

## Chapter 5

### *Power & Light*

“—so then she took this sheet of paper and made like a black border around it and wrote, ‘If that’s the way it’s going to be, what’s the point of being alive?’ And then she swallowed a whole bottle of aspirin. But it only made her throw up a jillion times, all *white*.”

“Good grief!” said Uncle Buddy. “And how old did you say she is?”

“Janey? She just turned nine, same as me.”

“And all this because—”

“—her folks wouldn’t let her watch *Laugh-in* anymore. (That’s my suitcase, coming down now.) Anyway: I kept thinking about her every time I looked out the plane window and saw those lumpy white clouds.”

“Talk about your Valley of the Dolls!” said Buddy. “Marble Orchard style, of course—if there could *be* such a thing as ‘Marble Orchard style.’ Now, is this all your baggage?”

“Well I wanted to pack a hatbox too, only I don’t have any what you’d call hats. What I should’ve done is bring two or three *empty* suitcases, and fill ‘em up while I’m here.”

“Attagirl! This way, darling.”

It was the week before school started and Skeeter was supposed to be spending it visiting her mother; but that lady, preoccupied with a brand-new gentleman friend, had suggested instead a week in Chicago with Uncle Buddy, who was happy to oblige. The flight here had been great: stewardesses and fellow passengers showing her lots of attention,

the captain or co-pilot (somebody in a scrambled-egg cap, anyway) coming back to hope she was “finding everything to her satisfaction.” Plus they gave her a bunch of free souvenir goodies, stuff she probably would have missed out on had Mom or Gramma tagged along.

She’d acted properly blahZAY about traveling alone by air, as though it hadn’t been three whole years since her last plane trip and the first time ever by herself. The only thing she’d been afraid of was it ending way too soon, but the flight took longer than expected and arrived a couple of hours late. Even then they didn’t let them get off (“disembark!” hee hee) for awhile; rumor was that the Vice President of the United States had just landed and was hogging their place at the terminal. You’d think a Vice President would have his *own* place. But this being a man named “Hubert Humphrey,” nothing about him could be too astonishing.

The airport in Chicago was complete chaos, just as a big city airport ought to be; but Buddy Otto stood out among the mob. He and Skeeter both started hopping up and down when they spotted each other, Uncle Buddy hopping with what he called True Effect since he now weighed upward of 250.

“How you’ve grown!” she told him, and “What boss threads!”—extra-large paisley shirt, vast striped slacks, and a Fu Manchu moustache on his plump round face. This actually make him look like a young blond Oliver Hardy (as opposed to his sister Aunt Ollie, who come to think of it kind of resembled Stan Laurel).

“I’d planned to give you a little tour of town to kick things off—if your plane had been on time, that is.” Buddy checked his watch and clucked his tongue. “But now—that is, if you’re not too tired—”

“No, look!” (*Bounce bounce bounce.*) “I can keep this up forever! I tried timing myself so I could tell the Guinness World Record people, but I keep having to quit to go to bed or school or things.”

“Well then, here’s what I propose we do—”

“Oh! oh! Uncle Buddy! can we please go see *Rosemary’s Baby?*”

“What? That is a FILM.”

“A scary one, too! I just love scary movies and I never get to see enough. Or howzabout *2001*? I hear that’s *really* weird. They say this bunch of monkeys dance around a big black slab that makes waa-waa noises at them, and then this computer kills a bunch of astronauts in their sleep!”

THUD from Skeeter’s suitcase as Buddy let it drop to the ground. “Child! You are in *dire* need of Live Drama. Happily I have tickets for *Gypsy* at the McGurn at eight. We have just enough time to catch a bite first, so let’s hustle; the car’s this way. (Slabs that make waa-waa noises!)”

They hustled along gigantic corridors and down a gargantuan escalator, Buddy fussing en route about movies and what he called their corruptive effect on acting. Then they were brought up short, and made to wait with a group of other airport-exiters till the Vice President’s limo departed.

“There goes Hubert Humphrey,” Skeeter informed her uncle.

“And his middle name is Horatio,” he replied.

“*Stop* it! Hee hee hee!”

She recovered in time to admire Buddy’s cuuuute little candy-apple-red MG. First from the parked outside and then from the convertible inside as they raced down the expressway, their hair blowing in the August wind—or Skeeter’s, anyway; Buddy’s was a tad too sparse.

“Is that why you grew the Fu Manchu? Are you going to try a beard next?”

“Hmm? Sorry, darling, this is only the second time I’ve driven this car on the freeway, and I’m just the least touch nervous... Here’s where we’d turn off if we were going home.”

Buddy lived on Devon Avenue (which he said the natives pronounced DEEEvawwn) not far from a school called Loyola that Skeeter thought sounded Hawaiian. Buddy shared his apartment with an equally fat roommate named Gig, and even someone Skeeter-sized might have found it a bit of a pinch if Gig weren’t going to be down at the stockyards all week, working at a big convention.

