

## Chapter 13

### *Little Artful Antics*

“Hi hi hi and *thank* you for that applause, considering I haven’t done anything yet except appear before you as my knockdown-gorgeous teenage self [*pose*]. My name *is* Skeeter Kitefly and speaking of famous tennis players, I was up extremely late last night (whoooooo)—

“Actually I was watching this old Hitchcock movie called *Strangers on a Train*, about these two guys who don’t know each other. Now that I’ve *ruined* the plot for you, I’ll go on with my joke. (It will too be a joke, a hilarious joke; Bjorn Borg laughed at it and *he*’s a famous tennis player. You don’t believe me? You can look it up: fa-mous ten-nis play-er. And-such-a-hunk.)

“You know who else is a hunk is Farley Granger. That’s right! Sounds like a farmboy, doesn’t he? Out there with the alfalfa and buckwheat and other Little Rascals. Well, Farley’s one of the *Strangers on a Train*: he plays this guy called Guy who’s a famous tennis player and so cuuuute—he has this dark, wavy face and these full, sensuous lips and oh! these little white tennis shorts! To *die* for, and a lot of dying goes on in this movie though none of it happens on a train or to a tennis player.

“Actually this all happened twenty-five years ago so Farley Granger probably isn’t that much of a hunk anymore; which only goes to show you...”

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Kelly Rebecca, blue-smocked and SKEETER-nametagged, lounged behind the register at Kleinsteins in blightful midtown Demortuis, killing time till college started. Two more weeks of this meaningful ‘n’ fulfilling job at a real-life I’m-not-kidding drugstore. And boy was this ever one dog day afternoon.

Here because she’s here because she’s here, three summers now; ultimately because her stepfather was the manager and that facilitated re-entry. Which was easier than bothering with finding something someplace else.

Skeeter’s attention span, like most of the rest of her, was short but intense while it lasted. She might concentrate, say, on grinning hugely at the customers—Who Can You Freak Out? Spook this one and win *a new car!* When grin-muscles start to ache, turn to coining nicknames for the familiar irregulars: Gunkhead, Baby Huey, Framptona, The Admiral.

“Where do you keep your sponges?” asked an old lady all wattled and dewlapped, with bottle-bottom spectacles. (Gertrude, maybe. Or Hortense.)

“I keep *mine* in Ancient Greece,” Skeeter grinned at her, hugely.

“Oh, my! You mustn’t do that; you should wring them out.” (Definitely Gertrude.)  
“What I’m looking for is a new loofah.”

“A loofah? For your sofa? Oh, for your *bawth*. Try Aisle Five. And don’t forget: for only \$1,200 more you can get a pre-plumbed Hot Tub delivered to your bathroom door, complete with hydromassage booster joints!”

This last a little louder, as Definitely Gertrude disappeared fast down Aisle Five.

Oh for a smoke. Good way to hit on cute-guy customers: bum a fresh-bought one from them, and if they’re truly cute—or if they smoke Pall Mall Filter Kings and at least aren’t uggoes—try talking them into a little something artful.

Gertrude avoided Skeeter come ring-up time, taking her new loofah to Loretta’s register instead. Big mistake! Too late. Served her right for coming in at 4:30 on a Friday afternoon. No escape for Gertrude now! No need either to ask about the black-on-black armband; Loretta would be sure to fill her in.

“Okay, show of hands—how many cried when Elvis died? I know I did [*burst out laughing*]. Where I was working at the time there’s this crazy-lady Elvis-freak who couldn’t afford to take off for Graceland prostrate with grief, ‘cause she’d used up all her sick leave and vacation and life savings already.

“So Loretta (not her real name—actually it *is* her real name, so don’t use it when you tell this story to your friends, okay?) so Loretta did the next best thing, which was come to work in full mourning, and wait on customers while singing ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ to herself. Through her tears! Or was it ‘Love Me Tender’? Hard to tell *what* she was singing, through her tears and that big black veil; might’ve been ‘All Shook Up.’ I know I was.

“Hey, Benjamin Franklin would’ve laughed at that joke, and *his* face is on the hundred-dollar bill; so there...”

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Home at last to shake the dog day blues with a dash through the shower: hop in, hop out, drip dry, boy howdy! Let those with eyes that can see catch a double peepful of Skeeter Kitefly dehydrating her peachy fuzzy coif, which unlike the rest of her was *not* short and which unlike prevailing teenage fashion was only somewhat Farrahfied. But still intense, flickering like a flamethrower in the blowdryer while Skeeter pranced about picking out dancin’ clothes with her free hand.

Firmly attached to bright red underwear, in theory but not yet reality: which to choose? Was there a single pair she hadn’t failed to sling into the carefully-loaded washing machine and so turn her mother’s once-blonde hair a trifle greyer?

