

Chapter 17

Near Dowels

The earliest Eighties were depression years, unless you happened to be a Republican, and Skeeter Kitefly was apolitical at the best of times.

Which these were not.

Third time's the charm (they say) and this was, let's see, yes: the third time in Skeeter's short life that her highfalutin derring-do had flamed out on her. Gone into a tailspin, a SHWEEEEEE-OOOOP nosedive, aiming to auger in at Mach 1+ and not with any whizbang but a stumblebummy whimper.

So where's the charm?

Where for that matter was Prince Charming? Stuck, maybe, but hardly in a rut. Stagnancy had overtaken Skeeter's nightlife too, thanks to the same loss of all ambition, aspiration, enterprise. And good old Projection Plus, with which you could kiss off every consequence. Lose this once (or thrice) and down you plummet, gluggity glug—to flounder in the deep end, engulfed by colorblindness.

But what else to do? where else to go? given the altered states of the earliest Eighties?

The answer came in a really weird dream. She would find out what-for and where-to at a school of some sort. (And ditch all her classes there till finals week, showing up to take the big test naked *and* weightless so she kept slipping out of her chair and floating around the exam room, bouncing nudely off the walls).

(Well, the basic dream impulse was probably sound.)

Back, then, to a School of Some Sort. Plenty to pick from, but which to choose? There were institutes devoted to business, real estate, acupuncture, dog grooming; technology, theology, cosmetology, bartending. (What a Good Idea Part Four—providing they let you drink your homework.) There were agriculture colleges if she wanted to plant beanstalks; music conservatories if she wanted to pursue piano lessons; and the USMC if she wanted to return to her Marine-clean roots.

In the end, Skeeter applied for entry to good old homespun Windohwa University (i.e. “Double-You-You”) down in Mount Oriela. She anticipated a routine enrollment such as she’d always breezed through at Keening, with tuition around her accustomed level—\$400, say, for a full-load semester, plus another hundred or so for books and supplies, and of course a smidgen extra for food and shelter and so forth.

“You’re not a state resident,” the Admissions Office informed her.

“Am too! I live in Rassiere Bay.”

“And that is since when?”

“That is since June.” (So there nyaah.)

“June of last year?”

“No, June of this year.”

“You’re not considered a state resident till you’ve lived here not less than one year—”

“—not less than?”

“—immediately preceding registration. Tuition this fall for *non*-resident undergraduates enrolling in twelve or more hours of course work comes to \$1,151.”

“One *thousand*?—”

“—one hundred and fifty-one dollars. Plus a \$49 incidental activity fee. Now, there are certain exemptions from all or part of this tuition. Are you a veteran or active duty military, or child or spouse of active duty military, or child of a POW or MIA, or an immigrant holding a refugee classification who has been in the United States less than one year?”

Skeeter’s being the only child of retired military who’d served overseas (but not been

taken prisoner or gone missing in action) after twice being considered for astronaut selection (and getting washed out both times) didn't quite qualify her as an exemption.

So—short of enlisting herself, à la *Private Benjamin*—\$1,200 had to be raised. Unfortunately not to buy a pre-plumbed Hot Tub with hydromassage booster joints. And after finding the pickings far from plentiful at Student Financial Aid, it was on to Ma Bell to swallow her pride. Yours, that is, not Ma's. Yours was no bigger at this point than the average aspirin; but just as apt to stick in your throat.

Ma, for her part, couldn't understand why Kelly RebecCA! couldn't simply go back to Keening and so avoid all this non-residential brouhaha.

A return to Keening, however, would entail crossing back into Nilnisi; and that, needless to say, Skeeter could not do. Just as she couldn't possibly have kept on driving T-Bird Elmer. Which, needless or not, was beyond Carrie's understanding.

But ARnold, God bless him, didn't have to be asked twice to ante up; and Uncle Buddy-Buzz sweetened the kitty with no dramatic strings attached. Aunt Ollie and Uncle Walt sent a crisp ten-dollar bill, and Gower Kitefly (working now for DisneyWorld—as a cropduster, Skeeter thought) made a contribution to atone for being a faulty exemption-provider. Thus laden with family spoil, Skeeter packed her poke and trucked on down to Double-You-You.

Where she was promptly thrown for a loop.

It was all so *different*.

Keening, Bonum, Whitman Junior High, Oswald Elementary—each new school had been a fresh continent to conquer, Skeeter charging down the gangplank to plant her banderole with choplicking relish. *Veni vidi vici ta-daa!* Yet here, after just one year away from college, she felt like an unclassified refugee in some foreign dimension, with only a tenuous grasp on the local language and manners.

Who could tell how many *faux* she'd *pas'd* already?

