

Chapter XIV

Liquid Ditty

“So when do I get to meet *your* friends? Will you introduce me as your mistress? Be sure to tug your forelock when you do.”

“I think you’re more of a *petite amie*. Or a paramour—”

“Hey! That’s not a nice thing to say!”

“No? *Par amour*—French for ‘with love.’”

“Really? No fooling? Okay then. I paramour you too. French kiss!” (*Smouche.*)

“So, when *do* I get to meet your friends?”

“I no longer pursue a social life. Trying to teach Art History to studio majors is enough to dampen any man’s congeniality—”

“Oh Peyton get real! What about those raspberry parties Sadie said you always used to throw?”

“*Rasburials*. Over and done with, years ago.”

“Well... oh never mind. I’d’ve liked—but anyway, it’s fine by me. Monopolizing you, I mean. After all I *am* supposed to be your ‘kept woman,’ aren’t I?”

“You,” he told her, “are about as ‘kept’ as a high typhoon.”

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Isolation.

Distortion.

But no sense of lamentation—no, sir.

See what happens when you pull up your venetians: back comes the hush, the gloom, the silent stealthy dust creeping up the stairs, infiltrating the miniloft like a dubious shade of difference.

Sweep it off the drawing table; there's work to be done. Cartoon panels to pencil, ink, and letter—"A Spectral Singalong with God's Older Brother Bub." (BLZ Bub, that is.) "This Month: Dead Rock Stars." Jimi, Janis, Elvis, Lennon, Morrison, Moon. What better than a touch of the tried and true? Or, for that matter, a touch of the sour-lemon screwdriver kept within easy reach?

Too easy, perhaps; your circles are becoming elliptical.

("I am the Eggman," said BLZ Bub.)

No matter. Patch up the cracks in your shell, Bub; make it hard as nails. They can only scratch its surface, no more. "Can you match the dead rockers with their causes of going bye-bye?" Assassination, heart attack, heroin overdose, sedative overdose, acute respiratory distress, choking on own tossed cookies: A, B, C, D, E, F.

Or none of the above, as in "listening to right now," as in Stevie Nicks (again). Still alive when last we checked; holding off the silence, if not the dust. *La la la la la, la la*. Stand Back. If Anyone Falls. I Need a Little Sympathy—echoing her earlier tune about leaving sugardaddies alone, when it comes to love.

Sweep away the echoes:

Since RoBynne O'Ring's come back to town

(hurroo, hurroo)

Our Skeeter's not been so much around

(hurROO, hurROO)

It's girls's night out most ev'ry eve

And guess who's left by himself to grieve?

Crying cockles and mussels, alive alive-O—

—good God. You've even begun to THINK along her lines.

"Have you noticed how much Stevie Nicks looks like ME? 'Cept she's got big dark eyes (poor baby). I sure do like the way she dresses, though. *And twirls. And sings.* I could

dress like that if I had the bucks, and you know I can twirl like a dervish's daughter, but I can't sing. I mean I can *sing*, but not SING. 'Loud' is about the best I can sing, these days. Not like back when I drank Piña Coladas—"

Not like two weeks ago when she was here saying this, either.

Not like the solid month they'd spent together before that; scarcely a day going by without some sort of in-person confession or conjunction—the latter succeeding the former and a hell of a lot more interactively. Accommodatingly. Delighting in her company: *alas my love you do me wrong to cast me off discourteously—*

Supposed to have dropped by tonight. Hadn't shown. Hadn't called. And here it was—what?—after nine; a stitch in time.

("There's glory for you," said the Eggman.)

Sugardaddyhood could only extend so far, after all. Or could it? One of these fine months she might be wanting—what?—"help with the rent," say. Or no, better still, help for *Sadie* with the rent; but "don't let Sadie know." Of course not. Clever. Cunning.

Well... if it comes to that—so what? Not like he'd been stinted as a result.

Not, at least, till just lately.

There had been no further talk of goin' dancin'—none, at least, that included Peyton Derente.

("Love 'em 'n' dump 'em," said RoBynne O'Ring.)