“Kelly RebecCA!”

“Yes ma’am!”

“*Where* is my best white blouse?” Carrie might demand, knowing full well that thanks to Skeeter’s brand-new panties this best white blouse was now blush-pink.

“Why Mother! That shade’ll look deeLISHus on you! It’ll bring out roses in your cheeks!”

“I’ll put some roses in *your* cheeks if it happens again!”

“That’s okay, Mom—no need to thank me.”

One of the perks of being petite was having room to cram that much more into a standard-sized bureau drawer. Transform it into a field of scarlet poppies, “attractive to the eye and soothing to the smell,” each a blossom that’ll bewitch the boys without putting them to sleep.

One a penny, two a penny: hot cross buns. Aha! These with the pattern of tiny yellow Tweety Pies, whose tinier-still blue eyes tawt dey taw a puddytat. (And dey did! dey did!)

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“I graduated last spring from Bonum High School and yes I’ve heard all the jokes, all the puns and clever wordplay, hey: I made up a lot of ‘em myself.

“Like what’s the most popular class at Bonum High? Advanced Voyeurism. (Lots of field trips.)

“We’re not talking extraoveractive hormones, but over half the guys at Bonum High *were* named Randy.

“And yes, I dated a few of ‘em; you could even say I dated ‘several.’ (Whooooop)—that’s right! You’re looking at a friendly ‘n’ sociable person here! I spent four years being a Bonum Vivant, saying ‘Hi’ to the guys in the halls, and maybe I did jump (or pounce, more ladylike) on one or two. I mean they had to be cute! A lady doesn’t pounce on just any old uggo.

“My friend Tanya Totalbitch never understood that. She’d say to me, ‘Skeeter: is there a guy in this school you *wouldn’t* hit on?’ Well, that made me indignant, so I grabbed this guy passing by that I’d never seen before and I told Tanya, ‘Yes! *This* one! As God is my witness, I’ll never hit on this guy!’

“Then I took a closer look at him and said, ‘Oh *what* the hell.’

“He was a real hotshot too. His name wasn’t Randy, it was Lank, and he liked to set things on fire. [*sing*] ‘My boyfriend’s Lank and he’s really into arson, hey la! hey la, my boyfriend Lank!’ Made for a lot of fun dates. I’d say, ‘Let’s go out to dinner,’ and Lank’d say, ‘Let’s BURN dinner!’...”

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Dancin' clothes: something with a bit of cling and slink to it, fit for the Welsh-witch dreams of Stevie Nicks. ("Actually this dress makes Stevie look more like *me*.") Blue, no-way smocky but marine/marine: aqua where it clung, ultra in its wicked-twitching slink and flow. Ooh yass.

Dancin' shoes: sandals, basically, and not too much heel. No falling off these puppies while doing the Hustle or Salsa or Bump, and spraining somebody else's ankle or kneecap or thigh.

Dancin' makeup: no big deal, what with Jolly Dame Nature having provided so very very much. Just keep those Winged Monkeys flying with a little touch here and another touch there and a shpritz of Prince Matchabelli.

Dancin' warmup: wheel out the TGIF circus artillery! Bring on Kiss and The Tubes! Breathe that fire, spit that blood, special those effects, gusto that panache! Crank it up and check it out, that outRAYgeeous specTACuular music; let those with bods that can boogie go swing it! hit it! knock it right out of the park! Put your hands together and thrust your chests  
for tonight's star attraction: DOLLY-GAYLE RONSTADT!

*If yew just wanna hold hands  
I'll be yer friend, o' coe-wurse,  
but oh! yer love would choke to death  
a full-grown hoe-wurse—*

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"Everybody here's seen *Star Wars*, right? Okay, how many've seen it half-a-dozen times and are going again next weekend? Same here! Show of hands—how many's favorite character is Han Solo? Aw-reet, mine too! I always identify with smugglers.

"My sister Sadie's into smuggling. A few years back she had this Portugese boyfriend who took her backpacking up down and sideways through Portugal. While they were doing the sideways part, she got a taste of this fancy expensive wine called Fonseca that you're supposed to drink with walnuts. Good crunchy wine. Had Sadie dancing on café tabletops. Pulling all sorts of artful antics.

“Now, you can’t get this stuff from Boone’s Farm. So here’s Sadie in the customs line, trying to smuggle home a couple of fancy expensive bottles of Fonseca and acting oh-so-nonchalant but all the while absolutely *spooked with dread* at the idea of ending up in a Portugese women’s prison (yuggh).

“I wasn’t there to advise her; she didn’t have Han Solo or Chewbacca for moral support—not even Chewbacca!—so finally Sadie compromised. She stashed the bottles and smuggled just the corks.

