

Chapter XXII

Angelmaking

Sunday mornings at the Cheval were heralded by the *whudd* of an extra-hefty Elsew *Reflector* being flung against each subscriber's door. The impact usually intruded on Peyton's subconscious as a BOOM or *chop!* or [Laughter]; but today's crept in on li'l flat feet, on sleek and sanguine haunches, as a steady pulse-thump offset by the *bzzzzz* of a toyland fire engine. Both coming from an unclothed undercover double-armful of Skeeter-booty.

(There's worse ways to wake up on a Sunday morning.)

But a vagrant echo of the *whudd* continued to linger in the back of Peyton's mind, irksomely, tweaksomely, like a rogue mattress spring. Little by little he disengaged himself from arms and legs and mumbled objections; patting a tush, nuzzling a nape, easing on out of the sofabed.

Shorts, slippers, robe, and the red fez that Booty-girl swore she'd haggled for at the Istanbul Grand Bazaar: an ensemble lending you a distinct resemblance to the legendary Major Hoople of *Our Boarding House* fame. Hrummf! Hakkaff! Egad, lads!

BZZZZZZ goes your raspburied treasure.

Imitation Opium, but bonafide risibility.

Plus exuberant salubrity; brightminded curiosity; cleverpants creativity; energy-bundle impact; kind warm loving heart; and a really dynamite bod. Adding up to seven

virtues (blessings, benefits, advantages) that mold a goodly vessel that holds a wealth of water that can quench your deepest, driest, sour-lemonest thirst.

(Step into the bathroom to empty your own waterwealth.)

Turn up radiator. Retrieve newspaper. Take it into a kitchen still smelling richly of yesterday's bakeathon: cherry cobbler, cinnamon rolls, and apple strudel from an old Wunderlich family recipe. Bring out cobbler scraps; pour glass of juice; put coffee on to brew—all this on ponderous tiptoe.

Booty-girl had frazzled herself foolish these past two months, working evenings and weekends in Radiology Records while taking a full slate of day classes at Use 'Em, including the long-avoided Biology. ("I do *not* see *what* good knowing *how* a frog digests flies is going to do *my* career as a social worker!... Frogs have cute butts, though.")

So on Valentine's Day Peyton had declared her the recipient of an Ad Hoc Ad Loc & Quid Pro Quo Single-Semester College Scholarship, enabling Skeeter to scale back her weekend work hours and so reclaim her half of his sofa. (Half? Make that two-thirds—make that three-quarters—"Tell ME I'm not a kept woman!" she'd said, roaring with laughter at a moment of supreme intimacy.)

(*Au près de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon dormir...*)

All right now. Settle down to breakfast and the Sunday *Reflector*. February 26th: a date that put another flea in your ear, to keep company with the *whudd's* vagrant echo. Couldn't imagine why, unless it was another Leap Day's being only three days off...

Anyway: editorial on David the Bubble Boy, who'd been brought out of his sterile cocoon to kiss his mother for the first time and then die. (That's the way it goes.) Editorial cartoon, lousily drawn, sounding the "Where's the Beef?" tocsin. Review of Eddie Murphy's farewell appearance on *Saturday Night Live*. Eulogy for the Elsew Travelers, who'd dropped another NBA game by a near-record margin. Society photo of Robert S. Hallowday and Pretty Young Starlet-Model—

"I am trying to eat here," Peyton gnarled.

Such, such were the joys of 1984, which so many pundits had spent so many years cringing and flinching from; as though Big Brother was to have popped up, prepackaged, at

the stroke of midnight on January 1st. Well, doublethink that one—Big Yuppie had arrived instead. Watching you, all right, with one eye bent toward buyout and the other toward consumption—like Prince Prospero in his castellated fastness, revelling while famine and pestilence devastate those without. (Now *there* was a cartoon idea. Too bad Peyton had been discurranted, left under the spreading chestnut tree...)

Turn page. Raise brows. Get up from the table and head for the sofabed, where Booty-girl was now ensnuggled with the big stuffed squirrel (fabric, not taxidermic) that Peyton had given her for Christmas and Skeeter had named Churl.

“Look at this.”

“Hjckrrh?”

“Isn’t this the one you called the Dough Girl?”

“*Wha’?*” went Skeeter, opening sleepstuck peepers; and by golly if they weren’t squinting at “Pamela Pillsbury-Beckett, rising young televangelist to the upwardly mobile.”

“Oh Jeez Louise!—”

“Well put,” said Peyton.

