

Three

WINDOHWA

*Come up and be a kite
And fly a diamond night.*

—KATE BUSH

Chapter 16

Really Weird Dreams

For many nights afterward she would have a dream, this really weird dream of going to bed and almost to sleep before the bed rolled forward like a dresser drawer being opened, and a goddam spotlight came shining right in her eyes which wouldn't close or even blink—and there were her folks, staring down at her from either side, all aghast.

Jeez quit it she'd try to say, you're acting as though I'm DEAD—

But this particular morning she was alive and awake and in pain, banging on Charles Wallace's door just as that Littlest Conehead was rinsing off and toweling dry his bumpety scalp.

He opened up, took one look and drew her in; attended to her outer wounds and contusions with practiced skill, keeping his Cheshire smile fixed tight despite the occasional lachrymose sniff. How could *anybody*, no matter how brutal or fiendish, do such-a-whatever to anyone as small and cute and frolicsome as Skeeter Kitefly?

How indeed?

No answer to offer.

Absolutely incomprehensible that one side of her comical doll-like face should be mottled the color of eggplant.

She shied at going upstairs to her own apartment, so Charles let her spend the day and following night at his place. He had to go to work but called a swingshift-bouncer friend

named Bevan to come play bodyguard, leaving Skeeter bandaged and compressed and applying a porkchop to her eye in lieu of steak.

It'd come to this, had it?

So much for Wilbur and Napoleon and Miss Piggy...

She tried to rest, to catch some Zs, lulled by the other-room mumble of Bevan's TV gameshows; but caught instead the first of those really weird dreams with the drawer, the light, her folks *acting as though she were DEAD*—

Must not be an act 'cause look, here she was, back in Marble Orchard alongside Grampa and Gramma and Cousin Mickey Hungerford, who'd bought the farm in Cambodia, and William the guinea pig in his shoebox underneath the crab apple trees, and Whippy Ann-Margret who'd joined them only last winter—and by golly! Great-Great-Aunt Claudia Wunderlich! Gone these twenty years, yet hanging on as the family's perpetual star mourner. Umm umm umm...

Skeeter was trying to dig her way out of Rosewood when Charles got home and peeked in and woke her hastily up. Scolding her about making sudden movements; you never could tell with head injuries. He had Bevan bring her a cup of steaming hot chocolate, regardless of the summer afternoon; added a jigger of orange Curaçao (“good for what ails you ha ha ha”) and made Skeeter drink it down every drop while she goggled bloodshottily at him, at them, her two protectors, her fogbound brain going *Wally and the Beave—Wally and the Beave*—

How COULD anybody lift a hand against Skeeter Kitefly?

Be annoyed at, certainly. Jealous of, to be sure. But blacken and bluefy? No way. Unreal. As a child she'd never once been spanked, though her mother had threatened it often enough. ARnold had seldom gone so far as to raise his voice.

Of course there'd always been Sadie B., exercising her big-sisterly right to deal out the occasional pummeling, being the older and larger and quicker to anger. Natural to a natural redhead: her sudden rages succeeded by bouts of eager affection, and vice versa.

Second door on the left—Sadie's old bedroom, the one Skeeter'd waited an entire fruitless decade to take over and move into. Half the time it had been accessible, its

occupant bidding little siblings welcome, sharing juice-details after heavy dates. Giving the admiring young Skeeter her first practical lessons in makeup, menses, and manhandling.

But then would come Quite Contrariwise, again and again: Sadie placing her room off limits to “shrimps and squirts,” if-I-catch-you-in-there-messing-with-my-things-just-once-more-I’ll-knock-your-block-off-I-mean-it, etc. Pulling her Pippi Longstocking routine, as though Sadie were the strongest girl in all the world and Skeeter her Mr. Nilsson monkey-slave.

In her *dreams!* Flout that ultimatum! Slip on your slyboots, your showercap, your borrowed wig over that, and tiptoe into the forbidden room at the ungodliest-possible hour. Shake Big Sissy half-awake:

“Sadie! Sadie!”

“Hjckrrh?”

“I think I’m losing my hair!—here, look—”

Yank off wig, stuff it in her hand, thrust showercapped baldpate in Big Sissy’s AWKing face, and scam while she tangles up in sheets and snarls, tripping on the stripped-off bedclothes, lunging...