“Tried to hide ‘em down her front [*coily demonstrate*] but she had to go put on a bigger bra first...”

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God (hee hee!) Sadie would track her down and kill her dead if she ever heard that one. Wasn’t even all that true: Sadie was no flattie, just a bit—wiry. But one of the perks of having a creative license was being able to improve on reality.

Skits, spoofs, and humorous vignettes: a shortening attention span. Intense while it lasted. Why trudge through all the scene-blocking line-conning unspontaneous overrehearsedness of sitdown drama—as opposed to standup comedy! Hijinks off the top of your head! The look of Monty Python, the feel of *Saturday Night Live*, the spur-of-the-moment improv of Second City—and the homegrown equivalent awaiting her at college: Nilnisi’s Nothingbutt Theater, whose company Skeeter aspired to join. Local girl makes it up good as she goes along!

Anything for a laugh. Ad-lib skits and spoofs, slapstick and sight gags; quick, brisk, soon over and done with, so on to the rampaging cast party. Let Pamela Pillsbury go off to dance in France (in nothing but her underpants, *you* bet)—Skeeter’s here to make the greasepaint roar! Why “break a leg” when you can break ‘em both? Get those people grinning hugely!

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“My sister Sadie’ll do just about anything to have a good time, and that includes drug-smuggling. Starting with those Fonseca corks, she went right on to the hard stuff—cherry-flavored cough syrup. (My personal favorite.) She still has trouble smuggling

bottles, but now she throws away the caps and pours the cough syrup down her front. (Hey, try it some time; it feels so goood.)

“Sadie’s my role model, but I’m not much of a smuggler yet. To do it right you’ve got to travel, see other lands, big cities! big mountains! big oceans! Take one of those grand tour package dealies and rip off the Crowned Heads of Europe.

“The only place I got to go last summer was Mime Camp. You know, at that famous theme park Marcel Marceauland, where on the roller coaster they all go [*pantomime scream*]. I got kicked out of Mime Camp for refusing to take off my Ray-Bans. They said aviator shades ‘dissipated the ambiance.’ Well, they didn’t *say* that, of course, they went [*mime trapped in glass box*] but you could tell what they meant.

“And all along I was just trying to spare them, like I’ve been trying to spare you [*whip off glasses*] THE SCORCHING BRILLIANCE OF MY SUNSPOT-BABY-BLUE EYES! [*reel about grimacing, as though blinded by flashbulbs*]. Hey, with eyes like mine you can see all sorts of nasty-nasty things [*peer at audience*]...”

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Hot August night, spoiling for a thundersquall, all of Elmer’s windows cranked open driving hither to yon. Fooling around till it got dark, till the air got electrified by silent lightning flashes and the wind came wailing through the car: see you in heaven, kid! Getting there’s half the fun!

Make that two-thirds—make that three-quarters—

The rush, the roar of planes trains and automobiles, the heavy metal boffola! Excitement since earliest childhood, right down unto the latest *va-va-varoom*. Picking up the gang, hard-partyers all, each on pleasure bent with a sixpack or bottle of Jack or half a lid of puffy stuff: bring on the night!

*And in it charged!* A windy howl, blowing up Skeeter’s Farrahfications layer by layer into a peachy fuzzy mushroom cloud, rising, twining, undulating: “Medusa you say!”

But Skeeter a gorgon? Just look at that face, deeLISHus round winsome pink peeping out of the boy-howdy cloud; how could it petrify anybody? Then look again at the abruptly-pointed chin, the tipped-up buttony nose, and listen to the peals of cacklelaughter—

oh my God she *was* a witch! Beware, lest she turn you all into newts! Who could say a house wasn't being dropped on her sister at this very moment?

O sassy saucy sorcery, bringing out the Salsa in your cheeks, the Disco-Ducking in your butt: gonna fly now! getting high now! Don't think we're in Nilnisi anymore—we must be up inside a cyclone, riding round and round that dizzifying carousel as the baaaand plaaaays onnnn—

So close your eyes, my child, be in tune with the infinite; a little touch here, another touch there and what do you get but one fine gold-hatted high-bouncing Winged Monkey lover?

And why stop at one? Make that two or three—make that three or four—

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“There's this guy (not Guy; the *other* guy, Bruno you know) in *Strangers on a Train* who has these wonderful theories about how you should do EVERYthing before you die. Get into all kinds of escapades, be terribly irresponsible; drive a car blindfolded at 150 miles an hour. My kind of guy.

“Even if he isn't as cute as Farley Granger, and even though he does strangle this girl at an amusement park.

