

Chapter 2

Two Points

Item: little blonde girl in a sickbed.

Item: little blonde girl in a little hand mirror, checking out what she could see of herself *in* the sickbed.

What've we got here? Small round pink face, small round blue eyes. Buttony nose and chin each coming to a point—*there she is! there she is!* “Rather diminutive altogether,” as Uncle Buddy said. And all of it made littler still by a great big whomp of hair the color of a goldenrod Crayola.

Not to mention the mouth you could open stuPENdously wide and almost fit your fist inside. Grimace with admiration at the gaping gap in that mouth: look, Ma, no front teeth! The two babies that used to be there had turned into a couple of Hershey's Semi-Sweet chocolate bars, after a short spell as Tooth Fairy dimes.

Grimace again and chafe chafe chafe—the old springs beneath you squoinketing *eeeenh eeeenh eeeenh!* So what about the sickbed? It was a four-poster, to begin with: not very big but plenty long enough and wide enough for the likes of Skeeter Beeter Bodeeter Kitefly. Clothes and stuff could be hung on the bedposts when Gramma fussed about them being strewn over the carpet. And the posts came in extra handy when the bed had to serve as a sports car or sailing vessel, dance hall or trampoline—each equipped with an identical velveteen patchwork quilt, adaptable to various purposes. Right now it was just a quilt.

Beneath it were a blanket and sheet keeping their hospital corners even after ten hours of playing nocturnal Twister. Gramma the ex-RN (for Extra Really Nursey) knew the fine art of bedmaking: *smooth* that sheet, *smoooooth* it out and double-fold with a tuck tuck tuck (last one for luck).

Sheets and pillowcases of a silly-looking frilly print, as though they were made from leftover underwear material. The pillows themselves, which had to be punched every night before sleep could come: one! two! three! a leery postman! Sometimes this caused a feather to escape and float off, tra la, to Feather Adventureland—

—leaving Skeeter stuck in this bed with a case of the German measles.

Again she used the little mirror to examine her fading rubella spots. Red was her favorite color too, the brighter the better, and she'd found her spots not unbecoming; but now they were un-becoming.

Skeeter had no sooner landed in a sickbed than she'd entertained high hopes of ambulances and oxygen tents, her life being despaired of, all her friends at school chipping in to buy flowers that could double if necessary as a funeral wreath. But what a gyp: nothing but a week of tucked-in isolation and denial of TV rights, since Gramma wouldn't move the family Magnavox upstairs.

Confined like this, you might just as well catch up on your reading (sigh). Couch yourself in proper storybook terms:

“A land there was in days of old, called the Great American Middle West. And in that land, a state there was called Nilnisi; and in that state, a city there was called Demortuis; and in that city, a Certain Person's mother lived but enough about *her*—this story's about the Certain Person, who dwelt in Booth County, in Marble Orchard, in the House With All the Porches—”

—alone in this bed with what was left of the German measles. And old Timmy the half-stuffed horse.

Rusty Bugs had disappeared some months before, having become so grossly oxidated as to require laundering and hanging out to dry. Gramma'd pinned him to the clothesline by his ears—unfortunately on the day of a big windstorm, at the end of which only the ears

remained. But Gramma had salvaged the situation by making up a series of bedtime stories about Earless Bugs, his wild-dust-bunny companions, and all their inattentive adventures in the land of Whiskaway. None of which got written down and that was a darn shame too, particularly at this stuck-in-bed-with-no-TV moment.

Actually Skeeter liked to read and owned quite a few books, some of them old family legacies, others precociously requested from Uncle Buddy and other literate-minded folk. *Stuart Little*, of course. *Beezus and Ramona*. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. *Henry Reed's Journey*. *The Marvelous Inventions of Alvin Fernald*. *Misty of Chincowhatsit* and her horsey friends. *Mary Poppins*, *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, *Mary Poppins Opens the Door*. All these and several more were on the shelf above Skeeter's bedside table; or at least there was a shelf above her bedside table where they belonged. After the past week's isolation they could be found strewn over the carpet and heaped on desk and chair. One was in bed with her now, the very best book of all time: and that, of course, was *Bagelanna*. Pick it up and find your place; settle down with a squoinketing bounce.

