

Chapter 21

Kitefly in the Ointment

The best method of cooking butterbeans (according to The B-52's, currently at play on RoBynne's boombox) was to pick 'em! hull 'em! and put 'em on to steam! Or you could stick your butterbean in a brand-new swimsuit and stretch it out on a cheap deck chair, whose rubber ribbies would quickly melt onto the bean's back and thighs as they all parboiled together under the August sun.

Well, at least your bean didn't have as much butter on it as it used to. Thanks to three months of Richard Simmons aerobicizing: *shed* those extra pounds! dance off that unwanted bulge-pudge till you regain your True Bod in all its unimpeachable compactitude!

Till you dare to wear your first as-God-is-your-witness bikini in three squabby years. Peer shortsightedly at the reflected results—left profile, right profile, and over each shoulder to check out the tush—

Ah, Such a Picture.

If you do say so your whuddababe self.

Figure reclaimed, eyes reignited, strawberry-golden whomp regrown to its old exuberant abundance (and mousse-free for the nonce). All exactly as it'd been then, again. You could hardly tell you'd ever altered—or had to alter *back*—by looking at Whuddababe in her latest lobster-red-indeedy bikini. Chosen not only for its enhancing cuppage and essential rubescence, but to match the shade your complexion would turn in two minutes flat if you didn't slather on the Coppertone from hairline to toenail.

CRACK! went a wet towel just then, causing you to leap and yelp and pirouette.

“So quit hoggin’ the mirror!” said RoBynne. “Make a little room there for me, why doncha?... oh m’Gahd. Next to you I look like a foggin’ giraffe.”

“Oh you do not.”

“Yes I do! I knew I shouldn’t’ve got the leopardskin. Why didn’t y’talk me out of it?”

Privately Skeeter thought it was the rhinestone suspenders worn *over* the leopardskin that might be giving that particular impression. Elongated, yes, but no way giraffelike; as anyone could testify who’d spent as much time with RoBynne in a state of undress as Skeeter had that afternoon.

It was *Van Vooren* galley weather that afternoon too, so hot and humid there was no way you could sunbathe without having a hop-in hop-out drip-dryer first. Skeeter’d assumed they would take turns doing this, but Ms. O’Ring barged into her occupied shower stall wearing no more than soap-on-a-rope.

“Jeez, RoBynne! Don’t you like guys?”

“Whaddaya mean, ‘don’t I like guys?’”

“Well, they sure like you...”

“Oh don’t be such a ‘fraidy space cadet. Be like a woman of the world! Where I live, you gotta fight to keep clean.”

(RoBynne shared a converted factory loft on the waterfront with a bunch of like-minded *nouvelle* types—Danielle, Crispy J., Muchacha, Wolfgang—and two-to-a-shower was considered *de rigueur*.)

“It’s either that or risk running out.”

“Of hot water?”

“Of *any* water, and *you* try shampooing with Handi-Wipes. So y’gonna give somebody else a turn under that nozzle, Pee-Wee?”

“Who’re you calling ‘Pee-Wee,’ you Q-Wu!—quit that shoving!”

“Oh, y’call that shoving? I’ll show you some shoving—”

And they had a rowdy hoyden water fight that brought down the shower rod, curtain

and all. Which would have made a lot better mess at RoBynne's loft than it did here at Skeeter's place in "Wheeville."

Where they were now out in such back yard as had survived the summer heatwave. Washed clean of SMECKable stickum, ready to work up a fresh honest sweat: Skeeter on the cheap deck chair, RoBynne prone on a gaudy beach towel. And already wriggling (the big show-off) halfway out of her suspenders and thong.

"Aay, Skee. Where's yer peepers?"

"In my head, behind my shades—"

"*No-ew!* I mean, don't you have any like VOYeurs around here?"

Skeeter squinted up at the triplex where she and a couple of roomies occupied the ground floor. Most houses in lowlying Deasil appeared to stand up extra straight, like raised eyebrows; but Skeeter's triplex looked like it'd begun to slump.

"*I* haven't seen any."

RoBynne seemed disappointed. "TurGID. Club Med this ain't."

Well rooty-toot-toot on a blue kazoo. It really did kind of suck that RoBynne had to be so olivaceous to begin with; hardly any need to catch rays in the first place. Much less for her to say, "Now yer hoggin' the *goop*—others of us can burn too, y'know."

"Oh right. Like when have you ever gotten burned, Ro?"

