

Two

DEMORTUIS

Short people got no reason

Short people got no reason

Short people got no reason to live.

—RANDY NEWMAN

Chapter 8

The First of the Svens

By the time she moved to Demortuis, Skeeter Kitefly was a woman—insofar as eleven-year-old anatomy went. To her mother she remained the same problematic little girl as ever, and to the running tab of maternal worries was now added *How would Kelly Rebecca cope, being a provincial New Girl in Town?*

Her mother need not have fretted; at least not about that. Fling Skeeter Kitefly into a dungeon, and inside of a week she would be on happycamper terms with all the other inmates. Move her to a middlesized city, plop her down among eleven-year-old Demortuisians, and inside of a month it would seem like she'd always been a natural-born one of them.

Not that she was a blender into the crowd. Too immediately noticeable for that, for somebody well under five feet tall and less than ninety pounds. Nothing subdued or anonymous about Skeeter Kitefly, by cracky! Her comical doll-like looks fell a trifle short of beautiful, or even unquestionable prettiness; but scarcely a month passed without some matron taking Skeeter's upper cheeks in a single squinchy handful and cooing what a cute, what a darling, what a *precious* little face!

Boys phrased it somewhat differently.

And so did Mrs. Maybrick, teacher of sixth grade at Oswald Elementary, and putter-up with none of this newerfangled nonsense. Her pupils got flunked on the spot for gumchewing; they rose en masse each AM to pledge hand-over-heart allegiance, under God

of course and no exceptions made. Strict alphabetic seating too, which placed Skeeter's desk directly behind that of Ginny Kirschwasser, who *was* unquestionably pretty (if you liked the lost-in-the-woods-and-raised-by-deer type).

The girls's first vis-à-vis encounter came when Ginny turned to pass back that week's spelling test, and found a Grand Guignol funnyface being made for her benefit. The sight caused Ginny to let out a shrill sharp bleat, like a lambkin tossed in a blanket; for which she received her first-ever reprimand from a teacher in front of everybody.

Unshed tears of shame blurred Ginny's spelling as she vowed to dislike the madgirl behind her, to never acknowledge or even glance back at her again. But when the test papers were handed forward, Ginny couldn't resist taking one cautious peek—which Skeeter and a goggle-moue were waiting to pounce upon.

No malice intended, of course. Skeeter simply delighted in Ginny's sheepish exclamations, and in surpassing them with her own cackly giggles; even in earning more frequent by-name reprimands from Mrs. Maybrick. And inside of a month Skeeter and Ginny were each other's very best friend, in class and out.

Not that they were kindred spirits, even insofar as eleven-year-old womanhood went. Ginny had been terrorstricken by her menarche, and turned scarlet at the mention of periods and colons and other marks of punctuation. Skeeter, contrariwise, had welcomed her time's arrival; and she collected nicknames for it, such as high tide, That Midol Moment, and "riding the cotton bicycle." (In future years she would sometimes punch men in the stomach—playfully, but *punch*—and say, "THAT'S for being a guy and not having cramps!")

Ebb and ebb, flow and flow. In next to no time the girls were skipping together to Ginny's house after the next to last day of school. Ginny rather dreaded the imminence of seventh grade, and having to leave familiar Oswald for Whitman Junior High and a bunch of strangers; but Skeeter the veteran transplant could hardly wait.

"Don't forget," she was cackling, "we'll have *teenage boys* there—"

—when out of Fate's box, cranked a tad too figuratively, came popping a prime-example jack.

“Yo!” said a Cool Boy, schwinning by on his Cool Boy’s bike; no way was it cotton, man. Over the curb he bounded to circle the girls (“Yeep!” went Ginny) and check out their budding prospects before/beside/behind; rewarding them, as he took off down the street again, with a nonchalant over-the-shoulder “Yo-de-*ho!*”

Then he was gone.

But not before Skeeter, brought to a halt some little while already, uttered a kind of inhaled squeal with glottal twist.

“Did you *see* that?” she wanted to know. Skeeter herself lacked the proper focus. Her bantam blue eyes might have been brighter and clearer than Ginny’s doe-browns, but like all the Kitefly features they fell a trifle short. Glasses took up the slack, but Skeeter’s were “dorky spastic” hornrims that she made a point of continually losing while she lobbied for stylish metalframes. As a result she spent a lot of the meantime squinting.

“Oh,” said Ginny, “that’s just Troy Janssen showing off.”

“Janssen! He must be Swedish!”

“Is not. He’s always lived around here.”

“You know what I mean. Ooh he’s a Sven! a Bjorn! a Lars! He is a *Laplander!*”

Skeeter and Ginny were experts on all things Lappish, having been partners on Mrs. Maybrick’s big Social Studies project with Scandinavia as their assigned topic. When it came to Troy Janssen, the Bambi-fostered Ginny might be slower off the mark, but she had one authentic advantage:

“You KNOW him?”

