

"You don't know the extent of your generosity, Mr. Lombardi," said Peyton.

"Eh! I've got no use for it after tonight. You'll be doing me a kindness," said Mr. Lombardi. His rheumy eyes glanced from haltertop to spaghetti straps. "It's good to see you being like your old self again, Mr. Peyton. Try to enjoy the picture."

"What a nice old man," said Skeeter. "Whatever we like, on the house—that means we can go sit in the balcony, right?"

"I think the balcony's closed—"

"So we'll have it all to ourselves!—you, 'your old self again,' and the two of us! I'll run up and grab three or four seats in the front row—you people bring the food—remember all my favorites—and that it's all free!—*get extra of everything!*—"

ZAP, FLASH, and Skeeter was gone.

"Ain't she cute," said RoBynne O'Ring.

"She is," said Peyton, severely.

"Aay I mean it! I love Skeeter, she's like my very best friend! *But* y'notice she's left us to do all the foggin' lugwork."

Which she had. RoBynne graciously offered to share packmule duties, loading Peyton with a vast array of semi-stale edibles, and volunteering to carry all the beverages.

"Three drinks're like nothin'—I was a carhop one summer at the Retro Rocket Drive-in, y'know like on roller skates? So for me just three's way easy. Look—see?"

Peyton looked and saw her cradling a root beer, Sprite, and strawberry slushee in the crook of one arm, with the other outflung caryatid-style. Posing in front of a blownup still of

Louise Brooks looking exquisitely hardboiled.

As did RoBynne.

As *felt* Peyton, tearing his eyes away from beguilement, and taking care to precede her up the sweeping marble staircase beyond the BALCONY CLOSED sign.

"Ew I *like* those, they're soooo bitchen."

"What are?" asked Peyton, nearly spilling his vast array when RoBynne slid a hand into the back pocket of his oversized yellow slacks.

"Bananarama! Such a gnarly color."

He glared down at her. "I don't keep my wallet there, if that's what you're looking for—"

"Guess yer just glad to see me then," she snortled urbanely.

And indeed Priapus, that most Pavlovian of gods, was going *Hello-o-o, Hepzibah!* as they entered the Rialto balcony. Which, though even less intact than the lobby, still seemed able to withstand Skeeter's bouncing around the front row.

"What'd I tell you?" she hollered at them. "All to ourselves! Why, we could get up to just about anything up here, couldn't we? Drinks are on you two! So what took you so long? Hey is this *all* you could carry? Should you go back for more?"

"Y'know what we call jockstraps where I come from?" RoBynne asked Peyton, loudly.

"...I haven't the foggiest—"

"HOOD ornaments!"

"Where *do* you come from?" asked Skeeter, playing stooge.

"Oh, 'bout six blocks thataway—"

(Shriek/howl of laughter.)

So: front row center. Taking a once-plush velvet seat and using a heavy vat of popcorn to subdue Mr. Priapus, Peyton handed out the rest of the edibles and accepted his root beer from RoBynne. She took the seat to his left, swinging her long sleek legs onto the balcony rail; while Skeeter, settling into the seat to Peyton's right, grabbed her Sprite and asked, "How'd you get started talking about jockstraps? Or do I not want to know?"

"Aay, one thing like leads to another."

"Oh it does, hunh?"

"Yeah—like I got the *perfect* topping for that popcorn!"

She reached into her sandwich-baggie, brought out a can of Hershey's syrup, and removed its plastic lid.

"Here, Peyton, lemme show ya... popcorn tastes *so* good dunked in chocolate... *lots* better'n caramel... *mmmmmmmm*—oh like I am so SHUwure, Skeeter! Whyncha have 'em shine a foggin' spotlight on it already?"

Peyton turned in some alarm and found that Skeeter, rearing up to stretch her own little legs to the railing, had extended her lower torso well past the point of camouflage.

"Y'know," RoBynne mused, "I hear they like invented *other* color underpants—"

"—shut up—"

"—*besides* candy-apple red—"

"—shut up! Nothing neither of you haven't admired before," said Skeeter, rearranging her skirt.

(Another snortle from Ms. O'Ring.)

"Hey! You're just jealous 'cause I *have* an ass!"

"I HAVE an ass!! I do SO have an ass!!! Whaddaya think you were pinching just now?!"

"Well it was so *flat* and *skinny* and *fleshless*, I couldn't be sure—"

RoBynne leaned across and started swatting her with the syrup can, till Peyton let it be known that he would brook no more of this nonsense.

"Okay, I apologize," said Skeeter. "You DO so have an ass. Peyton, say something nice about RoBynne's bottom."

RoBynne promptly laid her Aquanetty head on his shoulder. "Yeah please! If a *man* says it I'll believe it. I was like a rully late bloomer 'n' I'm still kinda sensitive—"

"Course you are, the way I pinch heinies," said Skeeter.

To forestall further swattage, Peyton gallantly observed that RoBynne had bloomed very fully; for which she planted a Bazooka-flavored peck on his cheek as the house lights

dimmed.

"Hey I heard that! Just keep your lips to yourself, Turketta!"

"Aay like share 'n' share alike, Tweety!"

"The film's starting," Peyton observed.

*The dream is always the same.*

He had grown accustomed to Skeeter's moviewatching commentaries, but now got one in stereo: both girls a-gurgle over babyfaced Joel, cooing that he could join *them* in the shower and scrub *their* backs whenever he wanted.

Whisper from the left: "Did Tweeter over there ever tell ya 'bout the time me 'n' her took a shower together?... 'n' got so into it, y'know, pushing 'n' shoving, that we had this rully bitchen water fight?... 'n' yanked down the shower rod 'n' curtain 'n' everything?..."

From the right: "What's all that whispering about?"

From the screen: "Old Time Rock & Roll."

From the left: "(Heh heh)—I was just saying that dancin' with no pants on's the *only* way to dance."

From the right: no reply.

For the center: disquiet then, for awhile.

The girls continued to dip into the popcorn vat, dunk into the syrup can, and occasionally feed him a chocolate-coated kernel. But they did this without squabbling, even taking turns to feed Peyton, so that he was soon able to unbend (despite the sharpnailed fingers in his mouth) and pay more attention to the movie.

And its continuity: why would Joel leave the beautiful callgirl Lana alone in his house while he went to the bank to cash the bond to get the \$300 to pay for his night of unbridled carnality—*other* than to give Lana the opportunity to swipe Joel's mother's Steuben glass egg and so set the rest of the storyline in motion?

No matter; suspend that disbelief. "Not supposed to be Real Life," after all. Let's pretend that young Joel might actually progress from being chased by Guido the Killer Pimp to "dealing in human fulfillment" on the home-bordello level, to "making love on a real train" (who was Joel to say no?) to the electrodynamic sounds of Tangerine Dream.

*Time of your life, hunh kid?*

*Yes; no; maybe.*

Mesmerizing imagery.

As the train flashes to and fro and Lana undergoes strobe-lit orgasms onscreen, blooming very fully as she blends Skeeter's angelic blue-eyed blonditude with RoByrne's coolly calculating urbanity to form a composite, an amalgam, a condition in the air tonight...

*It's good to see you being like your old self again...*

...and you have the balcony to yourselves and what better way to memorialize the Rialto than to share and share alike, turn and turn about, playing that most diverting of party games: Two Girls for Every Guy?...

(Joel comes home, whistling fatuously, to find the place denuded.)

—two girls—

*(They stole the goddam house! They took everything!)*

—for every—

*(Took a shower together 'n' got so into it...)*

—cracked egg—

*(Nothing neither of you haven't admired before...)*

—there's a crack in my egg—

*(Let my love open the door...)*

Till, at last, all is darkness and silence.

And do you know the last line?

Yes, you know the last line: *Here comes a chopper to chop off your head!*

—BOOM—

## Chapter XIV

*Liquid Ditty*

"So when do I get to meet *your* friends? Will you introduce me as your mistress? Be sure to tug your forelock when you do."

"I think you're more of a *petite amie*. Or a paramour—"

"Hey! That's not a nice thing to say!"

"No? *Par amour*—French for 'with love.'"

"Really? No fooling? Okay then. I paramour you too. French kiss!" (*Smouche.*)

"So, when *do* I get to meet your friends?"

"I no longer pursue a social life. Trying to teach Art History to studio majors is enough to dampen any man's congeniality—"

"Oh Peyton get real! What about those raspberry parties Sadie said you always used to throw?"

"*Raspburials*. Over and done with, years ago."

"Well... oh never mind. I'd've liked—but anyway, it's fine by me. Monopolizing you, I mean. After all I *am* supposed to be your 'kept woman,' aren't I?"

"You," he told her, "are about as 'kept' as a high typhoon."

\*

Isolation.

Distortion.

But no sense of lamentation—no, sir.



See what happens when you pull up your venetians: back comes the hush, the gloom, the silent stealthy dust creeping up the stairs, infiltrating the miniloft like a dubious shade of difference.

Sweep it off the drawing table; there's work to be done. Cartoon panels to pencil, ink, and letter—"A Spectral Singalong with God's Older Brother Bub." (BLZ Bub, that is.) "This Month: Dead Rock Stars." Jimi, Janis, Elvis, Lennon, Morrison, Moon. What better than a touch of the tried and true? Or, for that matter, a touch of the sour-lemon screwdriver kept within easy reach?

Too easy, perhaps; your circles are becoming elliptical.

("I am the Eggman," said BLZ Bub.)

No matter. Patch up the cracks in your shell, Bub; make it hard as nails. They can only scratch its surface, no more. "Can you match the dead rockers with their causes of going bye-bye?" Assassination, heart attack, heroin overdose, sedative overdose, acute respiratory distress, choking on own tossed cookies: A, B, C, D, E, F.

Or none of the above, as in "listening to right now," as in Stevie Nicks (again). Still alive when last we checked; holding off the silence, if not the dust. *La la la la la, la la.* Stand Back. If Anyone Falls. I Need a Little Sympathy—echoing her earlier tune about leaving sugardaddies alone, when it comes to love.

Sweep away the echoes:

*Since RoBynne O'Ring's come back to town*

*(hurroo, hurroo)*

*Our Skeeter's not been so much around*

*(hurROO, hurROO)*

*It's girls's night out most ev'ry eve*

*And guess who's left by himself to grieve?*

*Crying cockles and mussels, alive alive-O—*

—good God. You've even begun to THINK along her lines.

"Have you noticed how much Stevie Nicks looks like ME? 'Cept she's got big dark eyes (poor baby). I sure do like the way she dresses, though. *And* twirls. *And* sings. I could dress like that if I had the bucks, and you know I can twirl like a dervish's daughter, but I can't sing. I mean I can *sing*, but not SING. 'Loud' is about the best I can sing, these days. Not like back when I drank Piña Coladas—"

Not like two weeks ago when she was here saying this, either.

Not like the solid month they'd spent together before that; scarcely a day going by without some sort of in-person confession or conjunction—the latter succeeding the former and a hell of a lot more interactively. Accommodatingly. Delighting in her company: *alas my love you do me wrong to cast me off discourteously—*

Supposed to have dropped by tonight. Hadn't shown. Hadn't called. And here it was—what?—after nine; a stitch in time.

("There's glory for you," said the Eggman.)

Sugardaddyhood could only extend so far, after all. Or could it? One of these fine months she might be wanting—what?—"help with the rent," say. Or no, better still, help for *Sadie* with the rent; but "don't let Sadie know." Of course not. Clever. Cunning.

Well... if it comes to that—so what? Not like he'd been stinted as a result.

Not, at least, till just lately.

There had been no further talk of goin' dancin'—none, at least, that included Peyton Derente.

("Love 'em 'n' dump 'em," said RoBynne O'Ring.)

Indeed. Say something nice about playing donkey-headed Bottom to a fickle Titania and her fully-blooming Peaseblossom. You *don't* get used to sleeping alone; you get *disused*. While they're off "pursuing a social life," polishing their patoots with a YEEK-YEEK here and a WAUGH-WAUGH there and a CLUMP CLUMP CLUMP on the actual door—

"*Hi* sorry I'm late if you'd give me a spare key you wouldn't have to bother letting me in but I can't stay anyway I've got RoBynne downstairs outside in Floyd and I've gotta drive her up to Port Dormer *right now* so I—"

"Wait," said Peyton. "Take a breath."

"You've been drinking without me!" said Skeeter, removing the glass from his hand, draining the one while giving the other a smack.

"Ow," said Peyton. "Let's go back to your first remark. You say RoBynne's outside—"

"*Downstairs* outside, in Floyd—"

"And you have to drive her, in Floyd, up to Port Dormer."

"Attaboy, Peyton! Right now, too. So I need—"

"One moment, please. Port Dormer must be—what?—two hundred miles from here."

"Only each way."

"*And* it's after nine. So even at the rate you drive, you won't make it there till midnight."

"Which is why we gotta get *going*, sweetie, we gotta get there *by* midnight, and it's not payday till Wednesday so can I have some carfare *please*?"

"Ah..." said Peyton. "May I ask *why* you have to drive RoBynne, in Floyd, the two hundred miles to Port Dormer by midnight tonight?"

"Because we have to stop WOLFGANG!"

Who, it seemed, had just called his ex-squeeze RoBynne from a phone booth outside the reddest-necked bar in Port Dormer. Which, it seemed, just happened to be across the street from the town's baddest-assed Italian restaurant. *Both* of which, it seemed, he threatened to enter at the stroke of midnight and there profanely denounce Ronald Reagan, Frank Sinatra, Christopher Columbus, and/or that Korean airliner the Soviet Union had recently shot out of the sky—

—all to "prove his love," according to Wolfgang.

With her motorcycle still in someplace like Matamoros, RoBynne had called Skeeter begging for immediate transport to Port Dormer; so here was Skeeter begging Peyton for financial underwriting of the same, and fast.

(Indeed.)

Taking his glass back: "You shouldn't be driving if you've been drinking."

"*That* wasn't drinking! That was wetting my whistle!... Okay, okay, don't spaz,

RoBynne can drive; she's very good 'n' careful—"

From eight stories downstairs outside: "*Will y'foggin' hurry the fogg up PLEEZE!*"

Go to the window and peer down. There was Floyd, all right, under the parking lot lights; and beside him the equally unmistakable Ms. O'Ring, dancin' in frantic place.

"Can you trust her on this?"

"What? Hey! RoBynne's my best friend! Best girlfriend anyway, and when she's in anguish she's serious about it and I can tell so PLEEZE—"

Peyton, though mmphing, reached for his wallet. "Just promise me one thing, will you? If you find yourself in any redneck bars—"

"—or Italian restaurants—"

"—between here and Port Dormer, *don't* try to drive back tonight."

"We can pull off to the side and sleep in Floyd—"

"And *don't* pull off to the side and sleep in the car!" He handed over some more bills.

"I take plastic too, you know," said Skeeter, giving him a hasty smooch. "I don't taste any after-dinner! Didn't you eat anything tonight? I've really got to cook more for you—can't have you wasting away on me."

Peyton's culinary output was limited to the dish he called Bouillabaisse Tartare: empty random canned goods into a saucepan and stir the contents together "for as long as it takes."

"Bachelor cooking!" Skeeter had groaned, taking over his cobweb-free kitchen and cooking up a palatable storm, wearing a cute li'l red apron over her cute li'l pink compactification of hugely! healthy! appetites above and below, throughout and through-in...

...but not, at least, just lately.

"What's the matter?" she was asking.

"Nothing to sneeze at."

"What?"

"You should be going."

"But—"

"Go on. I trust you to *shave* me, don't I?"

She squinted up at him. Through beady little gleaming eyes.

Then stepped forward, reaching out, pressing her pug against his proboscis... and standing that way for a moment, the two of them together...

Till a faint "*Skeeee-terrrr!*" arose from the down and out.

"Well," to him.

"AW RIGHT ALREADY!" out the window.

And off she sped.

No longer a question, now, of whether the circle would remain unbroken. More and more it was becoming an oblong....

\*

*Peyton, go to school. Go teach something.*

Merely SAD's Liberal Studies Division was housed off the West Quad in the Old Library, a building almost as old as the St. Mintred Rialto, and almost as much of a rattletrap. Here nine faculty members were quartered, if not drawn: Communications, Natural Sciences, and Asian Art on the first floor; Creative Writing, Social Sciences, American Studies, and Performing Arts on the second; Dr. Theodore Ecklebury (Chairman, soon to be Emeritus) in a good-sized office on the third floor; and Peyton Derente at the top of the stairs, in a room neither good nor sized nor originally intended to be an office.

He had first been summoned up here—when?—eight, nine years ago, as a freshman taking Art 110 instead of having to shovel it out. The incumbent shoveler had found Peyton's essays entertaining (they'd had to write *essays* in those days) and brought them to Dr. Ecklebury's attention.

Then as now, Eck resembled a dyspeptic Teddy Roosevelt in owl-eyed bifocals instead of a pince-nez, and with fewer opportunities to feel *Dee-lighted!* But he'd praised Freshman Peyton's fluency, his quick grasp of comparative detail. Had young Mr. Derente considered pursuing a career as an art historian?

Well, why not? Skill at bombast and braggadocio might come in handy too, given the state (then as now) of art criticism *à la mode*. So he'd gotten his BFA, served as Eck's

graduate teaching assistant while earning his master's degree, joining the full-time faculty three years ago—

—and, every semester since, there'd been retrenchment and belt-tightening. Frozen budgets, cutback staff, increased teaching load, piled-up duty plate—and being relegated to an ungood unsized erstwhile storeroom at the rickety top of the rattletrap stairs.

So why did he stay?

(Good question, little absentee.)

Multiple choice? True or false? Whichever way you answered it, another Tuesday afternoon was upon us. Meaning another 20th Century Seminar, with one hour devoted to students reporting what they'd extracted from a week of “intensive study,” followed by a second hour's group discussion of the same.

(And may GoFoC be merciful to me a sinner.)

Peyton had never yet disparaged the History of Art, as such—only the attempt to impart it to puddingheads. This afternoon there was Heather, who always looked frightened, and Dominique, who always looked lost. Plus Tim, who wasn't Tiny but big as a lummoX and about as erudite. So naturally he doubled as the Liberal Studies student intern, turning even mundane office chores into hazardous melodrama.

The ineffable They had chosen today to replace the steam radiator in their assigned classroom; so Heather, Dominique, and Tim adjourned to Peyton's ex-storeroom, bringing with them an apparent poltergeist as thumps, bangs, and eerie whistles resounded through the walls and floor:

*Rap rap rap. Ssshhhhssss. RAP RAP RAP. WhaaaaaAAAAAnng!*

This drove Heather (due to make the first report) even deeper into panic mode than usual, so Peyton took pity and turned to the lummoX. “Now, Tim—you've been reading about the competing influences of Lee Krasner and Thomas Hart Benton on Jackson Pollock?”

“Yeah,” said Tim. “So that copy machine? You know, the one downstairs? They wanted the minutes xeroxed, so I'm feeding them through and the copies are coming out? And I take them outta the tray and, whoa! *the words brush off on my hand*, right offa the

page! The toner, see, it must not be fusing onto the paper, or maybe it's the wrong brand or something. So we can't copy anything more right now and I called the repair guy *again* but hadda leave a message. He wasn't there."

"Very good, Tim. Now, Dominique—"

Another pitiable expression. *Where am I? What am I doing here? WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?*

(Take me now, GoFoC.)

But God or Fate or Chance yielded to the Old Library poltergeist, who chose that moment to come plundering up the teeter-tottery stairs, accompanied by

*Don't let it get me!*  
*Don't let it get me, OW!*  
*Don't let it get me!*  
*Don't let it get me, OW!*

—till in burst a creature wearing gypsy petticoats and DayGlo camisole, followed by another in camouflage prom dress and porkpie hat; both singing "Eaten by the Monster of Love."

"*Here* you are!" said the creature in the porkpie hat. "Are these your friends? Hah there, friends! Lemme introduce mahself: Ah'm Vicki Lee 'n' this hyere's Stacey Jo!"

"No, I wanna be *Cherie* Jo!"

"You are so completely not a Cherry Jo!"

"That is CheRIE! Like 'My Cherie Amour!' You are so foggin' deaf!"

Both slightly blitzed but fresh as New Wave daisies. Not visibly worse for wear, as you might expect after an all-night round trip by DeSoto Firesweep.

"We changed at a truckstop!"

"Look, we brought y'back like a souvenir—"

And Peyton was handed a World's Greatest Foundryworker statuette.

"Well, it *looked* artistic."

"What have you two been filling your canteens with?" he asked, not warmly.

Skeeter: "Ohhhh, just an Eskimo Pie or two—"

RoBynne: "Yeah, both of us—"

(Shriek/howl of laughter.)

Peyton: "We are trying to hold a seminar here—"

"Ooh, can we watch?"

"Boy you're big!" said Skeeter to Tim. "What's your name, sailor?"

"Not Sailor. It's Tim."

"No way! I used to sleep with a horsie called Timmy."

RoBynne meanwhile draped her DayGlo self across Peyton's desk. Up rode the petticoats, down hung the camisole, and again came the whispering:

"Yo, teacher dude... woontcha like to be *my* sweet poppa?... does she tell you stuff? I was raised Catholic, *I* could tell you stuff—"

"Hey! Quit musclin' in on my *main man!*—"

Up jumped RoBynne, her gypsy lace carrying away Peyton's memo pad and tape dispenser. "Oh, *yer* main man, hunh? I'll show you some musclin'—"

The girls squared off and began to scuffle. Heather and Dominique tried to beat a terrified retreat but ran slap into Tim, who looked ready to gather them into his cumbersome arms and have a little tussle of his own.

"HERE NOW!" blared Peyton. "Tim—let them go!"

"Aw," said Tim. (Heather disappeared out the door, but Dominique loitered perplexedly on the threshold.)

"And you two! Calm the hell down!"

"Aay, we're not fightin'—"

"*I* wouldn't fight with my very best friend—"

And there was a tipsy playful embrace.

("We gotta have class like this more often," Tim told Dominique.)

No need for Li'l Bit to worry, or Teacher Dude either for that matter; RoBynne's heart belonged to Floydie. She toTALly adored that car, y'know, she rully had to like *possess* it; what foggin' Pink Cadillac could compare with a Pepto-Bismol Firesweep? Here! look! c'mon, take it! two hundred thirty smackeroonies, every cent RoBynne had in the world—



"You didn't say anything last night about her having \$230!"

"I didn't know," said Skeeter.

"N' I couldn't get it till this morning," said RoBynne. "Y'think I like keep all my money in my *cleavage*?"

"Yeah, Peyton! I mean, if she did, there's no telling WHOSE hands might get on it—"

And another tipsy playful scuffle.

"Perhaps I'd better drive you home," Peyton sighed.

"DIDN'T I tell you how sweet he is to me?"

"Yuh, he's a rull sweet poppa all right—"

Which was why they wanted to negotiate the sale/purchase of Floyd right there and then: to have the benefit of Peyton's counsel and advice. He counted to ten and tried to comply, but got off to a careless start by referring to RoBynne's \$230 as her entire liquidity.

"My entire *liquid ditty*? C'mere, Peyton, I got somethin' *else* to show ya—"

What became of Wolfgang he never found out.

## Chapter XV

### *The Demon Bag Lady of Skeet Street*

Eaten by the Monster of Love.

Don't let it get me.

(OW.)

There followed two weeks of Skeeter popping up at irregular intervals, full of hectic caprice; grabbing at him, yanking at him, saying "C'mon—"

Such as back to the trattoria on Quicksilver Street, where she ordered the fettuccine primavera and washed it down with a bottle of Gallo Sauvignon Blanc, enthusing all the while about a magnolia-yellow Dodge sedan that RoBynne O'Ring was plotting to inherit from her dying Aunt Violet.

\$230 having been deemed insufficient compensation for a DeSoto that had cost Skeeter \$400 just last August, the girls put their deal on hold till RoBynne could raise more wherewithal or find something fit to trade. (And not a lost motorcycle, either.) This sudden talk of "dying Auntie Vi" alarmed Peyton, even after Skeeter explained that Vi had been a worldly-wise taxi dancer in her day and was nobody's fool even now, on a respirator in the SMECK intensive care unit, squeezing hands once for "yes" and twice for "you can do better than that."

Two weeks of Skeeter keeping him apprised of the latest counteroffers during her hectic pop-ups, each with its grab, yank, and "C'mon"—such as to Sumi's Sushi Palace, where she ordered the sea urchin with one green tea and a whole series of sakis.

Peyton, to his surprise, did not end up embroiled in any dickering or haggling; Skeeter managed quite adequately on her own, becoming the proud owner of a '72 Dodge Dart while RoBynne took possession of Firesweep Floyd, and Aunt Violet vamoosed to that big dime-a-dance in the sky. Peyton did get to pay his respects by outfitting the Dodge with gas, oil, spark plugs, jumper cables, antifreeze (sorry Vi) and a New Car Smell air freshener; followed by an inaugural drive to the nearest Schnitzel Haus, where Skeeter ordered the Bavarian pork roast with knödel, red cabbage, and more than enough Piesporter to get silly on.

Back To His Place then, and Through The Usual Motions: extra frisky on Skeeter's part. Grabbing, yanking, c'moning; spending the night together in the same old sofabed in the shadow of the same D—

...but not so much in one another's arms.

\*

"I need a new poke, and you're coming with me!"

Peyton rounded up the usual objections. He'd just gotten home from his dayjob, still had his nightly quota of ellipses to put down on paper; no, he couldn't possibly go shopping with Skeeter this evening.

But "Aw please!" she would entreat, batting those apricot eyelashes; "*Won't* you be my sugardaddy?" To which appeal, of course, there could be no denial—or even resistance, as he found himself being reshod, rejacketed, and herded out the door.

"We'll go in Clarence, and have lots of fun, and all you need to do is keep me company. Okay? C'mon—ooh, look at the pretty sunset!"

"Mmph," went Peyton. "Yes, and shell out for this new 'poke' of yours—"

"Oh don't be such a growly turk. There's a full moon tonight too, and you know what *that* means."

(Werewolves, thought Peyton.)

"Lookit!" said Skeeter. "Isn't Clarence an A-bomb hot rod!" Auntie Vi's Dodge Dart, built like a magnolia-yellow warplane, with extra-roomy sock-it-to-me interior and every bit of chrome trim available.

"All right. Explain again why 'Clarence.'"

“Cause he hasn't got his wings yet.”

“And explain again the wings business, please.”

“Explain the wings” (rrroooooom) “I can't believe you sometimes, how can you never” (vrroooooom) “have seen *It's a Wonderful Life*? I mean no wonder you're such a grumpy pup. Hold on—” (Screeeeeeee.) “I'm going to have to make it my life's work, getting you to watch that movie.”

“Keeping this car in tire-rubber's going to be *your* life's work.”

“Oh be quiet. That's exactly what I'm talking about. You need a little—a little—”

“A little maniac in the driver's seat?”

“—shut up—a little faith in joy, or something like that.” She dug a Big lighter out of the remnants of her old poke. “Now watch this. Are you watching carefully? Okay: cross your fingers—close your eyes—say ‘Wish I had a million dollars’—” (Flick.) “HOT dog!”

“*Would* you mind driving for God's sake with your eyes open please!”

“Jeez lighten up! That's exactly what I mean: a little faith in joy... Hold this, wouldja kindly? I can hardly drive with it going to pieces on me. And get me out a cigarette?”

Gingerly he accepted Old Poke's pieces. “Good God. What happened to this?”

“It had a nervous breakdown today at work. Where's my cigarette? Thanks.” (Flick; drag.) “And hey! Since you keep mentioning work, and since we're going to the mall any old way—”

“How are things at SMECK these days?” Peyton hastened to ask.

“—oh—okay—you know what hospitals are like.” [To passing roadhog: “*HEY! Do us all a favor and get your head outta your butt!*”] “What a turk! And speaking of hospitals I really ought to look for a dressy-up outfit as long as we're at the mall, and definitely another pair of shoes and—”

“Skeeter—”

“I need a *few* new things, now that it's getting colder—I mean, look at this old top I've got on; it's practically tatters.”

Sidelong eyeful of a washed-out pullover, with *N I L N I S I* stretched across the

front.

“‘Tatters.’ Is that what you’re calling them now?”

“And since when have you not liked my tatters?”

“I didn’t say I don’t. Tatters are fine, tatters are fetching—”

“Fetching! That’s something DOGS do—”

“Now look: we are going to the mall, if we make it there alive, to get you a purse.”

“A *poke*.”

“So let’s concentrate on that.”