A big spread on the little lady too, with a head-and-shoulders portrait shot and another in profile, both wearing the expression of bemused bamboozlement often seen in pictures of Marilyn Monroe.

Pamela’s was an inspirational story: after high school she’d left Demortuis to pursue a career as singer/dancer/actress in Paris/London/Manhattan, ending up four years later as a Bunny at the Playboy resort hotel in Great Gorge, New Jersey.

(“She always said she wanted to dance in France—in nothing but her underpants, I always used to add,” Skeeter cackled. “Guess we were both right.”)

“Then I discovered Jesus in my heart,” Pam informed the interviewer.

(“God knows who she discovered in her pants.”)

This epiphany had taken place while watching the Rev. Howie Beckett’s *Jesus Loves Me Show*, a program syndicated nationally but lost in the shadows of Pat Robertson and Oral Roberts—until Ms. Pillsbury shed her cottontail and joined the JLM choir. Quickly featured as soloist, then as a lay practioner (“Oh AHEM!”) and then, at twenty-three, the second Mrs.

Beckett (Howie divorcing his fiftyish incumbent), Pamela was now by all accounts the star attraction and boss lady. Shifting the show's focus from *Jesus Loves* to *Me & Money*, leaving Howie's older followers aghast but delving deeply into the lucrative 18-to-34 market, not least with a line of JLM how-to videos on meditation, fostering miracles, improving your love life, and making killer investments.

The Gospel According to Dough Girl: not only *can* you have it all, you *ought* to have it all, with an emphasis on the Here and Now. Why waste time waiting till some old afterlife to enjoy your God-given rights?

"You want to talk about the future? About your destiny? Okay! The fast track is getting faster all the time! Nothing just happens, we have to *make* it happen, and we CAN—without guilt or pain! *Really* religious people are positive thinkers! We're not into guilt or pain!"

Adding to the exclamation points were homage-quotes from latter-day JLM fans:

"I get high on Pam's talk! I just adore her!"

"She makes me feel great! I leave her show singing!"

"Pamela's worth every penny of my pledge!"

A question mark or two were donated by anonymous informants, who hinted at offscreen temper tantrums and ruthless cupidity. No one denied Pam's acumen, her businesslike concentration on success—

"—her personal totalbitchitude," said Skeeter. "She was Drama Club Treasurer our senior year, and I always said she took out more than we put in. As for temper tantrums—this one time in English class we had to use vocab words in a sentence, and Pammy said, 'My mother is the *edifice* of our family.' The teacher said maybe she meant her mom was more like a *bulwark*, and Droan Webster (who always sat behind Pam so he could spend the hour mentally feeling her up) said, '*Bulwark* is to *edifice* like *Playtex* is to *hooters*'—and then he snapped Pam's bra strap in front of God and everybody, and Pam yelled 'YOU FLAMING ASSBITE!' right out loud and coldcocked Droan with the heel of her shoe, and would you believe she got extra credit for that? the teacher thinking she was acting out a scene from

The Last Picture Show, the book not the film, as if Pamela Pillsbury ever read anything thicker than a *Cosmo*—”

“Take a breath,” Peyton advised. “According to this, her show’s on at eleven. Feel like getting washed in the Blood of the Lamb?”

“Druther take a shower,” Skeeter grumbled; but pulled on her T-shirt nightie, asked for a cup of hot coffee, and reached for her wake-up toothbrush. “Promise me you’ll turn it off fast, though, if Pam starts turning loaves into fishes.”

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The Rev. Howie Beckett, an Ed McMahonish jowlster, appeared just long enough to warm up the crowd and remind the faithful that this was a religious program. Then, *heeeere’s PAMela!*—who made a grand entrance down a backlit runway to great whoops and cheers from the Young Urban Upbeat congregation.

She was dressed all in gold, designer gold, including an indubitable miniskirt that provided viewers a sparkly, above ‘n’ beyond look at Pam’s good Christian thighs. (*Hello-o-o, hosanna!*) With sweeping gestures to left and right she greeted her acolytes in the same syrupy snippydrip voice that Skeeter had just been imitating to unkind perfection:

“HI-ee, everybody!! You ready to rejoice a little? Everybody clap your hands! That’s right, let’s all feel happy together! Oh c’mon—you can do it if you want to! Let’s make a deal: you won’t give me any sad faces, and I won’t give you any sermonizing!”

But first, a commercial.