“Sure. He goes to my church.”

An instant-convert’s hand shot out and clutched Ginny’s arm.

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The announcement that Kelly Rebecca Kitefly would be accompanying Ginny Kirschwasser to JayCee (the Oswald Avenue Christian Gospel Church’s Wednesday Evening Youth Group) was variously received.

Ginny’s mother, who volunteered to give the girls rides there and back, thought it So Nice and What a Good Idea. Mrs. Kirschwasser was very devout, a church pillar, her devout

church pillary hand administering the such-a-*precious* squinch to Skeeter's upper cheeks. Regular attendance at Sunday morning worship, she predicted, would soon follow; and another tenant be gained for Abraham's bosom.

Representing the agnostic side were Skeeter's mother and stepfather ARnold, who preferred to spend their Sunday mornings sleeping late, and counted neither churchgoing nor churchabsence as a worrywart on the parental running tab. But what with school letting out, and three unoccupied months of summer vacation ahead, well, maybe it would be okay...

For the contrariwise, of course, there was Mercedes Benison, who at seventeen had seen it all. Overtly suspicious of organized religion, Sadie feared that Skeeter trembled on the verge of Jesus Freakishness, which was much verged-on that spring:

"I'm telling you He's soooo neat! So outtasight! He's such a gaa-aas! *The Lord is just such a turn-on!*"

Sadie took up sentinel duty in a chair opposite the front door on the night of Skeeter's first JayCee. A fine old Black Mass thunderstorm showed up for the occasion, complete with cracks and booms and banshee howls. Sadie found it difficult to concentrate on her Tarot cards: any moment she expected the earth to yawn and a glassy-eyed zombie to emerge, spouting Scriptural quotations as had Huckleberry Finn after Tom Sawyer's measles fever.

CRACK! The door opened and in sloshed Skeeter—no umbrella, of course; uncooler than hornrims. Sadie scanned her for signs of piety, genuflection, crossbearing, or denunciation of the peace symbol as a diabolic pentagram.

"So?" she demanded.

"'A needle pulling threaaad... ' O! dear sister! I pray the Lord your soul to keep/ when you lay you down to sleep."

"*Cut—it—out.* How'd it go, really?"

CRACK! Tremendous flash of lightning. "Look!" cried Skeeter, "God's taking pictures of us!"

Sadie chased her up the stairs. "That's not a bit funny! What *did* you do? Sing hymns and psalms?"

“Yeah! Listen to this one:

*We don't eat fruitcake 'cause fruitcake tastes GROHsss
and 'gross' will make you puke till you're a ghost.
Can you imagine an awfuller sight
than a man puking fruitcake? O God what a fright!”*

This was actually a relic of Brownie troop bacchanals. When it came to group crooning, JayCee made an honest attempt to accommodate popular music—if it could be wedged into the fisherman’s shoes of Christian interpretability. So “Bridge Over Troubled Water” was deemed acceptable, as was “What the World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love” (but not “One Toke Over the Line, Sweet Jesus”).

JayCee was there, after all, to provide young people with an outlet for good old cleanlimbed middleclass fun: a wholesome alternative to iniquity dens like Whitman Park, where Sadie Benison and other bad influences did their hanging out. (Not to mention their rumored drug trafficking, or their indulgence in Lordonlyknowswhatallelse.)

To counteract such dangerous kookiness there stood, like a rock, the Christian Gospel Church; and in its basement, like a cave, was a gymnasium where JayCee got together on Wednesday evenings to play run-around-but-don't-get-sweaty games. Then following a soda pop social break the boys and girls were separated, split up into small groups, and given Heartfelt, True-Life Examples to Follow by counselors with names like Curtis and Bev, who had the above ‘n’ beyond look of people who asked everyone believing in fairies to clap their hands.

But whether or not Tinker Bell lived, Skeeter Kitefly did experience epiphany at her first JayCee. She and Ginny were perched on the gym bleachers when Troy Janssen, like a Sven! a Bjorn! a Lars! put in an Appearance. The girls lost no time in clutching each other.

“Get him to come over here.”

“Me! You’re the one who’s goopy about him.”

“You’re the one who knows him. *I’m* a perfect stranger. Dare you to wave at him!”

“Oh right. Like I’m sure he’ll come running if *I* wave at him. *You* wave at him if you want him to come over.”

“Like you don’t, hunh? Okay, how’ll I get his attention? Strip bare naked and do the Funky Chicken?”

“SKEEter!”

“Dare you to *wink* at him if I can get him over here.”

“Oh yeah right.”

“Dare you!”

“Well (giggle)...”