“Gnarl gnarl gnarl. *What* a grump. I was KIDDING about the dogs and dressy-up outfit! You know—kidding? (Not about the shoes, though.)”

“Skeeter—”

“And for your information, we are not going to Run-o’-the-Mall—”

(*Screeee-jerk-thump*)

“—we have arrived.”

She contrived their entrance by parking in the lot off Payne Street, getting out of the car first, and oh so casually aiming for the northwest doors, which happened to be opposite a Tickle Me lingerie boutique. But before she could execute the final feint-and-dodge and disappear into its lace-edged maw, Peyton seized her wrist.

“Unhand me, fellow!”

“Skeeter. You’ve got entire drawers full of underwear already.”

“You leave my drawers out of it. I need lots more.”

“What, for instance?”

“Um... fishnet stockings! I need a thousand pairs! How do you expect me to work at a hospital without enough fishnet stockings?”

This caused a guffaw and seemed to improve her chances; but Peyton glanced at the boutique sign and turned away. “You said you needed a purse.”

“A *poke*.”

“A *purse*. *One* purse.”

“Oh all right,” Skeeter capitulated. Then CHING! went her lower lip. “Why don’t

you ever buy me underwear?"

"Beggorrah, it's unaware I was you were sellin' your underwear."

"Oh funny. What a *witty* turk I'm here with." But she slid her hand up into his, gave it one squeeze for "yes," and skipped along singing "MAWull, MAWull," pretending to maul her escort's arm with many beastly yawps and yowls.

\*

"And what's the matter with these bags, may I ask?" Peyton yawned half-a-dozen shop-stops later.

"They're all too small."

"Too *small*? What about that one there?"

"Nope nope nope nope—I can't use just any old poke; I need room for all my stuff! It's got to be big enough and deep enough to smuggle an illegal alien in."

"Mmph. I suppose wilderness outfitters stock something along those lines. Let's try them and be done with it."

So down and around a slew of outlets, each festooned with cardboard skeletons, gremlin masks, and jagged-grinning Jack-o'-lanterns.

"I ever tell you about my first Halloween dance in high school, when I went as a vampire? I wore this chalk-white fright makeup and a long black wig—"

"Yes, Skeeter, you told me."

"I didn't fill you in on the details. Remember Lonnie Fesso, who came as Dr. Jekyll *and* Mr. Hyde *and* busted the Halloween piñata, then went around walloping everyone with the piñata stick? Boy, could he shake it. ANYway I ran into him a few years later and guess what—he'd just started medical school, was going to study *neurosurgery*. I said to him, 'Lonnie! are you that into brains?' And he said no, he just liked cutting people's heads open... Oh here we go: GoreTexarama. Hey, check these puppies out! You can forget Tickle Me—THESE are what I call over-the-shoulder-boulder-holders!"

Peyton found a rainwear display to slouch against while Skeeter frolicked among the rucksacks.

"Lookit this one—cuuuute!—too small though. I wanna be a bag lady when I grow

up.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Oh spare us! Every Halloween I go partying as a bag lady. Now when I was little, I wanted to go out as a *trollop*. ‘Gramma I wanna be a trollop—dress me up like a trollop.’ Jeez, I loved the sound of that: like a lollipop on a bus, right? All-day sucker! All-*night* sucker! (Cackle.) ‘Absolutely not, young lady!’ Gramma’d say, and threaten not to let me go out at all. So then I’d threaten to run away and join the Roller Derby. I did one year, too.”

“You ran away?”

“No—joined the Roller Derby! When I was ten I put on my skates and a helmet and a T-shirt with a big number on it and went skating from door to door, ringing their bells and yelling TRIGGER TREETZ at ‘em, nastylike. At one house they got so freaked they gave me their whole bowl of candy—just handed it over—‘Here, take it all’—and shut the door *fast!*”

“Sounds like what I should’ve done a couple of hours ago.”

“Oh poop-a-doop! You know you love it.”

Eventually she chose a jumbo maroon poke that could have doubled as a sleeping bag, and busied herself with the transfusion from Old to New of cigarettes and Bic lighter and compact and lipgloss and eyeliner and eyeshadow and mascara and nailpolish and emery board and moisturizer and hairbrush and toothbrush and tampons and love gloves and Nordette Pills and No-Nonsense pantyhose and Imitation Opium and wads of kleenex (new and used) and barrettes and ribbons and keyring and rapewhistle and Mr. Wong’s jackknife and Walkman and Van Halen cassette and Men At Work cassette and Weird Al Yankovic cassette and paperbacks by Vonnegut and Tom Robbins and Ziggy address book and Ziggy things-to-do-today pad and movie ticketstubs and concert ticketstubs and broken pencilstubs and dried-out old ballpoints and clumped-together coupons and yet-to-be-replied-to correspondence and paid?-it-is-to-*laugh* bills and a ton of Sweet ‘n’ Low packets and the innards of half a ham sandwich and Peyton’s cartoon squirrel plus a wallet stuffed with photos of Skeeter alongside Sadie and Desi and RoBynne and Uncle Buddy-Buzz and Mao the cat and Dudley Moore not to mention overextended chargecards spilling out of cellophane sleevelets into a handful of loose change mingling with random bandaids and Lifesavers and no more than three or four

dollar bills, each of them practically tatters.

By the time this lot completed its change of venue, New Poke was rung up and paid for and Skeeter could tote it away, doing so with such skip-and-hop swashbucklery you'd have thought she'd reeled it in after a hard day's deepsea fishing.

"Well?" said Peyton.

"Well what?"

"Well don't I get a kiss or something?"

"Oh, sir!" gasped Skeeter. "You must think me a *flooze*... I tell you what. I'll take you to a really nice bar."

"Oh yes? And since when do you have money for treats?"

"Trick or treats?"

"I don't think it's a good idea, either way."

"Aw please! I promise I'll be good and have only two drinks, that's all, no more, just two, I mean you *will* be paying for them so you can regulate me, and then we'll see about kisses 'or something'—and if you say no I swear I'll go and look at earrings!"

Nor was this a false alarm, since it would involve the holding up to lobe in mirror of every last bauble in Run-o'-the-Mall. So again there could be no denial; and Peyton took her down Payne Street to Bert 'n' Ernie's Bar 'n' Grill, where all the waitresses cried "Skeeter's here!" and ran for the Cuervo and Cointreau and limeslice and salt.

And there Peyton nursed a single beer for the next two hours, watching his would-be bag lady's winsome pink face ruddify while she and the waitresses updated each other's scuttlebutt about mutual acquaintances.

"You about done with that second drink?" he finally inquired.

"You're being gloomy *again*," Skeeter told him, as she hitched up her *N I L N I S I* pullover... and stared down with dismay at her trim little midriff. "My belly button! It isn't winking!"

"All the better for us to contemplate it, I suppose..."

"Don't understand this. It's never not winked before! Maybe if I—"

"Keep your shirt on, please," Peyton requested as her hitching neared flash point.



"Oh *quit* with the grumping! See if I wink at *you* any more," she said, tucking her tummy away and signalling for another shot.

"There's a time and a place—"

"Yeah and you didn't even buy me any pretty bras to show off."

"You don't need any help from me to show off."

"Damn betcha! You're here with a celebrity! Haven't I ever told you 'bout the time I was up for Cookie of the Year?"

No, Peyton had not heard that particular confession. So Skeeter related the highly improvisational story of her entry in the Oxeye Biscuit Company's annual pageant, competing for a trophy, scholarship, and year's supply of crunchable merchandise.

"I came out third runner-up, the winner being this six-foot giraffe girl with no boobs and ugly roots—*what* a bitch. *Oh* I hated her."

"Well, they're usually biased toward the tall model-type—"

"—shut up—I coulda been a model-type contender!"

But her first and only booking, by a sleazoid agent, had been to deliver a singing telegram to a Little People's convention.

"Meaning he wanted me to STRIP FOR MIDGETS!"

And she who never got maudlin drunk or bitter drunk could, when full of margaritas, certainly turn indignant.

"I mean who the hell did he think I was, the turk! You know what I told him? I said to him, 'Hey!' I said, 'just because I act a bit demented now 'n' then does not mean I'm some sort of cheap dimestore slutto! *And,* ' I said to him, 'maybe you're thinking, "This girl's on drugs—I bet this girl's on drugs!" But not so, buster! I am a junkie *au naturel!*'"

"...Skeeter..."

"That's right! I tol' him, 'I smoke 'n' I drink 'n' I'm a natural-born blonde 'n' I shower every morning AND I douche when I need to, thank you very much! *I* am one talented lady!'"

Before she could demonstrate this by attempting cartwheels down the length of the bar, Peyton and a worried waitress-chum seized an armpit each and removed Skeeter, poke

and all, from Bert 'n' Ernie's premises.

"Whass goin' on?" she wanted to know, out on Payne Street. "Wha' happened? Did they throw us out? They *tried* to, din' they? Well, I'll show you goddam midgets!—"

And with no hesitation whatever she began to pull off her pullover.

The waitress chose this moment to helpfully disappear.

"—Skeeter!—"

"—SHUT UP—"

Even entangled within a snarl of sleeves, her intent and extent were sufficiently apparent for whooping dudes in passing cars to fill the night with honks and *whoas*.

"Skeeter, for God's sake—"

"I AM NOT A FLOOZE!"

Fearing he might at any moment be joined by the whoopers or taken for an assailant, Peyton grabbed Wild Irish Rose and wrestled her into an alley happily empty except for dumpsters. There she freed herself from her practically-tattered pullover and flung it to the ground.

"I'M NOT! *I'M NOT!!*"

"Come on, baby, settle down—"

"NO!!!"

Her face looked pandemonial in the lurid alley lamplight. Eyeballs bulging hubcap-huge, their veins thick and spirally as telephone cords; mouth distorted like McDougal's Cave with Tom and Becky trapped inside. And mauling at his arms again she shrugged off all coverup restraint: CHING! went her winsome pink chest, like wrathful bowlfuls of jelly.

"Whatsa matter?! Doncha like t'watch girls undress?!"

"Yes but not *here*, now come on—"

"Doncha like t'lookit ME then anymore?! I'M a girl!"

"The girl of my dreams."

"Course I am!... Am I?"

"More than you know, Skeeter."

"Really?... Am I?... All right then. I'm tired..." And into his beleaguered arms she

flopped, as confident of being caught as any Gatsby-party swooner. Reclining there she smiled up at him, all her fleeting ire gone: Tom and Becky rescued, angelface restored.

“A little faith in joy,” he quoted. “Just what do you expect me to do with you?”

“Um... point me in th’ right direction?”

“I try, but you keep going deaf—”

“M’up *here*,” she told him.

He transferred his gaze from jellybowls to angelface. “Sorry. Force of habit, I guess.”

*Wheeeee* went her angelfissure, briefly, even as apricot lashes fluttered shut. “Y’could take me home ‘n’ put me t’bed... fellow.”

Redressing his galvanic little charge as best he could, Peyton lugged her hundred-and-one pounds out of the alley. And miraculously no cops were waiting there, nor any whooping dudes or accusatory Take Back The Nighters. But all the way up Payne Street, underneath the full moon, Skeeter slooped a tune of her own recomposition that sounded something like:

*So hoist up the Dodge Dart’s parts,  
see if the engine starts,  
call like an ExtraTerrestrial:*

*Lemme go home!  
I wanna go home....*

\*

At last they reached wingless Clarence, against whom Skeeter got propped while Peyton caught his breath.

“Jeez,” she mumbled, “whass alla wheezin’ for? I mean, whole point’s t’get th’ girl drunk ‘n’ have y’wicked way with her, izznit?”

*Like hell.* A top-forty adolescent fantasy, all right: take Dream Girl home and put her to bed, with her well on the road to topless unconsciousness *and* in his close embrace—

—but the foremost image in his stark staring mind was of Skeeter suddenly chucking up her Cuervo and Cointreau and choking to irreversible death on them, right there in his arms.

Unwise instinct tightened those arms around the girl in question, who reflexively

sneezed over most of his shirtfront.

“Oops,” she burbled. “Sorry. Um... maybe you better drive. Oh—I almos’ forgot—”

Getting a grip on his shoulders she was able to peer upward, find his face, and on precarious tiptoe deposit a great big sloppykiss thereon.

“Thass for nothin’,” she carefully informed him. “‘N’ *that*... ol’ poop-a-doop... is from *Issa Won’ful Life*.”

She subsided then and resumed her shuteye while he, with a wheeze, began to rummage about New Poke in search of Skeeter’s keys.



## Four

### THE CONFUSIONS



## Chapter XVI

*—Or Flounder, Flounder in the Sea*

“Hello.”

“...Peyton?”

“Yes?”

“...s'me.”

“So I gather.”

“...Peyton?”

“Yes?”

“...how'd I get home?”

“I drove you, yesterday morning. In ‘Clarence.’”

“*Yesterday* morning. Really?... What'd Sadie say?”

“No one was there. I got you settled in, and left a note on the door saying you were ‘under the weather.’”

“Good. That's good... Um—how'd *you* get home?”

“Took the bus.”

“Oh... Um—how many drinks *did* I have?”

“Not that many, actually. It doesn't take many with someone your size.”

“Why didn't you... regulate me?”

“Quote ‘You're not the boss of me’ unquote.”



"Did I say that? Jeez, I can't remember any of it, hardly... Was I sick? Did I urp?"

"I thought you might. I left a bucket by your bed."

"Where? I don't see it... I—I remember us talking, at Bert 'n' Ernie's, and you not paying enough attention so I had to kind of yell, and then—or was that part a dream? I've had these really weird dreams where I have to yell at you... *I can't remember*. Peyton? Peyton, I'm scared! I'm—"

"Skeeter—"

"I never blacked out before! You've got to believe me—"

"I do, I believe you—"

"—and now I can't find my *horse!*"

"...pardon me?"

"My horse! Timmy, my stuffed horse! I've had him forever, since I was only two, but I've looked and looked (sniff) and I can't find him, not anywhere!—oh God—"

(Clunk.)

"Skeeter? Skeeter?..."

[Distant retching]

[Distant flushing]

"...Peyton?"

"Yes?"

"...I urped."

"So I gather."

"Aw hell, did you hear me?"

"Well, you did say that being with you would be a nonstop belly laugh—"

"Oh God... oh Jeez..."

"Shhhh. Shhhh. S'allright. Don't cry—"

"Will if I like! (Sniff.) Hell... just listen to me. I *always* sound like I'm laughing, don't I? No matter what—crying, throwing up, making love, everything. (Sniff.) My Grampa said I was born to do nothing but laugh."

"Your grandfather was a wise man."

"Now everybody points at me and says, '*There goes a dummy.*'"

"I'm sure no one's ever called you a dummy—"

"How do you know?! Maybe lots of people have! (Shniff.) Like one of those big dumb happy broads that hang around bars and clubs and—Ramada Inns, places like that. 'Cept I'm just a *little* dumb happy broad. When I'm happy, that is... (Shniff.) I can't even find an old stuffed horse! And you know I hate to sleep alone—"

"Yes."

"But, but Peyton? Listen... all that stuff, you know, about trollops? and about 'being a kept woman,' and everything? That was just jokes. You know? Just for laughs. Not for real."

"Yes."

"I need you to know that."

"...I do. I do."

"Good. Good. That's good... whew. We got our stories straight, anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"I told Sadie I had the bug—last night, it must've been. Don't know if she bought it, but she let Desi camp out on the living room couch. Kid was over the moon, big adventure... Anyway she didn't act pissed, Sadie I mean. And she sure would've, if she'd thought I'd passed out."

"(Cough.)"

"Oh *don't* cough at me, please, I feel bad enough... I haven't had an ache like this since—since last New Year's Eve. Jeez. And that one felt like The End of the goddam world..."

"You told me."

"Did I? Well... at least I'm not seeing any tiny pink elephants. Though those'd be kind of cute—"

"Skeeter—"

"Right right right, I know. No more bars or clubs for awhile. Not even really nice ones. (Shniff.)"

“Well, don’t cry about it—”

“I wasn’t crying! I was just—resting my *nose*, is all. Oh sorry, forget I said that. It’s just... I just wish that... I mean, it was best when—I could talk and talk all night and all day and tell you everything, everything... and you’d always listen. And pay attention. And hear every word I’d say.”

“Is that so! I might still do that if—never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just that lately you only seem to—”

“What?”

“All I ever hear from you anymore is—”

“*What?*”

“—never mind.”

(Silence.)

“...Peyton?”

(Silence.)

“*Peyton?*”

“...what?”

“I’ll never say ‘never mind’ again.”

“Thank you, Sean Connery.”

“Hee hee hee (ow)! *Hee hee hee (ow)!*... See? See, you make me laugh.”

“Sounds painful.”

“Well I’ve got a sick headache, don’t I?... But it really is laughing, this time. Really. Promise. You make me feel happy.”

“Do I?”

“*Yes (ow).* Yes. My head hurts but yes... I wish you were here. Or I was there, or something. But I’m glad you didn’t see me urp. ‘S’not very ladylike.”

“(Mmph.)”

“Hey! What was that? Were you guffawing at me?”

“Do I have any other choice?”

"Well... you're not mad at me, anyway?"

"No. How could I be?"

"You were, though."

"I was mistaken."

"I'll say you were!"

"(Mmph.)"

"But I'm not mad at you anymore, either. So will you go on talking to me?"

"As long as you like."

"Oh good. Peyton? I ever tell you how much I love the way you talk?"

"Not just lately..."

"Well I do. So much. So much... So will you tell me a story? A long boring one, that'll put me back to sleep?"

"Indeed! Well, I'm prepping my 'Intro to Baroque' midterm. Shall I tell you about Velázquez and his *tropo vero* portrait of Pope Innocent X?"

"What's *tropo vero*?"

"Too truthful."

"Oog. I don't want that, then. No, send me off to Never-Nevermindland. Oh wait a sec—lemme just pull up the covers—and put the phone here, beside my ear. Okay: tell me a *bedtime* story."

"In my best bedside manner?"

"ExACTly. You got it, Peyton. Ooh I'm yawning already..."

"Very well, then. 'Once upon a time—'"



## Chapter XVII

### *A Very Bad Wizard*

—in the days of old, a land there was called the Middle West; and in that land, a state there was called Nilnisi; and in that state, a city there was called Demortuis; and on the outskirts of that city a green pleasance there was, of rolling hills and meadows and orchards and creekgully: and that was Bander's Natch.

From Bander's Natch did the Kubla Khans of Demortuis decree that a suburb rise, a stately bedroom community of houses built in the Tudor and Georgian styles: and that was Cornwall. Treelined were its curving avenues and spacious its landscaped lawns; harmonious and troublefree they fashioned it, for pipe-puffing Dads in elbowpatched cardigans and pearl-necklaced Moms in starched apronstrings. Here they lived the commutably good life—not *rich*, perhaps, but certainly of the upper-midmost class, and always aspiring to achieve the *élite*.

Public-spirited were they, players of golfgame and bridgerubber at the Unicorn Country Club; takers of pride in Cornwall's being such a Nice Place to raise their children, and in those children's being such wellscrubbed variations on the Bud-and-Kitten theme. Innumerable were the glasses of freshpoured milk and plates of freshbaked cookies awaiting their *Hi Mom I'm HOEwum* return from school (always through the kitchen door, never through the front).

For Cornwall was their hearth and HOEwum, their stylishly plush cocoon: the Great American Dream made flesh in Good Old Heartland U.S.A., where God was ever in His

Heaven and Old Glory up Its Pole.

To the immediate east of this Wondersuburb lay another community, one of humbler bedrooms. Less rolling were its hills, less verdant its landscape; on rigidly rectangular lots were its bungalows built, fronted by patches of seedy lawn: and that was Chesterfield. Here the Dads went to bowling alleys clad in Ban-Lon and chinos, the Moms in curlers and Capri pants. Myriad were the Copenhagen snuff tins kicked by their Junior-and-Sis offspring (sometimes along the sidewalk, sometimes into the gutter) en route HOEwum to feast on Fizzies and pork rinds.

Now between Cornwall and Chesterfield, like a moat or hedge, ran fabled South 48th Street. Due west of this borderline, beyond heraldic arches, clomb the immaculate Cornish entryway known as Penzance Boulevard; but east of 48th this same thoroughfare narrowed and sagged into Chesterfield as plebeian Pawnee Road.

Two doors down from the corner of 48th and Pawnee, there amongst the chuckholes and Chevy pickups and transitorized rockabilly, could be found a bungalow wondrous to behold. Crammed it was with unChesterfieldian bric-a-brac: African masks and Chinese screens, a Russian samovar and a Persian narghile, jolly green Buddhas on pedestals and little carven owls on *étagères*. A grand (if shopworn) piano filled half the living room; the other half was taken up by a perpetual house party.

Presiding at the piano was a composite of the jolly Buddha and carven owl. Shortish was he and corpulent too, but sporting the natty wardrobe and elegant manners of a true chevalier. A lover of fine wines, of choice victuals, of high stakes and long odds and hundred-to-one shots, he was equally convivial as guest or host. Lavishly would he entertain in either capacity and largely would he spend, far more than he could spare—for he was only a collateral Derente, a cadet offshoot known to his cousins as “Lucky Pierre.”

(Sardonic, all the Derentes were; cutlery kings, after all.)

Nonetheless they marveled at how lucky Pierre proved to be, time and again, at charming the pants off ladies. Yet he stayed e’er faithful (in his heart) to the one he had espoused: Antoinette, who hailed from Louisiana and remained very Suth’n in her attitude, never saying “I” when she could utter “Ah.” Taller than her husband, quite as generously

fleshed and even more sociable, she dabbled in the local art scene (though frequently heard to sigh about how New Orleans beat Demortuis all hollow) and doted on extravagant divertissements. Half the house on Pawnee she filled with *objets* and the other half with those who painted, sculpted, and crafted them, alongside actors and dancers and Lucky Pierre's fellow musicians. Seldom did the merriment lapse at that wondrous bungalow, and seldom would the revelers take their leave—even if the gas or electricity were shut off, for intervals dependent on how well Lucky Pierre could live up to his name at the poker table, pool hall, or racetrack.

Then at the age of thirty Antoinette found herself carrying an unexpected child-to-be. So trumpetingly thunderingly was its presence felt that it earned the working title of Elephant (or El'phun, in its mother's patois). And like a maddened rogue did it balk at facing the wide bright world, holding out—or in—for seventeen days past its due date and then through seventeen hours of laborious delivery, till Antoinette informed Lucky Pierre that if he wanted a second child, he could dadblame rent him a dadgum uterus and have it his own *sacre bleu!* self.

Thus, from the very outset, was their son destined to be a one-and-only.

\*

From Elephant he quickly came to be known as Heffalump, and so by degrees as “Lumpy.” Thus-and-so: a lump of fresh clay was he, thrown on the cosmic potter's wheel. Who would mold him into a goodly vessel, staunch and strong?

At an extremely precocious age he realized (*sacre bleu*) that he could handle this fabrication all by himself.

Your self-made vessel, adroitly molded, could be put on like a suit of clothes and carried roundabout with you, wheresoever you might be taken. And what with playing Little Ricky to your parents's Desilu twosome, there were a lot of wheresoever to drop by or end up at, in and out of Demortuis.

“Got to tickle some ivories!” Lucky Pierre would say. “Come along, my boy! You're never too young to learn how to bust a few chops.” And off they would go, to one of Lumpy's homes away from home: Ensanglanté's on the West Side, where the onion soup and



dinner crêpes approached Antoinette's exacting standards; or Todd's Steakhouse on Lincoln Avenue, where Amos the headwaiter never failed to ask if the young gentleman would care for "a pot o' mocha java?"; or the Blue Rib Bone down on Rookery Row, where Lumpy might be rocked to sleep during live performances by Cannonball Adderley or Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson.

From time to time his vessel was toted off to Lake Severn to visit one or the other of the family enclaves: Le Tranchant (domain of old Jacques IV, "Uncle Quarty") or Le Bord du Rasoir (stomping grounds of Jacques V—"Uncle Sanka"—and his son Jazzbo). The original Jacques Derente, born to a long line of Calvinistic axe-grinders, had emigrated from Lyonnais to the Middle West back when most folk there ate with clasp-knives, and the only forks to be found were in the roads. By peddling overpriced flatware to outbound Forty-Niners, Jacques I had founded a business that bonanzafied a couple generations later when stainless steel was introduced. So now there were Derente™ knives and scissors and razor blades in coast-to-coast kitchen drawers and sewing rooms and medicine cabinets; and immense payloads of freshcut income trundling down the road to Lake Severn...

...though not so much, simoleonwise, to cadet offshoots in Chesterfield.

All the more reason to lose no time in molding your own vessel, and with the materials at hand.

In the beginning there were Hanna-Barbera characters scrawled in thick soft pencil on cheap coarse paper: Yogi and Boo-Boo and Quick Draw McGraw, Flintstone and Jetson flotsam and jetsam. The casts of *Peanuts* and *Pogo* and *Popeye* too, copied out of the funny pages or off the TV screen.

("So where's Scooby-Doo?" Skeeter Kitefly would one day ask, leafing through Lumpy's initial portfolio. "After my time," he would tell her. "I lost interest in Saturday morning cartoons around about *The Secret Squirrel Show*." "How can I ever respect you again?" Skeeter would sigh.)

Climbing the Crayola ladder from infantile 8 to routine 16 to the more sophisticated 24, to that unforgettable Christmas-stockings yield of the magnificent 48—after which the 64 seemed anticlimactic, built-in sharpener or no. Fit only for overindulged children, of whom

there were many across South 48th Street; as glimpsed through bungalow windows, while still a small lump, then at closer hand from kindergarten on. (Though this required an annual transfer into the Bander's Natch School District: a rite of passage that got ensnarled in stickier red tape with each succeeding year.)

Tempera, watercolor, agreeably messy charcoal sticks. Deeper talents being tapped, a series of private lessons arranged by Antoinette—nothing so fancy as that sounded, of course. The tutor was a starveling artist with a Jon Gnagy goatee, who always managed to arrive just as dinner was being served. But from him Lumpy learned the basics of perspective and proportion, and rudimentary caricature.

*Visual* caricature, that is; verbal came naturally.

(“Not French for nothing,” as Lucky Pierre liked to say.)

Being a rather fattish boy and having a Cyrano-nose from earliest childhood, Lumpy soon came to rely on the sarcastic riposte. Yes, Valvert, I *do* know how to play kickball, I helped invent the game—your version's pretty lame compared to how they play it in Peru. Oh, I've got a big nose, hunh? and do I want to *make* something of it? S'not a problem, my friend—(*phonk*)—here ya go: plenty more where that came from—

Didn't endear him to the juvenile louts of Cornwall.

Nor yet to its little Orange Girls, though Peyton took notice of them pretty damn pronto. (Not big-nosed for nothing, either.)

Having been a rather fattish boy his own *sacre bleu* self, Lucky Pierre put Lumpy to lifting weights, shadowboxing, and other exercises of the setting-up variety. In this he was seconded by Lumpy's third cousin and surrogate elder brother, Jazzbo the Suave (alias Jacques VI).

The Derentes engaged in a lot of Kennedyesque touch football at Lake Severn, and Jazzbo recruited Lumpy to hold the line for Le Bord du Rasoir. Height he inherited from Antoinette's Louisiana forebears; bulk from both parents and their high-caloric bill of fare. Swiftly did Lumpy grow, broad and stout and somewhat clumsy but entirely tenacious: ever steadfast on the line of scrimmage, stonewalling the abhorred team from Le Tranchant. Thus was a new layer added to his vessel; yet seldom was his mind on gaining yards or blocking

kicks or running interference, but on how this would be a surefire means of impressing little Orange Girls.

“A grape, a glass of water, half a macaroon... and your hand to kiss.”

Thrust home! Touché! Ho Cyrano!

The hand, for too long, was Lumpy's own, and occupied elsewhere.

Partly with pen and ink, in pictorial depiction of Orange Girls in imagined undress. Nothing so nasty as that sounded, of course; this was Art. And puberty had only just struck. And in those days *Playboy*, his chief reference book, still airbrushed away everything of a clinical nature.

At any rate these premature pin-uppies brought him his first repute as an artist. His first loutish camaraderie, first income from commissions, first and next several brushes with official censorship. All of which stood him in valuable stead when he started ninth grade at Cornwall High School—

—and got snapped up as a scrub guard on the JV squad by brusque Coach Tucker, who each fall informed new freshmen that Cornwall's mascot was the Blue Streak, so in no way would he tolerate any *Yellow Streaks* profaning his gym with their vile ochre presence!

