

Chapter 12

Projectile

The first car that Skeeter was allowed to drive on her own, without an adult accompanist, was *AR*nold's big old Thunderbird that Skeeter claimed wasn't a Ford but a Fudd and so dubbed Elmer. It went "huh-huh-huh-huh-huh" while shifting gears and backfired a lot when driven in chains, as Skeeter kept discovering one Leap Day afternoon.

She herself had a tendency to stomp on the gas at the sight of red lights, taking them as a signal to *go girl go!* There being many red lights visible this Leap Day, Elmer went *skid crunch skid* and "huh-huh-huh-k'pow" all the way down South 48th Street to Penzance Boulevard, which was one of several (but the best of all possible) entries to

CORNWALL

as picturesque arches on each corner declared.

Beyond them, the snowfall acted differently—Camelotly, in fact. Penzance Boulevard was shoveled not just clear but immaculate, without anything so prosaic as "salt" or "sand" to account for such clarity. As though a troop of tiny elves had done it overnight.

Whoa thought Skeeter. *Here* were suburban niceties. Only the most presentable snow had been spared, left on display like decorative cloudbanks, with Penzance Boulevard a horizontal four-lane beanstalk climbing between them.

(Elmer, not used to jacking around Cloud-Cuckooland, threatened Fuddishly to snap a chain.)

What else did *CORNWALL* put you in mind of? Not game hens, anyway. Or the surrender-at-Yorktown question on last semester's history final. But—pixiedust, maybe. And pirates with hooks. *Fee fi fò fum*, yo-ho-ho and a bottle of—St. Ives Street: turn left.

Last house in the cul-de-sac.

Land's End.

Not a gigantic house, but you'd have plenty of room inside to swing a cat. A sack of cats. Make that seven sacks, forty-nine cats, together with however many kits—never mind, forget it. Pull into the spotless driveway. Park Elmer. Get out. Go on up to the not-gigantic door and ring the bell. Mustn't dilly, mustn't dally, don't be silly, just go ahead and do it...

"Oh. Um. Hello..."

"Hi! Skeeter? hi, Skeeter—I'm Sally Whistletoe!"

(As if there could be any doubt.)

"C'mon in!—lemme take your coat—are you frozen?—have some hot chocolate—careful, we make it *hot*—marshmallows too—here, have more—and whipped cream—*shpritz!* Don't worry, you won't gain an ounce in this house—I'll have you yelling it off—HA! just kidding—c'mon down here—bring your cup—watch your step—have a seat, and tell me—rats! there goes the phone again! Just a sec, I'll kiss 'em off—(hi! what? did he? really? great! you tell Vicki yet? why not? well, call her now and call me back tonight if I don't call you first, okay? yeah! right! good! you got it! BYE-bye—)"

Jeez thought Skeeter. *This* was how to Do the Hustle.

Once upon a time Skeeter'd thought she too knew how to Hustle not to say Bustle; but now she felt reduced to stumblebummery.

They sat (Skeeter sat, Sally bustled) in a rumpus room with far less room than rumpus. Those sacks of cats and kits would be safe down here, behind and beneath the wealth of posters and banners and party impedimenta and stereo system with shoulder-high speakers and shelves of albums and shelves of eight-tracks and a pingpong table and pet rock menagerie and megaphone collection and all sorts of pompons and all sorts of weightlifting equipment and, along the far wall, a fullscale Olympic-size balance beam.

“You’re sure into a lot of things,” said Skeeter; and it was so. Sally Whistletoe was immersed in all ventures great and small that the Middle West could offer wholesome energetic teenage girls in those Derelict Days, the mid-Seventies.

She was no taller than Skeeter but looked a titan in her thunderbolted leotard. Sally had apple cheeks and deep-dish dimples, cinnamon-roll hair in a freshbaked Dorothy Hamill wedge, and a superimpressive bosom: the sort that appears to be pulling its owner along like a couple of dachshunds on abbreviated leashes.

“You gotta have a project!” she demonstrated with jutting jaw etc. “Gotta get with it—no time to waste!” You had to get a move on, get the lead out, get it all together and get your butt in gear, if you didn’t want to get nowhere fast. Sally certainly didn’t, and at Cornwall High this semester alone she was the Pep Club President, Spanish Club Vice President, Concert Choir Secretary, Tri-Hi-Y Treasurer, Student Council Sergeant-at-Arms, and Chairperson of the Courtesy Committee; none of which was a sinecure when Sally Whistletoe embodied it. In her spare time she tutored the youth of Demortuis in cheerleading, iron-pumping, self-defense, civic-mindedness, and especially gymnastics. Everyone agreed that Sally could have outgoldmedal’d the likes of Korbut and Comaneci if she hadn’t had so wide a range of interests, or perhaps been blessed with a tad less chest.