So Skeeter waved and beckoned with crooked finger while Ginny threw in assorted blushes and blinks, and the object of their preteen desire cracked his born-for-poppin’ knuckles—before heading for the bleachers oh my God *squeal!*

Tall he was, for an eighth-grader-elect. Fair he was, with carefully casual flaxen hair and Nordic-colored sideburns. Suave he was, sporting a dimple in his chin and a reputation as stylemonger, fieldplayer, and general stud-in-the-making. Possibly he shaved; probably he smoked; certainly he was anointed with whiffable Right Guard and Vitalis Dry Control. This, in short, was indeed a Laplander: the first to enter Skeeter’s love life, though by no means the last.

Closer he came, and closer!—and then he was stiffarming the wall by their bleacher seats, lounging against it as he glanced up at the girls with one flaxen eyebrow cocked, the other a-doodled.

His mouth opened.

He spoke.

“Hey there,” Troy Janssen said, and sauntered away.

But not before Skeeter felt her sissybritches curl up and head for high hog heaven.

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The following Saturday—Tricia Nixon’s wedding day, of all the good days in the year—the girls were sprawled tummy-down on the Kirschwasser patio, eating Screaming Yellow Zonkers and trying not to get fingerglop on their borrowed *Target*. This was

Whitman Junior High's yearbook, obtained so that Skeeter might moan and Ginny sigh over Troy Janssen's seventh-grade pictures.

Behold! He looked so much more sophisticated, mature, *finished* than the bratty bra-strap-snappers they'd had to endure in Mrs. Maybrick's class.

"Think about kissing him."

"(Sigh.)"

"I bet every kiss would leave a hickey."

"SKEEter!"

Three whole months till they could consort as schoolmates! Four whole nights till the next JayCee, and who knew if Troy might be there—if he might show up again all summer long? Measures would have to be taken, and directly. They turned to the Demortuis phone book and combed through its columns, whittling the possibilities down from twenty-seven to nine, to three, to one address... and one telephone number.

"Let's do it. Let's call him."

"Oh, I don't knooooow—my mother says a girl should never call a boy on the phone."

"Oh Ginny get with it. These are the Seventies! We've got to be liberated-type women! Besides, don't you *want* to?"

"Well (giggle)..."

Indoors then. The telephone. The dial. The ring. And another. And another. And—

"Yes?" Testily abrupt voice.

"Um," went Skeeter, till now a stranger to qualms. "Um, is Troy there?"

"Oh," said the voice. "This's me."

Both girls struggled to apply an ear to the receiver.

"Yeah... sure, I remember you. What's happenin'?... oh yeah? Both of you, hunh? No kidding... well, you could always drop by my place... yeah, both of you... naah, there's nobody here but me tonight... that's right... yeah. You got it. Second house from the corner. It's stucco. *Pink* stucco."

"GEE WHIZ!" went Ginny.

The next half-hour saw the girls doing their all-too-level best, given Ginny's limited cosmetic and wardrobe resources, to enhance budding anatomy into endowments. Not that Jolly Dame Nature had been stingy with either, given Ginny's unquestionable prettiness and Skeeter's immediate noticeability. But the age of twelve does not a teenager make; nor yet cause cups to overflow.

Was there stuffing? Would be telling.

Skeeter, though, would have cheerfully laid Demortuis waste if she could have gone to Troy's house in height-of-fashion hotpants rather than dorky spastic shorts.

Adorned if not augmented, the girls set off ("to the movies and back by nine," Mrs. Kirschwasser was told) with jaws at work on Juicy Fruit to offset the last residue of Screaming Yellow Zonkers. In less than twenty minutes they had struck pink stucco and were rapping on Troy's front door. And when Troy opened that door with his own hands, each girl uttered a little glottal-twisted squeal.

Resplendent he was, in an apple-green Van Heusen Body Shirt for the Feelings in Your Head, topped off by a genuine brass medallion. And O! there was Right Guard (whiff) and O! there was Vitalis (whiff) and O! there was...

Chef Boy-ar-dee?

No matter. His mouth opened. He spoke. "*¿Que pasa?*" Troy said, and "*Entrée.*"

The girls were given to understand that their host's parents were away on a weekend camping trip, leaving Troy to batch it out on his lone own—something he'd done "lots of times, sure, all the time," which was a baldfaced lie right there. His kid brother was in fact away at summer camp, but Mr. and Mrs. Janssen were merely enjoying a Saturday night on the town and would be back about midnight. In the meantime Troy's grandmother had called to check if he was "all right." Hence Troy's testiness.

And would he be feeling testy again tonight?

The little brunette chick (decent face, skinny legs, doubtful chest) looked scared and skittish and went *hee hee hee* whenever she couldn't resist taking a peek at him; while her little blonde friend (shorter legs, better butt, funnier face) poked around the living room and began this weird gabble about how much the Janssen house reminded her of someplace she

used to live, it was so much alike, just so exactly the same my GOD it was the *very same house*, she had been *born* in this house and raised here too, wasn't that curious how very bizarre and what a coincidence!

