



THROWN FOR A LOOK

Book Three of

BOLSTER, NOT MOLEST HER

(Being & Nothingness with Vicki Volester)

a novel by

P. S. Ehrlich

author of the *Skeeter Kitefly* books and *13 Black Cats Under a Ladder*

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<http://www.skeeterkitefly.com>

2022

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly

Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor

13 Black Cats Under a Ladder

Bolster, Not Molest Her — Book One: Wish Again

Bolster, Not Molest Her — Book Two: Vicki in Vanderlund

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Bolster, Not Molest Her — Book Three: Thrown for a Look

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For information contact the author at **psehrlich@gmail.com**.

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once again, for all the ingredienttes

Vicki Volester: rhyming with “bolster,” not “molest her.”
Precariously balanced between the beautiful and grotesque...

—13 BLACK CATS UNDER A LADDER

Three

THROWN FOR A LOOK

My feelings, Mrs. Todgers, will not consent to be entirely smothered, like the young children in the Tower. They are grown up, and the more I press the bolster on them, the more they look round the corner of it...

—CHARLES DICKENS

31

Looky-Loo

One thing was certain—*somebody* had to take the blame for the weather in Florida that June. Vicki was inclined to hold TWA responsible, for flying the Volesters there through an unnecessary thunderstorm. (Goofus, counting the hours till he could get in line to see *Star Wars* AGAIN, found the turbulence a big blast; Ozzie declared it was “a cakewalk” compared to the buffeting he’d undergone in the Navy; Vicki and Felicia clutched each other with one hand while holding their air sickness bags open and ready for business.)

Maybe Neptune or Poseidon or some other God of Moisture was at fault for what awaited them in Fort Lauderdale. Vicki was no stranger to high humidity—everyone in The Cityland bore its soggy scars—but down here in Florida it felt like you were enveloped by a sweltering waterfall that never let up or ran dry, regardless of whether it was raining outside or just overcast. You could virtually *feel* mildew sprouting. (And she’d thought the “Tropic Island Cruise” in the VW gym had been a squelchfest.)

One small mercy: Goofus was staying with their grandfather at Diamond Joel’s new condominium, so Vicki got a room all to herself at Los Vistazo. This hotel was relatively swanky (aside from inadequate air conditioning) and had a semi-enclosed swimming pool, which might’ve seemed redundant since the Atlantic Ocean was literally across the street, were it not for the endless rain that threatened to drench her entire vacation.

Nevertheless, Vicki hadn’t flown 1,200 miles *and* through a thunderstorm to not set foot on the beach where *Where the Boys Are* had been filmed. (She’d seen this Late Movie during an April sleepover, and while joining in the general mockery of George Hamilton,

Vicki couldn't help but cast herself as the star of a remake, surrounded by modern-day hunks.)

So on her first morning in Fort Lauderdale she donned a brand-new mulberry-colored scoopback maillot that Joss had called "scrump-tilly-umptious"—emphasis on the first syllable, reflecting the usual effect that Lycra spandex had on Vicki's scrump. She refused to buy a two-piece swimsuit, having suffered nightmares of losing her top in the surf; but this mulberry maillot was reassuringly secure, despite being fairly lowcut in front as well as back. Low enough cut for her father to raise a fuss:

"Unh-unh! No way!"

"Daddy, you haven't even seen it *on* me yet—"

"Don't need to! Case closed, Kitten! No daughter of *mine*—"

"Oh Daddy, Tricia wore *bikinis* everywhere we ever went, and they showed *lots* more than this nice one-piece that's exactly my favorite color and—"

"Okay okay *okay*! Keep it! Wear it! Just... wrap a towel around your waist, or over your shoulders, or something."

Vicki dutifully brought one along as she exited Los Vistazo that first morning and crossed the street to reach the beach, though it made her feel idiotic to take a towel out in the rain. But the moment her flipflops left concrete and touched sand, the clouds above abruptly parted and let the sun shine through as if from some gigantic arc lamp. *Lights! camera! action!*—and a great shout rose to greet it, from a milling crowd that hadn't been evident before then.

Vicki waded through the sweaty-lotioned multitude till she found a spot sufficiently unclaimed to drop her towel, beach bag and flipflops upon. No sooner did they hit the ground than she got surrounded by three hunks slightly older than herself—high school juniors? seniors? maybe even college freshmen? One a dark Cuban-looking hombre like Joe on *¿Qué Pasa USA?*, but with a gleaming silver incisor that sparkled when he smiled; one a barrel-chested bandy-legged Georgia bulldog, who said honest-to-God things like "y'all cain't"; and one a sunburnt preppy with an upmarket accent and attitude, who sported Brooks Brothers board shorts and a tinted golf visor.

As the center of this studly trio's attention, Vicki had what Joss would define as "a whale of a time"—drawing out the initial consonant, much like the "mmmm" of *Mandingo*. Vicki seldom failed to be convulsed when Joss started whale-of-a-timing, and did so now on the beach Where the Boys Were till her mulberry sides ached. Each of the boys thought she was laughing *with* him *at* the other two, which further whalefied their time together.

They played Frisbee and volleyball and chase-me-down-the-surflife, their feet dipping into sand like wet powdered sugar; there were piggyback battles and Polaroid snapshots and coolers full of pop and beer (that Vicki took tiny cautious sips of) and funnel cakes on the boardwalk while pelicans winged past; there were waves and foam and sultry breezes scented with coconut and hibiscus, unless that was just the assorted ointments on overheated bodies.

At 5 p.m. Vicki was obliged to leave this sizzling paradise, in order to prepare for mundane dinner with her humdrum family; and the very moment she slipped back into flipflops and picked up bag and towel, the cloudbanks closed ranks and started shedding rain again. *That's a wrap, people!*—as the beach mob melted away, Studly Trio and all.

Even so, Vicki practically danced back to Los Vistazo, singing in the shower as she rinsed off salt and extracted sand from places it had no business infiltrating. She had a hum in her heart as the folks drove to El Mirón Condominiums, where Diamond Joel (his scanty hair dyed bright orange) was introducing Goofus to some old ladies as "Boychik, my youngest—lives with his mother up north."

"Dad!" went Felicia, when the old ladies were beyond earshot.

"What? What did I say that wasn't nothing but the truth?"

He guided them to Wolfie's Restaurant, from which who should emerge as the Volesters entered but Joe Silvertooth, chomping gleamly into a slice of cheesecake to go. "Heyyyy," he went at Vicki as he passed by, trailing a "*Mañana*" over his macho shoulder.

"Who was THAT?" Ozzie wanted to know.

"Just some guy," Vicki explained.

"You are *not* going back to the beach tonight, young lady!"

"I wasn't planning to, Daddy! It's raining again."

(Still, if the rain should tail off...)

Which it didn't till next morning, at the same time and in the same way as before: after Vicki'd pulled on the mulberry maillot, grabbed a towel, strolled past the Los Vistazo pool deck and down the drive to cross the street... and set *Gidget Goes to Florida* back in motion. Again her flipflops touched the sand; again this caused the rain to stop and clouds to part and sun to shine through; again an invisible director cried *lights! camera! action!* and the throng of beach party extras sprang up with a gladsome shout. Again Vicki was encircled by her Studly Trio, for a second day of fun and frolic and funnel cakes, chase-and-catch between pelican fly-bys and warily sipped beer—till five o'clock struck and the rain resumed its descent, washing away *A Whale of a Time Part II*.

Weird...

That evening Diamond Joel conducted them to Lester's Diner, out of whose doors who should appear but the Peeling Preppy with a handful of fried clam strips. "*Greetings,*" he saluted Vicki as he passed by, saying "*À demain*" over his exfoliating shoulder.

"Who was THAT?" Ozzie inquired.

"A burn victim, Dad!" Goofus enthused. "I think he was that Wawak guy whose car caught fire at Daytona! What's he doing talking to *you*, Sis?"

Assuring her father (again) she wouldn't return to the beach that night, reminding him (again) that it was raining (*again*) anyway, Vicki filled her tummy with shrimp scampi and bread custard pudding. Then back to the hotel, where she wrote a long letter to Stupid Old Youth Music Camp recounting all that'd happened, speculating on its likelihood of repetition (AGAIN), and wwwishing wholeheartedly that Joss were there to share in it.

Vicki would've welcomed *any* of her friends to witness the whale's spouting for the third time. Next day was a carbon copy of the previous two in nearly every detail, though no one but Vicki seemed to take heed or notice. The same horde of beach extras re-cheered the same cloudbreaking sunburst; the same Studly Trio re-manifested themselves to re-assume that Vicki was laughing *with* each one *at* the other two as they all re-frolicked.

Had Joss and Alex been present, they could've played three-on-three with a variety of combinations. Would Silvertooth, for instance, be a better match for fellow Spanish-speaker Alex, or browner-pigment-preferrer Joss? Might Alex the equestrienne take a horsey shine to Peeling Polo Player, while Joss hung out with Georgia Bulldog—if only so she could say

“Oh BELvedere—come hyah, boy!” at him?

Vicki would never know. Her tentative solo attempts to introduce new elements, or at least a few variations on established themes, all fell short and fizzled out.

Five o’clock rolled around, re-shutting off the sunshine and re-switching on the rain. That evening Diamond Joel escorted them to Ernie’s BBQ, which disgorged Oh Belvedere chomping down a drippy pork on Bimini bread as the Volesters approached. “*Yrrrgghh*,” he hailed Vicki through an unswallowed mouthful, before adding an honest-to-God “Be seein’ y’all bah’n’bah, honey-chile!” over his meaty shoulder.

“Who the hell was *THAT*??”

“Just another guy.”

“My goodness, Brownie! You’re certainly a popular girl,” Felicia observed.

“Hope we’re not putting a cramp in your love life, Dillydoll!” cackled Diamond Joel. “Oh hey, that reminds me!—I got a ‘billay-doo’ here, that was mailed to *you* care of *me*.”

“OooooOOOOoooh,” commented Goofus, making a grab for it.

“Let *go*! Keep your mitts on your own mail, runt!”

“That better not be an *invitation*, young lady, to anything you shouldn’t think we’d let you go out to—”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Daddy! It’s just a letter from Joss—see?”

“*I* knew who it was from already,” bragged Goofus. “Any guy who’d send *you* luhhhhve letters’d hafta write ‘em in Braille!”

“*Mom!*”

“Christopher Blaine, don’t poke fun at the blind—”

“MOM!”

“Look, let’s just settle down and have a nice meal, okay?” grumped Ozzie.

“Order the conch chowder—good for what ails you,” Diamond Joel advised, with an ungrandfatherly leer and wink.

Vicki indignantly tucked the latest bulletin from S.O.Y.M. Camp into her purse, lest it get stained with barbecue sauce or Key lime pie. Too soon for it to be a reply to her own last missive, mailed out only yesterday morning.

Joss had dispatched a series of comical distress alerts about being billeted not just in the same “old, *old* building” at the State U., but the same dorm room as Spacyjane Groh:

HELP! ~ I'll be Stepford Wife'd in my sleep, and have to come back with big black empty eyesockets...

S.O.S.! ~ she's putting up Peter Max Paints America posters in our room ~ the horror, the DayGlo horror...

Mayday! ~ she brought a doll to camp, one of those old China things that weird me out even worse than Beth and Invisible Amy ~ it's watching me as I write this...

Joss's little sister (or sisters, if you included Invisible Amy) did have her/their owlsh weirdnesses, but Spacyjane Groh could be downright *unnerving*—inadvertently or otherwise. She had big wide unfocused Judy Collins-type eyes, very pretty but with the whites showing all round and the lids hardly ever blinking. Her delicate face might be describable as “elfin,” if that didn't imply an impish mischief instead of Spacejane's abstracted expressionisms. She often sang quietly to herself in a sweet true (yet eerie) voice. That habit, plus the eyes and the reveries, led to unwarranted conclusion-jumping: Robin, Fiona, and Matt LaVintner had all been disappointed to discover she was spacy by nature, not from substances. Well-meaning counselors tended to classify her with Matt and John Alphonse:

“Mrs. Groh, we're worried about Jane. She always seems so—well, not *drowsy*, exactly, but—”

“Oh, she's just farsighted. Don't let it bother you.”

It never bothered Spacyjane; nothing seemed to, not even Robin Neapolitan's hurling drumsticks at her head when she'd auditioned for the Rosa Dartles. And Vicki would have *died* of shame if *her* bodice had popped open during that “undress” rehearsal of *Carnival*, but Spacyjane only evinced mild surprise. She might wander at times into ootsie-cutesy-cunning pixilation—which might explain her falling head over heels for Split-Pea Erbsen—who, come to think of it, had popped up simultaneously with Spacyjane's bodice popping open.

(Coincidence, or cause-and-effect?)

warning! ~ she calls him her "Swee'Pea" (!!!)

—Joss had lamented in her last letter, received just before Vicki's departure for Florida.

Now, four days later, there was a whole new tone. Far from ridiculing Floramour (the china doll), other girls in the dorm had oohed and ahed over her. Spacyjane had cooked them a fabulous Fondue Fribourgeois (no wine required) that wasn't heavy on the stomach. Her parents owned Jergen's Café in The City, which featured live Flamenco music and flaming desserts (no Joss-gibe about either) and everyone was invited to dine there. Spacyjane had led them in an early-morning yoga session that didn't feel like calisthenics (boo hiss) at all, and there was talk of renting bikes so they could try some prairie cycling.

I've got to admit, she GROTHs on you. (Boy do I crack myself up...)

Vicki, attempting to digest this along with conch chowder and Key lime pie, was left with a dismal sinking heavy-on-the-stomach sensation. She and Joss had each "drifted away" from best friends before: was history repeating itself? Suppose when they got back to Vanderlund, Joss and Spacyjane were thick as thieves—hoarding all sorts of private in-jokes and secrets? No, that was absurd; Joss would be hurt and insulted that Vicki could even contemplate any estrangement between them.

But still...

If only they could talk on the phone! Let them have their nightly pre-bedtime conversations same as always, and everything would be all right. Except what if it wasn't? "Oh—Vicki—I wish I had time to chat, but SPACYJANE AND I have these big, big plans that wouldn't include you even if you were—"

Stop it. Right this minute. You have *nothing* to worry about. Joss will always be your very best friend. *And* you have an authentic bunch of others. (Unless Feef remains in L.A. and Alex gets trampled by a rogue pony and Robin lands in juvenile hall and Crystal gets snapped up by the Metropolitan Opera—)

(—oh go dose your indigestion with travel-size Pepto-Bismol. Serves you right for taking Dime's advice on what to eat.)

Next morning, slightly less dyspeptic, Vicki decided to loiter on the Los Vistazo pool deck and see what would happen if she didn't cross the street to set foot on the beach. Sure enough, the clouds hunkered down and poured rain without pause; so she spent much of the day semi-enclosed on a plastic folding chaise longue, leafing through *Cosmopolitan*. Which called to mind her first visit to Jupiter Street, when "Guadalupe Velez" was born—

"Don't start with me, I am not in the mood," Joss had said. "Go freak out—"

STOP. IT. RIGHT. NOW. Read your damn magazine.

"The Sex Drive: How Often Is Normal and Good? How Often Do Others Do It? An Authoritative New Survey Helps You Check Your (and *His*) Performance."

Not quite mistakable for Judy Blume's *Starring Sally J. Freedman As Herself*, which Joss had lent her as ideal Florida vacation literature. Vicki'd begun it at the airport and continued on the plane, but had to leave it unfinished when they hit the thunderstorm. Kind of a damp squib anyway, after *Forever...*'s softcore content; and she felt a trifle babyish reading about a ten-year-old's adventures, from the lofty plateau of fifteen.

Back to *Cosmo*. "Why Do I Do (or Say) Those Crazy Things? For the Answer, Read 'The Dark Side of Me...'"

Rather than explore her latent craziness, Vicki got dressed and accompanied her family on a pilgrimage to Bahai Mar, where Travis McGee's *Busted Flush* was supposedly moored. It and he were both absent and Vicki got bored to distraction, but the jaunt thrilled Ozzie and after all it *was* Father's Day.

For a change the clouds retreated at 5 p.m. sharp (Vicki checked her watch) and, though still muggy, the Volesters's last evening in Fort Lauderdale stayed rain-free. To further celebrate Father's Day they took a motor launch to Cap's Place, an island restaurant that had been a notorious speakeasy in the Twenties:

"Yep, Al Capone and Meyer Lansky broke bread there," Diamond Joel related en route. "Also FDR—Churchill—the Rockefellers—the Vanderbilts—Casey Stengel—Errol Flynn—why, there's no telling *who* we might bump into tonight!"

Vicki anticipated the entire Studly Trio would await her at the dock, divvying a yard-long tarpon sandwich—"We saved you the *fin*!" they'd chorus. If truth be told, she breathed a sigh of relief when the coast turned out to be clear of them: the Trio, taken collectively,

smacked a tad too much of the Gumbo Krauss/Kyoop Minsky substandard.

(Lemme tell y'all sump'n, fellers: ¿*Qué Pasa USA?* means never having to say you're sorry.)

But she didn't regret having dolled up in a superbecoming sundress with a flower in her hair, because the handsome young waiter at Cap's Place kept gazing at her even while taking everyone else's orders:

"And you, sir?... and you, sir?... and you, sir?"

"I'll have a broiled alligator snout, with swamp gravy!" said Goofus.

"Christopher Blaine..."

"Sorry, sir, we're fresh out of *snouts*," said the waiter, crinkling handsome young eyes at Vicki. "Can I interest you in a nice gator *tail*?"

"Really? No fooling? Do I get to pick mine out of a tank, like a lobster?"

Vicki pretended to take no notice of the waiter's admiration, but Ozzie still barely kept his butter-and-egg smile intact till Crinkle Eyes headed to the kitchen.

"He better not be planning to retire on the tip *I'm* liable to leave him tonight!"

"Now, Oz..."

"And *you*, young lady! I swear, you're getting to be your big sister all over again!"

"Not forgetting Fritz Ritz," added Dime. "Whenever *she* popped into the malt shop, all the boys in Adrian Square popped right after her!"

"Dad, you're exaggerating..."

Being weighed on the same superseductive scale as Tricia and Aunt Fritz made Vicki glow. "Oh don't be silly" was her official reaction; yet she felt buoyantly lighthearted for the first time in twenty-four apprehensive hours. Optimistic, even: whatever might lie in the future for her best friendships, maybe she could add a *masculine* one (or two, or three, or *more*) to the bunch—and none of them substandard.

*

This Era of Good Feelings (whoa whoa whoa) lasted till she reached home the following night, and realized Alex and Joss had another two weeks to go at their horse and music camps. As for Feef, who knew when (if ever) she'd return? Vicki's only clue was a nocturnal postcard of the Sunset Strip, shoved through the Burrow Lane mailslot to proclaim:

This is the Scene -- music's unbelievable -- went to the
 Whisky a Go Go on Monday for a New Wave show -- the
 Weirdos and the Zeros -- wish you were here -- ♥ FTW

From the names of the bands (assuming that's what those were) Vicki guessed "New Wave" was Los Angeles-ese for what London and New York called "punk."

Wish you were here—Vicki was glad she wasn't, if that meant being in "gob" range. Much better to carry on teaching kiddysports at Petty Hills Country Club—not that spitting was unheard-of among the littluns, but at any rate it wasn't encouraged.

Spitting *at* wasn't, at least; *swapping* spit was a different matter.

During her first break on her first day back, Vicki stumbled (almost literally) across a young couple making out behind the tennis clubhouse. Unlocking lips, they disentangled themselves to reveal Nanette Magnus and Boffer Freuen.

"Oh Gahd—don't mind me—sorry to um y'know interrupt—"

Vicki fled with crimson cheeks, flinching when Nanette sought her out at the fitness center that afternoon. But Nan came wreathed in uncharacteristic smiles; though her eyes were still icicle-gray downward crescents, she looked happier and healthier than Vicki'd ever seen her. She filled out her White Stag tennis dress more curvily than in past seasons (Boffer having requested she put more flesh on her bones) and gently stroked a Silver Gloves pendant that hung from her neck.

"Almost like a fraternity pin," she said with unNanettelike tenderness.

"So, I guess everything's going great for you two...?"

"Oh, you have NO idea!"

But Vicki soon did, since Nanette was dying to divulge her recent accomplishments, and Delia Shanafelt was still away at yacht camp (*yacht* camp?) with Salty Pilchard, while Nan was currently not on speaking terms with Gigi Pyle. So Vicki got to be her intimate confidante, and hear how she and Boffer had devoted the romantic month of June to doing it multiple times in multiple ways, each of which Nanette described in detail, going so far as to diagram them on Petty Hills CC stationery. Vicki, after overcoming embarrassment and skepticism, felt privileged to receive these insights from an experienced practitioner.

“Course I wouldn’t do It if I wasn’t in *love* with Boff,” Nanette vouched. “He’s had such a hard life—all that boxing—broken nose, fractured fingers, getting knocked out in the semifinals—and his big brother Derek was *killed* a few years ago, showing off on a roller coaster at the Lake County Fair!”

(Boffer, playing up his nebulous resemblance to Sylvester Stallone, neglected to mention that he’d hated Derek’s guts and had to hide a loutish smirk all through the funeral.)

“Anyway, I’ve got him out of that nasty ring now and onto the court. I’m teaching him tennis and he’s” (tittery nod at the diagrams) “teaching *me* a few things too!”

“Wow,” said awestruck Vicki, thumbing through this new variety of combinations. “If we’re in the same Biology class this fall, I hope you’ll be my lab partner.”

“Sure, why not?” smiled Nanette, sounding nowhere near as hissy-fitful as she used to. Could *this* be the beginning of a new best friendship? Vicki never would’ve bet such a thing were possible, but the same had been true with Stephanie Lipperman in Pfiester Park.

Two weeks later, though, the NO VACANCY light switched back on in Vicki’s heart. Joss came home from Stupid Old Youth Music Camp precisely on schedule, leaping out of her father’s Lincoln Continental to run over and enfold Vicki to her flopperoots, even picking her up and swinging her round in a staggy circle.

“Loopy the Loop!” *Jeez, I didn’t think I could miss you MORE this summer—last year was bad enough!*

Their super/sub mode was loud and clear as ever.

“You didn’t leave Spacyjane down at the State U., did you?” *I’m so ashamed, I got so stupid-jealous of her ‘n’ you making friends.*

“Naah, she and Floramour set sail for their little chalet on Cecidia Drive.” *You really are First Attendant to the Queen of the Nuts, I ought to clobber you.*

“Hey, Alex gets back tomorrow—maybe we could all meet up with Spacyjane on Sunday, like at Zeff Heff?” *Don’t bother, I’m clobbering myself as we speak.*

“Zeff Heff sounds great.” *Let’s go there now, I could kill for some ice cream and you know Alex won’t let us scarf any.*

Nor did their most special friend when they reassembled at the Zephyr Heaven Dairy Bar on July 3rd. “C’mon, guys, let’s stick to nice cool juice drinks. Think how much sugar

and saturated fat there is in ice cream.”

“Ohhhh yummm...” went Joss.

Alex extended her pageant-winning streak by achieving Deepest Tan While Out Of Town, having spent most of June in the saddle. Vicki came in second with olivaceous Florida panache, while the fair-skinned Joss didn’t even qualify.

“I know I said not to get *too* tan,” she griped, “but just once—just to see what it’s like—I wouldn’t mind getting ‘brown as a berry.’ Not that I’ve ever seen a *brown* berry, except for black or blue ones that’ve gone gross—”

“Eww, Jocelyn!” Vicki objected. “We’re trying to drink fizzy lemonade here!”

“But *are* there such things as brownberries?”

“Well,” said Alex the nature expert, “it’s not like strawberries are *straw*-colored, you know—JANE! DON’T! STOP!”

She sprang up from her bistro chair to vault toward the intersection of Cecidia and Eugene G. Green Road, which Spacyjane Groh was crossing diagonally against honking traffic, very much as if she were in need of a white cane or guide dog.

(Don’t poke fun at the blind!)

“You said ‘don’t stop,’” she told Alex the Girl Scout, after being hauled to safety.

“You shouldn’t *ever* cross busy streets catty-corner, Jane!”

“Oh, call me Spacy—everybody does. Hello, Joss—Floramour says ‘hi.’”

“‘Hi’ to Floramour.”

“Hello, Vicki—it’s neat to see you again.”

Vicki took her word for it, since Spacyjane’s star sapphire eyes seemed to be trained on some distant vista. She wore a peasantry blouse, gypsyish skirt, gaminelike espadrilles, and Annie Hall bowler attached to her hair with an old-fashioned hatpin, even though it was nearly ninety degrees out.

Alex the compassionate nurturer went to fetch her a lemon fizz, plus a refill for the cup she’d spilled springing-and-vaulting. Spacyjane meanwhile plunged an arm down, down, down into the big embroidered haversack she used as a shoulderbag, and drew out a copy of *North Squire*.

“I wanted to ask—do you know this girl?”

“Why, that’s Lillie Guldbaer,” said Alex, returning with a fresh fizz in each hand. “Oh my... that’s kind of a *revealing* picture, don’t you think?”

(Lillie projecting bosomly over her bikini top as she was caught in midair, diving to dig a volleyball at a beach match.)

“Does she go to our school?” asked Spacyjane.

“No, to Downsborough—or I guess Willowhelm High this fall; they don’t have ninth grade at Downsborough. She’s a year younger than us.”

“Doesn’t *look* like it, does she?” gnarled Vicki. “I don’t think they oughta put photos like that of girls our age” (or *under*) “in magazines that creepy guys can, y’know, ogle at.”

“My Swee’Pea took it. For a summer contest. He won \$25. See?”

Below the photo of the unidentified subject was a brief acknowledgment that Sidney Erbsen of Vanderlund had taken, submitted, and been compensated for the entry above.

“You didn’t say anything about this at camp,” Joss murmured.

“I didn’t know. Till I got home and saw it.”

“Well,” went Alex the positive-spin-putter, “*as* a photograph, I’d say it’s very excellent. I didn’t know Lillie plays volleyball too—if she’s as good at that as she is swimming and running, we’ll have our hands full when we play against her this fall.”

Especially if she wears a lowcut uniform, Joss sub-remarked.

Oh shut up.

YOU shut up.

“Does it... bother you?” Vicki asked Spacyjane.

“That she plays volleyball?”

“No! That Spli—Sidney, I mean—took it... of... her.”

“He only takes beauty shots,” Spacyjane asserted with apparent serenity. “He’s taken a few of *you*, Vicki, I’ve seen them. They were neat.”

“Um er well,” went Vicki. “But *I* had all my clothes on at the time!”

Fizzy lemon spit-take from Joss (*no gobbing at Zephyr Heaven, please*) followed by one of her silent gigglefits.

Oh shut UP.

YOU shut up (hee hee hee).

“Well then, I’m sure he’s taken plenty of *you*, Jane,” said Alex the spirit-pumper, before turning a bit wistful. “It must be so nice, having a boyfriend who can do things like that. I bet he missed you lots while you were away.”

Spacyjane, her eyes peering out from under the bowler brim at that distant vista, gave them a smile of beatific complacency. “My Swee’Pea is always with me...”

*

Twelve days later the Volesters piled into their Honda Accord CVCC and drove to Ann Arbor, where they lunched at the Whiffletree with Tricia. She was enrolled that summer in workshops with the Civic Theatre, while earning “petty cash” at Jacobson’s Department Store alongside her dance-major roommate Caprice.

“Not to be a pain, Daddy, but *did* you bring my check for fall term? I know registration’s not for weeks yet, but I want to get everything squared away ahead of time.”

Squaring things away was an Ozzie axiom, so he produced a cashier’s check for \$3,000 with grumbly assent.

“Don’t understand how they can call you a *non*-resident when you were BORN in Michigan, spent the first eight years of your LIFE in Michigan—”

“I don’t make the rules, Daddy. Thanks so much—we’ll just nip by the bank before we leave, so we can deposit this.”

Customarily Tricia received her check for fall tuition, housing, books and supplies along with her birthday presents on August 16th, but she’d requested this year’s a month early because “Caprice and I are thinking of moving.”

“What, again?”

“Gotta keep in motion, Mom.”

Tricia took the Accord’s wheel and whistled the score from Kurt Weill’s *Happy End* all the way to the bank; then a hundred miles north to Bay City for what would prove to be the final full-scale Volester/Kosnowski family reunion.

Babcia Brygid, relic of Casimir the sugar-beet refiner, was celebrating her centennial, and descendants unto the third generation were gathering at or near Great-Aunt Eveline’s B&B. (This had been known as the Handy-Dandy Bed and Breakfast till its sign got changed one too many times to “Hanky-Panky,” and so now was simply billed as “Eveline’s.”)

MomMom and PopPop came from Beansville to take one room; Uncle Ted and Aunt Edie came from Tempest Lake to take another; Ozzie and Felicia took a third; and a couple of cot-crammed chambers were designated as dormitories for their offspring—Goofus with cousins Barry, Stanley, and T.J. in “Boys Town,” versus Vicki and Tricia with cousins Monica and Barbara in “Co-ed Central.” Uncle Jerry (on leave from the Merchant Marines) and Aunt Bonnie aka Sister Agnes (on leave from the Grand Rapids Dominicans) found lodgings at a motel, while Great-Uncle Stash stayed put in the old Kosnowski house he’d occupied for decades.

“Stanislaw!” MomMom would remonstrate, “that crackerbox is fit to be condemned! One day it’s going to collapse around your ears!”

“Hunh? You say something, Sis?” Great-Uncle Stash would reply, having forgotten to replace the batteries in his hearing aid.

Cousin Barbara was the last to arrive, and the only one to bring a guest. She’d transferred from Aquinas to St. Peter’s in Jersey City, where she met and fell for Carmine “Ladder Legs” Pegliano, pride of the Peacocks basketball team. Before leaving for Bay City, Barbara’d made what was intended to be a quick trip with Carmine to Manhattan, where they got trapped in an elevator during the Blackout. By the time they got rescued, Barb ‘n’ Carm were engaged to be married.

Reaction to their announcement was mixed.

At her nursing home, Babcia Brygid wholeheartedly approved. Barbara was her eldest great-grandchild and nearly twenty-one; her groom-to-be, even if not of Polish stock, came from a good Catholic background and showed commendable height, as well as discretion by bunking in with Uncle Jerry at the motel. So, *na zdrowie!*

PopPop, his antipathy to all things Italian having lost none of its bitterness since he’d left Trieste in 1920, withheld congratulations and blessing and any other spoken word, ignoring every overture attempted by “Ladder Legs.”

The same could not be said for cousin Monica, who at thirteen (much to Vicki’s exasperation) was even more precociously voluptuous than Lillie Guldbaer. “(Monnie, button that up!)” Vicki’d whispered at the nursing home, alarmed by the sight of so much jailbait cleavage. “(What’ll Babcia say?)”

“(That I look just like her when she was my age,)” Monica’d responded, flippantly yet truthfully. Babcia always had the Barbie-Vicki-Monnie threesome open an ancient album and view pictorial evidence that they’d inherited their silky-black almond-bright charms from Brygid Blaszczyk of Bialystok. (Babcia also approved of Tricia, for resembling MomMom-as-a-girl so closely; but she detested Goofus, which was reason enough for Vicki to not mind visiting her.)

Monica, despite her C-cups, was less than five feet tall, and asked her prospective brother-in-law to stoop down so she could greet him with an extensive hug and emphatic kiss. Carmine showed no reluctance to comply, or to repeat this routine several times afterward at Monnie’s request; which did nothing to thaw the ice with PopPop, or prevent a frosting-over with Barbara. Vicki was uneasily reminded of Amelia Quirk’s alluring effect on Sheila-Q’s sweethearts; and of that time in Pfister Park when one of the Grusza twins stole the other’s fiancé without his even noticing. So much for sisterhood.

Her own sister seemed to regard all the goings-on with detached amusement, through emerald eyes that (like Spacyjane’s sapphires) were fixed on the faraway. Smoking wasn’t permitted in Co-ed Central, so Tricia took her Benson & Hedges out to the pergola behind the B&B, and Vicki tagged along one night to escape from mounting tensions between Barbara and Monica.

Great-Aunt Eveline’s back yard was a microcosm of the Middle West after dark in July: hot, humid, murky, *b-z-z-z-z-ing* with cicadas (a little touch of Vanderlund) and the occasional blast of racket from Boys Town.

“Want one?” said Tricia, shaking a cigarette out of its pack

“Um, no thanks, I’m in training,” said Vicki: an echo of that day with Steph by the Reulbach dumpsters. “I’m going out for volleyball next month—high school, y’know.”

“Yeah,” snortled Tricia, exhaling at smoky length just as Steph had done. “Better you than me.”

“So... how’re those Theatre workshops going?”

“They’re dull.”

“Oh. Um... your job at the department store, what’s that like?”

“Dull, dull, dull. You’re asking Mom-and-Dad questions.”

“Sorry.” She felt the old familiar emerald glare for a moment, before it subsided and Tricia (again like Spacyjane) began singing quietly to herself:

Could it be? Yes it could! Sumpten’s coming, sumpten good...

—which rang a faint bell and woke a vague memory of them skipping down Walrock Avenue to get Dove bars. In the here-and-now Tricia’s cigarette-free hand was fishing something—a pendant, on an extra-long chain?—from inside her tanktop, to stroke-stroke-stroke it just as Nanette Magnus had done. Maybe a genuine fraternity pin?

“So,” Vicki timidly ventured, “are *you* seeing anybody?”

“‘Seeing’ anybody, haw—the word’s *schtupping*, Vic. Say it with me—”

“Gahd, Tricia, I only asked...”

“I’ll say this: if *I’d* been stuck with a guy in an elevator during the New York Blackout, I sure as hell wouldn’t’ve said, ‘Golly gee! Here’s a chance to wangle myself a *wedding ring!*’”

“(Ssshhhh! They’ll hear you!)”

“Well it makes me sick—Barb might as well dig herself a grave and climb down into it. You’ll never catch *me* tying *myself* down like that. Not for *damn* sure.”

But we might get to be bridesmaids, Vicki wanted to say as they stood side by side, shoulders against the pergola, listening to the *b-z-z-z-z* of unseen insects. Till Tricia stirred, and sighed, and spoke.

“Not while there’s still a big-ass world waiting out there. For *me*. For *us*. To have a *life* in, BEING somebody. Remember that.”

“Mmm,” went Vicki.

Tricia dropped her cigarette butt, ground it out, and tucked her pendant away within her tanktop. Vicki got a glimpse of what appeared to be a silver rabbit’s head, but the only connection her tired mind could manage was to Laurie Harrison’s quivering bunny-nostrils. Which hardly seemed the sort of thing Tricia would choose to hang around her neck.

*

Flash forward another two weeks, to Monday the 1st of August.

Vicki rode her bike into the Burrow Lane cul-de-sac, parked it in the garage, and was about to trot upstairs to shower off another day of kiddysports when she saw a big manila envelope waiting for her on the foyer table. No return address, but a Los Angeles postmark.

More “New Wave” memorabilia from Fiona? Who’d sent a few souvenirs from concerts at the Whisky and the Starwood, featuring groups with names like the Screamers and the Germs. (Eww.) But Feef was actually due back in town today, having finally admitted her folks *weren’t* reconciling; so why bother to buy postage stamps for anything deliverable in person?

Detour through the kitchen for a nice cool juice drink (see, Alex? I’m being good) before lugging the mysterious manila whatsit up to her bedroom. Peek inside first, or shower first? Curiosity was strong enough for her to compromise and strip to the skin first, airing out her sweaty-lotioned body before putting on a terrycloth minirobe and unsealing the envelope.

“Oh. My. GAHD.”

There between two sheets of stiff cardboard was a glossy glamour print of Patricia Elaine Volester, aged nearly nineteen, posing in the full-frontal nude. *Completely* nude, unless she was wearing socks or something unpictured below her truncated knees; otherwise, not a single stitch of any sort.

It dimly occurred to Vicki that her own jaw was sagging lower and lower even as her minirobe sagged opener and opener. till it slid halfway off to leave her upper torso bare. Drop everything with a strangled shriek and lose the robe altogether, clapping arms over chest and underbelly and blushing cherry-tomato-red, just as Gigi Pyle had done that day in the cafeteria when Split-Pea played gotcha-paparazzo.

Gahddam you, Sidney Erbsen! Leave me and my sister alone!

Except this wasn’t one of Split-Pea’s *FLASSSHHHH FLASSSHHHH flassshhhhes*.

Pull the treacherous minirobe back up and on and firmly knot it; then retrieve the evidence scattered over the floor. Beside the glossy print, cardboard sheets and manila envelope, Vicki found two slips of paper. One was a typed caption:

All the world's a stage for Lucia Vantrop, a Michigan drama major who's trekked through Europe on her way to Going Places and Doing Things.

The other was a handwritten letter, lacking date or salutation:

In a week or so the enclosed will appear in Playboy's "Girls of the Big Ten"—I got \$300 for modeling, and the photographer thinks there's a good chance Hef will want me to do a centerfold and that'd be \$10 grand. In the meantime I am done with Michigan, piddling around in workshops and sucky summer stock. I'm using Daddy's \$3 grand as a nest egg to set myself up in L.A. — tell the folks that when I make good they'll get every cent back with interest. Sorry to have you be the one to break it to them, but like Gran always said you're the good girl. I'll try to keep in touch but don't worry if you don't hear from me for awhile, I'll be alright

Love to everybody especially you from — Lucia

Not quite mistakable for Little Em'ly's Dear Ham letter in *David Copperfield* ("Oh, if you only knew!... Oh, take comfort!... Oh, for mercy's sake!...") which had made the whole bunch howl, and earned Fiona an A for excoriating it in a term paper.

Glance again at the nudie pic. Yes: what you saw was what she had to offer, as you could testify from all those years of sharing close quarters—back to when you took baths together and Tricia behaved as if she were onstage, giving a crowd its money's worth.

Vicki, wrapping a towel around her waist and another over her shoulders, shuffled cautiously across the hall to what was called Tricia's Room, though Princess Smartysnoot hadn't spent more than three weeks total in it over the past two years. Even so, her presence was reflected in the mirrored closet doors, displaying the reverse image of a portrait hanging above the dresser: Tricia as *The Sound of Music's* Maria (von Trapp, not Vantrop). Fully costumed instead of stark naked, yet wearing the same glossy-glamour expression as the

imminent Playmate of the Big Ten.

Looking and thinking and acting *way* ahead of the curve.

Perfectly capable: yes she was, yes she was.

Tricia the loved and feared, Tricia the envied and resented, Tricia toward whom great waves of adoration had been ridden.

Retreat from the ghostly flickers of green and pink and yellow on the wall, on the doors, in every polished surface; scuttle back to your own cozy corner sanctuary. But before you could reach it—

“Brownie? You home?” from Felicia in the foyer.

Oh Mother, if it be possible, let this hot potato (make that tomato) pass from me to you.

This was a matter for grown-ups to deal with—but oh, the dread of telling them, of seeing the effect it would have on them. The fallout bound to follow even if they could hush this up, keep it secret, sweep it under the rug.

(Gulp. Swallow. Clear throat.)

“Hey Mom? Couldja come here a moment? *Now*, please??”

(Brief shake of towel-and-terrycloth-covered shoulders.)

Where’s my brave little sister?

Here...

WHO’s my brave little sister?

I am...

32

Downbite

For Fiona Weller, the turning point came in the aisle of an airborne Pan Am jetliner while waiting for a toilet to become unoccupied. She didn't really need to "go" yet, but figured the side effects of her latest Pill combo would kick in by the time she reached the front of the queue.

She was speculating how the stewardesses could bear to fly cross-country in those pantygirdled *Coffee Tea or Me?* outfits, when the girl ahead of her in line swiveled round and said: "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"(Who wants to know?)" Feef mutter-retorted.

"*Me* does," said the swiveler. "You're with that band, arntcha?—that all-girl group that played that gig at that disco, awhile back? Whatcha called—the Rosa Parks?"

"(Dartles!)"

"Yeah. That's right. You sang. You rocked."

They both rocked a few steps forward as the line shrank and the plane hit an aerial speedbump.

"(Um well thanks,)" went Fiona, relaxing somewhat. She hated having to interact with strangers when Robin or Vicki or Sheila or Joss weren't nearby; but this one seemed to be a *fan*. "(You live in Vanderlund?)"

"Athens Grove. Rerun."

"(Hunh?)"

"Call me Rerun."

Since the swiveler was neither Linus and Lucy's little brother nor an obese black guy in red suspenders and beret, this name seemed unmerited.

"(Why 'Rerun'?)"

"Hadda repeat ninth grade last year."

"(Oh. Flunked, did you?)"

"Let's just say I had a 'bad date'—with consequences."

Hastily: "(Say no more. Um... I'm Fiona.)"

"Nice. Real name or stage name?"

"(Real. If I ever use a stage name, it'll be 'FTW.')

"Cool. Helluva lot better'n 'Elly May.'"

Lurch another couple steps forward. "(Why the hell would I wanna be 'Elly May'?)"

"*You* don't. *I* hadda be. That's why I don't mind Rerun."

If Jed Clampett had a granddaughter who rebelled against both oil tycoonery and hillbillydom, Rerun would be it. If Donna Douglas had a lookalike lovechild who let herself go from zaftig to bulbaceous, replacing blonde pigtails with a limeade spike cut, Rerun would be it. If the sow in *Lord of the Flies* had fought back, cut Jack's throat, and jammed *his* severed head on a pointed stick as a Gift for the Darkness, Rerun would be it too.

FRUIT BRUTE FOREVER read her strained-taut tanktop, above a cartoon of the breakfast-cereal werewolf.

Clearly she and Fiona (in a *Station to Station* T-shirt, souvenir of last year's Bowie concert) would have heaps more to talk about, once their toilet duties were attended to. Rerun was traveling to L.A. with both parents and a kid brother ("Not *my* idea—we're going to a funeral") so Feef took her over to help cajole Moth into swapping seats. For this purpose Rerun transformed into an ever-so-polite Junior Miss—"Hi, Mrs. Weller, I'm Eleanor Pilchard, it's *so* nice to finally meet you"—clasping hands as if clad in little white gloves. And Moth, though a trifle perplexed, was only too happy to yield her place on the plane and go blather at Rerun's folks for an hour or two, so the girls could keep each other company.

"You *would* hafta be in the non-smoking section," Ree scoffed at Fee after Moth was out of earshot.

"(They wouldn't let *us* smoke anyway. Not what *I'd* light up, at least.)"

“*Blaze* up, you mean? Got anything good?”

“(Could be. But if you nark me out, I’ll say you planted it.)”

“Nobody’d believe I *planted* it—I can’t grow nothin’ better’n ditchweed.”

“(Yeah, I hear that’s the best you can hope for in Athens Grove.)”

“There ain’t *nothin’* to hope for in Athens Grove. It’s like the armpit of the planet.”

“(You’ve got it *made* in Athens Grove. Vanderlund’s the bowels of the earth.)”

“Only because *our* bowels are *impacted*—all clogged up with Turdminoff Park.

That’s why they call us ‘Asshole Grope’—”

AHEM went a scandalized lady across the Pan Am aisle, who bent a reproving eye their way. Rerun gave her a brilliant Junior Miss smile that grew into a jagged pumpkin grin, till their neighbor unbent her browbeaten eye and returned it to the pages of *The Thorn Birds*.

“Hunh! Talk about your *turds*,” Ree remarked to Fee.

“(Okay—whaddaya wanna know about ‘em?)” Fee replied to Ree.

“Haw! Okay—just how full of it *are* you?”

“(Less than when I stood in line behind *you*.)”

“Hee! Wanna stand behind me at this funeral I gotta go to?”

“(Whose? Yours?)”

“My Great-Aunt Maybelle’s. She was what they used to call a harlot-starlet, back in the Twenties.”

“(Cool. Cokehead?)”

“Who, me? Not yet. Trying, though.”

“(How ‘bout Aunt Maybelle?)”

“Hope so—we gotta clean out her apartment, after the funeral. Wanna come help?”

“(Would I get to keep anything I can carry away?)”

“Well, not the coke stash—I call dibs on that.”

It was almost as good as B.S.-ing with Robin Neapolitan. This probably-foredoomed trip to Los Angeles took on a sheen of new hope that got slightly tarnished when they arrived at LAX and had to part, though not before exchanging contact info. (Fee writing Ree’s in the little pocket spiral she used to jot down musical notes; Ree scribbling Fee’s on the yanked-around tail of her Fruit Brute tanktop.)

Lem was waiting at the gate, looking a bit more seamed and creased than the last time the Wellers had all been together in California, five years ago. Fiona allowed him to hug and kiss and admire her, feeling an undeniable twang in her father's embrace—yet with the indelible twinge of remembering when she'd asked "(I can come be with you summertimes, right?)" and Lem hadn't so much as said *We'll see*.

(She made sure he toted all her baggage, including the Fender bass which seemed to have weathered its journey intact if not in tune.)

Moth predictably lived up to her name, fluttering around at Lem's elbow—leaving herself wide open for fresh scorchmarks when she ought to be stocking up on fire insurance. Even if they *didn't* find some groupie-girlfriend of Lem's waiting in his Datsun, snapping her bubblegum to Shaun Cassidy on the car stereo. Even if Lem *did* pop T.Rex's *Dandy in the Underworld* into the cassette deck, with an over-the-shoulder *See? I remember your favorites* glance at Fiona in the backseat.

Even so.

Then again, you couldn't help feeling somewhat proud of a father who'd managed to rent a Spanish bungalow in Little Armenia, just off Sunset Boulevard and a stone's throw from the new Church of Scientology.

"You know I always liked to mix it up," Lem reminded them.

Despite the neighborhood they didn't dine on hummus with L. Ron Hubbard, but in a laidback nosherly akin to the coffeehouses that'd been their homes-away-from-home back in Portland—the Agora, the Charix, the Ninth Street Exit. Then again to Lem's bungalow with a jug of sangria, on which Fiona was permitted to take a few pulls while they played and sang all the old tunes—Lemon Moth, Cloudland Atmosphere, Well Well Well—Fiona chiming in on re-tuned Fender, her throaty rasp blending perfectly with parental harmony.

It was like entering an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

Straying into some parallel dimension or alternate universe full of ghostly specters.

This was how they might have lived—might now be living—might *yet* live, if Moth's wishes came true. Look how Lem was gazing at her all lovely-doverly, as he never had during his annual two-week visits to The City.

"(Can I call Robin?)" Fiona mutter-pleaded.

“Sorry, Flow, my long-distance bill’s already a whopper,” said Lem, not taking his eyes off Moth. (“Flow” rhyming not with *Flo*—bad nickname for anyone with menorrhagia—but *plow* and *frau*, since it was short for “Lo! the Fairest Flower Girl.”)

“Write her a nice long letter, dear,” suggested Moth, not taking her eyes off Lem till they both leaned in for a drawn-out kiss that Fiona didn’t linger to monitor, fleeing to the bedroom she’d been assigned.

No reminders of Bucephalus the Big Blue Bus in *here*: beige walls, beige ceiling, beige tile floor partly cloaked by a rug whose beigeness matched the open curtains (yank them shut) and rumpled coverlet (twitch it smooth) covering a single twin bed. The only standout spots of color were your own gear—three bags and a bass case reflecting possession during the dead-and-gone Glitter Age. Other than that, unrelenting La Mancha: “an empty space, a desert, a wasteland.”

Curl up on the orphan twin, Fender in your arms.

Many a night you’ve spent like this, resting your chin on the upper bout, feeling its resonance as you finger the frets: achieving amplification without an electric outlet. (Cousin Chloe, who still slept with a stuffed panda called Bambooboo, knew better than to pass judgment.)

Calling Robin would do no good. It wasn’t like they were Vicki and Joss, who by all accounts chatted on the phone every night even after spending the whole day together. Fiona and Robin’s telephonic conversations were more on the order of *Get your ass over here* and *What do you mean “you can’t”?* Plus it had gotten late, and was two hours later still at Villa Neapolitan, where Robin’d probably hit the sack (summer-jobbing again at the Triville Acme hardware store) and wouldn’t take kindly to being awakened “from the DEEPEST! SOUNDEST! SLEEP! I’ve had in *weeks*—”

Even an imaginary bawl-out brought Robin a few degrees closer, and made Fiona feel a shade less angst-ridden.

Probably the best that could be hoped for. She wasn’t a “phone person” under any circumstance; it smacked too much of blindfold improv—seldom knowing when to pick up her cues, or that they *were* hers, or even *were* cues. Plus of course she kept getting prompted to “*Speak up, Feef!*” even by her nearest-and-dearest, who ought to know her by now.

What could she say, anyway, to Robin or Vicki or Joss or Sheila-Q? *My parents are trying to drag me back into the Dead End Zone. I did NOT get put through a Year of Sheer Hell in You Reeka just for them to kiss and make up NOW, half a damn decade later. One YOSH per lifetime is already too many. If they want to pretend the past never happened, let them freeze their heels till I take off for college; then they can do whatever they want wherever they choose, flush themselves away for all I care and good riddance too—*

“Talk about your turds,” went a voice in her head.

Yes: there was ONE person in the approximate vicinity to whom she might turn. Even if it did happen to be a chance acquaintance who resembled a spiked-limeade Donna Douglas—who, lest we forget, had once been an occupant of *The Twilight Zone*: that plastic surgery washout who was thought to be as beastly as a pig’s-head-on-a-stick.

Except “Rerun” seemed the type to fight back and do the headjamming.

Fiona wondered if she herself could summon up enough guts to initiate contact.

Start by laying down the low end with an unplugged bass line—

—as through a beige wall percolated the sound of black-bordered Lemon Moth framing up against the sky (if the sky were a squeaky-creaky mattress). Paean to no break of day from no sweet by-and-by—

—more of a hideous threat that Fiona would not only be trapped here in Casa Beigeness, but with a brand-new baby brother or sister to boot.

Pluck harder then and accompany yourself, lifting up your voice at an angle calculated for distance:

In this age of grand illusion / you walked into my life / out of my dreams

I don’t need another change / still you forced away / into my scheme of things...

*

Next morning she was the first to rise (if not shine) and find no Fruit Brute in the kitchen, no FrankenBerry or Count Chocula or anything more interesting than grapeless nutfree Grape-Nuts. Fiona settled for a couple slices of rye toast and a glass of what she hoped was V-8. (It sure didn’t taste like tomato juice.)

Lem ‘n’ Moth came gliding in, their arms grossly twined around each other’s waists, as the kitchen phone rang and Lem snagged it with his free hand. “Yeah?... Who?... Oh! For you, Moonchild.”

“MOONchild?” went Rerun’s voice on the other end of the line.

“(Shut up,)” Fiona requested, hauling the phone as far from her folks as the cord would allow.

“What, were you born butt-first?”

“(Noooo—it’s ‘cause my sign happens to be Cancer.)”

“No shit? I’m a Pisces! Water signs rule—yay us! Anyhoo: you GOTTA come check this place out.”

“(Where, the cemetery? Is it funeral time already?)”

“Oh, that’s all done with—we shoveled Auntie under first thing today. Now we hafta ‘excavate the mummy’s tomb,’ and it’s gonna take weeks! Where you at? I’ll come pick you up, I rented a car.”

“(You rented a car?)”

“Had my license since March—and my mother’s Visa card since last night!”

Clearly there would be advantages in hanging out with such a significantly-year-older person. Also (gag! choke!) in having parents whose embarkation on a second *hornymoon* (heave! retch!) meant they’d act gladly eager for you to vamoose.

“It’s so nice that you want to help the Pilchards during their time of bereavement, dear,” Moth observed (while being ushered back into Lem’s—their—bedroom). “Give them all my very best *wishesss...*”

Fiona escaped as fast as she could from this den of iniquity and found Rerun roaring up the street in a Buick LeSabre convertible, its top down and Rerun’s top protruding over the neckline of a snug black sundress.

“(That’s what you wear to funerals?)” inquired Fiona, clad in a subdued lunar eclipse T-shirt she thought suitable for a Moonchild visiting mourners.

“When I’m in Califuckingornia, sugar pop!” hooted Rerun, flooring the gas pedal before Feef got fully buckled in. “Oh hey I love this song! *‘No one is restricted! No one is tied down!—’*”

Certainly not the rental LeSabre as it sped westward with KROQ on the dial and Sparks pouring out of the speakers—*All those who are with me, let's all raise our hands high / When they ask you, you'll surely answer LA-LA-LA-LA-LA-LA / I-like-girls-I-like-girls-I-like-girls-I-like-girls*—Rerun belting out the chorus while taking only token notice of stop signs, red lights, and Los Angeles traffic before SCREEEEEEEEEEEECHING to a halt—

“Welcome to Sunset Tower! See what I mean about ‘mummy’s tomb’? Don’t it look like an Egyptian pyramid, except for the shape?”

Fiona, running unsteady fingers through her windswept hair and wondering if all its Joan Jett dye had been blown off, gazed up at fourteen stories of monumental Streamline Moderne. “(Don’t you have to be rich to live in a place like this?)”

“Damn betcha! *And* she left every cent to my mother, just to spite my grampa—he was Maybelle’s brother—since he’d always ‘disapproved’ of her. More fool him! Colonel Klink lives here too, the guy who played him that is, I dunno on which floor but I sure would like to get hold of his monocle, I’d wear it over one eye and a pirate patch over the other—”

They ascended an ornate elevator (that took considerably more time than the drive from Little Armenia) and Rerun unlocked an expensive-looking door. Fiona steeled herself to enter Nefertiti’s crypt, but got admitted instead to Aladdin’s cavern. Or Aladdin’s warehouse, chockablock with every type of furniture imaginable, wedged together in serried rows and piled up from carpets to cornices. Most of the décor was in keeping with the Streamline Moderne motif, as if imported from those opulent Thirties musicals beloved by Moth and Aunt Polly—except that Fred Astaire would have to confine his dancing to the ceiling, since no space was available on the floor.

And talk about Colonel Klink’s monocle: rooted in front of an Art Deco cabinet (one of several) and inspecting its contents item by item through a jeweler’s loupe, was an older taller slimmer blonder version of Rerun in a much more decorous black dress.

“Royal Albert bone china,” she declared, flicking the edge of one item to hear it ring. “*Where* have you been?”

This flick was evidently intended for Rerun, who adolescently replied: “I *told* you where I was going.”

“Well, your father and brother couldn’t wait—they’ve left for the airport.”

“More room for us then. Here’s Fiona, she won’t take up much.”

The jeweler’s loupe was brought to bear on Feef; even after it got lowered, she felt herself being appraised as closely as the cabinet’s contents. Then an immaculate manicured hand was graciously extended over intervening fixtures:

“Ardine Pilchard—*so* nice to see you—I had the pleasure of your lovely mother’s company on the flight here—normally we don’t travel coach, but as you’ve no doubt heard this was an unscheduled trip—though of course we knew my dear Aunt’s days were numbered, poor thing.”

Fiona muttered some consolatory sentiments on Moth’s behalf.

“Can I go get changed *now*?” demanded Rerun.

“Well, *I’m* not preventing you—you might’ve done so the moment we got back from Valhalla.” (To Fiona:) “That’s the Memorial Park where we laid my dear Aunt to rest this morning—much favored by Hollywood society—”

“Yeah,” said Rerun. “I heard Oliver Hardy’s buried there, and the guy who did Elmer Fudd’s voice. C’m—”

—to Fiona, who followed her through a warehouse passageway that narrowed to a tunnel and wound up in a boudoir that made the rest of the apartment seem sparsely furnished.

“(Pilchard,)” Feef mutter-mused, recalling scraps of Laurie Harrison’s gossip. “(Is your brother called ‘Salty’?)”

“Not by me—I call him ‘Dorktongue.’ Thank God he’s scrambled for yacht camp. You dunno him from *there*, do you?”

“(Hell no—just heard he’s going with this girl at my school.)”

“Oh, that Ditzie chick?” said Rerun, doing a simpery impersonation of Delia Shanafelt that made Fiona snortle—till it extended to Rerun’s peeling the snug black sundress UP and OFF and ONTO a cluster of open suitcases atop the battleship-sized bedstead.

Recall another gossip-scrap (unusually spiteful, for Laurie) about Delia Shanafelt’s “forgetting” to close her drapes before she doffed her duds. Was that what Rerun had in mind while peeling and traipsing hither and thither (insofar as the furniture allowed) in a lowcut leopardskin bra and abbreviated yet apparently matching panties?

“Stayed at the Hyatt last night but me ‘n’ Ma’ve moved up here, the Old Man’s gone home to his maritiming insurancing and took Dorktongue with him (thank God) but not before I had ‘em flip this mattress, Ma was gonna grab this room but I said ‘Ma,’ I said, ‘Isn’t that the bed Aunt Maybelle *croaked* in, like five *days* ago?’ so she changed her mind (haw!) and made Dorktongue shift enough junk in the living room so the sofa’ll fold out. *I* won’t mind sleeping in somebody’s deathbed so long as the body’s not there and the mattress is flipped and the sheets are changed, I mean look how *big* this bed is, I bet you could set all sorta *orgy-records* in it and maybe Maybelle *did* when she was a harlot-starlet—”

Traipse, traipse, traipse. Hither-and-thither to an open wardrobe (very tall, very wide, one of several) and start poking through it. Reminding flustered Feef of that time at Vicki’s house when Sheila Quirk stripped down uninhibitedly to try on Vicki’s sister’s left-behind clothes—except that in S-Q’s *dreams* (as Vicki would put it) was Sheila built like Elly May Pilchard. Who squealed “*Lookit* all this! I bet Maybelle saved every stitch she ever owned! The vintage stuff is *priceless*—I shop at thrift stores and *know* what’s worth what—and a lot of it is just my size!”

Fiona, though no expert on Twenties fashion, suspected full-bosomed flappers had gone to painful lengths to acquire “boyish” figures, and that the necessary bondage and compression wouldn’t be provided by lowcut leopardskin. Even so, she sat by with zipped lips as Rerun tried to don a salmon-pink beaded cocktail gown without splitting its seams.

Finally: “*There!* Told ya! How do I look?”

“(Like you better not breathe too deep.)”

Shallowly: “Do not... Fits great...”

“(Your *face* is turning blue—clashes with the dress! You’ll never be able to wear that anywhere, except a one-way trip to Valhalla.)”

“Watch me,” Rerun prophesied.

*

Over the next two weeks, Fiona did.

She half-volunteered and was half-conscripted to join the Pilchards in their mummy-tomb excavating. Aunt Maybelle had indeed hung onto most every possession she’d latched

onto during a seventy-odd-year lifespan; and while many were finely preserved, few and far between showed any sign of orderly arrangement. Ardine and Rerun were both determined that a comprehensive inventory be done (by themselves) of the entire agglomeration; nothing should go into an estate sale that hadn't first been picked over by the heiress and *her* heiress. Only then would they stop to smell the eucalyptus (or whatever might be worth smelling in La-La Land).

Fiona didn't mind chipping in and taking part, even without a guarantee she could take part of the proceeds. It certainly beat spending more than obligatory-minimal time with the besotted Lem 'n' Moth. She proved to have a talent for classifying and cataloging; and with her lean physique, Feef could delve into gaps and crevices where Rerun's T&A would've gotten stuck like Winnie-the-Pooh in Rabbit's front door.

("Call me 'fat' and I'll take *you* to Valhalla," warned Rerun.)

It was an exhausting endeavor, but hardly ever dull. Aunt Maybelle's body might lie a-mouldering in the grave (none too swiftly, since she'd devoted her final decade to getting pickled) yet here she lived on in ten thousand haphazard puzzle-pieces. Assembling these into a coherent whole fascinated Fiona, and far more than the quantity or quality of any worldly goods.

Maybelle Grayling had hailed from Dardanelle, Arkansas, which Feef immediately identified as the home turf of *True Grit*'s Mattie Ross: homely, humorless, but able to kick the ass of every man she encountered from John Wayne on down. Fiona and Robin cheered her whenever they watched this movie with Fat Bob, whose favorite it was—though he always glared while the girls whooped at the Duke's whining "You are a lot of trouble!"

Maybelle, unlike Mattie, got out of Dardanelle by winning a beauty pageant and its first-prize ticket to Hollywood. There she resided with a flock of fellow starlets (if not harlots) at the Mayerling Hotel, as profiled in a Dardanelle Sunday supplement:

MAYBELLE OF THE MAYERLING. Our own Miss Yell County, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. Dalton Grayling, strikes a pretty pose outside this dormitory for young actresses seeking fame and fortune in the Celluloid Capital.

We can rest assured that our lovely Maybelle will soon find both and be unspoiled by either, as we applaud her artistry on the Silver Screen.

And for awhile Local Girl did Make Good: signed by Paramount, chosen as one of the WAMPAS Baby Stars, and co-starring with Clara Bow in an early talkie, *Hot Pursuit*. Many stills and posters and publicity shots from this thriller were strewn about Sunset Tower—framed on walls, rolled up in tubes, thrust into envelopes and shoeboxes. Out of each one Clara Bow leaped vividly at the viewer, Maybelle languishing at her side as the innocent waif whom Clara befriended and protected and took the unjust rap for.

Add a few pounds of pudg and swap the platinum bob for limeade spikes, and Our Lovely Maybelle was the spitting image of her aptly-named great-niece Rerun.

“Creepy! D’ya think I’m like her reincarnation?”

“(Not if you were born sixteen years before she died.)”

“I could still be! Like, y’know, an encore or sequel or something.”

Such as another *Hot Pursuit*, this one documented by bucketfuls of newspaper clippings. Maybelle Grayling, Paramount contract player, being grilled about the sudden disappearance of Joseph “Iron Man” Ardizzone, restaurateur and racketeer, who’d squired her around speakeasies. Maybelle stalwartly maintaining she had Nothing To Say—not the best qualification for a performer in talking pictures—so ta-ta to the Paramount contract. But discretion was the better part of value to the Mob; and Miss Yell County’s keeping mum apparently resulted in her being “kept” by the Dragna Family when they took over L.A.’s gambling and loansharking. No direct *proof* of this could be found, no imprudent diaries or love letters or canceled gangster-checks. Probably cold hard cash had been the medium of exchange—that and jewelry, which was scattered through every room at Sunset Tower.

“Now if we could just track down where she hid that coke stash,” Ree told Fee.

*

After two weeks the tomb was sufficiently exhumed for a Day Off to be granted, enabling the girls to haul ass from distant past to instant present. They hopped in the Buick and started cruising Hollywood Boulevard and the Sunset Strip, which even by daylight looked as decadent as advertised.

For a quarter-hour they simply eyeballed The Scene: it was enough to live in the moment, revel in liberation, bask in accessible licentiousness. Then Rerun SCREECHED up to Granny Takes a Trip, the outré boutique on Doheny Drive, and announced she was going on a whole-hog spree.

“(Haven’t you had your *fill* of clothes lately?)”

“Those were vintage. These are avant-garde.”

Not that the two were mutually exclusive: some of the merchandise here could have been on consignment from Maybelle’s wardrobes. Or so thought Fiona, whose lone sojourn into wearable fashion had come three years ago, during her Glitterdämmerung phase.

“(Just don’t spend the whole-hog *day* here, okay?)”

“Did you just tell me ‘don’t spend’? Just for that I’m gonna dress you up in purple from head to toe!”

“(…why *purple*?)”

“‘Cause I’m a *Pisces*.”

As was Vicki Volester, who found the Sign of the Fish an embarrassment and quickly changed the subject whenever horoscopes were mentioned. Fiona was further reminded (for whatever reason) that Vicki looked especially good in shades of purple, and had once loaned her a violet cardigan during a cold-weather sleepover at Burrow Lane.

You should really wear that color more often, Feef.

This reminder plus Rerun’s insistence on paying for everything (with Ardine’s Visa card, Ardine having appropriated Mr. Pilchard’s) led to Fiona leaving Granny Takes a Trip with a plummy vinyl jumpsuit, an eggplant suede jacket, and a pair of Deep Purple patent leather combat boots.

“(Not exactly *summerwear*, is it?)”

“Sugar Pop, *everything* is summerwear if you don’t mind sweatin’ through it,” said Rerun, loading the LeSabre trunk with her own array of spree-plunder.

Then zoom north on Doheny past a mile of billboards (just far enough and long enough to belt/rasp/harmonize “X Offender” with Blondie on KROQ) to arrive at Licorice Pizza, the records-and-tapes mecca. Before heading inside, Fiona took a catty-corner gander across the intersection at the fabled Whisky a Go Go, and its marquee:

KIM FOWLEY PRESENTS

NEW WAVE MUSIC

GUEST HOST RODNEY BINGENHEIMER

ALL AGES WELCOME

“(We have *got* to go to that.)”

“No prob—a Day Off means a Night Off too. Ma’ll be all tied up, maybe for real.”

(When they’d left Sunset Tower, Ardine was on Maybelle’s antique dial phone cooing: “Johnny Spooner, please... Tell him ‘Ardykins’ is calling... Johnny DEAREST! Yes, I’m in town... fresh off the plane, you’re the first person I’ve called... Why of *course* I’m free for *you*, Johnny...”)

(Fiona tried to imagine Moth uttering such words, but the only way would be if Burt Bacharach set them to music first.)

At Licorice Pizza they sought out 45s, LPs, fanzines, and other paraphernalia native to the L.A. area, throwing in a few British imports Feef hadn’t found at Cobwebs & Strange. She was annoyed that the new *Slash* tabloid cover didn’t display the Runaways, currently on a triumphant tour of Japan—not that she wasn’t still annoyed at the Runaways, or regretted having skipped their concert last year in Prospect Heights.

But still: how were there going to be *more* all-girl rock bands if *this* all-girl rock band didn’t get better ink? Fiona wished she had a Rosa Dartles demo cassette she could take to tonight’s showcase at the Whisky, even if Britt was out of the picture and Kim Fowley had a terrible reputation and Rodney Bingenheimer’s wasn’t much more stellar. Where were the A&R *women*, the female producers and promoters you might turn to for non-exploitative sponsorship? And where were the Dartles going to find a new lead guitarist with chops like Britt Groningen’s?

“(Remind me again why you don’t play guitar.)”

“Same reason I don’t play piano or tuba or xylophone. Never learned how.”

“(Okay then, how fast a *learner* are you?)”

“Depends on the teacher. And the subject. And if there’s anybody in the class like *adorable* enough to *distract* me—”

“(Will you be serious for a second?)” Fiona scolded, launching into a spiel on behalf of all-female musical groups, citing not only the Dartles and Runaways but Fanny and Isis and the Ace of Cups back in the days of the San Francisco Sound—

“Hoff you seen Bockstage Posssss?”

This interjection coming from the opposite side of the record rack: an older girl, perhaps nineteen or twenty, who looked like Natasha Fatale in a frizzy fuchsia wig and French maid’s uniform. With a deep contralto voice, so maybe not an older *girl*—though constructed with impressive skill, if a Hollywood tranny.

Natasha was accompanied not by Boris Badenov but Bonanza Jellybean: a petite knockout in full cowgirl panoply, complete with miniature Stetson. The face beneath it was unexpectedly Chinese in appearance; a complicated camera hung from her bandanna-knotted neck; and out of her red-rimmed mouth piped a high-pitched squeak with Dixieish overtones.

(Say boy-howdy to two Scenesters of the Sunset Strip.)

Bonanza and Natasha respectively chirped and purred about Backstage Pass, who billed themselves as “the new all-girl SENSATION” even though their drummer was a guy called The Perve.

“—‘cept he ain’t done enuff t’like *earn* that name, far’s *I* know—”

“—then there iss Spock, there iss Gennybody, there iss Marina del Rey—”

“—‘n’ don’t be fergettin’ ol’ Barracuda Majors—”

“—they are not bodd onstage, they played the Stahhwood losst week with the Weirdos—”

“—aw, them Weirdos! They wuz the first ‘uns t’ chop their hair short, y’know, ‘n’ they *never* had a drummer—”

“—wott about the Screamers? No *guitars*—nothing bott keyboards onnd Tomata du Plenty—”

“—he’s such a bassurd! Makes great tater salad, though—”

“—he iss *not* a bosstard, he iss occting Germonnic—”

“—naw, it’s the *Germ*s that’re actin’ manic—”

“—true, bott Tomata hoss *method* in hiss moddness, the Germ

s hoff only *mess*ss—”

“—zackly! If *they* made a pot o’ tater salad, it’d jes be *t’fling* it atchew—”

“—it iss oll performance ott, oll about who iss the most theottrical—”

“—not fer my Zeros it ain’t! Fer them it’s all ‘bout bein’ the *kewtest* lil chulitos y’ever did see—”

“—I hoff told you *onnd* them, if they wonnt to be known oss the ‘Mexican Ramones’ they mosst start colling themselves *Los Ceros*—”

“Sayyyy GRUNTCAKES!” Bonanza told Rerun and Fiona as her camera went FLASH in their faces. (Split-Pea Erbsen could take stealthy-pounce lessons from this photographic cat burglar.)

“No fair! Do over!” objected Rerun, slinging an arm over Feef’s shoulders and striking parody glamour poses, while Feef struggled not to spill her stack of albums etc. and Bonanza went on FLASH-FLASH-FLASHing—

“Stop, you will blind them!” commanded Natasha.

“Now who’s actin’ theatrical?” responded Bonanza.

“Hey, *speaking* of potato salad, you gals hungry? Where’s the best spot to chow down ‘round here?” asked Rerun, sounding like a just-tumbled-off-the-turnip-truck tourist.

Did Bonanza and Natasha exchange a sinister sidelong glance? Did they catch sight of Rerun’s credit card while Fiona’s etcetera-stack was rung up at the register? Were they hatching nefarious schemes as they scrambled into the LeSabre—Natasha taking shotgun (“I will guide you, if you pleasssse”) and Bonanza the backseat with Feef, whose trepidation continued to mount: were she and stupid Rerun about to be hijacked, robbed, beaten up, sold into sex slavery—

—SNAP—

—went Bonanza’s camera: no flash needed outdoors.

“Dontchew worry none. I jes hadda gimme a pic o’ yew *bein’* worrited—yew gotta great look—but gwan, relax, everthang’s kewl.”

And five minutes later they were ensconced at Carney’s Express, a yellow railroad car converted into a Sunset Boulevard eatery. There over cheeseburgers and chili dogs, Natasha and Bonanza formally introduced themselves.

Purring: “Tawdry Meadows.”

Piping: “Shudder Bugge.”

Beaming: “Pleased to meetcha! I’m Rerun ‘n’ this here’s FTW.”

“Chommed. You two will not be insollted, I hope, if I guess you are visiting here from... the sobburbs?”

“Way-the-hell-far-away suburbs!”

Way to leave yourself AND ME wide open, Elly May! groused the silent Fiona, far from feeling tranquilized as she picked at her ketchuppy fries.

“Then ollow me to offer you some oddvice,” Tawdry intoned between mouthfuls of burger. “Be very wary where you venture, especially offter dark. You will find many wonderful people here on the Strip, onnd many horrible others who prey oppon the yonng—”

—“‘n’ you’ll find ‘em *both* at the afterparty at our place t’night!” cheeped Shudder Bugge, dabbing chili from her red-rimmed lips.

“Ignore her,” said Tawdry, draining her shake. “We throw the *best* offterpotties. You two are welcome to join oss—our ‘affairs’ are (heh! heh! heh!) ‘to remember’—though people seldom dooooo.”

“We’d be delighted!” Rerun (though not Fiona) enthused. “Where...? How...?”

“We will find you tonight at the Whisky. Or you conn wait by your cahh in the Licorice Pizza pocking lot, onnd we will meet you there.”

“(Are you guys in a band?)” Fiona inquired, trying to mute suspicious apprehension.

“We are by nature mistresses of ceremonies—”

“*Groupies*, she means,” said Bugge, chomping a frozen chocolate-dipped banana.

“Way-ull, this wuz fun, but shit! we best be gittin’ back t’work. Mind givin’ us a lift?”

Where, back to your PIMP? Feef didn’t ask aloud as Tawdry directed them to the Tropicana Motel, almost as fabled a landmark as the Whisky a Go Go, and of which she claimed to be assistant concierge.

“*Charwoman*, she means. Gwan, show ‘em yer scrubbin’ brush—”

“Occhh! Go to your hott, you Bogge.”

“Do they *make* her dress like a French maid?” Rerun asked as they drove on down La Cienega Boulevard.

“Tawd? Naw, she always wears that gitup,” said Shudder Bugge, tugging a blue smock out of her saddlebag and over her cowgirl outfit as they pulled up beside a Fotomat

kiosk. “Whoa-kay then—thanks fer the grub ‘n’ the ride—see y’t’night—be sure ‘n’ wear yer hawtest deli cuts—‘n’ if yew run into any o’ them Zeros, hands off!—they’re all of ‘em *mine!*”

A moment of silence, alone in the Buick. Then:

“BeforeyousayawordIknowwhatI’mdoing,” Ree told Fee.

“(HOW? *How* do you know?)”

“‘Cause I know these sorta chicks—they know everybody, so if we know ‘em, *we’ll* know everybody. And just the sorta everybodies YOU oughta know, IF you wanna get ahead in the music biz.”

“(I want to do that *with* my music, NOT by groupie-ing around at some afterparty!)”

“It’s *schmoozing*, not smooching! You don’t hafta kiss anyone’s ass—just *meet* ‘em, get to *know* ‘em, make the first move—”

“(I am not making any ‘*moves*’ on ANYBODY!)”

“Look—if you come to their afterparty, I promise I’ll maybe try to learn how to play a guitar. Deal?”

“(...will you agree to leave the minute *I* want to leave, no matter what?)”

“Definitely. Course, I might wanna bring someone back to Maybelle’s *with* us—kidding, I’m kidding! Will you *trust* me already? This is gonna go as smooth as a Ken doll’s crotch! But first we gotta make a run to Frederick’s.”

“(Who’s Frederick?)”

“Of Hollywood—so we can pick us out a platter of ‘hawt deli cuts!’”

*

Now it is 4 a.m. and steps must be taken. Out of the ornate elevator, over to the expensive-looking door. Best foot forward (which is best? left? right? left? right?) as you follow Rerun, who moves with the exaggerated precision of a chop-chop Kabuki artiste. “KeeeyYY keeyYY keeyYY” she is going, not to beckon the laggard cat you left behind but as an open-sesame incantation.

“(...put it there...)” you say, pointing to the expensive-looking lock, as you did awhile ago to the Buick LeSabre’s ignition. And as she did in the car, Rerun solemnly shakes you by the hand and keeps on shaking it till you extract yours so she can insert the

key as advised, turning it with the overblown correctness of a vaudeville sneakthief.

Well, that's what comes from too much pills and liquor, as Liza Minnelli sang in *Cabaret*—yet preferable in the long run (or even the short) to reckless wreckage with your blood and brains smeared over Sunset Boulevard. Providentially, the speedier Rerun's personal engine is revved, the more carefully she maneuvers vehicles in motion.

Unless tonight is just a lucky fluke.

Door open, on into Maybelle's Mummy Mausoleum. Dark and silent as a tomb, all right. No Ardine waiting up for you; no Ardine asleep on the not-folded-out sofa. In her place, a sheet of paper is affixed to a pillow. Ransom note? Didn't Rerun predict her mother'd get all tied up tonight, for real? Or is it simply notification she "might be out late" with Johnny DEAREST Spooner?

Either way, not a problem. Nothing to compare to Rerun's gabbly "Get-me-get-me *outta* this," meaning the salmon-pink beaded cocktail gown. Whose stitches *did* split when she slithered it on for Whisky a Go Going; but was salvaged punk-style by a liberal application of safety pins. Which now need unfastening, if the gown's to be removed more-or-less intact. Plaintive reprise: "Get me *outta-outta-outta* this," sounding like the goose in *Charlotte's Web*.

"(...hey, you got yourself *into* this...)"

"Well I can't *sleep* in this, so help me!"

"(...you won't be doing *any* sleeping for a day or two...)"

"Am so am so! Lookit, I confusticollated those red dolls/red dillies/red devils from that li'l pussy! Pussies don't need help getting to sleep!"

"(...forget the reds. Just breathe deep in that dress, 'n' you'll pass right out...)"

"Aw, you want me to *stick* myself and *stick* myself, over 'n' over 'n' over!"

"(...druther *I* stick you? Okay if I make a long-distance call?...)"

"How's that gonna help me undo all these sticky-pricky pins?"

"(...I'll ring up Siouxsie Sioux 'n' ask how *she* does it...)"

"Funny! Real funny! Oh-so-funny!" pouts Rerun, bulleting bedroomwards as she starts unpinning as Kabukily as possible: "OwwwWWW owwwWWW owwwWWW—"

Meanwhile you roam around the still-cluttered living room, hunting for the phone, cursing as you stumble across where Ardine left it on the carpet. Sinking down alongside as you hazily unlace and detach your combat boots, then twirl the old-fashioned dial digit by digit.

4 a.m. here, so 6 a.m. home. Fat Bob always rises with the sun, regardless of any biker-bar shenanigans he might've participated in overnight. Sure enough, he picks right up at Villa Neapolitan. Surprise/pleasure/concern at your calling at this time of dawn; turning to trepidation when you ask to speak to Robin.

Heavy whisper: "(SHE—ISN'T—AWAKE—YET.)"

"(...c'mon, she'll talk to *me*...)"

"(Maybe so, but to say *what*?)" Fat Bob gulps.

"(...oh hey, that Ollie guy you look like? He's buried near here with Elmer Fudd...)" you inform him, or would if Fat Bob didn't lay the phone down to go rouse the she-wolf in her distant lair, from which you soon hear familiar snarls coming closer and closer—

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT THE HELL TIME IT IS??"

"(...fourish here, sixish there. Guess where 'n' what *I've* been 'n' done?...)"

It started out like any other covert clubbing. You alerted Moth (and Lem, for once) that you'd be spending the night at Rerun's (instead of the usual Robin's) while omitting to mention your preplanned attendance at a New Wave showcase and affair-to-misremember afterparty. (Lem 'n' Moth, far from forbidding you to go, might've wanted to *tag along*.)

Then, at the Tower, Rerun's salmon-pink slither-squeeze/stitch-split/safety-pinup, and your own prideful put-on of Rosa Dartles T-shirt and bermudas. Adding from the Granny Takes a Trip cache only the purple patent leather boots; feeling a tad foolish (and a lot foot-sweaty) but the effect, as Vicki Volester would phrase it, was "*striking*, let's say."

(Yes: let's.)

On then to the Whisky, onetime home to Doors and Byrds and Buffalo Springfield. Tonight its fabled stage was taken by Weirdos and Zeros and Germs, and the dance floor by a motley mob wearing everything from spraypainted rain slickers to billowy Hefty bags. As if this were a masquerade ball—but one where everyone's mundane secret identities got shed like so many faux snakeskins, to reveal inner AUTHENTICITY.

*Quit being a face in your crowd
and stop whistling against your din:
hark how the Snake of Nirvana
sheds whole centuries like a skin!*

Or as Joss Murrish would phrase it: Wonder Woman only *pretended* to be banal Diana Prince, till she unfurled that magic golden lasso and yanked its noose TIGHT—

—making the cymbals crash and the tom-toms bang and the walls begin to shimmy and the floor begin to quake—

—as you realized this was the Big One, bigger than the Zeppelin concert. bigger even than the Bowie concert, and most probably the Runaways concert in Prospect Heights (if you hadn't been too offended by Miss Feathershag's bustier corset to go to that)—

—since this was breakneck, a plunge into the jungle, as abrupt and precipitous as the doomed plane's to the island in *Lord of the Flies*—

—and here came a stormburst of shredded riffs and stompdwn chords to engulf the mob and pound it with pulsing throbbing thunderbolts, galvanize it into savage tribal chants that celebrated darkness *and* lightning, without *and* within—

FEEL THE BEAST!! BURN YOUR THROAT!! BOIL YOUR BLOOD!!

—so no choice but to dance and no room to do so except by jumping up and down, as if at a demented trampoline convention (*pig's head on a pogo stick!*) yet space enough for you to be swept off your feet and knocked to the floor, fearing you'd be bouncily flattened—

—but a dozen hands promptly reached to haul you upright. Only one belonged to Rerun (who stuck so close by your side you could feel the metallic nibble of her safety pins) and one each to Tawdry Meadows and Shudder Bugge (who honed in on you unerringly through the Whisky crush) but the others belonged to stranger-neighbors, unknown friends; and when they too took tumbles, you in turn reached and helped with *their* uprighting. It might be a savage mob, yet not a brutal one; no biting, no mauling, no tearing with teeth or claws. However, as you relate to Robin:

“(...this group called the Germs, you can hardly call them a *band*, they ripped through an insane cover of ‘Sugar Sugar,’ y’know the Archies tune, ‘You are my candy

girl’—while *emptying* these sacks of powdered sugar over the crowd like a gritty white hurricane, ‘n’ then they started squirting Reddi-Wip till Rodney Whatshisname threw ‘em off the stage...)”

“Are you DRUNK? You *sound* drunk! What’ve you been drinking?”

Spume from the New Wave.

Sweeping you out to sea (or at least as far as the Licorice Pizza parking lot) and washing you up to the good ship LeSabre with Rerun and Tawdry and Bugge and a swarm of other *b-z-z-z-z-ing* creatures, packed like hornets in a high-velocity nest. Again you felt apprehension; again you feared this might be a hijack, prelude to robbery and enslavement—

—except the mood in the car was far more cavalier, a rowdier motlier version of that cramfest in Uncle Cass’s Estate Wagon en route to the Blackstone for Joss’s birthday matinee; and before you knew it you began to sing *Ninety-nine boys in the back of the Buick* which the entire swarm took up, take one down and pass him around and make each unruly stanza more ribald than the last—

—till Tawdry had Rerun swing over to Yucca Street and park by a shabby-genteel Micawbrian building, all the hornets swarming toward it out of the nest and carrying you along with the crowd, Rerun seizing your arm as you reached the threshold, gesturing above it at a sign that by God WAS a sign:

THE MAYERLING

Inside which they discovered the heart of Punkamonium on earth, or at least this particular corner of Hollywood: every surface coated with emblems, insignia, graffiti in multiple media; pumped-up volume—radio, stereo, mike and amp, *a cappella*—pouring from every room, commingling into a pervasive universal hullabaloo.

Tawdry and Bugge’s place was called the Vault, and had been decorated à la Edgar Allan Poe with black cats as the predominant theme. They were omnipresent in framed photographs, shelved figurines, stuffed cushion-form, plus a sleek live one grooming itself atop a vertical coffin whose lid stood open to reveal a full-size plastic (?) skeleton dressed in bellhop livery.

“(Cute,)” you told Shudder Bugge.

“WHUT?” she hollered over the swarming hornet-ruckus.

“CUTE!” you exerted, nodding at Bony Bellhop.

“AW, THIS AIN’T *NOTHIN’*. Y’SHOULD SEE K.U.P.’S PLACE ‘CROSS THE COURTYARD—THEY GOT A REGGLER *DUNGEON* OVER THAR!”

K.U.P. was short for Krewel & Unusual Punishment, a band whose members sported names like Stocks Pillory and Larrup Knout and Flog Gibbet, and was fronted by the aforesaid Krewel who seemed to be of no known gender or maybe all of them at once.

“ENCHANTÉ!” he/she yelled at you later that night, raking the back of your hand with his/her tongue, much as the cat on the coffintop was methodically doing to its furry self.

Fortunately by then you were anesthetized against petty liberties. Tawdry’d handed you a green glass grenade with “Mickey’s” on its label, plus a wicked-sharp pulltab lid that you opened with extreme respect after a nearby guy sliced his fingers on *his* lid and let out a *YEEEAUGH!!* that momentarily pierced the clamor.

One sip from your grenade and you understood why this was called FINE malt liquor. Too many of your and Robin’s experiments with beer had been pilferage from Fat Bob’s hoard of Hamm’s, which might be brewed in the land of sky-blue waters but tasted more like cartoon bear-whiz. Mickey’s, by comparison, was widemouthed bliss, and enabled you to coast through the afterparty on a fairly even keel.

No freakout when the live black cat leaped sleekly onto your shoulder; nor when Rerun got “recognized” by a dotty crone called the Baroness, who’d lived at the Mayerling for fifty years and had known Maybelle Grayling when they both were harlot-starlets there.

“DRANK HERSELF TO DEATH, DID SHE? WHAT A SHAME!” the Baroness cackle-shrilled between slurps of Cold Duck. “CAN’T SAY I’M SURPRISED, THOUGH—BOOTLEGGERS PUT THEIR CHILDREN THROUGH COLLEGE ON WHAT MAYBELLE PAID THEM FOR BATHTUB GIN! KNOW WHY THEY CALLED IT THAT?”

“‘CAUSE THEY MADE IT IN A BATHTUB?” you re-exerted, scratching the cat’s sleek black head.

“NO—BECAUSE SHE DRANK A BATHTUBFUL EVERY DAY! DON’T *YOU* START DOING THAT, LOVEY!”

Said to Rerun, who plunked down between you and the Baroness on this unpadded mourner's bench, and started stroking Sleekie's twitchy tail from rump to tip.

"DO I REALLY LOOK LIKE HER?"

(Slurp.) "WHO, LOVEY?"

"MY GREAT-AUNT MAYBELLE!"

"OH MY YES. IF I SQUINT MY EYES JUST-SO, I CAN ALMOST BELIEVE IT'S SHE AND I WHO ARE HOSTING ONE OF *OUR* LITTLE BASHES! WE WERE FAMOUS FOR THEM, YOU KNOW. THEY WERE ALL JUST EXACTLY LIKE THIS ONE HERE TONIGHT!"

If that were true, the Dardanelle Sunday supplement had failed to describe them in accurate detail. They probably would've behooved a German Expressionist magazine to truly cover the spread—*Metropolitan*, say, or *The Blue Angel Review* or *Pandora's Digest*—if Maybelle and the Baroness had migrated to Berlin with Louise Brooks and Sally Bowles. Or to share four sordid rooms in Chelsea with a girlfriend known as Elsie. Or what the hell: why *not* right here on Yucca Street, where the Vault's afterparty was in its fullest flow (as also, apparently, was its plumbing)?

Yes: mix a Black Mass with a kegger at some louche sorority house, and you'd have the same raucous pasticcio of song and dance and swigs and snorts and heaves and pukes and masquers making out and masquers passing out and masquers freaking out, till it wouldn't astonish you to see Hop-Frog arrive with eight chained ourang-outangs and proceed to string them up.

(Which would've been fine by you, so long as they didn't get set on fire right in front of your mourner's bench.)

So help yourself to a fresh green glass grenade (your third? fourth? fifth?), checking to be sure it hadn't been pre-opened or meddled with. Wave off a brandished candy dish heaped high with pills (no thanks—your life had been sufficiently fucked over by pharmaceuticals) but Rerun accepted it, sorting through the contents till she found and popped what looked like a black beauty, before grabbing a couple of Seconals from Sleekie (already a black beauty) who'd scooped them out with a discerning paw.

"Hey! Those aren't cherry gumdrops!" you thought you heard Rerun scold the cat.

“MINE!!” you definitely heard from the literal spitting image of Overcast Max, ever-ripped keyboardist for the Cloudland Atmosphere, as *his* discerning paw groped for the two red devils and/or Rerun’s bazooms—

—till you stiffarmed him with the green glass grenade that sloshed fine malt liquor as it jabbed Max Jr.’s solar plexus, doubling him up and dropping him down to the Vault deck, where you and Rerun stepped over his jackknifed body (dumping the rest of your Mickey’s onto his overcast head) as you took your widemouthed leaves, with many thanks to Charlotte Pauk for all the handy self-defense training.

(Slurp.) “I don’t believe half your horseshit!” (Slurp.)

These slurps not by the Baroness on Cold Duck, but Robin Neapolitan on the cup of hot black coffee she’d had Fat Bob bring her.

“(…which half?…)”

“Both! *And* I don’t believe you woke me up to dish ‘em out long-distance!… So anyway, when’re you bringing your skinny ass home?”

“(…dunno…)”

“*Dunno!* You’ve been out there like forever!”

“(…*you’re* the one who’s Out There. ‘N’ it’s only been two weeks, so far…)”

“*So far!* You’ll be back by the *first*, right? You said you thought you would!”

“(…why the first?…)”

“It’s your BIRTHDAY, dumbass! You were born on July 1st! You’re about to turn fifteen! Why’m I having to *remind* you of this? ‘Cause you’re DRUNK, that’s why—and I’ve heard Mickey’s gives monster hangovers, so don’t come crying to me when you get yours!”

“(…why don’t *you* come out *here*, just for a weekend?…)”

“Oh yeah? You’re buying me a plane ticket, are you? ‘Cause there’s NO! DAMN! WAY! I’m taking ONE! THIN! DIME! outta my car stash—not with less’n four months before *my* birthday! Which’ll be my *sixteenth*, in case I hafta remind you of that too!”

“(…c’mon, you’ll love it out here. The drumming’s stupenderiferous…)”

“Forget it!” (Slurp.)

“(…will you at least *think* about it?…)”

“Not on your life!”

“(...if you don’t, I’ll call you up every morning at four-here six-there—)”

“—you try that ‘n’ I’ll put my fist right through this phone line ‘n’ punch your freaking lights out! I’ll *think* about it, okay?”

“(...okay...)”

“And hey, Spooky?”

“(...yeah?...)”

“YOU OWE ME THREE HOURS OF SLEEP!”

(Slam-click.)

Amo mia sorella maggiore...

On which sentimental note, let your eyes close for just a sec.

Then open them to find Ardine staring severely down at you on the rug with the phone in your hand as you block her path to the sofa. Except it *can’t* be Ardine, who hasn’t yet returned from her tryst with Johnny Spooner, so it must be Rerun ricocheting from the bedroom to ask what’s been keeping you from helping her unsheathe herself. Except it isn’t Rerun either, who *can’t* have dwindled away to such an extent in the brief time you were conversing with Robin. Might it be Bony Bellhop, bearing the gritty white cloud of powdered sugar you left behind at Yucca Street? Except it’s not a cloud but a *shroud*—

—as you open your eyes for real and find none of the above standing there, nobody blocking your path as you pogo-jump up and make haste to make waste in the bathroom, stepping bootlessly on every open safety pin discarded on the floor between here and there.

Bathroom’s awash with VERY cold water, on the tiles and in the tub and dripping out of the shower nozzle. Best-foot-forward through soggy towels and crumpled salmon-pink cocktail gown to enter the boudoir, where Rerun sprawls sideways athwart the battleship-bedstead. Thar she blows, not just exhibiting her still-wet ample nudity, but every indication that two red devils were used to overcome one black beauty and so gain Slumberland. Unless she’s joined Great-Aunt Maybelle in harlot-starlet heaven? Nope; breathing too stertorously for that. Unless she’s playing possum? Focus on a damp bare buttcheek and give it a good pinch, followed by a better swat. Nope: no reaction, other than jello-jiggle.

So draw a shroud—no, a *sheet* (splotted with nothing worse than bathwater, to judge from the scent) over Elly May’s sweet globular curves, and take your own skinny ass

back to the living room sofa. Better to share it with Maybelle's ghost (if that was what that was) than a waterlogged pill-popper. No matter how pinchable or swattable.

*

(ENCLOSED IN A SNOOPY-AS-JOE-COOL BIRTHDAY HALLMARK)

Dear Feef,

Thanks for the postcard ~ the Sunset Strip looks supercool ~ I won't ask about what you're getting up to, in case your mom reads this (just kidding, Mrs. Weller!) but take care of yourself among all those "Weirdos and Zeros."

We got back from Ft Lauderdale on Monday ~ met some cute guys there but they kind of turned into "Weirdos and Zeros" too, maybe because the weather was so crazy ~ raining most of the time (in Florida, in June!) except when I went to the beach, which may sound perfect but really seemed kind of bizarre.

Joss and Alex are still at their summer camps (boo hiss) and won't get back till the 1st or 2nd, I haven't seen Robin or Sheila or any of the bunch or even anyone from school except (!) Nanette Magnus at Petty Hills, and I better wait till I see you to tell what she's getting up to. (Just kidding again, Mrs. Weller!)

When are you coming home? Please don't wait till you've got a tan, if you're only going out at night!

Anyway, have a happy birthday ~ I got you a little something in Florida but you'll have to come home to see what it is. Till then~

Luv, Vicki

*

Fiona had been born in Half Moon Bay at the stroke of midnight, and there was initial hesitation whether to record her birth on June 30th or July 1st. According to family legend, the point was settled by flipping an English coin Lem had picked up during his gypsy travels; and serious thought was allegedly given to naming her "Florin Twoshillings" before that got dismissed as an overmercenary designation.

In spite of her birthplace there was a *new* moon on the night of Fiona's nativity, so "Moonchild" stemmed more from Cancerian associations than the state of the sky. This

lunar phase did lend itself to the lyrics of “Lo! the Fairest Flower Girl,” which Lem ‘n’ Moth re-crooned to the terminally chagrined Fiona as the bungalow clock struck twelve—or clicked over to twelve, being digital—on June 30th:

*Born unto us on an eve of New Moon
at midnight sharp as the calendar changed
to radiant July from fading June:
a blossoming-forth that the Fates arranged*

—and so on, in similar vein.

Moth presented Fiona with a crystal wristwatch, befitting (she explained) a fifteenth anniversary, but Lem took the birthday cake by handing over a receipt for an Ampeg SVT: the best bass amplifier on the market and also the heaviest, one that ought to come with its own herniaproof roadie. It was being shipped to the Plexiglas Palace, which might not survive its installation; and Fiona was just about to ask if delivery couldn’t be diverted to Little Armenia—

—when Lem compounded his cake-taking with the casual bomb-dropping that one of Nora Corazon’s regular guitarists had broken an arm, and Lem’d been invited to fill in on the Australian leg of Nora’s *Porque le Vas* world tour. Which would begin in less than a week, so Lem sure could use Flow’s help in packing up all his stuff for storage, since she now had so much practical sift-and-sort experience with the Pilchards.

“(Um...)” went Fiona.

Inattentive as she’d been to the state of the parental union, Feef *had* sensed a recent ebbing of the threat that a baby brother might be getting generated. Which, needless to say, was a load off her mind; and so far as she was concerned, Lem could go back up Nora Corazon, Donna Summer, Barbra Streisand, or Cher & Gregg Allman—as long as it meant he could afford to buy and ship her that Ampeg amp.

Yet she *was* concerned about Moth’s reaction, especially when Moth heaved a little sigh (brittle as the new crystal wristwatch) and said: “Well then... I guess... I’d better... book our tickets home...”

Meaning for her and *Fiona*—who was nowhere near ready or willing to leave L.A.

But who, by great good fortune, had a Get Out Of Jail Practically Free ace in the hole.

Maybelle's housekeeper/caretaker had quit after being left bupkis in the Grayling will, and daily maintenance of the tomb at Sunset Tower had gradually fallen to Fiona's lot since she had less vested interest in its exhumation than its livability. Hence when Ardine'd finally returned from spooning with Johnny DEAREST, she'd found Feef industriously swabbing out the bathroom, after brewing the resurrected Rerun (who was limeade-y around the gills) a cup of ginger tea with a generous dash of peppermint schnapps.

"You are such a *treasure*," Ardine had exclaimed then and repeated over to the phone to Moth twelve hours after Lem's bomb-drop, while making an official free-room-and-board bid for Fiona's services through the month of July.

Ree, murmuring to Fee: "(Do you do windows, Treasure Gal?)"

Fee, muttering to Ree: "(Push me and I'll go crash with Tawdry and the Bugge.)"

Who, the following night, wished Fiona "monny hoppy returns" and gave her a thin brass necklace—"guaranteed t'turn yer neck green!"—with a small brass *FTW* pendant, and the assurance that obtaining it hadn't cost them a cent.

Purloined or not, Feef put it on along with birthday gifts from Rerun: black tux jacket, black stretch pants, black opentoe shoes, and purple-framed purple-lensed wraparound shades. Rerun meanwhile donned a short labcoat over a brimming white lace bra and matching half-slip; Tawdry Meadows assumed her fuchsia wig and French maid's uniform; Shudder Bugge exchanged her cowgirl outfit for a gold sequined tailcoat, top hat, and tap shoes ("Ain't I jes the kewtest thang?") and Krewel came vaulting over the courtyard in a bustier corset that Miss Feathershag would've coveted, plus a string of pearls, garter belt, fishnet stockings, stiletto heels, and satin cape lined with silver lamé.

And thus attired they piled into the Buick and roared off to Wellworth Avenue for the midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Audience participation was still in its infancy, largely limited to [a] attending in costume, [b] saluting each other with a gesture midway between gimme-five and freestyle-crawlstroke, [c] cheering each character's first entrance, with Frank N. Furter receiving a whoopenstein accolade, and [d] shouting occasional responses to selected dialog.

The blackness might hit you; the void might be calling; madness might take its toll.

But once you passed through the Phantom Tollbooth, you were transported to that yearned-for cosmos where only “freaks” need apply—and if you be freaky, you be calling your tune. Such as *LET’S DO THE TIME WARP AGAIN!!*

(Yes: let’s.)

With an unforeseen hearkening-back to your electric koolaid childhood.

Not that there was gooble-gobble camaraderie between the freaks of old and new: punks scorned longhairs, even repudiating pot as “fit only for dirty hippies.” (Though your practiced nostrils could detect its weedy presence here at the UA Cinema Center.) So no, this wasn’t a fresh dawning of the Age of Aquarius—the moon might be in any number of houses, Jupiter might be aligned with who knew which planet, and there might be enough falsehoods and derisions to last until doomsday.

Yet you *did* feel the same kind of “tribal” atmosphere, here and at the Vault and in the clubs and on the streets, that you recalled from the Big Blue Bus Bucephalus days of yore. Then and now, “normals” would try to hassle you, would draw away with hostile distrust; but you’d be bidden welcome by the misfits, the oddballs, the weirdos, the zeros, the travelers-to-the-beat-of-a-diff’rent-drum—your fellow freaks. And now, just as then, you could rise together above the You-Reeka-ish murkitude, soaring up and up till you press your collective spaceface to the flashdazzly stars—

...don’t dream it: bee-ee it / don’t dream it: bee-ee it / don’t dream it: bee-ee it...

—except that now, much more than then, the bee-ee had a HORNET’S sting—a wild and an untamed thing that caused your heart to thump and your blood to sing—that thrilled you chilled you fulfilled you with jagged-edgy raw energy vibes, till you wanted to wrench the Sword of Damocles off its thread and swing it three times over your head so it’d change into an El Thorro hammer you could fling at all the Steerforthy faces and so wreak revenge for all the Rosa Dartles with a rush of the intensest adrenaline experienceable—

—WHOO HERE IT COMES AGAIN—

*

That year Fiona didn’t celebrate Independence Day on July 4th (she preferred metaphoric fireworks anyway) but the 5th, when Moth returned to Vanderlund and Lem took

off for Canberra. Moth's hints of willingness to [a] stay in L.A. with Feef and the Pilchards, or [b] serve as a camp follower on Nora Corazon's Australian tour, had [c] gone unheeded by the hintees.

"Well... try to be a good girl, dear," she perturbed Fiona in parting at the airport.

"(Um...)"

"I'll make sure she tries her *best*, Mrs. Weller," said Rerun.

"Want me to send you a marsupial from down under, Flow?" Lem chaffed at the international gate.

"(Uh...)"

"Send her a kookaburra—their lives must be so *cheerful*," said Rerun.

"(What're you, my press agent?)" Fee asked Ree once they were alone.

"Just call me 'Puff Piece,'" Ree told Fee.

Having disposed of two parental units (and with the third still Spoonerly occupied) the girls could now focus on Krewel & Unusual Punishment's fast-approaching gig at the Starwood on Santa Monica Boulevard, and their own roles in K.U.P.'s groupie auxiliary.

The Starwood, like the speakeasies Maybelle Grayling had frequented with "Iron Man" Ardizzone, was a nightclub run by honest-to-God gangsters. It was also the first major venue to be played by K.U.P., whose anticipation ranged from Stocks Pillory's stolid impassivity to Krewel's "I must confess, *mes enfants*, to being thrown into QUITE a fluttah!"

Starwood management encouraged lesser-known bands to invite every Scenester they knew to come fill up the joint and the bar and the pockets of onsite drug dealers. Rerun and Fiona were delegated to ferry over as many Mayerlingers as the Buick could hold, while K.U.P. brought the heftier roadier types (not all of whom were male) along with their instruments (not all of which were musical) in the band's van, a mobile dungeon-annex known as the "Misery Machine."

One instrument made the trek in the Buick on Feef's entrusted lap: Shudder Bugge's "big-ass fiddle," which was in fact a handsome cello she could play like a pro. Feef wondered whether Bugge had "boosted" it along with the *FTW* necklace and, very possibly, her fancy camera and cowgirl ensemble. A cello, though, would've required extra-dexterous sleight of hand—the petite Bugge could hardly have smuggled it out of a music store under

her gold sequined tailcoat.

At any rate this large-bottomed stringpaddle was now housed in a case that Bugge (inspired, she said, by Rerun's tales of Sunset Tower) had begun painting to resemble a miniature Nefertiti sarcophagus.

"I'da liked t'been one o' them EEE-gypshun chicks, back in Pharaoh-times."

As opposed to being—or at least sounding—like an Okie from Manchuria?

Existential thoughts in the LeSabre convertible: who *was* Shudder Bugge, and how'd she come to be? Ditto Tawdry, ditto Krewel, ditto Stocks and Larrup Knout and Flog Gibbet? Had any of them ever lived and breathed apart from the Strip? Or were they some outlandish celestial summer stock company, that would melt away into thin air when these revels ended?

Never mind: tonight's pageant seemed pretty damn substantial and unfaded. Well, perhaps a smidgen faded among the Starwood congregation—a mite ratty and sloppy and crusty and dingy and other Seven New Wave Dwarvesy. Fiona would've preferred that Robin and Vicki and Sheila and Joss were here, instead of the pervier Dwarves whose carnal scrutiny was by no means deflected by her having just turned fifteen.

Back off, asswipes! I know how to mash your noses with the heel of my hand, so keep your fingers off my butt!

A vibe the Dwarf-pervs evidently picked up on, since Feef was able to tote Bugge's sarcopha-case through the club unmolested.

7/7/77 read the calendars that day, which everyone agreed must be exponentially beyond any old 6-6-6. Krewel & Unusual Punishment sure as hell thought so, and took the stage (including Shudder Bugge on cello) to lambast the Starwood with:

We needn't mention the pressures of tension

Brains have to bear the brunt

Join the rehearsal of our mental reversal

Turn yourselves back to front

Brains go about-face and you'll find that it takes

Just a jiffy to adjust

*No need to write you—aloud we invite you
TO DO THE BASS-ACKWARDS WITH US!
You just squat down on your heels
And place a hand on each thigh
Like a frog you leap back
And let your knees spread wide
Between them put your head
And kiss yourself goodbye thus
YOU DO THE BASS-ACKWARDS WITH US!*

No sugar sacks got emptied over the assemblage, but there was a cornucopia of monster licks by Unusual Punishment, zealous pelvic gyrations by Krewel, and a surprisingly high-volume punk cello solo by Shudder Bugge that segued grotesquely into:

*Hell yes it's been building
Up inside of me
Makes me suffer from an awful clog
Feelin' ultra uptight
Like a strained square knot
Round the tonsils of a demagogue
Till a Drāno surprise
Opens up my eyes
That hold back a heap of repression
And when I gain release
From this chrysa-LEES
I'll make one big SMACK 'vun impression*

With another extended hardcore cello solo, and K.U.P.'s partisans echoing:

DRĀĀĀ-NOOO ... DRĀĀĀ-NOOO ... DRĀĀĀ-NOOO ...

On a lyrical level, this was not the greatest shakes; but out of Krewel's mouth and through a drooled-on microphone it became a battle cry of inflammatory innuendo, with gas hurled on the fire by vociferous Stocks-riffs punctuated by KABOOMS and KABLOOEYS from Larrup's drums and Flog's bass till K'POW—you got catapulted parachutelessly back to the Island of Lorded-Over Flies-by-Night, where "DRĀNO" gave way as the savage tribal *chant du jour* to:

SQUEEZE THE BEAST!! POP YOUR THROAT!! FROTH YOUR BLOOD!!

—evoking a gross (though cherishable) image of Robin Neapolitan trying furiously to assuage her strawberry complexion and *not* leave any pockmarks—

—but here and now it's Rerun's face bob-bob-bobbing (along with her boob-boob-boobies) on the invisible pogo stick immediately opposite you: an arguably plumpish face, yet Donna Douglassy as the one that came out from under *Twilight Zone* wraps in "Eye of the Beholder"—

—and behold her eyes staying parallel with yours as you trampoline in tandem: eyes inflated and dilated by who knew what amalgam of pills swallowed since you got here, but you can bet *some* of them were Quaaludes since the Starwood's as notorious for their ready availability as Lynndha Ednalino's Traverser orgies back home—

—and oh shit! does this mean *you* 've been cast as Clara Bow to Rerun's Maybelle in *Hot Pursuit II*, charged with protecting and defending this languishy luded-out waif's bounceable T&A from the encircling horde of asswipe Dwarves, a task WAY beyond your unvivid unClaralike capabilities—

—with the lone gleam of hope being Sunset Tower's close proximity, half a mile away down Santa Monica and up Flores, you'd both remarked about it beforehand and Tawdry Meadows even floated the notion of holding tonight's afterparty within the mummy's tomb—

—but *hold* that thought as you behold Rerun's arguably lush lips bearing down on your decidedly thinner ones, giving no chance to explain that Grandma Marietta Dunlop's the only one permitted to kiss you there, Moth and Lem have to make do with cheek or brow—

—but Elly May’s not one to make do with any cee-ment pond when there’s Frenchin’ to be done, so you mouthily bounce-bounce-bounce together in perfect synchronization (wee dawgies!) with what amounts to ironic commentary from K.U.P. on the bandstand:

*Cracker Jack and Jill they got high on a hill
 High to lie there side by side
 Cracker Jack said: Jill, I think I’ve had my fill
 ‘Cause there’s naught we haven’t tried
 I’ll tell you the truth if you don’t wanna be duped
 I’m candy-coated popcorn peanuts and pooped!*

*Cracker Jack (said Jill) I’ve got something to spill
 I’ve got something to confide
 There’s a thing to try still while we’re high on the hill
 Where we’ve lain and where we’ve lied
 Lie low with me now if you don’t wanna be caught
 ‘Cause the thing left to try is more naughty than naught!*

*TAKE ME! OPEN ME WIDE—
 TAKE ME! OPEN ME WIDE—
 TAKE ME! OPEN ME WIDE—
 and you’ll find a surprising prize inside—*

*

This club has many nooks and crannies where Starwoodgoers can share a bowl of consommé (jellied or jammed) but the two of you bail out, playing the close-proximity card before Ree’s too far gone to drive even half a mile. Vaudeville sneakthief heedfulness may have sufficed till now, but can’t be counted on when the driver’s not just blitzed but “frisky.”

So skedaddle while K.U.P.’s still encoring onstage. Abandon all the Mayerlingers, none of whom know Maybelle’s apartment number therefore can’t follow you; there’ll be no entombed afterparty tonight—

—at least not *en masse*.

Tête-à-tête 's another matter.

As you zoop down Santa Monica and up Flores, down the deluxe Tower lobby and up the ornate Tower elevator, through the expensive-looking door and into the bawdy boudoir, Rerun inquiring all the while:

Wummee smutcheye wunyoo?

Wummee smutcheye wunyoo?

Wummee smutcheye wunyoo?

To which, each time she asks, the truth-be-untold answer is: *Probably not*.

It isn't that you're unwilling or incurious or guiltridden or repulsed by the prospect. Nor that it hasn't crossed your naughtier-than-naught mind since administering those fat round pinch/swats the other night. (Call them the flip side of mashing a nose with the heel of your hand.)

You *do* feel a disquieting twang when Rerun drops her abbreviated drawers and stands before you clad in nothing but a rhinestone-studded dog collar—relic of some long-gone pooch who might've slept at the foot (or stern) of Maybelle's battleship-bedstead. Yet your disquiet arises not from Ree but that dream you had of Tony Pierro in almost the exact same getup, minus the rhinestones:

Say you found a nice clean hunky-dory in a drugged stupor, and could do whatever you liked without his knowing or responding in any way you didn't control...

Well—Rerun's acceptably nice and relatively clean and definitely drugged, though too rarin'-to-go to qualify (yet) for a stupor.

So—the truth behind your untold *Probably not*s?

Eleanor Marie Pilchard isn't your absolute first choice for your absolute first time doing this particular deed.

Nor would it be Tony Pierro or any other "puddyboy," not even swank extraterrestrial David Bowie himself.

No. If you're going to be utterly honest for once, at last, the best way for you to stir up the most enthusiasm and reciprocation will be to close your eyes to Rerun's lavish pink curvatures...

...and visualize the body of a dancer or a gymnast. Short and dark and slightly Mediterranean. With a wide mouth hanging open to display many bright white teeth. And narrow eyes like black stars shining at you through the gloom. As she makes your heart beat high and the blood rush to your face with the touch of her gentle fingertips, saying you and she are the two foxiest ladies in town, taking you in her arms for a cuddle-clinchy HUG...

(Yes: let's. Yes: let's. Yes: let's. *Yes*—)

*

“The thing of it is... I kinda sorta already gotta girlfriend.”

—disclosed Rerun between drags on a subsequent Marlboro, before sharing further intimate confidences. While you tried to tune out the more distressful and upsetting ones without stuffing the pillowcase into your ears; but enough filtered through to fill out a lot of melancholy background.

Behold Elly May as a boy-crazy weight-watching feather-shagged cheerleader: hostessing jockparties, blanketing bedroom walls with neatly-clipped photos from *Tiger Beat*, serving up ice cream at the neighborhood dairy bar when she wasn't learning to sail the *King Oscar*, her family's racing sloop—living the life of a typical all-around Blonde Babe Teenybopper.

Then came that “bad date”—with consequences” a couple Novembers ago, at the hands (and more) of Hayzoose the Horrible: a too-cool, too-suave footballer who proved to be all Zeus and no Jesus. The sort of Zeus, too, who'd take bull-form to abduct Europa—

(*Bum bum bum bum bum BAH bum, laying down a mental bass line so I can't hear this I can't hear this*—)

By the time you cautiously rejoined the program already in progress, a Year of Sheer Hell had passed and Elly May'd evolved into “Rerun.” Compelled to do ninth grade over again at Athens Grove Junior High (which like VW was a three-year school) while her classmates moved on to the Big Mountain as soph Olympians rather than frosh Arcadians. Not that Rerun gave a damnable shit about secondary education by then; which was one of the reasons why she had to repeat a grade in the first (or second) place.

Behold the post-YOSH Rerun: pudgy instead of diet-trim, mutinous instead of uplifting, limeade spikes instead of blonde feathershag, hangovers instead of ice cream

headaches, shoplifted Goya prints instead of *Tiger Beat* vealcake, *Fuck off loser* instead of *Have a nice day*—

And then girls instead of boys. Thanks to Gina Conti, one of the Four Genies of the Apocalypse, about whom Fiona'd heard athletic snippets from Vicki and Sheila-Q, and some harmless gossip from Laurie Harrison (whose prattle hadn't yet advanced to encompass all the variations on *l'amour's* theme).

View-halloo from coltish foxhunting Gina, who looked like Misty of Chincoteague right down (or up) to the birthmark shaped like a map of the United States between her shoulder blades. It was Gina who talked Rerun off the homicidal/suicidal ledge; Gina who "knew some guys" capable of stealing Hayzoose's pristine Corvette and subjecting it to outrageous indignities; Gina who lighted her way to the "L" station not operated by the City Transit Authority; Gina who could juggle discretion with intimidation to minimize their being taunted and harassed; Gina who made bearable even being in the same class as kid brother Dalton/Salty/Dorktongue.

And it was this kinda sorta girlfriend with whom Rerun had a run-in, shortly before Maybelle's death enabled a cooling-off period. During which Rerun agreed (with herself) to see other people (if fortune smiled) meaning other girls, since even before Horrible Hayzoose she'd begun to wonder whether boy-craziness was all it was cracked up to be.

(Long slow Marlboro drag.)

"So... what's *your* story, Morning Glory?"

What's the tale, Nightingale? Which for no good reason put you in mind of that ashen-beanstalk guy who'd approached you during the Winter Concert intermission, asking you to tell Vicki Volester goodbye—

—on *his* behalf, that is.

"(I guess... I have to say... I kinda sorta have one too. 'Cept mine'll never know it.)"

"Who, that Robin chick?"

"NO! (*That's* my sister!)"

With whom you had in fact shared a bed on many a night not spent solo with your Fender, for the very good reason that Robin had only one bed in her poky room at Villa Neapolitan. You'd even shared the same sleeping bag when you were both littler. And

though Robin never failed to issue dire threats of what would happen if you disturbed her rest with elbow, knee, or broken wind, you never failed to slumber deeply and securely by her side—knowing Robin would safeguard you from any evil, or perish in the attempt.

Of course, there *was* a noise factor.

Your very first sleepover at the Villa, bravely shaking Robin awake:

“...what the HELL do you think you’re doing THAT for?”

“(‘Cause you’re *snoring* is why.)”

“Oh yeah?” Far from denying it, Robin sounded pleased. “Like my dad! Wait’ll *he* goes to bed, then you’ll hear some REAL snoring!”

Indeed, after Fat Bob turned in an hour or so later it was night-shift-at-the-sawmill till the morrow dawned. Yet you soon grew accustomed to the crosscut buzzroar from him *and* Robin—unlike the irritating nocturnal noises made by cousin Chloe Rumpelmagen, in your “own” bedroom at the Plexiglas Palace.

“So,” said Rerun, grinding out her Marlboro, “this chick who’s not your sister... she prettier’n me?”

“(Snortle.)”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“(Put it this way—you’re both a lot prettier’n *me*.)”

“Yeah? Than you? She’d have to be supergorgeous—”

Mutter-blush: “(Oh shut up.)”

With pursed lips: “*Make* me!”

“(...can we at least brush our teeth first?)”

*

Fooling around of every sort came to a halt a few hours later, when Ardine returned to announce she’d sublet the apartment; they had a week to complete its clean-out, and all extracurricular activities were canceled for the duration. Rerun was inclined to rebel, but Fiona coaxed her into seeing sense and thus earned another Such a Treasure commendation from Ardine. So: once more unto the disinterment salt mines.

Lest they be accused of ditching the Mayerlingers and being derelict in their chauffeur duties, Ree and Fee left messages at the Tropicana, the Fotomat hut, and with

K.U.P.'s answering service. (The Vault didn't have a phone—"We're lettin' the gummint pay fer their *own* wiretappin'.") When these overtures bore no fruit, the girls went out on a final grocery run and detoured by Yucca Street, where the Baroness emerged from her dotty-crone den with Sleekie the black cat draped around her nape like a living fur stole.

"OH, THEY'RE ALL GONE," screeched the Baroness over the Mayerling's never-ending hullabaloo. "THOSE UNUSUAL BOYS WERE OFFERED A TOUR, YOU KNOW."

"NO'M, WE DIDN'T."

"OH MY YES. SOME OTHER MUSICAL GROUP DROPPED OUT—DO YOU YOUNG PEOPLE STILL 'DROP OUT'?—AT THE VERY LAST MINUTE, SO THE BOYS HAD TO LEAVE RIGHT AWAY IN THAT VAN OF THEIRS. AND MY TWO LOVEYS NEXT DOOR WENT WITH THEM."

"TAWDRY AND THE BUGGE?"

"IS THAT WHAT THEY'RE CALLED? DO YOU KNOW, I NEVER THOUGHT TO ASK THEIR NAMES? I JUST THINK OF THEM AS TALL LOVEY AND SHORT LOVEY. SUCH SWEET THINGS, I DO HOPE THEY COME BACK SOMEDAY."

(Yawn of philosophic indifference from Sleekie the cat.)

*

Thus ended that chapter of the Scene; and soon thereafter the Pilchards and Fiona quitted the Strip too, having picked Sunset Tower's bones as clean as a tooth on Maybelle's long-gone hound. Such of her effects as weren't shipped to Athens Grove got dispatched in an off-premises estate sale—including the battleship-bedstead, though Rerun mounted a campaign to keep it for herself.

"You already have all the bed you need," Ardine told her.

"I have a mattress and a boxspring. *This* is a BED."

But Maybelle's next-to-last resting place was carted away to be liquidated; while her sole heiress, spitting-image great-niece, and their Sugar Pop/Treasure Gal/Morning Glory assistant relocated to the Hyatt Regency in Huntington Beach for a couple weeks of posthumous R&R.

Any hopes that Robin Neapolitan might fly out for a weekend were dashed when Fat Bob's Sportster took a skid on loose gravel, landing him with a bad case of roadrash. Robin was determined to nurse him back to cycleworthy health in time for next month's Sturgis

Rally—even if it couldn't be as great as last year's, when golfball-sized hail fell (in August!) and the bikers kindled streetfires so as to drag race through the flames.

“(You *sure* he's okay?)” asked Fiona, her heart still thudding in her throat.

“He will be if *I* have anything to say about it,” crackled Robin over the Hyatt phone.

“(Are *you* okay? You don't sound okay.)”

“*I'll* be if you get home in time to help me dye all this gray hair he's given me. You *swear* you'll be back before we leave?”

“(Booked on Pan Am for the 1st.)”

“Hunh! You *said* you'd be back by *July* 1st.”

“(That was before I came out here.)” *So to speak*, she didn't add aloud.

“Sure sure sure, easy to say that now—oh hey! *I* found out something *you* didn't find out! 'Member how I never believed anyone named 'Petula Pierro' could be a true *paisan*? Well guess what—she AIN'T, and that's not her real name either!”

Downtown's birth certificate in fact identified her as “Doris Tays,” the offspring of a *mésalliance* between (as she called them) the Immoral Mr. Tays and Lotta Grief. Who broke up when the I.M.T. fell for a twenty-years-younger chippie who held out for marriage and so became none other than Ms. Tays-the-Tease from VW Earth Science.

“(Are you *shitting* me? Ms. Tays is Downtown's *stepmother*?)”

“*Ex*-stepmother—she dumped her daddy's sorry ass but kept his name, along with his alimony checks.”

Lotta Grief, not to be outdone, married Tony Pierro's half-great-uncle Beppe, who adopted Doris and redubbed her Petula and was said (by Downtown) to have wed Lotta just so he could Lolitafy *her*.

“(Oh my God, that is MESSED UP! Is *she* okay?)”

“Hell, she's *crazy* about him! She gets along fine with Ms. Tays, too. The only ones she can't stand are her actual parents.”

“(God *damn*. Makes *me* feel a lot more normal.)”

“Well, cut that out before you come home! Can't have you acting all normal on me—that ain't the Dopester way.”

(ENCLOSED WITH A FORLORN “WELCOME TO BAY CITY” POSTCARD)

Dear Feef,

Sorry this isn't as fancy as the one you sent of the Hyatt, or as weird as that flier for “Krewel & Unusual Punishment” (what a cool name for a band ~ Sheila-α says she was just about to suggest it as a new name for the Dartles) but I used up all my cards from Ft Lauderdale, and in Bay City we stayed at my great-aunt's B&B where this was the best she had to offer. Thanks again for all the stuff you sent about the concerts and so on.

Went over yesterday to Villa N and found your mom and aunt there, they'd brought Robin's dad a tuna noodle casserole that she wouldn't let him eat any of till he finished a bunch of exercises first. “No limping! No gimping!” ~ well, you know what R's like. But honestly you'd have thought she was joining the Marines and not that lousy Gumbo Krauss.

Anyway, everyone envies you living “hi-ho the glamorous life” at a luxury hotel with no parents around, at least none of your own. I mean, Joss and Alex may have gone away to camp, but they sure didn't stay at any Hyatt. Please bring us back some souvenir towels. (Just kidding!)

Seriously, Feef, bring yourself back as soon as you can. S-α says to remind you that she'll kick your you-know-what if you haven't written a lot of new songs for the Dartles. Also that she misses you as does the whole bunch, especially R (though she'd never admit it out loud) and of course me.

Lotsa Luv, Vicki

*

The Hyatt fortnight sped by far more quickly than the previous six weeks. Rerun spent much of her time immersed in the ocean, but Fiona'd only consent to skim over its surface aboard a rented speedboat—wearing a lifejacket, tie-down sunhat, and purple-framed shades. She preferred to remain ashore underneath the biggest, widest beach umbrella available, even while helping Rerun construct bizarre sand châteaux.

Predictably, Rerun's jelly-and-jampacked bikini drew a deluge of male attention, most of which was airily (or balefully) snubbed. Some she parlayed into procurement of fake California ID's, establishing both herself and Fiona as aged nineteen (eligible to buy beer and wine back home). Ree's cleavage also scored them two tickets to a Ramones concert at the Golden Bear; and Fiona geared up for years of Robin's growling, scowling, arm-punching reproach for going to this without her.

Feef might have to endure those punches, but could she evade a Quirk-kick to her who-knew-what by composing at least one song?—an ode, say, to surfing the New Wave through a summer of Punkamonium?

*Didn't suck enough to be so young
 Living through the Glitterdämmerung
 But I had to starve for something ripe
 That could fire up my smokin' pipe
 Then I found a haven far from home
 Where the raving maniacs 'll roam
 Till the sun's been plunged into the night
 And Scenester starlets go burnin' bright
 for your
 DOWNBITE
 DOWNBITE
 The flash of your teeth is a savagery sight
 yes your
 DOWNBITE
 DOWNBITE
 Never bite off less than you can chewwww-se
 Stuck together like we're ex-cherubs
 On the Island of Beelzebub
 Burst the beigeness of our mundane masques
 Dance whichever way the Fruit Brute asks*

Wear your wolf's head when the moon is full

Pursue urges when you feel their pull

Show a jagged-edgy pumpkin grin

Hurlin' gas on the adrenalin

of your

DOWNBITE

DOWNBITE

The flash of your teeth is a savagery sight

yes your

DOWNBITE

DOWNBITE

Never bite off less than you can chewwww-se

(yaah yaah yaah)

Never settle for what you can ree-fewwwwse

*

“As of this moment, I’m not gonna answer to ‘Rerun’ anymore. From now on, call me ‘PoonElly Scales.’”

“(…where’d you get *that* from?)”

“PBS!”

The girls had watched an episode of *Fawlty Towers* last night, their finale at the Hyatt Regency, while bemoaning today’s flight back to The City. Neither felt up to becoming a jailbait hooker in order to stay on Sunset Strip, so they’d agreed on “bringing the Scene back home”—insofar as that might be feasible, given what a constipated City it was, and how overlaid the northern ‘burbs were with blight.

“*You* can be ‘F.T. Whirrld’—two R’s, no E. You said if you ever used a stage name, it’ll be ‘FTW’—‘n’ you already got the ID necklace to show for it.”

Fiona rolled this around on her mental tongue. *Twirrld, Squirrld, Unfurrlld*: like Wonder Woman’s magic golden lasso. Yank that noose TIGHT—

—and the intercom croaked “Ladies-and-gentlemen-as-we-start-our-descent-please-make-sure-your-seatbacks-and-traytables-are-in-their-full-upright-position...”

“(Fuck the upright,)” Eff and Ell mumble/grumbled.

If only they *were* about to crash-land on the Island of Beelzebub. Be more to look forward to than Fiona’s possibly damaged-on-arrival if not tampered-with-afterward new mega-amp.

Rerun (‘scuse me: PoonElly) had telephoned an olive branch to Gina Conti, who’d reacted as if an old olive loaf sandwich had tumbled out of a vending machine instead of the selected fresh tuna salad. Uncomplimentary words were bandied by both kinda-sortas, so their grand airport rapprochement got scrubbed.

“Now nobody better’n the Old Man’ll be waiting for me ‘n’ Ma,” Poon pouted. “I’d da been satisfied with Suzi Quatro. Or Siouxsie ‘n’ the Banshees. Or Suzy Chapstick—”

“(Oh Kay,)” cut in Fiona, feeling her own punkified soul start its descent down the barren wasted drain of Windy Poplar Lane. “(You can help yourself to *my* mother. And my cousin Chloe too—I swear, if she’s done anything to screw up my new amp before I even get a chance to plug into it, I will PUMMEL her!)”

“Ooh-wee, arntcha belligerent,” cooed Poon.

But it was Fiona, after exiting the plane and having scarcely set foot in the terminal, who staggered from a tremendous blow to the upper arm. She whirled (make that *whirrld*) to face her assailant, poised for fast-as-lightning kung fu fighting—

—and looked into the chocolate-colored eyes of Robin Neapolitan. Who got only halfway through “SURPRISE!” before her remarkably de-strawberried Campbell’s Soup Kid face registered astonishment at Fiona’s giving *her* a good hard sock on the shoulder.

“What the HELL do you think you did THAT for??”

“(I missed you too.)”

Wrapping arms around her *sorella maggiore* for the first time in five years of Dopester Sisterhood. Which was even more dumbfounding than the retaliatory arm-punch.

But didn’t prevent Robin from hugging her back.

To Feef's everlasting gobstopper relief, Robin and PoonElly hit it off (without resorting to shoulder-socks) right away. Bonding over their bright hair dyes, dubbing each other "Limey" and "Nilla," sharing a rueful grimace at Fiona's addiction to basic black.

"(It's *jet*,)" she contended.

Thankful also that Poon, tutored in how to juggle discretion, behaved as though they were no more than Just Good Friends. Which might soon be the truth, depending on how reconciliatory Gina Conti could be; and would be perfectly fine with Fiona, who shrank from any kinda-sorta commitment. Nor was she eager to hear Robin's assessment of that kinda-sorta trailblazing.

Robin's reaction when Poon picked them up the following night was harsh enough:

"A Le Car? That's a *French* car! A car for *frogs*!"

"It's my 'Le Heap,'" said PoonElly. Flawlessly new six months ago on her sixteenth birthday; now multidented, multiding'd, and missing a couple of hubcaps.

"(Was it like this before you left for L.A.?)" asked Fiona.

"Hell, I'd only *begun* to break it in then."

"Well, just don't drive us anywhere near Loopy's lot," griped Robin. "I don't want my Sweet Babboo to see me with my ass inside *this* chunk o' junk!"

The Babboo in question was a '61 Plymouth Fury for sale at Volester Motors (aka "Loopy's lot") whose exact value was being haggled over by Fat Bob and Vicki's father Ozzie. The two dads seemed happy to prolong their negotiations till hell needed de-icing; but Robin had fallen in love with her S.B. at first sight, and now lived in dread of its being stolen from the lot or sold by mistake to someone else.