Her guest caught the tossed lotion bottle, fed a Psychedelic Furs cassette into the boombox, and slathered away to the tunes of *Talk Talk Talk*. Oh but she had been burned, fer shure fer shure: at birth and for the first thirteen years of her life as Robin Joan Goering, plain dull and boring.

"Yer always reading 'bout some foggin' Playmate chick who when she was thirteen her front teeth stuck out further than her titties, right? Well, that was me when *I* was thirteen. It wasn't only the teeth 'n' tits, either—I never had anything to say to anyone, or anything to think, or to *feel*—I just sat around by myself all the time and stared at the floor. Boo hoo hoo."

Till the happenstantial day she stumbled across Patti Smith's outré album *Horses* at an otherwise respectable flea market. A listen or two later, and Robin Joan was writing

“rully bad punk poetry” in imitation thereof. Adopting the Blank Generation attitude of Talking Heads and The Ramones, she became Robbin Shoplift (alias Gloria Klepto) who wore lots of black on her gaunt body and lots of mascara on her spectral face. Striking lots of sneaky-creepy poses with both: *gimme gimme shock treatment, I wanna sniff some glue!*

At which unlikely point Pinocchio’s BoogaBloo Fairy saw fit to reward Gloria/Robbin for finding *any* kind of personality, by causing her to blossom Modiglianiwise.

“What’d you do? Cross your fingers and wish upon an implant?”

“Shaddup, I’m being like serious here! Listen—this next part is so bitchen and it’s all *true*—a couple years later I boost this Blondie album, *Parallel Lines?* Debbie Harry was like my biggest idol and I’d done anything to be like her. So I put on the ‘phones and listen to her album over ‘n’ over all night long, and the next day, when I wake up... I got it *all*: the face, the tits (real ones), ass, legs, everything—all at once, all outta nowhere. I kept staring at myself, at like this stranger babe’s bod, on *me*—and I said, ‘SHIT this is so magical!’”

Hence: RoBynne O’Ring, the Blondie look (for awhile, till The Go-Go’s came along) and multilayered oh-gee Orgasms Galore. The latter largely stemming from groupiedom with various bands on the Elsew underground club circuit, most notably The Galoshes, who might’ve made it big had their lead singer, Billy Caligula, not attempted suicide once too often and been committed by his unadmiring parents.

“But before that he wrote like this whole song about me, called ‘Heartswipe,’” said RoBynne, snapping off the boombox and clearing her throat. Then, in a pulsatory monotone:

*she’s so ready to be robbing
with her red breasts ripe
she’s a stickyfingered baby
guess you know she’s my type
she’s unerring as a ringer
for a thief in the night
that makes her my type
and now my heart’s swiped
she’s a snatcher of affection*

*takes it as she likes
 she never pays for her pleasure
 no matter what the price
 she's unerring when she pinches
 and she does it just right
 that makes her my type
 and now my heart's swiped*

“Billy wrote that quick as a squirt and riding a Harley, too—*Gahd* what a poet he was. I got a tape of ‘em playing it at the Shih Tzu II Club. It was awesome, they were rully rockin’ to the max that night ‘cause this dude from Slash Records was supposed to be there. But if he was he didn’t sign ‘em. It got me thinking, though, about the stuff *I* used to try ‘n’ write. So now I’m working on a smutnovel.”

“A smutnovel?”

“Called *Grunts of Passion*. Gonna make me rich, but I won’t let that change me. Be nice and I’ll read it to you sometime.” She flipped the boombox back on. “Wish I’d brought the tape of ‘em playing my song. I would have, if I’d known I was gonna be spilling my entire life story to you.”

“Well, I’m glad you did,” Skeeter murmured, opening a cold Moosehead.

“(Aay I want one!) Well, I guess I hadda tell you,” said RoBynne. “I mean, yer like my very best friend.” She took a swig of brewski and let out an AWKKGGH of deep satisfaction.

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Jeez thought Skeeter. Talk about your “Heart of Glass.” Or Plexiglas: airtight, watertight, almost fireproof. All that from plain old Robin Joan in six short years, and getta loada her now!

Skeeter herself had been a kewpie doll at age thirteen, and was one still. (Emphasis on the “still.”) Exceedingly sobering to think that RoBynne was only nineteen and believed oh-gee was the ultimate It—herpes or no herpes, AIDS or no AIDS. While Skeeter had somehow hit twenty-four, with an uncle in Chicago dwindling down to become a gurneybound ex-Buddy-Buzz, decades too soon.