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The heart of Mount Oriela appeared to be a drunken T. The town's main street, Oriela View, served as a respectable north/south upright; but at Corbel Square it ran into

rakish diagonal Corbel Road, which made for an askew crossbar. (Given the number of taverns flanking Corbel Road, this slant was perhaps to be expected.)

Between Corbel and campus were block after block of non-dorm student housing, ranging in quality from the cheap to the bleak to the frankly inauspicious. Skeeter found an apartment here, and over the next couple of years would find five others (or maybe it was seven) nearby: each the sort of place you lived at till you had no choice but to move on. Some had dripping faucets and some had bonking steampipes, or cracked tiles or blistered linoleum or peculiar scorchmarks or immortal mildew. Some needed to be described with adjectives Skeeter'd only come across in old English novels—"frowzy," "scabrous"—and she withstood one month in a hole she swore only *pretended* to have electricity but still in fact laid on gaslight.

Now your typical freshman college student, tasting independence for the first time, might find all this delightful—think of Sadie in Tearytown! But Skeeter, like Huck Finn, had been there before. She'd sucked back her share of so-called happy breaths, and drained the funkily-rundown cup dry. (Which wasn't to say that she would turn down a refill, supposing somebody else were standing rounds...)

To augment her meager resources she got a job at the campus answering service, working alongside a large woman named Belinda who wore muu-muus and occasionally shared her abundant packed lunches. No answers to spare, though. Nor even any articulate questions.

And in the meantime there was all that What-For to be found out.

Skeeter had twenty-two Theater credits to transfer from Nilnisi, but Double-You-You accepted only six: scuttling four of her A's and two of her B's and effectively ringing down the final curtain on Theater as a major. She latched onto Philosophy instead, in misguided hopes of learning how to unscramble and decipher; but it quickly got too much like algebra and nothing at all like "The Gold-Bug."

If you know you are dead, then you are dead.

If you know you are dead, then you are NOT dead.

Therefore, you do not know that you are dead.

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*If thirty white horses are upon a red hill,
Then they tramp, then they champ,
Therefore they stand still.*

Goddam logic anyway. All it did was put frown lines in your forehead. Now and again Skeeter would nearly get a handle on some syllogism—“Hello Mrs. Premise!” “Hello Mrs. Conclusion!”—only to feel it physically, tangibly slipping through her mental fingers.

Didn't help that the GTA in charge of her survey class was none other than Bernie Farkas, the partial Marxist from that crocodile-rockin' party at La Pad. He still resembled a rabbit in a snit, wore the same set of belligerent muttonchops, and would seize on any pretext to rail against the Moral Majority. Here at least was something still its recognizable self even in this alien dimension, unaffected by the intervening years.

“Hi! Remember me?”

“Errrr...” said Bernie Farkas. “—should I?”

“Well, I was only thirteen at the time.”

Flash of alarm, giving way to Bernie's usual dialectic scowl as Skeeter explained about Sadie, Nilnisi, and New Year's Eve.

“Oh. No. Sorry, don't remember. Did you have any other question? I've got a rally to get to—” And pressing a Socialist Workers tract upon her, Bernie took off.

This was rather unnerving.

No memory of Skeeter in her blood-red Superclunky platforms, taking her very first hit off a real live bong?

How could she not be UNFORGETTABLE?

*If she hadn't been then,
And presumably wasn't now...
Therefore, what could the future hold?*

*

Slip-sliding away.

Skeeter tried to stick to her studies through thick and thin, but there was an illiberal

lot of the latter. Even after living in Windohwa the requisite year and becoming a sure-enough state resident, things remained tighter than tight. All costs and fees were going up as the Reaganaut tide washed away financial aid.

So that summer, and again the following winter and spring, she had to plop out of school and make some dough to keep her transcript afloat. Doing a little of this and less of that: resuming her stint as a drugstore cashier; waiting on tables at a hideous preppie bistro; working in a vintage clothing store popular with outmoded transvestites. In between these gigs she filled in for Belinda at the answering service, and had moonlight flings at valet parking, short-order cooking, karate lesson peddling, and magician-assisting.

One way or another she would get her head sufficiently above the tidemark to return to Double-You-You and change her major. Swapping goddam Philosophy for Political Science, and Political Science for Psychology, and Psychology for Sociology, and faring hardly better than the Duke and Dauphin had with temperance lectures or yellocution. Twice she turned to Academic Advising for help in finding out What-For; twice she bowed to their insistence that she *had* to take Biology 101, sooner or later; and twice she dropped Bio as soon as possible and took a different, less spookacious course.

(Skeeter might have lost her bearings, but still knew damn well where *that* road took you.)

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Tentatively, she emerged from her isolation tank. Resumed the dating game. Became involved with men again.