“Oh her glasses, did I mention her glasses? I must tell you about her glasses. The terribly irresponsible guy says [*suave Robert Walker voice*] ‘Is your name Miriam?’ and the amusement-park girl goes, ‘Why yes, how did you AWKKGGH—’ [*throttle self*]. She drops her glasses and you see her being strangled in them. Now, that's how I'd like to be choked to death—so I wouldn't miss any of it, and feel left out.

“Is there anything about *Strangers on a Train* I haven't given away yet? Oh, the ending: the merry-go-round breaks down, just like in the cartoon song. [*sing*] ‘You feel so looney-tuney, with Farley in your head; anyone for tennis? I think I'll go to bed'...”

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*Déjà vu* and me want-to-go home.

(I mean, what with *Déjà* being so irresistibly cute and all...)

Perhaps she *was* a wee bit pie-eyed—Tweety Pie-eyed, in fact (I *did* tee a puddytat!)

—but Skeeter had a distinct impression of having done all this before, once upon a time. Sloshing home through the rain to find none other than Sister Sadie on sentinel duty, waiting up in a chair opposite the front door.

Sadie hadn't done that (if she ever had) for a long time now, not least because she hadn't lived here for the past five years. First college in Keening, then art school in Elsew, with time off trotting the globe on student-discount rates: Portugal, Italy, Australia, the Caribbean. Back to Demortuis only for the occasional holiday, and today wasn't that occasional.

Could she have come back to wreak revenge for that harmless little cork-joke Skeeter hadn't even told anybody yet? Possibly: there were pins and needles in Sadie's eyes, which seldom boded any good. So pale in the face that her freckles seemed to hover like a granulated aura. A Pippi Longstocking apparition: Pippi goes to the South Seas and turns into a wire-eyed zombie!

The sisters stared at each other, pins versus pies, till Skeeter got gigglefitty and said, "This is really fun! Let's do this all night!" At which point Sadie's wiry expression went awry; up she jumped and off she ran toiletwards, with Skeeter wobbling after.

Not a year seemed to go by without Skeeter catching someone in the act of upchuck. (Excuse me: the act of *upcharles*.) "Is it me?" she wondered aloud while Sadie heaved away. "My breath? body odor? bellybutton lint?... boy, this brings back memories. 'Member that New Year's Eve, Sadie, when you were first at the U. and I came down to Tearytown and at the stroke of midnight you had to go puke? Or maybe that was me. Or maybe it was both of us, taking turns at the bowl—"

"Will you *shut UP??*" Sadie interjected. "God this is awful."

"Artful," Skeeter corrected.

"I think I'm pregnant."

"You always think that, every time you urp."

"Well this time I'm sure—I have *reason* to believe it, okay? God (shniff) what am I going to do?"

"You could flush it."

“You mean abortion?”

“I mean the john. One step at a time.” By way of demonstration, Skeeter’s aqua backside slid off the tub-edge to go plump on the floor. “Owwwwwww, FUH—arley Granger!... Guess I better watch my mouth, in case I become an auntie.”

Sadie laughed, though not for long. Laugh, then spit; look ready to retch again, but turn instead to crawl across the tiles and be enfolded.

Role model Mercedes, Madwoman to sidekick Skeeter’s Madgirl, crying that she *couldn’t* have a baby, she was an *art* student, what would she *do* with it?

*Hey* it occurred to Skeeter, maybe this was all a really weird dream, and they’d wake up and—wait a minute—who’d be waking? Was she a guest in Sadie’s dream, or the other way around? Let’s find out with a simple test—

“Ow!” Sadie squealed. “Who do you think you’re pinching, squirt?”

Both still here on the bathmat.

So this was reality.

Improve on it, then.

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“What happened was my sister took this economy cruise to the Caribbean, right? And the very first night she jumped (excuse me, *pounced*) in the sack with this Ramon-like individual who had a dark, wavy face and full, sensuous lips that she’d never seen before *or* since, and whose last name she didn’t even catch. And two months later there were Consequences.

“Morning sickness, pickle cravings, the whole (you should pardon the expression) enchilada.

“Then it was week after week of should-she/shouldn’t-she, which isn’t as fun a game as Who Can You Freak Out?, which Sadie won anyway when she told our folks.

“She put off having an abortion till it was too late; then she put off deciding whether to give it up for adoption till *that* was too late, ‘cause she had this beautiful little girl with a dark, wavy face and—well, you fill in the rest.

“So now Sadie’s a Mommy and I’m an Auntie and we have this permanent person to

play Pong with. She's a smart little baby, too; knows how to have a rockin' good time already, and cries along with The BeeGees.

“Sadie named her Desirée. I think that is so COOwull, being named after a famous streetcar like that....”