So she was sadder but wiser as well as older, all of which really did kind of suck. Take bed: the most exciting thing that'd happened there lately had been when she'd moved to Wheeville. A couple of commendable-butted young Mayflower men had carried Skeeter's mattress over the triplex threshold with her perched atop, riding it like a magic carpet for five whole minutes. Whoopee.

Then too: despite her cackling response to NOW POT HERE, she had in fact given up fighting glaucoma at the start of her aerobic program, and hadn't taken a toke since—since—well, not for a long time anyway. Only the occasional cigarette, for entertainment's sake.

So light up a Pall Mall, settle back on the rubber ribbies, and try to forget that you still have no clue as to the Meaning of Life.

“Y’mean the Monty Python movie?”

“Hunh?”

“*The Meaning of Life!*” said Olivaceous Oyl. “Ew, that was foggin’ tuBEWlar! A classic! What was yer favorite part?”

RoBynne's had been the huge fat man who ate so much he grossly exploded. Skeeter, after some thought, decided hers was the prayer to God not to put His servants on the barbecue or stir-fry them in a wok. (Or on a deck chair either. Amen.)

Cassette-changing time again: more music to sauté by. Pretenders, Waitresses, Eurythmics? No, the Stray Cats, calling to reluctant mind her own adoptee Mao, who'd run away from Belinda's place while Skeeter was overseas—*not* to search for her, oh please, not to yowl pitiful reproach at locked doors and rainswept windows on Corbel Terrace, but given ample welcome by some mildly-dotty widow with a pantry full of Chicken of the Sea, oh please.

The more-likely alternative she'd think about tomorrow.

(Always a day away.)

(And the same old thing as yesterday.)

The sun was setting now, right in her eyes, like that goddam spotlight in the dresser-drawer nightmare. Seen through Skeeter's wraparound shades it began to strobe and

whirligig—to flashdance, in fact. “What a feeling!” “A girl’s gotta keep believing.” How conveniently easy that would be if you too could weld by day and BoogaBloo by night, *and* have a wealthy (yet handsome) steel-mill owner waiting for you at The End with a bunch of goddam flowers.

Sweet dreams are made of this.

Other dreams are made of other boyfriends, the ski-instructor-types who seem so cool but send your heart and trust slaloming downhill time after time, till bewilderment sets in and you no longer feel like a Certain Person but some dumbfounded deepseated dumpling.

So what *was* It All about, then? and what *did* It All mean?

“Beats me,” she said aloud.

“Ew kinky,” responded RoBynne.

“So there you are,” said a tallish wiry woman, coming out the back door in an oyster-colored dress and contrary temper: Sister Sadie Benison, looking more drawn than usual. “How the two of you can lie around out here in this godawful heat, I can’t imagine.”

The sound of Sadie’s voice caused the basset hound next door to go *owww-uhhh!* *owww-uhhh!*, as might anyone suffering feduppishness after dropping a ten-pup litter.

“I know just how she feels. What happened to the shower curtain rod?”

“I think lightning hit it,” said Skeeter. “C’mon, Sadie, strip down and join us.”

“You know I’ll just burn. I just finished peeling off my last burn.”

“Aaay, natural redhead!”

“Hello Robin.”

“Ro-BYNNE.”

Sadie didn’t much like her either way; but then she hadn’t much liked anything since the daycare center in Rassiere Bay had succumbed to the recession. Pushing thirty now, anxious about the future, having to juggle breadwinning with single parenthood and now this scheme to get back into art school, Sadie could get stressed at the drop of a hat—very stressed, depending on what *kind* of hat.

“What’s that you’re drinking? Give me a bottle... God this is noxious! They ought to call it Moose*piss*.”

“Toxic,” RoBynne agreed.

“What’ve you done with Desi?”

“She’s upstairs watching TV with Leland,” said Skeeter. “They want to go see the puppies tonight.”

“Oh God no, Desi’ll fall in love with them and raise holy hell if we don’t buy one. At *least*. As *if*.”

Nor would this be unprecedented. Recall the koala candle scandal: “Mommmy! He wants to go hooome with me!”—and after a Desirée filibuster, Sadie’d given in and bought the thing with cash earmarked for that month’s electric bill.

“I bet those puppies sell for a hundred bucks each. No way am I going to waste my tuition money on something that craps in the yard.”

