

Five

THE CONCLUSIONS

Chapter XXIII

The Ruby Hotstuff Skeeter Kitefly

And then and then came Spring, a remarkably unMidwestern Spring, with no late killer frost to pre-empt the redbud's full bloom. And Skeeter put on her junior-miss overalls and gave Peyton's place a thorough spring cleaning, flinging wide his wine-colored curtains, yanking up the shades, letting in the sunlight, the birdsong, the wind blowing out of the west in breezes sweetly poetic.

*The wind one morning sprang up from sleep,
Saying, "Now for a frolic! now for a leap—"*

"You're going to throw a reception," said Skeeter.

"I am? In what direction?"

"Sadie's, of course! I'll lay in a bunch of hors d'oeuvres and other munchables. Nothing too heartburny—she's bound to be a bundle of nerves—and then there's all those kids to think of—"

"All *whose* kids to think of?"

"—maybe just Pepperidge Farm cookies and frozen yogurt. What sort of wine goes best with that?"

Cheap, thought Peyton. Playing semivoluntary host to the Pre-Commencement Jitterfest for Mercedes Benison, BFA-to-be, plus her daughter and father and stepmother and sister Alexis and brother-in-law Lenny Czolgosz come all the way from Buffalo with eight assorted offspring, most of them loudly indignant that Peyton didn't have cable, and chanting

“I want my MTV!” (plus an occasional “We know where you’re gohhhhwing!”) at every opportunity.

There too was RoBynne O’Ring, arriving in the decorous turquoise dress she wore “to make me look, y’know, like a foggin’ grownup”—or so she told Peyton, bussing him full on the mouth as she invariably did since Peyton had sought forgiveness for calling her a fair Shunammite maiden.

(“We know what you’re gehhhhting!” said one of the older Czolgosz boys.)

(Down on hands and knees is what he’d gotten, to crawl a few token paces and beg RoBynne’s pardon—not losing his composure even when she’d added a demand for “pretty please with kiss-and-makeup on it.” Then, just as they were getting to the kiss, Skeeter had snuck up behind RoBynne to give her a double-pinch to grow a double-inch.)

(“WAUGH!!” RoBynne had gone again, prolongedly.)

(“She was enjoying it too much,” Skeeter’d explained.)

(“What about *me*?” Peyton had said, within New Wave earshot; hence all the recent full-on-the-mouthings.)

RoBynne’s presence today stemmed in part from her smutnovel *Grunts of Passion* having inspired Sadie’s senior design project, the one required in order to graduate. Sadie had been a holy terror throughout this project, threatening more than once to go insane as she extracted Ululu the antiheroine from antinarrative and repackaged her, with much bossy nova backing and forthing, into a series of sequential diptychs.

Peyton had predicted such a collaboration would result in mass disaster, but things in fact worked out quite well: the diptychs were highly commended by all, RoBynne objecting only to Ululu’s being insufficiently “built” as an odalisque.

“Y’think college types don’t appreciate bitchen bods? Lemme tell ya—this one time I was delivering Chinese takeout by motorcycle, wearing these rully short outfits? And when I’d deliver to the dorm at that Use ‘Em school Tweeter goes to, all the dudes’d follow me out to watch me like climb back on the bike. Y’shoulda seen the tips I hadda lug away from that place!”

Merely SAD, being an art school, made no ordinary conferral of academic degrees, staging instead an off-the-wall outdoor ceremony that Peyton had never yet been able to get out of attending. Which was bad enough without having his apartment crammed beforehand with sixteen people, most of them deafening and nine of them juveniles (ten if you counted RoBynne O’Ring).

Shout at Skeeter over the din: “I suppose I should be thankful you didn’t bring the basset hound!”

“Oh spare us!” she hollered back. “Just be glad Nana Gubel isn’t here!”