"*Robin's egg blue*," she kept pointing out, flourishing a fistful of snapshots. "It's *meant* to be mine!"

"(You hate that shade of blue. You always said the name was an insult.)"

"It's a SIGN, okay? And if *she* can get a French 'Heap' that looks like it was painted with *mustard* for *her* Sweet Sixteen, I sure as hell can get a robin's egg blue *all-American* Fury for *mine*!"

"When is it?" asked PoonElly.

"Barely six weeks to go."

“What is that, October? You a *Libra*? Who’d thunk it—”

“I AM NOT A FREAKING LIBRA! I am a *premature Scorpio*!” To Fiona: “Tell her!”

“(Oh, she’s unbalanced, all right—)”

“HEY!!”

“(Hey what? *You’re* the one who told me not to start acting all normal on you.)”

“Well, *you’re* the one who told me to get a blue car!”

“(Black-and-blue, I said—)”

“That’d be a pretty good punk name—‘Premie Scorp,’” observed PoonElly.

“(‘Scorp & Scales’? Sounds like a seafood restaurant, not a pair of punks—)”

“Both of you pipe down and hang a left at the next stop, she lives on Pearlwort—”

She being the former Doris Tays and current Petula Pierro, whom they found playing horse (giddyup, not basketball) with a very tall, very thin, very swaybacked guy.

“Finally! I could’ve *walked* there by now!” said Downtown, climbing off her steed—
“Next time I’ll wear spurs”—and using the butt of her thin French cigarette to light a new one, the latest in her nonstop chain.

Downtown had taken up the gaunt-and-spectral torch that Fiona’d let fall while getting foxified last year. Thin as a rake (and as sharply barbed, and as dissolute) with a long white singlet hanging from her Bony Bellhop frame (like the shroud on Maybelle Grayling’s ghost, if that *was* what that was) across which **THE CLASH** had been scrawled in thick-tipped Magic Marker, she ran two prickly-nailed hands into (but not through) a ‘do like a briar patch. Acquired during a summer junket to the Modern Gomorrah, where she’d hung out at CBGB and got a poppy-with-thorns tattoo and left a flaming poopbag outside Studio 54 and hitchhiked to the burnt-out South Bronx and been shot at but missed by Son of Sam—
—or some New Yorker with a .44 caliber gun, anyway.

“I believe even less of *your* horseshit than I do *theirs*!” declared Robin. “Speaking of which, d’ja pick up that pony boy there during these horseshit ‘adventures’ of yours?”

“Meet Epic Khack!” said Downtown as her pony boy slowly rose to a vast if stooped height. He wore the ratty-sloppy T-shirt and crusty-dingy jeans of a true New Wave Dwarf, with hair shorn almost to the scalp in back but hanging uncombedly down past his eyes in front; and from a pendulous lower lip flew a bona fide punk-gob to garnish Pearlwort Drive.

“Nice aim!” applauded PoonElly, beaming delightedly. “So, *speaking* of horseshit—is it ‘Epic’ like that horse that chews tobacco in that comic strip—y’know, *Tumbleweeds*?”

“*TumbleBOLLOCKS!*” answered Downtown. “It’s ‘Epic’ like extraordinary!”

“(Wait a minute,)” went Fiona, peering up at (but not through) Mr. Extraordinary’s tangled bangs, speaking half to him and half to Robin. “(Don’t we remember you from Dopkins?)”

“Not with that forelock we don’t,” snortled Robin.

“(Aren’t you Travis Lingerspiel, Tippi’s brother?)”

“That’s his *slave* name,” explained Downtown. “Now he’s Epic Khack—and your new lead guitar! Doesn’t sing, and plays with his ass to the audience ‘cause he’s bashful—”

(Another PTOOEY-on-Pearlwort from Epic, and “Plays with his ass?” from Poon.)

“—so you can still call yourselves an all-girl band if you wanna. *You’re* welcome, my pleasure, *DE nada*—”

“(Wait a minute—)”

“Don’t mind if I drive, do you? Since I know where we’re headed? Keys please Loowheeze—”

“*You* drive? Since when are you not fifteen?” demanded Robin.

“Since I’ve been bogusly licensed!” crowed Downtown, deftly hooking Le Heap’s keys out of Poon’s hand. “Pile in, chickies—Epic’ll have to ride shotgun so he won’t get carsick—”

“WAIT A MINUTE!” exerted Fiona; but surly Robin and laughing Poon were already in the backseat, so she hastened to join them—and roll up her window, as Epic (following flaccidly) spat a third wad out the shotgun’s.

“*You* wait till you see this new dive!” Downtown gloated as she slid behind the wheel. “Used to be a gay bar called the Anaconda Club—then the gang from Cobwebs & Strange took over, slapped an ‘RCH’ on the marquee, and now it’s the AnaRCHonda *Pit!* We are finally *going* places in This City!”

Suiting deed to word by zooming them onto the Expressway even more rapidly than Poon would’ve driven. Jabbering about new local groups like Tutu & the Pirates and B.B Spin and how they were bound to carve out a riotous niche of their own, thrusting The City at

last into the same punktastic league as England and New York—

“—and L.A.,” from the backseat.

“Yeah yeah yeah,” (waving a dismissive prickled-nailed hand). “And WE are gonna be part of it, people! We got everything we need right here in this car—guitar, bass, drums, vocals—you can sing, right?” Briarpatchy head twisting around to address PoonElly; allowing Le Heap to pilot itself through the high-speed Expressway traffic—

—which seemed to tickle Poon’s fancy as she belted out the first bars of Fiona’s “Downbite” in a powerful penetrating ex-cheerleader’s voice, reasonably on-key.

“Bitchen!” went Downtown, glancing casually to the fore as The City surged toward them. “‘*Can’t think of a better way to spend the night / than speeding around underneath the yellow lights / LONDON’S BURNING!*’” she herself sang. “And *I’ll* be the designer, the visionary, the one who finally molds you doily-drapers into an actual *band*—”

“Watch your mouth, DORIS!” gnarled Robin, kicking the back of the driver’s seat. “We’ve done damn fine things with the Dartles—”

“Damn fine for *junior high*, maybe—”

“And ‘AnaRCHonda’? Don’t tell me *Artie Rist* ’ll be there—”

“Him? He was *born* with a fake ID. I suppose *you* chickened out of getting one, and we’ll have to leave you in the car—”

“Like FUCK you will! I hadda give Lola Charge-Your-Ass-Off a whole quarter of primo for mine, but I got it all right. You’ll just never catch *me* driving with it, not this close to going legit—”

“*Legit*? You’re a bigger sellout than Butthead Fayne—”

They continued this argument all the way south to what was already being called the New Armpit of the Planet (“Don’t tell me Mack ‘the Arm’ Pittley’ll be there too!”) while Poon laughed and Epic khacked and Fiona kept hearing *We got everything we need right here* and kept responding *But what about Sheila? What about Joss? What about VICKI?*—

What ABOUT Vicki?

Talk about your anticlimaxes. Arriving “home” at the Plexiglas Palace last night (after a lengthy sidetrack to Villa Neapolitan’s cellar, where your new amp had been safely-

and-soundfully installed) to commandeer the phone from Chloe and call Burrow Lane and...

...get the first in a long series of busy signals.

Last night; this morning; this afternoon.

Wondering whether Goofus or somebody had left the receiver off the hook. Or if Ozzie and Felicia had neglected to pay their utility bill.

Feeling too shy and awkward (and footsore, after a day spent tromping through ginormous airports) to go over in person, uninvited, when the Volesters might be having some sort of family crisis—

—a thought to shudder away from—

—and into awareness of PoonElly's soft warm smooth bare arm and softer warmer just-as-smooth just-as-bare thigh, as they pressed against yours in Le Heap's backseat.

33

A Pitcher of Gossipade

There are swan dives done without a splash, and belly flops that cause a tidal wave. Tricia Volester's plunge left everybody high and dry—particularly her parents and sister.

Friends, relations, and countrymen would be told that Tricia was taking a break from college to try her luck in Tinsel Town—a statement no lie detector ought to find fault with. The fact that “Lucia Vantrop” was credited with appearing in *Playboy's* “Girls of the Big Ten” helped keep the so-to-speak veil drawn, since reporters (including from the World's Greatest Newspaper on Michigan Avenue) were able to contact *some* of the Girls for interview, but had to acknowledge others had used assumed names and could not be located.

Goofus and his eleven-year-old cronies, by their lack of reaction, were apparently still too young to peruse *Playboy* or at least lay hands on a copy to peek at. Other family members who doubtless did so, like Gross Uncle Doug and Diamond Joel and cousin T.J.—formerly-known-as-Beaver, either failed to recognize Lucia as Tricia or kept mum about it. Her male classmates at Ann Arbor and Pfiester High were all safely distant; the Daddy-and-Princess commercials for Volester Motors had ceased airing a couple years earlier, drying up that connection; and Tricia'd never loitered around Vanderlund long enough to gain a visual foothold in memories there.

Apart from 3132 Burrow Lane.

Where, for Vicki on August 1st, *déjà* was *vu*-ing all over again.

Hey Mom? Couldja come here a moment? Now, please?

What's the matter?

Mom, look...

Handing over the unsourced envelope and its contents. Sitting huddled on the bed in terrycloth minirobe and two towels. Keeping eyes fixed on ten bare toes, idly noting which ones needed fresh nail polish. Hearing Felicia start to breathe as if she'd just run upstairs, which she had; but more like Miss Maudie in *To Kill a Mockingbird* when the news came of Tom Robinson's being shot dead.

Feeling her mother reach out, as though for a light switch in pitch darkness, and run a hand over the top of her (meaning your) sweaty Dorothy Hamill wedge.

Don't worry about it. Said without words; and no more effective than a kiss to make an owwie feel better. Repeated aloud when the garage door rumbled open, and Ozzie sounded his usual *Honey I'm home* toot on the Honda horn.

Mutual sigh by mother and daughter.

Then mother took herself off, taking the evidence with her; while daughter took her towels and robe off, taking a belated behindhand shower. Taking her time about it, too. As she did drying; as she did dressing; as she did pausing every few steps down the staircase, straining her ears for any reason to retreat.

But the house was deathly still.

Hurry into the empty kitchen just long enough to grab food and drink for the evening, then bolt back upstairs to hide inside your cozy corner. Grateful for one small mercy: Goofus was away on a camping trip with his friend Breezy, so called because of his gaseous nature; so be extra grateful not to have to share their tent.

Dinner dispensed with, plate and glass and utensils set aside for later rinsing, remove the polish from all twenty nails—upper as well as lower—so as to repaint them a nice cool lavender, matching this *wisteria* room. And mood of the moment. Flipping on The Big 89 in hopes of lightening the latter; but it must be Morose Monday at WLS, playing songs with downbeat lyrics like Heart's "Barracuda" and Pablo Cruise's "Whatcha Gonna Do" and Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville," instead of Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop (Thinking About Tomorrow)" or Rita Coolidge's "(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher and Higher."

Thanks a lot, Music People.

Then Nora Corazon's "*Porque le Vas*" came on, reminding Vicki of what Fiona'd written about her dad (*her* dad, not Ozzie) and also that Feef was coming home today, might already be home by now, so the bunch really ought to arrange a get-together sometime before Robin left for that motorcycle rally in South Dakota, assuming her dad's leg (Fat Bob's, not Ozzie's) had fully healed by then—

Ugh. Too many father-related thoughts...

Which weren't diminished in the slightest when Vicki picked up the phone for her nightly chat with Joss, and caught a few seconds of lachrymose huskiness that didn't sound like it was coming out of Felicia's mouth or tear ducts.

Ozzie was in fact an easy weeper, with a hundred macho-preserving alibis—"I was remembering the onions on my lunch burger"—and, like PopPop the sentimental Austrian, always kept a big cotton bandanna ready for service. "Nothing like a sunny day on a car lot to interfere with a feller's eyes."

But it was an awful thing for a girl to overhear her father doing. (And to whom? Not PopPop and MomMom—they'd be the *last* people to break the truth to.)

So replace the receiver in its cradle as painstakingly as if it were a bomb that might detonate, and leave the phone severely alone afterward. With no summons to answer any incoming calls, which implied that Joss was being balked by constant busy signals.

Don't dare try to sneak out of the house or even the cozy corner, except to rush down the hall to the bathroom and back, and only after pressing an ear to the door first.

Take another stab at *Starring Sally J. Freedman As Herself*—till Sally started to worry that her father would die at the age of forty-two (WHICH WAS EXACTLY HOW OLD OZZIE WAS). Turn off the radio when Andy Gibb falsetto'd "I Just Want to Be Your Everything" for the umpteenth unbearable time. Let out a treble shriek of your own at the sight of a *human face* peering in through the dark uncovered window—

(Dammit.)

(Too the hell many *déjà vu*'s tonight.)

(And damn you too, Lana Eisenstein: this is *my* room now, and has been for the past two years, so go haunt somebody else's.)

If only the face belonged to Joss, wanting to know why she couldn't get through on the phone; or to Fiona, unimaginably climbing a tree to proclaim her return from L.A.; or to Tricia, even less imaginably repentant about absconding *to* L.A.—

But it didn't, and it didn't, and it didn't.

So give up and go to bed ridiculously early, and to sleep after a considerable delay, and to dream of posing in the complete nude for a photographer no a painter no a sculptor who looked half like Humphrey Bogart and half like Buster Keaton as he ran half-hooded eyes over every inch of your squirming exposure while he wielded mallet and chisel on a block of stone no of metal no of wood that split and *split* and SPLIT wherever he hit it—

—giving you the latest in what promises to be a lifelong string of shattering awakening J-O-L-T-s.

Creep downstairs next morning (with more clothes on than you'd normally wear on a summer day, in case Buster Bogart was lying in wait) and find no trace of Ozzie, other than a reeking brimful ashtray. He'd never quite given up smoking, despite many vows to do so, but generally confined it to the Lot or alone in the car or out behind the garage.

Yet this ashtray was in the kitchen, at Felicia the tobaccophobe's very elbow as she sat with the phone clenched in one hand—and a burning cigarette in the other.

Vicki had only the haziest remembrance of her mother as a smoker, twelve years back before the New Baby mutated into Goofus instead of Julie the Raindrop. So maybe seeing Fel with a cigarette now was another dream, which would account for her indistinct *murmur murmur murmur* into the phone—except that she interspersed this with out-of-practice *hack hawk hoffs*.

Tiptoe around behind her, breakfasting lightly and as silently as possible (no Rice Krispies, no whistling tea kettle) as you watch for a chance to de-elbowize that repulsive ashtray; surely Felicia wouldn't keep smoking without one close at hand, not here in her house-proud kitchen. But when you edged toward it, she unbent that elbow and twined its arm around your waist, holding you snugly—no, tightly—against her thinner-than-it-used-to-be torso.

...Mommy?

What am I going to do?

To me?

All of us...

Snapping back to the present then; she plucking at your long-sleeved jersey with the hand that held the lighted cigarette.

My goodness, you'll boil alive in a thing like this on a day like this.

Pull away so you can pull it off (revealing a regulation PETTY HILLS COUNTRY CLUB JUNIOR STAFF T-shirt underneath) and seize the opportunity to nab the overflowing ashtray and spirit it over to the garbage bin, oh grohhssss oh grohhssss—

You are a good girl, Victoria, murmured a different voice as you scoured your befouled hands in the sink, wiped them on a clean dishcloth, wrote GOING TO JOSS across the kitchen chalkboard, and hightailed it out to (or at least toward) carefreedom.

Blessedly, neither Vicki nor Joss was scheduled to work before noon on Tuesdays, Vicki teaching kiddysports or Joss “playing bag lady” again at the Jewel Foods on Sendt Street. Not that Joss was unoccupied at home, what with Toughie vacationing in Mississippi and Meg getting a jumpstart on college in Ohio and Beth off rehearsing with an all-prodigy chamber group and Invisible Amy’s tendency to shirk household work.

So Joss was found mowing the Queen Anne’s lawn (definitely an early-morning chore in this weather) when Vicki pedaled up on her Sears Free Spirit with a dark cloud hovering over her bowed head. Joss took one look, suppressed any gibes about the ongoing telephone marathon at Burrow Lane, and led the way to the aerie via the linen closet for fluffy absorbents to blot their streaming humidity. Then:

“Okay... spill.”

Vicki, with lips locked, held forth an inexorable pinky.

“Aw c’mon, do I have to swear not to blab before I even hear what it is first?”

“This time, yes.”

With a groan, Joss linked pinkies and vowed confidentiality. “This *sufficient*? Or should I go get the family Bible?”

Vicki hesitated. “Maybe you better.”

Joss’s small blue twinkly eyes widened. “Is it that bad?”

“Well, it’s not good.”

Joss fetched the ornate Bible originally belonging to Hermione McGonigle Barnabas. Placing a solemn hand on it, she pledged eternal top-secrecy—and soon was clutching the Good Book to her flopperoots while succumbing to one of her silent bust-a-gut gigglefits.

“It isn’t funny!”

“(Course not,)” Joss gargled, collapsing backward onto her brass bed and into full-bellied laughter that Vicki, as per usual, could not resist joining in or surpassing till she rolled on the aerie floor in mute hysterics, and Fingers the cat sought refuge in the left-open linen closet.

Eventually the girls regained consciousness and adjourned their aching sides to the wide screened porch with a pitcher of Country Time lemonade, just as rain began to fall on the new-mown lawn.

“Oh great, now it’s gonna grow all over again,” said Joss. “So... you saw the actual nudie shot? How’d she look?”

“Sensational, of course. Nothing at all like me—”

“What, aren’t you even a little sensational?”

“Oh shut up, you know what I mean—she’s blonde and stacked and peaches-and-creamy, with green eyes and so on. Thank Gahd it wasn’t my cousin Barbara who did it, not that she ever would—but Barb ‘n’ I look a helluva lot more like sisters than Tricia ‘n’ me, and I bet she’d have used her real name too. Then every guy in town who reads *Playboy* would’ve seen ‘Volester’ and practically known what *I* look like... like that.”

“Like that,” haw—word’s NAYYYYKED, Vic. Say it wimme—

(Not sub-said by Joss, but an echo out of the past-and-gone.)

“I’m sorry I laughed,” said Joss. “You know how much I feel for you and your dad, and your poor mom—we have *got* to stop her from smoking again—but honestly, from everything you’ve ever said about Tricia, she’s a smart cookie who won’t let herself be taken advantage of, right? And it could be so much worse—she might’ve run off without giving you any idea why, or *stolen* the money by forging your dad’s signature to bad checks, or had a secret baby and snuck it into a basket on your doorstep for you to bring up—”

“—okay okay okay you’re forgiven,” said Vicki. “But just ‘cause it could be worse doesn’t mean it’s not bad enough.”

“I know, I know. I keep thinking, ‘What if it’d been Meg—’”

“Quit it, Joss!”

“—she’d probably have put ol’ Hef plumb out of business—”

“Quit it right this minute! My stomach hurts from laughing too much already!”

“But you feel better now, right?”

“Always do, when I come over here. Even though this is lousy lemonade.”

“‘Not too tart, not too sweet,’ just mediocre—but easy to mix. Oh hey! When things simmer down at your house, you can probably move into Tricia’s room and finally get those mirrored doors you’ve always wanted.”

“Maybe not...” said Vicki, recalling how creepacious the ghostly flickers in those doors had seemed yesterday. “Right now I just want to pretend nothing happened—or *will* happen. I mean, Gahd! Think how horrible the first day of senior high’d be if all the guys there were pointing and leering at you—”

“—they do that already, to pretty much every girl—”

“—yeah, but suppose it’s ‘cause they know your sister posed *that way* and what she looks like *that way*, even if it IS nothing like the way *you* look—”

“—they’d be pointing and *jeering*, if Meg had done it—”

“—I would die, absolutely DIE OF SHAME if that ever happens—”

“—well, don’t fret. *I* swore to keep this under wraps, even if Tricia didn’t—”

“—dammit! I said *quit it*, Joss!—”

“—and we’ll just have to make sure our favorite blabberyap doesn’t get wind of it.”

“Oh *Gahd!*” went Vicki. “How do we do *that*? She’s practically got antennas in her pooftails!”

*

Even as they spoke and only a couple miles away, Laurie Harrison was perishing of embarrassment while stuck on her bike in slow-moving traffic on Bashford Avenue, as the downpour transformed her into an unwilling wet T-shirt contestant.

Of course she’d had to put on a pastel pink top today, focusing on prettiness and forgetting one of the cardinal rules for babysitters: never wear anything that can show stains. Why oh why hadn’t she gone with navy blue or charcoal gray, some shade that rain wouldn’t

reduce to near-transparency?

I am so dumb.

And deathly afraid that a busload of every boy she'd ever known might pull up alongside, to gawk and catcall and snap Polaroids of her through spattered windows.

Unable to cover her chest while steering the bike, Laurie scrunched down over the handlebars and tried to maneuver over to the sidewalk—only to get honked at and sprayed below the waist by a duck-and-dash sports car. So now her shorts were as drenched as her top, and since they too were pastel pink (*so dumb! so dumb!*) she might as well be parading around town in just her undies.

She wasn't as straitlaced as Rachel Gleistein or supermodest as Samantha Tiggs, but any girl would be mortified by this predicament (*EEK! was that a wolf whistle, coming from that truck?*) unless she was a megaf flirt like Carly Thibert or an ultraseductress like Tess Disseldorf. Laurie was neither—simply an ordinary woebegone who should've taken side streets home, but was dumb enough to believe Bashford would be quicker at this time of day.

She'd been hired for a six-hour babysitting job with the Levinsons, and had almost pacified Errol (the showoff) and Lilibet (the fussbudget) to manageable levels, when Mrs. Levinson came home in a humongous snit—having driven all the way to the Magnificent Mile for an important appointment that'd been canceled without notice. By the time she got back, this had somehow become Laurie's fault; and though payment was tendered for time served, there didn't seem much likelihood of future engagements—or being given a bike-strapped-to-car-roof ride home through the sudden summer squall.

This wouldn't have been a problem last year, when she and Susie had run a small-scale daycare center out of their home on Grouseland Street. There was a big back yard with shady trees and a large toolshed convertible into a playhouse, and everything went fine till those nasty Clevingers next door complained (repeatedly!) about the noise. Not that *they* were any too quiet, with their German shepherds who worked in shifts to keep the neighborhood barksome.

So this summer Harrison & Zane reverted to freelance childminding; and *now*, just because Laurie was a nice person who wanted to help busy parents and nurture little kids and earn a few dollars in the bargain, she'd been turned into a mobile poster girl for all sorts of

squelchy fetishes. Drenched teen babysitter in see-through clothing on a stalled bicycle: *why couldn't this happen to Kinks Farghetti?*

FINALLY she reached Grouseland and the sanctuary of her own mud room, where she closed all the blinds and locked both doors before stripping down to the skin, piling sodden duds and probably-ruined gym shoes on the washer for later laundering. Laurie undid her dripping pooftails, wrapped her hair in a turban-towel, gave her bod a vigorous rubdown with a second towel that became a shortie sarong, and cautiously unlocked the kitchen door.

“Hello?...”

Mom and Pa Zane were at work, and Jason was supposedly on a pre-college road trip in Colorado, but she wouldn't put it past him to return unannounced just to catch her in a state of undress. (Which had happened before, and been fervently documented in Laurie's diary, much to Susie's disgust.)

(“I have told you and told you that you *cannot* have a thing for Jason! It's got nothing to do with him being your stepbrother—it's 'cause he's such a SCUZZ!”)

(*But I could change all that*, thought Laurie: her wellworn catchphrase regarding men.)

As it happened, the house was quiet and Jason-free (sigh) so hitch the sarong-towel more snugly under your armpits and trudge upstairs, remembering the “Tropic Island Cruise” costumes at last May's *Cicada* Dance, and how Kim Zimmer's had fallen off when she'd tried to hang herself afterward. Now there was talk that the Zimmers had separated and left Vanderlund, neither parent wanting custody of poor Kim, which in spite of all the mean things she'd said and done to you was a terrible thing to contemplate—

—but nowhere near one-hundredth as bad as entering your own personal private bedroom wearing just a couple of wet towels to find your own little sister making out with Patrick Baxter *while both were stretched out on Susie's mattress* WITH NOTHING ON ABOVE EITHER ONE'S WAIST—

Laurie let out a scream that set the Clevinger shepherds to barking and Susie to saying “Can't you *knock* first?” and Patrick to going “All *riiiight!*” at the sight of so much Laurie in so little covering, for which topless Susie slapped his face just hard enough to leave no doubt that no *ménage à trois* would be taking place here or anywhere, now or ever.

Patrick, to his credit, had become genuinely enamored with Susie and was quite sincere when he asked her to be his girlfriend, producing a prized NRA Sharpshooter medal as her token of their going together. But he was also a fourteen-year-old hornyboy who'd "taken an interest" in Laurie Harrison since earliest pubescence, and y'know like they say, "the more the merrier"—

"GET OUT OF HERE!!" Laurie shouted over her shoulder, having pivoted away to grab her bathrobe off its hook and drop it on the carpet and refuse to bend over or squat down to pick it up in Patrick's presence.

"C'mon, Punkin'," said Susie, putting Patrick in a half nelson and tugging him off the bed. "Let's go—"

"NOT WITHOUT YOUR SHIRTS ON!!"

"They're on, Lo, they're on... almost."

"Yeah, don't mind us," grinned Punkin' with a final squint at Laurie's toweled rump, before escorting Susie out the door and shutting it behind them.

Leaving Laurie alone amid the ruins of pollution, to raise tear-filled eyes and spot Susie's bra—her *real* bra, not a hated trainer but the real one bought not two months ago at the Della Verita Boutique, earned at long last "because Patrick's love made me blossom"—dangling from the overhead light fixture like a broken kite, or Kim Zimmer suspended from the rafters after her botched attempt at suicide.

*

I am so dumb.

I am so dumb.

I am so dumb.

Hardly a day of Laurie Harrison's life had gone by without her saying or thinking or feeling this.

One of her longest-ago memories was of Daddy (then a park ranger at Auldforest Woods) insisting with a straight face that Ranger Smith was the real star of Yogi Bear's cartoons. Little Laurie earnestly tried to make him understand that Yogi had to be the star, his name was in the title; till Daddy said "I'm just funnin' with ya, Bunny Rabbit."

I am so dumb.

Daddy taught her a love for nature that she never lost, though he wasn't always in a condition to share it with her. Daddy often got sick, throwing up down the potty and having to lie down with bad headaches. His work sounded damply dangerous, with him needing to be dried out after falling off wagons. Fortunately Mommy was a real live nurse and able to take good care of him, till the night Daddy got in an accident and wrecked his Jeep and lost his job and had to go to a place called Joliet.

Little Laurie devoted a whole weekend to creating a huge WELCOME HOME DADDY! glitter-and-construction-paper banner so it'd be ready when needed... only to be told that Daddy wasn't leaving Joliet anytime soon, and would not be welcome home when he did.

I am so dumb.

Then it was just her and Mommy, who went back to nursing at a clinic full-time; but that was okay because Laurie could go home after school with Ingrid Morton, her best friend who lived across the street. If they took special care looking both ways before crossing Grouseland, they were allowed to play in Laurie's back yard which Ingrid preferred because it was extra big and extra long, running down to a tall thick hedge and taller thicker fence that separated it from the Expressway. Ingrid said this made it like one of the Wide Open Spaces Out West that she was always reading and dreaming about.

(Laurie was just glad the cars on the Expressway couldn't jump over the fence and hedge, and land in the yard while they were trying to play.)

Ingrid Morton was very imaginative. She had all the *Little House on the Prairie* books, knew most of them by heart, and was always wanting to act them out. Laurie got to be Laura, while the other roles were taken by Ingrid or assigned to Wanda Lynn Reid who lived down the block. (Wanda Lynn didn't have much imagination, but could perform if she was coached, and as the prettiest of the three made a good spoiled Nellie Oleson.)

At McGrum Elementary they hung out with other girls, like JoJo Murrish who was friendly and funny and had wonderful curls, and Kimmy Zimmer who in those days was easy to get along with if you understood she was smarter and better-looking and more popular than you were. (Kim would've made a spectacular Nellie Oleson.) They usually all ate lunch together and spent recess together; you'd invite them to your birthday parties, they'd come with presents and invite you to theirs.

They also rallied around poor Jo when tragedies struck: first both her grandparents whom she lived with having to be put into a nursing home, then her mother getting ill and iller and actually *dying*. How Jo could be strong enough to survive all that, nobody knew; but she was and she did, and in time even became her old funny self again.

Laurie, meanwhile, remained the same *dumb* self she'd always been. Saying things that made everybody laugh, though she hadn't intended to be hilarious. Reading the wrong chapter, studying the wrong examples, filling in mistaken blanks, and then forgetting to bring her homework to school. Paying less attention to what Mrs. Clay (the lovely-but-strict fifth grade teacher) was saying than to pondering where she got her outfits, whether she had children of her own, how old they might be, and did they have to raise their hands at home before asking questions—

“Laurie! Are you woolgathering again?”

“Um... gathering *what* was it, Mrs. Clay?”

[Laughter] from the other students.

I am so dumb.

Every report card registered disappointment in HARRISON, LAUREL STACY's grades, Work Habits, Responsibility, sometimes even Self-Control. Yet they always showed tiptop marks in Getting Along With Others; and Mrs. Clay concluded fifth grade with the memorable remark that “Despite everything, [she was] a joy to have in class.”

That report card went up on the refrigerator.

The best thing about Laurie was her fascination with people, her eagerness to listen as they talked about themselves and not boring old science or arithmetic. Mrs. Clay found she lent a sympathetic ear even while being kept after school to make up missed assignments or for gabbling too much to schoolmates, passing along what A'd said to B about C. Some of the ABC's used Laurie to float trial balloons or conduct inquiries—“Find out if he likes me” was a frequent commission by fifth-grade girls—since everyone knew she would never (knowingly) tell a lie or snitch to a grownup, but could be induced to provide misdirection with planted rumors.

“Don't believe everything you hear,” Ingrid would say. Laurie, though, was deficient in skepticism while overblessed with naiveté, and increasingly needed a guardian angel.

Seldom more so than the afternoon she left school late and alone (having done more making-up of boring old assignments) and a man parked on McGrum Street beckoned her over to politely ask if she knew the way to Spanish Castle Square. Apparently confused by Laurie's helpful go-down-here-then-over-there gestures, he asked (politely) if she wouldn't mind getting in his car and *showing* him how to get there—

—before zooming off without a goodbye when sixth-grader Susan Baxter barreled up from the playground with a basketball under her arm to bellow “HEY!”

“Why'd you scare him like that?” Laurie asked.

“Don't you know better than to talk to strangers, kid? That was a bad guy! He wanted to do bad things to you! That's why he laid rubber when I yelled!”

(Which, from Susan Baxter, was a speech of phenomenal length.)

“But I just... he was asking... so I tried...”

Dither and tremble and start to cry, more from fear that Big Sue would keep yelling at her or even cuff the back of her head, as was frequently and publicly done to grubby little brother Patrick. But Big Sue took pity and said no more about it—after extracting a promise that Laurie would *try* to act like she had a brain in her skull.

Laurie never saw the polite man again; but bad things began to happen even so.

First of all Ingrid Morton moved to Montana, about which she was ecstatic—Wide Open Spaces Out West, for real!—and imaginatively able to make the miserable Laurie giggle through her sobs at the notion of living in a place called “Butte.”

(They vowed to keep in touch and resolutely did so, writing letters every month or two to apprise each other of updates and discuss the *Little House on the Prairie* TV show. Laurie knew any dumb errors she made in spelling or grammar would be overlooked; but it was harder to comprehend why Ingrid never came back to visit Vanderlund.)

Wanda Lynn Reid still lived down the block, and though she lacked imagination she knew lots about fashionable clothes and accessories: just the type of girl you'd want with you for counsel and advice on trips to the New Sherwood Shopping Center.

Then they started sixth grade, upon which Gigi Pyle descended like a hundredweight of glamorous bricks, or a haughty princess auditioning local peasants to be her courtiers. Kim Zimmer reacted with the resentful hissiness of a house cat whose domicile had been

invaded by a pedigreed feline. Jo Murrish laughed at Gigi's airs and graces, calling her "Dixie Cups" for her antebellum accent and precocious bustline (both of which Jo suspected were artificial). Laurie and Wanda Lynn were willing to accept these on faith, and be in biddable awe of Gigi as a true Southern belle.

She weighed them in her aristocratic balance; accepted Wanda Lynn as a sidekick/attendant; and dismissed Laurie with withering scornful contempt.

Mrs. Harrison RN returned from the clinic that afternoon to find her only child staring frantically at a mirror.

"Mommy! I don't have a *harelip*, do I?"

"Of course not, Laurie. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Um... *Huckleberry Finn*?"

Which wasn't a total fib. But Mark Twain could not be blamed for branding her as "Harelip Harrison," nor for causing her bunnylike nostrils to start quivering whenever she got nervous or upset.

And when *didn't* she, nowadays? It was her first persistent targeting by an indisputable Mean Girl, and Laurie had no idea how to cope. Ingrid was a million miles away. Wanda Lynn barely spoke to her anymore. Kim claimed to despise Gigi, but in a keep-your-complaints-to-yourself way. And Jo just smiled and shrugged and said "Don't let her get to you." Which was all very well for a fearless survivor like Jo to say; Gigi didn't take random-nips-for-no-reason out of *her*—and if she *did*, Jo would know how to respond without sounding or feeling or being *so dumb* about it.

Or *so wounded*.

Or *so lonesome*...

That desolate autumn, Laurie was abandoned even by her beloved Munchkin; and as she watered his grave with her tears, she swore to never fill his cage with another hamster.

Then her sad sorry life threatened to get even WORSE. Mommy came home from a Parents Without Partners meeting to smilingly divulge she'd gotten to know a nice man there, a *very* nice man who had a couple of kids—one "a daughter about your age"—and who'd invited them out for dinner that Saturday evening at the Flame Steakhouse.

Laurie's nostrils went into quivery overdrive. Oh gosh! *Oh gosh!* Suppose this "very nice man" was the Polite Bad Guy, who'd tracked her down *through her mother* to take another chance at doing bad things to them both? And this Daughter About Your Age—what if she turned out to be GIGI PYLE? Laurie would have to dig a bigger, deeper hole in the back yard and bury herself beside Munchkin, while cars whizzed by on the Expressway for all eternity.

She tried to make her opinion of this dinner subtly known by putting on her drabest outfit, but Mommy made her change into a pretty red A-line frock and pantyhose, even saying she could—and ought to!—apply lipgloss. (Some of which got on the tips of her plaited pooftails as she anxiously nibbled them, bunnylike.)

Oh gosh. Oh gosh. Oh gosh. I am so dumb—

"Laurie darling, I'd like you to meet my good friend Mr. Grayson Zane. His son Jason couldn't join us tonight, I'm afraid. But this is Susie."

Briefly clasp Mr. Good Friend's firm dry hand while taking a peripheral peek at his Daughter About Your Age. Who'd stepped off a page from one of Beverly Cleary's Ramona books: a scruffy little tomboy dolled up for the occasion, and not pleased about it.

No sooner did they get seated at the Flame than Susie leaped to her feet, saying she needed to find the washroom. And tugging at Laurie's sleeve till Laurie realized she was being asked to come along. And saying, once they passed through the door marked LADIES:

"Does this stupid dress make me look dorky?"

"Hunh?"

"C'mon, you know about clothes—"

"I do?"

"—so tell me the truth, I can take it." (With a slow brave inhalation.)

"Um," said Laurie, gazing at a brown plaid belted smock with Peter Pan collar. "No, it's cute on you. Though it might be better in green—"

"I *hate* wearing dresses! My legs are too skinny!"

"Well, but how old are you?"

"Ten, and I look *eight*. I'm the youngest-looking kid in my whole class this year, and it just sickens me!" Scowling at her reflection over the sinks, then down at Laurie's

pantyhosed gams. “I mean lookit yours, they’re gorgeous! You shaving them yet?”

“Um... once or twice—”

“I knew it! And you’re wearing a bra, right?”

“Well... just a training one—”

“A bra is a bra,” Susie stated loftily. “Are you really only eleven? My dad said you’re eleven. You may *be* eleven, but you look *fourteen*—the waiter might even ask if you wanna order a cocktail! And won’t offer *me* anything stronger’n chocolate milk!”

Laurie smiled for what felt like the first time since Ingrid Morton moved to Butte.

“Can I tell you something?”

Another slow brave inhalation. “Okay—shoot.”

“*You* don’t have a thing to worry about. ‘Cause when *you* blossom, you’re gonna outknockout us all.”

Susie tried to hide a grin by tossing her dolled-up-tomboy head. “*If* I blossom, you mean. Like maybe when I turn *fifty*.”

“Or eleven,” said Laurie, tentatively straightening her Peter Pan collar.

The washroom door swung open and Mrs. Harrison RN glanced in. “Girls?... Is everything all right?”

“Mom? After dinner, can Susie come home with us?”

“Yeah, can I? I’ve got a toothbrush in this stupid purse my Dad made me bring. (Does *it* make me look dorky?)”

*

By the following spring they were official sisters, having worked tirelessly in the meantime to bring this about.

Laurie put in extra-over-meantime toward this goal after Jason Zane—a freshman in high school and fresh man in *l’amour*—put in an appearance. Greeting Laurie with a “Hey, what we got *here*?” hand-cup of her ready-to-swoon chin; then infiltrating the back of her jeans and snapping her virginal pantyband. Which jumped Laurie several spaces ahead on the gameboard of adolescence; and made Susie shake her fist and say Jason would get a knee in the ding-dongs if he ever tried that again.

(A warning she’d often repeat over the years to come.)

Laurie was always careful to introduce and refer to Jason as her *step*brother—no blood relation, nothing to prevent their relationship from developing someday into legitimate coupledness. However, she was not *so dumb* as to share this romantic fantasy with Susie. No, it must be hugged close to her secret bosom—which, like her real one, got progressively jigglier each time Jason thanked her for a small loan by yanking her bra strap.

I could be his Golden Fleece, Laurie S-I-G-H-ed after encountering Greek mythology at school.

Susie hated her brother not just for standard kid-sibling reasons, but because (she said) he'd inherited all of their mother's scuzzier traits. The First Mrs. Zane (as Susie called her) had been an extravagant libertine, racking up thousands of dollars in debt, bedding every sort of adulterer, and finally choosing one with a fat bankroll to run away with.

"I thank Gahd every day I look so much like Dad," Susie confided. "Even if that means I don't look good in dresses—"

"You do so, you're cute in everything—"

"Cute schmute. Swear you'll smother me with a pillow if I ever start acting scuzzy."

"I could never do that!" Laurie protested. "We'd have to make one of those pacts where we'd die together—"

[Laughter] and a hug from Susie, who started calling Mrs. Harrison RN "Mom" the minute she blushingly showed the girls her new engagement ring. Very slim was its gold band and very small its diamond, since Grayson Zane was a man of honor who'd refused to declare bankruptcy, laboring for years to pay off his ex's debts. Now, after having holed up for so long in a tiny apartment, the Zanes were glad to move into the house on Grouseland Street, where Jason settled down (to a certain extent) in a renovated basement living space, and Susie was welcomed with open arms into Laurie's room.

HARRISON & ZANE read the glitter-and-construction-paper sign they framed outside its door. KNOCK BEFORE ENTERING (THIS MEANS YOU, JASON).

After some internal debate, Laurie decided to call her stepfather "Pa," but stayed loyal to her own Daddy as he tried to make a new start on parole and then up in the forests of Alaska. That was enough incentive for Laurie to maintain the name she'd been born with—

that plus Nana's pledge to bequeath her entire jewel box to Laurie if she remained a Harrison till *her* wedding day.

So not a single regret, except that she and Susie were in different grades and would be going to different schools that fall. Laurie gave some thought to flunking and repeating sixth grade at McGrum, but Susie wouldn't hear of it and went so far as to check and correct Laurie's homework.

"You're so smart, Susie, *you* should be going into seventh grade. Can't you get them to promote you a year?"

"Not unless you can clone me your figure. I'm not gonna be the even-younger-youngest-looking girl in my class!"

Thus that September Laurie had to go to Vanderlund Junior High all by herself—if you didn't count the other students, particularly those assigned to the 7-Y team. Her fellow McGrummians were there, Jo and Kim and Gigi and Wanda Lynn, along with alumni from Bashford and Petty Elementary Schools.

Among these was a buoyant brunette named Delia Shanafelt, who had milky-blue slightly-bulbous eyes and wore a perpetual giddy smile. She and Laurie struck up an immediate kindred spiritship, one that necessitated their being shifted apart from each other in Math *and* English after too much chatter and exchange of notes. Laurie began to put on an incessant happyface of her own, writing Ingrid Morton that *You will always be my bestest friend* ~~friend~~ *(to the end!)* *who isn't my sister, but I am so glad I met Delia.*

Until cracks appeared in their kindredhood, due to Delia's being not *so dumb* as much as she was *so absentminded*, if not plain *so thoughtless*.

"Where WERE you? I thought we were gonna meet at Zephyr Heaven at 4:30, I waited there for like an hour!"

"OopsSorryIforgot."

No kidding. It was Delia, though, who coaxed the reluctant Laurie into trying out with her for VW's drill team; though it was Laurie who phoned Delia (twice) with reminders as to where and when the tryouts were taking place. Then it was Delia, not Laurie, who made the drill team along with Gigi Pyle and Wanda Lynn Reid—while Kim Zimmer, after sneezing at the wrongest-possible time, wound up as an alternate and then had a meltdown on

Jo Murrish's shoulder. (Jo did not try out, since she disliked anything more athletic than bike-riding and cornet-blowing.)

After that, Laurie found herself more and more absent from Delia's mindedness. They quit making plans that wouldn't be remembered without prodding; and while Delia still passed the occasional note in Math and English and Girls Glee Club, Laurie sometimes felt like wearing a nametag so Delia could identify her. The finishing touch to their friendship breach didn't come till a year later, when Delia lured—*lured!*—away Chipper Farlowe and gave Laurie a royal case of denial hives.

Before Chipper, there were a number of other boys in her VW love life. Laurie might not be the prettiest or shapeliest or sexiest girl on 7-Y (Gigi Pyle held all those titles) but she was far enough up the winsome totem pole to attract plenty of male attention—even on days she didn't get her miniskirt caught in a jammed locker door.

The first guy to ask her out was Tyler Canute, who'd already loaded a trophy shelf via the swimming, diving, and water polo circuits. He was also cut from the same pork loin as Jason Zane, as Susie was ready to deduce when she bristlingly inspected Ty pre-date.

"So, you're the *really* cute one in this family," he told her, with a covert wink at Laurie.

"Um, that's right, she is," Laurie gamely picked up her cue (after a brief *Does he like Sue better than me?* qualm). "Have you got a brother or cousin or something, so we can maybe double-date sometime?"

"Just so happens I do," said Ty. "You into bowling, Susie? We could all go to the Red Devil Bowl next weekend."

"Uh... sure... I guess," gulped Susie. "Well then... you two enjoy the movie."

"We will," Ty assured her, taking Laurie's hand (OHHH) and leading her out of the house before remarking: "Y'know, *you* just asked *me* out on a *second* date before we even started this one."

"OhmygoshI'msorry!" gasped Laurie, ready to sink through the front sidewalk. But Ty gave her another wink and a heartening pat on the rear (OHHHHH) as he guided Laurie down the garden path.

OhmygoshI'vegotaboyfriend!

They did hit the lanes with Susie and Ty's kid brother Hardy the following weekend, and had a fine time till Susie kicked Hardy in the shin for saying she "bowled pretty good for a girl." Nevertheless, she could now boast to her peers of having gone on *her* first date—with a light dusting of cosmetics and freshly-pierced ears, too—all thanks to her big sister's insistence that Susie not be left out or behind when it came to life's great milestones.

Some of these could only be shared secondhandedly. Such as Ty's hand on Laurie's caboose; then around her shoulders as they watched *Juggernaut* at the New Sherwood; then holding hers as he bestowed her blissful First Kiss; then holding the rest of her close while the other hand conferred her First Feel-Ups (proceeding from over-sweater to under-sweater/over-blouse to partly-under-blouse/not-quite-over-bra); then slipping his swimmer's ID bracelet over her wrist (OHHHHHHH) as a First Going-Together symbol—

—that proved to be only on loan, since Tyler requested its return so he could pass it along to Nanette Magnus, who didn't thwart his getting altogether to unfettered second base.

Which resulted in Laurie's First Post-Dump Crying Jag, in her sister's enraged arms, while Susie wished through gnashing teeth that she'd kicked *both* Canute brothers and significantly higher than their shins.

Distraction from this grief was provided by the unbridled woe of Wanda Lynn Reid, who got cast out of Gigi Pyle's clique for "sloppiness at a sleepover" (or so the story went) and made plea after unheeded plea for clemency and reinstatement. Laurie's heartache eased a few degrees as she delved into this scandal—at some peril to herself, since the spurned Wanda Lynn turned hard and bitter as a calcified grapefruit. Enlisting as a henchgirl with the notorious ninth-grader Bunty O'Toole (emphasis on the T—no Bunny she) whom even hoodlum-boys treated warily, Wanda Lynn let it be known that she now went by "Razor," was armed with her namesake, and would not hesitate to use it as she saw fit.

The Reids were reportedly distraught; but Gigi Pyle was heard to say that if "Whiny Lynn" had access to a razor, she ought to try employing it on her armpits.

"Pretty sharp talk from someone who just turned thirteen," Jo gibed at lunch after Laurie imparted the latest.

"Ssshhhh!" hissed Kim. "(Don't talk so loud about them!)"

“Waste of a good name,” Jo continued. “I always envied her getting to be ‘Wanda Lynn.’ If she doesn’t want it anymore, I’ll combine it with mine and start calling myself ‘Jocelyn.’”

“Oh don’t be silly,” said Kim.

“No, seriously—I’m tired of being stuck with just two letters. This way I can go around jostlin’ people, and say I’m only living up to my name.”

“Could I be... I dunno... maybe ‘Lorelei’?” asked Laurie.

Snort from Kim.

“Well,” mused Jo(celyn), “you’ve got a good singing voice. Think you can tempt a sailor to wreck his boat on a rock?”

“Oh, I could never do that—”

“Can we talk about SOMETHING ELSE, please?” Kim grated to Jocelyn (not Laurie), glaring at Jocelyn (not Laurie).

And from that day on, she was Alternate Kim Zimmer in more ways than one. Her behavior went from unusual to unpredictable to downright erratic—even with Jocelyn, her best friend since kindergarten. “She didn’t *used* to be like this,” Joss told people, including Laurie who knew it already and was just glad Kim had quit biting off her own inoffensive head. Better to be ignored, which had been feelings-hurtful when Wanda Lynn did it, but was a lot less wounding than decapitation.

It almost seemed like Kim had gotten possessed, like in *The Exorcist*. At Jocelyn’s birthday party that April, Laurie overheard Kim raking Joss over incomprehensible coals:

Are you saying you think that’s what I wanna do?

No, I’m not saying that OR thinking that—

Oh, because some of us aren’t as ENDOWED as others of us, is THAT what you’re saying you’re thinking?

Jeez, Kim, it’s my birthday! Why are you acting so weird?

ME?? Why am I acting so weird??

All this raking-over done in a quacky splutter, as if Daisy Duck (to whom Kim had always borne a noticeable resemblance) was channeling the hair-trigger-tempered Donald.

And hearing it made Laurie too queasy to enjoy her slice of birthday cake.

Though not sick enough to stay home from school, as she had to with German measles (caught from the Clevinger shepherds, no doubt) for three days in May. And by the time she returned to 7-Y, it had been shaken by a new scandal—Kim’s taking her Alternativity to a possessed extreme by verbally attacking Jocelyn, in front of Gigi and her snotty clique, like a spoken version of the shark in *Jaws*.

Had it been anyone else, Laurie would’ve scrambled to the top of the scandalous lemon tree and begun squeezing detailjuice out of every rumorfruit to brew a giant pitcher of gossipade. *This*, though, was too stomach-turningly sour to think about, much less talk.

Being ditched by Wanda Lynn Reid had been saddening, yet not unfathomable; *she* was always a doer-as-told, a performer-as-coached, whether by Ingrid or Gigi or Buntz O’Toole. And Wanda Lynn’d never called Laurie “Harelip” or made mean fun of her like Gigi did. Nor for that matter had Ding-a-Ling Delia, who might be thoughtless yet not a “snide-ass,” as Joss would say. But Kim Zimmer—

How could Kim have done that? To her best friend, her oldest friend, her bosom friend? Was it because Joss was growing quite a full bosom, and Kim (with her cheerleader aspirations) hadn’t?

No. Laurie didn’t need to squeeze any lemons to guess the answer: Kim had betrayed her way into Gigi’s good graces (make that *bad* graces—*airs* and graces—*disgraces*) to join the snotty clique and achieve belittling popularity.

Laurie wished with all her heart for the courage of a lioness, so she could tell Kim Zimmer exactly what she thought of her. Yes, she’d say, I might be *so dumb*, but I would NEVER EVER stab a friend in the back or anywhere else—especially not one who’d *lost her mother* and didn’t get along that well with her sisters, so who knew whose shoulder was available for poor Joss to cry on?

Laurie wasn’t sure her own shoulder was qualified.

She tried to offer it anyway, and got the distinct impression that Joss was avoiding her—withdrawing to a remote cafeteria table, seeking asylum with a couple of Band buddies.

‘Cause she thinks I’ll want to ask about it, and talk about it, and BLAB about it.

Laurie felt a deep rush of shame, worse even than when her skirt had been hiked up almost to indecency by the jammed locker door. That had been simply embarrassing; *this*

made her feel nearly as guilty as Gigi or Kim.

She took a solemn vow to keep her yap shut forevermore.

Massive distraction was required, so Laurie began babysitting that summer and found it easy to interact with her young clientele. For the most part, the little girls thought she was smart and sought her opinion of everything going on in their miniature lives; while the little boys thought she was pretty and sought her admiration of their *lookit what I can do!* feats of kiddystrength.

Laurie worked on her own feats too, jogging around the neighborhood with Susie before the summer mornings grew too hot and humid. Susie was a born athlete, while Laurie could sprint fairly quickly and had good breath control from her singing lessons—plus, probably, all that finished-and-done-with blabberyapping.

Sometimes they heard (and felt) the THUD! THUD! THUD! of Susan Baxter gradually overtaking them, making the earth quake with her broadjump strides, laconically saying “C’mon now, don’t lemme lap you,” so they’d redouble their pace yet still fall behind. Susie idolized Big Sue and pounced on her terse suggestion that they try out for the new girls cross country team that was—no, wasn’t—yes, was after all—being formed at VW that fall.

Were it not for Susie’s boundless enthusiasm, Laurie would’ve quailed at risking another tryout washout; but besides the two of them and Big Sue, only nine others showed up and they all made the squad automatically.

It was the best thing to happen to Laurie since the advent of the Zanes. She loved being a Ladybug, looked forward to every practice, rooted for her teammates even as they ran against her, was never the fastest but won praise for always doing her Personal Best.

It took all her strength, though, to stick to her resolve and not relapse into yappery, no matter how fascinating the other L-Bugs might be. None more than Alex Dmitria the Russkie-Chicana, who seemed to have come to Vanderlund from some superlative planet where everyone was beautiful and tireless and generous and kindhearted—the incarnation of Good Graces, and exact opposite (except beautywise) of Gigi Pyle. Laurie took Alex as her role model, renewing her oath of personal-best gossip-silence—

—that got strained to the breaking point when she inadvertently eavesdropped on what Kim told Gigi about the new-girl-in-town (not-from-another-planet) Ladybug.

Vicki Volester was small and dark and longhaired and brighteyed and trimbodied. Very nice-looking and nice-acting, with no indication of deception or disguise about her. Yet Kim claimed that Vicki hailed from an urban slum where she'd belonged to a cutthroat gang even more brutally violent than Bunty O'Toole's!

Laurie's entire being cried out to learn more, especially when she saw Vicki eating lunch with a smiling Jocelyn Murrish.

Finally she dared to carry her tray over to their table—ask if it was okay for her to sit there—and nearly shed tears of relief when Joss showed every sign of being glad to see her, of having really missed her, of wanting to hear all the latest Y-Wing news now that Joss had transferred to Z.

But through her unshed tears, Laurie could not help but glance at and cower away from the two Band buddies lunching there—zitfaced biker chick Robin Neapolitan and gaunt punk sorceress Fiona Weller, both of whom *did* look capable of brutal violence—

“Vicki, can I ask you something?” she blurted through a mouthful of lettuce. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but is it really true—that is, y’know, if you don’t *mind* my asking—I mean...”

“Gahd, Laurie, what??”

“—were you really in a GANG when you lived in The City?”

(So dumb. So dumb.)

Everybody laughed, Robin so hard that milk shot through her pimply nose; and Joss, going into one of her trademark patter routines, improvised a career for Vicki (alias Guadalupe Velez) as Loopy the Enforcer, sergeant-at-arms of the Pfiester Park Pherrettes.

“Gahd, Joss! *Ferrets?*” went Vicki. “What kind of gang name is that?”

“Better’n Ladybugs,” said Robin, wiping milk off her face.

“I’ve always thought ferrets are cute,” Laurie offered by way of humble amends.

Vicki held no grudge and soon became one of Laurie’s favorite teammates, as did noisy boisterous Sheila Quirk who joined their lunch-bunch (and had several hunky older brothers). For quite a while, though, Laurie remained half-afraid of Robin and two-thirds terrified of Fiona, even after they invited her and Susie to supply backup vocals alongside Vicki at Robin’s birthday jam session.

She sang for her supper too, if that was something you could do at lunch. The bunch would say “Tell us the latest, Laurie”—or “Brenda Starr Girl Reporter” as Sheila-Q called her, which was really sweet even though Laurie didn’t have a red bouffant—and she’d serve them fresh glasses of gossipade, modifying her oath to *I will always use these powers for good, like Alex Dmitria would.*

Very soon she got to do so in support of Alex herself, who demonstrated that even a Supergirl was vulnerable to the Kryptonite-stress of overactivity. Vicki told the bunch they’d have to keep tabs on Alex, to reduce her velocity from faster-than-a-speeding-bullet; and Laurie played an instrumental part in doing this. Ditto when Fiona succumbed to an eating disorder, and they all had to make sure she’d dine on more than cereal snackpacks.

Then it was Laurie’s turn to need aid and comfort, when Delia Shanafelt stole—yes, *stole!*—Chipper Farlowe from her, in an act of ding-a-ling treachery beyond understanding:

“They weren’t! He wouldn’t! She’s not like that, not really! And I keep telling you, this rash is just a reaction to my new wool dress—”

“It’s *not*, they *were*, he *does*, and she *is* like that!” Susie asserted in spite of Laurie’s denial hives. And the bunch all agreed, telling Laurie she was much better off (hives or no hives) without Chipper and his jive.

She’d met him at a Petty Hills Country Club ceremony honoring Pa’s boss for something Laurie took no interest in after spotting Chipper in the crowd. He was a bit like Jason Zane, though less twisted; a bit like Tyler Canute, though less splashy; and almost as refined as Becca Blair’s suitor Ralph Waldo Emerson Lorgnon III, though the Farlowes wouldn’t pay to send Chipper to Front Tree Country Day School. For which Laurie’d given daily thanks, as Chipper ushered her around 8-Y and VW and Vanderlund and the wide bright world. Again she knew the thrill of heartfelt kisses and embraces; again she bore with the disquiet of breast-and-buttockfelt liberty-taking.

On the one hand (as it were) Laurie was vigilant against her modesty being outraged, as she knew Alex Dmitria must be—Alex had reacted to a public bottom-slap by ramming a plate of pasta and meat sauce into Craig Clerkington’s midsection.

On the other hand (so to speak) Laurie got some novel sensations in *her* midsection when Chipper started stroking and fondling her, and doing French things with their tongues.

Sometimes this got so sensational it was Chipper who had to surface for breath first, and Laurie who drew him back into the deeps—though she kept most of her clothes buttoned and zippered and hooked. He hardly ever got rough or crude with her, and even aced the Three Little Words litmus test on occasion.

Laurie, of course, had advanced from terms of endearment to picking out their silver pattern. Many a school notebook and diary page was filled with curlicued variations on *Laurie Farlowe, Laurel S. Harrison-Farlowe, Mrs. Charles Gilbert Farlowe*, and so forth.

“PLEASE watch your step with that guy,” Susie repeatedly advised.

“He’s different. We’re in *love*.”

“You *always* say that, every single time.”

“And *you* haven’t ever liked *any* of my boyfriends.”

“‘Cause none of ‘em’ve been worthy of you! You deserve a *prince*—”

“Well, I’ve found one! Didn’t he give me a real glass slipper?”

(Chipper had, in teensy Christmas-tree-ornament form.)

“Just watch out that you don’t end up in the *cinders*, that’s all!”

“Just *you* wait till *you* find *your* true love, and I get to be your matron of honor!”

“Oh, Lo...” sighed Susie; and the bunch sighed with her, all the way up to Chipper’s turning fickle with Delia. Whereupon he learned a fundamental fact of life:

Never jilt a gossipmonger—you’ll never hear the end of it.

Laurie Harrison was no Kinks Farghetti. She had no need to stalk Chipper’s every step or forage through his trash cans; her powers of observation and communication were honed to a finer edge. Delia, down on the ding-a-ling mezzanine, might stay blithely unaware; but Chipper’s ears must’ve burned to crisps if they sensed what was being said (and spread) about him by the girl he’d “let down easy” with a yo-heave-ho out of their highflying whirlybird.

Back on terra firma and done with denial, Laurie was clairvoyant where Chipper was concerned. Long before he became aware of it, she divined that Delia’d begun to unload him so as to take on Mike Spurgeon (then being rotated from one snottycliquer to the next). Laurie shared this revelation with the bunch, who unanimously urged her to dig a moat and stock it with alligators to prevent Chipper’s returning to her. Susie went so far as to get

down on dramatic knees and *implore* Laurie to bar the door, nail the windows shut, and stop up the chimney.

“...but then maybe he won’t, y’know, like *ever* wanna get back together...”

Very slow, very deep inhalation. “Then—make—him—CRAWL—first!”

Laurie tried to picture how Vicki Volester would handle such a situation, since it was difficult to imagine Alex Dmitria ever getting dumped, whereas Vicki seemed to have some mysterious poignant *affaire de coeur* in her past. (Laurie’d often speculated about this, yet felt a curious reluctance to probe further; Vicki, in her own quiet way, could be more daunting than Sheila or Robin or even Fiona.)

At any rate, when Chipper Farlowe did come a-knockin’ at her beg-your-pardon door, Laurie played it cool and standoffish and hard to get. Which evidently made her twice as desirable in Chipper’s eyes and loins, so that he went all out when she did forgive him just before the Bicentennial *Cicada* Dance. For this he coughed up the costliest red-white-and-blue wrist corsage obtainable at Bedeguar Way Florist.

Regrettably, it also made Chipper go all out *after* the dance, and then accuse Laurie of “stringing him along” when she wouldn’t dish up her desirability on a plate. Laurie spent the rest of that night working through a box of Kleenex, listening to “Silly Love Songs” and “Right Back Where We Started From.”

Her sister and bunch cared enough to not say *We told you so* more than a few times.

The subsequent summer was riddled with speedbumps. Harrison & Zane’s daycare center kept garnering complaints from those nasty Clevingers; Jason damaged the family’s Vega Notchback by failing to set the brake while parking with a girl whose father had forbidden her to date him; Susie had to get braces, and wanted to indict the orthodontist for not prescribing them earlier so she could be done with them sooner; Laurie’s application to transfer from VW’s Y team to join her friends on X or Z was rejected.

And then came Mr. Rebound Guy, Mack “The Arm” Pittley, who was supposed to be Laurie and Susie’s golf caddy/trainer at Petty Hills—and nearly taught Laurie an extra reason why sand traps are called “hazards.”

That notwithstanding, Laurie let Mack take her to the Back-to-School Dance, where the Rosa Dartles were gutsily trying to play through a bombardment of jeers and popcorn

when all the lights went out, and the Phantom of the Sock-Hop went on a sexual harassment rampage. Laurie had only “The Arm” to contend with in the darkness, but others weren’t so lucky (if that was the right word) as she discovered when she put on her Brenda Starr Girl Reporter hat and began investigating.

Among the victimized were Vicki Volester, Crystal Denvour, LeAnn Anobile, Rachel Gleistein, and Samantha Tiggs. All had been pawed and groped in different ways—some above, some below, some behind—but in every case by an apparently disembodied hand, like Thing on *The Addams Family*.

Laurie heard some of this firsthand (as it were, so to speak) and collected more from the grapevine, including that the Dartles might be held responsible for the entire “riot.” Vicki, as their manager, was going to lead the band into a summit meeting with Principal Driscoll; but before its outcome could be guesstimated, Laurie herself had an altercation in the very gym where “Feedbackgate” (aka “Fondlegate”) had occurred just forty hours earlier.

Well, not so much in the gym as the girls locker room before fourth period Phys Ed. This was the only class to which Laurie, Rachel, Samantha, and Kim Zimmer were all assigned; and as they changed into their gymsuits, Kim made some extraordinarily uncalled-for comments about how Rachel and Sammi had finally gotten some action by flaunting their underwear at a school dance—so why bother to put on gymsuits now, when they could just keep putting *out*?

Sammi (beetfaced) and Rachel (blanching) made no reply; but Laurie felt their palpable reproach that Kim was recycling hearsay from—who else?—Miss Blabberyap, Señorita Can’t-Hold-Her-Tongue, Fräulein Mighty-Talkative-For-Someone-Who’s-So-Dumb—

—and with that *coup de grâce*, Laurie marched over to get in Kim’s recoiling face and tell her off from head to toe, not only for today’s snide-ass snortles but also her disloyal Daisy Duck perfidy toward Joss, culminating in a resonant “SO THERE!” followed by a brusque “Let’s go play softball!” to the stunned locker room.

(An exit line Laurie almost spoiled by heading out without gym shoes; but Sammi Tiggs grabbed them off the bench and hurried after her.)

Midway through the game, Laurie's adrenaline plummeted. *What had she done?* A "civilian" couldn't bawl out a cheerleader without consequences—which, from Kim Zimmer, could involve a lethal beanball aimed at her noggin. And just because nothing happened before the whistle tweeted them back indoors didn't mean Kim wasn't biding her time to bite Laurie's head off once and for all.

So go through the zombieified motions of taking a shower, putting on regular clothes, heading to 8-Y for study hall, numbly feeling as though a round had been boxed with Apollo Creed but there were nine more to go, full of nosebreaking and eyecutting and mutilation...

When she zombiewalked from Y-Wing to Home Base for lunch, Laurie found that tidings of the contretemps had preceded her—broadcast not just by eyewitnesses but Alex Dmitria herself. Laurie cringed, thinking how gravely disappointed in her Alex must be; yet Alex, who tried hard to love everybody, could accept and even approve of chastisement when a Most Special Friend like Joss had been hurt, deliberately and coldbloodedly.

Kim Zimmer was a prominent member of the popular crowd, but not that many people actually liked her; and being taken down by LAURIE HARRISON (à la the killer rabbit in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*) eclipsed even Vicki's triumphant defense of the Dartles as a good-news noontime bulletin.

Kim skipped lunch that day to hide in a washroom stall; Laurie received hugs and applause and extra desserts. Best of all, Rachel and Sammi were now two of *her* Most Special Friends—though the three of them had little in common, at first, other than being female and on the 8-Y team.

Rachel Gleistein gave you the impression of being a foreign lady scientist in a spy movie, what with her exotic Middle Eastern looks, elegant intellectual attitude, and tendency to make whatever she wore seem like a labcoat—though her wardrobe was in fact suitable for any B'nai B'rith Youth Organization event.

She had a lot of similarities to her fellow future physician Becca Blair, with whom Rachel vied for top academic ranking. She had a lot more to Alex Dmitria, doing endless good deeds and good works: Red Cross Club, March of Dimes, Handicapped Awareness, Youth for Environmental Quality—all received many hours of Rachel's labors.

Laurie learned two key things about her before the week was out. First, Rachel had an easily-bruised sense of personal dignity, which turned black-and-blue when the Sock-Hop Phantom pulled up the back of her skirt, stuffed it into the seat of her wedgified panties, and left Rachel to spin around saying “What? *What?*” when the gym lights went on.

Second, though cordially acquainted with half of VW, Rachel had no intimate friends she could talk to about fleeing from the dance with shouts of *Hey Sweetcheeks!* and *Nice ass, Gleistein!* ringing in her humiliated ears. Laurie the Listener fulfilled that need very well, and didn’t argue when Rachel debunked the “disembodied hand” theory as irrational hokum.

“Sorry—I’m so dumb—”

“Don’t you ever say that!” chided Rachel, like lovely-but-strict Mrs. Clay back in fifth grade when Laurie’d use it as an all-purpose excuse. “Don’t even *think* it—and don’t let other people say it or think it about you, either.”

“Kay,” said Laurie, tucking into the plate of afterschool fruit-and-veg snacks Rachel had prepared. “Is this Jewish food? It’s certainly delicious.”

As for Samantha Tiggs, the first impression everybody got was TALL CHICK. Aged fourteen, she was six-foot-one and hadn’t finished growing. On an athletic field or court she felt comfortable in her own skin and whatever uniform covered it; anywhere else in any other outfit could be agony. Sammi got her stature from her highrise-window-washer father; her mother and older sister Sabrina were both petite and drop-dead-gorgeous. They did their best to put Sammi at ease with her self-image, but struggled to stay patient with her habitual *Oh what’s the use* and *I don’t WANNA try it on* and *‘Cause it’ll make me look even FREAKIER*.

Samantha was in fact a textbook example of sporty-cuteness, with a womanly figure marred only by yard-long thighbones. Her mom and Sabrina kept hinting that a tailored ensemble would conceal these while accentuating her many positive features; but the only garment Sammi put stock in was a no-frills Free Swing Tennis Bra—which the Phantom of the Sock-Hop ruthlessly lobbed and volleyed and disembodily-manhandled.

“And after you’d come to the dance and everything,” Laurie sympathized.

“(I was just passing through,)” mumbled Samantha, arms folded across her chest.

She’d only done *that* after some major persuasion by Alex Dmitria. Sammi was shy even around other girls, having been cursed till quite recently with a Cindy Brady lisp

(callous graduates of Bashford Elementary still called her *Thammi Tiggt*) even before she'd "giraffified." But mingling with boys was a triple torment: her profound self-consciousness clashed with full-throttle hormones and a mawkish schmaltzy taste in fiction, to produce hopeless inept crushes-from-afar.

"My *dream*," she hesitantly revealed to Laurie, "would be to meet a guy I'd have to, um, stand on tiptoe to, y'know, like... *kiss on the lips*. I know it's ridiculous." (Ducking her head and awaiting guffaws)

"No!" went Laurie. "It's soooo romantic! I can see it happening! Not at any school dance, though—more like a fancy-dress ball—out on a terrace, under the moonlight—"

"Really?" breathed Samantha. "What'm I wearing?"

"High heels!"

"No way! ME? Never—"

"Yes you are—it's fancy-dress, remember. And even in heels, you still have to stand on tiptoe!"

"Wow... and what about Him, how's He dressed?"

It was like telling a bedtime story to one of Laurie's little babysittees, even though Sammi was so much taller and a couple months older, and her story forged ahead to a much more grownup bedtime. (After a dream wedding, of course.)

The only drawback to these two Most Special Friendships was that Rachel and Samantha didn't really take to each other, sticking to their own cafeteria tables (caregivers vs. jockettes) rather than join Laurie at the lunch-bunch's. She did get them to come to the self-defense lessons at Villa Neapolitan; but they found Robin and her daily arguments with Sheila Quirk to be off-putting rather than enjoyable.

Both wanted Laurie to eat with them, so she took another leaf from Alex's book (or was it tree? Vicki'd once asked the same question) and began to circulate, dining-and-dishing with different groups on different days, getting involved with them all. She convinced Sammi it was safe to join the cross country squad this year, since their coach Mr. Heathcote respected the sanctity of the Ladybug locker room. Sammi in turn talked Laurie into going out for basketball; and while she didn't get much playing time or rack up impressive stats, the team voted her Most Valuable Second-Stringer for her *esprit de corps*. Meanwhile

Rachel put her in charge of drumming up contributions to Red Cross Club's canned food drive, which was a great success; and she tutored Laurie in every subject except Phys Ed and Home Ec, resulting in a personal-best report card for each grade period.

Most notably, Rachel and Samantha tipped the balance that Susie and the bunch had been weighing in on for weeks: Laurie should cut herself free from the grip of Mack "The Arm" Pittley, an amorous albatross if ever there was one (outside rejected titles for a Disney live-action film).

She did jettison Mack and his shackle of an Arm; then tried for the first time to switch off her PLEASE ASK ME OUT beacon. Here again the paragon to pattern after was Alex, who went steady with the entire school (and *not* in a "town pump" way) instead of any individual.

Rachel too was unattached, having withdrawn from the dating game after breaking up with Hillel Schiller—"His mother can say till she's blue in the face that he's a Nice Jewish Boy, but that'll never make it true!" Starry-eyed Samantha was counting the days till senior high, where there'd be a much larger pool of amazing colossal MEN. (In ninth grade the taller boys invariably seemed to favor shorter girls, while Sammi's most ardent admirers came from upward-gazing shrimp stock.)

Laurie hadn't taken herself *completely* off the courtship market, and thought she'd hit the jackpot when she met Jerome Schei—so handsome, so well-groomed, so interested in her, they had so very much in common—

"Yeah," Susie delicately disclosed, "you both like guys."

But I could change all that, thought Laurie, garbing and painting and scenting herself as sexily as she dared—only to have Jerome whoop and whistle and want to know which lucky fellow she was out to ensnare: "I want to take a gander at HIM!"

I bet you do. I am so—

No; not "dumb." A tad ironically-fortuned, maybe.

Jerome was still her pal and gossip-colleague, and they had plenty to work with that winter and spring. There was Vicki Volester's descent into and recovery from a deep dark funk (result of another tragic secret *affaire?*); Carly Thibert's sophisticorruption of Keiko Nakayama; Gumbo Krauss's breaking up with Carly and hooking up with Joss Murrish as her first known-of boyfriend; Arlo Sowell's transferring elephantine affections to Robin

Neapolitan from *her best friend* Fiona Weller (despite Fiona's being much less gaunt and more striking this year); the Rosa Dartles's comeback concert at the Vinyl Spinnaker, which pre-empted Gigi Pyle's supper party; the thrilling midterm-cheatsheet trial of Tony Pierro and Byron Wyszynski; the return of the Phantom of the Sock-Hop, this time to afflict and demoralize the *Carnival* musical; the *Cicada* staff desertions by Gumbo (after Joss dumped him) and Petula Pierro (gone radically agitprop); the eleventh-hour yearbook salvage by Vicki and Joss and Crystal Denvour, ensuring that this wonderful school year would be memorialized in grayscale photos and sans-serif captions; the "Tropic Island Cruise" dance, where Alex Dmitria was deservedly tiara'd as *Cicada* Queen—

—and which Harrison & Zane attended in the double-date company of the Messrs. Herbert C. Marcellus Jr. and Patrick Warren Baxter.

Laurie'd crossed paths with Buddy Marcellus at assorted VW functions, as well as the Red Devil Bowl where the Pachyderms (Buddy, Arlo Sowell, Haystack Dobbs, Nature Boy Rutherford) and the Pindoras (Laurie, Susie, Sammi, and Tina Korva who was tone-deaf and opinionated but could pick up a 7-10 split) both plied the lanes. At and away from the alley, Buddy was a fun-loving guy; but "Romeo" wouldn't be the first role a casting director might call him for—unless it was a comic-opera adaptation.

Even so, Vicki Volester had dated him—once—and encouraged Laurie to give him a try, noting that he'd paid to dry-clean her overcoat after it got doused with a malted milkshake. ("Accidentally, and I wasn't in it at the time.") Yielding to this matchmaking, Laurie went with Buddy to see the re-released *Fantasia* and out for burgers (but no shakes). She then invited him to Grouseland Street to sample her award-winning carrot cake soufflé, which Buddy packed away and on bended knee declared to be reason enough for him to propose marriage—or at least their taking the Tropic Island Cruise together.

Laurie did not regret accepting, other than Bud's being heftier (and sweatier) than her beau ideal. He lived up to his reputation as a great (if sweaty) dancer, and was definitely the nicest guy who'd ever asked her out; only... *why* couldn't he and Jerome Schei have traded bodies at birth?

She took pardonable pride in being one of the few of her friends to go to the *Cicada* Dance as half of a couple. Sheila-Q went with Phonsie Alphonse and Crystal with longtime

sweetheart Rags Ragnarsson (after a post-tiff patchup). But Alex and Vicki and Joss bought what Joss called “single-broad tickets” (she was still crabby about Gumbo) as did Rachel, though *she’d* leave on the arm of Bennett Fayne who’d come with Irina Saranoff who’d been carrying on with Mike Spurgeon for *weeks* behind Sell-O’s back though everyone knew Mike would’ve taken Keiko Nakayama if her scandalized parents had let her go in the first place.

Robin and Fiona were also no-shows—they never went to school dances unless performing as the Dartles—and so was Samantha, though Laurie’d sounded her out about maybe going with Haystack Dobbs. He was much taller than Sammi but also twice as wide, and impossible to envision wearing a tux on a terrace under moonlight.

Sammi was willing to wait for her Dream Man to happen along.

Susie was not, since he already existed in real life and a few blocks away.

She’d known Patrick Baxter since moving to Grouseland Street. They’d been in the same sixth-grade class at McGrum, assigned to the 7-Y and 8-Y teams at VW, and for most of that time Susie hadn’t thought much of Patrick—in quantity *or* quality. But all that flipped when the Baxters returned from a spring break fishing trip with Patrick sporting *stubble*, plus a couple inches more height than he’d had previously.

“It’s not *fair!*” raged Susie. “Girls’re supposed to mature sooner ‘n’ faster’n boys! So where does that leave ME?”

(Almost fourteen, yet looking not quite twelve.)

To Laurie, she was still the cutest little Ramonalike sister you could hope for; though this probably wasn’t the best time to say so.

“Don’t worry, Sue, you are gonna outknockout ‘em *all* before you know it—”

“Oh sure, ‘when I blossom’—like you’ve been telling me for *three years now*, Lo! Well, it’s never gonna happen and he’s never gonna like me!”

(Storming off to the back yard to whack the tetherball around its pole.)

It was Laurie’s first inkling that Susie’d come down with a crush—on Patrick of all people—and a serious-bordering-on-critical one, if the tetherball blows were any clue... to somebody whose powers of observation clearly weren’t up to their usual scratch.

Polish them up, then, and put them to good use. Grieve to see how piningly doleful Susie got when treated like One Of The Guys while she and Patrick helped plan next year's cross country program. Verify the crush, ratify its depth, and get hold of Big Sue on the hush-hush to stealthily ask:

"Has your brother got a girlfriend yet?"

"Haw! He *wishes*. Why you asking?"

"Not for *me*," Laurie hastily disclaimed. "It's Susie, she's kind of fallen for him."

"She can do better."

"I guess, but is there any way you could maybe, um, well, sort of *persuade* Patrick to, I dunno... ask... her... out... or something?"

"Yeah."

"Really?"

"Said so, didn't I?"

One cuff to the back of the head later, Patrick issued a token invite to the *Cicada* Dance. Which Susie assumed was the real deal, shoving all her chips into the pot as she thrust Patrick up against her locker and planted a Briar Rose wake-up SMOOCH on his mouth (and tonsils) to emerge from her long beauty sleep as an undeniable teenage flower in bloom.

She'd probably always be on the lean if not twiggy side. Yet Susie Zane, whether due to love or passion or sheer coincidence, was suddenly able to almost support a strapless gown on her natural own, without resorting to Scotch tape or padded tissues.

This warranted a special trip to the Della Verita Boutique, to lay the foundation for Susie's adolescent lingerie drawer. No plain white cotton today; look for the most colorful lace and decorative frills. Laurie recalled Vicki quoting *her* sister (who used to appear in television commercials for Volester Motors and thus knew about glamour) that just knowing you had on pretty underwear made you *feel* prettier and *be* prettier—"works every time."

"Well, take care that *you're* the only ones who know it," cautioned Mrs. Harrison-Zane RN.

"Oh Mom!" chorused her girls, exclaiming over an especially exquisite brassiere...

...that now dangled like a broken kite from the bedroom light fixture above Laurie's tear-filled eyes.

Right Back Where We Started From.

I can never sleep in here again. I'll have to move down to the basement. Jason won't need it anymore. It won't be so bad until winter comes...

I thought she told me everything. I thought I knew her. I thought she was my sister...

"Smother me with a pillow," she said, "if I ever start acting scuzzy." Like the First Mrs. Zane, her mother, her real true mother—not mine...

How long have they been doing this? How far have they gone? Where are they now? Over at Patrick's house, picking up where they left off, finishing what they began?

Does anyone else suspect—or do they already KNOW, everybody but me, and they all know I don't know and they're laughing and shaking their heads and saying "That Harelip Harrison is such a nitwit, such a patsy, such a sucker—"

I am so dumb.

I AM SO DUMB!

I AM SO DUMB!!

Digging fingernails into still-damp hair. Feeling the world rip and shred like so many split ends.

Had Mrs. Levinson's important appointment *really* been canceled? Or had it all been a prank, a trick, with little Errol and Lilibet in on the joke, giggling till they got hiccups when you biked away in the pouring rain—"We fooled her, Mama, we *fooled* her!"

At the *Cicada* Dance, when Buddy Marcellus said "You were robbed!" you gasped and reached for your earrings and other jewelry but he just laughed, saying "I mean *you* oughta be up there!" meaning the Queen's Court with Alex and Vicki and Crystal, which you thought very sweet at the time (and made you feel sorry to take spiteful pleasure in Kim and Delia's not making it either, plus Gigi Pyle's finishing *fourth* runner-up)—

—but Buddy'd LAUGHED, howled with laughter at you like Jerome and Chipper and Tyler and Jason and every other guy you'd ever cared for, pointing and jeering and talking about you behind your back, probably to tell the world you'd gone all the way with them—even Jerome!—and say you'd do it with *anybody* and charge them money for it like a hooker but lots cheaper than you were worth 'cause *you're so DUMB*—

—no—NO—**NO**—

—you’ve got to get out of here—
—look, it’s stopped raining—
—throw on some dry clothes (charcoal gray this time, to be safe) and a spare pair of racing flats—

—go out and find a friend, even if it’s only a pretend “friend”—
—someone you can talk to, watching for hidden smirks as you ask for advice and plead for guidance and beg for reassurance—

—*who*, though? Who can you trust? Who can be of help? Not Rachel, not Sammi, not Alex—they’d all be shocked by talk of wanton toplessness, if they’re sincere that is, and your heart would break if ALEX was deceitful. Sheila-Q’d be perfect, having to deal with mealy-mouthed Amelia who was capable of way worse than toplessness—but at this time of day Sheila’d be on volunteer duty at St. Benedict’s. *Joss!* If there was anyone nearby who had to be true-blue dependable yet unshockable, it’d be her—and you’re pretty sure she doesn’t start work till after noon. So hop on your bike and pedal fast as you can over to Jupiter Street—

—and if *Joss* laughs at you, run away to Montana and live with Ingrid Morton—
—or go find Wanda Lynn Reid, and ask to join Bunty O’Toole’s desperadoes—
—or tie a rope to a garage rafter, and show everybody you can do something Kim Zimmer’d failed at.

*

“Waal,” Vicki la-de-da’d, “guess I’d best be moseying over to The Club.”

“Yaas,” Joss tra-la-la’d, “got to teach Pookster McJinglepockets how to gallop that polo pony.”

“Oh don’t start talking ponies, or Alex’ll have us back in her stable again.”

“Hobble-de-hoy! No thanks.”

“I’ll try to call tonight, usual time, if I can wrench the phone out of my folks’s hands—”

“Oh my Gahd... look who’s coming!”

“Wh— *It is* her! How’d she find out so *soon*?”

“Don’t look at me, I’ve been here with you since *I* heard—”

“She really must have antennas in her pooftails—”

“Where *are* her pooftails? Her hair’s all—” Opening the scrollwork porch’s screen door: “Laurie? Are you okay?”

“What’s the matter?” Vicki chimed in. “Has something happened?—*LAURIE!*”

They sprang down the half-mown lawn and caught their favorite blabberyap as she collapsed off her bicycle, bursting into shuddery spastic sobs like Ralph at the end of *Lord of the Flies*.

*

“My Grandmother Schmelz used to say, ‘We all need to cry a little from time to time—it clears the head like rain does the air.’”

“(Not around *here* it doesn’t. Just makes it muggier.)”

“You need help with that?”

“(Nooooo, almost got it—there! Thanks again—this is great.)”

Fiona gave Vicki another hug (startlingly demonstrative, from doesn’t-like-to-be-touched Feef) and gloated over the tiny electric-bass bracelet-charm Vicki’d found in Florida. Vicki presented this mucho-belated birthday gift after tracking Fiona down to Villa Neapolitan’s cellar (where she’d spent the day communing with her new amp); and Fiona, not wanting to snag a braceleted wrist on Fender strings, affixed the bass-charm to her FTW necklace-pendant.

“I hope that stands for your *initials*, Feef.”

“(That’s what I tell people,)” Fiona said blandly. “(So then what happened?)”

“Oh, with Laurie? We cleaned her up—she was all over little wet grass clippings—and tried to mellow her out with lemonade—”

“(D’ja add peppermint schnapps?)”

“Now where would we get any of *that*? You know Toughie doesn’t allow a drop of liquor in that house. Anyway, I had to leave for work at Petty Hills, but Joss asked her to stay for lunch so Laurie could vent some more. I think she just needed to know, y’know, that we were ‘there’ for her—like we all do, when we freak out.”

“(Yeah. I know... You should all get fake IDs, though. Then you can at least buy beer and wine.)”

“Gahd, Feef!” went Vicki, peering at F.T. Weller (aged nineteen)’s new California license. “What *else* did you bring back from Out There?”

“(Well...)”

“AAY LOOP-AAY!” from Robin, upstairs in the Villa kitchen.

“YEAH?”

“LOOPY, YOU STAYING FOR DINNER?”

“YES PLEASE!... *I’m* in no hurry to go home. My folks’re in a tizzy ‘cause—well—see, my sister dropped out of college and ran off to L.A.”

“(Cool. Maybe I bumped into her. She look like you?)”

“No, more like the complete opposite.”

“(What, like a six-foot-tall guy with a beard?)”

“No! ‘Member that day you all came over while our parents decided what parties the Dartles could play at? We hung out in my sister’s room, and Sheila tried on her clothes—”

“(Oh right—we had to pry her out of that one dress.)”

“Yeah, and she ‘borrowed’ another one that Tricia noticed was missing right away the next time she whooshed through. I suppose Sheila can keep it now, if Mealy hasn’t swiped it... Anyway, Tricia’s blonde and stacked and peaches-and-creamy and has green eyes.”

“(I did meet a girl like that,)” said Fiona. “(Except mine had green *hair*...)”

*

Laurie coasted back to Grouseland through the sunset, having gone from Joss’s house to St. Benedict’s for a chat with Sheila-Q in the hospital coffee shop, then over to the Y where Samantha (too shy to hit the beach) was swimming laps, then over to Rachel’s for dinner with the Gleisteins. At each place she had less to say about what was troubling her, partly because she gradually calmed down over the course of the day—at least insofar as her friends were concerned, since they *were* her friends *and* concerned about her.

(Unless they were all superskillful actresses. Rachel the spy-movie foreign scientist, maybe; Sammi the devourer of *Young Love* romance comics, improbable.)

Laurie was trying not to glance up at the garage rafters while parking her bike, when she got forcibly collared and propelled into the toolshed/playhouse. “Quit *shoving*—OOF!” as

she landed on one of the old chairs they'd brought out here, and twisted away from the shadow taking a seat in the neighboring chair.

"First," said the shadow, "I wanna thank you for coming home when you did—we hadn't ever done anything like that before, we just started kissing and then kept going almost like we were daring each other along, and if you hadn't shown up—well, I don't know what 'cept I wasn't ready, and Patrick—well of course *he* was 'ready' but not *ready*, y'know, so things might've gotten... and turned out... anyway, thank you.

"Second—I'm so, so sorry we did *what* we did in *our* room, I know it was wrong 'n' gross 'n' I've cleaned everything up (I did your laundry too, and dried out your shoes) and wouldn't blame you if you wanted to move into the basement or someplace but *please* don't, it's *your* room 'n' you made it *our* room 'n' I promise I'll never do anything like that in there again.

"Third—I can guess what you're thinking about me doing *what* I did, *anywhere*, but it's NOT like that—I really, really love him, Lo, and I'm pretty sure he loves me and *wants* me too, which I never thought'd ever happen, but we had a long talk, him 'n' me, and agreed to take things slower 'n' stay outta each other's bedrooms from now on, I mean suppose it'd been *Big Sue* who walked in on us—

"Fourth..." [throat cleared] "Patrick's *not* the very best thing that ever happened to me... *you* are, you 'n' Mom" [throat cleared] "you two ARE my sister 'n' mother, 'n' you can smother me with a pillow if I *ever* do anything that might spoil that."

Silence in the playhouse, as dusk descended.

Then a thin tight bloodshot-sounding postscript:

"...you believe me, dontcha Lo?..."

"Course I do."

Said without forethought, in the same valiant voice that had denounced Kim Zimmer in front of an entire locker room. Said with an additional OOF, as Susie leaped onto Laurie's lap and buried her face into Laurie's neck.

It did put a whole new spin on the day's events if some guardian angel had stage-managed it all, sending Laurie home in the unscheduled nick of time to rescue Susie from

potential disaster; just as Big Sue had left the playground to save Laurie from the polite bad guy in the car outside McGrum.

But however comforting that notion might be, it did little to thaw the icicle-slivers that had entered Laurie's heart during Susie's professed confession—each a *Yeah right* or *I'll bet* or *Easy to say that NOW*, making Laurie writhe like it was an amateur acupuncturist's needle.

Maybe, though, these weren't lingering doubts.

Perhaps they were steps away from being *so dumb*—climbing the ladder, rung by painful rung, toward adulthood.

Grownups were more skeptical than kids, harder to hoodwink, and Susie'd always been that way: the big sister in everything except age and size. So possibly Laurie was just catching up mentally and emotionally, as Susie'd done physically last spring.

Which didn't mean that it didn't hurt like hell, there in the hot humid twilight, as she hugged her sister back and held on for dear life.

34

The White House

In what has been described at the last gasp of the Second Great Awakening, a group of missionary preachers led by Jan van der Lund left the fledgling City in 1853 to found a College of the Hereafter (later prosaically renamed Lakeside Central University) between the Hereafter Hills and La Cuna Bay.

That same year, an infant boy was found alone in a beached skiff on the bayshore, his parents presumably drowned. Adopted by the clergyfolk and raised as Whielding Wheaf, he graduated with honors from LCU and taught for awhile at its Preparatory Academy (later poetically renamed Front Tree Country Day). Able to discourse learnedly on many subjects and in several languages, Wheaf was a born teacher, but strongly felt that secondary education should not be restricted to offspring of the wealthy. He advocated establishment of a public high school in the village that had been laid out south of campus, originally named after the Bay but recently incorporated as the Township of Vanderlund.

His enlightened enterprise would be celebrated a century later by Dr. Hilde Krühler in *Being Cool with Your Public School*, but Wheaf's proposal was far from popular at the time. Much of the township's citizenry objected to what one contemporary editorial called "pampering foolish youth who ought better to be out earning an honest living by the sweat of their brows, than to waste taxpayers's money trying to con Latin and Greek."

Yet Whielding Wheaf was also a born wheedler; and by 1883 he had silver-tongued his way into becoming principal, faculty, and janitorial staff of the brand-new Vanderlund Township High School.

Housed at first in a single room above the post office, VTHS shifted to a lodge hall basement and thence to a sooty three-story structure on Junction Street, hard by the railroad depot. There it remained for forty years, tacking on annexes wherever another square yard or two could be cadged, as Vanderlund grew into a suburb and high school enrollment soared and more teachers were hired (too many for available space, never enough to meet demand) and the curriculum kept expanding. Emphasis always remained on the classics, but Wheaf was also a born innovator and added art, music, manual training, domestic science, physical culture, and commercial courses when each was considered an unverified novelty.

His pupils (whom Wheaf remembered individually by face and name, no matter how much time might pass between sightings) regarded him with a mixture of awe, esteem, and careful familiarity. As “Uncle Wheelie” he took part in baseball and football games with schoolboys on makeshift playing fields; and he was worshiped as a Norse god by two generations of schoolgirls, retaining his red-gold hair and beard well into middle age—though Wheaf claimed both turned snow-white the day he escorted the entire student body down to The City, waving a mass of Vanderlund pennants to let the Columbian Exposition know VTHS had arrived.

The World’s Fair had a lasting effect on more than Wheaf’s hair, though he kept this under his hat till a lavish banquet was thrown to honor the Class of ’13. For the first time, VTHS was sending more graduates to the Ivy League and Seven Sisters than Front Tree and Miss Startup’s Select School for Young Ladies combined. In part this was due to sheer numbers: the unexclusive firetrap on Junction Street now teemed with over 700 students, and even its coal cellar had been converted into extra classrooms.

Addressing township as well as banquet, Whielding Wheaf called on Vanderlund to rise to the occasion and recognize its transformative enhancement by the new sanitary canal, the new electric elevated train station, the new Torre del Oro Fountain at Spanish Castle Square. “Even as I have ever tried to bring out the best in our pupils, so surely can we provide them with a worthy new high school—the finest in The County if not The State, if not indeed The Nation—a veritable citadel of knowledge, built to outlast this century and provide unparalleled education to your children and grandchildren in ways we here tonight can but imagine. *Non scholae sed vitae discimus.*”

A born architect, Wheaf had begun drawing up plans for this ideal high school twenty years earlier, after being immersed in and absorbed by the Columbian Exposition's Court of Honor. He designed his new school accordingly as a Neoclassical Palace of the Beaux Arts, equipped with every modern convenience; able to accommodate two thousand students in spacious classrooms, laboratories, library, assembly hall, dining room, gymnasium, even a swimming pool; all of this framed by a vast pillared colonnade that would befit the front of a bank or church or state capitol.

Wheaf's silver tongue and roll of blueprints won over the Class of '13, the Board of Education, even the Township of Vanderlund. But while all agreed on the need for a new high school, and many favored building it on a scale of epic grandeur, there was no consensus as to *when* or *how* or *where*. Should it be north or south of the Channel? Close to or far from the business district (called "uptown" in Vanderlund; "downtown" meant the infernal City)? Soon battle lines were dug as deep as the trenches in France where Allies were squaring off against Central Powers, and with as little probability of a speedy truce.

Wheaf himself had his eye south of the canal and west of uptown, on a twenty-acre onion farm belonging to the comely though aromatic Widow Grooters; and for the next few years, with persistent diligence both onstage and behind the scenes, he wheedled her and the Board and the Township into an approximation of unanimity—

—only to see The Nation enter The War, and noncombatant construction suspended for the duration. By the time the Armistice was declared, everything had to be restarted from scratch; even the Widow Grooters (less comely by now, and more aromatic) had strayed into problematic negotiations with an encroaching onion-hawker.

And even as Woodrow Wilson suffered a breakdown while lobbying for the League of Nations, so too did Whielding Wheaf as he strove to turn his vision into reality, dedicated to Vanderlundian casualties Over There and their descendants unborn. Shedding tears freely and without shame, he exhorted ill-at-ease audiences to do their duty to the dearly departed. Widow Grooters penitently baked Wheaf a savory *Zwiebelkuchen* that some blamed for the stroke that relegated him to a rolling chair—"Uncle Wheelie" indeed—yet this crippling of the ex-Norse god generated enough pity votes to finally push the school bond issue over the top to victory.

“Iuventutis veho fortunas,” Wheaf intoned with a trace of his former verve at the 1923 groundbreaking ceremony. “I do not know the precise date of my birth—some would say it was seventy long years ago—” [Shouts of “No, no!”] “Well, in point of fact it *was*.” [Laughter] “Pray allow me, however, to consider myself reborn on this most glorious of mornings. Today, my friends, we all bear the fortunes of youth!”

Resounding cheers, and anticipatory thankfulness that he didn’t keel over dead till a week later.

Whielding Wheaf lay in state at the old school on Junction Street, with an honor guard to ensure the candles around his bier didn’t set the firetrap ablaze, as four decades of alumni trooped past to pay their respects. He’d bequeathed his skeleton to the new school for anatomical instruction, but the Board declined this as “unseemly,” while reprimanding waggish freshman Chester Brockhurst for suggesting that Uncle Wheelie be given a Viking funeral out on the Bay—in effect, sending him back where he came from.

When this same Chester Brockhurst, by then an audacious junior, beheld the new Vanderlund Township High School at its grand opening in 1924, he announced that the resplendent edifice of pearl-gray brick and granite and terra cotta taught them one thing, for sure: VTHS was obviously an abbreviation of White House. “Perhaps President Coolidge might consider renting it as a summer home—if Silent Cal ain’t afeard of haints.”

God Almighty may have told Whielding Wheaf that *I have caused thee to see the Promised Land with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither*. Even so, Wheaf may not have fully heeded the divine dictum; for as his cherished Pantheon arose from what had been onion fields, and its noble Corinthian portico towered above Grooters Lane (now renamed Wheaf Avenue), workmen reported glimpses of a shadowy figure observing them from a distance—looking on, as elderly gentlemen are wont to do at construction sites, except this one seemed to be grading their efforts and advising them to excel.

During the next half-century his presence dwindled to a surname on a street sign, a portrait in the school lobby, and a frieze inscription above it urging the youth of Vanderlund to BRING OUT YOUR BEST. Farsighted as he had been, Principal Wheaf could not have foreseen that by the mid-Seventies, Monty Python would inspire students to repeatedly alter this motto to BRING OUT YOUR DEAD.

*

Orientation for 1977's incoming sophomores was scheduled for Saturday, August 20th, but got canceled on the presumption that most of them had already visited VTHS for sporting, dramatic, or musical events; while those who hadn't would doubtless find their way around soon enough.

This was a specimen of the cost-cutting policies enacted by Mr. Tuerck, new CEO of the Board of Education, who'd campaigned on a platform to "Face Facts"—namely, that the Baby Boom had petered out and local population was shrinking year by year as more people settled in suburbs further inland. Before long, Vanderlund would not be able to subsidize nine elementary schools and a three-year junior high; so consolidation and closures were on the horizon, just a few short years down the road. Even the renowned senior high would not be immune from belt-tightening—hence the economical kibosh on Orientation.

The new sophs, though stunted overturwise, had already chosen their courses the previous May; and when class schedules were mailed out, Laurie Harrison solicited everybody's itinerary so Alex Dmitria could assemble a collective timetable. For the lunch-bunch, the results were dismaying—they'd been divvied up and randomly reallocated.

Life had been simple at VW: three lunch periods, one for each grade. VTHS operated on a drawn-and-quartered format, assigning two motley grab-bags to Fourth Hour and two others to Fifth:

4A: 11:20 – 11:45	4B: 11:50 – 12:15	5C: 12:20 – 12:45	5D: 12:50 – 1:15
<i>Joss Murrish</i>	<i>Laurie Harrison</i>	<i>Alex Dmitria</i>	<i>Vicki Volester</i>
<i>Sheila Quirk</i>	<i>Fiona Weller</i>	<i>Robin Neapolitan</i>	<i>Samantha Tiggs</i>
<i>Crystal Denvour</i>	<i>Spacyjane Groh</i>	<i>Rachel Gleistein</i>	<i>Carly Thibert</i>
<i>Petula Pierro</i>	<i>Hope Eckhardt</i>	<i>Nanette Magnus</i>	<i>Delia Shanafelt</i>
<i>Irina Saranoff</i>	<i>Becca Blair</i>	<i>Gigi Pyle</i>	<i>Britt Groningen</i>
<i>Buddy Marcellus</i>	<i>K.C. Battenburg</i>	<i>Jerome Schei</i>	<i>Arlo Sowell</i>
<i>Phonsie Alphonse</i>	<i>Matt LaVintner</i>	<i>Skully Erle</i>	<i>Rags Ragnarsson</i>
<i>Sell-O Fayne</i>	<i>Split-Pea Erbsen</i>	<i>Mike Spurgeon</i>	<i>Marshall McConchie</i>

You couldn't get much more haphazardous than that. And this was just a sampling: almost 700 other tenth-graders plus maybe 1,500 upperclassmen would be scarfing down with these four grab-bags in the VTHS refectory, all jumbled up like leftover stew.

Small comfort to Vicki and her bunch, who'd taken for granted that they'd be able to stick together at midday. But their diaspora had already begun: summer vacation or no summer vacation, they were all too busy to arrange what Joss called a "preunion" until Friday the 26th. Even then, Alex couldn't make it (out of town with her Scout troop) and Crystal was away breaking up with Rags ("this time for *good!*") though she invited everyone *else* to her family's annual Labor Day weekend barbecue. Even the antisocial Robin looked forward to this; Crystal's father Jasper Denvour, an oversized tympanist with The City's Symphony Orchestra, manipulated his grill like he did his kettledrums, and Robin was always susceptible to large men who made lots of noise pounding things.

This included pizza dough, so on Friday the 26th she and Fiona and Sheila and Laurie and Vicki and Joss preunited at Deeple's on Steeple Street, a venerable senior-high hangout around the corner and down a couple blocks from VTHS. Sitdown traffic was light that afternoon, which it assuredly wouldn't be for the next dozen Fridays; so they were able to grab one of the big semicircular booths—probably for the only time, as sophomores—and lay bets on how long *this* breakup-with-Rags would last, while waiting for their Deeple's Special Supreme Pan Pie. Robin, by craning her neck, could monitor the pounding of the dough by a hefty teen *pizzaiolo*.

"Lookit that guy—he could be Nature Boy Rutherford's big brother, if he had one."

"Big sister, you mean. That's *Ermyntrude* Rutherford—check out the boobs."

"Ermynt-yerass, Quirk! Those aren't boobs, they're *pecs*, and I call dibs on 'em!"

"Look again, Robbo—pecs *bulge*, boobs *bounce*. With all that jiggle she could be Charlie's Ugly Angel."

"*Uffa!* You Irishers can't appreciate what it takes to *impastare la pasta*. I bet you'd use a ROLLING PIN—when you aren't bopping each other upside the head with it!"

"Better a rolling pin than a bowling pin! How many gutter balls did you and your pasta-squishing hands rack up *this* week?"

“Oh you two, you two—how’ll the rest of us be able to enjoy lunch at school without your daily dose of badinage?”

“(Badinage? Like trussed up in black leather?)”

“No, *purple*—you have GOT to wear those purple combat boots the First Day.”

“Yeah, y’know, get off on the right foot—”

“(Nobody’s gonna get off on *my* feet, thank you—)”

“Do they really make purple patent leather combat boots?”

“(Deep Purple.)”

“Smoke-on-the-Water Purple.”

“(Noooo—House-of-the-Rising-Sun! We’re not going through this again—)”

“Oh hey!” [Singing along with the jukebox:] “‘*Up in the mornin’ and out of school / The teacher is teachin’ the Golden Rule—*”

“Yeah Laurie—yeah Laurie—yeah Laurie—”

“Oh quit it, I like this song. ‘*Ring, ring goes the bell—*”

“Oooh, ‘cause it’s your ‘n’ Buddy’s sonnnng?”

“We do not have a ‘sonnnng,’ I just like it is all. ‘*Hail, hail rock ‘n’ roll*’—and it’s whatchamacallit too, don’t you think? ‘Pertinent’—is that the right word?”

“(No—*purpletint.*)”

“That one line sure is—‘*deliver me from the days of old.*’ I mean, are they EVER gonna get tired of the freaking Fifties?”

“Hey, did you catch that *Laverne & Shirley* rerun in the haunted house? ‘Beware the Legend of the Ramsdale Hairy Thing!’”

“I’m being serious here! Next week we start going to an *old, old* school, and you know how I feel about antiquated buildings—”

“(You must hate this place, then. Looks like it could’ve been *his* pizzeria, back in the Fifties)”—with a nod at an impromptu wall shrine to the late Elvis Presley, dead these ten days. YOU’RE RIGHT, WE’RE LEFT, HE’S GONE.

“I make an exception for eateries, so long as the food is fresh.”

“Speaking of which, are they ever gonna give us our PIE?? It’s been half an hour and I’m like starving here, I didn’t eat anything since breakfast.”

“Trying to skinny down to a size three before the First Day?”

“Don’t joke about stuff like that, you guys. Nanette Magnus used to starve herself and stuff, it’s unhealthy.”

“What, and her biffing around with Boffer Freuen *isn’t*?”

“Is that the clown who looks like a smeared Xerox of Rocky? Eww.”

“Yeah, but seen Nanette lately, like at Petty Hills? She’s in great shape now.”

“(Finally let herself grow an ass?)”

“Feef!... but yeah, sort of. Boffer’s always got his hand on it, when they aren’t playing tennis.”

“*Eww!*” went the bunch, followed by “*Ahh!*” as their Special Supreme was delivered. Even Fiona waded into this, though with a mutter-remark that they’d each grown a pound of ass already by inhaling Deeple’s ambiance for thirty minutes.

Then for the next fifteen, conversation was reduced to commentary on the pie, comparison to past pizzas at rival parlors, estimation of how much more ass-poundage was being added with every bite, and innuendo (by Robin and Sheila-Q) about the piemaker’s potential as an ass-pounder.

Vicki turned a mouthful of cheesy sauce into earnest entreaty: “You guys—no matter what happens to us at senior high, even if they don’t ever give us the same lunch period, we need to keep doing things like this together. I know we’ve all got other friends and’ll be making lots more, probably, but... I’d’ve been lost at VW, if not for you guys.”

“Me too,” smiled Joss.

“Same here,” added Laurie.

“Way to make us blush, Loopy.”

“Your face is always red, Robbo, even when you aren’t gulping down pizza.”

“That’s with *rage*, Quirk! Soon as I get my Sweet Babboo, I’ll be making you ride in the *trunk!*”

“(Don’t worry, nobody’s moving away or anything,)” Fiona pointed out. “(Since I couldn’t stay in L.A., that is—)”

“*Say goodbye to Hollywood / say goodbye my baby—*”

“Yeah Sheila—yeah Sheila—”

“Um... senior high won’t be that bad, will it?” Laurie asked. “I mean, they don’t still have hazing and Hell Nights and stuff like that, do they?”

“Meg claimed they put her through a Hell *Semester*,” said Joss. “Course, this is the same Meg who swore that ‘Pucker Up’ Endell secretly tape-recorded everything she said.”

“‘*Pucker Up*’???”

“(And was he? If he was a he?)”

“He was a he *and* a perv, so very possibly. Though he must’ve been truly warped to want Meg’s braying on tape.”

“Well, nobody’s gonna bug *me* in any way shape or form, and live to tell about it!”

“(Riiiiight. Bugging you is *our* job, mine ‘n’ Q’s)”

“And we do it so well, Feef!”

“Watch it, you two! There’ll be room in that Fury’s trunk for both of you!”

“So... you *don’t* think the upperclassmen’ll pick on us?”

“Not if we pick back!”

“Not if we pick *first*!”

“Yeah, remember Rosa Dartle—she wouldn’t let anybody push her around, not even Steerforth!”

“*Remember Rosa Dartle!*” chorused the bunch, before resuming their assault on Deeple’s Special Supreme.

*

One of the creepier aspects of Elvis’s death (creepier even than his kicking the bucket while straddling a toilet) was that it happened on Tricia’s nineteenth birthday, or what would’ve been if the Volesters had taken overt notice of that occasion. It was almost as if Tricia’d *caused* him to die, to make room for a new star in the entertainment sky—not that Elvis had done much sparkle-shining lately.

So Vicki’d thought at the time; so she thought again, distractedly, while waiting with Alex at 7:40 a.m. on Tuesday the 30th for the Big Green Limousine to appear at the Foxtail bus stop on Lesser Drive.

VTHS, apart from sports teams and the handicapped, offered no transport service; the bulk of its student body was either driver’s-educable or had their licenses, and those without

cars or bikes were expected to stock up on rolls of quarters and dimes for the 35¢ youth fare. (Such rolls, held in a clenched fist, also made a handy deterrent to an aggressor's groin.)

Alex of course had wanted to *run* the three miles to VTHS, but Vicki'd prevailed upon her to make a proper First Day entrance. They were clad in patriotic variations on aquamarine and gold, the senior high colors (same as the Volester bathroom's): Vicki wore a jade romper jumpsuit with yellow accents, and Alex a turquoise knit top with buttercup cuffed shorts. Plus an expression of radiance that outsparkleshone even the Dmitria norm, since Alex harbored no qualms about their reception by the occupants of the White House.

"We're going to have so much fun! This is going to be the time of our lives!"

And other axioms to similar effect. Leave it to Alex to associate *so much fun* with going to school—especially the First Day at a new (Joss would say *old, old*) school.

The Big Green Limousine, mercifully on time, trundled into view; as did a figure racing up the sidewalk alongside it. This enlarged to a cobalt skimmer containing a young black female who clearly wasn't cut out for cross country. "Running like a girl," as an epithet, might be hotly resenable; but seemed apt for the ladylike flaps and flails propelling this latecomer and threatening to lose one or both of her shoes, if not the satchel jangling dangerously from its shoulderstrap.

devil with a blue dress blue dress blue dress

devil with a blue dress on

echoed in Vicki's brain for no good reason, as she raised a hand in what she hoped would be taken as reassuring encouragement.

The bus, outpacing Blue Dress, pulled up and opened its door to the still-chattering, unusually-oblivious Alex. Vicki followed more slowly, pretending to fumble for her quarter and dime, eliciting an annoyed grunt from the driver but giving Blue Dress enough time to catch up without losing shoes or satchel—though she risked bursting her bustline with puffy heaving wheezes. Facially as well as bosomly, she looked a lot like Thelma on *Good Times*, complete with a beauty dot over one eyebrow.

Then she sank into an open seat by Artie Rist (oh grohhsss!) and was lost from sight as Vicki trailed Alex halfway down the aisle. The back of the bus was already crowded with

Carly Thibert and her male devotees on one side, and LeAnn Anobile and her less numerous, less particular adherents on the other.

“Here okay?” asked Alex the wilderness guide, and Vicki shrugged off a knapsack (full of minty-fresh school supplies) so there’d be room to fit beside her. How on earth would this be do-able while wearing a winter overcoat? You’d have to balance the backpack on top of your head—

“Like my new hat?”

This from the straw fedora in the seat in front, which twisted around to reveal Spacyjane Groh’s delicate face and unfocused eyes.

Vicki let Alex dish out greetings and millinery appreciation for them both, while she assessed the significance (if any) of Spacyjane’s ditching the Annie Hall bowler and sharing a bus seat with—who was that, slumped against the window?—*Matt LaVintner*, who’d hitherto been dissatisfied by Jane’s being Spacy by nature, not from substances. And where was Split-Pea Erbsen? Of course, he’d been on the eastern X team at VW and thus unlikely to take this Z-country bus, so maybe Spacyjane’s seat-sharing was purely coincidental—

—except Jerome Schei didn’t seem to think so as he boarded at the Eugene G. Green stop, waving a transfer and halting in his aisle-tracks at he spied Matt and Spacy, till he got shoved onward by Buddy Marcellus and Howard Ullmann. You could almost sense Jerome trying to open telepathic hailing frequencies with Laurie and the rest of the Gossip Brigade.

Matt came to with a sudden snort, croaking “Root beer!” at Spacyjane, who reached into her big embroidered haversack and drew out not a bottle of Filbert’s but a bag of brown Jelly Bellys. Which Matt started wolfing down (heedless of Alex’s gentle remonstration that they weren’t the most nutritious breakfast food) as the bus crossed Mullein Road, spanned Petty Bridge, and turned northeast onto Panama Boulevard with a screech and a honk.

Alex, ever on sentinel duty, elbowed Vicki and gestured at the window, through which they could see Robin and Fiona swooping past on Margutta scooterback.

“So reckless,” Alex tut-tutted.

So long as they stay WRECKless, thought Vicki, worrying how Robin would behave once she got behind the wheel of her ’61 Plymouth Fury.

On through the open-air Tunnel of Sighs; on through the ornamental pine grove; on to the corner of Wheaf and Steeple, where other Big Green Limousines were converging from every point of the compass. And out of these mobile fishbowls poured the carless bikeless scooterless nonpedestrian student body of VTHS, to stream toward the massive-pillar'd façade of their grand aquarium.

Alex glided through the engulfing multitude, exchanging cheerybabe salutations with everyone she met. Vicki too swapped a heap of hellos as she approached the looming portico: "Hey there!" "Nice tan!" "Good summer?" "Cute outfit!" "No, I haven't seen her yet," "Yeah, I'll tell her," "Which is your lunch period?" "Who've you got for World History?" "Save me a seat in Geometry!" "See you at practice—"

At least it's morning and the electricity's on. (Though there was the same sensation of swimming upstream as during last year's Back-to-School power outage.)

And at least I'm not lost and alone in Baroque Vista. (Though there were the same Rod Serling-y contrasts of intense light and dark shadow—)

—as she almost fetched up against Thelma Blue Dress, who'd eluded Artie Rist's attempts to anarcho-syndicalize her, and was now in an isolated standstill staring up at the pediment atop the colonnade. Which proclaimed:

V A N D E R L U N D T O W N S H I P H I G H S C H O O L

Instead of ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE.

Even so, Thelma B.D. whispered "Oh sweet mother"—not as the opening line of a rousing alma-mater song, but a mournful verse from a funereal dirge.

*

Vicki'd planned to rendezvous with Joss at the lobby's western trophy case (more "inland" than the eastern one) but couldn't find her in the throng. Enrollment wasn't shrinking in *this* corridor, at any rate; navigating it was like threading through the Field Museum on field trip day, or the Cathedral of All the Stores during a bargain bonanza.

Then P-E-E-E-E-A-L went the bell, sounding like the fire alarm at St. Paul's Episcopal Church that time those altar boys blazed up too literally in the washroom. Except that here people started hustling to class rather than outdoors, so Vicki hustled with them up

to the third floor, located her locker, stashed a few items, then hoofed it to Room 312 for First Hour Spanish.

“*Sentarse en orden alfabético, por favor,*” requested Señor Banonis. His classroom was older-fashioned but more imposing than any at VW, with wall maps of Spain, Mexico, Central and South America that had sure-to-be-on-some-future-exam points of interest illuminated by Christmas-type lightbulbs. (How long would Mr. Tuerck continue to authorize electrifying *those*?)

Then too, Vicki’d expected this to be largely a sophomore class; but far more desks were tenanted by sophisticated upperclassfolk who looked on the verge of collegegoing. She excused herself through their urbane ranks to the rearmost alphabetical row, and was actually grateful to be seated once again by Carly Thibert—though that Caribbean Cutie’d been baked almost browner than Thelma B.D., so you couldn’t help recalling Joss’s prediction that one day Carly would blend in with a box of Raisin Bran.

“¡Hola! ¡Linda ropa! ¿Buen verano?”

Vicki’s other neighbor was a birdlike girl hunched over a big open newsprint pad, which she was artfully garnishing with colored pens whose residue stippled her fingers and arms and *Wimmen’s Comix* T-shirt. Even the tip of her nose, on which perched a pair of gaudy glasses that might’ve been swiped from Elton John.

“Hi,” Vicki ventured, lapsing into *Inglés*. “Remember me?”

Quick beady glance by the nearer bird’s-eye.

“Well enough not to call you ‘Velma.’”

This was Jenna Wibnitz, who’d been in charge of VW’s Stage Crew during *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown* the spring before last, and had earned Vicki’s envious admiration for her complete indifference to Candy Gates’s guff.

“*She’s* not here, is she?”—scanning where *alfabético* G’s might sit.

“I think she’s taking Italian, if they still offer it”—bird’s-eyes now darting back and forth between Vicki and the newsprint, on which a purple-and-orange Volester-vignette took rapid shape.

Jenna’d first been spotted (not to say smudged) at cross country meets, making charcoal sketches of Lisa Lohe and the Ladybugs in action. She was one of the few people

who could tolerate and even moderate Moana Lisa's ascetic excesses; and Lisa probably considered Jenna her closest friend, though disputing the way Jenna caricatured her.

"*Cálmate, comencemos*," ordered Señor Banonis.

Jenna began to doodle him in blotty ballpoint, sporting a matador's *montera*. Vicki smothered a *risita irrespetuosa* as Jenna captioned this A KIBITZ FROM A WIBLITZ IN THE BACK ROW.

She came from a famous family, being the youngest grandchild of Rabbi Philip K. Wibnitz, who'd been influential in establishing a Jewish foothold ("let's say pinky-toehold") in Vanderlund after its restrictive housing covenants eased. When this took place, Lyman T. Green had remarked: "Jews may be Jews, but Rabbi Pip is a pip." The rabbi'd responded that Lyme Green and the Real Estate Board must've allotted East Bay to the Jews because everyone would think it was east of the Bay—i.e., off in the middle of the Lake.

East Bay was in fact a respectable if outmoded district on either side of an avenue named for Balthazar Bay, who'd organized the local Merchants Exchange ("appropriate, nu?") that evolved into the Chamber of Commerce. Rabbi Pip led his flock to Balthazar's paved memorial, building Temple Beth Elohim on one corner of South Dock Street and a Community Center ("for the lost-and-found tribe of Israel") catty-opposite. A quarter-century later, the majority of Vanderlund's Jewish households still lived on East Bay or in its vicinity—including Jenna's optician parents, who indulged her with the outlandish sets of spectacles she rang daily changes on.

("She's the only Wibnitz who can see what she's doing," quipped her grandfather.)

Vicki, trying to pay conscientious attention to Señor Banonis, watched Jenna draw him a neon-pink cape and flutter it at an apathetic bull.

Then P-E-E-E-E-A-L went the bell and it was time for Second Hour Biology with Mr. Dimancheff, who honest to God looked like the Devil. A cruel smile greeted the all-soph newbies as they trooped into Room 208, saw his teeth and scrambled for sanctuary. Vicki was glad to be seated between nonchalant virtuoso Crystal Denvour and experienced practitioner Nanette Magnus, until Mr. Dimancheff parted his choppers and said:

"Do not get comfy-cozy. We are not here to be comfy-cozy."

Which he demonstrated by distributing a textbook whose graphic internal-organ illustrations Vicki flipped through with mounting horror; then by what he called an “exercise in arbitrary genetic classification,” designating lab partners alphabetically by *first* name. This resulted in Crystal being matched with Delia Shanafelt (who asked “Are we going to do skits? I love doing skits”) and Nanette with Petula Pierro (who sneered “They *beheaded* tennis players during the French Revolution, y’know”).

There were audible gasps when Fast Eddie Wainwright got reconnected to Tess Disseldorf, partly because many were surprised to learn that Tess’s real name was “Esther” like the aunt on *Sanford and Son*, but mostly due to her and Eddie’s romantic liaison having ruptured so vehemently at a recent baseball game that they were asked to leave the Friendly Confines.

“Aw come *ahn!*” Fast Eddie protested at the time and again now.

“Curb your impatience,” Mr. Dimancheff riposted. “We are not here to be impatient. Nor to do a square dance, so there will be NO ‘change-your-partners.’ You may all use the last ten minutes of this hour to take each other’s measure—and bear in mind that your *joint* efforts will account for twenty percent of your grade!”

(Nobody snorted at his stressing the word *joint*, then or afterward.)

Vicki wound up paired with Vernonique Smith, aka Thelma With The Blue Dress On, who also wore a reticent pokerface that admitted little or nothing from within or without.

Guess it’s up to me to make the first measure-taking move.

“Um, hi.”

Noncommittal nod from Vernonique.

“So... will you be catching the bus with us every day, at Foxtail?” *OhmyGahd I just asked a black person about BUSING.*

Warily softspoken: “No. Missed it at the stop before.”

“Sprangletop?”

“I guess. If that’s the stop before Kessell. Just moved here.”

“Oh well then, welcome to Vanderlund! I’ve only been here a couple years myself though it seems like forever, I live on Burrow Lane which is off Foxtail, but my friend Alex who was with me at the Foxtail stop? She lives on Sprangletop, like four blocks down and

four more over from the bus stop but she ran up to join me, she loves to run, she even wanted us to run all the way *here* this morning but I talked her out of it at least for today, so if you like you could wait with us or at least with me at Foxtail whenever you want if you don't have to y'know like run to get there in time from Kessell which *is* a couple streets after Sprangletop."

Two dark brows rose over two dark eyes, boosting one dark beauty dot a bit closer to the dark hairline.

I must sound like a crazy patronizer, no wonder she hasn't thanked me for holding the bus for her but maybe she doesn't realize it was me who did it, should I say something to find out?—no, 'cause I'm STILL talking about busing and need to change the subject FAST—

"I oughta confess right now that science has always been my worst subject, dunno why that is, I mean I didn't mind *Earth Science* last year 'cause it was all winds 'n' stars 'n' stuff, but *this*—" (holding up the Biology book of internal horrors) "—is just GROSS. I don't even like *cooking* that much when it involves raw bones 'n' giblets 'n' things, so I sure hope you're better'n me at dealing with it. Y'know, for both our grades's sakes."

After a pause, cobalt shoulders bobbed up and down. "'Spect we'll find out—"

—as her shrug bumped her satchel which tipped over and disgorged a musical instrument case that Vernonique had to lunge after and grab before it crashed to the floor. Cradling it to her chest, she blushed as brightly as any peaches-and-creamy blonde. (Not that Tricia'd ever deemed it necessary to blush.)

"Good save! What is that, a clarinet? Have you got Orchestra next hour, with Mr. Conzelman?"

"Um. No—an oboe. But yeah—next hour. You?"

"I don't, but a lot of my friends do. My best friend, Joss Murrish? She plays cornet and keyboards and is bound to ask if you have any brothers."

"...because?..."

"Oh well y'see she kinda thinks she has... African ancestors."

"...does she?..."

"Well... maybe if they were really, really, *really* NORTH African."

Twitch went the corners of Vernonique's mouth as she slid the oboe case back into her satchel, and nearly spilled it out again when the bell P-E-E-E-E-A-L'd.

"I know, right?" said Vicki. "See you later."

"Looks like it," said her lab partner.

*

All the way up to Room 416 and all the way through Advanced World History with Ms. Goldberg, Vicki rehashed this ten-minute measure-taking.

Not exactly CORDIAL, was she? Though I suppose I didn't make it any easier by chatterboxing like an idiot. And maybe she was scared enough as it is and trying to hide it—I know I'd be, if I was one of only a dozen or so white kids at an otherwise all-black school. Not that I'd be scared of them for BEING black, of course, but still you couldn't help but feel sort of inevitably excluded and outnumbered and so forth...

There were simply not a lot of blacks in Vanderlund. Like the Jews, they'd been explicitly barred for almost a hundred years (what Rabbi Pip called the NASJON Era—"Not a Single Jew or Negro") and even when allowed entry, they were nearly all sequestered down in Happel Land (as in *There is a Happel Land far far away*) between the Expressway and El tracks, just north of the Willowhelm border. Happel Land was by no means a slum; its residents were mostly professional people, albeit not in high-dollar positions. Rhonda-the-Roadrunner Wright's father, for instance, was a career counselor here at VTHS, and Claudia Thurman's mother was a buyer at the Lakeside Central University Bookstore.

Claudia herself was here in Room 416, filling page after page with notes as Ms. Goldberg discussed the rise of civilizations. Vicki'd served with Cloudy on VW's Student Council and they'd shared eyerolls at Sell-O Fayne's capers there, but that hardly enabled Vicki to stroll up and say *Please befriend my uptight Biology lab partner, you both being black chicks and so having more in common than I possible could*. No telling how Cloudy'd react to such a request, even euphemized; she'd freaked out last year and had to be sent to the nurse's office when computer wires got crossed and issued her Carly Thibert's abysmal report card by mistake.

Who else might Vernonique cotton to? (*Oops*—make that "get chummy with.") Maybe Willamene Fowler, who sang with the Mixed Chorus and Girls Glee Club at VW?

They'd have music to talk about—except that Willamene was a Baptist pastor's daughter and tended to work pieties about The Lord into every conversation, which could get monotonous especially for the uptight.

And if this morning's run-for-the-bus was any indication, Vernonique didn't stand much chance of being a top-drawer athlete; which meant no palling around with Henrietta Lang, who'd hobnob only with the best though her own drawer was more toward the middle of the bureau. Etta dwelled in the shadow of her older sister Louisa, a future Olympic medal winner who made Big Sue Baxter look petite; so Etta strove like Sisyphus to prove she was a Lang in her own right and not just Louisa's way-the-hell-distant runner-up—

—J-O-L-T by the Sisyphus boulder, waking Vicki to a guilty realization that World History had Advanced without her. This was an honors class too, so better hasten after those nomadic societies as they develop agriculture and permanent settlements. Ms. Goldberg's academic standards were every bit as high as old Mr. Koehler's, though he and she were at loggerheads on most current events and plenty of bygone ones as well. Instead of Z305's portraits of Washington, Madison, Lincoln, and Eisenhower, Room 416 had posters of Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Frederick Douglass, and Simone de Beauvoir.

Ms. Goldberg would certainly approve of your concern for Vernonique Smith, if not of letting it divert your awareness from the subject at hand. Others here would feel just as concerned—Alex for sure, Claudia Thurman and Rachel Gleistein, probably Hope “Esperanza” Eckhardt and the almost-all-powerful Becca Blair (who hadn't been on the bus this morning because she had upperclass car-owning suitors, such as senior Curtis Weatherly and his new Porsche). So there really was no need to worry, for Vernonique or yourself; not while you're surrounded by all these doers of good deeds and spreaders of good karma.

Wait till you trundle down to Room 221 for Fourth Hour Geometry with Mr. Rankin. Entirely different atmosphere in here: no twinkling maps or progressive posters or cross-sections of frog physique—just stark blank chalkboards. Mr. Rankin was starkly blankfaced too, except for a sort of furtive vigilance that denoted a member of the faculty liable to be consolidated out of a job. Vicki, not yet conversant with this woeful countenance, suspected Mr. Rankin of covert lechery and took a desk at an obtuse angle from his sightline.

“Aay Loopster!” went Robin, dropping into the seat to her right with a clatter of books, pens, and drumsticks on the desktop. Vicki’s initial gladness to have Robin there as a bodyguard (in case Mr. Rankin *was* calculating her jailbait proportions) gave way to a new worry: Kessell Road, to which a black family had just moved, was two blocks east of Pottage Road, on which Robin Neapolitan lived.

Now, Robin could not be tarred (as it were) with accusations of outright racism. If she had any awareness of Joss’s partiality to *The Horns of Africa* (so to speak), she made no taunt about it to Joss or Vicki or Laurie (who would’ve blabbed) or Sheila (who would’ve argued). Her ethnic slurs were limited to growly observations regarding “grape-soda-colored Cadillacs” and the like. Even so, Vicki still hoped the Smiths’s new home was considerably south of Villa Neapolitan. If, say, it were a couple blocks away from Alex’s Mission Revival house, Alex would be delighted and the three of them could wait for the bus at the Sprangletop stop.

Okay then: equilibrium restored.

Only to be re-upset a moment later by the sight of Gigi Pyle and Britt Groningen coming into Room 221 *together* and taking seats *side by side* while they conversed *with each other*; none of which had ever happened before (so far as you were aware) or was likely to portend anything good.

“Aay Smooch Smarks!” Robin razzed Britt. “Got your solid gold protractor?”

Dart—flick—gash went a sleepy little hatchet-honing smile, before Britt resumed whatever she and Gigi were shooting (or slicing) the breeze about. Possibly Floyd Lewis, who sauntered in after Mike Spurgeon and Brad Faussett as the tardy bell tolled, the three of them moseying studfully to the last remaining desks.

“We are here to geeOMMetize!” announced Floyd, alias Hiawatha, a title acquired from a jive-ass recitation in seventh grade. He was engaged in a perpetual audition for the role of streetwise swinger-pimp; yet Joss had tried on three different occasions to work up a crush on him, and failed each time.

(“Don’t mix castor oil with molasses when you’re trying to bake a cake,” she advised Vicki.)

That'd be *another* vicarious worry on Vernonique's behalf: the rest of the sophomore class's few black guys made Hiawatha seem like a longfellow.

There was Gabriel Bailey, a slovenly football lineman known as "Gutbucket," who brawled with teammate Craig Clerkington as regularly as the drill team did halftime routines. "I'd hate that fat bastard's guts no matter *what* color bucket he hauls 'em around in!" Craig once snarled, which was thought to be admirably openminded.

There was Marked-Down Mark Brown, bright and personable and eager to please, but also stunted and puny and prone to disaster. Some said VW never had a Phantom of the Sock-Hop, it was simply jinxed by Marked-Down's well-intentioned gaffes and blunders—such as when he unintentionally combined bleach with ammonia, causing the evacuation of a post-dance cleanup committee.

("Don't brew chlorine gas unless you're trying to re-enact World War I," Joss advised Vicki.)

And there was Harry Belafonte Jones, who styled himself "Sniper X" despite being a contender for The Cityland's Most Tedious Would-Be Militant. His dogmatic debates with Howard Ullmann and Artie Rist were more effective than Sominex at lulling an audience to sleep; even the most hardbitten bigots yawned at Jonesy's struggles to antagonize them.

("Don't try to set off a hurricane with baloney breath," Joss advised Vicki.)

This scarcity of great pickings (was that too close to "cotton to"?) might not pose a problem if Vernonique, like Willamene Fowler, wasn't permitted to go out on dates until she got married. Or if, like Rhonda Wright, she carried on several synchronized relationships with denizens of the "Spaghetti" (ex-Italian neighborhood) in Willowhelm.

"Guess this must be 'Geometry for Jiveturkeys,'" Robin reflected, loudly enough for Gigi and Britt to snigger at before Mr. Rankin called them to furtive order.