Now two years earlier this homily had been delivered to four boys who promptly formed a Yellow Streak fellowship and amateur rock band. To them it seemed obvious that in every house on Penzance Boulevard, every person sat down three times a day to dine and sup and break their fast anew upon a big brimming bowl of Shredded Bullshit.

This past spring the Yellow Streaks had distributed canary-colored attacks on the shootings at Kent State (“OF COURSE YOU KNOW THIS MEANS *WAR!!!*”). Over the intervening summer they had nurtured these broadsheets into a multipaged underground newspaper called *Streaky Bacon*. And with a copy of this in hand did Lumpy approach them to volunteer his journalistic services.

A grandly tendered offer, disdained at first by the revolutionaries—Danny Bananas MacBean, Armageddon Bedlington, Joe Mitchell the Mellow Yellow Streak (who had connections) and Snortin' T. N. Tweedle (who utilized them); together with La Belle Debbie of legend imperishable. (Ah! like honey upon whole-wheat toast was the color of her eyes

and her hair!) Not only was Lumpy a pedestrian ninth-grader, but also a pigskin jock-in-the-making and therefore suspect of narkish proclivities.

On the spot, armed only with a Bic ballpoint, he dashed off a series of satirical efforts: Spiro Agnew sampling demonweed, David and Julie Eisenhower in the Two Virgins album cover pose, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix arriving at Rock'n'Roll Heaven in trick-or-treat costumes.

This last, redrawn in Indian ink, was accepted for the next issue of *Streaky Bacon*, as were several of Lumpy's pin-uppermosts. Which sparked outrage among the Sister Hoods, Cornwall High's burgeoning feminist movement, who wore crimson hooded ponchos and delved into what they hoped was the occult. When a subsequent "Set Your Chickens Free!" issue appeared, the Sister Hoods fell upon every available copy and plastered them with patches stating THIS EXPLOITS WOMEN!

The Yellow Streaks, adding "CHICKENS TOO," peddled the blemished *Bacons* at half-price.

Their cartoonist provocateur had been signing his artwork "Peyote Lump"; but now, in recognition of his inflammatory aptitude, the Streaks bestowed upon him a great and powerful honorific:

Outlandish Wizard of Schnoz.

(Because *because* because because BECAUUUSE...)

(Ho Cyrano-nose!)

So when Coach Tucker ordered the honoree to desist forthwith from this sedition, or else give up any hope of someday becoming a *varsity* scrub, Lumpy felt entitled to throw out his Right Guard. If they weren't going to play co-ed football—touch *or* tackle—he saw no point in seeing the season through. Oh, I've got a bad attitude, hunh? S'not a problem, Coach: handing in my helmet, hanging up my cleats, I'm off to be a Wizard—(*phonk*)—and follow the Yellow Streak Road!

\*

Storied times then followed, and storied deeds done by dark and light and grey areas in-between.

O the outbursts, the upflares, the pitched battles with Armageddon Bedlington (would-be Weatherman) who favored militant stridency over idle satire! O the euphoria, the hilarity, being immersed in the spirit of infinite festival, absorbed by freedom and beauty and grape-boycott! O how La Belle Debbie caused the swearing of oaths, bringing about an improbable Last Alliance of Yellow Streaks and Sister Hoods to achieve that most glorious of revolutionary happenings: the Day of the Banana Peels at Cornwall High School!

Truly this was the stuff of balladry and folklore.

For the Wizard of Schnoz, that storied epoch culminated in a summer road trip via Jazzbo's new LeMans Sport convertible, *cherchez-ing les femmes du Moyen-Ouest*—or “chasing country twattail,” as Jazzbo phrased it. And O the jubilation of that chase, that hunt and seek and yoicks! tallyho! inside a borrowed sleeping bag outside Rapid City, South Dakota, with Miss I-Don't-Feel-Pregnant, whose apostasy would have caused the nuns to drop their teeth. (What *had* her name been? Molly Maloney? Katie O'Keeffe? Something redundant, anyway.)

No matter. Next morning, Whatsername went wheresoever. And goddam Jazzbo, leaving his Carly Simon lookalike in her Jeep Wagoneer waterbed, got behind the wheel of the LeMans and leaned on its horn. And the Wizard of Schnoz had to resume his lumpish old vessel as kid cousin riding shotgun, very much in the driver's suave shadow.

So much for culmination.

Jazzbo would go on to Dartmouth and the Wharton School of Finance, losing his Jazzboness over time and becoming “Jacques VI” instead. But Lumpy just lumbered back to Chesterfield, to Lucky Pierre and Antoinette and their uninterrupted bungalow party. Also to Cornwall High School, from which most of the Yellow Streaks had graduated—taking, it would seem, the very much interrupted legends of Bander's Natch away with them.

In their absence the remnants of the Last Alliance tried to persevere, to carry on, even serving up an occasional fresh rasher of *Streaky Bacon*. But the entire fabric of awareness seemed to be unraveling before them: the war abruptly over, POWs brought home, military draft blowing no more! And then the energy of America, once so abundant, grew steadily more scarce; even as Richard Nixon, once so impenetrable, staged a slow-motion downfall

upon the tape-recorded sword he had forged for himself.

So too did the Wizard of Schnoz feel: like a hot-air balloon taking a gradual leak. He had gone north-by-northwest with a lapsed Catholic damsel at the foot of Mount Rushmore, with four stonefaced Presidents looking on—and STILL the little Orange Girls of Cornwall didn't act impressed! They found him too gauche, too oafish, lacking even JV scrub cachet; and too snide, too sarcastic, which on the teen machismo scale ranked right up with sensitivity and enjoyment of Broadway showtunes.

Neither of which did anything to slake a constant burning lust to strip the clothes off every woman in school, in town, and the wide bright world beyond. Nary a resource had Lumpy to rely on but Franco-American wit; and fueled by frustration he honed his gibes till they took on a caustic cutlass edge, to pin down and needle away at his female classmates.

Thus was another coating added to his vessel. And these means achieved him some ends among lonely Rapunzel-types, who would let down their hair (to a certain extent, yes) when baited by rascallions seeking to clamber up that Certain Extent—

—only to be let down, in turn, by damnable lumpishness.

Popping the buttons off a Rapunzel's blouse ("This is brand-new!" she would wail) or wrenching the hooks right out of her bra ("I just *bought* this! I don't BELIEVE you!!")

The incredible pitfalls of getting to second base. Cornwalletries almost always dressed expensively, and Lumpy had to shell out a hell of a lot—without any reciprocation worth mentioning—to make amends after each infrequent date.

(But I'm a WIZARD, dammit!)

*After a momentary silence spake  
Some Vessel of a more ungainly make;  
"They sneer at me for leaning all awry:  
What! did the Hand then of the Potter shake?"*

Shake, rattle and roll.

Resigning himself to a senior year of Cyranohood, he astounded the school by making a spit-in-their-eye run for the presidency of the Cornwall Student Council. And by offering the assembled electorate an upfront bribe of thirty dollars for the job. And by wagering his

feeble (but well-meaning) opponent Larry Hayes that the loser should get his head shaved—thereby guaranteeing Hayes's victory.

Though only at the polls. Who now can say what was the Wizard's true motivation? Shaving his head before a large crowd of paying spectators, he gained a powerful resemblance to Telly Savalas, whose series *Kojak* happened to premiere that month. And with the new cueball came a staggering leap in his personal seductability.

Clustering round they came.

Clustery-round they were.

Orange Girls squeamish no more, resistant no more, eagerly offering their sweet macaroony selves by the by-God cookie-jarful.

(Stick a feather in your WHO LOVES YA BABY cap!)

So "swath" was not the word for what he proceeded to cut. Lumberin' Lumpy had transformed into Lex Lothario, and there was a heapin' helpin' of lost time to make up for. Let the Valverts drag their dates to burger joints; the Wizard of Schnoz knew how to demonstrate *panache*—

"Ensanglanté's? Really? Oh wow! But that's so expensive!"

"I wouldn't subject you to anything *cheap*, my precious." (O no, Gollum.)

Lesser macaroons he took to Todd's Steakhouse—"Table for two, Amos, and a pot o' mocha java"—while the occasional hard-to-get player got smuggled into the Blue Rib Bone on Rookery Row. And Lucky Pierre, if on ivory-tickling duty that night, would strike up "Let's Get It On" or "I'm Gonna Love You Just a Little More Baby."

Afterward, more often than not, they did and he would.

His old Lumpy reputation came in handy here, as the cookies hastened to unbutton and unhook themselves and so spare their pricey upper garments. (Which didn't prevent the Wizard from busting the zipper on a skirt, say, or reducing pantyhose to a set of split ends.)

(Apache dance time!)

Peeling and squeezing Orange Girls meant no more time for peeling bananas and squeezing out *Streaky Bacons*. Instead he spent his last semester at Cornwall High editing its sanctioned school newspaper, the *Flash*; and learned a bit about orthodox journalism when he

wasn't hosting staff bacchanals. (Why waste your nose on a grindstone when it complements your chromedome?)

Watergate was all the rage in those days, but no impeachment did the Wizard seek—not with all these macaroonies clustering round, thank you Jesus. Not even feeble Larry Hayes did he target, other than to rub it in editorially (*Flash* after *Flash*) about the ultimate results of their election wager. Finally Larry lost his well-meaning marbles one bright cold April day: stripping to the toe, taking to his heels, and cavorting through the halls of Cornwall High School as the bare-assed Last of the Yellow Streaks.

\*

Thus it came to an end, that age of the world in frumious Bander's Natch.

Cornwall and Chesterfield would endure, and South 48th Street would go on cleaving them asunder. Penzance Boulevard would continue its immaculate ascent beyond heraldic arches, granting access to those privileged enough to live on (or make deliveries to) Tintagel and Boscastle, Camelford and St. Ives. But never again would Cornwall see the like of the Glorious Revolution, celebrating the most cornucopious Joy and Peace and Hope; for the contents of that incandescent hourglass have been scattered and mingled with less illustrious sands.

Or so reflected the Wizard of Schnoz, unable to sleep one dank dark August night, shortly before he too headed off to higher education elsewhere. Rising before dawn, he scaled Penzance Hill and wandered its darkling empty pavements.

In-a-Gadda-da-Vida they cometh, but out from the Presence they goeth, to dwell and snore in the Land of Nod: thus had ever been the *sic transit* cycle. Forward from ashes, backward to dust; rounding about upon itself, biting its own tail as might a mad dog or a Worm Ouroboros.

The Wizard found his feet taking him down to Tulgey Park, to a duckpond there ringed with willow trees. On this quacksome strand had the Yellow Streaks held many a rally, passed many a demonic calumet from hand to hand. (Ah! to take it direct from La Belle Debbie's honey-dulcet lips! and then to overindulge in Texas tea, courtesy of Joe Mitchell's mellow connections!)



Storied times.

Storied deeds.

Outlandish...

He picked up and flung pondwards a single stone that vanished from sight, or what would have been sight had it not been 5 AM. One stone thrown and others to follow, chosen at random and hurled unseen, with only a SHPLOOP to testify they ever existed at all. Larger stones he chose now, harder did he fling them; bigger SHPLOOPS he achieved, with ripples now visible in the dawn's early light. Circles heading out to bounce off faraway shores and come back home again, cometh and goeth, around and around—

—till along came a wind blowing wrinklewaves across the duckpond: waves that overwhelmed the ripples, and wiped away the circles, and smoothed out the surface of the water.

## Chapter XVIII

*Dilated Nostrils*

“Alcohol,” said Peyton Derente, “is the key ingredient of every artistic endeavor.”

*Thunk* went the pitcher as it was set before him.

“Just so!” Peyton agreed. “Think, thank, thunk:

*We thank you for this beer in part  
Because it makes us think so smart!”*

(Ulg-ulg-ulg-ulg.) “Ahhhh! Precisely. Drink up, ladies; it’s cold outside.”

“‘Ladies’ is a sexist term,” Mercedes Benison informed him, frostily.

“Women, then. Fellow students! ‘Mutual pupils,’ if you object to ‘fellow.’ *Dilated Pupils*, I hope and trust:

*In Dilated Pupils I trust and hope  
‘Cause when they contract I can’t cope!”*

(Ulg-ulg-ulg-ulg.) “AHHHH! Hear hear. If I do hearsay myself—”

“That’s funny,” said Dawn Swift.

“What is?”

“‘Dilated Pupils.’ Did you make that up?”

“The concept—no. The couplets—yes.” Leering at them immodestly, he ran a thick finger this way and that along his new smudgestache, added to embellish the broad/blunt/banked Nose above. Altogether big and burly was Peyton by now, with glittering eyes under

sardonic lids under squared-off brow extending upward into stark arrant egghead.

He refilled his mug from the emptying pitcher and beckoned to the bar for refreshment. No fuss, no fret; no doubts, no debt—except that which the bar owed Peyton Derente for his invaluable patronage. Still a few weeks shy of his twentieth birthday, but a grizzled veteran of four semesters at Merely SAD—much of that time spent right here at Marr's Bar on the Milky Way, holding court at this corner table below the Michelob sign.

(Ulg-ulg-ulg-ulg.) “Haaaa! To be sure. One of these days I intend to present this establishment with a pewter tankard, quart-sized, with my name engraved upon it in Gothic characters.”

(*Thunk.*)

“Gothic characters?”

“Straight out of Edgar Allan Poe—Hop-Frog, Trippetta, the whole gang of Ourang-Outangs. Allow me to pour you another... and you, Dawn... and one for the dealer—”

(Ulg-ulg-ulg-ulg.) “HAAAA! *C'est ça*. And now for a little pipeful of something. May I offer you ladies—excuse me, you *mutuals*—a light? Strictly in the spirit of welcome-wagonning.”

“More like *tobogganing*,” said Mercedes. “I know a snowjob when I hear one.”

“When you *hear* one? ‘Silent snowjob, secret snowjob’—”

“Yeah whatever. We can light our own, thank you.” She struck up Winstons for herself and Dawn, contributing their fumes to the already smoke-filled room.

Peyton, puffing licentiously at his long wooden pipe, drank them both in. Both newcomers to campus: Dawn Swift, a drowsy young Brünnhilde, very fair and sedate, whose white jersey put you in mind of yodeling milkmaids; and Ms. Mercedes Quite Contrary, a paisan Demortuisian with red hair, gingersnap eyes, and crackly take-hold attitude. How does *her* garden grow? Less abundantly than Dawn's, but far from dismissible in an Amazing Technicolor Dreamblouse worn half-open (as any optimist could clearly see) despite the feminist rhetoric and February weather.

Pretty mutuals in a row: set 'em up and make 'em glow.

Starting with the oldest trick in the whole damn book—encourage them to talk about

themselves.

"So Mercedes, you were telling us about touring Italy last year," he prompted.

"Oh right. Well anyway, I kind of ran out of bread when I got to Florence, and had to work as an *au pair* for a few weeks for this old couple who actually lived not too far from the center of town, so I was able to catch most of the galleries and palaces—the Uffizi and Bargello and all. God it was beautiful."

"Gosh, I bet," sighed Dawn. "I'd love to go see Italy. Or anywhere."

"It's easy as pie. Just take a semester off—sign up for a student package deal—"

"Oh, I don't know. My folks are mad enough at me for leaving the U. to come *here*. And it's not like I'm even any farther away from home or anything. I know Merely's more expensive, but I want to learn about ceramics, you know, and maybe jewelry, so... um... I mean..."

*Yo ho dee oh lay hee* went her jersey.

"Just so, just so," said Peyton, squeezing her hand.

"Really!" Mercedes agreed, taking an indignant ulg-ulg from her own mug. "Don't let them browbeat you! We're here because we want to *do* things, to make things *happen!* Worthwhile and fulfilling things! You can't learn about that at a state university."

"Well said, well said."

"Damn right well said." (Ulg-ulg.)

"And yet, when it comes right down to it, how easy *is* pie?"

"Uh..." said Mercedes.

"?" looked Dawn.

So Peyton took back the conversational tiller, steering it toward more navigable topics. Second oldest trick in the book: allow them to hear about *you* for awhile. (Or at length. And at breadth.)

Tell them about you and the rest of the Dilated Pupils, and the highway robbery you'd staged last fall when the Dean invited Tom Wolfe Himself to come lecture Merely SAD on *The Painted Word*, for an undisclosed but probably exorbitant fee. To which Henry Bramham, the Minimalist sculptor, objected on both philosophic and economic grounds,

going so far as to lodge a formal protest and urge others on campus to follow suit.

A *conceptual* protest had then been masterminded by Isobel Otterburn, Merely's semicelebrated Performing Arts instructor, and mounted by her star protégées—a group who kept changing their collective name but were known for the moment as the Salamander Troika. They'd intended to enact the latest in their series of Burnt Offering tableaux, but were obliged to retool this at the last inclement minute and turn it into a Burial in the muddy East Quad.

Enter the Dilated Pupils. "Anybody can play the highbrow, but it takes FLAIR and SCOPE and DEPTH to be a Dilated Pupil!"—not to mention a preference for unyoked idleness over starchy abstraction, and for hanging out at Marr's Bar instead of dissecting *Artforum* magazine's decrees:

"Painting-is-obsolete?"

"Art-must-be-a-political-act?"

"There-can-be-no-escape-from-ideology?"

(Gangway there, Jackson; we've got a bucket o' suds to theorize about!)

Clearly a counterdemonstration was called for. Not so much in defense of Tom Wolfe Himself, as to irk and tweak the Salamander Troika; and not so much the entire Troika as its top banana, a hyperthyroid case named Elizabeth Goade; and not so much Beth Goade *per se* as her nonstop playing Houyhnhnm-on-the-brink to their Yahoos-over-the-verge.

In an earlier generation Beth might well have been a social deb, hailing as she did from a wellheeled family, looking as she did like a malnourished young Kate Hepburn, whinnying (rahlly she did) Bryn Mawrily. As a performance artist she was a standout: while the other Troikarinas tended the Burnt Offering hibachi, scattering ash and dust, Beth would strike spasmodic postures with head flung back, nostrils agape, and eyes popping out of their sockets—"not unlike a colt realizing it's trapped in a bog."

And about to be irked and tweaked.

When the Troika made their East Quad entrance, they found the Dilated Pupils prominent among those awaiting Burial there. Isobel Otterburn, regarding them with the utmost distrust, signaled for a halt; but not only were the D.P.'s somberly dressed and

-expressed, they were filming the proceedings with a Super 8 camera. And celluloid, to the conceptual-minded, was irresistible: "as-one-of-the-mechanical-media,-it-lends-validation-to-any-artistic-endeavor."

So the Troika (careful to stay in frame) carried on with their shrouding and finger cymbals and plastic floral arrangements and tape-recorded laments. But when Beth Goade went into her first colt-in-a-bog contortion, each of the D.P.'s whipped out and slapped on a papier-mâché mask with protuberant eyeballs, cavernous nostrils, flair scope & depth:

"DO THE RASPBURIAL!"

"Right there in the East Quad, too," said Peyton with expansive nostalgia, as though recalling exploits from ages long past. "Highway robbery! Completely stole the day out from under those Salamanders. And proved our point: the bitter part of valor IS dilation."

"You," said Mercedes, "have been talking to our chests for the past ten minutes."

"That's because I've been talking to you from *my* chest," he responded, clapping a hand on his heart.

"Oh gag!"

"Not at all—entirely in earnest. I plan to be an art historian, you see, so it's my duty to penetrate to the heart of things."

"Not by staring down *my* front you're not," said Mercedes, sourly refastening her amazing technicolors. "You ask me, all male art students ought to be gay."

"Well, leave a *little* room for the poor old straight and narrow—or rather for the straight but *not* narrow—so best leave a LOT of room—"

"*God!* That sounds exactly like something this pig of a dickhead who made me go with him to Lisbon and then dumped me just as I was trying to sneak a few bottles of Fonseca through customs absolutely spooked with dread that I was going to end up in some Portugese women's prison would have said!"

"Does it?" asked Dawn.

"And I resent it," said Peyton. "I'll have you know my mother gave *birth* to a pig of a dickhead."

Mercedes broke up a bit at that (foxy lady laughter!) so Peyton pressed on, wondering

aloud whether even a pig of a dickhead might be permitted to buy a couple of newcomers a couple of drinks. *Proper* drinks, mind you. Ever tried a “horseshot”—vodka, tomato juice, and horseradish?

“Yuck!”

“It does have a touch of the rumbustious, I will admit. But no—we *are* all art students, are we not?... (Three Wild Turkeys, please.) Back in a flush,” he added, stepping out to share his four beers with the plumbing: ulg-ulg-ulg-ulg.

Hardly likely that the girls would bolt without a taste of the hard stuff (haw). And hardly likely that they’d pay old Marr for it, or that Marr would give anyone so much as a glass of H<sub>2</sub>O without receiving C.O.D. Of course, some audacious rival might take advantage of Peyton’s absence to try muscling in; but unlikely that *both* girls could be spirited away in so brief an interval—especially not Ms. Foxy Red Nipple Alert Benison, nossir.

He adjusted himself, washed his hands, dried them on the last paper towel out of the dispenser (oho!) and returned to the babble of the rabble. Glancing at his corner table to find the pretty *mutuelles gone!*—no, coming back, sitting down; evidently having paid their own respects to the porcelain. Good for them! Prudent ladies! All our bladders empty, ply them both with plenty—action! action! we all faw down—

He collected his three Turkeys from Mr. Marr and transported them, ceremoniously, to the corner, acknowledging hoots from the rabble with a wink and a nod and an inclination of the Nose.

*Peyton’s waitin’...*

*Peyton’s waitin’...*

“Here we are now—glasses high—I give you the state of Windohwa, where you can buy true booze at the age of nineteen:

*Let us toast the Land of Milk and Cookies  
And the Merely School of Art & Design!  
Me a veteran and you two rookies  
Drinking whiskey ‘cause it’s quicker than wine!”*

(ULG-ulg.) “MMM-pha! And so say all of I.”

"What do you do, spend all your time coming up with these chants?—ooh! there's that dreamy Robert!"

"That who?"

"Robert Somebody, who T.A.'s in Design—God but he's handsome."

"Oh, you mean HAL," said Peyton, with a wall-rattling thunderclap of laughter.

"Dreamy Robert? That's a *capital* name for him! We'll all have to start calling him that immediately!"

Dawn stirred. "If his name's Robert... why do you call him Hal?"

"He's the principal Dilated Pupil—our Chairman of the Board. I myself started off as Toastmaster-Corporal, before catapulting to my present—"

"Yeah right good for you," said Mercedes. "So what's the story on Robert? Is he seeing anyone? Oh no—don't tell me—*he's* gay, isn't he? God! Just my luck!"

"I doubt that Chairman Hal is interested in boffing men *or* women (*or* sheep *or* iguanas)—just a big shiny pile of money."

"Hey, what's going on—why's everybody putting on their coats? It can't be closing time already, can it?"

"Almost twelve," said Peyton. "They're headed across the Way for the midnight show at the Mercury—*Barry Lyndon*, I believe. But the company here's so charming tonight, I think I'll give it a miss—"

"But Robert's going, isn't he?" (Craning her neck.) "He *is*! Um—*Barry Lyndon*, hunh?" (Up and struggling into her parka.) "Ryan O'Neal, right?—my little sister's in love with him—maybe I'll just tag along. Oh um thanks for the beer and all uh Peyton have to do it again sometime good luck with that Dilated Nostrils thing see ya bye!"

*Drum drum drum* went Peyton's fingers on the gritty formica tabletop.

And the overobvious jukebox chiming in with "Fox on the Run."

Sweet. Right. But no: all was not *Desolation Boulevard*. There remained one heavenly body on the Milky Way—no snap, no crackle, but yodeling carlottas worth their weight in heave-ho gold. Her eyelids going *buh-link, buh-link*: looking like they'd never been up so late in Dawn Swift's life.



“I’m very glad you’ve come to Merely SAD, my precious.”

“Uhhhm?” she went, peering at him with mild puzzlement. “Gee, I don’t know...”

*Schnell, Dawn, schnell.*

He ran a thick finger this way and that along her blonde Valkyrie braids, into the collar of her jersey (*quit that dancing down there! we don’t have a cabaret license!*)—eventually reaching the cuff of one sleeve. Taking her lax placid hand in both of his, he raised it almost to his lips and announced, “You have nine days, my dear, to prove yourself a wonder.”

## Chapter XIX

### *No-Nazz*

So: college followed, art school here in Elsew, Merely SAD on the Milky Way with its lights and sights and shops and stops and coffeehouses and then-and-nowses; brighter then than now. Drawing and Design in the classroom, seventh row center at the Mercury Theater, and that corner table at Marr's Bar—occupying more and more of it as time went by, and woe to any man who dared set butt there without Peyton's leave. (Bliss, of course, for any *woman* who dared; double haw.)

Six years he quaffed and waxed fat, or not so much fat as portly Orson Welles: a gargantuan tankard-clanging master of rounds and revels. *Fill your mugs! We leave no keg untapped before its time!* Mercedes Benison was there, between trips to Australia and Trinidad and the maternity ward. Who else? That languid ceramics major with the golden heave-hos; and those two rich kids who played at being nonconformist printmakers; and that glassblowing divorcée who ran off with a van full of archaeologists; and that unfortunate sculptor who transferred to the Music Academy and went schizo as a result; and let's not forget Vincent Van Gogh Jr., who outdid them all by committing outright suicide.

Studio majors: go figger 'em.

Peyton ate and drank and smoked with them, but declined the chance to *be* one of them; trading in his vaguely journalistic ambitions to concentrate on Art History as Dr. Ecklebury had suggested.

Even so, he was still a wizard when it came to pen and ink. In those days there was a freewheeling local tabloid called the Elsew *No-Nazz*, put out by “all the king’s horses at A.K.A. Enterprises.” For them Peyton did line drawings and spot illustrations, a cracked-shell yolk-spilling masthead logo, and a comic panel called *Guess You Had to Be There*. (Guess you had, at that: some readers never got it, objecting to such gems of whimsy as “Freak Up and Twitch Someone” or “Primitively Engaging—Engagingly Primitive.” Or “Gimme That Old-Time Revolution,” when Reagan was elected President.)

Heady times, up to that point. And there was one particularly heady young woman in the *No-Nazz* office, at Marr’s Bar, in Peyton’s apartment by day and by night: a lass and a lack...

As the Eighties descended in hard-time earnest, causing the *No-Nazz* to fold and the Dilated Nazztrils to break up and that particular young woman to break down, to pay Peyton back in full for any misdemeanors he’d ever committed, on paper or otherwise.

Guess you had to be there.

Once upon a time.

Immediately after which came the freakish news from Quebec about Lucky Pierre and Antoinette.

With the eventual (though still astonishing) legacy from their estate, Peyton could do as he pleased—not *anything*, of course, but he was able to settle his debts, invest in some T-bills, place a down payment on condo #809 at the Cheval. Live a bit more easily.

And get back together, the summer before last, with some of the old A.K.A. gang. Bonzo Krauss was nowhere to be found (nothing new there) and the Muffin Man had been born again as John Amberson, Jehovah’s Witness; but the rest pooled their resources and put out a special one-shot edition that went over very well. Response was gratifying and sales far better than forecast—so much so, in fact, that they were able to raise seed money and plan resumption of regular publication. Peyton for his part threw in a couple more grand, signed on as Contributing Consultant, and found himself grossly outnumbered when a majority of the staff opted to “go with the flow.”

(Dread phrase.)

First they moved uptown to a suite in the Moonan Tower, and that was just the start. They switched from tabloid newsprint to a slick magazine format, adding “Lifestyle” and “State of the Art” coverage, and removing the tongue from the Dining Out Guide’s cheek. No more smoke shop or condoms-by-mail ads, either; full-page spreads instead for fancy restaurants, fashionable resorts.

Not just bad but even worse: they went so far as to scrap the cracked shell, mop up the spilled yolk, and stick a sans-serif **CURRENT** on the cover. It would be the Elsew *No-Nazz* no more.

Loud in opposition to all these ploys, Peyton got outlobbied, outvoted, and told he could either abide by the flow or climb off the pot. So he took to mailing in his comic contributions, drawn along mordant *Guess You Had to Be There* lines; and had the satisfaction of seeing them appear in *Current* magazine’s first five issues.

But not in the last three. Ima Gene the art director had promised (over the phone) to include at least *one* of Peyton’s recent efforts in *Current* #9, the January issue about to be put to bed—without ANY Derente effort, as Peyton had discovered just in time.