Don’t. Please. Give it to me.

Hjckrrh?

Get up. Get dressed. Getting out of here. Now—

Skeeter could get away with things, pranks and tomfoolery and monkeyshines (nyaah to you, Mr. Nilsson) but Sadie could get away period. Flip her lid, fly the coop, run off to Aspen or Lisbon or Melbourne or—where the hell?—oh right, Rassiere Bay. Of course. Rassiere Bay, that’s the ticket: get up, get dressed and out of here, now; get a ticket on the first available rush-and-roarer, plane train or automobile, to Rassiere Bay! Get a move on, get the lead out, get your butt in gear, Wally and the Beave would help—

“Wally,” for his vexed part, tried to keep a level conehead and simmer Skeeter down, convince her it was the Curaçao talking.

He ended up doing most of the work to see her off. Packing bags, adopting plants, discharging utilities, concocting a plausible argument why Skeeter wouldn’t be returning to

work at Nilnisi Mutual Savings (main branch) but still deserved a good reference. Out of this he got his choice of Skeeter's weightier furniture, and first bid on Elmer the huh-huh-huh-ing Fudd Ford.

"I guess Elmer and I were meant for each other ha ha ha," said Charles. "Now remember," he told Skeeter at the bus station, "it doesn't matter where your body happens to be, or whether your brain's still in its pan, so long as your heart keeps beating. So have a little courage, and take this little bottle of yummy stuff—in case of snakebite, you know."

She left him sitting on a gate, waving a handkerchief after her, his bulging brow agleam in the sunset. By the Great Greyhound she resolved to keep in touch with Charles forever; but even as the bus departed from Demortuis, crossed the Ipsissima, and hunkered down to a four-hour evening journey that stretched into a six-hour night trek—

—even then, Skeeter could guess that things would turn out otherwise.

She copped a window seat at Fort Verba and tried to rest her sore temple on the window's not-very-coolness (or cleanness) but jolt bump shake, jerk back awake, again and again. Jerk Alert, in fact: sleazy-geezer moving in.

Hey li'l lady yuh sure are purty—

Turn gauzy compressed mottle towards him. Produce a Grand Guignol grimace. Choke geezer off.

Back to the growing darkness. Try to get some shuteye—no, rephrase that, try to catch forty winks—no, leave the winks with the sleazy-geezers. Simply try to rest. Make it to the next stop. Snarf another hidden dose of snakebite remedy, enough to help you sleep. Drain the bottle if necessary; turn it into a dead soldier. Like Grampa'd called his empty Falstaffs...

Jeez quit it (jolt bump shake) you're acting as though I'm AWAKE owwwwwwww, fuh— crying out loud! Just what she needed: another blow to the face. For a woozy moment she wondered if she'd actually shattered the bus window, or popped it out altogether like the lens gone missing from her broken glasses. Put back on what's left and check. No, there it still was, blurrily mirroring the Monocled Avenger.

Who felt more like Scarlett O'Hara, escaping from the burning of Atlanta only to find Tara disemboweled...

Well not quite.

Don't think we're in Nilnisi anymore, though.

Altered states through the Great Greyhound Looking-Glass.

Skeeter in Windohwa-land: say hello out there, somewhere in the pitchy dark, to flour mills and dairy farms, butteries and cheesemongers. The Land of Milk and Cookies.

At Jalousie she had to get out and change buses, make the correct connection. Not that one, heading back the way she'd come. Nor that one, going to Oeil de Boeuf, though she'd sent many boxtops there to get loot from the Oxeye Biscuit Company. Nor that big bus to Elsew, a place Skeeter'd always been meaning to visit, along with Belgium and Bangkok and Van Nuys Boulevard. No, tonight she was elsewhere bound, and the rest of the planet would have to wait its turn, turn, turn...

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...3 AM by a great grey lake. A Great Greyhound Lake. A busily grizzly *pooch* of a lake. So mother-goosey doctor-seussey, Horton hears The Who; meaty beaty big and bouncy, the dish ran away with the stew. (No wonder you didn't have any dinner. *If* you didn't. Vague memory of a pork chop back there somewhere.)

So this was Rassiery Bay: the Cap on the Pap, and things like that. You did not come here on a boat, you did not come here with a goat; you do have to deal with luggage retrieval, partaking of potty, dialing of phone.