Chew broodingly on the tip of your Papermate through ho-hum folderol about shapes and spaces, till the next P-E-E-E-E-A-L sent you up to Room 325 for homeroom/study hall. Whoever heard of having homeroom in the *middle* of the day? Especially since they'd already taken attendance and aired P.A. announcements at the beginning of First Hour?

Theoretically you were supposed to rely on your homeroom teacher for day-to-day guidance and advice, but one glance at "Grandma" Ivy stuck a pin in *that* hot-air balloon.

She was the oldest instructor at VTHS, now that Miss Rosamond Ambrose had retired as choirmistress. Mumbles Metcalf, who'd had Grandma for Latin last year, said she *lived* in Room 325 because she couldn't squeeze out through its doorway, and was given a special burn-down-with-the-school dispensation during fire drills. (**HA!! HA!! HA!!**)

Unkind, yet not unmerited: Grandma Ivy was Vicki's first close-up view of morbid obesity. Which might not have been so bad if she hadn't resembled a supersized, superannuated, supermuttersome Fiona Weller. It was almost as if they'd imported a corpulent crazy-crone from a downtown El station and put her in charge of study hall:

"(Take a seat, boys and girls... nice and neat, boys and girls... watch your feet, boys and girls...")

Vicki scanned the room for a friendly or at least recognizable face. Upperclassmen lined the back row, some apparently zonked to the gills. Slouching among them was the infamous Bunty O'Toole, paring her talons with a stiletto-ish nailfile! But maybe she was just making a token First Day appearance à la Burris Ewell in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and would ditch homeroom for the rest of the semester.

Then in bounded Samantha Tiggs, hurdling behind the desk in front of Vicki's and spinning around to gush: "OhmyGahd ohmyGahd I just bumped into the most perfect guy! Like literally! Out in the hall! It was Tab Tchorz! 'Member the 'Polish Polecat' when he played basketball at VW? Now he must be six-foot-six! OhmyGahd he *picked me up in his arms* 'n' said 'WELL HEY THERE LI'L LADY' 'n' put me down 'n' went into the room next door, d'y'think he'll have the same lunchtime as us? What'll I do if he does? What'll I say if he talks to me again? OhmyGahd have you got a lipstick or something I can borrow? And tell me how to use it? I don't know beans about makeup, Laurie always has to help me, ohmyGahd I can't WAIT to tell her about this—"

Marvel at Sammi's saying more in one minute than she had over the whole course of last fall's cross country season. Double marvel at her doing it with such a smitten glow, and at its being ignored in the hubbub of people yakking and stoners snoring and Grandma Ivy's mutter-mutter-muttering.

Rummage in your purse for the emergency tube of Joss-gloss you keep for when you know she truly needs it. The tint ought to be right, Sammi sharing Joss's blue-eyed fair-

complected brunettehood, so hand it over with your compact mirror and brief how-to-apply guidelines—as you sense amusement to your left, and turn to find Vernonique Smith there. Looking a bit mellower than she had in Biology: maybe she felt more at home in a noisy undisciplined classroom. (If that wasn't too prejudiced a conjecture.)

“Oh! Hi! How's it going?”

Another shoulder-bob, this one less ill-at-ease. ““Kay, I guess. Met your friend.”

“Oh, Joss? In Orchestra class? Did she...?”

“Yup. Told her I *do* have a brother—who just turned eleven.”

“Oh no! *I've* got a brother that age! Is yours going to Dopkins, the grade school?”

“I guess. If that's the one closest to Kessell. Yours a pest?”

“That's putting it MILDLY.”

Another mouth-corner twitch upward—then sideways as Samantha swung back to exhibit a sumptuous clown-kisser and ask “How's this?”

“Um,” went Vicki. “Better blot it with a Kleenex. No, not like that—more like you're biting with your lips.”

“Oh right. I knew that. *Mmmm...*”

Mmmmandingo! Vicki dared not risk a lefthand peep as she made introductions:

“This is Sammi Tiggs. This is Velma Smith—I mean Veronique—sorry, *Vernonique*—”

“‘Nonique’ is fine.” Said with a smile in her voice, even if one wasn't on her unpeeped-at face.

“Hi,” said the blotted Sammi. “How do *you* think it looks, now?”

“Um,” went Nonique. “Better?”

On which note the half-hour bell signaled 5C's end and 5D's imminence and Grandma Ivy's mutters receding as her homeroomers trooped out and down to the ground floor, Sammi on the alert for her laggard Polecat every which way every step of the way. Nonique tagged along after Vicki, who'd packed a light lunch rather than trust steam counter fare this late in the day—the First Day, at any rate. Things *ought* to go smoother once you've been (belatedly) orientated.

The VTHS cafeteria was actually a bit smaller than VW's but far more seasoned, “grownup,” booming with deeper-pitched tones from verge-of-collegegoers. Its upper

reaches were decorated with murals (protected by clear acrylic sheeting: gift of the Class of '74) that depicted scenes from the history of Vanderlund—though not Joss's great-great-grandfather Barney Barnabas peddling cocaine products to town and gown.

Joss! Yearn as you might right now for her and the old lunch-bunch, there was no time to lose. A mural-man with a red-gold beard flourished a beribboned scroll at you, as if to say *Seize a vacant seat ASAP and regain your bearings later*. Good advice—it'd be much less pathetic to take a look-see promenade *after* eating, than to wander around with an unopened brownbag like a forsaken unfed pariah: one of your earliest suburban nightmares.

But *hell*—the tables were filling up faster than lifeboats on the *Titanic*! At one Carly and Delia were surrounded by guys of all sizes, with no room for even a petite stowaway. At another Rags and Arlo and fellow humongo-hulks left barely enough space for you to squeeze past. *So unfair!* "First come first served" might be reasonable in theory, but not when the boat deck was stacked against you beforehand. Which (not to brag or boast) wasn't supposed to happen to somebody who'd achieved a certain degree of popularity at VW—

Aha! Through the mob of lifeboat-hoggers could be spotted a kitschy pair of Elton John eyeglasses, adorning a little birdwoman hunched over a jumble of art supplies that spread out like spilled Tinker Toys over one whole uninhabited end of a table—

"Hi! Um—are all these seats being saved?"

"Help yourself," invited Jenna Wiblitz, gathering the jumble into an untidy pile, her birdy-head nodding at her wingless elbow as if Vicki'd booked a dinner reservation there and had arrived on time. Vicki slid onto the stool with a thankful sigh; Nonique, vacillating momentarily, took the seat opposite; Samantha (head still revolving like a lighthouse beam) clumped down beside Nonique and across from Jenna. Who, doodling with a forkful of something vegetablisth, said "You remember Snoopy."

"Hunh?" went Vicki, unwrapping a chicken hero.

"Here's the world-famous gourmet galloping though a dish of succotash!" said the girl on Samantha's other side, addressing her vegetables as "suffering" in a Sylvestery accent before she hurrahd *"Hey ray Michigander!"* at Vicki.

This was jolly Holly Brollis, christened Hilaria Joy, who'd begun laughing when the obstetrician spanked her newborn butt. She'd been treading the comedy boards since the age

of three, when she portrayed a small-scale Dewey Lake Monster for Bigfoot-seeking tourists in Dowagiac (“just up the road from Elkhart, Indiana!”). Holly’d stolen the show as Snoopy in *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, much to Candy Gates’s displeasure, and compounded that infamy here at VTHS last spring when she was cast as Zaneeta in *The Music Man* (“Yeee gads!”) while Candy Gates had to make do with fewer lines and less stage time as her kid sister Gracie, not at all graciously.

In her own *Charlie Brown* roles as publicist and Gates-gopher, Vicki’d admired Holly Brollis for her abundant talent and festive vivacity; while Holly, discovering they had a mutual birth state, invented what she called a “Michigander high sign” that she and Vicki could give-and-take. She extended it now, stretching out an exuberant arm that disturbed her succotash dish and also the person dining opposite.

“What are you DOING?” demanded Lisa Lohe, seated on Jenna’s other side.

“What AM I doing??” Holly in mock horror asked the guy on *her* other side.

“Saying howdy?” said Nelson Baedeker, Mumbles Metcalf’s ex, who still had a fuzzfree babyface and wore either the same Tequila Sunrise T-shirt he’d had on when Vicki first met him, or one distinctly like it.

“Oh, it’s you,” Lisa informed Vicki. “Sorry you didn’t make varsity.” (She didn’t sound particularly sorry, but then *no* sophomores had made the varsity volleyball squad, not even Alex.) “Have you signed up for any clubs yet?”

“I just *got* here, Lisa!” Vicki demurred. “This is my First Day!”

“No point wasting time,” said Lisa, who could never be culpable of *that* sin. Her austere focus shifted to Nonique, quietly munching a sandwich in the corner seat. “I don’t remember seeing *you* at tryouts,” she admonished.

Nonique, bristling slightly, swallowed her mouthful and said “Scuse me?”

“She’s new,” Vicki interceded, with a placating word of explanation (“Volleyball”) to Nonique.

“Oh. I don’t play,” said Nonique.

“What, anything?” critiqued Lisa, tightening already-narrow eyes.

“The oboe,” Nonique answered shortly.

Holly laughed, Nelson snickered, Lisa lost interest, and “Cool—wish *I* could,” said the guy on Lisa’s other side, whose face was so gruesome it passed through the spectrum into cuteness, like a mongrel dog’s. “Ever see Ray Still play Bach or Mozart live?”

“*Heard* him,” Nonique replied, with a reluctant yet unmistakable smile.

Link Linfold could cajole one of those out of almost any female, from nursery to nursing home. Benevolent-minded teens, taking pity on his ugliness, tried to be extra nice (exaggeratedly, as if to a deaf foreigner) and more often than not ended up cuddling with him.

“He may be the Missing Link, but he sure as hell don’t miss *much!*” hooted the school’s Phoebus-types, each secure that *his* Esmeralda wouldn’t get her bell rung by chivalrous Quasimodo—unless she took the initiative and did the P-E-E-E-E-A-L-ing.

Lisa Lohe never left an initiative untaken. Everyone at the table was aware of Sammi Tiggs’s wriggly fidgety surveillance of the cafeteria, but only Lisa snapped “Will you SETTLE DOWN, Samantha, or else go out and run it off—”

“THERE HE IS!!” went Sammi in a tornadolike stage whisper, midway between springing to her feet and hiding under the tabletop.

“There WHO is?” inquired the person sitting back-to-back with Jenna.

Vicki, looking over her shoulder, found herself abutting even more luminaries of the junior class; confirming her fear that she’d intruded into a precinct earmarked for her elders. Not to mention betters, for here were Cheryl Trevelyan and Mary Kate Hazeldene, the Betty and Veronica (not to be confused with Bunty and Vernonique) of VTHS—if you factored in a personality reversal.

Cheryl Trevelyan gave every impression of being a goldenhaired Girl Next Door: she dressed *au courant* yet resisted Farrahfication, retaining her bouffant blonde ponytail that jounced through every cheerleader leap and cartwheel. New acquaintances chose words with care when speaking to Cheryl, steering clear of profanity and vulgarity that might offend her tender sensibilities—until they realized she was in fact a hot-tempered oath-swearing virago with an extensive list of unforgiven resentments. Cheryl once challenged Gootch Bulstrode to a fistfight at a formal dance, and Gootch had to back off not just because you can’t hit girls (not in front of the whole country club) but also since he suspected that Cheryl, with her

hackles up, might be able to knock his block off.

Vicki'd run afoul of her during the '76 *Cicada* Queen campaign. Cheryl Trevelyan and Candy Gates were the archest of enemies, which meant Vicki as Gates-gopher was automatically excommunicated till she shamelessly betrayed the *Gentlemen Prefer GATES* slogan and other pantyhose-based electoral secrets. This won Vicki a reprieve that endured even after Cheryl finished third, while Candy Gates came in second to Meredith Wainwright.

"*Meredith!* Just because that bootlicking asskisser can do the splits!" Cheryl notified Vicki afterward.

Contrariwise, at first glance Mary Kate Hazeldene seemed categorizable as a sloe-eyed vamp, a killer-figured voluptuary, a carnivorous homewrecker who'd make women draw their menfolk defensively closer to prevent their getting lured into her fatal web.

In fact Mary Kate was Not That Kind Of Girl at all (other than the eyes and figure) but the best-belovèd virgin in Vanderlund, committed to sustaining her chastity till her honeymoon. Had she been present at the '76 *Cicada* Dance, Mary Kate would've been crowned Queen by acclamation; but that evening her twin nieces Iola and Iona were making their debut in a grade-school production of *The Prince and the Pauper*. They and the entire Hazeldene family urged Mary Kate to go to VW, accept her tiara, and catch *P&P* on its second night; she selflessly went to the premiere, led the ovation and presented the twins with matching bouquets. All the girls adored her, Cheryl Trevelyan treasured their friendship, and even Candy Gates had to love Mary Kate—not least for her willing absence from the limelight.

Today in the cafeteria she sat next to Frank Wharton, that all-around all-American leader-of-men who neither smoked nor cussed nor drank alcoholic beverages, but gallantly look care of his pals when they did the latter to excess. Cheryl was paired with Stuart Nugent (the Nude Gent) who gave Vicki a thrilling wink when she discovered him seated spine-to-spine with her. True, he was fully clothed and hadn't scored as many swimming, diving, or water polo triumphs as Laurie Harrison's faithless ex Tyler Canute; yet any girl at Maine Street Beach could testify that Stu Nugent did far more justice to a pair of trunks.

"Oh hell," he was saying here and now about Sammi's polestar, "it's the Cherry Picker!"

“*Cheryl Picker*,” amended Jenna Wiblitz, sketching Sammi’s infatuated gaze.
“I heard that, Niblets! You better take it back,” warned Cheryl.
“Blame it on the succotash,” noshed Jenna.
“Oh I’m sure! Look, what’s-your-name—”
“Samantha,” supplied Lisa Lohe.
“Gahd really, like the witch? Anyway—believe me, you don’t want to get involved with *that* turd.”
“Oh, Cheryl,” murmured Mary Kate.
“C’mon, the Pick’s not so bad,” said Frank Wharton.
“The *Prick*, you mean! He was bad enough as just a Polecat!”
“How big a patch / could a Polecat scratch / if a Polecat’s a flatch- / -ulent catch?”
wondered Holly Brollis.
“Booooo!” went Nelson Baedeker.
“Natch-u-rally,” added Link Linfold.
Vicki aimed a giggly eyeroll at Nonique, who *almost* rolled hers back.
“*Look*,” Cheryl fumed, “I’m just trying to let the poor kid know she can do better than Tab Tchorz is all!”
“But I don’t *wanna* do better,” wailed Sammi.
“It’s hard to kick against the pricks,” philosophized Jenna.

*

Sixth Hour then: all the way up to Room 403 and Advanced Grammar Composition and Literature. No teacher visible, but a large sign was propped on the chalkboard tray:

**SIT WHERE YOU CHOOSE
JUST BE QUIET ABOUT IT**

And there at last was Joss, in the Summer Youth Music Camp shirt you couldn’t talk her out of wearing, who said “(Watch out for Feef!)” in your ear as you exchanged a big hug.
“(What? Why?)”
“HEY, GIMME A CHANCE, I HAVEN’T SEEN HER ALL DAY EITHER!” blared someone who looked like Fiona and had on a Krewel & Unusual Punishment T-shirt like Fiona’s, but

smelled strongly of Listerine, Clorets, and Freshen Up gum—which Fiona didn’t usually gargle/suck/chew simultaneously. Of course, she never used to wrap you in a zestful embrace either, on the First or any other Day of school.

“(Feef! What’ve you been *doing*?)”

“DINING OUT,” Fiona replied *più forte*.

Out meaning in Bootleg McGillah’s Galaxie 500 Hardtop, sharing a papersacked bottle with him and Downtown (ditching homeroom to elongate her lunch hour) and Epic Khack and Razor Reid (Laurie’s delinquent former friend) and a junior who’d been born Marcie Loftus but now billed herself as Cramps Aplenty.

Vicki wouldn’t hear about this escapade till much later, since Madeline Wrippley entered Room 403 just then bearing a white styrofoam cup of acrid black coffee.

“THAT FOR ME?” asked Fiona.

“Well hardly,” huffed Madeline, setting it on the teacher’s desk.

“Not if I get to it first,” concurred Mrs. Mallouf, striding in after having disposed of several previous cups’s contents. “Obey!” she added, slapping the sign on the tray with one hand as she swigged this latest refill with the other, examining the class over its styrofoam rim. *So you think you’re honor students*, her bifocals seemed to sardonicize.

Snap of freehand fingers at Madeline, who picked up a padholder and called the roll, checking off each name with what-did-you-want-to-bet-was a Scripto mechanical pencil.

Talk about “no point wasting time”—SHE sure didn’t dilly-dally getting adopted as a teacher’s narc.

Vicki tried to keep one eye on Fiona (now playing air bass, with a fortunately muted *bum bum bum bum bum BAH bum*) while the other roved around the room during Maddie’s headcount. All the chronic English honorees were here: Conrad “Leadoff” Aabercrombie, Hope Eckhardt, Bennett Fayne, Rachel Gleistein, Buddy Marcellus, Marshall McConchie, Jocelyn Murrish (yay!), Owen O’Leary, Trina “Stop the Presses” Purcell, Jerome Schei, and so on. Absent, of course, were Anglophobic overachievers like Becca Blair and Alex Dmitria.

“Claudia Thurman?”

“Here,” said Cloudy, with a touch of *T’s-to-Z’s always bring up the back of the bus*.

“Victoria Volester?”

Split-second pause to contemplate whether to just say “Here,” or throw in a “VICKI” to show Miss Ominous Mouse you ain’t afeard of *her*—

—when the door popped open like Spacyjane’s puppet-bodice, and in sped Sidney Erbsen with both hands nebbishly loaded.

“I had to pull many thorns out of many paws to get you this bearclaw,” he told Mrs. Mallouf, plopping it on its napkin on its paper plate onto her desk blotter. “Let’s just give thanks that BooBoo had a booboo.”

“You are not in this class,” Madeline stated, brandishing the roster.

“I try to be in a class by myself, but they sent me here,” said Split-Pea, sailing his reassignment form (folded into a needle-nose airplane) straight toward her mousy face; which made Maddie drop Scripto, padholder, and a bundle of handouts that burst their rubber band as they hit the floor.

“*Hey!*” squeaked Madeline. “Pick those up!”

“Hang on a mo,” said Split-Pea, crouching by Rachel Gleistein’s front-row desk to confide that “Your slip is showing.”

“(Awp!)” went Rachel, still hypersensitive about lingerie exposure, as she tried to subtly tug at her skirt.

“Not that one—*this* one,” explained Split-Pea, extracting a slip of paper from one of Rachel’s textbooks. “Just as I thought—horseracing bets! Wrong, wrong, wrong: never put more than \$2 on a quinella.”

Rachel snatched back the blank bookmark he wagged reprovingly at her Queen-of-Sheba-ticked-off-by-Solomon scowl, which she redirected from Split-Pea to Sell-O Fayne. He was *supposed* to be her boyfriend and ready to deal with such annoyances; but Sell-O had his S-M-I-L-E trained across the aisle at Trina Purcell’s thighs, which might be less enticing than Rachel’s yet were far more on display. Beside her Jerome Schei was keeping happy tabs on all these shenanigans, including Split-Pea’s appropriating a few loose-leaf pages from Hope Eckhardt’s three-ring binder.

“You little schnorrer!” Hope chubbily squawked.

“Loose leafs cause griefs, Esperanza.”

“Mrs. Mallouf—”

“COMMUNICATION,” went their teacher, finishing her bearclaw and proceeding to outline how they’d spend the semester exploring this topic—other than through *déjà vu*:

Go, Speed Racers! Go, Speed Racers, go!

I TOLD you this was an old, old school, sub-griped Joss. Full of ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggèd Beasties...

“(Bum bum bum bum bum BAH bum,)” mutter-strummed the sobering-up Feef.

And Sixth Hour wound down with “Victoria Volester,” “Fiona Weller,” and for that matter “Madeline Wrippley” present in body and presumably spirit, yet unaccounted-for checkmarkwise.

*

Down to the depths then, to the ground-floor Girls Gymnasium for Seventh Hour Physical Education. This would be the last year before Phys Ed went co-ed as mandated by Title IX, and the Girls Gym became the *West* Gym. Even though locker rooms would remain segregated by gender, Vicki didn’t think she could cope with taking the same Gym class as guaranteed-to-be-sexist-nuisance guys; so she was completing her Phys Ed graduation requirement this year, unlike Joss who thought going co-ed was the best thing that could happen to Gym, and the *only* thing to make her positively anticipate taking it.

(“They’ll just behave like chauvinist pigs around you!” Vicki forecast.)

(“What’s the point of my being a Curlylocks if I can’t feed swine once in awhile?”)

(“That’s not how that nursery rhyme goes at all!”)

So Joss wasn’t in this Last of All Girls-Only Gyms. But here was Laurie Harrison, lamenting Mr. Dimancheff’s having partnered her with Lenny “Ooh! Ooh!” Otis in Biology; and Sheila Quirk, psyched that she and Robin were able to have an argument in German—well, not *in* German yet, which they’d decided to take for the guttural harshness it would lend their *Auseinandersetzungen*.

Here too was Nonique Smith, briefly revealing a plain white conservatively-cut bra and panties while changing from cobalt skimmer to hideous gymsuit. Her face showed no trace of embarrassment or any other emotion; but her eyes, to Vicki’s startled distress, were

rife with dampened pain.

“(You okay?)” Vicki murmured while they laced up gym shoes.

“(Doesn’t matter,)” exhaled Nonique.

Unsure how to respond, Vicki gave her a fleeting “Dopester salute” (light tap of knuckles to upper arm) which Nonique at least didn’t recoil from.

Something must’ve happened after lunch. Somebody’d said or done some tactless hurtful thing—Gigi Pyle maybe, or Britt making one of her *dart—flicks* tailored for skintone, or Irina Saranoff sweeping through the locker room with a toss of *The Hair* and a smirk at Nonique’s modest Afro, or any number of other malicious students/faculty/staff (hopefully excluding Robin Neapolitan). Then again, Nonique might’ve gotten crudely hit on by some brutish guy; or it could be her “lady’s time,” as Imogene phrased it in *Paper Moon*, sending her into a tailspin (so to speak) as used to happen every month to Feef.

Whatever was amiss, they had no time to chat about it now even if Nonique were so inclined. Vicki quickly introduced her to Sheila and Laurie as they headed through the swinging doors into the gym.

“What’s happenin’?” went S-Q, not waiting for an answer (that didn’t come) before hollering “Watch out, Irina! Your wig’s slipping!”

“Wish you were *my* lab partner,” Laurie moaned. “I got stuck with an ultracreeper!”

No reaction to that either; nor to this basilica of a gymnasium and its hanging banners commemorating victories of Vanderlund jockettes. Oh, surely Title IX had enough wiggle room (as it were) for girls to keep a gym *of* their own *to* themselves—

TWEEEEET!! TWEEEEET!!

—shrilled the tape-recorded overture from last spring’s *Music Man* Operetta, as onto the parquet floor flashed the irradiating refulgence that was Star-Spangled Celeste Schwall.

Alex and Becca Blair knew all about her; they’d compiled a Celeste Scrapbook in their kindergarten days, when she reigned supreme at VTHS. Not just head cheerleader and captain of the Girls Athletic Association, but unflagging crusader for pre-Title-IX rights of young women to compete in interscholastic sports. Not just Homecoming Queen, but The State’s Junior Miss; not just Honor Society frontrunner, but National Merit finalist; and though Most Likely to Succeeds didn’t generally return a decade after graduation to teach

Girls Gym, Celeste Schwall was doing so to substantiate her doctoral thesis on aerobic dance, the new exercise-to-music program, which she'd learned firsthand at Pepperdine from its creator Jacki Sorensen.

She expounded on this in a husky parade voice while executing various moves to snippets of "Seventy-Six Trombones," "Being in Love," and "Till There Was You."

*"Oho you Wells Fargo Wagon keep a-comin'—oho you Wells Fargo Wagon don't you dare to make a stop—*so long as you're working out at your own level, lay-deez! You can walk with this, jog with this, run with this, go at your own pace—so long as you stay active and upbeat! It will tone your muscles, train your hearts and lungs, strengthen your cardiovascular systems, and provide mental and emotional RELEASE! Try it with me!—"

Coach Celeste guided them through a stretchy twisty warmup routine, then marching in place while pumping arms and breathing deep, then some basic maneuvers—step touch, step out, heel back, V step—before heading for a cooldown. It left Vicki feeling invigorated and exhilarated; and Laurie's "That was *fun!*" and Sheila's "Bitchen!" suggested she wasn't alone.

"Emotion in motion, lay-deez! Constant movement to a music soundtrack! *That's* the key to rhythmic conditioning!"

(Thank GOD this was a girls-only class—imagine the hoots and heckles that last line would've reaped from guy-jekylls, whose Mr. Hydes would be bugging out at Coach Celeste in her ungymteacherish leotard and tights.)

"Now, those of you who like traditional calisthenics and lively games needn't worry—we'll be doing those too! And just to strike a regular note, let's take five to take roll!"

Giving each called-on student an incandescent Celeste-smile flavored with contagious optimism, till she reached the S's.

"Vernonique Smith?"

"(Here.)"

"Would you happen to be the Rebounder's daughter?"

"(SIGH.) Mmm-hmm."

"Cool!" beamed Coach Celeste. "Tell him 'Hi' from me, please! Enid Stott?"

“Here,” said Eeny, squinting across at Nonique with new interest, as did the more open-eyed girls who either didn’t need glasses/contacts or (unlike Eeny Stott) weren’t too vain/squeamish to wear them.

Vicki joined in the looking-with-new-interest, since she’d learned about the Rebounder while helping Alex with an essay for Miss McInerney’s class in eighth grade.

Vernon Smith had been one of the first blacks to letter in basketball at the State U. He went on to play one year with the Globetrotters, then two in Abe Saperstein’s American Basketball League, then four in the NBA (including one with the original Bull-onies), then eight in the ABA from its inception till just before its demise. He earned his nickname as “the Rebounder” not from outstanding prowess at tipping in missed shots, but for having repeatedly fought back from season-ending injuries to try again, usually with a different team. Frank Deford profiled his final comeback attempt a couple years ago in a drolly sympathetic *Sports Illustrated* article (“On the Rebound”) which Alex found inspiring and wrote a Lang Arts essay on. More significantly, it landed Vernon Smith a gig as broadcast pitchman—“Listen up, folks! This is the Rebounder speaking!”—for Universal Nutrition Markets, The City’s rival to GNC.

His happening to be Nonique’s father was a great relief to Vicki. A black celebrity (or even semicelebrity) should be welcomed into all but the snottiest or most bigoted neighborhoods, with no nonsense about property values being lowered. And Vicki knew for a fact that Robin enjoyed the Rebounder’s commercials, especially that one where he squared off “nutrition” versus “oldtrition.” So everything was going to turn out fine—whew!—and there ought to be no reason for Nonique to look so chagrined, blushing like cherries jubilee with dark eyes glumly downcast.

(Who’s black and bright and blue all over?)

“Myrna Yentlebaum?”

“Chookie!” caroled that unabashed bubbeleh, for the seventh time that day.

“Okay, Chookie!” smiled incandescent Coach Celeste, before rearranging her bright features along more somber lines. “Lay-deez! We need to get serious for a second!”

She was very sorry to report that a sixteen-year-old Multch Township girl who’d gone missing last week had just been found dead, her body hidden in weeds by the

Expressway near the New Sherwood Shopping Center. Not to put too fine a point on it, she'd been bound, stripped, sexually assaulted, stabbed multiple times, and shot in the back of the head. This tragic news came just three days after the discovery of a girl in the woods north of Green Town, similarly murdered just before her thirteenth birthday.

(Whimper from Laurie Harrison.)

It went without saying that precautions would have to be taken, whether these crimes were randomly unrelated or, as some thought, the work of a Son of Sam copycat. So please always remember and never forget: don't hitchhike, don't go out alone at night, don't venture off Auldforest's beaten track by yourself—

—and that only scratched the surface of the DON'T list their parents were likely to lay down once they heard about this. Vicki'd already received an earful from Felicia over the weekend about how to avoid American Nazis, who kept announcing and postponing parades with burning torches and swastika flags and so forth. They'd be mealy potatoes compared to a Son of Sam imitator preying on girls in the northern suburbs.

Of course you had to grieve for the two victims, their families and friends, but let's be honest here—there'd be no end of inconveniences till this killer got caught. No going out running by yourself, that's for sure; no going to the New Sherwood for the foreseeable future; you might not even be allowed to take the bus to school come wintertime (no waiting in the dark at the Foxtail stop) which'd mean a *parent* would drive you there and drop you off IN PUBLIC! Maybe they'd let Robin operate a car pool once she got her Sweet Babboo—but suppose Fat Bob nixed that deal, lest she be hijacked by murderous perverts? Robin would blow a gasket—and probably fly off the haywire-handle when she met Nonique, who'd feel even bluer about moo-hoo-vin' on up here to the north 'burbs...

So Vicki ruminated as Coach Celeste led them through a series of standing yoga poses to put their minds at ease: the Mountain, the Forward Bend, the Side Stretch, and a more challenging stance called the Tree which required balancing on one leg and should've been called the Shaky Flamingo.

"Everyone wobbles," Coach Celeste crooned soothingly.

Then a palms-pressed-together *namaste* (reminding Vicki of Yash Pramanik back in Pfiester Park) before most of them were dismissed, with the customary First Day shower

exemption.

“Everyone who’s staying for volleyball practice, please help me set up the nets!”

“That’s us, gang,” said Sheila-Q. “C’mon, Laurie, shake a leg.”

“But I can’t stop thinking about those poor girls...”

“I know, I know, we’ll say a prayer and light a candle for ‘em, but right now we’ve got nets to hoist.”

“Hoist? Doesn’t that mean like *steal*?”

Vicki was turning to join them when she almost fetched up (again) against Nonique, in another of her isolated standstills.

“Um... you not leaving?”

“No, we’re on the JV volleyball team and’ll be here till 4:30, but—”

As if this were the camel’s-backbreaking straw, Nonique swung around on a squeaky gym-shoe-heel and stalked away.

Vicki wavered irresolutely—*what more can you do?*—then said “Back in a minute!” and headed after her into the locker room, where outgoing Seventh Hour students mingled with incoming volleyballers in a clamor of babble and clanging metal doors. She found Nonique all tangled up in her cobalt skimmer, looking ready to cry with vexation/frustration/aggravation.

“Hold on—here, let me—” offered Vicki, tugging empty sleeves sidelong so arms could slide through suitable openings, then zipping it up the back and giving that back a diffident pat.

Nonique, facing away, in a harshly guttural (though not German) wheeze: “Y’don’t *have t’be* nice.”

“Course I do,” said Vicki. “I need you to save both our butts in Biology.”

Ladylike SNORT that trembled on the brink, then tipped over into a reluctant yet unmistakable snortle.

“Seriously, you’re welcome to stay and watch us from the bleachers, Joss’ll be there too, and after practice we’re going over to Panama Hattie’s for a pop and maybe a snack. Wanna come?” *While we still can, without having to find a pay phone first and ask PERMISSION to risk our necks while that damn Copycat-of-Sam roams The Cityland.*

“Can’t. Sorry. Got to get home.”

“Will you... y’know... be okay?”

“Oh well... like they say... ‘Tomorrow’s another day.’”

“So,” said Vicki, “see you then?”

“Looks like it,” said her lab partner, before hitting the bricks and flying the coop: bedeviled with her blue dress on.

35

Vo-Dee-Oh-Doe

“Ham ‘n’ Eggs” was the moniker bestowed by Chester Brockhurst, Class of ’26, on Hamilton Exelby, the second Principal of Vanderlund Township High School. There may have been some parallels between his predecessor Whielding Wheaf and Woodrow Wilson (especially retrograde ones, toward the end) but Hamilton Exelby cultivated a dynamic resemblance to Theodore Roosevelt, including the Bull Moose moustache and Square Deal pince-nez. He went so far as to purchase a Dutch Colonial manse that he couldn’t afford on Roosevelt Way, to house his suffragette wife and brood of irrepressible daughters.

The eldest and least docile of these was Phyllis, called “Flips” from early childhood for turning handstands and cartwheels before learning to walk—a pedestrian activity she would seldom or never resort to. By sixth grade Flips advanced head-over-heels to flapperhood by being the first girl in her class to bob her hair, while openly scorning the traditional rite of passage from short skirts to long:

“Say, listen—you can’t hardly *run* properly with hems down around your shinbones!”

When VTHS opened its mighty doors in 1924, Flips sprinted through them as pacesetter of the sophomore contingent. A very short time later, she marched into her father’s office with Miss Grissell the physical education teacher, to lodge a joint complaint about the unfinished state of the Girls Gymnasium.

“Now see here, Phyllis,” said Mr. Exelby, “it’s high time you learned patience—”

“Say listen, Pop! Everything’s jake with the *Boys* Gym—they’re already in there doing setting-up exercises—and they’ve got a dandy dressing room with lockers and benches and *plumbing*—hot AND cold running water! Where are WE s’posed to go and what’re WE

s'posed to use—the pump out in the back alley? I ask you!”

Mr. Exelby dared not inquire in Miss Grissell's presence whether Flips was reporting hearsay about the boys locker room and shower faucets, or if she'd barged right in and inspected everything firsthand.

Backed by her younger sisters, her mother (first president of the Vanderlund League of Women Voters) and Miss Grissell, Flips rallied the girls of VTHS to “show ‘em what we're made of”—literally, if necessary. This bodacious threat resulted in bathing facilities being hastily improvised in the basement boiler room, though it flustered Mr. Svensen the janitor and meant chaperones had to go on monitor duty, lest peepminded boys find excuses to venture into the cellar.

“Say, listen—if any of ‘em tries to catch *me* washing up, I'll turn ‘em into a *stag* and throw ‘em to the hounds!”

English teachers, while applauding Flips's grasp of mythology, urged her to set a less slangy and more grammatic example as the Principal's eldest daughter. She persisted in prefacing sentences with the same two words and so got dubbed the “Say Listen Girl” by Chester Brockhurst, who (in a long-afterward retrospective) admitted “this was not one of my more inspired sobriquets—but then Elinor Glyn beat me to ‘It.’”

Which Phyllis Exelby possessed in abundance, though she brought It more to bear on sports fields than in beguiling what she liked to call the “unfair sex.” Boys had a well-tended football gridiron at VTHS, to which girls were denied access except as spectators; *they* had to play “swamp hockey” on muddy trampled turf. The Boys Gym was ready for business on Opening Day; girls were obliged till almost Christmas to make do wherever they could—stringing up nets in the boiler room, whacking handballs against basement bulkheads, braving wet weather to race five times around the school grounds and then head for the Sendt Street Drugstore, to reward themselves with hot fudge sundaes.

Unfairest of all, Vanderlund's boy teams were charter members of the Northeast Suburban Townships League, while girls were banned from interscholastic participation and restricted to home-based tournaments—third-string seniors vs. first-string juniors, etc. That is, until Flips and her Class of '27 chose an all-star basketball roster and challenged their counterparts at Startup, Multch and Willowhelm to exhibition games (“not that we'll *exhibit*

anything, not in black bloomers and middy blouses”) for charitable fundraising. They even breached The City to fling gauntlets at the girls of Pfiester and Hartnett High Schools, before Mr. Exelby intervened to prohibit “barnstorming” as unsuitable for young ladies.

“Say listen, Pop! Would everything be jake if we got together to play no-holds-barred *tiddledywinks*?”

Pince-nez popping off Ham ‘n’ Eggs’s out-of-joint nose: “Go to your room this instant, Miss, and write out *I will not sass my father to his face* one hundred times!”

“How many times *can* I sass my father to his face?”

“PHYLLIS—”

“I’m going, I’m going...”

Eventually all the way to Wellesley, where she excelled at archery and crew and the newly-added sport of lacrosse. Phyllis remained in the East as a teacher, coach, longtime athletic director of Elizabeth Cady Stanton College, and indefatigable promoter of women’s sports through the triumphant passage of Title IX. Forever a contender, she then delayed retirement from Stanton till she exceeded the thirty-year longevity mark her father’d made at VTHS (though not the four-decade record set by Whielding Wheaf—so unfair!) and penned a parting manifesto titled *Why Walk When You Can RUN?*

To Vanderlund Township High School she presented the Flips Exelby Physical Education Trophy, awarded each June to the girl who, through inspiring performance and sportswomanship, exemplified dedication to the spirit of SHOW ‘EM WHAT WE’RE MADE OF. Anticipating the masculine snortles this spirit would continue to elicit, space was left below the trophy title and above the names of its recipients (among whom was Celeste Schwall, Class of ’68) for two stark unyielding words to be inscribed:

SAY LISTEN

*

“Ladies, be prepared to do a lot of pickin’ ‘n’ grinnin’.”

So advised Natalie Fish, captain of the 1977 JV girls volleyball squad, as its dozen members wriggled into what Coach Celeste declared to be the latest thing in sportswear: “compression shorts.” Supposedly these would provide you more freedom of movement,

quicken your reactions, prevent injury and reduce fatigue. Whether or not any of this proved true, it was immediately undeniable that they rode up your rear end faster than any cavalry coming to save the day.

Natalie Fish, planted in front of the locker room's lone full-length mirror, plucked her upriden seat outward and downward and watched over one shoulder as it snapped back into highrise place. "Yowzah! Anybody order a couple of squunched buns?" she asked her eleven charges, most of whom were trying to see their own skintight seats in what little of the mirror Nat's chassis didn't fill. (She was built less like a Fish than a momma penguin, which kept her from advancing to the varsity despite her powerful serves and dexterity as a setter.) "Whaddaya say, gang? Who's up for an hour of butt-bumping drills?"

"C'mon c'mon c'mon, give the rest of us a chance—*OH* yeah. *OH* yeah. Watch me shake it till I bake it!" went Sheila Quirk, gyrating her impudent Irish duff at the mirror as if on a disco dance floor.

"Be serious," urged Michelle Blundell, slightly incoherently as she bit the remnants of her fingernails. "If Coach says these'll 'enhance our performance,' we ought not to make fun of them." (To Michelle, every word out of Ms. Schwall's mouth was as trustworthy as a blown-out birthday candle.)

"Won't be *us* making fun," slurped Kirsten Ogilvie, wiping her mouth on her wrist after a lengthy detour by the water fountain. Thirsty Kirsten could chug an entire quart without pausing for breath, then perspire every drop of it during a match till even her kneepads got soggy. "It'll be everyone else making fun of *us*. Never mind—just hang loose," she told her teammates and soon-to-be-dampened keister.

"Are *everybody's* shorts too small?" Laurie Harrison wondered aloud, trying to adjust her pair to cover more fundament.

"*Mine* aren't," sniffed Henrietta Lang, whose skinny (she preferred "wiry") brown frame lacked a stereotypical black girl's backside.

"*Mine's* fine," chimed in Alex Dmitria, who also wasn't overendowed bootywise. (Maybe Craig Clerkington's ass-slap had permanently pre-compressed it.)

"They feel like regular shorts to me," said Pebbles Preston, for whom an extra-small size had to be ordered. Though in tolerably good health, she always gave the impression of

having just risen from a sickbed after a wasting fever sapped all vitality, except from her thatch of tangerine hair.

Ann Hew stepped up to the mirror, pivoted, glanced once over each shoulder, shrugged both and moved silently away. She was Ann-without-an-E Hew-without-a-Y, hence “Ann Who?”—and tended to blend nondescriptly into offcourt backgrounds.

Samantha Tiggs, as recently as a week ago, would’ve given anything to be that inconspicuous. If these highrise shorts had been available last Saturday, she might’ve quit the team rather than delineate her hindquarters in what was practically the lower half of a swimsuit. (Lycra spandex, after all.) But that was before Tab Tchorz entered the Cherry-Pickin’ ‘n’ Grinnin’ picture; so Sammi sidled her statuesque profile into reflective range with a pleased blush. “Laurie? Do they sell skirts that’d make my, y’know, bottom kind of um well *shape up* like these shorts do?”

“SuhMANtha!”

“I mean, since we’re going shopping anyway...”

(After practice they were scheduled to join Sammi’s delighted mother and sister for a belated back-to-school wardrobe revamp.)

Vicki Volester, loitering in the rear guard, heaved a deep sigh and finally took the looking-glass plunge. “Oh GAHD,” she quietly supplicated. *Tell me it’s an optical illusion. Let it be Sammi’s caboose superimposed on the mirror that’s as amazed as we all are by her 180 degree rotation (see? I’ve done my Geometry) so she suddenly WANTS to show off her bod. I mean, she’s six-foot-two and wears a D-cup; so let HER be the scrump-tilly-umptious one and leave MY cheeks out of it for Jesus’s sake Amen.*

A prayer that got punctured when Chookie Yentlebaum stuck her assistant managerial head into the locker room to shrill “They want your *tuchuses* out on the court, now!”

“The plural of *tuchus* is *TUCHI*, Chookie,” rhymed Natalie Fish, leading the parade of sculpted glutes toward the gym’s double doors. One posterior, though, lingered by the mirror while its owner deliberately yanked her shorts into a flagrant self-inflicted wedgie.

“IS!” brayed Chookie. “Get it in gear!”

IS indeed. Vicki averted eyes, head, and body so as not to be subjected yet again to the breathsnatching heartpiercing shock she got every time she caught a glimpse of Isabel

Carstairs. *Don't look at her. Don't think about her. Just keep moving—*

Hold back a bit, though, with the other sophomore JVs, to let the four juniors enter the gym first. Not so much from a sense of precedence or “age before beauty,” as to have Nat, Michelle, Pebbles, and Thirsty K bear the brunt of the varsity’s hoots and jeers:

“OOH la la la!—”

“*Dang*, y’all *sprang* yer *thangs*—”

“Di-i-i-rect from the Great Pumpkin’s Patootie Patch—”

“**HA!! HA!! HA!!**—”

“Shake shake shake, shake shake shake—”

“Move ‘em in, move ‘em out, move ‘em in, roundabout—”

“Keep them dogies rollin’, raw-HIDE—”

The lofty Biguns, clad in standard baggy practice shorts, peppered the Littluns with derisive commentary till Ms. Ramsey put a whistlestop to it.

“*You’ll* be dancing the ‘Tighten Up’ before the season’s through, if those skivvies work as advertised!” she remarked. Ms. Ramsey was a Phys Ed teacher of the conventional school, but kept an eye out for new winning edges. Even so, any Tightening Up by the Biguns would be *then* and this was still *now*; so most of them prolonged their smirks.

There were four juniors on the varsity squad, all veterans of the groundbreaking ’75 Ladybugs: Yvette Metcalf, Susan Baxter, Rhonda Wright—in spite of her manicure—and Lisa Lohe, who’d lobbied to have first crack (so to speak) at testing the compression shorts before the JVs got designated as guinea pigs. Vicki and Sammi were now under strict instructions to keep Lisa briefed (again so to speak) each lunchtime about how their shorts were shaping up (ditto ditto ditto). Lisa too was on the *qui vive* for winning or at least *starting* edges:

“There may be only six starters per game,” she’d confided on Friday, “but that doesn’t mean they have to be six *seniors*.”

Lisa entertained grave doubts about how well the varsity’s senior sextet would cohere on the court. Two of them had concocted excuses from today’s practice, what with the Labor Day weekend having begun; but Ms. Ramsey’d threatened to discard any no-shows who weren’t certifiably unfit for duty. Which, to Lisa Lohe’s mind, was already a topic for

debate.

Take the varsity captain, Ginger Snowbedeck. This was a girl in perpetual motion, snapping her fingers like an appreciative beatnik, guffawing even louder than Mumbles Metcalf just now, seeking the thick-of-things whatever their environment—and exuding more ego than Kirsten Ogilvie did sweat. “Who needs modesty?” she’d say, grooving on her own dishabille as she ambled around the locker room after a shower, always the last one to get dressed. Ginger wouldn’t permit you to dislike her, but “feel free to be jealous”—of her looks, her build, her athletic and romantic prowess, her ability to party all night and skate through the next schoolday, playing better while hungover than any guy in her harem. If Ginger Snowbedeck had her druthers, they’d spend volleyball season wearing bikini uniforms at beach venues.

Gwendolyn Cokingham, by way of contrast, favored the forest (for the trees) yet always seemed to receive the splintery end of the stick. Three years ago she’d led the pack petitioning for a girls cross country program at VW, only to see its launch get put on hold till after her freshman year. At VTHS she’d mounted the same campaign and won approval last spring for a senior high cross country team—which Mr. Tuerck’s School Board aborted as “unaffordable.” Gwen then expected to be named the varsity volleyball captain as a kind of consolation prize—which Ginger Snowbedeck snapped up instead. So Gwen now bore a chip on her shoulder the size of a boulder (with a Sisyphus J-O-L-T) and was seldom at a loss for something to bitch about.

(To Vicki, she and Moana Lisa Lohe sounded like kindred soreheads.)

Acting as a buffer between Ginger and Gwen was good-natured Joyce Usher, she of the lopsided grin and cockeyed superstitions. Prior to every serve she had to bounce the ball twice with her right hand, spin it counterclockwise on her left, press it to her brow for three Mississippis, then (if Ginger quipped something like “Before we hit *menopause*, Ush?”) hold it for an askew-giggly “Now I’ve got to start over again...” And that was just serves; Joyce subscribed to a whole catalog of arcane rituals.

Two other Biguns (who’d’ve earned that distinction even if they hadn’t made varsity) were here to keep in shape for the next few months, having been penciled in respectively as captains of the basketball and track teams. Not that Amanda Pound didn’t take volleyball as

absolutely seriously as she did hoops: at the top of her voice, with next to no patience for human error, and none whatsoever for careless mistakes. Nor did Demandin' Amanda see the slightest point in Celeste Schwall's "yogaerobic ding-a-ling dance-alongs"—which pretty much cemented her enemyhood, so far as most of the JVs were concerned.

But they were all in awe of Louisa Lang, not least her kid sister Etta, who subsisted on infrequent words of praise doled out one by hard-earned one. Though never unfriendly, Louisa could go through an entire match (including the bus rides to and from an away date) uttering no more than the basic syllables of the sport—"Mine," "Yours," "Here," "Out," "Good" (if it were *truly* good). Comparatively speaking, she made Susan Baxter seem as loquacious as Laurie Harrison.

And then there was Mauly the Mauler.

Millicent Carstairs had been a stellar gem rising in the Startop sky, till she went berserk during a field hockey faceoff and knocked three teeth out of two mouths (neither of them hers). As this was her worst but not first such transgression, Mauly's parents were called in for a confab with the headmistress. Mrs. Carstairs, herself a Startop alumna, sought to smooth everything over; Mauly's father (an eminent oral surgeon whose offer to repair the dental damage at a discount had been spurned) took offense at the headmistress's "shabby misapprehensions" and withdrew both his daughters from enrollment. Now they were here at VTHS, Millicent wreathed in Lydia Languishtude when a blood-red battle-glint didn't derange her eyes, and Isabel—

—is situated squarely in front of you as the JVs take their warmup laps, except that nothing about Isabel Carstairs is square least of all her mega-wedgied derriere, and even from behind she looks exactly like—

(DON'T look. DON'T think. JUST keep moving...)

"Oh Lord," went Sheila-Q, focused not on Miss Doppelglüteser but the gymnasium bleachers. "Check out who's making another grandstand appearance."

Hobbling, wobbling, on the verge of sobbling: there swayed Doreen Jobling. Who should've been the fifth junior on the JV squad, had she not ensnared a foot in her seatbelt while leaping out of the car after acing her driver's test. Result: one broken ankle, sidelining Dory for at least six weeks from driver's seat *and* volleyball court. Three of the six weeks

had passed, but she was still in a cast and using crutches—plus plenty of handkerchiefs to blot away nonstop tears. Everyone'd made a big fuss over Dory the first time she bravely creaked in to watch practice, yet it was no fun hearing her weep while you were trying to concentrate on pass-set-hit drills.

"At least *she* doesn't have to wear *these*," murmured Vicki, with a fanny-wag that made Sheila snortle, since Dory (unlike her nautical namesake) was not flat-bottomed.

"We've got enough fat-asses on the team as it is. Dunno if they'll help us play any better," said S-Q, re-gyrating her duff, "but I betcha we'll pack more *guy*-asses in the stands than the varsity does! Specially with what *we*'ve got to offer—"

BAHDEE contact contract

SIGN IT on the dotted line!

BAHDEE contact contract

SIGN IT on the dotted line!

(And an audible honk-in-the-hanky by Doreen Jobling.)

*

Lights. Camera. Action.

Fast-forward through practice and the rest of Labor Day weekend.

The invisible director of the *Whale of a Time* series must've traveled up from Fort Lauderdale to shoot *The Second Week of School (Which, Like the First, Starts on a Tuesday)*.

By mixing and matching last week's outfits, Vicki and Alex were able to dress patriotically yet not repetitively, this time to highlight the opening of volleyball season. On which, by mutual consent, they didn't dwell at the bus stop or while riding the BG Limousine or when they met up again in Third Hour World History. Though Alex kept beaming and nodding and giving thumbs-up on anticipatory behalf of the Lady Gondoliers:

We're going to have so much fun...

Neither fun nor games was paramount in Vicki's mind that Second Tuesday. Again and again she gauged how deep the water'd gotten in each of her classes over the past week, and how long she might hope to swim forward against the current. She was maintaining pace so far, thanks to extra study time furnished by the three-day holiday weekend. But there

wouldn't be another of those for a month or more to come; and too much of the past three days had been devoted to you-guessed-it—fun and games.

Not every game had been fun for all. It would've been lots better if Rags Ragnarsson hadn't crashed the Denvour family barbecue and picked a fight with Crystal's new boyfriend, Judd "For the Defense" Courtney. Judd was too nice (as well as tall dark and hunksome, *plus* a senior *and* a starting cornerback—way to go, Crystal!) to do more than block Rags's punches and shove him backwards. However, this sent Rags tumbling heavily over an Orchestra Hall acoustician (the same one Meg Murrish had interviewed last February) who boxed Rags's ears and kicked him debilitatingly on the kneecap.

"He was *always* lame," Crystal insisted this morning before Biology. "I just didn't realize it soon enough."

"Soon enough for *what*?" inquired Nanette Magnus.

"And how soon'll Rags be ready to see other people again?" Delia Shanafelt wanted to know.

"Just as soon as he reattaches his BOLLOCKS," predicted Downtown Petula.

"Why, Miss Pierro—you've been reading ahead in the textbook!" rasped Mr. Dimancheff, entering the lab and the conversation with one of his pitiless piranha smiles. Which Petula returned, downbite for downbite: Mr. Dimancheff being her idea of an equitable teacher.

"(Do you understand any of this stuff about enzymes?)" Vicki whispered to Nonique, having read only so far ahead as this morning's topic.

"(Just that they come before *oh*-zymes,)" Nonique whispered back. With, when Vicki glanced up in startled worriment, a tiny closed-lip teehee: showing forward progress of her own against last week's tide.

More fun. More games. In Spanish, Jenna Wiblitz doodled little springs-for-legs critters whose arms stretched impossibly high toward zooming volleyballs. In World History, Becca Blair asked what sort of recreational pastimes had the ancient Egyptians enjoyed when they weren't making papyrus or mummifying cats. ("Competitive slave-driving," replied Ms. Goldberg.) Then came Geometry, where Robin Neapolitan was still laughing about Rags's barbecue debacle—till they heard a voice like a melting marshmallow

parfait go “Hiiiiieee...” behind them.

With a *crash-scrape-clunk* as Brad Faussett, Mike Spurgeon, and (to a carefully curtailed degree) Floyd Lewis clustered round the gloppytongued speaker.

“I ever mention how much Swiss Miss PISSES ME OFF?” Robin growled.

Ssshhhh went Vicki, though she had to agree. Swiss Miss had regrettable connotations dating back to cocoa-mouthburn in toddlerhood, multiplied by that Beastly study session with Roger Mustardman’s “taste the yo-de-lay-hee-ho” and Tail-End’s “it looksss like HOT TOMATO JUICCCCE!” Compounded now by this Swiss Miss Made Flesh—Lady Wish-She’d-Gone-to-Boarding-School-in-Switzerland—where, if she *had*, she wouldn’t be here now in Room 221, lurking in wait for you to turn your head and get zapped YET AGAIN by the blowdryer-in-a-bathtub thunderbolt that—

(wait for it)

(drumroll please, Robin)

—Isabel Carstairs was a dead-ringer lookalike for Patricia Elaine Volester.

Except that “Is” had aquamarine eyes instead of emerald.

Which, bordered as they were by goldilocks and goldibangs, meant her head was decked with Vanderlund’s school colors (as Alex had happily observed) even before she’d transferred over from Startop.

Make that *been* transferred over. Very much against her will, resisting every step of the way, even swallowing warm saltwater a week ago to upchuck out of coming the First Day. Not that Isabel’d been that fond of Startop either; ever since watching the made-for-TV *Heidi* movie back in first grade, she’d beseeched her parents to bankroll an Alpine education encircled by cheesemongers and cuckoo clocks. Far away from big sister Millicent, who alternately ignored and tormented her as Mauly’s pendulum swung from lethargy to mania, with pitstops greased by Lynndha Ednalino’s pharmaceuticals.

The Carstairs transfer to VTHS was convenient for Millicent, popping ‘ludes and schlepping around with Traversers when she wasn’t prowling over the volleyball court in search of quarry to mangle. But Isabel could only yodel to whoever’d listen—or pretend to listen, in the case of hornyboys—when she wasn’t drippety-dropping names, ranks, and society numbers:

“...my Granddaddy Altdorf went to Southwest Texas State with Lyndon Johnson and gave him the nickname ‘Bull,’ you can guess what *that* was short for, before he made a mint making bratwurst back in New Braunfels—Granddaddy I mean, not LBJ...”

“...then we went backstage after the *Rumours* concert and Lindsey Buckingham said to me, ‘You sure look fine, girl—lay-me-down-in-the-tall-grass fine!’ Wasn’t that sweet of him? Right in front of Stevie Nicks, too...”

“...oh, this old thing? I’d almost forgot it was in my summer closet—haven’t put it on since Pyro-theque Night at the Shoreward Club, and even then I got talked OUT of it to go swimming *au naturel* in the Bay underneath the skyrockets, such a fluorescent adventure...”

(At the Shoreward, mind you—not to be mistaken for the plebeian New Sherwood or picayune Petty Hills or uncouth Maine Street Beach. And the “old thing” in question? A bright fuchsia minifrock that Bob Mackie might’ve designed for an upscale cocktail waitress; it barely contained Isabel or covered her equally vivid/pricey/scanty lingerie. Sheila-Q thought Is wore This Old Thing to school in hopes of promptly being sent home, to change into something less “comfortable.”)

Needless to say, her brand of swankpalaver was meat and drink to Laurie Harrison. She scarfed down whatever braggartries Is dished up, as did Sammi Tiggs and nail-gnawing Michelle Blundell. Vicki tried to stay out of earshot, too often unsuccessfully, yet thankful that Isabel’s voice sounded nothing like Tricia’s—aside from a satirical pastiche Tricia liked to do of Blanche DuBois advertising Southern Comfort: “It’s terribly, terribly *sweeeeeeeet*—why, it’s a LIQUEUUUUUUUR, Ah believe!” (Glug glug glug...)

Isabel seemed piqued by Vicki’s static-electrified flinches whenever they happened to be vis-à-vis. But she asked no questions, and Vicki didn’t volunteer the info that *You’re a carbon copy of my older sister and also of our grandmother when she was a girl, so maybe there was a Kosnowski who changed his name to Carstairs way back and we’re like cousins or something, and oh by the way my sister posed stark naked for Playboy’s “Girls of the Big Ten” which those hornyboys clustering round you have probably committed to memory so don’t be surprised if they think YOU’RE related to “Lucia Vantrop,” better you than me, and thank God my parents are waiting for our home opener and won’t be at today’s away match ‘cause I haven’t figured out how to warn them about your superresemblance to Tricia that’s*

my sister who we don't talk a whole lot about anymore...

In Study Hall there was Samantha's new dress to praise: sea-green with lemon stripes, as befitted a good Gondolier. Apparently Laurie and the Tiggses couldn't agree whether vertical or horizontal stripes best befitted Sammi's anatomy, and so went with diagonal.

"Do you think they make me look crooked?"

"Hardly! That's a really great dress—"

"But is it *slimming*?"

"Sammi! You don't *need* to look any slimmer—"

"Oh, now I wish I'd got a, y'know, thingamajig" (stressed gestures) "pantygirdle!"

"Those're for old ladies," interjected Nonique Smith, after another tiny closed-lip teehee.

"Just put on your compression shorts," Vicki told Sammi. "*They'll* do the trick."

Which Lisa Lohe disputed at lunch, saying their trickdoing hadn't been tested yet under actual match conditions, just intrasquad scrimmages. But before Lisa's critique could continue, Mary Kate Hazeldene at the next table said "Let's ask Vicki!" and Cheryl Trevelyan ordered Stu Nugent to "Move your silly swimmer's butt" so she and Mary Kate could scoot over nearby.

"W-what?" Vicki stuttered, clutching her Tupperware cup of macaroni salad.

"Is this going to take *long*?" asked Lisa. "We're working on a game plan here!"

"Don't think long, think *tall*," said Jenna Wibnitz, quickdrawing a frowny Lisa-face glaring up at a ponytailed giantess.

"That better not be ME, Niblets!" objected Cheryl, who was the same height as Lisa if you deducted her bouffancy.

"We just wanted to ask," Mary Kate called over their heads to Vicki, "how well you know That Guy."

Cue the Marlo Thomas theme song as attention shifted to Rags Ragnarsson limping toward his table, using a cane to support the Ace-bandaged knee exposed below garish bermudas—and to bat away a barrage of wadded-up napkins from his hooting jeering jockpals. "Aw-REET!" they cheered as Rags socked one wad across the cafeteria and into a trash barrel. He started dancing on his good leg, cane shaken aloft like a devil's pitchfork, so

the faculty monitor took him into custody.

Cheryl and Mary Kate exchanged glances while Holly Brollis sang “*Yer blind, ump! Yer blind, ump! / Ya must be outta yet mind, ump!*”

“Ump...” echoed Vicki.

“Forget it,” said Cheryl, starting to scoot away; but “I still think he’d be right for her,” Mary Kate sweetly asserted.

“For WHO?”

For Doreen Jobling, who badly needed distraction from her heart-and-bodily aches. She’d been going with Larry Garrigan, though he was “Throb” no more—having dropped from toast-of-the-town in ninth grade to marmalade-side-down in tenth, to dumping Dory just before eleventh because he found her ankle-cast a “turnoff.” Rags Ragnarsson might be a year younger than Dory, with a learner’s permit instead of a license—both major impediments—yet he was big and manly in a doggish way (Dory loved dogs) and hey, they now had damaged limbs in common.

“We better go warn the poor kid he’s up for sale in the meat market,” Stu Nugent told Frank Wharton.

“Don’t you dare!” they were chided, as Mary Kate and Cheryl cross-examined Vicki goodcop/badcop-style: one probing into Rags’s virtues, the other categorizing his faults. Holly laughed her head off, Nonique undertook her third tiny teehee of the day, Jenna filled a sketchpad page with artistic commentary, Link Linfold soothed the fuming Lisa, and Sammi gathered everyone’s garbage so as to sashay her diagonal stripes past Tab Tchorz twice (forefront toward the trash barrels, flipside on the return).

Vicki, gobbling down pasta between Q’s & A’s, could only hope that a few carbohydrates would take hold in time for this afternoon’s volleyball match. She’d need all the energy she could get; senior high kept finding new ways to be exhausting.

*

Archbishop Houlihan Catholic School (*Disce aut Discede*) was less than a mile south of VTHS, sharing Deeple’s on Steeple as a midpoint hangout; so the Vanderlund volleyball team could’ve economized by donning uniforms in their own locker room, bagging their street clothes, and jogging down the street to the House of Cardinals. But no, they were

required by statute to travel there and back by smelly Yellow Submarine—on which Joyce Usher *had* to sit next to the window in the second row behind the driver, lest a whammy fall upon them all.

They were herded aboard by Chookie Yentlebaum and the varsity manager, Gretel Hitchens, whom Mr. Tuerck would commend as a model of frugality if not stinginess. Heaven forbid you should act like Oliver Twist and ask for an extra orange slice between games. (The JVs gave bits of theirs to Thirsty K so she wouldn't perish of dehydration.)

Besides the two managers, two coaches—one doubling as trainer—and twenty-two players, there were also two representatives of the male gender riding the team bus. These were second-stringers for the *Channel* school newspaper, sent to cover the Lady Gondoliers's season opener. Aggravated feminist Gwendolyn Cokingham requested an explanation why editor Tilda Purcell hadn't assigned a couple of girls (such as kid sister Trina "Stop the Presses": all the Purcells were addicted to printer's ink) to do this.

"A very good, very apt, very spit-spat-spot-on question," said the second-string reporter. "The fact of the matter, the truth of the issue, the *gist of the pickle* is that your story is a blue-ribbon gold-star feather-in-the-cap frosting-on-the-cake jackpot of a PLUM, and I'm here to tell you that I stuck in my thumb and PLED for it!"

"BLED for it??"

"On my knees, on my elbows, from the tips of my toes and the end of my nose, using all the corpuscles I've been brewing up since I was a wee broth of a boy!"

"You are so weird," said Gwen.

Across the aisle, Ginger Snowbedeck had corralled the second-string photographer: "Which do *you* think is my best side? Not that I don't already *know*, y'understand, but I also know you have to take into consideration things like the time of day. angle of the light—"

"Phase of the moon?" suggested the photographer, whom Ginger didn't recognize but nonetheless was Split-Pea Erbsen.

"Direction of the wind?" contributed his colleague, with an even wider and more relentless smile than Mr. Dimancheff's, Jimmy Carter's or Sell-O Fayne's.

"What're you saying?" flared Ginger, who may or may not have recently applied an extra layer of FDS spray.

Her Q went un-A'd as the Yellow Submarine completed its short-haul cruise and docked at Houlihan. The *Channel* staffers held back to let the Gondoliers file out first, a mannerly courtesy undercut by the Smiler's rah-rah-ing them along with a fight song cobbled from Gilbert & Sullivan and sifted through Little Richard:

*You have hearts for us a-plenty
 We have hearts but all too few
 You are lasses four-and-twenty
 We alas are only two!*

*Hail, hail our gal-Gondolieri
 Benvenuti! Tutti-frutti!
 Accept our love, our homage and our duty
 Benvenuti! Oho-rootie!
 A-wop bop a loo bop a lop bam boom—*

To which several passerby Gondolieri replied “Give it a rest, Dennis,” or “Put a sock in it, Dennis,” or “You ARE so weird!”

Dennis Desmond was in Vicki's First Hour Spanish class, and she'd heard him hold forth in rapidfire *español* till Señor Banonis told him to ¡*Cállate!* He would've been a first-rate top-notch five-star Professor Harold Hill in last spring's production of *The Music Man* (so Jenna Wibnitz said and Holly Brollis agreed) if he had the slightest inclination to stick to somebody else's script and not veer off on a dozen different tangents of his own devising:

“He keeps cutting the brake lines on his vocal cords,” explained Jenna, illustrating this with a really gross sketch.

In other words he'd be the perfect guy for Laurie Harrison, who was lagging back to the end of the Gondolier line so Dennis might gravitate toward her. Less tentatively, Isabel Carstairs commandeered Split-Pea's focus with a sudden “Oops—I'm losing my skirt!” that *sounded* embarrassed, as she fumbled butterfingeredly with its hook and zipper long before reaching the sanctuary of the visitors locker room. Which, to Sheila Quirk's glee, was in fact the *boys* locker room:

“And to think Brother Huntley (we called him ‘Hot Lips’) used to chase me away from these very doors, when I tried to take an innocent peek inside!”

“It’s not worth it,” said Pebbles Preston, a fellow ex-Houlihanian, who’d used this locker room as a visitor last season and (per usual for Pebbles) appeared to be drained pallid by the memory.

“Are you kidding?” said S-Q. “Were you here when Josie Nygren reverse-streaked the place while it was full of guys? She was the only one there with any clothes on! *That’s* liberation, sister!”

Maybe so, but Vicki found it a creepy locale for changing into away jerseys: white longsleeved tops stenciled with “VTHS” and simple greenish numbers for the JVs (while the varsity sported gold-outlined-by-aquamarine numbers and unabridged “VANDERLUND”). Not to mention replacing skirts and jeans with compression shorts—baggies for the Biguns—in a room where hairy bare-assed males had exuded testosterone-cooties *within the past hour*. (And she’d thought sharing a bathroom with ONE Goofus was shuddersome...)

Pulling on her kneepads, Vicki pondered what she was doing here.

After the VTHS cross country program got terminated, she’d planned to sign up for intramural soccer to bolster her legs and lungs till track season began; but Alex and Sheila and Laurie had talked her into trying out for volleyball in early August, and the four of them plus unpushy Samantha worked so well together, so intuitively and coordinatedly, that Vicki rode their jerseytails onto the JV squad.

To be sure, she herself had a remarkable knack for digging and rolling: the defensive ability to prevent an opponent’s spiked ball from hitting the floor, even at the last fraction of a second, and without injuring herself in the process. Taller girls joked that this was due to Vicki’s being the shortest and thus the closest to the ground, but she credited it to all those years of ballet lessons. *Accroupis* down low—get your forearms or fists under the ball—bump it into the air—tuck hands and chin to your chest—dip one shoulder—roll over onto your back with knees bent—keep rolling till your feet make contact with the floor—give a push and spring up to standing. (Resist the impulse to make a *reverence*.)

“Good work,” Ms. Ramsey’d said, her highest accolade; but Celeste Schwall topped it when she arrived from Malibu and agreed to coach the JV lay-deez. “Watch Vicki,” she

told the others, and Vicki would demonstrate how to dig-and-roll. Only Alex could do it as well—at least until Doreen Jobling got replaced by doesn't-even-want-to-be-here Isabel, who (everyone soon heard from the Swiss Miss mouth) was a born gymnast, proficient on balance beam and parallel bars. Then it was “Watch Isabel.”

“Yes, watch me!”

Not if I can help it. What am I DOING here?

In the Houlihan gymnasium, which Vicki'd imagined might be like the vaulted nave of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, though showing open devotion to the Pope and maybe piping Gregorian chants over the P.A. system. In fact it was just an athletic-scented barn like any other, where players outnumbered attendance in the sparsely occupied stands.

The Lady Cardinals wore unflattering red jerseys and black droopy-drawers, so they had no business laughing at the sight of Vanderlund's JV hind-riders. Pebbles Preston greeted old friends from a distance, but Sheila-Q waded right into their midst and swapped hospitable wallops with Josie Nygren of reverse-streak fame, who'd had to endure even more Pussycat remarks than Robin “Don't Call Me Melody!!” Neapolitan.

“Hey you guys!” Sheila hollered at the Gondoliers, wrapping an arm around the neck of another Cardinal. “Member Ralph Monroe on *Green Acres*? Well, here she is—be sure to get her autograph—”

“That's RAPHAELLE, you Squeegee!” Miss Monroe reminded her, giving Sheila's wrap-arm a Robinlike punch.

Ordered to rejoin the visitors, S-Q claimed she'd been “scouting the opposition—y'know, *probing* them for weaknesses,” which drew a volley of Lady Card disparagement, while the Gondoliers filed away “Squeegee” for future abuse.

Coach Celeste summoned the JVs for a few encouraging words (play smart, do your best, work together as an ensemble, above all *enjoy* yourselves) before Natalie Fish strolled over to meet the referee, shake hands with the Cardinal captain, and win the coin toss for a “Perfect season so far!” as she told her fellow starters taking the court.

“*Fries—Fries—Fries,*” chanted Vicki and the rest of the bench. “*Sizzle to the skies!*”

This was not to acclaim potatoes served in the French fashion, but to give a cheer to their starting teammates. Two lineups of approximately equal skills had emerged during

mix-and-match training: one was the four juniors and two kid sisters, Henrietta and Isabel; the other was Vicki's bunch plus Sammi and Ann Hew. Natalie, laboring under an enforced diet in the hot August gym, had dubbed her group the Fries ("If I can't eat 'em, I'll *be* 'em") and the other the Broils ("Take care not to get *charred*").

Celeste's plan was to have the Fries play the first game and the Broils the second, making no substitutions to either lineup if possible so both could get a full workout. Those who played smartest ensemblewise stood the best chance of returning for the third game. Which might not be necessary: the Fries scored four straight unanswered points, and Natalie was still serving.

She'd mastered the difficult jump serve and delivered it with a Momma Penguin hop that made opponents giggle, even as the ball went *thunk* between or beyond them for an ace. Nat was even better at setting, so long as the ball got passed within her somewhat limited reach. "If I can *touch* it, I can set it up—anything from a volleyball to a tray of hot lasagna! (Oooh, lasagna...)"

Michelle Blundell played intently, earnestly, with Coach Celeste's words written across her apprehensive face (*above all I'm enjoying myself—above all I'm enjoying myself*). You could depend on Michelle to be there and be square, with plain reliable blocks and bumps. She followed every order to the letter and every leader to the limit, tending to the most tedious scutwork (like helping Chookie account for team towels) with dutiful nail-chewing thoroughness: no frills, no flash, no pizzazz.

The Houlihanians remembered Pebbles Preston too well to target her as a weak link, even when she glided up and down the court like the ghost of an unadopted orphan. Watch Pebbles soar up to intercept an incoming missile, her tangerine hair escaping from its tied-back bun, then take a rare stumble as she alighted—

"BERNADINE??" cried a nun in full habit, perched worriedly on the bottom row of the bleachers.

"I'm fine, Sister Loretto," said Pebbles with her usual wan smile.

"*Are* you fine?" asked Michelle, fingertips halfway to mouth.

"We're *all* fine," Natalie informed her, as the Gondoliers made it 7-2 on a clammy-handed roll shot by Kirsten Ogilvie.

“*Whuff*,” went Thirsty K, trying to wipe her palms dry on an already moist jersey.

“YEAH BABE!” responded Kirsten’s number-one fan in the stands.

The thing about Thirsty K was she never descended into gross-out saturation, even at the end of a match when her jersey would be plastered to her torso. (Coach Celeste had discreetly suggested she wear a seamless bra and apply bandaids to its contents.) After a shower, towel-off and blowdry, Kirsten was not only presentable but one of the cutest Gondoliers, with a beaming smile to match Alex’s. Her habit of chugging beverages indiscriminately might’ve left her prey to drunk-inducing scoundrels if she weren’t as good as engaged to Jake Korva—Tina’s older brother, the one whose Stratocaster Tina’d swiped for auditioning with the Rosa Dartles.

“SLATHER ‘EM, YOU THIRSTY GIRL!” Jacuzzi Jake bellowed, paying no heed to Sister Loretto’s scandalized reaction.

The Korva family had peddled hydrotherapeutic products since emigrating from Finland, and were really cleaning up now that hot tubs were all the rage. Jake, accustomed to casual nudity in saunas, was blasé about damp bare women till he met Kirsten Ogilvie and fell in love at first sweat. She in turn was mortified at being a natural-born steambath, till Jake convinced her it was a precious gift from the *schvitz*-gods.

“You *sure* you don’t mind?” she’d gasped through the fog of their First Time.

“Don’t... ever... change...” he eventually replied; later composing her a power ballad, “Ev’rytime I Kiss You (I Wanna Taste Some Salt)” —though he had to be careful about plugging in his electric guitar when she was nearby.

So Thirsty K basked in Jake’s adulation while trying to concentrate on volleyball placement, unaware that Isabel beside her was firing up the showboat for Jake’s benefit (and Split-Pea’s, and Dennis Desmond’s, and Brother “Hot Lips” Huntley’s, and every other male present’s).

Henrietta Lang took note, though, hissing “(Eyes on the ball!)” at Is.

“(S’what I’m doooooing,)” Is yodel-burbled back.

The two Kid Sisters were a contrast in more than black and white (or skinny brown and shapely peach). Etta could be prickly, irritable, averse to non-sports talk; yet in Louisa’s presence (and Louisa was watching the lines during the JV match) she sometimes

transcended her limitations, and did so today. Etta spent much of the Fries game airborne, not soaring like Pebbles but *clawing* her way up to smack spikes down onto the Cardinal court. She racked up almost half of the Gondolier points—the score was now 12-5—and had to struggle not to look smug while patrolling her zone of the net. *Who's aiming for top drawer of the bureau NOW, hunh? Somebody answer me that!*

Henrietta prowled like a jungle cat, a Lang among Langs. Isabel pranced like a high-struttin' filly, a tease among Fries. She kept her uniform on but performed as though it were coming off, tweaking jersey and shorts after every play with that same “Oops—I'm losing my skirt!” attitude. *Her* bra, unlike Kirsten's, had detectable seams and straps and more underwiring than a double sump-pump; and while most of the Fries were compression-wedgied by now, Is's was the deepest and most vibrant. Tricia herself could not have done a better job of attracting notice from the sparse-though-it-was audience.

Which included Joss, waving a long stick with an absurdly small “V” pennant on it; and Spacyjane Groh, whose star-sapphire gaze was fixed unblinkingly on Isabel. Not like a hornyboy's, but because Joss'd said “(*Aaagh!* It's Floramour, come to life!)” when Is first joined them in Advanced French class. “(Wouldn't that be neat?)” Spacyjane had replied, taking a sheaf of Floramour photos out of her haversack. And from some angles the china doll *did* look uncannily like Isabel Carstairs.

“Spacyjane didn't, like, *show* the pictures to Isabel and *say* anything about them, did she?” Vicki'd asked.

“No, Space thinks that'd ‘break the spell’—she'd rather believe some Blue Fairy turns Floramour into a Real Girl who follows us to school every morning, then goes home and turns back into a doll before Space gets there. So mum's the word—at least as long as Floramour's lips stay zipped.”

“Well... that's a relief, I guess...”

They watched Isabel contort gymnastically and scoop the ball ceilingwards for Henrietta to claw up and slam down, winning the game for Vanderlund 15-7. Off came the Fries to receive plaudits and orange slices (Chookie risking Gretel's wrath to slip Kirsten an extra one) and on went the Broils, along with Lisa Lohe to call lines. She gave Vicki a narrow-visaged glare that clearly said *Take plenty of mental shorts-notes*.

(*Gahd! Talk about putting my ass on the line...*)

“*Broils—Broils—Broils,*” chanted the Fries around citrusy mouthfuls. “*Mighty fightin’ goils!*”

“Did they just call us ‘mighty *flighty*?’” Sheila asked as the Broils took their court positions: Vicki, Laurie, and S-Q in the back row, continuing clockwise to Ann Hew, Sammi, and Alex in front. Houlihan had the serve to start the second game, and sent the ball straight into the net. Side out and serve changed: Vanderlund rotated, bringing S-Q forward to leer at the crestfallen Cardinal frontliners, and Alex backward to exemplify how service shots *should* be made, placed, timed.

The other Broils put on a display of close-order choreography, marred only by a few hits that went out of bounds. It really did feel like taking part in a dance troupe’s recital, using the volleyball as prop and impetus for all the steps and moves: everyone working in synch, even Ann Hew whom you hardly knew but was *where* she was supposed to be *when* you wanted to bump her a pass or set up a shot. Samantha played superconfidently, in her element, all shyness shed; Laurie made bolt-upright leaps like a true bunny-girl; Sheila capered, cavorted, and coruscated without cutting entirely loose; Alex was quintessentially Alex; and Vicki kept the impetus-prop in play with seven consecutive digs-and-rolls.

The Gondoliers scored fifteen points in less than fifteen minutes, winning the second game and with it the JV match. Final count was a wider-margined 15-5, meaning the Fries owed the Broils a pop, which Natalie would probably say meant *one* pop to be shared by the six of them. For now, the victorious Broils took their orange slices up into the stands behind the Vanderlund bench, while the rested Fries went to shag balls during the varsity warmup and then call lines for *their* match. Which might last another hour or more.

Vicki’s gametime euphoria leaked away like the innards of a punctured balloon. She now had to sit through the varsity match; then try to clean up in that cootiefied locker room; then take the Yellow Submarine back to school—again required by statute, this time through rush hour traffic unless the match ran *extra* long—and then get home from there. Despite some sentiment for going out to celebrate the season opener as a squad if not a team, it was still a School Night: homework awaited, as did housework (if you expected to receive any allowance this week) and besides, if you started partying with Ginger Snowbedeck, you

might not reach home till the dawn's early light.

And THEN you had to do it all over again in just two days, at Multch West for the first league match; today's win didn't even count in the NESTL(É) standings!

What have you got yourself into??

"Jeez!" went Joss over your shoulder. "Who's that?"

"Oh Lord," Sheila snortled. "It's Boomer, making a grand entrance after pregame prayers! The Biguns're gonna get their clocks polished!"

"Sssshhhh," cautioned Alex. "I know she's very good, but she's only one person."

"Betcha the pop we won from the Fries that Boomer beats the Biguns in two."

"Sheila!"

"I'll make the bet," offered Spacyjane. "That girl has a brittle aura."

"Boomer" Wrang (christened Petronilla and voted Most Likely to Vanquish an Army) sublimated every carnal yen into able-bodied righteousness. Imagine a Joan of Arc twice as tall, twice as lean, and extremely longer-armed than usually pictured, replacing her suit of armor with an unflattering red jersey and black droopy-drawers, and you'd have the varsity Cardinal captain.

Try to set the night on FIE-urr! sub-sang Joss.

Oh shut up.

YOU shut up.

"Sorry we're late," apologized a gargoyle, looking as if he'd rushed over after ringing 5 p.m. in St. Benedict's bell tower.

"Melvin! I haven't seen you in forever," said Spacyjane.

MELVIN? thought everyone who hadn't known Link Linfold's real name, while he and Spacyjane snugglehugged.

"Do you pray?" chirped a little bird with spearmint breath over Vicki's other shoulder. Vicki turned and found Jenna Wiblitz wearing a pair of specs with frames like miniature scoreboards.

"Pray? Um, kinda—not like they do here, y'know..."

"Well, pray or wish or knock on wood that She gets some playing time. Otherwise we're in for H-E-Double-Hockeysticks."

They eyed the back of Lisa Lohe's head as She took a stoic seat on the Gondolier bench, while Ms. Ramsey sent in the six seniors to start the game.

Planning for this match, Ginger hadn't discounted Boomer Wrang's prominence; it'd been grappled with often enough in school tournaments and at beach competitions. "But this year we've got the Mauler," who'd bruised Houlihan on Startop's behalf in past matches. Today's began with a protracted rally, each side evaluating the other as the ball sailed back and forth, bump-set-hit bump-set-hit again and again and again till Vicki was ready to groan aloud—

—when *whammo!* Mauly drew first blood with a megaspikes that almost cracked the Houlihan gym floor. Cheers from the Gondoliers and calls for a shutout; but Boomer Wrang gave them an unruffled nod, a "Begone or I will make you go" indication such as Joan the Maid gave the English at Orléans, and then began to return FIE-urr.

Vanderlund stayed in contention, yet couldn't catch up as Houlihan steadily mounted their lead to win the first game 15-10. With Lisa Lohe having spent precisely zero time on the court.

"*Not* good," twittered Jenna, flipping to a fresh page in her sketchpad and taking out a new charcoal pencil, having smudged much of the previous one over her hands and face. "Knock on wood harder."

"Maybe we should slip them our shorts," Isabel could be heard oozy-cooing at Split-Pea and Dennis, as she pretended (Vicki *hoped* she pretended) to wriggle hers down past her hips—a Carly Thibertish antic greeted by squeals from Laurie, lower-key equivalents from Sammi and Michelle, a FLASH by Split-Pea's camera and uncompressed observations by Dennis Desmond.

At least this put some smiles on Vanderlund faces: the last ones for awhile.

The most charitable thing sayable about the second varsity game was that it went by quickly; the secondmost, that Spacyjane didn't mind owing Sheila-Q a pop.

Mauly Carstairs started shooting wild, nearly braining the referee with one errant projectile. Gwen and Amanda started calling for and charging toward balls in each other's territories, colliding with Joyce whose jinx-evasions left her unguarded. Ms. Ramsey started shuttling in subs, who fared no better if not worse—Mumbles took a Boomer-bomb smack in

the breadbasket, her **OOO!** resounding through the gym as she bowled over Pebbles the linesperson, both of them hitting the deck (with Sister Loretto's shrill cry lending the **OOO!** a reverb aftereffect). Lisa *finally* got sent in, the last Bigun to play, virtually warbling

GIMME THE BALL

GIMME THE BALL

GIMME THE BALL

YEAH!

from *A Chorus Line* (Holly Brollis would be gratified). But the other Gondoliers couldn't even manage a simple pass by that stage of the rout, and the Cardinals didn't send the ball Lisa's way till Boomer nailed one last undiggable spike right at her toes: winning the game 15-zip and the match two-to-none.

Bloodcurdling scream from Lisa Lohe as she stared down at the great white goose egg, tearing her hair with both hands like a scene out of the Bible.

"¡Ayyyyy, Vicki!" breathed Jenna in spearminty Spanish.

"Aye-aye," Vicki glumly agreed.

"This is going to take more than orange slices to put right," predicted Melvin the Missing Link.

*

Next morning, for the first time since Vicki'd known her, Jenna Wibnitz came to school wearing plain-framed glasses—which made her look quite pretty, especially since she hadn't yet daubed herself with charcoal or Magic Marker.

"It was touch and go for awhile, but She survived the night," Jenna was telling Vicki before Spanish, when Dennis Desmond brought his wide bright teeth over to cut in:

"¡Hola, Jenny Wren! 'La persona de la casa, modista de muñecas y fabricante de acericos y limpiaplumas ornamentales, estaba sentada en su curiosa butaca baja, cantando en la oscuridad, cuando llegó Lizzie. La persona de la casa había alcanzado esa dignidad, a pesar de sus pocos años, por ser la única persona digna de fiar de la casa'—"

"Don't call me 'Jenny Wren.' I am not a crippled blonde," Jenna said flatly.

“*‘Su verdadero nombre esa Fanny Cleaver; pero hacía tiempo había elegido aplicarse el nombre de señorita Jenny Wren’—*”

“What do you WANT, Dennis?”

“Why, just to have a WEE WORD,” he gleamed incisorly, first at her, then at Vicki who couldn’t make head nor tail of the preceding dialog. Not only was she unacquainted with *Our Mutual Friend* in any language (what did Jenny Wren have to do with a crippled blonde?) and distracted by memories of Joe Silvertooth in Fort Lauderdale, but Dennis spoke Spanish as speedily as Mrs. Dmitria’s *conversaciones* with Alex.

“Um... yes?”

“Spread the wee word—broadcast the little news—disseminate the teensy tidings—that the photos of yesterday’s match should be ready for your kudos by *tomorrow’s* match. I’ll admit to being dubious of young Erbsen’s aptitude for photography and taking him to be a mere apprentice paparazzo, but—”

“*Cálmate, comencemos,*” requested Señor Banonis.

Dennis broke off and moved away toward the front of Room 312, causing Diana Dabney to yelp and shimmy as she tried to sit behind the desk beside his.

“*¿Qué pasa, Señorita Dabney?*” asked the teacher.

“I got PINCHED,” reported Diana, with an angry moue at her neighbor.

“*En español, por favor.*”

“Uhhh... *me... me pelican... no, ¿pelicannon?*”

“*Pellizcaron,*” Señor Banonis corrected her, before ordering Dennis to cease and desist.

Diana belonged to the junior class snottyclique, so Vicki disliked her as a classic Duckweight (and therefore—a witch!), but a pinch in the classroom was still an infringement to be resented by all females. Particularly when the perp reminded you less of a Cuban hombre in Florida than Og the leprechaun in *Finian’s Rainbow*, which Joss had made you watch all the way through on the Late Movie because she liked the score:

*When I can’t fonnndle the “hand” I’m fonnnd of
I fonnndle the “hand” at hand—*

Typical mannish-boy piggery. Speaking of which—

“Your kid brother’s my kid brother’s new hero,” Vicki told Nonique before Biology.

“Oh no,” went Nonique. “What’s he been doing now?”

Leaving his lunch apple uneaten, so Randle Smith could take it out on the Dopkins playground at recess (accompanied by Goofus, Breezy, Patches Rumpelmagen, and their sixth-grade gang) and hurl it up onto the school roof: a feat the other boys tried and failed to duplicate, splattering their uneaten fruit against the walls (on in one case, through an open window). So far no one had been caught at it.

Nonique burst out laughing—ruefully, but indubitably—and buried her face in her hands as if to deny this merriment. “My mother will *kill* him,” she said through her fingers. “And then my passed-away grandma will finish him off.”

No mention of the Rebounder; but at least Nonique sounded elated at the prospect of parental dander being shed onto a kid brother.

“So good to see so many of you looking so *mirthful*,” remarked Mr. Dimancheff.

“What say we clear our desktops off, off, off, and start our hour together with a POP QUIZ?...”

In World History Ms. Goldberg announced that another girl had been found bound and bludgeoned in the woods: this one still alive though unconscious and unidentified, and admitted to a City hospital as Jane Doe. After repeating the by-now-timeworn cautionary advisories, Ms. Goldberg went on to cite older correlations to barbaric depredations in Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome—till even the guys who doted on such talk began to squirm, and Becca Blair raised a stately hand to testify that “We get the picture.”

Alex, stepping up and down the aisles with an open envelope, collected donations for the poor unknown victim in the hospital and drafted Vicki to do likewise on the other side of Room 416. “I bet Caesar and Pharaoh couldn’t be any quicker about it than we are!”

““Those that with haste will make a mighty fire / Begin it with weak straws,”” warned Ms. Goldberg.

“(That sounds like an *English* quote!)” Vicki heard Becca cavil.

“(Oh, not in World History,)” Alex consoled her.

They were taking Honors Geometry and so missed Mike Spurgeon carrying Isabel Carstairs over his shoulder (breech first, skirt skittish) into Room 221 for Ordinary

Geometry. But Gigi Pyle witnessed this, and snidely derided it to Britt Groningen (who asked “Want *us* to put her down?” when Mike was slow to obey Mr. Rankin) since this was *not* acceptable public behavior by an ex. If Mike *must* carry on with other girls, let him do it clandestinely like he had last spring with Irina “Rat’s Nest” Saranoff.

“Who’d a thought Geometry’d be this soap-opera-ish?” Robin asked Vicki.

In Study Hall there was another new dress to admire on Samantha, this one a deep blue skimmer not unlike Nonique’s First Day frock.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Sammi asked her anxiously. “You don’t think people’ll say I’m being a copycat, do you?”

“’Spect they’ll be able to tell us apart,” said Nonique.

“I only got it ‘cause they told me it ‘brings out my eyes’—whatever that means.”

“I got mine ‘cause it brings out my *blues*.”

While they reviewed shades of difference, Vicki dealt with unfinished homework for Sixth Hour English, having run out of time to complete it last night. Natalie Fish said some of the JVs hit the books while up in the bleachers during varsity matches. Ms. Ramsey disapproved of this—“Keep your mind on the game, even when you’re not playing”—but it could be done surreptitiously, like passing notes in class. More easily during a home match, when you didn’t have to lug books to another school on the bus.

Useful advice, which of course didn’t come in handy *now* as you hurriedly prepped for Active Participation in a seminar discussion of the short story version of “Flowers for Algernon.” (Read? yes; summarized in notebook? yes; essay-to-be-turned-in-on-Friday begun? working on it.) Then its plot structure would have to be compared IN DETAIL to the expanded novel version’s later this month. (Looming on the horizon? yes—)

“*Amo, amas, amat, amamus,*” mutter-conjugated Grandma Ivy to an unseen legion of past Latin pupils. “*Quod erat demonstrandum...*”

Vicki dreaded going to lunch, but Jenna’d told her not to ditch it or sit at a different table—“I need all the help *She* can get.” True, Lisa Lohe was hardly Vicki’s favorite person in the world; yet she (Vicki) had always respected her (Lisa) and knew how painful that varsity Houlihan game had been (to them both). Also, Lisa allowed Vicki & Co. to sit at her upperclass cafeteria table, even if it was Jenna who’d issued the initial invite.

So: once more into the maw of dining *en masse*. Hoping it wouldn't be a maze like Charlie and Algernon had crisscrossed, with the cheese at the end poised in a mousetrap, and flowers needing to be planted on a grave in the back yard.

It felt like entering a house (or approaching a cafeteria table) of bereavement, where Mourna Lisa sat all in black, as did Jenna (except *her* T-shirt displayed the Batman emblem), and Holly needed every ounce of acting chops to keep a straight face.

Vicki, Tupperware in hand, felt she ought to be bringing a covered casserole with a Hallmark *My Sympathies* card. Yet no sooner was she seated beside Jenna than the somber mood got a big fat J-O-L-T when Rags Ragnarsson half-limped, half-bounded up to bark: “Hey there! How's it hangin'?”

(Cheryl Trevelyan had told Stu Nugent to go get Rags, so she and Mary Kate could check him out two-on-one and decide whether he was worthy of healing Doreen's broken heart. Stu, hungrier at that moment for lunch than for Cheryl, suggested she find a rope and lasso Rags herself. “Maybe I *will*, FOR myself!” she snarled, at which point peacemaker Frank Wharton went to bring Rags over—quietly warning him en route to watch his step: “The girls are trying to set you up with a friend of theirs.” “COOL!” responded Rags, taking for granted that any friend of Cheryl and Mary Kate had to be a high-caliber babycakes. And who did his Norwegian elkhound eye get snagged by but that little Stage Crew chick who usually hid behind freaky glasses, though today she had on a normal pair that *wow!* made her look even prettier than Vicki Volester beside her! This must be the friend Frank said the girls wanted to hook him up with! Probably too shy to approach him herself, too aware of being an “older woman”—probably sixteen to his *practically* sixteen. Well, one thing Rags Ragnarsson prided himself on [even with a bum knee] was putting ladies at their ease and doing it subtly, too. So he gave Cheryl and Mary Kate a humongous *I-get-your-drift* wink, halted at the end of his new lover-gal's table, and caused Vicki to drop a lunchbowl when he cleverly asked *her* how was it hangin'.)

Brief panic by Vicki, who liked Rags a lot but had never *like*-liked him, nor envied Crystal during their age-old courtship other than for having a steady(ish) boyfriend. Whose doggy-regard was riveted now not on Vicki, but...

“Um hi, Rags! You know everyone? This is Jenna Wib—”

“HEY THERE! *Nonna nonna nonna nonna!*” went Rags, mimicking the *Batman* theme as he gaped at Jenna’s T-shirt. She in turn made her friends gape by arching her back, shaking a lock of hair (now flecked with paint) over one lens, adding some Mae West to her birdy-chirp, and engaging in banal hackneyed repartee with this youthful swain—while scribbling on her sketchpad for Lisa and Vicki to read:

Think I can get him to pose in the row?

“Mmph,” went Vicki, cramming a paper napkin into her mouth.

“Sweets to the sweet!” pledged Rags as, at Jenna’s request, he limp-bounded off to buy her a big ol’ sugar cookie.

Whereupon most everyone at the neighboring tables gave way to hysterics. Nonique reverted to a closed-lip teehee, but Holly Brollis literally fell off her stool, while Lisa (who was seldom moved to more than amused exhalations) laid her head down between the trays and howled.

“NIBLETS!!” exploded Cheryl in an energetic cheerleader’s steam-engine whisper. “Why’d you choose *now* of all times and *him* of all guys to start acting like a SUCCUBUS??”

“Oh, Cheryl,” scolded Mary Kate.

“Wish I could say we *planned* all this to cheer you up,” Link Linfold told Lisa, as she began to regain composure and brush away crumbs.

“Who says we didn’t?” maewested Jenna. “Ooh, here comes my Sugar Cookie—”

*

After that, the seminar discussion of “Flowers for Algernon” seemed fairly sedate; though Vicki was annoyed that Madeline Wrippley didn’t have to be an Active Participant, since she was tracking everybody else’s input for Mrs. Mallouf. (You’d think someone as rodentlike as Madeline would take personal interest in a story about a mouse.)

Split-Pea Erbsen incidentally mentioned that Dennis Desmond had jumped the gun: “Yesterday’s photos will *not* be ready by tomorrow. For that matter, yesterday’s *laundry* won’t be ready by tomorrow, and yesterday’s future is going to let tomorrow’s bygones be bygones.”

He was right about the laundry, at least. Phys Ed was spent in the usual hideous gym suits (be sure to bring yours home on Friday and toss it in the washer), then volleyball practice took place in scrimmage togs that sounded as clean as they felt.

The JVs and varsity drilled at opposite ends of the gym, but Bigun backbiting filled every cubic inch to chomp at the ambiance like Michelle Blundell was doing to her nails.

PHWEET went Ms. Ramsey, before lecturing the entire team (especially the Biguns) on good sportsmanship “or, if you prefer, sportspersonship” (everyone glanced at Gwen Cokingham) and support for the program. Which is expected every day from each of you, banded together, not flopping apart! If you want individual notice, earn it with *teamwork*! Refrain from arrogance and arguments—no criticizing and no bellyaching! Those who feel the need to INDULGE will spend the rest of the season out the door! *DO* I make myself clear?

Ma’am yes ma’am.

This clarity stayed smear-free through Thursday’s matches at Multch West. That school was far enough away for the Gondoliers to do some team mantras—“Here we come, Multch West, here we come” (clap clap) etc.—on the bus ride there. Then Dennis Desmond who was again stringing along struck up “Great Balls of Fire,” and they all pitched in:

Ah chew mah nails ‘n’ Ah twiddle mah thumbs

Ah’m really nervous but it SHORE is fun—

Multch West was the newest of that township’s four high schools and had the most modern amenities; even the boys locker room looked antiseptic, though Ginger taped a “You don’t have to tell *us* twice” note to the FLUSH AFTER USE sign above the urinals.

Coach Celeste continued to platoon the JVs, this time starting the Broils in game one. Multch West’s Lady Tomahawks might lack a star like Boomer Wrang, but they lived up to their name by being sharper and harder-pressing than the Houlihan Cardinals. Challenge made; challenge met.

And for the better part of the next hour, it all seemed worth it—all the time spent drilling, drilling, drilling, serves and bumps and sets and spikes, passes left and right and forward and backward, knowing every step of your place in the rotation, your and everybody else’s zone on the court so you can keep the ball in play and over the net, in play and over the

net, in play and over the net—

—so that you and your teammates can be part of a flowing expressive movement larger than yourselves, a forceful disciplined mobilization with an overlay of grace and finesse: like ballet used to be, before you became a Klumsy Klutzer at it.

The Broils eked out a 17-15 win in game one; the Fries lost game two by the same squeaky margin. Everyone got a chance in game three, and their concerted efforts (aided by compression shorts?) outlasted the tiring Tomahawks to prevail 15-11. Group hug by the JV Gondoliers, even Isabel and Henrietta; all of them certain Ms. Ramsey was telling the Biguns “*That’s* the way to play volleyball!”

But then, when Vicki wanted nothing more than to hit the shower and go home, she was obliged to chase *more* balls for the varsity during *their* warmup. While showing hustle on the double; even Coach Celeste would give you extra laps if you slacked at shagging, and Ms. Ramsey might throw in a dozen situps or pushups.

Gone was the sense of Seems Worth It. Now you had to muster endurance, search for the stamina to withstand another hour of this grind, followed by another bus ride all way back to VTHS even though Multch West was just off Laubdecke Street and if you took that due north it turned into Eugene G. Green Road—

—*FLASSSHHHH*—

(Gahdammit, Sidney Erbsen! Go stick that camera up your own face!)

“You’re providing human interest,” he told you.

Like hell you are. Not by *fetchin’ the ball, fetchin’ the ball, fetchin’ the ball, YEAH*—a job that any dog could do. There was Rags up in the stands with Jenna—did he have his arm around her?—anyway, even with a sore knee he’d be better at this than you, in the state you’re in. Needing to wrap up that “Algernon” essay for English and brush up on angle definitions for Geometry and touch up that map of Ancient Egypt for History and mop up the latest vocab list for Spanish—

—and try not to *throw* up at the realization that all of these had to be tackled before bedtime, unless Algernon could remain amazed (again) till tomorrow’s Study Hall.

“Heads up!” called Lisa Lohe, sounding positively cheered up, as one final warmup ball went zooming past your nose.

*

The first issue of the VTHS *Channel* came out on Friday the 9th and was largely devoted to football, as was the bulk of that day. The G-Men wore suits and ties to classes; cheerleaders were uniformed and saddle-shod; a pep rally assembly took place in the auditorium, with sequential yells of *V-I-C-T-O-R-Y that's the sophomore/junior/senior/Vanderlund battle cry*; and for one hour, at least, the joint jumped like an old-fashioned high school.

What with all the rah-rah, Friday's *Channel* included just two mentions of the volleyball team's impending home opener. Besides a line in the Coming Up calendar, there was a back-page photograph of three JVs in unposed rear profile, their compression shorts shown to full effect. Nearest to the camera and twisting half toward it (like a flower to the sun) was Isabel Carstairs, giving the lens an *are-you-pointing-that-thing-at-li'l-ol'-ME?* twinkle. To her left was Sheila Quirk, divvying a peevish glance between Isabel and Sidney Erbsen; and beyond S-Q, with face obscured but bottom scrumptiousized, stood Lady Gondolier #22. Which happened to be the number worn by Vicki Volester.

Photo caption: NETTERS READY TO PLAY.

It was said that Ms. Ramsey raised hell's roofbeam about this kind of coverage with Mrs. Blackburn the Journalism teacher, who countered that the "coverage" in question was the volleyball program's own selection.

Vicki (thankful her face couldn't be seen in this homage to Dubble Bubble) gave a goodly portion of roofbeam-hell to Split-Pea, who shrugged it off saying "It won't happen again if you face forward next time."

They were out on the open-air bleachers flanking Hordt Field, so-called in honor of Mortimer "Thundering" Hordt who'd coached Vanderlund through the Ham 'n' Eggs era. The lobby's eastern trophy case featured Mort Hordt's legendary Board, a paddle worn thin as a yardstick after clouting a generation of champions into shape.

Vicki glowered at Split-Pea's scrawny buttocks as they roamed through the stands, taking an occasional FLASH of spectators or gridiron. He'd captured one of her looking hostile, one of Joss who hadn't stopped laughing at her since the *Channel* came out, and three or four of Crystal Denvour seated pacifyingly between them. A small gold pigskin dangled

onto (almost *into*) her capacious bosom, to signify Crystal's official going-togetherness with Judd "For the Defense" Courtney.

"Who does she think she is?" a seething upperclass girl nearby wanted to know.

"The new Big Momma on Campus?" laughed Joss.

"Miss About-to-Get-a-*Chest-Cold*?" suggested Vicki, as payback for Crystal's earlier "Was that your tush on the back page of the paper?"

"How you talk," Crystal preened. "The weather's still balmy—no worries about gooseflesh—"

"No, not while we're *sitting* on it," said Vicki, glowering again at Split-Pea.

BLAA-AA-ATT! BLAA-AA-ATT! trompette'd the Marching Band as it snakedanced across the field and got a vigorous raspberry from Joss.

"I can't believe you wanted me to join that train wreck!" she mock-reproached Vicki.

"All I did was ASK if you MIGHT."

"You do play a brass instrument," Crystal pointed out, moving her cleavage so Judd's gold football would catch the last rays of the setting sun.

"You know me too well to think I might *march* with it—"

"**GO!! GO!! GO!!**" Alex erupted on Joss's other side, at a volume worthy of Mumbles Metcalf on *her* other side, whose stomach hadn't fully recovered from Tuesday's torpedoing by Boomer Wrang. And even if it *had*, Mumbles was too busy flirting with Curtis Weatherly on *her* other side to match Alex **GO** for **GO**.

Now Alex leaped up and began to pulverize her tonsils as Cheryl, Mary Kate, and the other varsity cheerleaders exhorted the crowd through a series of **G-O / N-D-O / L-I-E-R-S** while quarterback Jeff Friardale took offensive center stage.

"Lord, the day keeps getting more 'n' more *buttcheeky*," Sheila groaned on Vicki's other side.

Jeff Friardale was the swaggersome masculine version of Ginger Snowbedeck, all set to star in his own Right Guard commercial. ("Wanna sniff my armpit? Yeah, it *is* a treat!") Letters to *Penthouse* could be written, he alleged, about his and Ginger's on-again/off-again interludes, each of which supposedly left her in an erotic swoon.

“Oh please!” Ginger would crack back. “*I* always dazzle and leave *him* frazzled. Gotta admit it, I’m just too much for the poor guy—well, for *any* guy, truth be told.”

Tonight the G-O / N-D-O / L-I-E-R-S were too much for the Front Tree Timbermen, who played like the preppies they were. Gaining control of the ball just long enough for Vanderlund fans to sing a few bars of the Monty Python “Lumberjack” song, before Judd’s defense forced another punt or fumble so the Aquamarine & Gold could score again.

By halftime it was 28-3 and Curtis Weatherly was ready to bail. He being their ride, Mumbles, Vicki and Joss pried Alex away, leaving Crystal to further flaunt her pigskin and gooseflesh. She’d be going with Judd to the postgame carousal at Jeff Friardale’s house, as would Sheila-Q and Avalanche Dobbs (older brother of Haystack), plus Curt and Mumbles after they took the other girls (denied permission to party hearty) home in Curt’s father’s Lincoln Versailles. (His own Porsche was in the shop.)

Papa Dmitria had given consent for Alex to be chauffeured, but only after receiving Weatherly testimonials from trusted chums like Mumbles and Becca Blair. Even then, Papa stood outside the Mission Revival house—big, bald, and protruding his toothpick—till Alex got dropped off with no trace of any funny business. Unless you counted her saying “I’ll never forgive myself if the guys go and blow it without me there!”—which deepened the wrinkles in Papa’s Telly Savalas scalp.

“That,” Curtis declared as they drove on up Eugene G. Green Road, “is one scary character.”

“*Tell* me about it!’ chorused his passengers.

This being Friday night, Joss was bunking at Burrow Lane and got out there with Vicki, thanking Curt and requesting that Mumbles do nothing *they* wouldn’t do. Mumbles responded with a low-pitched “Better watch your ass at practice tomorrow, HA! HA! HA!”

“She had to remind me,” Vicki sighed, digging the *Channel* out of her backpack. “C’mon, we might as well get this over and done with.”

They found Ozzie and Felicia down in the family room watching *Documentary Showcase*. (Way to live it up, folks. Way to prepare for a shock...)

“My picture’s sort of in the school paper,” Vicki began, extending the *Channel* with her thumb over Isabel’s face.

Necks were craned; then a burst of parental laughter, which naturally set off Joss again. “Bet you could pick *hers* out of a hundred, right? Or should I say out of *two* hundred—”

“ENOUGH,” Vicki told her, before shifting her thumb. “Um, that’s Sheila beside me, of course, and *this* one... is Isabel Carstairs.”

“Cute,” said Ozzie.

“Well yeah, but... don’t you think she kind of... y’know, looks a bit like...?”

“Oh,” went Felicia. “Well. No. Not really.”

Blankish second glance by Ozzie, before returning his attention to the TV screen.

And that was that. Vicki (followed by the still-snortling Joss) went upstairs, unable to believe their lack of reaction. Had she *hallucinated* a likeness between Is and Tricia that simply didn’t exist?

They ran into Goofus raiding the kitchen fridge for an afterdinner snack. “*You* think this looks like Tricia, don’t you?” Vicki asked, shoving the *Channel* under his nose.

Goofus went “*Bweeheehee!*” and spilled mustard over a package of pastrami. “How can I tell when your BUTT’s taking up so much of the picture?”

“Watch it, runt!”

“You’re not giving me any *choice*—”

“I swear, this is the last time I try to break bad news gently to anyone in *this* family—oh, shut up!” to doubled-over Joss.

From down near her knees: “**HA!! HA!! HA!!** *You* shut up.”

*

Robin Neapolitan had proposed “Alias Doris & Travis” as the new punk group’s name, but its other members identified more with the title of their first song—“Downbite”—as characterizing both sound and mood.

Those who’d crammed into PoonElly’s Le Heap for descent upon the AnaRCHonda Pit were now augmented by Cramps Aplenty (alias Marcia June Loftus) who, like Jane Eyre, could play “a little” on the piano. More importantly, she had a ’71 Gremlin and the dependable-driver habit of ingesting nothing more mind-blowing than Midol, though that in much greater quantity than its bottle advised.

On this Sunday afternoon, after a Downbite meeting/rehearsal/wildgoosechase where zilch had been composed/performed/accomplished, Cramps was transporting Epic Khack and Petula Pierro away from Villa Neapolitan. (Epic had failed his driver's test several times and Downtown, who'd begun to restyle herself as "the Tayser," was glued to a flask of Irish Mist.) Fiona'd tried to steer them toward playing "Bring Out Your Stupid," her new work-in-progress (or regress: inspired by the conclusion of "Flowers for Algernon"); but Downtown—excuse me, *Tayser*—acted more interested in how soon Bootleg McGillah might be able to chisel into the local pharmaceutical supply market, without risking open warfare with the Traversers.

"Not that those pluto-pups'd stand a chance against Bunty O'Toole's crew—"

"Hey! Put that bottle away!" went Robin. "No swigging slop in this cellar!"

"Since *when*?"

"Since I say so! Even if you *are* 'returning to your boggy Irish roots.' Get soused in your own basement."

"Well excuuuuse ME, narkaholic!" whinged Tayser. "Talk about going *legit*—"

"*Hey!* You are NOT pulling any drunk-stunts that might screw up my getting my Sweet Babboo! Not with my old man upstairs! Not you or Pony Boy or the Mad Bludgeoner either! *Capisce?*"

"*Schmapisce*," replied Signorina Pierro. "And what's the Mad Bludgeoner got to do with it?"

"Long as he's out there bludgeoning, we're all of us damsels in distress," drawled PoonElly.

"*Schmistress*," sneered Tayser. "So what *are* we 'permitted' to do?"

Robin started loading the bong with good old stuff.

"*Seriously?*"

"(Fat Bob says it's 'cooler and healthier' than hand-rolled,)" Fiona mutter-cited.

"So we're supposed to smoke *weed*, like a clump of grungy hippies?"

"Go ahead and 'abstain' then, *Taysie*. Here's a deck of cards: you can play Old Maid with Pony and Plenty instead."

PTOOEY by Epic (into the gob-can he'd been provided) and a pained "Oh don't mind me" from Cramps.

Tayser took a grudging pull on the peace pipe, followed by a second longer deeper one-for-the-road before departing in temporary amity and Cramps's Gremlin, along with Epic and his cuspidor and a swirl of uncapped Irish mist.

The bong having been emptied by then, Robin negotiated the stairs up to the kitchen to wrestle with preparing Sunday dinner. This gave Poon and Fiona a seizable opportunity for some wigged-out fooling-around (the best kind) though Poon kept pausing to *chat*:

"...give anything to be back on the Strip right this minute, dontcha think? us two there with *real* bands, *true* punks, real true punk bands..."

"(...mmm...)" from Feef.

"... 'cause Gina's been on my back since I *got* back, dontcha know? which she's got no business being on, even if she's the one got me *in* business back there..."

"(...mmm...)"

"... 'n' school stinks out louder 'n ever this year, Ms. Thrace that's the gym teacher's got it in for me, whudda big bully—dontcha let *her* inside no china shops ..."

"(...mmm...)"

"...I mean, she gimme this choice between fuckin' detention and fuckin' substitute *towel girl*, dontcha tell *me* she's got no sense o' fuckin' humor..."

"(...mmm...)"

—when the door suddenly opened at the top of the cellar stairs.

"AAY SPOO-KAY! LIME-AAY!"

Freeze tag.

"(...hunh?...)"

"LOOK, Y'WANNA EAT, Y'GOTTA DO IT UP HERE, 'CAUSE I'M NOT GONNA LIKE LADLE IT DOWN YOUR THROATS, Y'KNOW? WHAT'RE Y'UP TO DOWN THERE, ANYHOO?"

"WORKIN' ON A SONG," offered PoonElly.

"HOW COME I DON'T HEAR THE AMP?"

"AIN'T GOT THAT FAR YET."

"WELL, KNOCK IT OFF 'N' GET YOUR ASSES UP *THIS* FAR!"

Red-faced as well as red-eyed, they untwined and ascended and found their hostess filling every bowl in the Villa with pretzels, popcorn, peanuts, pork rinds, potato chips, corn chips, cheese puffs, and Cocoa Krispies.

“(This is dinner?)”

“Hell no! Too hot to cook in here, so I sent Dad out to Paulsie’s for a coupla pies. This here is *snacks*.”

Paulsie’s pizza might be nowhere near as appetizing as Deeple’s, but it was cheaper and closer and so not to be sneezed at. Meanwhile the girls set to work on the munchables.

“Betcha you two don’t know whatcha doing this Tuesday afternoon,” said PoonElly, emitting an orange cloud of Cheeto dust.

“Do so! Gonna be two days closer to driving my Sweet Babboo!”

“Sides that. Like I toldja—wait—no, told *ja*—”

“(Who, me? What’d you tell?)”

“That I gotta be this substifuckingtute *towel girl* for Thrace’s volleyfuckingballers. And guess what—we’re coming to YOUR SCHOOL on Tuesday! You gotta be there to watch me do my Dance of the Seven Towels.”

“(Wait, we know about this...)” said Fiona with furrowed brow.

“Quit bogarting the Krispies,” Robin told her. “*We* know about her towel dance?”

Flashback to a bawdy boudoir. “(No, about the volleyfuckingballers. Vicki and Q’ll be playing, and Alex and Laurie and them all. ‘Member that picture with their butts jutting out?)”

“Haw! Yeah! Guess we gotta go getta loada *that* then—hey! Whicha you snarfs hogged all the Fritos??”

“Who you callin’ a SNARF?” retorted Poon.

They tussled over the empty dish as Fiona, idly licking pretzel salt, thought *Here’s another how-de-do*.

A weird school year so far and no mistake. Getting wasted *at* school the First Day *was* a mistake, one that Robin’d bawled you out for while you were still green around the gills. As if *she* weren’t going to be thoroughly ripped soon enough; but, as she’d rightly added, that should be an *afterschool* activity.

Then there was Downbite—if there *was* a Downbite, in the same sense that there’d *been* a Rosa Dartles, and not simply as some sort of highpunkthesis. Fat Bob kept asking why “those nice girls” weren’t coming to the Villa cellar anymore, in place of the Tayser (whom he disliked), Cramps Aplenty (who made him uncomfortable) and Epic Khack (DAMN! NUFF! SAID!). PoonElly he did approve of, limeade spikes and all; she flirted with him and “had meat on her bones,” a requisite component of coquetry for Fat Bob. Yet even he wasn’t beguiled by Poon’s attempts at musical vocalization: she was LOUD, but less and less on-key the longer she tried to sing.

(“ExACTly what we want!” claimed Tayser.)

As for Those Nice Girls, they were too busy this year or too unpunklike or too put off by Alias Doris & Travis. Vicki Volester was all three; and when Feef, as gently as she could, broke the bad news that Downbite wouldn’t be needing her managerial services, Vicki’d looked horrified at the possibility that they *might* have been.

“Um...” she’d said, “you do know Downtown’s not the most *dependable* person, right? Like when she bailed out of *Cicada* and left us in the lurch?”

(Tayser would deride the word and slur it into “dependency,” saying that The Lurch was where everybody OUGHT to be left.)

Honk from Fat Bob’s truck and whoops from Limey and Nilla as they ran out to help tote in the pile of Paulsie’s pizzas. Leaving Fiona to dump the snack-scrap into a single big bowl (instant trail mix) while feeling a creeping presentiment that these might not be all the pieces she’d be picking up—and not within the remotely distant future, either.

*

Gina Conti wasn’t what you’d call a complex character.

Her leitmotif was a need for *speed*—not methamphetamines, but rapid velocity. Gina lived to sprint as fast and as far and as long as she could, wanting to run forever. Like the Nike ad said: THERE IS NO FINISH LINE.

Her best friends were the other three Genies of the Apocalypse, Jeanne and Jeanine and especially Jeannette. Together they’d put Athens Grove on the cross country map, first as junior high Arcadians and now reunited at the “Big Mountain” senior high, ready to do the same as Olympians.

Run run run till Daddy takes your Nikes away (which ain't gonna happen). Other means of achieving speed were less satisfactory. Bicycles required mechanical maintenance; drivers ed led to lectures about limits; horseback riding resulted in too much poop; and there were never enough roller coasters or tilt-a-whirls available. The Four Genies talked about skydiving and hang gliding, but Jeannette Crittenden surged to the forefront (as per usual) by signing up for *helicopter* lessons. She was the oldest and most fearless Genie, seldom refusing any dare except ones involving what she called "mush," which were numerous since Jeannette looked like Chrissie Evert and always had guys flocking after her. "None of your mush!" she'd tell them, "*I am a champion who breakfasts on Wheaties!*"

"(Did she say *tweeties?*)" people whispered, adding to the rumors that'd swirled around the Genies since junior high. Yet because they were all attractive girls (though none of them had light brown hair) guys were more intrigued than disdainful.

Gina quickly learned how to "do what comes natural discreetly" (one of Jeannette's catchphrases) and never more so than with Elly May Pilchard, on whom Gina'd conceived a ginormous crush in eighth grade, when Elly'd been a Blonde Babe Teenyboppin' pompon-pushin' ice-cream-scoopin' ninth-grader. Nothing might have arisen from this crush if Hayzoose the Horrible hadn't brutalized and demoralized Elly, consigning her to a rerun through the ninth grade and a wallow in the mire of desolation. Out of which Gina, now a classmate, had hauled her up like a double-armful of living clay and molded her into a New Woman, like that whatchamacallit statue who came to life—not Pinocchio, the other one—for that whatshisname sculptor.

(Gina was an indifferent student and often employed the bright-thought-unscrupulous Jeanne Janssen to "help" her with homework.)

Once Elly began to embrace her Rerunniness (not to mention Gina's Genieficence), they shared a blissful springtime that stretched into one long bitchen sitchoo-itchen (another of Jeannette's catchphrases). Then school ended, vacation began, and Elly amscrayed to California for what turned out to be *two whole months*. Even at the get-go this time apart was disturbingly open-ended so far as Gina was concerned, but Elly didn't seem to mind that much and increasingly less so the more Gina remonstrated, till departing without a goodbye worth its weight in salt from the tears Gina shed that summer.

One small mercy from having to keep all this hush-hush was minimal gossip about it. Only the other three Genies got clued in, and they were unfailing pillars of strength (*not* salt). Jeanine Greeley aimed to relieve Gina's heartbreak with a bit of matchmaking, and since Jeanine's tastes were broader than the Genie norm, this extended to dangling a few guys under Gina's nose. (Gina did team up with one of these guys to train for a youth marathon, but that was as close as she came to playing footsie with him.)

When Elly finally reappeared, she'd gone beyond limeade spikes to fully punk out as "*PoonElly Scales*"—giving Gina little more than a souvenir T-shirt of Pippi Longstocking skewered with safety pins and shouting *FUCK PLUTTIFICATION!!* (Which was not the sort of garment you could hang on the Conti family clothesline.)

"She gave you *what?*" gasped the equally incredulous Jeanne, Jeanine, and especially Jeannette. (The Four Genies of the Apocalypse might have a cool collective name and not be button-down Barbie dolls, but the punkiest *they* got was leaving their legs unshaved longer than the average teen girl.)

Then Elly kept tootling off to hang around with like-minded punk-types. Gina would feign interest when she could get hold of "Poon" (by phone if not by hand) and draw her out. Like a perforated waterbed, once Elly started spouting it wasn't easy to plug her up; and Gina learned a lot more than she wanted to know about carryings-on here and there and back on Sunset Strip.

One name—or rather, one set of initials—kept bobbing up to the surface of these emissions: **F.T.** Gina couldn't think of anybody so initialed in Athens Grove who'd be prone to go punking. Maybe Freddy Turkenkopf (who had gross tattoos) but Elly'd referred to **F.T.** as "she" and "her," repeatedly. With warmth. And affection. And *hankering*—

—which accelerated the cankering in Gina's heart.

Whoever **F.T.** might be, SHE had better watch HER step.

'Cause like Gina's Uncle Rico always said, "*Nessuno un Conti sfida impunemente*"—nobody messes with a Conti and gets away with it. (Or words to that effect.)

Not that *Gina'd* lay a finger on **F.T.** Oh no: Gina knew a few guys capable of doing that. Just like when Elly'd wished there was a way to wreak revenge on Hayzoose the Horrible, in spite of his being such a too-big too-believable too-invulnerable football jock.

Well, before that week was through, his beloved Corvette was fit only for use as a hazmat depository. (Or so Gina *heard*, with ears as clean as her hands and conscience.)

She might not know how to say it in Italian, but *nobody* was going to steal Elly Pilchard from her. And very soon an opportunity to put things right was seizable: Elly cheesed off Ms. Thrace, who gave her the choice of detention or helping the volleyball manager at an away match on Tuesday. You'd've thought Elly was being subjected to that "cruel and unusual punishment" she kept yakking about; yet she chose to do the volleyball stint since it'd get her out of Athens Grove and over to Vanderlund—

—where she kept tootling off to anyway.

"Want me to tag along?" Gina trialballooned. "Thrace'll let me ride the bus."

"Sure, f'y'wanna," brusqued Elly. "I'll get some of the Downbiters to come too."

(Aha.) "They go to Vanderlund?"

"Some of 'em, yeah. Maybe all, I dunno—we don't really talk about school much."

(Oho.) "Maybe they can be like a punky marching band, and play between games."

"Hee! Wouldn't that be bitchen? Sex Pistol songs outta sousaphones!" she laughed, looking more like Springtime Elly than September Scales; and Gina's fraught heart leaped.

Say your prayers, F.T....

*

The Vanderlund volleyball varsity did their own roofbeam-raising at Saturday's practice, which was no fun at all. The Biguns had played much better at Multch West but still lost the match two games to one, leaving them winless in the standings as well as anonymous in the *Channel*; whereas the JVs were undefeated *and* had their asses on the dotted line. Ideal for taking potshots at in the intrasquad scrimmage, which the Biguns did till you'd've thought they'd switched sports to bombardment dodgeball.

Then Coach Celeste was out ill on Monday and unable to protest final plans regarding Tuesday's home opener. Gretel Hitchens announced that only the varsity players would be introduced by name, and only the varsity roster would appear in the program. The Littluns would be lumped into a single-spaced squib, minus team numbers or any other marks of identification. In light of Saturday's bombardment, Chookie and Natalie thought it best to lodge no formal complaint. Anyway, Tuesday the 13th was Rosh Hashanah and they'd be

excused from school *and* the match.

“We’ll pray for you,” Natalie intoned.

“While eating apples dipped in honey, to make it a ‘sweet’ New Year,” added Chookie.

Lisa Lohe would also be absent, as would Jenna Wiblitz the rabbi’s granddaughter and Split-Pea Erbsen the gotcha-paparazzo and the rest of the East Bay crowd. (Joyce Usher’s family was Congregationalist but she tried to beg off too, rather than play on a 13th.)

On the plus side, hosting the Athens Grove Lady Olympians meant no bus ride there or back. Publicity posters had been made and hung (by the JVs, naturally, and *not* depicting hindquarters) to fill the newspaper’s promotional gap; and non-Jewish turnout was better than predicted—particularly by males, drawn in (as S-Q said again) by what the not-so-Littluns had to offer.

Ozzie came with Felicia and a cranky Goofus, who perked up at the sight of his heart’s idol Alex. Ozzie was less content, having finally realized that the seats shown in last Friday’s *Channel* belonged to shorts worn by his daughter on volleyball courts. He’d had a word with Ms. Schwall (over the weekend! over the *phone*!) and she’d overpowered his objections with gabble about kinesthetic-control-of-the-body-through-an-overall-range-of-mobility; but Ozzie still would’ve preferred that the girls *wore* overalls.

(Coach Celeste was back today and Vicki saw her privately to express hope that “talking to my dad wasn’t what made you sick”; but Celeste said she’d simply overdone a *salamba sarvangasana* shoulderstand.)

Ozzie was not made any cheerfuller by the presence of photographers for the *Channel* and the *Baratarian* yearbook (though neither was Split-Pea) along with Dennis Desmond, who resumed the attention he’d paid Vicki in First Hour Spanish. Señor Banonis had been among the missing (whether due to Rosh Hashanah, overdone yoga or some other cause) and the unwary substitute teacher didn’t stop Dennis from taking Jenna’s vacant desk to dally with Vicki. Ostensibly this was an interview about the afternoon match; but as Vicki tried to tune him out and listen to the artless sub, Dennis segued into a *sotto voce* monologue:

“(…when you play *ball* you work willingly with other people so you’ll do what they want, unless you play *hardball* by getting aggressive so they’ll do what you want and you can

have a *ball*, become the belle of the *ball* and maybe somebody's *ball*-and-chain in a whole new *ball* game, unless you drop the *ball* and find out that's the way the *ball* bounces...)"

"(Ssshhhh!)" Vicki hissed out of the side of her mouth.

Dennis piped down for a moment, then went into lullaby mode:

*After the BAWWWL was over, my Bonnie popped out her glass eye
Rinsed off her dentures with water, hung up her falsies to dry
Took off her hairpiece till morning, laid her peg-leg on the shelf
After the BAWWWL was over, only half of my Bonnie was left—*

Vicki attempted a fake sneeze into her cupped hands, but even the sub knew she was giggling. If not why: "*¿Por qué te ríes?*"

The bell saved Vicki from explaining but not from being followed out of the room by Dennis the Menace, who imparted a "VO-DEE-OH-DOE" on the back pockets of her high-waisted flares before pursuing Diana Dabney's down the hall and around the corner.

This preyed on Vicki's mind for the rest of the morning, since VO-DEE-OH-DOE was Laverne & Shirleyese for going all the way. "I do *not* vo-dee-oh-doe!" Shirley would insist. "You vo-dee-oh'd," Laverne would remark. "*Once*, after I'd gone steady for a whole year," Shirley would concede. And Vicki could empathize: this might not be the Fifties, but a girl still didn't like having her back pockets insinuated about by second-stringers.

Well anyway—there behind the Gondolier bench sat Dennis and his teeth, flaunted more widely and lengthily than the Joker himself's. Also in the bleachers was Jacuzzi Jake Korva to holler for Thirsty Kirsten (filling in for Natalie as captain, to psych out the Olympian captain with her clammy handshake); and Joss, who said she'd be keeping one eye on her watch so as not to be late getting home for the premiere episode of *The Richard Pryor Show*; and Spacyjane, more fascinated than ever with Isabel after seeing her saucy *Channel* photo ("I've caught Floramour making the exact same face"); and miracle of miracles, there were Robin and Fiona convulsed with hilarity at the sight of their bunchkins in bunhugger shorts. (Once upon a time it'd been startling to see Feef crack so much as a smile.)

Vicki allowed a *ball*—dammit, Dennis!—to roll over where they held their aching sides, and chased it there herself. "Well, I'm happy you two are having such a good time."

“Wouldn’ta missed it for the world!”

“(Or the *mooon* either!)”

Fresh burst of Dopester mirth, in which Vicki couldn’t help but join; unaware that this would be her last laugh for quite a long while.

*

As fate would have it, the Athens Grove volleyball assistant manager came down with food poisoning—not in the school cafeteria, but at a greasy spoon patronized by her now-ex-boyfriend—and had to miss the Vanderlund match. Gina Conti volunteered to fill in, earning a brownie point from Ms. Thrace and (more *to the point*) getting to work hand-in-glove with “towel girl” Elly. Though that meant Gina did all the competent lion’s share of the work, and Elly had to be nudged into doing the petulant lamb’s.

(But if the lion got to *lay down* with the lamb...)

Well anyway—Gina was frankly offended by the Gondolier compression shorts, more suitable for a beach bout than an official NESTL(É) event. Forget “kinesthetics”: these shorts were about cheap sex appeal, and before you knew it girls might be expected to run cross country in string bikinis!

Not that kinesthetics would make any difference: Athens Grove was the league’s defending volleyball champ, having won both varsity and JV titles the past two years. So Vanderlund’s binding their buttcheeks would be of no avail, and Gina could focus more on Putting Things Right with Elly than on equipping the Olympians for battle.

Elly, though, was acting too distracted for any immediate Right-Put. Scanning the stands till she spotted some new arrivals (two? three?) toward whom she started moving before Ms. Thrace’s peremptory Stay-Put drew her up short. Even then, Elly took a towel and began to twitch it at the bleachers, hopping from foot to foot like a spastic matador.

“PILCHARD,” went Ms. Thrace, articulating every consonant.

“Calm *down*,” Gina told Elly. Adding “(Them your friends?)” in her ear.

“(Yeppity yep)”—with a final twitchy hop.

Oh-so-offhand: “(Which one’s **F.T.**?)”

“(The little dark ‘un)”—with an unmistakable tug of smug.

Which little dark ‘un? as the two/three girls in the stands were joined by Gondolier #22, who had a ball under her arm and a bloat inside her shorts that didn’t disqualify her from being described as “little.” Unnervingly familiar, this ‘un was—Gina the indifferent student might have a mediocre memory, yet filed away in it was every body she’d run against on cross country courses.

And this ‘un’s body was definitely among them.

Meaning it had to belong to **F.T.**

A hunch hardening to certainty as the little dark ‘un turned away from the stands, with a laugh brightening a face so pretty it drove a cold iron spear into Gina’s aorta.

While Elly kept *her* eyes fixed on the bleachers, obviously to mislead and deceive.

No matter. Leave “Poon” to her hoodwinkery. Sidle over to the net, where Nadine Rugova was springing up to slam imaginary volleyballs through the Vanderlund parquet.

There were several reasons why Nadine Rugova wasn’t on the Olympian varsity squad. She was a sophomore, and the competition was upperclass; some of her serves and spikes went so wild as to be lethally feral; and Ms. Thrace suspected their ricocheting off bystanders (turning them into bysprawlers) was not always accidental. Nadine took after her mother, who as Gladys “Punchy” Widmark had been a star for the Roller Derby Gangbusters till getting discharged for injuring too many skaters too badly too often. Now divorced from Nadine’s father, Punchy ran a bar catering to The City’s leather trade, and Nadine saw her on weekends.

