

## Chapter 14

### *The Clearing Stage*

It was the fourteen dead guinea pigs that brought home Skeeter's lack of destiny to be an improv comic. It wasn't that she *wasn't*, merely that she *couldn't*; and you could blame some of that on Joe Biggins, who had bad skin and gross teeth but indubitable comic destiny. Not to mention more characters than Sybil had split personalities: there was Marvin Hanker the lickerish anchorman, and superhero Bud the Wonder Janitor, and Gary the Circus Geek of PBS telethon fame; Disco Sniper, out to get you in his crosshairs, and Doctor Ronald (with his Scienterrific Show for Young People) and Doctor Ronald's assistant, Suzi Kreemkups.

When, midway through their sophomore year at Nilnisi, Skeeter and Joe Biggins auditioned for the Nothingbutt Theater, Joe played a fastfood clerk and Skeeter his indignant customer. *What's this?* Skeeter began, and Joe said *That's your refried Sluggoburger, ma'am! with onions tomatoes and extra relish, together with a chocolate Sluggoshake to wash it down with, and fourteen dead guinea pigs in hollandaise sauce.*

Whereupon Skeeter should've gone *Fourteen dead guinea pigs?!* so Joe, all earnest determination, could've said *In hollandaise sauce—that's right, ma'am*, so Skeeter could've insisted *I didn't order fourteen dead guinea pigs in ANY kind of sauce*, so Joe could've then explained that *Ah! you DID order a refried Sluggoburger with onions tomatoes and extra relish; and with every Sluggoburger we give away a side bucket of fourteen free dead guinea pigs in hollandaise sauce—sorry, ma'am, quantities limited; only fourteen per customer.*

Or words to that effect.

But the improvident Skeeter had long since doubled over with a laughing gas attack, such as people often suffered when Joe Biggins got going. And helpful Joe could not resist heaping it up and piling it on, seeming to spill Skeeter's chocolate Sluggoshake with a realistic SHPLORT and asking *Do you still want that, ma'am? I'd be glad, no PROUD to fetch a fresh new Sluggocup for it, and a Sluggoshake's the very thing you need to treat those nitrous oxide overdoses—say! as long as you're down there on the floor, ma'am, would you mind looking for my Sluggocontact lenses? I lost all three of 'em when I dropped your shake; and there was an old gypsy in this morning who left behind his glass eye and crystal ball and I think they're down there, too—*

By which point Skeeter was rolling around the stage in helpless ecstasies, and not just ecstasies but a closefitting tush-accentuating red spandex jumpsuit. Which saved Skeeter from fizzling there and then, and kept her for the moment in Nothingbutt contention.

(Shameful it might be, but accentuated tushes do play their part in show business success.)

To its credit, the Nothingbutt Theater didn't do its casting on a couch. But never enough young women tried out for improv, and cute ones were scarcer still. As Steve Martin aptly put it, *Comedy Was Not Pretty*. Too often it had bad skin and gross teeth.

Nobody doubted Skeeter's stage presence, or her knowing where she was coming from. It was the going-to that kept tripping her up, especially when interacting with comedians liable to pull the unexpected. Joe undertook to coach her, but all for naught; as an improv comic, Skeeter made a damn fine audience. She would get agog and engrossed in what her partners were coming up with, then miss the ball altogether when it was thrown her way, or burst out cacklelaughing fit to die.

There was still the standup circuit to turn to, if you didn't mind sleazy nightclubs full of drunks and hecklers defying you to paste a smile on their Blue Meanie faces. And if you wore a nice short skirt to show off your nice short legs, the BMs only stared at and up them and provided running commentary en route. (Yuggh.)

Tuesday was open-mike night at the Nothingbutt and Skeeter seldom had any problem there as a solo, gabbling with the customary collegiate crowd. Allow me to get *cozy*

with you; taste your intoxicating applause! No worse than your average wet T-shirt contest. Though of course Nilnisi U. had its full quota of BMs.

But to go pro, to be a permanent part-time dues-paying opening act, treated to scattered chortles if not deadly silence, honing and polishing ten minutes of material over and over again for months if not years, until one fine discover-me-bigtime day—

No. Encores were one thing; monotony another.

So (not for the first time) Skeeter found herself devoid of all practical professional ambition. If not theater, what then?