“I *still* haven’t had a worthwhile offer from the placement service!” Sadie complained. “It’s all because of those damn diptychs—I *knew* I should’ve stuck to mid-Victorian murderesses—God when am I going to start trusting my gut instincts?!—”

Trusting his own, Peyton donned his Master of Arts cap, gown, and hood far ahead of schedule, and started marshaling his munchable company out, down, and across the park to campus. The adults obeyed, figuring he must know what was going on; and the children went too, though it took a lot of grabbing and yanking in some cases.

“Step along, please!”

“Oh he’s so *insistent*,” Skeeter and RoBynne chorused.

By hellish chance, an ice cream truck chose that moment to go dinging past. Desi and five of her cousins set up a clamor, while three other Czolgoszes chased the truck up Glazier Street with Alexis in bullhorning pursuit. Sadie was too dazed by then to take any notice; Carrie clucked and shook her head; ARnold beamed throughout; and Peyton, thanks to westerly pollengusts, had to keep blowing his nose into his black bandanna.

Skeeter would accuse him of rank sentimentality, but Peyton would blame his sniffles on (a) the memory of Cathy Sue Hoopleman and (b) the presence of Lenny Czolgosz, who still wore Brut.

*

It had also been Skeeter’s last-semester-at-last, of course—though it wouldn’t have been, had she not overcome one final obstacle:

“I got a D, I got a D in Biology! I passed! *I passed!!* There IS a God!!!”

Having aced her four Sociology courses, she came by the Cheval to model her own newly-rented regalia. True to Use 'Em standards, the mortarboard looked lopsided and the gown like a plastic raincoat; but Skeeter was bouncy as all get out and kept flipping her hem to flash a little wellshaped wellshaven leg.

“Where'd you come by that?” asked Peyton, meaning the new gold chain around Skeeter's neck, from which Betty Boop swung astride a musical note.

“An *admirer* gave it to me for a graduation present. Somebody whose *bed* I've even shared on occasion, so are you jealous?”

“Mercedes or Desirée?”

“Both of them, actually. (Boy are *you* complacent.) So you're going to have to dig deep to top this.”

“Mmph,” was all he said, so she tried another tack.

“I'm going to be twenty-five next month, you know.”

“I ought to. You've marked the date on every calendar I own.”

“What'd you expect? You've *never* given me a birthday present, not ever!”

“I've known you for less than a year.”

“Urrrrgh!—okay, call *me* complacent, but I ASSUMED you'd be giving me *some* little token or other—I mean, you're the one to blame for my even graduating in the first place!”

“That's as may be,” he said, but relented at the sight of the crestfalling face below the lopsided mortarboard. “Very well. Perhaps you'd care to walk this way—”

Perking up in an instant: “Hey! if I could walk *that* way—”

“Har hardy har har,” said Peyton, leading her up to the miniloft, where a large box had been hidden behind the drawing table. It was about six inches thick, two feet wide, and a yard or so high; astonishingly heavy for its size, and they had a struggle bringing it down the staircase intact.

“Jeez, what have you *got* in here?” Skeeter gasped. “Big flat emeralds? Or, I know—my thousand pairs of fishnet stockings! You went to Tickle Me and bought out the store!”

“Guess again,” said Peyton. “Take your time and take your choice,” he added, laying a small sealed envelope beside the box, and holding Skeeter back as she lunged for the loot.

“*Wha-utt?* Do I only get one of these? I have to choose between them?”

“Ask me another.”

“I *want* another, I want ‘em both! Why should I have to pick just one?”

Gallic shrug: your life, my love.

She stood there for a moment, indignant fists on plastic-raincoated hips. “Well aren’t you being cryptic and riddly.” She began to gnaw her thumbnail. Big or small? Heavy or light? Permute the possibilities, combine the likelihoods, try to secondguess—“If I pick the right one... *then* can I have both?”

