

## Chapter 9

### *Visions of Sugarbongs*

“Madwoman!” cried Skeeter.

“Madgirl!” cried Mercedes.

And each fell on the other’s neck, as though they hadn’t just spent Christmas together or driven down to Keening in the same car.

Their parents had given Skeeter permission to spend New Year’s Eve at Sadie’s college dorm, already open again for residents. What with Skeeter being halfway through the eighth grade, it was thought she ought to get a preparatory taste of collegiate life; also that her folks might get a peaceful quiet weekend in the process. So on Saturday the 30th the girls climbed into Sadie’s Gremlin and zopped off to the University of Nilnisi, a hundred miles away from adult supervision.

Skeeter knew she was expected to act bedazzled by this. Like an adult herself, in practical fact; or at least Sadie was, so Skeeter could be one vicariously. (Rooty-toot-toot on a blue kazoo.) Hence her *Madwoman!* cry and fall-upon-neck when they arrived at the dorm and Sadie said, “Well, this is it: La Pad.”

But after that first flush of dramatics, Skeeter took a look around and found La Pad not only crowded but no bigger than her own bedroom at home. Which was definitely smaller than Sadie’s old bedroom, which Sadie wouldn’t let Skeeter move into despite Sadie’s being here at college for most of the last four months and, presumably, most of the

next four years. Which was like a really hoggish stance for Sadie to take *and* stick to, if you asked Skeeter.

The girls had never actually shared a room before, unless you counted that ill-fated family vacation to Fort Lauderdale three summers ago, when they'd had to share not just motel rooms but motel beds and ended up having an outright punch-and-pummel fight one night, when neither would own up to having been the first to kick the other.

But now here they were, practically adults, the old team together again and occupying the narrow spaces between a couple of bunks and a couple of chairs and a dollhouse desk and a cupboard or two (three if you included the closet) plus a "bathroom" containing a sink and toilet but no fuller-length facilities.

"Kind of small, isn't it?" said Skeeter. "You must get cramps in here a lot."

"Don't be gross! I didn't bring you down here to hear you being gross."

"Did you bring me down here so I could be *frigid*? Why's it so cold?"

"It's winter, stupid. You'll warm up getting unpacked."

La Pad had a radiator that produced a lot of noise but little else, and neither girl had yet taken off a coat or glove or scarf or the green tam-o'-shanter from Sadie's red shagcut or the cerise beret from Skeeter's blonditude.

A suitcase was hauled onto one of the slender beds, which received it with a shriek.

"How can you sleep on that thing?"

"Oh, you know me—like a log, every night. Of course I get some help down here—"

"From guys? Who? How many? How often? What's their names?"

"God what a sordid little mind you've got. Hurry up and get unpacked."

Not about to be bossed around at this late date, Skeeter wandered over to a window and glanced out at a gravel lot. Some dead-looking trees. Certainly no strapping young men, higher-educated or otherwise. She breathed on the glass and with a still-mittened finger wrote her initials, the date, and WASH ME on it.

"Cut that out, you'll leave streaks. Why aren't you unpacking?"

“It sure was nice of you to coax Mom and *AR*nold into letting me come down here to freeze my patoot off.”

“Oh shut up, it’s not that cold.” Sadie stashed her empty valise and joined Skeeter at the window. “C’mon, kiddo. We’re going to have a good time. *You* always manage to have fun no matter what, or where, so I don’t know what you’re worried about.”

“Worried! Who’s worried? I’m not worried. I just wish I could feel my *feet* is all. I bet they’re turning baby blue.” Her small round face lit up. “Actually that’d be COOwull! Think how my feet would set off my eyes! And what I could do with toenail polish—”

Sadie gave her a hug, less formal than fall-upon-neck. “I tell you how we’ll warm the place up. We’ll have a party, a New Year’s Eve party here tomorrow night, and I’ll invite all my friends over.”

“A college party! Will there be smoking and drinking and lots of making out?”

“You better believe it,” Sadie assured her. “Of course, how much of each depends on who comes.”

They went out to lay in party provisions before it got too dark, and Skeeter took her first prolonged look at Keening or “Tearytown” as it was called in the underground press.