Which was why he was sitting here in this excruciating chair across a futuristic matte-black desk from a Sergio Valente suit containing his oldest friend in Elsew: a man whose matte-black doorsign and deskplate read ROBERT S. HALLOWDAY, but who had never been known in his twenty-nine years as Bob or Bobby or Rob or Robbie. Always as Hal.

Not unlike the looney-tune *Space Odyssey* computer, as Peyton used to enjoy reminding him.

“Speaking of which, have I complimented you yet on this *Return of the Jedi* habitat?”

“That’s right,” said Hal. “You haven’t visited us for awhile, have you? Glad you like it.” All the latest gizmos and gadgetry were at work in his office: lights flashing yellow, burning red.

“Spiffy,” went Peyton. “Last time I dropped by, this was a shoestring operation and your furniture was waterstain-brown. Living a little beyond our means, aren’t we Hal?”

“A few creature comforts. Advertising is up—single-copy sales booming—so suppliers extend credit limits. All part of the Intended Visual Effect.”

On his matte-black slab of a back wall were the chrome-framed covers of each *Current*, May through December, the latter now on newsstands everywhere. All but the first featured a pretty young starlet-model—in leotard and legwarmers (November) or a button-down business suit (October) or an up-to-the-minute clubhopping outfit (September, the last issue in which a Derente cartoon appeared). December, #8, had a thousand-dollar herringbone trenchcoat on a ringer for Nastassia Kinski, to illustrate the theme of MEGAWORK.

Megamisdemeanor.

“If you recall,” Peyton said, “Ima Gene called me and asked for something ‘timely’ about current events. I congratulated her; I was glad to hear you were going to take on an issue of substance for once, at last—”

“We’ve had this discussion before,” Hal remarked.

“I’ll grant you that ‘Where to Find the Best Quiche’ *is* a red-hot topic, and global thermonuclear war isn’t quite in the same league controversywise; but I *did* spend a solid weekend drawing this so you could squeeze it in the January issue and be ‘timely.’ Now I hear you’re not using it.”

Hal glanced down at the black ellipses on the white bristol board on his matte-black blotter. The panel in question: CONFIDENCE MAN (Ronald Reagan, costumed super not to say duper heroically) welcoming you to the WarGames video arcade, where you could invade Grenada, shoot down Korean airliners, blow up Beirut with truck bombs, or herald *The Day After* by having a radioactive cyclone descend upon Kansas.

“Peyton...” said Hal. “These aren’t the Seventies anymore—”

“I am aware of the date. I can even tell you what time it is: quarter to four.”

“Not by my watch. You really should get a Rolex. Worth the price.”

Peyton scowled significantly at a chrome decanter on a matte-black credenza. Not quarter-to-four (or whatever) for nothing; but Hal didn’t take the hint.

“Publishing is a risky business,” he went on, leaning back in his highrise executive chair. “You have to go where your readership goes. We’ve geared *Current* to the Young Upwardly-Mobile Professional market—”

"Yumpin' yimminy."

"—because they *buy*. The *No-Nazz* crowd didn't; that's why it went belly-up.

Today's readers *like* to buy, to live the good life, and why shouldn't they? Enjoy being a consumer—"

"Enjoy being consumptive. Is that why you recycle sunglasses into office furniture, and install it on the never-never?"

"That's how we do business, nowadays. Everything's under control."

"And if I were to say you owe me two thousand dollars, what then?"

"Peyton," Hal exhaled, straightening up, "you are a Backer. One of many. You'll see your share of any and all profits, when/if. Now, you asked to see me about your submissions, so let's cut to the chase—"

We, it seemed, had a problem. Peyton had been churning out his usual stuff on the presumption that Ima Gene could "squeeze it in," regardless of whether it could be reduced to fit and still be decipherable. That aside, Peyton's cartoons were too grating—today's readers preferred something a little lighter and certainly less cluttered. Take this other panel, "A Spectral Singalong with God's Older Brother Bub." It looked like something out of an early *Mad* magazine: sight gags jampacked into every square inch. And "Dead Rock Stars"? Didn't Peyton think that a trifle *réchauffé*?

"That, Mr. Hallowday, is the style of MY substance... Shall we discuss my kill fee?"

Hal leaned back again, bristol board in hand. "I'll add it to your profit share—when/if. We can hold these for inventory if you like, old man."

"Old man! When I first joined the Dilated Pupils you called me 'young fart.'"

"Yes, we go back a long ways, you and I," Hal grinned. "Remember those all-night poker sessions at Marr's? Good times; good times."

What Peyton recalled was saying *Don't bogart those, Esau*, while Chairman Hal raked in pot after pot.

"I would like my artwork back, if you please."

Slight regret on Hal's part. Well, if that was what you wanted. Always glad to see you, of course. How was the famous APE monograph coming along? Send us an extract

when you can. More than willing to look it over. And Peyton: have a happy Thanksgiving....

\*

*O that I ever split a pitcher of Michelob with that bullshit pizzler! That glibfaced whoremongering highway-robbering Sergio-Valente-wearing carefully-enunciating amoral upscaly unscrupulous son of a bastardized bitch! May the Angel of Death put a knot in his gut!*

Wanting to hurry home and lay hands on a thesaurus, on German and Italian dictionaries full of Axis epithets, he didn't notice the 4:06 leaving for Merely till its doors slammed in his face and off the bus went, like an ark, leaving the unchosen behind to be flooded, like a cellar. Dry skies opening up to dump on him, go wee wee wee on him all the way home.

Well, this was adult thinking, and it improved Peyton's mood a thousandfold as he waited outside the Moonan Tower under a no-account umbrella for the rain-delayed next bus. Watching greedy-gutted piggies go upmarket-upmarket to buy a fat lot of creature comforts: jiggety-jig, joggety-jog.

*Current* #9: was it just a dream?

How much of It All was fact and how much fantasy?

Confidence Man needs a martial moment, so let's invade an island in the Caribbean (not Stalingrad, mind you) and depose a Marxist regime (not Castro's, mind you) in nine days flat—and be a proven wonder! To stirring strains of B-movie music, and the audience's hip-hip huzzahs.

Fact or fantasy? Not that *Current* and its cohorts care, so long as the public buys it. This year, Grenada; next year, they might stage it on some Hollywood backlot—sending in the cavalry to rescue MIAs from Vietnam, or Sgt. Fury's Howling Commandos to wipe out the Ayatollah. All you have to do is keep reiterating that celluloid-lends-validation; that fantasy is, in fact, Fact. (A task tailor-made for the Trickle-down Mummer in the White House.)

Not for nothing was next year 1984: you could see Winston Smith in the Ministry of

Truth, working on screenplays.

As you catch the next bus, board it, crawl along the Expressway inside it, and neglect to pull the cord at your customary stop, meaning you have to double back across campus on waterlogged foot. Stomping past students who have nothing better to do than attend evening classes. Pausing only to heave a rock or two into the murky pond—

SHPLOOP! SHPLOOP!

“Hellthunder and damnation,” Peyton mumbled up the elevator, muttered down the hall. The phone was ringing in his apartment as he let coat, hat, gloves, scarf, and no-account umbrella fall to the floor. Squelch on up to the miniloft: familiar mess on the drawing table, stacks of dusty paper on either side.

Toss today's rejects on top. Two, three hours devoted to the penciling alone. Inking took even longer—get it right or start over again, from scratch. Uncompromising process.

Sit and stare, some little while.

There were two layers to make-believe: the artist looking at the molded vessel, asking *Does it hold water?*—and the dealers looking at the package, asking *Will they buy it?* (in every sense of the word). Ignore the latter question, and nothing you make will sell. But ignore the former question, and all that you sell will be nothing.

*You gotta be a hype if you don't wanna be a ciphe.*

Downstairs the phone began to ring again. That would be Skeeter, calling from Wheeville as had become her nightly habit. “I'm here. Talk to me,” she would say—and hang up. At which point Peyton would call back and assume the charges, Sadie having squawked about the triplex phone bill.

“Why don't you simply call collect?” he'd asked.

“I like to hear the phone ring,” Skeeter'd replied.

So he would dial her number and she would say, “Whoever can this be?” and they would have long nonsensical conversations.

For a week following the alley imbroglio she had remained invisible; then with absurd formality asked if he wouldn't mind her dropping by the next day. Which she did wearing a voluminous pink velour jogging suit from her bulge-pudge days. Zipped up to her abruptly-



pointed chin, it concealed her curves as thoroughly as her personality was hidden beneath stilted smalltalk:

"I can't stay long... How have you been?... I'm feeling fine, thank you... I thought you might like some herbal tea"—producing a box of Red Zinger from her new poke.  
"Perhaps you'd allow me to brew you a cup?..."

Not precisely Bubbles the Party Chick. But neither was there any recurrence of yawps, yowls, tears, or urps; and that night on the phone she sounded quite herself again.

*I'm here. Talk to me.*

What he wouldn't give to have her materialize right now, right here, appearing unlooked-for as she used to do in the earliest days of their relationship; full of bounce and gabble and relish. Here not to talk to, just to hold and be held by: burying your face in her hair, in her neck, between her breasts, breathing in her Imitation Opium...

Down between the paperheaps was a small brown plastic bottle. He fished it out, opened it, popped a couple of little yellow pills. Then exhumed a much larger frosted-glass bottle, to wash the pills down with.

*Riiiiing. Riiiiing.*

Last night she'd been pissed at a Mrs. Rhodes, her dyspeptic new clinic manager at SMECK, who'd declared herself "shocked and dismayed" at something Skeeter'd either done or failed to do. Whereupon Skeeter lost no time in dubbing Mrs. Rhodes "Wide Load" and "That Would-Be Colossus."

"And *now*—now she wants to cut back my hours! Says there's not enough for me to do! Can you BELIEVE this bitch? *What* a pothole. *Oh* I hate her. I told RoBynne and RoBynne said, 'If they wanna screw ya they gotta kiss ya first.' What do you think?"

"Well, RoBynne's putting it that way doesn't really surprise me—"

"About my *situation*, turk!"

"Mmph... Have you considered pulling a Mercedes?"

"That anything like yanking a Porsche?"

"I mean, going back to college yourself?"

"What! Me? Be a student again? What would I stoody?"

Adopting his best academic advisory tone, Peyton had asked what Skeeter would ultimately like to be, did she have her druthers.

"Yes I did, for breakfast, with cream and sugar and a sliced banana. I'd *like* to be the Queen of Belgium, but other than that... I dunno. Um... maybe a social worker?"

He must have twitched audibly at that, because she'd plunged on with a trace of impatience.

"*You* know—promote the general welfare, secure the blessings of liberty, that sort of thing. Child care, mental health, human services—I could be a surrogate mother-figure to teenage boys. *Wayward* teenage boys. (Cackle.) 'Skeeter Who Must Be Obeyed.'"

Toting up her various credits from Keening and Mount Oriela, Peyton had found her only a semester short of a bachelor's degree in Sociology. But beyond all doubt she would have to take another course in one of the Natural Sciences.

"Oh Jeez no, not Biology! Not the worms again! Not Pukey the Fetal Pig! Um... do you really want me to go back to Mount Oriela?"

No need for that. Windohwa University (Double-You-You) had a branch campus in St. Mintred (UWSM or "Use 'Em") with an ornate Beaux Arts campus drooping off the summit of Widdershins Hill, not far from SMECK. Peyton had gotten his master's there, and knew for a fact that Use 'Em's standards for transfer students were not exactly exacting.

"I see through your wicked scheme, you scamp! You just want to carry on with a schoolgirl! Oh, I've heard about teachers like you!..."

(Another washdown shot.)

(See if she lets the phone ring ten times this time.)

(What he wouldn't give...)

Dead Rock Stars under his nose. This overdose, that overdose, alleged heart attack, choked to death on own vomit, assassination—no outright suicides, though. Unlike studio art majors.

That scrawny idiot just off the turnip truck, intent on becoming the next Sufferin' St. Vincent Van Gogh: another time-honored undergraduate schmeer. Couldn't hold his liquor *or* a paintbrush. Give him the least opportunity and he would slobber at you for a full

hour by the Marr's Bar clock. In no time flat nobody could stand him; people would actually leave the bar rather than risk his plunking down to wallow on about how they would not listen, they didn't know how, but perhaps they'd listen now—

(How many rings was that?)

(Awfully long pause between them, anyway.)

Finally the cruddy vapors overcame Van Gogh Jr., and he ended it all by shooting himself in the stomach on a not very starry, starry night in November, seven years ago—probably seven years ago this very night. Good God. That was what Peyton had said at the time: “Good God! Anything to get our attention!” Clanging his tankard, he had proposed a toast to *Lust for Life*; another to being derivative even unto death; another to all the ears that V.G. Jr. had conversationally sliced off; another to the corpse's probably having acquired a fine set of dilated nostrils; and lastly to the belly laughter that Peyton enjoyed at the time and was replicating now—nonstop, all-night, twitching audibly....

## Chapter XX

*As Per Usual*

BRRRRING me my books and my bottle, YO-de-ho! they're singing at the Unfinished Aquarium, skipping cueballs across an indoor duckpond—who left the taps on? Random spheroids flying unseen, sinking into the never-never, smoothing out the surface of the eggshell. Quick!—glue your eyes to the cracks before they become crystalline! Appearance you see *is* everything, *through* everything, *look*—

BRRRRING me my books and my bottle and here she comes in all her oblivion, arms outflung caryatid-style, emptyhanded as though to display or embrace or maybe take a double stranglehold as she undergoes another upheaval, grasping and clutching, causing the frosted glass to shake-buck-quiver and a tankard-bell to CLANG CLANG CLANG—

—on which note Peyton was brrrrrought up off the drawing table.

*Scheiss de la merde.*

And crick de la neck. Not to mention sick de la stomach as he lurched down the cuuuute little staircase, picked up the brrrringer and landed on the cold, cold ground. *Gag...* have to be more careful with those books and that bottle.

“Jussa minute!”

What the devil-hell time was it? AM or P? A, probably, given the extent of the crick; oh these mornings after. Unclench your jaws now, wipe your face, find the phone.

“Peyton?” it was saying. “Are you there? Can you hear me? Hello?! Peyton!!”

“Here.”

"Jeez you scared the hell out of me! What was that crash? It sounded like a gang of muggers got you! What's going on? Why didn't you answer the phone last night? I called and called—"

"Maybe I was out," he told her. "What time is it?"

"About seven. Why?"

"What are *you* doing up at seven?"

"It's Thanksgiving, you turk! We've got a meal to prepare here! Our folks made it in yesterday. You should have seen my mother's face when she found out we're having lamb; she about had a cow. But I—hey! are you listening to me?"

"Mmph."

"What'd I say just now?"

"Your mother about had a cow but hey am I listening to you."

"ExACTly! Keep right on taking notes; everything I say's worth remembering. So when should I pick you up? How does noon sound?"

*Like it rhymes with June.* "No need," he said. "I'll get there."

"It's no trouble, I can hop into Clarence and be there in a jiff—"

"I'll *get* there, I said. You tend to your cooking." (Make an effort, man; take the sting out.) "Greek food, right?"

"You know it! No more turkeys for me! All right then, sweetie, be here around noon, okay? Or no later than one. Or two at the latest; we generally eat around two. Unless—"

"I will BE there. Have you ever known me to be late for anything?"

"No," she admitted. "Okay then, I luvya—gimme a smooch... louder!... You *sure* you don't need a ride?"

What Peyton needed could not be supplied; at least not over a telephone.

Groan up off the carpet, grimace out of yesterday's saggy-baggy clothes, step into the bathroom—and damnation! How *was* the famous APE monograph coming along? Right off its dusty paper and onto the author's face. That's what you get for using the Liberal Studies copy machine...

Put on a fresh set of duds. Reassemble yourself for an alleged day off. Wallet,

notebook, black pen, red pen. Keys, change, bandanna dry and folded...

Hell. One of the advantages of orphanhood ought to be “no forced holiday celebrating.” Last year, with the Chesterfield bungalow finally sold, he’d ignored both Thanksgiving *and* Christmas and enjoyed himself immensely, kneedeep in the *No-Nazz* resurrection. Before that turned into an upwardly-mobile ascension.

(You feed upon lambs, I’ll feed upon sheep.)

So anyway: down the elevator, out the door. Down and out and no one about. As though this truly were The Day After a neutron bomb killed off all living things, leaving the streets and buildings undamaged but empty.

Patchy fog today. Only to be expected, given how long you’re likely to be out in it. Normally to get to Deasil you’d take the Expressway and be there in no more than half an hour, depending on traffic. But today, of course, there were no express buses and damn few anything elses. Just the Ole 99, whose stop was only a couple of miles away, afoot.

So chalk it up to exercise. *Once I had a Porsche, now it’s gone—buddy can you spare the time?* Sure can; it’s The Day After, remember. Just keep walking briskly. Should take no more than forty-five minutes to hike down Dee Ridge. No rain, no snow, no dancin’ sprite by your side; nothing to hold you back. Onward and downward to the Dee Valley Highway. *Okay fine, fer shure fer shure: take the Val Highway ‘cause there is no cure.* Nossir, just the Ole 99 with its resident onboard sideshow: bearded ladies and human skeletons, Bobo the Dog-Faced Boy and Roscoe the Snake-Geek—they baffle science!—looking like fugitives from an oldtime comic strip.

Patchy fog...

What was it? two, three—four?—years ago? he’d been doing research for his master’s thesis on the contents of the Ash Can School, sifting through microfilmed copies of the Philadelphia *Press*. Eyes blaring over, he’d taken a break to check out vintage 1908 comic strips—and stumbled across *Skinny Billy the Kid Chimney Sweep*, drawn by someone signing himself “APE” with a tiny stick-figure monkey for a flourish.

(“Oh cuuuute!” Skeeter Kitefly would one day say. “Look at it swinging from the E!... That curly tail sure is suggestive, don’t you think?”)

Skinny Billy swept the chimneys of a city existing only at bird's-eye level, all shingles and smokestacks and capering flames in sooty stovepipe hats. As though this were the uppermost reaches of Montmartre, drawn by Toulouse-Lautrec's taller brother.

Certainly by a capital-D Draftsman: there was delicacy of line, yet dark emphatic contours; silhouettes precisely defined, yet isolated with a few rapid strokes; moments seized and trajectories traced against bold Gauguinish backgrounds.

Our friend APE appeared to be a dues-paying Post-Impressionist.

But one about whom the comic history books said as little as possible. For every George Herriman or Winsor McCay, there were a score or more of forgotten pioneers lost in syndicate archives or buried in newspaper morgues. Peyton had begun digging through these, and over the next few years was able to compile a sizable dossier on the life and works of Mr. Asa Pursch Ewell. Who had wanted, in his 1890s youth, to go to France and study painting, become another Eakins or Homer, join the Great & Sublime. Had made it as far as the Chicago Art Institute, till he was caught "coarsening his style" by doing caricatures of the models in life class.

So he'd abandoned canvas, become a newspaper illustrator, worked as a sketch artist in Good Old Heartland USA till hitting the big time: hired by Hearst to join the New York *Journal/American* combine. His cartoonist colleagues there, Hall of Famers all: Rudolph Dirks, R. F. Outcault, Frederick Oppen, Jimmy Swinnerton, Tad Dorgan. No reason why A. P. Ewell shouldn't have risen to their ranks right there, except that his first comic strip—*King Stork in Babyland*—was less than remarkable. Picturesque idylls, Sunday after Sunday: nothing to make your jaw drop or sides ache.

To Philadelphia then, *Skinny Billy* at bird's-eye level, Toulouse-Lautrec's Taller Brother paying his dues with those dynamic-patterned dancing flames—all in the space of two, three years. Then back to the Middle West to hook up with Inter Service, who distributed a color supplement to rural Sunday papers. Retreating to the boondocks, some might say; but out of it had come *Daring Dewey*, which Peyton would exhume from the catacombs seven decades later.

(Over the river, across the Dee, the Glazier Street Bridge we use. Far less gluttoned

than the Hynde even at rush hour, and empty today—you could drop a body off this bridge without fear of interference. Lots of broken branches and fallen leaves down there for it to sink into, be covered up by. The river was narrower here, flowing through a deep gorge before twisting sharply to the east and hastening to empty its mouth into Lake Windohwa. Accompanied elbow-to-elbow by the Valley Highway's hash houses and gas stations and used car lots, motels catering to the street trade and nursing homes featured on *60 Minutes*. All silent today, all secret. No snow, though—just patchy fog...)

No cutting to the chase in *Daring Dewey*. Nothing else to cut from: the title character's constant pursuit of an artful-dodging entity called Farf Etched, who would change his/her/its appearance from frame to frame. Sometimes a gloating moustachio'd villain; sometimes a delectably beautiful lady; sometimes the Supreme Hee-Haw, Oldest and Wisest Jackass in All the World.

Dewey's pursuit never had any overt motivation, other than the unrelenting end-in-of-itself that Wile E. Coyote's would one day be. Farf Etched relied heavily on onomatopoeia, wrenching a CRUNCH or SQUEAL off the vibrant backdrop to konk Dewey over the head with; but Dewey always vowed vengeance anew upon his elusive quarry, even from the depths of a tarpit:

"So you think me beslubbered, do you Farf Etched? Ha ha! Blighted being! We shall see who laughs last!"

In *Daring Dewey*, APE took distortion to elliptical heights. Peyton would search for some confirmation of contemporary influences—the Fauves, *Die Brücke*, Kandinsky, Cubism—but there was only Farf Etched hitching rides on speech balloons, stealing a scowl from a scowly and using it to transform from Stone Age caveman to Louis XVI *gentilhomme* to elegant lepidopteran taking wing into the surrealistic twilight sky.

Powerful stuff. Vivid; even lurid.

Then one day in 1914, SHPLOOP: no more Dewey, no more Farf. *Vesta the Vampire* took over their supplement space, going through weekly Theda Bara motions as Carmen or Cleopatra but revealing her true self each time to be a stringy schoolmarm-type. "Bewail your fate, wretched man! You have lost your heart to Vesta, the woman who does not care!"



Nor did the reader. APE's *Vesta* was a far more hackneyed comic strip, repetitive and somewhat vindictive.

(Had Ewell perhaps been unlucky in love?)

(Haven't we all, Asa P.)

Unlucky in something, anyway: big time to small time to no time at all. *Vesta* axed by Inter Service; APE drawing an inferior version of *Skinny Billy* for awhile, then ghosting strips for other artists till the early Twenties. By then the "funnies" were a big business, run by major-league syndicates that forced cartoonists to draw down the middle of the road. Leaving Asa Pursch Ewell off by the side in doleful obscurity, illustrating children's textbooks: a shuddersome fate.

Peyton had set out to save Dewey and Farf from oblivion, and incidentally win himself (he was not shy) a little critical recognition with a proposed article that grew in *FLAIR*, *SCOPE*, and *DEPTH* till it dilated into a definitive full-length study. The famous APE monograph: "a scholarly treatise on a specified subject," written with one hand tied behind the scholar's back.

Those had been the best of times—Peyton at his very sharpest and keenest, chock-full of touché potential. Grad school at Use 'Em, GTA at Merely; praised as "insightful" for his Ash Can thesis, urged to seek a research assistantship and press on toward a Ph.D.

But that would have meant signing up for the tenure treadmill, wasting your nose on the publish-or-perish grindstone. Did universities scorn Merely SAD as no place for an art historian? You could take advantage of the flexibility there, the liberty to freelance on the side—do artwork for the *No-Nazz*, review gallery shows and traveling exhibitions. At Merely you felt at home: you lived there, did most of your drinking there, holding fresh raspburials as Lord High Nazztril of all you surveyed.

Within spitting distance of the Valley Highway: then as now.

With the Ole 99 materializing out of the patchy fog to disclose its onboard sideshow, ready and waiting for you: *Gobble gobble, one of us! one of us!*

Freak up and twitch someone.

LURCH of stomach as we embark on an hour's crawl to Deasil, jouncing along

among the scratch-and-sniff set.

But what more could you expect? what better could be hoped for? after the past two comma three years? Certainly zilch on the academic side. Not that you hadn't tried to throw yourself into your work—big plans, big projects, devising agendas, concocting syllabi, applying for (and failing to get) NEH grants. Dayjob Diddlybop: a rising gorgeful of broken branches and fallen leaves. Early efforts backburnered, pigeonholed; later ones scattering like a mess of all-the-hell-over catalogs.

So much for trying to act useful.

Them's the breaks.

What other conclusion could you jump to? with gaunt Henry Bramham, that counter of pennies and paradigms, taking over as Dean? Merely SAD had been forced to face up to the need for hard-edged austerity, and who better to impose it than a Minimalist sculptor? Get out the adze and chopping block! Away with the fiscal-foolish, spectacle-at-any-cost previous Dean; away too with ten of the sixty SAD teaching positions. Not Peyton's, thanks to Dr. Ecklebury; but Isobel Otterburn's semicelebrated head had rolled. As had that of Thomas Stockwood, longtime Chairman of the Design Division.

Picture Foghorn Leghorn with a white leonine shock, blackstrap molasses drawl, and habit of sweeping aside anything he found uninteresting as "Irrelevant trivialities! What's important Ah say important heah is the DISPLAY! the PRESENTATION! the *IM*-PACT!"—and you've got Br'er Tom, Tennessee's favorite son for sixty years and big man on the Merely campus for nearly thirty.

Every September, December, and June, Br'er Tom would have all the Design majors out to the rambling country manse he called "T-Square Terrace." Much of the Dilated Pupils's raspburial spirit was derived from these raucous hoedowns, and many Stockwood mannerisms were borrowed by Peyton Derente for his own personal vessel. Br'er Tom, having built up the Design Division from hardscrabble scratch and regarding it as an entity unto itself, ignored the edicts of paradigm-counters:

"They might use a T-square as a backscratcher, now and again, but Gawdam if they'd ever let a body draw a straight line with one! There's such a thing as fine art, sure enough,

but there's also such a thing as *practical* art. And between the fine and the practical there's a heap o' foofaraw that's growin' deeper every day, with all sorts of virtuoso sockdolagers wantin' you to go and *step* in it. Nemmind 'bout them, son—just drop bah mah office 'n' Ah'll have Miss Emmy write you out an *exemption*, heah?"

In short: be a goodly vessel /that shall laugh at all disaster /and with wave and whirlwind wrestle.

But don't let your divisional bookkeeping get too slapdash, lest Henry Bramham allege misappropriation of funds—and use that backscratcher to draw a straight line directing you to involuntary early retirement. Another shuddersome fate: not made any less melancholy by seeing Tom Stockwood hunched alone in Marr's Bar, blank and inanimate, like one of Orwell's broken-nosed old revolutionaries at the Chestnut Tree Café. A shuddersome sight: like beholding yourself through some cracked future looking-glass.

Heave and ho.

And arrival in Deasil: up we stand, out we go, leaving the bus and its resident fugitives behind—no, not all, some are following you out. Bound perhaps for the Glory Gospel Mission and their share of the day's wishbones. (*Bon appétit.*) Head on to the heart of lowlying Wheeville, to the triplex whose ground floor is occupied by the girl of your dreams—though not those feverdreamy swelternaps. Nor that particular lass with her perilous lack...

(Nemmind 'bout her, son.)

Come to think of it, one of those broken-nosed revolutionaries—Rutherford was it?—had been a famous cartoonist. Who, if memory served, ended up imitating himself, rehashing his earlier work in a hopeless attempt to relive the past. Probably came as a relief when the Thought Police finally executed him: *Stop me before I draw this again.*

Like the APE monograph in your own miniloft: dusty stacks of photocopied comic strips, with all the eyes in all the panels staring out to ensnare yours, demanding that you shake a leg and stir your stumps, chop-chop mooey pronto! make it snappy, Pappy!—whatever their speech balloons might actually say.

It could use the services of an entrustable editor. (So could *Current* magazine.)

Peyton was sick of it, the stomach-twisting cut-and-paste contraction necessary to overhaul any overwritten manuscript. But all through the bad times, and the worse times, and the two or three years since, the APE monograph had been there for him. To set the thing in order at last, to declare it well and truly completed, would be to gather the loose ends of his own unravelment and tie them together again. And he'd especially hoped to wrap it up this year, the fiftieth anniversary of A. P. Ewell's pauperized death; but there were only thirty-seven days left and he knew he couldn't manage it in time.

So some of it lived but the most of it died and the rest simply faded away, relegated to the Litter of Unfinished Projects, along with the vast bulk of Orson Welles. Amounting to little more, in The End, than a hill of might-have-beens.

The old question: What is the purpose of Life?

The old answer: To puncture romances, O Tillie.