“(Psssst...)” went Gina, from a respectfully safe distance. “(See number 22?)”

“(Them or us?)” went Nadine.

“(Them. Find a way to whack her. ‘Kay?)”

No acknowledgment from Punchy Jr., other than her next imaginary spike making a percussive silent SPLAT.

*

Coach Celeste decided to stick with platooning for one more match, using the indomitable Alex to cover Natalie’s zone for the Fries as well as her own for the Broils.

But even on their home court, in their almost-aquamarine home jerseys, there wasn’t a lot of sizzle-to-the-skies for the starting Fries that afternoon. Athens Grove blew in like a

blast of January air off the Lake As Big As An Ocean; and Thirsty K's clammy palm turned bone-dry when clasped by Olympian captain Melina Homer, who reminded Vicki of Melissa Chiese back in Pfiester Park: bent on glaciating any opposition. Melina didn't need tight shorts to garner her share of wolf whistles, which came more thickly from the higher-percentage-of-male-attendance-than-at-Houlihan-or-Multch-West. Isabel was flipping her goldilocks and presenting her curvatures panoramically, but Michelle had her befuddled thumb in her mouth (unless it was bitten off and swallowed) and Pebbles finally seemed in need of Sister Loretto's safekeeping.

They gave their all during game one (Isabel deep-seatedly) but Alex for once played a smidgen out-of-synch, even though she often practiced with the Fries and they'd had a copacetic scrimmage on Saturday. Maybe Melina the Snow Queen and her *Winter Wonderland* Blizzard were throwing Alex off her game, though she generally went superRusskie in such weather and raced around like her Borzoi Yermak. Now she'd gone Latina-in-a-cold-climate and was shivering like her Chihuahua Tonio. Bumps and sets fluttered erratically to receivers who fumbled them, particularly Etta, whose irritation grew with each botched volley. "Aw come *ahn!*" she railed at Alex, sounding like one of the Wainwrights, as a pass veered out of reach. Alex slapped her own forehead in contrite bafflement and went "Horse-knacker!"—the most profane word in her vocabulary. Coach Celeste took her out after awhile and tried Sheila-Q, but Melina Homer served a series of quick aces to bury the Fries by the dismal score of 15-4.

"(Jeepers, we were playing like the *varsity!*)" Kirsten murmured during orange-slice break.

In went the Broils to save the undefeated season, or at least postpone its end till a third game. Again the arctic Athens Grove gale *whooshed*, but this time Vanderlund hunkered down in a rearranged rotation and retaliated choreographically. Alex snapped out of her momentary unevenness, playing daisy-fresh as if she'd found her inner Cossack; and the Broils racked up a multipoint lead which they hung onto for several rallies.

Then Athens Grove started chipping away at it, tying game two at 11-11 before moving ahead. There was a frosty-mugged Olympian, #30, whose deadpan mien never changed even when her spikes went in odd directions. Whichever angle they took, Vicki's

hands and fists and forearms got STUNG blocking them, as she did on one dig-and-roll after another. *Keep the ball in play—never mind the bruises—keep the ball in play—never mind the bruises*—and hope Coach Celeste would pull you out soon and put in Isabel, who'd appreciate the additional exposure if not the likely contusions.

Sammi stepped up and got in some potent spikes for the Gondoliers, pulling them within one, but Athens Grove regained serve and soon it was match point. Melina Homer sent a snowball to the Vanderlund backcourt; Laurie and Ann Hew both called for it, colliding and falling in a tangle of limbs; the ball caromed off them and back over the net to Frostymug. A simple shot beyond the entanglement would win the match, and Sammi and Sheila and Alex were all turning in an effort to obstruct it, when Frostymug dealt the ball a colossal *sideways* BIFF that cleared the net by an inch at most and hurtled toward the furthest-away Broil, Vicki Volester, who had a split second to go *Wha'?*—

—before it SMASHED into her face, propelling her into the air like Piggy off Castle Rock in *Lord of the Flies*, to land with a rumpfirst WHUMP and skid spread-eagled out of bounds.

Initial gust of laughter at this elaborate pratfall.

Shredded by twin screams (from Joss and Felicia) as Vicki lay there supine and inert, blood streaming out of her pulped nose and around her agape mouth and off her sagging chin. Enshrouded in a cone of deathly silence, while the rest of the gym had its roofbeam raised surprisingly high by a nowhere-near-full house.

Trainer/Coach Celeste was first on the scene, wincing at the sight and also from her overyoga'd shoulders. Alex the Girl Scout and Sheila the Future Nurse ran up to assist, outwardly unflappable though both were pale as haints. The other JVs hovered just outside the cone, arms linked for communal support (Laurie was blubbering) and to partly screen the victim from view. Isabel took one look and retreated to tuck her head between her kneepads and retch up a half-digested orange-slice.

Most of the varsity Gondoliers fanned out to handle crowd control, preventing those not wearing gym shoes from setting foot on the court. Louisa Lang singlehandedly (though with two arms) held back Joss, Felicia, Ozzie, *and* the agog Goofus while Ms. Ramsey tried to reassure them that Ms. Schwall was a professional caregiver doing a preliminary

examination. Other Biguns helped Gretel Hitchens with the ice chest and first aid kit: a routine they'd learned by heart during their injury-plagued previous season.

Ms. Thrace hustled her Olympians over to the visitors bench, giving #30 a *What kind of spike was THAT last shot?* glance, and getting a deadpan *Won us the match, didn't it?* reply. This while the home fans leveled accusations of murder, demands for justice, and calls for a vendetta against Frostymug. The loudest of these came (no surprise) from Robin Neapolitan, and the least audible from Fiona Weller, who was in almost as much shock as Vicki. Not wanting to see more than she'd already witnessed, yet compelled against her will to try, Feef heaved herself up off the bleacher—

—and got eyesnagged instead by a limeytopped head at the other end of the gym, swaying in an insistent side-to-side *no-no-no* motion. As the hands below it secretively gesticulated *down-down-down*.

Stealthy PoonElly, still thought of as Rerun, bearer of the Fruit Brute: and had she planned...? Was this her scheme...? But *no-no-no, down-down-down, don't let her see you, don't let her know who you are...*

And then the figure at Poon's elbow. Looking not at the crowd around the silent cone, but sideways at Poon: puzzlement in the posture, uncertainty in the stance. Turning to trace the invisible line that connected PoonElly to the bleachers, to *this* bleacher, to Fiona.

As two pairs of eyes met and stared at each other, across the expanse of that raucous basilica.

*

—*wha'?*

(we now rejoin this program already in progress)

Hands up to block the incoming torpedo... no longer in flight. Hands taken and squeezed by teammates on either side... of a really weird perspective.

Are you lying (or is it laying?) on the *floor*? With Coach Celeste pressing a chilly something to your *nose*? If it's smelling salts, it's (or is it they're?) not doing its/their job: your nose feels completely stifled. And the wrong size. And the wrong shape. And so hot it authenticates you as a Broil. And IN PAIN—

—*Marcia-Marcia-Marcia "Oh my nose!!" PAIN—*

—that’s in no way lessened by Celeste saying “Tell me your name.”

OhmyGahd don’t you know me? Did I trip and stumble into the Twilight Zone?

“—your name—”

“...Viggi Voadstah...”

(And an incorrigible snortle from Sheila-Q.)

Give her a miffed squint as you struggle to sit up, as you get gently pushed back down while other stupid who-where-when questions are asked and impatiently answered. Braincheck done, followed by the rest of the head, the neck, the spine, while the unseen Felicia can be heard nattering on about stretchers and ambulances—

“BUDDER!” you go (at Felicia; not as a request for churned cream). “I’B OHGAY!... hebb be ubb, you guys,” to your bunchkins. Nod from Coach Celeste and they take a firm grip, carefully raising you to unstable feet and a smattering of applause, leavened with hardy-har-hars as Celeste keeps the icebag on your nose through the uprising. Whoa! Headrush! *Buttache!* “Owwwwww...”

“What?? Where??” from Alex.

Stupid answer to more stupid questions: “By bottubb...”

“Lucky you’ve got all that extra padding,” says S-Q.

“Suddubb, *Squeedzee*,” you growl—as Coach Celeste removes the icebag for a fresh assessment. S-Q draws in a breath and Alex slips a comforting arm around your waist.

Rocky recollection: Yer nose is broke. / Howzit look? / It’s an improvement.

“Id... id by doze boke?”

“I don’t think so,” says Celeste, reapplying the bag and placing one of your hands upon it. “Not bent or twisted—just swollen. More important, you don’t seem to’ve had a concussion, but the doctor’ll be able to say for sure. Your folks’re waiting to take you now.”

“Want a cold compress in your compress-shun shorts?” Sheila asks as they swivel you slowly around, to find your family still restrained by the mighty Louisa.

Shrug off Sheila’s support and detach Alex’s arm, asking her to please get your stuff out of your locker. Then, with cautious steps, make your own way on your own power off the court; while someone who sounds like Dennis Desmond incites the not-much-of-a-crowd

to actually (unless your hearing's been affected too)

“GIVE A BIG HAND FOR THE LITTLE LADY!!”

36

Una Gran Mano Para La Pequeña Dama

Twenty-four hours later, Vicki held a different kind of court at home on Burrow Lane, looking even worse (hugely bruised schnozzola, eyes surrounded by zombie-blotches) than she had yesterday in St. Benedict's ER. Where, after sitting in the waiting room (or was it waiting in the sitting room?) for an hour or more, she'd ordered Ozzie to drive antsy-pantsy Joss home to catch *The Richard Pryor Show*, and take Goofus along for the ride so he'd quit oohing-and-ahhing over the gorier emergency newcomers.

In overdue course Vicki was seen by a handsome! young! doctor who might've been the kid brother of suave Mr. Erickson at VW (S-I-G-H) and to whose boyish bedside manner Felicia took skeptical exception. Vicki only objected to Dr. Dreamboat seeing her (though not to his FEELING her) when she looked so much less than her best. But oh! she FELT so much better as he lightly manipulated her face *and then her buttocks* (after asking permission! like a gallant caballero!) to check out her tailbone and corroborate Coach Celeste's diagnosis, saying "You'll be lovely as ever"—his very words!—in a week or so.

Felicia, who hadn't wanted Vicki to be treated at a "doctrinaire" hospital despite its proximity to VTHS and being vouched for by Sheila Quirk, was incensed by it all.

Vicki, after getting dosed with a new prescription painkiller called "ibuprofen" and freshly icebagged above and below, phoned Jupiter Street to snuffle-update Joss and hear about Richard Pryor; then Sprangletop Road to snuffle-update Alex and hear how the varsity'd avenged Vicki by trouncing Athens Grove. (In the first game, before losing the next two and thus their third straight match.)

“But that first win was what *really* counted,” said Alex.

Vicki’s bid to spend “a week or so” recuperating in seclusion was downgraded to a day-by-day basis by her *we’ll see* parents. They were firm believers that sickdays shouldn’t be spent “loafing in bed” unless you were mortally immobile. So Vicki spent the night trying to find a position where her nose and butt could be at ease simultaneously; then did upright things at home on Wednesday the 14th, like the family’s laundry and ironing, refilling her own icebags (“Might as well call me the scullery maid and be done with it!”) and dealing with her period’s choosing NOW to begin. She also read the novel version of *Flowers for Algernon*, which cast further gloom over the day; and took time out to watch *A Lover’s Question* on TV, where Lance had apparently awakened from his coma only to get lost searching for ex-fiancée Marisol in the jungles of Peru.

By mid-afternoon Vicki was steeped in self-pity and avoiding eye contact with every reflective surface, though painfully aware they were there and what they must be showing. Then she heard a PUT-PUT-PUT chug-chug-chug into the cul-de-sac and COUGH-COUGH-COUGH to a stop.

“Lousy *spazzatura!* Can’t you hold out one more month?” snarled a familiar voice.

“(You’ll make her headache worse,)” muttered another as the doorbell repeatedly chimed the first six notes of *Peter and the Wolf*.

Felicia was out erranding, so Vicki donned sunglasses and shuffled over to admit the Sister Dopesters, who presented her with a get-well Slurpee from 7-Eleven and today’s Geometry homework from Mr. Rankin.

“Don’t go putting raw steak on those shiners,” Robin advised, peering through Vicki’s shades. “Too expensive, and doesn’t tenderize the meat worth a damn. Well, I gotta fly—Wednesday, y’know” (daddy/daughter day at Villa Neapolitan) “and there’s a heap of soft-soaping to do if I’m ever gonna plant my ass in the driver’s seat of my Sweet Babboo.” (To Fiona:) “Write that down—sounds like lyrics.” (To Vicki:) “Say the word ‘n’ we’ll hire a hitman to do a snuff job on that skank who bowled *your* ass over.” (To Fiona:) “Limey knows who that was, right?” (To Vicki:) “And don’t sweat doing those constructions. Geometry’s nothing more’n different ways you can spin your wheels. Well, catch you two on the flip side—”

Punch on the biceps for Loopy; punch on the biceps for Spooky; head on out and broaden the wordlists of all the little kids in the cul-de-sac by cursing an aged scooter back into operability until it PUT-PUT-PUT-ed away.

“(Sorry,)” went Fiona.

“Ehh, dat’s just Wobbin bein’ Wobbin,” said Vicki, trying not to spill the Slurpee as she sucked its contents through the awkwardly-bent straw while jamming the icy-cold cup against her swollen congested schnoz.

“(No... I mean...)” Vague left-handed wave at Vicki’s puffified features. Vaguer right-handed swipe at her own suddenly-runny mascara.

“Aw, Feef...” Double-armed embrace, propping the Slurpee on Fiona’s shoulder. (As they both harked back to *Tears and shiners—Tail-End on the park bench.*) “S’dot like I got caught by deh Bad Bludgeoder...”

“(I know... but...)”

“*You* cad stay awhile, wight? Like baybe for didder? I bid goig cwazy cooped up here, stuck to dese icebags—at least dis one tastes good” (slurp) “and by bob’s been actig like it’s all *by* fault for playig a ‘violedt’ sport.”

“(Not your fault. It was... I mean... I dunno, forget it.)”

“Wow,” went Vicki, letting her go and stepping back. “Sweet o’ you to twy lookig *worse’d* be, but you bight wudda go fix your face.”

“(What? Oh—ugh...)” at black-stained right-fingers.

She was heading off to mend her cosmetics when a car pulled into the driveway and Vicki, backing further away from the window, asked Feef to reconnoiter. “Is it by bob? Did she bwig Joss? She said she’d *twy*.”

“(Yeah,)” said Feef, peeking circumspectly between the drapes so as not to besmirch them. “(Joss and the Space Cadet—and that Vernon chick, too.)”

“Dodique? Weally?” Taking Fiona’s place at the veiled window in time to see a tyke on a trike roll up and confirm it:

“Hey, you’re *black!*”

“Yeah?” went dispassionate Nonique, while censorious Felicia went “*Pippin!*”

Who leaned on his handlebars with a captivated kiddy S-I-G-H to add: “And purrrrrty.”

(Welcome to Burrow Lane, courtesy of little Pippin Baumeister, whom Vicki'd babysat a scad of times without netting such esteem.)

"Um... thanks?" dithered Nonique as Felicia opened the front door, trilling "Look who's here!" "Bringing gifties," Joss warbled as she crushed Vicki (and Vicki's English homework) to her flopperroos: much softer, warmer, and more heartening than volleyballs. Next came Spacyjane Groh, stepping forward to give Vicki a flowery fedora-brimmed hug, plus her Spanish homework obtained from Jenna Wiblitz: "She's handmaking you a card for when you go back to school, and told me to say that everybody 'felt your absence' at lunch today—isn't that neat? Your face looks very interesting."

Which widened Vicki's smile, reminding her of Joss's face that first traumatic day on Petty Road. You could say the same about Nonique's face now: biting both lips in dismay at Vicki's mottled puffification (not to be confused with pluttification) and turning the hue of cherry-covered chocolate when Vicki pulled her into a welcoming clinch.

"I'b so glad you cabe." (And that Robin left before you arrived.)

Nonique declinched herself but tarried nearby. "You hurting?"

"Dot as buch. I s'pose you bwrought by *Bio* hobework?"

"Well, you know Mr. Dimancheff," said Nonique, presenting it.

Vicki converted her smile to a piranha grimace as she perused the assignment. "Oh yuck—cellular stwucture."

"That's right—building basements," quipped Joss. "Shall we ease on down to the family room?"

"I'll just rustle up you girls some snacks—oh hi, Fiona! Didn't know you were here," said Felicia. "How's your mother?"

"(H'lo Mrs. Volester, fine Mrs. Volester,)" droned Feef, having repainted her domino mask. "(Hey,)" to the new arrivals, including Nonique whom she knew slightly from the Orchestra woodwind section.

"Oh no really I can't stay," began Nonique, edging toward the door before being overridden by Unitarian racial empathy. (Which had kept Felicia from riding over Louisa Lang yesterday—that and Louisa's immense height, weight, and depth.) Nonique was handed the phone, told to call home and ask for clearance to visit her convalescent lab

partner, and would she prefer fruit juice or iced tea? Ambiguous “Um” from Nonique before handing back the phone: “My mother’d like t’speak t’you please.”

Half an hour later the mothers were still at it in a corner (animatedly, if Felicia’s expression was anything to go by) while their daughters chatted about music with Feef and Spacyjane, and Joss who came back up to the living room when the others didn’t follow her downstairs. Nonique, sneaking fretful peeks at her watch and toward the phone, stayed put on the couch; so Vicki beside her did too, as did Fiona on Vicki’s other side, Spacyjane in one of the adjoining armchairs, and Joss taking the one opposite.

They were relating the rise and fall of the Rosa Dartles to Nonique when a sudden VA-VA-VA-VOOM up the driveway caused a group spit-take of fruit juice or iced tea.

“What on earth...?” from Felicia, signing off with Mrs. Smith.

“That’s an awfully *orange* car,” remarked Spacyjane at the window.

Joss opened the front door and in tumbled Alex, Sheila, Laurie, and Sammi Tiggs, all just out of volleyball practice and breathless to various degrees. They parted like a line of chorus dancers to admit a cabaret emcee in plaid pants and a Zippy the Pinhead “Yow!” T-shirt. Vicki let out an answering “Yow!” as she covered her face and twisted away from the emcee’s too-bright pearly whites as they opened wide to sermonize:

“Deeeearly beloved, we are gathered here to offer CONdolence and CONSolation to this our deflected afflicttee (OH YES TELL IT!) and entreat her to *turn* not away from the Light but *bathe* her wounds in its tropical Shine (YEA VERILY!) oh my children, *raise* your hands in a glory HONNolulu ay-loha ay-men—”

(this to Fiona and Vernonique, who were raising theirs to fend him off even as he laid his on Vicki to smoothly untwist her till she faced forward again, though still hidden behind clustered fingers)

“—parsley sage rosemary and thyme, the flowers of spice comPEL thee to make me a cambric shirt / without no seam nor fine needle work (ARE you going to Scrabbleboard Square?) as we go sweeping through the plates to be washed in the mint sauce *of the Lamb!* Lo and behold and praise be to mercy mild, here’s Vicki’s sister a-standing amongst us!”

GASP from Vicki, unfingering her face to take a look-see—but of course it wasn’t Tricia, nor even Isabel Carstairs. Just flummoxed Felicia goggling as Dennis Desmond

bussed the back of her fist; while Laurie ducked past Sammi to be next in line, holding one arm out and up for grabs.

“YAYess!” went Dennis, taking Laurie in hand. “She *walks!* She *talks!* (You do, right? Nod twice for *Yo hablo Inglés.*) Oh bear witness, my children: she is fluent in *tongues!* Gather round and eavesdrop as I fess up to suffering from KLEPtomania” (taking possession of Laurie’s purse) “and PREStidigation” (extracting a hanky as if it were a magician’s trick scarf) “not to mention rampant FRESHgetting” (as he enclosed Laurie’s waist with an arm that drew her flank-to-flank) “and being a general UNDERpinning” (as Laurie sagged rapturously against him, until the aghast Samantha pulled her free).

Alex crept through parishioners’s legs to crouch by Vicki, hand over World History homework, and present a big greeting card signed by everyone connected with the volleyball team. “(He made us sing all the way here,)” she faintly divulged.

“(What, like alog wid deh wadio?)”

“(No—*drinking* songs! ‘Whiskey You’re the Devil,’ ‘Seven Drunken Nights’—and *loudly*, with our heads out the windows, so people in other cars could see us and hear us!”)

“(Has HE bid dwigig?)”

“(All I know is I’m glad I don’t need him to drive me home—look, my hands are still shaking—)”

“Hey, whose snazzy Camaro is parked out there?” asked Ozzie, stepping through the left-open front door.

“*Mister* Volester I presume, welcome back sir! We’ve kept the place just as you left it!” proclaimed Dennis, striding over to pump palms. Ozzie complied cordially but with bewilderment, since his living room hadn’t been occupied by a crazed Irishman and nine teenage girls (one like Thelma on *Good Times*) when he’d left for the Lot that morning.

“...so, the Camaro’s yours, then?”

“Raised it from a pup! Gave years of my life to breeding it from an Impala—”

“Don’t mind him, Mr. V,” said Sheila-Q. “He gave years of his life to getting dropped on his head! No offense,” to Vicki-on-the-mend, and “I’m taking your chair!” to uproarious Joss as the latter rushed off to the nearest bathroom. (Hastily sub-grumbling that *Every time I set foot under this roof, I wind up wetting my pants!*)

(Good thing Holly Brollis wasn't there to stage a Laugh Till You Lose Control contest.)

"Dad! Mom! Howja know I wanted an orange Chevy with blue rally stripes?" crowed the arriving Goofus, whose chest got smacked by car keys flung at him by Dennis.

"Warm it up for me, my man—you and I are going to House o' Chopsticks and getting enough takeout to feed all Shanghai! Hope everybody likes Szechwan shrimp—"

"Now see here..." began Felicia.

"Glad to! Now I'll see it over *here*—" firesigned Dennis as he and Goofus headed for the door. "While we're gone, the rest of you kindly notify Miss Vicki I'll be taking *her* out on the town ohhhh letttt's saaaay maaaaybe ten—ten?—yes, ten days from now: that'll be ample time for her to adjust to the idea—"

"He's still got your *purse*—" went Sammi, so Laurie galloped after them saying "Wait for me! I'll go too!"

"What, out with me? All the way to Monte Carlo? So we can risk everything on one mad throw of the dice? Wearing camouflage so we won't be blackmailed for our sins? Why, this is so sudden—"

He's asking me out too!! glowed Laurie as she gave her friends a backward bye-bye.

"Lord, you do NOT want to go out with that clown—he was vaccinated with a stereo needle!" snapped Sheila-Q.

"Oh, did Motormouth leave? Or just run out of gas?" wondered the returning Joss.

"He won't drive TOO wild with Goofy in the car, will he?" fretted Alex.

"(Maybe not, but *Goofus* will if he's still got the keys,)" muttered Fiona.

"Wouldn't it be easier for them to go to Atlantic City?" Spacyjane asked the dropjawed Samantha.

"It is always like this around here?" Nonique asked the shellshocked Vicki.

"...so, we're having Chinese tonight?" Ozzie asked the bamboozled Felicia.

*

"You will never in the world guess *who* is gonna call *here* any minute to ask *me* out!" said Laurie later that evening as she burst into the office/bedroom of HARRISON & ZANE on Grouseland Street. "Not if you made a hundred guesses! What am I gonna *wear*? What'll I

do with my *hair*?”

“It isn’t that screwball windbag with all the teeth, is it?” asked Susie, not looking up from her Civics textbook.

“He is *not* a screwball *or* a windbag! Why would you say that when he’s so perfect for me?”

“‘Cause Tina told me what she overheard Kirsten telling Jake about what that guy did to her friend Nancy.”

(Quickflip through mental gossip Rolodex.) “Nancy Hantz, Nancy Sykeman, or Nancy Buschmeyer?”

“Tina didn’t say. But whichever it was, *she* got all hot ‘n’ bothered and then got left high ‘n’ dry by ‘Old One-Shot Thanks-a-Lot Untie-the-Knot’—that’s what he calls *himself*! Never calls a girl after a date, though, never goes out with her a second time.”

“Well, maybe *I* can change all that—”

“Oh for Gahd’s sake, Lo—”

“He was so sweet, Sue! Asking Vicki to go out with him sometime, just to make her feel better—she really does look awful, even with sunglasses on—but flirting with *me* and taking *me* with him to get Chinese food for everybody (here, I saved you a fortune cookie) and saying *we’ll* go to Monte Carlo, which is like the most glamorous casino in Mexico, right?”

DISTANT WATER DOES NOT PUT OUT NEARBY FIRE read the tiny slip in Susie’s cookie. “Did you give him our phone number?” she sighed.

“*Aaagh!* I didn’t! And I can’t call *him* up to let him know it, ‘cause I don’t have his! I tried to look it up the other day, but he keeps it unlisted! What’ll I do, Sue? Oh, I know, I’ll call Sheila—I bet she knows his number since they’re both Irish—and I *know* she’s home ‘cause we took her there first from Vicki’s ‘cause she said she’d couldn’t stand listening to him any longer, which wasn’t very nice since he *did* pay for all our Chinese food and—”

The line was busy at “Castle Quirk.” Meaning Dennis might’ve given up on Laurie and decided to ask *Sheila* out instead; and since opposites attract, she might be saying YES to him on the phone right now! But wait—wouldn’t he have asked her a long time ago (both of them being Irish) and *not* do it again, if Tina’d told Susie the truth about his never dating any

girl twice? Find out if it *is* the truth—call Thirsty K, investigate what’d happened with which of the Nancys or maybe *Nanette* as in *Magnus*, even though she’d supposedly been engrossed with Boffer Freuen since way last spring—

But Kirsten was out with Jacuzzi Jake. (This late, on a school night? With the Multch East match tomorrow? Scandalous! Make a mental note to delve into it tomorrow.)

What to do *now*, though?

Ring up the smartest person you know to ask for clarifying counsel and advice—only to be told that Rachel Gleistein was through with love.

“Bennett Fayne has put me off relationships for *life*. LET Trina Purcell have him—IF she can hold onto him. I’LL devote myself to medical science.”

“Oh, Rachel, no! You’re too beautiful to give up dating!”

“I can’t help that. I should’ve known better than to trust a guy who S-M-I-L-E-S nonstop at everyone, no matter what. That’s the calling card of a con artist!”

(Gulp.)

But wait—Rachel’s judgment was impinged upon by bitterness (don’t forget *she’d* gotten Sell-O on the rebound after Irina Saranoff’d two-timed him with Mike Spurgeon) so, for once, her aptitude couldn’t be taken on faith. No, this time you needed to seize the bull by the horns and tackle Dennis Desmond head-on.

Not looking like *this*, though. Fetch the hot rollers, undo your pooftails and bouncify them—lay out every shade of blush and eyeshadow in your vanity caboodle—

And after a tremendous series of what Rachel would call permutations and combinations, garb yourself Thursday morning in a flame-colored blouse and charcoal-tinted skirt: both chosen to engender HEAT in the observer.

Jerome Schei whooped and whistled and unerringly deduced whose horns Laurie was planning to seize. He then had the nerve to *belittle* her choice: “From what I hear everybody say, he sounds like a trifle-with-your-affections-er—and haven’t you had your fill of those?”

If YOU’D’VE come to your senses and understood that WE were meant to be, I wouldn’t have to worry about BEING trifled with, Laurie managed not to say aloud.

From prior surveillance, she knew Dennis had Fifth Hour Chemistry on the other side of the same second-floor corridor as Laurie’s Fifth Hour Biology. (How was *that* for an

overlap?) So after Lunch 4B she left the cafeteria on the run, sped up to the Science wing (not easy to do in platform sandals) and succeeded in collaring Dennis as he reached the top of the stairwell. He in turn lost no time in putting the squeeze on her softest charcoal-tinted anatomy.

“EEK! Don’t! Not here in school!... Um, okay—do you know Tab Tchorz?”

“Ah: Polish Polecat that was, Cherry Picker that is, Semipro Gigolo that will be? Yes, he owes me several favors and several dollars, generous as I am to a fault.”

“Right, good—so is there any way you could maybe sort of persuade him to ask out my friend Samantha?” *While YOU ask ME out, so WE can all double-date this weekend?*

Wide-eyed wonder-glance from Dennis, receding across the hall. “Class, after—here, back—me, meet—then, talk—BELL, RINGING—”

Laurie made it over Room 208’s threshold just before the P-E-E-E-A-L ceased. Even so, Mr. Dimancheff bared his scary choppers at her: “So *generous* of you to join us, Miss Harrison!”

“Ooh! Ooh!” added Lenny Otis, Laurie’s Horshackish lab partner, presumably in heated tribute to her flaming/charcoal ensemble.

She could hardly confine herself inside it through Fifth Hour, anticipating the outcome of her crafty subtle hornseizure. Going out tomorrow and/or Saturday night, she and Sammi with a couple of upperclassmen! Who (let’s face facts) would want to make out as soon as possible, as much as possible, and as *far* as possible. Which may have also been the case with every caddish rotter Laurie’d dated till now; but who were Tyler Canute or Chipper Farlowe or even Mack “The Arm” Pittley in comparison? Small potatoes, that was who! Dennis and Tab were great big HOT potatoes, so she and Sammi would have to be extra on their guard to not get burnt—while still ensuring they got asked out a second time.

When the next bell rang, Dennis was already waiting by the stairwell and behaving more mannerly, with no grab at her rear end. Though continuing to wear a wonder-glance:

“Did I hear you say you wanted to set up the Cherry Picker with a *friend* of yours?”

“Sure—you know Sammi Tiggs—kinda tall, really cute, supergood at sports? Well, *she’s* not doing anything this weekend except volleyball practice, and *I’m* not doing—”

“It’s no favors you’re doing your *friend* if you hitch her to Tab Tchorz’s chamberpot. And it’s sad I am that it’s a patsy you are for such wicked-Pickèd wiles as the Polecat *exudes* upon the fair sex in this fine school. Wurra the day! Repent and lament lest ye cement your ASSENT—”

Giving Laurie’s might-as-well-be-clad-in-spandex bottom an openhanded SWAT that resounded like a pistol shot, up and down the second-floor corridor.

*

On Saturday the 17th Fiona Weller pinned on a black armband in remembrance of T.Rex’s Marc Bolan. Wizardy-warlocky rider of white swans, flying o’er the astral plane with curls and feather boas blowing in the elf-wind, he’d met death yesterday when his Mini GT hit a tree: making him now truly a *Dandy in the Underworld*.

PoonElly came by in Le Heap to take Feef and Robin to the Golden Arches on Chubb Avenue, which had a brand-new drive-through window (“Now you can get our famous food without even leaving your car!”). Robin rode shotgun, stamping on nonexistent brakes and accelerator, while Fiona sat in back penning lyrics for a memorial dirge:

*diamond meadows disguise dinosaur bones
savage rockslides silence strangeling groans*

And Big Macs were conveyed through Arch and Heap windows, together with a bundle of fries that Robin forced on the appetiteless Feef. Poon parked in the Golden lot so she and Robin could snarf their grub while it was hot, arguing between gobbles as to whether or not these were the worst burgers ever incinerated.

Fiona, trying to think of a two-syllable rhyme for *jeepster*, gazed aimlessly out at a vintage car as it drove into the slot to the right of Le Heap. She’d seen this car before, driven by both Martin Sheen in *Badlands* and the Pharaoh hoods in *American Graffiti*; it was what Robin would call a “chopped lead-sled,” lowered so close to the ground you had to wonder how it could move without scraping asphalt. Its windows were like slitted portholes, and in the one directly opposite Feef’s a face appeared—part of a face—eyebrows to lower lip.

Enough to be recognizable. Identifiable. Police-artist-sketchable.

Belonging to the girl who'd stood at Poon's elbow in the VTHS Girls Gym last Tuesday.

Then up beside it loomed another half-face: that of the deadpan frostymug whose sideways spike had smashed Vicki senseless.

Together the two halves stared at Fiona like apparitions from *The Omen* or *The Sentinel*, or *The Wind in the Willows*—when Mole wanders into the Wild Wood and sees wedge-shaped stoats weaseling at him out of dark hollows. Giving the evil-eyed *malocchio*, like Kinks Farghetti or Britt Groningen—except that these two halves seemed even more baleful and baneful.

Fiona stood (or sat) her ground, not allowing her domino mask to waver as she raised a greasy French fry to her mouth and took a deliberate downbite.

Then called “(Can we get going already?)” to Le Heap's front seats.

“Lookit that bitchen Merc coupe,” remarked Robin as PoonElly dutifully backed out.

“Hey, that's the Trashman!” said Poon, honking her horn at the Mercury and giving its driver a wave. (Its passengers were no longer visible through the porthole slit.) “*El Hombre de la Basura!* He was the leader of the guys who ravaged Hayzoose the Horrible's ‘Vette.”

“Who *are* these people, professional wrestlers?” asked Robin.

“Trashman's real name is Clark Barrantes—we used to call him ‘Zagnut,’” said Poon. “Emphasis on the *nut*—he's got one o' them love/hate fetishes going on with cars. Y'know, either rubbing on layer after layer of Turtle Wax, or demolition-derbying ‘em. Oops sorry,” to Fiona, remembering the black armband. “Cops've had his ass in a couple times for questioning ‘bout trash jobs he's done, but he's kept it out of the wringer—so far.”

“Well, let Mr. Zag-emphasis-on-the-*nut* know that if he ever tries anything with my Sweet Babboo, I will crush that Merc into a jagged cube and introduce it *up* his ass!”

No further questions about Hayzoose, whose horrible role in Poon's past hadn't been shared with Robin. Nor did either of Le Heap's front-seat riders notice that the chopped lead-sled had also left the Golden Arches and was now trailing them up Chubb Avenue. But Feef noticed, before sliding down in the backseat till her knees met her nose.

That same Saturday, Vicki Volester returned to volleyball practice for the first time since being taken from the gym to the hospital. She'd missed Thursday's matches with the Multch East Screaming Eagles, both of which Vanderlund won; though it was almost a foregone shoo-in (despite all the airs the varsity put on about finally notching a victory) given how dejected the Lady Eagles were. Multch Township had just announced that East, the oldest of its four high schools, was going to be closed in three years and its student body consolidated into Multch North's. Parents and alumni were mounting figurative barricades to protest this abomination, but the East volleyball team simply went through perfunctory motions and lost twice.

Laurie Harrison must've suffered sympathy pains: by Seventh Hour on Thursday she looked so unwell that Coach Celeste sent her to the nurse's office, excused from Phys Ed and also volleyball. With both Laurie and Vicki out, the JVs abandoned platooning and started their best six, who dispatched the Unscreaming Eagles in two quick games.

Vicki returned to classes on Friday, her face looking a lot better but still pretty awful, and coated with more makeup than Robin'd worn at her pimpest. Jenna Wibnitz had on X-ray specs that saw through Vicki's concealer to the blueish-greenish (aquamarinish?) bruises, which she sketched in gaudy living color; but Vicki forgave this after receiving the beautiful card Jenna'd handmade for her, its front an intricate net with a realistic hole torn through it. The card had been signed by everyone at lunch: a sweet honor to be singled out for best wishes by the likes of Cheryl and Mary Kate, Frank Wharton and Stu Nugent—

—and Dennis Desmond, who waltzed over before Spanish to add his unasked-for autograph and say “*Eight* days till I take you out / is not enough to show I care!”—while reaching over to beep Carly Thibert's cute little nose.

Quizzical stares from most of the other girls in Room 312, most disbelievingly by Diana Dabney, while Jenna's feathery bird-brows flew up above her X-ray specs.

Vicki gave them all a feeble inept shrug.

“(Was he talking to you or me?)” asked Carly, eyeballing Dennis with fresh interest.

The rest of that Friday felt just as off-balance. In World History Vicki was passed a note from Becca Blair, the first ever from that august personage, transmitting a dry little drollery that recommended she:

Keep your chin up
(next time)

Vicki was weighing whether to send a reply under Ms. Goldberg's meticulous gaze, when the fire alarm went off and the P.A. system directed everyone to evacuate VTHS "calmly and quietly."

This sort of endeavor was tailor-made for Alex the Girl Scout, who would've been disappointed (upbeatly) if it were only a drill; but actual smoke could be seen drifting out of an open window, as those exiting school sent excited word back through the queue. So Alex had her hands full, reining in student anticipation of their alma mater's being destroyed by a blazing inferno, till (much too soon and to the majority's regret) the smoke petered out before a fire engine rolled around the corner at a laidback pace, not even using its siren.

Vicki, waiting with the crowd on the "safe" south side of Wheaf Avenue, held Becca's Gucci bag while the August Personage enhanced her regal manicure, shaking her imperial head at each rumor about the smoke's cause/effect that reached her imperial ears. Vicki for once was grateful to play maidservant and be lost in Becca's august shadow, given the exaggerated contrast between golden auras and aquamarinish bruises.

"Chin," said Becca, and Vicki pointed hers ever-upward like Agnes's finger in *David Copperfield*, till a mundane report came from Home Ec that Doreen Jobling had let a pan of blueberry muffins burn to blackened crisps. Luckily (and amazingly) Dory wasn't hurt—though for the next month or so she wouldn't have curlable eyelashes.

The schoolday ended on a mostly positive note when Phys Ed spent Seventh Hour out on the cinder track. Vicki could ask for nothing better: it felt *so good* to run outdoors again, not doing laps inside a stuffy gym but with the wind in her hair and on her face, and nothing to imperil the still-sore latter except a stray cinder or two kicked up by pounding gym shoes.

"Isn't this *GREAT*?" she exulted, rolling the repronounceable "R" Tony-the-Tiger-style as she pulled alongside Laurie. Who stuck *her* cute little nose high in the air and sprinted silently ahead.

Vicki was so astonished by this lack of response that she began to doubt it was really Laurie Harrison she'd spoken to. "What's with *her*?" she asked Sheila-Q, running up from behind.

“What’s with *who*?”

“Laurie—I asked her something and she didn’t answer *anything*, not one word.”

“Well, she left early yesterday and went home sick—might be laryngitis. Enjoy the hush while it lasts.”

Or until Alex accompanied Vicki and Joss to Burrow Lane, intent on reaccustoming Vicki to ball control (with an admonitory frown at Joss’s reaction to this term).

First by rolling a ball from one to another, like preschoolers; then a gentle game of toss ‘n’ catch; then faster passes, from which Vicki sometimes couldn’t help but shrink away. Then a pause to convince the disapproving Felicia that this was a *good* idea, a *necessary* step—of course employing the “when you fall off a horse” maxim, as if Alex had ever taken a fall in her equestrienne life.

Well: it was one thing to be thrown off a bucking bronco, and quite another to get trampled beneath its iron-shod hooves. A rodeo acrobat might gamble this wouldn’t happen a second time, but Vicki wasn’t a cowgirl and already had her fill of blues. (Faltering as another fastpass whizzed by to bounce off the flagstones.)

“This is AWFULLY Phys-Eddish,” grumped Joss. “Can’t she get ‘back in the saddle’ by riding a bike?”—the only form of exercise that Joss condoned, other than blowing into a musical instrument while *not* marching around with it.

“Just a few more,” promised Alex.

Vicki did her molar-gritting best to cope with them, though it felt like spoonfuls of strained carrots (blecch!) were being slung against her clenched teeth. None of which had been loosened or chipped or knocked out by last Tuesday’s ultraspike—yet who could say that wouldn’t occur when the *next* one struck?...

Come Saturday morning, Alex and Mumbles had to almost drag the passive-resistant Vicki out of Mumbles’s Maserati Merak and into the school gym.

“Um, sorry, I just got kind of cramped in that little backseat is all...”

“Look, I knowww how you feeel,” drawled Mumbles, who’d only recently regained fighting trim after taking that Houlihan cannonball to the gut. “When it happens, you just wanna crawl off AND PLAY A HEAVENLY HARP! **HA!! HA!! HA!!** But you caaaan’t, you gotta” [*singing, as Alex chimed in*] “pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over

again.’ So—start!”

All over again.

Them, on you.

Weird how people react to someone else’s head injury.

Fiona Weller’s noggin had gone *clonk* when she’d fainted on the VW Band Room floor; but the only visible result had been a bump hidden by her hair, and everybody was more concerned about the eating disorder that’d caused her collapse. If Feef got stared at afterward, it was to make sure she put proper food in her mouth.

Fat Bob Neapolitan had bloodied the hell out of his nose when he’d tripped and fallen during the Battle of the Bands blackout; yet once it got packed with cotton, people hadn’t gawked at him as if he were a maimed casualty or freakshow resident. (Not more than *usual*, anyway.)

But let a girl get smacked in the face by a supersonic volleyball, and watch her become the centerpiece of a whole new spectator sport—embraced by tearful sympathizers, scrutinized by critical analysts, ridiculed by mock-well-wishers. Vicki’d run the gamut yesterday; her friends (and a few mockwells) hastened to say she looked “so much better,” but they all knew how far that was from GOOD.

Now fellow Gondoliers crowded round to shell out encouragement, tips for getting back into the swing of things, and a Canadian nickel that Joyce Usher swore would protect her from further bad luck. “Kiss it each time you rotate position,” urged Joyce, not saying which side of the nickel to kiss: Queen Elizabeth on the head or a beaver on the tail.

Coach Celeste had Vicki do some easy pass-set-hit drills with ethereal Pebbles and unobtrusive Ann Hew. Vicki tried not to think every ball might be a neutron bomb with her name on it; but it was a massive hassle, bearing down on the basics in front of the entire gym and not excelling at them, either. More and more eyes turned her way—some buoyantly, like Natalie and Thirsty K and Rhonda the Roadrunner; some appraisingly, like Lisa and Etta and Ms. Ramsey; some inscrutably, like Big Sue and Louisa and Gretel Hitchens; some uneasily, like Michelle and Samantha and Chookie Yentlebaum.

Isabel paid her no-never-mind (fine by Vicki) and some sort of squabble was going on between Ginger and Sheila-Q (over the bragging rights to Avalanche Dobbs?) so they too

were inattentive. But that left more scope for antagonistic glances from Gwen Cokingham, always on a stakeout for a bitchabout; and Demandin' Amanda, intolerant of lapses and slipups; and Mauly the Mauler, whose blood-red battle-glints shone clear across the room. And if all *those* weren't enough to knock your nerves for a loop, Laurie Harrison *again* kept her mouth shut and her nose in the air whenever you ventured into her vicinity; while up in the bleachers sat newly-lashless Doreen Jobling, poring over every flub you made (and you made more, the more she pored) with almost ghoulish intensity.

*

On Monday the 19th, Aunt Polly Rumpelmagen brought Fiona home from an afterschool dental appointment that left her full of novocaine and weltschmerz. (So much for "healthy eating"—might as well have stuck to cereal snackpacks.)

"You had a phone call," said Chloe, sounding irked that it'd pre-empted one for *her*.

"(From...?)" Feef mutter-cued through numb gums.

"I don't know—they didn't say—just asked if you lived here. I said 'Yes' and they hung up. You're not gonna call them back *now*, are you? *I'm* expecting a—sorry!" Chloe backpedaled, as thunderclouds developed over Fiona's head.

The household attributed this to the dentist or Marc Bolan, or that poor Jane Doe who'd expired without regaining consciousness: the latest addenda to the Mad Bludgeoner's death toll. (Spacyjane Groh had honored Jane Doe by sticking a white plastic carnation in her fedora's hatband.) Moth and the Rumpelmagens gave Fiona room to brood, which she took and did.

They know who I am. They know where I live.

Even after Le Heap had lost the stalking Merc in last Saturday's traffic. Or so Feef'd thought and hoped at the time, peeping through Le Heap's rear window to find it gone.

Where had they picked up her trail? Maybe at the damned dentist's, chancing to spot her in the cream-colored Chevette shared by Moth and Aunt Polly, which was parked now beside Uncle Cass's Estate Wagon in the Plexiglas Palace garage. Behind closed locked doors; theoretically secure.

People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones—but how do they keep from being TARGETED?

External threats: you never feared them when Robin was close by, but when she wasn't, things could get hairy. And *this* external threat wasn't Gary Sedgemoor mouthing off like a noisome salamander, or Britt Groningen bringing her abysmal gaslight to bear, or some bizarre Scenesters who might hijack and enslave you on the Sunset Strip. *This* was (or may as well be) a Mad Bludgeoner—aware of who YOU were and where YOU lived, and very possibly what cars YOU got driven around town in.

Which meant there was no way Robin could safeguard you against *this* hairy threat. Even if you felt up to explaining why Gina Conti was out to get you; even if you admitted the further reaches of your more-than-Just-Good-Friendship with PoonElly; and even if Robin took it all in stride (yeah right)—she couldn't protect you from predators like Frostymug or the Trashman. Robin herself was in danger, as bad or worse than yours: suppose they got hold of her “Sweet Babboo” and laid it waste? That'd *kill* Robin, even if she weren't behind the wheel when it happened.

(Shudder away from the thought.)

Nor could you simply ask Poon to tell Gina to lay off. A Conti was no more likely than a Neapolitan to chuck a blood feud just like that. Plus, you and Poon hadn't really discussed Tuesday's “incident”—certainly not then in the gym, nor elsewhere afterward. If Poon didn't suspect Vicki Volester's true significance in your life, thinking she was just the Wrong Little Dark ‘Un, better leave well enough alone—no telling what might fall out if *Poon* took it into her head to get jealous.

So who WAS there you could turn to for help?

Memory of praying to a flounder in the sea. *O Gollum, Gollum, in your cave / or Tail-End, halfway to the grave*. Chanted thirteen times in quick succession, leaving a stupid aftertaste in your psyche.

One step at least was takeable by yourself. Several steps, in fact: let the household retire to its various beds, let Chloe start making her nocturnal noises, then ease up and out and down and over to check the locks and catches on all the garage doors and windows. While you inhale the mingled scents of motor oil and tire rubber—comforting odors, since they waft your fragile nostrils eight blocks north to Villa Neapolitan. As the rest of you stands here in near darkness for uncounted minutes, listening for intimations of trouble that

do not come. Before easing back over and up and in and down; to wrap your arms around your bedded Fender and seek its calmative resonance.

*

On Tuesday afternoon the Lady Gondoliers crossed the canal to vie with the Blue Angels of Hereafter Park. All the other NESTL(É) teams agreed that “Angels” was a misnomer; Hereafter Park got away with murder so often its players ought to be called the Scot-Frees, the Slaps-on-the-Wrist, or the Forty-Lashes-with-a-Wet-Noodle. H.P.’s referees called more fouls and penalties than any in the league, but hardly ever on the home squad. (Ginger Snowbedeck said even if a Blue Angel went on a chainsaw-massacre spree, the H.P. ref would blow the whistle on a visiting opponent for “unnecessary gore on the court.”)

You can’t squeeze blood out of a stone, though.

Over the Channel and up the Hills came Gondolier #26, Laurel Stacy Harrison, or “Levelheaded Laurie” as she now thought of herself. *Not* “So Dumb,” not ever again; not after being smacked into sense and sensibility—thrust, as it were, through a crack in the eggshell that had contained her until last Thursday. Into, at the outset, a state of post-smack stupefaction that’d intensified during Sixth Hour French, till Floyd Lewis who sat behind her raised a wannabe streetwise hand to say:

“Yo Mister Masseur sir? Think we got us a case o’ heeBEEus-jeeBEEus here!”

“*C’est vrai?*” went Monsieur Dunlap. He hailed from St. Louis, which entitled him (so he said) to spell his name d’Unlap “*à la mode de Mark Twain*” and disport like a wine steward on a snooty steamboat. “Shall we appease you with a recitation of *belle poésie*, Mademoiselle Harrison? Will *un peu de Verlaine* suffice?”

He reeled off a few stanzas with *très sarcastique* intonation, then ordered Laurie to translate the poem’s first two lines aloud as he dashed them onto a chalkboard:

*Il pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville*

Thanks to Rachel’s tutoring, Laurie was fairly conversant in elementary French; but now she remained silent (*so dumb*, as it were) till “Hiawatha” Lewis hid behind his notebook while piping out a falsetto:

By the shores of Gitche Gumee

By the shining Big-Sea-Water

[Laughter] as the bell re-P-E-E-E-E-A-L'd.

Laurie trudged downstairs with Enid Stott, who again wore neither glasses nor contacts and so noticed nothing extraordinary about Laurie's demeanor. But Sheila-Q did, the minute she entered the locker room; and Ms. Schwall did too, when the perturbed S-Q called her over to see stupefaction crumble into shivering:

Quelle est cette langueur

qui pénètre mon cœur?

Coach Celeste wrapped her in a couple of towels and had Sheila take her to the nurse's office, where the song of the rain (and it *was* raining outside) pitter-pattered a still small voice between her eardrums.

And to think that I thought I should get all dolled up today...

Nurse Rathbone, wise in the ways of teenage wasteland, made mild inquiries about possible substance usage, venereal situations, etc.; while the still small voice recalled that *When it happened to Alex, SHE rammed a plate of spaghetti and meat sauce into the guy's gut...*

Reflexively, the macaroni salad Laurie'd had for lunch congealed into a pasta popsicle in her digestive tract.

"I'm cold," she realized.

"There, there," said Nurse Rathbone.

No comment as to whether the scantitude of Laurie's wardrobe might be causing these chills. Nor did Pa Zane remark on this when he came to get her, though he draped his suit jacket over her tremulous bare shoulders and held his umbrella over her wobbly head.

Not till she was in her own room, her own bed, beneath a quilt dug out of her own trunk, did she tardily wish that *Jason* Zane had been the one to pick her up and bring her home. But Jason was off at college, partying down in Carbondale, and a *step*brother—make that a *scuzz*brother—would be of no good to her now.

And to think that I thought he was sooooo suave went the s.s. voice, in between sips of warm milk.

Susie returned from VW cross country practice, very damp and unkempt—*we run in rain! we run through mud!*—yet seemingly in the know as to how and why Laurie was laid up in bed (so to speak) at that time of day. She held her tongue, though, in deference to infirmities, and stepped aside when Mom came home from the open-late-on-Thursday clinic to provide a second opinion.

“No fever,” said Mrs. Harrison-Zane RN. “Any headache? Dizziness? Coughs or sneezes?”

Slow shake of denial by Laurie, whose shivers had settled into a steady unwavering C-H-I-L-L that wasn’t hurtful or stressful, but peculiarly *delicious*—goosing her flesh within unseasonable flannel PJs and thick wool socks.

Ooooooh, kewwwwl... was this what they called “sangfroid”?

“Ms. Rathbone was right, then,” said Mom, relieved to be off duty. “Lots of rest and lots of liquids—and no, the one won’t make the other impossible. Above all, no wasting your breath on the horn.”

Meaning not a brass instrument like Joss’s, but the pink touchtone Princess that was stashed on its shelf in Susie’s closet, along with the Phone-Mate that could record over two dozen thirty-second messages.

The girls had been given their own phone line a couple Christmases ago, partly so that Mom and Pa and Jason might regain a chance of getting and making calls themselves, and partly in hopes of Laurie learning some telephonic self-control. Many rules had been laid down, with Susie given full rein to enforce them; including a new lock on her closet door, behind which the Princess resided when not in permissible use.

Later that evening Susie retrieved the closet key from its current hiding place and listened to the Phone-Mate’s messages. “Three from Jerome, two from Sammi, one each from Rachel and Buddy and Sheila and Chookie (they beat Multch East in both matches) and one from Michelle Blundell, sounding worried. Well they *all* are, of course, about you.”

“...I’ll talk to them later...”

Susie, concealing uneasiness at this lassitude, called everyone back with brief indefinite reassurances. Then: “Y’ready to talk to *me* about it?”

“...just caught a chill is all...”

Hugging her sangfroid close and tight like a second skin, like body armor; as though she were an Athens Grove Olympian or Boomer Wrang, or even Joan of Freaking Arc.

Next morning she cloaked this with a more decorous outfit than the day before’s, but left her hair unplaited to hang down to her shoulders and into her eyes. Brushing it forward into bangs as thick as Travis Lingerspiel’s: *all the better to PEER through at you, my dears...*

Susie and their parents sized her up sidelong but said nothing, other than that she looked (as she felt) better.

Full listening mode on Friday: drawing friends out, studying them like textbooks. What was it Sheila’d said at Houlihan? “Probing them for weaknesses”—not just hypocrisy, as on that unhappy day six or so weeks ago, but every kind of character flaw.

Buddy Marcellus, for example. All the things that’d ever bugged Laurie about him bubbled forth till she wished he’d go SWEAT them away with Thirsty K in Jake Korva’s jacuzzi, or do a Right Guard commercial with Jeff Friardale. Had things gone differently yesterday, Laurie’d planned to get out of their Saturday date (miniature golf at the Kool Course amusement arcade) by giving Buddy the classic Something Suddenly Came Up brush-off.

Well, guess what: Something HAD.

There were so many cooler courses she could take. Such as into the second-floor washroom between Third and Fourth Hours, so she could encounter Gigi Pyle and Britt Groningen and let out a still small (yet very distinct) snortle:

To think that I thought you two were soooo frightening...

Contemptuous perusal by Gigi’s Evergladesy irises.

Still smaller (yet even more distinct) response from behind bangs:

Fancy thinking the Beast was just a bunny you could hunt for sport...

Wordless HUFF by Gigi, who dried her lily-white hands and took her Dixie-cupped leave; probably to go curry further favor with the junior class snottyclique, having lost all her own disciples from VW. Britt, though, lingered for a moment, regarding Laurie with sleepy-

smily new interest; then said “Later” before strolling off.

That was unexpected; but not half as big a surprise as Laurie’s virulent revulsion at seeing Vicki Volester in Friday Phys Ed, and again at Saturday volleyball practice.

Had she been asked beforehand, Laurie would’ve unhesitatingly replied that Vicki was one of her closest friends, a heroine, a role model. Hadn’t she wept when Vicki got injured just a few days ago? Then gone to Vicki’s house, dined with her on Szechwan shrimp, and given her a big hug at parting?

C’était avant, c’est maintenant. (How was THAT, Monsieur So-called d’Unlap?)

Turn your back and tilt your nose and pretend to ignore the Pfiester Park Pherrette—who, let’s not forget, was the one who set us up with Bubble-Forth Buddy last spring. Now we know *why*! (And pay no attention to the flickerish image of Vicki soothing a girl covered with wet grass clippings on Joss’s newly-mown lawn.)

As we go KER-BUMPITY down the far side of the Hereafter Hills and back to the present day: Tuesday the 20th of September. With Isabel Carstairs oozy-cooing to half the team bus and Millicent Carstairs languidizing to the other half; each about the Blue Angel JV captain, a cousin of theirs who evidently embodied the worst traits of both.

Marilyn “Jive” Mansfield was a reputed expert on cheating at anything cheatable: athletics, card games, elections, final exams, commercial transactions, *l’amour*. Her folks had withdrawn her from Startop Academy along with the Carstairs sisters, but Jive was on the brink of being asked to decamp. She never visited the Shoreward Club without racking up some ill-gotten gain—pecuniary, pharmaceutical, or somebody else’s *bien-aimé*. One time Jive had enthralled a Front Tree foreign exchange student named Farshad, leading him on and leaving him destitute with nothing to remember her by but a pair of her pantyhose, which Farshad used to strangle himself.

“To *death*?” gasped Sammi and Michelle.

“They had to dig the L’eggs out of his neck before shipping him back to Iran,” Isabel oozed.

“Is she telling that Fathead story again?” lolled Mauly from the varsity end of the bus. “Was he the Shah’s cabaña boy in today’s version?” (To the Biguns:) “Now, this is what Jive *really* did to him...”

Our cue to tune out both Carstairses. Particularly Is, retelling her previous tales about how psychotic Mauly could get (when not luded to the gills) which we've heard so often we could set them to music:

*To think that I thought you were soooo sophisticated
Now I'd just like your whoppers to beeee abbreviated*

Weird. Never able to think up lyrics before. Always been in awe of those who could, Britt and Fiona and so on. Must be a side effect of smacked-into sensibility.

In the Hereafter Park boys locker room (same stale urinal jokes as at Houlihan and Multch West) Coach Celeste named the first game's starters. Presuming H.P. won the coin toss (*a fait accompli* on their home court) it would be the six who'd played their best against Multch East: Sammi, Alex, and Natalie on the front line, Pebbles, Isabel, and Kirsten on the back. If Vanderlund somehow won the toss, same lineup rotated one position clockwise, so Nat could serve.

Smoldering acquiescence by Etta and Sheila-Q, whose hot tempers were better suited for Fries-and-Broils platooning. We, on the other hand, felt ice cream cool-coursing through our veins. Enabling us to be patient and put Sammi's mind at rest about our new match day 'do: two unpoofy drooptails, plus the bangs down below our brows.

"Like Dyna Girl?" asked Samantha, still a *Krofft Supershow* devotee.

"Making *you* Electra Woman."

Which Sammi accepted, even though she wasn't blonde. But still: "Feel okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Go, go. Play, play."

G-O / N-D-O / L-I-E-R-S, and so forth.

Ann Hew blended into the bench, but Michelle required convincing that her chances of court time today and making varsity next season hadn't been scuttled. Which was easier to say *and* do as Isabel got blitzkrieg'd by Cousin Jive (who looked like Is in a Vampirella wig) and the villainous H.P. ref.

The Blue Angels *did* win the toss—with a loaded coin, Natalie swore—after which Jive fired serve after serve at Vanderlund's middle back row. Is tried her utmost to bump these within Nat's reach or to another setter; but her hits went wide or fell short or got

TWEETed as illegal—intentional delay of game, or violation of sportsmanship, or derogatory remarks to the referee in regard to these decisions.

With the Gondoliers down 8-0, Ms. Schwall pulled Isabel (cranberry-red by then with exasperation) and sent in *not* Etta, *not* S-Q, *not* Laurie or Michelle or Ann Hew, but Vicki Volester. Who had the nerve and gall to *not* only be fully recuperated from last Tuesday's bruises and blemishes—but to look even *more* attractive than she did before!

As if pain BECAME her.

The other benchwarmers cheered Vicki back onto the court; the other starters welcomed her there. *WE* chose to take an *au contraire* course by crossing our fingers, our arms, our toes inside our gym shoes, and beginning a silent chant of *JINX—JINX—JINX—*

*

"Laurie's got boars in her drawers. Again," Sheila'd stated fifteen minutes earlier from the other end of the bench, as Natalie went to shake hands with Marilyn Mansfield (who had hair like Cher but a face like Suzanne Somers: NOT a match made in heaven) and pretend there was a fifty-fifty chance of winning the coin toss.

Vicki peeked past Sheila-Q, Ann Hew, Henrietta and Michelle to contemplate Our Favorite Blabberyap. A new thicket of bangs screened any responding peek, but Vicki could sense a malignant discord lurking there—as though Kinks Farghetti were on the prowl again.

"What is *with* Laurie?" Vicki'd asked Samantha in Study Hall.

"Not sure," Sammi'd hedged. "She came down with chills real sudden last week, y'know, and went home early? Back at school next morning, told me she felt all well again, but hasn't been acting like herself since. Y'think we should be, like, um... concerned?"

Hard to say. According to Joss who'd known her the longest, Laurie had always been gullible and naive and taken advantage of. Her standard reaction was disbelief (up to and including denial hives) followed by turning on the waterworks (as she'd redundantly done on Joss's just-doused lawn that day in August). Rarely if ever was she speechless or taciturn, even when garbled by sobs.

The only conjecture Vicki could make was that Laurie's nose-in-the-air had been put-out-of-joint by Dennis Desmond—who seemed to believe Vicki was destined to go out on a *date* with him that weekend, willy-or-nilly! That morning in Spanish he'd serenaded her (in

English) with a mishmash medley of Ruby and the Romantics and the Chambers Brothers:

Our day will come (tick tock tick tock)
The day after the day after the day after
Tooooo-morrow (no tears for us)
Let's do our laundry in the tumbling Tide
So our clothes can be psycheDELicized
Yes, our day will come (hey hey)
Then our time is gone (whoa whoa)
There'll be things to reee-alize
If we floss our gums and wear a smile
And put off spittin' till SAA-TUR-DAY—
(shoobie-doobie-wah)

From Señor Banonis: “*NO MAS CANTO, POR FAVOR.*”

Jenna Wiblitz kept her birdy-beak shut till Lunch 5D, when she'd chirped out of the side nearest Vicki's ear: “(You'd better double with me and Rags.)”

“Hunh?”

“(Ssshhhh. You'd best have me along—I know his tricks and manners. Even if he better NOT call me ‘Jenny Wren’ again.)”

Vicki hadn't been entirely certain what Jenna meant (though it was obvious who “he” was) or whether she herself had the durability to double-date with Rags Ragnarsson. He didn't lunch at Vicki's table; Lisa'd banished him after a single unfortunate tryout, and Rags was now only allowed to come over and stand in the aisle for a few minutes after bringing Jenna her daily sugar cookie. Holly and Link had petitioned to give him a second chance, but Lisa was adamant (“no dogs at the table!”) and there really wasn't room enough for a big chowdown guy like Rags. Not unless Sammi could summon the courage to go crash Tab Tchorz's table, and she'd probably die of embarrassment before *that* could happen.

Vicki, watching the JV Gondoliers and Blue Angels do their pregame warmups, thought what a shame it was that Rags hadn't fallen for Samantha. Look at her, built like a college woman, leaping and striking and following through like a virtuoso dancer. They

were all dancers: Alex the gazelle and gymnastic Isabel and not-yet-soppy Kirsten and stronger-than-you'd-think Pebbles and even Momma Penguin Natalie. Once more Vicki sat back and gave herself over to sheer enjoyment of the choreography, the sight of everyone working in synch like a ballet troupe before a recital.

Then the game began and this vista disintegrated.

Marilyn Mansfield lobbed one jive serve after another over Alex and Sammi's outstretched hands to swoop into Isabel's zone—nobody else's—thwarting the moves Is made to keep it in play. And those that the ball didn't thwart, the referee did, till you thought he was going to wear out his whistle.

Isabel might not top any popularity poll of her teammates, but they rooted for her now from court and bench as she underwent this onslaught. Pebbles and Thirsty K tried again and again to cover for her, but were no more successful than the front line at blocking Jive's serves. Finally, just as Isabel's face was about to burst like a scalded tomato (which the ref would probably call a flagrant foul), Coach Celeste called a time out.

"Vicki—go in for Is."

"Me?"

"(Dig-and-roll all you can,)" Celeste quietly instructed.

"(KILL her. Kill her DEAD,)" Isabel added, her face on the rupture-brink as she and Vicki touched palms in passing.

More emphatic gimme-fives came from the remaining starters as Vicki took her place in the middle back row, suddenly sweatier than any of them, including Kirsten who hadn't had many opportunities yet to work up a thirst. Sweatier and scaredier: *I'm not ready yet—I've had only two practices in the past week—I didn't even quit FLINCHING at the ball till yesterday—*

Oh for a hockey mask.

That morning when she'd approached the mirror, there'd been no recoil for the first time in seven days. All the bruising and swelling was gone; she was "lovely as ever" after a washup and application of cosmetics (with a pre-torpedo amount of concealer). *Lovelier*, if anything; as if in reward for being a Brave Soul and Good Sport. Others too perceived an enrichment of appearance: her family, her friends, guys she knew, guys she didn't; Dennis

Desmond *sang* his appreciation. Now if there was a way to drop by St. Benedict's ER and show off the enriched face to Doctor Younghunk—

—*without* its getting smashed by a second torpedo.

Oh for a hockey mask, or a fencing mask, or a Masai warrior mask...

And *speaking* of masks: had Hereafter Park decorated this gym for Halloween a month early? Were all the Blue Angels really costumed as girl-goblins, except for their server who was done up as Dracula's daughter?

Vicki shook these mirages out of her unmasked head, saying "Mine!" in a loud clear voice as the white leather orb rose high over the net and came plummeting earthward—or, more accurately, gymshoelacesward. React automatically—*accroupis* down low—get your forearms under the ball—bump it into the air—tuck hands and chin to chest—dip one shoulder—roll over onto your back with knees bent—

—and sprawl there with feet pedaling haphazardly, almost kicking Alex and tripping Pebbles while causing Nat's set to go out of bounds untouched. Score: 9-0 Hereafter Park.

Hoarse whisper from Joyce Usher, whose turn it was to call lines: "Didja kiss the nickel while suiting up? *Didja?*"

No she hadn't; but *not* kissing a Canadian nickel wouldn't account for muffing the end of a dig-and-roll. That was due to rustiness and maybe absentmindedness. Next time remember to *keep* rolling till feet contact the floor, then spring up to standing.

Except that Vicki's next attempt resulted in a bellyflop dive with no roll at all; and on the try after that, play was whistled dead when she *caught* the ball and held it between her elbows. Which would've been a fine save by a soccer goalie, but lost Vanderlund another point in volleyball, making the score 11-0.

Feeble inept shrug at Alex, at Natalie, at Coach Celeste.

Holy smoke I really pulled a Charlie Gordon that time...

Yes, forget monster movies. This was the scene in *Flowers for Algernon* where Charlie thought something had gone wrong with his eyesight, before realizing he could no longer read German or any of the languages he'd learned as a supergenius. *All gone...*

Very early the next morning, in Wednesday's wee-est hour, the Plexiglas Palace was rocked by what felt and sounded like an artillery fusillade.

Fiona, awake in an instant, flopped out onto the carpet and slid her Fender to safety under the bed; then quickcrawled to the bedroom door, flipped its lock and jammed a chair under its knob.

"Whuss happnin'? *Whuss goan on?*" went groggy Chloe.

"SSSHHHH!!"

Outside the door: the sounds of drubbing footfalls, throbbing voices, a car horn blaring an incessant F#. Fiona groped for and grabbed hold of a three-foot drill rod she'd "borrowed" from stock metal in the basement, taking a self-defensive stance with it as the doorknob rattled and Chloe yawped fearfully behind her.

"Girls? It's okay, you can come out."

Said the wildcat to the mice. "WHAT HAPPENED?" Feef exerted, as if to the Baroness back at the Mayerling.

"...there's been kind of an accident, in the garage."

And when Fiona (bringing her drill rod) and Chloe (clutching Bambooboo the panda) followed Moth out and down and over there, they found the Buick Estate Wagon wedged midway through a shattery chasm in one of the garage doors. The other door had been opened more conventionally, and Uncle Cass strode back in below it after stifling the Buick horn. Patches, Smarty, Bootsie, and Chuckles were lined up with their backs against the wall, gorging their ids on the spectacle of so much homespun destruction. Uncle Cass planted himself between them and the entrapped Buick, fists on bathrobed hips, and focused grimly on his oldest son.

"Peter Behrens Rumpelmagen, I want you to look me in the eye—"

"I didn't do it, Dad!" protested Patches, who *was* only eleven—although if he *had* succeeded in hot-wiring the car or at least dislodging its brakes, *this* would've been among the likelier consequences. But not in the wee-est hour, in a house full of adults and with the garage's side door also ajar, its bolt apparently jimmied.

"Now, Cass..."

"No more babying him, Polly!"

Outraged exclamation by Patches; jubilant snortling by Smarty, Bootsie, and Chuckles; doleful sighs by Aunt Polly and Moth; sheepish bleat by Chloe.

By this time neighbors in nightwear were arriving from all over Windy Poplar Lane, together with a copcar flashing its red domelight. Fiona discreetly stowed her rod in a corner for later retrieval, and tugged the collar of her Ziggy Stardust T-shirt/nightie up over the cord around her throat. This was not the chain of her FTW necklace, but the suspender of her life savings.

Back in L.A., while helping Lem pack his stuff for storage before he joined the Nora Corazon tour, she'd discovered his old grouch bag—a chamois drawstring purse that'd originally belonged to his vaudevillian grandmother. Fiona remembered it as the Weller family bank in Cloudland Atmosphere days.

“(You don’t use this anymore?)”

“Nope—sold out and opened a checking account.”

“(Can I have it?)”

Lem had ceremoniously hung the grouch bag round her neck, and she'd begun stashing her currency inside it. What with PoonElly's picking up so many tabs, Feef had stockpiled a tidy sum over the summer—earmarking it for bass maintenance or acquiring more import albums; not forgetting that Robin's sixteenth birthday was in less than a month.

Now there were more immediate needs. Uncle Cass and Aunt Polly might be relatively well off, yet they had five children to raise (and start bailing out of juvie before long, even if Patches *was* innocent tonight) as well as providing room and board to Moth and Fiona. Now there'd be major repairs to the garage and Estate Wagon to pay for, as well as the Palace alarm system Uncle Cass was talking to cops and neighbors about installing.

Restitution was not really an option.

But retribution could be.

Had the house been randomly broken into by a car thief so dumb he forgot to raise the garage door before trying to make his getaway? So Patches and the boys were theorizing; and since there were no hooligans among Uncle Cass's architectural competitors (so far as he knew) the cops seemed inclined to find this credible.

Fiona jumped to a variant conclusion. She said nothing about it to Moth or the Rumpelmagens; nor to Robin or Fat Bob a few restless hours later when they drove by to take her to school, after inspecting the damage done and temporary fixes made so far.

“Pretty goodsized hole,” said Robin. “Get any pictures of the Buick while it was stuck in it?”

“(Yeah, for insurance.)”

“Be sure and make me copies.”

Fat Bob offered to lend a meaty hand when permanent repairs began later that week. Not today, though: this was one of his and Robin’s daddy/daughter Wednesdays, so Feef told them she’d get a different ride home that afternoon.

“From who?” asked Robin.

“(Depends.)”

“*Deep ends?* Be just like you to go off ‘em!”

Or hire someone else to do it for you. Fiona set this in motion during Second Hour Advanced French, which she took with Joss and Spacyjane and Isabel Carstairs—and Cramps Aplenty, who forwarded Feef’s motion-setting question to the next level. Further intercessions were hampered by Feef’s refusal to dicker with the deputized; but after the final bell rang she made her way to the low-profile corner of Steeple and McKinley, on the other side of the school fence from Hordt Field. (Actually from the marshy turf where Flips Exelby & Co. had played “swamp hockey” half a century earlier.)

(Ghostly *clacks* and *plops*.)

After an indeterminate while, a Galaxie 500 Hardtop revved up McKinley and paused just long enough for Feef to scramble into its empty backseat. Bootleg McGillah was at the wheel, playing one of his own tapes at top volume: Aerosmith at Comiskey, summer before last. He drove on across the bridge to Panama Boulevard, in and out of the Tunnel of Sighs under the Expressway overpass, south and west through inland Vanderlund and northern Multch, before coasting to a stop by the All Creatures Great & Small pet cemetery.

Then, from the shotgun seat, came a flat-as-roadkill “So?”

“(Favor to ask,)” said Fiona.

A taloned hand was raised beside the shotgun window. In it Feef placed an envelope filled with her grouch bag's ex-contents. A taloned thumb opened the envelope and riffled the content-edges. Then: "Well?"

Fiona leaned into the gap between the shotgun seat and window, and muttered her request into the multi-studded ear of Bunty O'Toole.

*

Meanwhile, at much the same moment in the VTHS Girls Gymnasium, Wednesday's child was full of woe.

Vicki Volester may have been born on a Thursday (meaning she had far to go) yet woeful Wednesday clung to her like a pair of leg irons.

Ms. Schwall was off taking a return call from NESTL(É) concerning the complaint she'd informally lodged about Hereafter Park's officiating. Which left Ms. Ramsey wholly in charge of volleyball practice, looking no mellower than she had on the bus coming back from H.P. yesterday, when she'd berated the entire team for folding like a stack of cheap lawnchairs.

Sure, some of the ref's calls might've been questionable, but that was NO excuse for giving up or laying down on the job! Even when the cards are stacked against you, a team that *tries* its best and *does* its best earns respect! You may get outplayed, you may get outscored, but you fight for every point and stay in every game till the end—bitter or sweet! There are nine more matches on the schedule, ladies, *plus* the Startop Invitational IF we stay invited, and anybody here who isn't willing to commit herself to the program for every one of those matches can turn in her uniform and head out the door! *DO* I make myself clear?

Ma'am yes ma'am.

It'd been no fun to be harangued like that, especially after the frightfest in Hereafter Park's haunted house. Both ordeals invaded Vicki's dreams overnight, filling them with bungled bumps and sets, muddled spikes and dinks, and a furious castigating coach.

Mr. Heathcote had sometimes spoken severely to the cross country Ladybugs, but he'd never yanked their wings off when they lost a meet. Nor, when Vicki was a Ladybug, would she have quailed at the prospect of *nine more* competitions—ten, including the Startop

tournament—interspersed with a dozen afterschool and Saturday practices through the next dense month.

Wednesday's child is full of woe...

Ms. Ramsey was not a barbarian. She showed no pleasure at chewing up and spitting out her players (as Mr. Dimancheff might have, with relish) or subjecting them to potential humiliation. But her idea of strengthening and toughening you was to stage intrasquad scrimmages: teammate versus teammate, varsity opposed to JV. And today the Biguns were extrapissed since Ms. Ramsey'd told them they had *less* than no excuse for giving away *their* match to Hereafter Park; they'd known how the Blue Angels could gouge and chisel, so they should've persevered like veterans and set a better example for the Littluns.

Thus it was now bombardment time (AGAIN) and the JV scrimmagers had their asses on the dotted line (AGAIN) and prominent among these was Vicki's (OF FREAKING COURSE) and, with each volley, she seemed less and less able to keep it from being kicked.

It wouldn't have felt so bad if her old L-Bug buddies—Mumbles, Rhonda, Big Sue—had been on the other side of the net. Or even Lisa Lohe, though she was such a perfectionist that she'd make you do a drill twenty times to get it right on the twenty-first. But for this and anything else she might've said or done that Vicki found necessary to forgive, Lisa had formally (if a bit abstractedly) begged her pardon at lunch.

True, that was part of today being Yom Kippur Eve (or *Erev* or *Chava* or however you said "Eve" in Hebrew). Lisa and Natalie Fish and Chookie Yentlebaum were all excused from practice to go visit Temple Beth Elohim and then have their pre-fast banquets before sundown. After that, no food or drink for the next twenty-four hours, not even a sip of water; "I feel like I should've sinned *more* first," Natalie'd groaned. Jenna Wibnitz had left early too, as Rabbi Pip's youngest grandchild; but Vicki'd forgiven her last Friday.

"For *what*?" Lisa'd wanted to know.

"For drawing my face when it was all bruised and swollen. In color, too."

"Oh, that. She's done a whole sketchbook of *me* looking injured."

"With a few pages of her *other* expression," Jenna'd said, quickly adding the ritual "*G'mar chatima tova*"—which sounded more like a Robin Neapolitan curse than anything meant for anyone's benefit.

Just as this scrimmage felt more like a scourge than a strengthening. Whichever way you turned, there was a Mauler or a Pounder or a Snowbedecker or a Bitchingham ready to stuff another ball down your throat. And almost as exclusively as Marilyn Mansfield had targeted Isabel. You weren't alone on this side of the net, there were five other just-as-stuffable Littluns; but the stuffing kept being knocked out of YOU while their meant-to-be-supportive cries dwindled to a few impatient words before dying away till only your grunts of frustration could be heard. No trash talk by the varsity was permitted, but their scorn hung in the air like a grotesque burlesque teasing-to-pieces out of the distant past:

Wedding at The City Hall!
Where the bridesmaids stand and call,
"This is Mrs. Wernie Ball!"
All in all in all in all—

Yes: the Blue Meanies had risen from the dead-and-gone to haunt you again, to taunt you with zingers and brickbats as you careen around the court, losing all coordination, all sense of direction, striving just to hold your arms correctly and not use them to ward off blows or hide the tears you expect to start shedding any second now as you lunge for one last pass and don't lay so much as a finger on it before falling on your disgraced face and hearing from long ago and far away the snidely-whiplash voice of Melissa Chiese say:

That isn't Vicki Volester—her real name's KLUMSY KLUTZER—

Through which miserable memory pierced the here-and-now hacksaw of Demandin' Amanda Pound: "Oh come *on*, you're not even TRYING—"

And before you or she or Ms. Ramsey or anyone else knew it, you were up off the court and under the net and charging for Amanda's throat—and hanging over Louisa Lang's steel rail of a right arm as it shot out to hold you back. Hanging over it but poised like an unsheathed bayonet, your eyes blasting forth black laserbeams to lacerate the Amazonian Amanda Pound, who gawped down at you like a gigged frog as you broke the gym's dead silence to say:

"DON'T EVER—I MEAN *EVER*—TELL ME I'M 'NOT EVEN TRYING—'"

Aiming your lasers at the rest of the Varsity except Louisa, all of whom—Joyce, Ginger, Gwen, even Mauly the Mauler—raised unironic hands and took a step back.

Pivoting to ensure the other JVs knew you meant business. They too retreated from your black beams, with Laurie Harrison emitting a little shriek (such as the Dormouse gave when pinched by the Mad Hatter) as they swept over her.

Belated *phweet* by Ms. Ramsey. “Team: take your laps. Vicki: my office.”

Vicki didn’t budge, other than to swivel slowly round and stay pinpointed on the Lady Gondoliers as they took their laps, none glancing back but all manifestly aware of her scrutiny.

A hand on her arm. Louisa again? No, Coach Celeste, whose conversation with the Assistant Commissioner had finished in time for her to witness the foregoing. Ms. Ramsey seemed glad to leave its aftermath to her as Celeste led Vicki from the gym to the adjoining coach’s cubbyhole.

“Well...” she began.

“I’m done,” said Vicki. “I’m not a quitter. But I’m no good at this game anymore. I’m getting worse every day. Dory Jobling’s ankle ought to be healed by now—maybe the league’ll let her replace me. She wants to play and it’s her sport. It isn’t mine. I should’ve signed up for intramural soccer. Now I’ll wait for track season and try again then.”

“Well... you’re sure? Another few days of rest, and...?”

“No. It stopped being fun. Now it’s a drag. And I am too, on the team.”

Ms. Schwall studied her awhile, dimming down her own incandescence as Vicki’s starry black rays shone unabated. “You know we’ll be shorthanded tomorrow, with Yom Kippur and all. We’d appreciate it if you’d stay for the Willowhelm match—you can sub for Chookie as the JV manager. I won’t play you if I don’t have to. And that’ll give us time to check with the league about Dory.” *They owe us a favor*, she indicated. (Everyone knew NESTL[É]’s Assistant Commissioner was a Hereafter Park alumnus who sided with H.P. whenever possible.)

Vicki consented to these terms and returned to the gym, intending to linger there alone till the locker room was empty. But waiting for her beneath the commemorative banners were Alex and Sheila and Samantha, and (somewhat to both their surprise) Laurie.

I don't want to talk about it yet, Vicki sub-told them; and though none of them was Joss, they *were* her bunchkins and able to comprehend.

Three of them could, at least, escorting Vicki to the locker room like a brace of bodyguards. The fourth one lagged a little, blinking continually behind her bangs as she nibbled the tip of a drooptail.

You see what she's capable of, said a still small voice from the middle distance of her inner ear. *We must bide our time...*

*

Next morning in Spanish, Señor Banonis repeated his Rosh Hashanah no-show; and this time they got a stoner-or-equivalent sub who played with the Christmas-type lightbulbs on all the wall maps after telling the class to divide into pairs and quiz each another on irregular syntax.

"My specialty!" said Dennis Desmond, again usurping Jenna's desk.

Vicki twirled toward Carly Thibert, who gave her a bawdy wink before turning away and coupling up with Woody Tays, a much squarer shooter than his cousin Petula Pierro (who'd tried and failed more than once to "incesticize" him since they'd hit puberty).

"Which position do you play again?" Carly giggled.

"Tight end," Woody replied.

"Ooh, TELL me about it!"

Tell her off while you're at it! seethed Vicki, still hot under the collar from yesterday. No, forget "hot"—make that fit to be tied. *No*—make that bent out of shape. *NO*—make that NOT in the mood! As Vicki cuttingly informed Dennis; yet he, for once, was comparatively low-key.

"Atone your fears with my more noble meaning," he remarked.

"Hunh?"

"If we do now make our atonement well, our peace will, like a broken limb united, grow stronger for the breaking."

"Can't you ever talk like a normal person?"

"Not on the Day of Atonement."

"But you're not Jewish... are you?"

“Who can say for sure, with circumcision the norm? (*That one’s not Shakespeare.*)”

It was no secret that Dennis had been chosen for adoption because he was considered the most menacing baby at the orphanage. So thought Morrigan Foley-Desmond, The City’s answer to Diane Arbus, who operated an *outré* photographic studio out of her rambling abode on Gloaming Avenue; and had featured Dennis in her portfolio of aberrancies for the past sixteen years.

“No better way to learn the Carny Code without actually living on the open road,” he boasted.

Kodachrome did not flow through his adopted veins; Dennis left camerawork to “mere apprentice paparazzi” like Split-Pea Erbsen. Today, though, he served as a traveling picture salon with a film noir poster silkscreened on his T-shirt:

“TYRONE POWER IN *NIGHTMARE ALLEY*.”

“What is that, a horror movie?” Vicki asked.

“More like career guidance—how to become a professional geek without half trying.”

Tyrone Power didn’t look particularly geekish. Vicki remembered him from *Witness for the Prosecution*, when she and Joss and Alex and Fiona had agreed that Tony Pierro would probably resemble him in thirty years. Dennis Desmond wouldn’t, though; he had none of Tony/Tyrone’s sleek dark puddyboyishness. Truth be told, Dennis all of a sudden looked more like that Hunk With No Name who’d dissolved into dustmotes back at VW—fair-haired, bright-eyed, even some hints of rippling musculature. But no diffident smile; just one distending every which way to display all those TEETH.

For a second, Vicki wondered what it might be like to smooch a really bigmouthed guy. Whose eyes were an odd shade of topaz and seemed to revolve around their pupils like minuscule carousels; recalling when Dennis led the Chinese-takeout diners at Burrow Lane in an oompahpah chorus of

Oh you can’t bounce an eggroll

Though try with all your might

Turn on with Geritol!

Fly higher than a kite!

Now, stretching the bounds of irregular syntax, he inquired:

“*Are* you doing anything this Saturday?”

“*Are* you asking me instead of telling me?”

“Wouldn’t’ve ended with a question mark if I weren’t.”

“Exactly what would you have in mind, for doing on Saturday?”

“No more than what you’d be willing to accept doing, on Saturday.”

“Well, hear this—I don’t ‘vo-dee-oh-doe.’”

“So, no field trip to Hasenpfeffer Incorporated?”

“And anything we’d do would have to be with Jenna Wiblitz and Rags Ragnarsson.”

“So, book a double pic-a-nic basket?”

“Pic-a-nic? Last week you were talking about Monte Carlo!”

“Depends how much gas money I can cadge from the Old ‘Un.’”

“What old one?”

“The Widow Foley-Desmond, Starmaker of Abnormalities. With a heart as big as an outdoor artichoke, and largesse to match.”

“Then where’d you get the money to pay for all that Szechwan shrimp?”

“Lemme give ya the bird’s-eye lowdown on that caper. Me ‘n’ yer brudder, see, we knocked over the House o’ Chopsticks like we wuz pickin’ up jackstraws.”

“I don’t believe you.” (If Goofus had participated in armed robbery of a Chinese restaurant, he’d surely have bragged about it by now.)

“Believe this—we sent ‘em down the Big Seesaw, and that’s on the level.”

“Well, *I* don’t ride teeter-totters anymore.” *OhmyGahd don’t put you “riding” anything in his head—*

“Riding? Aw baby, I was MADE for it. ‘Hey lookie lookie and don’t be bashful, the big show is about to begin! Step right up to the divine fulcrum, climb aboard and cue the organist! You’ll never be so tickled in your life!’”

Which sounded very smutty and objectionable, even if Vicki wasn’t sure what “fulcrum” meant. She aimed a vehement laservision FLASH forward at Dennis—and saw it shock-absorbed by his dental shield-wall, making it glisten all the more.

“So, whaddaya say? Shall we go escape from the crowd under the dwarf maples?”

“Okay, wise guy, you got it! Saturday, that is! But I’m gonna be on the lookout for any move you try to make!”

“Ten-four, good buddy!” Dennis replied in the same hardboiled-yeggish tone, as if Spade or Marlowe or Nick Danger had got hold of a CB radio.

“Hey yeah, go see *Smokey and the Bandit*—that’s what *we’re* gonna do on Saturday!” Carly Thibert told them and also Woody Tays, who’d been unaware of this till now.

“Uh...” Woody square-shot, “shouldn’t we be *hablando en español*?”

“¿*Un beso caliente en el extremo de un puño mojado*?” suggested Dennis.

“This is SO COOL,” said the stoner-sub, lighting up the map of Central America.

*

Nettled at having given in so readily, Vicki stopped by the washroom before Second Hour and there ran into Laurie Harrison, looking like Mean Mary Jean from the old Plymouth ads, in a Midway Monsters tunic and star-spangled shorts such as Coach Celeste might wear.

Laurie, casually: “Hi.”

Vicki, guardedly: “Hi.”

Forthrightly: “So—*are* you gonna go out with Dennis Desmond?”

Obliquely: “How do *you* feel about him?”

A tad shrilly: “*He’s* the one who did the feeling!... I mean—be careful, if you *do* go out with him. He really IS so weird.”

Vicki got buttonholed all day long all over school about the pitfalls of going on a date with One-Shot Thanks-a-Lot Untie-the-Knot. She began to wonder if he’d taped a sign publicizing the event to her back, one that vanished when she’d reach behind to feel for it.

At lunch Cheryl and Mary Kate plunked down on Jenna and Lisa’s empty stools, Cheryl to deliver a believe-me-you-don’t-want-to-get-involved-with-*that*-turd caveat, and Mary Kate to throw in an “Oh, Cheryl!” or two plus a few good words on Dennis’s behalf.

“What do *you* think of him?” Vicki asked Holly Brollis.

“Well, you sure won’t have to worry about any long awkward first-date silences from HIM, at least!” laughed Holly. Sammi and Nonique agreed with this; Nelson Baedeker objected to Holly’s shoving a sly elbow in *his* quiet ribs; and Link Linfold sagely kungfu’d

“There are awkwarder things than silences.”

One was Jerome Schei dashing over before Sixth Hour English to contribute his two cents while Vicki was trying to have a private *tête-à-tête-à-tête* with Joss and Fiona.

“Don’t mind me BUT like I told Laurie last week, Dennis Desmond could write a book on how to trifle with affections. Not that you shouldn’t give him a fling if you really want to, but you’re so *particular* about who you go out with—I mean it *has* been awhile, right?”

“THANK you, Jerome. Bye now.”

“(Should he even be here? Since when is he not Jewish?)” asked Fiona as Jerome returned to his side of a classroom bereft of Rachel and Split-Pea, Hope Eckhardt and Sell-O Fayne.

“Since he joined the Cat People—and I’m not talking about Mittens, Fingers and Thumb,” gibed Joss.

In Phys Ed, Dennis warranted thumbs-down from Sheila-Q (“He didn’t get the name ‘Unlucky Charms’ by walking under a ladder, y’know”) but was remembered with some fondness by Irina Saranoff (“He said he wanted to run barefoot through The Hair—not that I would’ve stood for that, of course”).

“Get your mind off him and on the match,” skimped Gretel Hitchens when Vicki reported to her after Seventh Hour. (Gretel abhorred all things masculine, starting with her twin brother Hansel who was as profligate as she was stingy.)

So prepare for volleyball, keeping your black lightsaber strapped on your metaphoric hip, with no backslide from yesterday’s resolution: *Atonement means never having to say you’re sorry WHEN YOU’RE NOT.*

Help Gretel set up the nets and referee stand; fetch the game balls and confirm they’re pumped; check the first aid kits and load the coolers; arrange the towels (six at the end of each bench, two at the nets, three on the scorer’s table). Vanderlund was hosting, so no need to organize bus rides; but the boys locker room had to be trespassed into—YUCK—for temporary refurbishment as a visiting girls vestry. (Fresh towels here too, obviously.)

Then verify that every Littlun except Natalie was present, properly equipped and fit to play, even as they restored Dennis Desmond to conversational-topic status:

Thirsty K, again filling in as captain: “He cracks us up nonstop in Chemistry—and y’know, that’s not a superfunny subject.” Michelle, back in the starting rotation: “I’ve heard some nice things about him and some not-so-nice—mostly half-and-half.” Pebbles: “He’s not a bad guy, just likes to hear himself talk... and talk... and talk...” Alex: “*Please* don’t let him drive you anywhere, not even around the block.” Isabel: “Is it really true he *wheedled* two girls into posing for a porno photo shoot?” Henrietta: “If he ain’t on any team, why should I know about him?”

Laurie, Sammi, and Sheila had already been heard from; Ann Hew as usual had nothing to add. But Doreen Jobling (scurrying up and down the bleachers to prove her robustness) paused for sufficient breath to attest that “Dennis took me out last January or was it February anyway we had a wonderful time even if he didn’t ask me for a second date” (resuming her jog) “which is true of everybody he goes out with so *that* doesn’t count—”

“Careful, Dory, your shoe’s untied!”

“—ULP—”

Then accompany Gretel out to meet the Willowhelm bus, greet the Windjammers, exchange handshakes with their managers and *Hi how are you’s* with Lillie Guldbaer, who though only a freshman was already star of the Jammer JV squad. Sculpted from the same early-bloomer flesh-fount as Becca and Crystal and Gigi Pyle, Lillie could’ve passed for a senior and probably did, with or without a fake ID. Rumor had it that she enjoyed a party-till-you’re-popeyed nightlife to rival Ginger Snowbedeck’s, while showing even less wear and tear as a result.

Isabel (another precocious flourisher) took one look at Lillie and girded herself for *mano-a-mano* combat. Lillie responded entirely in kind, and they engaged in a tweaktease tug-of-war that got closely observed and loudly applauded by the males in attendance, Dennis among them.

“*Told* ya we’d pack more guy-asses in the stands than the varsity,” said Sheila-Q.

Apart from Lillie and Isabel (and Henrietta, who openly despised the three black Windjammers as “Spaghetti hoes”) both teams played magnanimous unexhibitionistic ball. This was the sort of milieu in which Alex thrived best, and she collaboratively led the Gondoliers to win the JV match two games to one, the deciding score a hardfought 16-14.

Between managerial assistance and doling out orange slices (generously: Kirsten was awarded an entire half) Vicki found time to simply be a spectator, with no impulse to go out and take part. It wouldn't be a hardship for her to turn up for the last four home matches—as a spectator, cheering on the players, showing support for the team.

Prudent policy too, as Louisa Lang had hinted in the locker room. Other Biguns had avoided eye contact with Vicki (and her lightsaber) till Louisa, as track captain-designate, came over to ask laconic questions about her personal best time running in cross country meets. Then, laying a large (yet unheavy) hand atop the much shorter Vicki's head, Louisa had touched on Ms. Ramsey's points about loyalty and commitment—not so much to a mismatched enterprise, as to those better-suited who carry on with it.

“Nome saing?” Louisa'd concluded.

“Course,” Vicki'd replied.

Pat pat pat by the large unheavy hand. After which most (though not all) of the other Biguns had quit averting their eyes, and offered comradely salutations as if Vicki'd just arrived.

Even so, she watched without heartbreak as the varsity *tried* their best and *did* their best yet got outplayed and outscored by Willowhelm, dropping to a record of 1-4 (1-5, counting Houlihan) and a tie with Multch East for last place in the Shoreside Division.

What a darn shame.

Though not the only one, that Late Afternoon of Atonement. No sooner had the JV match ended than Isabel'd leaped into the bleachers to plop her spandex'd bottom beside Dennis and start quizzing him about that alleged porno photo shoot he'd purportedly wheedled girls into posing for.

Vicki, relinquishing the reins to Gretel (along with fewer oranges than Gretel would've preferred), took a seat by Joss and Alex and Spacyjane and *didn't* listen to a conversation *she'd* planned to have with Dennis, though for all she knew (OR CARED) he might be asking Isabel out for tonight or Friday night and after all why shouldn't he? Miss Is was *way* more likely to vo-dee-oh-doe on a first date even without the likelihood of a second; so *let* Mr. Dennis Desmond go out-and-out with her tonight if not tomorrow night if not both AND leave Vicki the hell alone on Saturday—

“That one. Over there. Isn’t that the one my Swee’Pea won the summer photo contest with?” asked Spacyjane, her gaze trained unblinkingly on Lillie Guldbaer in the visitors bleachers across the gym.

Affirmations from Vicki, Joss and Alex, all slightly startled to hear her still make mention of *My Swee’Pea* after spending so much of the past month with Matt LaVintner.

Then the star sapphires swung over toward Isabel, sitting now with no discernible gap between herself and Dennis as she frisked a hand along the thigh pressed against hers.

“Floramour would never do a thing like that,” said Spacyjane, in a downright unnerving voice.

Mayday! sub-trumpeted Joss. *Isabel broke the spell and Space’s on the warpath!*

I’m not exactly cool as a cucumber about it myself, y’know, Vicki sub-retorted.

Who can keep cool when the Blue Fairy sets the night on FIE-urr?

No way am I going out with him Saturday if he’s going out with HER first.

Hey, she’s just warming up his LEG for you—

Oh shut UP.

YOU shut up (hee hee hee)...

*

Certain hurdles would have to be overcome within the next forty-eight hours if Vicki were to go out on her first non-volleyball-related date of the no-longer-new school year. Her first date, to be precise, in nearly six months—excluding Tony Pierro (who as good as stood her up, thanks to Kinks Farghetti) and the Studly Trio in Fort Lauderdale (with whom she’d played beach volleyball).

Six months.

That was just WRONG.

Vicki got to school early Friday morning and found Jenna already in Room 312’s back row, creating “airgoyles”—paper airplanes on which she drew rococo gargoyle faces.

“Hi! How’d your fast go?”

“Slowly. *You’re* in a lot of trouble.”

“What? Me? Why? ‘Cause I said yes to Dennis? I may have changed my mind about that—”

“Dennis made you quit the team?”

“What? I didn’t ‘quit,’ I like ‘stepped aside’—oh Gahd. Lisa’s heard about it, hasn’t she?”

Weighty stare through rhinestone hornrims as Jenna dangled an airgoyle with notably Lohelike features.

Fatalistic sigh. “Well, it was nice having lunch at your table—”

“¡Hola chicas abrazables!”

A figure arose behind them, as if emerging up from the linoleum or through the rear wall of illuminated maps, to wind one long arm around Vicki and the other around Jenna. Not companionably over their shoulders, but below their pits and past their ribs, so each wrist came close to taking part in cross-your-heart lift-and-separation.

Oh my heart is beating wildly / and it’s all because you’re here—

Og the Leprechaun strikes again.

Sending your sports reflexes to the fore: bat that hand/wrist/arm away, as if setting up a dink at the net. Jenna took the extreme edge of the other cuff and removed its appendage from her person, gnarling “¡No intervenga!”—

—while a flush suffused the cheeks beneath the hornrims—

—and a green-tipped arrow shish-kebab’d Vicki’s heart. How *dare* Jenna Wiblitz be (or *act*) agitated by *your* date’s touchy-feeliness! Wasn’t Rags enough for her, without having to entice Dennis with possibly PHONY aversion?

“Speaking today as tomorrow’s pickup artist,” Dennis was saying, “I need to nail down and bolt tight tomorrow’s pickup sequence.” First, Rags on Kennelly Avenue; then, Jenna on Millbank Street; then, Vicki on Burrow Lane; then, maybe a movie and maybe a meal and maybe a morsel of mayhem. S’awright? S’awright. *¡Hasta mañana!* to them and *¡Bienvenido de nuevo!* to Señor Banonis, who looked like his fast had gone even more slowly than Jenna’s.

“*Siéntate, por favor,*” he told Dennis.

“*Perdonad; os tomaba por un escabel.*’ *¿Así habló el Bufón en El Rey Lear, no?”*

Fatalistic sigh by Señor Banonis. High-pitched yipe by Diana Dabney, as she pirouetted her heinie out of harm’s way when Dennis cracked his knuckles at it.

Effectively de-shishing Vicki's kebab. *My heart's in a pickle / it's constantly fickle / and not too partickle, I fear...* for which she gave Jenna a repentant Day After Yom Kippur eyeroll.

To which Jenna reiterated: "Don't even *think* about ditching lunch or sitting at a different table. When you're in trouble with Her, soonest over is soonest clover."

Which sounded rather morticiany. But not inappropriate, as Vicki headed to Biology for one of Mr. Dimancheff's "just because it's Friday" exams. She and Nonique had minicrammed for this on the morning bus, with Alex coaching them through cellular structure; but in the lab Nonique leaned over to whisper a worried "(You ready?)"

"(As I'll ever be.)"

"(You look beat. Got to practice again tonight? Thought you quit that team.)"

"(I like *stepped aside*,") Vicki told her; repeating this more loudly and in greater detail to Natalie Fish and Chookie Yentlebaum when she happened to meet them in the hallway before Third Hour.

"Well, if we can't change your mind, don't be a stranger," said Chookie.

"Don't *act* any stranger, either," added Nat. "We've got enough people acting stranger every day!"

Among whom was Isabel Carstairs, who spent Fourth Hour shooting aquamarine gleams of triumph at Vicki. Unless they were intended for Robin Neapolitan at the next desk, or over their heads at Britt Groningen and Gigi Pyle; but most likely at Vicki.

Isabel's curves were encased in what appeared to be a coating of red spraypaint, yet was in fact a Palan Pétard designer original: the sort of dress that a girl might wear to the electric chair if she wanted to go out with a bang. Every male eye in Room 221 (including furtive Mr. Rankin's) was fastened on Is, and hardly a female stomach was left unturned. Vicki's certainly wasn't; eliminating any last shred of appetite for lunch. If triumphant gleams were anything to go by, Is had a date with Dennis Desmond that very night—unless she'd already *had* one with him, *last* night—unless she'd busted through his second-date barrier, and would soon be going-out-with-a-bang TWICE.

Which sent a whole quiver of aquamarine-tipped arrows into Vicki's bosom.

"(What is this, another episode of *All My Pythagorean Theorems?*)" carped Robin.

“(No—*A Lover’s Protractor*,)” said Vicki.

Her own love life seemed perpetually protracted: drawn out, dragged out, strung out. She had a vague distasteful notion of what “sloppy seconds” entailed; enough to be adamant against wasting time waiting in line for Dennis to “do his business,” like a hound on a hydrant. (Eww.) And *particularly* not if a “Lucia Vantrop” lookalike was part of the hydrantic equation.

One thing for certain: aquamarine gleams could not outshine black laser beams. Vicki used hers when the bell rang, to burn twin holes in the red spraypainted posterior preceding her out of Room 221. Which Isabel must’ve felt, since she jerked and squeaked and gave Brad Faussett a naughty-naughty headshake.

Vicki stayed galvanized through Study Hall, and by lunchtime was able to march up to her regular stool at her regular table where Lisa Lohe sat in foreordained judgment and, before Lisa could open with *What’s all this nonsense?*, recount what had happened on Wednesday and why she’d made the decision NOT to quit BUT step aside from the JV volleyball squad: sounding as crisply concise as when she’d testified at the Fondlegate hearing a year ago.

Furthermore—let it be known far and wide that if Mr. Dennis Desmond entertained any plans to take anybody else out this evening, his date tomorrow with Vicki Volester was *terminado*.

“A line in the sand,” said Jenna, drawing one on her sketchpad. “Three more and you can play tic-tac-toe on the beach.”

Lisa, who’d hadn’t gotten a word in edgewise, dourly swallowed a forkful of leftover kugel. “Well,” she concluded, “at least you haven’t completely lost your mind—over that weirdopath Dennis, anyway.”

Other Jewish friends and classmates belatedly weighed in on the weirdopath question before Sixth Hour English. Rachel advocated renunciation of romance, singling out Sell-O Fayne as particularly disownable. Sell-O himself S-M-I-L-E-ingly belittled Dennis for failing to put his fast-talking megablarney to more profitable use. “Esperanza” Eckhardt recited a lengthy Spanish proverb that Vicki couldn’t decipher; and Jerome Schei offered the Gossip

Brigade's services (if not those of the Cat People) to track Dennis's dalliances that night, should any occur.

What about any that might've occurred LAST night? Joss sub-queried.

I don't want to burn ALL my bridges, Vicki sub-replied.

Even if leaving a bridge unburned did increase the odds of a rustyheaded troll climbing up from under it to follow you down from the fourth floor to the first, losing Joss on the third and Fiona (unusually silent, even for her) on the second. Leaving you alone with Split-Pea Erbsen, on his way to Seventh Hour Journalism—in which Dennis Desmond also happened to be enrolled.

"If you haven't already delivered your dating ultimatum to him," Split-Pea remarked, "I'll be glad to hand it over for a small tip of spare change. Or a large tip of lavish cash."

"*Here's your tip,*" said Vicki at the foot of the stairs: "I think Spacyjane is mad at you. And I don't know what she might do if she *is* mad, or hurt, since I've never seen her be either—and I don't *want* to, either."

"Tip o' the iceberg," said Split-Pea, tipping the brim of an imaginary hat (bowler? fedora?) as he peeled off toward Mrs. Blackburn's classroom.

During Phys Ed, Coach Celeste let Vicki know the league had agreed to Dory Jobling's taking her place on the JV squad for the remainder of volleyball season; and Vicki promised to be on hand (in the stands, as a fan) for the rest of their home matches. So those loose ends got tied up; but another lay in wait to be tripped over as Vicki left the locker room with Nonique and Sheila and still-lagging Laurie—

—and they all ran into Dennis Desmond as he loitered just outside the door.

"Caught you red-eyeballed, you peeper!" accused Sheila-Q.

"*My eyeballs are ever-lovin' yellow,*" avowed Dennis.

"Jaundice, hunh? Serves you right for hanging around girls locker rooms!"

"*Hoke contraire—I'm here purely at your surface, to provide you with a surplus.*"

Hitchcockian articulation: "Does anyone heah requah motorized trahhnnsporrtr?"

"I should say not!" sniffed laggard Laurie, re-tilting her nose ceilingward as she stalked away.

"Me neither," said S-Q. "I know how 'transported' you get when you're motorized."

“Um well see you Monday,” went Nonique, dodging Vicki’s efforts to snag her by the satchelstrap and prevent her escape.

“*Ain’t gonna let NOBODY turn her round,*” sang Dennis, pulling a loose tube sock out of his pocket and flapping it in farewell. “*Walkin’ into freedom land!...* Anybody here prefer to get there by ‘Super Hugger’ sports car?”

“*She* does, Huggy Bear! She wants you to drive her to Tijuana for the weekend!” said Sheila-Q, ducking a Vicki-slap upside her brass-bold head.

“‘Hey, when the spirit is willing, the flesh can do all *kinds* of groovy stuff!’” quoted Dennis. “So, señorita: all aboard the owtoboose for MEH-heeko! We will tour its Russian colony and see the quaint native craftsmen carving wooden nutmegs!”

YOU’RE a nutmeg! thought Vicki, who might have maintained resistance if Joss hadn’t shown up just then.

“*There* you are—I was afraid you’d got knocked out again on that stupid gym floor. Ready to go?... OHO,” went Joss, catching sight of Dennis.

“*OHO—*” echoed Sheila, striking up a harmony as Dennis supplied bass-baritone counterpoint: “*OHHH-HOHHH...*”

“**OHHH-KAY!!**” Vicki shouted. To Dennis: “Let’s leave already!” To Joss: “He’s driving us!” To Sheila: “And you’re coming too!”

“You can check out my backseat for the second time in nine days,” Dennis offered.

“You wish!” said S-Q. “Sorry, gang, it’s Football Friday—I’m going with the Pep Club to the game at Multch South.”

“Not Multch *South!*” wailed Dennis. “Whenever Gondoliers take on Buccaneers, Vienna gets pillaged! Who will save the baby sausages? Or the snails of Old Vienna?...”

Blathering on and on as they parted from Sheila and left the school, Vicki and Joss toting bags of books for their weekend homework, Dennis bringing nothing except that loose tube sock, tucked into his collar like an aberrant ascot.

While exiting VTHS and entering the “Super Hugger,” Vicki was on guard for any sign of skintight red elastic stretched over a left-behind derriere bearing laser-blasted punctuation marks. Not even an apostrophe could be seen, but that didn’t quell Vicki’s disquiet. Nor Joss’s curiosity: after admiring the Camaro’s backseat, she poked her curly

head between the front seats and propped her chin on the driver's right shoulder to ask "So what IS going on between you and Isabel Carstairs?"

Joss!!

Oh c'mon, you know you wanna know.

"Trying to inveigle her and her sister into posing for the Old 'Un," said Dennis, with no evasive tremor in the shoulder under Joss's chin. "Maully just wants to know how much she'd be paid and how soon she could turn that pay into snootcandy. It's Is who wants to be *inveigled*—upveigled, downveigled, throughveigled—and acting so COY about it she could fill a Japanese fishpond. As if she'd never EXposed herself to a camera lens before—"

Vicki and Joss exchanged *D'you think HE thinks SHE was 'Lucia Vantrop'—that she lied to Hef about her jailbait situation?*s as Dennis pulled the Camaro into the parking lot at Panama Hattie's, after a moderately placid drive by Desmond standards.

Panama Hattie's ranked with Deeple's Pizzeria, the Sammitch Shoppe, and the uptown Zephyr Heaven as Vanderlund's senior high hangouts (for law-abiding purposes). Hattie's north windows afforded a fine view of Startup Academy across the canal, and VTHS girls traditionally gave it an audible BOO! as they took seats in Hattie booths or at the snack counter. (Vicki did so self-effacingly and Joss with fullbodied cornetist gusto.)

The place was packed as per usual on a Friday afternoon, but Dennis had sway with a beehived waitress who accommodated them after a brief delay. Vicki'd called Burrow Lane on one of the VTHS pay phones to report her and Joss's whereabouts, lest a parent fear they'd been targeted by the Mad Bludgeoner; so no need for haste—or, for that matter, to fret any more about breaking training. So Vicki ordered a pickleburger, as did Joss; while Dennis selected a jumbo chili cheese dog with every available topping (except ketchup: as taboo here in the 'burbs as at Biff's down in The City).

"Hope you don't expect to 'get lucky' after eating that," Joss told him.

Joss!! Shut up!!

YOU shut up, I know you were thinking the exact same thing.

"LUCK," struck Dennis, commencing a declamation on how he came to be known as Inauspicious Amulets ("Unlucky Charms to the vulgar") that didn't impede his consuming the jumbo chili cheese dog, or cause any gross crudities like chewing with his mouth open or

spraying blobs of sauce, or obfuscate the celebrity voices he used to express parts of his soliloquy—Jack Nicholson, Robert DeNiro, Rodney Dangerfield—even a duet sung by Joe Cocker and Karen Carpenter. None of whom went on record to say that Dennis and his bellyful of spicy pungent garnishes *wouldn't* be “inveigling” Isabel later that night, so good thing Jerome was sitting nearby with Wes Gormley (another card-carrying member of the Gossip Brigade), both of them giving you a *we're-on-the-case* thumbs-up that ought to be reassuring—but what made you even WANT to go out with this “weirdopath” and his steamroller personality that was mutating before your eyes into a Luke Skywalker caricature (“I mean, who here DIDN'T used to bullseye womp rats that aren't much bigger than two meter maids, amIrightfolks?”) yet away from whom you wanted to order every other girl to back the hell off, including your dearest friend Joss who in the past had referred to Dennis as a “loco towhead” though that didn't stop her from having a gigglefit or rather a *jigglefit* to demonstrate she had a lot more to bestow in the flopperoo department—but it was YOU Dennis was addressing, YOU his ever-lovin' yellow eyes kept honing in on, YOU his wide bright teeth had asked out for tomorrow night which you couldn't help but anticipate with growing excitement (redde n tingle blush) and YOU who might just end up busting through Dennis Desmond's second-date barrier as he let loose another starry-war story—

“A short stormtrooper, a rebel groper and a kleptodroid go into Touché Station to shoplift some power converters...”

*

That night at Burrow Lane, Vicki and Joss debated makeout logistics.

Vicki's only pertinent auto-interior experience had been in the back of Roger Mustardman's Rolls-Royce: melting into sumptuous upholstery while he stroked her then-long hair. But he hadn't kissed her till they were *out* of the car and standing under a streetlamp, with everything going downhill from there—no return to the Rolls for an afterdinner makeout.

Now for the first time she'd be going out with a licensed driver, of a modern Chevrolet that had no bench seat up front. Even when the gearshift was placed in park, there'd be no easy (*don't* say “easy”—make it *facile*, one of this week's vocab words) no *facile* sliding over beside the driver for front-seat canoodling. Backseats of course were

backseats; but on a double date the driver could hardly get *his* date back there without ordering the other couple to trade places.

Vicki wished she could consult the possibly-knowledgeable Jenna Wiblitz about how close to “vo-dee-oh-doe” you might be expected to go in a car (backseat or front) after maybe-a-movie and/or maybe-a-meal. Maybe really truly a morsel of mayhem?

“Call her up and ask,” said Joss.

“I *can*’t! It’s Friday night and she’s a rabbi’s granddaughter!”

If not Jenna, *some* trustworthy older girl—Mumbles, Holly, Rhonda, Cheryl. (Mary Kate wouldn’t know; she never went beyond non-French kisses.) Yet even if any or all of them were here with Joss in Vicki’s bedroom, how could she pose the question without sounding like a stupid kid—an Ultravirgin, like the one in Fiona’s song?

This was one of those times when you really needed your big sister.

But Vicki’s was God knows where and Joss’s, even if she weren’t away at college, would (in Joss’s opinion) be useless to ask. “I’m sure Nutmeg got plenty of action, but I’m even surer she had no clue what was going on half the time. (I can’t believe I never thought of calling her ‘Nutmeg’ before. Thank Dennis for putting it in my head—that alone makes your going out with him worth it, no matter what else happens.)”

Vicki wasn’t sure whether she wanted anything to “happen,” beyond a nice chaste non-French kiss or two. Playing hard to get would be no defense; you’d have to make it difficult for any “get” to transpire, even with the gearshift in park.

“Wish I hadn’t turned in my compression shorts along with the rest of my uniform. Bet they’d keep me ‘reinforced.’”

“We could go down to the Green Bridge tomorrow morning and find you a new pair. Or how ‘bout a pantygirdle, like Sammi wanted? I hear those can be hell to wrestle off.”

“Maybe if I was built like a *battleship*.”

Which would hinder fitting into her new blue denim jumpsuit, prefaded “for the ‘lived-in’ look,” with two deep sidepockets for stashing caches of mad money in case she had to abandon ship and find her way home from some makeout spot—like DeRussey’s Point (aka DeLuster’s Leap) atop the highest Hereafter Hill.

Vicki might lack Alex’s Girl Scout credentials; yet she too could Be Prepared.

*

Nevertheless, she *wasn't* prepared for the Saturday evening J-O-L-T of Dennis Desmond's truckin' into the cul-de-sac behind the wheel of an International Harvester Wagonmaster four-door crew cab pickup.

"What happened to the Camaro?"

"That's my *weekday* vehicle."

The frontseat (singular) of THIS vehicle was indistinguishable from its backseat. Both were cushiony sofas, with room for three people to sit (or *lie?*) shoulder to shoulder, and thereby form competitive *ménages-à-trois*.

Tonight the Wagonmaster contained only Jenna, in her Keane-Child-with-pinkeye T-shirt and conjunctivitis-colored glasses; Rags, who gave Vicki a boisterous greeting before barking others out his window at passers-by; and Dennis, crooning "*Besame Mucho*" over the CB to a lady trucker who used the snow-white handle *Blancanieves*.

WELL! went indignant Vicki as the pickup barreled down Foxtail Road. *Singing to a Latina stranger while "Guadalupe Velez" sits right here beside him—*

—hey, wait a minute—why've we turned WEST on Lesser?

"Aren't we going to the New Sherwood? For *Smokey and the Bandit?*"

"Nope—the double feature at the drive-in," Dennis informed her. Then back into the CB, Dylanesquely: "*Spanish is the loving tonnnngue...*"

"HEADIN' FOR THE DRIVE-IN!" concurred Rags out the window, to honks from other motorists.

Vicki shrank within her jumpsuit. *The drive-in!* They might as well be making a beeline for DeLuster's Leap! Was it too soon to panic?...

Be cool, sub-said a calm clear voice. *I always pack an X-Acto knife.*

And when Vicki twisted around, Jenna produced the end of its metallic handle for her to see. With an absurdly enormous sense of beholden relief.

Thank you for bringing that. Thank you for being here. Would you please be my new big sister?

Long as you don't ask to borrow my specs.

"So, what's playing at the drive-in?" Vicki asked, trying not to sound shaky.

“*Diez-cuatro, mi amor,*” said Dennis, signing off with the Latina trucker. To Vicki he intoned “Action! Adventure! Intrigue! And lastly but not leastly—*WHORE ORE!*”

(Guffaw from Rags out the back window.)

“Horror,” Jenna interpreted. “The remake of *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. That’s the second feature, after *Pancho and Lefty*.”

Which was supposed to have been a blockbuster but ended up eating *Smokey and the Bandit*’s dust. Based very loosely on a true story, *Pancho and Lefty* starred Nora Corazon as a pioneer aviatrix who ran a dude ranch in the desert, and ex-child-actor Billy Jude as a southpaw test pilot trying to break the sound barrier. Part historical drama, part romantic comedy, and part musical (with Nora rendering three torch songs, including her hit single “*Porque le Vas*”) it was apparently all dust-eater. The expensive aerial effects were reduced to instant obsolescence by *Star Wars*, and any chemistry between Nora and Billy Jude got diluted by her being old enough to be his mother (however wonderfully preserved) with a few years to spare. As for *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, it couldn’t be *too* ghastly a horror movie if it was rated PG... could it?

Maybe it wouldn’t matter: Maybe they’d be gone from the drive-in before the second feature started. Saturday’s sunset, which should’ve been head-on through the windshield, was shrouded by darkening clouds; and if baseball games could get rained out, wouldn’t the same hold true for outdoor theaters? Even if their patrons were all inside cars and trucks?

Dennis (having entertained a *camionera* who was probably older than Nora Corazon but a lot less glamorous) began giving Vicki sundry little winks and leers and a trill-whistled “Happiness” from *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. “Oh good grief,” went Jenna; but Vicki had to giggle as she remembered the Dartle variation:

*Happiness is
getting all baddy
with a beef patty
on a warm bunnnn...*

(Redden tingle blush.) Who knows? Things *might* take a canoodly turn, with nobody in the Wagonmaster watching the second feature or even much of the first, whether under

rainclouds or starshine.

Gliddy glub gloopy, nibby nabby noopy, la la la lo lo...

Headin' into the drive-in. No turnin' back now...

Emery Ridge styled itself as the “Emerald Suburb,” though its high school teams were called the Scarlet Royals, and there were fewer evergreen trees than black cherries. West of Triville and north of Athens Grove, it did have the Emerald Suburb Drive-in Theater (Flea Market by day) at which quite a few of tonight’s teens had been conceived during early-Sixties summers. But the drive-in’s nights were numbered: its acreage was too fertile to lie fallow, and developers were planning a big new shopping mall anchored by a multiscreen cinema. Tomorrow’s teens would have to get begat elsewhere.

Dennis parked the Wagonmaster in a back row and sent Rags to the concession stand for popcorn, pop drinks, and other junkfodder. As Rags loped off, a subcompact sedan zoomed past him to pull into the stall immediately in front—so immediately that Dennis said “And here I am without a cowcatcher.”

Even in the overcast dusk this car was obviously a Pinto, whose firetrap disposition when rear-ended had recently been ballyhooed; and Dennis speculated aloud as to how big a bonfire might be caused if his truck happened to lurch forward.

“See that it *doesn't*,” said Jenna. “We don’t need to toast any S’mores.”

Then they saw the Pinto passenger door open and a golden head come slanting out, followed by a gymnastic torso that corkscrewed 180 degrees without leaving the sedan.

“Dig that wicked dig-and-roll!” went Dennis, flipping on the pickup’s lowbeams.

Swiss Miss froze in their lights.

Clad not in a dirndl but what appeared to be peach pajamas (probably silk) that clung as snugly to their contents as had the Palan Pétard designer original.

Squinting irately at an obtuse angle, before she slowly countercorkscrewed and withdrew into the Pinto’s turtleshell.

Way to illustrate geometric constructions!

And, seemingly, a point for Vicki in their one-on-one volleyball rally.

Jerome had phoned (at considerable length) to report the Gossip Brigade had found no evidence that Isabel’d “interlaced” (Jerome’s term) with Dennis last night. Not in the

Camaro, at any rate; but what about this Wagonmaster? *Seriously, though* (Vicki imagined Jerome asking), *could you picture a Carstairs “getting it on” inside a pickup truck?*

(Eww...)

Still: would that be any worse than having to picture a Carstairs making out in the backseat of a Pinto?

“Awww, looooo—Izzy-Whizzy’s taking pity on ol’ Garrigan!” Dennis cackled. “Bless her butterflies, isn’t that bount-i-ful of her?”

“Until Cheryl goes *bounty hunter* on her,” said Jenna.

(Larry Garrigan’s dump of broken-ankled Dory had enraged Cheryl—not a difficult thing to do—but even Mary Kate had called it inexcusable, and together they’d spearheaded a Garrigan boycott by junior girls that spread to incoming sophs... till now.)

More to the point: *Bless her butterflies?* Had Dennis just paid sly homage to Isabel’s underpants—that fancy French-cut pair with the butterfly motif? And if so, under what interlacement circumstances had he made their acquaintance?

Before Vicki could figure out a subtle way to find out, Rags returned bearing mass quantities of unhealthy edibles. He distributed these around the pickup, employing the same “Sweets to the sweet” line he used every time he brought Jenna a cafeteria sugar cookie.

“Careful, you’ll spill it!” was her unsentimental reply.

“Settle down back there—this is a PG-rated vessel!” commanded Dennis. “Open up the hailing frequencies, Mr. Sparks! (That’s you, Ragnarsson.)”

“Oh! Aye-aye, cap’n!” Rags obliged, clicking on a large portable radio stashed between him and Jenna (for the time being) in the backseat. “YOU’RE AS COLD AS ICE!!” boomed Foreigner till Rags twiddled the dial to the drive-in’s low-wattage transmitter that had replaced old-fashioned speakers on poles. (Portable radios were recommended for those who didn’t want to keep their vehicles running throughout a double feature.)

“Take extra-OR-dinary special care with that high-tech radar set, Mr. Sparks! It’s got police, aircraft, and weather bands, plus forty CB channels—so if we choose to, we can finally talk to ourselves!”

“Cool! Which switch gets the police station?”

“—report of a car fire on Arahova Road—”

“Pop goes another Pinto!” Dennis told Vicki, while Jenna took the radio away from Rags and dialed it back to the Emerald Suburb signal. It, like the mammoth screen, urged theatergoers to grab as many goodies as they could hold.

Larry Garrigan, though no longer a “Throb,” appeared to be taking that advice along with as much advantage of Isabel as she’d yield while keeping one aquamarine eye on Wagonmaster activity through the Pinto’s rear window. *Not* that Vicki was conducting a similar vigil in reverse—but it soon became a moot point, as Is and Larry disappeared from view.

“And now, our feature presentation.”

(No coming attractions: this was the last weekend in September, summer was officially over, and who knew how much longer the drive-in would stay open?)

“*Porque le Vas*” gushed out of the portable radio as Nora Corazon, decked out in glitzier pilot togs than Amelia Earhart ever wore, climbed into a biplane and soared over the opening credits into the desert sky. From which drops of rain began to fall—no, those were coming from the dark clouds above the Emerald Suburb, to splat atmospherically on the pickup windshield. As they began their pitterpat, a long right arm slithered over to insinuate itself behind Vicki’s back... below her pit... past her ribs... and slide into second with a boob perched upon its thumb.

A big hand for the little lady...

Okay. Okay. Can’t say you haven’t been waiting for something like this to happen. Take it easy (make that *facile*) and, with sham nonchalance, wriggle just a bit to your left. See? You’re not entirely unwilling or even unready. You’re in senior high now, out on a double date with a very appealing albeit looney-tuned upperclassman (emphasis on the *man*: that’s a man’s hand moving up to encircle your modest perkiness) and a backseat chaperone who at this very moment was mixing twitters with *her* date’s snortles behind your cushiony sofa seat. Yes, there they were and here *you* were and *he* was too: just a couple of cozy twosomes, sharing a Wagonmaster from the good folks at International Harvester under a gentle early-autumn-evening rain...

—when all at once a *FLASSSHHHH FLASSSHHHH flassshhhh* split-pea’d the darkness as if Sidney Erbsen was trying out a gigantic telephoto lens—

—followed by a great *CRUMMMPPPP CRUMMMPPPP crummbbbble*, as if Robin Neapolitan had hurled her drum kit and bowling ball down a flight of steep steel stairs directly overhead—

—sending heaven’s sprinkler system into hyperdrive as the rain started pouring down like Niagara Falls or an upside-down Old Faithful—

“**HOO-HAH!!**” from Dennis, goodie-grabbing Vicki’s *pechuga derecha* and hauling her bodily adjacent with a painful hip-smack. “’Tis a wild night! Let us contend with the fretful element, the to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain! Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Smite flat the thick rotundity of the world!”

React instinctively to save yourself, defend your dignity, protect your cheeks from having their rotundity smitten as you execute an upright reverse dig-and-roll, overturning your popcorn tub and Filbert’s root beer, winding up at arm’s length but with that big hand clamped around your left wrist as he uses his other to fling open the driver’s door—

“Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume! Off, off your lendings! Come unbutton here! Naked as jaybirds shall we dance the night away, and not go to bed till noon!”

Springing backwards into the deluge to be promptly engulfed: his fair hair a sodden green in the murky neon, his face bone-white in a fresh FLASH of fulguration, his yellow eyes turned to jack-o’-lanterns and his wide bright Joker-teeth all a-slaver—

“THIS IS THE FOUL FIEND FLIBBERTIGIBBET: HE BEGINS AT CURFEW, AND WALKS TILL THE FIRST COCK!!”

—that big hand drawing/dragging/stringing you along toward the wet maw of the doorway till your free arm seizes hold of the steering wheel and your left clog braces itself against the doorframe, giving you just enough time and leverage to lash out with your right—

“—O DO DE DO DE DO DE! HALLOO HALLOO LOO LOO!—”

—breaking free and casting him away as the door slams shut, almost but not quite on his hand and your foot as you crawdaddy backward to approximate safety—

—while the castaway weirdopath dances around in the pelting rain like a frenzied if not rabid monkey.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get him!” Rags seemed to say, drowned out by the downpour as he dove out into it. Jenna locked all the doors after him, thrusting the portable radio over onto the empty driver’s seat, followed by her sketchbook and pencilbox (*on a date?*) and scrambling over after them, Vicki mechanically giving her a hand (not big, but for an even littler lady than herself) while her brain strained to process what had just happened. What was *still* happening, insofar as could be seen through the rain and gloom—

Dennis eluding Rags, Dennis skinning off soppy shirt, Dennis shedding soppy trou, Dennis waggling soppy ass at the Wagonmaster—Dennis yanking open a Pinto door and extracting Isabel like a champagne cork as the Pinto started up, nearly colliding with other cars as sheets of water were sent from every direction over Dennis, over Is and the pursuing Rags who all lost their footing and fell if not actually struck down and run over—

“(Sorry, sorry, *I dropped the knife, are you all right?*)” Jenna super/sub-said, the torrent on the roof sounding now like a plague of hailstones and all the windows fogging up. Then Vicki’s got hammered by a frantic fist, the door handle repeatedly shaken, as the girls let fly a mutual screech. Vicki took a frightened swipe at the windowfog and in goggled a mermaid, an undine, a Rhinemaiden—

—or Isabel Carstairs wearing only pajama bottoms, and them turned from silky peach to saggy sour cream.

Continuing to hammer and shake and disregard motions to try the rear door, till Vicki reluctantly unlocked and opened hers just wide enough for Izzy-Whizzy to squeeze in—and throw her drenched sobbing seminudity into Vicki’s arms.

New Big Sister, have you met my old one’s lookalike?

THIS was what you got for granting asylum—a powerful reminder of the day you helped the Murrishes give their cats a flea bath. Plus uncomfortable awareness that your “lived-in” jumpsuit was getting soaked-in—by much-too-intimate contact with *Isabel*, of all people.

“*HE’S GOT MY TOP!*” bawled Is.

“*IS THAT IT?*” asked Jenna as a saturated garment went WHAP on the pickup’s windshield. Which, once the inner glass got mopped, was revealed to be a pair of Jockey shorts with a RAGS tag sewn onto the waistband by Mrs. Ragnarsson. Meaning Jenna’s date

must have joined the dimly distant striptease raindance, melting away out of sight.

“(Well, *THAT* was fun while it lasted,)” super/sub-said Jenna.

“*AND MY SHOES! AND MY PURSE!*” added Isabel. (Presumably Larry Garrigan had absconded with them in the Pinto, since Dennis was surely down to nothingness by now.)

She pulled away from thankful Vicki, using one trembly bare arm to cover trembly bare breasts, while the other hand knuckled gushing tears from dripping eyes.

“(Yeah okay there there,)” Vicki tried to tell her, super/sub-asking Jenna “(Can you drive this thing?)” with a nod at the keys left in the ignition.

“(Not even if it was dry and sunny out,)” Jenna attempted to reply, as Isabel gave an interrupting scream at the just-noticed sight of conjunctivitis-colored glasses. “(For crying out loud, be COOL!)” went Jenna, pulling them off to reveal her pretty little birdwoman face.

Is subsided then, mouthing *I’M COLD*. They all were by then, so Jenna turned the key in the ignition, found the pickup’s heater control and turned it on. Vicki ran futile hands down her dank jumpsuit, brushing away stuck-on popcorn and peering out at the desolate pool they seemed to be stranded in.

Last year, Dave Solovay had tried to drag her into entombment under Dead Man’s Slope. This year, Dennis Desmond tried to drag her into re-enactment of *Lord of the Flies*.

Boy, can I pick ‘em.

Or: can they pick me...

“DON’T—STOP—THINKING ABOUT TOMORROW!” blared Fleetwood Mac as Jenna tinkered with the radio, trying police/aircraft/weather bands, from which came unsurprising news of thunderstorms and local flooding. “(Maybe we could use the CB to call for help?)”