Fencing maybe—she enjoyed prancing about with mask on and foil in hand: *Hey! ho! get off the flo'! avast, me hearties!*

Or she could major in German like her roommate Missy Trace, who must've been a chipmunk or hamster in some former life and retained the squeaky voice, timid eyes, and tendency to nibble her food. This mouselike linguist was in utter awe of Skeeter, who graciously allowed Missy to become her personal idolatress and source of flexibly-repayable loans. She sometimes had Fräulein Trace recite Goethe or Brecht in the original, mystifying Missy with her fit-to-die cacklelaughter. (German was such a hilarious language. You always sounded like you were having a fit.)

Missy herself suffered shrill fits at the hands of Joe Biggins, who would creep stealthily up behind her to shout *Where have you been, my lost love!* while putting Missy in a headlock and sticking his unspeakable tongue in her poor chaste ear. Joe knew better than to try that with Skeeter, who would have bombarded him with Dynamints while demanding to know whether he kissed his mother with that nasty-nasty mouth.

Maybe she should become a dental hygienist. (Oh *yuggh.*)

Maybe she ought to chuck college outright. Look at sister Sadie: dropped out of Nilnisi after not-quite-two years to be whisked away to Portugal; then out of art school in Elsew after *another* not-quite-two years, this time to have baby Desirée.

And now Sadie the single parent was twenty-five and chafing under her folks's roof. Seething every time Carrie or Alexis lent well-intentioned advice about when and where and how a child should feed itself, wash itself, take its naps, take walks vs. being pushed in a

stroller, endure teething, speak in complete sentences, and embark on toiletrization. She even snapped at ARnold, sympathetic as ever but not entirely reconciled to having a single-mother daughter. *His* onetime mother-in-law, who went by the voodooish name of Nana Gubel, wouldn't recognize Desi as her great-granddaughter any more than she would accept Skeeter Kitefly as anything but a step-interloper. Which was peachy-fine with Skeeter, who regarded Nana Gubel as a dismal old snuffdipping crone of a bitch.

It was during Easter dinner, after grace was disposed of and ARnold began to carve the ham, that Sadie dropped her casual grenade of a plan to move self and child out of house and home (as soon as damn possible) and relocate in Rassiére Bay—a couple hundred miles away, across the broad Ipsissima. There she would help run a daycare center with her old college chum Gwendolyn (Winky no more, not since out from under *her* parental roof).

Cheers, dears.

During the ensuing hullabaloo Skeeter helped herself to a big plateful of ham and yams. Extracting Desirée from her highchair, she took babe and plate out to the back yard—hello sun! hello sky!—where they could eat in relativeless peace, play peekaboo and toddle around the meager garden, touching each struggling flower—hello crocus! hello tulip!—with one finger only.

Skeeter had never understood Sadie's longing for an over-the-rainbow place where she could *do* things; probably because Skeeter, wherever she might be, did *do* things and without a whole lot of Judy Garlandizing about it, or even much in the way of forethought.

Whenever Sadie flipped her lid and flew the coop—staying out all night with some guy called Dingus, or getting super 'luded at a motorcycle rally, or notifying the folks by picture postcard that *Hi guess what I'm in Aspen* [or Lisbon, or Melbourne] *and God is it beautiful here I'm all out of bread but not to worry I can find work as an au pair or something* *Later Lotsa Luv*—

—well, Skeeter took pride in herself as a madcap example-setter. Yes, that was how you *did* things: with the same GERONIMO! satisfaction you felt when Baby Desi made her very first unprompted request for *bobbahs* [Pop Rocks].

And no sooner did Skeeter return to the U.N. than she decided she wasn't going back

to the U.N., at least not after wrapping up the spring semester; barely a month left and then she could boast of going to college two full years in a row. (Nyaah to you, Mercedes.)

As a consequence she coasted through finals and got okay-enough grades and bade farewell to the Nothingbutts and never saw any of them again; and wished Joe Biggins the best of knock ‘em dead luck and never saw him again either. (Except maybe once on *The Merv Griffin Show*; she was a bit swacked at the time and might’ve imagined it.) Missy Trace wanted to drop out too and go on being Skeeter’s roomie, but her parents wouldn’t let her do either and this sent poor Missy into a *waah-boo!* crying jag.

Skeeter’s parents didn’t learn of her decision for some little while, thanks to Skeeter’s desire to spare their feelings. Or maybe just because it slipped her mind, there being other matters for them all to deal with. No sooner were finals over than everybody had to hustle out to the Booth County Hospital, where Gramma Addie Otto had been an RN fifty years before, and where she lay dying now.