For several years now, the University of Nilnisi had been in both underground and streetlevel news notoriously often; and what with rallies and demonstrations, symposia and moratoria, clashes between students and the administration and students versus the police, Skeeter halfway expected to be caught in some uprising melee.

But no such luck. The campus seemed deserted; there was hardly any traffic; a few frayed McGovern posters fluttered from telephone poles in the nippy wind. Of course it *was* between semesters, and Sadie said things were very different when classes were going on, but still...

Then too the Nilnisi Epitaphs, “them Fightin’ Eppies,” had failed to make a Bowl for the first time in seven seasons, and that couldn’t be doing much to boost local liveliness, but still...

It was Saturday night (almost) in a bonafide college town! Weren’t things supposed to be *happening*? Where were the embroilments, the kegs of brew on tap? And why was

Sadie sucking back happy breaths as if she couldn't get enough of this funkily rundown neighborhood? It looked just like Oswald Avenue, which Sadie'd always despised and dismissed as Bummerburg—"pieds-à-terre in need of paint," she'd called it only last week, trying to sound like a rooty-toot college student.

So what was the marvelous difference between there 'n' then and here 'n' now?  
Wotta Lotta Krappa.

At the mom-and-pop co-op, Sadie wouldn't buy Fritos or Ruffles or anything that Skeeter considered party food, but filled a basket instead with fruit and cheese and carrots and celery and some timid-looking mushrooms. All the while there and on the way out she lectured (as she had on Christmas Eve and again on Christmas Day) about the virtues of organic fat-free vegetarianism.

"All *right* already!" said Skeeter. "From this moment on I'll eat nothing but turnips. Mashed turnips, and a patchouli sandwich or two, and of course Hawaiian Punch."

"God I almost forgot," said Sadie, and stopped in a ShortKut to add three flavors of Boone's Farm.

They encountered no strapping young men on the way back to the dorm, nor anyone else for that matter. The students of Nilnisi had wrestled the University into keeping its dorms open between semesters, but few appeared to be taking advantage of this. Not that Sadie seemed aware of any absence, or bothered by it, or in any hurry to send out invitations to tomorrow night's party.

Her own roommate Winky was still away for the holidays, leaving a bed vacant for Skeeter's use. On the wall above it was a poster of an old Chinese man asking where W. C. Fields would sleep, and the Great Man replying, "On my right side, with my mouth open."

Skeeter arranged herself and mouth accordingly beneath a heap of blankets. "Hey—just how many people do you know around here, anyway?"

"Plenty," said Sadie around a pasted toothbrush.

"Yeah, but I mean you've only been here since September."

(Spit.) "Don't worry about it." (Rinse.)

“I’m not worried! When’s your roomie coming back?”

“Tuesday, I think. Or Wednesday. I don’t know.” Sadie turned off the overhead and caused another bedshriek by climbing undercover. “If she *was* back, there wouldn’t be room enough for you, so why hurry her up?”

Pause in the chilly darkness. Then: “*What’s* her name again?”

Sadie, knowing very well that Skeeter knew the answer, kept tightly silent; and Skeeter uttered her first cacklelaugh of the visit.

“What kind of name is Winky, anyway?”

“What kind of name is Skeeter?”

“Hey! Skeeter is a *magnificent* name. Six queens of Belgium were named Skeeter.”

“Oh yeah? Which ones?”

“Skeeter the First, Skeeter the Second, Skeeter the Third...”

Madwoman suggested she shut up and go to sleep, and Madgirl said hey! Sadie’d started it, by rudely being born first.

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Twenty-one hours later Skeeter clomped up dorm stair and down dorm hall in one of her Christmas presents, a pair of blood-red Superclunky platform shoes that increased her height to a full five feet (almost).

She and her sister had gotten up at noon and spent the rest of the day redecorating La Pad. With balloons inflated and streamers strum, candles lit and lava lamp installed, their attention turned to personal appearance. By nightfall one girl was primed and the other pumped up.

Even to Skeeter’s accustomed eye Sadie looked a sophisticate in her emerald tam, mohair top and twenty-four-inch bells; while Skeeter was her usual buttoncute self from beret down to Superclunks. The only obvious obstacle to their throwing a really bitchin’ New Year’s spree, besides the lack of hardstuff, was the shortage of guests counted on to provide it.