“(Would it be SAFE?)” went Vicki, imagining responses to a broadcast that three teen girls were trapped at a drive-in, even if they didn’t mention the buxom one was topless.

“*I DON’T WANT TRUCKERS TO SEE ME LIKE THIS!!*” yelled Isabel, hunkering down next to the heater, her face again a scalded tomato about to burst.

Then other brighter redness blinked through the rain and fog as a copcar came plowing through the pool, easing to a halt as Jenna leaned on the Wagonmaster horn and Vicki flipped the headlights on/off/on/off. A big tall Batmanly silhouette in cape and hood got out and started toward them, taking slow careful steps.

“*IS HE AT LEAST CUTE?*” asked Isabel, curled up in a concealing-as-possible ball.

A second caped-and-hooded silhouette got out of the copcar’s other side and sloshed off in a different direction. Vicki guessed that two of the girls’s three escorts might soon be rejoining them, equally in need of dry (or any) attire.

All things considered, she couldn’t say she was devastated that Dennis Desmond never dated anyone twice.

*

[BURIED IN THE CITY’S SEPTEMBER 25TH *SUNDAY TRIBUNE*]

Storm comes too late to save torched car

A vintage car was forced off Arahova Road in Athens Grove on Saturday night. Its driver, a boy aged seventeen, and his passengers, two girls aged fifteen, were forced out and beaten as their masked assailants firebombed the car, a 1949 Mercury Eight coupe. The driver was burned badly trying to save his vehicle after the assailants fled. The violent thunderstorm put out the blaze but too late for the car to be salvaged. The three youths were treated at Memorial Hospital, where the driver was questioned by police. He previously had been suspected of vandalizing automobiles, and police theorized that Saturday’s firebombing may have been done in retaliation.

*

“So Gina won’t be running cross country or Nadine Rugova playing volleyball for awhile,” PoonElly informed Fiona later that Sunday. “And the Trashman, of course, he’s out of what you might call commission altogether-like. Gina’s telling me ‘n’ the other three Genies that she ‘n’ Nadine ‘fought off the Mad Bludgeoner,’ but everybody thinks the smokies’re right—it was a hit job on Zagnut, that they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time for.” (Ruminative pause.) “*You* wouldn’t know anything about that, would you Sugar Pop?”

“(Mee-ee?)” went Feef. “(I don’t know anything except how to lay down a bass line.)”

(*VO-DEE-OH-DOE*)

37

After School Specials

On the day that Robert Peary set off on his final expedition to find the North Pole, a child was born three thousand miles south of that target. The child's father wanted him to be christened John Logan Agate Jr., but the child's mother prevailed and named him after the Reverend Fenster Mouple, composer of torpid temperance hymns.

From a very early age this child would introduce himself and sign every document as "F.M. Agate," hinting the initials stood for Ferdinand Magellan. He yearned to become a great explorer like Peary, blazing trails into terra incognita by land or sea or avant-garde airplane, winning glory for his family name (if not first or middle) on some distant frontier or battlefield. While still in kneepants, he prayed that the Great War might last till he was old enough to enlist and go Over There. The closest he got was to be dubbed "Major Domo" by his classmate Chester Brockhurst (already exhibiting trenchant wit as a fifth-grader).

That title stuck to F.M. through graduation from Vanderlund Township High School in 1926. Nor was he able to escape homebody status for the next three years, during which he commuted daily to the Normal College down in The City. Male enrollment there was vastly outnumbered by co-eds, some of whom looked with favor upon F.M.; yet he was duty-bound to return nightly to Vanderlund and tend to his widowed mother, who frequently smelled F.M.'s breath to make sure he was adhering to the blessed precepts of Prohibition.

At twenty-one he began his teaching career, not in an exotic foreign clime but unexciting Green Town, which may have produced Jack Benny and Ray Bradbury but held little charm for F.M. Agate as he eked out subsistence during the Depression. Living on

scant rations in cheap boardinghouses, he devoured each month's *National Geographic* from cover to cover and squirreled away nickels for the picture show. F.M. enjoyed extravaganzas that were set abroad—*Stanley and Livingstone*, shot on location in Africa, was a particular favorite—and treasured the travelogue newsreels that transported him (if only for a few minutes) to faraway realities.

As opposed to near-at-hand banalities, in which obstinate Fate kept him rigidly rooted.

Though among the first to volunteer for service after Pearl Harbor, F.M. was disqualified for having poor eyesight and flat feet. He did get drafted into administrative duties at school, becoming an assistant principal by V-J Day, but could venture no further from The Cityland than to attend a former colleague's funeral outside Kenosha.

In 1951 he returned to VTHS as deputy to Hamilton Exelby, who'd begun to act more like Teddy in *Arsenic and Old Lace* than the Hero of San Juan Hill. F.M. was delegated to host his Class of '26's silver reunion, though its keynote address was delivered by Chester Brockhurst the belletrist ("I prefer the term 'belittler'") who'd attended Princeton and Yale ("not quite simultaneously"), freelanced for *College Humor* and *Weird Tales* ("hard to tell them apart sometimes"), worked on the editorial staff of *Coronet* magazine ("hogs aren't the only things that get butchered in This City"), and now wrote a newspaper column that was syndicated nationwide three times a week.

"My proudest boast," he told the assembled Class of '26, "is that I've never bought a copy of *The New Yorker*. I will plead guilty to having read it over other people's shoulders."

[Laughter] from Vanderlund alumni.

None, though, from F.M. Agate when Brockhurst profiled the reunion's host in a column as "my old chum Fenster Mouple the Major Domo, whose geography lessons possess the vividness of a chalkboard *March of Time*. 'He almost makes you believe he can see what he's talking about,' a dimple-cheeked bobby-soxer informed me."

Hard and cold did Mr. Agate become after this waggery hit the press. He kept his backbone ramrod-upright; a military moustache embristled his upper lip; and students began to believe he really had been a high-ranking officer in some armed force or other. Being sent to "the Major's" office was seen as a stroke of disciplinary doom.

Thus armored, he took part in the Coup of '53 (when old Ham 'n' Eggs got put out to pasture against his will) and assumed the mantle of VTHS Principal, pledging to restock the faculty along Eisenhowerish lines, cutting out deadwood without allowing any rotten pinkos to sneak aboard.

After three years of such overhaul, Mr. Agate interviewed applicants for an entry-level position in the Social Studies department. He was handed impeccable credentials and references by Miss Shirley Ewing, who had red hair and green eyes and an arresting resemblance to young Greer Garson.

("Shirley Ew-jest,") muttered Mr. Staffel the Social Studies chairman, who thought no young women should be teachers unless they were the stringy schoolmarm stereotype.

Mr. Agate, however, was whisked back to 1939 and the first time he saw *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. How achingly he'd longed for a Greer-as-Kathie to be there beside him at the Rialto, at his boardinghouse, in his lone lorn bed. Now the perfect candidate had come at last but far too late: she in her twenties, he pushing fifty and her prospective boss to boot.

Miss Ewing's cool green eyes regarded him with Elizabeth Bennetesque appraisal as Mr. Agate tendered an offer (despite Mr. Staffel's misgivings) to join the faculty. She accepted, came to VTHS and enchanted the male student body while winning the distaff side's admiration. Bachelor teachers (plus a few married ones) sought her company for nights on the town, yet she'd only go out as part of a group—and often invited Mr. Agate to come along. At first he'd demur, but Miss Ewing would cajole him into attending a lecture at Lakeside Central on the Suez Crisis, or an exhibit of African masks at the Art Institute, or the Lyric Opera's rendition of *La forza del destino*.

One by one the other group members drifted away, leaving F.M. with Shirley and a need to be extremely circumspect about where they might go and what they might do there. Not that she hinted (much less bargained) for preferential treatment, which he wouldn't have given for all her vibrant expressive allure. He never dared ask what Shirley saw in *him*. Perhaps it was because she'd lost her father at Guadalcanal when she was only eleven; perhaps because she felt he needed as much nurturing as any callow freshman boy.

In any event she agreed to be his wife, having taken steps to quash any suspicion of workplace favoritism: a friend was going on maternity leave from the ever-expanding Multch school district, and Shirley planned to transfer there if F.M. could convince Mr. Staffel to provide a glowing letter of recommendation.

“One from *you* might be seen as a wee bit biased,” she told her intended, giving him a *Random Harvest*-y kiss.

Vanderlund mourned her departure, though there’d be no tragic dying-in-childbirth for young Mrs. Agate; she and F.M. decided they had quite enough kids to look after already. Apart from that, it was a thoroughly Chips-and-Kathie marriage of contrasting attitudes: Shirley, though hardly a rotten pinko, didn’t vote the straight Republican ticket and was in fact an early supporter of John F. Kennedy, while the Major continued to Like Ike (and Dick Nixon, to a lesser extent). He thought it imperative that the United States beat the Soviets in the Space Race; she wished flying to the moon could be done internationally. Yet F.M., after having his lenses gently polished, was able to see eye-to-eye with some of her perspectives: Shirley convinced him, for instance, that there were more promising roles for the Peace Corps than what Dick Nixon called “a haven for draft dodgers.”

Then befell the Pitched Debate of 1963.

That spring Vanderlund elected a new Board of Education, the previous one having worn itself out during a four-year wrangle over whether to build a new West High School for the inlanders, or a district-wide junior high to which shorefolk would have to be bused. Ultimately the latter course was chosen, preserving VTHS *as* VTHS and not a diminished “Vanderlund East.” Now the new Board had to decide whether to approve an experimental proposal by which a carefully-screened Negro or Negroes (as unplural as possible) would be selected for admittance *to* VTHS.

Deliberations were held in executive session, behind locked and guarded doors.

Favoring the experiment were Father Phelps of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church; Miss Brandoffer the real estate attorney; and young Mr. Sherman of the Red Cross.

Opposing the proposal were Mr. Beauchamp the banker; Mr. Drexler the insurance agent; and Mr. Peabody the corporate consultant.

Straddling the fence (awkwardly, and not just because he was built like William Howard Taft) was Mr. Horton the School Board President. His grandfather had in fact been Taft's last Ambassador to Spain, the one who'd arranged Madrid's financing of the Torre del Oro Fountain in Spanish Castle Square as a grand gesture of hatchet-burial, fifteen years after the sinking of the *Maine*.

Half a century later there were devout hopes (and harbored doubts) that the current Mr. Horton would be able to achieve a similar reconciliation. Doubts took the lead as Eberhard Drexler spent many minutes discoursing on how this scheme was the thin edge of the Communist wedge, engineered by Khrushchev to reinforce the infiltration of *Jews* into Vanderlund's school system.

"Bunk!" replied Miss Emily Brandoffer, who (it was rumored) knew the net worth of everyone in the township and the location of every skeleton, closeted or otherwise.

Mr. Horton, mopping his portly brow, asked if Principal Agate had any remarks to make on the matter at hand.

"I do, sir."

His inclination had been to line up with the opposition. Not so much behind ranting Mr. Drexler as analytic Mr. Peabody, whose charts and graphs forecast longterm benefits being outweighed by shortterm harm. But a pair of cool green eyes had guided F.M. through a scene almost identical to the one in *Chips*, when Brookfield balked at hosting a soccer team of slum boys who were sure to be hooligans, leading to "incidents" that would wantonly upset a status quo better left undisturbed.

This sort of trepidation cut no ice with Shirley Ewing Agate. Nor should it with the man she'd fallen in love with, the man who was intrigued by African decolonization and had exchanged cordial letters with the headmaster of a high school in Ghana.

Chips, they're wrong, you know, and I'm right. I'm looking ahead to the future...

And so was the Major when he rose to address the School Board and later the PTA, the VTHS faculty and its student body, giving each his version of Harold Macmillan's "Winds of Change" speech:

"This is not Tuscaloosa, nor is it Little Rock. This is Vanderlund, and we shall move forward together into a future that will take us to the stars and beyond. We shall disentangle

every knot along the way in a contemplative fashion and tranquil frame of mind, like the good Gondoliers we are, have always been, and will forever be!”

Which persuaded Mr. Horton that a person was a person, no matter Who; and secured his vote for the integration—if only to a token extent—of VTHS.

The first black pupil to enroll was Orson Porter, whose fine husky-sounding name mollified dubious Vanderlundians—if you gotta recruit a colored kid, find one who can play football like Willie Galimore!—till Orson turned out to be built like Sammy Davis Jr. Some students defied the Major and tried to trigger incidents, subjecting “Pullman” Porter to various kinds of badgerment; but many rallied around Our Negro and gave him ovations when he performed “What Kind of Fool Am I” and “Make Someone Happy” in annual talent shows. (A decade later Orson would choreograph the musical *Fabulous!* in San Francisco, having been a pioneer in more than one field.)

A trickle of other students of color followed in his footsteps; more as the Real Estate Board dealt with Fair Housing by devising Happel Land for their habitat. There were never enough to constitute a “bloc” (such as the Afro-American Movement that occupied the Lakeside Central bursar’s office in 1968) but blacks eventually amounted to almost 1%—if you rounded up—of total attendance. Most, when asked, would state for the record that they were proud and glad to be part of Vanderlund’s venerability.

And why not? This was its Golden Age, when VTHS bestrode The Cityland like an academic colossus. Producing a dozen National Merit Scholars and Finalists each year; making bleachers groan under the grouped-for-a-photo National Honor Society; requiring additional trophy cases to house not just NESTLÉ(É) championship cups in every sport, but county/state/regional awards for music, debate, safety, civic spirit, community activism, and all-around excellence. Vanderlund consistently ranked among the top public college-prep high schools in America, and had no hesitancy about innovation during the tenure of Superintendent Amsterdam (“Call me Dutch”) who seldom encountered a groundbreaking program he didn’t want to implement. New Math, sex ed, team teaching, modular scheduling, relaxation of dress codes and hair-length standards—all of which caused Eberhard Drexler and his ilk to write long blistering screeds to the editor of the *Daily Herald*.

If truth be told, Principal Agate felt increasingly ill-at-ease among these scholastic novelties. He took a dim view of shaggy hair on boys, miniskirts on girls, and slouching postures on either; remarking that Coach Mort Hordt (RIP) would've corrected the latter condition with one swing of his thunderous Board.

Test scores maintained their loftiness, but extracurricular activities reached their peak in 1970 along with enrollment—2,413, of whom nineteen were black—after which the participation tide began to ebb into Seventies apathy. And not just among students but the general population: households with school-age children were starting to decrease, as was Vanderlund's alacrity to subsidize public education. A levy necessary to cope with inflation did the unthinkable by failing at the polls in early 1973. Discipline became a constituent watchword; the school district ditched "Dutch" Amsterdam and was able to pass a lesser levy later that year, averting a teachers strike; but for VTHS the Golden Age was over.

Mr. Agate, though implored to soldier on, took advantage of turning sixty-five and relinquished his Majority. Mrs. Agate (who at forty-two looked Greer Garsonier than ever) had taken leave of absence from Multch to train for the Peace Corps, and some said she'd also taken leave of her senses; but F.M. jumped on the same bandwagon. Here at last was his chance to blaze a trail into terra incognita (to him, if not its native people) as he and his beloved wife were transported out of theoretical suburbia and off to faraway realities.

From Nairobi the Agates sent a telegram to their good friend Father Phelps back in Vanderlund:

HAVING WONDERFUL TIME GLAD WE'RE NOT THERE

*

Vicki Volester would've been happy to say the same when she arrived at school on the Monday after her drive-in debacle with Dennis Desmond.

It was no thrill to poke her head into Room 312 at 8 a.m. and find "Old One-Shot Thanks-a-Lot Untie-the-Knot" already present, looking no worse for wear from his Saturday night standup skinnydip. (He and Rags had been given only a dressing-down—so to speak—by the Emery Ridge police, while Larry Garrigan got charged with ripping off Isabel's blouse and bra—"in a *Pinto!*"—along with her purse and shoes.)

Vicki, having taken care to tone down her sex appeal by wearing one of Joss's baggy T-shirts over one of her own, edged cautiously into the classroom... and Dennis paid her no more attention (whew!) than he did any other girl in First Hour Spanish, except of course Diana Dabney who always bore his brunt.

In the back row, Jenna Wibnitz was bearing with a *lump*. It looked like a big gray tortoise, reminding Vicki of what Ozzie'd called "that dang upside-down bathtub"—a 1950 Nash Airflyte taken in trade by Diamond Joel, which had squatted in the Lot for years as a conversation piece before finally getting sold for parts.

Could this tubby turtle be Rabbi Pip, here after giving his youngest grandchild a ride to school? No: on closer inspection Vicki recognized the lump as a student named Skinner, who'd been Jenna's stage crew scapegoat at VW. If anything went missing or awry during *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, Skinner was to blame. Some people even identified him as the Phantom of the Sock-Hop, who dropped that sandbag on Lucy's Psychiatric Help (5¢) booth; but as Jenna'd said at the time, a *competent* Phantom would've managed to crush Candy Gates as well.

Right now he was lumpily blocking the way to Vicki's desk as he leaned over Jenna's with a sheaf of papers, at which Jenna (busily sketching a big gray slug stuck inside a saltshaker) didn't glance as she said "*Tell*, don't *show*."

"But if you'd just take a quick look..." whined Skinner.

"Scuse me," sighed Vicki, neither loudly nor rudely; so Skinner really had no reason to leap into the air like he did, scattering his sheaf and an armful of other belongings over the back-aisle floor.

"Butterfingers!" went Jenna, translating that as the first bell rang to "*¡Manazas!*"

Vicki, with another sigh, plopped her own things onto her desktop and stooped to help Skinner retrieve copies of *Star Reach* and *Heavy Metal* and *The Silmarillion*, plus glossy autographed headshots of Pamelyn Ferdin and Maggie Cooper from *Space Academy*.

"Um... yeah... so..." went Skinner, backpedaling toward the door. Out of his gray turtleneck protruded an incongruous pigeon's head, ashen of hue; it had flat lifeless hair, a sharply pointed nose, and wide eyes round with astonishment. "Wouldn't she be perfect?" he asked Jenna, before plunging away when she ordered him to *piérdase*.

“(¿Quién?)” whispered Vicki.

“(Luego,)” said Jenna as the late bell clanged and Señor Banonis called for *cálmate*.

They were beginning a new unit on Identity and Personal Characteristics, with a focus on direct and indirect object pronouns. The class would again be divided into pairs (Carly Thibert promptly laying hands on Woody Tays) to prepare an oral report, using accurate vocabulary and appropriate illustrations, for delivery in two weeks time.

To Carly (if not Woody) this meant postponing work for the next thirteen-and-a-half days; but Jenna passed Vicki a blotchy-ballpoint note that read:

*We should start this afternoon
Come to my house after school?*

Vicki was gratified by this sign of trust and reliance by her new big sister; all the more so when Lisa Lohe heard about it at lunch and snapped “*Some* of us still have volleyball practice after school! *We*’ve got a match at Multch North tomorrow—right, Samantha?”

“Not here,” murmured Sammi, vigilant as ever for glimpses of her Cherry Picker.

“*We*’ve got personal pronouns to play with,” said Jenna, drawing a bouncy *Nosotras*.

At 3:30 she and Vicki left school under a garish yellow umbrella with a plastic corncob handle, obtained at last year’s State Fair by Cheryl Trevelyan and traded to “Niblets” for a large stuffed unicorn that Jenna’d received from her injudicious Aunt Sophie. Vicki took charge of this “umbrellow” since the might-as-well-still-be-summer rain was being blown about by a breeze off the Lake, and Jenna (shorter and slighter than herself) was burdened with a hefty zippered art portfolio wrapped in a plastic drycleaning bag that kept trying to skim off and fly away.

“Is he following us?” Jenna asked as they detoured down Steeple for a couple of slices at Deeple’s.

“Is who? You mean Skinner?”

“I don’t mean Leif Garrett.”

“Can’t tell—too many people,” said Vicki, craning her head around at the crowd.

“Safety in numbers,” said Jenna: the anti-Mad-Bludgeoner battle cry.

If true, the pizzeria was a jam-packed sanctuary. Space was made for Jenna (as a junior) and Vicki (as her little-sister guest); both being petite, they didn’t need much elbow room, though as per usual every bite of deep-dish pie supplemented their rumps.

The rain ceased as they headed east on Millbank Street, Jenna resuming her commentary (suspended at Deeple’s—“Not while I’m eating!”) about Adlai Stevenson Skinner, aka Egghead aka ASS:

“He’s had a *dote* on me since fourth grade. That makes seven years of dotage—drab, dull, *doltish* dotage. Dribbly too, like a sniveling shadow. And this in spite of knowing that I’m ‘spoken for.’”

Jenna was officially in love with Lisa’s older brother Ike, a handsome operatic tenor (much admired by Crystal Denvour) whom many predicted would be the next Jan Peerce. He was currently chasing that goal with singleminded determination (like all the Lohes) at the Indiana University School of Music.

“So Rags was...?”

“A *splurge*,” explained Jenna. “A girl’s got to work off the pizza-pudge somehow. *And* find a way to keep the ASS off her ass, if you get my dote-drift.” She dodged a sidewalk puddle while glaring over her shoulder at her bobolink-bottom, then back to see if Skinner was following them *now*, then over at Vicki through today’s frames: small awning-shaded storefronts. “Bet *you* ’ve had to deal with an ASS or two in your life. Am I right?”

“Oh Gahd... mine was this creepy-crawly paste-eater with cobweb-hair.” Whom Vicki’d spent two whole years happily forgetting about, only to have him bob back into her consciousness twice in the past five days: *This is Mrs. Wernie Ball / all in all in all in all*. “But that was a long time ago, and far away from here.”

“Count yourself lucky. And enviable.”

Sudden queasy afterthought: “Is Adl—I mean, Eggh—I mean, SKINNER—is he any relation to Byron Wyszynski?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him! Is that the paste-eater?”

“No, a different guy I knew at VW.”

“Byron Whatwasit? I thought I knew all the weirdo W’s in town. Assuming this Byron’s a weirdo, and in town?”

“Well he *was*. We called him ‘Tail-End’—he was always the last one to finish taking tests. Then I had to *defend* him for cheating on a midterm, at this silly trial we had at VW last spring. Did you guys hear about it?”

“No, we were tied up with a scandal of our own. Gootch Bulstrode was accused of stealing the answers to a big trig test. As if anyone would believe he could’ve passed it *without* loading the dice.”

“My friend Fiona says there’s cheating rings at schools all over town, even Startop.”

“Startop cuts the cheating *stencil*—the rest just get blurry mimeographs... Well, welcome to West East Bay.”

Such was the unauthorized name of that portion of East Bay separated from the rest by the El tracks. Which could be seen a couple blocks away, and stirred a much pleasanter memory of Pfiester Park: scurrying like daredevils through the Hagenbush Avenue viaduct, back when you thought a “vy-a-duck” was the tunnel beneath the El.

In West East Bay both sides of Millbank Street were lined with limestone bungalows, the Wiblitzes on one side and the Lohes almost opposite. Lisa’s house was unsurprisingly larger and grander; her father designed prototypes for the American Furniture Mart, and her mother sat (heavily, for a narrow-hipped woman) on the board of the Jewish Community Center. Contrarily, Jenna’s parents co-owned a low-key optical shop and collected antiques in their spare time, with an occasional mocking observation about “modern décor” to make the Lohes bridle.

Vicki quickly felt at home at 429 Millbank. The Wiblitz bungalow, though clad in limestone rather than salmon stucco, called to mind Gran and Dime’s lox-colored cottage; the same rose bushes lined the veranda here as they had around Gran’s cottage porch, and Jenna’s dormer bedroom had certain similarities to Gran’s time-honored sewing room.

Excluding tidiness: this was a working artist’s studio. Apart from a rumpled daybed in one corner, it had a big drafting table that doubled as desk and tripled as vanity, with an attached accordion mirror; plus a tall floor easel on which sat a shrouded work-in-progress. Jenna’s complete wardrobe seemed to be heaped on the floor of her closet, whose rod was

bare of hangers; its shelves, like the half-open dresser drawers, were crammed with art tools and materials. There was paint in tubes and jars and spraycans; paper by the sheet and pad and roll; brushes ranging from fine-haired to whiskbroom-sized; stacks of sketches with various stages of dustiness; and an atmosphere perfumed by tempera and turpentine.

“Scuse me asking,” Vicki ventured, “but doesn’t this give your folks like constant heart attacks? Mine would freak if I left my *bed* unmade.”

“They know me better than to think that’d faze me. Besides, my bed *is* made.”

(Gran would definitely have disputed that. *Tuck in those sssseets and smooth them out, Miss, if you do not wisss to sleep on the cowntzz tonight.*)

Jenna’s parents were still at work down in The City, but their handicraft was featured on one side of the studio: rack upon rack of unconventional eyewear, including many frames that Vicki hadn’t yet seen at school.

“Aren’t all these glasses kind of expensive, even for an optician?”

“Nope—every one of ‘em has plain plastic lenses. I’ve got 20/20 vision, but wear specs to Make a Statement. Also as publicity for the shop—they pay me commission instead of an allowance. Mention my name if you ever need or just *want* a pair.”

Another wall was hung with prints and posters, some by The City Imagists; Jenna pointed out June Leaf’s *The Salon* and Suellen Rocca’s *Sleepy-Head with Handbag*. Others were stylized cartoon faces and configurations, reminiscent of *Astro Boy* and *Speed Racer*.

“ASS and I are making a showjoe mahngah.”

“Um... you ‘n’ who are making a what now?”

“*Shōjo manga*—that’s a girl-centered comic book. All the rage in Japan these days. Moto Hagio’s *They Were Eleven*—Riyoko Ikeda’s *The Rose of Versailles*—”

“But... you’re making it with...?”

“*Working* with—Skinner, of course. Ever heard of ‘sublimation’? When a guy (to give him the benefit of the doubt and call him one) channels frustrated urges into something worthwhile? Well, nobody’s more frustrated than ASS. He’s writing the story for my graphics. The more graphically I stymie him, the better he writes. It’s a win-win situation.”

“Well, but... for him too?”

“For him *most*. Otherwise he’d do nothing but flap his flippers.”

“Sounds like a bad After School Special,” tutted Vicki.

“Exactly—an ASS for an ASS. Oh, and when he said ‘Wouldn’t she be perfect’ this morning? He meant you, as a model for one of the characters.”

“Who—me? To, like, *pose* and stuff?”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Jenna stated, rummaging through the zippered portfolio for her Spanish text and notebook. “Right now let’s get started on this *proyecto de identidad*. I’ve got better things to do than *it* during the next two weeks. Soonest over, soonest clover.”

“Y’think Diana’d agree?” asked Vicki; and they shared a snortle at Diana Dabney’s struggle to express that she’d rather be boiled in oil than do a two-week project with Dennis Desmond—particularly one where’d they’d share their Personal Characteristics.

“*Usa las palabras correctas, Señorita Dabney.*”

“*¿Hervir en Crisco, comprende? ¡Hervir—en—CRISCO!*”

*

On Tuesday morning Vicki dispensed with baggy T-shirts and donned her favorite purple top—the latest in a series, each of which Joss called “your *sexy* purple top”—as befitted a potential showjoe-mahngah model. Jenna’d declined to give any further info regarding this, except to assure her that she (Vicki) would pose for her (Jenna) while “that ASS” (Skinner) was nowhere within visible range.

The first three hours of Tuesday’s schoolday went by without undue worriment. Then Vicki descended to Room 221 for Geometry, and found a set of concentric circles forming just outside the open door. At the set’s innermost center a confrontation was taking place between two girls garbed in the exact same outfit: magenta satin blouse, Sasson designer jeans (the brand you had to wriggle into while lying down) and open-toe platform clogs. One of the girls was Gigi Pyle, the other Isabel Carstairs, and they even had identical skintones—scarlet vermilion, from hairline to collarbones—as they stood nose to nose with teeth bared, fists clenched, and bosoms heaving.

This was being appreciatively observed by an outer circle of boys, Mike and Brad and Floyd among them, who’d heard about Isabel being stripped half-naked Saturday night at the drive-in, and now reckoned magenta satin might get shredded off Is or Gigi or both—which would be a dandy way to study spherical constructions.

The set's furthest perimeter was circled by girls like Robin (who grinned at the chance of seeing turmoil) and Britt (who sported her Red Queen cause-of-all-the-mischief demeanor) and Vicki herself (who simply wanted to remain uninvolved). When Mr. Rankin stepped out to ask why everyone was loitering in the hall, Vicki dashed past him into the classroom—

—but not before seeing Britt lean in to murmur something that absolutely poleaxed Isabel. Who then got elbowed aside by fit-to-be-tied Gigi, while Robin suggested they sign up for a bout of intramural mud-wrassling, as done by Betty the amnesiac in last month's *Archie at Riverdale High*.

“Well now,” Mr. Rankin said, after Is got propelled to her desk by Brad and Mike. “If we’re finally all seated, let’s open our books to page 65... 65, is it?... yes, 65... and continue with Inductive and Deductive Reasoning—”

yyyyyyaaaaaahhhhhh

DEEEEEE-LAAAAAYYYYYY

HHHEEEEEE-HHHOOOOO

rose a wailing keening yodel-howl, with the resonant reverb of a banshee migrating from Ireland to the Alps.

Transfixed, the class stared as Isabel tipped her crimson countenance toward the ceiling and let loose an even spine-tinglier second outcry:

Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-A-A-A-A-A-A-H-H-H-H-H-H

“Should we... maybe one of us should... will *you* please take her to the nurse’s office?” bleated Mr. Rankin—at *Vicki*, of all people.

WHY? Because she was the girl sitting nearest to Isabel? Whose numerous male neighbors could not be trusted with such a task? Even if they were too flabbergasted by this paroxysm to take hornyboy advantage of it? *Oh for GAHD’S SAKE...*

Vicki unwillingly got to her feet. Turning to Robin (whose undyed chocolate brows were raised practically off her forehead) with a silent plea to *TAKE GOOD NOTES FOR ME*. Bestowing a black laserblast on Gigi (who ignored it) and Britt (who basked in its lacerating

beam). Gathering her books under one arm, Isabel's under the other, leaving two fingers free for Mr. Rankin to insert a furtive hall pass between. (*Eww.*)

By this time Is had bolted through the doorway, legged it down the corridor, and vanished inside the second-floor washroom, from which a couple of tobacco-scented punkettes soon made an indignant slambang exit.

"Can't do NOTHING in this craphole!" grouched Razor Reid.

You can have the latest in a series of Pfiester Park flashbacks, Vicki thought as she pushed past *la puerta* into *el baño* and her memory of Stephanie Lipperman's phlegmy sobs. Which had been minor tweets compared to the unearthly whoopage Isabel was doing here and now behind a closed stall hatch.

"Is? C'mon. I'm supposed to take you to the nurse—"

"Go *'way!*"

"Fine. I'll leave your stuff here by the sinks—"

"*No, wait!*"

Out of the stall slithered a study in magenta: her face the same color as her blouse, except where liquidated eye makeup left inky downstrokes; her swollen lids were shut tight.

"Tell me the truth... is it as bad as I think?"

"Is what?"

"How I *look!*"

"Oh. Well, yeah, probably. C'mere—"

Tug of magenta sleeve over to sink; dampened paper towel placed in trembling hand.

"Those *bitches*," went Isabel, blindly mopping the wretched refuse of her expensive cosmetics. "Those BITCHES."

"Yeah, that's Gigi 'n' Britt for you. Robin calls Britt the 'Queen Bitch,' so I guess that means Gigi's the Empress."

"This has been the worst week of my life, the very *worst*. I wish I was dead. I wish I was buried at sea."

"Well, maybe the nurse can give you something for that. C'mon—"

"I can't go out there, looking like *this!*"

Oh for GAHD'S SAKE. "Okay. Hold this book up close to your face. If anybody's out there, maybe they'll think you're reading."

"But then I won't be able to see where I'm going."

"I'll GUIDE you there, okay? Now hurry up, I need to get back to class!"

She escorted the invalid out of the washroom, around to the stairway and down it step by step, with open-toe platform clogs threatening to stumble over every one. Isabel kept her face crammed in the upside-down *Essentials of Geometry*, through which a muffled voice asked: "Vicki?... Can I talk to you?"

"Make it fast, we're almost there."

"Not *now*. After school."

"I'm not on the team anymore, Is. I won't be going to Multch North—"

"Well I won't be either, not now! They excused *Laurie* just for catching a little cold—I've been sick since Saturday night, and was absent all day yesterday!"

(Vicki'd guessed she'd dosed herself again with warm saltwater to upchuck out of coming.)

"So can you meet me at the station after school? I've GOT to talk to somebody!"

"Talk to the nurse, that's her job—"

"Not an *old* person! Please, Vicki? You're the only one I can trust!"

Shades of Candy Gates ("*Velma! You're the ONLY one I can depend on!*") whom Vicki'd avoided running into all year so far. Now here were Isabel's bloodshot aquamarines peeping imploringly over the top of the textbook, ready to shed a fresh batch of tears.

What SIN did you commit to deserve THIS? From somebody you had every reason to dislike; who'd attempted to steal Dennis Desmond from under your nose *four scant days* ago.

Okay: every reason but one. Undeniable and unrejectable as ever: Isabel was the spitting (or at least dripping) image of Patricia Elaine Volester—eye color excepted.

And just last night there'd been a bad dream about Tricia in trouble, Tricia in danger, Tricia in need of rescue and salvation. You could only guess how often Ozzie and Felicia'd had such nightmares. Not a word had anyone heard for two months now; no telling how many months might pass before any came. You could only hope Tricia could depend on the kindness of nonpredatory strangers, out there in Tinsel Town or wherever she might be.

(SIGH.) “Meet you where’d you say? The station? You mean the uptown El?”

“Yes—I know a place where we can talk, private-like. *Pleeeeee* say you’ll come.”

(Again that melting marshmallow oozy-coo!) “Look, I’m not promising anything... and if I’m not there by, say, 3:45, that means I can’t make it. ‘Kay? Now get *in* there—”

Cutting short profuse gratitude by shoving Isabel and her possessions through the nurse’s office doorway.

Less than an hour later, Natalie Fish dropped by Room 325 to bawl “HELLO, MRS. IVY!” in Grandma’s morbidly obese ear. “OKAY IF I HAVE A WORD WITH VICKI VOLESTER?”

“Of course, dear. Just keep your voices down,” Grandma said quite lucidly, before relapsing into her customary Study Hall mumble.

Sammi Tiggs offered Nat her desk, moving to the one in the back row left vacant by Buntz O’Toole since the First Day. Nat sat down more heavily than usual, looking less like a momma penguin than Abe Vigoda’s aged detective Fish: hangdog even though he’d gotten his own spinoff show.

“All righty,” she exhaled. “What’s the deal with Isabel?”

(Gotta give credit to the junior class grapevine—it’d taken Natalie fewer than sixty minutes to hear about this from Thirsty K, who’d heard about it from Nancy Buschmeyer, who was a Fourth Hour student assistant in the nurse’s office.)

Vicki filled Nat in on firsthand particulars, excluding any mention of maybe meeting Is at the El station after school.

“I might’ve known,” groaned Nat. “Here I was thinking we stood a good chance against Multch North.” Whose Lady Hurricanes led the JV Shoreside Division, but had been shaken up by a near-riot after their win at Multch East last Thursday: the first time any North team had played on an East court or field since their future consolidation got announced.

“How’s Doreen working out?” asked Vicki.

“Put it this way—at yesterday’s practice, she didn’t set any muffins on fire. I don’t suppose there’s any chance *you* might reconsider...?”

“Me? Oh—no—thanks for asking, but I wouldn’t play any better than I did last week. Anyway, I’ll be in the stands rooting for you Thursday, against... who’s next?”

“Triville—the Red Devils. Maybe we’ll have something to root for by then.”

Shrewd Abe Vigoda glance: “*If* you run into Is anytime soon, tell her to get over whatever’s ailing her as soon as possible. We need somebody besides Alex who can dig-and-roll-and-live-to-tell-about-it.”

Vicki spent much of Lunch 5D trying to devise unhurtful excuses for blowing off any talking-to by Izzy-Whizzy, which was sure to be soppy-gloppy. She wanted to ask Jenna for advice, some clever contribution that wouldn’t leave a scar; but with Lisa sitting right there on the *qui vive*, it wasn’t safe to whisper or even risk slipping a note.

Joss had no such compunction in Sixth Hour English; yet they had barely enough time (or space, as Jerome Schei hovered nearby) for Vicki to super/sub-share the gist of the day’s goings-on, before Mrs. Mallouf barged in to quaff coffee and natter on about some old play called *The Crucible*. Fortunately Madeline Wrippley had a stack of Salem witchcraft handouts to distribute, and Joss adroitly slid an appendix into the one she passed to Vicki:

You have GOT to go see her—I’d tag along if I didn’t have rehearsal. You might wind up disco-ing the night away with preppies at the Shoreward Club!

Just what Vicki needed. That and Jerome leeching onto her heels from the fourth floor down to the first (again losing Joss on the third) to the very door of the girls locker room, where she shook him loose without disclosing the *latest* latest. He’d receive it soon enough from Laurie—one would assume; though Laurie was still acting residually weird and not nearly as avid for gossip as she used to be. (Worry about that some other time.)

Sheila-Q wasn’t surprised that Britt’s dart-and-flicks could devastate the vulnerable, or that Gigi Pyle was capable of being *eine Kaiserin der Hündinnen*. (Why Gigi’d enrolled in German rather than a romance language was a mystery to Sheila and Robin, who relished her attempts to wrap a Dixiefied larynx around phrases like “*Ich spreche nicht gut Deutsch.*”)

“Member how we used to say it’d be a lucky afternoon when Robbo’d laugh so hard that milk’d shoot through her nose? Well, now it’s *double* lucky if you see Gigi shpritz when she talks—TRIPLE lucky if she has to wipe her mouth afterward!”

Vicki wished nondisgusting luck to S-Q and Laurie against the Hurricanes; likewise to Coach Celeste, after providing her the same lowdown on Isabel's ailment that had already been given to Natalie.

Lowdown was right. Isabel might wear French-cut butterflies beneath French-cut jeans, but Vicki's butterflies were re-congregating in her stomach to disturb digestion of grilled cheese and vegetable soup. After the bell's final P-E-E-E-E-A-L, they fluttersnuck her out across Hordt Field to the back gate on McKinley Avenue; then half a mile east to the uptown El station, whose platforms were occupied by a miscellany of mid-afternoon commuters...

...none of whom bore any resemblance to Isabel, Tricia, or Lucia Vantrop.

Vicki scanned the platforms again with one eye and scowled at her wristwatch with the other. *Stood up! Now I'll have to sprint back to catch the bus—*

"You came," said a remote voice from close at hand.

"Is...?"

"Yes, it's me."

You could've fooled Vicki. Instead of skintight designer threads selected for their allurability, Isabel had on a semi-shapeless sweatsuit of generic gray. Her goldilocks were tucked within an unadorned ballcap, and her aquamarines were concealed by a pair of dime store shades that Jenna Wibnitz wouldn't have allowed on Millbank Street.

"So glad you came," said this apparition. "Are you hungry? There's a place up on Campus that bakes the yummiest pastries."

Vicki's butterflies let out a collective growl. Grilled cheese and veggie soup were all very well, but pastry rang a totally different bell; you could put up with a lot of gloppytalk in exchange for gloppytopped gateaux. (Last summer Mrs. Denvour had decided that she, Crystal, and Crystal's little sister Amber were getting too plump, and so began freelancing "healthy cupcakes" that Vicki'd been too polite to complain about at their Labor Day weekend barbecue.)

Wait together for the northbound train, you on semi-tenterhooks. Suppose the Gondolier team bus made a 180-degree wrong turn en route to Multch North and discovered you here with Isabel, whose volleyball truancy would somehow be blamed on *you*? But

maybe even Mauly wouldn't recognize Is in her dowdy camouflage getup...

"There's Floyd, dancing at us," Is quietly observed.

Over on the opposite platform, "Hiawatha" was leering their way as he performed a Huggy Bear hustle that took him into a southbound train. Bound for Willowhelm, perhaps, to try his luck with unsuspecting Spaghetti girls. He got no responding do-si-do from Isabel, no flaunting of figure (difficult to do in a sweatsuit) or flirtytoss of hair (confined to ballcap). Nor was attention paid to other guys at the station or on the train they presently boarded, though some were cute and some were college-aged.

She really MUST be sick, thought Vicki; uneasy now about how responsible she (Vicki) would have to be for her (Isabel) if she (ditto) showed symptoms of getting worse.

For a minute they sat listening to the familiar *lickety-click* of public transit in motion. Then, just loudly enough to be heard, Is said: "When I was little, Mauly'd tell me the noise a train makes is really chains being dragged by the ghosts of everyone who'd ever ridden it—and are still riding it, there beside us. Not friendly ghosts like Casper, but zombie vampires that crawl inside your head through your mouth and nostrils and earholes, to suck your brains out while you sleep."

"...well, y'know, big sisters..."

"Then she'd hide under my bed and make sucking sounds. Night after night. 'Cause I'd scream every time."

If you believed Jerome Schei's scuttlebutt, the entire Carstairs/Altdorf/Mansfield clan was clean crazy. And had been for six generations, starting with the first Lafayette Carstairs (Mauly and Isabel's father was the fifth) who claimed he'd saved Abraham Lincoln from being struck by a runaway horse-and-buggy outside the Putnam County Courthouse in 1845. Lafe parlayed that assertion into vigorous office-seeking during the Civil War (till Honest Abe said "I ought to appoint someone who can kick Carstairs *downstairs*") while making a fortune, losing most of it, and depositing a dependent or two in lunatic asylums. This set a family pattern that persisted to the present day: Mauly saw a shrink twice a week, when she bothered to show up; Arabella Mansfield (Jive's mother, Mauly and Isabel's aunt) shuttled in and out of private rehab centers; while one of the Altdorfs down in New Braunfels had been put away for introducing his girlfriend's husband to a sausage-making machine.

So if Is was “ill,” how liable might she be to go completely bonkers as the train pulled into the Hereafter Park station and she said “Here we are,” softly (if not *sinisterly*)?

“Campus,” to northeast suburbanites, meant Lakeside Central University. Vicki’d been brought here fairly often by alumna Felicia and sports fan Ozzie, to attend artistic events and Yellow Jacket games; but she didn’t know her way around the place, and had no clue where Isabel was leading them through a constellation of ivy-covered edifices. It was after four o’clock now and Campus was sparsely populated, so any cries for help would probably go unheeded at the far end of this ivy-covered alley—

—where a shabby sign over a dingy window read *La Boulangerie de la Ruelle*.

Its proprietor was a lantern-jawed Parisian apache who glowered at them over a flour-speckled counter, around which wafted all the fragrances of fresh-baked heaven.

“*Deux tartes aux myrtilles étoilés, s’il vous plait,*” Is told the apache.

“*Bien,*” he grunted with grudging respect; and an instant later the girls were seated in a dark booth staring down at circular starry night skies.

“What...?” asked Vicki.

“Blueberry pies,” answered Isabel. “The stars are made of crème Chantilly.”

Vicki was hesitant to taste hers, having been unable to enjoy this particular fruit since reading how Avery’s frog splashed soapy water over a blueberry pie in *Charlotte’s Web*. Yet it took only the teensiest morsel to banish that memory; and she dialed down conversation to “Mmm’s” at the pie and “Mmm-hmm’s” at Isabel.

Is picked at her own plate while burbling about various dilemmas and distresses. Vicki tried to pay occasional attention, vaguely associating mention of “Maully’s coke spoon” with the bottle of Coke syrup that used to be the only good thing about childhood vomiting. Each barf earned you a spoonful of delicious relief, till Goofus got greedy and made the folks resort to treating nausea with plain old Pepto-Bismol.

“Well,” Isabel sighed after awhile, “thanks for listening. I hope we can be friends now. I wanted to before, but every time you looked at me you acted like I was covered in spiders or snakes.” Said with a dollop of reproach that sent guilt-pangs through Vicki’s heart, even as she sent the last blueberry swallow down to satiate her tummy-butterflies.

“I’m sorry about that. It’s just—you kind of look a whole lot like *my* big sister, who sort of ran off to California a couple months ago. We’re not sure where she is.”

“Ohhhh,” breathed Isabel, “you are so *lucky*. I’d give anything to say that. But do you really have a sister who looks like *me*?”

“YES—she takes after my dad’s side of the family, I take after my mom’s. And *you* look like *her*. ‘Cept she’s got emerald-green eyes.”

“She must be very beautiful.”

(Snortle.) “Yeah. She is. Well... you both are.”

“Well, so are you—‘specially when your tongue matches your top.”

“Oh Gahd! Does it?” went Vicki, sticking out her tongue and staring at its deep purple tip. “Hah bong wiwwih *thay* thih way??”

At which Isabel let out a peal of crème-Chantilly’d laughter.

*

“...so she lent me the dough (ha-ha) to buy three more pies to bring home, and two of them are gone already,” Vicki told Joss during their nightly phone chat. “Dad and Goof practically *inhaled* ‘em—even Mom had two slices, and you know how (she says) she’s ‘watching her weight.’ I’ll try to bring you a slice tomorrow—meet me at the west trophy case before First Hour. Even if it gets all shmushed on the bus, it still ought to taste how-do-you-say *magnifique*.”

“You do know what that means, right? Not *magnifique*—‘*tarte aux myrtilles*.’”

“Like I said—blueberry pie.”

“Nope! It means WHORTLEBERRY TART. You ate a WHORTLEBERRY TART with Isabel Carstairs! No wonder your tongue got stained—”

“Now cut that out, she was really nice, like a whole different person. I kind of hinted she could make a lot more friends (girls, at least) if she did that more often ‘stead of using her bod to, like, *beguile* every guy she meets. But y’know what Is said? ‘Boys HAVE to like me.’ It was so sad.”

“Not as sad as Meg saying ‘WHY don’t boys like me?’”

“Oh shut up. Your sister had more boyfriends than either of us have managed to have so far.”

“*You* shut up. WE are selective and won’t settle for just anybody’s body. Oh, speaking of which—did you warn Isabel that Spacyjane’s ticked off at her for besmirching Floramour’s reputation when the Blue Fairy turns her into a real girl?”

“*Besmirching?*”

“Hey, you said ‘beguiled.’”

“No, we only discussed how much Is looks like Tricia, not Spacyjane’s doll. You’re all in the same French class—you can talk to both of them about it then. Just be sure your tongue is purple when you do.”

*

Further dramatic heights were scaled on Wednesday. Vicki successfully conveyed the Tupperware’d pie slice to school intact; but at the trophy case Joss pretended to drop it, Vicki dove for the save, the girls conked their noggins, and the slice got shmushed after all.

“You didn’t even get a chance to see the star!” mourned Vicki.

“Oh *didn’t* I?” moaned Joss, rubbing her curly head.

Then Vicki found Skinner blocking the aisle again in Room 312 as he rambled discursively about the *manga*’s storyline to Jenna, who was briskly sketching his pigeonface as a cracked-open piñata.

“Vicki, would you be so good as to kick this ASS out of here?” she requested.

“*Shoo!*” went Vicki, as she did to Alex’s chihuahua Tonio when he got too frisky with her footwear. (Yermak the Borzoi was too dignified to do more than give shoes an inquisitive sniff.)

Skinner gave Jenna a long last look of raw dotage and an offhand glance at Vicki before lumbering turtlishly away, saying “I still think she’d be perfect...”

“Well, you did *that* perfectly,” chirped Jenna. “I’ve been trying to make him go *shoo* for the past seven years.”

“Got any aspirin?” Vicki asked. “This day’s shaping up to be a headache...”

Substantiated outside the Biology lab before Second Hour, when TWO contretemps took place simultaneously. One pitted Nanette Magnus against Petula (alias Downtown alias Tayser) Pierro: they hadn’t been *simpatico* on last year’s *Cicada* staff, and a month of lab partnership had excavated deeper antagonisms. Each regarded the other as a bony-butted

skank, which wasn't fair to Nanette's caboose since it'd filled out during a summer with Boffer Freuen, whereas Tayser's had shrunk since hooking up (or as she would phrase it, *hawking* up) with Epic Khack.

The second contretemps was going on (and on, and on) between Tess Disseldorf and Fast Eddie Wainwright. Those two had reconciled three times in the past four weeks but now were breaking up again, even more vociferously than their typical wont.

Tess, unlike such LOOKIT-ME! lasses as Carly and Isabel, dressed with demure modesty even on Maine Street Beach. This however was a façade, to which Tess coupled a stance and gaze of insolence so spellbinding it could seduce the trousers off a bronze statue. Milder-mannered girls might pine for guys to ask them out; Tess Disseldorf went on safari and bagged big game with infallible aim, mounting head after head over her metaphoric fireplace. Fast Eddie resented this, both for his own head's sake and because he thought Tess should keep her succulence under wraps exclusively for him.

"When ya go with Fast Eddie, ya gotta go WITH Fast Eddie!"

"*Quick* Eddie," heckled Tess. "*Hasty* Eddie—*Premature* Eddie—"

At which combustible point Vicki broke into the breakup with a Wainwrightish "Come *ahn*, come *ahn*," trying to herd all the adversaries into the lab. (Mr. Dimancheff was known to lock out late arrivals and dock them a day's attendance.) Delia Shanafelt pulled Nanette away from Petula ("Be careful, she carries a knife!"—"You're thinking of *Razor!* I'm *Tayser!*") while Crystal Denvour reined in Tess, giving her incidental kudos on behalf of the FEEE (Fast Eddie's Exes Everywhere).

"*Careless* Eddie—*Messy* Eddie—*Slapdash* Eddie—" Tess continued to taunt.

"Do not become overwrought," Mr. Dimancheff notified her, closing the door and shooting its bolt. "We are not here to become overwrought. Today we are here to study MEMBRANES. As Maeterlinck tells us:

*Most creatures have a vague belief that a very precarious hazard,
a kind of transparent MEMBRANE, divides death from love.*

"By the time we complete this unit, your belief about MEMBRANES will be neither *vague* nor *precarious*. Let us be *transparent* about that at the outset."

No one chose to refute Mr. D by so much as a cleared throat. Vicki did move her head far enough to exchange an eyeroll with Nonique—and was alarmed to see twin fires blazing in her usually reticent sockets.

Oh no! What now?

“—the MEMBRANE regulates whatever enters a cell, such as *food*; and whatever exits a cell, such as *waste*—”

(Eww.)

Do not get distracted—you are not here to be distracted. Science is your weakest subject, so you need to pay strict attention to this MEMBRANE lecture.

Just as you need Nonique to save both your non-bony butts in this Biology class.

Whisper on your way out of Lab: “(You okay?)”

Sidelong twitch: “(Can’t STAND the name Eddie!)”

And with that Nonique strode off to Instrumental Music, leaving Vicki to brood through World History while Ms. Goldberg talked about Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path—presumably to Sixteen Candles and a driver’s license. The whole Buddhist shebang, including those yoga poses Coach Celeste had you do, was intended to attain a “cessation of suffering”—which apparently was still out of reach for Vernonique Smith.

Though not Isabel Carstairs, who popped into Geometry on the brawny arm of quarterback Jeff Friardale, who gave her a this-is-my-good-profile smoocheroo right in front of Gigi Pyle, who’d been plotting to ensnare Jeff for her own exploits but now had to flinch from one of Britt’s derisive dart-and-flicks.

(As Isabel, licking her lips, tipped Vicki a gleeful little wink.)

Then came Homeroom/Study Hall, where Nonique sat with extinguished eyes till Vicki couldn’t bear it any longer and passed her a note:

*If you ever want to talk about why you
can't stand the name Eddie, I'd like to
know even if it's none of my beeswax*

Nonique sustained her downcast posture for a yoga count of one, two, three, four, five... then picked up a pen:

you busy after school?

Not since I quit volleyball. Want to come over to my house?

or we could go where I'm staying

Okay I'll phone my mother and let her know

I expect she won't mind

This last note-passage made with a reviving twitch of mouth-corners. Which stayed upward when Sammi Tiggs whipped around to gasp “Ohmygosh! Don’t I have a book report due today? Laurie’s supposed to remind me of stuff like that! I can’t even remember which book I didn’t read!”

Vicki calmed her down and had Sammi check her carryall, from which she drew a dog-eared Harlequin paperback titled *Bride of Zarco*.

“Sounds like a horror story,” murmured Nonique.

“Oh no, it’s a thriller—and the heroine’s named Samantha!”

Better to turn in *any* book report than none, they reasoned; so in the cafeteria Sammi left her lunch uneaten while churning out a last-ditch essay on this epic tale, much to Lisa Lohe’s disapproval:

“No English teacher will accept a report on that sort of book!”

“Miss DuJardin will,” predicted Jenna. “Miss DuJardin appreciates fine trash.”

“It is *not* trash!” protested Sammi, focused so resolutely on scoring 500 words that she missed Tab Tchorz meandering past.

“*Fine* trash,” said kindly Link Linfo, who harbored a crush on Samantha that everyone else at the cafeteria table suspected (and Lisa resented).

“GREAT trash! Can I borrow this?” asked Holly Brollis, nearly choking with delight as she skimmed through *Bride of Zarco*. “I love it—there’s even a stomach-pumping scene!”

Nod from Sammi as the bell rang and she galloped off, report in hand, watched wistfully by Link.

Vicki climbed back to the fourth floor for more of Mrs. Mallouf's *Crucible* boilover, plus convincing Joss that an overture into Nonique's personal space needed to be a solo venture, no matter how badly Joss might want to go too.

"Breaking the ice has to be done super extra carefully," Vicki told her, "or we'll fall through and get frozen out."

"What is this? Are you writing torch songs for fortune cookies now?"

"Oh shut up."

"*You* shut up. And memorize every last detail of what her bedroom's like!"

Felicia, when phoned, was equally eager and agog (as Nonique expected). During Fel's first conversation with Mrs. Smith two weeks ago, she'd invited Nonique's family to dine at Burrow Lane—and then been puzzled by the convalescent Vicki's aghast reaction:

"BUDDER! I ab *dot* lettig deh Weeboudder see be lookig like *dis*!"

"Now darling, wasn't he injured all those times playing basketball? I'm sure he's used to the sight of swollen noses and so on."

But Vicki'd vowed to go on a hunger strike, so Guess Who's Coming to Dinner was postponed—indeinitely, as it turned out, since the Rebounder got called out of town for a Universal Nutrition publicity tour.

Nor was that the only ad campaign afoot. Ms. Schwall coaxed Vicki into coming in early the next morning to stand under the front portico and help Alex, Michelle, and Ann Hew hand out fliers to promote the home volleyball matches against Triville. Both the varsity and JV had upset Multch North yesterday, and there were hopes for momentum going into the weekend tournament at Startop; so there really ought to be a *few* fans in the stands. Vicki winced at the idea of offering leaflets to strangers, some of whom were bound to ask if that had been *her* sweet ass in that *Channel* photo. Why couldn't the fliers be shoved anonymously through locker vents, like for the Vinyl Spinnaker concert last February? Yet it was still better than going oncourt and making a fool of herself in compression shorts.

After Phys Ed she lingered in the gym long enough to coordinate Thursday's early arrival with Alex and wish her a good practice. Then it was off to the bus stop with Nonique, neither of them saying much as they rode the Big Green Limousine westward to Panama, through the Tunnel of Sighs, over to Lesser and past the Foxtail stop to disembark at

Sprangletop. Walk two blocks over to Kessell Road and then down to Jimson Drive, Vicki remembering how Robin had feigned a heart attack at the news that a black family had moved within hollering distance (if you could holler a mile) of Villa Neapolitan.

““Ohhh, this is the Big One! Y’hear that, ‘Lizabeth? I’m comin’ to join ya—”

Vicki’d read Robin the riot act: “This is a very nice girl who’s having a very hard time, and you are NOT gonna make it any harder for her!”

“Okay, okay! Jesus, Loopy, lighten up! I wasn’t planning to go burn a cross on her lawn or anything.”

“Well, see that you don’t.”

(Pause. Then:) “The Rebounder’s what—six-foot-eight? He must drive a grape-soda-colored *stretch* Cadillac—”

“Robin...”

As a matter of fact, Vicki couldn’t say for sure how hard a time Nonique might (or might not) be having. Some days she seemed mellow-‘n’-laidback; others were a repeat of the First Day’s rifeness-with-pain. Never did she kid around like Rhonda Wright, who liked to embrace the nonplused Meredith Wainwright as her separated-at-birth soul sister—“‘cept *I* got enough sense to come in outta the WAIN!”

But sometimes (again as on the First Day) Nonique came to an isolated standstill, and so suddenly you almost fetched up against her.

As you did now.

“Well,” she went, “this is it.”

On the corner of Jimson and Kessell: behold the Old Brandoffer Place.

That was a name of clout and substance in Vanderlund. A Brandoffer had been among the pioneer missionaries who stood with Jan van der Lund in founding the College of the Hereafter. His descendants included a director of The City’s Board of Trade, a member of The County’s Board of Commissioners, and an eminent jurist who’d refused appointment to The State’s Supreme Court because he disliked traveling “over those God-damned prairies!”

This plainspoken magistrate married a sibilant heiress, daughter of Silas Kessell the copper cookware king, who’d purchased substantial acreage of what was then farmland from

father-in-law Jesse Lesser. Silas and his son Ezra had spacious ambitions to cultivate this agrarian tract into an independent suburb called Lesser Park, with a north-south thoroughfare named after themselves. Here the newly-robed Judge Brandoffer built a half-timbered Tudor Revival house in 1907; and here he treated his only child as someone who had “a brain in her head—not a wad of wet sawdust.”

Her mother wanted Emily Brandoffer to be “finished” at Miss Startop’s Select School for Young Ladies; the judge sent her to VTHS, where she was salutatorian of the Class of ’13 and presided over the banquet where Whielding Wheaf made his “veritable citadel of knowledge” speech. Her mother wanted Emily to marry a nice acceptable man and raise a respectable family; the judge sent her to law school, after which she joined her father’s firm at a time when female attorneys were classified with bearded women on the freakshow circuit.

Over the next three decades Miss Emily built up a practice specializing at first in probate law, then branching out into real estate and property. This diversification came too late to save her Uncle Ezra from ruin during the Depression, or prevent Lesser Park’s annexation by “greater” Vanderlund; but by the Fifties Miss Emily had become an unlanceable boil on the neck of Lyman T. Green and other developers partial to *sub rosa* dealmaking. Very often she would get wind of some stratagem before the deed could be inked, and either scotch it outright or skew it in somebody else’s favor.

In her youth Miss Emily had been acquainted with Jane Addams, Mary McDowell and Sophonisba Breckinridge, but felt no yen to follow them into social service—at least not directly. She too could operate *sub rosa*, prompting and steering from behind the scenes, and letting others take the fall (if needs be) while she drove selected measures toward the greater good.

On the Vanderlund Township School Board she was not a front-and-center advocate of district integration, and made no stirring speeches in the Pitched Debate of ’63. Yet her “Bunk!” reply to Eberhard Drexler’s garrulous Commieplot diatribe put an effective cork in the opposition. Miss Emily then played a noteworthy (though largely unnoted) role in the concoction of Happel Land as Vanderlund’s path to compliance with the Fair Housing Act, partly through what she called (though not for public record) “blackmailing bigots.”

Know the net worth of every citizen and the location of every skeleton, closeted or otherwise...

When she grew too frail of body (though by no means of mind) to continue residing at the Old Brandoffer Place, Miss Emily deposited herself in the same posh nursing home where Joss's Grandpa Mac and Grandma Sadie had been sent. It put no crimp in how she managed her affairs or fostered the greater good; indeed, she decreed that her house should be rented to a family of color, the first to dwell in that inland neighborhood. (If you didn't count domestic servants; and when Miss Emily was young, there'd been a local resolution to *not* employ Negro maids, cooks, chauffeurs, etc. if you were unable to quarter them on your premises, since Lesser Park certainly didn't want them living there on their own.)

"We shan't upset the apple cart—simply introduce a few pomegranates," Miss Emily told her staff, instructing them to solicit an authentic black celebrity or semicelebrity who was married with school-age children, to whom assurances of minimal harassment could be made. And not idly, since she owned most of the mortgages on Kessell Road and Jimson Drive; and not even Lyman T. Green would dare engage in blockbusting on Miss Emily's home turf.

Hence: "This is it" for Vernonique Smith, daughter of the Rebounder.

Who glanced warily up Jimson, down Kessell, then at the Old Brandoffer Place itself. From outside it gave the impression of a gingerbread house, and (as if to ward off hungry children) it was surrounded by a high brick wall with an iron-barred gate that Nonique unlocked and relocked once she and Vicki passed through. Same ritual at the arched front door, set between diamond-paned windows below an overhanging canopy. Yet even with a couple of barriers secured behind her, Nonique didn't seem to breathe more easily; and Vicki too began inhaling/exhaling with heightened awareness.

This Place was not the Queen Anne mansion on Jupiter Street that she'd fallen in love with at first sight and happily slept over at on Saturday nights. This was more of a *cloister*, silent and secluded, where you got the distinct sensation of being WATCHED—not by some hostile neighbor peeking through drawn blinds, but by the Place itself: cagey and covert, full of disorienting vibes.

"(Want a pop?)" Nonique asked in an undertone.

“(Sure,)” said Vicki, wondering despite herself *Will it be grape-soda-colored?* till she was handed a bottle of Fanta Orange.

The girls had the Place to themselves, what with the Rebounder on the road and Mrs. Smith having a substitute-teaching gig, and Randle (like Goofus and Breezy and Patches Rumpelmagen) out raising sixth-grade hell till dinnertime. Nonique gave Vicki a quick tour of the first floor, where the Smith furniture looked like it’d been misdelivered to the set of a Bette Davis suspense movie—*The Nanny* or *Hush Hush, Sweet Charlotte*. Portraits of Nonique and Randle at various ages hung bravely on the looming walls, along with memorabilia from the Rebounder’s career—including a trophy, more plastic than metal, for winning the first championship of the late lamented ABA. It wasn’t very big so far as trophies went, but the chairs and sofa and so forth were all oversized as if to accommodate a professional basketballer’s frame.

Vicki nearly spilled her Fanta on the oversized sofa when a CRACK disrupted the stillness, causing Nonique to cringe and mouth *Oh sweet mother*. They stood motionless, awaiting further commotion—maybe from some racist zealot pounding a WE DON’T WANT YOUR KIND AROUND HERE!!!! sign into the lawn, like Judy Blume wrote about in *Iggie’s House*. But the Place resumed its watchful silence, and the girls restarted their hearts and lungs.

“(Old houses, y’know, make noises when they settle,)” Vicki suggested.

“(How ‘bout when they *unsettle?*)” replied Nonique.

She led the way up a wide Tudor staircase (that Anne Boleyn might’ve ascended) and down a dimly-lit Tudor corridor (that Bette Davis might’ve stalked or been stalked in) till Nonique twisted a knob and opened a door and ushered Vicki into a Tudor bedchamber (that might’ve been Princess Elizabeth’s prison cell in the Tower of London). It was largely vacant except for stacks of cartons, each marked “N,” and a row of unlatched suitcases full of folded garments. The closet was even emptier than Jenna Wibnitz’s; the furnishings were bare-topped and bare-shelved; and only a neatly-made bed (which Gran Schmelz would’ve approved of) showed any indication of recent use.

“You’re all packed!” cried Vicki. “You’re not moving away, are you?”

“Um, no... just haven’t got around to *unpacking*, yet...”

After a month or more here? Vicki, on vacation trips, couldn't get through a single night without transferring the entire contents of her luggage to motel fixtures. "'Scuse me asking—but doesn't your mom mind?"

"Oh, she minds, all right..."

Again a watchful silence filled the room.

Both girls happened to be dressed today in bright blue tops and plain blue jeans (*not* Sasson) whose snug denim seats hugged their round rear ends as they sat on the floor with yogafied grace (Coach Celeste would be proud) and leaned back against the bedside, taking sips of orange pop.

"Mind some music?"

"No, I love it."

A cassette recorder was extracted from under the bed and switched on to play not rock or soul or gospel, but an album of oboe concerti.

Bracing herself with Vaughan Williams in A minor and a deeper sip of Fanta, Nonique cleared her throat. "So... okay... here's the story..."

Of a lovely lady! sang Joss's voice in Vicki's head, necessitating the repression of a wild giggle and automatic *Shut up!* Nonique was tensely taut, on guard against any hint of being pitied or patronized, and an interruption now would doubtless seal her lips forever so far as Vicki was concerned. And Vicki *was* concerned, far more than she'd been about Isabel; thankful not to be distracted by blueberry pie from listening with both ears.

Nonique had no gift for straightforward narrative. She started in the middle, worked her way outward in several overlapping directions, jumped forward and sideways and off on tangents. Vicki would have to piece it all together with earlier and later disclosures, to form a coherent consecutive chronicle of Vernonique Smith: hearing echoes throughout of her own story and those of her other friends, as the solemn oboe music rose and fell.

Once upon a time...

38

Shade Air

Airs and graces: hymns and prayers.

Shades and curtains: ghosts and graves.

*

South Holloway Street is the buckle on The City's Black Belt. It borders one side of a namesake park where the Curry family reunites every 4th of July to celebrate the birthday of their patriarch Ezekiel, who claims every year that all the fireworks in town are being set off in his honor.

Big Zeke came from sharecropping stock in Choctaw County, Alabama, where he lost his first wife to tuberculosis and his livelihood to boll weevils. With four young sons and a freshly-wedded second wife in tow, Zeke took part in the Great Migration northward to The City. Midway there the Currys were joined by newborn Catherine, who from an extraordinarily tender age took charge of kith and kin and never relaxed her grip during the next sixty years.

("That doggone Cat got *claws* in her paws!" Big Zeke would often say.)

The Currys settled on South Holloway and Zeke went to work at a meatpacking plant, which "sure beat pickin' cotton—cain't eat *that*, no matter *how* deep you fry it!" Over time he sired seven more children (the youngest, Delores or "Duz" as the dozenth, would be only a decade older than Nonique and more of a big sister than a great-aunt) in between burying Cat's mother, marrying her best friend, and burying her too after Duz was born:

"I done *my* share o' bein' fruitful 'n' multiplyin'—'n' payin' off undertakers too!"

Cat Curry, having witnessed this marital mortality, took vows of spinsterhood but got talked out of them by amiable Abram Randle, who was part of the CIO's effort to organize packinghouse labor. This crusade, remarkable for its integration across racial and ethnic lines, helped Big Zeke keep putting meat in his offspring's many mouths:

"Bad enough bein' saddled with all these chillun, 'thout 'em wantin' to be *fed* three times a day!"

Cat never quite forgave Bram for winning her heart while still in her teens. To compensate, he was frequently urged to make a better life away from the Stockyards for Cat and their firstborn Alfreda, who from infancy was told in no uncertain terms that *she* was going to graduate from high school *and* go on to college before *she'd* be permitted to so much as THINK about wife-and-motherhood.

Cat's spouse and child knew better than to disobey. Bram learned the electrical trade while in the army and got into the refrigeration business after WWII. Freda studied hard, received straight A's, and made plans to become a teacher. The Randles were augmented by postwar son Curry, called "Babe" by everyone except his mother, who said after all the grief he'd put her through—twelve pounds at birth!—he must be intended for either the church or the penitentiary; so she'd see him standing in a pulpit or lying in a casket—his choice. (Babe pursued his love for music into a career as an African Methodist Episcopal choirmaster.)

Alfreda attended the State University, pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha, and roomed with Leatrice Higden who adored babies and couldn't wait to become a delivery room nurse so she could help bring more into the world—even after she met Mama Cat and heard, at length, about the miseries of unloading Babe. Freda the future teacher preferred children who were old enough to be disciplined without causing tear-floods, yet not so old as to require what Big Zeke defined as "serious ass-whuppin'." For the foreseeable future she didn't anticipate kids would be calling her anything but Miss Randle or Cousin Freda. (Zeke's progeny now included forty other grandchildren.)

Then she met Vernon Smith. He was six-foot-eight, with proportionate fingers that could work wonders with a basketball, and an innate ability to juke his way out of any predicament. These had served him well growing up (and *up*, and *up*) downstate in Little Egypt, where racial attitudes were much the same as in deepest Dixie; they also won him a

full scholarship to the U., a position in its starting varsity lineup, and letterman's status at a time when that still meant being a Credit To His Race.

"Shucks! T'warn't nothin' more'n *chile*'s play!" he would smirk, particularly when talking to a pretty girl.

Most of the Alpha Kappa Alpha ladies were pleasantly aware of Shucks Smith, and he worked his systematic way through their affections. Leatrice Higden remained immune, having fallen for Airman Second Class Marvin Wilmore of Chanute Air Force Base; but Alfreda Randle, to her amazement, found herself most heavily smitten.

(Not for nothing had Shucks lettered as a power forward.)

She was the last in her sorority to succumb—"I *always* save the sweetest fo' dessert," he told her in his best Sam Cooke voice—and she was the one who consoled Shucks when The State dropped out of contention his senior year after ranking in the top ten nationwide. Freda introduced Shucks to her folks: Bram was laudatory, Babe a hero-worshiper, and even Cat gave conditional approval of Vernon Smith's being a college man—albeit one who had to ride his own athletic coattails to earn a degree.

Which he then did nothing better with than play professional basketball. In those days the NBA had only eight franchises, none of which drafted Shucks; he landed a tryout with Cincinnati, but got lost in Bob Boozer's gold-medal shadow. Bram Randle offered assistance in finding him a good steady job in refrigeration, but Shucks went and signed with the Harlem Globetrotters, thereby donning a permanent duncecap in Mama Cat's remorseless eyes. Freda too was disillusioned: her heart beat high for daring young men on flying trapezes, but she had only scorn for circus clowns.

So they parted. Freda, after serving as Leatrice's maid of honor, returned to The City and began her sadder-but-wiser teaching career. Then the Globetrotters came to town, competing with a squad of college all-stars in what was billed as "the World Series of Basketball." Bram took Babe to see this; Babe teased Freda into accompanying them; the Trotters minimized their trademark antics to prove the legitimacy of their chops; and Freda got smitten all over again with Vernon Smith—this time for keeps.

Abe Saperstein was forming a new league to rival the NBA, and handpicked Shucks to play on The City's team. Shucks took Freda out to celebrate at the Regal, where he

amazed her once more by proposing marriage. This resulted in an honest-to-God elopement: the happy couple drove down to Chanute so Mrs. A2C Wilmore could be matron of honor, and tied the knot while the entire base was distracted by Gus Grissom's near-drowning after his Mercury spaceflight.

Freda would feel almost as sunk as Liberty Bell 7 when her blissful telegram home triggered this reply from Mama Cat:

WE DID NOT PUT YOU THROUGH COLLEGE JUST TO MARRY A DRIBBLING FOOL

And that was the final word (for awhile) from South Holloway Street.

The newlyweds took an apartment in Bronzeville; Shucks played a season with the ABL Majors; and Freda barely completed a second year of schoolteaching before Vernonique Curry Smith made her Juneteenth debut. Leatrice Wilmore wired congrats and regrets at not being on hand for the L&D, while Grandma Cat resurfaced—"like ol' Moby Dick," muttered Shucks—to take charge of mother and newborn, and behave as though eleven months hadn't elapsed since last she'd spouted.

"Not the slightest doubt but this child is *purely* a Curry," declared Cat, cradling baby Nonique in her unshakable arms.

"Ain't nothin' like a birthin' fo' gettin' a free SEE-gar!" added Big Zeke outside the nursery window, puffing on one of Shucks's robusto grandes. His own seventy-second birthday would be celebrated two weeks later at South Holloway Park, with Nonique paying carefully-hydrated respects for a few pre-pyrotechnic minutes.

And life went on swimmingly till year's end, when the American Basketball League abruptly folded and left the Smiths high and dry.

Shucks hooked up with some barnstorming hoopsters to try making ends meet; his wife and child left their Bronzeville apartment to move in with the Randles; and Grandma Cat broadcast the three little words **TOLD YOU SO** in every way expressible.

Nonique would later guess this was when her parents first assumed Dickensian traits: Freda vowing *I will never desert Mr. Micawber* and Shucks affirming that *Something will turn up*. And something actually did: himself on the roster of the St. Louis Hawks, thanks to a lucky break (of another power forward's leg) that enabled Shucks to juke his opportune

way out of another predicament.

The Smiths had three good years in St. Louis, and Shucks had three good seasons with the Hawks—twice making it to the NBA conference finals—before being summoned back to The City in the expansion draft for the brand-new Bull-onies. At the same time his household expanded to make room for Vernon Randle Smith, whose lusty howls (“like Mowgli trying to act like a wolf cub”) darkened Nonique’s earliest memories.

Randle would be taught to call Shucks “Dada,” but to Nonique her father had always been “Taw”—her infant pronunciation of *tall*. A favorite family portrait showed her clinging to Taw’s shin, gazing upward for miles and miles to see his beaming face. By the age of four she was able to take conscious pride in Taw’s accomplishments, bragging on them to fellow preschoolers—till karma came home to roost at the International Amphitheatre, where Taw broke *his* leg and was out for the rest of the season.

He worked long and hard to recuperate, regain his form, recoup his jukes. Then he jumped to the new American Basketball Association and had the best year of his career, playing for Pittsburgh with Connie Hawkins and the champion Pipers. Nonique made a new set of kindergarten friends and anticipated a long stay in Steeltown; but after only one season the team upped stakes and moved to Minnesota, where Nonique had to start over from scratch with a different bunch of first-graders.

Which was nothing compared to the scratch Taw had to start over from when he got sideswiped by an Oakland Oak, reinjuring his leg worse than before. This, it seemed, might be The End: Vernon Smith was over thirty now, convalescence took longer, and he had a wife and two growing children to support. Freda nudged him gently toward a new vocation, say in physical education; but Shucks couldn’t bear to bow out as a player just yet.

He made the rounds of training camps, and his knack for opportune juking pulled him through once more: this time as a veteran reserve with the Kentucky Colonels. Freda, however, had been hauled out of four different homes in four different cities in as many years, and drew the line at moving to Louisville.

Her parents had left Holloway Street for a townhouse in Ferndean Gardens, a new cooperative development (“NOT the projects!”) in Riversgate, which was as far south as you could go without stepping across The City limits. Here Freda was determined to settle down,

give Nonique and Randle a stable upbringing, secure an anchored base for them and herself—and Shucks too, wherever else the bouncing ball might take him.

(I will never desert Mr. Micawber!)

Nonique was used to Taw being away on the road for weeks at a stretch, and didn't miss him more than usual. She knew girls and boys whose daddies never came home at all, their whereabouts unknown. One such was LaVinia Wilmore, daughter of Leatrice ("Aunt LeeLee") and Sergeant Marvin (MIA in Vietnam). The non-missing Wilmores also relocated to Ferndean Gardens, giving Nonique and Randle automatic best friends in LaVee and her little brother Reggie.

Nonique and LaVee were the same age, same race, same gender, and had both come from gypsylike backgrounds (pro ball vs. military) but otherwise they were complementary opposites. Nonique was the pretty one, the quiet one, the nice girl, the obedient girl. LaVee was the cute one, the noisy one, the wild child, the "sassyfrass." She took the lead in double-daring-do, able to turn any dull chore into adventurous fun; Nonique yanked them back from toppling into truhhhhhble, and saved LaVee's sassyfrass from getting smacked—some of the time.

Ferndean Gardens was a wonderful place to grow up in. It was run by a tight-knit community; the adults looked out for each other's kids, and not simply for self-protection; gangs and drugs were kept at bay. No one who lived there was rich but most were fairly comfortable, holding down jobs at factories and industrial plants, with the occasional teacher like Freda or nurse like LeeLee. There might be truhhhhhbles to contend with, yet they were outnumbered by joys.

For Vernonique Smith, the foremost joy was instrumental music. What her father's fingers could do with a ball, or her mother's intellect with self-discipline, or her Uncle Babe's lungs with breath control—all these Nonique could do with woodwinds, beginning on a plastic recorder in second grade.

"That child is blessed with Talent, and you know I don't use that word lightly!" said Miss Fanny Hooker, an old friend of Grandma Cat's who was constructed from much the same armor plate. (No kid ever laughed at her name more than once.) Miss Fanny's music lessons were neither cheap nor easy, but Nonique excelled and was soon starring in recitals

on the flute. Uncle Babe encouraged her interest, buying her record albums, taking her to the Summer Festival and Orchestra Hall. There she first heard Ray Still play Bach and Mozart live, her eyes filling with tears at his oboe's ringing singing tone, till she'd have to close them and sit weepily enraptured.

"Why you wanna go all the way up there just to take a *sad nap*?" LaVee would ask.

There were no words to explain.

Not many of Nonique's peers shared her partiality to the classics. LaVee could enjoy any musical genre so long as it was loud and rhythmic and danceable-to, preferably as part of a crowd. (From the age of nine her ambition in life was to appear on *Soul Train*.) When Mrs. Mosely the docent took their fourth-grade class to a Symphony Youth Concert, LaVee almost had to be tied down to prevent her boogieing in the aisle to the Radetzky March.

"(Just sit and clap along!)" hissed Mrs. Mosely.

"AW, LET'S PUT OUR *HANDS* TOGETHER!!" shouted LaVee, and the entire Hall suited deed to word. Conductor Henry Mazer thanked them for their enthusiastic response, but Mrs. Mosely gave LaVee the stink-eye all the way back to Riversgate.

Miss Fanny Hooker, strict as she was, would never do that; yet she wasn't wreathed in smiles when Nonique asked about taking up the oboe. "That is a challenging instrument, a difficult instrument. The double reeds, the embouchure, the articulation—they need a world of practice and an eternity of patience, child! Are you willing to bear with that?"

"I can try," said Nonique. And the first time she laid hands and lips on an oboe, it felt like it was part of her—as though she'd sprouted wings that might someday allow her to fly and swoop and soar, if she could learn how to use them.

"*Why* you gotta be blowing on that thing alla time, just to make it *honk* like a *goose*?" LaVee would sniff. "You better hope you grow *boobs* before you sprout any wings, sistah!"

Nonique progressed beyond duckcalls to vibrato to the chromatic scale to alternate fingerings and, in due course, to the limits of elementary oboe education. Miss Fanny and Uncle Babe found an affordable intermediate instructor near Greektown ("of all the places on the Lord's good earth!") in old Mr. Nikodemos, who as a youthful junk dealer had bought a broken oboe, mended it, mastered it, and gone on to play it in taverna ensembles.

“Hoo-wee!” went LaVee. “If you gonna start hanging round with an old white man, why not one who looks like Burt Reynolds?”

Nonique had a few forebodings, but soon warmed up to Mr. Nik who was exacting yet praiseful when merited; and also to Mrs. Nik who gave her Greek treats that she at first only nibbled at so as not to hurt any feelings, before developing a taste for them which made her feel very cosmopolitan.

Mr. Nik taught Nonique how to play the full range of the oboe and do it expressively, with phrasing and dynamics, building up her strength to tackle longer pieces without fatigue. He spoke to her about the future—making her own reeds, entering competitions, applying for scholarships that might pay for most or even all expenses at a fine conservatory.

The Lord knew Nonique could use such funding; she was hardly likely to be a grand heiress. Taw didn’t rake in big bucks as an aging ABA reserve, and while he never failed to fork over his share of what might as well be called child support, there were whispers that he spent the bulk of his balance at the track, in gambling houses, and on “image.”

Louisville sports reporters dubbed him “the Ol’ Colonel” and Taw gloried in that role, growing a moustache and goatee, wearing tailor-made white suits offcourt and twirling a gold-topped cane. He could always be relied on for a colorful quote, and the clippings he sent home for Nonique’s scrapbook contained more of his chatter *about* games than how often or how well he played *in* them.

Kentucky was a prime contender all three of Taw’s seasons there, going to the ABA championship series his second year. He promised Freda he’d retire if the Colonels won it, but they lost game seven in a heartbreaker. The next season they compiled the best record in league history; but Taw tore ligaments in his knee just as the playoffs started, Kentucky bowed out during the first round, and Vernon Smith announced his retirement a day later.

(“Now he got a *use* for that fool cane,” said Grandma Cat.)

He seemed a shoe-in for a job as color commentator at one of the Louisville TV or radio stations, but no shoe fit and apart from rehab, Taw was left at very loose ends. Then Charles O. Finley came to his rescue—if that was the right word—by hiring Taw for the last-place Memphis Tams, whose paychecks bounced higher than their basketballs.

Had something turned up? Nothing but turnips for two grotesque years of repeatedly getting fired and rehired, Charlie-O-style. Nonique put away her scrapbook and struggled not to feel shame, nor to resent her father's dwindling to a shadowy figure on the fringe of her life.

It was around this time that she began to dream of the Shady Man.

Who had NO connection to Taw (she was sure) but probably stemmed from what Freda euphemized as “becoming a woman”—though Grandma Cat said THAT wouldn't occur till Vernonique's wedding night, so long as Cat had any breath left in her body. Whichever woman-tense might be accurate for a sixth-grader (became? becoming? will become?) Nonique was shy around boys; especially compared to LaVinia Wilmore who could juggle a dozen crushes at once, including whichever one of the Chi-Lites she favored most at the moment. Sixth-grade boys took increased notice of them both; LaVee reeled them in as if fishing off a pier, but Nonique (no longer able to brag on her dad) stood by tongue-tied, shifting from one shapelifying leg to the other. Shyness wasn't the only reason: most of these boys were as brattily immature as Randle or Reggie Wilmore, and (as Miss Fanny would say) it was “challenging and difficult” to picture any of them *ever* having the stuff dreams could be made of.

Unlike the Shady Man.

Arriving in Slumberland, Nonique would meet the Shady Man in some tranquil poetic setting lit by candlelight—a Paris bistro, maybe, or a loge in an old-timey theater. She wouldn't be able to make out his features in the flickering dusk, but didn't need to since she *knew* they were of one mind, one heart—as simply intimate as Schumann's Second Romance for Oboe and Piano. The Shady Man would pour effervescence from an uncorked bottle of champagne; they would clink costly goblets, entwine their arms and drink till the bubbles ran up their noses...

Night after night after night.

Did her mother still dream of Taw that way? Did she relive his proposal at the Regal, their elopement to Chanute? Better that than be reminded of his riding the has-been bench for the moribund Virginia Squires, till the inevitable day he messed up his knee AGAIN. And even *THEN* he refused to throw in the towel, turning up like a washed-up turnip at next year's

round of training camps for one last try.

He was out in San Diego when Frank Deford recognized him—*Didn't you used to be Shucks Smith?*—which led to that “On the Rebound” profile in *Sports Illustrated*. Only a page and a half, but it lent the Ol’ Colonel’s muleheaded tenacity a quixotic valor sprinkled with winks and shrugs and jukes. No one signed him to play ball that season (the ABA’s finale), yet his mention of all the vitamins he’d consumed during his comebacks inspired Universal Nutrition to have Taw make a commercial for their health-food markets.

“Listen up, folks! This here’s the Rebounder!”

And just like that, he was launched into semicelebrity.

(“First a hoopster, now a huckster,” grumped Grandma Cat.)

Vernonique could’ve done without seeing the “gentleman of leisure” suits he chose to Rebound in—on TV, on billboards, in newspaper and magazine ads, at every Universal Nutrition Market in The City. That said, she voiced no complaint at Christmastime when Uni-Nute money bought her a splendid new Yamaha oboe; though all the menfolk from Big Zeke down to Randle cracked jokes about her popping wheelies on it.

Taw at least applauded her medley of holiday carols. “That’s *cold*—that is COLD, baby girl! Someday you gonna be playin’ that thing for the Queen o’ England!”

And she’d want him there to hear her do it—if he’d lose those pimpish outfits first. Too many of her fellow eighth-graders subscribed to that sartorial regimen, in Nonique’s opinion; part of the interminable debate about straightened hair vs. natural Afros, dressing/talking/acting “street” vs. dressing/talking/acting “white,” etc. etc. and so forth.

“I don’t see what all the fuss is about,” ironic Reuben Burns would say.

“Hey, man! Where yo dog at?” insensitive passers-by would ask.

Reuben, cupping a hand behind his ear: “Sounds like some mutt’s barking at me.”

Nonique would cup a righteously defensive hand inside his elbow, and the mutts would change their tune to “Hey, man! That yo seein’-eye *fox*?”

No denial by Reuben, tapping his cane on the junior high school linoleum.

He and his mother (the extensively-traveled AME missionary Jarena Otway Burns) had recently come to Riversgate after a prolonged tour of Bangladesh. Grandma Cat could not comprehend how Widow Burns could drag a boy that young *and* blind through a foreign

country so afflicted by war, flood, and famine, no matter how many good-work points the Lord might award them. But Reuben was capable of looking out for himself, with a little help from his friends—a chocolate labrador named Kukura, that Reuben wasn't allowed to bring to school; and a classmate named Bruiser Poole, whose presence restrained raillery to Reuben's being called "Ray Charles," "Stevie Wonder," etc. etc. and so forth.

Girls giggled interestedly around Reuben, at least when his misshapen eyes were shielded by dark glasses. He seemed a bit older and worldlier than most students at Riversgate Junior High, with an air of detached remoteness that many girls took as a personal challenge to penetrate—none more so than madcap LaVee, who claimed Reuben was *faking* blindness to trick women into shedding their inhibitions in his presence. To prove this, she'd flash her bra and drawers at him while watching for a giveaway reaction.

"See? See that? He got *sweat* on his brow!"

"Probably 'cause he can guess how *crazy* you're acting!" said the scandalized Nonique, tugging LaVee's skirt back down.

Reuben ran unruffled fingers over a keyboard in the Riversgate band room: "*It was an itsy-bitsy teenie-weenie yellow-polka-dot bikini...*"

"You SEE? He SAW!"

"You're wearing *pink*," Nonique reminded her.

Ironic arpeggio by Reuben.

He was a budding virtuoso on a wide range of instruments, from mandolin to sitar, but especially adept at ivory-tickling. At school and church he and Nonique made beautiful music together: Schumann's Three Romances, Carl Nielsen's Fantasy Pieces, Saint-Saëns's Sonata for Oboe and Piano. Their spending a lot of time off by themselves, rehearsing and "jamming" and listening to LPs, had predictable side effects—from LaVee's "So is he alla time trying to 'feel yo face?'" to Uncle Babe's "How soon should we reserve the wedding chapel for you two?"

Nonique's lips were primly sealed; but Reuben *had* concluded one of their classical jam sessions by asking if he could kiss her.

"Um, sure," she replied. (Would this count as her First Kiss? Given how she hoped she wouldn't glimpse his blemished eyeballs through his Ray-Bans?)

It went okay: he felt good, smelled good, tasted good, and she kept her own eyes shut. But as an audition for a live-action Shady Man, it was a bust—no pop of champagne cork, no passionate fizz of intoxicating bubbles. They were compatible in every other way, like-minded, well-matched; it would've been so *convenient* for Reuben to be her Shady Man Made Flesh, even without perfect sightliness. Yet as Grandpa Bram always said: you can't hope to make a sundae if your ice cream's in an unplugged fridge.

So dream on, Vernonique—night after night after night...

Then came Thornford. Riversgate's senior high school was named for Rowland Thornford, "the black Ambrose Bierce," whose grimly sardonic stories were now staple texts in Language Arts classes. You'd expect a school of that name to look like a Gothic citadel or crumbling tenement; but Thornford High, Home of the Ravens, was built along Bauhaus glass-box lines and regarded (not always approvingly) as "modern" in outlook. Though not overprovisioned with resources, its graduation rates were high; many students went on to earn college degrees; a significant percentage of The City's younger black doctors, lawyers, and other professionals were Thornford alumni. There was also a boastworthy music department under the direction of Mr. W.C. "Handy" Lynn, who'd been following Nonique's progress as avidly as an NCAA coach would monitor an outstanding sports prospect.

"Good oboists are worth their weight in gold—no, platinum," said Mr. Lynn, preadmitting Nonique to the Thornford Concert Band before her first day as a freshman. He had fifteen clarinets, most of them upperclassmen selected after rigorous evaluation; but Nonique was the lone oboe.

Band work was a sorely needed diversion for Nonique after her bittersweet parting from Reuben Burns, whose mother'd decided their missionary efforts were needed in China where an earthquake had just killed a quarter-million people.

"But what about Kukura?" worried Nonique, scratching behind the lab's chocolate ears. "Aren't there like quarantines 'n' stuff? And don't those Chinese Communists hate running dogs? Not that you let Kook run around that much..."

"Well," said Reuben, "I don't think they'll *eat* her, though I do hear that she *looks* delicious. And maybe they'll quarantine us both; then I'll have time to finish my Requiem."

Not the Requiem again. Nonique hated when he talked about that weird blend of Bartók and Jacques Brel, sounding as though he were composing it for himself. “Reuben? We ever gonna see each other again?—oh, y’know what I mean...”

“Not like I’d like to. But we’ll always have Schumann. Here’s looking in your direction, kid.”

Nonique wept a little as she kissed him goodbye, partly because (again) there was no spark when their lips touched. Then too, she was left without even a facsimile of a boyfriend at the very start of senior high; leaving her prey to full-grown *men* who shaved and smoked and had driver’s licenses, not to mention wolfish intentions toward freshgirl lambs. What she needed wasn’t a boyfriend but a bodyguard—someone like Bruiser Poole.

“Forget *him*,” sniffed LaVinia as she braided Nonique’s hair. “Him ‘n’ ‘*Love Bite*’ think they’s MADE fo’ each other.” (Louder sniff, resentful of snooty Elouise Briggs for pre-empting a nickname ideal for LaVee.) “How ‘bout you give ol’ Winth-ROP a whirl?”

“Oh please!” went Nonique. She’d known Winthrop Eshton since Miss Fanny Hooker’s recitals; he could play a mean trombone but had a meaner mouth off the instrument, going so far as to argue with Miss Fanny about arrangements *and getting away with it*. Now he lived and breathed for participation in the Thornford Marching Band, reportedly wearing his uniform and plumed shako even in bed—“Eww!” went the girls at that grisly image—and deriding Nonique for her exemption from marching duties.

“It’s not *band* music if you aren’t up on your feet, out on the street, in a parade! Sitting all day on a chair in an auditorium’s nothing more than fooling around!”

“Better’n fooling around with ol’ Winth-ROP,” said LaVee, handing Nonique a mirror for braid inspection. “How ‘bout Stumpy, then? He’s always checking you out, be *more’n* glad to guard yo body—”

“Hush now!” went Nonique. George Sumpter was built like a rain barrel and used that as an eye-level excuse to ogle bosoms. “Which he wouldn’t do so much if you’d let me wear what *I* wanna wear to school.”

“Girl! *Am* I not yo very best friend?”

(Sigh.) “Yes, you’re my very best fr—”

“*Are* we not practically cousins, practically *sistahs*?”

“Yes, we’re practically cou—”

“*Do* I not OWE it to you to help you look yo best? Anybody object to that fine outfit I picked out fo’ you to wear tomorrow? No ma’am, not even Miz Cat! And if y’own grandmom don’t object, why on earth should YOU?”

At least the close-fitting dress hanging on the closet doorknob would keep Nonique’s curves decently covered, and by her favorite shade of blue; whereas LaVee’s blouse was half-unbuttoned (as usual) so George Sumpter and the world could enjoy her native shade of brown.

Nonique scowled at LaVee’s cleavage. “If you don’t button that up, Stumpy’s gonna dive in ‘n’ go *deaf*. You’ll have to yank him out by the ears so he can come up for breath!”

“Ooooh girl, what you saaaaaaid...”

There wasn’t much they didn’t saaaaaay to each other. But not long into their first semester at Thornford, Nonique was asked to do something that had to be kept clandestine *especially* from LaVee.

Possibly due to her musical mentality, Nonique was very sharp at math and aced all the quizzes in Mrs. Dent’s Algebra class. Alas, the same could not be said for Addie Mae Anderson. If a Frolicsome Frivolette pageant were ever staged, she would qualify as an instant finalist; and if a short attention span could be considered a talent, the tiara would go to Addie Mae without question. But she’d only been admitted to the eleventh grade after scrambling to stay off academic probation at school—and keep out of solitary confinement “TILL YOU GET THEM GRADES UP!” at home.

For a supergregarious girl like Addie Mae, isolation was unendurable. Even in the womb she’d demanded a second egg cell be fertilized so she could have a twin companion—who, as it turned out, was the only person unmoved by A.M.’s crying alone in her room after flunking yet another subject.

“That’s what you GET fo’ bein’ a dizzy-dimpled SIMP!” her twin would shout through the closed door.

“*You* the bigger dummy!” she would sob-respond, hoping to kick off a conversation. “Hey, you still out there? C’monnnn, talk to meeee...”

Addie Mae was neither stupid nor lazy; she always tried extra hard to concentrate on her studies, memorize enough of them to answer enough questions correctly so she could continue to circulate and jubilate. Everyone at Thornford (except her twin) loved A.M. and wanted to help; but she could reduce the most seasoned tutor to a state of exhaustion. One such exhaustee said coaching her was like trying to herd a sugar-high kindergartener through a field trip to a puppy farm.

Vernonique had helped LaVee, Reuben, and other friends cram for math tests; she'd even pounded some arithmetic through Randle and Reggie's stubborn little skulls. So after consulting her mother on instructive strategy, she accepted Mrs. Dent's challenge and agreed to try tutoring Addie Mae Anderson. Five minutes into her first attempt, she fully grasped the sugar-high puppy-farm analogy:

“—you SO purty not like that last sourgrapes couldn't teach a toad how to hop hey ain't yo daddy that Rebounder man on the TV? he SO handsome I do loves me tall dark 'n' handsome men 'ceptin' this one beanpole Dwayne? he gone now but we dated some and tall? I tell you he was taller'n a traffic light but nowhere *near* as bright 'n' you *cain't* date a man that dumb fo' long you just *cain't* his dumbness'll *rub off* on you so who YOU datin' girl? I know you just a freshie but SO purty why when *I* was yo age the boys filled up the whole front yard 'n' my daddy'd say 'Addie Mae!' he'd say 'Count o' five I'mma turn the *hose* on that pack o' hyEEnas!' but 'Daddy!' I'd say 'What can I *do*?' I'd say wasn't like I *ax'd* 'em to fill up the whole front yard oh listen to me gibbetin' on while you wait so patient I sure don't wanna dispoint Miz Dent again she *such* a nice lady not like that sourgrapes I had for Basic Math? *first* time I took it hadda take it twice Miz Dent she say to me 'Addie Mae!' she say 'You gotta pay closer 'tention!' but 'I TRY!' I tell her 'I TRY Miz Dent!' but doin' that homework? takin' them quizzes? why it feel like when yo popsicle slurps off'n its stick 'n' lands onna hot sidewalk 'n' what *can* you do when it all melts off'n yo MIND?—”

(This Bicentennial Minute was brought to you by Miss Frolicsome Frivolette.)

Nonique did her best to translate the x's and y's of abstract formulae into graspable scenarios, such as how much it would cost to design, prepare, and market different ensembles of clothing. This Addie Mae could readily understand: she was a habitué of thrift shops and church bazaars, mixing and matching ingenious new wardrobes. Her twin

dismissed this knack as “bag-lady boogie,” but A.M. set fashion trends for much of teen-female Thornford and definitely LaVinia Wilmore, who closely tracked how she dressed and did her ‘do and painted her face and polished her nails and carried on as a partygirl paragon.

“Ever’body needs a role model,” LaVee would say. “*Her* role is bein’ *my* model.”

Nonique knew LaVee would never-forgive-her-as-long-as-either-of-them-lived for not being asked to sit in on the Addie Mae tutorials, or even to know they were underway. But that would double the puppy-farm and treble the sugar-high, and could not happen till Nonique’s illustrative examples strung a rope ladder from A.M.’s cascading stream of consciousness to *potential* passage of Algebra.

Exam time came. The rope ladder, though flimsy, did not snap; Addie Mae Anderson received a tolerably adequate C-, and so adopted Nonique as her personal good-luck charm. Invited to sit with A.M.’s clique at a crucial football game against archrival Millcote, Nonique asked “Can my best friend LaVee come too, she’s like your biggest fan?”; and so avoided excommunication when the whole tutorial business was at last made public.

SAY IT NOW ‘N’ SAY IT PROUD!!

HERE WE BE—THE LOUDER CROWD!!

Steered by senior Marquita McLeod, this was not the snobbish coterie dominated by Elouise Briggs’s big sister Rochelle, nor the earnest overachievers led by Winthrop Eshton’s big sister Aimee. The Louder Crowd simply sought to have the best possible time at the highest possible volume, and no social get-together could be considered a Party without the Crowd’s involvement.

LaVee, wearing a double-breasted storm coat just like Addie Mae’s, was torn between delirium and smugness at being among the Crème de la Crowds at the Game of the Year. Nonique, huddled by her side in a hooded polyester parka, wished they weren’t outdoors on such a windswept November evening. LaVee had palpitations for five different varsity Ravens, elevating each in sequence to soulmate-status as he ran or passed or caught or blocked; Nonique couldn’t tell any of them apart in their black jerseys in the chilly darkness, and wished she’d gone to see *Bugsy Malone* instead. At least she and her oboe didn’t have to march with Winth-ROP’s trombone over that frigid-looking unacoustic field.

“*Lookit lookit there’s Fair Catch!*” went LaVee as the Ravens lined up for a kickoff return. Nonique knew that “Fair Catch” was Addie Mae’s twin brother Eddie Ray Anderson, who habitually signaled for fair-catch receptions of kick or punt. Moreover, he was deemed to *be* a fair catch by girls like LaVee, despite Eddie Ray’s longtime liaison with a haughty majorette named Rumah Myers, who reputedly had Creole blood and could cast voodoo hexes: “bad mojo with a spinning baton.”

LaVee risked Rumah’s wrath by openly sighing and moaning and squealing for Eddie Ray, even outshouting the rest of the Louder Crowd in a concerted

Two bits! Four bits!

‘Fro needs a pick!

Ever’body stand up

‘N’ do the Funky Chick!

late in the fourth quarter when the Millcote Broncos kicked off after taking the lead 21-20. As the football descended and Eddie Ray began to raise his arm for the usual fair catch, LaVee shrieked his name at the top of her lusty lungs, piercing the tumult and diverting E.R. from the task at hand; his facemask turned her way as the ball caromed off his chest and into the crook of his unraised?/upraised? arm. A second later three Millcote Broncos threw him to the turf, where five others piled on top.

Burst of referee whistles, amid which LaVinia turned to Vernonique and said “He was looking at *you* when it happened!”

After they exhumed Eddie’s body, his arm was ruled to be more *up-* than *un-*; so Millcote got socked with interference and personal foul penalties, Thornford scored a last-minute field goal, and the Ravens won the Game of the Year. Eddie Ray received a chanting stamping tribute as he was loaded on a stretcher and carried off the field; but Addie Mae was fit-to-be-tied at being told she had to go with E.R. *to* the E.R., thus missing the Louder Crowd’s postgame bash-o-rama.

“Why *I* gotta go?? Wasn’t *me* got knocked down ‘n’ stomped on like a big ol’ clumsy dummy!!”

LaVee felt even more indignant, since she and Nonique lost their Golden Ticket to the bash-o-rama when A.M. left. Nonique doubted their folks would've sanctioned their being present at a probable saturnalia, but LaVee sniffled all the way home and there got confined by Aunt LeeLee on Monday after incubating a fullblown case of the flu.

That's what you get for not wearing a hooded parka, thought Nonique; though not too snidely since she knew LaVee feared being sick all week including Thanksgiving, when she'd normally eat her weight in turkey 'n' trimmings. "And not gain an ounce, 'cept where it counts!" (Shake-shake-shake of sassyfrass.)

That same Monday Addie Mae had an anxiety attack about Mrs. Dent's new unit on inequalities, which A.M. thought had been eliminated by the civil rights movement. Nonique was implored to come to the Andersons's house for that afternoon's tutorial:

"I gotta go straight home 'n' BABYSIT that Big Clumsy Dummy 'n' his big busted armbone *fo' free* after he gone 'n' ditched a whole day o' school my momma's waitin' fo' me t'get there so she can go t'work she say 'Addie Mae!' she say 'He yo TWIN BROTHER!' like any o' that's *my* fault him 'spectin' me to wait on his *hand* 'n' *foot*—"

The Andersons lived in Douser Dell ("the Dow-Dee" to street-linguists), a bleaker, more projectlike part of Riversgate. Daddy worked at the paint factory and Momma cleaned offices, both with frequent overtime obligations. The twins were assigned to keep the house tidy; but since neither spent much time there, Momma had to pick up the slack. ("Z'if I didn't spend twenty-four hours a day on my feet cleanin' the rest o' the world already!")

In the Anderson front room was a davenport sofa, and lolling upon it was Eddie Ray in a red plush bathrobe and red plush slippers, with his right arm in a cast and sling. Wedged between his left ear and shoulder was a telephone receiver, and from it came a stream of almost-decipherable vitriol.

"Hold on, baby," E.R. told the phone. "Gimme 'nother pop!" he told A.M.

"I am *not* yo waitress!" snapped Addie Mae. "F'that's Rumah, tell her t'bite yo head off 'n' be done with it!... C'mon," to Nonique.

"*Hold* on," Eddie interposed. "Who *this* you brung home fo' me to see?—NAW, baby!" (into the phone, hastily) "Just sayin' hey to my stupid sis! 'Hey, Stupid Sis—"

"Shut yo mouth, EEE-YORE!"

Nonique could detect no trace of twinness in the Anderson siblings. Not only were they different sexes, but Eddie Ray had none of Addie Mae's cinnamon-skinned/eyed/haired beauty. His face was dark and comical, rubbery-featured with roguish eyes and elastic lips, like photos Nonique had seen of Louis Armstrong. His voice added to this impression: rich, slow, deep, gravelly, the polar opposite of Addie Mae's "gibbeting."

"...but baby, I still got one strong arm can hold you tight... heh heh heh heh... ain't nothin' wrong with my legs neither, dance all night till the ol' rooster crow... heh heh heh heh... 'cock-a-doodle-doooo'... HEY ADDIE! I AX'D YOU FO' 'NOTHER POP!"

"Ignore that clumsy dummy," A.M. told Nonique in the cluttersome dining room, clearing a space for their Algebra texts and notebooks, then giving her guest a sudden apprehensive glance. "Unh-UNH! Don't do it, girl! Don't even *think* 'bout fallin' fo' him! You too good, too *smart* fo' that—we find you a really *fisticated* type f'you t'date—"

But, of course, it was too late.

Vernonique Smith had found her Shady Man.

POP went the cork; PFFFFOHHH went the effervescence.

She tried to pay this no-never-mind, burying her brain and Addie Mae's in the intricacies of unequal equations; and for awhile she almost succeeded. Then from the front room rose a rich, slow, deep, gravelly sound of heavy breathing that edged toward all-out snores. Over which crackled a fiery new stream of audible vitriol:

"EDDIE RAY ANDERSON?? YOU BETTER *HOPE* YOU DIDN'T FALL ASLEEP ON ME!!"

"Scuse me a sec," Nonique told A.M. Up she stood; over she marched; out from under E.R.'s sagging jaw she plucked the phone; up she hung it with a decisive CLICK.

Eddie's eyes popped open, assimilating what had just happened; then his elastic lips extended from ear to ear. "Sweet thing, you saved my life!" His free hand reached out; in it was a Sharpie marker. "Sign my cast... 'n' put yo phone number after yo name... heh heh heh heh..."

And there they were: bubbles running up Nonique's intoxicated nose.

By Thanksgiving Day she was ready to confess all to LaVee, beg her pardon for claimjumping one of her crushes, and beseech her aid in winning Fair Catch's heart. Also in eluding any reprisals by Rumah Myers, who'd publicly dumped E.R. for hanging up on her

(also for inconsiderately breaking his arm right before the holiday season) but was not the sort to tolerate her love-dumpster being sifted through by scavengers.

Eddie'd taken their split-up in stride and turned that to *strut*, returning to Thornford decked out in cast and sling and a cluster of honeys who hung upon him while appending their names and numbers to his plaster-of-Paris. "Write with a *fine* point, now! Leave a li'l room fo' the next gal in line!"

Nonique had neither clustered nor queued, yet her path got crossed again and again by the Fair Catch strut. Each time he gave Sweet Thing another ear-to-ear elasticsation, while his hangers-on shot eye-daggers at Nonique from top to toe.

LaVinia had shot her a couple of eye-thumbtacks before relenting for Thanksgiving and best-friendship's sake. "You just lucky I been sick—else *I'da* scooped him up. You even luckier I got well enough in time to *eat*. Okay, girl, I help you catch him, but only if—*IF*—we hook *me* up with one o' his better-lookin' varsity buddies. Don't matter which sport, but he gotta be at least twice—*TWICE*—as funktastic as George Sumpter!"

So they set out to bag themselves a couple of wild turkeys.

LaVee quickly set her sights on Damon Ingram, high diver on the Raven swim team ("Ooooh, don't he just *fill* them trunks!") who'd been known since wading pool days as "Dook." Some said this was as close to "Duke" as he could spell; others attributed it to his eccentric hygiene, though LaVee argued that he was cleansed by chlorine and had precisely the right degree of macho aroma.

LaVee being LaVee, she soon mapped out Dook's and Eddie's daily routes through and around Thornford, locating points where these could be easily intersected by herself and Nonique. When all four converged on certain spots at certain times, LaVee would wield her enticing rod-and-reel while Nonique stood by, tongue-tiedier than ever—and let Eddie Ray Anderson handle the palaver. He had to keep his cast on till Christmas, but nothing fettered *his* tongue or lips or gravelly voicebox as he brought them to bear on susceptible Nonique. Other girls continued clinging to him as a Fair Catch; yet he seldom let slide a chance to bear down on Sweet Thing and coo a few sly suavities into her hotly-blushing ear.

There were only four-and-a-half downsides to this delightfulness.

The first-and-a-half was that neither Eddie nor Dook made any move to actually ask the girls out, for even so much as a 7-Eleven Slurpee. And if they ever *did*, the odds were zilch for getting parental permission; their mothers had dictated “No DATE-dating till you turn sixteen,” and as far as Taw was concerned, “You ain’t goin’ out with any boy till you been *married* sixteen years!”

Secondly, Rumah Myers kept parading around the periphery like the aloof majorette she was—or the voodoo hexcaster people said she might be. Some whispered that Rumah’d *caused* Eddie’s injury by skewering an effigy she’d made out of chicken bones. You could hear the Witches’s Chorus from *Macbeth* whenever Rumah’s roving thundercloud obscured the horizon.

Thirdly, this didn’t intimidate LaVinia or stop her from telling Eddie (on Nonique’s speechless behalf, when Rumah was within earshot) that because the Smiths came from Little Egypt, they were therefore gypsies and endowed with uncanny powers of their own. Hence the Rebounder’s expertise at basketball and Nonique’s on the oboe: “Y’ever hear her play that thing? She can blow up a *storm*, and don’t need no scraps from a chicken bucket t’cast *her* magic spells!”

“(Veeee...)” shrilled Nonique.

“I c’n dig it,” nodded Dook.

“‘*She was a gypp-see woman... she was a gypp-see woman,*’” sang Eddie (à la the Impressions, not Brian Hyland).

And out on the periphery Rumah Myers went “RRRGGGH”—or whatever noise a tigress makes when gratuitously flouted.

Fourthly and finally: the Band’s marching season had gone on hiatus (to Winthrop Eshton’s desolation) and concert season was in full swing, with incessant rehearsals for the annual holiday program. These obstructed Nonique’s intersecting with Eddie Ray, till LaVee contrived one of her clever workarounds.

Twenty-five years earlier, Mr. Lynn had composed a musical about the Three Magi titled *Christmas Caravan: A Kismet Carol*. Every December he foisted excerpts from this opus on Thornford High, with varying degrees of appreciation. (The dancing camels were always a hit, though far more students auditioned for their front halves than their back.) It

included all due reverence and adoration of the Christ Child (which needed to be soft-pedaled in a mid-Seventies public school) and had a soulful oboe solo for Nonique to perform when Yazmin, daughter of the Magus Melchior, relinquished her precious frankincense to own a Deity nigh.

LaVee (God bless her everyone) lured Eddie and Dook into the auditorium long enough to hear Nonique practice this, pouring her heart out through her embouchure, imagining each note was a strand in the romantic lariat she hoped to sling around Fair Catch's rich-slow-deep-gravelliness.

Then came that exultant moment by the metal shop, where *just* Nonique encountered *just* Eddie—no LaVee, no Dook, no cluster of hangers-on, no Rumah darkening the skyline—and was presented with a shiny-bright split-ring washer as if it were costly jewelry:

"My Christmas gypp-see woman... my Christmas gypp-see woman..."

Chords crashed like breaker waves on the beach of Vernonique's devotion, sweeping her away from there to eternity.

Or what might've been eternity had winter not descended with a vengeance: the HARSH winter of forty-three straight days below freezing, twelve of them below zero, and the Lake itself nearly transformed into an iceberg.

Rumah Myers's brother Maurice got stabbed on Christmas Eve, officially while resisting a robbery at the Dow-Dee liquor store their father managed; though rumor had it that Rumah did it herself when Reese tried messin' with her. However it happened, Rumah was in need of what Dennis Desmond would call "CONDolence and CONSolation" and so drew Eddie Ray back into her web. By New Year's Day they were fully reconciled, and Fair Catch was off the free market.

Nonique had scarcely a minute to bemoan this before Grandma Cat suffered a bad stroke that turned much worse when the weather delayed her being rushed to the hospital. Not that Cat would admit to any need for admission there; in her mind, the doctor's diagnosis was plumb wrong, making her fritter time away in a convalescent bed. Her certainty about a swift return home was contagious, at first, thanks to apparently unimpeded vigor:

"It still snowin'? You better not tell me you been shovelin' it, Abram—get that Jenkins boy to clear the driveway—make sure he salts the front steps good—I don't wanna

slip on ‘em the moment I get home. You eat right last night? What you fix for dinner?”

“Bacon and eggs,” said Grandpa Bram.

“Bacon and eggs! Better not be ruinin’ my kitchen! Where you drain the grease?”

“Grease?”

“*Don’t* you tell me you poured it *down* the drain!”

“Course not, honeybunch! Sopped it up with a piece o’ toast.”

“Okay—*that* does it—get my clothes—I’m outta here—*someone* gotta save your fool arteries from hardenin’—”

Cat tried to fling off the bedcovers with her unaffected arm... and couldn’t. The next day she sounded almost as rambunctious, but a trifle less coherent; and each day after that was a further step down into the shadows.

Agitation displaced hardihood. Doctors, nurses, therapists were accused of lying about her condition so they could keep her in the hospital and run up the bills. Husband, children, siblings were rebuked for collaborating. Cat suspected perfectly well that Vernon Smith, not Medicaid, was picking up the tab for week after week in this semi-private room, and she wouldn’t stand being beholden to that man, do you hear?

The thing of it was, she could no longer stand even when aided. Increasingly she could not make herself understood. Inexorably she melted away, degree by degree, as the once-harsh winter was starting to do outdoors.

Before long the only ones able to comprehend Cat without difficulty were her youngest sister Aunt Duz, who taught sign language to deaf children; her old friend Bessie Higden, Aunt LeeLee’s mother, who was an experienced social worker; and Nonique, on the purely-a-Curry wavelength.

Glance from the eye with the undrooping lid. Press of the hand whose fingers could still return a squeeze. Exchange of words without recourse to phonetics.

Don’t you be running yourself ragged, child.

I’m not, Grandma.

You look like you are. Don’t want the both of us here in this fool bed.

I’m too big to fit in that one with you anymore.

That’s right, you’re a big girl now. But don’t be thinking you’re a grown woman yet.

Not even sometimes?

I'll tell you when you are. Until then, no more wearing yourself out.

It's just this awful weather. What they call cabin fever.

Tell me about it—stuck in here. Better yet, play me "From All That Dwell."

Nonique was permitted to bring her oboe to the hospital during visiting hours and play it in Cat's room, so long as the other occupant (latest in a succession, all of whom groaned in their sleep) didn't object. An audience would gather around the doorway (medical staff, other visitors, ambulatory patients) to hear the miniconcerts of what Uncle Babe liked to call "airs and graces—hymns and prayers. Get it? Get it?"

From all that dwell below the skies

Let the Creator's praise arise

Let the Redeemer's name be sung

Through ev'ry land by ev'ry tongue

And till that cabin fever breaks (thought Nonique) don't spill the beans about my heartaches.

In eighth grade she'd read a scary story about how silent secret snow made the world grow smaller and smaller, like a flower shrinking backward into a tiny cold seed. Such was Nonique's life that bitter winter: an ever-abbreviating cycle of rise without shine, frost without thaw, means without end. Home, school, hospital; or home, church, hospital; or home, Mr. Nik's, hospital. With only dribs and drabs of awareness of what was going on beyond that cycle. Being cut some slack for this by everyone, even LaVinia who usually demanded complete attention. Glimpsing the Shady Man in just the loges and bistros of Slumberland, unvexed by voodoo hexes yet vanishing at the next rise-without-shine.

Eternal are Thy mercies, Lord

Eternal truths attend Thy word

Thy praise shall sound from shore to shore

Till suns shall rise and set no more

A time fast coming for Catherine Curry Randle.

Enough of her old armor plate remained intact to threaten she might linger in an interminable vegetative state, like Karen Ann Quinlan. Yet as Cat herself would've put it, "The Lord knows me better than that"—and she breathed her last shortly before Easter and her sixtieth birthday, when the thermometer took a typical Citylandish leap from below freezing up into the eighties.

We are (we are) / climbing (climbing)

JACOB'S LADDER / soldier (soldier) / of the cross...

With Cat's grip gone from the reins, her family faltered to a halt. Patriarch Ezekiel was Big Zeke no more, but a wizened old mutterer-about-undertakers who'd buried three wives and now his eldest daughter alongside two of them. Grandpa Bram could not bear to live alone in the Ferndean Gardens townhouse and so bunked with bachelor Uncle Babe, both of them swamped by melancholia.

Bessie, LeeLee and Miss Fanny Hooker took it upon themselves to divvy Grandma's effects, acting on instinct for who Cat would've wanted to inherit what. Nonique received a gold locket that she was afraid to wear outside her blouses, but felt uncomfortable dangling beneath them.

"Under's best—leastway if the chain snaps, yo bra'll catch it 'fore it falls," observed LaVee, regarding the extra cupsize Nonique had gained over the winter.

"(Not so loud,)" went Nonique, hugging her oboe to her accentuated bosom.

"Girl, we're here t'*be* heard!"

They were at a rehearsal for *The Wiz*, Thornford's Spring Musical, in which LaVee'd been cast as one of the Munchkin/Winkie chorus. She'd wanted to be a Funky Monkey till hearing they wouldn't be flown on harnesses over the stage; Thornford couldn't afford the insurance coverage.

Snobby-conceited Rochelle Briggs had won the role of Dorothy, which was only slightly less preposterous than Diana Ross's stealing it from Stephanie Mills for the upcoming movie version. Not that it'd matter, since Thornford's show was certain to be stolen by Marquita McLeod as Evillene the Wicked Witch. That part actually seemed more suitable for Rumah Myers; but she and the other majorettes were performing all the standout

dance numbers, with Rumah turning the Tornado Ballet into a Striptease of Seven Veils (off a disco leotard).

Addie Mae Anderson would've been perfect as Addaperle the Feelgood Witch, if the Drama Club had been able to raise enough funds to rent her a giant teleprompter. She was content to stitch together wondrous concoctions as the show's costume mistress, taking her "bag-lady boogie" to a theatrical level. Meanwhile the stage crew enlisted Eddie Ray to handle the switchboard, he being almost as proficient with toggles and rheostats as his twin was with needle and thread.

"Say the word and I'll be *dimmin' the lights!*" he proclaimed at every rehearsal, leering down from the backstage catwalk—

"You listening t'me?" LaVee broke into Nonique's reverie, cutting her no more slack. "High time you quit that sleepwalking."

"Not s'posed to wake up sleepwalkers," murmured Nonique.

"Well I *got* to, don't I? Ol' Tippins be calling us any minute now—"

"WINKIES FRONT AND CENTER, PLEASE!" crackled Mrs. Tippins over the P.A. "ALL WINKIES, ON THE DOUBLE!"

"What I tell you?" sighed LaVee. "Bet they don't treat dancers like a bunch o' cows on *Soul Train!*"

Off she mooed for another run-through of "Brand New Day," while Nonique joined the Concert Band in front of the stage to provide accompaniment. As the lone oboe, she played the A-note for the Band to tune to: a task she previously took pride in, but now was just another trancelike step taken through another somnambulistic afternoon.

It wasn't as if she hadn't *tried* to perk up since Grandma's funeral. Everyone kept urging her to do so, even the chorus onstage: *Just look about! / You owe it to yourself to check it out!*

Easier sung than done when you kept stumbling and fumbling through opaque darkness, brushing against unseen things that clung to your hands and arms till you were afraid you'd be pinioned, caught in a winding sheet, shrunk down to that tiny cold seed—

—as Mrs. Tippins whistled the Winkies to stop after stop and Mr. Lynn had the Band do likewise, going back and doing over and we'll-stay-here-all-night-till-you-get-it-right

which wasn't apt to happen (the staying if not the getting) while you persevered, your clung-to arms outstretched, trying to sleepwalk past the unseen and find an exit or at least some illumination—

“Kill the lights,” ordered Mrs. Tippins, her voice rough with disgust. “That’s enough for one day. Everybody out.”

LaVee promptly swooped off the proscenium—who needs a harness to fly?—and, giving Nonique an airy wave, sprinted up the aisle out of sight. Nowadays she was going with (as well as after) Dook Ingram, and had to hustle to make the most out of Friday-night-until-curfew (or-as-late-as-can-be-gotten-away-with).

Nonique remained behind to mechanically dismember her oboe. Swab out its joints, blow out its reed, pack these in their separate cases, latch them glumly shut—*snick, snick*—

“Allow ME, Sweet Thing,” went a gravelly unravelly voice.

Classical masterful laying-hold of her instrument with one hand, as the other arm (long since freed of plaster) draped itself over her shoulders, causing her internal candelabra to undergo spontaneous combustion.

“Might I be *transportin’* you anywheres?”

“W-what about...?”

“Addie? She off to one o’ her ‘quiltin’ bees’—and’ll be there makin’ outfits fo’ Poppies till they put her to *sleeeeeeeep*—”

“No, I mean...”

“You twistin’ that purty head ever’ which way lookin’ fo’ Rumah the Tornado? Don’t worry none ‘bout her—*she* won’t be showin’ till my next payday.”

Eddie had a part-time job at the Riversgate Conoco station, which didn’t generate enough income to keep Rumah satisfied on a full-time basis. In the meantime she was stepping out with Billy Carter—not the new President’s beer-swilling brother, but a senior on the Thornford track team who preferred fortified wines like Ripple.

Be that as it may, Nonique didn’t feel Tornado-safe till she was buckled into Eddie’s elderly Cutlass Supreme with all its doors locked, and they’d driven far enough away that the school could no longer be seen in the rearview mirror.

“Come on ‘n’ ease on down, ease on down the road,” crooned Eddie before cranking up Studio 107 on the car radio—and, like the SuperAfro dude in *Car Wash*, lip-syncing Rose Royce’s “I Wanna Get Next to You.”

Well, you have—and you ARE, thought Nonique between poundings of her heart. *So what happens next?...*

A segue to Earth Wind & Fire’s “Can’t Hide Love,” and Eddie’s idling at a red light to strike up a cigarette.

“What brand you smoke?” asked Nonique, thinking *Could you ASK a more idiotic question?*

“Newports. ‘Bold ‘n’ cold!’ Want one?”

“Oh no thanks.”

“They menthol—good fo’ the throat.”

“Um maybe so but I gotta save my lungs, y’know, for the oboe...” *Idiot! IDIOT!*

“That’s cool.” (As Kool & the Gang chimed in with “Open Sesame.”) “You right to take care o’ yo’self. *And* to look out fo’ that Rumah Myers. Her ‘n’ me, we was lazin’ ‘round this one time when a moth flies inna her room. She screech ‘That’s the devil been chewin’ holes in my clothes!’ ‘n’ jumps up to catch it. Knockin’ stuff over as she chases that bug—chair, lamp, perfume bottles—then she grabs hold of it, ‘n’ takes this pin looks big as a chopstick ‘n’ *impales* that po moth like she was giggin’ a frog! She watches (and makes *me* watch) till its wings quit beatin’—then sticks that damn pin with that dead bug in her *hair*.”

Slow smoky-clouded exhalation out the Cutlass window.

(“Get down with the genie!” commented Kool & the Gang.)

“Heh heh heh heh...” went Eddie. “Now if *I* caught me a moth, I woudn’t do no worse’n stick it down some purty gal’s *neck*”—demonstrating with the back collar of Nonique’s floral print blouse.

YEEEEEP!! by Nonique.

“Now what we got here?” inquired Eddie, his finger snagged. “Feels like you got sump’n heavy hangin’ on this here chain—heavy ‘n’ hid away. Wonder what it could be?”

“*Don’t!*” went Nonique, clapping an arm across her bustline as if he’d gone straight for her bra hooks.

“Oho—it’s like that, is it?” said Eddie, cruising the Cutlass to a halt along a side street. His snagged finger gently (yet irresistibly) traced the chain under the collar around to the throat, and there hoisted up its pendant accessory till it glittered in his hand. “My oh my... where you get this?”

“From my Grandma,” wobbled Nonique.

“Well, that’s nice—real nice. Par-tic-u-lar-ly since you didn’t get it from no other boyfriend.” He propped the locket on her bosom-shelf with careful exactness, and snuffed his Newport in the chockablock ashtray. “Why don’t we straighten our legs a little?” he suggested, sauntering out and over to open the passenger door like a courteous gentleman.

It seemed rude to stay seated inside.

He’d parked the Cutlass beside a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire, beyond which lay vast acreage belonging to the water reclamation plant. No one was nearby except a few seagulls wheeling overhead, and a row of crows perched companionably on the fence. Lounging against it below the crows, Eddie used a thumb to dislodge teardrops from Nonique’s tremulous lashes.

“Ain’t gonna cry on me, are you?”

“(Not ‘less you make me.)”

“Now why you think I ever do a thing like that, Sweet Thing? Course, you might cry fo’ *joy* if I give you a fine bracelet to match that nice necklace.”

“(Thought you said you got no money.)”

“That’s cause I *invest* it, see? Like a MOE-gool, fo’ a REE-turn—such as one o’ these” (encircling her waist) “or one o’ these” (drawing her to him) “or one o’ *these*” (pressing his tobacco-tinged mouth to her Fashion Fair lipgloss—)

THUNDER THUNDER THUNDER stormed Nonique’s circulatory system as he tightened his Fair Catch embrace, till they were mashed together and the locket dug into both of their chests.

So it began.

The spring fling that would become a flung sprung.

Nearly all of it (but not enough, in the end) done on the sly.

Vernonique realized from the get-go that *she* was the Other Woman in a triangle with Rumah Myers—or a quadrilateral, if you included Billy Carter—unless it was a *pentagram*, factoring in the Voodoo Devil. Whichever way you outlined the relationship(s), discretion would be the greater part of survival.

LaVinia knew all about it, of course, and teemed with ploys to facilitate matters. Addie Mae knew too, wringing her hands (when not busy at the sewing machine) as she counseled noncompliance with Eddie Ray's tendencies. And then, during another take-five at another *Wiz* rehearsal, an additional interested party reared an unwelcome head. Winth-ROP Eshton, who'd never shown the least concern for Nonique's wellbeing before now, executed a double-left-flank-*HUT* to block her path and hiss into her face: "(What are you *doing*? What do you think you're *doing*? Have you gone and lost your *mind*?)"

"Wh—" went Nonique; but Winthrop had right-oblique-*HUTTED* off to the backstage ladder and was clambering up it to the catwalk. There he confronted Eddie Ray—who had on a neon orange jogging suit that outshone the spotlights—and, while keeping his hiss low, demanded to know Eddie's intentions vis-à-vis Nonique.

"Guess you could say I'm a mew-chew-ull friend o' the *fambly*," said E.R., emphasizing the B to madden Winth-ROP, who was a stickler for clear enunciation.

"Well, you just... you just... you just... leave her alone, that's all!" he stammered. "If you know what's good for you!"

"I jus'... I jus'... I jus'... always know WHO'S good fo' me," remarked Eddie from on high. "Run along now, li'l freshman—yo trombone's tootin' fo' you."

Winthrop descended the ladder and harch-harch-harched back to hiss "(You *see*? You *see*? I am SO disappointed in you!)" into Nonique's dumbfounded face, before falling out of formation and retreating from sight.

"What was *that*?" Nonique asked LaVee.

"Looks like you got a secret admirer."

"Aw, noooo... not *him*."

"Sure looks like it. Mind if I don't get jealous?"

That task was speedily volunteered for by Marian "Midget" Pettis the glockenspiel player, who'd borne an unrequited crush on Winthrop since first grade. LaVee theorized that

Midget had been dropped on her head as a baby, accounting for both the crush and her lack of height. Now she peered up at Nonique with wordless reproach; and the pentagram was enlarged to whatever you called a plane figure with seven points. (Heptagon? Heptazoid? Hepzibah?—good name for the Voodoo Devil.) Making it even trickier to keep Nonique and Eddie’s intersections on the QT. His neon orange jogging suit didn’t help, either.

As *The Wiz* edged on down the road to and through what Mrs. Tippins, with morose optimism, called the worst dress rehearsal in Thornford Drama Club history, Nonique yearned for a cyclone cellar in which she might hide from crackpots and lamebrains. When she wasn’t being mutely accused of love-larceny by Midget Pettis, her heels were getting dogged by the abnormally hamfooted Winthrop. Then she had to withstand LaVee’s goading her to do-this-with-Eddie, try-that-with-Eddie, while Addie Mae lobbied for hindrance and restraint, and Teri Rhett (the chummiest of the Band’s fifteen clarinets) kept asking “What’s the story with you and Fair Catch?”

All of which was preferable to the goings-on and gettings-down in Slumberland.

Where once Nonique had cozied up with the Shady Man, she now could only see him at a lengthening distance, unable to be followed or called back, till she was abandoned to stumble and fumble again through clinging obscurity—before brushing up against Hepzibah the Voodoo Devil who was armed with a pinion bigger than a chopstake and set for pointedly blood-red *impalement*—

Awaking to circulatory THUNDER THUNDER THUNDER, night after night after night...