Pam in a sheer silver leotard, relentlessly perky: “Not only do we gals have to keep our spirits up—we’ve got to keep our *figures* up too! Well, now you can do both with my new Jesuscise™ aerobic video and diet plan!”

*One and two and three and four
(Jesus Loves Me all the more)
Five and six and sev’n and eight
(When I take off ugly weight!)*

“That’s \$39.95 for VHS, \$29.95 for Beta,” she was adding when Peyton hastened to turn off the TV, fearing Skeeter might rupture something otherwise.

“—oh God!—oh Jeez!—”

“Take a breath, now.”

“...oh Holy Ghost...”

“Well,” said Peyton.

“—*hic!*—”

“In the affluent words of Joan of Arc: ‘I may vomit.’”

“*Hic!* All we need is Video Gaga! *Hee hee hee—hic!*—oh, I forgive her for everything! Even—*hic*—these hiccups. I must’ve laughed off—*hic*—five whole pounds.”

“You hardly need to lose any weight. I’m the one you’re fattening up.”

“Hey! I helped you eat that strudel, didn’t I? (*Hic.*) I don’t intend to pudge out again! C’mon, gimme room—‘One and two and three and four’—”

“Isn’t it cheating to do situps in bed?”

“Oh hootch hootch hootch. (*Hic.*) Like Mother Theresa said just now: ‘No pain—*hic*—just gain money.’ (Cackle.) So, what’d you think of her?”

“You’re considerably cuter.”

“CONSIDERABLY?”

“Ah... exponentially?”

“Better! You want to check out a pair of thighs, take a look at *these*—not an ounce out of place!”

“I’ve noticed that about them. Also that you’ve ceased hiccupping.”

“Hey I *have!* Never knew you could cure hiccups with lying-in-bed situps. Wait’ll I tell Richard Simmons! But c’mon, ‘fess up—Pammy got you all hot ‘n’ bothered, didn’t she?”

“Only bothered. For all her talk about happiness, she didn’t seem to be having a particularly good time.”

Snort from Skeeter, now doing deep knee bends. “Oh, that’s the Dough Girl, all right. If she couldn’t snag you with her floppy-doppy T & A, she’d make you feel *sorry* for her.” (Shoulder stretches.) “I sure wish I had twenty thousand dollars for every time I said, ‘Pam—’”

“—twenty thousand?—”

“—well why shouldn't *I* think in high numbers?—for every time I said, ‘Grow a brain, Pam! Be pissed at me for a FEASIBLE reason!’” (Side twists.) “The *edifice* of her family! Betcha her mom's thrilled. ‘My daughter the lay practitioner’—and this after shaking her floppydops all over Great Gorge, New Jersey. Just thrilled to death... Hey! What are *you* doing wearing *your* robe?”

Peyton was a little slow in answering that it went with the fez, of course.

“Well... I'm... gonna... take a... shower... now,” Skeeter drawled back at him. “And when I'm done, I'd like to find your robe waiting for me *s'il vous plaît*. (Am I not a polyglot?) Feel free to be waiting there in it—or beside it—holding a towel for me, if you like, unless you druther scrub my back?”

“I think... I'd better... finish the paper first,” said Peyton, sounding preoccupied; but stepping out of his big brown robe and dutifully handing it over.

“What a sweetie,” Skeeter murmured. By dint of biting her tongue, she managed to keep out of Gigglesville till safe in the tub, with shower curtain pulled and nozzle-spray roaring. Then: oh my GAWudd! *Hee hee hee hee hee!* Those paunchifying BVDs! Taken in conjunction with the fez and slippers and nose and smudgestache and chest hair and leg hair and distracted expression, they gave Peyton (hoople hoople hoople) the appearance of a pasha who'd mislaid his Turkish bath:

*Nothing in it, nothing in it,
But a ribbon round it.*

Poor sweet honey, who'd better not be turning moodish and broodish on her again—especially not over that double-dealing Dream Girl of his, with her many flaws and faults and what Skeeter felt confident had been a seriously fat ass. Not a trimly! tautly! rounded one, with a capacity for turning the other cheek (cackle) or sheer jubilation at just *being* here, alive and awake and in this beloved tub with that beloved bearskin waiting to enwrap you, and your very own Paramour Pasha within easy reach once and for all, now and forever.