Ahem.

By 10 PM Sadie's behindhand invites had brought forth only Bridget Costello, a placid plumpish friend from Freshman English, and another bottle of Boone's Farm. Of course there was also Bernie Farkas the partial Marxist, whose ongoing pursuit of Bridget might have seemed lupine had Bernie not been so dorkesque.

He had sacrificed all other body hair to raise a set of radical muttonchops, but clad in these he reminded Skeeter not so much of Ché or Fidel as of Rabbit in *Winnie-the-Pooh*: busy days, busy nights, never let things come to you, always go and fetch them. Sadie disliked Bernie for interrupting their English teacher with many beggared questions, and for trying to seduce Bridget (who was into macramé and biofeedback) by extolling the Irish Republican Army.

He went lengthily on about a Sean O'Somebody who was fasting in prison, while Bridget sipped Strawberry Hill and nodded a lot and their hostess stood over the telephone dialing, dialing, her miffed snit growing, growing: she had promised her little sister a college blowout, by God! and a blowout they were going to have, by God! even if that meant inviting by-and-large strangers, and dispatching Skeeter to go do so.

Hence her clomping up stair and down hall, knocking on unresponsive door after door, feeling like she was in some really weird dream. And after each knock the same stillness, the same echoless hush.

Till Skeeter reached the very last door on the top floor. This opened to reveal a yawning Third Worlder in striped pajamas and polka-dot robe, with a vague idea something was amiss.

"...a fire drill is this?"

"That's right!" said Skeeter. "A Chinese fire drill!" And not bothering with further ado, she carried him bodily off.

Very young-looking and thin-looking he was, having escaped from a despotism somewhere east of Mecca and west of Manila, only to end up in the University of Nilnisi's Foreign Exchange program. Watching hours of American TV in order to choose himself the ideal American name, he had stumbled across *All in the Family*.

"Please be calling me Archie."

“Okay! You can call *me* Jughead!” said Skeeter, smacking her lips; and “Look what I found! Isn’t he cuuuute?” she demanded of Sadie and company.

“Oh, is a party here?” said Archie, politely retying his robe-belt.

An older man—perhaps as old as thirty—had arrived while Skeeter was out scouting, and Sadie introduced him with uncharacteristic fluster as João. He was an art major; a self-exile from Lisbon, whose estranged father was something big in cork; he wore a rakish corduroy jacket with ultrawide lapels; had a flask of clear liquid to mix with the Boone’s Farm; and kept toying with the pompon on Sadie’s tam. João murmured rather than spoke, and sounded like a cross between Sugar Bear and a Portugese Pepé Le Pew.

Sadie, presenting this combo to Skeeter, took hold of her arm in a manner instantly recognizable as the hot-puppies grip, the thank-you-Santa! clinch, with thumbnail pressure translatable as “We are in the presence of the essence of Cool.”

Well fiddle-dee-dee. Skeeter had her own exotic man-of-the-world-type escort (and him already down to his jammies) so nyaah to you, Mercedes Benison.

Bernie Farkas tried to catechize João about guerrilla warfare in Mozambique, and ended up waxing froth till Sadie got pissaway red in the face and even Bridget looked alarmed. But João was at ease in tight situations, having a natural affinity for bottlenecks. He lounged in Bernie’s abandoned chair; found accommodation on his knees for Sadie’s fair bottom; bobbed a nodding wink at Bridget; and turned Archie into an icebreaker by asking if he’d seen any good movies lately.

“Indeed yes, the one called *1776*,” said Archie. “What an education it was besides an entertainment too. I liked best the Benjamin Franklin, he did a funny dance.”

This last word made Skeeter leap for the radio—dish up some dance music quick!—no, not Donovan’s “Epistle to Dippy”—but Elton John’s latest, aw-reet! Lay hands on Archie and do the Crocodile Rock, oh lawdy momma with a-hoppin’ and a-boppin’ and a YAAAAA yah-yah-yah-yah—

It was just as well that Skeeter and Archie were both of smallish build, as there was no room in La Pad for more than miniature boogaloo.