So take off your green spectacles and see your Emerald City as the handiwork of a hoodwinking Wizard, a snake-oily charlatan peddling purple-bark sarsaparilla to the unwary. *A fraud and a sham: I am, I am—*

(And there was Skeeter peering through the window, Skeeter popping through the door, Skeeter in a bright red apron and ovenmitt, radiant as any sled-in-the-furnace rosebud. Look at that glow: see what a month's absence from really nice bars can do to combat inanimate blankness.)

"You made it! Smooch me for real!... *that's* not for real!... OOG your face is sweaty! Are you okay? You look awful pale. I knew I should've driven over." Yanking the bandanna out of his pocket, making as if to mop his face—

"I can wipe my own nose, thank you."

He took back his hanky and dabbed at himself. Dripping, all right. Ready, at any rate, to head indoors and take the chill off—but Skeeter held him back.

"We're having *kalamarakia* as an appetizer; please don't tell my folks it's squid. And my mother insisted on bringing some of her cranberry compote; when I tug my ear like *this*, that means I'm going to distract her so you can stick it in your napkin. Believe me, that's the safest thing to do with it—"

"Are we going to stand out here all afternoon?"

"Oh and I keep forgetting to ask—did you watch that nuke 'em movie last Sunday? You know, *The Day After*?"

"...why?"

"Mom and Sadie had a 'discussion' about it. My mother's gone all goopy over Ronald Reagan; she's even become a Republican ward heeler or whatever they call it out in Booth County. Don't ask. Better just avoid any talk about politics."

"I shall be happy to," he said.

Skeeter, beaming, grabbed him around the waist and gave his ribs a squeeze. All too feelable even through his overcoat and her ovenmitt. "Skin and bones!" she tut-tutted. "Starting today we're going to fatten you up."

So on to the slaughter, Skeeter leading him into the triplex where a Greek record was playing Zorba music and Sadie, annoyingly cheerful since her Merely re-entry, was passing round the squid. (Desi should have been following as instructed with fresh lemon wedges, but she was off in a corner turning them into snifftoys for Brooke.)

ARNold Benison was just as you might expect: big and solid, quietly genial, offering polite commonplaces as he shook Peyton's hand. Skeeter's mother was quite good-looking in a Republican cocktail waitressy way, with the Otto blue eyes and Wunderlich chin and hair a metallic shade of blonde. She shook Peyton's hand too, demonstrating a political grip.

"So you're Kelly's young man," she informed him.

"Who?" said Peyton. "Oh—you mean... yes. I suppose you could say that."

Carrie bent a critical Otto-blue eye upon him. Yes, he must be making a terrific first impression. I *am* your daughter's gentleman friend, Mrs. Benison; I may be only twenty-seven but I look a decade older, and used to be goodly-portly though now I'm sallow skin and bones, dampfaced, baggy of pants, SAD of sack, with a Lumpy Rutherford nose. I'm Kelly's sugardaddy and she's my *petite amie* out of the kindness of her heart and the greenness of my cashflow—my "currency," if you will.

When he refocused, Carrie had just finished offering him formal thanks for helping to coax Kelly Rebecca back toward college to complete her degree.

"Just like me," said Sadie in the Lilliputian dining room. "She always did have to do everything *I* do."

"I'm afraid that's true," Skeeter's mother sighed, triggering a Sadie-sowl and causing ARnold to murmur, "Now Carrie..."

"Well, she was pushy and got born first!" Skeeter hollered from the kitchen. "*I'm* still going to work part-time; RoBynne's finding me a job in Radiology Records. I can hardly wait to go tell Aunt Rhodie her old gray goose is cooked."

"Kelly RebecCA!"

"Yes ma'am!"

"Don't you be reckless. She's still your boss."

"Not for much longer," Skeeter sang, coming out and handing Sadie her mitt. "The zucchini's in the fricassee; take it out in fifteen minutes and let it cool for ten... Guess what!" to Peyton. "I forgot to tell you on the phone—I actually unearthed a copy of my Mount Oriela transcript! Isn't that thrilling? Aren't you proud to know me?"

"Always," he told her, his tone perhaps too acrid; Carrie again bent an eye.

"So why aren't you having Thanksgiving with *your* parents, Peyton?"

"They're dead."

"Oh! I'm so sorry."

"Well, I don't hold *you* responsible, Mrs. Benison. It was sort of a circus accident."

"A... circus accident? What were they, acrobats?"

"Carrie!" went Sadie. "I need your help in the kitchen right now with the pilaf and asparagus please!"

Accepting this as holiday gospel, Carrie hastened to obey. Then, from the kitchen: "What does he mean, a 'circus accident'?"

"He means it was freakish, Carrie! He doesn't like to talk about it."

Not his favorite subject, to be sure; but there were other things he didn't care to discuss even more, matters meant to be kept to oneself. A fact of life that Skeeter Kitefly had yet to learn—here she was propelling him into the bedroom she shared with Desirée, ostensibly to examine her transcript but really to have fingers snapped—playfully, but

*snapped*—in his face.

“All right” [snap] “unknit those brows” [snap] “what’s the matter? I know it’s not just my mom, you *got* here looking crabby, and you know I don’t allow that sort of thing. Do you feel sick?”

“No.”

She peered up past the smudgestache, over the broad banked nose and into his eyes: rung-down, closed-tight sets of blinds inside them.

“Just a headache,” he amended. “Nothing more.”

“What’d you take for it? You want some Tylenol?—”

“*No!* no more pills!”

She stepped through the echoes then, laying hands on his arms, squeezing his elbows. “Has something happened? Tell me. Can I help?”

*Come sing me a bawdy song. Wink your bellybutton, make me merry; take the sting out.*

“As per usual,” he said, returning to the living room where ARnold was watching football on Sadie’s aged TV. (Dinner ready yet? Few more minutes.) Content not to talk—unlike women, who never knew when to leave well enough alone. And it wasn’t like she didn’t have enough on her plate already, what with That Would-Be Colossus and Use ‘Em and Radiology Records and staying away from really nice bars.

He sat down, dug out his notebook, red pen, black pen, trying to get something going; doodle if nothing else. Just ink on paper, after all. Loops and lines and ellipses. On the floor by the chair, that morning’s Elsew *Reflector*, turned to the comics—*Blondie*, *Tumbleweeds*, *Apartment 3G*, *Hagar the Horrible*. And *Peanuts*, of course. The pattern of bittersweet defeat. Circle and squiggle, zigzag stripe: you’re a good flop, Charlie Brown.

“You’re a good drawer.”

Desirée, standing unexpectedly at his elbow, forgetting her sullenness at having to put Brooke outdoors. “Can you do Garfield?” she wanted to know.

Of course, little girl. That one’s not in the *Reflector*, though; bring me something to copy. Desi ran to her room, brought back a Garfield book, a *Ranger Rick*, her new phantasie

calendar and Auntie Skeeter to watch Peyton turn out facsimiles of fatbellied cats, ermine lynxes, unicorns regarding their foreheads in pools of water.

All the king's horses and all the king's men. Feeling, but not meeting, a troubled pair of Otto-blue eyes.





## Chapter XXI

### *Fine Lines*

Every trade or profession has some chore akin to mucking out the stables. For accountants it is the audit; for physicians, the autopsy; and for teachers it is called “grading papers.”

This Peyton Derente was doing one bitterly uninsulated December afternoon, not in his doghouse office but down the hall in Dr. Ecklebury's, where the radiator actually worked. Eck had gone home, declaring it not a fit day out for man, beast, or undergraduate. The high so far was twenty degrees Fahrenheit, with a plumb-zero windchill whistling in to turn Peyton's fingers into jointed icicles.

He tried grading with gloves on, despite their loosening his grip on his red pencil, and that grip already enfeebled by these final exams. Each student in Art 110 had been told to pick two slide-projected works of art, identify them, and provide a critical mini-analysis of their Significance to History. One student had chosen Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*:

*This shows a naked girl having a picnic with two men still wearing coats etc. causing a scandal because this girl was not a goddess in “tasteful paintings” but an ordinary naked girl outdoors that next posed for his painting “Olympia” that caused more scandal one newspaper said she had a yellow belly and probably a prostitute...*

Putting down his pencil, Peyton covered his eyes for a frosted-flaky moment. “I can't be responsible for that,” he decided, and moved on to recoil from the next paper.

*La Chanteuse Verte (The Singer in Green), pastel by Edgar Degas. Unabashed in his hatred of women, Jews, and the working class, Degas portrays the Singer as an ANIMAL with bestial features. But she stands defiant with head held high, one hand making a gesture of SCORN as she tries to cover more of her exploited body, protecting her identity as a person AND an artist, which explains the green...*

Mmph? Peyton glanced around at Dr. Ecklebury's shelves of reference books. Pulled out and thumbed through a volume on Degas, to see if he could see what this student had read into *La Chanteuse*.

Glossy plates. Horses, dancers, bathers. Anonymous women caught climbing into and out of tubs, washing and drying themselves, engaged in personal hygiene. *Nude Woman Having Her Hair Combed*: whose pose should have recalled Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* to Peyton's mind, and not a brazen image of RoBynne O'Ring. Whom he had never seen (nude or otherwise) teasing her burgundy-streaked 'do.

Yet the image persisted—coolly knowing, insolently challenging, shamelessly undulating into, say, a rully bitchen shower stall after a liberal application of olivaceous oil—okay! yoicks-tallyho! here we *go!*—definite stirring in the underbrush so give chase with gloved hand, urging on your hound after the transient fox—

—rrr rrr rrrumble—

—rrr rrr rrrumble—

...fizzlesticks...

God DAMN it.

Her too. Them both. Him most. It All.

Back to being dumbstruck by the banshee's whammy.

\*

Eleven days ago, the Saturday before last, Skeeter banging on his apartment door—“Surprise! I brought RoBynne!”—“Aaay handsome, we're paying a social call on you!”—the girls just out of their Jazzercise class, lustrously toned, clad in matching toreador pants and checkerboard tanktops.

"TuBEWlar place y'got here," said RoBynne, idly snapping her toreador waistband. "Ew, lookit all the foggin' books! Do y'like read these?" *Snap. Snap.* Once, twice, and again: loudly elastic.

"Why did you bring her?" went her surly host in Skeeter's ear.

"To lend moral support," said Skeeter, brightly enough, given how awkward things had been since Thanksgiving.

"Yo Skee, anything good to drink here?"

"Should be some of that yummy Cabernet left, if he hasn't scarfed it all. Cabernet? Chardonnay? Something with a neigh in it, anyway—"

"Here a nay, there a nay—"

"—everywhere a nay-nay!"

(Shriek/howl of laughter.)

"ANYway, I'll go see—"

"Awesome! Pop me a cold one."

"Oh yes help yourself," Peyton grated, dropping into his swivel chair. RoBynne promptly sat on his lap and looped an arm around his neck, enveloping him in a froth of lemon-lime perfume. Carbonated, like Mountain Dew. Shifting her foxy posterior (once, twice, and again) to accommodate/evade his baying hound of love—

"So, I hear y'like raspberries. Wanna guess what color French-cuts I got on?"

"Hey!" from the kitchen. "Quit describing your panties to my fellah!"

"Oh, *yer* fellah, hunh?"

"Oh, *yer* panties, hunh?"

"What the devil-hell IS this?" Peyton demanded, trying to stand, but prevented by RoBynne's extended height from displacing her proportionate weight.

"It's those 'megrim's of yours," said Skeeter, coming in with a tray, bottle, and three full glasses that all slopped over as Skeeter caught sight of them together and burst into stagger-giggles. "Oh dammit! See what you made me do—"

"This is *my* honey now," RoBynne announced, sticking out her tongue. "We'll find *yew* a new dude later."

"Are you going to let her sit on me like this??"

"Well you know *I'm* not a lapsitter," said Skeeter, placing a sloppy glass in Peyton's hand. "Makes me feel like a ventriloquist's dummy. So it might as well be Minnie the Moocher there." She took her customary leap onto the sofa. "I mean you've been a chronic gloomy gus lately, so Ro and I decided to come cheer you up—"

"—yeah, like by force if necessary."

Peyton glared at them, at RoBynne's earbangles: trapezoidal bits of mirror, catching and flashing back every light in the apartment. "Sometimes you just get into the dumps, is all—"

"Not *me*."

"Me neither."

"Specially not now!"

"Not at Christmastime!"

"Fifteen shopping days left!"

"Lookit me on Santy Claus's lap!" said RoBynne. "Ho-ho-ho—aaay, ain't y'gonna be decorating this place up?"

"Of course we are. We'll start tonight—"

"I do not decorate for Christmas," Peyton told them. "At most, I sweep the floor."

His guests went *eww* at that, and RoBynne flicked his nose with a long-nailed finger.

"WOMAN! WILL YOU DESIST!"

"Oh m'Gahd, that wasn't meant to hurt—y'want some Midol?"

"?????"

"It's like all the painkiller I got. Oh whaddaya think, it'd grow ya *boobs*?"

Pavlovian slant down her plunging checkerboard into a New Wave push-up device. Add those accents to *décolleté*! A garden of live flowers, not rosy like Skeeter's ("Would you believe this turk never buys me lingerie?" "Rully? that's awful!") but ultraviolet, a shade to go with the quarter-pound of eyeshadow and eyeliner and mascara, everything between RoBynne's brow and bust elongated, obliquified—

—everything between Peyton's belt and seat inflating, dilating—

—faltering, loitering—  
 —shriveling, withering—  
 ...fading drily away...  
 (The banshee's whammy.)

*Now King David was old and stricken in years; and they covered him  
 with clothes, but he gat no heat...*

"My legs are falling asleep."

RoBynne snortled and said she could take care of *that*, which caused Skeeter to cackle and throw a sofa cushion that was supposed to miss but didn't, dousing the swivel chair's occupants with yummy Chardonnay or Cabernet, everywhere a nay-nay—

*...and let her stand before the king, and let her cherish him, and let  
 her  
 lie in thy bosom, that my lord the king might get heat...*

—RoBynne squealing, "Y'little ZOD! Trying to hose us down, are ya?"—letting go of Peyton's neck to wipe off her dampened chest, saying, "Like 'em? They're rully mine, even if they didn't show up till I was fifteen"—Skeeter cackling as though this were all one big prize hoot—

*...and the damsel was very fair, and cherished the king, and  
 ministered to him: but the king knew her not.*

—till Peyton forced his know-thee-knotted legs to leap to their feet, depositing RoBynne O'Ring on the carpet with a bottomfirst WAUGH as he stood over her and snarled:

"I HAVE NO NEED FOR AN ABISHAG!!"

RoBynne, after some thought, decided she'd been insulted.

\*

"I don't give a rat's ass what she's decided!" Peyton told Skeeter a day later, over the phone. "What kind of 'painkiller' is she on, anyway? Benzedrine?"

"Now Peyton, get real. RoBynne'll smoke dope if she can bum it off somebody, but she doesn't do anything else. And even if she *did* she couldn't afford it, she spends all her

money on clothes and things. Besides, she used to go with this guy Billy Caligula who freebased a lot and kept trying to off himself—”

“They sound like the ideal couple! I can’t believe you brought her here without a word of warning—”

“Jeez I’m *sorry*, I just thought you could use another friend is all. Don’t be mad—”

“I am not mad! And why are you so all-powerful anxious to find me another ‘friend’? Gotten weary of my company, have you?”

Evidently not. She took his discourteous attitude much better than he would have guessed, not losing her cool or even raising her voice much but calling him night after night, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. Still opening their conversations with, “I’m here. Talk to me,” but gabbling less and listening more, prompting him along with an occasional question.

“What’re you thinking about?”

“Mmph?”

“Is it RoBynne?”

“No it is not RoBynne! I’m sorry she’s your friend and all, but—I *am* sorry she’s your friend and all! She’s a perfect example of an undesirable influence.”

Undesirable? Didn’t he find RoBynne attractive? He could admit if he did, RoBynne after all was still a teenager, with ultraviolet underwiring and really long legs; didn’t Peyton know how many men would kill themselves to have such hot stuff on their laps?

“Is *that* why you brought her over? Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you both.”

“I brought her over because she wanted to see you. Because she likes you, or at least she did.” (Pause.) “Just because someone is gaudy and bitchen and talks like a loon, that doesn’t make her a bad person.”

“Mmph.”

“Don’t you think RoBynne’s been a good friend to me? I’d’ve been lost at SMECK without her.”

“So you’re saying she’s never tried to get you into drugs?”

(Silence.)

“Well, you don’t have to tell me—”

"I don't do drugs," Skeeter said quietly. "I don't need them. The day we first met, I told you that. Remember? 'I can get high—'"

"—on an Eskimo Pie,' yes, but we're talking about your bosom chum, the one who'd never steer you wrong, not even at the BoogaBloo Angel and those other so-called dance clubs. You mean to say Our RoBynne hasn't introduced you yet to some friend-of-a-friend with French-cut connections?"

"No, Peyton."

"No, she wouldn't do that, RoBynne looks out for your interests. Refresh my memory: how many times has she told you that you drink too much? In so many words?"

Without rebuke: "Have *you* ever told me that? In so many words?"

(Silence.)

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. They moved on to other matters, and Peyton found himself telling her about the APE monograph's stagnancy, about *Current's* deep-sixing his cartoons.

Very nettlesome to be drawn out like this. Especially when you're the one used to doing the drawing.

"I'm not exactly institutionalized—you needn't practice your counseling on me," he told her on Wednesday. "And at what point did you become the listener, anyway? I thought that was *my* role in this relationship."

"Well remember, I'm a curious person—I like to burrow into things."

Social Worker Squirrel. He could see her writing all this down, filling out case study forms:

*Patient is secret, self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. Edges his way along the crowded paths of life. Being rich enough, he has no right to be dismal or reason to be morose. Assessment: Classic anal-retentive maladjusted degenerate who declines further intervention.*

He gave Skeeter the gist of this, that grating note in his voice again; and when she made the fatal mistake of saying "I'm just trying to be *supportive*," he slammed down the phone with a great CRASH.



Refusing to answer it the rest of that night or all the next day. Instructing Tim the lummoxy intern to take While You Were Out messages for him, to which he didn't respond. Friday he worked late at the Old Library, preparing next week's finals; and that night at home, no calls came.

Bit of a pang, cutting her off like that.

But there was a dust-off-your-hands afterglow, too—as you might feel after finally cleaning out the garage or attic or bungalow, pitching a lot of sentimental minutiae.

He would simply have to put Skeeter Kitefly out of his mind; and towards that end on Friday night he drank a large Pink Gin that sent him straight off to sleep.

And dreams of fire extinguishers.

Hardly necessary what with your lighting already-lit matches that promptly go out, one! two! three! sweep 'em away, shadowboxing, shadowsealing sarcophagi, a Campbell's Soup Kid imploring you to extricate her before it's too late, you can hear her pounding away inside the can except it's more like a bottle, a belljar, an X-ray or saranwrap—and there she is in all her oblivion, stifling, smothering, coming up for the third upheaval, clinging to the surface before you thrust her back under, extinguishing her candleflame once and for all, *mmm-mmm-mmm* NOT good—

—on which note Peyton awoke, face crammed into his pillow.

This was it, he realized, The End: he had done what he'd dreaded doing almost from the start. With one crashing hangup he had snuffed out the past four months—no, the past four-and-twenty years of Skeeter Kitefly's hard, hard life. And a horrible cold wind swept through him at that moment, blowing back the covers, hauling him out of bed to run around flipping on every light in every room.

The phone did not ring that weekend.

Nor could he bring himself to pick up the receiver and dial.

Some, in his place, might have been able; Peyton could only feel the lack, the loss, the wrenching sense of desolation. Isolation. Distortion.

Traces of her presence whichever way he turned: in the commandeered closet, the taken-over chest of drawers, the medicine cabinet crammed with nature's necessities, the

handfinished hardwood goldleaf picture frame. Have to pack it all up, ship it off to Wheeville, all the sights and sounds and scents of her.

He went up to the miniloft to wash down a couple of yellow pills first, but didn't. Decided to sit down at the drawing table, get some sort of grip on what he'd have to do instead.

*Sat. Dec.17th*

*Dear Skeeter*

*First of all I find it odd I call you that considering I've always called your sister Mercedes since I met her when she was going through a don't call me Sadie phase thinking "Mercedes" more appropriate for an art student rather like I've thought "Skeeter" more suitable for a country-western singer but if I addressed this to "Kelly Rebecca" you might think it's from your sainted mother and that could pulverize you names can do that the most closely guarded secret of my youth was that my own middle name is Farquhar—*

He tore this run-on into end-runs and threw them into separate wastebaskets to prevent their ever receiving a rejoinder.

No: quit with the evasions, equivocations, outright lies; your nose is long enough already. Explain what you refrained from explaining when she asked *What do you think?* Since it wasn't a matter of what you do think, but of what you don't—about Life and its Meaning.

Don't go into cases, though. Don't spell out the whens and wheres and hows. Above all, make no mention of the Girl of your Dreams. What would be the point? Putting faith in catharsis was too much like putting your charred-to-a-crisp hand back into the fire. Once burnt, twice fried; once wept, twice cried. Simply offer some kind of apology. Sorry, little girl, I did my damndest. *Mille regrets.*

Not for the first time, either.

As Bill Sikes said, just before falling off the roof with his head in a noose:

"THE EYES AGAIN!!"

Always the eyes. The first Skeeter-feature he'd taken in while they were spreading

eagles in Brecknock Hall, even before the feel of her 101-poundage, had been her blazing baby-blues. And RoBynne O'Ring: it was those obliquified askant glances that had stirred his notice, before he redirected it décolletéwards. And Dream Girl's eyes—

Dark. Decidedly. Bright, like shoebuttons are supposed to be; but black, with pupils blending into irises. Sloeshaped, crescenty, almondesque: the sort of eyes that, even wide open, always looked half shut. A touch of cunning there, in every sense of the word—that, perhaps, had been the key to her uncommon attractiveness. Likewise RoBynne's, however much he might deny it. Likewise Skeeter's, needless to add. All three belonging to that category of well-favored young women about whom the word "pretty" was not the first to spring to mind. With Skeeter, of course, the first word was "cute." (Excuse me: *cuuuute*.) A quickfire definition of RoBynne O'Ring might be "striking." And as for Joyce Finian—

At first glance you'd have to call her "sweetfaced." Dark eyes under dark lashes under wide-open half-shut lids. Intriguingly curlicued nostrils, set dead-center in a heartlike visage framed by very long, very glossy, very black hair parted straight down the middle, pinned back at either side yet falling past her shoulders to her waist, to tickle sweeter curves than any Rossetti ever revealed—

—out of order—

—ahead of ourselves—

That first morning, that last day of the last spring of the Nineteen Seventies...

He dropped by the Unfinished Aquarium (so called because it looked just like one) to drop off his latest *No-Nazz* drawings and guess what, there she was, sitting primly behind the Selectric. *Hello-o-o, Hepzibah!* Lordy let her be coming to work here and not to repossess the typewriter, which would have been perfectly possible given the always-uncertain financial condition of A.K.A. Enterprises.

"May I help you?" she asked. Softspoken, voice like an oboe.

"I'm the Art Department here," he told her.

"Oh! How do you do? I'm the new office manager. Joyce Finian—" She held out a fine-boned hand which he took and pressed, resisting the overromantic urge to raise it to his lips.

Slim and slender without being skinny. Very pale, very white, Irish-colleenish with a long swanny throat emerging from the neck of her sleeveless blouse. Bare arms daintily prickling with gooseflesh—probably not from the touch of his hand, alas.

“My name’s Derente, Ms. Finnegan.”

“Mine’s Finian,” she corrected.

“Finian, not Finnegan. Let me begin again—” Which caused her to duck her head, go *tee hee hee*, and come up displaying pearly choppers in a smile so wide it made those almondesque eyes disappear outright.

“Ah...” went Peyton. “Anyway, welcome to the Elsew *No-Nazz*,” he said, and was starting off toward the Muffin Man’s office when she stopped him.

“Um—can I ask you something? Is it always this cold in here?” She hugged her exquisite elbows and Peyton had to *harrumph* before explaining that the Unfinished Aquarium’s air-conditioning system had long ago escaped human control and reverted to untamed wildlife.

While Ms. Finian enjoyed another duck-and-titter, he took concupiscent inventory. How *are* things in Glocka Morra? Clothing neither new nor stylish but very clean and neatly pressed. Pastel blouse, modestly opaque. On the smallish side, by no means flat but fragile-looking, at least as far as could be glimpsed behind the Selectric. Quite a woman, Little Fan! A delicate creature, whom a harsh breath might have withered! As if to shield herself she wore a lot of citrussy perfume, as though she bathed in a tubful of fresh lemon juice—imagery that would provide Peyton diversion during more than one midnight hour to follow.

As would Joyce’s blush. Excuse me: her BLUSH. Catching him examining her personal space, a flood of crimson welled up out of her pastel collar to sweep over the cygnet throat, the cheeks, the ears, the forehead: her face aflame with *intense* self-consciousness.

“Allow me,” Peyton said, hurrying to swipe somebody’s jacket from the Aquarium closet and drape it gallantly around Joyce’s shoulders.

BLUSH-duck-titter, smiling from crimson ear to ear. “Thank you, that’s so nice.”

Peyton repeated those very words half an hour later when he left Muff Amberson’s office (shouting “Next time I want your opinion I’ll take an onion and add pee to it!”)—and

encountered the back of Joyce Finian, bending over a file cabinet. Ahem: Jolly Dame Nature at her very *finest*. Concealed not a whit by the waistlength hair, the borrowed jacket, nor the skirt cut full and free to below the knee but stretched drum-tight over the *derrière*.

News for Scrooge: Little Fan needs an upgraded name.

Phenomenal!

Superlative!

And visible panty lines you wanted to take home and keep on your parlor mantel.

She glanced up as he and Priapus left, giving him a ladylike smile and wave and “Bye.”

Yes, this was clearly a nice young woman, a demure young woman—euphemistic too, one who would use quaint phrases like “I have to go powder my nose.” An immensely polite young woman who would, without irony, thank you for handing her a stack of scrawls to be typed up immediately.

Joyce took over the day-to-day running of A.K.A. Enterprises, relieving *No-Nazz* editor Bonzo Krauss of payroll and petty cash, keeping tabs on contributors, proofing their eccentric copy. She would coo at photos of people’s pets; become almost physically ill if anyone’s birthday went by without circulating a card for all to sign. She worked hard, too hard as Peyton saw it, and at the end of her first week he urged her to kick back and come to a Freak-Up Friday powwow of the Dilated Nazztrils.

“A few drinks, a few laughs, some debate of topical issues. I promise we’ll keep any vulgar mudslinging at a bare minimum.”

After some hesitation Joyce agreed, submitting with that oddly monotone *tee hee hee* to Peyton’s holding open the Marr’s Bar door for her, his holding the chair next to his private throne for her, his ordering a glass of sparkling wine for her. She admired all the alcohol-related art on Marr’s walls, created and donated by generations of Merely SAD students.

“Which ones did you do?” she asked Peyton.

“That one there, the archetypal Ugly Customer; and a couple of dipsos behind that pool table. The best one, I’m afraid, is on the inner side of the men’s room door. Not for your eyes, Ms. Finnegan.”

“Finian.”

Joyce volunteered little else about herself. Just out of college; a liberal arts major without a terribly marketable degree; glad to get a job right away at A.K.A. but also working part-time at one of Elsew's many highrise hotels.

"The Hilton? The Hyatt?"

"The Excelsior," she said with a wistful grimace. "They say it *used* to be nice. And I've got to be getting there now. Thank you for inviting me. And for the wine."

"Need a lift? I can drive you, if you don't mind riding in a khaki-colored VW Bug."

"Oh, no thanks," she said, still wry. "I have a ride already."

Such was the first hint that Joyce was engaged—or that she had been, but had broken the engagement—or that it was *semi*-broken-off, but she and her fiancé had temporarily patched things up. In any event a small diamond ring appeared, at intervals, on the appropriate finger.

It would be pleasant to report that Peyton's gentility overcame his libido and kept him from hitting on Joyce; but though he made no *crude* pass or proposition, there were many lingering looks at Little Fan's fundamentals, below and above and in between.

Sexual harassment, as a concept, was only beginning to be broached at this time, and Joyce had to put up a bold front the day she couldn't fit a new correction spool onto the Selectric and Peyton, when asked for assistance, took an overobvious gander down her goosebumpy blouse.

"*Peyton.*" Said with moderate reproach, both hands clasping blousetop to Anne Boleynlike throat. "You embarrass me."