When last we left our heroine she was still a-wandering in the Forest of Galagonya, a-carrying her emptying bagelbag. (Skeeter wished she had that bagelbag right here and it full of savory bakery munchables, and them in her mouth in place of Gramma's thermometer. You could pretend it was a cigarette for only just so long.)

Suddenly Bagelanna spied a light in the darkness and made for it. She came to a clearing, and in that clearing was a dwelling-house, and through the window of that dwelling-house could be seen a hearthfire glowing red. Bagelanna knocked on the dwelling-house door, and then she rapped on it, and then she pounded—

—and then she was confronted by a Gobbogoki! A frightful big Gobbogoki too, with three monstrous heads, each wearing a tasseled nightcap of hideous design. In one hand the Gobbogoki bore a flaming candelabrum; the other knuckled the eyes of each head in turn, none of them looking pleased at being roused out of bed.

“Who might you be thinking you be, waking me up in the midst of night?!” roared the Gobbogoki—

PWAH! went Skeeter as she spat out the thermometer, almost following it up with a shriek. But the unexpected creature in her doorway turned out to be Gramma Otto in noiseless nurse-type shoes, with a trayful of breakfast and not just any breakfast but a proper chowdown of eggs and bacon and biscuits and gravy and OJ and Nestlé's Quik.

No need for Gramma's "Now I want you to eat every bit of this, and drink every drop of your juice," since Skeeter despite her bitsy-smallness could and did eat like a couple of horses, and was tucking in with a happyhazard will and way. "Tastes better with a napkin," Gramma added, dodging between forkthrusts to drape one in front of Skeeter's T-shirt nightie. (Which was red, of course, and a shade particularly selected to set off rubella spots in their prime.)

Gramma inspected the pwah'd thermometer. "Hawney," she said, "just for once, just to be different, I wish you'd keep this in your mouth till I take it out... hum. *Ninety-nine* point six. Well, considering what a whirling dervish you are, I'd say that's just about normal..."

She sat down on the double-folded bed-edge and blew her nose. Skeeter looked up from the last of the over-easies. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Is it Grampa?"

"What? Oh, no. I just got some sad news is all. My Uncle Stanley passed away last night."

"Which one was he?" asked Skeeter, pointing her fork at a framed photo of the Wunderlich Family Quartet circa 1913, when its renditions of "No Night There" and "Nearer My God to Thee" had not their match in all Booth County.

"Don't point," said Gramma. "Uncle Stanley's not in that picture. He was never one for music or singing."

"Guess he didn't go to Heaven then."

"Kelly Rebecca! That's not respectful!"

"Sorry. So what did he do?"

"Practiced dentistry in Demortuis."

Skeeter choked on a biscuit and came up cackling. "DEN-tiss-tree in Duh-MORE-tew-uss!"

Gramma grinned too, a trifle ruefully. “Wipe your mouth, and try chewing next time... Don’t know why I should have the sniffles, at that. Seventy-seven he was, and the most boring person in the state of Nilnisi. Unless it was his wife Minnie.”

“Minnie! Was she a mouse?”

“No, she was a pill. A Real Pill. *And* they put on airs. Would phone you up of a Sunday afternoon and hold forth till heck wouldn’t have it. Still, there it is—he’s gone; the last of my aunts and uncles. Does make a body feel old.”

Skeeter, having conquered her juice in one long chug, came up for air and asked whether Uncle Stanley had always been a dullard.

“That’s not very respectful either,” Gramma chided. “It wasn’t entirely his fault. He was the baby of the family, for one thing, and kind of got spoiled by Grandma Wunderlich and Aunt Livy.”

