

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 *wheeee...*” 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 heavy-lidded 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?”

“Yugg! 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 swogging 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; *yugggh*. 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 banded-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, Crazy 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 burred 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!”

“*Ssshhhh!*” 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. (Yugg.) 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*....”

