

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 *wheeee...*") 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 pleeeeze' ... hmmm. 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.

“*Ssshhhh!*”

“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, tidied 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 toweled 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 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.