After that he stayed out of her live-flower garden, committing fewer peekabooboos. Still hung around by her desk, having arm's-length chats with her; relating anecdotes about the French Impressionists, whose artwork Joyce was collecting in postcard form.

"I love the colors," she'd sigh, holding the cards up one by one, solemnly asking Peyton's advice as to what matting would go best with each.

So she's-a-Person-not-an-Object: nothing censured, nothing strained. Ever since his Kojak headshave, women made themselves available to him immediately or not at all. Even the immediates didn't get emotionally involved, just physically available; and that was damn

near ideal for a young man in the late Seventies. Involvements got in your way, stood in your light, and peered over your shoulder like an infernal buttinski.

So Joyce-the-Person he consigned to her fickle fiancé, using her as a basis for midnight imagery when he wasn't preoccupied with some available lady's flesh—most often that of a fellow Use 'Em GTA named Cheryl, who had big green eyes and spearmint-breath and unconventional views on Photorealism.

Thus things stood for the next six months.

Then Bonzo Krauss threw his “Kiss Off the Seventies & Kick Off the Eighties” party, the last of its kind at the Unfinished Aquarium. Peyton, arriving late and alone, waded indomitably into the melee—“Gangway there! Displace yourselves!”—and stumbled on Joyce standing all by herself in a corner. Her sweet face, framed by a black turtleneck and longer-than-ever tresses, looked pallidly wan and woebegone.

“Ms. Finnegan! Surely you're not the wallflower type.”

“Oh Peyton, thank goodness—can I get you a drink or something?”

*Or something, oh yes.*

She brought him what tasted like really cheap rye—“Damnation, Bonzo! Dismantle your still!”—and stuck closely by his side. Not that he was about to chase her away.

“Where's Cheryl?” she wanted to know.

“Haven't the foggiest. Home for the holidays, I presume.”

“I thought you two were such a hot item.”

“Lukewarm at best, Ms. Finnegan.”

Duck-and-titter. “*Finian*. You're always forgetting.”

“Finian, not Finnegan. Shall we begin again?” He looked down into her dark eyes, sloeshaped and crescenty, before they disappeared behind a wide bright smile.

“Yes. Let's.”

“How's life with Semibrokenoff?” he asked, not thinking.

“Who?”

“This whiskey is truly undrinkable... I beg your pardon. I was referring to your fiancé, whose name I'm also always forgetting.”

"Well," said Joyce, "maybe that's because I don't have one."

"But the ring?" He reached for her hand to check, and there it was.

"I'm not saying I *never* had one." She sounded almost flirtatious. "Why did you call him Semi—what did you say?"

"Semibrokenoff?" Peyton paused and thought this time. "I got the idea from—well, not rumors, but hints I picked up—that he's kind of a Chekhovian character. Lurking in the background, not getting a lot accomplished. Excuse me if I'm mistaken."

She threw her head back, laughing out loud; no monotone tee-hee here. "You are so smart sometimes."

"Only sometimes? May I get *you* a drink, Ms. Finneg—Finian?"

"Okay. Um—some brandy, please." And after he fetched it and they clinked glasses and she took a nibbly sip, she asked: "Why don't you ever call me Joyce?"

"You occupy a position of respect at my favorite periodical—"

"Oh *come* on. Don't you ever talk like a normal person?" Her own voice became throatier, clarinettish. "Don't you like me?"

"Exceedingly," said Peyton. "Or as you once put it: excessively."

"When did I ever say that?"

"When you first came here. You told me I embarrassed you."

Heightening color. "Oh. That. Well, you did."

*And do I still?* Retrieve that glance aimed for her globular backcurves; show penitence. "I've tried to do better." *But you must admit it's hard.* "But you must admit it's difficult."

Midnight then; Happy New Year.

Joyce looking up, as if to gauge the distance—

—launching forth, as though from a springboard—

—swanny throat outstretched beyond her turtleneck—

—landing lipfirst with an audible *splat* and hanging there suspended, on tiptoe, for the mouth-to-mouth resuscitative moment it took her slender arms to swivel round—

—and execute a link about the neck of her caressee.



\*

For six weeks they went out together, by themselves, for lunch or a drink, he being permitted no more than a hug and a peck afterward; definitely no bosomgropes or buttockfondles. Peyton foresaw an old-fashioned courtship ahead, she keeping him on first base while he tried to get fresh and steal second; not at all what he was used to, but neither was it a disagreeable change.

Joyce moved that January from one furnished apartment to another, gently declining Peyton's offer of assistance. No housewarming either—"I move too often for that. I have the worst luck with roommates." Nor would she allow Peyton to take her Back To His Place—unsurprising, at this stage of the grand old game.

The diamond ring remained on her finger. For all Peyton knew, Joyce was in fact fully engaged, and a jealous-raging Semibrokenoff could appear at any moment to challenge him to a duel. What! Kissing his missus-to-be! Trying to take her where the dearhearts that can't elope play! *En garde, monsieur!*

Well, not French for nothing. Keep that foil well-oiled.

So Peyton reflected the day he bought the soppiest-possible Valentine he could find, to give Joyce as a joke. But when he stopped by the Aquarium what did he overhear but Joyce on the phone, saying something sharply to someone about what she and her "boyfriend" might be doing that evening; and at the sound of that one word Peyton felt a blow as though on the back of his neck. Harsh as a guillotine, too.

He turned on his heel, stalked ponderously out and away, paying no-never-mind to Joyce's calling after him, her hastening to catch him on the stairs—

"Hey, wait for me."

"Why?"

"Aren't you taking me to Marr's?"

"Won't you be too busy with this BOYFRIEND of yours?"

And a truly indescribable expression touched her sweet pale face.

"But... that's... *you*... isn't it?"

If a blow on the back of the neck has an exact opposite, that was what Peyton felt then.

He gave Joyce the cream-of-mush Valentine, which she took absolutely seriously to the point of shedding tears, which Peyton felt empowered to kiss away.

"We're 'involved' now, aren't we?" she asked.

They were. He was.

The climax (one, at least) followed two weeks later, on a Friday doubling as Leap Day. The Ravenelle Collection, a traveling Impressionist exhibit of high repute, was opening downtown; Peyton had wangled preview passes and invited Joyce to accompany him. She got all excited, dressing up in a smart white suit over a fluffy black blouse under her old yellow slicker.

"You certainly look lovely today, Ms. Finnegan," Peyton said. She no longer corrected him on this but took it as an endearment and blushed all the more. "You'd *better* blush," he added. "When we get there, no one will have eyes left for the paintings."

When they got to the Elsew Art Museum, things promptly went awry. A guard ordered Joyce to check her slicker at the cloakroom—"I was going to! He didn't have to be so mean"—and another, just as gruff, barked at Peyton to quit taking notes. Were that not enough to rankle, the Ravenelle's layout, lighting, and lack of accommodations more than made up the difference.

"A massacre of masterpieces!" Peyton thundered, seizing Joyce's arm and hustling her back to the cloakroom.

"But I didn't get to see everything—"

"Nobody got to see ANYTHING, with that *ignis fatuus* illumination! I know Degas and Cassatt went blind—Pissarro too—but not *before* they did their painting! Come with me! I'LL show you how an Impressionist exhibition ought to be organized!"—overcoat flapping after him, Joyce trotting anxiously at his heels.

"Where are we going?"

"To my place!" And when she hung back at the khaki Bug's door: "Good God,

woman, do you think I'm going to manacle you to my bedroom wall? Call a chaperone to meet us if you want, but come on if you're coming!"

She tagged along then, alone with him to his home on Saturn Street. Which, like its planetary namesake and Peyton himself, was encircled by a wide belt. (Of Corinthian-colonnaded apartment buildings, in the street's case.)

Joyce's first indoor words were, "What a lot of books you have."

Peyton snapped on the overhead, strode over to one vast bookcase and began hauling down its contents. Opening them to Giverny waterlilies and boats at Argenteuil, look here! and here! you don't segue from X to Z without Y!—turning pages, sinking to his knees, spreading out the books and propping them open, there! and there! *that* is how anyone with bare-minimal brains would have arranged it!

He felt a tug at his shoulders, looked distractedly up, found Joyce trying to help him off with his coat.

"Thank you. I didn't mean to treat you like a Sabine woman. Please, make yourself at home—there's wine in there—pour yourself a glass. One for me too, while you're at it. And as long as you're hanging up my coat you should do the same to that godawful mackintosh, it does you no justice whatsoever."

"Keeps me dry," she replied. "Um—can I ask you something? Where's the bathroom?"

"Through there."

He turned back to his books, adding selections from other collections, treating the boats and waterlilies like so many French Lincoln Logs; and was startled again when Joyce knelt gracefully by his side. Smoothing down her long white skirt, handing him the asked-for glass, clinking it against hers.

"So is this your private gallery?"

"Well," he heffalumped. "Anyway, this is how *I* would have laid it out."

"I see. What about thee-ese?" she chirped, pointing to a batch of glowing Renoir nudes. "This part must be for adults only."

Peyton was reminded of the one-armed art teacher in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

who sent the girls into gigglefits by tracing the bottom-contours of Botticelli ladies, and then, when the girls would not shut up, smashed a saucer to the floor. Peyton almost did the same with his wineglass when Joyce, setting hers down empty, said:

“Can I ask you something else?... How would you lay *me* out?”

Not by staring dumbstruck into her sparkling black irises, anyway. (Dumbstruck he wasn't, not by a hell of a long shot.)

He reached back beneath Joyce's snugly-outlined bottom. Laid a hand on a shiny white shoe. Plucked it off a black-stockin'g'd foot. Set it in place before two Renoirs. BLUSH-duck-titter as the other shoe was removed and set beside the first—as, with elephantine finesse, Peyton began working his way upwards and inwards.

Many and many a time in the years to come, he would rerun this scene in his mind. First for pleasure and then in light of later accusations, he would replay and reassess it.

*Had* he seduced Joyce Finian that Leap Day evening? Overpowered her will, inveigled her into a debauch? Or, in light of later actions: had she recognized the Derente name and taken the initiative—given herself to him, with an eye out for what she might gain as a result?

One way or the other, all her clothes got taken off and arranged on Peyton's carpet. (Less carefully as heights were scaled, depths were charged, and clumsy lumpishness returned to pop and rip and snag.) Joyce emerged from within like Venus on her shell or Chiquita on her peel, to coyly model her sweetbodied self. An Orange Girl indeed: translucent skin coloring hotly from the roots of her hair to the tips of her nipples. The earlobes in particular, tomato-red behind their peridot studs, looked ready to hemorrhage; and not just at the rest of Joyce being undressed, but because her Maidenforms were rather threadbare.

Peyton was far from minding. Everything he'd ached to see and touch (*and grope and fondle*) for months upon months, exposed to the light at last AT LAST and better than he'd ever imagined it: no Madame Tussaud waxwork was this, no mannequin polished with Lemon Pledge, but sanguine Finian-flesh living and breathing—

—and all a-shiver. Still February, of course, for a few more hours.

March in like a lion then. He hastened to turn up the radiator before mingling his garments with hers; then into his arms she was swept, and to the bed she was carried, and

there sheets were hit, and they became a couple.

In the best *Lord of the Flies* tradition, he was heavy and fulfilled upon her.

So heavy, in fact, outweighing Joyce by a hundred pounds or more, that he feared—after awhile—that she might have been crushed. True to his word, he hadn't tied her up or down or into pretzel-knots; but her passive compliance began to be almost alarming.

"Joyce? Still with us?"

"Right here."

"Enjoying yourself?"

"Sure." (Wide bright smile.)

"Any requests?"

"Um—could you please move over just a little?"

*I never lose my inhibitions*, she'd told him once at Marr's when urged to have a second drink. No regrets but no requests; just a generic hold-me gesture. Up early the next morning to mend her rips and snags with safety pins, then blow him a kiss—say "Thank you for having me"—and head off to the Excelsior.

Something amiss here.

Peyton resolved to treat these misgivings if the opportunity ever arose again. Which it did the very next Friday, when Joyce went out to dinner with him and back to Saturn Street with him and, after a cognac (none of Bonzo's homemade slop), presented the zipper of her dress to him. He managed to unzip it without a jam, continued inward and downward, and went to cookie-popping work.

Compliant passivity instead.

(Mmph.)

(*Mille regrets*, little girl.)

But they were still "involved," after all; Joyce kept bestowing her sweetness on him, Friday after Friday. So Peyton figured if she could bear the brunt, he could keep dishing it up. His own heavy fulfillment was nothing to sneeze at.

Spring arrived, packing showers, and one night Peyton got out of bed to close the window against the rain. He noticed a Finian-foot protruding from the bedclothes, and flicked

a finger along its sole—only to hit the floor as Joyce and bed together let out a wild squoinketing *EEEEEEENH!!!*

Achilles had nothing on Joyce Finian.

All her blush reserves were called to active service and she became extraordinarily participatory: squirm, writhe, bump, grind, seize the brass bedframe in a two-handed stranglehold and chew the stuffing out of pillows while Peyton played This Little Piggy (and ankle, calf, kneecap, inner thigh: all the fine lines of her sweet torso) with his fingers and tongue and a red sable paintbrush from his cartooning equipment. Unbutton that modesty, unhook that reticence, tug down those losable inhibitions till the pillowstuffing gives way to what sounds like throbbing rapture, or Yoko Ono with Bamm-Bamm in Bedrock: *abba dabba DAIIIIIEEEEEEEE—*

Freak up and twitch someone!

\*

The thought struck Peyton (admittedly not immediately) that Joyce might not care for this on a regular basis. But she started tarrying at Saturn Street all day Saturdays and sometimes through the Sabbath, issuing unmistakable “Me now!” orders from time to time.

He thought weekends were an especially busy time in the hotel trade, and worried that these beddy-bye upheavals might cost Joyce her Excelsior job; but she said not and he let the matter drop, having small reason to complain.

Actually there *was* a small reason: namely that Joyce began her tarrying just as Peyton had to bear down on his academics. There were finals to prep for, an Ash Can thesis to complete, a master's degree to acquire, employment to obtain—

“I’ll be quiet as a mouse,” Joyce promised, and stuck to this outside of Piggy-play, padding around like a mousestalking cat. To further this impersonation she washed and groomed herself a lot, combed and brushed her long black hair a lot, sat detachedly and stared a lot—out the window at the sun, or on the sofa at TV. Leafing through his big Impressionist folios, making *ooh* and *ahh*-type faces but never a noise. Balancing Peyton's checkbook, filling out his tax forms, sewing on his buttons, typing up his thesis: looking after him. When he took a break and came to join her, she would look up with the expression a cat gets while

deciding whether your lap is suitable for jumping on; and if it was, she would follow through and they would have themselves a strokefest.

The only time she lapsed from quietude was in bed. Even after the *abbadabbas* were done with for the night, there would be a constant wriggling and fidgeting and heaving of sighs and checking of clock and getting noisily up to pad into the bathroom.

“Restless, are you?” Peyton would mumble.

Evidently so. In May she moved again, this time to a narrow basement room on Venetian Street. Joyce had been in no hurry to have him visit her previous apartment, saying “Sometimes I like to be alone.” But she seemed immensely proud of this new place, of the Tintoretto-shaded flowers blossoming above its windows; and she invited Peyton over with such ceremony that he dared not poke fun, other than to dub it The Gondola.

Not much in the way of furniture. A bed, a table, two chairs, curtains at the windows, an old-fashioned Singer sewing machine, a bureau and an alcove containing her spotless Snow White outfits and maybe forty pairs of shoes. Pinned to one wall were Joyce’s collected postcards: Monet, Seurat, Sisley, Morisot, matted on sheets of construction paper. Peyton noticed no pictures of friends or family members, no photo albums; perhaps there was *no* family, and Joyce had sprung fullblown out of Finnegan’s Forehead.

At the Gondola he refined his technique of tickling her ivories (and pinkeries, and creameries)—his big fat fingers deft and nimble on armpit and ribcage as though he were wielding a crowquill over cardboard instead of compelling his susceptible girlfriend to contort, convulse, and explode one night with a *pleez pleez pleez pleez* DAAAAH-DEEEE!!!—

—that left her drenched and drained, and brought Peyton up short.

She gave vent then to a little stream-of-consciousness about her father, who’d gone so far one thirsty day as to drink all of Joyce’s perfume, and her stepmother’s, and her younger sister’s. There was something about an odd stepbrother too, or maybe more than one; or maybe that was the basis of his oddity.

At any rate she drifted off to wryfaced sleep and never referred to it again, and Peyton thought it best to ask no questions. True or not, it provided the sum total he would ever hear about her early life.

Joyce he did buy lingerie, for her twenty-third birthday: elegant floral confections to replace her utilitarian unmentionables. "Oh pret-t-ty... but didn't you feel bashful, buying these? I know *I* would have."

"Nonsense. I simply told the clerk in a loud clear voice, 'They're for *me*. I intend to lose weight this summer.'"

And why not? That was the summer of his mastery, Peyton taking his M.A. from Use 'Em and being hired by Merely as a fulltime instructor. Joyce attended the commencement exercises and was introduced to Peyton's parents for the first and only time, Lucky Pierre's eyes lighting up (no surprise there) and Antoinette often asking after her afterwards. As one might about a prospective daughter-in-law.

Which should have been a most disturbing thought.

He presumed Joyce covered herself contraceptively in some fashion. She would always disappear into the bathroom beforehand, but Peyton never asked whether it was to insert or apply or imbibe something to prevent his seed taking root. Certainly *he* contributed nothing toward that end, in those easier-to-deal-with days. Yet what *if* pregnancy resulted? Would she demand he do the Right & Proper Thing?

Not a dreadful notion.

Good God...

This, he supposed, was truly Being Involved. The diamond ring, he realized, had vanished from her finger some time ago; perhaps he might see about replacing it. Which would have been easier-to-deal-with had he not just traded in his old khaki Bug—and a considerable chunk of future income—for a brand-new silver Porsche.

Joyce (who'd loved the Bug but took a dim view of the Porsche) *did* make one Right & Proper demand: when the summer heatwave turned horrendous, she implored him to buy her an air conditioner. He went out and got an enormous one, a by-God dreadnought icebox, that on second thought would probably glaciare the little Gondola—but was the ideal size for Saturn Street. So to hell with the electric bill, my precious, along with the thermometer!

"Um..." said Joyce.

*"Mi casa es su casa, queridita."*



And for someone who'd been "freezing" at the Unfinished Aquarium just a year ago, she spent a lot of that summer at Saturn Street cozying up to this icebox, shucking down to her fancy new frillies and splaying herself out in front of it. And Peyton would pay sonorous homage to her goosey-swanny beauty, overriding Joyce's wistful insistence that her thighs and caboose were "fat"—no ma'am! in no way fat! but of a classic quality beyond the power of any romantic artist to capture and sustain.

"Oh gee," Joyce would say.

\*

Then, one fine day—

He switched off the dreadnought, opened all his windows, let in poetic September sweetbreezes: first cool evening in what seemed like a thousand years. They were going out to celebrate, Joyce was in the bathroom touching up her appearance, had been at it for half an hour and he was going to shout, "Aren't you presentable *yet*? The reservations are for seven!" but only got as far as the "Aren't" when there came a CRASH and a cry and the sound of hiccup-weeping—

Don't bother to knock, turn the knob; don't bother to lock, bathroom privacy being respected at Peyton's place, which was just as well since otherwise he would've had to break the door down and how that would have jarred his shoulder, his arm, on top of which he'd still have found Joyce in there on the tiles, on her knees, face pale as sleet, tears dripping down among bits of shattered mirror. Mixed with what Peyton, in his godawful naiveté, thought at first was spilled talcum.

He even wondered why she'd taken a hand mirror into the bathroom when there was a perfectly good one on the medicine cabinet.

And then; and then.

The higher you are, the farther you fall.

Peyton would have believed anybody else on earth to be a snowbird, including Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and his own mother (who at least mingled with an artful crowd).

But Joyce Finian???

He *had* suspected her of catching a summer cold, from all that lounging in front of the

air conditioner, and of trying to conceal it lest he think her contagious.

Eyes brimming, nose running, dab dab abbadab, sniff sniff sniff. Face flushing painfully, then bleached out again except around her darkrimmed eyes and dampchafed nostrils. Peculiar curlicues: trying to explain the pressures of tension, of being a woman, a shortish slightish young Liberal Arts major—it was incredible, having to respond under such strain—he was a jolly male giant with a big loud voice, how could he understand what she had to go through every day, every night, all her thinskinnyed jitters, her anxiety-ridden insecurity?

So what else could she do but lay out a line of fine white powder on the glass?

Toot her own horn, and then—

—it was like being inside one of her postcards. *There* at Giverny or Argenteuil, able to see through Monet's eyes but with heightened clarity—or like looking at a Seurat and seeing it whole, but at the same time each tiny dot was separate and distinct. Each a burst of pure, intense color—

—like sailing over a rainbow.

All it took was Pixie Dust.

At the cost of a gram or two a week.

Which could run you two, three hundred dollars, depending on your dealer and the market; whereas Joyce's takehome pay hardly topped a thousand a month, even adding in extra hours at the Excelsior.

And lately she'd been grinding her pearly choppers, and hearing too many noises at night so she couldn't sleep; her nerves were wearing thin, her nasal passages were inflamed, and she felt utterly humiliated unbosoming herself this way, to him.

*Didn't want you to see me like this.*

*Never wanted you to know.*

Well guess what, he had and he did; and thanks to Being Involved, he felt a certain responsibility. Racking his self-absorbed memory for some warning sign he might have detected and averted—but hadn't, so couldn't, so here they were. She dabbing and sniffing; he with not the slightest clue what to do. Having prized his snoot too highly to subject it to California cornflakes, what the devil-hell did he know about their abuse and disuse?

When had she begun? Before she'd met him? Before they'd first hit the sheets? He racked his brain all over again for some recollection of chafed nostrils before then. Made over with makeup, perhaps? Not a happy thought that she'd needed the stuff to cope with *his* pressures, the weightiness of his fulfillment.

So what might Dear Abby/Ann Landers suggest?

To seek counseling, of course; get some therapy from qualified professionals. Actually that sounded fairly sensible—Joyce seemed to agree—arrangements were made—he drove her to the first session, stayed in the waiting room reading a review of *The Stunt Man* over and over while she broke the ice and tested the water—and came out radiant, full of resolve, intending to go cold turkey, you could do that with cocaine, it was all psychological, she would recover scot-free and be good, he'd see; he would be proud of her. She'd be proud of herself. And bursting with pride they went back to his place and made genuine love for once, dispensing with the you-now/me-now to chase after simultaneity.

All it took was a little discipline.

She would be good and disciplined and never touch the stuff again.

Or at least cut back.

Control her use.

Go for days, weeks without it, not acting like an addict.

She wasn't.

She *wasn't*.

(And he really didn't want to go too deeply into what followed; the three years since then had provided too thin a scab.)

Missing sessions with her counselor. Trying another place, not liking their attitude either: they were hostile and arrogant, suspicious of her. She wanted to talk but not to listen. When Peyton tried to "be supportive" (fatal phrase) she would shrink away bristling, often as not. More often, as time went by and he tried to let her be, to let things slide.

Hanging around Saturn Street in exasperated suspense, not wanting to go out, no appetite for anything; picking and snapping at the elastic on her fancy underwear, saying it made her feel itchy. As though bugs were crawling over her, getting under her skin.

And at work it was worse. The *No-Nazz* Election Eve issue didn't get out on time, Joyce was leaving early and coming in late or not at all, doing less-than-coherent work when she *was* there. Given a warning, then given notice, Peyton demanding a reprieve but Bonzo saying no, the grounds were too shaky, Joyce had to be let go; there were reproofs, recriminations, she departed and disappeared and Peyton didn't see her again for two weeks.

Letting her phone ring a dozen times at a stretch, finally getting a recording—"The number you have dialed is no longer in service"—and when he went to Venetian Street the curtains were gone from her basement windows, he squatting down to peer in and find the Gondola scuttled, vacant, postcards gone from the wall.

Badgering the Excelsior, getting an I'm-new-here person who had no idea who Joyce Finian might be; getting transferred to an I'm-just-filling-in supervisor, who would say only that Joyce didn't work there anymore—and possibly never had.

Appropriating the A.K.A. personnel records—but of course Joyce had been the one who maintained those, and there were lacunae aplenty where she herself was concerned.

The lady vanished into thin air, whichever way Peyton turned.

\*

A bad time, bad atmosphere, after Reagan's unforeseen landslide victory: "Gimme That Old-Time Revolution" stood little chance against the triumphant howls of the Far Righteous, their declaring all who opposed them to be inspired by the Antichrist.

The night after John Lennon was killed, Peyton heard a scratching at his door and there she was. Looking brittle of body, pasty of face, hair like black cobwebs—remorseful maybe, but uncommunicative. Where was she living now? What was she doing for money? Had she gone back to Semibrokenoff, and exactly what part had he played (did he play) in all this?

No answers.

Just that generic hold-me gesture.

Thus she came and went that winter, like something out of unhappy Celtic legend: a muted banshee who slipped away before the dawn. Peyton took to staying home every evening he wasn't in the classroom, abandoning the Nazztrils and other pastimes in case she

might show up; though when she did, he felt oppressed by futility. Playing Pietà: Joyce huddled in his lap under a quilt, watching Late Late Shows with her face pressed against his neck, shivering. They saw several old movies in this manner—*The Lady from Shanghai*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Of Human Bondage*—none of them very cheerful. Heavy flicks.

What reinforcements could he enlist? Two, three times he urged a return to therapy, a detox center, a hospital; but away she would run and not come back for days or weeks. Shouldn't he be taking a firmer stand, *make* her stop somehow, have a straitjacket handy and the phone predialed: I've got her! She's here! Come and take her away ha-ha to the funny farm before she breaks loose and vanishes again!

God damn it, he hadn't asked to be cast in some ongoing madness-takes-its-toll. There was a fine line between involvement and obsession, and Peyton didn't want either side of it.

There was also the obscure fear that They would cite him somehow as being liable, culpable, blameworthy—you mean you *knew* she had this problem, yet you stood idly by and did nothing? (I tried! I offered—) You tried! If you'd at least *doodled* on the test paper, we'd give you *some* credit—

Another night of heavy flicks: Friday the 13th of February, Peyton in the tub when he heard a scratching as of someone's claws a-catching at his chamber door. Towel wrapped around him, he ran to answer; truly your forgiveness I implore—

She stood at his front window, staring out between Corinthian columns, while Peyton dressed and explained that she'd caught him on the verge of making his radio debut. A.K.A. Enterprises was suffering a financial crisis, wild schemes had been hatched to stave off bankruptcy, the latest taking place this midnight on Sargent Poach's *Scrambled Segue Show*, broadcast live on KLOT-FM.

"The Mighty Yellow Tee, you know... We need every last bit of ballyhoopla we can get... I think I *will* wear a necktie, for moral support... Keeping busy, are you?... Joyce? Still with us?"

He came out of the bathroom in some haste. She remained at the window, her back to him, it still retaining its voluptuous curvature even while the rest of her ebbed and waned.

"Ah... I realize this is radio we're talking about, but... how do I look?"

She turned around.

Peyton had grown somewhat accustomed to her hollow brink-of-drowning eyes, but tonight he was struck by how infinitely *dry* they seemed: all tears shed. The very pupils losing their Glocka Morra glint, dissolving into the irises to form two black holes—

He changed his mind, he wouldn't go, Bonzo and the Muffin Man could handle it without him, he would stay here with her—

And then; and then.

A lass and a lack.

Like that scene at the end of the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, where Kevin McCarthy and Dana Wynter hide in a cave from the pod-people who've replaced their friends. Dana's exhausted, dozes for just a second... and awakes taken over, body-snatched, having *become* a pod-person with coldblooded eyes in a blank masklike face, one of the chillingest images in Peyton's picturewatching memory: *you're next! you're next!!*

"No, you go on." She stepped forward, reached up to tighten his tie, settle his collar. "I'll come back later." All very monotone, like her *tee hee hees*.

He might have invited her to come with him, or to wait for him there, but he didn't. Considered asking again for a current address or phone number; thought better of that too.

She walked him down to the silver Porsche, grimaced at it, declined his offer to drop her anywhere. They embraced briefly, along former lines: her arms around his neck, his hands upon her rump.

"Take care of yourself, Ms. Finnegan."

"I will," she said.

So he left her; and they parted.