Indeed. Say something nice about playing donkey-headed Bottom to a fickle Titania and her fully-blooming Peaseblossom. You *don't* get used to sleeping alone; you get *disused*. While they're off "pursuing a social life," polishing their patoots with a YEEK-YEEK here and a WAUGH-WAUGH there and a CLUMP CLUMP CLUMP on the actual door—

"*Hi* sorry I'm late if you'd give me a spare key you wouldn't have to bother letting me in but I can't stay anyway I've got RoBynne downstairs outside in Floyd and I've gotta drive her up to Port Dormer *right now* so I—"

"Wait," said Peyton. "Take a breath."

"You've been drinking without me!" said Skeeter, removing the glass from his hand, draining the one while giving the other a smack.

“Ow,” said Peyton. “Let’s go back to your first remark. You say RoBynne’s outside—”

“*Downstairs* outside, in Floyd—”

“And you have to drive her, in Floyd, up to Port Dormer.”

“Attaboy, Peyton! Right now, too. So I need—”

“One moment, please. Port Dormer must be—what?—two hundred miles from here.”

“Only each way.”

“*And* it’s after nine. So even at the rate you drive, you won’t make it there till midnight.”

“Which is why we gotta get *going*, sweetie, we gotta get there *by* midnight, and it’s not payday till Wednesday so can I have some carfare *please*?”

“Ah...” said Peyton. “May I ask *why* you have to drive RoBynne, in Floyd, the two hundred miles to Port Dormer by midnight tonight?”

“Because we have to stop WOLFGANG!”

Who, it seemed, had just called his ex-squeeze RoBynne from a phone booth outside the reddest-necked bar in Port Dormer. Which, it seemed, just happened to be across the street from the town’s baddest-assed Italian restaurant. *Both* of which, it seemed, he threatened to enter at the stroke of midnight and there profanely denounce Ronald Reagan, Frank Sinatra, Christopher Columbus, and/or that Korean airliner the Soviet Union had recently shot out of the sky—

—all to “prove his love,” according to Wolfgang.

With her motorcycle still in someplace like Matamoros, RoBynne had called Skeeter begging for immediate transport to Port Dormer; so here was Skeeter begging Peyton for financial underwriting of the same, and fast.

(Indeed.)

Taking his glass back: “You shouldn’t be driving if you’ve been drinking.”

“*That* wasn’t drinking! That was wetting my whistle!... Okay, okay, don’t spaz, RoBynne can drive; she’s very good ‘n’ careful—”

From eight stories downstairs outside: “*Will y’foggin’ hurry the fogg up* PLEEZE!”

Go to the window and peer down. There was Floyd, all right, under the parking lot lights; and beside him the equally unmistakable Ms. O’Ring, dancin’ in frantic place.

“Can you trust her on this?”

“What? Hey! RoBynne’s my best friend! Best girlfriend anyway, and when she’s in anguish she’s serious about it and I can tell so PLEEZE—”

Peyton, though mmping, reached for his wallet. “Just promise me one thing, will you? If you find yourself in any redneck bars—”

“—or Italian restaurants—”

“—between here and Port Dormer, *don’t* try to drive back tonight.”

“We can pull off to the side and sleep in Floyd—”

“And *don’t* pull off to the side and sleep in the car!” He handed over some more bills.

“I take plastic too, you know,” said Skeeter, giving him a hasty smooch. “I don’t taste any after-dinner! Didn’t you eat anything tonight? I’ve really got to cook more for you—can’t have you wasting away on me.”

Peyton’s culinary output was limited to the dish he called Bouillabaisse Tartare: empty random canned goods into a saucepan and stir the contents together “for as long as it takes.”

“Bachelor cooking!” Skeeter had groaned, taking over his cobweb-free kitchen and cooking up a palatable storm, wearing a cute li’l red apron over her cute li’l pink compactification of hugely! healthy! appetites above and below, throughout and through-in...

...but not, at least, just lately.

“What’s the matter?” she was asking.

“Nothing to sneeze at.”

“What?”

“You should be going.”