“Don’t let no bad dreams bother you,” soothed Eddie Ray. “Do what I do—have yo momma make you a glass o’ warm milk fo’ you go to bed. Course now, there’s *other* things you can do at bedtime that’ll give you a good—sound—sleep... heh heh heh heh...”

On that subject he was never at a loss for words, or moves, on unfrequented sites around Riversgate where their intersecting could take place. Besides the fence by the reclamation plant, there was a quiet corner behind the auto salvage yard; an odd little grove out back of the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church; and various hidey-holes off Deliverance Road, which wound through semigreenery between the Expressway and the River.

There’d been an assembly during Black History Month about how Deliverance Road got its name from being one of the “stations” on the Underground Railroad, where escaped

slaves were given safe haven by abolitionists (like Joshua Douser of the original Douser Dell) en route to freedom in Canada. However, this inspirational tale clashed with present-day Deliverance Road being a notorious lover's lane—plus a reminder of that backwoods-redneck movie from a few years ago, so all the class clowns began to make “Dueling Banjo” noises and squeal like a pig.

Nonique continued to frequent these hidey-holes as *The Wiz* came and went. Maybe *too* frequently, given Eddie's mastery at manipulating causes and effects; particularly on a Good Girl who meant only to allow the milder liberties to be taken, as she had with Reuben Burns (and a few of those had been inadvertent). But E.R., unlike Reuben, could see clearly how to breach her barricades step by step; and for him it was as easy as riding up an escalator. Or more aptly an elevator, since he could play upon Nonique's buttons as if they were switchboard rheostats.

Down the garden path she was led through that merrily-rolling-along month of May. In short order they advanced from full-frontal hugs and Franco-American kisses to fondling (her) through fabric, to liberating the upper torso (hers) from Lycra, to hickeyfication of her liberations (shunting Grandma's locket aside) and then to tentative fondling (*him*) through fabric. All of this was accomplished without high-pressure tactics on Eddie's part—unless you counted whatever mesmerizing gambit he employed to make *Nonique* be the sensual aggressor and take the backseat initiative, time after time.

“Go ahead, Sweet Thing,” he would sigh with feigned capitulation. “Do *with* me what you *will*!”

And she did, again and again. Eddie might play upon her blouse-buttons, but it was Nonique who undid them. He might slide an inquisitive fingertip into the front of her bra; she was the one who reached behind her back to unhook it. He might raise his Fair Catch hand in benediction on her emancipated bosom; she'd grab that hand and put it to touchy-feely work. He might pucker his rich/slow/deep/gravelly mouth; she'd cradle his head wet-nurse-style while it sought sustenance and nourishment.

Then Nonique would go to bed (alone) after drinking the prescribed glass of warm milk; and before her nightly brushup against Hepzibah's chopstake, she would re-enact that day's latest double-daring-do. Sometimes writhing with shame; sometimes thrilling with

bliss; always boggling at her own audacity. Were it not for the thankfully hidden bosom-hickeys, she'd've been inclined to chalk it all up to fantasization.

Yet how could *she*—SHE—be taking such steps forward, for real? Steps down the garden path and through the gates of the Carnal Chocolate Factory, to carry on like Augustus Gloop and Veruca Salt and Violet Beauregard combined? Her face (and chest) burned at the thought; never before had she given way to covetous gluttony. Now she was involved with embouchures on a whole different scale—one that entailed much heavier breathing, and a lot more saliva.

“What is that man DOING to me??”

“Don’t you know?” asked LaVee as she painted Nonique’s toenails Fashion Fair Foxy Pink.

“If I *did*, would I *ask*?”

“‘He’s yo boogie man, that’s what he am, here t’do whatever he can,’” sang LaVee. “Hold *still*, girl! This is my *good* polish!”

Restive shifting by Nonique, with gaze-aversion from the swim team photo (blown up to poster-size and taped on LaVee’s bedroom wall) of Dook Ingram in anatomically-correct trunks.

“*Do* I not come from a medical background?” LaVee had sassified when Aunt LeeLee’d objected to this being hung.

“So you’ll put *these* up beside it,” LeeLee’d replied, adding really gross diagrams of the human muscular and skeletal systems to the same wall.

Imagine how the Smith household would react if Nonique dared replace her gallery of favorite oboists—Ray Still, Harry Smyles, Evelyn Rothwell—with beefcake Polaroids of Eddie Ray Anderson in the backseat of his Cutlass Supreme—

(*Ohhhh sweeeet motherrrr...*)

(Her imagination never used to go to such FERVENT lengths...)

“Hardly need t’turn on a lamp in here, you blushing so bright,” smiled LaVee as she started on the other foot.

“Quit tickling!... You think I *wanna* have these ‘thoughts’ running wild through my mind?”

“Face it, girl: you always been a thinker, not a doer. Now yo bod’s finally catching up with yo brain, and about time too. Perfectly natural—no need t’freak. *Would* be, if you blushing so bright over ol’ Winth-ROP—”

“Will you HUSH?”

It wasn’t bad enough to *behave* like a Bad Girl, knowing she should reject impulses to trespass on personal private property (his and hers) instead of sizzling with possessive anticipation and palpable gratification. No: along with all that, she had to steer clear of Winthrop Eshton. Which was nothing new, since he’d never hesitated to shoot off his longwinded mouth about recital precedence or the superiority of marching bands. These days, though, he seemed to have trouble putting two words together without spluttering. Worse yet, too many of those words seemed to center on his being INFATUATED.

With NONIQUE.

She’d been crushed on by plenty of boys—first for being her father’s daughter, then for prettiness enhanced by bashfulness and blossoming shapeliness. Not one had been worth reciprocating (Reuben fit more into a friend-with-benefits category) and LaVee’d told them to buzz off, occasionally reeling a crusher in for her own fun before throwing him back.

Winth-ROP, however, was unbuzzable as well as unbearable. He’d show up at the most inopportune times, *ahem*-ing and *harrumph*-ing without managing to clear his throat, grimacing at Nonique’s brow or chin but never quite into her eyes as he rang disjointed changes on his earlier *What do you think you’re doing?* query.

“Do you MIND?” Nonique would huff at him.

“Do YOU mind being made a fool out of?” he’d try to reply, after apparently swallowing an entire hardboiled egg unchewed.

“What business is it of *yours*?”

“*Funny* business! And I’m here to tell you—so listen good!—there isn’t anybody, not anybody who wouldn’t laugh themselves SICK if they knew what you’re getting up to—or should I say getting *down with*?”

“Get AWAY from me!” Nonique would request; and LaVee (if present) would add something like “Yeah, go ‘n’ empty yo spit valve over someone who deserves it!”

“You bet I will!” Winthrop would vow, sounding as if that hardboiled egg was lodged inside his windpipe. “I’ll just have a *word* or two with your Tin-Eared Woodman” (clenching one fist while shaking the other) “and maybe teach him a thing or two about where and how he can SLIDE HIS OIL!”

Away he’d lurch with none of his parade-ground precision; leaving Nonique to seethe and LaVee to scoff and Midget Pettis to quaver “If he gets beat to pieces, it’ll be on *your* two heads!”

“None o’ this be happening if *you* be woman enough to work yo wiles on a man, or even a Winth-ROP!” LaVee would sneer; whereupon Midget would trot off in unrequited tears, making Nonique feel even worse.

“You didn’t have to tell her that.”

“You want *her* hanging round all afternoon, giving us the stink-eye?”

Well, no. This heptawhatsit was becoming far too complicated for Nonique. She felt relatively sure that Eddie wouldn’t fight Winthrop unless he (Winthrop) came after him (Eddie) with an axe. Yet Eddie was liable to bombard Winthrop with witticisms about being a li’l tromboner who played upon his own buttons, till he (Winthrop) *did* come after him (Eddie) and get himself beaten to pieces (axe or no axe). And then there’d be a ruckus, and Midget would fuss it up further, and Rumah Myers would hear about it, and Nonique would be constricted more tightly than ever by this heptawhatever—

—when all she craved was an exclusive undivided intersection with Eddie Ray. And not just another huggery-muggery backseat miniliaison, either. There had to be more to romance than erotic angling, no matter what LaVinia thought or how Eddie maneuvered.

You couldn’t hash such things out with a parent or teacher or school counselor or clergyman. The only approachable adult Nonique knew was Duz Curry, technically her great-aunt but really her surrogate big sister, and one who’d savored La Dolce Vita. “Oh, that Delores,” Grandma Cat had always called her (with a sigh and shrug and headshake). Freda called her “Acksh”—partly from years of saying “Actually she’s my *aunt*” and partly from Duz’s colorful career as an Action Girl.

In the late Sixties she’d cultivated an Angela Davis Afro and attitude, her militancy disturbing Big Zeke and her older siblings who thought it foolhardy to openly antagonize

white folks. Duz had simmered down (politically) since then and now resembled that *Get Christie Love!* actress who'd joined the Jehovah's Witnesses. Duz opted instead to learn sign language and have a quickie affair with her Caucasian instructor, whom she (with voice and hands) cheerfully called "Honk."

(Oh, that Delores!)

Nonique arranged to interview her about ASL for a Thornford project. After taking many distracted notes on signing and special ed in Duz's Bronzeville flat, she gingerly broached the subject of breaching barricades—and nearly fainted when Duz pressed a fistful of condoms into Nonique's petrified hands.

"But—but—but—but—"

"I know, honey, and here's hoping you won't need 'em for a long while yet. BUT—don't you *ever* let a man take that last step with you 'less he's got one of these on. And don't take his word for it, either—you watch while he *puts* it on (try not to laugh) or better still, you put it on *for* him, they almost enjoy that—"

"AUNT DUZ!!"

"I *know*, honey. Just think of 'em as insurance premiums."

To be hidden in the concealed zipper-pocket of the fancy tampon pouch (warranted to scare off meddlesome little brothers) that Duz also gave her, as an early birthday present.

Nonique barely survived the El ride back to Riversgate, dead certain all the other passengers could tell her purse was overflowing with prophylactics. Which would have to be kept secret even from—*especially* from—LaVee, who'd say or do Lord only knew what if she found out about them. And the exact same could be said for Eddie... at least for the time being. Until later. If not sooner. But then when?...

"Pastime Paradise" was chosen as the theme of that year's Junior-Senior Prom, beating out the Louder Crowd's high-volume bid for "Midnight Love Affair." Eight different guys sought Addie Mae's company on Prom Night; she, unwilling to hurt any feelings with an outright turndown, had them stage a tournament which was won by Freeman Sumpter (Stumpy George's taller cooler older brother). Eddie offered Freeman mock consolation for spending \$100 on Addie's ticket, Addie's corsage, and Addie's limousine rental when he could've gone stag (like Eddie) to sift through a ballroom of ladies brought

and paid for by other suckers. Including Billy Carter, who might escort Rumah Myers *to* the Prom, but had no guarantee she wouldn't depart *from* it with somebody else.

LaVee vowed this somebody wouldn't be Dook Ingram's body, which she'd branded PROPERTY OF LAVINIA WILMORE. Not many freshgirls got asked to the Prom, and LaVee flaunted Dook's dutiful invitation to such an extent that Nonique had to keep reminding herself *This is my very best practically-cousin practically-sistah friend, and not JUST an uppity-butted egomaniac*. Who invested \$100 of her own allowance-advancement in a formal gown, shoes, accessories, hairdressing and makeover—

—yet got diverted from the official afterparty to visit a leased-by-the-hour room at the Gaffer Motel, where many a virginity had been shed and LaVee's was no exception.

Worth it, as having “proved her love” for Dook; and even if the First Time didn't live up to hype or feel especially pleasurable, “practice makes perfect” which Nonique of *all* people shouldn't need to be convinced of, so quit making that face.

“Well, did he at least use a—a—”

“A *what?* Snorkel? Nose plugs?”

“A you-KNOW-what!”

“Did he use an I-KNOW-what? Oh sure.”

(Equally interpretable as *Of course* and *Yeah right*.)

Anyway: woe to any girl who tried to swipe Dook away now. As for Nonique, she'd better shore up her Eddie Ray sand castle before the tide swept it away; E.R.'d been a boogie man with just about every female on the “Pastime Paradise” dance floor, even Mrs. Tippins the chaperone. And quite a few had judged him to be a Fairly Available Catch—hexed or unhexed.

Thus: a fork in the road.

Take the safe route and maybe get left behind on her lonesome. Or climb aboard a roller coaster of “love-proving” and plunge headlong into the depths of peril like a daredevil. Which was all very well for a cowabunga madcap like LaVee; but Nonique had always been the sensible one, the prudent one, the cautious-for-caution's-sake one.

Till now.

“Eddie? Are you ‘n’ me—the two of us—are we... *going* anywhere?”

“Far as you like, Sweet Thing. Just hold on tight, ‘n’ be gentle, ‘n’ promise you’ll respect me in the mornin’.”

All aboooooooooaaard the Cowabunga Express!

Yes. Better to risk peril than shrink backward into that tiny cold seed, left fallow and forsakenly unhatched.

As was hammered home (like the last nail in a coffin lid) during the family Memorial Day re-gathering at Grandma Cat’s still-fresh gravesite. Big Zeke stayed away—“Ain’t givin’ y’all a chance to go ‘n’ leave *me* thar!”—and Taw was off negotiating renewal of his contract with Uni-Nute; but the rest of the extended Curry/Randle clan came bearing flowers, and Nonique brought her oboe to join the hymn-singers led erratically by Uncle Babe, who couldn’t trust his voice to stay unbroken through “How Great Thou Art.”

Nonique, as she worked keys and reeds with proper decorum, couldn’t trust her heated brain to not rewrite sacred lyrics:

O Eddie Ray, when I in awesome wonder

Consider all the moves thy hands have made

I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder

Thy power through my anatomy displayed—

Wait for the familiar Grandma-glare you’d been lanced with whenever LaVee’d get bored in church and start something irreligious that, try as Nonique might to smother it, seldom failed to make her titter.

Don’t tell me you two’re making light of the Lord in His own House!

Today there was only the glare of the sun through intermittent rainclouds, and the sound of Uncle Babe choking up on “humble adoration.”

(Unless you counted Aunt Duz’s telepathic *You still insured, honey?*)

Afterward they took Grandpa Bram out to Leon’s BBQ and then to see Muhammad Ali in *The Greatest*, which he pretended was a pick-me-up though he returned to Uncle Babe’s place as despondent as he’d left it. Nor was Nonique overjoyed to glimpse Winthrop Eshton lurking around her own townhouse, spurring her to close all her bedroom shades and curtains despite the uncool Memorial Night.

Airs and graces: hymns and prayers.

Shades and curtains: ghosts and graves.

That night, instead of another stumbly-fumbly sojourn through Slumberland to the Voodoo Devil's chopstake, she was drawn to a BUMP against implacability: broad and high and black as the *Space Odyssey* monolith. Grandma Cat might lack breath in her body, but that didn't hinder her getting a dream-message across good and plain:

Don't think you're becoming a grown woman yet. I've TOLD you when that'll happen.

So: step on the brakes.

No need to freak, as LaVee'd said; or to rush, as LaVee'd done. The whole summer lay ahead, oodles of time for coming to grips with love-proving, and maybe Rumah Myers would disappear somehow from the heptamacallit—taking that devilish chopstake with her and leaving Nonique's intersection free and clear.

Well and good, and hopefully acceptable by the Memorial Monolith.

But then Taw came home driving a brand-new Fleetwood Brougham, waving an aggrandized contract renewal that verified the Rebounder wasn't some flash-in-the-pan like Larry "Junk Food Junkie" Groce. Meaning it was high time for the Smiths to split from Ferndean Gardens and moo-hoove on up to a dee-luxe apartment in the sky—or out in the 'burbs, shaking the dust of Riversgate from their affluent heels.

And the sooner the better.

Alfreda was amenable, and not simply because *I will never desert Mr. Micawber*. Lately (as she told LeeLee) you could almost feel the earth moo-hoove under your feet and not from any Carole Kingish tumbling-down, but as if the River itself was eroding the ground below you. Little by little security was slipping away; the tight-knit community was coming apart, factory workers were worrying more and more about how long their jobs might last. Neighborhoods increasingly pitted themselves against each other—the boys of Ferndean Gardens, slandered as "soft" by those of Douser Dell, declared a state of enmity and escalated squabbles into fistfights. How much longer could parents hope to prevent encroachment by gangs and drug hustlers?

“So you think *Exodus* is the answer?” sniffed LeeLee, who was all about keeping the faith (and still expected her MIA Sergeant Marvin to show up any day out of the blue).

Nonique couldn’t afford to be that confident. Not when precious hours were being lost having to study for finals, and cram Addie Mae through the Algebraic obstacle course—a task not made any easier by Addie’s continually citing this or that boy as worthier of Nonique’s attention than her clumsy dummy of a twin brother. Nor by Winthrop’s getting hold of Nonique’s yearbook and blotting one whole page with **DON’T SAY I DIDN’T WARN YOU!!!** in Magic Marker. (Beneath which Midget Pettis squeezed a miniscule NO DON’T SAY THAT.)

Then the school year ended and the course ahead was mostly cleared. Winthrop and Midget left town, taking their trombone and glockenspiel to a downstate marching band symposium. Addie Mae (waving her final C from Mrs. Dent like a captured battle flag) went to spend a couple weeks with kinfolk in Detroit. And Randle Smith was packed off with Reggie Wilmore to be philistines in summer church camp.

The course’s remaining obstacles could be sidestepped with a touch of subterfuge. Till now, Nonique’s miniliaisons had been kept under the parental radar by a variety of alibis, all corroboratable —though coming from Nonique, they were rarely questioned. (LaVee said she had the makings of a criminal mastermind oboist.) Now that school was over and vacation begun, her chief pretext for absence in the evenings became “dropping by the Y,” where she was associated with a children’s musical appreciation program. Even when this wasn’t in session, Nonique took pains to be seen inside the Y before sneaking out and down the block for Cutlass pickup when Eddie got off Conoco duty.

Then it was time for Sweet Thing’s chariot to swing low and swing fast, her foot no longer stepping on the brake. Reckless? Yes. Wrongheaded? Maybe. Yet a ravenous thirst was upon her to quaff champagne with her Shady Man—and not some Lawrence Welky bubblewater either, but a trampled-out vintage where you could taste the very toes that had pressed the grapes. No reluctance, no holding back, lest the goblet (make that the bottle) be dashed from her lips to shatter into squandered fragments of unproven love.

So in even shorter order than before, Vernonique became a consummate organist: playing by ear with hand and mouth, putting her embouchure abilities to extraordinary use as

she produced rich/slow/deep/gravelly grunts and groans and “DAMN, girl! where you *been* all my life?”s from Eddie Ray Anderson.

Her own life was about to complete its fifteenth year, on a Sunday this time around; and another miniliaison was slotted into the preceding Friday evening (“Maybe I’ll get up enough nerve to give you yo First Kiss, heh heh heh heh”) but Nonique put her criminal mastermind to making this a *maxiliaison*—indeed, THE *maxiliaison*.

She’d have to stake her claim without delay, outstaking Rumah’s blood-red chops to pin down the Shady Man and bind him to *her*. She was better looking than Rumah Myers, better built, better natured, better suited to accommodate a lover she’d already finessed with hand and mouth. But Rumah would undoubtedly be on the warpath: Billy Carter had graduated from Thornford and left town, so there was nothing to avert that whammy-eye from Nonique or divert that juju-charm from E.R. And even if there *were*, how many other girls might be ready to step in if Nonique vacillated at this critical moment?

No (or, rather, Yes): the Friday before Juneteenth would be her *prima notte*.

Which, like the “premiums” in her tampon pouch, had to be kept dead secret.

Even though, when that fated Friday rolled around, she badly needed a pep talk by a recent undergoer of the ritual. So up she went to the undergoer’s bedroom, where black jeans and a black T-shirt were being pulled on over black drawers, a black bra, and a liberal coating of Yoni Yum feminine spray powder.

“What’s all this for?” she asked the undergoer. “You going out to buy my birthday present?”

“Already been got, and hid where you ain’t gonna find it, so forget trying.”

“Where’s Dook taking you tonight?”

“*Taking* me?” snorted LaVee. “That boy’s *steppin’ out* on me! So I aim t’play Night Stalker on his high-diving butt—all night, if that’s what it takes—”

“*LaVinia?*” Aunt LeeLee yelled up the stairs.

“(Ssshhhh!) *Yeah Moms?*”

“*I’m off to work*” (the late swing shift at the hospital). “*Remember that The State got a curfew, The City got a curfew, and YOU got a curfew.*”

“*How can I forget?*”

“I’m calling this phone at eleven sharp ‘n’ expect you to answer it on the first ring.”

“At MIDNIGHT sharp, didja say?”

“Don’t sassifyfrass me, young lady! You heard what time I said!”

(Nonique knew LaVee was capable of popping home at 10:59, taking the curfew confirmation call, heading back out at 11:01, and explaining later that she’d slept through any subsequent ringing by the phone—AND making LeeLee the faithkeeper believe it.)

BANG went the front door, and back to what passed for a pep talk went LaVee. “You gotta sink yo hooks into a man deep as you can, if you wanna keep him caught. Then get the jump (‘n’ the *stomp*) on any skank dumb enough to try snatching him away.” She laced up a pair of black Converse gym shoes that didn’t look lethal on LaVee’s little feet, but probably would be if she got to jumpin’ ‘n’ stompin’ on a steppin’-out fool.

“You watch yourself out there tonight,” Nonique warned.

“I’ll be busy enough watching *him* ‘n’ any *her*, if there IS one and I find out WHO.”

What would you say if I told you MY plans for this evening? What advice would you give, what tips would you offer? One thing for sure: you’d never try to talk me out of taking a GERONIMO! jump out of a plane or off of a cliff. As I’ve got to do, with or without your blessing—

“Don’t go making That Face at me again,” said LaVee.

“I’m just... kinda jumpy myself, I guess.”

“Took you long enough! How many times I try getting you to jump double dutch when we was kids, and you always chicken out?”

“Spect it’s too late for that now.”

“But not for me to use this ol’ jumprope to *hogtie* Dook if he’s messing around on me! Okay, I’m ready—see you tomorrow. Don’t do nothing tonight *I* wouldn’t do.”

There it was: advice and blessing intermingled.

Nonique gave her a hug, wondering how LaVee could hope to shadow Dook while wrapped in a cloud of fragrance that didn’t quite camouflage her underlying tension; and so they parted.

It was time to Drop By The Y, be seen there as the clock ticked down to the pickup hour, and recheck her appearance (clad all in Foxy Pink) every fifteen minutes. *You can do*

this. You will do this. You MUST do this, or it'll be too late for more than double dutch.

Four days shy of the summer solstice, the sun was just setting as Nonique snuck away and slipped into the Cutlass as it came gliding by. Steered one-handedly by Eddie Ray as he Fair Caught her with the other, moving it hither and thither over her Foxy Pinknesses, now grazing them with fingernails, now stroking them with open palm; breaking contact only to light a Newport or navigate the still-novel drive-through window at a Golden Arches. (Far enough from Riversgate that few if any Thornford Ravens would be on its premises, eating or working.)

“Hold the onions, heh heh heh heh,” Eddie spoke into the mike, adding “You can see *why* I said hold ‘em!” to the Golden Archer at the window, who leered appreciatively at Nonique as he handed over a sack of Big Macs and jumbo fries.

One real-life raven flew over to perch on the Cutlass hood and peer at them through the windshield as they munched onionfree burgers.

“Hey, li'l brother! You oglin' my chow or my chick?” asked E.R., tossing it a greasy fry that went unpursued; the bird stayed put and focused beadily on Nonique.

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, STILL is sitting—

till Eddie snapped on the headlights and gunned the engine. Away flew the bird and so did the Cutlass through the gathering dusk, while Nonique wiped ketchup from her mouth and replaced it with fresh lipstick. (Not Foxy Pink but Sangria Red, chosen to leave a multitude of marks.)

Eddie's left hand steered them back to Riversgate while his right meandered over every reachable part of Nonique. She in turn redirected right-hand traffic toward routes more to her liking, as mutual expectations steadily rose.

They turned onto Deliverance Road (cue the dueling banjos) and came to an isolated stop in one of the semigreen hidey-holes reserved for parking-minded teens. Eddie left the motor running so the fan could supplement a sporadic breeze and the radio could contribute a Studio 107 soundtrack: Natalie Cole's “I've Got Love on My Mind,” Marvin Gaye's “Got to Give It Up,” the O'Jays's “Darlin' Darlin' Baby (Sweet Tender Love)”—

—counterpointed, before long, by E.R.'s grunts and groans.

Nonique, always a thorough rehearser, had sacrificed one of her insurance premiums to practice rolling it onto the end of a mop handle; and so had no problem enveloping the genuine article once she'd rendered it good and ready.

"GawDAMN but I'm a lucky dude!" gasped Eddie as he got nimbly outfitted.

You said it went Nonique's brain as she divested her body and reclined on the Cutlass backseat. *I'm gonna be the best you'll ever have, Mister, so follow my lead wherever I go...*

Prepping for pain.

Prepping for risk, rubberized or not.

Prepping for proof that the ultimate intersection can cross up hexes and undo voodoo.

O whatever God hath wrought

Don't let me be OVERwrought

And then, and then, on the very brink of the final verge—

Uttering a sustained high-C piggy-squeal at the sight of a ghastly visage gawping at her through the car's rear window.

Eddie Ray (bucked up and off and into a rampant squat) took one look at the haggard specter, then uttered an unrich/unslow/undeeep "FUCK YOU, REESE! GO FIND YO OWN WOMAN!"

The frightmask, completing its survey of their sweaty nudity, receded from view.

"That fuckin' Reese," laughed Eddie.

So it hadn't been Winthrop or Midget back from their marching band conclave, or Bruiser Poole or "Love Bite" Briggs or Teri Rhett of the clarinets or Marquita McLeod of the Louder Crowd or Miss Fanny Hooker.

No: it'd been Maurice Myers, Rumah's brother, who since getting stabbed on Christmas Eve had become a black Boo Radley—hiding by day in the liquor store stockroom, then emerging after dark to prowl around Riversgate like a Peeping Po' Boy.

The mood he crack'd from side to side

"The hex is come upon me," cried

The Lady Overwrought

“Now then, where was we ‘fore we got so rooooodly interrupted, heh heh heh heh—”
Laughing again. Laughing *again*.

“BACK OFF,” ordered Lady O, redonning her foxy pinkies and requesting to be taken home immediately.

This time, button-playing availed him not. Nor did gravelly reassurance nor whining pleas nor indirect threats—all fell on deafened ears. Nonique wouldn’t even return to the frontseat beside him; Eddie was obliged to chauffeur her to Ferndean Gardens like a furiously frustrated cabbie, without a single heh-heh when the Climax Blues Band sang “Couldn’t Get It Right.”

“Well thanks fo’ the free spanky-hanky!” he said through gritted teeth. “Mind if I use it on somebody *else*?”

“YOU DO THAT,” she retorted, flouncing out of the car and into her townhouse.

For hours that night she lay in a pit of stone-cold humiliation, hearing echoes of Gothic lyrics: *A frost had come at midsummer; a December storm had whirled over June*. Far beyond anger, beyond rage, beyond writhing with shame, she resonated incredulously.

The Code of the Macho meant he couldn’t betray any embarrassment: okay.

The state he was in kept him from chasing Reese off or punching his lights out: okay.

And “C’mon, whyncha *relax* already?” was his idea of tender comfort following a traumatic incident: even that might’ve been tolerable.

BUT WHY DID HE HAVE TO *LAUGH*??

WHY COULDN’T HE HAVE CARED ENOUGH NOT TO *LAUGH*??

(*My love shivered in my heart, like a suffering child in a cold cradle...*)

Then: THUP.

And again: THUP.

A few more seconds, and: THUP-THUP-THUP.

As if gravelly pellets were being hurled against her bedroom windowpane.

Probably by LaVee, who’d been known (though not by parents) to accidentally lock herself out after answering a curfew call and then returning to the fray.

Bleary glance at the digital clock showed it to be 3 a.m.

THUP. THUP. THUP—

Blinking glance between the curtains, below the shade and through the window.

At a silhouette too tall and broad to be LaVinia Wilmore. (Or Winthrop Eshton, who'd've been your unhappy second guess despite his still being away downstate.)

The silhouette waved a hand upward. In breach of proper decorum and, at this curfewed hour, of civil ordinance; yet also of barricades. As if signaling for a fair catch.

Oh sweet mother—

Pause only to step into sandals, and listen half a sec outside the master bedroom door for the snores testifying that Vernon Smith Sleeps Here. (Alfreda said she herself couldn't get a good night's shuteye when out of earshot of this incessant barrage: *I will never desert Mr. Micawber.*)

Creep downstairs then, wearing just jammies: no bra, no makeup, hair bent out of shape, breath touched by despair yet ready to inhale new hope. Creep down to the patio door, unbarring and unlocking and sliding this open just far enough to permit egress.

A nightlight was on above the patio, as were others behind neighboring townhouses, and more across the grassy courtyard on the opposite side of the block; yet these were more like low-lying stars than lamps to see by. There was no moon, no beams from passing cars, no sound of crickets or katydids—too early in the summer for them. Nothing except the silent silhouette on the narrow walkway that divvied up the courtyard.

Again it waved, but came no closer.

Nor would you, if you were a guy seeking to make amends at 3 a.m. with the teenage daughter of a six-foot-eight Rebounder who might wake up at any moment.

Instead, a come-hither gesture.

Step slowly and soundlessly over the patio, over the courtyard lawn, over to where the silhouette stood waiting to be forgiven—

—and perceive an instant too late that the silhouette didn't belong to Eddie Ray Anderson, but to Damon Ingram (commonly known as Dook) whose eccentric hygiene was accented less by chlorine at the moment than a bouquet of cheap booze.

What was *he* doing here? Why had *he* targeted *Nonique's* window, when they were secondhand acquaintances at best?

Dook slurrily asserted that E.R. 'd told the truth—Nonique WAS all broken in for bareback gallops, and champing at the bit like a filly in heat for a fresh buckaroo.

Which was awfully unaquatic talk for a watersportsman. But not nearly as awful as his taking hold of her with gropy squeezezy paws that reduced Nonique to stupefied paralysis.

“(L-L-LaVee?)” she managed to whisper.

““At gal stanks lakka daid fish,” badmouthed Dook, propelling Nonique along the sidewalk. “Tries cuvvin’ it up, but cain’ nothin’ de-stankify a daid fish. Now y’all, betchoo smell mo lakka rahp *peach*—so les hustle, car’s down hyah—”

The streetlamp at the end of the block revealed a beatermobile parked at a crazy angle, one front tire straddling the curb.

“(B-b-but Eddie...)”

“He say he’p m’self, *he* done w’f’you. Be a long time ‘fo *I* am—”

Nonique tried to dig benumbed sandal-heels into the courtyard, collect enough of her demolished wits to scream for help; but before she could do either the path was blocked by a dark shadow that sprang forward like a short martial artist and gropily-squeezezy grabbed Dook by the throat.

“*Ssstanksss???*” it hissed. “*Ssstanksss???*”

Nonique, shaking herself loose, dodged behind a sycamore tree whose roots had raised a big bump in the courtyard sidewalk. (Kids swore that a treasure and/or skeleton was buried within this bump; many attempts had been made to extract its contents.) She watched Dook stagger back from the assault, then break the shadow’s grip and thrust it away from him so it tripped on the rootbump and landed in a chokeberry bush.

“Shi’, don’ need *this* sorta shi’ no-how!” mumbled Dook. “Where you go, ‘Sweet Thang?’ Ain’ up fo’ playin’ no hide ‘n’ seek... Well, I catch you later—sometime when ol’ Stanky-Snatch ain’ buttin’ in on us.”

He teetered off to his beatermobile; almost drove it straight into the streetlamp; then careened away for additional temptation of doom.

Leaving the night soundless again, except for ragged irregular whimpers from inside the chokeberry bush.

Nonique, feeling number than ever, stepped around the sycamore and bent down to extend a helping arm—

—only to tumble back over the rootbump with a muted cry as the end of a jumprope lashed out, its handle flicking her smartly across the face.

“YOOOO??” went the shadow. “YOOOO??”

Try to deny, to explain, to make more than thin keening squeaks like a fieldmouse beset by a hoot owl. But by the time she was able to sit up, clutching her welted cheekbone, the shadow had dissolved into the unhearing darkness.

Then came a gap in Nonique’s recollection. The next awareness she had was of being tangled in her own bedsheets, with the sunlit clock showing that noon had passed.

Any thought or prayer that recent events had simply been a nightmare got quashed by the sight of her motley contusion in the bathroom mirror. Which at least she was able to face by herself: a note taped by the mirror informed Sleepyhead that her parents had gone for a tour of potential suburban domiciles. They might not be home till late, but her birthday breakfast would be served without fail at the customary time tomorrow morning. No need to remind Nonique, of course, that tomorrow was also Father’s Day. (“HINT HINT” addendum in Taw’s scrawl.)

A memento punctuated by a tremendous **SLAM** against the townhouse’s front door.

Suck in a great gulp and hold it for hours, waiting for the next outburst (or inburst).

But not so much as a twitter-tweet followed.

So treat your cheek with Betadine and ease on down the stairs for circumspect reconnaissance, taking Randle’s toy periscope to ascertain whether anyone lurked within its range. Then unlock, unbolt, and open the front door by infinitesimal degrees—

—and find a large unsealed cardboard carton, filled to the brim with freshly-minted trash.

Drag it inside and upstairs. Spend the afternoon sifting through its shreds and scraps.

Every trace of half a lifetime’s best friendship, practical cousinness, practical sistahhood. All the things you’ve ever given or loaned to LaVee—clothing and cosmetics and cassettes, photos and postcards and plush toys—all ripped apart or smashed to splinters. Some, like a paperback copy of *Wuthering Heights* borrowed for an end-of-semester book

report, were defaced with thickly-printed monosyllables.

Sort out these remnants. Arrange each on your unmade bed, putting them in date order like a sequential jigsaw puzzle; harking back to the past so as not to think about the present. Until, at the very bottom of the carton, a gaudily-wrapped birthday gift is found flattened as if by a flailing hammer, and with the bluntest-possible monosyllable smeared over it in Fashion Fair nail polish.

(If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee.)

So throw on some untorn garments; throw a few more into your shoulderbag; latch onto your oboe case (snick, snick) and run the hell away from that box, that room, that house, that block, that cooperative development. Hasten to the station and board a northbound El, trying to erase your mental chalkboards and keep them blank till you can take sanctuary with Aunt Duz in Bronzeville and seek some answers to...

...why is the sun so low in the sky...

...whether your last meal was yesterday's burger and fries...

...wherefore art thou, inasmuch as which...

—*how could he*—

—*how could she*—

—*how could they*—

...did you leave a going-to-Duz's note for the folks...

...should you have tried phoning there first...

...because it's Saturday night and That Delores isn't responding to her buzzer and where do you go now since your second choice would be to join Reuben and Kukura in Chinese quarantine but fat chance of reaching them this evening...

—*HOW COULD HE*—

—*HOW COULD SHE*—

—*HOW COULD THEY*—

—blankness, keep the blankness intact as you rest against the Bronzeville brownstone and let Bill Withers chant "Lean On Me" in your mind's ear, segueing to "Grandma's Hands" while you tug Cat's gold locket up from inside your cotton top and clasp it for strength, rub it for guidance—

—and get struck to the ground for the second time that day, more heavily this time and more painfully as the locket-chain snaps off your neck and the bag-strap gets wrenched off your shoulder and the oboe case is wedged between your ribcage and the pavement with an all-the-wind-knocked-out-of-you **OOF**—

Not quite drowning out the sound of fugitive footsteps.

No telling who the culprit or culprits was or were.

Nor are any witnesses or “Stop thief!” Samaritans nearby.

So, singlehanded and unassisted, regain your wind... and your seat... and, incrementally, your feet.

If not clarity of thought. Or understanding of incidents.

Vague memory of an emergency five-spot that ought to be tucked inside your bra. But you can’t remember stashing it there today... and don’t feel up to rummaging around for it. Modesty aside, your neck and shoulder and ribs (and cheekbone, *again*) all feel too sore.

At least the undamaged oboe case is still bearhugged to your midriff. Which intensifies discomfort while bestowing some relief... as well as self-admonishment: you completely forgot about your regular Saturday lesson with Mr. Nik.

Okay. Start trudging westward, where the sunset’s last rays are receding beneath the horizon. Try to find a pay phone in functional condition. (Easier said than done.) Finally locate one at a filling station—*not* a Conoco—several blocks away, and dial O for Operator.

“...yeah, um... need to place a collect call.”

“What is your party’s number, please?”

“...uh... can’t remember the number. His name’s Mr. Nik.”

“Can you tell me his *last* name and address?”

“...his last name *is* Nik... Niko... I forget the rest of it. He lives near Greektown.”

“(Sigh.) I’m afraid we’ll need more than that to place your call.”

“...er... he’s my oboe teacher?”

“Why don’t you try again when you can remember more, dear?” (Click.)

Try again. Easier TOLD than done.

Receiver’s still in your hand, but who else...? Aunt Duz was a no-show. Folks won’t be home yet, and you don’t want to return there anyhow. Aunt LeeLee’s probably

working the swing shift again—and you don’t want to talk to anyone by the name of Wilmore. Or Anderson. Or even Uncle Babe or Grandpa Bram or Big Zeke or Miss Fanny Hooker, any of whom would just make you go back... and re-face the music.

Which you can do by yourself.

Still got your oboe, safe in its good sturdy case. Maybe it’s not too late. Maybe Mr. Nik’ll overlook your tardiness (unprecedented) if you demonstrate how serious and dedicated you are... by walking all the way to his place. Like the song says: *if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.*

Just keep going west till you reach the old Egyptian Road, then turn right and head north. As if you were a courageous escapee from slavery following the Underground Railroad to freedom. (But not to Deliverance—never again anywhere near Deliverance.)

The old Egyptian Road: Taw said they called it that because it ran all the way up here from Little Egypt, and one time in his teens he hitchhiked its entire length via rides with a series of pretty women in sports cars.

“Only goes to show you what a good-for-nothing road it is,” Grandma Cat would snort. “Seedy where it’s not sordid—got a saloon on every corner—and’ll never be rid of the reek of them infernal Stockyards.”

I know, Grandma. But I have to do this. I lost your locket. I lost my purse—

You lost nothing, child—they were STOLE. The Lord’ll punish the sinners who did it.

And He will walk beside you this evening, if you make a joyful noise unto Him in your heart.

Sing with me, Grandma.

Have you seen the light, light of the world?

Have you seen the light, light of the world?

Ever-shining on this—ever-shining on this—

Ever-shining on this road!

Not around HERE you haven’t: a white blue-collar neighborhood renowned for its hostile unfriendliness to outsiders, especially those with dark skintones.

You are a Curry, child. Stand up straight and hold your head high.

(Sore neck and all.)

Plod as inconspicuously as you can, veiled in unobtrusive abstraction, sticking to the (hate-to-say-it-but) shady side of the street. It's almost Midsummer Night, and you are a classical musician: play the Overture from Mendelssohn's *Dream* in your head. Where it's startlingly infused by:

*If we shaddas have offended
Tink but dis and all is mended
Dat ya have but slumber'd here
While dese visions did appear—*

—as pronounced by Hizzoner Da Late Mare, whose habitat this was (and seemingly still is).

Some visions are less than likely to restore amends. See a patrol car come rumbling toward you: don't think twice before you duck down a side street. "Culled folk don't need to find *no* PO-liceman in This Here City," Big Zeke would say. "If you culled, that PO-liceman gon' come find *y'all*."

And arrest you as a vagrant juvenile curfew-violator—confiscate your oboe as stolen merchandise, even though your name is printed on the case—then clap you in a jail cell crammed with desperate degenerates and leave you to their mercy.

(Oh sweet mother...)

Count to a million Mississippis before drifting v-e-r-y casually around the corner...

Patrol car's out of sight. Okay. Get your bearings back. Take care to face the right direction—due north, like a compass needle. And resume your trek up the old Egyptian Road, trying to blend into the "shaddas," ducking and dodging as you go.

Plugging your ears against any refrains of *She was a gypp-see woman*...

The hardest stretch is going through the Expressway underpass, then having to cross the South Branch bridge. Nowhere to hide in/on either case. Suppose desperate degenerates approach you from both the front *and* rear??

They don't, though. They leave you alone, as does every passing-by vehicle, for which you're thankful *and* forlorn because you're all by yourself in the middle of This Here City. Out after dark without a dime or a friend and what did you do to deserve it? To be subjected to misjudgment, betrayal, insulting defamation by people you loved and cherished?

Unfair. Unjust. Unforgivable.

And undeniably unnerving when you enter the next neighborhood, once Czech, now mostly Mexican, where the walls are painted with lurid murals that look like *Night Gallery* backdrops. Meant to be uplifting and motivational, and maybe they are when the sun shines on them—but not as they surface through the murky gloom like underground graffiti exposed to atomic radiation.

With them comes an eerie jangle of random notes that resolve not into samba or salsa but, of all things, the third movement of Mozart's 40th Symphony. "Minuet in G minor," remarks Reuben Burns as he strolls out of nowhere up beside you, led by tail-wagging Kukura. Neither of them disturbed by the lateness of the hour or the darkness of the world; Reuben's Ray-Bans being an ironic touch. "Says it all in a nutshell, don't you think?"

... 'scuse me?...

"G minor. Pain. Grief. Tragedy."

...just 'cause it's a minor key doesn't make it sad...

"Be that as it may; this is no time for minuets. Better shake a leg; we haven't got all night."

Together you *allegro assai* along a viaduct till you reach the Big Blues Street Market, currently a ghost town. By daybreak (if day ever breaks again) throngs will gather here for Sunday morning whoopjamboreehoo: a teeming bazaar of huckster kiosks, bargain hagglers and burly shills who harangue the likes of Addie Mae Anderson into purchasing hawked-up wares.

Right now it feels more like an easy-credit no-money-down *Twilight Zone*, exuding a low-tide odor of corruption and decay.

"Never fear," says Reuben, remotely detached as ever. "If worse comes to worst, you can always pick a spot and play your oboe for pocket change. Earn enough to buy a shovel, dig yourself a hole and follow us to China."

He and Kukura drop out of sight, as if through a trapdoor in the gritty grimy asphalt, and take Mozart's 40th with them.

Alone again (naturally). Passing through fetid alleys between decrepit edifices, pursued by a wraithlike cadence that builds into a twelve-bar chord progression:

*I done went 'n' caught me a Holy Mackerel
 Yeah, done went 'n' caught me a Holy Mackerel
 Now he gon' turn me into sump'n unnatural*

As sung by the one Grandma Cat never talked about: her brother McDonald, who performed at this very market on many a Sunday and, like Little Walter, was said to pack a gat in his amp.

Uncle Babe, without mentioning him by name, would sometimes get mischievous and begin to hum a “Mackerel” Curry blues tune around Grandma, who always shut him up sharp: “That is the *Devil's* music, boy! Don't you raise your voice against the Lord in THIS house! And don't think you're too big for your britches for me to take a strap to their seat!”

*You never seen such scufflin' and shufflin' 'til the break of dawn...
 And if you ever want to get a fist in your eye, just mention a Saturday night fish fry...
 CAIN' NOTHIN' DE-STANKIFY A DAID FISH—*

Try to run then, run on blistering feet away from the market till its garbage-stench is overwhelmed by fried onions and sausage from a 24-hour Italian diner. Your empty stomach howls like a ghoulish even as your gorge rises at the notion of swallowing solid food. Were you not a Curry, you might go in and beg for a drink of anything quenchable—but you are, so you don't, and continue to Walk On By like Dionne Warwick.

Foolish pride / is all I have left...

Nobody lives in Greektown anymore. Its tavernas and restaurants and giftshops may have been spared, but all the residences got bulldozed in the name of urban renewal. Among them was Mr. and Mrs. Nik's, despite their valiant resistance and that of their neighbors.

“We fought as Leonidas did at Thermopylae,” Mr. Nik once told you before playing the theme from *The 300 Spartans*. “Alas, with much the same result.”

However, the outcast Niks were rescued by their grandson Milo Savas, who along with likeminded risktakers invested in a couple of blocks a mile or so west of Greektown. Here too the houses had been slated for demolition, but were saved from the wrecker's ball and awarded landmark status. Built as mansions almost a century ago before degrading to fleabaggery, they're now well on their way to renovated restoration and are informally

known as “the Preserves.”

Milo Savas’s particular Preserve is a three-story Neo-Classical greystone, with the Niks occupying its first floor. Often when you go there for lessons Mrs. Nik will take you aside to admire some fresh refurbishment, most recently a beautiful stained-glass picture window fit for a church.

“Now Mother,” Mr. Nik chided from his den/classroom, “the girl is here to study *music*—”

“Which means to say she appreciates the finer things in life! Is that not so, Vernonique?”

Oh yes ma’am.

True then; true now. And toward which end you turn left (right? yes, west is left) and limp the last mile or so, deeply dehydrated as well as footsore, necksore, shouldersore, stomachsore, cheekbonesore, and heartsick. (Actually all of the above *except* footsore, since you can no longer feel your feet...)

Just a few more blocks for to tote the weary load

No matter, ‘twill never be light

Just a few more blocks must we ease on down the road

To my oboe teacher’s home tonight...

And there, improbably, it is.

But by the time you negotiate the front gate and the front walk and the front stoop and curl up on the top step with your case in your arms like a nursing baby, the hour is so very very late or very very early that you think it polite not to bother the Niks quite yet...

Z-Z-Z-Z-Z-Z-Z-Z-Z-Z-Z

“(Kid! Hey, kid! C’mon, you can’t sleep here—say, don’t I know you?)”

Nonique opened her eyes.

A man who looked like Milo Savas was peering squiffily down at her.

“M’here f’m lesson,” she informed him.

Only patchy recollections after that.

Mrs. Nik's arms enclosing her. Mrs. Nik doling out cool sips of tap water, more palatable than the costliest champagne. Mrs. Nik bathing and bandaging her external wounds, and dosing the internal ones with secret Grecian elixirs. Mrs. Nik lending her a summer nightie, bedding her down on the couch in Mr. Nik's den, then propping her up on pillows while feeding her spoonfuls of *avgolemono* soup. Shushing Nonique's frequent tearful "(Sorrrys,)" while sending dithersome grandson Milo upstairs to his own bed. (Milo's wife had taken their kids to visit her parents for a few days, so he'd indulged in a night out "striking a blow for historic preservation" at some of The City's more venerable bars.)

Through her tears and over the soup spoon Nonique stayed fixated on the oboe case Mr. Nik had persuaded her to surrender. He kept one protective hand upon it as he sat at his desk in his bathrobe, the other hand patiently dialing the Smiths's number at five-minute intervals and getting a busy signal each time.

"Your mother and father must be very anxious about you," he remarked.

"(...yessir... sorry...)"

"Once again: you say you fell down? And lost your purse? And walked all the way here, in the middle of the night?"

"(...yessir... sorry...)"

"But you do not wish us to call the police?"

"(...NOSSIR... sorry...)"

"Shush," went Mrs. Nik, again plying the soup spoon. "*Eínai dýskolo gi 'aftoús,*" she reminded Mr. Nik: *It's difficult for them.*

After the last eggy-lemony spoonful came a fadeout of indefinite length...

—till the door whacked open like it did at the end of that silent secret snow story, letting in "a gash of horrible light" along with Shucks Smith playing power forward on a fast break as he scooped Nonique off the couch, telling her she'd "imposed on these good people" long enough, striding out of the den past the protesting Niks while Nonique yelped for her oboe, Alfreda intervening to retrieve the case and assure the Niks that Nonique hadn't fled from an abusive home. And incidentally informing Nonique that "Your father had a word with That Boy—he won't be upsetting you anymore."

"Ahhhh," said Mr. and Mrs. Nik, nodding at each other. "There was a *Boy*."

A very strange enchanted Boy / who made me wander very far, very far...

She curled up in a fetal position around her oboe case on the Fleetwood Brougham's backseat (so thoroughly different from the Cutlass Supreme's) and answered none of Taw's many interrogatories, he giving her no time to reply to one question before posing the next; culminating with "Whatchoo tryin' to *do*, gal?? Tryin' to RUIN Alla This fo' m—fo' us??"

"Darling," murmured Freda as the car swerved and veered.

"Well, it's a helluva way to celebrate Father's Day!"

Or to turn fifteen years old.

Knowing that her father had become so enmeshed in "Alla This"—ego-tripping as Uni-Nute's high-dollar Rebounder, yet fearing relegation back to washed-up turnipdom—that he could never be "Taw" to her again.

Much later she would piece together the having-a-word-with That Boy. For openers, her parents had returned late as predicted from their tour of potential residential suburbs. Her mother'd taken a sleep-tight peek into Nonique's room and found the bed occupied only by a scurrilous scrapheap. Recognizing LaVinia's monosyllabic handiwork, Freda'd run over to the Wilmore townhouse, let herself in with a spare key and discovered LaVee passed out on the carpet beside an empty fifth of Jack. (Obtained covertly from Reese Myers in the liquor store stockroom: his equivalent of Boo Radley's knothole offerings.)

LaVee's revival took considerable time and effort (and bouts of porcelain purgatory, grimly induced by Aunt LeeLee when she came home from her hospital shift). Far from coherent and farther still from rational, LaVee vented a bilious opinion that Nonique could be found boinking her skanky deceitful two-faced ass all around the Dow-Dee, starting with Eddie Ray Anderson.

Freda knew the Andersons's address, having jotted it down when the Algebra tutorials began; so the Fleetwood roared over there at a very wee hour for Daddy A. and Momma A. to be roused out by the Rebounder pounding on their door, and astounded by his demanding to know his daughter's whereabouts.

Eddie, as it happened, had slunk in a short while earlier after allaying Friday's frustrations with a late Saturday in Rumah's bewitchable embrace. Summoned from the bed

he'd just climbed into (and told by his mother to go put something on over his boxer shorts) he issued a general denial of wrongdoing followed by "Hey, she led *me* on, man!"

This got repudiated at great length by Addie Mae, back from Detroit and in fact back inside the house only five minutes herself, after an ardent curfew-elusive tryst with Freeman Sumpter. (Daddy Anderson always waited up for her on date nights, but invariably dozed off long before A.M.'s arrival.) Momma pleaded with everyone to keep their voices down, yet Addie Mae boosted hers to Louder Crowd volume for insistence that there wasn't a better or nicer girl at Thornford High than Nonique Smith, she's the one who got me my C in Math, but also the one I warned a hundred times not to get scrambled up with *this* clumsy dummy but oh no *he* had to go 'n' get her all BRAINWASHED so don't you believe a single word he says about her and oh my Mr. Rebounder if you don't mind me saying it at a time like this you sure *do* look even handsomer in person than you do on the TV (et cetera, et cetera, and so forth).

"Well, Eddie Ray?" went Daddy A. "What you got to say to that?"

Daunted by the circle of scowling adults, E.R. took a Bible oath that he and Nonique had only funned around with each other, no harm done; and the last time he'd seen her had been *very early* Friday evening when he gave her a ride—that is to say, *drove her home*, at her request, again no harm done—regardless of what SOME people (furious squint at his twin sister) might imply, impute, or insinuate.

"Ax him!" Addie insisted. "Ax him if he ain't been talkin' trash 'bout Nonique to his lowlife friends!"

"Course not!" pledged Eddie, with *mea culpa* written over his Fair Caught face.

Vernon Smith, bumping the Anderson ceiling at a fully-risen six-foot-eight, had the aforementioned Word with That Boy about contacting, discussing, or upsetting Nonique in any way, shape, or form ever again. Then he and Freda hurried back to Ferndean Gardens, where LeeLee'd pried several more specifics out of LaVee: among them an inkling of the role Dook Ingram'd overplayed with both girls.

"(I think he gave my baby *trich*,)" said LeeLee. "(And IF he did and IF I get hold of him, there's gonna be one sorry swimmer boy looking for work as a cutdown harem guard!)"

Freda, at a mindblown loss, returned to Nonique's bedroom and methodically tidied it, eradicating the jigsaw puzzle of sullied shredded splinters, depositing these in the carton they'd come in and that carton underneath a stack of old magazines. Grieving all the while for the two little moppets who'd romped in this room "just the other day" with dolls and toys and stainless inexperience.

Downstairs Vernon manned the phone, apologetically waking up friends and relations to ask (between jawcracking yawns) if they'd heard from Nonique. Among these was Mr. Nikodemos, who reported that she'd neither shown for yesterday's lesson nor called to cancel. Which didn't smooth away any worry-wrinkles, but accounted for why the Niks weren't entirely surprised when Nonique turned up on their doorstep.

"Now I gotta call 'em all back 'n' tell 'em you been *found*—ain't never gonna see my bed this night—you can just forget 'bout this bein' yo birthday—you 'n' me gonna be talkin' 'bout this in the mornin'—no, make that the *afternoon*—and I'll be wantin' some *answers*, gal, so you best go dream up a few GOOD 'uns!"

Shucks Smith, as an often-on-the-road dad, had seldom administered day-to-day discipline. When he did it was almost exclusively to Randle, along athletic lines. ("Drop 'n' gimme twenty!") With Nonique an occasional "Quit that practicin' and get some sleep!" had been sufficient. Now his little girl had raced off the teenage rails without a word of warning, whether at That Boy's behest or her own; and he dreaded the morrow's Q&A session. Hitting the sack at last, Vernon tried to think how this might be fobbed off onto Alfreda, but swiftly settled into Snoresville.

Fobbing would not be necessary. For the first time in three months, Nonique slid down a ladderless chute and alighted in dreamfree oblivion—no devilish chopstakes, no implacable monoliths, no effervescent Shady Man. Nothing but static void ...

...till this got rippled by a pulse-pulse-pulsing that transitioned to a melancholy mournful tempo, not unlike Purcell's *Funeral Sentences*...

Cometh up and cutteth down like a flower

Fleeth as it were a shadow

Ne'er continueth in one stay...

—till erupting into sudden explosive sobs that gushed forth like Vesuvian lava over Pompeii.

OH SWEET MOTHERRR

who materialized right on cue to enfold her, nestling into the narrow bed as if to recreate another accouchement from fifteen Juneteenths ago. Rocking her like a slow metronome till the lava dwindled to a trickle, cooling on cheeks and chin and pillowcase.

“(Okay. Talk to me. The truth, now. Nothing but.)”

Confess then to having dated Eddie Ray Anderson without parental knowledge or consent, knowing this to be wrong but Eddie wanted to keep it strictly confidential since he had a really mean ex-girlfriend who stuck pins into live moths. So Nonique was swayed into secrecy, cloak-and-dagger intrigue—even to going parking on Deliverance Road despite its reputation. Eddie took her there *early* Friday evening, but before anything “happened” (no mention of consummate organist exploits) they were ambushed by the really mean ex’s mentally ill brother. So Nonique came to her senses and told Eddie to drive her right home, right then, and he was mad and objectionable about it yet did as she asked.

Then on Saturday morning—*yesterday* morning—LaVee’s boyfriend Dook showed up (no mention of wearing only pajamas outside in the courtyard at 3 a.m.) to PROPOSITION her, quoting lies Eddie’d allegedly spread about her; and before she could deal with *that* shock, LaVee (who already suspected Dook of being an unfaithful cheaterbutt) popped up and jumped to the wrongest conclusion imaginable. Which was no excuse for her going off the deep end and dumping a carton of trashed friendship at the Smiths’s front door.

THAT was the camel’s backbreaker for Nonique, who couldn’t bear to stay there a minute longer and so ran off to Aunt Duz’s, forgetting to leave a note but intending to phone from Bronzeville, except Duz wasn’t there and Nonique got blindsided by an unseen mugger, losing her purse and Grandma’s locket but saving her oboe (thank the Lord) and groggily recalling she was late for her lesson at Mr. Nik’s house. To which she proceeded to walk, not realizing how far it would be (seven miles, as later measured on a map) or how long it would take, till it was too late to turn back. Yet even though the way had been dark and ominous and sometimes menacing, she’d feared no evil because Cat was there beside her, and Reuben and Kukura for part of the time, and even “Mackerel” Curry towards the end.

She was very sorry about it all, having bothered and frightened so many people who cared about her; and she didn't want to see Eddie or LaVee or that nasty Dook or anybody else in Riversgate ever again. The sooner the Smiths could pack up and move away to some distant suburb the better, so far as Nonique was concerned.

It went without saying there was more to this story than had been told, and Alfreda knew it; but also that what *had* been disclosed, however bowdlerized, was “nothing but the truth.” All the same, certain boundaries had been crossed with illicit intent; and even after weighing Nonique's travails in the balance, certain consequences must ensue.

For going out on dates without knowledge or consent, the verdict was detention—as Randle called being grounded by their substitute-teacher/permanent-mother. That was fine by Nonique, who shunned re-entry into the Gash of Horrible Light. Yet a retreat into the shell of a tiny cold seed brought her no “grounding” in the regain-emotional-sensibility sense. She picked listlessly at food, continued to shed tears in her sleep, grew gaunt and lethargic and unresponsive. Even on the oboe she played only “Dido's Lament” (in G Minor) over and over again.

*When I am laid, am laid in earth
May my wrongs create no trouble
No trouble in thy breast...*

Utterly unsure what to do, her parents welcomed a suggestion by Aunt Duz (who felt guiltily responsible for not having been there when her great-niece/kid-sister needed her). Why not have Nonique come along on a summer course Duz was taking at Gallaudet College in Washington DC, one of the foremost academies for the deaf? Change of scene; change of mood. It'd mean missing the Curry Fourth of July reunion in South Holloway Park; but as Big Zeke himself said, “We done come together too many times this year fo' the worstest sorts o' reasons. Y'all skedaddle—'n' go tell Jimmy Carter heighdy from me!”

So off they went to the District of Magnificent Distances. And apart from its sweltering even worse during July and August than Home Sweaty Home, their trip there proved to be a cure-nearly-all for Nonique. She found her appetite and refilled her figure; studied ASL basics at Gallaudet; practiced less inconsolably lugubrious music. Mr. Nik was

able to connect her with a local oboe instructor named Del who majored in that instrument at Howard University and was almost rockstar-handsome, yet safely benign since he had an unabashed boyfriend called Rio and didn't rise to pushup-bra bait (much to Aunt Duz's disappointment).

Del taught Nonique how to blow the blues à la Yusef Lateef—"Trouble in Mind" became a signature tune—and showed her around the Howard campus, where she wanted to skip the rest of high school and enroll that fall. Rio played tour guide on sightseeing jaunts around the capital, asking deliberately naïve questions in a loud singsong voice (variously accented) and while they never got to say heighdy to the President, they did catch a living glimpse of his mother Miss Lillian.

But the cure-nearly-all had mixed results in Slumberland. No more quaffing champagne with the Shady Man in candlelit loges or bistros; she now stood on a dank riverbank and watched as he floated past, skewered by a chopstake and tossed into the drink by a Rogue Trombonist in a black-plumed shako. Some nights Nonique stood by and beheld the Shady Man's ultimate sinkage; some nights she waded in to stage a rescue and do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation with her expert embouchure.

Either way, she could not risk returning to Riversgate. Each night, whichever way she dreamed, a prayer was sent up for deliverance from the road to relapse.

Then good news came as she and Duz were about to go out and enjoy their last lunch in DC. Nonique's folks had just signed a rental lease on what was said to be a really fine place in Vanderlund, a far northern suburb on the opposite side of The Cityland from Ferndean Gardens and Douser Dell. "They have really fine schools there too," Alfreda enthused long-distantly, "and the high school has a really fine orchestra."

That much Nonique knew already: the Vanderlund student ensemble, directed by Gerard Conzelman and sponsored by generous underwriters, was perennially one of The State's top-rated.

Brief excitement, checked by a queasy qualm.

"Is it... y'know... integrated?"

"What, darling? Speak up."

"Is it *integrated*—the school? The neighborhood? Vanderlund?"

“Oh. Yes. Some.”

“...how much is some?”

“Don’t worry, darling. We won’t be alone.”

Seven words to prick the cure-nearly-all balloon in seven places.

Tiny cold seeds of worry and loneliness began to sprout tiny cold tendrils.

At lunch, and at the airport, and on the flight back Aunt Duz was full of assurance that this *would* be a good move, one bound to come up roses. Which was a change of tune from a onetime militant who’d disdained *Room 222* as “chocolate milk for Establishment Oreos” and said if you wanted a depiction of real-life schooling, go see *Halls of Anger*. But Nonique had enjoyed her weekly visits to Walt Whitman High, where everybody got along pretty well and even sweet shy white Helen could be unfrightened friends with big belligerent black Jason.

Maybe it couldn’t happen in The City, only out in Hollywood; but as Nonique envisioned a future career with a Symphony or Philharmonic, she knew this would require mingling with white people, blending in and (hopefully) standing out on her merits. She wanted to be Vernonique Curry Smith, World-Class Oboist—not abbreviated to “that *black* oboist” or “that *girl* oboist” or, especially, That Foxy Brown Sweet Thing Check Out Her T&A Oboist. She wasn’t ashamed of who she was or how she looked or where she came from; but didn’t want those things to comprise the first and maybe only impression she might make on people, either.

Back in The Sweaty City everything was rush-rush-rush so they could moo-hoove on up in time for the kids to start school on schedule. Randle’d returned from church camp to accept the impending migration with a complacent shrug, as befit an eleven-year-old boy who had a powerful physique and gift of glib gab. (“Shucks Smith all over again,” their father’s friends called him.)

Nonique by contrast felt more and more hemmed in by stark images from Black History: Dr. King, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Rosa Parks, Jackie Robinson, the Little Rock Nine. She honored and esteemed them all but did **NOT** want to stand out as they had—she was nowhere near that brave, that strong, or that able to juke her way out of predicaments (as her father’d done to survive at the State U).

Nor was she used to being so stranded, so isolated—so not having a best friend to talk to and rely on and commune with.

Their mothers took several shots at arranging a reconciliation, if only to say goodbye. But Nonique's heart had hardened over the summer; she knew LaVee too well, had yanked her back too many times from toppling into truhhhhble. By now LaVee would be wholly committed to the unshakable conviction that Nonique *MUST* have given Dook *SOME* sign of readiness, willingness, availability—why *ELSE* would he have let himself be seduced away from LaVee? (Never mind anything Dook might've inflicted on *her*; that was just a side effect of Being In Love.)

LaVinia had made her never-forgive-her-as-long-as-either-of-them-lived choice; now she could lie in it.

Nonique, cleaning out her bedroom, packed that selfsame carton with everything *she'd* ever received from or shared with LaVinia Wilmore, neatly folding the fabric items, wrapping the breakables in tissue paper, and paying Randle three dollars (bargained down from five) to lug it over to that no-longer-practically-cousin/sistah's front door.

THAT's how you smack a sassyfrass.

Then came the exodus from Ferndean Gardens, the pilgrimage up the Expressway through The City to Vanderlund. Glad their Fleetwood was so well air-conditioned, since emotional clamminess had joined physical perspiration to foggify her mind.

As she had on the Old Egyptian trek, Nonique held her oboe case close and tight from start to finish, trying to find Reuben Burns in her mindfog and solicit more worldly words of unruffled wisdom; but the only response she got was *REPLY HAZY, ASK AGAIN LATER*.

Then they arrived at the Rented House.

From outside it did look to be a really fine place, one that *belonged* in a far northern suburb, and fortuitously shielded from intrusion by a high brick wall with an iron-barred gate. So far, not so bad. But indoors—

(Yeeeeeep...)

They said the old lady lawyer who owned this house was a longtime advocate of civil rights, and had personally selected the Smiths as the ideal family to inject a dose of soulful color to lilywhite Kessell Road.

(Gee thanks...)

Promises of “minimal harassment” may have been made, but the interior of this Rented House didn’t appear to have gotten that memo. Each room seemed wary of the Smiths, or at least of Nonique: vigilant, dubious, mistrustful. Making her feel like she’d gone into a “mainstream” store and—even as the sales staff smiled—been automatically tagged as a potential shoplifter.

May I help you? (Meaning: *Don’t help yourself.*)

Try to picture how Grandma Cat would react, Cat who’d’ve told a Ku Klux Klan rally to go run their sheets through the washer again and this time use bleach.

Were you raised to let a vacant house rile you, child? Put your faith in The Lord and your best foot forward.

It calmed her a little but not a lot. And there was no time for fretting or brooding about this stupid house; not with the First Day of New School to psych up for.

From her jumbled baggage Nonique dug out an Addie Mae Anderson designer original: a skimmer dress of cobalt blue, its hue suitable to her mood. Which wasn’t improved by having to run for the bus that First Day, or having to board it with her cobalt bosom heaving for all the boys to see (*T’s for two and two for tease*), or having to put her best hesitant foot forward into a vast gray mausoleum of a high school.

At least there *were* other black students in attendance; though nowhere near as many as on *Room 222*. From this fraction she thought she found a friend that very First Morning: Claudia Thurman, who was slightly high-strung and overweening yet well-versed in the ways of Vanderlund and also nearby Lakeside Central University. A most valuable person for a newbie to know and, with any luck, buddy up with.

No such luck. “Why didn’t you *tell* me your father’s ‘the Rebounder’?” Cloudy demanded that afternoon in a voice dripping with scorn. Rumor had it that Vernon’d spurned an offer to live in “Happel Land” with the Thurmans and most of Vanderlund’s other black families. Vainly did Nonique deny having any say in where they’d moved; Cloudy wouldn’t listen and dismissed her with a withering “I suppose you think you’re SOMETHING ELSE!”—the most inexcusable conceit among female teens.

So Nonique finished that First Day of New School feeling miserable, and ever more so during her solitary walk “home” from the bus stop—solitary as in the only brownskinned person visible on the length and breadth of Kessell Road. True, no Caucasian accosted her by word or glance; but all the other really fine places along both sides of that lilywhite street sounded the same challenges as the Rented House’s interior:

Who are you? What do you think you’re doing here? State your business. Show some ID. Servant’s entrance is through the REAR door. No excuse for failure to wear a maid’s uniform. How long before you turn tail and go the hell back where you came from?—

“Why aren’t we in Happel Land?” she wailed at her mother.

“Oh, don’t be silly. Hurry and do your homework now, so there’ll be plenty of time after dinner to unpack and set up your bedroom—”

“What’s the point? I bet we won’t last a month in this—this—” (gesture/expression interpretable as *creepy old dump*). “Be better off living out of suitcases, ready to move away at a moment’s notice!”

Infuriatingly, Alfreda humored her defiance and asked only that Nonique agree to make the best of things for the month in question, till the end of September. Maybe this was to keep her from bolting off again to the Niks’s, or back to DC to stay with Del and Rio; or maybe her mother too had reservations about trying to live in *this—this*—and would be just as glad to decamp.

Kid brother Randle had no such misgivings. He rapidly entrenched himself at Dopkins Elementary, indifferent whether he hung around with Reggie Wilmore or a gang of white boys so long as they followed his lead in raising hell. It mortified their mother, who slapped extra detention on top of the school’s; while Grandma Cat (the Implacable Monolith) doubtless waited to finish him off for his myriad sins. *Whoever called him “Shucks Smith all over again” wasn’t lying.*

Their father also seemed to fit in dandily on Kessell Road, signing autographs and sharing his predictions for the Bull-onies’s chances that year. (“Not as good as if *I* was still playin’ for ‘em!”) Nonique wondered sourly if his white audience would act so cordial if he were to announce that more blacks might be joining them next door or down the street. In any event Vernon soon took off on an extended publicity tour for Uni-Nute, leaving his wife

and children to fend for themselves.

Hear the echo: *easier said than done*.

Nonique kept out of trouble and out of the swing of things at Vanderlund Township High, where other black girls were of no more help than Claudia Thurman. Willamene Fowler, though polite, frowned at her not being a more fervent churchgoer. Etta Lang had no interest in anyone who wasn't athletic, while her big (make that BIG) sister Louisa nodded at Nonique in the halls but had nothing to say. Rhonda Wright talked *too* much, all of it jokes: "You GOT to join the Minority Students Association, it's a hoot 'n' a half—even there 'they' got us outnumbered three to one!" And the black guys were a flock of turkeys: bogus lothario Floyd Lewis, disaster-prone Mark Brown, gutbucketed Gabriel Bailey, and tiresome wannabe "Sniper" Jones who made Winth-ROP seem charismatic by comparison.

Pickings were a little (but not a lot) better in the Orchestra. There she was accepted hospitably by Mr. Conzelman into the mostly-upperclassmen Symphonic ensemble; and with a tip-o'-the-Stetson by Beau Guthrie, who projected the image of a banjo-plucking cowpoke but was possibly The Cityland's most gifted young oboist and had won praise from Ray Still himself.

Beau was an amiable first-chair player and easy to talk to about music (he dreamed of playing woodwinds in the Hot Band for his *belle ideal* Emmylou Harris) yet you could hardly ask him to listen while you spilled your most intimate secrets. Not just those from the blistered past but also the distressful present: about how you always had to wonder what this-or-that white person REALLY meant by saying such-and-such to you—and then, when you got back to the place you were staying, you had to wonder whether every unexpected *thump* or *thwack* was a racist offensive being launched at last. Which would almost be better than these constant jitters, this endless uneasiness, this perpetual anticipation of hazards ahead.

(So bad for the heart: keeping control while falling apart...)

No, you couldn't talk to a guy about such things, not even an unfailingly kind and supportive guy like Melvin-the-Missing-Link Linfold. Only another girl would be able to fathom what you'd gone through before and were up against now. But that wouldn't be any of the black girls you'd tentatively approached; nor Sheila Quirk (brazen, boisterous, argumentative) nor Fiona Weller (edgy, closed-off, peculiar) nor Robin Neapolitan

(definitely someone to keep your distance from) nor Laurie Harrison (gossipmonger lately gone uptight) nor Samantha Tiggs (odd combination of sports star and infatuated groupie) nor Alex Dmitria (superextrafriendly for brief interludes before galloping off elsewhere) nor even Joss Murrish (zealously wanting to BE black, even combing her *light* brown curls with a fist-for-a-handle Afro pick).

No.

If you were going to unburden yourself, there was only one person to turn to.

The one who'd held the bus when you ran late that First Day. The one who'd helped you back into your dress when you were upset by Cloudy's censure. The one assigned to be your lab partner, and study hall colleague, and regular-seat-at-a-lunch-table finder. The one who (though as pretty a white girl as you'd ever known personally, even after getting socked in the face by a high-speed volleyball) apparently had as unfortunate a romantic track record as your own. The one you'd felt gratitude toward, and resentment for that gratitude, and remorse for that resentment. The one you might talk to, and rely on, and commune with—who clasped your hand and held it and encouragingly squeezed it when this story got difficult to tell. Though you sure didn't know why she wanted to sit through it all, when (as she herself had said) it was none of her beeswax.

"Well," said Vicki Volester after several throatclearings, "wanna know what I think?"

"...what?"

"Friday's the last day of the month."

"...so?"

"You said you'd give it till the end of September."

"...and?"

"So maybe Joss and I, and Alex if she's not busy, could come over after school and help you unpack. Set up this room so it's yours."

"...why?"

"Cause... um... I want you to stay. And not feel bad, or alone. I was a New Girl in Vanderlund, and would've been completely lost if I hadn't met Joss. It helps so much to have a friend—better still, a bunch of friends. You're never alone then. Sometimes you even *want* to be, and have to go hide from them awhile—"

As on the First Day, a ladylike SNORT trembled on the brink before tipping over into a reluctant yet unmistakable snortle. “You always make me laugh.”

“Do I? *With* me or *at* me?”

“Bit of both, I guess—”

Then a humongous **SLAM** from downstairs.

The girls dropped their empty Fanta bottles and clutched each other till an end-of-a-long-day voice said “Vernonique?”

Sighs of mutual relief.

They found Alfreda Smith in the process of wriggling out of her pantyhose, right there in the watchful wary rented living room. She’d hoped to resume full-time teaching now that Randle was in sixth grade; but since budgets were being cut even by far northern ‘burbs, she had to make do with intermittent work as a substitute.

“Oh!” (smoothing down her skirt with an assumption of academic dignity) “—hello there. I’m guessing you’re Vicki?... I don’t generally greet guests like this,” she added as Vicki gaped at her with dropped jaw.

“No ma’am—I mean yeah, I’m Vicki—I mean ‘scuse me for staring—but you look just exactly like my Aunt Fritzi!”

Pin-up model, showgirl, chorine, dance studio mistress, professional party planner—all the Fritzi Ritz hallmarks were there to be seen, most unexpectedly in light of everything Vicki’d just been told about her.

Now Freda and Nonique’s mouths hung open.

“Um—should I say *Ahhnt* Fritzi?” Vicki faltered. “I mean, she tans pretty deep—so do I—see?—‘olivaceous,’ they call it,” holding up a still-summerkissed forearm.

And causing a wild WHOOP of laughter to burst out of Vernonique: bemusedly, but indubitably.

*

Joss had a mild case of hurt feelings when informed that she’d auditioned a tad too off-puttingly for the role of Nonique’s soul sister. *Don’t you DARE say “I told you so,”* Vicki was sub-ordered.

Why would I say YOU told ME so?

Oh shut up.

YOU shut up.

At any rate, on Friday afternoon Joss came to the Old Brandoffer Place as her normal convivial self, telling funny stories about Miss Emily Brandoffer whom she'd met at law-firm festivities, and presenting Nonique with a roomwarming poster of Richard Pryor playing a bassoon. (Which Vicki was made to pay half for, even though Joss had bought it for herself a year ago: "I was just breaking it in for her.")

Alex regretfully couldn't be there (the volleyball team had a special Friday practice for the weekend tournament at Startop) and Ozzie was tied up till late at the Lot; but Felicia came over after awhile to meet Freda and marvel at her Fritzi-resemblance. The two mothers speculated about how genetic applesauce might've criss-crossed between deepest Dixie and Lithuania, while they pulled together an impromptu supper that the three girls ate up in Nonique's half-assembled room so as to avoid rubbing grubby elbows with Randle and Goofus, who'd been shooting trashtalk hoops with the rest of their gang.

"I was feeling sorry you had to live in such an OLD inland house," Joss said between bites of sweet potato pie, "but at least the walls and floors here are solid enough you don't have to overhear every little annoyance. (This pie is *so good*—beats whortleberry tarts by a mile!)"

All in all, the roomwarming went "like a boudoir on fire" (as Joss phrased it) and when Nonique finally bedded down that night, it almost felt like it *was* her room. The entire Rented House seemed to take a sabbatical from surveillance, allowing Nonique to have her first truly pacifying sleep in a month.

(No: make that the first since New Year's Day.)

*

On Saturday morning, the 1st of October, she took her oboe up to Burrow Lane where Joss and her cornet had sleptover as usual on Friday, and Nonique was invited to do likewise if and when she chose. They were soon joined by Spacyjane Groh, bringing her guitar from Cecidia Drive and also Floramour the china doll. Nonique had seen Spacyjane on the bus and thought of her as a trippy-hippie chick, given the straw fedora and embroidered haversack and unfocused star sapphire eyes. Now, from the way Vicki and Joss

were reacting to her having arrayed Floramour in a tight red leatherette minisheath, Nonique had to wonder whether some criss-cross applesauce with Rumah Myers might be afoot here.

“Space, what have you done?” Joss asked sternly.

“Oh, I just thought it’d be justified. You know, for what we’re doing today.”

“Did you like *sew* this? It’s a perfect fit,” said Vicki, peering doubtfully at the doll.

“A little *too* perfect,” said Joss. “Better phone Alex and make sure Is made it to the tournament.”

Nonique raised inquisitive brows (and beauty dot) at Vicki as they trooped out to crowd into Felicia’s Firebird. “(Is?)”

“(Ever met Isabel Carstairs?)”

“(Don’t think so.)”

“(Let’s hope you just *didn’t*.)”

“(Ohhhh-kaaaay...)”

Felicia drove them to Jupiter Street, long enough for Vicki to drop off her overnight bag for the Saturday sleepover, and Joss to give Nonique a quick tour of her “I Like Black Guys” aerie gallery (where a new Richard Pryor poster replaced the one with the bassoon). Then back in the Firebird and down to the gateway of Auldforest Woods, where Jenna Wiblitz awaited them in a stiffening breeze with a weighted-down sketchpad propped on a plastic-bagged portfolio propped on birdwoman-knees propped on a furled yellow umbrella.

“How’d you tote all that over here?”

“Call me Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,” chirped Jenna, whose frames today featured tiny carousel horses.

“Are you girls sure you’ll be all right?” nattered Felicia. “It’s supposed to start raining later—”

“Provided for,” said Jenna, hauling up her umbrellow by its corncob handle and giving it to Vicki, the only one without an instrument or zippercase.

“Yes, but remember what happened to you two *last* Saturday—”

“Mom, that was completely different! We were out with a couple of lunatics!”

“And there aren’t more of *those* in *there*?” Fel headjerked at the Auldforest Woods, as though a dozen Mad Bludgeoners were concealed behind a dozen trees.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. V, they’ll know better than to tackle all five of us at once,” Joss told her.

“All *six* of us,” said Spacyjane, nodding at the blonde china head protruding from her haversack. Felicia gave it a nervous glance and the Woods another, but eventually left them on their own.

“Your mom’s nice,” Nonique remarked.

“You bet she is!” Joss warmly agreed.

“She should’ve stayed—her aura’s really green,” observed Spacyjane.

“Well, before *our* auras get really *wet*, let’s take a dab at this,” said Jenna, leading the way into the forest preserve.

Trees quickly pressed around them, tall and thickset on either side of the path, arching overhead to link branches into a dense canopy that shut out the sky. Which might be helpful if it did start to rain, but also dimmed the light and cut off the breeze.

Like a regular wilderness thought Nonique, keeping close to the rest of the group. *Wouldn’t want to walk seven miles in HERE after midnight.*

“Is this really a good idea, with the weather and all?” Vicki asked Jenna. “Maybe we should’ve gone to the Startop tournament—at least that’s indoors. I mean, will Lisa ever forgive you for missing it?”

“Lisa hasn’t forgiven me yet for missing the spelling bee she won in second grade,” said Jenna. “She’ll be fine. We’ll be fine.”

“If we *did* do this later and Alex was with us, she could build a Girl Scout shelter out of twigs and leaves,” Joss threw in. “And if we wait a couple weeks, the leaves’ll be lots prettier—”

“Oh, I think they’re neat right now, just starting to turn,” said Spacyjane. “And raindrops hanging off their edges might be scenic.”

Scenic is as scenic does, Nonique was thinking when she, for once, almost fetched up against Vicki as *she*, for once, came to an isolated standstill—at the head of a footbridge that the others tromped over without pause. Her line of vision could be traced to a clump of skinny ash trees, the sight of which made Vicki take a long deep breath.

“(You okay?)”

“(Tell you *my* story sometime,)” sighed Vicki, almost unheard over the brook babbling beneath their feet.

“(Can’t wait. But got to, for now. C’mon—)”

They caught up with the others at the “rather boggy and sad” hollow reminiscent of Eeyore’s Gloomy Place. On past Saturdays it would’ve been filled with stoners and dealers and rowdy wastrels; today there were only a few *b-z-z-z-z-ing* dragonflies that put the word *chopstake* through Nonique’s brain, very briefly, before Spacyjane distributed handwritten sheet music.

She’d unearthed some lyrics from one of the books she collected by and about women named Jane, to go with a tune “noodled together” for this occasion. That’d been enough to dissuade Fiona Weller from taking part, despite Vicki and Joss’s coaxing. “(I don’t play the clarinet outdoors, and even if I did I still wouldn’t play anything SHE ‘noodled.’ SHE gets the hell on my nerves as it is, and I don’t need that set to music.)”

Nonique could sympathize. With one eye on the score, she rolled the other at its composer: “*Adagio* in G minor?”

“My favorite tempo and favorite key,” smiled Spacyjane. “Hers, not so much,” she nodded at Floramour.

“(Ohhhh-kaaaay...)”

The players, situated by Jenna, took precarious seats on the brim of the hollow; then spoiled this tableau by scootching forward so as not to slide down to its boggy bottom. After a new arrangement (with less risk of mud) was devised, the cornet and guitar and oboe came out of their cases, the sketchpad was opened to a fresh page, and a charcoal stick was picked up like a conductor’s baton. All this in aid of delineating a scene from *Phantaphyre*, Wiblitz & Skinner’s *shōjo manga* about a star cruiser of female astrocadets landing on a planet of extradimensional entities—music-minded ones in this scene.

Nonique felt self-conscious about posing, though Jenna’d often drawn her (along with everybody else) at the cafeteria table. She was more confident about providing the group’s tuning note like a good oboist; and more at ease than Vicki the background vocalist, who had to share a score with Floramour. Less willing to dilly-dally, though; her regular lesson at the Preserves was pending, and Joss likewise had a Saturday cornet “tootorial” to get to.

Then Spacyjane began strumming a slow ethereal melody on her guitar, and in a sweet true (yet eerie) voice sang:

*I dreamed it would be nameless bliss
 As I loved, loved to be-ee-ee
 And to this object did I press
 As blind as eagerlee-ee-ee

 But wide as pathless was the space
 That lay our lives betwee-ee-eeen
 And dangerous as the foamy race
 Of ocean-surges gree-ee-eeen

 And haunted as a robber-path
 Through wilderness or woo-oo-ood
 For Might and Right and Woe and Wrath
 Between our spirits stoo-oo-ood—*

Breaking off there because Joss had ceased to blow her horn, having succumbed to one of her silent-but-contagious gigglefits when they reached the haunted robber-path.

Jenna, usually unfazeable, verged on a Moana Lisaesque conniption flip until Nonique (again the good oboist) stepped up to restore harmony.

“How ‘bout we try it again *without* the singing?”

“Then what am *I* supposed to do?” asked Vicki. “Sit here and hold Floramour?”

“Look up at the sunshine,” suggested Nonique.

Sure enough, some slender beams were filtering through the overclouded sky and branchy canopy to shed a little light and cast a little shadow. So the artist went back to her sketchwork, the trio went back to *adagio*-ing, and the background vocalist (if not the china doll) hummed along with the otherworldly air as it was played in the shade.

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Soph Wars

Lucas Stabeldore was a man of few words, “yep” and “nope” being predominant in his vocabulary. He had been raised on an orchard farm outside Dowagiac (“Dwaaahjack” to Michiganders) where he was acquainted with Holly Brollis’s family, her great-uncle Wallace Brollis being one of his scoutmasters. Luke rose through the ranks to Eagle Scout by keeping himself physically-strong-mentally-active-morally-straight, and always prepared to do his duty assisting others at all times. This didn’t prevent his shooting at Japanese aircraft while serving as a Marine fighter pilot; but as Luke laconicized, “T’other feller was shooting back.” Before, during, and after the war he lived by the twelve principles of The Law:

Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, reverent.

Riding the GI Bill he attended Michigan State, joining the national service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega (open to any Scouting alumni) and lettering three years straight on the Spartan tennis team that won the Big Ten championship. This despite a slight hitch in his gait that added to the overall Gary Cooperish impression: sober, solid, steadfast, never raising his voice in anger, intent on sharing his devotion to the American Way of Life and encouraging the common good—even when that entailed self-sacrifice.

Such as by becoming a public schoolteacher, as had his older sister Dorcas, whom Lucas followed to Vanderlund in 1957. Shirley Ewing’s having transferred to Multch Township after marrying Principal Agate left a vacancy in the Social Studies department that Luke ably filled, standing tall before his classes, holding forth on history, citizenship and

current events with an economy of expression that many students applauded, since it meant fewer notes to take.

Dorcas Stabeldore taught Business courses at VTHS and then, when the junior high opened, Typing at VW. She and Lucas were able to afford a midsized house on Scotchbroom Road and share it in suburban comfort. Dorcas, though content with spinsterhood, dabbled in occasional matchmaking for her bachelor brother; his being a Strong Silent Type attracted numerous ladies, but he got flustered and uncomfortable when not in an academic setting or on a tennis court.

“Honestly, Luke, you’re just an overgrown boy,” Dorcas chided while preparing his peanut butter sandwich for the morrow’s lunch. “You haven’t changed one whit since the days you’d hide from little berrypicking girls back in Dwaaahjack.”

“Yep, guess so,” he taciturned. “Got any jam for that sammitch?”

Ten years he taught at Vanderlund High School, earning his master’s degree on the side, taking over as Social Studies chairman when Mr. Staffel retired and then as Vice Principal in 1967. That was the year *Cool Hand Luke* branded him with an indelible sobriquet, little though he resembled the antihero portrayed by Paul Newman.

Wish you’d stop bein’ so good to me, Cap’n...

Being promoted out of the classroom spared Lucas from a failure to communicate with his Social Studies students. Their increasing hostility to the war in Vietnam mystified him, as did the experimental programs implemented by Superintendent Amsterdam. Luke tried to take it all in hitchgaited stride and deal out discipline with coolhanded forbearance. Not for him were the crackdowns by more hidebound Vice Principals, nor the reactionary rantings of Eberhard Drexler (who had to leave the School Board after an apoplectic stroke). Luke’s being physically big enough to quietly intimidate the rowdier elements helped keep the boat from rocking into disarray.

Yeah, them poor old bosses need all the help they can get...

Yet seasickness spread through Vanderlund as the Seventies deepened, as the Baby Boom ebbed and stagflation flowed and VTHS was hit with a triple whammy in 1973: education levy defeated, “Dutch” Amsterdam ousted, and Major Agate departing for the Peace Corps. Leaving the school to wallow through the tempest, in urgent need of a steady

grip on the helm, a skipper able to handle whatever might get lobbed at him next. And who better for such a task than Game-Set-and-Match Stabeldore?

So he stepped up to become VTHS Principal (only the fourth in ninety years) and, as he phrased it, apply elbow grease to troubled waters. A reduced levy was approved; a threatened teachers strike got called off; and the golden anniversary of what oldtimers still called the “New School” was celebrated in 1974-75, very much according to the nostalgic fad for Simpler More Natural Times.

Yet the present-day student body’s fading interest in VTHS activities continued to wane. (Fiona Weller would remark how coincidentally this paralleled the rise in teen consumption of demonweed.) A similar decrease was affecting the Scouts and bewildering Mr. Stabeldore: why, at a time when attention was focused on the environment as never before, were outdoor skills getting *de-emphasized*—and camping actually made optional??

Fortunately that didn’t deter the happier campers, particularly Alex Dmitria who’d been the Stabeldores’s exclusive source for Girl Scout cookies since she was first able to ring their doorbell. Enroll enough Alexes and you’d never be concerned about participation in extracurriculars—although her mother and Mrs. Driscoll, the VW Principal, indicated that Alex had gone overboard activitywise in junior high and come close to burnout. (Something any Scout ought to know how to douse.)

Another ray of sunshine was Hilaria Joy, pride of the House of Brollis. Hers was the dramatic branch of the clan, Dad working as a stage director and Mom as a wardrobe mistress, while Holly herself had been a professional comedienne from the age of three. Mr. Stabeldore welcomed the Brollises when they moved to Vanderlund from Dwaaahjack, knowing no theatrical production at VTHS could possibly flop with Holly in its cast; though he did wish she wouldn’t flirt with him so incorrigibly at every opportunity.

However, you could count on only so many Hollys and Alexes per student body, and each year there seemed to be fewer of them. Indifference was the order of the decade, which puzzled the Principal even more than hostility. Wasn’t youth supposed to be the time of your life when you cared *most*, before reality wore you down?

Not that Cool Hand Luke had given in or given up, or ever would; but more and more he felt like he was on a lonesome crusade to restore lost honor and achieve redemption.

Every night he knelt beside his bed and said heartfelt prayers toward these ends, with the conclusive vow: *On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country, and to obey the Scout Law...*

Even when his endeavors got hobbled by the stringent austerity measures imposed by Mr. Tuerck's School Board and Superintendent "Save-a-Nickel" Billings. As these compounded student apathy, many a VTHS tradition was falling by the wayside or in danger of doing so. Mr. Stabeldore had spoken (tersely) against canceling Orientation, and shelving the annual school directory, and hiking the *Channel's* subscription rates to the point of unsustainability; but each time he'd been outvoted or countermanded.

Now on the prospective chopping block were what remained of the Vanderlund Literary Societies. These dated back to the turn of the century, when one for senior boys and another for senior girls had been established to encourage appreciation of literature finer than dime novels or pulp magazines. They were also seen as an uplifting alternative to the Greek-letter chapters that Lakeside Central's fraternities and sororities were trying to implant at VTHS, as they had at Front Tree and Startup. This movement was stoutly resisted by Whielding Wheaf, who scorned it as "exclusionary ostracism bent on mumbo-jumbo" and extolled the virtues of literary societies in comparison:

"Here, scholastic merit is the only standard. Here, the pupil finds the best that is in him or her called into active realization. *Palmarum qui meruit ferat!*"

But after his death and the opening of the New School in 1924, Vanderlund's lit societies took on all the trappings of Greek-letter-bearers. They expanded and divided till there were three for boys and nine for girls, with younger students allowed to take part providing they underwent arcane initiation rites and ceremonies of privilege.

Ostensibly the only requirement for membership was to earn a B in an English or Speech class and have a C grade average, with every applicant guaranteed a place in some society or other. Yet a rigid pecking order was soon nailed firmly into place, and less desirable applicants got relegated to *other* societies instead of *some*.

Each spring an Intersociety Literary Contest was held, featuring competitive entries in poetry, short story, essay, oration and declamation; plus as much high-caliber hoopla as could be packed into one convocation. A silver cup was awarded to the society (nearly

always a *some*, very seldom an *other*) that scored the highest ratings, followed by a banquet interspersed with additional speechifying. (This banquet almost got aborted in 1926 when Chester Brockhurst invited Sinclair Lewis to come be its toastmaster. The Man from Main Street couldn't make it but sent Chester a droll letter of regret, expressing hope that *he* might one day reject his own Pulitzer Prize.)

The cachet of LitSoc status would become so coveted that by the Sixties fully a quarter of all students belonged to an *other* if not a *some*. Yet even these charmed circles lacked immunity from Seventies phlegm; involvement declined at a precipitous rate, sped along not just by anti-elitism but an unfortunate incident that, had it happened a few months later, would've quadrupled the Whammy of '73.

Bitsy Lurdinger was smart but schlumpish and so got allotted to Christina Rossetti, the *otherest* girl LitSoc. Defiantly embracing their *otherness*, the Rossettis staged a "Goblin Market" induction ordeal that grew fruit-juicier every autumn. By and large this bound the *others* closer together—

*For there is no friend like a sister / In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way, / To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down, / To strengthen whilst one stands*

—yet Bitsy Lurdinger, "gorging on bitterness without a name," staged a solo post-ordeal suicide attempt. It was just as unsuccessful as Kim Zimmer's botched hanging-from-the-rafters would be five years later, but Bitsy's had farther-ranging consequences. A thorough investigation of all LitSoc rites and rituals was mounted, resulting in the dissolution of Christina Rossetti; which averted a lawsuit by the outraged Lurdingers but sent several Rossettis into therapy, even as schlumpish Bitsy got transferred to start a more juiceless life at Multch West.

Over the next several semesters LitSoc turnout fell off continuously, and one by one the shrinking societies voted to merge or disband till only four were left in 1977—all girls. After scraping through a lame edition of the spring lit contest and an aberrant *Aqueduct* (the annual magazine produced in conjunction with the Art Club), representatives of the surviving socs met after Memorial Day to discuss strategies for enlisting new members come fall.

“Might as well call ourselves literary *cults* and try to shanghai converts,” grumbled Debra (Don’t Call Me Debbie) Karberski of Howe-Stowe LitSoc, who not surprisingly was a friend and mentor of Moana Lisa Lohe.

Then the four representatives and their faculty advisors were summoned to a confab in the Principal’s office, where Cool Hand Luke elicited six gasps and two squeals with his casual suggestion that they recruit BOYS to fill their depleted ranks.

“Mr. *Stabeldore!*”

“We can’t do that!”

“The very *idea*—”

“These groups are for WOMEN—”

“Guys wouldn’t bother to do anything, except bother *us*—”

“All they ever read is porn and sports sections!”

“I’m afraid things could be rather difficult...”

“And awkward too—‘boys and girls together,’ y’know (giggle)”

Whoa now, blinked the Principal. *Hold your durn horses.*

With reddened face he succinctly disavowed enabling anything that he (like Jeannette of the Apocalyptic Genies) might categorize as “mush.” Nor did he propose treading on feminist toes, or traditionalist ones either. No—this was simply what the School Board labeled *maximum utilization of existing resources*, or what his old Granny Stabeldore had called “living make-do.”

The last LitSoc for boys (Longfellow, of which Luke had been a faculty advisor) folded three years ago. Now time had passed and there was a whole apple orchard out there, ripe and ready for harvest.

His audience felt this analogy smacked of Adam-and-Eveishness, not to mention Rossettilike fruit juice; though the Principal was simply reverting to his orchard-farm roots. Which didn’t lessen the controversy about his recommendation or keep it from being debated up and down all summer, with *some* arguing for “integrity” and *others* for “inclusion.”

In the end it was decided to see just how many (if any) guys would evince interest in joining a formerly all-girls literary society, given that “mush” was excluded from the agenda-menu. A publicity task force was put to work, and when Mr. Stabeldore arrived at school at

Zero Hour on Monday the 3rd of October, he found publicists taping up posters and hanging a banner to alert VTHS about this novel (“get it?”) literary opportunity—with perhaps a hint or two that a *little* Adam-and-Eveishness *might* occur.

Tall as the Principal was, these hints sailed over his head. He merely reflected that he himself would’ve been too bashful to seek admittance to a semi-sorority, except perhaps as guest speaker. Couldn’t rest easy in such surroundings, unlike those of his own college frat Alpha Phi Omega. Nope, hadn’t engaged in any folderol there—no hazing, no imbibing, no philandering, no hijinks wilder than sponsoring the Interfraternity Spring Sing. Which brought to mind the songs and chants performed by Vanderlund’s LitSocs as they marched into the auditorium for their annual contest, each bearing its society pennant like Scout troops at a Jamboree. There’d been no parade at last spring’s contest, and only a few self-conscious chants; but here was Rhonda Wright singing “John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt” and demanding that Mr. Stabeldore join in on the *dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah*.

“Right on, Mr. S! Why’re you wasting your time ‘round here when you could be touring the world as an opera star?”

“Oh pshaw,” went Lucas. He’d known the Road Runner since she was a scampering child, her father being the first black career counselor hired by the Vanderlund School District. Fine family, even if Rhonda kidded around to an excessive extent. “Good work,” he told her, repeating this to Mary Kate Hazeldene as she held the ladder steady for banner-hanger Cheryl Trevelyan, who to the Principal’s relief had gone aloft wearing jeans instead of a miniskirt.

“You’ll notice it’s us Dickinsons doing all the hard work!” she said as she descended, with a glare at a couple of Brontë-Brownings lounging idly across the corridor. “Those BBs wouldn’t lift a finger to help, not if it meant they might work up a *sweat!*”

“Oh, Cheryl,” murmured Mary Kate.

“All I’m saying is, give credit where credit’s due!” Cheryl persisted. “Am I right, Mr. Stabeldore?”

He swiveled away from her wrathful chest (clad in a snug T-shirt sporting the Dickinson LitSoc motto: *FOREVER IS COMPOSED OF NOWS*) and ahem’d “Guess so” as he hitchgaited to his office like Gary Cooper in *High Noon* after facing down furious Grace

Kelly. Whew! Hadn't had to deal with *that* when he'd been advisor to the Longfellows! Sure, some of them had occasionally kicked over the traces—but they'd done so without heaving their chests to ever-loving distraction.

Maybe mixing Longfellow boys with Dickinson girls *would* trigger another unfortunate incident. Recall last year's Prom, where that same Cheryl Trevelyan had challenged Gootch Bulstrode to an actual fistfight—and just before he was accused of cheating on a trigonometry final, too...

Nope—forget these misgivings. Be reminded that the vast majority of student clubs had been co-ed from the get-go, and without plunging headlong into either mush or mayhem.

So take a seat in the big padded Principal's chair (legacy from Mr. Agate) behind the big shiny Principal's desk (legacy from Mr. Exelby) and begin another workweek at the helm of Vanderlund Township High School (legacy from Mr. Wheaf) while puckering Coopish lips to whistle a wishful tune:

Do not forsake me, O my darlin'...

*

TAP TAP TAP went an apple-green wedge sling sandal on the veranda (as Virginia Leigh Pyle called the front stoop) at 1314 Clubroot Drive. The sandal and its mate matched the apple-green blazer-jacket Gigi was wearing over a multigreen checkered (*not* plaid) dress; as well as the crossbody bag whose apple-green strap was getting pinched ever more tightly by Gigi's fingers as her wristwatch ticked closer to 8 a.m.

Think patient thoughts...

She'd found this bag in a little Carolina boutique during the family's late-summer trip taking Riley to start college at Duke. Gigi almost loved her brother nearly as much for attending such a glamorously-named university in such a wonderfully-ideal setting, as for getting the hell out of her day-to-day life and away from Clubroot Drive.

TAP TAP TAP TAP.

(If this went on much longer she would have to request a ride to school from Lizabeth Ann, and be subjected to maternal conversation en route.)

Gigi glanced back at the red brick Colonial Revival house she'd thought of as a veritable Mount Vernon when they'd moved here from reeky Refineryland four years ago.

Now she could see its numerous flaws—built-in pilasters instead of portico columns, no garage wing, no symmetrical second chimney. Now she couldn't wait to make her own escape to college, though of course in her case it'd be one in Virginia—James Madison, say, or William and Mary. And *not* to major in electrical engineering like stupid Riley.

“Need a lift?” asked the gangly boy across the street, standing by a Volkswagen squareback that might not have been beige when new, but certainly was now. A beige car that *belonged* on the other side of Clubroot Drive, in regrettable Willowhelm which scarcely deserved classification as a suburb. All the lawns on the Willowhelm side were flatly level, as opposed to the sloping lawns on the Vanderlund side.

“No *thank* you.”

Nod and wave from Gangleboy, who got his beigemobile started (on the second or third try) and sputtered off, leaving Gigi to TAP TAP TAP TAP TAP her sandal's genuine plantation crepe rubber sole. (Emphasis on the “plantation”—a dreamed-of place where she ought to have been born and raised, but hadn't.)

She'd planned to make a grand entrance at senior high. Not so much this morning as five weeks ago, on the First Day. She should've arrived at VTHS as the Conqueress of VW: *Cicada* Queen, captain of the freshman cheerleaders, star (and producer-in-all-but-name) of a recordbreakingly successful spring musical, *and* the chief executive of junior high's most selective and discriminating clique. In short, as a Presence to Contend With.

But everything had fallen short or fallen through. *Fourth* runner-up at the *Cicada* Dance. Not even *co*-captain of the frosh squad. Stuffed into a trainwreck turkey of a musical. Deserted by the faithless clique dropouts. And obliged to dump a boyfriend who'd proved too dull to endure. (Marshall McConchie's idea of a fun summer outing was to visit the Museum of Science and Industry—might just as well go major in electrical engineering.)

So now was the autumn of your discontent as a run-of-the-mill sophomore. Dressed, shod, and accessorized in the color of bellyache-causing fruit. Slipping a Rolaid between your carefully glossed lips as Marshall's successor *FINALLY* put in an overdue appearance, halting in the middle of Clubroot rather than turning into your driveway. Popping open the passenger door from inside rather than getting out and holding that door open for you like a gentleman. Then saying “C'mon Jeedge!” when you didn't immediately leap into his yellow

Chevrolet Monza—which sounded like a kind of cheese and frankly smelled like one too, there being a not-quite-empty pizza box in the backseat.

Think patient thoughts, dammit...

Graham Aleshire's father was a former mayor of Vanderlund. His mother's family owned the Scrimpton Inn hotel chain. He himself was a starting linebacker on the JV football team. Tote it all up and he still only qualified as "adequate" on the boyfriend scale, even before you factored in this Monday morning's mannerless tardiness.

So plunk that apple-green crossbody bag lengthwise atop your left thigh: no fondling would be allowed during the drive east on Clubroot and north on Sendt. Nor would you give more than the briefest responses to his stabs at making smalltalk. You'd planned by now to lasso Jeff Friardale the varsity quarterback, who was a senior and owned a Toronado; but that ODIUS Isabel Carstairs had somehow snagged him last Wednesday—just *one day* after she'd pitched a hysterical fit in Geometry. Leaving you stuck here with Graham, who tried to act like a good ol' boy but had all the earmarks of a carpetbagger.

"What's eatin' you, Jeedee? C'mon, spit it out," he said genially.

(Oh, very charming. This *bon mot* from a John Denver replica who'd spent far too much of last week's game being run over by the Emery Ridge offense. And his JV teammates weren't much better, especially compared to Jeff Friardale's varsity Gondoliers; which didn't bode well for future cheerleading.)

"It's nothing," Graham was frostily informed.

Before he could do more than shiver, you arrived at school and vaulted out of the Monza, flapping a well-manicured hand not in farewell but to dispel the smell of cheese.

The student parking lot was tucked way the hell behind VTHS, meaning you had to either circle all the way around to enter school properly (beneath the noble Corinthian portico that belonged on your Colonial Revival house) or else *sneak* in through the building's unadorned backside. And thanks to Graham being a straggling laggard, there wasn't enough time this morning to circle; so in you *snuck* like a commonplace backsliding sophomore.

Thank heavens Vocal Music was the first class of the day. An advanced-level class too, taught by temperamental Mr. Frazee who ran the Concert and Chamber Choirs: a thoroughgoing perfectionist and rightly so. Here your capabilities were recognized,

appreciated, honed to a fine edge—often by putting your larynx to the grindstone, but you were up to the rigors of that challenge.

Only the most talented soph singers were allowed to audition for this class. Here with you was Enid Stott, who had Welsh blood and perfect pitch and incidentally some promise as a dependable Gigi-follower, should you choose to assemble a new clique. Eeny's most obvious drawback was a constant squint, due to her being too vain to wear glasses and too squeamish to try contacts. As a result she reminded you of Sandy in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, who wound up betraying the title character—not a desirable trait in a potential disciple.

Here too was Britt Groningen, whom you hadn't looked at twice back at VW, other than to shake your head at Britt's idiotic waste of 24-karat opportunities. Squandering her solid-gold position as younger sister of Fleur Groningen—yes, THE Fleur Groningen—in all of whose gilt-edged footsteps you intended to tread. Maybe not to become valedictorian, but head cheerleader and Homecoming Queen and Most Likely to Succeed as Prima Drama Donna.

Not one of these goals did Britt aspire to. Once, with your own ears backstage at a concert, you'd overhead Fleur imploring their mother to DO something about Britt's unsuitability. But even though that mother was a famous psychologist or sociologist or possibly both, Britt remained irregular and inappropriate—a slightly sinister chameleon who seemed to take nothing worthwhile seriously. From time to time you'd catch a glimpse of her looking half-asleep yet attentive, observant, ready to ambush a passerby—like a little she-gator pretending to be a log in the bayou.

Watch your step, she seemed to say.

At VW Britt had been on X Team and you on Y, but this year the two of you had three classes together, starting with Vocal Music. You couldn't deny that Britt was able to sing rings around the average crooner—in fact *crooning* was what she did with that uncanny voice, like a little swamp-witch casting quagmire spells.

And it was here, five weeks ago on the First Day while Mr. Frazee delivered his introductory tirade, that Britt took a seat by your side on the risers and crooned irreverent *sotto voce* commentary, with flickers of blue gaslight coming from her heavy-lidded eyes—

“See you at lunch?” Enid Stott was saying, as the bell brought you back to the present day.

Give her a moderate nod for ending that sentence with an uncertain question mark. (It would never do for Eeny to take companionship for granted.)

Then came three hours of “G” classes: German, Geography, Geometry. Why on earth had you let Marshall talk you into signing up for an uncouth language like *German*? Its only saving grace was the teacher, Frau Agapito, who offered a much-preferable Italian elective to upperclassmen—which gave you something to look forward to *next* year. For the moment, though, you had to sit through a hocktooeyfest with Marshall mooning forlornly at you, while Sheila Quirk had another one of her vulgar arguments with Robin “Angry Acne” Neopolitan, and a shock of rusty hair turned around to reveal big glasses on a big nose atop a paltry figure—

—*oh Lawdy*—

Sidney Erbsen.

Every day you forgot he was in this class till he turned to take a gander at you. And even without using his complicated camera, he always made you feel positively undressed. Not like the leers and ogles you’d been pestered with since blossoming at eleven-and-a-half: those you could generally fend off, or bend to your will. But your will kept getting *bent* by “Split-Pea”: the LAST person in school, in town, *on earth* that you could bear to let touch you, hold you, kiss you in front of a standing-room-only throng watching you do it in the flesh, in the spotlight, in the smoke-and-mirrorsy camera lens coming in for your closeup, Sid’s infernal X-ray camera lens that you’d been picturing with your private mind’s eye since it first popped up after last February’s Sweetheart Hop—that you kept imagining was trained on you during your most intimate ministrations, in the boudoir, in the bathtub, in spite of his never having laid a physical finger on you and his repeated refusals last spring when you’d asked him *again* and *again* (even treating him to a bowl of oyster stew at Chez d’Arlequin) to play her bitter puppeteer lover in *Carnival*—

—and the thing of it was, you hadn’t even WANTED him.

Not then; not now. And not when Frau Agapito asked you to recite:

“Um... er... *‘Ich esse keine Suppe! Nein! Ich esse meine Suppe nicht!’*”

Sputtered beigemobileishly. Which cracked up rotten Robin and rottener Sheila, while Split-Pea wondered aloud whether Suppen-Kaspar, after starving himself to death, had become a Personal-Space-Invading Ghost and changed his name to Klaspar.

Mercifully, Second Hour came to an end before you blushed your face off, allowing you to flee to Geography. This was a far more tolerable class and even enjoyable for someone adept with maps—like you, who pored over travel guides planning someday-trips to exotic locales. In Geography there were no probing intrusive lenses, just the usual deflectable leers from second-rate boys like Tyler Canute (Nanette Magnus's ex) and K.C. Battenburg (Sheila Quirk's ex) and John "Phonsie" Alphonse (your own unforgiven adulterous ex).

Here too was Trina Purcell, who'd been your alphabetic neighbor on VW's Y Team, and was now a "Stop the Presses!" reporter for the *Channel* (of which her big sister Tilda was editor-in-chief, which ought to prove useful for press-agent purposes). Trina could be relied on to get Mr. Hatch, the Geography teacher, gabbling about his silly stamp collection—"You can learn a whole lot about the world by studying its stamps"—toward the end of Third Hour, and so forget to assign homework.

"He can airmail us the assignment," Trina wisecracked as she headed to Lunch 4A with her boyfriend, Conrad "Leadoff" Aabercrombie, while *you* went to stupid Geometry with your what-had-you-ever-seen-in-him ex, Mike Spurgeon. Plus Brad Faussett, whom you'd never dated because he was so unabashedly full of himself. Plus that rotten Robin Neapolitan and that prissy Vicki Volester and that pathetic darktown strutter Floyd or Flap or Fudge—

—and that ODIIOUS Isabel Carstairs, who had the baldfaced gall to appear again today on Jeff Friardale's besotted arm, giving him a sloppy Swiss kiss that literally sucked.

"(Hematoma time,)" crooned Britt, leaning over from the next desk; which almost made you smile but didn't quell your apple-green nausea. Who *wouldn't* be grossed out by Odious Isabel's daily display of rank exhibitionism? With her it was either frantic bedlam in the classroom or indecent exposure at the drive-in or—

(an URP of acid reflux)

Think patient thoughts. Calming thoughts. Non-sickening thoughts.

And pop a discreet second Rolaid to get you through this awful Fourth Hour.

Then as far as the cafeteria for Lunch 5C, though eating anything seemed out of the question. (Absolutely not the Salisbury-steak-and-whipped-potatoes *du jour*.)

“Want half of my sandwich?” Enid asked.

What *was* that—Polish sausage? Fine thing for a Welsh girl to dine on. But she also had a box of Junior Mints, so help yourself to those—a mix of chocolate and peppermint might make a difference, and taste less chalky than Roloids.

Back in VW’s lunchroom you’d presided over a clique-and-jocks table like the one over there, occupied by Nanette Magnus with Mike Spurgeon and Fast Eddie Wainwright. You and Nanette hadn’t exchanged two words since last spring’s *Cicada* Dance, when she ignored all your ideas for the “Tropic Island Cruise” theme and then scored second runner-up (to your fourth) in the Queen contest. And *then* claimed it was their “Christian duty” to go see Kim Zimmer after her manic-demented failure to hang herself; and THEN said “Shame on you!” when you reasonably asked “What *can* yew ‘spect from someone so fly-by-nighty?”

(For a fleeting moment you wondered what’d become of Kim, whose idolatry would come in handy nowadays.)

Anyway: this year you dined with a thespian circle. Besides Eeny Stott there was Jerome Schei, who could never wait to spill the latest beans about everyone—*burnt* beans if they concerned Nanette, whose guts he’d loathed since their mutual-upstage feud during *Carnival*. With Jerome was his fellow flit Owen O’Leary, the classic Irish tenor who’d whipped up that same feud like the nasty canasta he was. And with them were three eleventh-grade veterans (though not prominent honchos) of the VTHS Footlight Players.

One was Alva Dee Bickling, who dutifully filled any fat-girl roles and could dance pretty nimbly for someone so tubby, but preferred to work on the stage crew. (You were savvy enough to stay on good terms with techfolk, who knew all sorts of tech-tricks that could make a diva—naming no names, but CANDY GATES—look and sound ridiculous.)

Beside Alva Dee sat Kerry Hinterwald, who’d be natural casting for any juvenile parts: he’d not only skipped a grade or two but was short for his age and even more beardless than Babyface Nelson Baedeker. None of which discouraged Kerry from trying to act like a wanton lothario; his hungry gaze hadn’t wavered from your bustline since Lunch 5C began.

And across from him was Fletcher Wyndham, who could give Brad Faussett lessons on how to be a narcissist. No one more tragic at acting had trod the boards since the Duke of Bilgewater in *Huckleberry Finn*; yet Fletch believed he possessed Gielgudian finesse and was hampered by nothing more than the jealousy of his peers and the oversight of his elders.

“Victimization,” he told the table in richly-toned accents, “is a terrible handicap to have hanging around your neck.”

(Another reminder of Kim Zimmer: twice in one day.)

From Fletch’s bombast you were gladly diverted by eavesdroppable chitchat behind you. There Gwen Cokingham was egging on Millicent Carstairs to languidize about...? The Traversers, a rich-kid cult rumored to “bathe in Quaaludes,” which sounded like something a Carstairs would do. (Jerome said their entire family was bat-guano insane.)

For Gwendolyn, though, getting luded-out would be an unexpected feat.

The Cokinghams lived a couple blocks down Clubroot from your house, and Gwen’s mother had been palsy-walsy with Lizabeth Ann since you first moved there. You’d hoped Gwen would be a glamorous older-girl neighbor (very useful) but were sorely disappointed, she being a raw jockette with Unrefined Refineryland written all over her.

Gwen was also spooked foolish by the occult. People said she’d started running cross country one Halloween night because she thought the trick-or-treaters in white sheets were really ghosts. A few years later when *The Exorcist* was on everybody’s mind, Gwen went through an extended freakout about demonic possession and its alleged effect on Parnell Travers, an unremarkable stoner-boy who’d spent eighth grade getting baked. Then Parnell had gone zonk-tobogganing, passed out in a drift, been caught up by a snowplow, propelled for several blocks and left buried by the roadside. By the time he was excavated, an “entity from a separate plane of existence” (according to Gwen) had taken control of Parnell’s soul, transforming him into Paranormal Travers the Astral Slacker.

Which was hardly worth freaking out about, in your opinion.

But Gwen and her superstitious friend Joyce Usher had galloped around town wailing that an emergency exorcism ought to be arranged, especially as other students sought Parnell out as a spiritual (or diabolic) guide. Gwen’d seldom stopped for breath in those days, sprinting hither and thither to keep one step ahead of hellish enthrallment.

Now almost four years had passed and here she was, weirdly eager to hear about Parnell's motley crew of lude-scarfing orgy-goers. What could have gotten into her? Other than embittered feelings and resentful yearnings, which didn't improve an already-homely girl's appearance?

(Or, for that matter, your own immaculate complexion.)

(Sigh...)

Millicent Carstairs was filling her in, but not like someone with a reputation as a Mauler. She idly toyed with fork and spoon, scarcely touching her food. Hard to believe such lassitude could switch in an instant to ferocity; though it was pleasant to imagine Millicent mauling her little sister Isabel. Maybe if you listened more closely you might hear her *describe* such torment... but ugh, her voice! It oscillated like a blah-de-dah gelatin mold, aggravating your apple-green bellyache with echoes of Isabel's melting-marshmallow-fluffy tone that would make even cries for mercy unbearable to listen to. You'd have to gag Is first, using a sleeve torn off that magenta satin blouse she'd dared to wear the same day last week you wore yours—

“Are you okay?”

Asked Enid Stott, squinting worriedly. As Jerome and Owen watched overinterestedly, and Kerry stared pointblank at your fluttering bosom, and Fletch paused with over-the-top emphasis till tubby-tactful Alva Dee prompted him to resume telling about the Holdahl Dinner Theater's production of *Kisses and Knishes*, and how HE would interpret the lead role.

“M'allraht,” you fibbed to Eeny, returning her unfinished box of mints.

Then from the adjacent table came the single word “Coke.”

As if Gwen'd asked what Mauly's favorite soft drink was, or Mauly'd abbreviated Cokingham the same way Ivar Ragnarsson was called Rags.

But no. Of course not.

Don't be pitifully naïve.

Millicent Carstairs was a rich kid, a Traverser, and “Coke” was the sort of thing rich-kid Traversers did nowadays when they weren't bathing in Quaaludes.

Nothing to get shocked about.

Or to *shout* about either, within earshot of a gossip-moppet like Jerome Schei or a miscreant like Owen O’Leary, who’d send poison-pen letters to his own grandmother:

I KNOW WHOSE COW KICKED OVER THAT LANTERN IN THE SHED LAST SUMMER

Just play it cool...

Lunch done, move on to Study Hall for twenty-five minutes of unwanted proximity to Margo Temple and Diana Dabney, a gruesome twosome who posed more of a threat to your complexion’s immaculate clarity (ranklewise) than dining on chocolate and peppermint might (breakoutwise).

Diana was a former ugly duckling who, since swannifying, glided around with her beak in the air when she wasn’t being hassled by that looney screwball Dennis Desmond, or compelled to bow ‘n’ scrape by the potentate sitting to her left—Miss Fasten-Your-Seatbelts-It’s-Going-to-Be-a-Bumpy-Study-Hall. Whose real name was *Margaret*, thank you very kindly, NOT “Margo.” And not as in *Princess* Margaret, thank you extra kindly, but PLAIN OLD Margaret—as in the nemesis to a different Dennis the Menace. And not just to him, since she was also *Captain* Margaret of the JV cheerleading squad and thus in an official position to rub your nose in things.

(Not “Coke,” at least not yet; though you wouldn’t put it past “Margo” if she could badger some poor pusher into *giving* her the stuff.)

Look at her squatting there with her back to you, and it wearing a dusty-sage velour blouse that gave her bottle-blondeness an unclean tinge. Matching the dingier, deadlier tinge in her contemptible heart. If anyone outranked Isabel Carstairs on the Odious scale, it would be Miss Embargo-Your-Cargo-All-the-Way-to-Key-Largo, and cram it with a ramrod where the sun don’t shine.

Think non-sickening thoughts...

At VW each grade had its own pep group: drill team in seventh, pompons in eighth, and then the freshman cheerleaders. Upper grades had a certain amount of sway over lower ones, particularly when selecting the next year’s leadership; and Margo Temple had used hers to block *your* becoming captain of last year’s frosh squad—or even maintaining co-captaincy with Becca Blair, as you had in eighth grade.

Now here you were at VTHS on the same JV squad, of which Margo was in charge and primed to critique your every step or move or cheer. Not that there was anything to cheer about: Graham Aleshire and the B-Team footballers were winless after five games, losing each by at least ten points; and when the bell rang (or *tolled*) for Sixth Hour, you had to clench your jaw and permit the Gruesome Twosome to precede you downstairs to the Girls Gym. If you didn't stay a few steps behind them, Margo would snap her stubby fingers and sardonize "Where do you think *you're* going, soph?" with Diana adding "Yeah, where?"—as if they didn't know you were all in what amounted to Honors Phys Ed together.

This was taught by Ms. Cliffhouse, who'd been coaching the Vanderlund varsity cheerleaders since Celeste Schwall's student days. The best thing about it was getting to witness the Gruesomes kowtow to the current varsity squad—not just seniors like Penny Stone, Rula Hradek and Angelique Anstruther, but also their own junior classmates like Mary Kate Hazeldene, Meredith Wainwright and Cheryl Trevelyan. (Mary Kate was too sweet to enforce JV deference and Meredith too insipid, but Cheryl detested Margo Temple and rarely let a Sixth Hour pass without dispensing some Margo-rebuffs. Yay Cheryl!)

The worst and most senseless thing about Honors Phys Ed was its being scheduled *Sixth* Hour instead of Seventh. Meaning you were then obliged to take a quick shower, get dressed, climb up to the fourth floor, and sit through Grammar Composition and Literature before *returning* to the gym, changing into your practice uniform, and heading out to Hordt Field (in all weathers) to spend *another* sixty minutes rehearsing cheer routines.

LAWDY GAWD...

Five weeks of this monotony so far and another *eight months* to go, wishing every day that you'd bowed out of Pep Club after VW and concentrated on Drama where you belonged. But that would've killed your mother, who came to every game whether home or away to vicariously cheer through you. Back when she'd been Lizabeth Ann Orpington, Hoosier high schooler, she'd had the looks and the bod and the dream to push pompons—but no coordination whatsoever. More than once you'd heard her say she married J.W. Pyle because he was "the best dancer in Hessville," and she wanted her babies to inherit those genes. Not to dance onstage in a musical revue, though. No ma'am—out on a field or a court, cheering for a herd of jockstrap athletes. ("Dramatics are a distraction," she'd nag.)

Another bell. Shower, dress, and leave the locker room, making your way out through the unfair incomers who'd pre-empted Seventh Hour Gym. Enid Stott was among them (*et tu, Eeny?*) as were Harelip Harrison and Rat's Nest Saranoff and Rottener Sheila Quirk. Also prissy Vicki Volester, who came in laughing with a colored girl (as if Vanderlund didn't have enough of *those* already) and not just any old colored girl, but the one Mary Kate Hazeldene had actually urged to go out for cheerleading!

No way—no how. *THAT* would be the *coup de grâce*, so far as you were concerned. Not even Ma's bellyache would keep you from quitting then.

Up to the fourth floor your poor feet climbed, getting chafed at every step by these damnfool wedge sling sandals. And for nothing more rewarding than a run-of-the-mill sophomore English class. Poetry and composition you were good at; grammar and spelling, not so much. Which lumped you in among such hotshots as Lenny "Ooh! Ooh!" Otis and Dino "He's a Pimp!" Tattaglia, who both spent Seventh Hour lecherizing you and not from very afar, either. Barely far enough away to be fended off, weary as you were.

"(They're just a couple of Smooch Smarks,)" whispered Britt Groningen, leaning over from the next desk again as Lenny leered and Dino ogled and you popped a third Rolaid, tugging your multigreen checks into haughty place.

Stare your eyes blind, losers. Go diddle yourselves miserable.

Mrs. Staghorn began to ramble about the drive to revitalize the school's literary societies. Several upperclass pepgals belonged to these, though some couldn't be called "bookish"—yourself included, if playscripts didn't count. But they must, since the A you'd earned in your last VW Speech class qualified you to join a VTHS LitSoc. Which Mrs. Staghorn was urging everyone eligible to do—"Boys as well as girls this year," she said puckishly, or as puckishly as Mrs. Staghorn could approximate.

"Ooh! Ooh!" went popeyed Lenny Otis, and *gnnnnogg* went Dino Tattaglia while biting the heel of his swarthy hand.

Still: maybe this was the solution to your problems. If you joined a literary society you'd get to do orations and declamations, which you'd aced in Mr. "Mispronounced" Martincich's VW Speech class. LitSoc membership might be just what you'd need to spiff up your applications to William and Mary and James Madison University—or so you'd

argue, using this to spring you free from cheerleading. Ma would simply have to find some other reason to live.

Caution, though: you'd have to find a society that the Gruesomes didn't belong to, or that Odious Isabel wouldn't try to join, or any of the other girls (and boys) you couldn't abide. Which left—who? Enid; Trina; maybe Alva Dee Bickling... and Britt. Who was bound to be a shoo-in at whichever society her sister Fleur must've been a member of—

—except that Britt, when glanced at, was flickering blue gaslight at you again from under heavy eyelids. As her small pale freckled head framed by long bright burgundy hair slowly shook from side to side; and her small pale freckled hand slid a wide-open spiral notebook over for you to read:

*there are lots better ways to get lit
believe me*

*

“There is only one Literary Society to consider,” declaimed Lisa Lohe, “and that is Howe-Stowe!”

Here we go, Vicki exhaled into her chicken salad. And, sure enough:

“You are so full of spit, Lisa!” Cheryl expectorated from the neighboring table.

“Oh, Cheryl,” went Mary Kate.

“Oh nothing—we know she is, and *she* knows she is!” Cheryl insisted. “And we *all* know DICKINSON’S the only LitSoc worth considering! You there, Vicki—I don’t want to see you join anything else!”

“Um...” from Vicki.

“You’ll notice she didn’t mention *you*, Vernonique,” Lisa said somberly.

“Um...” from Nonique as Cheryl rose from her stool, jostling Stu Nugent as he tried to slurp soup.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean? Obviously she’s free to do whatever she wants!”

“How nice,” Lisa smiled thinly. “Did you hear that? Dickinson thinks you’re obviously free.”

(Nonique, chewing a mouthful with lips sealed, gave Vicki the tiniest eyeroll.)

“Will you siddown and lemme finish eating?” Stu asked Cheryl.

“Don’t try to boss me!” she gnarled, her hands balling into fists.

“How ‘bout vice versa?” Jenna Wiblitz wanted to know. “Is she making *you* join Dickinson, Stuart?”

“Um...” from the Nude Gent, busy with his minestrone.

“He’s CHOOSING to do it,” said Cheryl, flouncing back down. “And so is Frank!”

“Um...” from Frank Wharton.

“Well, *Link* is joining Howe-Stowe!” Lisa retorted. “*Aren’t* you, Link?”

“Guess I’d better,” mused Link Linfold. “How ‘bout you, Sammi?”

“Um...” from Samantha, holding her usual lunchtime vigil for Tab Tchorz.

“I doubt she made a B in English last semester,” Lisa said disapprovingly. “You don’t get B’s by reading Harlequin paperbacks—”

“*I* do!” broke in Holly Brollis. “And you’re *all* wrong—Austen-Alcott’s the LitSoc to join! You won’t have any fun with those other gaggles,” she advised Vicki and Nonique.

“Oh for Gahd’s sake!” from Cheryl, and “We’re not HERE to ‘have fun’!” from Lisa.

“Nelson is—Nelson belongs in Austen-Alcott,” suggested Jenna, rapidly sketching him wearing a lowcut Regency gown. Which provoked [Laughter] from both cafeteria tables and a delighted shriek from Holly, who flipped a quarter to the artist. “I’m buying that, Jen! Frame it for me so I can hang it on my wall!”

“Aw, c’mon...” blushed Babyface Nelson.

“Well, now I know what we’re gonna make *you* do for initiation!” Cheryl archly told Stu.

“Have him wear your silk sequin disco dress,” said Jenna. “Isn’t that the one that’s scoopnecked down to your navel?”

She was sketching Stu in this (while being ordered to “Shut up, Niblets!”) when the bell rang and everyone began to gather trays and trash except Mary Kate, who hastened over to tell Nonique “Seriously, we’d love to have you join Dickinson.”

“Um, thanks...” from Nonique.

“Hey!” from Cheryl. “Don’t think I’m cleaning up after you, Mary Kate!”

“Oops! ‘Scuse me,” said Mary Kate, hastening back to dispose of her milk carton and sandwich wrapper.

“Those two are a trip,” Nonique told Vicki as they left the cafeteria. “The one looks like apple pie à la mode, but is full of fishhooks—the other looks like some slinky femme fatale, but I bet she never even takes off her *shoes* in front of a guy.”

“They mean well, though, even Cheryl,” said Vicki. “Even *Lisa* means well. Don’t let them put you off joining a LitSoc, okay?”

“Said I’d *think* about it.”

“So think ‘yes.’ If they do make us dress up like Dolley Madison for initiation, you and Joss’ll *show off* so much better in those dresses than me and Alex—”

“Oh hush now.”

“*You* hush now,” Vicki cheerio’d as they parted for Sixth Hour, Nonique going to Mr. Prout’s World History and Vicki to Mrs. Mallouf’s Advanced English, where an extemporaneous debate took place about—what else?—literary societies.

This being an honors class, Room 403 was chockfull of ambitious go-getters (e.g. Sell-O Fayne) for whom LitSoc membership might still be a rung up the ladder to the Best Colleges, Finest Grad Schools, Most Lucrative Entry-Level Jobs, and Greatest Chance to Make Their First Million Before Turning Thirty. There was also a sprinkling of genuine literature-lovers like Joss; plus one or two like Fiona who hadn’t asked to be assigned to an advanced level and were here more or less against their will. As Feef muttered:

“(Just ‘cause I can read and write doesn’t make me *literate*.)”

She doodled random musical notes and Mrs. Mallouf got her hourly java fix while the rest of the chronic honorees hashed out the benefits and shortcomings of VTHS LitSocs.

“There is *NO* point of *ANY* kind why *GIRL-ONLY* groups should *ALLOW* guys to *JOIN* them,” raged Rachel Gleistein, sounding rather like Toughie Twofields with her cadenced syllable-nailing, and as though the word *JOIN* had been steeped in vinegar. “Let them revive *THEIR* societies if they *WANT* to, just as *LONG* as they *LEAVE* ours *ALONE*—”

—flinging eye-daggers at Sell-O, who G-R-I-N-N-E-D back.

“There’s a *point* to it, all right!” he assured her.

“Maybe Rachel’s never *gotten* the point,” insinuated Owen O’Leary.

