

Chapter XIII

Pandora's Bop

“So what do you *think*?”

“I wasn't aware that the Army made camouflage prom dresses.”

“This isn't an *Army* prom dress, you turk! It's perfectly obviously a Marine Corps original! I found it down on the waterfront, at Wretched Wrefuse—we really need to take you and your bank balance there sometime. They've got these really cool bandoliers that were made to go with this dress, and wouldn't clash with the spaghetti straps *at all*. Hey watch this!—”

Saluting him, Skeeter executed a Marine-clean 'bout-face and nearly fell off her higher-than-usual heels. Peyton, lunging forward, caught her arm and yanked her back to the vertical.

“YEEK!” went Skeeter. “Darn these heels, they nearly made me go splat. Good save there, partner! We absolutely ought to go dancin' after the movie. Why haven't we ever gone dancin'? You *never* take me dancin'!”

“Dancing?”

“No—*dancin'*. There's a significant difference. Disco may be dead but *I* intend to keep Stayin' Alive, thank you kindly. And T G it's F, after all.”

T G it's quitting time on a Friday afternoon in the grim grimy city of St. Mintred. At such a time, the safest place for a vintage DeSoto to be is in the SMECK parking structure atop Widdershins Hill. So Skeeter and Peyton left Floyd there and hiked down the Hill on

precarious foot—a descent not made any less hazardous by Skeeter’s intermittent attempts at dancin’.

Not that level ground was any bowl of cherries either, down around Pabst Street: home to the dilapidated, the ramshackle, the fossilized. Where names of 19th Century proprietors were still faintly visible high up the sides of buildings, above (or between) the spraypaint of latter-day graffiti. Cars inched along Pabst toward freeway onramps, to join the factory workers streaming out of Prithee Motors, Importune Transport, Point Beseachment Shipping, Cadger Cargo Delivery, and Panhandle-Grattiss Aerospace.

The city of Elsew was a national conveyance center, but foisted all the resulting toil and travail onto St. Mintred. Where TGIF was nowhere in the atmosphere—displaced, perhaps, by the sour metallic whiff known as “St. Minnie’s Bouquet,” that intensifies throughout the week and is especially foul during Friday rush hour. The drivers got to inhale it (along with a hundred unfiltered Marlboros) while they idled at stoplights, hurling honkish remarks at each other and passers-by. A bile-green Subaru blocked one intersection; from its occupant came a whistle as Skeeter went hightailing past.

“Ahoy there!” she waved at the Subaru, smirking at Peyton. “Did you hear *that?* Aren’t you going to run after him and challenge the guy to a duel?”

“Maybe after the picture, before we go dancin’...”

Then a piercing shriek tore through the Bouquet, followed by a prolonged howl from further down the block.

Peyton lunged forward again, only to find Skeeter (the shrieker) already in the arms of another (the howler). Who emerged from the embrace to reveal a lofty olivaceous girl in Ray-Bans, tinfoil haltertop, plaid Bermuda shorts, and stiletto-pointed footwear such as a James Bond villainess might use to bedevil 007.

“When’d you get back?!” Skeeter was demanding.

“Like about three this morning—too pooped to call ya,” said the prolonged howler. “I only got up just now so’s I could like go over to Turbo’s ‘n’ get my ‘do made over. Whaddaya think?”

To Peyton, the ‘do resembled a Toni home permanent sent through a wind tunnel after a burgundy streak job, with one side draped over the other and held in place by an enormous feathered roach clip; but Skeeter exclaimed admiringly.

“So how was the trip?” she wanted to know.

“Aay y’know—love ‘em ‘n’ dump ‘em.”

It seemed that the howler and one of her loftmates (Crispy J.? no, Muchacha) had planned to motorcycle clear around the Gulf of Mexico to Club Med in Cancún; but got no further than the Rio Grande.

“Like I dunno *where* exactly we ended up, but ‘Chacha’s still down there, I guess—”

“You *left* her there?”

“To get the bike fixed! Anyway she’s got like these cousins or uncles in Matamoros or, y’know, someplace like that.”

“So how’d *you* get home?”

“Hitched! It was toTALly awesome, Skee, I did it topless a lotta the way—went through like six cases o’ sungoop, ‘n’ had those foggin’ truckers eating outta my hand. Aay, I almost forgot!—I boosted ya some awesome bracelets, they’re back at the loft—I think they might be rully bronze.”

“You *robbed* some poor Mexican peddler?”