"Now wait a minute," Troy tried to object, but the crazy little blonde was tear-assing through the dining room, the breakfast nook, the kitchen, making up all sorts of stuff en route like "There's where the piano was!" and "That used to be a china cabinet!" and "Where was it we kept the rubber plant? Oh, I remember—it was *upstairs!*"

"SKEEter!" went the brunette.

"Rubber plant, hunh?" said Troy. "Well, maybe we oughta go check this out. You never know—could be your rubber plant's still up there."

Toward and up the stairs he maneuvered his little guests, a carefully casual hand on each. Blondie matched his nonchalance but was clung to by the brunette, whose *hee hee hees* were getting shriller. Troy wondered if he wasn't rushing things, maybe he should feed them a couple of Scotches first? But if he swiped that much more than usual he risked his old man's realizing there was an in-house whiskey leak. And *yo-de-ho!* Was it even necessary?

He'd taken part in make-out parties and had his way (to an extent and degree) with several seventh-grade girls, but not with two at once, and *never* in his very own pinch-me-Jesus bedroom! Maybe these two weren't teenagers yet but who the hell cared? They were going to have themselves a slumber party and the possibilities boggled Troy's Lappish mind. Through it ran riotous thoughts, crass male thoughts such as no woman was ever safe from, not even Tricia Nixon:

—man these chicks are hot for it man do they want it man these babes are beggin' for it man oh man—

And the ultimate: *God, wait till I tell the guys about THIS.*

His bedroom was filled with standard-issue junk and a powerful Spaghetti-O aroma, Troy having dined in.

"Mmm, sure smells good in here!" said Skeeter. "We sure would like some Spaghetti-O's, and I bet you didn't save us any. You *owe* us now, Troy."

“Oh, I’ll pay you back,” Troy grinned at her, at Ginny demurely awash in perfumed perspiration. “You know, now that you mention it, I think I got some sauce here on my shirt. Guess I better take it off.”

“*Yeeeeeep!*” went Ginny, her lips stretched out in a *hee hee* rictus; she would have made for the door had Troy not suavely blocked it. “Don’t worry,” he told her. “I won’t be embarrassed.”

Unbutton. Unbutton. Unbutton.

Skeeter waited till he had that apple-green Van Heusen halfway off his shoulders before making her move. Then instant-convert hands shot out, took hold of Troy’s hairless pecs and copped a double feel before giving them a big fat shove. Troy staggered back with arms entangled and landed flush against Ginny, whose doe-browns bulged out of their sockets Whipcat-style as she shoved him back toward Skeeter—pickle in the middle!

But not for long, as the girls with unspoken consensus sent their pickle tumbling facedown onto his unmade bed. And before the astonished Troy could do more than go “Hey!” and “Wha’?”, Skeeter had her eighty-eight-pound self astride his legs while her cute little darling little *precious* little fingertips made themselves immediately noticeable against Troy’s ribcage.

“We’ll be going to Whitman too this fall,” she breezily informed him as he bucked and winged. “So are you gonna ask us out, Troy? You gonna ask us to dance? Say you’re gonna ask us out, Troy-ee! Ask us to dance!”

The bed beneath them went *eeeenh eeeenh eeeenh*, and the shirt on Troy’s frenetic back went *rip rend tear*, as pinch hitter Ginny came sailing off the bench to help pin down Troy’s medallion-stabbed upper half.

“If he doesn’t say yes he ought to be spanked!” Ginny suggested: the most daring, above ‘n’ beyond words she had ever uttered aloud. Skeeter, contrariwise, was already yanking at Troy’s back pockets with apparent if not authentic expertise.

“Are you gonna, Troy-ee? You gonna you gonna you gonna?”

What Troy was gonna do, if truth be known, was let fly the contents of his bladder as

his flares flopped and a Fruit of the Loomy moon arose. “*Are you gonna?*” the spanking twosome above him chanted. “You gonna you gonna you gonna you gonna—”

“YES!” came the word from the man in the moon. “YES YES YES JUH-HEE-ZUSS YES!”

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All that summer and the following fall Skeeter and Ginny waited for Troy to call them, ask them out, invite them to dance. But he never did, and in fact was never the same again: no more a stud-in-the-making but a furtive displaced evacuee, the sort of ex-Cool Boy who goes prematurely flabby and develops a stoop. The girls were unforgiving about this, and for the rest of their very best friendship they would regard Troy Janssen as a Heartfelt, True-Life Example to Avoid.

“Men!” Ginny would fume at his memory.

“No,” Skeeter would correct her. “*Svens.*”