But perfectly at ease, as Gramma kept assuring them; or what would have been ease were it not for the cancer. She took educated interest in her treatment, was friends with all the present-day nurses, and never missed *The Edge of Night* as long as she was conscious.

The last time Skeeter and her mother and Aunt Ollie got to see her, Gramma was drifting merrily-merrily down the gentle stream, wishing only for a taste of Wunderlich Bros.’s potato salad—still the only true potato salad on the face of God’s earth—and recalling when little Kelly Rebecca would run up to the Courthouse water fountain and turn the knob as far as it would go, the highest possible spray (which was pretty darn high coming from a county appliance) and with her precious little face all bright and shining, go *YEAHHHH!*

Gramma had hold of Skeeter’s hand but clutched it then, turning with the utmost urgency in eyes and voice to say *Hawney—at the house—upstairs—in the sewing room—that big dresser—not the one by the closet—but next to the window—there in the third drawer—from the top—toward the back—*

Skeeter couldn’t figure out what Gramma had wanted her to get, or find, or realize. Nor could her mother; nor could Aunt Ollie; and it became a subject of recurrent family

speculation. There *was* a big dresser by the window in Gramma's sewing room, and it did have a third drawer and that drawer was full of bobbins and safety pins; but that was about it.

So they buried Gramma in Rosewood beside Grampa and generations of Wunderlichs going back to pointed-chin Gustav and maxim-coining Frieda. It was a June funeral such as only the Middle West can dish up, too hot and glaring for anyone to wear black and not soak it through. Skeeter thought with so many nurses in attendance they should have all been in white anyway. Gramma would've wanted a brisk and cheerful funeral, not like Grampa's during that raging December blizzard when they'd kept having to wait till the wind died down.

With Gramma gone, the question arose of what to do with the old house in Marble Orchard. Great-Aunt Emmy had lived there too for the past nine years, but during Gramma's final illness she'd been placed in a nursing home and brought out only for the funeral. Relatives took it in turn to lead Emmy, blind and mad (not insane, just mad), around Rosewood. When Skeeter was on duty Emmy would say no more than *It's come to this has it child?*—over and over, as though it were a honed-and-polished punchline worth learning by heart.

Back to the house: Aunt Ollie and Uncle Walt didn't want it, having nearly paid off their own mortgage; and of their two surviving sons, Doug lived in rehab centers when not in jail, while Jerry had taken his creepshow to law school in Cleveland. Uncle Buddy-Buzz refused to ever set foot again in Marble Orchard; but Skeeter's mother, astonishing everyone, felt differently.

Oswald Avenue was changing, according to Carrie; the neighborhood simply wasn't safe anymore. (Which Skeeter, with a snort, interpreted as *Too many Hispanics and blacks oh my!*) But there was more to it than that—more of a middle-aged longing for some under-the-rainbow place where you didn't have to DO things.

ARNold posed no objections. He liked the idea of having a This Old House to renovate, and four acres of lawn and garden to rescue from neglect. He even liked the old cat Margaret (Whippy no more at age thirteen), who might be stiff and somnolent but needed only one glimpse of Skeeter to bug her eyes out as of yore.

*AR*nold had worked for the Kleinstein Drugstore chain all his life in one capacity or another; now, by cashing in a career's worth of IOUs, he got the Kleinsteins to make him a sort of overseer for their ShortKut convenience stores in Booth, Herold, and Surratt Counties. So a FOR SALE sign went up on Oswald Avenue, though not before Carrie insisted on repainting the entire interior with Skeeter's suborned help and long-distance applause from Rassiere Bay, where Sadie put Desi on the phone to cheer in her auntie's ear. Skeeter was only mildly wounded by this (it not being Joe Biggins's tongue) and even less touched by the pangs of cleaning out her room, emptying her closetful of jackets and sweatshirts borrowed from guys she'd batted lashes at during adolescence, most of whose names she no longer remembered.

Least wounding of all was *AR*nold's knocking shyly at her door with a request to have a Serious Chat, revealing that though he'd fully intended to pay Skeeter's way through college—which would have been a first-time accomplishment for him, what with Sadie's gadabouts, and Alexis opting to marry Lenny Czolgosz and shuffle off Buffalowards to produce babies every other year (five so far, with number six due in November or should we say six-and-seven as it was or rather they were likely to be twins)—

Skeeter lassoed *AR*nold with a big hug and told him not to fret; she'd been thinking of taking some time off from school anyway, getting a job and paying her own way when she went back. Which *AR*nold protested, though not to the point of talking Skeeter out of it.