“Hell no!—got ‘em outta Nieman-Marcus. Y’need to use like *finesse* in a store like that—”

“HarrumMPH,” went Peyton.

The howler slid her shades down a long narrow snoot to inspect him through eyes adorned by a quarter-pound of purple makeup. They were very young eyes but immediately recognizable as belonging to a tough chick, an *urban* girl, the kind Peyton had first marveled at from Jazzbo’s car on inner-city road trips: eyes that looked coolly knowing, sharply appraising, insolently challenging, and provocative beyond the dreams of mortal man.

The tough chick eyes widened; the urban girl mouth opened.

“Oh m’Gahd, is this *him*? He’s so BAWLD!”

Skeeter, beaming elatedly: “Peyton Derente, meet my friend RoBynne O’Ring.”

“Like *¡buenas tardes!*” said RoBynne, extending a hand festooned with gewgaws on fingers and wrist. Before Peyton could clasp it, she reached up to run it over his scalp (“Y’gotta excuse my doing this”) and then moved very close, treating him to a heady teenage compound of Giorgio, Aquanet, Tropical Blend tanning oil, and Bazooka bubble gum.

“Yer like taller than I thought, y’know? Whatcha doing with Li’l Bit here? Tall dudes need tall women—”

“Hey! Who are you referring to as a ‘bit,’ Miss Turketta?”

“WAUGH!!” went RoBynne, prolongedly, as Skeeter used both hands to pinch plaid Bermuda patootie. “Aaaayyyy, I was just fooling arowwwnd!”

“So I *saw*.”

“And I just got back ‘n’ had my hair done ‘n’ everything!”

“So consider that your welcome-home-I-love-your-new-‘do *tweak*.”

RoBynne, pouting and massaging her rump, stumbled over Skeeter’s poke lying unattended on the gritty dusty sidewalk. “*Aay!* Now yer trying to tweak my *neck*, are ya?”

“I didn’t ask you to trip over my poke with those dominatrix booties of yours!”

“No, and y’weren’t paying any attention to this ‘poke’ thing o’ *yers!* Oh m’Gahd, whaddaya GOT in this thing? It weighs like a cow!”

“Well I guess *you’d* know what a cow weighs like—”

“Shaddup, I’m being like serious here! These’re like mean streets, y’can’t be leaving yer stuff wherever y’feel like—even if it *would* give a pursesnatching dude a hernia!” To Peyton: “Y’gotta keep yer eye out for this one every minute, else she gets into all sorta kindsa trouble!”

“Thank you, *Mommy*,” said Skeeter, as RoBynne rehung the poke over her shoulder with many scolding tuts and clucks. (RoBynne herself carried a purse no bigger than a sandwich baggie, attached to what appeared to be a strand of dental floss.)

“So whatcha two doing around here anyway? Looks like yer dressed to go dancin’.”

“Maybe after the movie—hey Ro, c’mon with us, we’re going to the Rialto! You know, the one that’s closing tonight.”

“Closing! The Rialto? Y’mean like for always? No way!”

St. Mintred's Rialto Theater was not some common fleapit, nor a collegiate art house like the Mercury, but a downtown picture palace where three generations of friends-and-relations would go to behold Hollywood extravagance. Offering both a Wurlitzer and a five-piece orchestra in silent days, providing lavish intermissions in a lobby decked with gilt mirrors and crystal chandeliers, the Rialto had enjoyed nothing but the best for half a century. Recent years, however, had seen nothing more than tits 'n' laffs of the *Porky's* ilk. Where once *The Sound of Music* had played, the likes of *Screwballs* now held sway.

Though not after tonight. Preservationists were intent on preventing the Rialto's demolition; its exterior was a prime example of what Peyton called "Renaissance Revival, or terra cotta a-go-go"—façades encrusted with all manner of cartouches and filigrees, pilasters and architraves and caryatids with arms outflung. But even if the landmark folk could save it from the wrecking ball, the Rialto might never be more than an ornate ghost looming over the corner of 5th and Pabst—a baroque derelict, like so much else in St. Mintred.

For its last picture show, a final vulgarity appeared to be on the marquee:

"*Risky Business!*" squawked RoBynne. "But we seen this already, like twice."

"Hey!" said Skeeter, "you can't get too much of that Tom Cruise kid dancin' in his jockeys."

"Oh yeah! (heh heh)—" snorted Ms. O'Ring.

So Peyton forked over for three tickets instead of two.

Inside, the girls went bopping off to check out the Ladies and find even the toilet paper dispensers on the verge of shutdown: nothing available but single-ply, and that only one square at a time.