“You are perhaps sixteen?” Archie ventured.

“Thirteen-and-a-half!” said Skeeter. “You’re dancing with jailbait here!”

“Now, about Mozambique—” Bernie insisted.

“Suppose we change the subject,” murmured João.

“We are talking here about the repression of a movement! I can’t put it more clearly than that—”

“*You* are talking there and you *are* a movement!” Sadie told him; but João shrugged and winked and encouraged everyone to have more wine: “I have, let us say, goosed it up a little.”

On which note there popped in a couple of changelings known to Tearytown as Waif and Stray, the Stonehenge Twins. They regarded the partiers with protuberant eyes (on Waif’s part) and languid lids (on Stray’s).

“Halloo halloo—”

“—and who are *you?*”

“My sister Skeeter,” Sadie gnarled, “and you guys took your own sweet time.”

“Lotta parties tonight, Miss Mercedeeez—”

“—lotta calls to make—”

“Like *where?*”

“Oh—over there—”

“—outta town—”

“—but here we be: New Year’s Eve tea party mix. Primo. Enjoy.”

Sadie gaped at the minute offering. “This is your idea of a nickle bag? Since when?”

“Since this stuff’s special—”

“—comes from outta town—”

“—not the usual boo a-tall.”

“Not your usual oregano, *you* mean. Well all right. Um... you guys’ll stay for a bit, won’t you?”

“Shall we?” said Waif.

“Surely,” said Stray. “Brought the bong along.”

So load it, light it, pass it around from hand to lip; don't be bogarting but toke away! toke away! And most of them did, though João declined a turn at the ceramic trough, preferring to roll his conical own Continental-style; and "Thank you please," yawned Archie behind a courteous hand, "I am not being a smoker."

Skeeter on the other hand was wild to take her very first hit, her best shot at getting high like a practical adult.

"Slow and deep and hold it in," Sadie instructed.

"I know that! I'm not some dumb kid!" She applied herself to the mouthpiece slowly, deeply, with a steady *sssucckkkk*—gag! choke! HUCK HUCK HUCK, sounding like runaway Jim on the fogbound raft.

There was genial laughter from her elders and somnolent concern from Archie.

"Mmmm *boy* that's good grass," coughed Skeeter. "So how soon before I'm ripped? Does it happen instantaneously? Or when?"

No response from Sadie or João, who'd moved on to debate the designs and color schemes of La Pad's wall posters. That one on the bathroom door: *I Can't Believe I Ate the Whole Thing (You Ate It, Ralph)* in flaming DayGlo purple, yellow, pink, and burnt orange.

"Powerful. Vivid."

"Lurid, even."

"Cosmic," declared the Stonehenge who dabbled in bathroom-stall graffiti, mostly seaside vistas full of Joshua trees and coyotes going *aroooo*.

"Quadrasonic," objected the other Stonehenge.

"Like how?"

"Like scrubwomen. Cockeyed scrubwomen."

"Ooh yass... that is it, man. Cockeyed old scrubwomen. Look at 'em looking through the window."

"Where?" said Skeeter. "I wanna see!" She strained to make out the poster's hidden tenants with small round eyes that were unimpeachably bright clear blue but a trifle shortsighted, even at the best of times.

"Without a doubt," Waif was saying. "Unless—"

“—are you seeing?—”

“—cello players. Fat ones.”

“Blind ones?”

“What do *you* think?”

“Fat blind cello players? Li’l bit better no doubt.”

“A little bit *better?*” cried Skeeter. “Are you guys kidding or what?” She turned to her sister for assistance, but Sadie and João had disappeared behind the bathroom door to extend their debate.

Placid Bridget held out her plumpish wrist, on which Spiro Agnew’s hands pointed way the hell past midnight; so the remaining partiers wished each other *Feliz Año Nuevo*. Archie had fallen asleep, so Skeeter didn’t get an entirely satisfactory New Year’s kiss out of him, or out of the bong either as she took her third and longest-held pull.

“Nothing’s happening!” she wailed. “I’m not high yet! I don’t see any scrubwomen or cello players! When is the *rush* going to hit me?”