Peyton nodded once, then again... as, with immense hesitation, Skeeter selected the envelope. Which contained an antique pre-Hallmark card that read:

*Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
The Winter Garment of Repentance fling:
The Bird of Time has but a little way
To fly—and Lo! The Bird is on the Wing.*

“Oh well that makes EVERYthing clear!” she said, and would have grouched further had he not stepped aside and pointed to the big flat box. Skeeter promptly threw herself upon it: “Gimme a knife!—a crowbar!—a pitchfork!—open open open, come to baby... hey what *is* this? Full of paper? Oh I know—it’s your monowhatsit, isn’t it? About old APE? Did you finally finish it? You better have dedicated it to *me*—”

He had but he hadn’t, because it wasn’t.

Skeeter stared at sheet after sheet of two-ply bristol board, each containing a quartet of hand-drawn comic strips. *RUBYHOTSTUFF* they were titled, this being a compactified character with round winsome face, tipped-up nose, abruptly-pointed chin, niftily exaggerated curves, and (in the Sunday pages) flame-colored hair.

Not too astonishingly, Ruby’s comic strips jumped around a lot as they depicted her adventures growing up—well, not *up*, but advancing from sperm-and-egg conception through childhood to adolescence and beyond. *Bounce bounce bounce*: knocking over a

display of A & P tomatoes, trying to cherrybomb an empty rabbit hutch, transforming a sickbed into a trampoline and limousine and dance hall floor. There was little Ruby's earless bunny sidekick Oxidation; and there were Ruby's two ponies Cutty and Sark, hitched to a Cinderella eggplant (they were all out of pumpkins) en route to the Brownie troop bacchanal. There was her take-charge stepsister Gracie Underpressure, who wouldn't let Ruby move into her room even after heading off to college with the Spacebar Twins (Bo and Zo) and Merv the Foreign Exchange student. There was totalbitchy rival Tricia de Foiegras, who would hook up with that Thriller preacher/politico, Affirmative Jackson; and there was strapping Lappish sweetheart Bubba Rand, who would transform into the creepy-crawly snowman Abe Omminable; and there was Ruby the gameshow contestant, Ruby the patoot-tattooee, Ruby the standup improv comic:

“I was in the library taking a nap when I woke up and found my *poke* missing! I wouldn't mind so much if it'd been stolen by a cute guy, but I just *know* it was an uggo—a woman can sense these things...”

There was Ruby demanding that her creator give her a soapbox or a stack of phone books or a ladder to stand on or *something*—“Hey! I'm down HERE!” with arrows labeled HERE directed at tremendous cars speeding by, their driver's head barely visible above the steering wheel; and there was Ruby playing miniature boogaloo in a disco-dancing montage of hot hot Hotstuffs (some just need it but others of us *are* it, so nyaah to you Donna Summer); and there was Ruby getting into all kinds of escapades, being terribly irresponsible yet blithe as any spirit.

There I am—there I am—there I am—

Pingponging along in boxes four inches square, drawn in a much sparer, “cleaner” style than Peyton had ever used before. *Carpe*-ing more *diems* with less clutter, a few rapid APElike strokes, and onomatopoeia that Farf Etched could have rung changes on—*sphlort* and *squoinket* and *whump!-tump-shuffa, waah-boo!* and *yeeeeeee-HAWWWNNHH!*

And they were all for Skeeter Kitefly: Walter the guinea pig who ate nothing but hollandaise sauce, Christopher Frobbin the butterfingered lover and Leopold the Littlest Conehead ha ha ha, Lank the dinner-burning arsonist and Loretta the crazy-lady Elvis-freak,

Momma Sleeze and Definitely Gertrude and Velvette Blew the *nouvelle* Best Friend, flouting mystic ultimatums along with Isis and Osiris and Miss Amphie Tamine:

- 1) *Crinkle crinkle little sack*
- 2) *I eat Fritos by the pack*
- 3) *Mixed with gin they make me high*
- 4) *As tortillas in the sky...*

And then there was the sugardaddy confessor, Ty Kuhn—flat on his back on a freshwaxed floor, or dunking cheese wedgies in a glass of Amontillado, or struggling with a hideous serpentine mutant that turned out to be Ruby’s oversnaggled telephone cord.