But who else in Cornwall could be spearheading plans for the local Bicentennial celebration? Or leading efforts to help victims of the Guatemalan earthquake? Or emergency-supervising the Winter Sports Dance Morning-After Clean-Up, when the girl supposed to be in charge didn’t show (having broken up with her boyfriend at the dance itself)?

Nobody Doesn’t Like Sara Lee

as the rumpus room abundantly testified.

“I know a lot of it’s kid stuff,” said Sally, “but some of it’s not—most of it’s fun—you gotta be a Hype if you don’t wanna be a Ciphe—so I say seize the moment! *carpe the diem!* and YOU—”

(zeroing in on Skeeter with shot-forward fist and shot-forward forefinger)

“—*your* project is to learn *how* to project—right? right! yeah! good! why?”

“What?”

“Why?”

“Oh. Um. Well...”

Skeeter was unaccustomed to going oh-um-well. Not so long ago she'd been a Whistletoe-in-training, hyperactive if not yet an active Hype; but today she paled and shrank in Sally's comparative presence. A-squirm at the unspectacle she must be unmaking—she, Skeeter Kitefly, who used to think nothing of jumping on a cool guy's back, with or without the benefit of prior introduction.

Skeeter a stumblebum? A wissy-wuss?

Yugggh.

Just last year she'd been a Buzzette. That had begun it; but what else to do? where else to go? given the state of Demortuis in the state of Nilnisi in the midst of the Derelict Days? Your choice: doodle or squat.

The Buzzettes had chosen both. Not as if they'd ever been an honest-to-God skag-gang, either. Just a gaggle, in whose company Skeeter had cultivated the blank stare and sullen indifference of a classic urban girl—only to remain a thoroughgoing cutiepie.

What/where else had the Buzzettes done/gone? They'd cruised around town when cars were available. Chugged Buds when Buds could be had. Smoked a lot. Hung out. *And* out. Till Skeeter began to feel like Mowgli among the Bandar-log, whose tails might be curved in the shape of a cupid's bow but hung down behind them even so. And never did what they set out to do.

So Skeeter'd bailed out *and* out of Buzzettehood, without much in the way of a parachute or safety net; and after an aimless summer had begun her junior year at looser ends than ever. Droopier drawers, too: no great pickings among her school's upperclassmen, whom Skeeter had already gone through grade after grade with. Their kisses, to her blasé lips, still tasted premature. (Double yugggh.)

Life, in short, lacked spice; and Skeeter, also short, lacked luster, till Mrs. Browning put her English class through the time-honored method of acting out assignments as little

skits. Which hadn't jumpstarted Skeeter's academic interest; but she was a natural ham and took to the skits as if they were pineapple slices.

Before she knew it, Mrs. Browning had shanghai'd her into school theatrics and Mr. Minie the music teacher had cast her in that year's operetta, *The Big Noise*, as Bitsy the third-lead-and-comedy-relief.

Skeeter was exactly the right type for this part, according to Mr. Minie; the librettists might've had her in mind when they wrought the play. For was not Bitsy bitesized, jocose and twinkle-eyed, with toothsome grin and roguish giggle and verve as big as all outdoors? All of which Skeeter was, had, or could readily approximate.

The Big Noise troupe included her longtime overarch rival Pamela Pillsbury, equally bitesized and a veteran theatricer to boot (though she never booted, not even after dress rehearsals). Disdaining the role of Bitsy, Pam aspired to stardom as Darlin' Da-a-arlene but had to settle for Mamselle, the second-lead-and-(implied)-town-pump. Da-a-arlene's part went instead to LaFayette Smith, a dead ringer for Donna Summer, who was no sooner cast than Mr. Minie announced his intention to "bring out the essential Fiftiesishness" of a 1944 musical for reasons he went on about at tiresome length.

"How Fiftiesy are we going to look with LaFayette as Da-a-arlene?" Pamela snippy-dripped, not quite under her breath.

Which made Skeeter (a) admire LaFayette all the more, (b) remark that some people looked fif-teasy ALL the damn time, and (c) surname Pam's character "Hepzibah" after *Pogo's* svelte French skunk.

Alas! As it happened, not even LaFayette's elegant voice could salvage Essential Fiftiesishness from Bonum High School's *Big Noise*. Half the cast came across as imitation Fonzie's, their lines littered with *aays* and *yo!s*. Pamela Pillsbury totalbitched her Dainty Baby way through every run-through. And Skeeter, though a treat to see onstage, could not be heard beyond the orchestra pit.

Bitsy might not be the titular Big Noise but she *was* supposed to have a loud mouth, as exemplified in the madcap ditty "I've Got a Clue" and the production number "Bombshell Conga." Skeeter brought Bitsy grin, giggle, verve, happily on-key warble, and that

stuPENdous mouth she could still almost fit her fist inside. *Plus* the same regrettable tendency to stomp on the gas and go too fast, swallowing her words or letting them drown in the ensemble.