“But—”

“Go on. I trust you to *shave* me, don’t I?”

She squinted up at him. Through beady little gleaming eyes.

Then stepped forward, reaching out, pressing her pug against his proboscis... and standing that way for a moment, the two of them together...

Till a faint “*Skeeee-terrrr!*” arose from the down and out.

“Well,” to him.

“AW RIGHT ALREADY!” out the window.

And off she sped.

No longer a question, now, of whether the circle would remain unbroken. More and more it was becoming an oblong....

*

Peyton, go to school. Go teach something.

Merely SAD’s Liberal Studies Division was housed off the West Quad in the Old Library, a building almost as old as the St. Mintred Rialto, and almost as much of a rattletrap. Here nine faculty members were quartered, if not drawn: Communications, Natural Sciences, and Asian Art on the first floor; Creative Writing, Social Sciences, American Studies, and Performing Arts on the second; Dr. Theodore Ecklebury (Chairman, soon to be Emeritus) in a good-sized office on the third floor; and Peyton Derente at the top of the stairs, in a room neither good nor sized nor originally intended to be an office.

He had first been summoned up here—when?—eight, nine years ago, as a freshman taking Art 110 instead of having to shovel it out. The incumbent shoveler had found Peyton’s essays entertaining (they’d had to write *essays* in those days) and brought them to Dr. Ecklebury’s attention.

Then as now, Eck resembled a dyspeptic Teddy Roosevelt in owl-eyed bifocals instead of a pince-nez, and with fewer opportunities to feel *Dee-lighted!* But he’d praised Freshman Peyton’s fluency, his quick grasp of comparative detail. Had young Mr. Derente considered pursuing a career as an art historian?

Well, why not? Skill at bombast and braggadocio might come in handy too, given the state (then as now) of art criticism *à la mode*. So he’d gotten his BFA, served as Eck’s

graduate teaching assistant while earning his master's degree, joining the full-time faculty three years ago—

—and, every semester since, there'd been retrenchment and belt-tightening. Frozen budgets, cutback staff, increased teaching load, piled-up duty plate—and being relegated to an ungood unsized erstwhile storeroom at the rickety top of the rattletrap stairs.

So why did he stay?

(Good question, little absentee.)

Multiple choice? True or false? Whichever way you answered it, another Tuesday afternoon was upon us. Meaning another 20th Century Seminar, with one hour devoted to students reporting what they'd extracted from a week of “intensive study,” followed by a second hour's group discussion of the same.

(And may GoFoC be merciful to me a sinner.)

Peyton had never yet disparaged the History of Art, as such—only the attempt to impart it to puddingheads. This afternoon there was Heather, who always looked frightened, and Dominique, who always looked lost. Plus Tim, who wasn't Tiny but big as a lummoX and about as erudite. So naturally he doubled as the Liberal Studies student intern, turning even mundane office chores into hazardous melodrama.

The ineffable They had chosen today to replace the steam radiator in their assigned classroom; so Heather, Dominique, and Tim adjourned to Peyton's ex-storeroom, bringing with them an apparent poltergeist as thumps, bangs, and eerie whistles resounded through the walls and floor:

Rap rap rap. Ssshhhssss. RAP RAP RAP. WhaaaaaAAAAnng!

This drove Heather (due to make the first report) even deeper into panic mode than usual, so Peyton took pity and turned to the lummoX. “Now, Tim—you've been reading about the competing influences of Lee Krasner and Thomas Hart Benton on Jackson Pollock?”

“Yeah,” said Tim. “So that copy machine? You know, the one downstairs? They wanted the minutes xeroxed, so I'm feeding them through and the copies are coming out? And I take them outta the tray and, whoa! *the words brush off on my hand*, right offa the

page! The toner, see, it must not be fusing onto the paper, or maybe it's the wrong brand or something. So we can't copy anything more right now and I called the repair guy *again* but hadda leave a message. He wasn't there."

"Very good, Tim. Now, Dominique—"

Another pitiable expression. *Where am I? What am I doing here? WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?*

(Take me now, GoFoC.)