“You guys are disgusting,” Hope Eckhardt told them. “This is exactly why you shouldn’t belong in girl societies.”

“Well, you might need us to manipulate the pencil sharpeners,” said Sidney Erbsen, “and bring all your Number Twos to a fine *point*.”

“Let’s try to keep it clean here,” said Mrs. Mallouf over the rim of her styrofoam cup.

“That’s right,” Split-Pea agreed. “You’ve got to sharpen pencils cleanly if you want them to write right. Otherwise whatever you write might be downright dirty.”

“Which is just what you’d do if we let you in!” Hope concluded. “‘*Sucio*’ *lo dice todo*—‘dirty’ says it all.”

“Just for the record,” said Marshall McConchie, sounding like Gregory Peck in *Cape Fear*, “not all of us feel that way.”

“Yeah, some of us feel *this* way,” chimed in Buddy Marcellus, fondling his own chubby face; and Sell-O, stretching his from ear to ear, said “Sorry if that hurts your feelings.” (“*Whoa whoa whoa*,” sang Jerome Schei.)

“Let’s get back TO the point,” Trina Purcell said briskly. “*I* think societies that’ve been girls-only till now *can* admit the right sort of guys” (coy side-glance at Conrad Aabercrombie) “and it’ll be a win-win situation for everyone involved.”

“Um...” from Leadoff, when nudged by Trina’s elbow.

“And don’t forget,” Joss spoke up, “we’re getting co-ed gym next year—which *I* think’ll be ‘win-win.’” [Laughter] “So how bad can having mixed LitSocs be?”

“Plenty,” grumped Rachel.

“*Mucho*,” concurred Hope.

“Interesting points,” said Mrs. Mallouf, finishing her coffee. “Vicki, anything you’d care to contribute?”

“Oh! Um... I guess I agree with Joss, of course.” (*Except about co-ed gym.*) “Other than that, I haven’t really made up my mind yet.”

“Claudia?”

“I better warn you,” Cloudy Thurman sighed, “that Mark Brown wants to join. And you know what a disaster he can be.”

(Trying to help in the main office last week, Marked-Down Mark had managed to damage the mimeograph machine in a way the repairman said was physically impossible.)

“Madeline?”

“It’s a moot point,” sniffed Madeline Wrippley, tucking mousy hair behind mousy ears and settling a prim white collar around her mousy neck. “People may call them ‘literary societies,’ but they’re only party clubs that do a *little* reading and a *little* writing—”

“And have a *little* bit of a rhythmic tic,” broke in Split-Pea. “Wouldn’t you say?”

Maddie twisted around and regarded him with the same rodent-eyed animosity that Vicki recalled (much too well) from last April’s Student Court trial.

But Split-Pea’s big glasses reflected this back at her, eye for eye, nose for nose, till Madeline flushed an abrupt tomato-red and looked, for a split second, less like a mouse than a plucked-bare chicken.

“(Whoa WHOA *whoa*,)” went Jerome.

Crossing spindly arms above her desk and spindly legs below it, Maddie quavered “You will have your *little* joke.”

“That’s why I’m here,” nodded Split-Pea. “Glad to be of service.”

Brief silence in Room 403 after that, till Mrs. Mallouf tossed her empty cup into a wastebasket full of its predecessors and said “Fiona?”

“(Can we go back to talking about *The Crucible*?)” Feef mutter-asked.

*

“MORE WEIGHT! MORE WEIGHT!” Vicki and Joss chanted as they marched upstairs for their regular Friday night sleepover at Burrow Lane. Giles Corey’s demand to be crushed to death rather than respond to charges of witchcraft had been adopted as their super/sub-catchphrase for the heavy burden of senior high’s curriculum; though it was difficult not to crack up at the memory of Buddy Marcellus grunting this line in class “like a pressed ham.”

Who else would they cast to play which parts in a comical *Crucible*? Madeline Wrippley might be the conspicuous choice for Abigail the Antagonist, but could you really pit her against *Split-Pea* as John Proctor?

“Him, a guilt-ridden hypocrite? Unh-unh. I can see Marshall as guilt-ridden and Sell-O as a hypocrite, but we need them to be the Judge and Deputy Governor.”

“And Hope Eckhardt to be Tituba—remember, this is a *comedy* we’re talking about. If we were playing it straight, Spacyjane would have to be Abigail—she’s the one he seduced ‘n’ abandoned.”

“But to cheat on her with *Madeline*?”

Both: “Eww!”

“*Isabel* I could understand. But can you picture Maddie posing for Split-Pea wearing nothing but a necktie and a bowler hat?”

Both: “*Eww!*”

“Still, that little ‘interlude’ between them in class the other day...”

“Except it was more like *she* was telling *him* ‘I will cut off my hand before I reach for you again.’”

“Well, can you blame her? Split-Pea can give even Gigi Pyle the mortified meemies.”

“*Mortified meemies?* That sounds like a breakfast cereal. Hey, did I ever tell you I did a whole science project about breakfast cereals, back in grade school?”

“*Over and over* again...”

“Shut up, I bet I never mentioned it before.”

“*You* shut up. Of all things to keep a deep dark secret from your very best friend...”

“Y’know, we really ought to form our *own* literary society and get our old lunch-bunch to join it. That’d show Lisa and Cheryl and all of them.”

“We could name it after Judy Blume, and adopt ‘Ralph’ from *Forever...* as our mascot!”

(Gales of mirth.)

The problem was that most of their old bunchkins showed no great willingness to take part in any LitSoc. Fiona was deadset against it, even if that put her on the same side as “(that snippy little Wripple chick.)” Robin was far too busy counting the hours till she could take possession of her Sweet Babboo as a fully licensed rock-around-the-clock motorist. And Sheila-Q wouldn’t participate if the Dopesters were steering clear—“though *that’s* not guaranteed, once Robbo gets behind the wheel and starts burning rubber!”

“Aw c’mon,” Vicki’d wheedled wistfully. “Member all the fun we had divvying up *David Copperfield*?”

“Yeah, and playing with the Dartles,” said S-Q, pulling a sad face but shrugging it off. “Guess those were the good old days, hunh? We never shoulda let Britt get away.”

Vicki had doubts about that—*get away with WHAT?*—and also about Laurie who’d been acting weird for three weeks now and not just toward Vicki. Her weirdness could be traced further back, to the spastic sobbing jag on Joss’s half-mown lawn a couple months ago—but it’d accelerated when she caught that sudden chill, and (as Sammi Tiggs said) she hadn’t been acting like herself since.

This LitSoc business was tailor-made for Normal Laurie; she’d be blabberpolling everyone by phone and note and in person as to who and where and why, then spreading her findings far and wide. But these days Weird Laurie stayed veiled behind sheepdog bangs, saying next to nothing to nobody. One afternoon she did return a tentative “Hi” from Vicki when they chanced to enter the locker room at the same time, but Gigi Pyle brushed between them with an irritated “*Will* yew get outta mah way??”—and Laurie clammed back up.

As Sammi’d asked: “Y’think we should be, like, um... concerned?”

Hard to say.

Worry more about it later.

Vicki’s milderpolling of other sophs found no consensus. Sammi *hadn’t* made a B in English last semester, so she wasn’t eligible. Crystal expressed some interest, but seemed preoccupied with Judd “For the Defense” Courtney. Spacyjane thought LitSocs might be “neat,” but wanted to see who else applied before she’d commit to do so. Isabel, on the other hand, was raring to go wherever the cuter boys went, and ready to play Pied Piperess if that’d ensure cute boys made the scene (if not *a* scene). Nonique, as she’d said, was “thinking about it”; and Alex, still a fictionphobe, would be enthusiastic only if she didn’t have to read a lot of novels.

Even Joss confessed to one hesitation: her sister Meg had belonged to a LitSoc (Austen-Alcott, Holly’s “fun” society) when she went to VTHS, and Joss was leery about doing anything that might be construed as imitating Meg—though their late mother Betsy, the *Little Women* fanatic, wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Before leaving for college, Meg had hidden her three *Baratarian* yearbooks; but since cunning subtlety was not a Meg characteristic, they were discovered in the first place Joss looked. She and Vicki had perused them last summer in Joss's aerie, but tonight they were smuggled to Burrow Lane for the Friday night sleepover.

"Toughie'll *know* I 'borrowed' these, even though Meg'll never have a clue. But we've got serious RESEARCH to do here!"

Which didn't stop Joss from laughing herself into stitches (again) over the maudlin inscriptions by Meg's well-wishers, while Vicki checked out all her own upperclass friends and acquaintances in their younger guises.

The old Ladybugs from two years ago hadn't altered out of recognition: Mumbles was just as deceptively Buddhafaced, showing no hint that her **HA! HA! HA!**s could cause a sonic boom; Rhonda Wright still kept her BEEP-BEEP tongue in her Roadrunner cheek; and Lisa Lohe, if anything, had gotten even narrower-visaged and more intently ascetic. This attitude, though, got knocked slightly askew whenever Jenna Wibnitz stood next to her in a group photo. Cunning subtlety *was* a Wibnitz characteristic, and Jenna had a knack for conveying caricature with posture as well as on paper. In last year's Howe-Stowe photo she'd contrived to have her spec-lenses turned into blank discs by the camera FLASH, giving her Little Orphan Annie eyes and thereby casting Lisa as Miss Hannigan the dour orphanage matron: *It's a hard-knock life ...*

Turn the page to Dickinson LitSoc and snortle at *their* double caricature: Cheryl beaming with bouffant affability instead of baring furious-lioness teeth, while Mary Kate set the page ablaze like a sultry man-eater instead of making it shine with superwholesome maidenhood.

Flip over to smile at Holly as Zaneeta ("Yeee gads!") in *The Music Man*, dancing the Shipooopi with Wes Gormley. She always glowed in publicity shots, even bundled up in a Snoopy costume for *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, and sparkled while clustering with the other girls of Austen-Alcott: *Pappy's little puppy loves EV'ryone! ...*

That left Brontë-Browning, whose picture was one of many in last year's *Baratarian* to feature Fleur Groningen. The list of her appearances ate up two full inches of index column; Joss would've pitched a fit at having to count that many for the *Cicada* index.

“They might as well have titled this the *Groningenian*,” Vicki grouched editorially at the full-page glossy of Fleur tiara’d and bouquet-laden as last year’s Homecoming Queen.

“Betcha can’t say that three times fast,” Joss challenged.

“Say what? *Groningenian Groningenian Groningenian*?”

“Now you’ve done it—you’ve conjured up an evil spirit, and it’ll manifest itself right here in your bedroom. Probably never get the stink out of your drapes—”

“Manifest? You mean like destiny?”

“More like *ditz*-tiny—get a load of this—”

Joss read out what “Pucker Up” Endell had written in (and Meg had futilely tried to erase from) the tenth-grade yearbook.

“Gahd, he really *was* a perv!” Vicki giggled as she thumbed back through the twelfth-grade yearbook to Brontë-Browning. Fleur had only been its first-semester treasurer, yet her celebrity won her the photo’s front-and-center focal point; all the other BBs seemed to peek out of their eyecorners at Fleur, as if in wonder at how they’d gotten lost in her shadow.

Why join a society just to have that happen? It’d be too much like trailing after Tricia. (Echo from the distant past: *I’ll ALWAYS be older than you, and smarter, and richer, and happier, and lovelier.*) Lisa and Cheryl might try to dominate and overshadow, but they were usually kept in check by Jenna and Mary Kate. Someone like Ginger Snowbedeck could inflate an entire gymnasium with her ego, but she joked about that herself—“Who needs to be modest when you can be a GODDESS?”—and always wanted everybody to have as phenomenally big a ball as she was having.

“Would you want to be part of a party-club LitSoc?” Vicki asked Joss.

“Like Madeline was crabbing about? Why can’t it be both—serious literary matters to begin with, followed by a bit of whoopie-doopie? Specially if that *does* bring in guys.”

“Well, whatever happens tomorrow at the Pop Party, let’s not let them split us off from Alex and Nonique. Or Crystal, if she shows up—Laurie too, I guess. I’m not sure about Spacyjane and Isabel.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure what Space thinks of Isabel—and Floramour, and the Blue Fairy, and besmirching whortleberries. Are *we* sure we want to be in the same LitSoc as Izzy-Whizzy?”

“Well... *I’m* pretty sure *she’d* make sure we’d have plenty of whoopie-doopie.”

*

On that same Friday Rachel Gleistein tried to stage an intervention with Laurie Harrison, whose recent behavior had become increasingly worrisome.

The Gleisteins weren’t strict Sabbath-obervants (except on the now-past High Holy Days) so Rachel’s timetable wasn’t encumbered by sun-setting, candle-lighting, challah-blessing or the like. But she did have to struggle with other-interventionist-finding, even among Laurie’s nearest and dearest. Susie Zane was either in denial about her stepsister’s bothersome conduct, or hoping it was simply a temporary funk-phase. Jerome Schei could not be depended on to intervene in a tattle-free manner. Buddy Marcellus was nursing battered heartstrings after Laurie blew off their miniature golf date at the Kool Kourse arcade. And Samantha Tiggs hung up the phone with a deafening **CLICK** when Rachel called her after Thursday’s volleyball match.

Rachel and Sammi had never really gotten along, yet Laurie’s welfare ought to be their shared goal and common objective; so Sammi had no reason for bawling “*Too late for that!!*” when Rachel’d scarcely begun to outline her intervention plan. Rachel, who took great pride in being empathetic, wasn’t deaf (until that thunderous **CLICK**) to the desolate unhappiness in Sammi’s voice; and she tried phoning back, only to be told by Mrs. Tiggs that Sammi was no longer “available.”

So be it. Rachel would just have to handle all the intervening on her own.

Be strong. Be brave. Be fearless. You are never alone.

Nor was Sammi as she received solace Thursday night, curled up on her six-foot-long (but-still-too-short) bed with the elderly (but-still-quite-handsome) Mr. Splotches.

He was a chestnut belton English setter with whom she’d spent countless hours working out by day and snuggling close after dark, as Sammi offered many a prayer for a magic spell that would turn him into a human boy. (Still doggish, but like Rags Ragnarsson or K.C. Battenburg were; taller than herself, with broader shoulders and hips; and perhaps a less particolored face than he had now.)

No, forget that. Pray instead that Mr. Splotches would stay hale and hearty, and not be too disturbed by Sammi's having plunged into bummedepths.

That morning she'd put on a turquoise knit pullover like Alex Dmitria's "school color" top, except Alex's *was* a pullover and Sammi's was more of a squeezinto. In the past she, like Joss Murrish, would've opted for a baggy flopperoo-hiding sweater; but ever since Tab Tchorz gamboled over the sensuous horizon, Sammi was unafraid (okay, *not* as afraid) to draw attention (*his*, at least) to her endowments.

Unfortunately Tab didn't present any attention to be drawn. Sammi hunted for him everywhere, lingering as long as she could outside Room 325 before and after Study Hall, then doing a ten-minute survey of the cafeteria; but she only attracted notice by insignificant sweater-inspectors, and a scolding by Lisa Lohe:

"Will you SIT DOWN and eat something, Samantha? We've got a match to play in three hours!"

"Why isn't he *here*? Who ditches *lunch*?"

Link Linfold gently alluded to enterprises (authorized or un-) that people got up to during lunch periods; but Sammi had a Polish Polecat on her sizzling mind, and soon tuned Link out.

In that sidetracked state she sat through General Business class with nasty Mr. Clapper, who thought women had no place in an office other than to be a receptionist and take dictation. Definitely not to disrupt menfolk's concentration, as Samantha's sweaterfront was doing to boobminded Kerry Hinterwald, who gawped at her even while answering a question about balancing checkbooks.

"Miss Tiggs—a word, if you please," Mr. Clapper requested as the bell rang and the classroom emptied. "Perhaps you would be so good as to dress more conservatively in future—as would be appropriate for an office setting."

A month or so ago such a remark from a male teacher would've made Sammi sink through the floor in aghast embarrassment, but today she only gave him a vague "Yessir" and hurried out to Not-Quite-Remedial English.

Whether or not Miss DuJardin appreciated "fine trash" (as Jenna Wibnitz said) she did accept book reports on Harlequin paperbacks (as Jenna'd predicted) so long as they

documented that the books had indeed been read. *Bride of Zarco* garnered Sammi a C+ that might've been a B- if written in less of a godawful rush. This week's report was on *Devil's Gateway*, about a marriage of convenience to a South African sheep farmer who said things like "You don't possess the type of beauty that would ever have the power to drive a man to the brink of passion."

(Even squeezed into a turquoise knit pullover...)

The only passion-brinkmanship Sammi'd ever drive would be to *short* guys like Kerry Hinterwald, who came up no further than her collarbone. Never an amazing colossal Dream Man, whose lips she'd have to stand on tiptoe to kiss.

But then—but then—

Out in the crowded corridor, two long strapping arms reached down from above to embrace her boldly from behind, and pull her back against rock-solid masculinity.

"WELL HEY THERE GORGEOUS."

His very word! For real! Not in a fantasy! "Gorgeous," as if she were her dropdead sister Sabrina who was called that by boys all the time! OhmyGahd ohmyGahd ohmyGahd as he gave the top of her head *what felt like a smooch*—

—she was going to swoon, she was going to melt, she was going to burst—

—as the palms of his hands stroked upward from her waist to the base of her bosom, cradling it through turquoise knit top and Free Swing Tennis Bra, and making her D-cups go

BOUNCE

BOUNCE

BOUNCE

as if he were testing melons for ripeness or sporting goods for resilience, or how her heart would react to tachycardia followed by a coronary.

"*N-i-i-i-i-ce*," commented Tab before letting go, stepping away, and strolling off.

"Haw! You got Cherry-Picked!" grinned Razor Reid, brushing past on her way out for an afterschool smoke.

"Hope ya *felt up* to it!" leered oily Roy Hodeau, heading in the opposite direction but for the same purpose.

“C’mon, we’re gonna be late!” said Pebbles Preston, skimming wispily down the hall toward the stairs and the gym, towing Sammi along like a pallid tugboat salvaging a derelict ocean liner.

Today was the rematch with Hereafter Park’s Blue Angels, this time on Vanderlund’s home court where referees weren’t blatantly biased. A win would give the JV Gondoliers a 6-3 record and potential tie for first in the Shoreside Division with Multch North, whose Hurricanes the G-Girls had beaten last week.

None of which was on Sammi’s numb mind as she dazedly replaced her stricken pullover with a jersey that, unlike the pullover or the compression shorts, hung loose and easy.

Two words that Tab Tchorz must think described Samantha Tiggs to a T. Otherwise he wouldn’t have practically *squeezed her breasts* in public, in a crowded corridor, in front of everybody.

It could’ve been so romantic. If he’d done it in private, when they were alone, out under the moon and stars. If he’d asked her out first, or even midway; entreated her to join him in an exclusive relationship.

If he hadn’t taken liberties fatally similar to those seized in darkness by the Phantom of the Sock-Hop at last year’s Back-to-School Dance—disembodied grabbing and groping that still gave her occasional nightmares—

“(I have *GOTTA* talk to you!”) she tried to tell Laurie in the locker room, and during pregame warmups, and between oncourt rallies. Sammi wasn’t playing anywhere near her best; each smack of hand on ball reran the invasive sensation of Polecat paws bounce-bounce-bouncing her boobs for a bigger audience than was in the stands to watch the match.

It threw Sammi so far off her game that Coach Celeste benched her and sent in Laurie, meaning they *still* couldn’t talk until Marilyn Mansfield and her Evil Angels jived out a bitter victory. Even after *that*, up in the bleachers sitting through the varsity’s defeat, there was no give-and-take to speak of.

The old Laurie—the *Real* Laurie—would’ve been all agog to hear what Sammi had to say, eager to offer comfort and advice, her pooftails dancing with anticipation.

But on this blighted Thursday she sat there immovably with bangs drooping down past her eyelashes, and no indication she was even listening to Sammi's agitated whispers. Till she stirred, and shifted from one compressed rumpcheek to the other, and said:

“You didn't do yourself any favors, trying to get hitched to that chamberpot.”

Spoken as if by a stranger—a remotely distant stranger.

With a faint yet acerbic overlay of *This is all YOUR fault*.

Which, when Samantha finished rehashing it for the hundredth time in her not-long-enough bed, made her start to cry on Mr. Splotches, who sympathetically whimpered in his sleep.

No tears were shed on Friday by Rachel Gleistein, in full foreign-lady-scientist mode and a long white labcoat-like cardigan; though she had to stage her intervention unassisted and almost inaudibly. The VTHS multipurpose media resource center (here called a Library) turned into a ghost suite after 3:30 at the end of the week; but quietude was still imposed upon it by the MPMRCperson (i.e. Librarian).

So it was at a hushed carrel, fenced in by solitude and shelves of books, that Rachel notified Laurie she WAS going to go to Saturday's LitSoc Pop Party—no excuse of any sort would be brooked. Thanks to Rachel's tutoring, she'd gotten B's both semesters in Lang Arts last year; Rachel intended to join a literary society, wanted Laurie to join with her, and together they'd strive to keep it all-girls.

“(This is exactly what you need to snap you out of the mood you've been in. You'll enjoy everything about it, and you'll be good at it too—like when you coordinated the canned food drive for Red Cross. Nobody's got better powers of communication than you—when you aren't stifling them up like you've been doing. It's unhealthy. It can even be dangerous.)”

No need for Rachel to raise her voice to get this across. Merely administer the Queen-of-Sheba authority she'd often used during tutorials to ward off woolgathering and redirect digressive small talk. The old Laurie—the *Normal* Laurie—could seldom hold her tongue for long, and Rachel once had to threaten to zip her lips with masking tape till she learned her lesson.

But on this callous Friday in the multipurpose media resource center (aka Library) her only reaction to Rachel's straitlaced whisper was a slow blink behind bangs.

Could Laurie be "on" something? Had she begun to abuse a controlled substance, trying to cope with the pressures of starting senior high? No, that was unthinkable absurd. She had Rachel's support on the academic side and Samantha's on the athletic. Of course there was also a *romantic* side to grapple with, and none of them had mastered that. (Rachel least of all—thanks again, Bennett Fayne and Hillel Schiller!)

Drugs, angst, heartbreak, derangement... *something* insidious was afflicting Laurie. And she was Rachel's closest friend, the one most deserving of care and lovingkindness.

Another behind-bangs *blink*.

"(You need help,)" breathed Rachel. "(Whatever the problem is, I'm here for you.)"

Little by little, Laurie's unzipped lips widened in something akin to a smile.

Not hers, though. Not Laurie Harrison's affectionate guileless smile.

This was more of a memento—a reminder of Bubbe Gleistein's morbid fairy tales about *dybbuks* hijacking innocent host bodies for their own infernal purposes.

Rachel shuddered inside the labcoat-like cardigan as Laurie (or her occupant) replied at a penetrating volume, unmindful of the MPMRCperson's scandalized *Ssshhhh!*

"Don't be silly. You want to be a surgeon—not a shrink. Wise up and stick to your scalpel."

Withdrawing from the carrel and departing from the Library without another word.

Leaving Rachel to gradually get to her feet—and suddenly spin around, to check if a Phantom-hand might again be reaching out to wedgify her undefended backside.

*

"This ought to work out great for all of us," Vicki postulated in the backseat of the Murrish Lincoln Continental.

"You trying to *convince* all of us? Or just yourself?" speculated Nonique, sitting to her left.

"It might be a neat experience—depending on who else experiences it," ruminated Spacyjane, sitting to Vicki's right.

“You *didn’t* bring Floramour, did you?” Joss interrogated, turning sideways to peer over the frontseat at Spacyjane’s haversack.

“No, I left her looking out your bedroom window.”

Nice view from there, Vicki and Joss sub-communicated: a power lacked by Laurie Harrison, even at the height of her normality.

“That doll is really pretty... and reminded me of someone. But who?” meditated Alex, riding shotgun—not that she would ever carry a firearm, even to earn a merit badge.

DON’T MENTION ISABEL! subbed Joss.

ALEX WOULD FREAK! subbed Vicki.

“Uh, well, maybe you had a doll like that of your own when you were little?”

“No, just my horsies.” (Which Alex continued to collect in multiple media, ranging from stuffed toys to plastic figurines to glass statuettes.) “Floramour’d be a nice name for a pony, if your doll wouldn’t mind sharing it.”

“You’ll have to ask her. She’s called that because her best dress has a love-lies-bleeding pattern,” Spacyjane explicated.

Silence in the Continental, till Joss started humming a truncated Elton John melody and Spacyjane began to sing along:

*My guitar couldn’t hold you, so I split the band
Lovvvve lies bleeding in my hands—*

“Ohhhh-kaaaay...” went Nonique, the first to jump out of the car when Mr. Murrish deposited them at VTHS.

Vicki could tell Nonique was having second (third, fourth) thoughts about this entire undertaking—not just the LitSoc Pop Party, but then to be transported down to Jergen’s Café for a fondue dinner prepared by Spacyjane’s parents, and *then* to spend the night with four white girls (and one odd doll) at a sleepover in Joss’s aerie.

She didn’t come to an isolated standstill this time, though. No, she strode into the school building side by side with Vicki and Joss, a step ahead of Spacyjane (still singing) and several yards behind Alex, who as usual was dashing ahead like a zesty gazelle.

“C’mon! Let’s get *cracking*, you guys!” she advocated.

“Hope she doesn’t mean our knuckles,” said Joss.

THIS WAY TO THE POP PARTY read a coyly-highlighted placard, on which Litfolk had tacked a panoramic view of the cafeteria from six or seven Pop Parties ago. Back then a dozen societies at abundantly-decorated booths vied for consideration by a swarm of sophomore candidates, who sampled their recruitment inducements while taking polite sips of carbonated beverages.

Today, however, the cafeteria looked less like the Big Blues Street Market than the Auldforest Woods—a wilderness of tabletops sprouting upside-down stools and overhung with shadows. (Most of the ceiling’s fluorescent lights were switched off, doubtless as a cost-cutting measure.)

In one corner by the side windows, four tables had been cleared of stools and festooned (by no means abundantly) with LitSoc regalia. More students appeared to be staffing these tables than were milling around swigging Cokes and Sprites and Filberts.

Vicki couldn’t help but remember the first day of cross country at VW, when only twelve Ladybugs had shown up. Not that she’d anticipated a mob would be here today, but turnout was no better than the fans in the stands for a JV volleyball match.

Alex had made a beeline for the Dickinson table and was waving vigorously (again as usual) for the others to follow her there. *FOREVER IS COMPOSED OF NOWS* remarked the Belle of Amherst (in banner form) as Vicki & Co. were greeted by Cheryl (fuming at the scanty congregation) and Mary Kate (pouring cups of pop).

“You know Penny Stone, of course”—away from whom Vicki instinctively edged, since Vanderlund’s head cheerleader could outintimidate even Demandin’ Amanda Pound. But Stone-Cold Penny was in a good mood for once: the Varsity G-Men had defeated mighty Athens Grove at Timonoff Park last night for their third straight victory. “We were more terrorstruck by Penny Stone than the Olympians,” Jeff Friardale said postgame (and only half-facetiously) to the *Channel* reporter.

“And this is our President, Pamela Redfern”—a reborn Jacqueline Bouvier, complete with tasteful poise and breathless voice and Vassar aspirations. Plus a JFK-ish boyfriend in Jeremy Tolhurst, the senior class charisma king, who was slouching by the outer doors with Frank and Stu and other conscripted guys.

“So glad you’ve decided to be part of Dickinson,” Pam jackie-ohh’d at Alex and Vicki.

“Well, we’re *thinking* about it,” Vicki replied.

“I thought we already deci—” Alex was saying when Vicki (who’d outintimidated Amanda Pound too, if just the once) muted her with a minifrown.

“See, we’re hoping to join together, as a group—us five,” she told Pam. Whose bound-for-the-diplomatic-corps gaze moved from Vicki to Joss (staving off a gigglefit) to Spacyjane (*still* singing softly to herself) and then to Nonique (at her most Thelma-on-*Good-Times-y*).

“Of course,” Pamela sidestepped, “you should check out *all* the societies before making your choice.”

“Which *will* be Dickinson,” forecast Becca Blair, arriving (as always) fashionably late, dressed to the nines, and undeterred by her *Damn-I-hate-English* perspective. Doling out quasideferential nods to the upperclassgirls, she registered presences and absences. “Mumbles and Doreen not here?”

“Mumbles hasn’t made up her mind about doing LitSoc this year,” said Alex.

“Hmmp!” went Cheryl. “‘Cause Curtis Weatherly isn’t interested, I’ll bet!”

“And Dory hurt herself trying to bake cookies for the Pop Party,” sighed Mary Kate. “She really has the worst luck using ovens.”

“What about the Purcells?”

“They were *supposed* to bring a couple guys *and* cover the party for the *Channel*,” said Penny, reverting to stone-coldness as she glared at a wall clock.

“Probably stopped off at DeLuster’s Leap and lost track of time!”

“Oh, Cheryl,” murmured Mary Kate.

“Don’t ‘Cheryl’ me—this party is just plain pointless.”

“HEY! You two, get your boy-butts over here!” Penny shouted, flagging down Buddy Marcellus and Marshall McConchie as they wandered past.

Vicki & Co. slipped away toward the next table, not venturing too near since the ladies of Brontë-Browning were being helter-skeltered by Dennis Desmond *and* fuddy-duddied by Fletcher Wyndham simultaneously.

Dennis: “It’s a lesser-known little-flown fact that Elizabeth Barrett Browning invented the root beer float but hid the recipe in her classic poem ‘How Now Brown Cow?’ to keep from being persecuted for fizzy witchcraft after she cholesterolized hubby Bobby—”

Fletcher: “As you’re probably aware, my portrayal of Heathcliff in the summer-before-last’s production by the Hickory Haven Creative Dramatics Workshop won plaudits! Don’t take my word for it—here’s a supporting actress who will tell you the same—”

“*AWP!*” went Nanette Magnus, who’d been cast as Nelly Dean in Hickory Haven’s *Wuthering Heights* and now got tackled by Fletch to testify on his behalf. Which inspired Dennis to put Delia Shanafelt in a leprechaun headlock, to illustrate the hazards of brown-cow cholesterolization.

“That’ll do,” said Principal Stabeldore, hitchgaiting over to restore order (if not lost honor). “Let ‘em go, boys, and leave ‘em be.”

“A thousand apologies!” intoned Fletcher, bowing deeply.

“A thousand and *one*,” added Dennis. “Conviviality overwhelmed us!”

“That’s okay,” simpered Delia, with a flirtatious roll of slightly-bulbous milky-blues. “It only *tickled* a little.”

“*I tickled her fancy / just to be chancy*,” Dennis serenaded her.

“See what I mean, Mr. Stabeldore?” flared Angelique Anstruther, President of Brontë-Browning, who’d objected to opening up the LitSocs genderwise from the very start and now felt vindicated; not least because Kerry Hinterwald was staring openly at her clingy cowlneck top.

“Yeah! You are all SO WEIRD!” Gwen Cokingham told him and Fletch and especially Dennis.

“Weird and underweight,” drawled Millicent Carstairs, sauntering up to give Kerry’s earlobe a tweak that *looked* playful but drained the blood from his face and sent him skittering elsewhere. “So long, Shortstack.”

“A pinch to grow a flinch!” praised Dennis.

“Make *him* scram too!” pleaded Diana Dabney.

“Naah, he can stay,” Mauly yawned, planting a languid haunch on the BB tabletop and causing all its pop bottles to rattle.

“Ex-cuuuuse meeee??” went indignant Margo Temple.

“Long as his mom shells out big bucks for picturetaking,” said Mauly, while Dennis called for other Steve Martin impressions and the Principal asked everyone to simmer down and the motto-banner *LET YOUR PERFORMANCE DO THE THINKING* wobbled on its pole and Vicki dragged her Co. out of the Brontë-Browning periphery.

Next station on their grand tour was Howe-Stowe (*SERENITY OF MANNERS REQUIRES SERENITY OF MIND*) where Lisa and Rhonda and Michelle Blundell and Don’t-Call-Me-Debbie Karberski were trying to hobnob with Link and Hope Eckhardt and Claudia Thurman and Marked-Down Mark Brown (mopping up a spilled Mr. Pibb) while they all kept peeking at the transparent barricade Rachel had mounted to thwart Sell-O Fayne’s S-M-I-L-I-N-G approach.

“Now let’s be reasonable about this, Rach—”

“**NO**—there is **NO** ‘us,’ there is **NO** ‘we,’ there is **NO** ‘our,’ there is **NO** first-person-plural in **ANY** shape or form here—do **YOU** understand **ME??**”

Vicki was more curious about the cold-shoulder standoff of Adlai Stevenson Skinner by New Big Sister Jenna, who’d turned her birdy-back on him and folded her birdy-arms and set her birdy-jaw, and was beckoning Vicki over with a twitch of her bespectacled birdy-head. (Today’s frames were adorned with tiny quill pens.)

“Vicki: will you please wake this ASS up to the fact that *I* will quit Howe-Stowe the instant *he* joins? That is NOT how we are going to collaborate!”

“Uh, Jenna said to tell you...”

“I heard,” said mournful Skinner, his ashen pigeon-pate sinking into his drab gray turtleneck. “Just trying to help... don’t mean any harm...”

“Neither does that guy!” Jenna huffed, twitching her quills at Mark Brown who was now retrieving a pile of LitSoc circulars he’d strewn across the floor. “A fine mess the two of you’d make if we let you in! No—do as I tell you and pump the SciFi Club dry of anything *manga*-related. *If* you want to be useful, that is, and not simply a nuisance. So trot yourself outta here!”

“Um... yeah... so...” went Skinner, bestowing another long last look of rawly-doting astonishment at her as he eggheaded away.

“Don’t,” Jenna told Vicki.

“What? Call Debra Karberski ‘Debbie’?”

“Don’t feel sorry for him,”

“Sorta have to, with guys like that.” (The habitual queasy pity: *Ew, don’t cry...*)

“It’s wasted on that ASS. He only responds to harshness—sad but true. Forget it.

Let’s go regain serenity of mind over manners.”

They found Lisa Lohe expounding on the services Howe-Stowe provided to boost literacy down in The City, such as buying books for grade school libraries and reading them aloud to children there.

“We also sponsor events,” said Rhonda Wright, “like the Muddy Waters ‘Blues Had a Baby’ Spelling Bee and Inner Urban Triathlon.”

“Rhonda, be serious!” chided D-C-M-D Karberski.

“So sorry,” said the repentant Roadrunner. “We actually *co*-sponsor that event with the synchronized swim team—they can’t get enough of Muddy Waters.”

“She’s just kidding,” Michelle Blundell explained between nailbites.

“Well, the things you do sound great,” said Alex. “But I kind of already told the Dickinsons—”

“—that we’re checking out *all* the societies before we decide,” Vicki interposed.

“Right, Joss?”

“You betcha,” went Joss as she helped Link rescue Mark Brown from the cafeteria stool whose legs he’d somehow entangled his own with.

“*Didn’t* I warn you?” Cloudy groaned.

“*Si, nos avisaste,*” answered Esperanza Eckhardt.

“ENOUGH!” steamed D-C-M-D.

Vicki & Co. took this kvetch as their cue to go complete the circuit, wrapping up the Pop Party at Austen-Alcott’s table under a *WHAT IS RIGHT TO BE DONE CANNOT BE DONE TOO SOON* banner. Before they reached it, Spacyjane froze in her tracks and the others slowed to a crawl at the sight of Isabel Carstairs’s shapely thigh bared to her pantyline as she hoisted the hem of an Yves Saint Laurent skirt for Sidney Erbsen to *FLASSSHHHH FLASSSHHHH flassshhhh* at.

“(Take it that’s Is?)” deduced Nonique.

“(T’Is,)” Joss confirmed. “(As in *Tizzy*.)”

But Spacyjane unfroze and resumed her *sotto* singing:

The roses in the window box have tilted to one side

Ev’rything about this house was born to grow and die...

“Hiiiiieee!” Isabel blithely hailed them, letting her designer hem fall into decorous place. “I wasn’t sure I was going to be here ‘cause, y’know” (expressive aquamarine eyeslide in Mauly’s direction) “though now I’m glad I came” (coquettish aquamarine eyeroll at Split-Pea, whose camera had refocused on the nonplused Nonique) “and this bunch seems the most fun.”

With a sweeping trade-show-model gesture at Austen-Alcott Literary Society.

Its Presiding Genius was Lesley Ogilvie, Thirsty K’s drily articulate older sister, who could prolong a “shaggy rug” story *ad infinitum* (she’d been telling one about a taxidermist’s toupée since the first pop bottle got uncapped). Assisting Lesley was Nancy Sykeman, a standup/improv artist destined for The Second City, who recounted the atrocities committed by her boyfriend Bub:

“As in BLZ Bub! When I said ‘*Please* let’s go to a movie instead of housebreaking your dog’ he picked *The Hills Have Eyes*, saying it’d be a travelogue, and made *me* pay for the tickets and the fright insurance (naming *him* as beneficiary) so I said ‘Bub, the least you can do is cough up for popcorn’—and he took me *literally*...”

Less voluble was fellow senior Rula “Erotic” Hradek, who not only kept detailed records and ratings of all her trysts and conquests, but was *roman à clef*-ing them into a chiller-thriller like Lois Duncan’s *A Gift of Magic*, *Down a Dark Hall* and *Summer of Fear*—though far more explicit than any of those, depicting the infiltration of a suburban high school by an extroverted incubus/succubus.

(“In other words, a modern version of *Northanger Abbey*,” Joss would quip.)

Among the junior Most Fun AAs was of course Holly Brollis, busily flirting with “Uncle Luke” Stabeldore; Alva Dee Bickling, who’d brought homemade maple walnut fudge (such as she hadn’t consumed en route) to the Pop Party; and Nancy Buschmeyer of the

bizarre hair perms, who was as compulsive a signer-up-to-do-things as Alex herself.

Not present were Thirsty K (“Lesley got all the book-smarts in our family”) and—to Vicki’s relief—Candy Gates, who’d decided literary societies were a barren blind alley and so dropped out of Austen-Alcott. Her parting blast (as mimicked by Holly) had been “I put up with this for a year, I’ll put it on my college apps, but *now* I’m putting in for something that’ll put me in a position to give the public something better and finer!!”

(‘Nuff said.)

A few compliant boyfriends (though not BLZ Bub) were on dutiful hand: Nelson Baedeker, despite the Regency gown threat; Pete “Chewy” DeWitt, a cracker-barrel hand-me-down to Nancy Buschmeyer from the nonliterary Nancy Hantz; and Lesley’s longtime swain Scott Grampian, who was this year’s *Aqueduct* editor and wrote Edward Goreylike verse illustrated with Gahan Wilsonesque squiggles.

Also loitering at the AA table was Split-Pea Erbsen, who finally turned his lens on Spacyjane as she skipped to the finale of *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* and whisper-sang:

*Harmony and me, we’re pretty good company
Looking for an island in our boat upon the sea...*

(“In other words, the opposite of *Lord of the Flies*,” Joss would quip.)

Jerome Schei, scanning their corner of the dim cafeteria, heaved a woebegone sigh. “No Laurie. I begged her on my knees over the phone to come! That girl’s had a burr in her bloomers for too long.”

“Sheila-Q calls it ‘boars in her drawers,’” Vicki told him. “And for like a whole month now, or longer. I keep meaning to worry more about it.”

“(Is she a smoker?)” Nonique whisper-asked.

“Maybe!” went Jerome, his nostrils quivering like Laurie’s used to. “Why? Have you seen her smoking?”

“(Hush!)” Nonique ordered, taking a wary step away from Alex and Isabel. “(No, but yesterday after Gym she asked me for a cigarette.)”

“(OhmyGahd! What’d you tell her?)”

“(That I didn’t have one—I don’t smoke.)” To Vicki: “(That’d get her kicked off the volleyball team, right?)”

“(If she got caught,)” said Vicki. Sternly, to Jerome: “(Or talked about—)”

“(The word is MUM,)” he whisper-vowed, just before Alex told everyone to quiet down so the Principal could address the Pop Party.

As per usual, Mr. Stabeldore was a man of few words. He thanked all who’d dropped by, briefly singling out seniors like Jeremy, Scott, and Chewy DeWitt (a yep/nope favorite of his) for setting a good example for younger boys. He noted that a decade ago, high schools throughout America’d had active literary societies; today Vanderlund was one of the very few still upholding that fine tradition, and he hoped the ladies and gentlemen here would not let it lapse. Please dispose of all bottles and cups in their proper receptacles.

“Did you notice who *else* was a no-show?” Jerome effervesced as he handed his cup to Vicki for proper disposal. “Gigi Pyle! I thought she’d be here for sure! D’you suppose” (dramatically lowered voice) “she and Laurie are off together having an *oke-smay*?”

*

“No way!” scoffed Joss several hours later when she heard about this bubbly conjecture. “Not after all those ‘Harelip’ cracks.”

“All those *what* now?” asked Alex, hearing only the last four words as she emerged from the aerie’s half-bath in trefoil-emblazoned PJs.

Joss gave her (and Nonique and Spacyjane) the lowdown about Gigi’s sixth-grade reign of mistreatment at McGrum Elementary, which Joss had laughed off at the time but poor Laurie hadn’t.

“How unkind!” Alex lamented. “I never want to think less than the best of anybody, but... well, I guess I kind of knew that Gigi’s sort of...”

“‘Snottylviciouscruelconceited’ is the word you’re looking for,” said Joss.

“Sums her up, all right,” said Vicki, coming out of the half-bath in a violet nightie. “Member the fuss she made about our disco concert party?” She gave Nonique and Spacyjane (and also Alex, who hadn’t heard the entire backstory before) a capsule recap of Gigi’s reaction to the Vinyl Spinnaker Quinceañera’s scuttling her own Drama Club supper

party. Vicki's imitation of Gigi's *All raht then, looky here: yew owe me one bigtime* raised a general laugh; though Nonique shook her head ruefully while retying the belt of her peignoir.

"There's girls like that all over," she told them, adding a hesitant Thornford anecdote about the stuck-up Briggs sisters, Rochelle and Elouise, who thought they were SOMETHING ELSE with an egotistic vengeance.

"Briggs?" said Spacyjane, nestling in the beanbag chair with Fingers the cat on her negligée'd lap. "I wonder if they're related to the Mr. Briggs who comes into our Café a lot but my dad says always undertips?"

"Doubt it," smiled Nonique. "Don't think many folks in Riversgate are that into fondue."

She, at any rate, was currently as stuffed with fabulous Fribourgeois as the other four sleeping over at the Queen Anne manse. Nonique might've preferred to stick her first toe in the potentially muddy waters of Caucasian slumber-partying with Vicki alone; but Alex was so nice and Joss so hospitable, while Spacyjane seemed genuinely unaware of any significance in their different skintones, other than Nonique's being a pretty shade of brown.

"Okay, since we've brought up the snots" ("Joss!" ewwed Vicki and Alex as their hostess, now clad in her oversized Edgar Stubley T-shirt, rejoined them) "let's finish picking a LitSoc. I may not see eye to eye with Isabel Carstairs"—rolling a small blue twinkler at Spacyjane, who didn't look up—"but she's right about Austen-Alcott being the most fun. And they must be the broadest-minded, since they accepted *Meg* as a member and didn't kick her out for acting Meggish. Even so, my vote's for AA."

"I already promised Dickinson," Alex demurred.

"You promised for *you*, not for *us*."

"But we said we'd all join together! And I know Becca's expecting Vicki to be a Dickinson."

Nobody says "can't" or "won't" to Becca Blair and makes it stick hung in the aerie air, till Vicki waved it away. She'd already beaten Becca to the can't/won't punch by telling her (Becca) that she (Vicki) wouldn't be a candidate for class office this semester; last year's Student Court duty had glutted her (Vicki) for a long time to come.

“Let’s look at this like, y’know, objectively,” she said. “Dickinson’s mostly mover-and-shaker girls—and I don’t mean cheerleaders, all the LitSocs have those. But you could tell what Pam Redfern was thinking—Joss is the most literary of us five, but she hasn’t been a class officer or belonged to anything except Band and Orchestra. So to Pam she ‘isn’t Dickinson material.’”

“I don’t think that’s fair,” said Alex.

“No, it isn’t,” Vicki went on. “And Brontë-Browning’s even less fair—*they’d* be the ones Gigi would join if she was going to join. Probably Britt too if *she* was, even though her sister Fleur belonged to BB and Britt can’t bear Fleur even worse than Joss can’t bear Meg.”

“‘Cept *I’m* broader-minded,” bragged Joss, hopping up to flip over the Miles Davis LP on her turntable. “I’d even donate Meg a kidney, if she needed one to bake a steak-and-kidney pie.”

On which cue Beth materialized in the doorway, accompanied by Thumb if not Invisible Amy, though Spacyjane made room for both on the beanbag chair. “Are you discussing *Ulysses*?” Beth inquired.

“As in S. Grant?” Joss growled.

“As in James Joyce. ‘Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented u—’”

“ENOUGH!” Joss dontcallmedebbied. “Go downstairs and pop us a big bowl of Orville Redenbacher.”

“Oh please, I’m so stuffed with cheese,” moaned Nonique. “Couldn’t eat another bite.”

“You don’t *bite* popcorn,” said Beth, observing her with owlsh interest. “‘Mr. Bloom watched curiously, kindly the lithe black form. Clean to see, the gloss of her sleek hide,’” she cited before vanishing.

“‘Mrkgnao!’” threw in Thumb from Spacyjane’s lap.

“Ohhhh-kaaaay...” went Nonique.

“Sorry sorry sorry,” Joss apologized. “Beth was *always* a weirdo, even as a baby.”

“What in the world was she was talking about?” asked the befuddled Alex.

“It’s from a famous novel she has no business reading yet, much less memorizing.”

Alex blew out her lips. “This is exactly why I need you guys to be in the same LitSoc as me! I don’t understand *anything* about famous novels!”

“So let’s settle this before Weirdetta comes back with the popcorn. Which one’s next—Howe-Stowe?”

“I’d like to be in the same Soc as Jenna,” said Vicki, “and I wouldn’t mind reading library books to little kids. But I doubt that Lisa and Debra and probably Rachel and Hope would let us *enjoy* doing it. What do you guys think?”

“’Spect *I’m* supposed to join them—right?” Nonique said bluntly.

“Because...?” went Alex, again befuddled.

“Howe was the first Soc to accept Jews, and Stowe the first to accept blacks,” Joss explained. “Now it’s basically the Sammy Davis Jr. Society for Girls.”

“So for me, it’s them or nothing?” asked Nonique. “Tell the truth now.”

“Oh, I’m *sure* not!” cried Alex. “Not nowadays! I mean, *I’m* half-Latina—”

“Be cool. I could live with that; I just don’t want to be stuck with Claudia Thurman rankin’ on me every minute like *I’m* some kind of snot!... ‘Scuse me. My turn to say sorry.”

“Be cool?” suggested Spacyjane, to another general laugh.

“Cloudy *is* kind of high-strung,” Alex conceded.

“Which brings us back to Austen-Alcott,” said Vicki. “I agree with Joss that they’re the most fun, and I bet they’d be happy to take us all—Holly’ll be, for sure. But Isabel’s gonna join them, and I know she’s not everybody’s favorite person. How ‘bout it, Space—could you bear being in the same Soc as Is?”

Fingers and Thumb sprang off the beanbag; Invisible Amy seemed to beat a retreat. Spacyjane, however, showed no sign of discomposure. Again that star-sapphire gaze was trained on a distant vista (Floramour on the windowsill?), again with that smile of beatific complacency. And again came that non-sequiturish adage: “My Sweet Pea is always with me.”

“Okay then,” said Joss. “AA it is.”

“But I *promised* Dickinson,” wailed Alex. “Scout’s honor! I can’t go back on my word!”

“Well then, we can be friendly competitors—y’know, like the Fries and the Broils,” Vicki reassured her. “It’s not like we’ll be fighting a gang war against each other.”

“Spoken like Guadalupe Velez of the Pfiester Park Pherrettes—”

“Will you shut UP about that?” Vicki howled.

“*You* shut UP about that,” Joss responded.

“You guys are a trip,” murmured Nonique.

“We don’t *mean* to be,” mumbled Alex.

““Crannocks of corn and oblong eggs in great hundreds,”” quoted Beth, returning with *Ulysses* in one hand and Orville Redenbacher in the other.

*

At that very moment, on that same Saturday night, Gigi Pyle was in the backseat of a Toyota Cressida speeding up the highest Hereafter Hill—though not, as one might presume, to DeRussey’s Point alias DeLuster’s Leap. Which was just as well, since she was in a mood to do some lusterless leaping.

It had been a week where every possible thing went amiss, awry, or out-and-out wrong. First a slapstick pratfall during Monday afternoon’s cheerleading practice, caused by feet chafed into stumblebummery by those damnfool wedge sling sandals. Then a public bra-strap malfunction on Tuesday that inspired Craig Clerkington to dub you “Lopsy,” short for lopsided: his idea of amorous wit. Then an unprepped-for pop quiz in German on Wednesday, for which you’d had to resort to dicey guesswork. Then being sent to the Geometry chalkboard two hours later to prove a theorem about congruence, and making a dusty bungle of it. Then mislaying Lizabeth Ann’s onyx ring on Thursday, after borrowing it from her jewelry box without bothering to ask. Then, as if in retribution, becoming infected with a chin-zit that defied all attempts to remove or conceal it, like some migrant pustule from Angry Acne Neapolitan. Then having to bear up yesterday under Maleficent Margo Temple’s cutting remarks about your so-called failure to try out for her silly-ass literary society—“I guess you’re too obsessed with skidding on pimply banana peels to even *pretend* to make an effort.” (“Yeah, obsessed!” from Diana Dabney.) Then needing all your Rolaid-

dosed self-restraint to not bite off Eeny Stott's squintilla head for gushingly volunteering to "boycott" LitSocs with you. Not to mention the several hours you sacrificed going through cheery motions as the JV G-Men got shut out 26-0 at Athens Grove—and Graham Aleshire suffered a poke in the eye on the *sideline*, from one of his own *teammates*; which if nothing else gave you an excuse to quit being chauffeured in that smelly yellow Monza.

Instead, here you were (on a Saturday night!) alone in the backseat of a speeding Cressida. Sufficiently acquainted with Shakespeare's "sluttish spoils" to curl your lip at such a name for a Toyota model. Trying to *Think unflappable thoughts* as your eyes were ensnared and held fast by the driver's in the rearview mirror—a pair of bonked-out bruise-bordered eggshells, bob-bob-bobbing to the dissonant beat from the Cressida tapedeck—

"What *is* that racket?" you snapped.

"Penderecki's *Devils*," bobbed the driver. Who fittingly tagged himself as "Flake," but might just as easily have chosen "Al Bino" or "Johnny Winter Jr."

His syncopated surveillance made you squirm even worse than Sid Erbsen's will-bending camera lens. Which, offensive at it was, at least made you feel *positively* undressed: like the most expensive bondmaid on the auction block. But Flake's reflective scrutiny (like yours of the Colonial Revival on Clubroot Drive) felt like a dispassionate cataloging of every physical flaw, from that ineradicable zit on your chin right on downward and inward to the unsightly birthmark on your privatemost underbelly—

"Shouldn't you watch where you're going??" you crackled.

"Am I not?" Flake bobbed back. "Echo effect: *am-am-am aye-aye-aye not-not-not...*"

"Mauler alert," reported the little red-haired girl in the shotgun seat, her petite feet (in Diane von Fürstenberg gym shoes) propped upon the Cressida dashboard. "Make tracks."

"*Aye-aye-aye*," repeated Flake, flooring the gas pedal as an Alfa Romeo Spider roared up to tailgate your tuffet and *Lawdy Gawd* you began to pray, *Don't let me get killed alone in the backseat of this ugly car*—

Topping the final rise with all four tires off the asphalt, then crashing back to earth and swerving onto Matterhorn Terrace, the loftiest street in Hereafter Park, to beat the Alfa Romeo into a welter of haphazardly parked vehicles.

“We’re here because we’re here because we’re here,” crooned Britt.

“*We’re* the first to gain entrée,” countered Mauly Carstairs as she and Gwen Cokingham (of all people) ran up the walkway to what even the late-night darkness couldn’t disguise was a faux neo-rococo chateau.

“Behold the Den of Dental Iniquity!” brayed Flake. “Erected over a graveyard of root canals!”

“*Der weisser Engel, der weisser Engel!*” chanted Britt, with Flake chiming in on a cryptic chorus of “*SZELL! SZELL! Is it safe? Is it safe?*” that must’ve been an inscrutable password, since the chateau’s front door (slammed shut by Mauly and Gwen) swung back open as Britt and Flake—and you, trotting nervously at their heels—approached it.

This couldn’t be the Carstairs place, even though Odious Is had a thing for the Alps, and her-and-Mauly’s father was a wealthy oral surgeon who could afford to build a gaudy house. No, they lived down near La Cuna Bay on Shoreward Circle, and this ersatz castle must belong to their uncle “Painless Joe” Mansfield, brother-in-law and surgical partner of Dr. Carstairs. Though it bore less of his stamp—or gouge—than that of his wife, Arabella Carstairs Mansfield, who (as Jerome Schei put it) had termites in the windmills of her mind.

(“Ever see *House on Haunted Hill*? They say Arabella fell in love with that movie set and wanted to live there ‘forever and ever.’ Too bad she spends more of her time away getting detox’d.”)

She was definitely present in spirit at tonight’s come-as-you-are (when-you’re-out-of-your-skull) Saturday Masque. Every dimly-lit room in the faux chateau was packed with noisy bodies gulping and puffing various substances as they lurched to the throb and screech of what sounded like horror-film soundtracks. A glass of Lawdy-knew-what was thrust into your hand and you did your best not to spill it as you hurried after Britt and Flake, who were threading through the crush at an accelerating pace that threatened to abandon you to this mob of mad bludgeoners—

WHUMP! A fight broke out at your elbow, making you dodge sideways and empty the glassful partly onto the carpet but mostly over your sure-to-be-stained double-knit skirt. *DAMMITALL!* Then one of the combatants reared up to reveal Gwen Cokingham yelling “*The Space Shuttle will save us from the Soviet Union!*” (if your ears didn’t deceive you) as

she tore the shirt off her adversary, who was bewhiskered like a radical agitator and *YAROOHED* like one too as Gwen dug her nails into his hairy bare chest.

Hastily you ducked around them and started searching for a bathroom or kitchen or someplace with towels and a sink where you might salvage your skirt. Turn a knob at random and stumblebum into what appeared to be a *ballroom*, dominated by a grand piano at which a Joel Greylike gnome was announcing “Your own—your very *very* own—*GER-TROO-DEH SSCHNEEEE-BE-DECKT!!*”—and up on the piano pranced Ginger Snowbedeck, whom you’d always resented for having a first name too similar to yours, but now boggled at as she commenced to perform a striptease while caterwauling:

ASHAM WAS A TOOTIN' TURK

TOOTLE-OOTLE-DOO TOOTLE-OOH-DOO-DOO

MADE HIS WIFE PUT OUT FOR JERKS

TOOTLE-OOTLE-DOO TOOTLE-OOH-DOO-DOO

Turn and run out of the ballroom, not waiting to see whether Ginger deserves her name anywhere below her scalpline, and carom off gulping puffing lurching bodies till your wrist is grabbed by a darting flicking fist that resists your panicky struggles to yank free until you realize it’s Britt’s pulling you along an increasingly unpopulated hallway till you reach a door on which she tattoos a complicated knock. Loud sounds of unlocking, unbolting, unchaining—and you’re slipped past it into a chamber lit only by banks of candles.

And occupied, you intuitively know, by the hardcore hub of the Traversers.

Here is Mauly Carstairs, lazily licking a spoon though no bowl of batter or frosting’s at hand. Here is her cousin and your hostess, Marilyn “Jive” Mansfield, whose face has a kiln-fired porcelain hardness enclosed by a Morticia Addamsy ‘do. Here is Renee Shackleton from Startop, a talented figure skater under suspicion of bribing an ice-dance judge. Here is Roald Bjelke, the disreputable “Great Dane” from Front Tree, who augments his allowance by swiping and reselling high-priced eiderdown jackets (he’s wearing one now). Here is the string-and-bones high priestess, Lynndha Ednalino of pharmaceutical infamy. And here supine on an Arctic-blue bedspread is Parnell Travers himself: scraggly, unkempt, with vacant yawning peepers.

“(Yes, Virginia, there *is* a Santa Claus,)” Flake hisses in your left ear.

“(And there may be Pop Parties, but there are also *Coke* Parties,)” Britt croons in your right.

From the figurehead on the bedspread comes an oracular gurgle: “If’n ya run outta snuff, ground pepper’ll cure what’s ailin’ ya.”

Lynndha Ednalino reiterates this maxim with string-and-bones intensity, copying it into a thick logbook of Parnell’s utterances. “Harkee—so be it,” she amens.

“*Speaking* of pepper,” says Britt, giving Parnell a one-second gaslight-glance, “here’s a Pep Clubber who’s run low on pep. Have we got anything good for what ails her?”

“Depends,” Jive replies in a voice like hammered enamel, inspecting you with the same faultfinding X-ray vision Flake deployed in the Cressida. “‘I’m a Pepper—he’s a Pepper—she’s a Pepper—we’re a Pepper.’ Have *you* got what it takes to be a Pepper too?”

No pop-commercial singing or dancing to these amended lyrics. Just half a dozen Traverser faces obscured by candlelight, yet clearly giving you the same unimpressed nitpicky once-over. Which you stand up under with as much hauteur as you can muster, considering that your skirt’s still soaked with Lawdy-knows-what.

“Depends,” you riposte. “How much?”

“A line. How much depends how fine we chop it.”

“No, I mean—how MUCH...?”

“This isn’t a bring-your-own-blow party,” Jive grates. “On the house for guests.”

Nod and smile (haughtily) and think to yourself *They’re only a passel of damn Yankees!*—but not *I suppose it is customary to strip your victims? (I shall die if you do!)*

“Okay then,” goes Jive.

An antique looking-glass such as Alice might’ve gone through is removed from the wall. No combination safe behind it, but a small white envelope tucked inside the frame. Jive lays out its contents on the flattened mirror and wields a razor blade while your heartbeat reverberates faster and faster and you take hold of your wet skirt so as not to reach for Britt’s hand like a scared baby but she leans over like she does at school to let you know “(Your troubles’ll melt like lemondrops, ‘cause you’ll be way above the chimneytops)” which helps you breathe easier and after all this is what actors and actresses do nowanights

on Broadway and in Hollywood so it's like a rite of dramatic passage a necessary step up the ladder to the theatrical roof where you'll see heaven much better and look at the fine white lines lying above and below the mirror's surface like contrails from skyrockets launching to lift you off that dreary banal roof till the clouds are far behind you and the stars above are where they'll find you as you take refuge within this tightly-rolled century-note at your nostril and genuflect to the sugary streak on the flickering glass with a sharp inhalation while the Astral Slacker remotely gurgles *Make damn sure yer powder's dry befo' ya go to war—*

40

International House of Punkettes

The townships of Vanderlund, Athens Grove, and Multch adjoin at the conflux where the sanitary canal drains into the Fourth Fork of the North Branch. Overlooking this scenic spot is the Carrefour Shopping Center, less highfalutin than the Green Bridge or New Sherwood, yet of greater stature than a stripmall. Among its eateries is an IHOP frequented by students from many different schools, and understood (like Vegas by the Mob) to be a neutral site where no rivalry-shenanigans are permitted. This rule is enforced with rigid impartiality by bouncer-sized management, as Brad Faussett learned a couple years ago when he spilled a pitcher of mulberry syrup while staging a fake epileptic attack, and had his splattered ass ejected from the premises.

One of the IHOP booths is perpetually reserved for a certain party, upon whose entrance anyone sitting in it is either told to move elsewhere at once, or wise enough to do so without prompting. A plate of not-on-the-menu *palačinkas*, specially prepared with Old World flair, is swiftly delivered to this party's placemat and eaten with no outward show of enjoyment, though down to its last jammy morsel.

(Here's to you, Beata Maria. Almost tastes the way you used to make them.)

The party in question is always accompanied by one or more companions who sit in the same booth but get served regular IHOP fare. None is so foolhardy as to ask for "just a taste" of the crêpe-like *palačinkas*, since the party is (as Mickey the trainer called Rocky the boxer) a Very Dangerous Person, and recognizable as such by even the dimmest-bulbed—regardless of the party's being a five-foot-four-inch girl aged only seventeen.

“Everything to your liking tonight, Miss Antoinette?” a bouncer-sized manager sidles over to ask.

“Not bad,” replies Bunty O’Toole.

Who may *look* as Irish as Dennis Desmond, given a snubnosed colleenlike face that even Dennis wouldn’t dare try to steal a kiss from; but is far more Mitteleuropean by nature, filled with subtle intrigue instead of reckless blarney. This trait had leapfrogged two fallow generations in New Bohemia, a grandiosely-titled hamlet in western North Dakota where Czech was the spoken tongue and cattle shipping the chief occupation. There the Kostelecky clan had eked out a bovine existence, driving more soft bargains than hard, till a resurgence of crafty shrewdness enabled Anton Kostelecky to chisel kickbacks as a supply sergeant during WWII. He parlayed this nest egg into a thriving polka-band agency based in Fargo, where his daughter Bibi (christened Beata Maria) was treated to a Beer Barrel Hoop-de-Doo upbringing.

At Holy Rosary School the lovely Bibi befriended the lively Harriet (“Hay Fever”) Flynn, headache to every nun and exploiter of many boys. “The Lord helps those who help myself,” Hay would say when asked about trinkets-of-remembrance acquired from those boys, “and that’s nothing to sneeze about.”

After graduation she and Bibi roomed together and pursued a Laverne & Shirleyish lifestyle, working at a creamery—“delicious dairy products, fresh from the farm”—and searching for Mr. Right (Bibi) or a tolerably generous sugardaddy (Hay). Neither found her object of desire in Fargo; and Bibi fell the furthest short by being impregnated by Clarence O’Toole who was obliged to marry her at the prodding of Anton Kostelecky’s shotgun, despite Clarence’s objections to purchasing a cow he’d previously milked for free. Bibi’s honeymoon was further curdled when her parents had to hit the road back to New Bohemia (Anton having shaved a polka band too close for comfort) and Harriet Flynn also made plans to depart, staying just long enough to stand godmother to Bibi’s ominously-named baby:

“Marie Antoinette, vade in pace et Dominus sit tecum.”

“Amen,” from those in attendance.

“(All that ‘hafta get married’ bullshit, ‘n’ you couldn’t even gimme a son!)” from Clarence O’Toole.

“(Please don’t leave me ‘n’ the baby here with him,)” Bibi implored Hay.

“(Soon as I make my fortune, I’ll send for you both,)” Hay pledged.

Shortly thereafter she set off to seek that fortune in The City, becoming a popular callgirl (billed as Helene Favray) whose price rose steadily over the next arduous decade. When Hay turned thirty she still looked twenty, but knew there wasn’t much time left to be borrowed before it would catch up with her—and then what? Never one to pray in earnest, Hay wished upon the first star she saw every night; and Fate (as Jiminy Cricket chirped) can step in and see those who do this through their troubles.

In Hay’s case she struck gold by resuscitating the potency of Aloysius Walsh, owner of the Hudden & Dudden Pub at Multch’s Crossing. He also had a hand in sundry other operations, being an eminent member (known as “Alley Mushmouth”) of the North Side Gang, which the Cavanaugh Family had spent forty years rebuilding from the ashes of the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre.

Al Walsh secured Harriet-alias-Helene’s exclusive services, setting her up in a plush pad at the Vacamonte on Vanderlund’s Panama Boulevard. And Hay, like Maybelle Grayling a generation earlier in L.A., obtained a guarantee of income for life—dependent on her absolute loyalty to Alley Mushmouth and the North Side Gang, plus their continued survival vis-à-vis law enforcement and the South Side Outfit. (Playing it extra safe, she salted away a percentage of each month’s largesse in blue-chip assets.)

It was a sustainable competence but not a fortune, so Hay/Harriet/Helene didn’t send for anyone in Fargo. She and Bibi O’Toole did keep in touch, each knowing the other was being less than candid about what went on in their real lives. During Clarence’s extensive truancies and infidelities, Beata Maria devoted herself to the bottle (not of milk or cream) and to the daughter she called “Bunty”—possibly an abbreviation of Bye Baby Bunting since daddy was often gone a-hunting, though not for any rabbitskin to wrap little Antoinette in.

Thirteen years after leaving North Dakota, Hay returned there for Bibi’s funeral—to which her widower brought a date, arriving after the mass and leaving before the reception. Clarence took no notice of his daughter, who ignored him and was unresponsive to Hay’s consolatory overtures, yet not wholly standoffish. As a just-turned-teenager about to be packed off to St. Wenceslaus School in New Bohemia, “Bunty” was slightly pearshaped and

puddingfaced and reticent on every topic except her late mother's nurturing:

"I'll miss her dumplings. And braided buns. And pancakes."

Harriet Flynn may have had a heart of gilded ormolu, but it went sufficiently out to Bibi's lone lorn child that she gave Bunty her actual address in Vanderlund rather than the P.O. box number Bibi'd corresponded with. "Let me know if you ever need my help, hon."

Bunty said nothing but pocketed the address.

And as a blizzard raged the following winter—on the same day, as chance would have it, that Parnell Travers got plowed into his transformative snowbank—Hay was alerted by the Vacamonte doorman to the arrival of a young wayfarer who'd spent Christmas vacation hitchhiking a thousand miles on I-94, in the middle of a global gas crisis to boot. Unlike the original Marie Antoinette, Bunty'd come through this tribulation with a head on her shoulders, plus considerably more aplomb than she'd shown at her mother's funeral:

"Mind if I crash here awhile, Aunt Hay?"

Taken aback, Aunt Hay *did* mind, and not simply at the prospect of inconvenient intrusion by a strange teen. Lurking behind Bunty's casual veneer was a shrouded presence like a bird of prey, a falcon or seahawk waiting to swoop upon some quarry... such as Hay's not-altogether-hardboiled conscience:

"You said to let you know," Bunty added. "If I could ever use your help."

Clarence O'Toole didn't want her. The Kosteleckys had problems of their own, Anton having picked the wrong time to invest in Dakota petroleum. St. Wenceslaus was more than happy to sever ties ("Please don't send her back here!" beseeched a long-distance nun). And Hay *had* accepted solemn godparental responsibility for Bibi's Baby Bunty.

So Antoinette was installed at the Vacamonte and Vanderlund Junior High, where she quickly came to the attention of Vice Principal O'Brien for shaking down younger students, jimmying open lockers, pilfering classroom supplies, and being "a disgrace to the Irish." When Hay's attempts to scold and chastise her had no effect, Bunty was sent to the Hudden & Dudden Pub for a last-chance talking-to by Al Walsh, accustomed to smacking around dames of all ages if they didn't toe the line.

"Want me to take my belt to you, kid?" he blustered. "Is that what you need, a good hiding so you'll play nice?"

“How ‘bout you give me a job instead?” parried brazen Bunty. “Y’know, to keep me ‘out of mischief.’”

“A job! Whaddaya think I am, a social worker? This is a *bar*, kid! You shouldn’t even be in my office! Got no use for a brat your age!”

“I know how to do a thing or two,” Bunty remarked. “Had a grandmother, Maudie O’Toole, who ran a boardinghouse in Dilworth, Minnesota. She was accused of poisoning four men—not all at once; at different times. Never admitted doing it. Never got convicted. My old man said she was just a lousy cook.” Sedate staredown: “Got anybody you want me to cook for, Uncle Al?”

Fist thumping desktop: “Don’t try to smartmouth *me*, you little geebag!”

Momentary GLEAM in the no-longer-sedate eyes across the desk.

Lasting just long enough, and Linda Blairishly enough, to send a chill of fear through the ironclad gut of Alley Mushroom.

Damn shame she ain’t a boy. With a whammy-glance like that, a boy could rise to the top of the rackets if they didn’t knock him off for using it—

Oh knock IT off and put me to work.

Again that GLEAM from those hawkish eyes; again that fearsome frisson through Alley’s entrails.

Better keep this one out of the kitchen...

Put her to work? Doing what, exactly? The North Side Gang had never trafficked in prostitution (except as patrons) or anything involving jailbait, so no dice there. Even though the kid wasn’t bad-looking in a somewhat pudgy way, and like too many girls nowadays had on a nondescript blend-into-the-crowd sort of outfit...

“How good can you be at *not* getting noticed, kid?”

“Try me,” said Bunty. Fading into the pub office’s background without leaving her chair.

Al tested her skills at inconspicuous observation, giving Bunty penny-ante spying and tailing assignments. She aced them all, adroitly evading traps he’d laid for her plus one or two he hadn’t foreseen. Little by little Al broadened the scope of her commissions and deepened their attendant pitfalls; not once did Bunty let him down or do anything that might

implicate herself.

This extended to school life at VW, where Mr. O'Brien (try though he might) could no longer catch her red-handed in any suspendable act. Bunty'd learned the benefits of covert discretion, which greased the wheels of conducting untrammelled activities. More and more of these were intermediary in nature as she began to gather underlings and set them up in businesses reporting to her.

Bunty's first second banana was Lola Svoboda, a fellow Bohemian girl with a gift for forgery. Limited till now to counterfeiting excuse notes and hall passes, Bunty had Lola advance to the far more gainful manufacture of fake IDs, which launched their classmate Rula Hradek on an Erotic career when she used hers to dupe a Lakeside Central tavern into believing she was of age.

("You meet such interesting people on Campus," said Rula, posting her first trysts and conquests in a brand-new ledger.)

Next to sign up for the O'Toole crew was Gordon McGillah, heir to a funeral parlor but far more interested in the production of pirated tape recordings. He fell hard for Bunty even before she bankrolled his Memorex infringements; and she always said the best thing about Bootleg was his knowing from the very start which one of them was Boss.

Indeed, he called her neither Bunty nor Antoinette but "Blondie Johnson," derived not from her hair color (which was darker than light) but a Late Movie where luscious young Joan Blondell rose from hit-upon drudge to kingpin—make that *queenpin*—of a criminal gang. "That could be you, Blondie J!" Bootleg told her. "This City's gonna be your oyster and I'm gonna help you open it!"

An ambitious goal, towards which Blondie/Bunty/Antoinette started paying dues by scrupulously donating a share of every profit to her Uncle Al. He was both amused by and approving of this unbidden tribute from a natural-born wiseguy—or wisegal. Their professional connection remained strictly hush-hush; Alley Mushmouth risked ridicule (at the very least) by dealing seriously with a teenage girl. Even so, he viewed Bunty O'Toole as a secret weapon in his own arsenal, unsuspected by rivals or the law. Which might be an outlandish notion, but outlandishness never fazed an Irishman.

As time went by Al gave her weightier tasks and duties, laying more intricate traps to test her along the way; and Bunty made consistent three-point landings, with nary a loss of cargo or crew. The latter grew as it drew from other schools in the northeast suburbs, mostly on the inland side, and mostly (like Bootleg McGillah) hunkish boys of Celtic blood.

From Athens Grove came Long John Shanahan, a budding piano virtuoso whose family owned a sloop suitable not only for racing the Pilchards's *King Oscar*, but also clandestine transit and small-scale smuggling. From Multch West came Tommy the Torch Dwyer, son of a Presbyterian minister but with more of a vocation for vandalism, sabotage and pyromania. From Multch South came Ford Lennox (aka "Fort Knox") of the freshman Buccaneers, who could strongarm anyone from a wide receiver to a defaulting loan recipient. So mighty were his biceps that they gulled him into thinking he could mutiny against Bunty O'Toole (whom he mocked with gynecological rhymes) and take command of the crew. Till the Boss had her boys collar Fort Knox in the Wee Grotto at the All Creatures Great & Small pet cemetery, where with newly-grown finely-honed talons she curtailed him to a mere Ox.

(Or so it was whispered.)

(Dispelling any doubts about her Very Dangerous Personhood.)

When Bunty moved up from VW to VTHS, Mr. O'Brien sent Principal Stabeldore a thick dossier concerning her ways and means. Cool Hand Luke called her into his office for a little chat of few words by either participant: he issued no warnings, she uttered no threats. Mr. Stabeldore did suggest she put her obvious formidability to "healthful" use by taking up tennis; Bunty said she would think about it.

But most of her exercise over the next two years came from taking care of business while rolling down the highway in Bootleg's new (used) Galaxie 500 Hardtop. By the age of seventeen she held a key go-between role in the distribution of primo weed to NESTL(É) students, with Skully Erle as her chief retailer in Vanderlund. Bunty maintained the specialty enterprises for Lola's IDs and Bootleg's tapes; subcontracted odd jobs for Long John and Tommy the Torch; and oversaw Junior-Achievement-level gambling, extortion, and loansharking at every public high school in the area except Hereafter Park. That was Traverser territory, along with preppy-havens Startop and Front Tree; as were also the regionwide cheating rings and non-weed drug trade.

Though Bunty and her Uncle Al had plans for the latter.

Quaaludes might be of small-potato interest, but cocaine was far more consequential. Just where the Traversers were getting theirs in such supply was the question of the day. Most likely Lakeside Central, given their collegiate ties; yet any and all contacts were kept close to their collegiate vests. Bunty'd been told (and would've done it anyhow) to reconnoiter blow-by-blow goings-on so that the Traverser source might be traced and its flow siphoned off.

There was, to coin a phrase, a lot of money in that white powder: more expensive in The Cityland than California, New York or Miami. Here the street price could range up to \$100 a gram, depending on quality—a trifle beyond your average schoolkid's budget. But this was Vanderlund, where allowances (especially among shorefolk) were well above par and ripe for the plucking. Your average schoolkid might be content for the time being with beer and pot, but that simply meant your coke-hook would have to be properly weighted and baited.

(Mental talons tick-tock-tap the keys of a cerebral calculator.)

Cutting the product with adulterants would reduce its price and expand the clientele, boosting your bottom line—particularly if you could monopolize the supply side. As you'd already accomplished with the vending of NESTLÉ weed: competitive dealers were either absorbed or eliminated by Juicer Lynch, strongarm successor to Fort Knox. Want to get ahead in business and stay there with impunity? Find yourself a market and BOGART it—just as IHOP had by cornering the international flapjack griddle.

Up to and including special-order *palačinkas*.

(Savor the aftertaste of plum jam.)

"S'go," Bunty told Bootleg, who was mopping up his pigs-in-a-blanket. They were due to swing by a shindig, but seldom partook of anything offered at social affairs; much wiser to eat, drink, and smoke trustworthier provisions beforehand.

Bootleg piloted the Galaxie out of Carrefour and on up Panama, past the bridge turning onto Pottage Road (though that was their party destination) and eastward to the Tunnel of Sighs beneath the Expressway overpass, then north on Collinwood Lane into Hereafter Park. There they found a hodgepodge of cars—including a telltale Toyota

Cressida—jumbled outside the home of Renee Shackleton, which (apropos for a skater) resembled a two-story Art Nouveau igloo.

“Another snortastic Saturday night,” said Bootleg, parking across the street.

“Last week at Jive’s joint. Next week at...?”

“Won’t know till *they* know. Can I slash Hasleman’s tires?” (Bootleg bitterly envied Flake’s array of high-tech tape decks: cassette in the Cressida, open-reel for rivalrous concert recording.)

“Not *yet*,” Bunty gnarled. “That’s a goodbye kiss. We haven’t said hello yet. Go greet the guests.”

Bootleg, not daring to grumble, got out and went over to check license plates by the light of a silvery Rayovac. Bunty meanwhile pondered the latest report from Rula Hradek’s snooping trysts at Campus bars: plenty of wannabe users, a few plausible sharers, but no clue as to a wholesaler. Who, of course, would have to be pretty stupid to let any clues slip—

Pause as a sentinel face appeared at an upstairs igloo-window.

Even in the dark and from a distance, it clearly wore a smirk and was framed by long red hair.

“Her again,” grouched Bunty as Bootleg slid back behind the wheel. “Little Sees-All-Knows-All.”

“Yeah—and too psyched-up to be bushwhacked.”

“Well, they may call her the Queen Bitch, but there’s only room around here for *one* of those.”

“Fuckin’ A, Blondie J.”

Bunty outstared the face at the igloo-window until it withdrew from view. Not as a retreat, though; more like a flanking maneuver.

Circumvent it with one of your own. Nod at Bootleg to crank up his less-high-tech-than-Flake’s-yet-more-powerfully-speaker’d cassette deck. Blast forth the McGillah tape of Aerosmith at Comiskey, inundating Collinwood Lane with “Same Old Song and Dance” till the Galaxie gets shed of the Hereafter and swerves west onto Triville Avenue:

*Gotcha with the cocaine they found with your gun
No smoothy face lawyer to getcha undone—*

—just the smirky face of a weatherman’s daughter who must know which way the blow goes. And, thus far, has shown no chink in her coppertopped armor, nor any hint that she can be daunted by a GLEAM from swooping-falcon eyes.

You could look, but you ain't gonna find it around...

Forget Aerosmith. Tonight’s license-plate checklist turned up nobody new, just the rich-kid regulars. Among them, the double act of Groningen & Hasleman was pivotal—probably not as the coke-source, but doubtless involved in the coke-flow. Take them away (especially *her*) and the Traversers would revert to a negligible lollygagging ludehead cult.

“(Britt’s not one of them, not really.)” So said that muttersome Weller girl, Fiona, who claimed to have crossed swords with Queen Brittch and fought her to no worse than a draw, but said once was more than enough. Bootleg had first vouched for Fiona a few weeks ago when she’d held out for a one-on-one parley regarding her vintage-auto-arson request. (Tommy the Torch had relished pulling off that caper, and kept asking for more like it.)

Fiona and Marcie “Cramps Aplenty” Loftus had a punk rock band performing at Robin Neapolitan’s Sweet Babboo Jambalaya, to which the Galaxie was now zooming as Aerosmith played “Walk This Way” and Bootleg bellowed along. Bunty took little interest in music of any genre, but there’d been indications that Uncle Al planned to make her assistant manager of the Vinyl Spinnaker and two other stripmall discos. (Mr. Poliakoff, their current proprietor, owed him money *and* favors.) And while punk rock would never play at discos, there was an AnaRCHonda Pit down in The City that might be persuaded to “welcome” investment by the North Side Gang and its teen auxiliary crew. Fiona said the Starwood night club (and drug emporium) in Hollywood was run by mobsters, which seemed on the button for a punk hangout.

Make that “on the nose.” Whether punk or disco, a cocaine concession would generate a helluva lot more revenue than any club’s cover charge. Coke sold like hotcakes at discos, even a cheese factory like the Vinyl Spinnaker; and while the punk crowd could be absurdly particular about what they’d ingest (“only dirty hippies smoke pot!”) they were

hardly likely to turn up their noses at affordable blow.

Almost affordable. Terminate the competition and you could write your own ticket.

Find someone who could go undercover, who Britt Groningen wouldn't be on her guard against—so *not* Fiona or Robin or Cramps or that crazy Petula Pierro. Someone dismissable as harmless, humdrum, even simpleminded; yet capable of picking a figurative lock and purloining the necessary paydirt.

Someone who wasn't Gordon McGillah, singing "TOYS, TOYS, TOYS IN THE ATTIC!" with the band and the crowd on the tape as he parked on the edge of another hodgepodge-jumble, this one outside a garage where cars were outnumbered by motorcycles. The night, though, was eerily quiet—had the bash been busted? No, a pulsating rhythm could be felt underfoot.

"They got a soundproof basement," Bootleg explained.

"Convenient," Bunty was about to comment—when they heard a blow being struck, and a body crashing to the ground, and the sound of gaggy-gaspy-sobby blubbering.

Approach warily around the corner of the garage, to find one figure bent over a prostrate doubled-up other. "You could cut yourself with this thing, Wanda Lynn," the bender was saying. "I better hold onto it for you—"

"It's Razor!" said Bootleg, meaning not the assailant (as you might expect) but the casualty *and* her confiscated property. "Drop it!" Bootleg ordered the bender, who unhastily straightened up without any sign of fear, guilt, sorrow, or prop-droppage. "C'mon—hand it over!"

"Hand what over?"

"Yourself," said Bunty in a flat-as-roadkill voice. "Here. Now."

The figure stepped across Razor Reid (still gaggy-gaspy-sobby) and into the light above the garage doors, to be revealed as a rabbit girl who'd evidently taken up residence in a briar patch—or at least behind a dense overgrowth of tousled bangs.

Bunty glanced at Bootleg, who shrugged.

Rabbit Girl chomped on a wad of gum, in lieu of a carrot. *Ehhh... what's up, doc?*

"Who're you?" Bunty inquired.

"Me? I've been called 'Harelip.'"

“By Razor?”

“Oh, we go way back.”

“That why you popped her?”

“I asked if she had a cigarette. She mouthed off at me. So I gave her a poke.”

More like a grand-slam in the solar plexus. “Harelip” was of no more than medium height or weight, but appeared to be in athletic shape.

“Do that often?”

“Wanted to, but haven’t till now.”

“You take her shiv?”

“Is that what it’s called?”

“Toss it over here. On the driveway. Between me and him.”

Leisurely compliance. Buntz picked up the tickler, folded it shut, pocketed it, and nodded at Bootleg to go look after Razor Reid, who’d regained enough breath to vomit with.

“*Blecch*,” echoed Bootleg.

“What are you, finicky?” Buntz asked. “Make sure she doesn’t choke.”

“You done with me?” Harelip wanted to know. “We’re missing the Jambalaya. Robin’s getting her Plymouth Fury tonight.”

“You know Robin Neapolitan?”

“Course.”

“How ‘bout Fiona Weller?”

“Feef? Oh sure. We were all in the same bunch, back at VW.”

(Interesting.) “And Britt Groningen? Know her too?”

“Yeah, but *she* won’t be here. Hasn’t been since the Rosa Dartles broke up last spring.”

“Seen Britt lately?”

“Now and then, at school.”

“Talk to her much?”

“Me? Hardly ever. She hangs around with Gigi Pyle—the one who kicked Wanda Lynn there out of her cheerleader clique. ‘Member that, Wanda Lynn?”

Incoherent abusive noises from Razor, clutching her midriff as Bootleg helped her up and leaned her against the garage wall.

“Can I have her shiv?” asked Harelip. “In case she tries to give *me* a poke?”

Bunty regarded the rabbity girl. “Ever use a razor, kid?”

“On my legs and pits.”

(Snortle.) “No payback,” Bunty informed Razor. “Get me? Leave this one alone, or I’ll have Juicer ‘talk’ to you.” Turning back to Harelip: “Know who I am?”

“Oh, everybody does.” (Chomp.) “Wish I could be as badass as you. Nobody takes me seriously, unless I give them a poke. Which I never did, till tonight.” (Chomp.)

Go and find a rabbitskin to wrap a secret lockpick in.

“Want to work for me, kid?”

“Depends,” said Harelip. “Got a cigarette?”

*

*Forget the sound barrier, forget the speed of light
this car is charged up and'll rocket outta sight
there ain't a single limit we won't smash through—
we're gonna break ev'ry street taboo!*

So Downbite clamored in the soundproof Villa cellar at Robin Neapolitan’s Sweaty Sixteen Jambalaya, before Fat Bob drove her beribboned Sweet Babboo up from Loopy’s Lot for climactic presentation. Robin’d decided it should stay robin’s egg blue, lest a paint job imperil their meant-to-be affinity; and had even urged that this color be worked into the lyrics of “Street Taboo.”

“(Like *how*?)” Fiona’d grimaced.

“I don’t know! ‘Robin’s egg blue’ rhymes with ‘taboo,’ doesn’t it? Do you expect me to write the whole damn song for you?”

Fat Bob knew he couldn’t prevent her from taking *Il Dolce Babu* out then-and-there for an inaugural spin, and that a motorized Robin was more than a match for any skulking Mad Bludgeoner; but he forbade her from giving rides to anyone he didn’t pre-authorize. Bunty O’Toole he knew by repute, and also for having bought Juicer Lynch a Harley Super

Glide for cold hard cash; so Fat Bob gave a polite thumbs-up to her conveyance when Bootleg didn't return after taking Razor Reid home.

"*When* he shows up, tell him I left," Bunty instructed Fat Bob.

Nobody was boneheaded enough to ask if they could join her in the Plymouth's spacious backseat; but she summoned Fiona to come along, telling Robin "Corner of Whierry and Bittercress. Got a stop to make."

Robin, like a good cabby, let her passengers converse privately while she communed with the mobile Babboo in Italian babytalk: "*Tu sei mio, tutto mio, tutto mio, oh siiiii...*"

"So," Bunty said to Fiona. "Tell me about this Harelip girl."

"(Not the one in *Huckleberry Finn*?)"

"No. The one with bangs hanging down to her nose."

"(Oh—that's Laurie Harrison. Yeah, I heard she got called 'Harelip' by snots back in grade school.)"

"One of 'em Razor Reid?"

"(Could be. When Razor was Gigi Pyle's flunky—Gigi picked on Laurie the most.)"

"Picked, or picks?"

"(Not any more, I don't think. Gigi kind of fell apart when we left VW. And Laurie's changed too.)"

"Hold that thought." To Robin: "Turn in here."

Directing her to drive around behind the McGillah Brothers Funeral Home, where only a skeleton staff (so to speak) was present this late on a Saturday night. Plus a Galaxie 500 Hardtop, parked vacantly by the locked gate to the loading dock.

Robin was handed a spare car key that Bootleg didn't know Bunty had, just as Bootleg's father and uncles were unaware of the unsanctioned key *he* had to their mortuary. "You know about engines, right? Go yank his distributor cap and leave the hood up."

Said matter-of-factly, without any sense of malice or rancor, though Bootleg'd most likely brought Razor here to "hose her down" and "tend to her wounds." And while Wanda Lynn Reid might've been a calcified grapefruit since her eviction from Gigi Pyle's clique three years earlier, she still bore the makings of a cheerybabe underneath her punkette carapace: like strawberry frills below black leather. Bootleg's craving for such a layering

didn't vex Bunty, who allowed him off the leash to hump freely—though not if that meant being delinquent in his duties.

“He wants to be late? He gets to be LATE.”

Cap yanked, hood left open, and Robin's hands fastidiously wiped before resuming contact with her Sweet Babboo's steering wheel, they drove on up Panama as Feef completed mutter-briefing about Laurie Harrison as-she-used-to-be.

“(Gabbled nonstop for two years, then clammed up all of a sudden—about a month ago. Changed her looks too, especially her hair—like she's trying to hide behind it.)”

“Any guess why?”

“(Some guy or other, maybe. She used to always keep getting her heart broke. But always let everybody know about it, endlessly. Not this time.)”

“So she just mopes around?”

“(Well... in Bio she's got this asshole lab partner, Lenny Otis, who'd hassle and hit on her. At first she'd complain about him, but just yesterday he acted *afraid* of her and not like it was a joke. Dimancheff even thanked her for ‘muzzling Mr. Otis's membranes.’)”

“As if she'd got under this asshole's skin? Like a tick or chigger?”

“(Could be. Really weird behavior, though, for Laurie Harrison.)”

Pause as Robin, still *tutto-mio*-ing, eased off the boulevard into the Vacamonte's entranceway. Then Bunty asked:

“Think she could get under Britt Groningen's skin?”

Drymouthed spit-take by Fiona. “(Britt'd eat her alive!)”

“Then, or now?”

“*I GOT THIS!!*” Robin snapped at the Vacamonte doorman as he reached for her pristine door handle *with an ungloved hand*. She leaped out, Bootleg's distributor cap (swaddled in a clean rag) under one arm, and used the other to pull the seat forward so her fare could egress. But the fare stayed put, awaiting Fiona's answer—which sure as hell had better be accurate.

Finally: “(My bet'd have to be on Britt.)”

“We'll see,” said Bunty O'Toole. “Cool car,” she told Robin while disembarking, and “Somebody'll be by for this, sooner or later,” to the doorman as he received the

swaddled cap.

Then falcon-eyes raked the Sister Dopesters like talons feinting at a pair of sparrows. *I am a predator*, they were reminded. *You two could be prey at any time, any day. Nothing personal—strictly business. Be aware of that.*

And with no further word or glance, a Very Dangerous Person took her leave.

*

Early Sunday afternoon Fiona phoned Athens Grove, rousting PoonElly out of bed and eventually into Le Heap for a trip to the Carrefour IHOP and indulgence in a belated brunch.

Poon was still jubilant from Downbite's *tour de force* at the Jambalaya. "Bring Out Your Stupid" had kicked ass FASTER! LOUDER! BRASHER! than ever. Sheila Quirk'd sat in on rhythm guitar and swung a hardcore axe, but wouldn't commit to longterm participation since she found Epic Khack personally repugnant and musically discordant. Tayser's insisting "That's the *point!*" hadn't squeegeed S-Q, which didn't make much difference since Downbite had no future gigs lined up anyway. Poon dwelled instead on the gusto of last night's shriekfest (having provided most of the shrieks) while she devoured a tall stack of buttermilks drenched with boysenberry syrup.

Fiona spent more time watching Poon gourmandize than picking at her own plate of hash browns.

The day had dawned (well after dawn) with a call from the Neapolitans, loudly interrupting each other as they wrestled for the handset. Fat Bob'd discovered a crust of dried puke beside his garage that morning, after Robin had SWORN! AN! OATH! that neither booze nor drugs would cross the Villa threshold last night—but here was upchuck-evidence sullyng the Villa concrete! Robin broke in to hotly deny it'd been spewed by any of *her* guests; how did Fat Bob know it wasn't an eruption from one of *his* biker-buddies?

Fiona, asked to attest about substance abuse/absence at the Jambalaya, listened to them trade shouts until she hung up unnoticedly, knowing she'd be treated to lots more on this subject later. In the meantime she pulled on her eggplant suede jacket and Deep Purple patent leather combat boots, and roused out their purchaser for some belated brunching:

“*Arntcha* glad I talked you into doing that Chinese number? *Didn’t* I say it’d rock ‘em better’n anything by them dumbass Dead Boys? Fess up, Sugar Pop—I’m forfuckingEVER on the damn ball!”

With a smack of boysenberried lips, licked by a buttermilky tongue.

Her so-called Chinese number—“I Ain’t No China Teacup (But You’re Still Just a Mug)”—had been loosely adapted from a Late Movie where W.C. Fields, arriving by autogyro in the Celestial Empire, asked “Is this Kansas City, Kansas or Kansas City, Missouri?” and added “Don’t let the posey fool you” when a foppish chap answered “Wuhu!”

“Hey, this here’s an International House too!” Poon realized. “I oughta jump up on the table like them gals in that roof garden and sing it all again!”

“(You oughta lay off the syrup, Elly May.)”

“But *dontcha* think we kicked serious ass last night? That Quirk chick can really riff. We gotta find a way she can stomach playing with Epic—‘Quirk-‘n’-Khack’d be a killer guitar combo—and where does *she* get off acting all prissy-pantsed about poor Ep when *she* came to the bash with that Grossius Maximus guy?”

“(Alvin Dobbs. They call him ‘Avalanche.’)”

“Yuck! Well, if she does join Downbite and we get a gig in Aspen and she brings *him* along, we gotta make sure he stays on the kiddie slope!”

“(A gig in *Aspen*?)”

“*Don’t* it sound like a punk hangout? ‘The Asssspen Pit!’ And hey, didn’t that Claudine Longet chick waste her boyfriend there?”

Initiating a gleeful dissertation on celebrity lovercide.

Fiona would’ve preferred to talk about Laurie Harrison and Bunty O’Toole; but Poon didn’t know Laurie and had only heard rumors about Bunty—mostly in relation to Long John Shanahan, whom Poon’d known for years and derided as a piano-plinker who couldn’t steer a sloop to save his life. Stories about his smuggling and getaway escapades must be wild exaggerations. As for the firebombing of Zagnut-the-Trashman’s Mercury coupe, Poon had shared no more speculations since the day after it happened, other than “Outta my sight—outta my mind.”

(Her words, not Feef's.)

So PoonElly, shrieking *I been a torso-tosser / with lotsa flesh to feel!* last night in the Villa basement, hadn't been jolted (much less J-O-L-T-ed) by the sight of Laurie Harrison descending the cellar stairs at Bunty O'Toole's elbow. Or of Laurie lingering there through the Jambalaya, till Susan Baxter took her and Susie Zane and Patrick Baxter home. Or of Big Sue seeming to offer the Bootlegless Bunty a lift in the Baxters's Vista Cruiser, which Bunty declined—in order to grill Fiona about “Harelip.”

Who, apparently, was under consideration for enlistment by the O'Toole crew.

And who, though she might be Feef's least-favorite member of the old lunch-bunch, still qualified as somebody to be concerned about.

They had the same lunch period this semester, 4B, during which (up till a month or so ago) Laurie'd engaged in the same tablehopping she'd done last year at VW. Fiona didn't dine too often in the VTHS cafeteria; she and Cramps and Razor Reid and occasionally Epic and Tayser (when the latter ditched homeroom) spent 4B in a variety of places, including inside Bootleg McGillah's Galaxie. When they did kill lunchtime as cafeteriagoers, Laurie'd always waved at Fiona with a transient “Hi Feef!” Never sat at their table, probably to avoid Razor who'd been a grade-school friend till Gigi Pyle enticed her away—and later alienated her from being Wanda Lynn into *becoming* Razor.

Who'd disappeared early from the Jambalaya. To be taken by no-show Bootleg to his funeral parlor for “hosing down” and “wound tending.” With a lump of dried vomit discovered next morning beside the Villa garage. After the local teen mob's *Bossa di Tutti Bossi* expressed sinister interest not in sweet silly Laurie Harrison, but a “Harelip” thought to be capable of getting under Britt Groningen's—BRITT GRONINGEN'S—pale freckled skin.

Connect the dots...

Any guess why?

Some guy or other, maybe.

Such as Dennis Desmond, whom Laurie'd flipped over at that impromptu gathering at Vicki's, tagging along with him when he went to House o' Chopsticks for that takeout of Szechwan shrimp. Then coming to school the very next day in a pushed-up flame-colored blouse and pushed-out charcoal-tinted skirt, as though she were trying to outstimulate

provocative types like Carly Thibert or Isabel Carstairs who dressed like that all the time. Laurie and Fiona both had Fifth Hour Biology (perfect timing: right after lunch) and that day Feef saw Laurie's pushed-out booty getting squeezed by Dennis outside Room 208 before class. (Talk about being "smitten.") Laurie'd barely made it into the lab before Dimancheff locked the door, after which her heaving pushed-up bosom distracted all the hornyboys from any talk of cellular structure—including Feef's lab partner Ewan "Haystack" Dobbs, the not-so-little-brother of Avalanche Alvin. Which didn't bode well for Feef's Biology grade.

But the very next day after *that*, Laurie began to change and not just her clothes, though she wore no more racy outfits to school. From then on she was clammed-up instead of gossipmongery, with hair in drooptails instead of trademark poofs, and bangs hanging down below her eyebrows as if *she* were Epic Khack's sister instead of Tippi Lingerspiel.

Fiona's mind refused to connect the dots that brought about this overhaul.

Though it was easy to surmise who was responsible for the causing.

Vicki Volester'd been traumatized just getting caught in a thunderstorm at the drive-in with Dennis Desmond. There was no telling (or *imagining*) what might result from anything more "interactive" than that. Yet what else could've led to the debut of a "Harelip" who, incredibly or not, had dispatched Razor Reid to a funeral parlor and impressed the likes of Bunty O'Toole?

"You sitting there paying me no-never-mind, Sugar Pop?" PoonElly pouted.

"(Just thinking of the china teacup you claim you ain't.)"

"Feel more like a six-pack of Old Style Lager!"

"(Gag,)" went Fiona.

That evening she seized the Palace phone away from Chloe and got hold of Joss, who'd known Laurie longer than anyone. But Joss didn't have any classes with Laurie that semester and had scarcely seen her to talk to since the Szechwanfest at Vicki's a month ago. Joss hadn't even been aware that Laurie was at last night's Jambalaya; and though saddened (if not surprised) that *another* caddish rotter'd dunked their favorite blabberyap into a blue funk, Joss was frankly thankful not to spend every lunchtime hearing about it.

"I still get acid flashbacks of her moaning over Tyler Canute. And Chipper Farlowe. And Mack 'The Arm' Pittley."

As for Laurie's mutation into a henchgirl (or even a hitwoman) called "Harelip," Joss told Feef not to fret:

"I say this with love, but she doesn't have the smarts for anything more combative than volleyball or basketball. She might get *tricked* into doing a hit job, but our Laurie's just too gullible and naive to pull it off. Any target could take advantage of her—maybe literally, if it was in a James Bond movie."

Not heartened by this, Fiona (paying no-never-mind as Chloe yammered for the phone) called Burrow Lane and got Vicki, who wanted to chat about the Jambalaya and Downbite and Robin's Sweet Babboo and Mrs. Mallouf's grades on their *Crucible* essay papers. Feef couldn't get a mutter in edgewise till exerting her boogie-diva voice; but Vicki, once she was acquainted with the whole Laurie-as-Harelip heaviness, picked up on its jeopardies right away.

"I KNEW I should've worried more about her acting so weird! I kept meaning to, then setting it aside till later, and now it's maybe TOO later. I bet you Dennis *did* do something to her—she even warned me to be careful when I went out with him, though she already wasn't talking to me then like she used to, but I didn't listen. Except I remember asking 'How do *you* feel about him?' and Laurie getting all shrill about '*He's* the one who did the feeling!' even though getting her bottom squeezed outside the Bio lab shouldn't've been enough to weird her out so much, I mean guys were always grabbing at her back at VW and she'd just think they were being 'romantic'—"

"VICKI," Fiona re-exerted.

"...yeah?"

"(Be cool. And tell me if there's anything we can do—without messing with Britt, or Buntz O'Toole,)"

"...I dunno. Sammi and Rachel and even Jerome haven't gotten anywhere with her lately, and they're her best friends aside from Susie. Maybe Alex'll have an idea, if I can figure out the right way to fill her in about this so she'll understand without freaking. Maybe Joss'll have an idea how we can do *that*... Gahd, this is getting complicated."

"(I know,)" Feef mutter-sighed. "(And probably there's nothing any of us *can* do.)"

“I know,” Vicki agreed. “Whatever happens, we’ll just have to hope Laurie can see it through on her own. Without freaking.”

*

We must bide our time.

So the still small voice had told you, from the middle distance of your inner ear.

So you abided for fifteen days from that afternoon after practice in the Girls Gym.

Then your time came in the same place, midway through the rematch with Hereafter Park’s Blue Angels.

Just *why* your time should’ve come when it did was not, of course, for you to say. Yet *when* it did you knew it, and without having to be still-small-middle-distant-inner-earful told.

Coach Celeste sent you in for Sammi, who was way off her game and kept prattling about how she GOTTA talk to you. It was a relief to get away from her and into the match, though by then the Angels had as big a lead as they would’ve had on their own home court with its crooked refs. Marilyn Mansfield zeroed in on you, just as she had on her cousin Isabel at H.P.; but unlike Is, you returned Jive’s lobs without trouble or effort, spiking them at her feet or those of her girl-goblins. Jive bore down, looking like Cruella de Vil when she chased the van full of Dalmatian puppies: a scene that’d given you nightmares when you’d seen it with what’s her name, Ingrid Morton, back in second grade. Now you just smiled and bore UP and smacked that volleyball back at the Angels till they quit aiming at your zone and scored a few aces at the other end of the court to win the match.

Then you sat in the bleachers during the varsity’s loss and watched Mauly the Mauler—examining her resemblance to Cousin Marilyn, who ought to have been called Lily Munster (not to be confused with Lillie Guldbaer), while Sammi kept whining *on* and *on* about that Cherry Picker Chamberpot till you finally told her to put a cork in it.

As you had to do again the next day, *twice*: first when Rachel (at the library) and then when Jerome (over the phone) both nagged at you to go waste the afternoon at their lame-assed Literary Society Pop Party.

Instead you went to Timonoff Park for The Cityland’s cross country invitational meet, where Susie got multiply devastated. Despite being the Ladybug captain she came in

fourth behind the Bobbsey Triplets, Karen Lee and Caroline and Taters Quirk; while the team as a whole not only came in *seventh* among the girls but scored worse overall than Patrick's squad did among the boys. Meaning Susie's squad would have to do all the scutwork at the postseason banquet, which Patrick gloated about till Susie kicked him on the shin and put their romance on hold.

Susie cried herself to sleep that night, which was annoying and spurred you to drag her by the ankles out of bed very early Sunday morning to go for a run. She balked; you prevailed. She protested about the chill and damp; you set forth in your star-spangled Mean Mary Jean shorts and a plain white T-shirt, even though it was sure to turn see-through if rained upon. Which didn't happen, but wouldn't have bothered you if it had.

Not this time. Not now that YOUR time had come.

Before reaching the end of Grouseland Street, you heard (and felt) a familiar THUD! THUD! THUD! and told Susie "C'mon," escalating your pace and hers till for once, at last, you kept ahead of Susan Baxter's broadjump strides till everyone hit the brakes on the bank of the sanitary canal.

"Good job," said Big Sue, eyeing you with terse curiosity when you responded with no more than a brusque nod. Then during Monday's intrasquad scrimmage, she and equally closemouthed Louisa Lang led the Biguns in testing you with a bombardment; but you retaliated wallop for wallop and won a starting spot in the JV lineup for Tuesday's match against Emery Ridge. And *you*, rather than Natalie or Kirsten or Alex or Pebbles or Michelle or anyone on the bench, led the JVs to victory over the Scarlet Royals and then to annihilation of the Screaming Eagles at Multch East on Thursday. For these triumphs you accepted praise as Big Sue or Louisa would: with a slight silent smile but no harping on events. People like Lisa Lohe and Coach Ramsey said you "must be growing up." You didn't enlighten them about your time having come—Sheila-Q would be sure to say *What, your time of the MONTH?* and then you'd be tempted to lash out at her.

Which you didn't want to do. Not to S-Q.

Not when there was such a long list of people ahead of her on your get-even-with agenda.

The first to get checked off was Lenny Otis early Friday morning, when he gave your caboose a goose in the school lobby. You twirled around and pinned him to a trophy case with the point of your elbow deep as could be in the small of his back, making Lenny go “OOH! OOH!” for real as you hissed in his unclean ear:

“(Don’t be surprised if you pee blood for the rest of the day. Try anything again and I’ll make sure you pee blood for a *week*.)”

Lenny, still nursing his kidneys in Fifth Hour Biology, kept his crummy interjectional mouth shut through an entire Dimancheff lecture for the very first time that year.

“Did you find some method of muzzling Mr. Otis’s membranes, Miss Harrison?” Mr. D asked.

You flicked your bangs at Lenny; he flinched in a manner that might’ve been comical, but wasn’t; and the appreciative Mr. D said “On behalf of the class, I thank you.”

(Il n’y a pas de quoi.)

But there was more to it than that.

When you’d bawled out Kim Zimmer a year ago, the resulting adrenaline rush hadn’t lasted very long and left you feeling number (NOT dumber) than a zombie. This time (yours having come) the exhilaration burned like that Biblical bush on the backside of the desert; you wanted to kick off your shoes and dance barefoot in its flames.

It burneth, but consumeth not.

Dance all the way to Villa Neapolitan: driven there Saturday night by Big Sue along with Susie and her reconciled “Punkin’,” who deserved a lumbar puncture of his own for all the grief he’d given Sue plus the designs he harbored on your own bod. But the s.s. voice advised you to hold out for bigger, better game—and who should show up to fill that bill outside the Villa garage but Wanda Lynn Reid, the good spoiled Nellie Oleson of yore.

Lag behind as the others head for the cellar. Ask Wanda Lynn for a smoke; get a disparaging refusal. Plus a flourish of that straight razor she’d never used (so far as you knew) to actually cut anybody. So duck and dodge like a good Lady Gondolier and jab her in the breadbasket, with all the **OOMPH** of a megaspikes by Boomer Wrang.

And stand over Wanda Lynn while she writhed on the gravel, struck down as if by a tempest of hail and lightning like ancient Egypt between those frog and locust plagues.

FLASH-FLASH-FLASH went the lightning in your heart.

CLATTER-CLATTER-CLATTER went the sheet of hail before your eyes.

Through which you peered, like an extra layer of bangs, while being questioned by the shortish yet imposing punkette you recognized as Antoinette O'Toole. (*Not* "Bunty"—too close to "bunny"—for someone nobody'd think was like a rabbit.)

Want to work for me, kid?

If I can be as badass as you.

And leave the bunny rabbits down their holes.

Your badassification began Monday morning in Contemporary Living. This class, a hybrid crossbreed of Home Ec and Social Studies, touched on everything from household budgets to teen suicide (one can lead to the other) and was taught by Ms. Derwent, a fearless New Zealander rumored to have Maori tattoos. When Superintendent Billings tried to save a nickel by purging Contemporary Living from the VTHS curriculum, Ms. Derwent shrugged him off as a *scodey doongi* (definitely not Down Underish for Scooby-Doo) and won the day.

Badassery in action!

That Monday she assigned you to work on a new relating-to-peers project with Lola Svoboda, a senior known all over town for peddling fake IDs. You'd been a bit fearful of Lola in the olden days, unwilling to break the ice on any topic except Ms. Derwent's Kiwi accent or who Lola's cousin Carly Thibert was currently going with. Now, however, you were relating-to-a-peer—and one who'd been delegated by Antoinette to orient you to the O'Toole crew's ways and means.

Badassery in progress!

The s.s. voice harmonized with most of Lola's tutelage, intimating a few variations that you kept to your sangfroidy self. Along with the hailstones that continued to drum upon your consciousness, like Robin's sticks beating Robin's skins at the Jambalaya; a promise that you'd be let loose before long to pummel a skin or two without compunction.

Get a head start Tuesday at the Multch North rematch, which you pretty much won singlehandedly; tying the Hurricanes for first in the Shoreside Division and as second seed in the upcoming JV tournament. Again you accepted kudos with a slight silent smile, this time while Alex Dmitria harped on the event:

“I *told* them you’re galloping straight and true! They were all worried about you, Vicki and Joss and Fiona, but I told them you’re just a lot more focused now—*doing* instead of *talking*—not that you didn’t do things before, of course—”

Tune her out and focus on the s.s. voice going *G-R-R-R-R* at the names of the worriers. Oh yes, you’ll worry them all right, “worry” with your jaws and teeth like a terrier on a rat—
—or a *vole*—

But the voice said: *All in good time...*

For right now, practice the Drop. In your head as well as with your hands. Again. Again. The Drop had to seem unintentional, an awkward accident—like trapping your hiked-up skirt in a jammed locker door. When that’d happened you’d gone *Don’t look! Don’t look!*, same as when you got caught on your bike in the downpour that turned your clothes translucent. This time, however, you *wanted* them to look; as if you were Carly or Isabel, who apparently enjoyed having their underpants ogled. Although the Drop didn’t involve exposing any lingerie or arousing any hornyboys.

No indeedy...

Wednesday in Contemporary Living you demonstrated it to Lola, not using the actual bait but items of similar size and weight—your compact, your keychain.

“Don’t go all to pieces,” Lola said for the benefit of Ms. Derwent’s other students, and “(Not bad)” confidentially to you. “(Maybe give it a try, if you get the chance. Just a taste, remember.)”

Peer-relating nod.

Then more mental rehearsals: practice makes perfect, especially when it’s supposed to look *imperfect*. Again. Again. Till the 4A bell rang and you headed for Study Hall, detouring midway into the second-floor washroom.

Where you bumped into Gigi Pyle and Britt Groningen.

Literally enough that you lurched forward and sent an object sailing out of your purse to skitter across the tiles.

“Shoot!” you went, bending not-too-rapidly to retrieve it in almost-full-view of Britt and Gigi; allowing them sufficient look-see for the object to be identified as a money clip (actually a large metal barrette) loaded with one twenty-dollar bill folded Jackson-faceup

over a wad of indistinct singles. “(Lucky the floor’s sort of clean,)” you murmured, as if to your *I-am-so-dumb* self, wiping the clip and shoving it back into your purse.

Drop accomplished, go quickly through washroom motions and emerge from the stall to join Britt and Gigi at the sinks. Noting (from behind bangs and hailstones) how Gigi’s Everglade-eyes went all okeefenokee as they darted sidelong toward you, then shiftily down to your purse as she rinsed her magnolia hands—

—and you felt an abrupt surging impulse to plunge your worrisome teeth into her magnolia throat: *HOW’D YOU LIKE A HARELIP HICKEY, MISS DIXIE CUPS??*—

—who blanched and winced and reached fidgetishly for the paper towel dispenser, her halftucked blousetail slopping over the waistline of her wrinkled gaucho pants, which seemed to sag in back as though she’d lost some buttweight: all very uncharacteristic for Lady Prideful Pyle. Nor did she give you a wordless HUFF upon exiting—with her head not up, her shoulders not squared, and her hips not swaying like a steady pendulum.

Britt, contrariwise, regarded you and your purse in the mirror with a persistent sleepy-smily attentiveness, and again told you “Later” before strolling off.

Just a taste, remember.

Yet as with pancakes and popcorn and potato chips, one taste is never enough...

41

Nevermore to Roam

*Tottering above
In her highest noon
The enamoured moon
Blushes with love
While, to listen, the red levin
(With the rapid Pleiads, even
Which were seven)
Pauses in Heaven...*

Spacyjane Groh paused on the upstairs deck of her family's chalet on Cecidia Drive, watching the moon rise over Galloway Road and recalling an oral report she'd made a couple years ago in Miss McInerney's class. "Israfel" was a lyric poem, quite unlike Edgar Allan Poe's usual dark output; and its mention of the Pleiad[e]s anticipated Maia, who came down from the sky with a quicksilver step to do her Christmas shopping a century later, amazing even Mary Poppins.

(Miss McInerney's class had laughed when Spacyjane'd mentioned this in her oral report; but Maia would've been pleased by such a gleeful reaction.)

The Sunday night moonrise stirred memories of "Israfel," yet its author was already on Spacyjane's mind after a just-ended episode of *Masterpiece Theater*, where Charles Dickens met a lunatic Poe and got ensnared in the grisly "Case of M. Valdemar." (Becca Blair had done *her* oral report on *that* story, about a man put into suspended hypnosis at the

very moment of death; but Becca'd mitigated its gruesome conclusion by flashing her golden belly-button at the class.)

*The ecstasies above
 With thy burning measures suit
 Thy grief, thy joy, thy hate, thy love
 With the fervour of thy lute
 Well may the stars be mute!...*

Though Maia certainly hadn't been. "Could we have imagined it?" Jane Banks (one of the Legion of Janes whom Spacyjane collected) asked her mother after the Christmas adventure with Mary Poppins. "Perhaps," Mrs. Banks answered. "We imagine strange and lovely things, my darling."

(Loathsome ones too, when you factored in M. Valdemar.)

*If I could dwell
 Where Israfael
 Hath dwelt, and he where I
 He might not sing so wildly well
 A mortal melody...*

Tonight the moon was waxing gibbous, three nights away from full; too soon for Hallowe'en a week from tomorrow. *Surfaces are deceptive*, warned tomorrow's horoscope for Aquarius: *some by nature, others by design. Evaluate each independently.*

Spacyjane, stepping back from the deck into her chalet bedroom, evaluated whether she should sing a tune by one of the Aquarian composers who shared her January 27th birthday—Mozart, Lewis Carroll, Jerome Kern, Harry Ruby, Bobby "Blue" Bland, or Ross Bagdasarian who'd created Alvin and the Chipmunks. She decided instead on "Dancing in the Moonlight"—King Harvest's version, not the current song by Thin Lizzy:

*When that old moon gets so big and bright
 It's a supernatch-u-ral delight
 Everbuddy's dancin' in the moonlight...*

Suiting actions to lyrics, here in a pool of moonshine on the bedroom's braided rug; while her Legion of Dolls, grouped on windowsill and bureautop, looked on like wallflowers till she caught Tip/Ozma by his/her convertible arm and waltzed her/him (garbed as a Princess tonight) around the velveteen-curtained canopy bed. "I KNEW you slept in a *Stepford Wives*-y bed like this!" Joss Murrish had exclaimed the first time she'd been up here; which was clairvoyant of Joss, though she hadn't explained what *The Stepford Wives* had to do with it.

*Everbuddy here is outta sight
They don't bark and they don't bite
They keep things loose, they keep things light...*

As did Floramour, sitting on the velveteen counterpane with her golden head resting against satinette pillows: giving every evidence of being a good girl, as she had all weekend. Spacyjane, returning Ozma/Tip to her/his place on the bureautop, took Floramour in hand with a reassuring "I know none of it's *your* fault."

*We like our fun and we never fight
You can't dance and stay uptight...*

Not when it's time to play lady's maid to a Swiss bisque doll. Helping her out of her Sunday ensemble; replacing it with a flannel nightgown, to ward off the late-October chill; giving her golden coif a hundred brisk brushstrokes.

She'd come to Spacyjane from Grohsi, who was neither gross nor a Groh but Grandmother Emmenthal, whose favorite doll Floramour (originally called "Flurina") had been during Grohsi's childhood. That connection skipped a generation, passing over Spacyjane's mother Emma, who'd always felt uncomfortable in Floramour's presence.

"It's like she's all the time *staring* at us, even when her eyes are closed!" Emma would say.

"Well of *course* she is!" Grohsi and Spacyjane would reply.

Emma, not a doll person, was far more at ease out in the chalet garden, growing everything that could be eked from its suburban soil. Four years ago when Elton John'd released *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* and Spacyjane'd been puzzled by its oddly-titled

opening number, Emma'd explained that *love-lies-bleeding* was another name for the plant called *amaranth* or *tassel flower* or *floramour*. She showed Spacyjane its picture in a colorful gardening book which got shared with Spacyjane's friend and neighbor Kathleen Prindle, who was desperately shy but the nimblest kid with needle and thread in Vanderlund. And after some coaxing encouragement, Kathleen produced the love-lies-bleeding-patterned dress that gave rise to Flurina's being redubbed.

*The roses in the window box have tilted to one side
Ev'rything about this house was born to Groh and die...*

Time was getting on. Tucking Floramour beneath the satinette sheet, Spacyjane dealt with her own hair and teeth and sleepwear and bedtime rituals. She wound the eight-day cuckoo clock inherited from Opa—Grandfather Emmenthal—who'd repaired timepieces for a living, but preferred to think of himself as a freelance psychotherapist. Opa's spirit not only lingered in the cuckoo (which had his unmistakable voice) but visited Spacyjane in her dreams, interpreting these for her while they were underway.

*My guitar couldn't hold you, so I split the band
Lovvvve lies bleeding in my hands...*

(Sing it now; dream it later.)

Last of all came the kissing of her Swee'Pea's framed photo, taken by himself. "You are always with me," she reminded him, "and I know none of it's *your* fault either."

Switching off the bedside lamp, Spacyjane laid her brunette head beside Floramour's golden coif, and was swiftly transported back in time and space (not so very long ago or far away) to Whierry Elementary School.

Its surrounding neighborhood had been (and was still) dominated by Candy Gates, the year-older taskmistress who'd stage-managed all make-believe done by children Janie Groh's age, plus year-younger ones like Karen Lee Bobko and Caroline Appercy (tagged from birth as the Bobbsey Twins, despite their mutual detestation) and Annamaria Farghetti (not yet Kinks by name, though perceptibly so by nature). Candy Gates called them her stock company, roping in some of her own swayable peers like Kerry Hinterwald (already a

pushover for a pretty face, long before any breasts got sprouted) and Tim McDermid (who years later would meekly submit to playing Schroeder to her Lucy in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*).

It was Candy Gates who first called Janie Groh “spacy,” for her habit of straying from C.G.’s clearly-enunciated stage direction (EVERY SYLLABLE DISTINCTLY AUDIBLE) and a tendency to not hit marks *when* and *where* they’d been assigned. Janie might have a vivid imagination and lots of free-spirited ideas, but even Aquarians were expected to toe the lines laid out and cued for them by Candy Gates.

“ATTENTION PLEASE, MISS SPACY! WE’RE TRYING TO *PERFORM* HERE!”

Janie hadn’t minded this, and still didn’t; rebukes and reproofs never bothered her. Besides, Candy Gates was a star-in-the-making and well-versed in spaciness:

They’re blasting off now
Josie’s on a rocket ride
Pussycats all by her side
Bleep-Bleep is the kooky guide
Come along and dig the chase
With the Pussycats in Outer Spay-hace!

Away from the playground and the animated Milky Way, Miss Spacy threw some epic tea-party musicales for her ever-growing Legion of Dolls, assisted by two kindred-spirited cronettes. Kathleen Prindle—though bashfully speechless around other people, and scared stiff of Candy Gates—was thoroughly at home in Toyland and able to outfit its occupants for any occasion. LeAnn Anobile—though mystified by the real world, and apt to get lost walking around the block—could identify with every kind of plaything and whatever role each needed to portray. These cronettes followed Janie’s visionary lead, taking shelter in her unfazed shadow when confronted by obnoxious reality—most often in the earthbound form of their grade’s indisputable (and proud of it) Mean Girl, ornery Dawn Amory:

“Well well well, lookit who’s crawled outta their playpen to see us! It’s Spacyjane, Scaredy-Kat, and Inside-Outie—the Three Ree-tards!”

(LeAnn's epithet had been bestowed the day she came to school wearing an inside-out blouse, baffled by why it was so hard to button.)

Dawn, a creature of limited wit, kept twanging the same old saws meant to cut their targets to the quick. But some could be customized as musical instruments: "Spacyjane," for instance, had a neat ring to it and so got adopted by Janie Groh as her chosen moniker, much to Dawn Amory's annoyance. Getting picked on was supposed to result in hurt feelings; that was the Law of the Jungle Gym (according to Dawn) and Spacyjane was a sneakycheat for ignoring it. Unlike those other two Ree-tards—Scaredy-Kat could be reduced to stricken sniffles by a single Mean Girl leer, and Inside-Outie had no comeback to wisecracks comparing her to the aromatic pork sausage her father imported from Italy.

("Where *else* is he s'posed to get it?" LeAnn would whimper to Spacyjane.)

Bullying was even less subtle when done by boys, particularly by the class lout Louie Como to the class goat Ryan Purvis. Spacyjane and her cronettes admired Ryan for being gloomily sadfaced and poetic, like Edgar Allan Poe or Joe in the *Danny Dunn* books; but Louie Como branded him as "Perv" and other variations on the unmasculine theme. This despite Ryan's having a flagrant crush on Dawn Amory and writing thinly-veiled verse about her, which Louie claimed was *proof* of his pansyhood.

"EWWW! SICCCCK!" went Dawn when Louie critiqued one of Ryan's swiped poems (*If you and me could only touch, / our closeness then would be so much*) as a deviant petition to borrow her underpants and training bra.

"But... but... but..." Ryan dissented.

"THAT'S for being a Perv 'n' grossing her out!" Louie informed him, with a castigatory wallop.

On the contrary hand, neither Louie nor Dawn found Matt LaVintner objectionable when he transferred to Whierry, looking like a preadolescent cross between David Cassidy and Carlton Fisk: as proficient at athletics as he was at dramatics. Dawn did take offense at Matt's spending more time with Spacyjane than any other girl in class, though this wasn't just due to her star sapphire eyes and delicate elfin face.

"I bet you drink wine all the time at your house, right?" he asked after hearing that the Grohs owned and operated a fondue café.

“I don’t,” Spacyjane told him.

“But you *do* got lots of it *at* your house, right?”

Farsighted spacygaze into Matt’s restless countenance. “Would you like to come over sometime?”

He would and did one day while her parents were at the café and Grohshi was off playing Schieber Jass. At the chalet Matt sampled mouthfuls of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, and Spacyjane herself when they exchanged First Kisses that were well advanced for fifth-graders, thanks to the effect of fermented grapes on Matt’s ten-year-old bloodstream.

The LaVintner family, despite its name, was in the tomato processing business and had been for several generations, turning *pommes de terre* into paste and sauce and juice. But when sales were impacted by the rising popularity of City-style hot dogs (ABSOLUTELY NO KETCHUP!) paterfamilias Morris Lavender concocted “Maurice LaVintner’s World-Famous International Relish,” which proved to be extremely popular during Prohibition. (Though local purists still refused to spread it on hot dogs.)

Matt found his great-grandfather’s signature condiment inadequate as an intoxicant. He was equally disappointed by his father’s locking the liquor cabinet at their Aguadulce condo on Panama Boulevard; and by Jane’s being Spacy by nature instead of from available libations. She in turn loved Matt far more like a baby brother than a potential boyfriend, and thus entrusted him to LeAnn whose parents didn’t seem to notice how their full Chianti bottles kept transforming into empty candleholders. (Dawn Amory tried to tempt Matt with Holland House Margarita Mix, which fell short of her hyping it as “hard stuff.”)

The Anobiles did notice that LeAnn was blossoming *very* early, which attracted attention from plenty of boys and also a polite man who’d been chased away from McGrum Elementary by Big Sue Baxter and was now trying his luck outside Whierry. He beckoned LeAnn over to his parked car and asked for directions to somewhere or other, but all she could tell him was “I hafta GO, whyncha ask *her*?” with a flustered nod at passerby Dawn. And when LeAnn returned from the school washroom, the polite man’s car had vanished and so had Dawn Amory.

Not till after a search (ultimately futile) had been mounted for the missing girl did any connection between these events penetrate LeAnn’s inside-outie mind; and then she was

afraid to come forward and tell anyone except Spacyjane.

“What’ll I *do*, Janie? Will I get in trouble? Will everybody blame me?”

Farsighted spacygaze into her cronette’s apprehensive visage. “Oh well... if I were you, I’d try to forget all about it.”

Which LeAnn soon did; so that in later years when she and Laurie Harrison became friendly at VW, they never happened to swap accounts of their mutual close call. Louie Como forgot Dawn too, when his father got laid off during the recession and they moved to a distant hardscrabble suburb. But Ryan Purvis remembered, with a long-lasting Lost Lenore phase in his poetry; and Spacyjane added an unnamed phantom to her dolly operas, though not so spectral as to frighten Kathleen. (Whenever the cronettes had sleepovers at LeAnn’s house, Spacyjane would light a Chianti-bottle candle for Dawn Amory’s release from the mundane.)

No one picked up the fallen Mean Girl torch during the rest of their time at Whierry; nor did Candy Gates have a rival for the Queen Bee title till the summer before seventh grade, when Becca Blair migrated to the Aguadulce and enthralled Matt LaVintner at first sight. Spacyjane was pleased to see her baby brother walking on air and circling cloud nine; then she was just as pleased to pick up his pieces and reassemble them after Becca cut Matt loose from their love paraglider. And Spacyjane was no less pleased to keep a maternal eye on her humpty-dumpling at VW—though at a lengthening distance, as Matt went from drowning his sorrows to snuffing them out with Skully Erle and the Z Team’s stoner-boys.

Meanwhile Becca Blair flourished most intriguingly. She’d gone to Snead for grade school, so Spacyjane had no firsthand awareness of what Becca was like before junior high; though anyone could tell she’d outhearilyblossomed even LeAnn. (Who lived in awe of Becca and her best friend from Snead, Alex Dmitria; as did Kathleen, who wondered if Snead could be some sort of prep academy for supergirls—just look at and **LISTEN TO!!!** that year-older bronco-buster, Yvette “Mumbles” Metcalf!)

Even among other stellar luminaries Becca Blair stood increasingly out, and not just bustwise (though formidably so in that respect). Some people tittle-tattled that she’d undergone bionic surgery like *The Six Million Dollar Man* and was now a she-cyborg, more

computerized than human. Spacyjane found this scenario entertaining and enjoyed plugging Matt into it, keeping him unaware of his test-subject status even as Becca got programmed (or more likely programmed *herself*) to become a synthetic Wonder Woman.

Naturally Floramour was cast as Bionic Becca in the resulting dolly opera, *Westburb Heartbreak*. Same golden hair; same golden aura; and Spacyjane had to admit there was considerable fabrication in Floramour's constitution. This was something to be on guard against, characterwise; but not a flaw when it came to physique, as acknowledged in the stirring aria "Backbone of Steel":

*Nothing strange is happening
You can check and doublecheck
Me as I go on challenging
The practice to be perfect...*

"Do you think THAT'S why Joss Murrish mentioned *The Stepford Wives* when she first saw your velveteen curtains and canopy bed?"

So asked Opa, interpretatively: a sure sign that dreamtime was coming to an end, and soon confirmed by six Opa-voiced "cuckoos" heralding Monday's rise-and-shine.

Spacyjane dressed herself in shades of orange and yellow, like the brilliant autumn leaves embellishing Galloway Road. Unlike Kathleen, who waited on the Prindle porch in one of her plain anonymous outfits; she could never be cajoled into making herself any clothing as vibrant as her doll costumes. Nor would Kathleen loiter while they crossed Bittercress Drive, to peer down the block at the picturesque McGillah funeral parlor. (She had a longstanding dread that one of its hearses would park in her driveway by mistake.)

The funeral parlor was framed by a row of tall evergreen trees, changeless even at the height of autumn. If Barbra Streisand were here, this glimpse might inspire her to croon *Love fresh in the morning air* along with Spacyjane:

*Ev'ry day is beginning
Spirits rise and their dance
Is unrehearsed...*

Kathleen would only lip-sync (she was prone to dizzy spells when obliged to sing aloud in public) and only till they reached the bus stop on Chubb Avenue, where Whierry alumni congregated for their weekdaily pilgrimage to VTHS.

Not Candy Gates, of course; *she* got an escort from whichever of her courtiers had the fanciest wheels. Next year the same would probably be true for LeAnn, who resembled a topheavy Valerie Bertinelli but was forbidden to accept a ride from any licensed guy before her sixteenth birthday. Still a true-blue (if half-baked) cronette, she smiled and waved at her friends from between the pedestrian boys flanking her at the bus stop. These did not include Matt LaVintner or Ryan Purvis, with whom Spacyjane and Kathleen paired up as usual.

It couldn't be said that Ryan and Kathleen were "going together," since Ryan's heart had been remaindered long ago to the ghost of Dawn Amory; but he and Kathleen usually shared the same seat on the bus and table in the cafeteria, where she did her best to mend his many shreds and tatters. Ditto for Matt and Spacyjane, though he was far more dependent on her for guidance and support—literally so on a Monday morning like now, after a fully-baked weekend like always.