And almost without exception (whatever her intentions) these men turned out to be Svens: part of the same old Lappish-minded smörgåsbord. By no means were they all Scandinavian-looking, though most had blank unfurnished bedroom eyes. Those who didn't tended to be "neerdowells"—and Skeeter pronounced it that way too, without apostrophe or hyphen: *near dowels*. Which was about as close as that type came at the best of times.

Which these were not.

The ultimate near dowel was probably Steve Martin's character in *Pennies from Heaven*: not the familiar Steve Martin of "King Tut" and "Cruel Shoes" but a darker-haired

semistranger, who wouldn't tell lies "if he could help it." Perfectly willing, however, to seduce and abandon and have women support him, while he lip-sync'd songs of the Great Depression.

Skeeter went to see this movie not just once but again and again, despite being pretty much broke and about to plop out of Windohwa for the second time. Yet she kept going back to *Pennies from Heaven*, identifying more-more-more with the kewpie snookums played by Bernadette Peters: repeatedly used, and abused, and ending up peddling her flesh for Christopher Walken (yugggh).

But as Bernadette said: *We've only got one life.*

And as Bernadette sang: *Love is good for anything that ails you.*

So Skeeter floundered on through the monochrome deep end, through her own series of one-after-the-other-night stands; not that there was much standing involved. Or beaucoup charm to be found in going down for the third time. Just the same old offkey replay of "Norwegian Wood," suitably geared to some Sven biding his time while she was drinking her wine, or gin, or Scotch, or Two Fingers Tequila Gold. Lacking the capacity to match him drink for drink for long without getting engulfed.

And in such altered state would Skeeter be escorted (bodily toted) to wherever happened to be home by the Sven of the moment, who seldom bided his time in closing ranks—or attempting to, if a near dowel.

Afterwards she'd always say, "Oh puhLEEZE! Ages ago I dumped that one!" when asked about her latest ex-boyfriend. But it was actually Skeeter, all too often, who got given the old heave-ho; and each time this happened she would shed her steppin'-out clothes, put on olive drabbery, and declare in a fraught voice—as a jilted Catholic girl might speak of taking the veil—that nothing was left for her now but Chinese Communism.

Red, of course, had always been her favorite color.

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She adopted a stray cat and named him Mao, though nothing about him was red except his nose and (courtesy of B. Klivan) mousey tongue. The rest was black-and-white along Sylvestery lines, blending right in with Skeeter's colorblind world.

She took him to the vet to be fixed up and fixed period, leaving Mao a permanent partial Marksman baffled by the neighborhood's brazen young unspayed, whom he would pursue and pounce upon, only to wonder what to do *next*.

Near dowell!

"People are like water" (quoth another Mao) "and the army is like fish." Mao the cat liked fish too, and soon grew too fat to fit comfortably on the seated Skeeter's lap or the supine Skeeter's chest. So he took to curling himself over the sleeping Skeeter's ankles, which came in useful on chilly nights, and earned him the surname "Lumpenproletariat"—recollected from Skeeter's semester as an apolitical Political Science major.

That was Sven, this is Mao: an improvement over her previous bed partners, and a good excuse for staging her own Cultural Revolution. Tubbish and unbubbly, she spent most of those chilly nights in isolation with her cat and her Walkman, listening to Stevie Nicks demand that Tom Petty stop draggin' her heart around; and with her harmonica, trying to teach herself to play the blues (but only causing Mao to hide behind his litterbox); and with her Rubik's Cube, trying to get the frustifying little bugger to come out *right*—

Hell.

Had she lost her touch? Ever *had* a touch? And if she hadn't had it then, and presumably lacked one now... was she the one to blame?

Maybe her environment was at fault. Or her heredity: both paternal grandparents had been barnstorm stunt pilots, and both had been bodily toted away from crashes more than once (or thrice). Mix those genes with what Great-Aunt Emmy Wunderlich had called her Uncle Willie: a flighty lazybones, frittering and frivolling his way through life.

Well, Skeeter had no fear of frivolity or flightiness. But there *were* consequences to life's being just a bowl of cherries—such as its otherwise being a bitch-and-then-you-die. And even *that* would be a bit more acceptable if, beforehand, you could decipher and unscramble some worthwhile meaning and purpose to It All.

Like WHAT???

She started devouring fortune cookies by the carton, in search of an answer. Every YOU WILL HAVE A NICE DAY brought to mind the poster at Sadie's La Pad: the one where the

old Chinese man asked *Where will you sleep?* and W. C. Fields replied *On my right side, with my mouth open.*

But which side was the right one?

Night after night she dreamed she was Superclunking up and down those empty dorm corridors at Nilnisi, knocking on every goddam door trying to drum up revelers, and getting next-to-no response...

Hell. Never *had* gotten much out of college. Not even what-for; not ever.