The *Scrambled Segue* endeavor did not pan out. Sargent Poach kicked things off by suggesting the *No-Nazz* do a hardboiled exposé of his invisible parrot, Egbert Soufflé, and went on about how morose Egbert had been since his lover Omelette flew off—

—"to that big cage lined with newspapers in the sky! Egbert never drinks on-air, but he's frequently hung over—isn't that right, Egbert?" [*Pained parrot-voice: "Squawwggkh."*]

"So let's humor him and all you last-minute Valentine shoppers with something new from Gino Vannelli, called 'Living Inside Myself...'"

\*

Act as though nothing's changed, as if the *No-Nazz* enjoys unlimited life potential. Stroll on over to the campus Book & Supply Store, lay in extra bristol board and India ink for drawing all the cartoons off the top of your head. Every one a guaranteed chucklebuster! "Claptrap Gives You Mental Clap." "What *You* Need Is a Long Ocean Voyage." "Okay, Okay! You're *Not* an Asshole—"

Handing the cashier your Mastercard, she handing it back with a headshake: "Sorry, you're over your limit." Astonishment, impossibility, must be a screw-up on somebody else's part—the students in line behind you clearing *yeah-sure* throats—

To the phone then with an assumption of dignity, calling up Mastercard—yessir, over your limit—must be a stupid computer error, of course. Plain as the nose on a Derente face. If you'd learned nothing else from Lucky Pierre, it was "Lose if you have to—hock what you must—but always pay most of your debts, my boy, and that way they'll let you keep playing."

Demand a statement *achtung tout de suite*; find one already in your mailbox, from the bank. Good news here, at least; interest rates on savings were going through the roof and so too, cartoon-style, was the top of Peyton's head when he opened the envelope and found his account cleaned out empty.

Goggle and boggle: *two* computer errors? Somebody impersonating him? Some—  
Pietà piñata.

When had she managed it?

Ample opportunity, over the past year; access to all his vitals; clerical expertise. Perhaps she'd been biding her time for months.

He signed affidavits, closed his savings account, cut up his Mastercard; did without from then on. Did without many things—such as his silver Porsche, lost before long to the repo man. Why not report her to the police? "My toothead ex-girlfriend ripped me off royally in order to obtain controlled substances. No, I have no idea where she and her sweet ass are, which makes it kind of hard (you must admit it's difficult) to prosecute the latter off

the former and return it to my parlor mantel—”

—*yeah-sure*—

She hadn't gone so far as the sung-of Mary Lou, who stole Bob Seger's watch and chain and EV'rything—but that might have been because Peyton owned no gewgaws. Otherwise they too could have been heisted and handed over to some Semibrokenoff entrepreneur.

The Elsew *No-Nazz* folded; the Dilated Nazztrils scattered; the Mercury Theater showed *Atlantic City*, and there to take your mind off reality was Burt Lancaster selling cocaine when he wasn't watching Susan Sarandon anoint her Renoiresque chest with lemon juice.

And yet there were depths still to be charged.

At the steamy end of May, having just given a final exam, he went back to Saturn Street to change his sweated-through shirt. Coming down the hall he heard a Marley's Ghosty sound of dragging chains, followed by a tremendous BOOM that turned out to be his disconnected dreadnought hitting the floor. Deposited there by Joyce Finian, who must've had a key cut by hook or by crook—*Let my love open the door*—except that a sudden wind blew through the gaping hole in Peyton's window frame and slammed the door shut behind him, giving them all a start.

Joyce in tough-chick clothes, no makeup, eyes no longer half-shut but wider-open than he'd ever seen them and not with love either, nor with fright. Beside her was a handtruck, and loading the air conditioner onto it was an undeniably beautiful woman, wholesome-buttery like the young Shirley Jones of *Oklahoma!* or *Carousel*, but with a top-sergeant's haircut.

“Yikes,” she said at the sight of Peyton's perspiring wrath.

“I suppose you think you're going to steal *that* now, and turn IT into snow!” he thundered.

But those were the only words he would get in, as the wide-eyed Ms. Finian opened her mouth.

Molly Bloom ends *Ulysses* with a monologue; Joyce Finian took her banshee leave



(and Peyton's air conditioner) after a diatribe. A chew-up-and-spit-out tirade too, executed as if by an etcher's scribe with a diamond point for engraving the finest of lines.

She didn't need "snow" anymore, she'd found her true being, her true self, she'd been deluded by Peyton but knew better now, knew him for what he was: a gross fat man who'd reduced her to a helpless slobbering whore night after night, making her feel defaced and dismembered and why? why had he done it? because he was a fraud and a sham and a very bad man who'd never loved her not once, who wasn't capable of loving anyone, of doing anything but strip her naked and devour her, stab her and shoot her with his rotten Thing that would serve him right if it shriveled up and withered on him, women were far better off by themselves, with themselves, *for* themselves and they were taking this air conditioner not only because she'd *earned* it and *deserved* to have it but as partial reparation for all the outrageous atrocities inflicted on Joyce and womankind, all the misery, the nausea, it made her *sick* when she had to let him kiss her, she only did it because he drove her crazy, and afterwards she always had to *wipe her mouth*, that's right, WIPE HER MOUTH—

Even then, through all the diamond-pointed crosshatchery, he realized this last bit had been swiped from Bette Davis's conniption fit in *Of Human Bondage*.

And, like gimpy Leslie Howard, he could do no more than dumbly take it. Too late for sarcastic ripostes; no swordplay could parry her perforations as his vessel cracked from side to side, twisting in the venomous wind, eyes ears nose throat suffocatingly congested—

"YOU PRICK," she hissed.

And vanished, she and face-averted Shirley Jones, together with their handtruck and the a/c à trois.

Then, at last, all was darkness and silence.

\*

Change the locks. Wedge the windows when not there. Bar the door at all times. Make no effort to replace the air conditioner but do without, do without. Answer the phone only to hear *It's about your parents, Mr. Derente, and I'm afraid the news isn't good—in fact, it's quite bad...*

Of course it is. Of course they are.

And: at least this way I won't have to tell them about Joyce.

Then: could she have somehow been the cause of Lucky Pierre and Antoinette's circuslike demise? But no, that would be impossible, unless she was fiendishly clever by half.

Yet: why doubt that? Had he himself not been targeted from the start, turned into a shaven-and-shorn patsy? Hadn't her every gesture been calculated beforehand, her every step plotted in advance, right down to that shivering on his lap, face pressed into his neck...

But—

No: it was a classic *Magus* case, straight out of John Fowles. Right from the very beginning she'd been putting him on with her sweet twofacedness, her ducks-and-titters and *tee hee hees*—

—could you *fake* a blush?

Well...

Like Miniver Cheevy, he thought and thought and kept on thinking; coughed and cursed and called it fate, and kept on drinking. Like Egbert Soufflé, he drank alone a lot that bleak dehydrated summer.

What about Abby/Ann's advice? Forget it; the funny-farmers needn't institutionalize him just yet. He did accept a prescription of little yellow pills, handy for deadening the senses. And the appetites: off came his Lumpy Humpty Dumpty weight, twenty pounds by Labor Day, thirty more by New Year's.

The pointless nature of It All. First one, then a couple. Initial promise of joy followed by grief and pain. The best-laid schemes, the best-schemed lays resulting in hearts broken, spindled, shredded, mulched. So why keep struggling? Why not commit some form of suicide—if not physical, then by becoming a sapphophobe, a misogynist, an insulated all-around misanthrope?

But even that was denied him.

His folks's estate not yet settled, the Cheval still a year off, he had to escape from haunted Saturn Street "straight into Uranus," a crackerbox walkup by the Interstate onramp. One sweltering August night he was packing his books in soggy cartons while listening to "She's Got Bette Davis Eyes" for the umpty-umpth time, when suddenly there came a

scratching—

—Who's that?

—Please. Is Joyce there?

—*No!* Go away.

—Please. Is Joyce there?

—NO!! Go away!

And they might have kept that up for quite a long time had Peyton not wrenched the door open and found Young Shirley Jones, looking wholesome-buttery beautiful and heartbroken.

Joyce had disappeared from their place. No word, no note, money missing. Shirley had searched everywhere, asked everyone else, found not a clue.

—Join the club.

—No, she talked about that—about you—

—I'll *bet* she did.

—No no, no really, I think—I mean—she felt—about what she said—when she thought about it—she got so... that's one reason I was hoping... she might've come back here... to you.

—Oh.

All things considered, it didn't much matter whether Joyce had ever loved him, or Young Shirley either—in a way that would be far worse, her loving either or both of them, and they unable to save her from her jitters and restlessness and insecurity; from living in dread of what the darkness hides.

*We can't be responsible for that.*

But if only they'd shown more patience, taken more upon themselves, maybe...

Peyton retrieved a bottle from a soggy halfpacked carton and he and Shirley shared it, hand to hand, sitting shoulder to shoulder on the carpet in that accursed hot apartment, mourning together.

It was very late and very dark when the bottle got emptied, but they continued to avert faces from each other as they wiped the moisture from their eyes. She offered him the air

conditioner back; he said no, you might as well keep it; she handed him a scrap with her number, asking him please to call if he ever heard anything. He never did; so he never had.

And that was the last time he'd been that close to a woman, to another human being, to anybody, till a couple of years later when Skeeter Kitefly came skating out of nowhere to sweep him off his feet and bloody his nose....

\*

His hand was cramping badly by midday Sunday, when he looked down and found it had written a gone-into spelled-out case study of himself and the Girl of his Dreams. Against all orders: a neatly-lettered spill-of-guts in black and white. Putting it on paper was like ripping a bandage off a hairy clotted chest wound.

Or so at least it should have felt.

In fact it felt as though he'd finished taking a final exam. Maybe aced, maybe flunked, but either way done with and out from under.

(Mmph.)

(Good God.)

He considered the Significance to History of the document before him; and the Curious Person to whom it was addressed.

*It appears I have told you the story of MY hard, hard life. Which I suppose makes you my petite amie confessor. Or confessress. Or confessrix—take your pick.*

*I'm sorry I hung up on you.*

*I hope it didn't hurt your feelings (or your ear).*

*I never meant to give your grief.*

*I hope you will forgive me and forget it.*

*I haven't done very well by women in my life so far, but I want to start doing better.*

*I want to do better by you. More than simply "listening" and "paying attention"—as if my being all ears (except for the rest of me) could have lent some sort of meaning to Life.*

*Perhaps the true meaning or purpose of Life is to FIND a meaning*

*or purpose for our lives.*

*Each other's, if not our own.*

*In the meantime, I would like to go on paying attention to you.*

*Yours,*

*Peyton Derente*

*P.S. Did I ever tell you how much I love the way you talk?*

*(So much. So much.)*

\*

He stuffed this into a manila envelope, slapped on all the stamps he could find, and mailed it off to Wheeville first thing Monday morning. It would presumably arrive the next day, and Skeeter being a fast reader and quick study she'd probably react right away; so after giving his Tuesday exams he ran home and sat by the phone all afternoon, all evening, all night, into the next AM...

Letter delayed by the Christmas rush, of course. Annoying but understandable. And then there was that plumb-zero windchill, too; postmen freezing to mailboxes, letters trapped in ice floes...

Wednesday—today—it was so cold he had to put on longjohns, a thermal sweater, two pairs of socks, and a ski mask (to save his nose from frostbite) before he could head out to wrap up finals and resume papergrading at the Old Library. Moving to Dr. Ecklebury's office as the day dragged cruddily on. Seeing dismal images of Skeeter in tears, Skeeter in dives, Skeeter with bottles and razors and ropes, Clarence the Dodge Dart broken down on lonely roads, buried in snowdrifts so there would never be a response to his confession, never a word or a look or a touch again from that miniature maniac, his antic cutiepie...

At least in here he wouldn't have to hear his phone *not* ringing with the non-news that Snow White had told him next to nothing, and he'd botched it; whereas Rose Red had told him all in all, and *still* he'd botched it. And if you were looking for strike three, there was always Dream Girl and he'd snuffed her out five nights ago in a see-through can of Campbell's Soup.

All out; none safe.

However agnostic you might believe yourself to be, there were all those Calvinistic axe-grinders in your genes and maybe there *was* something to predestination: those three had been his foreordained soulmates, he had failed them all, and what possible promise of joy could ever be left to him now? What chance of being saved (for want of a better word) from what he'd coughed at and cursed at and called fate?

Damnation.

Indeed.

"THERE you are!" said a deep voice, jolting him half out of Dr. Ecklebury's chair.

Not GoFoC, though; just Tim the lummoxy intern.

"Wha'?"

"I didn't know you were in here," said Tim. "Uh—about my term paper? The one sorta due today? You know, the Art History one—"

"I am aware of the subject. And that it's due today. So where is it?"

Tim held out a single slip of pink paper.

"Kind of short, don't you think?" Peyton said, glancing at it: WHILE YOU WERE OUT.

"Oh, that's just a message. My paper, well, it's not quite ready to turn in yet—it's all written, pretty much, but not typed—see, I was gonna use my roommate's girlfriend's typewriter last night? But it sorta broke, and I know you said you wouldn't take our papers late 'even if the moon fell outta the sky' but I could have it for you tomorrow, all written and typed and everything, I promise—"

Peyton cramming halfgraded exams into his briefcase, struggling into his coat and scarf and skimask: "It'd better be so good it's flabbergasting, Tim, when it *is* ready tomorrow and in my box by 5 PM *at the latest*."

"Hey, thanks, man! I owe you one!"

"We'll call it a draw," said Peyton as he pounded away down the Old Library's rattletrap stairs, out the door and through the cold West Quad, past Brecknock Hall and Haller Hall, the Amphitheater, the New Library, the Book & Supply Store; skidding on patches of ice around the frozen pond as he ran to the Student Union. In through its double

doors, down another staircase, around a corner and into a Game Room pretty much deserted—

—except for a pint-sized young woman in a fire-engine-red UWSM sweatshirt, its hood too small to contain a great whomp of hair the color and fuzziness of a prime-time peach. Her back was to him as she played Ms. Pac-Man, whanging at the joystick with many *unnnnhs* and *grrrrs* and cries of self-encouragement, cheering herself on—

—as Peyton paused for breath, peeling off his skimask, feeling his heart try to force itself out of his mouth. Watching her with a trace of wonder that anyone so short could loom so large in a person's life.

As if he could ever have simply put her out of his mind; forgotten anything she might be likely to think or feel or say or do. Quite a woman, Little Fan.

He came up behind her and said hello.

She let out a high-pitched shriek, whirled around: "*Jesus to pieces, Peyton!*"

"Sorry. I got your message... I take it you got my letter?"

"Maybe," she gasped, one hand clutching her chest.

"Well then," he said.

She reached out her other hand, caught hold of his elbow, clasped it with an expression of nettled forbearance. She, too, pausing for breath.

"Ah..." said Peyton. "So... what do you *think*?"

And try as she might to keep it back, to smooth it out, she couldn't prevent the horizontal fissure from spreading across her face, the split-kicking grin from shining forth. No way to hide the light or cap the gladsome spirit: let nothing you dismay.

He took her fine-boned hand off his elbow and raised it to his lips.

"(Shniff)" went Skeeter, after awhile, as he kept her knuckles pressed to his nostrils. "Well, if you think I'm never going to wash this hand again... (shniff) ...I guess I'll overlook your incivility, *this* time... (shniff) ...isn't that a great word? 'Incivility'—like a snail when it crawls out of its shell. You see I'm ready to tackle Biology... (shniff) ...are you only going to kiss my hand? There's lots more of me, you know—"

"I think," said Peyton into her ear after a much longer while, "you might just possibly

be able to bluff your way through it.”

“Through what?” (Smooch.) “Biology?” (Smooch.) “Or kissing?”

“Social work. Talking leapers off ledges, and things like that. Being a surrogate Wendy to wayward Lost Boys.”

“That’s right—there’s more than one way of growing up! (Cackle.) Or I could play BoogaBloo Angel to Pinocchios.” She let go of his neck, tweaked his nose, and slid down to land on her feet. “I’ve got so much to tell you, it’s like I haven’t seen you for months—c’mon!”

“Where to?”

“Why, anywhere, Pooh Bear—out to dinner—out to lunch—out to smooch my honeybunch.”

Putting on her own coat, earmuffs, mittens, a stocking cap instead of the too-small hood; describing a Cabbage Patch Doll riot she’d taken part in at Run-o’-the-Mall; gloating over a secret present she’d gotten him for Christmas—no, not razzleberry dressing, but Peyton would love it and she would have to kill him if he didn’t; grabbing him by the glove and yanking him up the stairs.

“I swear, what a year this has been—I began it fed up with school and men and myself and everything, ‘n’ getta loada me now! Oh—RoBynne says hi.”

“Mmph?”

“Please don’t be mad but I told her some of what you wrote in your letter and she says she’s willing to forgive you if you’ll crawl on your hands and knees and plead with her a little first.”

“Exciting prospect.”

They went out into the December twilight, the full-blast fury of the whistling windchill—

“It is so COLD!” Skeeter yelled, fumbling off her big round glasses. “On the way over here these fogged up and then *froze over*—lemme just tuck ‘em in my poke—okay! Now, warm me up—”

She buried her face in Peyton’s coatfront, burrowing deep into his embrace, digging



on down with abruptly-pointed chin till nothing facial was left visible except a peeking-upward de-glassed gaze.

Candles in the wind? Not these magic campfires, perfectly round, perfectly clear, piercing the gloom like baby-blue M&M's set ablaze by some confectionery pyrotechnic. Ah yes: the eyes again. The eyes again.

## Chapter XXII

*Angelmaking*

Sunday mornings at the Cheval were heralded by the *whudd* of an extra-hefty Elsew *Reflector* being flung against each subscriber's door. The impact usually intruded on Peyton's subconscious as a BOOM or *chop!* or [Laughter]; but today's crept in on li'l flat feet, on sleek and sanguine haunches, as a steady pulse-thump offset by the *bzzzzz* of a toyland fire engine. Both coming from an unclothed undercover double-armful of Skeeter-booty.

(There's worse ways to wake up on a Sunday morning.)

But a vagrant echo of the *whudd* continued to linger in the back of Peyton's mind, irksomely, tweaksomely, like a rogue mattress spring. Little by little he disengaged himself from arms and legs and mumbled objections; patting a tush, nuzzling a nape, easing on out of the sofabed.

Shorts, slippers, robe, and the red fez that Booty-girl swore she'd haggled for at the Istanbul Grand Bazaar: an ensemble lending you a distinct resemblance to the legendary Major Hoople of *Our Boarding House* fame. Hrummf! Hakkaff! Egad, lads!

*BZZZZZZ* goes your raspburied treasure.

Imitation Opium, but bonafide risibility.

Plus exuberant salubrity; brightminded curiosity; cleverpants creativity; energy-bundle impact; kind warm loving heart; and a really dynamite bod. Adding up to seven virtues (blessings, benefits, advantages) that mold a goodly vessel that holds a wealth of water that can quench your deepest, driest, sour-lemonest thirst.

(Step into the bathroom to empty your own waterwealth.)

Turn up radiator. Retrieve newspaper. Take it into a kitchen still smelling richly of yesterday's bakeathon: cherry cobbler, cinnamon rolls, and apple strudel from an old Wunderlich family recipe. Bring out cobbler scraps; pour glass of juice; put coffee on to brew—all this on ponderous tiptoe.

Booty-girl had frazzled herself foolish these past two months, working evenings and weekends in Radiology Records while taking a full slate of day classes at Use 'Em, including the long-avoided Biology. ("I do *not* see *what* good knowing *how* a frog digests flies is going to do *my* career as a social worker!... Frogs have cute butts, though.")

So on Valentine's Day Peyton had declared her the recipient of an Ad Hoc Ad Loc & Quid Pro Quo Single-Semester College Scholarship, enabling Skeeter to scale back her weekend work hours and so reclaim her half of his sofabed. (Half? Make that two-thirds—make that three-quarters—"Tell ME I'm not a kept woman!" she'd said, roaring with laughter at a moment of supreme intimacy.)

(*Au près de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon dormir...*)

All right now. Settle down to breakfast and the Sunday *Reflector*. February 26th: a date that put another flea in your ear, to keep company with the *whudd*'s vagrant echo. Couldn't imagine why, unless it was another Leap Day's being only three days off...

Anyway: editorial on David the Bubble Boy, who'd been brought out of his sterile cocoon to kiss his mother for the first time and then die. (That's the way it goes.) Editorial cartoon, lousily drawn, sounding the "Where's the Beef?" tocsin. Review of Eddie Murphy's farewell appearance on *Saturday Night Live*. Eulogy for the Elsew Travelers, who'd dropped another NBA game by a near-record margin. Society photo of Robert S. Hallowday and Pretty Young Starlet-Model—

"I am trying to eat here," Peyton gnarled.

Such, such were the joys of 1984, which so many pundits had spent so many years cringing and flinching from; as though Big Brother was to have popped up, prepackaged, at the stroke of midnight on January 1st. Well, doublethink that one—Big Yuppie had arrived instead. Watching you, all right, with one eye bent toward buyout and the other toward

consumption—like Prince Prospero in his castellated fastness, revelling while famine and pestilence devastate those without. (Now *there* was a cartoon idea. Too bad Peyton had been discurrented, left under the spreading chestnut tree...)

Turn page. Raise brows. Get up from the table and head for the sofabed, where Booty-girl was now ensnuggled with the big stuffed squirrel (fabric, not taxidermic) that Peyton had given her for Christmas and Skeeter had named Churl.

“Look at this.”

“Hjckrrh?”

“Isn’t this the one you called the Dough Girl?”

“*Wha’?*” went Skeeter, opening sleepstuck peepers; and by golly if they weren’t squinting at “Pamela Pillsbury-Beckett, rising young televangelist to the upwardly mobile.”

“Oh Jeez Louise!—”

“Well put,” said Peyton.

A big spread on the little lady too, with a head-and-shoulders portrait shot and another in profile, both wearing the expression of bemused bamboozlement often seen in pictures of Marilyn Monroe.

Pamela’s was an inspirational story: after high school she’d left Demortuis to pursue a career as singer/dancer/actress in Paris/London/Manhattan, ending up four years later as a Bunny at the Playboy resort hotel in Great Gorge, New Jersey.

(“She always said she wanted to dance in France—in nothing but her underpants, I always used to add,” Skeeter cackled. “Guess we were both right.”)

“Then I discovered Jesus in my heart,” Pam informed the interviewer.

(“God knows who she discovered in her pants.”)

This epiphany had taken place while watching the Rev. Howie Beckett’s *Jesus Loves Me Show*, a program syndicated nationally but lost in the shadows of Pat Robertson and Oral Roberts—until Ms. Pillsbury shed her cottontail and joined the JLM choir. Quickly featured as soloist, then as a lay practioner (“Oh AHM!”) and then, at twenty-three, the second Mrs. Beckett (Howie divorcing his fiftyish incumbent), Pamela was now by all accounts the star attraction and boss lady. Shifting the show’s focus from *Jesus Loves* to *Me & Money*, leaving

Howie's older followers aghast but delving deeply into the lucrative 18-to-34 market, not least with a line of JLM how-to videos on meditation, fostering miracles, improving your love life, and making killer investments.

The Gospel According to Dough Girl: not only *can* you have it all, you *ought* to have it all, with an emphasis on the Here and Now. Why waste time waiting till some old afterlife to enjoy your God-given rights?

"You want to talk about the future? About your destiny? Okay! The fast track is getting faster all the time! Nothing just happens, we have to *make* it happen, and we CAN—without guilt or pain! *Really* religious people are positive thinkers! We're not into guilt or pain!"

Adding to the exclamation points were homage-quotes from latter-day JLM fans:

"I get high on Pam's talk! I just adore her!"

"She makes me feel great! I leave her show singing!"

"Pamela's worth every penny of my pledge!"

A question mark or two were donated by anonymous informants, who hinted at offscreen temper tantrums and ruthless cupidity. No one denied Pam's acumen, her businesslike concentration on success—

"—her personal totalbitchitude," said Skeeter. "She was Drama Club Treasurer our senior year, and I always said she took out more than we put in. As for temper tantrums—this one time in English class we had to use vocab words in a sentence, and Pammy said, 'My mother is the *edifice* of our family.' The teacher said maybe she meant her mom was more like a *bulwark*, and Droan Webster (who always sat behind Pam so he could spend the hour mentally feeling her up) said, '*Bulwark* is to *edifice* like *Playtex* is to *hooters*'—and then he snapped Pam's bra strap in front of God and everybody, and Pam yelled 'YOU FLAMING ASSBITE!' right out loud and coldcocked Droan with the heel of her shoe, and would you believe she got extra credit for that? the teacher thinking she was acting out a scene from *The Last Picture Show*, the book not the film, as if Pamela Pillsbury ever read anything thicker than a *Cosmo*—"

"Take a breath," Peyton advised. "According to this, her show's on at eleven. Feel

like getting washed in the Blood of the Lamb?”

“Druther take a shower,” Skeeter grumbled; but pulled on her T-shirt nightie, asked for a cup of hot coffee, and reached for her wake-up toothbrush. “Promise me you’ll turn it off fast, though, if Pam starts turning loaves into fishes.”

\*

The Rev. Howie Beckett, an Ed McMahonish jowlster, appeared just long enough to warm up the crowd and remind the faithful that this was a religious program. Then, *heeeere’s PAMela!*—who made a grand entrance down a backlit runway to great whoops and cheers from the Young Urban Upbeat congregation.

She was dressed all in gold, designer gold, including an indubitable miniskirt that provided viewers a sparkly, above ‘n’ beyond look at Pam’s good Christian thighs. (*Hello-o-o, hosanna!*) With sweeping gestures to left and right she greeted her acolytes in the same syrupy snippydrip voice that Skeeter had just been imitating to unkind perfection:

“HI-ee, everybody!! You ready to rejoice a little? Everybody clap your hands! That’s right, let’s all feel happy together! Oh c’mon—you can do it if you want to! Let’s make a deal: you won’t give me any sad faces, and I won’t give you any sermonizing!”

But first, a commercial.

Pam in a sheer silver leotard, relentlessly perky: “Not only do we gals have to keep our spirits up—we’ve got to keep our *figures* up too! Well, now you can do both with my new Jesuscise™ aerobic video and diet plan!”

*One and two and three and four  
(Jesus Loves Me all the more)  
Five and six and sev’n and eight  
(When I take off ugly weight!)*

“That’s \$39.95 for VHS, \$29.95 for Beta,” she was adding when Peyton hastened to turn off the TV, fearing Skeeter might rupture something otherwise.

“—oh God!—oh Jeez!—”

“Take a breath, now.”

"...oh Holy Ghost..."

"Well," said Peyton.

"—*hic!*—"

"In the affluent words of Joan of Arc: 'I may vomit.'"

"*Hic!* All we need is Video Gaga! *Hee hee hee—hic!*—oh, I forgive her for everything! Even—*hic!*—these hiccups. I must've laughed off—*hic!*—five whole pounds."

"You hardly need to lose any weight. I'm the one you're fattening up."

"Hey! I helped you eat that strudel, didn't I? (*Hic.*) I don't intend to pudge out again! C'mon, gimme room—'One and two and three and four'—"

"Isn't it cheating to do situps in bed?"

"Oh hootch hootch hootch. (*Hic.*) Like Mother Theresa said just now: 'No pain—*hic!*—just gain money.' (Cackle.) So, what'd you think of her?"

"You're considerably cuter."

"CONSIDERABLY?"

"Ah... exponentially?"

"Better! You want to check out a pair of thighs, take a look at *these*—not an ounce out of place!"

"I've noticed that about them. Also that you've ceased hiccupping."

"Hey I *have!* Never knew you could cure hiccups with lying-in-bed situps. Wait'll I tell Richard Simmons! But c'mon, 'fess up—Pammy got you all hot 'n' bothered, didn't she?"

"Only bothered. For all her talk about happiness, she didn't seem to be having a particularly good time."

Snort from Skeeter, now doing deep knee bends. "Oh, that's the Dough Girl, all right. If she couldn't snag you with her floppy-doppy T & A, she'd make you feel *sorry* for her." (Shoulder stretches.) "I sure wish I had twenty thousand dollars for every time I said, 'Pam—'"

"—twenty thousand?—"

"—well why shouldn't *I* think in high numbers?—for every time I said, 'Grow a brain,

Pam! Be pissed at me for a FEASIBLE reason!” (Side twists.) “The *edifice* of her family! Betcha her mom’s thrilled. ‘My daughter the lay practitioner’—and this after shaking her floppydops all over Great Gorge, New Jersey. Just thrilled to death... Hey! What are *you* doing wearing *your* robe?”

Peyton was a little slow in answering that it went with the fez, of course.

