

Chapter 19

Taking Avail

“Why,” asked the severe mother-superior-type at the interview, “would you want to work with *us*?”

“Wow,” said Skeeter. *Why in the world would I?* “Well—”

“As you are doubtless aware,” the interviewer continued, “jobs within the Department are not so plentiful as once they were.”

“Oh, I’m not picky or choosy—”

“You’re not in a position to be either, if I may say so.” (Glare over a pair of abbesy bifocals.) “Not only have you no degree, but I see you’ve suspended your college studies three—no, four times, in as many years.”

“Well, only the first time did I really *want to*,” said Skeeter. “I was a lot younger then. And money’s been tight lately, especially now—”

“The same, I’m afraid, is true here at Social Services,” said the abbes. She placed Skeeter’s application atop a thick stack in an extra-deep wire basket. “And likely to grow more so, under” (slight grimace) “Governor Halvers. My advice to you, Miss Kitefly, would be to try the” (marked grimace) “private sector.”

“I *have*,” said Skeeter. “I don’t need another bunch of dippy make-do jobs. I want something that has something to do with my major... which is Sociology,” she added after a pause to consider. “Look, I’ll take anything you’ve got, whatever’s available—part-time, hourly, temp—just so long as it pays a *little*.”

The abbess, after a pause of her own and a lengthier bifocal glare, fished Skeeter's application out of the basket. "Very well. I shall take you at your word," she declared, giving the final syllable singular emphasis.

Within the week Skeeter reported for duty at a dank grey concrete enormity on the turnpike. This slice-of-Chicago, though officially designated the Windohwa State Central Record Depository, was more generally known as "the warehouse" or (among its staff) as "The Pit." A certain section was reserved for the Department of Social Services, and here Skeeter was issued a blue worksmock much like the one she'd worn at Kleinsteins, but emblazoned with a stark white "S.S."

Other departments wore different-colored smocks with different initials; not that it seemed to make much difference. Even as Skeeter was being trained in basic S.S. duties by her corpulent supervisor Earl, along came a forklift bearing a skid of loosely-labeled cardboard cartons.

"Hey! That *all* for us?" Earl demanded.

"Guess so."

"We only want Soc Services down this way! Got no room for anybody else's junk! Look at them boxes—even upside-down, cain't you see that's a 'L' and a 'I' on some of 'em?"

"You got me," said the forklift driver.

"Didn't it *occur* to nobody on the loading dock that 'L & I' might just stand for 'Labor & Industries'—who're still down at the whole other end of this Pit, same as they always been?"

Shrug from the forklift driver. "You best talk to Vern about it. Vern, he told me to bring 'em all over here."

"I swear!" went Earl. "Some of them mother-blessèd bastards cain't tell their own backside from a damn hole in the ground. ('Scuse me, young lady.)"

Nor was Earl far off the mark. The new Governor, Hugh "Hacker" Halvers, had just taken office in the state capital at Jalousie; and among his first acts was to have the previous administration's files boxed up in loosely-labeled cartons and shipped thirty miles down the

turnpike to the Mount Oriela Pit. Once there, dispatched hither and yon by Vern on the loading dock, it suddenly became imperative that “a number of records” (read: umpteen) be located and retrieved without delay. Skeeter, assigned to do this, spent the next three months burrowing up and down through the dank grey concrete labyrinth, while the labels on the cartons grew ever looser.

She worked physically harder that winter than she ever had before, feeling at times like young David Copperfield forced to wash bottles alongside the likes of “Mealy Potatoes”—except that in Skeeter’s case she got to work with corpulent Earl and a sleazy-geezer named Eustace (who might have been a strapping young man forty years earlier, but now was little more than an unlaundered uniform).

The textbooks at Double-You-You didn’t tend to cover topics such as this.

Skeeter had done well enough as a Sociology major—straight B’s—but found much of the subject matter depressing: social deviance, the woes of minorities, entire populations regressing to riot and mayhem. Faced with this in theory and the S.S. Pitstop in reality, how could anyone be expected to make a positive impact? Much less to put on a happy face, stick out a jaunty chin, and carry interminably on about the sun coming out *tomorrow! tomorrow!?*

Even Annie herself (Orphan, not Oakley or Frank) admitted *that* was always a day away.

And too few of the Little Artfuls seemed to have a handy Daddy Warbucks stashed in their day-away future. Skeeter certainly didn’t; so here she was swinging her legs off the edge of the loading dock, dining out of thermos and lunchbox like a proper working-class heroine. Nothing shameful about that (and her ham salad sandwich was very good) but she’d taken this job in early January and here it was getting on to April. By her calculation it would *still* take a solid spanking year for her to complete her college degree, what with scrimping up the pennies to pay for it and all.

And all, *and* all.

Her first impulse was to take off immediately, at once, for Nowhere or Anywhere; but that was Sadie’s way out and Skeeter was wise to its dead ends.

No: another coop-flying might be due, but this time there could be no lidflipping involved. She'd have to plan things out in advance, keep both feet firmly on the ground—act very grownup, in fact, if she truly hoped to stand a chance.

Accordingly she slept till noon the following Sunday, which doubled as the first day of spring; then went out and bought a big fat Sunday paper, the statewide *Windohwa Observer*. Ignoring comics and coupons, Skeeter turned to the classifieds and had her eye snagged at once by

OVERSEAS OP AVAIL

Hall o' the Hearth™, a chain of missions headquartered in Oeil de Boeuf, needed what it called “Hearth Helpers”—and soon—to accompany its delegation on a transAtlantic steamer bound for Greece.

After working for “Hacker” Halvers, how bad could Hearth Helpers be?