To ease the exodus for all concerned, Carrie suggested that Buddy-Buzz invite Skeeter up to Chicago for a week's vacation. This he readily did, and escorted her to a number of shows, vast and dapper in his tailored three-piece summer suits.

At thirty-seven he now resembled Oliver Hardy in his bacon-grabbing prime (though with fewer spicurls). But the same grandiose eloquence decorated his rhetoric as he too sought a Serious Chat with Skeeter, urging her to reconsider and not turn her back upon the stage. True, it was nothing more than make-believe, a magic shadow-show round which we phantom figures did but come and go. But after all, darling, what was Reality? Nothing more than everyday life—the workaday world—artlessness.

Buddy-Buzz had realized this when he was Skeeter's age and went behind the scenes to become a designer. Yes, it was only a paper moon hanging over a cardboard sea, mere scenery, not Reality; but that's where the magic came in. With a dab of paint here and papier-mâché there, you could *make* people make-believe just as much if not more than the actors out front (who could and did flub and freeze in midscene).

And even we poor tech folk, darling, can achieve a certain renown. Who could forget Buddy-Buzz's set for the Off-Loop production of *God's Codpiece*, with its fire-eating green-nudes motif? *And* we can earn a comfortable living. (Expansive envy-of-the-neighborhood glance around his highrise suite—if a two-bedroom-kitchen-and-bath could be called a suite.)

(Buddy-Buzz always did, with feeling.)

But at Marshall Field's Crystal Palace, over enormous ice cream sundaes to soften the blow, Skeeter broke the news that she was auditioning for a clerical role at the Nilnisi Mutual Savings Bank (main branch) in downtown Demortuis.

Her uncle took it gracefully enough, with a your-life-my-love shruggy gesture he'd picked up not from Oliver Hardy but a prop man called Milt, whom Buddy-Buzz had known in his youth. (Which one's youth Skeeter didn't find out.)

She aced her audition, though, and got cast as a file clerk in the bank personnel department. It would be impolite to speculate whether accentuated tushes played their part, Skeeter having sat on hers through the bulk of the interview.

At any rate she began to feel like an adult. Turning twenty in July, she wasn't a teenager anymore but a mature woman with a real job and real wages of \$650 a month to do with whatever she chose. Such as pay rent, which was a real high priority with the house on Oswald almost sold and Skeeter in need of her own place as soon as possible—somewhere neither over nor under the rainbow, but movable-into and fast.

The Nilnisi Mutual (main branch) personnel department consisted of several older women and several her-own-age women and one indeterminate fellow with the wonderful *Wrinkle in Time-y* name of Charles Wallace, who had little in common with Madeleine L'Engle's uncanny character other than a willingness to make people sandwiches.

Charles did have an unusually protuberant brow like the Littlest Conehead ha ha ha (as he usually phrased it) and a tight fixed smile that remained on his face, Cheshire style, even while he was in tears. As Skeeter discovered her very first workweek when a maintenance hunk came to replace some burnt-out fluorescent lights, and Trish the bitch receptionist said in a loud callous voice *It sure is nice to have a man around the office for a change*, which Charles overheard whether it was intended for his ears or not. Thus Skeeter found him in the fileroom, ducked head grinning and dripping.

She lost no time in treating Charles to afterwork drinks, proposing this conspicuously in front of Trish's desk. Over the drinks Skeeter made a few remarks about the authenticity of Trish's hair color, bustline, and personal virtue; but Charles was so nice and magnanimous, saying *Oh well Trish can't help having those bubbling hormones ha ha ha*, and Skeeter replied *She sure can't, that's her whole problem*.

So that topic was disposed of, fresh drinks were served, and Skeeter went on to strike up a very best friendship with Charles that marked something of a first for her, and perhaps for him too.

He lived in an unpretentious little walkup on Garfield Street, as Skeeter learned not in the usual your-place-or-mine manner but because an apartment was open for rent there and Charles, hearing of Skeeter's circumstances, hastened to tell her all about it. The building wasn't far from the bank and only a block or two away from McKinley Street, where Skeeter had gotten butt-tattooed what seemed like a billion years ago by Madame Zelda, who'd since gone on to a better world or maybe just a better locale.

Make that a *different* locale. Skeeter saw nothing to disparage in a neighborhood so replete with happy funky bistros and boutiques. The apartment for rent was quite as delightful, recently repainted and with a new lime-green shag carpet laid. All this plus heat and water would be Skeeter's for one-fifty a month; and dispensing with forethought she converted her first week's paycheck into a rental deposit.

