

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!...

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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...)