Skeeter lost no time in arranging an interview with the deputy chief missionary, a Pastor Muncie, who son-of-a-gun looked exactly like Gale Gordon but sounded like Jim Backus. (The Reverend Howell Mooney! Demonstrating once again that what goes around, comes around bass-ackwards the second time.)

“Um, maybe I should say right now—I'm not a real religious person,” Skeeter admitted.

“Ha ha ha *hee!*” went Pastor Muncie. “That's quite all right, my child! Oh yes indeed.”

Offered passage, Skeeter jumped at it. Greece meant Zorbaland, the realm of the Magus, home to Olympian gods and Arcadian egos. There you might be retaught how to dance, even if you'd been out of step for ever so long.

“I just hope you know what you're doing!” said her mother. “I just hope for your sake you're going to be *safe!*”

*AR*nold said little, as always, but sent Skeeter a hefty sum for traveler's checks.

Fare-thee-well then to Mt. Oriela, to The Pit and the Four Deuces, the Mark Twain and Corbel Square. Mao she hugged and kissed goodbye and boarded with Belinda of the

muu-muus, until such time (if any) that Skeeter might return. For she was heading over the ocean and through the sea, to find where My Bonnie lies: this bird has flown! just like the white-winged dove! (or the black-plumed crow!)

Except that any dove straying aboard the good ship *Van Vooren*—or “Belgian Bulge,” as its crew called it—would probably end up baked in a pie. (Any crow too, maybe, if you mixed in three-and-twenty other blackbirds.) Who’d have guessed that missionaries could *eat* so much? They didn’t belong to Hall o’ the Hearth so much as to “All You Can Scarf.”

Perhaps sensing this, the *Van Vooren*’s assistant chef jumped ship before they even left Hoboken; and Skeeter, as a somewhat experienced short-order cook (to say nothing of magician’s second banana), was pressed into service. She worked physically harder the next three weeks than she ever had before; that winter at The Pit seemed a catered picnic by comparison.

“WHO YOU SUPPOSED TO BE?” greeted Skeeter when she made her first hairnetted headpoke around the galley door.

The question was posed by Mr. Wong the head chef, who looked seven feet tall even without his high white hat, and a yard across even when he wasn’t brandishing a meat cleaver at you.

Mr. Wong let it be known from the outset that his ancestors had been ship’s cooks for centuries, going back to the gilded junk of Emperor K’ang Hsi; and that none of those Wongs had ever been so cruelly served as to have a mere slip of a landlubber girl foisted upon him as an assistant.

“You, Ki-fi! Better look sharp now!” he would shout periodically. “Maybe you learn how to boil water today, hey?! Surprising the both of us then, hey?!”

Life became a constant game of Bagelanna vs. the Gobbogoki.

And for three weeks the world was bounded by decks and bulkheads, with lots of ocean to stare at and sea legs to acquire and *mal de mer* to sail through. (Unassailably: not a Marine brat for nothing.) Pounds of pudge to sweat off behind the steaming service counter, with inane punchlines crawling through your mind: “If that’s the Captain’s mess, let *him* clean it up,” or “Somebody put rum-ration in my rum-ration!”

There were near dowels to avoid among the *Van Vooren* crew (ahoy there matey; stow it ye swab). There were prayer services conducted by the Hearthfolk, and Skeeter attended a couple, but Pastor Muncie’s sermons kept reminding her of Mr. Magoo and that in turn would call other cartoons to mind, effectively pre-empting any religious programming.

Other than that, Hall o’ the Hearth made no attempt to convert Skeeter or ask anything of her besides grub and lots of it. She never did find out why Christian missionaries were going to Greece—whether it was to smuggle baklava back to the Oxeye Biscuit Company in Oeil de Boeuf, or to infiltrate Iran and there baptize the Ayatollah.

Never mind. God is great, God is good, let us cook His servants food. Stick to your galley, you Ki-fi! (Aye aye, sir! all larders stocked, sir!) But splurge a little before reaching port, and acquire a second tattoo: this one a right-ankle **VV** for *Van Vooren*, that could also be interpreted as a **W** for Windohwa—or for Wong. (Skeeter gave the head chef this last impression and he made no comment at the time; but later, after their final mess-session together, Mr. Wong presented her with an ordinary jackknife as ceremonially as though it were made of jade.)

Disembarking at Piraeus, she left the “Bulge” at the dock and the Scarfers to their own devices. Traveling solo now, armed with lists of hostels and *Let’s Go* travel guides and bearing a knapsack half as big as herself, Skeeter proceeded to backpack through what she would always call the Length and Breadth of Asia Minor, but which was more along the lines of the Aegean coast.

Whatever that cloudless country’s true name, its skies seemed strangely familiar to her eyes: blue and clear they were, drenched with the April sun. And as Skeeter basked and hiked beneath them, taking the occasional bus or boat break but still walking physically farther than she ever had before, full of figs and feta and yogurt and olives and ikons and goatpaths and vineyards and *raki* and *ouzo* and bouzouki music and tamboura music and people actually called Kurds and the original Jive Turkeys—

—she began to see colors again.

Not all of them blues, either.

For the first time in going on three years, she could feel her heart go hop, her heart go thump. (“Disembark”—hee hee!)

It might all be to little avail. Doors might be locked and their handles unturnable; life itself might not be sensible or quite understandable—

—but it *did* get easier, further on.

So Skeeter decided en route across the Bosphorus.

And no sooner did she arrive in Istanbul, with a bounce in her step and a song on her lips about the city’s not being Constantinople, than she met a man with blank unfurnished bedroom eyes....