The famous Rialto lobby was already partly dismantled, though some of this was masked by blowup photos of the theater in its heyday, or stills from movies celebrated in bygone times. Beside a classic shot of W. C. Fields they found Peyton chatting with an elderly man in a creaky tuxedo.

"You shouldn't've had to pay your way in, Mr. Peyton. I want you to be my guest."

"Nonsense, Mr. Lombardi; it's matinee pricing."

"That's so. That's so. No more than it should be for such a picture—boys turning

their family home into a bordello, while their parents are out of town! You got to wonder what sort of people make films like that.”

“Fiends in human form, Mr. Lombardi.”

“I’d say you’re right, Mr. Peyton. Yes, I’d say you’re right. Even so, I’m sorry you can’t stay for the 10:15 show, I’ve planned a little ceremony... but I know you’re busy. You’re busy. At least allow me to offer you refreshments. Whatever you like, on the house—and your young friends too, of course,” he added as the girls joined them.

“You don’t know the extent of your generosity, Mr. Lombardi,” said Peyton.

“Eh! I’ve got no use for it after tonight. You’ll be doing me a kindness,” said Mr. Lombardi. His rheumy eyes glanced from haltertop to spaghetti straps. “It’s good to see you being like your old self again, Mr. Peyton. Try to enjoy the picture.”

“What a nice old man,” said Skeeter. “Whatever we like, on the house—that means we can go sit in the balcony, right?”

“I think the balcony’s closed—”

“So we’ll have it all to ourselves!—you, ‘your old self again,’ and the two of us! I’ll run up and grab three or four seats in the front row—you people bring the food—remember all my favorites—and that it’s all free!—*get extra of everything!*—”

ZAP, FLASH, and Skeeter was gone.

“Ain’t she cute,” said RoBynne O’Ring.

“She is,” said Peyton, severely.

“Aay I mean it! I love Skeeter, she’s like my very best friend! *But* y’notice she’s left us to do all the foggin’ lugwork.”

Which she had. RoBynne graciously offered to share packmule duties, loading Peyton with a vast array of semi-stale edibles, and volunteering to carry all the beverages.

“Three drinks’re like nothin’—I was a carhop one summer at the Retro Rocket Drive-in, y’know like on roller skates? So for me just three’s way easy. Look—see?”

Peyton looked and saw her cradling a root beer, Sprite, and strawberry slushee in the crook of one arm, with the other outflung caryatid-style. Posing in front of a blownup still of Louise Brooks looking exquisitely hardboiled.

As did RoBynne.

As *felt* Peyton, tearing his eyes away from beguilement, and taking care to precede her up the sweeping marble staircase beyond the BALCONY CLOSED sign.

“Ew I *like* those, they’re soooo bitchen.”

“What are?” asked Peyton, nearly spilling his vast array when RoBynne slid a hand into the back pocket of his oversized yellow slacks.

“Bananarama! Such a gnarly color.”

He glared down at her. “I don’t keep my wallet there, if that’s what you’re looking for—”

“Guess yer just glad to see me then,” she snortled urbanely.

And indeed Priapus, that most Pavlovian of gods, was going *Hello-o-o, Hepzibah!* as they entered the Rialto balcony. Which, though even less intact than the lobby, still seemed able to withstand Skeeter’s bouncing around the front row.

“What’d I tell you?” she hollered at them. “All to ourselves! Why, we could get up to just about anything up here, couldn’t we? Drinks are on you two! So what took you so long? Hey is this *all* you could carry? Should you go back for more?”

“Y’know what we call jockstraps where I come from?” RoBynne asked Peyton, loudly.

“...I haven’t the foggiest—”

“HOOD ornaments!”

“Where *do* you come from?” asked Skeeter, playing stooge.

“Oh, ‘bout six blocks thataway—”

(Shriek/howl of laughter.)

So: front row center. Taking a once-plush velvet seat and using a heavy vat of popcorn to subdue Mr. Priapus, Peyton handed out the rest of the edibles and accepted his root beer from RoBynne. She took the seat to his left, swinging her long sleek legs onto the balcony rail; while Skeeter, settling into the seat to Peyton’s right, grabbed her Sprite and asked, “How’d you get started talking about jockstraps? Or do I not want to know?”

“Aay, one thing like leads to another.”

“Oh it does, hunh?”

“Yeah—like I got the *perfect* topping for that popcorn!”

She reached into her sandwich-baggie, brought out a can of Hershey’s syrup, and removed its plastic lid.

