

Chapter 20

Ring Around with RoBynne

The St. Mintred Medical Center squats, grim and grimy, atop Widdershins Hill, which once commanded a fine view of St. Mintred Bay and now overlooks a host of intervening smokestacks. There are bowers and enclaves of well-preserved Victorian architecture to be found nearby; but Widdershins Hill is mostly inhabited by crazy-vagrants, and a security escort is recommended after visiting hours.

SMMC (pronounced SMECK, as in “You do that and I give you soch a smeck!”) was perhaps the last place on earth where Skeeter Kitefly ever expected to wind up. Working, that is. And especially not now, ten years after she’d started high school and slit open her first worm and renounced all desire for a nursing career.

Yet here she was: soothing no brows, feeling no pulses, but filing filing filing and filling in on phones. Greeting the general patient public, many of whom were unwashed and powerful reminders of yellow-breath’d Westport Willie back in Demortuis.

One such reminder approached Skeeter on her very first morning and asked if he could mooch a thumbtack, wanting it to dig bits of broken light bulb out from under his fingernails. (What? no, li’l lady, he wouldn’t druther go to ER; he’d just accompanied a gurneybound ex-buddy there after a street altercation, and wouldn’t be troubling Skeeter at all if not for this dire thumbtack need and all the bulletin boards being glassed over.)

So there were occasional happenstances to zip shut Skeeter's yawning-open boredom, her overfill of hospital paperwork and grossly-disfigured restrooms (yugg) and whether "PT" stood today for patient or payment or physical therapy or Phineas Taylor Barnum.

And SMECK wasn't all bad: there was less damp cardboard than at The Pit, and not quite as much ralphing-over-the-side as aboard the "Bulge." SMECK's cafeteria food was surprisingly digestible, its younger male employees's butts were generally commendable, and most everyone had the sort of gallows good humor that people share after floods and mudslides.

There's no place like home.

(Which this was, and this wasn't.)

Skeeter had no clear memory of how she'd got here from Istanbul, other than her trip taking most of what was left of her missionary pay (and changing planes in Frankfurt, where everyone sounded like they were having a fit). Feeling wholly disoriented at the Pan Am terminal in New York—wholly disoccidented, too—tired poor huddled yearning-to-be-free; but with no particular reason to go back where she'd started from.

What then to do? where then to go? given that she'd been running away from home since the age of twenty-one? Having been Over There like young Grampa Otto, shouldn't she next be determined to work her way across America, see the rest of the world?

It was then that Skeeter'd felt... a prompting—from the wings, as it were. A silent stage whisper like a tug at her ankle—hasty glance downward, but there was no Gotham airport pervert there. Only her new tattoo. Double-Vee-Vee: a **W** indeed. Passport not to Alice's Wonderland or Earless Bugs's Whiskaway but back, she guessed, to Windohwa.

No place like it.

One thing at least was for certain: just as in Casablanca everybody came to Rick's, so too in Windohwa did everyone eventually end up in Elsew. Except that people never seemed to go *to* Elsew, but *through* it and *around* it. They didn't live in Elsew but in nearby Deasil (alias "Wheeville") where the River Dee emptied its mouth into the Bay; and they didn't work in Elsew but here atop Widdershins Hill.

Where powerful pungent public reminders kept needing greeting.

SMECK encouraged its clerical staff to wear dressy-up clothes, but didn't pay entry-level nearly enough to buy new; so Skeeter had to make the petite rounds of thrift stores and garage sales, always on the lookout for an Everything You Can Stuff in a Sack for Five Dollars bonanza. The outfits she found were kind of mid-Seventies, but hey! Skeeter had no problem with the pre-preppie look. No more Dressing for Success for *her*. And to accessorize, what better than her resurrected collection of Mork-from-Ork lapel pins? Little plastic ice cream cones and question marks and Betty Boops, enlivening the stodge of these Annie Hall-type vests. For extra measure she added a big red ASAP sticker to her photo ID nametag: ASAP standing for "Ah, Such a Picture" on good mornings, and "[what] a sap" on bad.