So splish splash Gurglesville, scrub-a-glub-dub! Sing about girls just wanting to have fun, UH-oh! UH-oh! Favorite new song, courtesy of a compact snookums named

Cyndi Lauper, who in her kitschy-koo habiliments looked a lot like Skeeter Kitefly impersonating RoBynne O’Ring. *I wanna be the one to bop in the sun; I’m So Unusual*—

Hopping out, dripping dry, dehydrating that everpeachy everfuzzy coif flickering like a flamethrower in the blowdryer, boy howdy! Put on oversized glasses and purloined robe; collect your hairbrush and Churl the Squirrel; head for the kitchen, discover it empty.

“Are you hiding? Am I supposed to seek you?”

(Silence.)

“Should I count to twenty thousand first?”

No answer.

Oh Jeez. What now?

She climbed the little staircase to peek into the miniloft, and there found Peyton sitting in a brown study and half a grey sweatsuit. Communing bare-leggedly with the middle distance.

“Do you ever miss your father?” he asked.

“My *father*? No. Why?”

“I was just thinking...”

Not very cheerily, either; the buoyance brought by coffee and cobbler had evaporated, and he sat sunk in gloom.

Skeeter perched on the top step and started brushing her blonde whomp. “Well, if you mean Gower, he was never really around enough TO miss. And *AR*nold, of course, I can get him on the phone whenever I want, but he’s never been much of a talker.”

She surfaced from opulent depths to watch Peyton light his longstemmed pipe.

“I just remembered,” he said. “Been bugging me all morning. Today would have been my father’s sixtieth birthday.”

“Your father was a *Pisces*? That seems a little fishy, doesn’t it?” (Brush. Brush.) “What was he like, your dad? I know you told me before, but I think I was asleep at the time.”

“Well...” (Puff. Puff.) “They didn’t call him ‘Lucky Pierre’ for nothing.”

In his youth he'd shown brilliant talent as a pianist, been urged to refine it to classical caliber, but a Chico Marxlike love for gambling kept him plugging away on the nightclub circuit. He'd rehearse with racing forms propped beside his sheet music; come home from tours either bearing expensive presents or emptyhanded and -pocketed. Seldom won at cards or pool or roulette, but always paid most of his debts. Had a Chicolike eye for the ladies too, for *filles de joie* of every age and race; but always remained faithful (in his heart) to Peyton's mother. As for Antoinette: it was gumbo this and gazpacho that, jambalaya every day and lots of Gallic shrugs. She loved the world of art, visiting studios and galleries, cultivating pet painters and sculptors—youngish men, more often than not. Maybe she and Lucky Pierre hadn't lived in conventional bliss, but they'd spent thirty years together and shown every evidence of staying that way to the end of their lives.

As indeed they had.

Vacationing in Quebec at the summer place of their crony Martell Delamain, a gentleman of means (and pinky rings, Havana cigars, and inscrutable sources of income) who was a friend to many families—including a capital-F one in Montreal. He and the Derentes were anchored off Île-aux-Coudres on the *Sambuca*, Mart's cushy old cabin cruiser, on a halcyon day disturbed only by the WHOOMP of the boat blowing up—scattering debris from helter to skelter and sinking with the loss of all aboard.

A long-winded bilingual inquest failed to determine whether this explosion had been the result of gas fumes accumulating in the *Sambuca's* bilge, or an odd spinoff from the ongoing rivalry between Sicilian and Calabrese elements in the Montreal mob.

Either way: freakishly circuslike.

Of course it is. Of course they are.

And of course they left an estate so monstrously snafu'd it took a full year to slither through probate court. During which limbo-stretch Peyton was not allowed to sell the Chesterfield bungalow or even empty it of its forlorn green Buddhas and doleful carven owls.

The clan out at Lake Severn, Quarty and Sanka and Jazzbo and all, offered poorly camouflaged charity that Peyton declined, more than once. He tightened his slackening belt;

moved to the crackerbox walkup by the Interstate onramp; tried to throw himself into his dayjob and monograph. Broken branches, fallen leaves; heave and ho.

And then the wholly unexpected legacy—a bumper crop, even after the tax harvesters got through with it. He still suspected someone had misplaced a decimal point, or hit the zero key more times than intended. How Lucky Pierre and Antoinette had managed to leave *any* assets untapped was a mystery more unfathomable than the explosion that turned them into so many smithereens.

(Puff. Puff. Puff.)

Skeeter, though longing for a Pall Mall, stayed put on the top step of the miniloft staircase. Making no move other than to keep sifting through her wealth of yellow hair.

(Brush. Brush. Brush.)

Peyton took the pipe out of his mouth. Cleared his throat and continued.