“*I* remember *her*,” Skeeter boasted, meaning Aunt Livy, and she practically did; at any rate there was an image in her mind of a wispy white-haired lady trying to teach Baby Kelly how to whistle. (Baby had no trouble making the necessary pucker-and-blow, but could produce only bubbles.)

“But there was one person who never spoiled Uncle Stanley,” Gramma continued, “and that was my father. They were just so different, there was never much hope of their getting along. In fact they—well, they hated each other. It’s a terrible thing to say about brothers, but it happens.”

Stanley, it seemed, was always kind of fat and slow and fussy, an indoors-type who couldn’t abide being out in the sun, while his big brother Lou was a born athlete. “More than anything else, my Dad wanted to be a pro baseball player. And he was good, too, good enough to play in the county league. But all that came to an end when he tried to steal third sliding and tore up his whole left side—hip, leg, foot. Broke his foot something awful. They wanted to fetch a doctor, but Dad wouldn’t have it—said just to take him home, he’d ‘sleep it off.’ He was that mule-stubborn.”

“Sounds like Grampa,” said Skeeter, attending to her saved-till-last Quik.

“Hum. Well, they did take Dad home—couldn’t get him up the stairs, so they put

him on the horsehair sofa in the parlor, and there he lay groaning. Uncle Stanley came down to complain about the noise, took one look at Dad's foot and fainted away. Dad never let him forget it, of course."

But the last laugh was on Gramma's father, who walked with a limp for the rest of his life. Which he chafed away, out of sheer frustration. "Towards the end Dad had ulcers and high blood pressure, wanted everything right-this-minute, shouted at you when it wasn't. Scared the bejeebers out of your poor Aunt Ollie when she was a little girl. Your Mommy probably doesn't remember him at all; she was only three when he died."

"I wouldn't've been scared of him," Skeeter said, too loudly.

"Shush!... No, I expect you wouldn't." Gramma frowned at Skeeter's pushed-aside tray, its plate and glasses emptied of the last crumb and drop. "When a man gets like that, he needs a woman to look after him—knock some sense into his head, if that's what it takes. Didn't help that my Mama died so young (a weak heart, she had) and then when Dad remarried it was to a—well, let's just say she had a *bad* heart."

"You had a wicked stepmother? Neat!"

"You can find those outside of storybooks, true enough. But never mind, she never did me any harm; my sister and I were raised here in this house, by our Grandma Wunderlich. And *she* always said, 'If you learn nothing else in this life, it should be two home truths.' And one of them was: 'When you fall down, get up and dust yourself off, apply sticking plaster, and move on.'"

"What's sticking plaster?"

"Old-fashioned bandaids. Anyhow, that was one lesson my poor Dad never learned. I'm trying to teach it to your Grampa. And he's trying, hawney, trying as best he can to keep going and be like he was. But it's hard... You know yourself, now, that being sick in bed's no spring picnic. We have to help out, and understand, and overlook what we can."

"Knock some sense into his head," Skeeter suggested.

"That too," said Gramma. "Don't be afraid to tell me, hawney, if Grampa ever disturbs you."

Skeeter said she wouldn't, again too loudly, and again got shushed.

Gramma stood up and smoothed out her housedress. Old reflexive habit made her inspect the sheets on her patient's bed, and give a clinical glance to its bitsy-sized occupant. Not as specklefaced after the past week's isolation, but Skeeter's eyes were still undimmed: blue they were, blue as a cloudless country sky, like...

"Did you know your Grampa ran away from home when he was just fifteen? Well, he did. And he was big for his age, so he could lie—well, fib—about how old he was, so the army took him on, and off he went."

"Where?"

"Why, over there—to France, of course. Came back determined to work his way across America. Made it as far as Booth County. Took a job with Power & Light when he was just eighteen, and never left."

Every life had its ups and downs. On the one hand, you had your burdens; on the other, your blessings; and it was up to you to count the blessings if you wanted to count *on* them. So: if Bert Otto hadn't stayed on in Booth County, he would never have met Addie Wunderlich, wouldn't have charmed and wooed her with his ways. Big for his age he was and remained. Everything he did had a sort of expansive flair.

