

Four

THE CONFUSIONS

Chapter XVI

—*Or Flounder, Flounder in the Sea*

“Hello.”

“...Peyton?”

“Yes?”

“...s’mee.”

“So I gather.”

“...Peyton?”

“Yes?”

“...how’d I get home?”

“I drove you, yesterday morning. In ‘Clarence.’”

“*Yesterday* morning. Really?... What’d Sadie say?”

“No one was there. I got you settled in, and left a note on the door saying you were ‘under the weather.’”

“Good. That’s good... Um—how’d *you* get home?”

“Took the bus.”

“Oh... Um—how many drinks *did* I have?”

“Not that many, actually. It doesn’t take many with someone your size.”

“Why didn’t you... regulate me?”

“Quote ‘You’re not the boss of me’ unquote.”

“Did I say that? Jeez, I can’t remember any of it, hardly... Was I sick? Did I urp?”

“I thought you might. I left a bucket by your bed.”

“Where? I don’t see it... I—I remember us talking, at Bert ‘n’ Ernie’s, and you not paying enough attention so I had to kind of yell, and then—or was that part a dream? I’ve had these really weird dreams where I have to yell at you... *I can’t remember*. Peyton?

Peyton, I’m scared! I’m—”

“Skeeter—”

“I never blacked out before! You’ve got to believe me—”

“I do, I believe you—”

“—and now I can’t find my *horse!*”

“...pardon me?”

“My horse! Timmy, my stuffed horse! I’ve had him forever, since I was only two, but I’ve looked and looked (shniff) and I can’t find him, not anywhere!—oh God—”

(Clunk.)

“Skeeter? Skeeter?...”

[Distant retching]

[Distant flushing]

“...Peyton?”

“Yes?”

“...I urped.”

“So I gather.”

“Aw hell, did you hear me?”

“Well, you did say that being with you would be a nonstop belly laugh—”

“Oh God... oh Jeez...”

“Shhhh. Shhhh. S’allright. Don’t cry—”

“Will if I like! (Shniff.) Hell... just listen to me. I *always* sound like I’m laughing, don’t I? No matter what—crying, throwing up, making love, everything. (Shniff.) My Grampa said I was born to do nothing but laugh.”

“Your grandfather was a wise man.”

“Now everybody points at me and says, ‘*There goes a dummy.*’”

“I’m sure no one’s ever called you a dummy—”

“How do you know?! Maybe lots of people have! (Shniff.) Like one of those big dumb happy broads that hang around bars and clubs and—Ramada Inns, places like that. ‘Cept I’m just a *little* dumb happy broad. When I’m happy, that is... (Shniff.) I can’t even find an old stuffed horse! And you know I hate to sleep alone—”

“Yes.”

“But, but Peyton? Listen... all that stuff, you know, about trollops? and about ‘being a kept woman,’ and everything? That was just jokes. You know? Just for laughs. Not for real.”

“Yes.”

“I need you to know that.”

“...I do. I do.”

“Good. Good. That’s good... whew. We got our stories straight, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told Sadie I had the bug—last night, it must’ve been. Don’t know if she bought it, but she let Desi camp out on the living room couch. Kid was over the moon, big adventure... Anyway she didn’t act pissed, Sadie I mean. And she sure would’ve, if she’d thought I’d passed out.”

“(Cough.)”

“Oh *don’t* cough at me, please, I feel bad enough... I haven’t had an ache like this since—since last New Year’s Eve. Jeez. And that one felt like The End of the goddam world...”

“You told me.”

“Did I? Well... at least I’m not seeing any tiny pink elephants. Though those’d be kind of cute—”

“Skeeter—”

“Right right right, I know. No more bars or clubs for awhile. Not even really nice ones. (Shniff.)”

“Well, don’t cry about it—”

“I wasn’t crying! I was just—resting my *nose*, is all. Oh sorry, forget I said that. It’s just... I just wish that... I mean, it was best when—I could talk and talk all night and all day and tell you everything, everything... and you’d always listen. And pay attention. And hear every word I’d say.”

“Is that so! I might still do that if—never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just that lately you only seem to—”

“What?”

“All I ever hear from you anymore is—”

“*What?*”

“—never mind.”

(Silence.)

“...Peyton?”

(Silence.)

“*Peyton?*”

“...what?”

“I’ll never say ‘never mind’ again.”

“Thank you, Sean Connery.”

“Hee hee hee (ow)! *Hee hee hee (ow)!...* See? See, you make me laugh.”

“Sounds painful.”

“Well I’ve got a sick headache, don’t I?... But it really is laughing, this time. Really. Promise. You make me feel happy.”

“Do I?”

“*Yes (ow).* Yes. My head hurts but yes... I wish you were here. Or I was there, or something. But I’m glad you didn’t see me urp. ‘S’not very ladylike.”

“(Mmph.)”

“Hey! What was that? Were you guffawing at me?”

“Do I have any other choice?”

“Well... you’re not mad at me, anyway?”

“No. How could I be?”

“You were, though.”

“I was mistaken.”

“*I’ll* say you were!”

“(Mmph.)”

“But I’m not mad at you anymore, either. So will you go on talking to me?”

“As long as you like.”

“Oh good. Peyton? I ever tell you how much I love the way you talk?”

“Not just lately...”

“Well I do. So much. So much... So will you tell me a story? A long boring one, that’ll put me back to sleep?”

“Indeed! Well, I’m prepping my ‘Intro to Baroque’ midterm. Shall I tell you about Velázquez and his *tropo vero* portrait of Pope Innocent X?”

“What’s *tropo vero*?”

“Too truthful.”

“Oog. I don’t want that, then. No, send me off to Never-Nevermindland. Oh wait a sec—lemme just pull up the covers—and put the phone here, beside my ear. Okay: tell me a *bedtime* story.”

“In my best bedside manner?”

“ExACTly. You got it, Peyton. Ooh I’m yawning already...”

“Very well, then. ‘Once upon a time—’”