“Here, Peyton, lemme show ya... popcorn tastes *so* good dunked in chocolate... *lots* better’n caramel... *mmmmmm*—oh like I am so SHUwure, Skeeter! Whyncha have ‘em shine a foggin’ spotlight on it already?”

Peyton turned in some alarm and found that Skeeter, rearing up to stretch her own little legs to the railing, had extended her lower torso well past the point of camouflage.

“Y’know,” RoBynne mused, “I hear they like invented *other* color underpants—”

“—shut up—”

“—*besides* candy-apple red—”

“—shut up! Nothing neither of you haven’t admired before,” said Skeeter, rearranging her skirt.

(Another snortle from Ms. O’Ring.)

“Hey! You’re just jealous ‘cause I *have* an ass!”

“I HAVE an ass!! I do SO have an ass!!! Whaddaya think you were pinching just now?!”

“Well it was so *flat* and *skinny* and *fleshless*, I couldn’t be sure—”

RoBynne leaned across and started swatting her with the syrup can, till Peyton let it be known that he would brook no more of this nonsense.

“Okay, I apologize,” said Skeeter. “You DO so have an ass. Peyton, say something nice about RoBynne’s bottom.”

RoBynne promptly laid her Aquanetty head on his shoulder. “Yeah please! If a *man* says it I’ll believe it. I was like a rully late bloomer ‘n’ I’m still kinda sensitive—”

“Course you are, the way I pinch heinies,” said Skeeter.

To forestall further swattage, Peyton gallantly observed that RoBynne had bloomed very fully; for which she planted a Bazooka-flavored peck on his cheek as the house lights dimmed.

“Hey I heard that! Just keep your lips to yourself, Turketta!”

“Aay like share ‘n’ share alike, Tweety!”

“The film’s starting,” Peyton observed.

The dream is always the same.

He had grown accustomed to Skeeter’s moviewatching commentaries, but now got one in stereo: both girls a-gurgle over babyfaced Joel, cooing that he could join *them* in the shower and scrub *their* backs whenever he wanted.

Whisper from the left: “Did Tweeter over there ever tell ya ‘bout the time me ‘n’ her took a shower together?... ‘n’ got so into it, y’know, pushing ‘n’ shoving, that we had this rully bitchen water fight?... ‘n’ yanked down the shower rod ‘n’ curtain ‘n’ everything?...”

From the right: “What’s all that whispering about?”

From the screen: “Old Time Rock & Roll.”

From the left: “(Heh heh)—I was just saying that dancin’ with no pants on’s the *only* way to dance.”

From the right: no reply.

For the center: disquiet then, for awhile.

The girls continued to dip into the popcorn vat, dunk into the syrup can, and occasionally feed him a chocolate-coated kernel. But they did this without squabbling, even taking turns to feed Peyton, so that he was soon able to unbend (despite the sharpnailed fingers in his mouth) and pay more attention to the movie.

And its continuity: why would Joel leave the beautiful callgirl Lana alone in his house while he went to the bank to cash the bond to get the \$300 to pay for his night of unbridled carnality—*other* than to give Lana the opportunity to swipe Joel’s mother’s Steuben glass egg and so set the rest of the storyline in motion?

No matter; suspend that disbelief. “Not supposed to be Real Life,” after all. Let’s pretend that young Joel might actually progress from being chased by Guido the Killer Pimp to “dealing in human fulfillment” on the home-bordello level, to “making love on a real train” (who was Joel to say no?) to the electrodynamic sounds of Tangerine Dream.

Time of your life, hunh kid?

Yes; no; maybe.

Mesmerizing imagery.

As the train flashes to and fro and Lana undergoes strobe-lit orgasms onscreen, blooming very fully as she blends Skeeter's angelic blue-eyed blonditude with RoBynne's coolly calculating urbanity to form a composite, an amalgam, a condition in the air tonight...

It's good to see you being like your old self again...

...and you have the balcony to yourselves and what better way to memorialize the Rialto than to share and share alike, turn and turn about, playing that most diverting of party games: Two Girls for Every Guy?...

(Joel comes home, whistling fatuously, to find the place denuded.)

—two girls—

(They stole the goddam house! They took everything!)

—for every—

(Took a shower together 'n' got so into it...)

—cracked egg—

(Nothing neither of you haven't admired before...)

—there's a crack in my egg—

(Let my love open the door...)

Till, at last, all is darkness and silence.

And do you know the last line?

Yes, you know the last line: *Here comes a chopper to chop off your head!*

—BOOM—