But God or Fate or Chance yielded to the Old Library poltergeist, who chose that moment to come plundering up the teeter-tottery stairs, accompanied by

Don't let it get me!
Don't let it get me, OW!
Don't let it get me!
Don't let it get me, OW!

—till in burst a creature wearing gypsy petticoats and DayGlo camisole, followed by another in camouflage prom dress and porkpie hat; both singing "Eaten by the Monster of Love."

"*Here* you are!" said the creature in the porkpie hat. "Are these your friends? Hah there, friends! Lemme introduce mahself: Ah'm Vicki Lee 'n' this hyere's Stacey Jo!"

"No, I wanna be *Cherie* Jo!"

"You are so completely not a Cherry Jo!"

"That is CheRIE! Like 'My Cherie Amour!' You are so foggin' deaf!"

Both slightly blitzed but fresh as New Wave daisies. Not visibly worse for wear, as you might expect after an all-night round trip by DeSoto Firesweep.

"We changed at a truckstop!"

"Look, we brought y'back like a souvenir—"

And Peyton was handed a World's Greatest Foundryworker statuette.

"Well, it *looked* artistic."

"What have you two been filling your canteens with?" he asked, not warmly.

Skeeter: "Ohhhh, just an Eskimo Pie or two—"

RoByrne: "Yeah, both of us—"

(Shriek/howl of laughter.)

Peyton: “We are trying to hold a seminar here—”

“Ooh, can we watch?”

“Boy you’re big!” said Skeeter to Tim. “What’s your name, sailor?”

“Not Sailor. It’s Tim.”

“No way! I used to sleep with a horsie called Timmy.”

RoBynne meanwhile draped her DayGlo self across Peyton’s desk. Up rode the petticoats, down hung the camisole, and again came the whispering:

“Yo, teacher dude... woontcha like to be *my* sweet poppa?... does she tell you stuff? I was raised Catholic, *I* could tell you stuff—”

“Hey! Quit musclin’ in on my *main man!*—”

Up jumped RoBynne, her gypsy lace carrying away Peyton’s memo pad and tape dispenser. “Oh, *yer* main man, hunh? I’ll show you some musclin’—”

The girls squared off and began to scuffle. Heather and Dominique tried to beat a terrified retreat but ran slap into Tim, who looked ready to gather them into his cumbersome arms and have a little tussle of his own.

“HERE NOW!” blared Peyton. “Tim—let them go!”

“Aw,” said Tim. (Heather disappeared out the door, but Dominique loitered perplexedly on the threshold.)

“And you two! Calm the hell down!”

“Aay, we’re not fightin’—”

“*I* wouldn’t fight with my very best friend—”

And there was a tipsy playful embrace.

(“We gotta have class like this more often,” Tim told Dominique.)

No need for Li’l Bit to worry, or Teacher Dude either for that matter; RoBynne’s heart belonged to Floydie. She toTALly adored that car, y’know, she rully had to like *possess* it; what foggin’ Pink Cadillac could compare with a Pepto-Bismol Firesweep? Here! look! c’mon, take it! two hundred thirty smackeroonies, every cent RoBynne had in the world—

“You didn’t say anything last night about her having \$230!”

“I didn’t know,” said Skeeter.

“‘N’ *I* couldn’t get it till this morning,” said RoBynne. “Y’think I like keep all my money in my *cleavage*?”

“Yeah, Peyton! I mean, if she did, there’s no telling WHOSE hands might get on it—”

And another tipsy playful scuffle.

“Perhaps I’d better drive you home,” Peyton sighed.

“DIDN’T I tell you how sweet he is to me?”

“Yuh, he’s a rull sweet poppa all right—”

Which was why they wanted to negotiate the sale/purchase of Floyd right there and then: to have the benefit of Peyton’s counsel and advice. He counted to ten and tried to comply, but got off to a careless start by referring to RoBynne’s \$230 as her entire liquidity.

“My entire *liquid ditty*? C’mere, Peyton, I got somethin’ *else* to show ya—”

What became of Wolfgang he never found out.