A sappy-bad morning it was, too, when Skeeter first spotted RoBynne O'Ring making with the sash and shay.

Down and up SMECK's narrow corridors went the Radiology courier's pushcart, delivering sharp-edged X-rays in slick flippant envelopes. No less sharp of edge or flip of pants was the courier, an elongated girl with Modigliani eyes in a Modigliani face atop a body very much to match: as though Seated Nude or Reclining Nude had gotten off her divan, stepped out of frame, dyed her hair fuchsia, combed and moussed it cockatoo-style, put on scoopneck spandex and a leather mini, and joined The Go-Go's.

"She got the beat!"

Sash and shay; stiletto-heeled to boot. RoBynne O'Ring didn't make delivery rounds, she *bopped* them, and mock-bopped at that. Watch her mockbop along to her own internal polyrhythm, putting on a dozen daily goggleshows, giving the vast bulk of onlookers no more than a sly-eyed glance askance. Or, at most, some "cool yer tool" remark in her mail-order accent (a rully bitchen blend of Flatbush and The Valley). Treating the rest of SMECK like so many two-way-mirror surveillants of her extensive exclusive changing room, with RoBynne knowing all about them and giving not a hootly damn.

Grown men grew Pavlovian in her presence. Licensed physicians's tongues lolled.

The hospital brass ahem'd a lot but did little to make RoBynne mend her ways or means, not even when she took to taking half-hour breaks with the guys in the mailroom.

And *JEEZ* thought Skeeter. *This* was Bad Girl panache on an awesome scale.

She admired it from afar those first few sappy days, dying all the while for the bimbo-from-another-cosmos costumery. DayGlo crinoline and jingle-bell anklets! Studded wristbands and black lace mitts! De-sleeved raincoat a size too snug, with sequins across the back spelling out A*L*I*E*N L*O*V*E*R!

And the earbobs! O the earbobs! Tiny twin chainsaws or bourbon bottles or Christmas presents or ostrich plumes (one orange, one green) or knife-and-fork (encrusted with strands of fake spaghetti) or Hershey's kisses (genuine chocolate, intended to melt) or elegant intertwined *Hoodah/Thawtit?*

Who indeed?

Not Skeeter Kitefly, obviously, in her Mary Hartman Mary Hartman hand-me-downs.

That so COOwull a dresser as RoBynne O'Ring should think her dowdy by nature—or, worse yet, not think her anything at *all* but look right through her lack of New Wave wardrobe, askant-oblivious to Skeeter's goddam-obvious kindred spirithood—well, it was sickmaking and intolerable. Just what you'd expect for relying on happenstance rather than your own sixth sense.

So one afternoon Skeeter marked time behind the clinic counter, filing phoning greeting being powerfully reminded, and trying to act premeditative for once in her helter-skelter life. At least until RoBynne brought her cart around for its final pickup of the day.

Then, instead of handing over X-rays with some lame *Gosh! you sure wear neat clothes!* trial balloon, Skeeter flung forethought to the four winds with a yes-you-can-can aerobic kick, depositing her leg *kerplonk* on the countertop and causing a pair of Modigliani brows to shoot skywards, as well they might at the sudden sight of five little piggies indignantly a-wiggle.

“HAS THIS HAPPENED TO YOU?” Skeeter demanded.

She produced her gunnysack-sized poke and popped it open under RoBynne's narrow nose.

“Ew!” went RoBynne. “Uhhhh... am I supposed to take a sniff or a peek or what here?”

“LOOK,” she was directed.

“Awright already... oh m’Gahd. It’s fulla *shoes*.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well okay—there’s like five shoes in here. Only two of ‘em match.”

“Exactly,” Skeeter sighed. Restoring her leg to the floor with a martyred heave, she unleashed a shaggy-doggy shoe story about how much she disliked wearing heels (“I’m *proud* to be short”) but felt obliged to do so as far as the clinic timeclock, after which she’d kick them off and pad around in No-Nonsense hosiery, grinning at all the younger male employees’s commendable butts.