"Used to take me dancing," Gramma recalled. "Three times a week when we first kept company; my Grandma didn't quite approve. Can you imagine your Grampa dancing the Black Bottom? Well, for a big man he did it mighty fine. Light as a feather he was..."

So it's off to Feather Adventureland again we go, tra la—such were life's blessings. As for its burdens: well, keep your sticking plaster handy.

"Hum!" said Gramma. "High time I stopped gossiping and headed downstairs. There's the ironing to attend to, and lunches to fix, and by then I think I'll have earned me a couple of stories." (Meaning *As the World Turns* and *The Edge of Night*, of course.) "And no you can't come down to watch *Dark Shadows*; dreadful show. Absolutely not, young lady."

"I wanna go out and play," grumped Skeeter. "It's been a whole weeeek..."

"Well, if you feel lively enough, you can always—"

“Clean my room (sigh).”

“Aunt Livy kept this room in apple-pie order every day of her life, even when she was over eighty. Now it looks like a landfill with a door on it. At least you could pick those books up off the carpet and put them where they belong.”

She was turning to go when Skeeter asked, “What was the second thing?”

“Hum?”

“The other home truth your Grandma said to know.”

“Oh—ha! ‘You can always catch a husband, but with men so lazy you’d best get an education first.’ Remember that, hawney, and study hard.”

So: back to *Bagelanna*. Pick it up and find your place. When last we left our heroine, she was being roared at by a Gobbogoki; and who might she be thinking she be?

“I might be thinking I be Anna o’Jrebma,” replied that staunch-hearted baker-girl.

“And what might you be wanting here, poking your unwelcome nose into my private ghaankland?”

“I might be seeking food and shelter,” Bagelanna told him. “And prepared I am to work for both, as a baker-girl of some talent and repute.”

“Well!” said the Gobbogoki, looking her down and up with each of his horrible shortsighted heads, and finally grinning with two. “No need have I for baking, but I could use just such a spirited lass as yourself to look after my ghaanks...”

And so forth. Bagelanna was about to meet her fellow ghaankherdresses, who would turn out to be those dumb Damsels in Silver and in Gold and in need of rescue, when Skeeter heard a *whump!-tump-shuffa*, coming down the hall.

Put down your book, throw back the covers, be prepared to jump.

Whump!-tump-shuffa. Whump!-tump-shuffa.

The old man appeared in the doorway with another *whump!-tump-shuffa*, and Skeeter leaped out of bed with a squoinketing *eeeenh*. The old man paused then, leaning heavily on his walker, one hand knuckled and the other alight; sweatbeads stood on his brow and ran

down his face. But when he looked at Skeeter, it was with eyes every bit as undimmed a blue as her own.

“Back for more?” Skeeter asked. “I’m gonna wipe you out.”

“Ho,” went her grandfather. He drew himself up to his full height—still big for his age, despite it all—and plowed through the carpet-strew, making gradual way to Skeeter’s little desk chair. There he stopped, reached down with the hand retaining a sound grip, and got hold of a couple of books, placing them on the already crowded desktop. (A third book slipped and fell; the old man chose to ignore this.) Chair cleared, Grampa Otto lowered himself onto it by slow degrees.

Skeeter had meanwhile been emptying her wastebasket and balancing it atop the cluttered dresser. From one of its drawers she grabbed a hidden collection of regulation papercrumps. Half she heaped on her desk, within the old man’s easy reach; the other half she hugged to her happyhazard bosom as she hopped back into bed.

Which was now a four-postered basketball court; the velveteen quilt, its polished hardwood floor; and for the next half hour Skeeter and her Grampa engaged in a one-on-one freethrow contest, each going “Hey” and “Ho” when baskets were made—

—but shushedly, and with fingers often raised to lips, so that Gramma might not be disturbed.