CRACK!

“*What was that??*” went Buddy.

“I just snapped my bubble gum.”

“Oh my stars and garters! I thought my time had come. DON’T do that again, please, this car is temperamental enough... Well, we’ve made it as far as the Loop.”

A confusion of sights, an agreeably rollercoastery effect: skyscraping towers on either side, and a rumbling train up on a track like an endless bridge.

“That’s the El,” said Buddy.

“And this is an MG,” said Skeeter. “Guess we know our P’s and Q’s.”

They hustled on to Gusenberg’s, a little steakhouse on Dearborn, where it took Buddy no more than ten minutes to put away a medium-rare T-bone smothered in onions. Skeeter had a slightly smaller version of the same, followed by a shpritz of Buddy’s Binaca “to take the curse off.” Then out along a grey concrete sidewalk between grey concrete buildings under a grey concrete overpass or viaduct or something high in the air, anyway; and so to the McGurn Theater and mezzanine seats for *Gypsy*.

This proved to be a funny-enough musical with familiar-sounding songs. Not as good as a computer killing spacemen, of course; but it made for engaging entertainment (or at any rate diversion) as did the whispered sarcasms she traded with Buddy about the actresses’s legs and the chorus boys’s faces.

“What was all that mumbling about?” Buddy asked out on the mezzanine, after the final curtain call.

“*What* a bitch. *Oh* I hated her.”

“Who? Rose? She’s supposed to project that sort of—”

“No, not Rose!—that Dainty Baby June!

*If Momma was married I’d act like a bitch  
Just like I do now all the time—*

—as if she was the mincy-pincy Queen Bitch of the World... hey! You didn’t say, ‘Don’t say bitch.’”

“Well,” said Buddy, “if the leash fits, wear it.”

“All right!” Skeeter cheered. “Bitch bitch bitch bitch bitch—”

“The word’s not a cow, darling. Don’t milk it.”

A tall young man with long white hair and a Nehru jacket brushed past them on the stairs. “Hi, Buzzy. Who’s your little chum?”

“Who was *that?*” asked Skeeter.

“Just a friend. A rather careless friend.”

“He called you ‘Buzzy.’”

“Yes he did. Don’t tell Gramma, okay?”

(As if Gramma would care whether a trendy-looking guy in Chicago pronounced his D’s like Z’s.)

The McGurn had been heavily air-conditioned, but outside there was actually kind of a chill in the air. *And* gusty blasts of wind off the Great Lake only a few blocks away. Skeeter almost began to wish she’d packed a sweater like Gramma’d advised. Maybe she could run after careless Mr. Nehru and borrow his jacket.

“Getting back to Baby June,” Buddy resumed as they reached the MG, “I think that’s a role *you* could play.”

“Me? Oh puhLEEZE. You’ll make me upchuck like Janey Orrick.”

“Alas, poor Orrick. And here in the Big City we say ‘upcharles,’ darling.” He wrestled his sizable bulk behind the wheel while Skeeter giggled herself silly. “Now, I’ve heard you sing, and I’ve seen you bounce around—”

“And now you’re going to make me a star! Even before I show you what I learned when I was a Brownie! We drove our troop leader insane and freed her to become a professional belly dancer. Before she left town she taught us how to bump ‘n’ grind like teeny-boppers.”

“You’re making that up! Oh, what a story!”

“No, honest!—just like Gypsy Rose Lee, but with *impact*.”

“I think you’re still a few years shy of *impact*,” said her uncle, revving the car. “Right now it’s more like *compact*, and that’s better in keeping with Baby June. Think you could kick your leg over your head like she did?”

Skeeter did so then and there in the moving MG, causing Buddy to swerve and kill the engine.

After a moment of quiet: “I asked did you *think* you could.”

“Oh. Sorry about that, Chief. Yes: I *think* I might be able to.”

(*Rrr rrr rrr* from the MG.)

“So, any other acting experience” (*rrr rrr rrr*) “besides bumping and grinding with the Brownies?” (*Rrroooooom.*)

“Well remember in second grade I played the duck in *Peter and the Wolf*, and then last fall we put on *Columbus Sails the Ocean Blue* and I was one of Queen Isabella’s attendants. I rolled my eyes and made these oh-really? faces when Columbus talked about the world being round. I guess you could call that acting bitchy. Oh and at camp I did the Noxzema Girl: ‘Take it off. Take it *all* off. The closer you shave, the more you need—NoxZEEEm!’”

“I’m convinced,” said Buddy, miming shaving with his free hand. “Every little role helps.”

On the other hand, look at Buddy’s own stage experience. From boyhood he’d wanted to play the romantic and the doomed: Tony in *West Side Story*, Othello and the whole Shakespearean tragedy gang, plus any number of Tennessee Williams characters. Yet he’d invariably gotten stuck with chubby sidekick roles. So he’d gone behind the scenes, concentrated on set design, contrasting scenery with reality: hanging paper moons over cardboard seas. And maybe it was nothing more than make-believe, but after all, darling...