Mr. Minie tried to help, but like a parent giving driving lessons he gnashed his teeth and tore his hair and ultimately announced, “I don’t need you to *quack like a duck!*” Which delighted Pamela Pillsbury no end, and caused Skeeter to feel outright embarrassment for perhaps the first time in all her sixteen years, not excluding that otherwise-dull party last summer when her spaghetti straps had come unstrung.

So she didn’t sound right. So what. Tough noogies.

But never before had Skeeter Kitefly been unable to dish up the consommé when push came to shove came to kick down the stairs. It was simply a matter of getting a grip on the saucepan-handle. All she needed was a crash course on how to get it.

Ethel Merman wasn’t available. Mr. Minie was a waste of breath. LaFayette Smith lent some friendly advice but tagged each pointer with an *umm-y’know?*—and Skeeter didn’t. But after the quack-crack Mamselle Hepzibah took to calling her “Daffy,” which of course you knew meant war.

She’d have to go straight to the top.

And in Demortuis that wasn’t some guru’s mountain peak or Kung Fu academy, but the Land’s End house in the Cornish cul-de-sac off the Street of St. Ives.

Where Sally Whistletoe, burrowing through umpteen albums and eight-tracks, came up with the original Broadway cast recording of *The Big Noise*. And soon her shoulder-high speakers ditted forth with:

*Y’ever seen a concertina
played like he can play one?
Like an accorDEEon,
wishin’ it was you?
For a squeeze or two?
How’re you s’posed to get the most
squeezes when he’s weary?
It’s a myster-eery—*

but I've got a clue!
(Ooo-wee-ooo-wee-ooo!)

“Know it! know it! love it!” Sally enthused. “Okay! On your feet now, here we go! First of all—very important—physical conditioning—gotta warm up properly! Breathe IN through the nose, deep! deeper! deeper!! Fill ‘em up and *hold* it—*find* it—*feel* it—blow it OUT through the mouth!”

Skeeter blew it PERIOD end of sentence.

“Quit laughing!” Sally smiled. “Start over! INhale—deeper—hold it—EXhale, like this: *foooo!* Like there’s a bunch of birthday candles you’ve made a wish on! OverexAGgerate! Yeah! right! good! now do it all *again*—”

And again, *and* again.

Skeeter the bootcamp neophyte had to amplify her lung capacity for quite some little while, extinguishing imaginary candles with a *fée fi fò fum*, yo-ho-ho and a bottle of—

“Okay, take a breather—HA! just kidding,” said Sally. “No really, relax a minute, you’re doing great! That’s the basics—do ‘em every day—your lungs’ll love you for it—boys will too, when you can hold a kiss till they’re blue in the face!”

“Wherever,” Skeeter gasped.

“Now stand back and gimme room—here’s where the fun begins—I’ll show you what else you can do, when you know your projection!”

Eyes closed, fists clenched, legs straddled, Sally sought her innermost bosomdepths and from them extracted a reverberating

LA!

that you could’ve heard clear across the Ipsissima River.

Upstairs too, where somebody stomped three times.

“They oughta be used to that by now,” said Sally, not even breathing hard. “Anyway, that’s how you project—directly from the diaphragm!”

Oh sure thought Skeeter. In her case it’d be from the diaphrag-ments.

But no time to quail, as one after the other the girls went:

“Ooooh...” (“Ooooh...”)
 “Wheee...” (“Wheee...”)
 “Ooooh-wheee...” (“Ooooh-wheee...”)

till you’d have thought a hogcalling duel was going on.

Not once did Sally glance at clock or watch. She acted like all the time in Land’s End was at Skeeter’s disposal—except the occasional phone-ringing interval, when Sally would kiss ‘em off while expanding plans for the Pep Club’s Spring Spirit Picnic, or Tri-Hi-Y’s character-building retreat, or the Spanish Club’s authentic ethnic dinner at a Mexican restaurant.

Finally Sally took the phone off the hook and told her trainee to let herself go.

And Skeeter quailed. Visibly.

There followed a moment of silence, as though some infinite Being had sucked all the rumpus room’s acoustics IN through its infinite Nose.

And Skeeter suddenly noticed that Sally Whistletoe’s eyes, for all their freshbaked cinnamon warmth, could be as penetrating as her voice.

“Don’t worry about your throat. This time, when you hold it and find it and feel it, bring it *all* back up—let it *all* hang out—shoot the works and let it FLY—”

So close your eyes, bitsy Skeeter, clench your fists and reach within, rummage about, pray for pixiedust and bid those fears goodbye: you can fly, you can *fly*, you—

Can/could/did shoot the works and bring forth an

OOOOH-WHEEEE-OOOOH

that must have achieved genuine resonance, since it turned her mood ring ruby-red, and touched off a fresh stomp from upstairs.