“Don’t sweat it, li’l babe,” said Waif. “You don’t ever space out the first time.”

“What do you mean? Why not?”

“Well... like, you don’t just pick up an ax and sound right away like Jerry Garcia, dig? Gotta keep at it, practice—”

“—like playing the cello—”

“—no lie. Else how you gonna tell your ragweed from your Mexican, am I right? Yo—” (to Stray) “—remember Momma Sleeze? Used to take her old kitty litter—”

“—’n’ call it ‘hash.’ Yeah. Talk about your bad shit, man...”

This was entirely too much for Skeeter. “Are you saying you gave me *catpoop* to smoke and sat there watching me *inhale* it? How the hell’m I supposed to practice getting high on goddam CATPOOP?”

She might have sprung upon the Stonehenges then and there, had her stomach not let out a terrible caged-beast growl.

“I,” she discovered, “have got a serious case of the munchies.”

Waif grinned, and “You’ll get used to ‘em in time,” said Stray.

“I mean it! I want pizza,” Skeeter told them. “I want Chinese,” she said to Bridget and Bernie and the fast-asleep Archie. “I wanna hot dog bag o’ popcorn chocolate bar—”

She fetched up against the desk with its plates of wilting saladstuff (yugg) and wrinkled her retroussé nose. “Okay, that’s it. That’s it! That’s—everybody gimme all your nickels and dimes. I’m going out and score us some candy, right? C’mon c’mon! Sadie’ll never have to ever have to know!”

A double handful of spare change accompanied Skeeter’s stomp-clomp off in search of undefended vending machines.

“Maybe one of us should go too?” Bridget wondered.

“Keep an eye on her,” said the bonged-out Bernie.

“Transcendental,” agreed the Twins, and turned their own lids inside out.

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Baby Ruth and Butterfinger, Hershey’s this and Nestlé’s that, Snickers and a Bit o’ Honey, all of which Skeeter crammed into her gullet on the way back upstairs. The results would probably be atrocious. Sadie and Sugar Bear better be done with the bathroom, tee hee hee!

So first-timers couldn’t get high, hey? ho? hee? Hell, the writers of that rulebook hadn’t reckoned with the likes of Kelly Rebecca Kitefly. In Belgian that meant *I can get high on an Eskimo Pie*, by George and Jove and the Crocodile Rock. Cling to that bannister! Her feet just wouldn’t stay stood; they’d never had them a better time and she guessed they never would. Oh lawdy momma! Make way for the Madgirl Wonder!

She found decidedly fewer people in La Pad. The bong was gone and its keepers with it; but João lingered to kill off balloons with a conical roach, and across Winky’s bed lay Archie on his right side with his mouth open.

Even at this wee hour Sadie retained her green tam-o’-shanter, and over her shoulders was João’s rakish art-major’s jacket, but she’d mislaid her mohair somewhere and Skeeter noticed Sadie’s chestfreckles forming a definite pattern. Coded message of some sort? She set out to decipher it but got sidetracked by goosebumps the size of *bumblebees*, so far out!

Archie sat up rubbing his eyes. “The party is over? Time to go split?”

But Skeeter was tee-heeing too hard to answer, wiggled out on a sugarjag that escalated into a total flipflop spaz attack, oh woe! can't breathe! Bent over backwards she collapsed off her Superclunks, João and Sadie kneeling by her side: was she okay? was she okay?

*"No way!"* Skeeter gasped, *"I think I'm in labor!"*

So push! push! they cried as one, and with a YAAAAA yah-yah-yah-yah—  
—she delivered a little invisible baby, swatting his or her little invisible butt.

*I can't believe I ate the whole thing.* DayGlo by lava lamp: vivid, even lurid.

Futuristic purpleface turning to nausea, mouth contorted, distorted eyeballs bulging hubcap-huge, their veins as thick and spirally as telephone cords. Oh, ulp! Somebody hasten with the basin! *"I can see I had your funnnn..."*

"You can see what I've had to put up with," Sadie grumbled.

"A student of the finer arts she'll be," murmured João.

"Excuse please," said Archie, "but is she drunken?"

And Skeeter Kitefly, looking through all kinds of windows, threw back her head and burst out anew.