Sadie AWK'd just like old times.

Bossy as ever, demanding to know exactly what had happened and when and where and to whom it'd been reported and inasmuch as which.

Mugged. Yeah, mugged by a stranger. Poke stolen, ears boxed, general jitters. Needing a change of scene. Of course she'd seen a doctor; of course she'd notified the police; no she hadn't told Carrie and ARnold, yet; and yes, she could have called before busing two hundred miles alone at night, but that would have involved forethought.

"Sadie," she added, "can you come get me? I'm tired..."

Which was so unheard-of a thing for Skeeter Kitefly to be that Sadie AWK'd no more but raced right over and picked her up, almost literally, in her long familiar freckly arms.

So Madgirl and Madwoman were together again, augmented by Madbaby Desirée aged two-and-a-half, who was Roo-excited at being allowed out of bed way the hell past midnight, and anxious to introduce her auntie to her horsies Rover, Fido, and Spot. These lived on sunflower seeds in a cage in the kitchenette and strongly resembled gerbils, but they *did* gallop on their exercise wheel when not asleep in a communal pile.

What a good idea. Skeeter followed suit that first night, sharing Sadie's bed with residual ow!-quit-kicking contention; and Desi squeezed in as well, asking whether Skeeter'd ever ridden a big horse? and if so had she ever fallen off? and had she been hurt and if so how much and had she been scared and if so how badly and—

“Go to *sleep*, Desirée,” said her mother, unable to hear herself think how improvisational this mugging-by-a-stranger story sounded. Ears boxed, certainly; jitters, to be sure; but poke stolen? That saddlebag on the bureau looked awfully recognizable and not “just another one just like the other one.”

Aloud, Sadie hoped the mugger would be caught and have his malefactory ass prosecuted to the law's full extent. Think how many other women he might have already victimized; how many more, should he remain at large—

“I'll think about that tomorrow,” said Skeeter, slipping off to really weird dreamworld: *Jeez quit it...*

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On Sadie's insistence, she went to a women's clinic to have her bruises checked out. But in comparison to the raped and molested, and elderlies suffering from the killer summer's heat, Skeeter felt she was there on pretty small-potato pretenses. So too seemed to feel the harried MD or RN (somebody in a white labcoat, anyway) who examined her, and tried to act empathetic but fell rather short.

“What'd they say?” demanded Sadie in the waiting room.

“Told me to eat more yogurt. And maybe take piano lessons.”

“Piano lessons! In this weather? Aren’t they going to *prescribe* you anything?” And Sadie would have given the clinic a piece of her coppertopped mind had Skeeter not dragged her away, spluttering that you might as well go to a medieval barber and get yourself *bled*.

What a good idea Part Two. Skeeter stopped by a budget salon and had her peachy fuzzy opulence of blonditude chopped off, cropped short as it hadn’t been since her earliest Marine-brat days. Sadie took one look at her suddenly shrunken head and burst into tears.

Oh the vandalism!

Too hot to keep your hair on.

It shook Sadie up no end. She would creep into the kitchenette late at night to peer at Skeeter on her cot with her icepack sombrero, sleeping solo except for Timmy the ancient half-stuffed horse. Plus Rover, Fido, and Spot, galloping on their squeaky wheel to nowhere.

Skeeter could watch them do this by the hour. She often did, when insomnia set in.

Far more *raison* to a gerbil’s *d’être* than, say, a guinea pig’s.

Though not so much as, say, a squirrel’s.

Where her own ranked in the Great Scheme of Things was anyone’s guess. Hardly any savings to speak of; no income coming in; no college degree; job prospects existential.

Sadie communicated privately with their mystified folks, saying *Not to worry—leave her to me—can you lend us some bread?* Which Carrie and ARnold did, calling it Skeeter’s birthday present, she opportunely turning twenty-one in July. As for employment, there was Sadie and Gwendolyn’s daycare center out on Soutien Lane. They couldn’t afford to pay but had plenty to occupy an extra pair of hands; Skeeter’s being idle, she took them to the devil’s playground.

Her eye and face healed sooner than expected and more or less unmarked, regaining a modicum of their respective brightness and freshness. But not their vitality, their unreflecting audacity; that merry-go-round had broken down.

And she had always been such a classic happy camper.