The first time her discarded footwear had gone missing, Skeeter’d thought she was being taught a cruel dresscode lesson; but now she suspected they were getting swiped by a foot fetishist. “And the worst of it is, the son of a bitch only takes one at a time! Has it happened to you yet? I mean you wear such Byzantine boots and things, and hey! since the subject *is* your clothes and stuff, I was wondering where and when and how you get them all—”

RoBynne O’Ring, after a moment of bogglement, burst into laughter; and her two-way-mirror came tumbling down.

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“Okay, now try this—’n’ this, ‘n’ this—*not* that! That’d make y’look like a melvin!”

Where and when and how to shop for a *nouvelle* image: to begin with, you aVOIDed the malls—hanging out there was for like high school *sophomores*, y’know, soooo immature. No, Skeeter’d done the right thing by hitting on thrift stores, and some of the stuff she’d bagged there might be salvageable; but RoBynne knew lots wickeder places. C’mon—

Down at the waterfront, for instance, at Liquid Skyjack or SyntheSizes, you could pick up a pair of T-strap slingbacks that’d look megawicked with white cotton anklets—worn over fishnet stockings, of course. At Turbo’s Heads & Tails (where performance hair stylists did blindfold mohawks) you could buy cut-rate jewelry for any part of the body you cared to encircle or pierce. Navels Ahoy! had a complete trousseau for the bare midriff,

including special belly-button liner and shadow. And at Wretched Wrefuse you could find the dress Skeeter was wearing today, made of chopped-up-and-stitched-together Izod alligator tops.

Wherever they went, RoBynne would check out her protégée through those hoodah/thawtit X-ray eyes and suggest ever more radical enhancements. If Skeeter hesitated, RoBynne would lead by example or rather by ensemble: today's being a tuxedo T-shirt, cummerbund, and plaid skirt that might have been primly kneelength had its hem not been clipped to the opposite hip in order to display RoBynne's striped tights (and see how many agitated middle-aged women might take her aside to hiss, "*Honey!* You stuck your skirt in your pantyhose!!").

(Half a dozen at last count, excluding the guys in the mailroom.)

Here came the behavioral scientist herself to announce, "It's five, let's drive"—toting a boombox the size of a hydrofoil, covered with stickers and decals and chains.

"Thank God already," said Skeeter. "I could kill for a smoke."

"And a drink."

"And a bite to eat. I'm starving."

"So'm I."

"Sushi?"

"Sumi's?"

"*Si, señorita.*"

"Say *sayonara.*"

"So you say—"

"So you see—"

"So sue me!"

"I am soooo SHUwure," RoBynne summed up. "Then maybe the arcade, till the clubs open?"

"Are you SHUwure you wanna take *me* on at Ms. Pac-Man again? I'm gonna wipe you out!"

"Yer so full of it, Skeeter! Aay, y'wanna do yer hair before we go?"

“Oog! In this place?”

“Unless y’think we’re going to like some masquerade party, with you as a *beige* chick or something—ow! Careful! I’m carrying a rully fine sound system here!”

Makeover moment in a grossly-disfigured restroom. Boy howdy! Let those with eyes that can see catch a double peepful of Skeeter Kitefly working a glop of industrial-strength dippity-doo into her coif. Result: modern dancin’ hair!

“Gimme yer brush,” said Ms. O’Ring. “Pull it up, like this... bring it to a point... give it a little twist—there! That looks tuBEWlar!”

Attach a cigarette to your lower lip; offer another to RoBynne the notorious bummergirl. (“Aay! *I* supply the foggin’ lighter, don’t I?”) Trade wicked-twitching looks in the smoggy mirror: Who Can We Freak Out? Let’s go see! Exit then with an *a capella*

O-B—G-Y-N

O-B—G-Y-N

O-B—G-Y-N

And Obgyn was her name-oh—

calculated to make the stoutest pacemaker skip a beat.