In due course Ty Kuhn created an author named Fred who wrote a novel each night while in bed, till he used up his sheets and so cold turned his feet that he switched to short stories instead—all about Li’l Bitsy, the Girl of his Dreams at that particular depth-level. And so presumably on and on, *ad infinitum*: each Him molding a vessel for each Her, out of the amazing colossal scrunched-down essence that She’d shared with Him in the first place.

The joys of the compact. Short, maybe, soon over and done with; but able to grasp the Great Scheme of Things entire and remold it nearer Art’s desire.

(“Who’s Art and what’s *he* got to do with it?” Skeeter asked; finding it necessary to punch Peyton on the arm when he replied that Art was a lonely unter.)

Only a paper moon sailing over a cardboard sea; mere scenery, not reality. Let the trickledowners claim their fantasies are, in fact, Fact: for what is Real Life, in the end, but Raw Stuff from which imagery can be extracted? You may have to add some hype if you don’t want it to be a ciphe, but that’s where your creative license comes in. Abracadabra! Undo the hoodoo, nullify the hex! Gift of the GoFoC Magi to otherwise ordinary mortals: the ability to make you make-believe, to find Meaning and Purpose and bid your fears goodbye—you can fly, you can *fly*—

So this is Reality?

Improve on It, then.

And when you have done so, unfold me a story and hang me a tale....

*

“What’s the next step?” Skeeter wanted to know. “How do we share Ruby ‘n’ me with the admiring public, and make several fortunes out of our scrumptious Hotstuff? Hold on—” (*Screeeeeeeeee.*)

“Presuming we survive this road trip,” said Peyton, “you must realize there’s next to no market for daily comic strips nowadays. To make *Ruby* peddleable I’ll have to edit it down—”

“Nooooo!—”

“—to thirty-two pages, and turn it into a comic book.”

“The first of a series! And why stop at one? Make it two or three—”

“Well, the salability might be improved that way. You could self-publish the book—”

“You talking to *me*?”

“—for a grand or two: limited press run, glossy cover, newsprint guts—”

“—oh yugg—”

“—or on oversized slick paper and call it a ‘graphic novel,’ and try to distribute it to the comic specialty shops. Lots of competition there, limited shelfspace; but if the first book sells, you *might* be able to interest a publisher in picking it up for a series. And then—”

“—there’s all the merchandising tie-ins!” said Skeeter. “Not to mention the movie rights and firework concessions... Hey! What would’ve happened if I’d picked the *box* first?”

“You’d have gotten the card second, and it would have served as a coda or ‘moral’ instead of an intro—”

“But—I thought you said I had to make the right choice to get them both.”

Peyton gave her a sidelong once-over. “Well, obviously they were *both* right choices.”

“You absolute TURK!” she cried, walloping him. “I was *agonizing* over which one to choose!—”

“Will you kindly keep your hands on the wheel and your eyes on the Interstate for God’s sake please!”

“That’s no fun,” she mumped, and a moment later took hold of his left arm and draped it behind her neck. “I just thought it was supposed to be an either/or situation. You know, like The Lady or The Tiger.”

“Ah...” he said. “But, you see, you fill both bills very nicely.”

“Well of *course*...”

*

Skeeter having flung her lopsided mortarboard in the air, she and Peyton and Clarence the Dodge Dart were following the elder Benisons back to Marble Orchard for a postgrad weekend visit. But Clarence dawdled along the way, detouring around Demortuis to drive down Pawnee Road, across South 48th Street, and past the picturesque arches that still declared this the best of all possible entries to

CORNWALL

Up the four-lane beanstalk of Penzance Boulevard they rose, leaving behind Tintagel and Boscastle, Camelford and St. Ives. And there beyond Land’s End they came to the uttermost brink of cloudland: and on it were the Pillars of Hercules.