Her folks sold their house in August and that was that; they all packed up and left Oswald Avenue for the last time. On moving day ARnold and Carrie lugged some redundant furniture over to Garfield Street in the station wagon they'd bought to replace Elmer the

Fudd Ford Thunderbird, also bequeathed to Skeeter who in her own mind had owned Elmer for years.

The furniture outfitted her new apartment to the point where Skeeter could host her folks at a combination housewarming/sendoff, and partly allay their worries about her being on her own in such a part of town—alongside such curiosities as Charles Wallace, who lent Skeeter his blender for mixing up yummy stuff ha ha ha.

Skeeter's mother in fact got so sentimental on strawberry daiquiris that she delivered a speech about her baby girl being all grown up and what would Carrie do without her? Which was a change from twenty years of wondering what to do *with* her. But all that was done and done with and Carrie actually wept when the time came to part, *AR*nold ahem-ing and jingling car keys during mother and daughter's embraces, and blushing when Skeeter kissed him goodbye. Then the Benisons were out the door and down the stairs and in the station wagon after exchanging final waves, and away down Garfield in search of the Interstate and the long road home to Marble Orchard.

Skeeter felt she'd burned her britches that night. It felt so good she gave over most of the remaining summer to doing it again and again. Accentuating her tush in Calvin Kleins, topping herself off with a satin disco jacket (borrowed, of course) and heading out to shake booty at Pleasure Island or The Nosferatu. Or strapping on skates so she could giddown to the Roller Boogie Rink-o-theque on Lincoln Avenue, where love on wheels was all the rage.

On wheels or in heels, Skeeter got to dance with a great many guys wearing shirts open to their waists and expecting her to flash and drool over their flaunted chest hair, their fourteen-karat Zodiac medallions. And Skeeter was human: she could flash, she could drool, and she could do both now without being confined to some disco sniper's Mercury Capri.

Your crosshairs or mine?

Allow me to get *cozy* with you; taste your intoxicating applause while Donna Summer sings about how she needs Hot Stuff. (Some just need it but others of us ARE Hot Stuff, so nyaah to you Donna.)

Skeeter meant to send Missy Trace her new address but forgot all about it, and her ex-roomie's letters ended up forwarded everywhere except Garfield Street. Come September

Skeeter almost remembered, but the deeLISHus feeling of perpetually ditching class swept everything about the U. right out of her head; and she never saw Missy Trace again either.

She did see lots of scary movies, though, on nights not spent dancin' or skatin'. With her series of snipers and occasionally Charles Wallace she went to see *Alien* and *Phantasm* and *Love at First Bite* and *Dawn of the Dead* and *The Amityville Horror* and *When a Stranger Calls* and Steve Martin as *The Jerk*, several times.

During the autumn she filled her new apartment with M. C. Escher posters and Edward Gorey posters and Loren Salazar posters and crystal prisms and crystal snowflakes and B. Kliban cat pillows and other neat junk found at local trinketries or mail-ordered from *High Times* magazine ads.

Not that all was beer and skittles, of course. She had to wage a running battle against these little tiny bugs that weren't roaches thank God but occupied the inner corners of her kitchen cabinets, and kept leaving their little tiny bug crap that looked like pepperspecks all over the damn place (yugg).

Then there was this bizarre case of pimples, almost the first Skeeter'd had to deal with in her nearly unblemished life, and these in a most inconvenient place; but she went to a clinic where she was prescribed an ointment that chased the rash away jiffy-quick, to Skeeter's thorough relief. She blamed it all on her first and last drink of Perrier; from now on, she told the girls at work except Trish, she'd stick to wholesome healthy Piña Coladas.

And Skeeter resolved to touch bases with herself more often, especially when no strapping young man was handy. At such times, say of a Sunday morning, she might even get up before noon and have a leisurely brunch of Golden Grahams and Cheetos, gazing out the window at Garfield Street, and the modest skyscrapers of downtown Demortuis peeping over it at her.

If she woke particularly early she could catch mists rising like dry-ice effects over a Buddy-Buzz set, and be reminded of Pip's going off to London with all his Great Expectations spread before him. That was one of Skeeter's favorite scenes in one of her favorite books, stumbled across in one of the English classes she'd taken back when she was in school.

Those were the Seventies, my friend, fast coming to their end; and if they'd been one big blast, just think how much bigger and brighter a blast the imminent Eighties would be!  
At any rate, as with Pip, it was too late to turn back now.