“Too much else had happened at the time, so it didn’t sink in... ah... so to speak. At the time all I could think was, ‘Such is Life.’ And then when I’d work on the monograph” (pointing pipestem at nearby stacks of APE paper) “I’d see Ewell achieving stylistic breakthroughs with *Daring Dewey*, only to throw it all away. Or watch it being taken away. And I’d wonder if *he* thought, ‘Such is Life.’”

“As Per Usual,” Skeeter mumbled to Churl the Squirrel. “But now?...”

“The part that bothers me most? That it happened to them *just like that*. Of course, for their sakes, I hope it did. But still: one moment you’re here, the next you’re not, it’s all over in a matter of seconds—and then you’re gone. Forever. And ever. Whatever the Reverend Howie and your Dough Girl friend might say.”

They sat awhile in silence then.

Weary of confession-making and -taking: the confusions of absolution.

Skeeter disentangled her hairbrush, setting it down among the sprung-loose flaxen threads. Split ends in need of gathering up and tying together; winkle winkle winkle.

“So,” she said, “is that It, then?”

His eyelids twitched, and turned to her.

“Lately,” he said, “I haven’t been so sure...”

“Well thank *GOD!* I was beginning to think you were *never* going to admit it—move over, Pasha—” She squeezed in beside him, found his fez and donned it at a rakish angle. “Now we’re getting someplace! And since we’re on the subject: who *was* St. Mintred, anyway?”

“Mmph?”

“I mean I’ve been working at his hospital and going to his university for months now, but I’ve never heard of him—as a saint—so who?—”

“St. Mintred the Suppliant. Youngest son of Ethelred the Unready. As a child he was exiled to the Abbey of St. Jumièges near Rouen, where he constantly implored visitors for money. Some say he died of a wasting fever; others that he got poisoned. At any rate he was canonized in a package deal with his older brother, Edward the Confessor; and for centuries his voice has been heard at Jumièges, saying ‘Pray give me thy purse, that I might render it unto Our Savior.’ You could call him the first televangelist—”

“You’re making this up, you turk!”

“Am I? Well, if I am—it’s an educated kind of joke, right? An ignoramus wouldn’t make a joke like that.”

He stood and struck a boulevardier pose, BVDs genteelly exposed—and *zut alors!* if Solomon Grundy wasn’t being born again on Sunday!

Behold, thou art fair, my love; yea, exponentially cuter than any miniskirted Jesusciser. Thou art of a sanguine-pink complexion that goeth achingly well with thy strawberry-golden hair and tiny little bright blue eyes. Verily, thine unpropped upper deck maketh my heart go CHING. How much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices!

All you need, after all, is a little faith in joy.

And what better way to keep the faith, to feel the joy, than to have someone to hold and be held by, all through the dark cold lonesome night?

So open up the yearbooks of your hearts and inscribe *LUVYA LUVYA LUVYA* therein, as you join them together and go cart cart cart wheel wheel wheeling all round the miniloft.

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“Let’s go out and play in the snow,” Skeeter said several hours later.

“Didn’t you have your fill of that yesterday?”

“Hey! I *never* get my fill of fun. C’mon, you know you want to play with me—”

To which, of course, there could be no denial. Out-of-doors then before the afternoon was over, lugging along a flattened carton to toboggan upon in Brecknock Park, where they found every branch and twig of every tree encased in a glassy sheath. The snowman they’d built the day before had become an ice sculpture, and the snow angels Skeeter had surrounded it with were frozen over also. She promptly fitted herself back inside one.

“This is so COOwull!”

“I daresay.”

“When I make angels in the snow, do I do good work or what? These are going to last till the end of the world! Help me up.”

He braced himself and lent a hand. “The end of the world? I hate to be the one to break this to you, but your material here has a habit of melting.”

“(Uffff—should’ve exercised a bit more.) Hey! Snow can melt and ice can thaw, but *this* is a Work of Art. I’m surprised you didn’t recognize that. We’ll rope it off with velvet cords and build a snow gallery around it and charge people money to see it and sell it to some big out-of-town collector for twenty thousand dollars, and you can write your next monowhatever about it and Richard Attenborough will buy the rights for a fabulous amount and adapt it as *Gandhi II*, and we’ll get our pictures on the cover of *Rolling Stone* and department stores will beg me to help myself to their best merchandise and the people of Belgium will declare me their Queen, and Pamela Pillsbury-Beckett can hootch down a runway every Sunday in a Playboy Bunny outfit and act out how a frog digests flies!”

(Now, *there* was a idea.)