Consommé!

“Attaway to go!” Sally applauded, exhaling. “Nothing to it when you know how! Just practice practice practice—treat sore throat with honey and lemon and menthol-eucalyptus—works wonders! Now,” (consulting a fat Week-at-a-Glance) “*what* night does

your show go on? and *what* time? oh damn, I'll be rehearsing myself then, and there's a Pep meeting after that—well rats! I'd've loved to come and hear you knock 'em dead, 'cause that's exactly what you're gonna do! Trust me! Guarantee it!"

"What do I owe you?" Skeeter wheezed.

"Owe me! Tell you what—we'll Indian wrestle, the two of us, and if you can beat me you can pay me!"

Skeeter declined, Sally being uncommonly strong in the arms. As she proved with her farewell bearhug, before alley-ooping onto the balance beam to reinforce equilibrium.

No time to waste.

Skeeter got with it without delay: got a move on, got the lead out, got her butt in gear. She began to practice practice practice on the way home, projecting down the four-lane beanstalk-length of Penzance Boulevard and stirring up those sacks of cats.

It took her mother less than the rest of Leap Night to banish "all that yodeling" from the house; so most of Skeeter's vocal exercises took place in the garage inside Elmer, with the heater on and the door left open to discourage asphyxiation.

Steamy exhale after icicle inhale: each breath held—found—felt—brought up—hung out—let *fly* to rattle the windows as an OOOH-WHEE-OOOH, Elmer chiming in on huh-huh-harmony.

And by dress rehearsal Skeeter could bounce a quarter-note off the balcony railing. Can/could/did outbelt Merman, out-ham Jolson, leave no scenery unchewed; leaping into the arms and onto the backs of various chorus boys, and generally carrying on like Miss Amphie Tamine of 1976.

The Big Noise troupe exclaimed over Skeeter's untying-of-tongue, though Mr. Minie said no more than "That's getting there," and Pamela Pillsbury disappeared from view during take-fives till Skeeter ran to a remote restroom for an undisturbed smoke and found Pam there in one of those awful stalls, on her knees, genuflecting as she upped and chucked and booted away.

Skeeter's immediate reaction was disgusted satisfaction, for which she chided herself; Sally Whistletoe wouldn't react like that. No, Sally would march in and hold Pam's head

and save her from choking on lumps, oh GROHsss! Sorry; Skeeter wasn't that hyperadvanced yet.

But when Pamela finished, and flushed, and got up, and turned around, and saw Skeeter, and burst into tears, and wailed, "*Why* does everything always have to happen to meeee?"—Skeeter would not have gloated openly for cash on any barrelhead.

"Oh don't cry, stop crying, come here and rinse your mouth."

"Shut up! Get lost! Don't hassle me!"

"Oh calm down," said Skeeter. "This is what happens when you scarf junkfood. C'mon. Let's tidy you up."

Pam submitted to spitting and rinsing, to having the front of her costume mopped down with coarse brown paper towels, and being told to "Wipe there—you've still got some there." Skeeter offered her a cigarette ("Oh go ahead, they aren't doped") and both girls smoked while inspecting each other in the smoggy mirror.

"What's got *you* so cordial?" Pam wanted to know.

"Acting!" Skeeter bravura'd, and thrilled to hear the ancient johntiles quiver. So stench or no stench, IN through the nose, reach! rummage! repeat:

ACTING!

And there were echo effects worthy of Wagner or The Who.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" breathed Pamela.

"Well, there's this deformed phantom lives in the school basement who's been giving me private lessons—HA! just kidding," said Skeeter. "Actually it was my fairy godmother taught me how to bibbidi-bobbidi-boo—and now I'm going to the *ball!*"

With lip sucked in and eyes rolled, so that Pam could hardly help but laugh.

"C'mon!" Skeeter told her. "We're gonna knock 'em dead—the band'll be one big boner!"

"Awp!" went Pam. "I was *going* to say, 'Break a leg.'"

"Oog!" went Skeeter. "Painful!" And they laughed and headed back to the auditorium, where despite their newborn camaraderie Pam still tried to upstage Skeeter in

every scene.

But to no-way-José avail. The night belonged to brass-bold cutiepiety. And if that meant Mamselle Hepzibah had to be blown out of the water together with Darlin' Da-a-arlene and Mr. Minie and both choruses and the one-big-boner band—well, *c'est la show business*.

Skeeter Kitefly stole the operetta blind, and not just blind but immaculate. When all was said and sung, she took a solo curtsy with ears full of raves, arms full of Uncle Buddy's roses, and throat only slightly inflamed—utterly convinced that musical comedy was now to be her forte in life.

It was, and it wasn't.