“Well... I’m... gonna... take a... shower... now,” Skeeter drawled back at him. “And when I’m done, I’d like to find your robe waiting for me *s’il vous plaît*. (Am I not a polyglot?) Feel free to be waiting there in it—or beside it—holding a towel for me, if you like, unless you druther scrub my back?”

“I think... I’d better... finish the paper first,” said Peyton, sounding preoccupied; but stepping out of his big brown robe and dutifully handing it over.

“What a sweetie,” Skeeter murmured. By dint of biting her tongue, she managed to keep out of Gigglesville till safe in the tub, with shower curtain pulled and nozzle-spray roaring. Then: oh my GAWudd! *Hee hee hee hee hee!* Those paunchifying BVDs! Taken in conjunction with the fez and slippers and nose and smudgestache and chest hair and leg hair and distracted expression, they gave Peyton (hoople hoople hoople) the appearance of a pasha who’d mislaid his Turkish bath:

*Nothing in it, nothing in it,  
But a ribbon round it.*

Poor sweet honey, who’d better not be turning moodish and broodish on her again—especially not over that double-dealing Dream Girl of his, with her many flaws and faults and what Skeeter felt confident had been a seriously fat ass. Not a trimly! tautly! rounded one, with a capacity for turning the other cheek (cackle) or sheer jubilation at just *being* here, alive and awake and in this beloved tub with that beloved bearskin waiting to enwrap you, and your very own Paramour Pasha within easy reach once and for all, now and forever.

So splish splash Gurglesville, scrub-a-glub-dub! Sing about girls just wanting to have fun, UH-oh! UH-oh! Favorite new song, courtesy of a compact snookums named Cyndi



Lauper, who in her kitschy-koo habiliments looked a lot like Skeeter Kitefly impersonating RoBynne O'Ring. *I wanna be the one to bop in the sun; I'm So Unusual*—

Hopping out, dripping dry, dehydrating that everpeachy everfuzzy coif flickering like a flamethrower in the blowdryer, boy howdy! Put on oversized glasses and purloined robe; collect your hairbrush and Churl the Squirrel; head for the kitchen, discover it empty.

“Are you hiding? Am I supposed to seek you?”

(Silence.)

“Should I count to twenty thousand first?”

No answer.

Oh Jeez. What now?

She climbed the little staircase to peek into the miniloft, and there found Peyton sitting in a brown study and half a grey sweatsuit. Communing bare-leggedly with the middle distance.

“Do you ever miss your father?” he asked.

“My *father*? No. Why?”

“I was just thinking...”

Not very cheerily, either; the buoyance brought by coffee and cobbler had evaporated, and he sat sunk in gloom.

Skeeter perched on the top step and started brushing her blonde whomp. “Well, if you mean Gower, he was never really around enough TO miss. And ARnold, of course, I can get him on the phone whenever I want, but he’s never been much of a talker.”

She surfaced from opulent depths to watch Peyton light his longstemmed pipe.

“I just remembered,” he said. “Been bugging me all morning. Today would have been my father’s sixtieth birthday.”

“Your father was a *Pisces*? That seems a little fishy, doesn’t it?” (Brush. Brush.)

“What was he like, your dad? I know you told me before, but I think I was asleep at the time.”

“Well...” (Puff. Puff.) “They didn’t call him ‘Lucky Pierre’ for nothing.”

In his youth he’d shown brilliant talent as a pianist, been urged to refine it to classical

caliber, but a Chico Marxlike love for gambling kept him plugging away on the nightclub circuit. He'd rehearse with racing forms propped beside his sheet music; come home from tours either bearing expensive presents or emptyhanded and -pocketed. Seldom won at cards or pool or roulette, but always paid most of his debts. Had a Chicolike eye for the ladies too, for *filles de joie* of every age and race; but always remained faithful (in his heart) to Peyton's mother. As for Antoinette: it was gumbo this and gazpacho that, jambalaya every day and lots of Gallic shrugs. She loved the world of art, visiting studios and galleries, cultivating pet painters and sculptors—youngish men, more often than not. Maybe she and Lucky Pierre hadn't lived in conventional bliss, but they'd spent thirty years together and shown every evidence of staying that way to the end of their lives.

As indeed they had.

Vacationing in Quebec at the summer place of their crony Martell Delamain, a gentleman of means (and pinky rings, Havana cigars, and inscrutable sources of income) who was a friend to many families—including a capital-F one in Montreal. He and the Derentes were anchored off Île-aux-Coudres on the *Sambuca*, Mart's cushy old cabin cruiser, on a halcyon day disturbed only by the WHOOMP of the boat blowing up—scattering debris from helter to skelter and sinking with the loss of all aboard.

A long-winded bilingual inquest failed to determine whether this explosion had been the result of gas fumes accumulating in the *Sambuca's* bilge, or an odd spinoff from the ongoing rivalry between Sicilian and Calabrese elements in the Montreal mob.

Either way: freakishly circuslike.

*Of course it is. Of course they are.*

And of course they left an estate so monstrously snafu'd it took a full year to slither through probate court. During which limbo-stretch Peyton was not allowed to sell the Chesterfield bungalow or even empty it of its forlorn green Buddhas and doleful carved owls.

The clan out at Lake Severn, Quarty and Sanka and Jazzbo and all, offered poorly camouflaged charity that Peyton declined, more than once. He tightened his slackening belt; moved to the crackerbox walkup by the Interstate onramp; tried to throw himself into his

dayjob and monograph. Broken branches, fallen leaves; heave and ho.

And then the wholly unexpected legacy—a bumper crop, even after the tax harvesters got through with it. He still suspected someone had misplaced a decimal point, or hit the zero key more times than intended. How Lucky Pierre and Antoinette had managed to leave *any* assets untapped was a mystery more unfathomable than the explosion that turned them into so many smithereens.

(Puff. Puff. Puff.)

Skeeter, though longing for a Pall Mall, stayed put on the top step of the miniloft staircase. Making no move other than to keep sifting through her wealth of yellow hair.

(Brush. Brush. Brush.)

Peyton took the pipe out of his mouth. Cleared his throat and continued.

“Too much else had happened at the time, so it didn’t sink in... ah... so to speak. At the time all I could think was, ‘Such is Life.’ And then when I’d work on the monograph” (pointing pipestem at nearby stacks of APE paper) “I’d see Ewell achieving stylistic breakthroughs with *Daring Dewey*, only to throw it all away. Or watch it being taken away. And I’d wonder if *he* thought, ‘Such is Life.’”

“As Per Usual,” Skeeter mumbled to Churl the Squirrel. “But now?...”

“The part that bothers me most? That it happened to them *just like that*. Of course, for their sakes, I hope it did. But still: one moment you’re here, the next you’re not, it’s all over in a matter of seconds—and then you’re gone. Forever. And ever. Whatever the Reverend Howie and your Dough Girl friend might say.”

They sat awhile in silence then.

Weary of confession-making and -taking: the confusions of absolution.

Skeeter disentangled her hairbrush, setting it down among the sprung-loose flaxen threads. Split ends in need of gathering up and tying together; winkle winkle winkle.

“So,” she said, “is that It, then?”

His eyelids twitched, and turned to her.

“Lately,” he said, “I haven’t been so sure...”

“Well thank *GOD!* I was beginning to think you were *never* going to admit it—move

over, Pasha—” She squeezed in beside him, found his fez and donned it at a rakish angle. “Now we’re getting someplace! And since we’re on the subject: who *was* St. Mintred, anyway?”

“Mmph?”

“I mean I’ve been working at his hospital and going to his university for months now, but I’ve never heard of him—as a saint—so who?—”

“St. Mintred the Supplicant. Youngest son of Ethelred the Unready. As a child he was exiled to the Abbey of St. Jumièges near Rouen, where he constantly implored visitors for money. Some say he died of a wasting fever; others that he got poisoned. At any rate he was canonized in a package deal with his older brother, Edward the Confessor; and for centuries his voice has been heard at Jumièges, saying ‘Pray give me thy purse, that I might render it unto Our Savior.’ You could call him the first televangelist—”

“You’re making this up, you turk!”

“Am I? Well, if I am—it’s an educated kind of joke, right? An ignoramus wouldn’t make a joke like that.”

He stood and struck a boulevardier pose, BVDs genteelly exposed—and *zut alors!* if Solomon Grundy wasn’t being born again on Sunday!

*Behold, thou art fair, my love; yea, exponentially cuter than any miniskirted Jesusciser. Thou art of a sanguine-pink complexion that goeth achingly well with thy strawberry-golden hair and tiny little bright blue eyes. Verily, thine unpropped upper deck maketh my heart go CHING. How much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices!*

All you need, after all, is a little faith in joy.

And what better way to keep the faith, to feel the joy, than to have someone to hold and be held by, all through the dark cold lonesome night?

So open up the yearbooks of your hearts and inscribe *LUVYA LUVYA LUVYA* therein, as you join them together and go cart cart cart wheel wheel wheeling all round the miniloft.

"Let's go out and play in the snow," Skeeter said several hours later.

"Didn't you have your fill of that yesterday?"

"Hey! I *never* get my fill of fun. C'mon, you know you want to play with me—"

To which, of course, there could be no denial. Out-of-doors then before the afternoon was over, lugging along a flattened carton to toboggan upon in Brecknock Park, where they found every branch and twig of every tree encased in a glassy sheath. The snowman they'd built the day before had become an ice sculpture, and the snow angels Skeeter had surrounded it with were frozen over also. She promptly fitted herself back inside one.

"This is so COOwull!"

"I daresay."

"When I make angels in the snow, do I do good work or what? These are going to last till the end of the world! Help me up."

He braced himself and lent a hand. "The end of the world? I hate to be the one to break this to you, but your material here has a habit of melting."

"(Uffff—should've exercised a bit more.) Hey! Snow can melt and ice can thaw, but *this* is a Work of Art. I'm surprised you didn't recognize that. We'll rope it off with velvet cords and build a snow gallery around it and charge people money to see it and sell it to some big out-of-town collector for twenty thousand dollars, and you can write your next monowhatever about it and Richard Attenborough will buy the rights for a fabulous amount and adapt it as *Gandhi II*, and we'll get our pictures on the cover of *Rolling Stone* and department stores will beg me to help myself to their best merchandise and the people of Belgium will declare me their Queen, and Pamela Pillsbury-Beckett can hootch down a runway every Sunday in a Playboy Bunny outfit and act out how a frog digests flies!"

(Now, *there* was a idea.)

## Five

### THE CONCLUSIONS



## Chapter XXIII

*The Ruby Hotstuff Skeeter Kitefly*

And then and then came Spring, a remarkably unMidwestern Spring, with no late killer frost to pre-empt the redbud's full bloom. And Skeeter put on her junior-miss overalls and gave Peyton's place a thorough spring cleaning, flinging wide his wine-colored curtains, yanking up the shades, letting in the sunlight, the birdsong, the wind blowing out of the west in breezes sweetly poetic.

*The wind one morning sprang up from sleep,  
Saying, "Now for a frolic! now for a leap—"*

"You're going to throw a reception," said Skeeter.

"I am? In what direction?"

"Sadie's, of course! I'll lay in a bunch of hors d'oeuvres and other munchables. Nothing too heartburny—she's bound to be a bundle of nerves—and then there's all those kids to think of—"

"All *whose* kids to think of?"

"—maybe just Pepperidge Farm cookies and frozen yogurt. What sort of wine goes best with that?"

*Cheap*, thought Peyton. Playing semivoluntary host to the Pre-Commencement Jitterfest for Mercedes Benison, BFA-to-be, plus her daughter and father and stepmother and sister Alexis and brother-in-law Lenny Czolgosz come all the way from Buffalo with eight assorted offspring, most of them loudly indignant that Peyton didn't have cable, and chanting



"I want my MTV!" (plus an occasional "We know where you're gohhhhwing!") at every opportunity.

There too was RoBynne O'Ring, arriving in the decorous turquoise dress she wore "to make me look, y'know, like a foggin' grownup"—or so she told Peyton, bussing him full on the mouth as she invariably did since Peyton had sought forgiveness for calling her a fair Shunammite maiden.

("We know what you're gehhhhhting!" said one of the older Czolgosz boys.)

(Down on hands and knees is what he'd gotten, to crawl a few token paces and beg RoBynne's pardon—not losing his composure even when she'd added a demand for "pretty please with kiss-and-makeup on it." Then, just as they were getting to the kiss, Skeeter had snuck up behind RoBynne to give her a double-pinch to grow a double-inch.)

("WAUGH!!" RoBynne had gone again, prolongedly.)

("She was enjoying it too much," Skeeter'd explained.)

("What about *me*?" Peyton had said, within New Wave earshot; hence all the recent full-on-the-mouthings.)

RoBynne's presence today stemmed in part from her smutnovel *Grunts of Passion* having inspired Sadie's senior design project, the one required in order to graduate. Sadie had been a holy terror throughout this project, threatening more than once to go insane as she extracted Ululu the antiheroine from antinarrative and repackaged her, with much bossy nova backing and forthing, into a series of sequential diptychs.

Peyton had predicted such a collaboration would result in mass disaster, but things in fact worked out quite well: the diptychs were highly commended by all, RoBynne objecting only to Ululu's being insufficiently "built" as an odalisque.

"Y'think college types don't appreciate bitchen bods? Lemme tell ya—this one time I was delivering Chinese takeout by motorcycle, wearing these rully short outfits? And when I'd deliver to the dorm at that Use 'Em school Tweeter goes to, all the dudes'd follow me out to watch me like climb back on the bike. Y'shoulda seen the tips I hadda lug away from that place!"

Merely SAD, being an art school, made no ordinary conferral of academic degrees, staging instead an off-the-wall outdoor ceremony that Peyton had never yet been able to get out of attending. Which was bad enough without having his apartment crammed beforehand with sixteen people, most of them deafening and nine of them juveniles (ten if you counted RoByrne O'Ring).

Shout at Skeeter over the din: "I suppose I should be thankful you didn't bring the basset hound!"

"Oh spare us!" she hollered back. "Just be glad Nana Gubel isn't here!"

"I *still* haven't had a worthwhile offer from the placement service!" Sadie complained. "It's all because of those damn diptychs—I *knew* I should've stuck to mid-Victorian murderesses—God when am I going to start trusting my gut instincts?!—"

Trusting his own, Peyton donned his Master of Arts cap, gown, and hood far ahead of schedule, and started marshaling his munchable company out, down, and across the park to campus. The adults obeyed, figuring he must know what was going on; and the children went too, though it took a lot of grabbing and yanking in some cases.

"Step along, please!"

"Oh he's so *insistent*," Skeeter and RoByrne chorused.

By hellish chance, an ice cream truck chose that moment to go dinging past. Desi and five of her cousins set up a clamor, while three other Czolgoszes chased the truck up Glazier Street with Alexis in bullhorning pursuit. Sadie was too dazed by then to take any notice; Carrie clucked and shook her head; ARnold beamed throughout; and Peyton, thanks to westerly pollengusts, had to keep blowing his nose into his black bandanna.

Skeeter would accuse him of rank sentimentality, but Peyton would blame his sniffles on (a) the memory of Cathy Sue Hoopleman and (b) the presence of Lenny Czolgosz, who still wore Brut.

\*

It had also been Skeeter's last-semester-at-last, of course—though it wouldn't have been, had she not overcome one final obstacle:

"I got a D, I got a D in Biology! I passed! *I passed!!* There IS a God!!!"

Having aced her four Sociology courses, she came by the Cheval to model her own newly-rented regalia. True to Use 'Em standards, the mortarboard looked lopsided and the gown like a plastic raincoat; but Skeeter was bouncy as all get out and kept flipping her hem to flash a little wellshaped wellshaven leg.

"Where'd you come by that?" asked Peyton, meaning the new gold chain around Skeeter's neck, from which Betty Boop swung astride a musical note.

"An *admirer* gave it to me for a graduation present. Somebody whose *bed* I've even shared on occasion, so are you jealous?"

"Mercedes or Desirée?"

"Both of them, actually. (Boy are *you* complacent.) So you're going to have to dig deep to top this."

"Mmph," was all he said, so she tried another tack.

"I'm going to be twenty-five next month, you know."

"I ought to. You've marked the date on every calendar I own."

"What'd you expect? You've *never* given me a birthday present, not ever!"

"I've known you for less than a year."

"Urrrrgh!—okay, call *me* complacent, but I ASSUMED you'd be giving me *some* little token or other—I mean, you're the one to blame for my even graduating in the first place!"

"That's as may be," he said, but relented at the sight of the crestfalling face below the lopsided mortarboard. "Very well. Perhaps you'd care to walk this way—"

Perking up in an instant: "Hey! if I could walk *that* way—"

"Har hardy har har," said Peyton, leading her up to the miniloft, where a large box had been hidden behind the drawing table. It was about six inches thick, two feet wide, and a yard or so high; astonishingly heavy for its size, and they had a struggle bringing it down the staircase intact.

"Jeez, what have you *got* in here?" Skeeter gasped. "Big flat emeralds? Or, I know—my thousand pairs of fishnet stockings! You went to Tickle Me and bought out the store!"

"Guess again," said Peyton. "Take your time and take your choice," he added, laying

a small sealed envelope beside the box, and holding Skeeter back as she lunged for the loot.

“*Wha-utt?* Do I only get one of these? I have to choose between them?”

“Ask me another.”

“I *want* another, I want ‘em both! Why should I have to pick just one?”

Gallic shrug: your life, my love.

She stood there for a moment, indignant fists on plastic-raincoated hips. “Well aren’t you being cryptic and riddly.” She began to gnaw her thumbnail. Big or small? Heavy or light? Permute the possibilities, combine the likelihoods, try to secondguess—“If I pick the right one... *then* can I have both?”

Peyton nodded once, then again... as, with immense hesitation, Skeeter selected the envelope. Which contained an antique pre-Hallmark card that read:

*Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring  
The Winter Garment of Repentance fling:  
The Bird of Time has but a little way  
To fly—and Lo! The Bird is on the Wing.*

“Oh well that makes EVERYthing clear!” she said, and would have grouched further had he not stepped aside and pointed to the big flat box. Skeeter promptly threw herself upon it: “Gimme a knife!—a crowbar!—a pitchfork!—open open open, come to baby... hey what *is* this? Full of paper? Oh I know—it’s your monowhatsit, isn’t it? About old APE? Did you finally finish it? You better have dedicated it to *me*—”

He had but he hadn’t, because it wasn’t.

Skeeter stared at sheet after sheet of two-ply bristol board, each containing a quartet of hand-drawn comic strips. *RUBY HOTSTUFF* they were titled, this being a compactified character with round winsome face, tipped-up nose, abruptly-pointed chin, niftily exaggerated curves, and (in the Sunday pages) flame-colored hair.

Not too astonishingly, Ruby’s comic strips jumped around a lot as they depicted her adventures growing up—well, not *up*, but advancing from sperm-and-egg conception through childhood to adolescence and beyond. *Bounce bounce bounce*: knocking over a display of

A & P tomatoes, trying to cherrybomb an empty rabbit hutch, transforming a sickbed into a trampoline and limousine and dance hall floor. There was little Ruby's earless bunny sidekick Oxidation; and there were Ruby's two ponies Cutty and Sark, hitched to a Cinderella eggplant

(they were all out of pumpkins) en route to the Brownie troop bacchanal. There was her take-charge stepsister Gracie Underpressure, who wouldn't let Ruby move into her room even after heading off to college with the Spacebar Twins (Bo and Zo) and Merv the Foreign Exchange student. There was totalbitchy rival Tricia de Foiegras, who would hook up with that Thriller preacher/politico, Affirmative Jackson; and there was strapping Lappish sweetheart Bubba Rand, who would transform into the creepy-crawly snowman Abe Omminable; and there was Ruby the gameshow contestant, Ruby the patoot-tattooee, Ruby the standup improv comic:

"I was in the library taking a nap when I woke up and found my *poke* missing! I wouldn't mind so much if it'd been stolen by a cute guy, but I just *know* it was an uggo—a woman can sense these things..."

There was Ruby demanding that her creator give her a soapbox or a stack of phone books or a ladder to stand on or *something*—"Hey! I'm down HERE!" with arrows labeled HERE directed at tremendous cars speeding by, their driver's head barely visible above the steering wheel; and there was Ruby playing miniature boogaloo in a disco-dancing montage of hot hot Hotstuffs (some just need it but others of us *are* it, so nyaah to you Donna Summer); and there was Ruby getting into all kinds of escapades, being terribly irresponsible yet blithe as any spirit.

*There I am—there I am—there I am—*

Pingponging along in boxes four inches square, drawn in a much sparer, "cleaner" style than Peyton had ever used before. *Carpe*-ing more *diems* with less clutter, a few rapid APElike strokes, and onomatopoeia that Farf Etched could have rung changes on—*sphlort* and *squoinket* and *whump!-tump-shuffa*, *waah-boo!* and *yeeeeeee-HAWWWNNHH!*

And they were all for Skeeter Kitefly: Walter the guinea pig who ate nothing but hollandaise sauce, Christopher Frobbin the butterfingere lover and Leopold the Littlest

Conehead ha ha ha, Lank the dinner-burning arsonist and Loretta the crazy-lady Elvis-freak, Momma Sleeze and Definitely Gertrude and Velvette Blew the *nouvelle* Best Friend, flouting mystic ultimatums along with Isis and Osiris and Miss Amphie Tamine:

- 1) *Crinkle crinkle little sack*
- 2) *I eat Fritos by the pack*
- 3) *Mixed with gin they make me high*
- 4) *As tortillas in the sky...*

And then there was the sugardaddy confessor, Ty Kuhn—flat on his back on a freshwaxed floor, or dunking cheese wedgies in a glass of Amontillado, or struggling with a hideous serpentine mutant that turned out to be Ruby's oversnaggled telephone cord.

In due course Ty Kuhn created an author named Fred who wrote a novel each night while in bed, till he used up his sheets and so cold turned his feet that he switched to short stories instead—all about Li'l Bitsy, the Girl of his Dreams at that particular depth-level. And so presumably on and on, *ad infinitum*: each Him molding a vessel for each Her, out of the amazing colossal scrunched-down essence that She'd shared with Him in the first place.

The joys of the compact. Short, maybe, soon over and done with; but able to grasp the Great Scheme of Things entire and remold it nearer Art's desire.

("Who's Art and what's *he* got to do with it?" Skeeter asked; finding it necessary to punch Peyton on the arm when he replied that Art was a lonely unter.)

Only a paper moon sailing over a cardboard sea; mere scenery, not reality. Let the trickledowners claim their fantasies are, in fact, Fact: for what is Real Life, in the end, but Raw Stuff from which imagery can be extracted? You may have to add some hype if you don't want it to be a ciphe, but that's where your creative license comes in. Abracadabra! Undo the hoodoo, nullify the hex! Gift of the GoFoC Magi to otherwise ordinary mortals: the ability to make you make-believe, to find Meaning and Purpose and bid your fears goodbye—you can fly, you can *fly*—

So this is Reality?

Improve on It, then.

And when you have done so, unfold me a story and hang me a tale....

\*

"What's the next step?" Skeeter wanted to know. "How do we share Ruby 'n' me with the admiring public, and make several fortunes out of our scrumptious Hotstuff? Hold on—" (*Screeeeeeeeee.*)

"Presuming we survive this road trip," said Peyton, "you must realize there's next to no market for daily comic strips nowadays. To make *Ruby* peddleable I'll have to edit it down—"

"Noooo!—"

"—to thirty-two pages, and turn it into a comic book."

"The first of a series! And why stop at one? Make it two or three—"

"Well, the salability might be improved that way. You could self-publish the book—"

"You talking to *me*?"

"—for a grand or two: limited press run, glossy cover, newsprint guts—"

"—oh yuggh—"

"—or on oversized slick paper and call it a 'graphic novel,' and try to distribute it to the comic specialty shops. Lots of competition there, limited shelfspace; but if the first book sells, you *might* be able to interest a publisher in picking it up for a series. And then—"

"—there's all the merchandising tie-ins!" said Skeeter. "Not to mention the movie rights and firework concessions... Hey! What would've happened if I'd picked the *box* first?"

"You'd have gotten the card second, and it would have served as a coda or 'moral' instead of an intro—"

"But—I thought you said I had to make the right choice to get them both."

Peyton gave her a sidelong once-over. "Well, obviously they were *both* right choices."

"You absolute TURK!" she cried, walloping him. "I was *agonizing* over which one to choose!—"

"Will you kindly keep your hands on the wheel and your eyes on the Interstate for

God's sake please!"

"That's no fun," she mumped, and a moment later took hold of his left arm and draped it behind her neck. "I just thought it was supposed to be an either/or situation. You know, like The Lady or The Tiger."

"Ah..." he said. "But, you see, you fill both bills very nicely."

"Well of *course*..."

\*

Skeeter having flung her lopsided mortarboard in the air, she and Peyton and Clarence the Dodge Dart were following the elder Benisons back to Marble Orchard for a postgrad weekend visit. But Clarence dawdled along the way, detouring around Demortuis to drive down Pawnee Road, across South 48th Street, and past the picturesque arches that still declared this the best of all possible entries to

## C O R N W A L L

Up the four-lane beanstalk of Penzance Boulevard they rose, leaving behind Tintagel and Boscastle, Camelford and St. Ives. And there beyond Land's End they came to the uttermost brink of cloudland: and on it were the Pillars of Hercules.

A highrise hilltop was the western Pillar, outscaled perhaps by its eastern neighbor, but that was barren and cheerless while the western Pillar was in full June bloom. From its summit, on a clear near-summer day like this, it was possible to behold the world in all its vibrancy and intensity: chlorophyll glistening in every leaf on every tree, green upon green upon green, through which brown branches wove like a box of Irish Girl Scout cookies run riot. And the sky above was a page torn out of a children's Bible, a yonder wide and blue as far as the eye could see, pushing the panorama as far as it could go in every direction.

Skeeter kicked off her sneakers, yanked off her socks, and began capering about barefoot. "I learned this in Asia Minor! Make contact with the earth, get your tootsies as close to it as you can—"

"You don't fool me with that down-to-earth talk," said Peyton. "Any moment now I expect to see you go floating off—"



“—to Feather Adventureland, tra la!” She romped around a rosebush in lieu of a mulberry, skipping and spinning in her snug short-shorts and snugger T-shirt (this one posing the question AREN'T I WONDERFUL?), with her freshly-perm'd saffron whomp billowing hither and thither. “Wouldn't this be a great place to go hang gliding off off? You've *never* taken me hang gliding.”

“There's a very good reason for that.”

“Oh come on! When have I ever steered you wrong? Don't be so mule-stubborn. My Gramma always said when a man gets like that, he needs a woman to knock some sense into his head. So watch your step!”

“Precisely why you won't find me hang gliding,” said Peyton. “I'll sit here and applaud your efforts—and pick up the pieces, if necessary.”

“Aw PEEshaw,” said Skeeter, pausing in front of him. “Another thing Gramma said that *her* Grandma always told her: If you learn nothing else from life, you should know two home truths!”

Pointing one finger: “When you fall down, get up and dust yourself off, apply sticking plaster, and move on.”

Pointing a second: “You can always catch a husband, but with men so lazy you'd best get an education first.”

Wagging V-for-victory: “Buckle my shoe!”

“The Two Universal Maxims,” said Peyton. “Passed down through generations *ad infinitum*. I can see you passing them along to *your* granddaughter, one of these decades—”

“PuhLEEZE! I'm just a grohhhhwing child.” Who resumed her merry-go-rounding.

“Mmph. Perhaps that's what she meant by the dresser drawer.”

“What?” said Skeeter, brought to a dead halt. “Who? *Wha*-utt? TELLLL me—”

“Your grandmother,” said Peyton. “That bit you couldn't figure out, about the dresser in the sewing room? ‘There in the third drawer—from the top—toward the back—’”

Pointing one finger: “Bobbins, for gathering together loose threads—”

Pointing a second: “Safety pins, for getting up, dusting yourself off, and moving on.”

She stood there a moment as if turned to stone.

Then: SHWEEEEEE-OOOP! she went, she sang, bounding over to plant a whizbang whirligig *mmmm-wah!* on his nose, as the west wind swept the Pillartop with a rush and a roar to blow her perm'd billow into a peachy fuzzy mushroom cloud—

—so grab hold of the earth with the tips of your toes, spread your arms and stretch your bod and *feel* the power of cutiepiety, *be* in tune with the infinite: BOP-budda-bop-budda-bop-budda-BOP—

—while Peyton applauded and played out the string, awaiting Skeeter's presumable return from the heights of the sky.



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