“My last run I had this rush order, right?” said RoBynne. “From the Eye Clinic? They had this stupid fogger show up who’d shot himself in the *eyeball* with a bow ‘n’ arrow—”

“Yugggh! Talk about your shish kebab—”

“—he didn’t still have the arrow sticking outta his *socket*, see, that was like last week? ‘N’ he’d already been admitted and discharged and now he was back for a post-op—”

“Eye’s surprised—”

“—at least! And those dorks, y’know, they’re always in a tear-ass hurry, it’s ‘STAT PT HERE’ and ‘STAT PT THERE’ all day long, enough to make y’barf out loud—”

“Gag you out the window—”

“—bag you out the door! So when William Foggin’ Tell pops in, they freak and send their order over like this:

STAT STAT NOW NOW POT HERE!!!

like they were advertising Panama Red eyedrops or something—”

“Hee hee! POT HERE? Why didn’t you come get me? I bet they had free samples!”

“It’s good, they say, y’know, for the glaucoma—”

“Hey! I get glaucoma *lots* of times—”

Outdoors then, respectively a-cackle and a-snigger.

Hot muggish summer evening. Foggin’, in fact: the air thick with refinery fumes, factory scents from industrial plants. You could look down the Hill from SMECK’s front steps and see not-so-distant steel mills belching fire. Beyond them, on the horizon, were hints of the spires of the city of Elsew.

Dodge around graffitified plywood barriers. Step over pools of best-not-ask on the sidewalk. Enter the parking lot and look for your new used car, your ’58 DeSoto Firesweep, the pride of your latter-day life—and find it looking like it’d been steeped in a vat of Pepto-Bismol.

“Oh m’Gahd,” went RoBynne.

An immense relief, considering how much trouble you’d gone to in the first place to find an automobile this exact shade of pink, and thus worth naming Floyd.

“I toTALly love this car!” RoBynne slavered, clambering in. “Y’ever wanna sell it y’gotta lemme know!”

“Sell it! I just *bought* it. Cost me four hundred big ones, though it’s easily worth five. Of course it does tend to stall going uphill,” said Skeeter, backing up and taking off: “Good thing we’re heading *straight down!*—”

And from the top of Widdershins they suited deed to word, va-va-vamoosing with a rush and a roar as the wind raced up to meet them, to twirl Floyd round like some dizzying cyclone carousel, blowing RoBynne’s cockatoo-crest to fuchsia flinders as she cranked her boombox higher and higher (“*This is soooo foggin’ breakneck!*”) till out screamed The Police, preaching synchronicity with an AHHHH-*ahhhh*-ohhhh, AHHHH-*ahhhh*-ohhhh—

You could always depend on Sting to suit the mood of the moment.

It has been argued that when you get onto one of the freeway bridges spanning the Dee, you have a fifty percent chance of ending up right back where you started. But Skeeter made it across that night, guided by RoBynne O'Ring in Floyd the DeSoto; and following sushi at Sumi's and an evening at the arcade, they went on to sample the local alien-lover's scene.

Elsew after dark: a Krypton Metropolis.

"A rully big like bright-lights city," one that dim Demortuis couldn't hold a candle to. Keening and Mt. Oriela seemed hicktowns by comparison, Athens and Istanbul simply jumping-off places, when you were driving a '58 Firesweep through the Bad Part of an Urban Epicenter.

Here you are at a liquor store, giddy with suspense when RoBynne wants to boost a fifth of Old Overcoat; and here is RoBynne getting you into a breakers club, the BoogaBloo Angel, where the floor's full of inner-city kids spinning on their backs and necks and heads. RoBynne's still a teenager and you can easily pass for one, be taken for one, treading water in the Fountain of Youth; and here you are dancing with boyhunks five, six, seven years younger than yourself, Pall Mall a-dangle from your lipgloss as you chaindrink Manhattans, cackling so loud in one midswallow that a maraschino cherry comes up nearly through your nose—buttoncute! And here you are outdoors again, surrounded by neon and freon and shivaree bewitchery, plunging into the vibrant hub of the hive while at the same time living on the edge; and you can feel...

...you can feel...

...the merry-go-round starting up again. Freeing itself from the ground, revolving as it hovers in luminous midair; so you'd better hold on tight while it spins and soars and sings a song of sixth sense, a pocketful of rye—ashes! ashes! we all ring around!!—

