

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 Peyyyyyton
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.

“*Sooooo 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]