A highrise hilltop was the western Pillar, outscaled perhaps by its eastern neighbor, but that was barren and cheerless while the western Pillar was in full June bloom. From its summit, on a clear near-summer day like this, it was possible to behold the world in all its vibrancy and intensity: chlorophyll glistening in every leaf on every tree, green upon green upon green, through which brown branches wove like a box of Irish Girl Scout cookies run riot. And the sky above was a page torn out of a children’s Bible, a yonder wide and blue as far as the eye could see, pushing the panorama as far as it could go in every direction.

Skeeter kicked off her sneakers, yanked off her socks, and began capering about barefoot. “I learned this in Asia Minor! Make contact with the earth, get your tootsies as close to it as you can—”

“You don’t fool me with that down-to-earth talk,” said Peyton. “Any moment now I expect to see you go floating off—”

“—to Feather Adventureland, tra la!” She romped around a rosebush in lieu of a mulberry, skipping and spinning in her snug short-shorts and snugger T-shirt (this one posing the question AREN’T I WONDERFUL?), with her freshly-perm’d saffron whomp billowing hither and thither. “Wouldn’t this be a great place to go hang gliding off of? You’ve *never* taken me hang gliding.”

“There’s a very good reason for that.”

“Oh come on! When have I ever steered you wrong? Don’t be so mule-stubborn. My Gramma always said when a man gets like that, he needs a woman to knock some sense into his head. So watch your step!”

“Precisely why you won’t find me hang gliding,” said Peyton. “I’ll sit here and applaud your efforts—and pick up the pieces, if necessary.”

“Aw PEEshaw,” said Skeeter, pausing in front of him. “Another thing Gramma said that *her* Grandma always told her: If you learn nothing else from life, you should know two home truths!”

Pointing one finger: “When you fall down, get up and dust yourself off, apply sticking plaster, and move on.”

Pointing a second: “You can always catch a husband, but with men so lazy you’d best get an education first.”

Wagging V-for-victory: “Buckle my shoe!”

“The Two Universal Maxims,” said Peyton. “Passed down through generations *ad infinitum*. I can see you passing them along to *your* granddaughter, one of these decades—”

“PuhLEEZE! I’m just a grohhhhwing child.” Who resumed her merry-go-rounding.

“Mmph. Perhaps that’s what she meant by the dresser drawer.”

“What?” said Skeeter, brought to a dead halt. “Who? *Wha*-utt? TELLLL me—”

“Your grandmother,” said Peyton. “That bit you couldn’t figure out, about the dresser in the sewing room? ‘There in the third drawer—from the top—toward the back—’”

Pointing one finger: “Bobbins, for gathering together loose threads—”

Pointing a second: “Safety pins, for getting up, dusting yourself off, and moving on.”

She stood there a moment as if turned to stone.

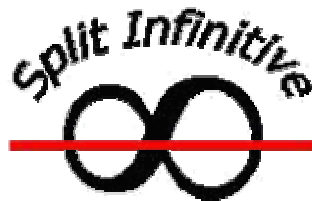
Then: SHWEEEEEE-OOOP! she went, she sang, bounding over to plant a whizbang whirligig *mmmm-wah!* on his nose, as the west wind swept the Pillartop with a rush and a roar to blow her perm'd billow into a peachy fuzzy mushroom cloud—

—so grab hold of the earth with the tips of your toes, spread your arms and stretch your bod and *feel* the power of cutiepiety, *be* in tune with the infinite: BOP-budda-bop-budda-bop-budda-BOP—

—while Peyton applauded and played out the string, awaiting Skeeter's presumable return from the heights of the sky.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P. S. EHRLICH was born, raised, and educated in Kansas City, Missouri. After enduring thirty-one summers and winters there, he exchanged Middle Western climate for Puget Sound's in 1988. Employed by the University of Washington (not necessarily as an instructor), he lives with himself outside Seattle.



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