Sadie had returned to Elsew six months ago, determined to get back to where she once belonged: to complete the art degree she’d fallen short of when she dropped out to have Desirée. Which was why she’d temporarily compromised herself so far as to take a gopher position with Wilde & D’Annunzio, the scrap-your-scruples ad agency; when what she wanted of course was a *real* job, something worthwhile and fulfilling where you could *do* things, make things *happen* in the graphic design line.

Lacking time or money to waste, Sadie intended to be readmitted to her old art school at senior level, with all her pre-Desi studio credits intact, *plus* those from her less-than-complete last semester. “You’d think motherhood would be reason enough to take a few years off!” was Sadie’s stock argument. “Besides, I can’t afford to plough through retakes. Can you get off and come too?”

“Hunh? When?” said Skeeter.

“Tomorrow! Haven’t you been listening? I wrangled an appointment with the Dean tomorrow morning, and time off work to go keep it. I need you to do the driving (I’ll be too stressed) and lend moral support. And look after Desi.”

“You’re taking Desi?”

“Of course! What did you think? I *have* skill; I *need* luck.”

As per usual with Sadie B., any request couched as a favor-plea left no doubt what

was expected. “Oh well—it’s my turn to call in sick on Friday anyway. Ro can tell ‘em how I got sunspot-stroke in spite of all the Coppertone.”

Agreeable to this, but nettled at not occupying the conversation’s navel, RoBynne began talking artfully about a Christo wannabe she knew who intended to “do” St. Mintred Bay in Lycra spandex. Sadie, warming up a bit under the Moosehead influence, turned this into an opportunity to orate on layout, her own favorite artsy topic: arranging everything in the space allotted, getting it all positioned in terms of symbolic insight, but never, *never* “organized”—

—which RoBynne countered with a boildown of the tempestuous relationships being undergone by Ululu, the antiheroine of her smutnovel *Grunts of Passion*. Clean Ululu sometimes got but never, *never* “sober,” and the scoundrels she tempested with seldom bothered taking her to bed but made do with chair or floor or (in one particularly hardboiled case) left her draped bottoms-up over a wetbar. Ululu was about to wreak a little vengeance on Particularly Hardboiled, though RoBynne hadn’t yet decided how—

—and here Sadie was able to make some suggestions, recalled from an illustrated treatise she’d helped lay out on mid-Victorian murderesses. There was Constance Kent who’d cut her half-brother’s throat in the family privy, and Maria Manning who’d made black satin unfashionable by wearing it to the gallows, and Mercedes Benison who nearly squashed her little sister by plumping down on the deck chair, heedless of its occupant—because this was *It*, kiddo, this was Art, depicted with much gesticulation by Sadie’s longfingered hands.

Not that any VOYeurs in the neighborhood would be feasting a peeper on Sadie’s pantomime, what with RoBynne O’Ring causing all the brows in Wheeville to stand up extra straight by stretching and bending and picking up her swimwear and, gradually, redonning it.

Sadie paid no attention to this. She was elbow-deep in commentary on the importance of sequential visual imagery and the need for what you might call “backing and forthing”—

“Aaay!” sniggered RoBynne, “don’t forget the need for whatchamacall ‘inning and outing’—”

Mumbo and jumbo.

Listening to them joust for advantage, each elongated and angular and full of vivid (even lurid) plans, Skeeter wanted to ask what they really thought chances were of surviving on one's second chances. She opened her mouth—

—and shut it again, miles away from the conversational navel.

The boombox tape ran out and nobody but Skeeter took any notice. She turned it over, wondering what the hoo-hah she was doing here, basketed again on her stepsister's doorstep. Not that Sadie minded; it had been her idea, after all, when Skeeter'd run out of dough and returned from New York looking around for a place to call home. Should she have gone back instead to Mount Oriela or Keening? Or to Demortuis (no) or Marble Orchard (no) or the Santa Ana Marine Corps Air Station or Cherry Point NC?

Jeez, hadn't she learned *anything* from being abroad?

Oh-um-well.

Life was not a coming full circle, but a constant loop-the-loop reel-to-reel Slinky spiral you could never seem to get out of or away from. Something like the figures on a Grecian urn: up and down and around they go. Where they can stop, nobody knows—least of all the small fry, the pint-sized, the downright goddam *short*. Shameful too, having to tread water where it's shallow. And even after you find your footing you still loiter near the shore, afraid to venture out into the deeps again, lest you and all your shortcomings be pulled down under for the final third time.

So when Sadie'd invited, Skeeter'd accepted, ending up here with Floyd and at SMECK and in Wheeville where nobody took any notice, not even her nearest and dearest; and it made her feel about five years old....