Better than well-adjusted. Cheerful as you please. Basically unfazable. Able to get along with even the totalbitchiest of snippy-drips, because—hey!—she was Skeeter Kitefly the One and Only, and the rest of the world but an oyster on her half-shell.

Now she belonged to the Ordinary People: lame, feckless, and lacking Robert Redford to direct her.

Who, then?

She loved Sadie, but would never cease to bridle at her Longstocking'd bossy nova. She adored Desirée, but at two-and-a-half Desi didn't quite qualify for mentorhood. She liked Gwendolyn, but come on—how seriously could you take anyone originally introduced to you as “Winky”?

Who else? Her folks were far away, and even up close could scarcely be conversed with on any kind of revelatory level. Uncle Buddy-Buzz was in British Columbia for the summer, and would probably agree that she should take up piano lessons. Charles Wallace and her other just-as-distant friends would be too remote, by and by, even for memory.

What else, then? Could there be anything to the occult? Astrology, say: she was a Leo, loyal and honest and generous and romantic. (Right.) Consult a few horoscopes: *focus on insights guard against tendencies be aware act accordingly...* hell.

What about biorhythms? Calculate her peaks and troughs: twenty-one years old, plus three weeks, plus two days—add that up, let's see, 21 times 365, don't forget Leap Years, carry the seven, then divide... hell. Math had never been her strong point.

Consult a palmreader? A phrenologist? An oversized eightball? *Reply hazy, ask again later.* Like hell.

Sneak a peek at Sadie's Tarot cards, despite the likelihood of getting your block knocked off for messing with them. Sadie would insist on doing a proper reading with all the gypsy trappings; let's just take a random glance...

The Page of Wands: a Hamlet or Romeo-type, gazing soulfully at the top of his walking stick. The Four of Cups: a guy sitting under a tree, with a disembodied hand offering him a drink; very Omar Khayyámmy. The Five of Pentacles: a stained-glass window with a couple of beggars beneath it, outside in the snow. The Eight of Swords: *yugggh!* a woman tied up and blindfolded with a bunch of blades stuck in the ground around her. The Wheel of Fortune: gameshow time again. What next, Concentration or Jeopardy?

Oh GROHsss! The Hanged Man!—and hanging upside down too, with his *hair* on fire or something.

Well forget this! Nothing but a pack of cards, after all. Might as well get a regular deck and play goddam solitaire. Squat on the cot in your crimson underwear and deal deal deal ‘em out out out on the kitchen table. Chainscarf caramel brownies all the while from Gramma Otto’s heirloom legacy, the octagonal canister with “America the Beautiful” lyrics on its eight sides. Toss crumbs to Rover, Fido, and Spot: God shed some grace on thee. And me.

Brownies. She’d been one herself, back in Marble Orchard. Had grossed out an entire bake sale by speculating whether *their* brownies were in fact the remnants of troopers lost in the woods.

Hee hee! Bacchanalian days! When she’d ad-libbed whole routines about the Tooth Brownie, who didn’t bother waiting till kids put their teeth under pillows to haul them away [*demonstrate, with sound effects*]. Or the Brownie Brownout, which was something like a cookout but a lot less stomachable. Or singing “Brown brown brown is the color of my Dating Game Bachelor Number One’s hair”—meaning Jeff Scolley, of course, the first boy she’d ever pounced on. And herself leading the other girls in a wicked chorus of:

*Skeeter ‘n’ Scolley, sittin’ in a tree,
Making out like chimpanzees...*

But that was then and this was now and things had gotten really weird. A never-ending junkfood chainscarf. Once-trim waistline pooching out over panties-band; thighs gradually rising, doughlike, to meet it. She would end up looking like Gertrude Stein and have to dine on Alice B. Toklas brownies. (What a good idea Part Three.) Might as well scrap her petite crimsons and scarlets and fire-engine-reds; order up those white cotton size-forty boxer shorts without delay.

No: have to put that off till later, along with the brownies and the surviving ice cream and what was left in Mr. Potato Chip Bag. Time to get off your plumpening rump, get it dressed and in gear and down to Soutien Lane for the changing of the guard.

Another evening of another day; sit and watch the children play. Jubilant exuberance, skyrocket-high spirits, smiling faces all aglow. Doing things that Skeeter Kitefly used to do, before the dreams began.