Buddy found he’d lost his audience to the show of Chicago by night: the Windy City of Light! (As opposed to Paris, which was merely breezy.) So he drove Skeeter around and then around some more, looping the Loop down Clark, up State, back over to Dearborn, under the El screeching overhead—

—and lookit all the burlesque houses! the pawnshops! the saloons! the drunk-looking man staggering out of that one! This must be the genuine authentic BAD part of town! But

“Wait, it gets better,” Buddy was saying, swinging them roundabout again and heading off in a new direction.

“1-2-3 Red Light!” Skeeter sang—and all at once the world lit up like the carousel at the Booth County Fair. But a thousand times brighter and a million times better: everything was *enormous*—the billboards! the streetlamps! the honks and snarls of traffic! And on every side, in all directions, were these buildings like what cathedrals might be if you plugged them into a starmaker socket: dazzling glass palaces, massive shafts and cones and pillars of power and light. And looking at them you could *feel* the carousel starting up, a Strawberry Fieldsish merry-go-round of neon and freon and shivaree bewitchery—feel it leaving the ground, taking off with a great blast of trumpets like in *Mary Poppins Does Something or Other*—taking you with it, too, so you’d better hold on tight while it spins and soars and psychedelices...

But in the mundane meantime Uncle Buddy was demonstrating that every generation has its own gap. Acting like a tour guide: that’s Marshall Field’s, and there’s Picasso Plaza where just last Friday a pig called Pigasus got nominated for President. This drawbridge crosses that river and takes us to the Magnificent Mile along North Michigan. Over there’s where Hugh Hefner lives (ooh! naked bunnies!) in a mansion he never comes out of. Now we’re on the Gold Coast, on Lake Shore Drive, and we’re pulling over to take a peek up at those ritzy highrise apartment buildings.

“The most elegant in the world. The envy of (snort) New York.”

“Which one is yours, Uncle Buddy?”

“All of them. Meaning none just yet, darling. But you wait and see; we’ll end up there someday, and have the lights at our feet.”

“I wanna move in right now.”

“Well, so do I. But tonight I’m afraid we’ll have to settle for a more humble abode up on—” (Skeeter chiming in:) “—DEEEvawwwn... and it’s high time I got you there. Getting late. Been a long day for you. And there’s a curfew or something,” he added vaguely.

But it couldn't be over, so way too soon; the night must still be young, must never end. "I wanna see some hippies!" she announced.

"Tomorrow, darling—"

"I wanna see some hippies *now!*"

"Well," sighed Buddy, "they're mostly over in Old Town. Or wait, I know—we can run through the park, I know a shortcut. They say Allen Ginsberg's there; we might hear him chanting *Om*."

"*Om?* Like in 'Ommmm, you don't go to chur-urch?'" Skeeter cackled.

The MG sped along Buddy's shortcut, and no sooner entered the park than it had to dodge a skinny guy wearing nothing above the waist but love beads. He carried a placard proclaiming YIPPIE! VOTE PIG IN '68!

"Yay!" Skeeter agreed. "Hooray for Pigasus."

"I prefer Pat Paulsen myself," said her uncle. "Gig, of course, is down at the stockyards playing 'Clean for Gene'—I don't know who he expects to fool—"

All of a sudden their way was blocked by a dimly-seen crowd of people. Some were taking picnic tables and building what appeared to be a fort. Beyond it a whole new set of lights was shining through the darkness, red and blue ones this time, flashing over and over as they revolved atop more police cars than Skeeter could possibly count.

For one split second everybody kind of paused and turned to glare at them—as if they'd interrupted a dress rehearsal, Buddy would say later.

Then "DISPERSE" crackled a huge electronic voice, "YOU WILL LEAVE THIS PARK IMMEDIATELY," countered by cries of *Dump the Hump!* and *Hey hey LBJ!* from the picnic-table fortmakers. There was just enough time for an "Uh-oh" from Uncle Buddy before the first of a series of F-O-O-M-P-S as these big fat cans came crashing down through the tree branches; and then in nothing flat there was instant fog that made your eyes smart and throat tickle like you were catching a summer cold. People began chasing each other, and some of them had clubs and some of them wore helmets and before you knew it the whole reeking shebang was stampeding directly towards you!

“*Sweet Jesus!*” went Buddy, throwing the car into reverse and spinning it around a hell of a lot faster than any psychedelic carousel. And so they made an agreeably hellbent getaway a step ahead of the mob, laying rubber along a solid mile of Clark Street (so Buddy later estimated) and not stopping for breath till they were halfway to Skokie.

“That was so COOwull!” Skeeter exulted, kicking a leg over her head. “Was that tear gas? Were they teargassing us? Damn! Wait’ll I tell Janey what I did on my summer vacation! This is what *I* call being ALIVE!”

“There’s probably a great lesson to be learned in all this, somewhere,” said Buddy, and went back to mopping his face.