"Root beer," he croaked, and Spacyjane reached into her embroidered haversack for the bag of resuscitative Jelly Bellys as a big green bus trundled up Chubb to take on the Whierryites. It headed north and turned east, adding Carly Thibert and *her* pedestrian devotees; then Nonique Smith and Alex Dmitria and Vicki Volester, all of whom were wearing multihued headgear. Kathleen, noticing this, twisted around to give Spacyjane a panicky glance.

"(I forgot it's Socks-and-Hats Day!)" she whisper-quavered.

So had Spacyjane, though no one would suspect it since she had on her Annie Hall bowler (resumed with the coming of autumn) and a pair of apricot stockings (as part of her celebrate-the-foliage ensemble) which inadvertently prepared her for the first day of Spirit Week at VTHS.

"Got your tam?" she asked Kathleen, who sighed with grateful relief and fished a drab wool tam-o'-shanter out of her dull vinyl purse. As for LeAnn, she could be loaned a big fuzzy mitten from the bottom of Spacyjane's haversack, and pin it over her bouncy Bertinellish hair with rearranged barrettes.

No need to provide any chapeaux-to-go for Matt or Ryan, neither of whom was into Spirit—at least not the footbally kind. Nor, apparently, were many other guys at VTHS that morning, not even the sporty types; most of today’s Socks-and-Hats were on female legs-and-heads. Prominent among these were the long shapely gams and beautiful blonde noggin of Angelique Anstruther, who wasn’t just a senior and varsity cheerleader but also a dead ringer for her namesake witch on *Dark Shadows*. Spacyjane and her cronettes had watched that gothic soap in childhood (Kathleen through fingergaps in the hands covering her eyes) and Angelique-the-witch had been their favorite character. So it was extra neat to be singled out for Spirit-adherent praise by Angelique-the-cheerleader (in legwarmers and a sunbonnet) even though Spacyjane habitually wore eyecatching hats and hosiery to school, regardless of the week.

Angelique was in her First Hour class, Introduction to Photography, an elective open to all three grades at VTHS. Though often the target of camera lenses, Angelique refused to rest on such laurels; she was the senior version of Becca Blair, a whiz at math and science, bound for an Ivy League pre-med program. More literary-minded and militantly-disposed than Becca, Angelique campaigned tirelessly for feminist causes and the Equal Rights Amendment; she seldom let a chance slip to reprove boys or men, and today upbraided all of them in First Hour Photography who hadn’t bothered to put on a Spirited hat or socks.

“Now Eek, you wouldn’t be wantin’ me to hide this fine crownin’ glory from the eyes o’ the world, would you?” crackerbarreled the touslehaired Pete “Chewy” DeWitt.

“Don’t call me ‘Eek,’” snapped Angelique.

(Spacyjane had observed how many cheerleaders were inclined to be snappish—not Becca Blair, but Gigi Pyle and Nanette Magnus and Margo Temple and Cheryl Trevelyan and especially Penny Stone. Perhaps an overdose of pep caused them to grind peppercorns?)

“Let’s hit the road, people!” called Mr. Szot, shepherding the class on a minifieldtrip to try out their light meters around Hordt Field.

Spacyjane walked with Tess Disseldorf, who had on a demure stocking cap (“counts as Sock-*and*-Hat”) and was insolently ignoring Howard Ullmann as he lumbered alongside them, making ponderous remarks about F-stops.

“I can think of a few people *I’d* like to effing stop,” Tess gibed at Spacyjane.

Her main purpose in being here was to aggravate ex-boyfriend Eddie Wainwright, who thought Polaroid snapshots were the last word in picturetaking—point, click, self-develop. Anything more complex would be a waste of his *come AHN! come AHN!* time.

“Eddie wouldn’t know a come-on if it bit him on the *tuchus*,” Tess confided.

“Yeah—it’s like that with most guys. They fade in and out of consciousness,” said Nancy Buschmeyer, who’d hit a dry patch with Chewy DeWitt since the LitSoc Pop Party, and looked sourly cottonmouthed as Chewy continued trying to chat up the unresponsive Angelique.

“Focus, people!” requested Mr. Szot when they got outdoors; meaning minds instead of lenses, since today’s topic was the light meter. He began talking about shutter speeds and exposure times, but Spacyjane’s focus was suddenly concentrated on the blazing splendor of a rustyheaded superspectacled smoke-and-mirrorsy *FLASSSHHHH FLASSSHHHH flassshhhh*—as her Swee’Pea ambled onto the field of vision.

Needless to say, Sidney Erbsen didn’t belong in any introductory photography class. Sophomores might not be eligible for the advanced course, but he could’ve asked that an exception be made. Instead he opted for an easy A in Intro—“I know my place, and how to keep it with a bookmark, and ways to make the most out of placekeeping.”

Mr. Szot treated him as a *de facto* teaching assistant and also a department publicist, what with Photography being on the school district’s budgetary chopping block. Swee’Pea’d launched a big snap-it-yourself contest, similar to *North Squire*’s that he’d won last summer (using That Girl from Willowhelm) and given it ample promotion in each issue of the *Channel*; though Nancy Buschmeyer (who’d volunteer for any activity, no matter how onerous) got stuck with doing most of the organizational work.

“I only wish one of the contest prizes was a coupon for a *good* hair salon—and that the winner’d take pity and share it with *me*,” groaned Nancy, her latest bizarre perm packed halfway into a turban for Socks-and-Hats Day.

Swee’Pea had capped his own rustiness with a scalloped beanie like the one worn by Goober and Jughead. On him it was a regal coronet, giving him a profile that could be minted for a commemorative coin, even if it was currently pointed at Tess Disseldorf. (No worries there: Tess might be the school’s most subtle seductress, but she’d disdained

Swee'Pea since kindergarten and pooh-poohed him as "the Beast of East Bay.")

(Which, if true, might account for his frequent matchups with Beauty.)

(Which sometimes falsely masqueraded as the real thing.)

(Which, of course, was none of *his* fault.)

To Spacyjane he was not a Beast but a Ralph, in both the William Golding and Judy Blume *Forever...* senses; and had been since the FLASH of his Minolta caused both her heart and puppet-bodice to burst open during *Carnival's* dress/undress rehearsal last April.

La-dee-da! La-dee-da!

He'd taken her to go see *Annie Hall*, several times; he'd suggested she adopt Annie's hat and vest and necktie as a charming theme look; he'd proposed that she assist him with his pictorial engagements. All of which she'd done and more—readily, willingly, repeatedly—savoring a Springtime in Emotional Paris as her Swee'Pea's ever-present accessory.

"Excellent at setting up tripods (in a manner of speaking)," as he neatly put it. And *put it*.

And PUT IT—

La-dee-da! La-dee-da!

Till she and Floramour had to leave for Summer Youth Music Camp, spending a month away downstate... and coming home to find a surprise. That Girl from Willowhelm, projecting off the *North Squire* page and over her bikini top in Swee'Pea's no-fault contest photo, to the unsung tune of \$25 prize money.

That's kind of a REVEALING picture, don't you think?

He only takes beauty shots. That are neat.

(And sometimes falsely masquerading.)

Relationships, as has been said, are totally irrational and crazy and absurd.

But, as has been added, most of us need the eggs.

And such things never bothered Spacyjane Groh.

"It must be so nice, having a boyfriend who can do things like that," Alex Dmitria'd wistfully sighed. "I bet he missed you lots while you were away."

To which there could be only one reply: "My Swee'Pea is always with me."

*Though it's a chill October morn
 Out on this grassy gridiron
 I'll cast off all my bright raiment
 (While retaining our bowler hat)
 And set up your tripod anew
 Wholly au naturel for you...*

Causing a bolder note to swell from Israfel's lyre within the sky; although the rusty head for which it was intended did not turn.

*

The cronettes, remembering ahead of time that Tuesday was Fifties Day, agreed that wearing long skirts and little neck scarves would be sufficiently Spirited. Kathleen also sewed a big Lavernelike "L" on the front of LeAnn's tunic top, and Spacyjane replaced her bowler with a beatnik beret.

"*C'est très approprié à porter ici*," Monsieur Dunlap commented as she and the beret took their seat in Second Hour Advanced French.

"(Approprié mes fesses,)" muttered the decidedly unFiftiesish Fiona Weller, who held Monsieur DunLAP in low esteem for acting too much like her uncle Buck DunLOP—a glib on-air personality "(*Quelle smarm*)" who hosted *Bowling for Dollars* in Pittsburgh.

Fiona wasn't fond of Spacyjane either; but then she seemed to withhold affection from pretty much everybody. Even so, personal relationships—irrational/crazy/absurd—could always change for the better: Joss, for instance, who hustled into the classroom wearing an anti-Fifties sweatshirt that read THE FUTURE IS **NOW**, hadn't warmed up to Spacyjane till they shared a dorm room at Youth Music Camp. Then they became good friends, though Joss still had reservations about their other roomie Floramour.

Ahem ahem ahem: Joss and Fiona were clearing their voices as Zalman Tergeist dragged past, dressed all in black and toting Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Street Survivors* album, released just three days before last week's fatal plane crash. Zal was a dramaturge and player of heavy roles; he could shave closely at 7 a.m. and have five o'clock shadow two hours later. (Jenna Wibnitz said it saved the stage crew from wasting greasepaint.)

Behind him hobbled Pebbles Preston, who'd gotten injured last Saturday during NESTLÉ's season-ending volleyball tournament. The JV Lady Gondoliers had been second seed but lost the championship to Athens Grove, who won their third straight title with inescapable iciness. That same frosty-mugged Olympian who'd slammed Vicki to the floor six weeks ago administered the terminal spike, pulverizing Pebbles and breaking Doreen Jobling's *other* ankle. (Just one week before the Homecoming Dance, too; Dory was re-wretchified.)

Pebbles, looking even more wan and pallid than her wasting-fever norm, had her thatch of tangerine hair bound into a Flintstone topknot around a plastic bone: not precisely Fiftiesish, but a commendable effort. She was helped into the room and to her desk by an *entirely* Fifties figure—saddle shoes, bobby socks, poodle skirt over petticoats, backward cardigan, and hair worn in a chignon. Not just any hair either, but a wealth of goldilocks; and not belonging to Becca or Nanette or Cheryl or Angelique or any other blonde in Vanderlund, but to

THE EMBODIMENT

“(Aaagh!)” Joss had gone on the second day of Advanced French. “(It’s Floramour, come to life!)”

“(Wouldn’t that be neat?)” Spacyjane had replied.

And so it had been, for awhile.

But embodiments owed it to their *temporarily* incarnated spirits to be proper hosts and conduct themselves appropriately. Otherwise it would be a case of FLESHY POSSESSION, and never-do-a-thing-like-that misbehavior might come to pass.

(And so it had.)

“*Événements actuels, s’il vous plait,*” said M. Dunlap, and the class divided into their preassigned pairs to discuss preselected news items *en français*. Spacyjane was teamed with Rula Hradek, another senior cheerleader and author-in-progress of a Lois Duncanesque chiller-thriller. This morning she appeared to be test-flying a Homecoming gown, practically strapless but with a snap-on crinoline stole: very Fifties Dayish.

They exchanged remarks about Hamida Djandoubi, a one-legged Tunisian who'd recently been guillotined in Marseilles for torturing and murdering a kidnap victim; not unlike the local Mad Bludgeoner ("*Matraque Fou*") who still hadn't been apprehended. Meanwhile peeks at Rula's varsity cleavage were being sneaked by M. Dunlap and most of the guys in class—

—but not Zal Tergeist, paired with an Embodiment who was doing her *way-beyond*-level best to distract him from Lynyrd Skynyrd lamentation. Leaning forward to make her point(s) through a stretched-tight coral cardigan, putting additional strain on the coral buttons lining her spine—

—which was something Floramour would *never* do, even if she had a jutable bosom.

It canceled out all the good Embodied deeds done by assisting teammate Pebbles, who should've been her *partenaire de discussion* but now had to cope with the *you-think-YOU'RE-in-pain?* one-upmanship of Marcie Loftus (aka "Cramps Aplenty").

"*Quand vas-tu m'inviter à la danse de retour?*" coquetted The Embodiment with Zal.

"(*Je sais que rien de tout ça n'est de TA faute,*)" Spacyjane reassured the spirit within.

Fleshy possession. Floramour had been prepared for this early that morning, in a Fifties Day outfit accurately anticipating everything in The Embodiment's except the *backward* cardigan and its coral color. Floramour, when Spacyjane departed for school, wore a nice navy sweater buttoned up the front over a nice white blouse; meaning changes had taken place between then and now—alterations made to enhance juttability, flirtability, and impropriety.

Spacyjane was not a prude. She hadn't been upset when her own bodice popped open at that undress rehearsal, at least not until being compelled to wear a pinchy-squinchy bra.

But the moral integrity of a Swiss bisque doll was at stake here.

Not to mention the ongoing beguilement of a Swee'Pea Paparazzo—remember that flaunted thigh at the Pop Party.

(And the flaunted throat of Marie Antoinette on the nonbudgetary chopping block.)

"*Que pensez-vous de l'utilisation de la guillotine?*" asked Rula Hradek, adjusting her crinoline stole.

What *did* Spacyjane think about punitive beheading? A rather drastic comeuppance (or dropdownance) as it'd been for Marie, and Anne Boleyn before her; yet no guarantee of dispelling bewitchery worthy of a *Dark Shadows* Angelique.

Which The Embodiment displayed to an even greater extent that afternoon in Seventh Hour World History. While Mr. Gosling lectured repetitively (“What I’m saying is this... what I’m saying is that... what I’m saying is t’other”) about the decline of the Byzantine Empire, a whole different dropdownance was going on at the desk in front of Spacyjane’s. Continuous twisting hither and thither to stir up adjacent guys (Rags Ragnarsson on the left, Bradley Faussett on the right) and keep them riveted on the coral cardigan’s undulations and fluctuations (Rags *hee*-ing, Brad *haw*-ing) while Constantinople fell and the Ottoman Turks conquered Asia Minor.

“Need I remind you all that midterms are next week?” Mr. Gosling testily interjected, rapping the wall map with his pointer. “What I’m saying is, pay attention here!”

Guilty *gulp* not by The Embodiment, but Kathleen at the desk behind Rags, whom she timidly worshiped from afar even when nearby. Offended *sniff* by Willamene Fowler at the desk behind Brad, she being very religious and disapproving of his antics as well as The Embodiment’s. Resigned *sigh* by Spacyjane as one... two... three hardpressed buttons got twisted out of their reversed holes, exposing the backstrap of an imposing foundation garment that Grohshi might’ve worn in the actual Fifties. (Black lace, too: no wonder Zal Tergeist had been drawn in.)

No visible reaction by The Exposee to this airy baring as the next textbook chapter was assigned, and the bell rang to end the regular schoolday, and people started surging noisily to their feet. Then Spacyjane (with another *sigh*) reached over to tap a peachy-creamy shoulder blade—

—which spun around and then again in the opposite direction, as if to be shown off to as many spectators as possible. “Oops—I’m losing my sweater!” while peachy-creamy butterfingers fumbled behindhandedly with the undone buttons.

“Need some help?” *hee*’d Rags; “Here, let ME!” *haw*’d Brad; speechless *gulp* by Kathleen; irate *sniff* by Willamene.

“Hold on,” said Spacyjane, tending to the refastening with her deepest *SIGH* yet.

“Oh—thanks,” from The Embodiment in an ungracious voice that turned melting-marshmallowy as aquamarine eyes caught Spacyjane’s star sapphires over a recovered shoulder. “Heyyyeeeee—we’ve got that Gong thing to go to now, don’t we? C’mon—”

And before Spacyjane knew it they were clattering down four stories together, leaving the heehawgulpsniffers in their wake. Squeezing through the day-end staircase crowd with an oozy-cooed series of *Hiiiiieee*’s amid Embodied chitter-chatter about the countless invites she’d gotten to the Homecoming Dance and her ambivalence about ending that brief fling with Jeff Friardale who’d been terrorstricken into escorting Queen candidate Penny Stone but how this school was proving to be *tons* more fun than anyone could’ve guessed though it’d still be a dream come true to go to school in Switzerland and heyyyyeeeee! Spacyjane’s family were Swiss weren’t they? had they ever vacationed in the Alps? or gone yodeling on mountaintops? and was that cute little redhead camera guy who acted like Woody Allen taking *her* to the Homecoming Dance?

“He’s taking *pictures*,” Spacyjane got in edgewise.

Not adding that *she* danced solo by the light of the moon (the moon, the moon) or that she KNEW none of this was the spirit within’s fault—

—even when the shameless host body flat-out pressed her poodle skirt against Dennis Desmond’s leg when he gave the poodle a stroke in passing.

“Howzabout taking *this* for a stroll by the Old ‘Un’s studio, with or without your snowbird sister or any of these junctionated petticoats?” he said.

“Mayyyybeeee I will! When’re *you* gonna ask me to the Homecoming Dance?”

“Will you won’t you will you won’t you come home Nellie, all is forgiven?”

“The name’s *Isabel*,” pouted an Embodied lower lip and an outthrust Embodied hip.

Spacyjane, tearing herself away from this unlicensed dalliance, whisked through the double doors of the VTHS auditorium and found each of its four corners occupied by a small knot of new LitSoc recruits. They’d been assembling at intervals since the Pop Party, mostly to work on an intersociety float for the Homecoming Parade. Its design—an open book under a reading lamp upon a lectern atop Don’t-Call-Me-Debbie Karberski’s grandfather’s Dodge Polara—had been hammered out by the seniors, exhausting them. The juniors had begged off from any participation, saying they were too busy cramming for PSAT exams; so

all constructive labor landed on the sophomores. Austen-Alcott's sophs had been tasked with producing hundreds of tissue-paper flowers, and Kathleen was delighted to help make these even though she couldn't muster up the nerve to seek membership herself.

Nor would she have enjoyed being cornered here in the auditorium, rehearsing group recitations for tomorrow (Gong Show Day) which would also serve as their LitSoc initiation rite in this post-"Goblin Market" anti-hazing age. AA had selected the extract from *Little Women* where Jo was writing in the garret with her pet rat Scrabble, who nibbled her manuscripts when they weren't shut away in an old tin "kitchen" (reflector oven). Joss Murrish got all wrought up reciting *There, I've done my best! If this won't suit I shall have to wait till I can do better*, saying she could hear the words being spoken by her spirited-away mother who'd known *Little Women* by heart.

Right now, though, Joss was scrunched up between Vicki Volester and (galloping over from Dickinson's corner) Alex Dmitria, both evidently agitated about something.

"Boy trouble," diagnosed The Embodiment, sauntering down the aisle.

"I'll say," murmured Nonique Smith, stepping away from the scrunch-up; though she gave no hints about its details, other than looking bemused.

"Okay, you guys, let's settle down and get to work!" called Alva Dee Bickling, in charge of AA's recitation rehearsal now that the PSATs were done with and no longer junior-excuseworthy.

"Alex! Over *here*, please!" called Mary Kate Hazeldene from the Dickinson corner; and Alex obediently complied, though wringing fluttery hands.

Joss gently but firmly pushed Vicki into an auditorium seat, giving her a nod followed by a headshake followed by a shrug. Various interpretable, thought Spacyjane; what would Opa make of it? Find out when the next dreamtime rolled around. Till then, be content with a farsighted spacygaze into Vicki's disoriented demeanor, from which might spring a neat new dolly opera.

"Okay, you guys, let's take it from the top!" directed Alva Dee; and the sophomore members of Austen-Alcott Literary Society (minus Jerome Schei, unlucky enough on this gossip-likely day to be sick at home with an ear infection) responded with a ragged chorus of

Jo was very busy in the garret, for the October days began to grow chilly, and the afternoons were short...

*

Ninety minutes earlier in Mrs. Mallouf's class (quieter than customary, what with Jerome's absence) Vicki was frowning at Joss and Fiona for flouting the Fifties Day theme, while fretting that she herself looked too much like Shirley Feeney in *Happy Days* duds when she ought to be figuring out how *The Great Gatsby* fit into the American Dream, instead of frivolling with fantasies of Robert Redford as the title character though she hadn't seen his film version (which Stephanie Lipperman'd said was "fatuous") even when it was shown on TV, because Ozzie and Goofus had been forceful about watching *Kojak* that night.

P-E-E-E-E-A-L went the bell and *exeunt* went Mrs. Mallouf's students. Vicki & Co. were waiting for Nonique to come down the hall from Mr. Prout's classroom when up out of the linoleum rose a taller thinner less-pugilistic Carmine Ragusa, who stepped forward and said "Angel Face...?"

Gazing at Vicki, who couldn't be mistaken for Angelique Anstruther.

It was a dark sleek compact apparition with diffident puddyboy eyes that made Fiona (of all people) suck in her breath and take to her heels, while Vicki remained rooted to the spot. "Tony?" she ventured. "Tony Pierro?"

"Yeah, it's me. Can I talk to you?"

"I, um, gotta, y'know, get to Gym."

"Only take a second."

"Course she can," prompted Joss, giving Vicki a little shove while reaching out the other hand to take hold of Nonique, who stood by waiting quizzically till Joss tugged her downstairs.

"(C'mon. Those two have a lot of catching up to do...)"

"(She call him Tony? Thought she told me his name was Dave...)"

"(That's the *other* one she needs to catch up with...)"

Joss's voice faded away and the between-classes crowd dwindled to Split-Pea Erbsen, who paused long enough to remark "Door to the roof is open."

"Hunh?" went Vicki.

“At the end of the hall,” Split-Pea added, trotting down the empty staircase.

“They wouldn’t leave that unlocked!” she called after him.

“Just saying,” his Woody Allen monotone drifted back.

“C’mon,” said Taller Thinner Carmine, taking her hand (OHHH) and pulling her along the corridor to a door marked NO ADMITTANCE whose knob in fact turned freely and allowed them to duck past it just as the late bell clanged: a noise echoed by their feet hurrying up a metallic flight to another off-limits-yet-unlocked door, and also by Vicki’s heart at the thought of how many rules and regulations were being broken here—

—as they went up the ladder to the roof. *Where we can see heaven much better.*

Vicki half-expected to find a Gatsbyesque orgy in progress, but the school roof was deserted except for a few pigeons on the gravelly aggregate. Even so: wasn’t it insanely risky and ridiculously dangerous for the roof of a four-story building to be accessible by more than two thousand neurotic teenagers and underpaid faculty? No need to drive all the way to DeRussey’s Point if you wanted a DeLuster’s Leap to make out on, or maybe plunge off of—

—grope hastily behind you to ensure the door can still be opened and you aren’t trapped up here (ditching a class! even if it’s only Gym!) with a guy you hardly know, meandering around this stark plateau dotted by short vertical pipes and big grooved towers recalling *the* Tower—that crenellated cupola atop Reulbach Elementary in Pfister Park, where juvenile detainees were said to be imprisoned.

“Where’ve you been?” Vicki asked. “I thought you were... I mean, I haven’t seen you since... that is, for like the last six months or so.”

“Oh, I’ve been around,” said Tony. Stooping to pick up what looked like a very old apple (had Nonique’s kid brother hurled his lunch fruit onto this roof, as well as Dopkins’s?) before letting it drop and wiping fingers on Fiftiesish dungarees. “So anyway—”

Rumble from above, and Vicki looked up to find a sky weightily overcast by bulging brooding clouds. “We better go back in!” she exclaimed, but Tony moved toward the parapet at the edge of the roof. “Here first,” he called, waving a Fiftiesish leather-jacketed arm at her.

OhmyGahd what if he really IS planning to jump the hell off?? “Don’t!” she squeaked, scurrying after him, then recoiling as he turned to face her—*OhmyGahd suppose HE’S the Mad Bludgeoner?? That could be why he’s been so incognito the past six months—*

—but Tony only blinked big brown unassuming peepers at her, just as he had at the Columbine Deli last April, and gestured over the parapet at the world below. Vicki (keeping well out of reach) took a giddy glance down at—*OhmyGahd there’s my Gym class heading out to play soccer—*with a pang at missing this chance to run around and kick up her heels, though relieved not to do so below a bank of thunderclouds.

“So anyway—remember I asked if you wouldn’t mind giving me a raincheck?”

“Hunh?” went Vicki, glancing at him and then back up at the sky.

“When I asked you to go with me to NESTL(É)’s indoor track meet, but had to bail ‘cause I had to work? I know it was a long time ago—maybe you’ve forgot.”

“No I haven’t,” Vicki bristled, instantly reliving the exasperation of being as-good-as-(no-make-that-*bad*-as)-stood-up—AND because Tony Baloney Breachofpromise here had been enticed and deluded by Kinks Farghetti!

But she also hadn’t forgotten coughing “Yeah sure okay” when he’d humbly asked for that dating raincheck, right after Joss composed that future fantasy invitation—

*Mr. and Mrs. Oswald Volester request the honor of your presence
at the marriage of their daughter, Her Highness/Majesty Victoria
Lorraine (attended by beautiful Maid of Honor Jocelyn Murrish).
to Anthony Whatshismiddlename LetssayPetulascousin Pierro...*

Nor had she forgotten watching *Witness for the Prosecution* with Joss and Alex and Fiona, who’d all agreed that Tyrone Power’s character’s being named Leonard VOLE must be a sign—obscure, yet unambiguous—that Vicki and Tony were destined to wind up together.

Nor had it slipped her memory that the *last* guy she’d dated once wore a T-shirt silkscreened with a film noir poster for TYRONE POWER IN *NIGHTMARE ALLEY* (though Dennis had called that movie “career guidance how to become a professional geek without half trying”).

(Takes one to know one, Unlucky Charms!)

“So... will you?” Tony was asking—not down on one knee, so not for her hand in wedlock. “Go with me to the Homecoming Dance?” he clarified.

“Oh! Um... gee... can I think about it?”

“Guess a lot of guys’ve asked you already.”

“What? Oh—well—yes—some,” Vicki blushed. “Haven’t told any I’d go with them... yet.”

“Okay,” smiled Tony. “Can I call you later? Still at the same phone number?”—rattling it off flawlessly, without consulting a little black book.

“Yeah. Sure. Okay.”

“Oh, one more thing before we go back in. That is, if you don’t mind me getting ahead of myself”—

—as he leaned over, darkly sleekly puddyboyishly, and gave Vicki a kiss on the lips that took her as much by surprise as the crawfish-flavored smooch Phonsie Alphonse had stolen at Chez d’Arlequin, but was not *at all* the same thing. Nossireebob: Tony Pierro’s kiss, like the baby bear’s bowl and chair and bed, was JUST RIGHT.

Even though it left Vicki feeling exceedingly lightheaded.

Especially after Tony took her back indoors and down to the fourth floor where he *dissolved into dustmotes* EXACTLY LIKE THE HUNK WITH NO NAME IN EIGHTH GRADE.

Vicki splashed cold water on her face in the nearest washroom, but still felt dizzy (as well as damp) so she crept downstairs and got checked by Nurse Rathbone, who asked her many of the same questions that’d been put to chillified Laurie Harrison six weeks earlier.

Since the schoolday was almost over and Vicki’s mother had arranged to pick her up after the Austen-Alcott rehearsal, Nurse Rathbone consented to Vicki’s lying down awhile and then gave her a note to take to Ms. Schwall. Which Vicki (feeling somewhat refreshed) did before the end of Seventh Hour, finding Coach Celeste busy with towel on hair and brow in her humid cubbyhole, while the girls were showering in the extra-sweaty locker room.

“This weather could make anybody woozy,” said sympathetic Celeste; making Vicki feel even guiltier with her concern about lingering aftereffects Vicki might still suffer from last month’s volleyball knockout. Nadine Rugova’s having struck again at Saturday’s tournament (undaunted by her beatdown by firebombers) had reminded everyone of that

previous KO blow, and Coach Celeste was filing another complaint with NESTL(É)'s Assistant Commissioner.

They could hear Sheila-Q filing a grievance with Laurie in the locker room about Laurie's brutal shoulder charges on the soccer field:

"Didn't *enough* of our butts get busted by Athens Grove to satisfy your *bloodlust*? What're you trying to do—become the next Mauly the Mauler?"

"Just playing the game," replied Laurie: a lengthy statement for her these days. (No time to worry about that now.)

Coach Celeste went "LAY-DEEZ," waited till S-Q's boisterous voice diminished to nothingness, then gave Vicki some final words of guiltmaking advice. Vicki thanked her, hastened out of the cubbyhole through the gym, and almost shoulder-charged Nonique away from the locker room mirror where she was retying her little Fifties neck scarf.

"Oof..."

"Sorry sorry sorry—"

"Got all caught up with your Mystery Man, did you?"

Vicki began a *Reader's Digest* condensed version of her relationship (such as it *hadn't* been) with Tony Pierro as they quickwalked around to the auditorium. Nonique'd received an even more abbreviated account from Joss, who'd had to cut it short and run to Personal Typing ("our assignments are superdiscreet") which had left Nonique agog but perplexed as to what sort of dish *kinksfarghetti* might be.

Vicki didn't have time to disentangle this conundrum, or to bring Joss up to date in AA's auditorium corner before Alex came stampeding over like a gun-shy gazelle to blurt that Mike Spurgeon had just asked *her* to the Homecoming Dance, and what was she going to dooooooooo??

Nonique stepped away from the two ambushed invitees ("Both of them white as a sheet, if they'll 'scuse my mentioning it") so Alex could fill in her most special friends about what'd happened in Ms. Cliffhouse's Sixth Hour Phys Ed. There'd been a scrimmage between the senior and junior girls prepping for tomorrow's Powderpuff football game, with sophs like Alex and Becca cheering from the sidelines along with boys from Coach Bolero's Gym class. Among these was Mike, King of the Towheads, who stealthily gravitated his

Peter Frampton ringlets into Alex's proximity...

—and then, after Louisa Lang and Amanda Pound halted an advance spearheaded by Meredith Wainwright and Susan Baxter, made his "Signed Sealed Delivered (I'm Yours)" dance request.

Which Alex initially paid no heed to, thinking that Mike was asking *Becca* out.

Realization that SHE was the one being addressed turned Alex to stone, like a reverse Galatea. Though not as whiteknuckledly as that day in the VW cafeteria when Kim Zimmer'd snuggle-cuddle-nuzzled with Mike, right in front of Joss and Vicki (and Alex).

Two years had passed since then. Plus an additional six months after seventh-grade spring break, when Mike (as Becca'd told Vicki) must have made a move on Alex (his longtime best buddy at Snead Elementary) and she'd either freaked and fought him off, or gone along with it (everyone knowing for years they were sure to become a real couple) and Papa Dmitria had caught them. Either way, Alex had stiffened and shrunk into a bundle of hyperactive nerves (especially when guys hit on her) and it'd taken eons to get her even partly mellowed out.

But then last February she and Mike had danced elbow-to-elbow at Vicki's disco concert party at the Vinyl Spinnaker; and this semester they shared the same lunch period and homeroom/study hall without Alex relapsing into petrification.

Until today.

"She'll think about it," Becca informed Mike on the Powderpuff scrimmage sideline, before conveying Galatea to their Seventh Hour Honors Biology class. Fortunately it was a lecture and not a lab session, giving Alex opportunity to defrost... and come unglued, feeling like her Fifties Spiritwear and chaste lingerie had all fallen apart at the seams, leaving her nakedly exhibited like Miss Mazeppa lashed to a rampant stallion. Which delved into Alex's privatemost nocturnal fantasy—except no bondage was needed there; just a Cossack girl on her Cossack steed, riding bareback across widespread sundrenched Ukrainian plains.

(Sometimes the steed was a Cossack centaur.)

(Sometimes with long towheaded curlylocks.)

(Other times with a big bald head and a toothpick protruding between its lips.)

Papa would never in a million years give *any* guy permission to take her to a dance. She could only go out with girlfriends (vetted beforehand) and even then only if she made regular check-ins by phone to the Mission Revival house on Sprangletop Road; and that was only because Papa'd been banned-for-life by the Vanderlund Township School District from chaperoning (and desolating) any festivities.

But now that autumn days were growing shorter, Papa and every other parent with a daughter in the northeast suburbs was on constant alert for indications of the Mad Bludgeoner. Student safety had topped the agenda at the VTHS Open House earlier that month, with a speech made by a morose Mr. Amory whose daughter Dawn had disappeared from Whierry Elementary five years ago. Alex remembered hearing about that back then and wanting to join the search parties; but her Junior Girl Scout troop had been deemed too young (and endangered) to do more than "keep their eyes open"—which was hard to do while weeping for somebody who might've been a special friend someday. Dawn's mother still clung to the belief that she'd been abducted by a cult and would eventually be rescued; so that special friendship might yet happen—

—as opposed to being taken by a boyfriend to Saturday's Homecoming Dance.

Many guys in all three grades had asked her; Alex's stock response was "I'll be glad to *see* you when I *get* there." But with Mike Spurgeon this deferment seemed unbecoming, and not necessarily valid (*would* she be glad?) so what was Alex going to doooooooo??

Becca wanted her to accept Mike's offer *conditionally*—that is, without his coming to Sprangletop Road or phoning her there, so Papa need not be disturbed by even a *conditional* acceptance. Rachel Gleistein, also in Honors Biology, had renounced romance and would counsel UNconditional refusal of Mike or any other guy. Mumbles Metcalf, who'd been Alex's mentor since Snead days, would drawl-advise her to calm downwwn—be footloose and fancy-free with boys as well as horses, **HA!! HA!! HA!!** And Coach Celeste Schwall, who'd been Alex and Becca's star-spangled heroine as far back as kindergarten, would urge her to achieve mental and emotional release (as well as tone her muscles and strengthen her cardiovascular system) with upbeat aerobic dancing—

—to songs from *The Music Man*.

As sung by Fleur Groningen, playing Marian Paroo in last spring's VTHS Operetta: ballads such as "Till There Was You" and "Being in Love."

What a lovely dream! And yet, somehowwww

Being in love's only half of what I'm longing for now...

Alex couldn't wait to hear what Vicki and Joss thought about all this. Neither had (as yet) accepted any of *their* invitations by guys to Homecoming; but all three girls had gone shopping together at the Green Bridge for dresses to wear, since they planned to go to the dance as their usual triumvirate if *all* of Joss and Vicki's inviters ended up unacceptable. Nobody'd expected Alex to contemplate ways she might "dance around" her Papa and *conditionally* accept *any* guy—LEAST of all Mike Spurgeon.

But even though she *was* thinking about how this might be done, she had no choice *but* to wait after blurting out her news—because Mary Kate summoned her to Dickinson's rehearsal for *their* Gong Show initiation (a poetic medley of "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed" and "Wild Nights—Wild Nights"). Then when the girls regrouped to be driven home by Vicki's mother, conversation was impeded by Mrs. Volester's being there along with Spacyjane Groh and Vernonique Smith—nice girls, sweet girls, both of whom Alex had spent a fun sleepover with after the Pop Party; yet not yet classifiable as *special* friends.

Vicki's mother did most of the talking on the drive home, in a Chrysler Town & Country station wagon she'd obtained from the Volester Lot following the Open House forum on student safety. It'd been enough of a challenge squeezing four girls into her Pontiac Firebird for that trip to Auldforest Woods; if Alex had come along, there'd have been no way to fit her *and* Joss in at the same time since both were so much taller than the other three. Now Daylight Savings was about to end; sunset would be an hour earlier; Robin Neapolitan was the only bunchkin licensed to drive a vehicle of her own; and the other girls shouldn't have to wait at bus stops in twilight (or *darkness*) for secure extracurricular transport. Hence the Chrysler T&C (which Joss had dubbed "Loopy's Luxury Liner") that could accommodate up to nine passengers at a time.

"I've got major plans for this station wagon!" Felicia enthused from behind its wheel. "I've almost positively decided to become a real estate agent, and with a car this size I could

shuttle an entire family of prospects from one property to another.”

“Good for you, Mrs. V!” said long-legged Joss in the shotgun seat. “Then you’ll be able to find ME a brand new place on the inland side of town!”

“Now Jocelyn, you know your father’ll never sell your Queen Anne—”

“He can keep it and buy me my own one-bedroom condo unit. I’m sure *you*’ll be able to talk him around, Mrs. V...”

In the Chrysler’s middle seat Spacyjane was *sotto voce*-ing one of her catchy-yet-
eerie musical compositions, and Nonique instinctively hummed along while trying not to
snoop too unsubtly on Vicki and Alex in the Chrysler’s back seat, where they were passing a
note back and forth. Anxiety and traffic on Sendt Street kept turning Alex’s copperplate
script into a wiggly scribble:

*So like I said , M. S. asked me to the H. D.
What do you think I should tell him ?*

You mean like a polite brush-off?

What? No — I mean , I don't know

can you picture yourself there with him?

Maybe — we both like to dance

But would you like to dance with HIM?

I could get into the most awful trouble

So give Mike the polite brush-off

[vigorously scratching out “Mike”]

DON'T write his name — my Papa could read this note !!!

*I'LL keep the note, Alex! calm down—
Just tell "M" the same thing you tell everyone else*

But maybe I won't get into trou

A line left unfinished as Loopy's Luxury Liner pulled into Jupiter Street and let out Joss, who thanked Felicia, bade everyone farewell, super/subbed "CALL ME AS SOON AS YOU CAN WITH EVERY LAST LITTLE DETAIL" to Vicki, and grumbled "Old, old, old" at the Queen Anne as she trudged inside it.

"Room for you up front now, Alex!" Felicia called, but Vicki called back "We're still working on tomorrow's History, Mom!" with a tiny "(Oh hush)" in response to Nonique's ladylike snort, which was followed by Nonique's stoic sigh as Felicia hauled *her* into the shotgun seat with a reminder to tell her parents that Fritz Ritz *would* be in town on Sunday for the long-postponed dinner with the Smiths at Burrow Lane, and a "separated-at-birth" photo shoot with Alfreda.

The Luxury Liner turned west on Clubroot Drive, went through the Expressway overpass onto Paillis Road, crossed Panama Boulevard and the sanitary canal to turn north on Galloway and drop off Spacyjane (still singing) at her Cecidia chalet. Meanwhile Alex and Vicki flipped over their notepaper and rephrased everything they'd already scribbled on its frontside, but without coming any closer to a conclusion as Nonique got deposited at the Old Brandoffer Place and the Chrysler drove on to the Mission Revival on Sprangletop, where Vicki tore their note into Papaproof confetti.

"(Forget everything but what your heart tells you,)" she quietly fortunecookied.
"(Sleep on it and we'll get your mind made up at the bus stop tomorrow morning.)"

Alex, blushing radiantly to the roots of her pixie-cut hair, gave her a silent sheepish hug before galloping out and away.

"My goodness! Just what is it you're studying in History tomorrow?" Felicia asked as Vicki joined her up front for the remaining drive home.

"Um... big papers on the Dark Ages to finish for Ms. Goldberg," Vicki improvised.

“Well, don’t let Spirit Week sidetrack you too much, darling. School’s still for *education* first of all, you know.”

“Right, right. Soon as dinner’s over I need to call Joss about *The Great Gatsby*—big papers due on that too.”

Though when they did get down to telephonic business, it wasn’t to debate about what the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock symbolized (Joss had told Mrs. Mallouf “I think it signifies ‘Hello sailor!’”) but to finally settle on who they’d be going with to Saturday night’s Homecoming Dance.

Prior to Tony’s proposal, Vicki’d received four others: from crawfishy John Alphonse, Buddy Marcellus (recuperating from his repudiation by Laurie), ex-“Throb” Garrigan (oh-so-likely after ditching Isabel at the drive-in deluge), and Marshall McConchie (though his offer was tentative since Gigi Pyle had given Graham Aleshire the heave-ho and so was theoretically available again).

Joss had been asked by three fellow instrumentalists—oily Roy Hodeau (EWW) and Slim Jim Khim (whose Korean ancestry gave him a *slightly* darker skintone if nowhere near “brutha” hue) of the Cadet Orchestra, and Hansel Hitchens (Gretel’s profligate twin, who had a car but also the habit of driving it while drunk or high or both) of the Symphonic ensemble.

“He hasn’t had any accidents so far or even a speeding ticket, but I sure don’t wanna be anywhere near the vicinity when Hahhhnsel’s dumb-lucky streak runs out. So I guess I’ll give Slim Jim a go—if you’re sure you’ve nabbed Tony. Aren’t you afraid he’s trying to call you right now and getting a busy signal?”

“Let him! I’m not holding my breath, waiting for him to cash in his ‘rain check.’ And if he really has changed back into a pillar of chalkdust I’ll say yes to Marshall, if only to save him from Gigi’s clutches.”

“I told you, didn’t I, that I saw her the other day at the New Sherwood with that Great Dane guy they say is a black-marketeer in stolen ski jackets? He and Gigi both had one on—maybe on top of *others* they’d shoplifted. I’ll bet trying to do that would make you sweat, even if you weren’t afraid of getting caught.”

“And *I* told *you*, didn’t I, that if Gigi Pyle was going to be a shoplifter it’d be stuff like perfume or jewelry or imported silk underwear—*not* ski jackets.”

“Maybe she had that other stuff stashed *in* her ski jacket. Or ski jackets.”

“Forget Gigi Pyle. How do we get Alex to go to the dance with Mike?”

“Does she *want* to go with him?”

“I think *secretly* she does, if her Papa never gets the faintest clue about it happening. Okay, how’s this? We all pretend we don’t have dates—”

“—yeah, we’re used to that—”

“—shut up—and go to the dance as our usual bunch of single gals, then meet the guys at school?”

“*You* shut up. We might as well; it’s not like anyone who’s asked us has his license yet, except Hahhhnsel and ‘Throb.’”

“*Ex-‘Throb.’* And we wouldn’t be going with either of them anyway.”

“You really think Alex the Girl Scout will give in, fool her Papa, and slink off to dance the night away with the King of the Towheads?”

“If she *didn’t* want to, she wouldn’t be in such a dither about it or making so much fuss—he’d just be another one of her fob-offs.”

“I’ll bite my tongue and NOT say what ‘fobbing off a guy’ sounds like.”

“*Please* don’t. And don’t bite your tongue either—you need that for your cornet.”

“And maybe Slim Jim Khim too, tee hee hee—sweet dreams!”

No sooner did Vicki hang up than the phone rang again. “I GOT IT!” she hollered, turning a deaf ear to Goofus’s “You wish!” and Ozzie’s “Five more minutes, then I’m yanking out the cord!” because a Tyrone Powerful puddyvoice was asking if it might speak to Vicki Volester, please.

“Thank you,” she replied. “I mean, you’re welcome—I mean I *will* go with you to Comehoming—I mean HOMECOMING—I MEAN, yes this is me Vicki speaking hello there!”

(Tyrone Powerful puddylaugh at the other end of the line.)

But if you stand me up again, I’ll find the firebombers who beat up Nadine Rugova and pay them to do the same to YOU, Tony Baloney—so watch your step this time around...

*

The panel of faculty judges at Wednesday’s Gong Show kindheartedly permitted the four groups of LitSoc initiates to complete their recitations ungonged. Few other contestants

were so indulged, and Dennis Desmond ran over to pre-gong *himself* without bothering to put on an act. The winners were senior stage troupers Ron Deacon, Theresa Challis, and Judy Disseldorf (Tess's big sister) who chanted the *Three's Company* theme song while clomping around like baby elephants enveloped in a straitjacket *à trois*.

Come and knock on our doooooor (CLOMP x 3)

We've been waiting for yooooou (CLOMP x 3)

Nonique had to wait until Study Hall to hear the *latest* latest from Vicki, since the morning bus was too crowded and they didn't dare pass notes under Mr. Dimancheff's piranha nose. Vicki in return got updated on matchmaking endeavors by Rhonda Wright, who'd long since quit sifting through the sparse black male pickings at VTHS and foraged instead in Willowhelm's Spaghetti. One of her senior steadies there ("We call 'em 'soul mates,' honey!") had a sophomore brother who was allegedly ideal for Nonique; and even though Nonique was still convalescent from the Eddie Ray Anderson fiasco, she didn't want to spend the next three years (or however long the Smiths might live in Vanderlund) stranded on the unromantic bench.

*This is wonderful! You can trust the Road
Runner — she may joke a lot but would never play
any tricks on you about going out with a guy*

*Maybe not but the only blind date I ever
had was Reuben and that's not even funny*

*It's sort of funny. Rhonda's date and his
brother aren't on the Willowhelm football team
are they? That'd be awkward with us against
them in the Homecoming Game*

*No they're both into music. Luther
(her guy) plays saxophone in the jazz*

band and Darren (his brother) sings
baritone with the gospel choir

Does that mean Darren would behave more
like a “proper gentleman” with you?

In front of his mother maybe. But go to
any church and you’ll be surprised what
can happen in choirs -- my Uncle Babe
once said (not to me) they ought to hand
out chastity belts along with the robes

Will you at least get to meet this Darren
before Saturday night?

Rhonda says they’re coming to see her
play in the Powderpuff game this afternoon
-- I won’t lie, I’m feeling nervous

No that’s perfect! We’ll all get a chance to
check him out and if you don’t like Darren
maybe we can match him up with Joss...

The Buckley brothers, Luther and Darren, did drop by VTHS that afternoon and inspire Joss to reprise the routine she’d performed time and again for Lamar Twofields—flinging open her hooded topper and standing in profile, flopperoos to the fore. Which the BUCKLEYS may have taken favorable note of, being teen males; but were undemonstrative about, being *black* teen males visiting a nearly-lilywhite high school.

Vicki thought Luther looked like an older browner version of Skully Erle: lankishly starveling, in need of a deep potent toke before his next sax solo. Darren, though not an

instrumentalist, seemed far more suitable for Nonique: with an “air of detached remoteness” similar to Reuben Burns, yet clearly aware of Nonique’s *Thelma-on-Good-Times* attributes.

(*Her flopperoots were kept concealed within a zipped-to-the-throat polyester parka, resisting Vicki’s helpful show-him-you’re-interested nudges.*)

Sub-suggestion: *Don’t let Joss outbosom you.*

Sub-retort: *Oh hush up and keep your mind on the game.*

Spoken aloud by Darren Buckley, a lot less remote and detached: “LOOK out now!” as the Powderpuffers transformed Hordt Field into a class-warfare combat zone.

Maully Carstairs got ejected for tackling a touch-football opponent and knocking Margo Temple groggy. This infuriated the junior girls, particularly Cheryl Trevelyan who may have despised Margo but considered Maully’s tackle to be a savage underhanded attack. And not even Boomer Wrang of Houlihan could’ve led a more offensive countercharge: Cheryl’s kamikaze blocks pierced the senior line anchored by Louisa and Amanda, twice causing Ginger Snowbedeck to fumble the ball away. Penny Stone berated Ginger as a sloppybutted showboat, and got derided in return as a preciousassed Peony (her legal first name, prolonged to “PEEEEE-ON-KNEEEE” as in preschool days) which set off a hairpulling brawl and resulted in two more senior ejections. Gwen Cokingham and Joyce Usher tried their understudy best to stem the tide for the seniors; but Lisa Lohe sprang loose to sprint downfield and catch a bomb from Meredith that tied the score at 17-17, with Rhonda kicking the extra point to win an upset victory for the juniors.

They were still celebrating at lunchtime on Thursday—Country-Western Day in the Spirit Week lineup—with a heapin’ helpin’ of cowgirl hats, boots, and bandannas. Fiona kept muttering something about “(Shudder Bugge)” that no one except Robin understood; and Robin took no notice because she’d finally attained her five-year ambition: Craig Clerkington asked her out, and not just out but to go with him to the Homecoming Dance.

“*I’ll be his San Antonio Rose!*” she exulted. “Anybody got a pair of *spurs*?”

WVTR, the school radio station, broadcast downhome music from records spun by Beau Guthrie and Chewy DeWitt and Faye Howell the Princess of Pony Paradise Stable, much admired as an equestrienne by Mumbles and Alex. “Filly Faye” was a prime contender for Homecoming Queen: she not only looked like a young Tammy Wynette but

was dating Knobby Dutton, the Varsity G-Men's starting center and probable MVP, who never botched a snap despite being deaf in one ear. "I can *feel* the vibes," he'd say, though some irreverent folk scoffed that what Knobby *felt* was Jeff Friardale goosing his perineum.

On Country-Western Day the cafeteria served barbecue (City-style) and baked beans, whose musical-fruitiness supplemented the junior girls's whoopery. No one had ever seen Lisa Lohe so effervescent; her Immaculate Reception had flushed away all the bitter frustrations of volleyball season, and Jenna was going to depict it in vivid acrylics. Cheryl too was in an unusually ebullient mood, though not above taunting any senior jockettes within range and making light of Mary Kate's benign reproaches.

Vicki missed all of this, along with the City-style barbecue and baked beans; yet she did not rue the loss, nor suffer any hunger-pangs from staying put in Study Hall. There Grandma Ivy's extra-large chair was vacant (how had she been winched out of Room 325?) until the same stoner-or-equivalent sub from Yom Kippur Spanish wandered by to hold down the fort, leafing idly through a copy of *Us* magazine. Samantha Tiggs lurked in the back row, her blue funk deepened by knowing that after yesterday's Powderpuff loss, Amanda Pound would be ten times as Demandin' at basketball tryouts. Nonique (thankful that her mother hadn't been called in as homeroom substitute) was passing a new note to and fro with Vicki regarding her now-definite double date with Rhonda and the Buckley brothers, when the inconspicuous person at Sammi's usual desk swung around in front of Vicki and was revealed to be—

—Tony Pierro.

No bandanna or cowboy hat, but a bolo tie beneath the collar of a checkerboard shirt.

"(Howdy, ma'am,)" he quietly moseyed.

"(D-d-do-si-do,)" Vicki stammered, squinting askant at Nonique's half-smothered guffaw. "(H-h-how long have you... y'know... been here?)"

"(Oh, awhile,)" said Tony, giving her a Marlboro Manly smile that tickled Vicki's fancy in a way that Dennis Desmond's relentless teethbaring never could.

"(So... are you in this homeroom now?)"

Self-evident shrug of checkerboarded puddysoulders.

"(Have you met my friend here, Ver—um, Ver—um...?)"

“(Verrrrypleasedtomakeyouracquaintance,)” Nonique finessed, arching her spine to swell out her gingham blousefront. *Don’t let me OUTBOSOM you*, she wickedly sub-sassed.

OOH just for that I’m gonna make your brown eyes blue! Vicki sub-seethed as Tony gave Nonique a genial nod, while the stoner-or-equivalent let out an unsmothered guffaw at an *Us* article on “Ann Landers’s Search for a New Man,” and Link Linfold sidled in like a mobile gargoyle from his own homeroom to sit with Sammi and offer her comfort as he’d been doing periodically over the past three weeks.

“(I bet you don’t even GO to this school!)” Vicki told Tony. “(I bet you’re *sneaking* over here from one of the Multches, or... oh, don’t tell me you really go to Willowhelm!)”

“(I wouldn’t tell you that,)” Tony assured her.

“(So who’s your regular homeroom teacher, then? What’s your Sixth Hour class?)”

“(Charlie Rich—‘Rollin’ with the Flow,’)” said Tony, either in answer to her questions or *Name That Tune*’s.

The 5D bell rang at that point and most of the students promenaded out of Study Hall, with Link leading Sammi in an allemande left; but Nonique dawdled by the doorway as Vicki and Tony stuck to their seats.

“Uhhhh... aren’t you guys supposed to go to lunch now?” the stoner-or-equivalent inquired.

“They’re still working on tomorrow’s History,” Nonique intervened. *See? It can be good to eavesdrop sometimes.*

Vicki picked up Ms. Goldberg’s heavy textbook and displayed it to the sub. *Okay, I owe you—your eyes can stay brown.*

“‘Kay,” caroled the credulous sub, following Nonique out of Room 325 and even closing the door behind them. Leaving Vicki alone with Tony Pierro and the piped-in sound of Dolly Parton’s newly-released crossover hit:

*All you gotta do is smile that smile
And there go all my defenses...*

Filling up Vicki’s senses as Tony rose from behind his desk, took her by the hand, gently lifted her to her feet, and began a sweet swaying slowdance.

*Shakin' me up so that all I really know
Is here you come again—and here I go...*

*

Spirit Week started to unravel that afternoon. An old-fashioned ice cream social had been arranged by the senior class, with frozen treats and unlimited root beer to be supplied by the uptown Zephyr Heaven; but its manager had taken the advice that Jay Gatsby fatally rejected—“go to Atlantic City for a week, or up to Montreal”—and Zeff Heff’s staff was neither aware of his ice cream social deal, nor where to reach the manager to confirm it. So Pamela Redfern and Jeremy Tolhurst were obliged to refund more than \$1,000 to a disgruntled crowd of country-western hankerers. Fortunately none had a pitchfork, but a few did carry lariats and one of those was being twisted into a noose when Jeremy beat a hasty retreat, pursued by Pam who added to his beating for having gotten them into this pickle.

Friday the 28th—Aquamarine & Gold Day—got off on a much better foot, thanks to the successful distribution of pre-ordered school-color carnations to loyal Vanderlunders. This enterprise had been sponsored by the Pep Club in conjunction with Bedeguar Way Florist: a partnership which also produced the massive “LOVE GONDOLA” cruise-ship float that dwarfed all competitors in the afterschool Homecoming Parade.

Vicki, wearing an aquamarine carnation as she watched the queue of decorated cars snake out of the VTHS parking lot to circumnavigate the block, was both annoyed that only upperclassgirls had been allowed to ride the joint LitSoc float, and grateful not to be on it herself. Even after everybody’s efforts, it was far from the most impressive parade entry; but at least its signs and slogans were all *spelled* right.

The Lettermen’s car had a Goodyear blimp aloft above a stadium scoreboard showing the battle cry “SKUTTEL THE JAMMERS,” while the Footlight Players’s float urged the school to “GET PYSCHED” while Judy Disseldorf, Theresa Challis and Ron Deacon again flailed around, their threesome straitjacket now labeled “WILLOWHELM WHACKOS.” Which might be in questionable taste; yet Vicki found it less cringemaking than the Pep Club’s flamboyant megaGondola (how many flatbed trailers were linked together in that beflowered convoy?) trumpeting “*Lovvvve, exciting and newwww...*”

(Eww.)

Vicki and Joss had tried to watch *The Love Boat* just once. “It’s as if Gilligan’s castaways were trapped at sea aboard the *Minnow* and never made it to the island,” Joss concluded. “Even those guys in *Lord of the Flies* were better off on *their* island than circling around it on a ship full of laughtracky guest stars.”

Speaking of stars: this year’s Homecoming theme—“A Little Starry Night Music”—was featured on several floats, but none took it to more literal lengths than Alpha Centauri (the Science Fiction & Fantasy Club) who’d rigged constellation charts with Christmas-type lightbulbs à la Señor Banonis’s wallmaps, mounting these atop a Saab Sonett alongside a loudspeaker that played a continuous loop of Holst’s *The Planets*. All these accoutrements caused the Sonett to break down and block what Jenna Wiblitz called “the ASS end of the parade” (Skinner being one of Alpha Centauri’s crew) till the derelict float got shunted over to the Wheaf Avenue curb. There Jenna drew a sketch she titled “Uranus the Magician.”

At the post-parade Pep Rally back in the parking lot, the six Homecoming Queen candidates and their G-Men escorts were introduced. Bootleg McGillah and his bookie cohorts, working the crowd and assessing its applause levels, gave Rula Hradek the best Erotic odds of winning and Penny Stone the longest shot—her chances largely based on people’s fear of how much vengeance she might wreak if she lost.

Then Tilda Purcell took the rally’s microphone. As editor-in-chief of the *Channel* she’d obtained today’s issue of Willowhelm’s newspaper, the *Topsail*; and from it she read out an article insinuating that the students of Vanderlund were an effete corps of impudent snobs who thought themselves entitled to hog fortitude.

This was an unsubtle reference to last spring’s contretemps when a new Corvette Stingray (driven by a VTHS senior) ran a used Subaru Coupe (driven by a Willowhelm senior) off Fortitude Road and into a lakefront greenbelt. When the Corvette’s driver (Brewster Canute, Tyler and Hardy’s preppified older brother) was pulled over and questioned by police, he laid all the blame on the Subaru’s driver (Corey Dumas, brother of an unemployed longshoreman) for obstructing traffic with his “rusted-out shitbox.”

Principal Stabeldore did his best to defuse this powder keg, excluding Brewster from commencement exercises (he went on to Middlebury unscathed) and making a public apology to Corey (still on the community college waitlist). This was thought to be sufficient

redress by most of the girls at Willowhelm, many of whom had been *undressed* and exploited in that Dumas Subaru, then callously scrapped; which explained why the Lady Windjammers held no grudge when they came to VTHS for last month's volleyball match.

Far less placated were the *Topsail's* editor and most other males at Willowhelm, who'd enshrined Corey as a carnal-knowledge casanova and condemned Brewster Canute's wrongdoing as a *nouveau riche* assault on Middle American *machismo*. There'd been a number of minor altercations between the two schools during the summer and early fall, but tonight's Homecoming Game would be their first major competition (i.e. not girls playing volleyball) of the semester; and Mr. Stabeldore did not appreciate Tilda's delivering an inflammatory discourse at the Pep Rally.

(Just as well Mr. Tuerck had vetoed the traditional rally-ending bonfire.)

It didn't help at all that the Jammers held a half-game lead over the G-Men, 5-0-1 to 5-1-0, for first place in NESTL(É)'s Shoreside Division. Tonight's winner was almost certain to clinch the title and a slot in the November 12th league championship game against either Triville or Athens Grove; and the winner of *that* would probably qualify for The State's 5A semifinals. So a helluva lot was on the line tonight—not least for Bunty O'Toole's gang, who pegged Vanderlund as 3-to-2 underdogs.

Those odds might be the final score too, since both teams were renowned for defense: the Gondoliers behind Judd Courtney, the Windjammers led by Herschel "the Rabid Badger" Brach and Willis "the Wheelbarrow" Whitman. Willis's nickname had various explanations, some of them obscene; Robin Wright claimed he toted his grandfather around in one, since Big Daddy Whitman refused to use a wheelchair. At any rate Willis was an All-Conference linebacker and hardly anybody got past him—assuming they could get past Hershey Brach, NESTL(É)'s most feared defensive lineman, who led the league not only in tackles and sacks but injuring opponents and teammates alike. "F'you don't want yer asses busted, keep 'em the hell outta my way!" he advised unwary Jammers.

Such a threat would trigger derisive laughter if made by Sal Farghetti, Willowhelm's quarterback and cousin of Kinks. Their fathers and two other Farghetti brothers were all in the delicatessen business, and could have run the biggest deli in The Cityland had vendettas not kept them apart and strapped for cash. Sal Farghetti was strapped for leadership talent;

his team paid him scant attention, preferring to ad-lib its own offense and blame Sal when it failed. This happened so frequently that Brandy Heinzerling (Willowhelm's counterpart to Ginger Snowbedeck) reputedly swore to remove an article of clothing every time the Windjammers put points on the board; and when Ginger got wind of this, she lost no time in pledging the same to Jeff Friardale's Gondolier offense.

Thus a lot of cameras were taken to Hordt Field that evening, though how well their flashcubes would fare in the vast outdoor darkness was debatable; Mr. Szot got consulted left and right. Some girls like Carly and Isabel were eager to join Ginger in "encouraging our boys," but the cheerleaders viewed this as encroachment on their turf. They were a fairly modest lot, varsity and JV alike, no matter how often pleated miniskirts might get flipped in the air; you wouldn't catch Becca Blair in a wet T-shirt contest, or Nanette or Meredith or Gigi Pyle. *Maybe* Delia (if tricked) or Cheryl (if tiddly) but NEVER Mary Kate. As for Angelique Anstruther, she advocated that cheerleading was a sport in its own right and not simply a galvanizer for other athletes, much less a burlesque fetish for boyish libidos. No love had ever been lost between her and Ginger Snowbedeck; yet neither of them could abide the sight of Brandy Heinzerling being carried shoulder-high into the Hordt Field visitor stands and seated directly under the brightest arc light. (Ginger immediately took the corresponding spot on the home side, ostentatiously unbuttoning her letter sweater.)

Vicki, sitting with the bunch and not planning to shed *any* layer of *her* apparel, remembered Brandy as the scandalizing daughter of The Heinie—Mr. Heinzerling, assistant principal and security guard at Reulbach—who'd packed an actual gun under his suit jacket, yet couldn't clip Brandy's way-out wayward wings. "*She'll* never wear a braided chain made of finest silver from the north of Spain," Stephanie Lipperman had cackled. "Steal and pawn one, maybe, but not *wear* it."

PHWEEEEET went a whistle, ending preliminary ceremonies and kicking off the Homecoming Game, which soon settled into deadly dullness. Neither team could move the ball past the fifty-yard line, so no significant stripping took place in the bleachers.

Vicki quickly lost interest in pigskin-on-the-gridiron and fretted instead about Tony Pierro's whereabouts. He hadn't exactly said he would be here tonight, but there'd been no clearcut denial either; Tony was as difficult to pin down as a hopped-up moth.

(“You *did* see him there in Study Hall, right?” she’d asked Nonique.)

(“Saw him, heard him, spoke to him. If he’s a hallucination, it must be contagious.”)

Gloating yells as Judd-for-the-Defense intercepted another Farghetti pass. The name brought Sal’s cousin to Vicki’s uneasy mind: presumably Kinks was still attending VW, as a freshman this fall. Could she have come here tonight “for the game” but really to recapture Tony’s susceptible affections *and* spoil Vicki’s rendezvous with him AGAIN? That would be so like Kinks! Why couldn’t she rekindle her obsession with Phonsie or Fast Eddie, or better yet stalk Dennis Desmond and put his One-Shot Thanks-a-Lot Untie-the-Knot mindset to the grindstone?

BANG went a gun: not in committing a crime of passion, but to end the dismal first half. Off went the footballers; on pranced the Drill Team and Marching Band to strut through a choreographed act (Joss repeating her “I can’t believe you wanted me to join that train wreck” witticism) and then prizes were awarded to the top three parade floats, with the “Love Gondola” of course weighing in as number one.

Set a course for adventure, your mind on a new romance...

(As was Vicki’s, though less buoyantly than if Tony Pierro were there beside her.)

Leave it to me to fall for a guy with the initials “T.P.” Which might *also* stand for Tricky Poser or Trifling Puddyboy or Totally Pointless—but at least not Terribly Pathetic, as everybody thought when Tug Pulley went out to take his annual bow. Winner of more letters and setter of more records than anyone in Vanderlund sports history (except Phyllis Exelby), Tug had been All-State halfback for the undefeated Gondoliers in 1941 when Thundering Mort Hordt called him “the next Red Grange.” And so he might have been, had Tug not quit school to enlist in the Navy, have a mediocre war, never go to college or turn pro, and wind up in “the wholesale seafood business” (i.e. work for his fishmonger father-in-law). Now he haunted VTHS Homecomings and was cited by Coach Bolero as a melancholy example to avoid: “Be as respectful as you can, men, but don’t let him Tug you down—stay revved up for the second half!”

Good advice as the Windjammers came charging out to seize control of momentum. Sal Farghetti and the Jammer offense worked in aggressive synch for once, driving the

G-Men back as they advanced downfield. What sparked *this* off? Willowhelm's Coach Marish was known for breeding attack dogs as a hobby, but not as a motivational speaker. Rumors spread through the Gondolier ranks that Brandy Heinzerling and other wantons had snuck into the Jammer locker room—the Vanderlund *girls* locker room, now tarnished and befouled—to provide halftime “encouragement.”

“We gotta get even!” declared Sheila-Q. “Crystal, it’s up to you!”

“*What’s up to me?*” went Crystal, after exerting her almighty lungs in a “*PUSH ‘EM BACK, PUSH ‘EM BACK, WAAAAAAAY BACK*” rah-rah for Judd and the defense. “Nobody here’s cheering louder than I am!”

S-Q said that wasn’t enough; for retaliation’s sake, Crystal needed to pop the lid off her almighty boobs.

“No way! Do it yourself, Sheila!”

“That’s right, Quirk, show us how it’s done—just as a *morsel* of an *appetizer*,” jeered Robin. They argued about this through Willowhelm’s scoring a touchdown (and Brandy’s discarding her gaudy down vest) but missing the extra point (and Brandy’s refastening her gaudy beaded belt).

Things looked pretty bleak for the G-Men and bright for those 3-to-2 odds, if not now 2-to-1, until Woody Tays and Diesel Erle came off the bench to play tight end and fullback. Neither had done anything spectacular so far this season; but they began to gain enough yardage in the fourth quarter to keep making first downs, while Knobby Dutton and the front line started giving Jeff Friardale solid protection from Willowhelm blitzes.

Crystal and Sheila were still hesitant to “retaliate,” but Carly Thibert frolicked down from the stands to sling off her corduroy car coat, thrust out her perkified blousefront, and egg on the offense. Ginger, caught napping, promptly followed suit; Isabel and likeminded likechested girls did likewise; flashcubes popped all over the bleachers. Angelique, Penny Stone, and the other cheerleaders gave angry KEEP-YOUR-SHIRTS-ON! glares to those brandishing bustlines on the sideline, even as they bounced their own uniformed bosoms exhorting the crowd to roar and the team to score.

Buoyed by so much cross-your-heart support, the G-Men made incremental progress through Willowhelm territory but had to use all their time-outs to stop the clock after the

two-minute warning. Finally, with only seconds remaining, Jeff eluded the Jammers and threw a long slant pass toward Woody Tays on the goal line—where Wheelbarrow Whitman loomed up like a zombie from a tomb to snatch an interception as the gun went off. And Vanderlund gave a great communal **GROAN** at not simply losing its Homecoming Game, but getting skunked by its archrival in the process.

Except that a ring of yellow flags lay on the turf, encircling a supine Gondolier.

Hershey Brach had come up on Knobby's deaf side and rabid-badgered the soon-to-be-MVP into unconsciousness.

For the next hour or two, residents of all the houses and condos within earshot of VTHS wished they lived elsewhere, as Knobby was carted off the field and Faye Howell had to be restrained from hurling herself onto his stretcher and the Windjammers raised unrepentant voices over the volcanic din to argue that Badger Brach had made a clean hit which the Gondoliers hotly disputed while the Vanderlund fans shrieked for blood.

What they got instead were ten seconds put back on the clock; a first down on the five-yard line; a Friardale handoff to Diesel Erle; a sweep behind Knobby's righteous fellow linemen into the end zone; and (after a flurry of further disrobing on the sideline) a triumphant extra point to win the game 7-6.

Celebratory hullabaloo extended from Hordt Field into the boys locker room and on out to the VTHS parking lot, where some Vanderlundians were less than gracious in victory. As the dejected Jammers tried to board their team bus, Coach Marish looked like he wished he'd brought a few Rottweilers for protection; Hershey Brach got soaked with sharp-iced beverages from the concession stand; Willis Whitman, who'd done nothing worse than intercept that last-second pass, was targeted with racial slurs; and the bus itself got pelted with handfuls of parking lot gravel. The police, belatedly called in by Principal Stabeldore, imposed enough order for the Willowhelm bus to skedaddle; and the Vanderlund crowd huzzahed Knobby Dutton when he shakily emerged, leaning on Filly Faye's fair arm.

"None of this would've been necessary if *you'd* just flashed *your* boobs at 'em," Vicki heard Robin telling Sheila-Q.

Scuttlebutt ran wild through the night that a mob was on its way from Willowhelm, led by Spaghetti thugs bent on burning Vanderlund to the ground. (Willowhelm's population was in fact predominantly white, many of whom blamed blacks rather than unscrupulous blockbusters for Spaghettoizing the old Italian neighborhood. Sal Farghetti was one of these faultfinders: he'd even laughed at Willis Whitman's getting denigrated in the VTHS parking lot.)

But once the parking lot brouhaha cooled off, nothing disturbed the peace other than some rowdy postgame parties and the usual TGIF drunks at local taverns like the Conga Line Cocktail Lounge. Then there was fresh blather Saturday morning that the Homecoming Dance had been canceled; but Jerome Schei, laboring valiantly without Laurie to guide the Gossip Brigade, received confirmation from Mr. Stabeldore's own lips (dragged away from their Quaker Oats on Scotchbroom Road) that the dance was still on.

Vernonique Smith, however, needed considerable persuasion to agree that *she'd* still go. All her earlier fears and trepidations had resurged to the surface, and when Nonique wouldn't talk about them on the phone, Vicki ran over to the Old Brandoffer Place to entreat her in person.

"*Please* don't let some nasty stupid bigots scare you away from anything as cool and crucial as a Dance!"

"...cool and crucial?..."

"You heard me! And remember, you 'n' Darren won't be there on your own—his brother 'n' Rhonda'll be there too, plus all the rest of us backing you up side by side!"

"...sounds painful..."

"I'm serious! We're like a team, our bunch, and some of us are AA sisters besides—whatever happens to one of us happens to *all* of us!"

"...don't want you fighting my battles for me..."

"I won't!—we'll all fight them *together*. That's what friendship's *for*. And anyway, don't you wanna be there to see how things work out between Alex 'n' Mike? Or Joss 'n' Slim Jim? I KNOW you wanna know what'll happen with Tony 'n' ME—you can't deny it!"

"...urrrrgh... you can be a real Sneaky Pie sometimes, girl..."

“Oh and let’s not forget Spacyjane!—*she* still thinks she’s going with Split-Pea Erbsen! We’ll all have to be there for *her*, no matter what else happens to the rest of us.”

*

Coming home, coming home
Nevermore to roam
Open wide Thine arms of love
Lord I’m coming home...

Though not to the chalet on Cecidia Drive, but Alex Dmitria’s Mission Revival house on Sprangletop Road, where some of the girls gathered before being driven to the Dance.

Spacyjane came in a midnight-blue knit dress with a long skirt and long sleeves, and silver shoes that got sniffed appreciatively by a handsome Borzoi dog called Yermak. Spacyjane also wore the Annie Hall bowler hat affixed to her hair with a silver *épinglé*, its brim shading her star sapphires as they peered out at what appeared to be an oasis resort in some arid desert—Mexican or Siberian, or maybe Egyptian. Which would account for the gigantic Pharaonic figure that hardened the heart of the Dmitria living room, looking averse to Opa’s or Joseph’s or anyone else’s interpreting *his* dreams.

He had no headdress on his vast bald scalp; nor was King Tut generally pictured with tinted glasses or biting a toothpick. The longer Spacyjane studied him, the less he looked like Ramses or Amenhotep and the more like Snorro Stone Troll, one of her Legion of Dolls: a Tor Johnson-y Hallowe’en prop put to operatic use.

Snorro stood with stony arms folded, glowering while Alex’s and Vicki’s mothers snapped photos of the four girls lined up in their Homecoming Dance outfits—Alex wearing turquoise, Vicki her favorite violet, and Joss a shade of almond she called “café au rhum.” (Nonique was at Rhonda Wright’s house, awaiting the arrival of their double dates.) Alex told the troll to “come stand with us, Papa,” but he wouldn’t budge till Spacyjane went over and took hold of his stony sleeve—he staring down at her astounded, as if she were Alex’s little chihuahua (hiding in back of a potted cactus) and had his stony cuff between her teeth. Spacyjane, unbothered as usual, shifted Snorro into position as she would on a dolly stage, assisted by Alex bounding over to grab his other arm; and they held him in place while Joss

and Vicki moved so far away they had to be motioned closer to get back in the picture.

“Everybody say ‘Yay Gondoliers!’” Alex beamed at the cameras. “It’s like we’re *all* going to the Dance with Papa!”

So said the mesmerized Superprincess, rapt with entrancement; yet her trollish captor was powerless to thwart her taking flight from his stony coop to breezy freedom. (Should the Superprincess have wings like a butterfly? Maybe cloaked until needed? Kathleen could make her a neat pair out of gossamer fabric...)

“Behave yourself, Alexandra,” Papa grated at the Mission Revival door; out of which Vicki and Joss, serving as Alex’s wings, propelled her at high speed toward Mrs. Volester’s station wagon.

“(He *knows!*)” Alex bleated.

“(He *doesn’t* know,)” Vicki told her.

“(He at least *suspects*—)”

“(He’d do that even if Sheila-Q changed her mind again and *did* become a nun and we were going to visit her in a convent someplace where there wasn’t a man for miles around,)” said Joss as they boarded the Chrysler.

“What Mr. Dmitria told Alex goes for all of you,” Vicki’s mother instructed during the drive to school. “Be extra careful tonight, and think twice if anyone suggests doing anything better left undone—”

“We *will*, Mom!” Vicki broke in. “We’ll think twice and be careful and leave things undone—”

“Not our *zippers*, though.”

“JOSS!”

“Just kidding!”

“I hope *so*, Jocelyn!”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. V—I’ll see to it that they behave themselves tonight.”

“Us? *You’re* the one we’ll have to watch out for, if you go on one of your whirling dervish kicks—”

“Now simmer down, girls. Save it for the dance floor—”

But Spacyjane began to sing; and Alex, who'd been twisting around to see if her Papa was trailing them surreptitiously in the Dmitria sedan, added her glowing alto:

*She's the girlfriend of the whirling dervish
 She's the sweeee-test one he's found
 But ev'ry night in the mellow moonlight
 When he's out dervishing with all his might
 She gives him the runaround!*

"Oh I love that song! I learned it at Scout camp!" Alex crowed to Joss and Vicki's applause and Mrs. Volester's "That's more good advice to keep in mind," as they pulled up on Wheaf Avenue.

Van Gogh met Han Solo met Stephen Sondheim in "A Little Starry Night Music's" something-for-everyone cafeteria décor. Spacyjane detected the scenic-designing hand of Jenna Wiblitz—and here she was in a polychrome dress with Ken Keezer, who'd played the title character in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* and was just as impervious as Jenna to Candy Gates's bluster. Here too was Lisa Lohe in basic black, with Graham Aleshire (who'd helped coach the junior girls to their Powderpuff win) instead of Melvin Linfold (who'd switched his Link to Samantha Tiggs).

Kathleen of course wasn't here, and wouldn't have come even if asked by Ryan Purvis (who danced only with the dead) but was waiting avidly at home for Spacyjane's descriptions of what everyone wore to the Dance. LeAnn of course *was* here, in bright pink and with Kerry Hinterwald, whose invite she'd accepted since he was a junior (albeit slightly younger than herself, due to past grade-skipping) and familiar from the Whierry neighborhood, where he'd been the first boy to precociously wolf-whistle at LeAnn's blossoming.

Here too was The Embodiment, of course in gold: Spacyjane had adorned Floramour in a golden gown and slippers before leaving for Alex's house. She (T.E.) was with Zalman Tergeist, who'd been brought far enough out of Lynyrd Skynyrd mourning to wear a gunmetal-gray suit that matched his five o'clock (now nine o'clock) shadow. Nearly all the guys had come in unflashy suits and ties, this being a semiformal cafeteria dance where

jackets could be doffed and tossed onto tables or stools; though Jerome Schei did have on a dazzling set of rainbow-striped suspenders.

Vernonique, clad in cobalt, tried to make an unobtrusive entrance but Rhonda Wright, in ruby red, proclaimed their approach with one of her piercing BEEP-BEEPS! They and their escorts were greeted by Joss and Slim Jim Khim, but Vicki and Alex had disappeared into the crowd—probably to go search for their whirling dervishes, or find out whether *they’d* been given the runaround.

Which was more good advice to keep in mind.

So Spacyjane went forth to do likewise.

If I could but know his heart, everything would become easy...

So wrote Miss Austen, premier member of the Legion of Janes and foremost incentive to join the AA LitSoc, even if that meant belonging with The Embodiment. Then again, Miss Austen had also written *Could there be finer symptoms? Is not general incivility the very essence of love?* (And she might as well have penned that sage horoscope caveat *Surfaces are deceptive: some by nature, others by design. Evaluate each independently.*)

A band was playing, a genuine professional if down-on-their-luck group from Lakeside Central called Omega Vega, who couldn’t seem to decide whether to sound like Styx, the Temptations, or the Electric Light Orchestra. At any rate lots of people were dancing to their music; and among them Alex Dmitria boogied elbow-to-elbow with Mike Spurgeon, though not in such a way as to signify they were supposedly here together.

A cosmic throne had been set up on a galactic platform for the Homecoming Queen’s imminent coronation, and behind it Spacyjane stumbled across Vicki Volester with her head tilted back—not from interest in the ceiling’s streamers and balloons and glitterball, but to save her eye makeup from getting smudged by an abundance of unshed tears.

“I can’t find Tony,” she gulped. “I don’t think he’s here and he didn’t call before I left so maybe he’s just late but what if he isn’t coming like he didn’t to the track meet last spring but at least then he had the decency to *say* so and *tell* me ‘cause it really *is* getting stood up if he didn’t even bother to do that ‘cept I don’t *feel* ‘stood up’ (gulp) I feel *knocked flat* like at that dumb old volleyball match I didn’t even want to play in and WHY does this keep happening to me again and again, Space? It’s not fair, it really truly isn’t...”

Spacyjane took Vicki in her midnight-blue arms and laid Vicki's gulping head on her midnight-blue shoulder (which wouldn't show much spottage from molten mascara) as she did when real life got to be too much for Kathleen or LeAnn or Floramour; lightly rocking Vicki to Omega Vega's rendition of David Ruffin's "Walk Away from Love":

So I'm leaving (I'm leaving, yes I am)
This time I'm playing it smart (I'm leaving, yes I am)
I'm gonna walk away from love (walk away from love)
Before love breaks my heart...

"There you are! Mind if I cut in?"

"OH GAHD!" cried Vicki, leaping off Spacyjane's shoulder to whirl dervishly around Spacyjane's back, averting her streaked face from the resurfacing of Tony Pierro.

"Sorry I'm late, but—"

"Space! Ask him where has he been??"

"Hello, Tony. It's neat to see you again. Where *have* you been?"

"Er well—hi, Jane—I didn't get off work when I thought I would, and—"

"Space! Ask him if he's still working at that deli with KINKS??"

"The Columbine Deli? *Are* you still working there, Tony? I haven't seen you there in forever."

"Er well no, I left them a long time ago. Now I work Fridays and Saturdays at Paulsie's Pizza, and—"

"Oh, the one on Bedeguar?" Spacyjane asked unprompted.

"No, the one on Pfenniger, up near the Lagoons. I had to—"

"The Lagoons! I haven't been *there* in forever. Do you get to go kayaking—"

"*Space!*" went Vicki.

"—had to wait for a ride home," Tony persisted. "So I could get cleaned up, y'know, and put on a suit... hey, you've been crying!"

Useless for Vicki to have Spacyjane deny this. Or to stay as resentful, since Tony'd cleaned up very neatly and wore an appealingly purple bow tie; he even carried a wrist corsage of what looked like sweetheart roses.

“Oh... is that for me?” Vicki asked him directly.

“Yeah, hope you like it.”

“Um... thanks... maybe *I* oughta get cleaned up, though, before I put it on—”

“Space, have you seen Vicki?” said Joss, craning her curly head behind the throne.

“*There* you are! We’ve got trouble—Nonique’s date’s getting hassled at the snack table, and—*aaagh!* What happened to *YOU?*” Dervish-whirl on the startled Tony: “What’ve you done to her?”

“I—I—nothing! Just got here late is all—”

“Never mind that,” said Vicki, swiping a crisp white handkerchief from Tony’s blazer pocket and applying it to her facial streaks, which only made them smearier. “Where’s Nonique?”

“With him! That” (lowered voice) “butthole Baa-Baa’s got ‘em hemmed in—”

“Let’s go,” Vicki ordered; and off the four of them went on the double to the table by the steam counter that’d been set up with a punchbowl, plates of cookies, dishes of finger foods and other refreshments. At one corner they found Nonique, Rhonda and the Buckley brothers being accosted by a large boozy-breathed guy whom Spacyjane recognized as Sheila Quirk’s older brother Burke, said to be the family black sheep: hence “Baa-Baa.” (Recently he’d vowed to “throw everybody who ain’t Irish” out of the Grand Parade Bar & Grill, under the schnockered impression that Columbus Day was supposed to be St. Paddy’s Part II.)

Now Rhonda Wright was cracking unresponded-to jokes while Darren Buckley offered baritone gospel pacification; but there rooting for Baa-Baa was an even bigger guy, Craig Clerkington, who had a mean little smile on his heavy meaty face and two cups of punch in his heavy meaty hands. *Haw haw haw* he went as Baa-Baa interrogated the “Buckwheat boys” on what school they attended when they weren’t crashing Vanderlund dances; and though Darren and Luther might be skilled at protective camouflage in combative situations, they didn’t look likely to put up with this much longer before putting up their dukes which was just what Baa-Baa probably wanted to provoke and Craig too, all set to “accidentally” spill those cups of punch—

—though maybe not on the Buckleys as Joss and Vicki swooped around from either side to stand next to Rhonda and Nonique, the latter completely expressionless except for

enormous brown eyes that somehow widened even further at the sight of Vicki's streaky-smudged face—

“Jesus, Loopy, this isn't an Alice Cooper lookalike contest!” said Robin Neapolitan, who stood by smirking in a strawberry dress till Vicki turned in her direction and ZAP—sent practically-visible laser beams out of blotchy blackened sockets, making Robin (that hardcore toughminded biker chick) practically-visibly flinch. “Yeah, well... c'mon, babe, I'm thirsty here,” she told Craig. “Thought you were getting us something to drink.”

“*Thirsty*, hunh?” grinned Craig, allowing himself to be detached from the tablecorner and drawn away. Spacyjane took his place, gazing up with great interest at Burke Quirk, who stared down at her in much the same astonishment as Papa Dmitria.

“Who're *you* s'posed to be—Panama Hattie?” he barked, reaching for her bowler-brim; but Spacyjane, serene as always and securely *épinglé*'d, did a laidback bob-and-weave (*you can't dance and stay uptight*) to Omega Vega's “Lido Shuffle,” causing Baa-Baa to overextendedly sprawl onto his unstable knees and nearly capsize Slim Jim Khim, who was rambling around in search of Joss.

“What's going on here?” demanded Mr. Wright, career counselor and Homecoming chaperone, who as Rhonda's father had (at her request) been patrolling the other end of the cafeteria.

“Why, I do believe it looks as if Quirky Burke took a li'l fall,” Rhonda remarked.

“Might've known,” grimaced Mr. Wright as he heaved Baa-Baa halfway upright.

“Been sampling something stronger than punch, Mr. Quirk?”

Garbled burble by Baa-Baa, drowned out by Alvin Dobbs avalanching over to report “*That rat bastard Brach's out in the parking lot, trashing our cars!*”

“MY BABBOO!!” shrieked Robin Neapolitan, racing through the crowd with her strawberry hem held knee-high for greater acceleration. Many others tore out after her, including Craig and Alvin and Baa-Baa and Mr. Wright, though the latter shouted for everyone else to slow down and stay calm.

“Are all your dances like this?” Darren Buckley asked Nonique.

“You got me—this is my first here,” she replied before turning to Vicki. “Girl, what happened to *you*?”

“Sorry I wasn’t here sooner. Are *you* okay?”

(Exhalation unleashed as she accepted Vicki’s embrace.) “Oh, I ‘spect so... *Are* all the dances here like this?”

“Gahd, I hope not.”

“Well, *this* one isn’t over yet,” said Tony Pierro: taking back his hanky, dipping it into a glass of clear liquid (water? Sprite? Smirnoff?) and dabbing tenderly at Vicki’s motley blotches.

“*Don’t!*” went Spacyjane, shooting out a delicate elfin hand—not at Tony, but the lens of a complicated camera raised to a big-glasses-on-a-big-nose’d eye by a paltry figure with a shock of rusty hair, who’d sprung up out of thin air to advance Vickiwards. The lens bobbed; Spacyjane’s hand bobbed. Lens weaved; hand weaved. Lens was lowered; hand was not.

“You shouldn’t’ve oughtn’t’ve done that,” reflected her Swee’Pea.

Fingers trembled, yet hung in there resolutely. “Just leave them alone,” said Spacyjane.

“Why certainly. How much would they like—five hundred, a thousand?” he firesigned before fading away.

And nobody does it better

(Though sometimes I wish someone could)

Nobody does it quite the way you do

(Why’d you have to be so good?)

—played Omega Vega as Tony led Vicki onto the somewhat-depopulated dance floor, where they were followed by Joss and Slim Jim; Alex and Mike were already slow-waltzing there, almost together.

“Man, let’s *blow* this joint!” grouched Luther Buckley.

“Ooh honey, try not to blaze up till we get outdoors,” recommended Rhonda.

※

Luckily for Hershey Brach, he fled the VTHS parking lot before doing any damage to Robin’s Plymouth Fury and incurring her eternal wrath. (If it *was* Hershey who’d been out

there vandalizing; some suspected Clark Barrantes, the Trashman of Athens Grove, of going on a vengeful spree for getting battered by the same firebombers as Nadine Rugova.)

It took quite awhile to herd the dispersed dancers back into the cafeteria, but Fleur Groningen couldn't wait; as last year's Homecoming Queen she'd agreed to come crown her successor as tradition dictated, but not to spend the whole damn weekend in Vanderlund. So at the stroke of eleven she plunked the tiara onto the new Queen (Faye Howell, of course, after last night's melodrama) and took off for her red-eye return flight to Yale.

The Homecoming Dance continued for another hour, toward the end of which Spacyjane's restive path again crossed that of her Swee'Pea, whom she discovered with Dennis Desmond and an out-of-water nymph or naiad or nixie (emphasis on the *nix*) spilling forth from a *décolleté* sea-green gown.

That Girl from Willowhelm, in the flesh.

Talking a mile a minute with Dennis about her scheme to pop into the homecoming galas at every NESTL(É) school, plus Startop, Front Tree, and Archbishop Houlihan. Some of these fêtes were on the same night, necessitating a fuel more potent than coffee or tea; as might be surmised from the glistening glint in her eyes and upon her nostrils.

"Appears that you had to hike over here from Hereafter Park through seven miles of a seven-foot-high snowfall without benefit of shovel or plow or roof rake or sidewalk scraper," said Dennis.

(Giggle-iggle-iggle.) "They do know the best ways how to party. And have the best stuff to party with."

FLASSSHHHH FLASSSHHHH flassshhhh by Swee'Pea's camera at jiggle-iggle-iggles.

"Eww, it's that floozie-pooh, I just hate her!" hissed The Embodiment in Spacyjane's ear. "Don't you just hate her? She's so OBVIOUS."

Pots and kettles and the calling of blackness.

Or of darkness: as of the heart. Or the enshrouded moon, unable to blush (through no fault of its own) as love lies bleeding below: a phantom like Dawn Amory, needing candles to be lighted for its release from the mundane.

Westburb Heartbreak: challenging the practice to be perfect Stepford Wives for guys that fade in and out of consciousness, whether theirs or yours. And beware of any superficial

masquerade as Beauty—yet you have to treat embodiments (however shameless) with great care, lest their temporarily incarnated spirits be jeopardized.

Ongoing beguilement by those *lacking* souls, though, was quite another matter.

Envision a dolly opera with an old-fashioned spinning newspaper headlined:

Search continues for missing girl

Police continue to search for Lillie Guldbaer, 14, a Willowhelm High School freshman, who disappeared Tuesday evening on her way to a Halloween party. A star athlete on swimming and volleyball teams, Miss Guldbaer was last seen at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 31, wearing a sea-green coat over a mermaid costume described as “very revealing.” According to friends, she never reached the party. In recent days 100 policemen and volunteers have combed through nearby woods and fields using bloodhounds, a helicopter and CB radio, but so far the search has turned up no trace. Illustrated fliers asking, “Have you seen this girl?” have been posted throughout Willowhelm and neighboring communities. Miss Guldbaer’s mother, who stated, “Lillie spends too much time in the company of undesirable elements,” has enlisted the aid of a psychic to help find her. Willowhelm police would not confirm whether they have evidence of a connection between Miss Guldbaer’s disappearance and recent abductions and killings of several other area girls, victims of the so-called “Mad Bludgeoner.” Miss Guldbaer has long blonde hair and blue eyes, stands 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighs 130 pounds. Anyone with information pertaining to her whereabouts is urged to contact the Willowhelm police.

(But don’t contact them too soon.)

(No, not too soon...)

42

Eraserlip

There were in fact four separate dinner parties when the Volesters hosted the Smiths and Carlisles at Burrow Lane that Sunday. Felicia, Alfreda, and Aunt Fritzzi chattered at one end of the dining room; Ozzie, the Rebounder, and Gross Uncle Doug traded horselaughs at the opposite end; Goofus and Randle ran the dozens on each other, harping on Halloween and head lice (of which there'd been a recent rash of cases in local grade schools); while Vicki and Nonique cleaned their plates as quickly as possible, cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher without being asked, then escaped to Vicki's room—

—though not before Patches Rumpelmagen banged on the terrace's glass doors with a pumpkin, into which an illuminated pair of mooning buttocks had been ingeniously carved. The resulting insulting boy-gang ruckus was still audible even after Vicki snapped on her bedroom radio and turned up its volume.

"Why couldn't we have had little *sisters*?" she wailed, raising her voice over the Alan Parsons Project's unsympathetic "I Wouldn't Want to Be Like You."

"Guess we were extra-blessed," Nonique sighed. "Speaking of which—"

"(Groan.) *Please* promise you can save both our butts on tomorrow's test."

"Girl, we're going to be swimming with a SHARK in the water. Even if you hold onto me, you'll still have to kick your own feet to stay unchomped. So c'mon—"

Biology books were cracked open and review was begun of half a semester's cellular study—structure, function, membranes, hemostasis, photosynthesis, energetics, respiration. Long before the last page was turned, Vicki could hear nothing but the *Jaws* fisherman

wanting to know “*What is this bite radius crap?*”

We’re gonna need a bigger boat to outrun Mr. Dimancheff...

“Look at it this way,” Nonique advised. “We haven’t had to slice ‘n’ dice any animals yet.”

“(Groaaaaan...)”

So it went all midterms week. Vicki missed the old VW cram sessions, where the whole bunch would gather at one of their homes every night and Robin’d bring a Special Supreme Pan Pie or two to nourish their group scholarship. Even being on different academic teams hadn’t hindered this, since the standard eighth- and ninth-grade curricula had been similar regardless of who taught it, and an honors student on X could readily tutor any general-level Y’s or Z’s. But now at VTHS they were all so scattered, taking such different courses with variant teaching methods, that it was safest to stick with your own classmates—Nonique in Bio, Jenna in Spanish, Alex in World History, Robin in Geometry (despite her impatience with the less-mathematical-minded) and Joss *and* Fiona in English, doubling up there since that midterm was sure to be graded by Madeline Wrippley, and with as much willingness as Mr. Dimancheff to flunk them one and all.

Apart from Maddie, Mr. D and other predatory types, the week took grueling toll on everyone including the football Gondoliers, who went up to Hereafter Park on Friday night for the last game of the regular season and, needless to say, got stiffed by the referees on every play. Penny Stone was so disgusted by this defeat that she not only canceled the afterparty at her house, but threatened anybody who threw one anywhere else. Nor was Penny mollified when word came from Athens Grove that the Windjammers had lost to the Olympians; meaning Vanderlund had *backed* into the Shoreside Division title with a 6-2-0 record, versus Willowhelm’s 5-2-1 and Hereafter Park’s 4-3-1.

“Call yourselves ‘G-Men!’” she sneered at Jeff Friardale. “You ought to change your name to *F Troop!* Nobody who lets themselves get bilked and fleeced deserves a shot at the championship!”

“What the hell were we *supposed* to do against those asshole H.P. refs??”

“I’ll thank you not to cuss and swear at *me*, LOSER!”

(Another man might've made some mention of the Homecoming Queen contest at this point, but Jeff Friardale was hardly that reckless.)

Penny, as Alex later related, was still raging the following night at Dickinson Literary Society's annual candlelight tea party. This was intended to formally welcome newly-initiated members and, like most other LitSoc rites and rituals, used to be done with a lot more pomp and circumstance. "This year we might as well toast S'mores over a campfire!" Penny snarled.

("I'd've *loved* to do that!" Alex the Girl Scout later confided to Vicki and Joss.)

All four societies held their tea parties on Saturday the 5th of November. "I know of no reason / why the Gunpowder Treason / should ever be forgot," enunciated Mrs. Pentire, Austen-Alcott's faculty advisor, at whose home the AA party took place. Her quote was understood by those like Joss who remembered the introductory note to *Mary Poppins Opens the Door*, and those like SpacyJane who could recite that note word for word:

"Only the very meanest people refuse to give pennies, and these are always visited by Extreme Bad Luck."

"Try vocalizing with greater inflection, Jane," suggested Mrs. Pentire.

She was a Speech teacher and herself rather Poppinsish, though with less of a nanny's aura (as SpacyJane would phrase it) than that of a telephone operator on a hearing-impaired exchange. Her oral finickiness was lightened by an Austen-Alcottesque sense of humor, though *never* when it came to proper articulation; she was one of the few who regretted the departure of Candy Gates's DISTINCT SYLLABLES from AA.

The Pentires lived in a Prairie School house on Pearlwort Drive near Petty Road, and Mrs. Pentire's husband Paxton worked as a public relations director for a plastic packaging plant. Besides providing his wife with a pithy exercise in "voiceless plosives," Mr. Pentire gave prorated room and board to Miss Rosamond Ambrose, his late mother's best friend and longstanding choirmistress at Vanderlund Senior High, now retired on a pittance of a pension.

"I'm *so* pleased my Blue Rose china service has a chance to be enjoyed by so many young people," she twittered at the tea party. "And *please* don't worry about damaging any of the cups and saucers. Or the teapot. Or the sugarbowl. Or the creampitcher."

(Everyone handling any of these promptly found a sturdy flat surface to anchor it on.)

“‘Blue Rose’ is kind of a... whatchamacallit, isn’t it?” asked Alva Dee Bickling.

“Try to be more specific in your choice of words,” urged Mrs. Pentire.

“Um... contradiction?” ventured Scott Grampian.

“Oxymoron,” one-upped Lesley Ogilvie, as was her right (indeed duty) as Presiding Genius and Scott’s girlfriend.

“They have *yeller* roses in Texas,” Chewy DeWitt rebutted, with a “*Yellow* in the north, that is” nod at Mrs. Pentire.

“Aren’t carnations really white roses that wind up getting ground up into powdered milk?” wondered Nancy Sykeman.

“Not on Aquamarine & Gold Day they weren’t. Or didn’t,” said Nancy Buschmeyer. “The Pep Club hogged all the white carnations in town for their float. *Monopolize*, I mean—not ‘hog,’” with an apologetic glance at Mrs. Pentire.

“Much more suitable,” she approved. “*And* accurate. I found their float decoration to be rather excessive. Overabundance is not necessarily a virtue.”

“‘Nothing amuses me more than the easy manner with which everybody settles the abundance of those who have a great deal less than themselves,’” chipped in Spacyjane. Who added (after the tea party was reduced to silence) “That’s from *Mansfield Park*.”

Oh-of-course murmurs from the other AAs, and “Isn’t that the one with the priggish Fanny?” enthused Jerome Schei.

“Fanny! That’s right, I appeared with Fanny Brice in Billy Rose’s *Sweet and Low*,” remarked Miss Rosamond Ambrose. “Mind you, I was only in the chorus, but Borrah Minnevit *did* let me hold his harmonica. If you young folks catch my meaning.”

Vigorous *pay-no-attention* headshakes by Mrs. Pentire, causing candleflames to flicker; which didn’t deter Jerome, Isabel, and Holly Brollis from beseeching Miss Ambrose to tell MORE if not ALL. She demurred at first, then went on in graphic detail about her days (make that nights) as a Jazz Age Broadway chorine, including backstage assignations with Chico and Harpo Marx during the original run of *The Cocoanuts*.

Austen-Alcott drank this in with dropped jaws, their tea forgotten; and Rula Hradek took copious notes for her erotic *roman à clef* till Mrs. Pentire begged everyone’s pardon and

firmly escorted Miss Ambrose upstairs to bed.

“Please don’t take anything she said seriously,” requested Paxton Pentire the PR pro, who’d emerged from his den during his late mother’s best friend’s tell-ALL if not MORE.

“Aunt Rosamond is an old lady, and I’m afraid she’s slipping into a world of her own.”

“(But *what* a world,)” murmured Rula as she flexed her cramped writing hand.

“And all this came out ‘cause Space knows her Jane Austen,” quipped Joss as she and Vicki waited in the vestibule for Mr. Murrish to pick them up for their Saturday sleepover at Jupiter Street. (Spacyjane was spending the night with her friends Kathleen and LeAnn, who were respectively too shy and too dumb to join a LitSoc; while Nonique was going down to Riversgate to visit and attend Sunday worship with her Uncle Babe, Grandpa Bram, and great-grandfather Big Zeke. But Alex would be brought over to the Queen Anne from Dickinson’s tea party; and Jerome, if they’d let him, would’ve come too to elicit the *latest* latest about Alex and Mike Spurgeon, plus whether Pam Redfern had yet absolved Jeremy Tolhurst of all negligence, plus Penny Stone’s fulminations and Cheryl Trevelyan’s exasperations and how Becca Blair still hadn’t come to cyberterms with Vicki’s having disobeyed her edict to join Dickinson.)

(Malfunction. Malfunction. This does not compute...)

“Byyyeeeee you guyyyyeeeee!” oozy-cooed Isabel as she traipsed away on Chewy DeWitt’s homespun arm. Nancy Buschmeyer, watching them go, yanked a balaclava over her own worse-than-usual perm.

“Ever wanted to dropkick a girl with bouncy hair?” she asked through knit fabric and gritted teeth.

“Um, well... we weren’t allowed to do that, playing volleyball,” said Vicki.

“Even so,” scowled Nancy B, stalking off to climb into Nancy S’s Clown Kar (a Rambler Rebel painted the color of streaky bacon).

“That reminds me: Toughie’s got this new recipe for extra-egg quiche I want to try tomorrow morning,” Joss was saying as the Murrish Lincoln Continental pulled up on Pearlwort—

—and nearly bumped into a stray pedestrian who’d appeared out of nowhere but evaded head-on impact with a classic backflip pratfall.

WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED?? Vicki and Joss sub-yelled at each other, hurrying over to the curb where Raymond Murrish crouched by the silhouetted tumbler, whose butt was in the gutter and legs were splayed onto the sidewalk. “Dad!” gasped Joss. “Is he...?”

“Oh, I’m okay,” said a semirecognizable voice. “I know how to roll with the flow.”

“Take it easy, son,” Mr. Murrish told the tumbler; but he reared himself elastically upright, scarcely even using his hands to push. Vicki was thinking this limber guy had a whole lot of resemblance to Tony Pierro, when she realized this was because he *was* Tony Pierro, brushing dust from his jacket and jeans and waving off Joss’s father’s concerns for caution.

“Guess I wasn’t going where I was looking,” Tony murmured, his big brown diffident-puddyboy eyes (visible even in the evening darkness) fixed on Vicki. “No harm done. Sorry I got in your way, sir.”

“That was quite a fall you took, son. Lucky for both of us I’ve got Sure-Track brakes. Still think you ought to get medical attention.”

Vicki’d be GLAD to examine you, Joss sub-offered.

Shut UP!! You almost said that out loud!!

YOU shut up. You know you’d love it.

“Here’s my card, anyway,” Mr. Murrish was saying. “Don’t hesitate to call me if you do have any problems. Now, can I drop you anywhere?”

Too late for that, Joss sub-observed. *He’s the Man Who Fell to Earth.*

That’s not funny! He could’ve broken something—DON’T you dare say it! Vicki sub-warned.

“Oh no thanks, I’m bunking over there now,” Tony replied, indicating the Prairie School domicile two doors down from the Pentires. Which Vicki hadn’t noticed before, but recognized from past *Cicada* staff gatherings as Petula Pierro’s house.

“Are you living with Downtown now?” she asked. “Tayser, I mean? Or whatever she’s calling herself these days?”

“Well, actually with my Uncle Beppe and his wife. I don’t see” (vague handflap signifying Tony’s half-stepcousin-once-removed) “that often. It’s kind of a long story...”

“Which’ll have to wait for telling, I’m afraid,” said Mr. Murrish. “Got to get these young ladies home. If you’re sure you’re not hurt, son?”

“Nossir, I’m fine.”

SO fine, Vicki couldn’t help but sub-sigh.

Doo-lang-doo-lang-doo-lang, Joss sub-chiffoned.

“Um, I’ll be at Joss’s till tomorrow afternoon,” Vicki told Tony as he slowly backed away. “But if you wanna, y’know, ‘talk’ or whatever, about that kind-of-a-long-story...”

“I’ve got your number,” said Tony. “Night now.” Re-silhouetting under a Pearlwort streetlamp with one hand raised: not for a vague flap this time, but as if to wave—or was it to beckon, Solovayishly?—before Vicki’s goggling eyes.

*

Nor was that the only echo from a year ago to resound in Vicki’s boggling mind.

Even after the Homecoming Dance, Tony Pierro remained as elusive and evasive to answering Twenty Questions as Dave Solovay’d ever been. To be sure, midterms week wasn’t the prime time to establish a lasting relationship; but Vicki *still* wasn’t certain whether Tony went to VTHS, or was simply dropping by (like *The Man Who Fell to Earth*) at odd hours. He didn’t always appear in Grandma Ivy’s Study Hall; he deflected most of Vicki’s when-and-where inquiries, shrugging off her who-and-whys.

Tony *did* show up unexpectedly near the end of the English cram sessionette at Burrow Lane. Three other amazing things about that pop-in were Fiona’s [a] blushing to the roots of her dyed-black hair, [b] stuttering instead of muttering at Tony, and [c] taking off for home *on foot*, which was NOT Feef’s preferred mode of travel. “(Can I help it if I’ve got sensitive soles?)” she’d say.

Vicki remembered their trip to the Columbine Delicatessen last April, and speculating then whether Fiona nursed (insofar as Feef could ever nurse) a covert thing for Tony Baloney—weird as that’d been to imagine, even though he *was* a darker-sleeker-compact repackaging of the Hunk With No Name who’d inspired her “Ultravirgin” ode back in eighth grade.

Vicki’d never really pictured Fiona with *any* guy (other than her Thin White Duke, Mr. Bowie) though more than a few had expressed interest in her after she’d gotten foxified.

Their interest was always decidedly unrequited, if you didn't count a fleeting fascination with Arlo Sowell's enormity when they were both in the *Lord of the Flies* Piggy group.

Nevertheless: Feef *was* a fox and in no way ineligible to attract (if not captivate!) the very guy on whom Vicki's heart was currently set, *or* to desire him just as deeply in return. Maybe she'd been smitten during the Student Court trial, and they'd carried on a secret torrid love affair all through the summer which Fiona'd only PRETENDED to spend among the punk rockers out in La-La Land—

Oh for Gahd's sake.

LISTEN to yourself.

Secret torrid summer love affair with Tony? Isabel Carstairs, maybe. Carly Thibert, maybe. Tess Disseldorf, maybe. Kinks Farghetti, if she were willing. Ginger Snowbedeck (doubtless capable of seducing younger boys), perhaps.

But NEVER Fiona Weller.

Who was merely as susceptible to so-fine puddyboys as the rest of us.

And anyway: it wasn't like he'd dropped by to help Feef or any of them cram for Mrs. Mallouf's (i.e. Madeline Wripley's) Grammar Composition and Literature exam. He'd come over (so he said) to hand out Paulsie's fliers—for the whole pizza chain, which would explain his being so far west of Pfenniger Street. And he hadn't stayed very long, or come further into the house than the foyer (eyeing its giant-snowball pendant light hanging from the thick icicle chain: "Cool," he called it); so Feef might just as well have hung around, though they'd pretty much wrapped up their studying anyway.

(And all three of them went on to ace the midterm—take *that*, Mousy Maddie!)

However: Tony Breachofpromise went on to mimic Dave Solovay's **NOT** calling Vicki on Sunday, despite "having her number" and knowing it BY HEART. Of course, she still had Downtown/Tayser's number from *Cicada* days and could've tried to phone *him*... but Vicki didn't feel liberated enough to transcend the time-honored girls-mustn't-call-boys taboo. Besides, Tayser/Downtown might've answered and Vicki had no appetite for talking to *her*, even just to ask if Tony was available—and probably get an indecent reply!

So Vicki arrived at school on Monday the 7th in less than a good mood. Which was in no way improved when she AGAIN found Lumpy Skinner blocking the way to her back-

row desk in First Hour Spanish; or when she AGAIN saw him leap in the air and strew his belongings over the back-aisle floor when she barked “‘Scuse me!”

“Take Uranus out of here,” added Jenna Wibnitz, not glancing up from her sketch of the Mock Turtle from *Alice in Wonderland*, whose calf’s head was replaced by a pigeon’s and whose shell was partly submerged in a boiling cauldron.

Skinner’s actual pigeonhead, protruding as usual out of a gray turtleneck, stared at Vicki with typical wide-eyed stupefaction. “It IS you!” he squawked.

Vicki, flouncing past him to her desk, assumed this AGAIN must mean she was the “perfect” model for Peteliske or Liblikas (character name not yet finalized) in *Phantaphyre*. But from behind her back, Skinner announced:

“You were the one who was with that man in Auldforest Woods!”

That cut through the early-morning start-of-the-week class-not-yet-begun hubbub, at least in the back-half of Room 312.

Carly Thibert (busily flirting with Woody Tays, Mario Neri, and Tim McDemid) perked up her ears. As did Gail Spruce, an upperclass member of the Gossip Brigade; as did Tanya Saranoff, Irina’s older sister, who sat in front of Jenna; as well as Wayne Rhineland, who sat in front of Vicki and took Spanish because he planned to become a professional wrestler in Mexico.

“WHAT man?” they all heard Vicki remonstrate.

Skinner’s hand rose to rub his sharply pointed nose, shielding his obscurely imitative Solovayish mouth from view. “The one in the trees by the footbridge,” he faltered behind it.

Every trace of olivaceous color fled from Vicki’s face and her heartbeat ground to an appalled halt, as if Skinner had blundered into her bathroom just as she stepped out of the shower. “GET AWAY FROM ME,” she said—not loudly, but with a precision and distinction that Candy Gates would’ve envied and Mrs. Pentire would applaud.

Jenna, hopping up from her perch, thrust the agape ASS over the threshold and into the corridor where he got entangled with Chookie Yentlebaum’s brother Shecky, who always took advantage of sitting closest to the doorway to stroll in just as the late bell rang.

“Did I miss something?” Shecky asked, after shaking himself free from Skinner’s clumsy clutches.

“No,” said Vicki in a blanched voice that flared into “And don’t YOU start anything with me!” as she shot a black laserblast across the room at Dennis Desmond. He barely had time to parry it with his dental shock-absorbers; and all the Christmas-type bulbs on all the wall maps seemed to vibrate.

Silence in the classroom. (*Silencio en el aula.*)

Broken by Dennis slowly whistling Mimi Fariña’s “In the Quiet Morning.”

And then by the teacher’s “¡SEÑORITA VOLESTER! ¿CUÁL ES EL PROBLEMA?”

Vicki, still monochrome facewise and voicewise but with an approximation of composure, took her back-row seat. “*De nada. Cálmate, comencemos.*”

“Uh... *bueno*,” said Señor Banonis. “*Abramos nuestros libros, por favor.*”

Disregarding over-shoulder peeks from the rows ahead, Vicki opened her textbook with pale white hands that soon unfolded a blotty-ballpoint note from one desk over:

*come to the auditorium
instead of study hall*

And when she did, having slunk numbly through Biology and History and Geometry, Jenna’s birdy-wings enfolded her in a petite big-sisterly embrace such as Vicki’d seldom if ever received from Tricia. It reminded her of Bella the cockatiel and Aldo the budgie and Luigi the parrot back in old Mrs. LoCascio’s apartment on Walrock Avenue, all of whom would roost on your finger or wrist with snug little claws that held fast without biting. Sooner or later, though, they would flutter off as Jenna did now, briskly saying “All right all right all right. C’mon, we’ve got a lot of canvas to cover before lunch—”

She led the way backstage, which was mostly locked up when the auditorium wasn’t in use; but Jenna had quasi-free rein as a key member of the Stage Crew, and found them a private spot on a bench by the empty props table.

“Okay. Just for you, I *lowered* myself to speak to that ASS. He claimed he wasn’t there in the Woods *especially* to spy on you—‘it just sort of happened.’”

“What was he even DOING in Auldforest that early on a Sunday morning? Trying to buy drugs? But the rangers cracked down on that. Is he really the Mad Bludgeoner?”

“Well, he’d definitely be the *last* person you’d suspect of *that*,” snorted Jenna. “But didn’t all this happen a year or so ago? There wasn’t a Mad Bludgeoner back then—at least not one who did anything we heard about. No, that ASS was out there fantasizing about girls getting lost in an extradimensional forest. He didn’t even recognize you as the girl with the guy in the trees by the footbridge till today. You have on the same top now as then, he said.”

Vicki looked down at her purple hooded sweatshirt and realized it *was* the one she’d worn that particular morning, the September before last. It had shrunk a bit or she’d grown a bit (less likely bustwise than drycleaningwise) but she’d kept it for its color... and memories.

“Anyway,” Jenna continued, “for what it’s worth you gave him the idea for *Phantaphyre* that day, so thanks. And for what it’s also worth (which isn’t much) he says he’s ‘sorry.’ Which I *can* believe, since he’s that all the time anyway everywhere he goes.”

“Yeah... I guess... but it’s so embarrassing to know somebody was watching when I, when he, when we... It’s like finding out your underwear drawer got rooted through.”

“Tell me about it,” said Jenna, her birdy-face darkening.

“I’d like to... *all* about it... when we’ve got time. Could I maybe come over after school today?” (She’d never told anyone but Joss the full story of Dave Solovay, not till Nonique came along needing reciprocation. It wasn’t the sort of thing you could share with Alex or Fiona.)

“Absolutely. But right now we’d better get to the cafeteria, before they run out of pineapple slices to go with the creamed chicken.”

Vicki paused long enough backstage to give her another hug. “Thanks... I’m so glad you talked to me. And listened to me. And’ve gotten to be my friend.”

“I always wanted a little sister,” Jenna said matter-of-factly, adjusting her glasses: framed today with miniature tracks on which tiny choo-choos were frozen in motion.

“I suppose everybody in Spanish thinks I’ve gone *loco*,” Vicki mumbled as she and Jenna headed up the auditorium aisle.

“The guys are a lot more interested in you. The girls want to know your deep dark secret. So do I, but what I *really* want is your help convincing Enid Stott she can’t go another day with a squint on her face instead of a pair of Wiblitz specs—‘the Aston Martin of Eyewear.’”

*

Vernonique slipped Vicki her second note of the day across the cafeteria table:

*your loverboy was in homeroom
wondering where you'd got to
where DID you get to?
are you okay?*

“Oh hey, I just thought of the answer to that Biology question,” Vicki ad-libbed.

“Let me write it down for you...”

*I was talking to Jenna in the auditorium and
I'm doing better (thanks) tell you more in Gym
did Tony say why he didn't come to lunch?*

Nonique shook a head with bent brows and descended beauty dot. *No he didn't and since when do YOU “think of answers” for a subject I'M supposed to save YOUR butt in?*

Sorry sorry sorry, it's been that kind of day all morning, I should've stayed in bed.

“Early to bed means early to RISE,” interposed a male voice.

“That does *not* mean what you seem to be *implying* it means,” carped Lisa Lohe.

“If not now, WHEN?” philosophized Hillel Schiller, to Lisa and the cafeteria table.

Hillel had taken Link Linford's seat there while he auditioned for Link's role as Lisa's consort, Link having resigned from both seat and role to go care for Samantha Tiggs, who'd forsaken her seat between Nonique and Holly Brollis. (Link fell far short of Sammi's beau ideal—no way would she need to stand on tiptoe in high heels to kiss *him*—but they'd begun walking their aged dogs together in Bashford Park, Sammi's Mr. Splotches and Link's basset hound Alouette. Alex found this poignantly sentimental and wished Mike Spurgeon had a dog so they could do the same.)

The vacant Tiggs stool *should've* been occupied by Tony Pierro, today and every lunchtime. Yet even if it were, his reticent presence couldn't have offset the obnoxiousness of Hillel “Call Me Killer” Schiller, including his presumption that you'd immediately notice

his spitting-image likeness to Richard Dreyfuss:

“That means nothing to you people? You have no romance, no soul?”

“Shut up, *Swiller*,” from Cheryl Trevelyan at the next table.

Hillel’s mother dreamed of him transferring to The City’s prestigious Jewish Academy where he could tread in the footsteps of his grandfather, Rabbi Moishe Lorch. (“The name says it all,” remarked Rabbi Pip’s granddaughter Jenna.) But Hillel had no religious ambitions; he yearned to run roughshod over scores of nubile females and racquetball opponents. His win/loss record in both categories was less than overpowering.

Postmenopausal women were blind to Hillel’s faults and urged their offspring to either date or play racquetball with him. Rachel Gleistein fell into the first trap at the behest of her Bubbe, who ought to have known better; Hillel, if not a *dybbuk*, was at least a *zhlub*. Lisa Lohe accepted the second challenge, got peeved by his court tactics, and was further irritated when Hillel treated her afterward to nothing better than a hot dog and fries. (“He didn’t even spring for double cheese!”) Lisa’s veins-standing-out rictus-of-exertion did little to ignite Hillel’s libido; yet he pressed his suit upon her, needing a new table to eat at after pissing off Charisse Sassoon *and* her new boyfriend Cal Cavella. Cal’s assigned lunch period was 4A, but he paid a special visit to 5D just to chase “Killer” away from Charisse.

“I’m not going to waste my time arguing with a man who’s lining up to eat a *lukewarm* lunch,” Hillel dreyfussed.

Lisa could actually sympathize, having scorned Charisse Sassoon as a tepid pierogi since seventh grade. Jenna, though, quicksketched a gesticulating guinea pig (Hillel talked with his hands along with his mouth) that Vicki giggled at and Lisa chose not to be aware of, even after Jenna murmured “‘Early to bed’ is squirrely advice.”

*

All very entertaining yet beside the point: which *once again* was the whereabouts and whenabouts and whyabouts of Tony Truant Absentee Pierro. Who STILL couldn’t be depended on to put in an appearance anyplace at any time, much less to chase off Hillel or Dennis or Skinner or any other harassing nuisance.

No surprise then (except maybe to *him*) that when he finally bobbed up on Tuesday, Tony received a rather frigid shoulder from spite-tinged Vicki—until he apologized, unasked

and of his own accord, for being remiss in his wooing.

“That’s all gonna change Friday night—that is, if you’re free Friday night. I wanna take you out on a proper date—that is, if you’d like to go on a proper date. Dinner, movie, the works.”

“Hunh! You sure you won’t *have* to work, and bail on me *again*? Like you did when you asked me to the indoor track meet last March?”

“Uh, yeah, well... like I said, I left that deli a long time ago. And I can get out of my Friday night shift at Paulsie’s—the manager owes me a favor for handing out all those fliers. So will you, Vicki? I really do wanna do the right thing by you.”

“Well I dunno,” she sniffed—not so much from playing hard to get, as to keep from being a meltaway pushover. (Wondering what his ears looked like under all that flowing hair, and what they might taste like if nibbled upon, and how Tony might react if she *blew* in one. Which sounded dumb if not gross, but was reputed to be sensual and unquestionably intimate.) “So why didn’t you phone me Sunday? And why didn’t you come to lunch yesterday? And why *are* you living in Downtown/Tayser’s house? And—”

“I’ll explain all about everything Friday night. We’ll have lots of time to ourselves then. No more interruptions.”

“Well... how would we get anywhere?”

“Sorry I don’t have my license yet, but my Uncle Beppe can drive us. Howzabout to the New Sherwood? Plenty of places to eat, and they’re showing *The Last Remake of Beau Geste*—y’know, with Marty Feldman.”

“You’d have to meet my parents first.”

“I’d like to meet your parents first.”

“You’d have to give me a straight answer to any question I ask.”

“I’ll do my best to give you a straight answer to any question you ask.”

So call me a pushover, thought Vicki. *Not to mention meltaway* she added, when Tony sealed their datemaking with a long sizzly kiss.

*

Wednesday was one of those days when Cityland temperatures plunged from the mid-60s down to the mid-30s. This affected everyone at VTHS (especially those who didn’t

wear the layered look) and short-circuited Mr. Watford, who taught computer programming and supervised the audio-visual squad. Hacking into the school P.A. system, he warbled “Tiptoe Through the Do-Loops” over *and* over it in a hollow sepulchral voice till Becca Blair took bionic charge, talking him down and out and into an ambulance. This saddened Matt LaVintner, who wished he’d thought of such a coup de grâce first; but gladdened Mr. Rankin the Geometry teacher, who was asked to take over Mr. Watford’s duties and thereby gained a dollop of job security.

Then on Thursday Isabel pitched another public fit, this time in the cafeteria. She’d begun coming there for Lunch 5D (after dining alfresco till it got too chilly outdoors) and Vicki’d worried that Is might try to capitalize on their kinda-sorta-friendship to take Sammi’s place at her table. But Izzy’d whizzied over to the nearest congregation of jocks and hunks, where she could make an entire meal out of tidbits mooched off jock-and-hunk trays. Today, though, she loaded a tray for herself and got it as far as the cashier before discovering her Fendi Zucca coinpurse wallet had gone missing from her Bottega Veneta bag.

Result: fit pitched, followed by consolation given (and lunch paid for) by Gootch Bulstrode and Rags Ragnarsson and Creaky Locke and Arlo Sowell.

Vicki presumed Isabel had either left her wallet at home or in her locker, or been ripped off by Mauly; but Joss had a different idea. “When the bell rang after Second Hour everyone charged out of all the rooms at once, because of the rumor” (that school would close early due to heavy snowfall, which failed to happen) “so there was this big mob out in the hall that got to see Is go sprawling in the shortest skirt ever worn in November outside the Ice Capades. Anyway, all the guys took a good long look before helping her up and collecting her stuff, including that fancy Italian bag. Any one of them could’ve helped themselves to anything inside it.”

“And she didn’t check her bag when she got it back?”

“No, she was too busy *not* pulling her skirt down,” said Joss. “Feef muttered ‘(I thought *Carly* was a bitch-in-heat)’—excuse my Advanced French—in one of my ears, while Space said “At least those are pretty butterflies’ in my other ear. Probably meaning the ones on Izzy’s underpants, but with Space you never know.”

“Gahd, is Isabel still wearing those French-cut panties? I suppose we should be thankful she wears anything.”

“Well, don’t be surprised if Floramour has on the exact same pair, except teenier.”

*

November 11th used to be Armistice Day; then Veterans Day, till that got shifted to the fourth Monday of October; and would once again be celebrated as such starting next year. But for right *now*, November 11th was merely another TGI Friday. Though not to the desolated Tony Pierro, who had to inform Vicki he was no longer on Paulsie’s Pizza’s payroll.

“Because you asked for tonight off??”

“No.”

“So why then?”

“Can’t tell you.”

“Oh, not this again—you *promised* you’d give me straight answers, Tony!”

“Said I’d do my best to.”

“Well this isn’t your best! I can’t date a guy who won’t be upfront with me!”

“You wouldn’t wanna date me anyway if you knew what happened.”

“I probably would so! C’mon, it can’t be that bad—I mean you didn’t *kill* anybody, right?”

“No.”

“Did you beat someone up?”

“No.”

“Were you like sleeping on the job, or sneezing in the sauce, or selling dope on the side?” (*This sounds like Snow White grilling a Dwarf.*)

“No, no, no.”

“WHAT, then? Are you a secret pizza embezzler?”

(Silence.)

“TONY?? I just made that up! How could a pizza even *be* embezzled?—did they like accuse you of stealing Special Supreme Pan Pies?”

“No... they said... I took some money... from the register.”

DON'T ASK "DID YOU?" "Well... that was a stupid thing for them to say. You don't have to put up with it lying down, either. Joss's dad—you met him in the street last weekend—he's a lawyer, and can take Paulsie's to court—"

"No! That'd just give them a chance to, y'know, rake up other things."

"...what other things?"

"You know... that whole trial business... saying I cheated on that test..."

"Well, but you were found—" (HAD he been found innocent?) "—I mean it was all Tail-End's fault, *you'd* studied the whole night before" (with KINKS FARGHETTI) "like you said, and didn't know what was inside that pencil he loaned you—"

"I know that, and maybe *you* believe it, but—"

"Course I do!" *DON'T ASK IF HE WAS ANYWHERE NEAR ISABEL'S WALLET YESTERDAY MORNING.* "And we won't say another word about it. A nice night out with a beautiful girl (ha ha) is just what you need to get your mind off things. So have your uncle pick me up around six, and—"

"I can't take you out tonight! I'm flat broke—hadda pay back all the money they said I stole, so they wouldn't call the cops."

"That sounds like a shakedown! Are you *sure* you don't wanna—"

"Yes I'm *sure* I don't wanna—"

"Well never mind. We can still go out. I can lend you some—"

"Nuh-unh! Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but a GUY should take a GIRL out and pick up all the checks, with his own money."

Commendable and gentlemanly but not very helpful. "Um... didn't you have a bunch of jobs last year, all at the same time?"

"That was last year and those were kiddie jobs."

"Okay... well, would you like to come over for dinner at my house? We could go through the want ads—"

"Thanks, but no thanks—I don't wanna meet your parents till I'm back on my feet and have money in my pocket again."

GRRRR! "Okay then, how about ME coming over for dinner at YOUR house?? You can do all the cooking if you want to. And if you know how to. And just so long as I don't

have to eat with your cousin Petula.”

Amusement at last from Tony. “You really don’t like her, do you?”

“She left the *Cicada* in the lurch! Saying ‘I won’t open letter bombs for you,’ as if anybody’d asked her to!”

“Well... I’d have to check with my uncle and aunt. Couldn’t be tonight... but maybe tomorrow? If you wouldn’t mind playing cards with me ‘n’ Bud?”

“Bud?” said Vicki, thinking maybe he meant Nancy Sykeman’s BLZ Bub.

“Buddy Marcellus—we play cards on the weekend, that is when we aren’t working. He could ask his girl to come too, make it kind of like a double date. Then me ‘n’ you could save our *real* date, the night out by ourselves, for when I’ve found another job.”

“You’ve already got a job—a big one.”

“What’s that?”

“Figuring out how we can get my folks to okay this without you meeting them first.”

Felicia was well-disposed toward Vicki and Buddy Marcellus (whom she *had* met, and forgiven for dousing Vicki’s coat with a malted milkshake) for wanting to go cheer up a mutual friend who was “having kind of a tough time.” But Fel insisted on at least speaking to Tony’s uncle or aunt for assurance that an adult would be on the premises—standard parental protocol, as in Rosa Dartle days—and Vicki reluctantly gave her the phone number, dreading again that Downtown/Tayser would answer and say something horrible. For that matter, so might Tony’s uncle or aunt, or even Tony himself if he got on the line.

SOMEBODY’S gonna spill the beans! Vicki sub-despaired.

You don’t even know what beans he’s got to spill, sub-chided Joss, there at Burrow Lane for their regular Friday night sleepover. (Nonique had been invited but asked to be excused; Darren Buckley was taking her out on their first solo date, to go see *A Piece of the Action* instead of *The Last Remake of Beau Geste*. Vicki wished her luck and Joss said not to do anything Miss Rosamond Ambrose hadn’t done.)

Felicia, as she hung up the receiver, said “What a very odd woman.”

“...who, Mom?”

“Mrs. Pierro—Tony’s aunt. She said an adult was always at her house, because her husband never took her anywhere. I asked if one of them could drive you to Jocelyn’s *no*

later than eleven—”

“YES, Mom—”

“—and she said her husband could do it even at 3 a.m., because he never sleeps. I asked if she wouldn’t mind telling why Tony’s living with them instead of his parents, and she said his mother’s ‘a slugabed who has more vapors than the whole Vicks company.’” Felicia frowned at Vicki, then at Joss, then at both. “Isn’t this the boy you were talking about *marrying* last winter?”

“We were just KIDDING, Mrs. V,” Joss reiterated.

“I’m not going over there to tie the knot, Mom! Just to have some dinner and maybe play some cards.”

“Well, I remember Jocelyn saying ‘This is how it all begins.’”

“And *you* said ‘I hope we’ll get to meet this young man before you elope with him,’” Joss smiled. “I remember too! We were having Puffed Rice for breakfast, and I said we ought to save some to throw at the happy couple, or maybe shoot out of a cannon—”

QUIT HELPING, Vicki sub-clamored.

YOU quit helping. Now I’m hungry—what’s for dinner?...

*

On Saturday afternoon the Vanderlund Gondoliers, their varsity cheerleaders and a substantial contingent of fans trekked up to Triville for the NESTL(É) championship game. Triville’s Red Devils had clinched the Inland Division with a record of 7-1-0 versus Athens Grove’s 6-2-0, finishing the regular season with a couple of landslide shutouts; but since these victories were over hapless Emery Ridge and winless Multch East, Coach Bolero held out hope for the Red Devils being overconfident. Which they may have been; yet if so, the G-Men failed to capitalize on it. MVP Knobby Dutton bungled the very first snap, resulting in a Jeff Friardale fumble that the Red Devils recovered and ran back 79 yards for a Triville touchdown. Things slalomed downhill from there; and Vanderlund’s substantial contingent of fans, after enduring through the halftime show, seized the excuse of cold inclement weather to beat an early retreat. (Thus missing Penny Stone’s fourth-quarter tantrum-upchuck on the sideline.)

(“One yearbook photo, coming right up,” snapshot Split-Pea Erbsen.)

Vicki was starving when she reached the Pierro place on Pearlwort Drive. Triville's stadium concessions were offensively overpriced, so Vicki'd bought nothing but a hot chocolate that tasted like parboiled Play-Doh. Then when she and Joss departed at halftime (leaving behind G-Men girlfriends Crystal and Sheila-Q, plus Alex the diehard rootin'-tooter) they bummed a getaway ride in Nancy Sykeman's Klown Kar to Arthur Treacher's Fish & Chips; yet Vicki, not wanting to spoil an appetite blunted by faux cocoa, ate only a few hush puppies that had more grease in them than cornmeal.

From there they repaired to Sykedelic Acres, as Nancy S called her home on Nutsedge Road ("Wouldn't live anywhere else") for further hanging out and cheering up of Nancy Buschmeyer, who'd been eating her heart out since glimpsing Chewy DeWitt's arm around Nancy Hantz's body in the football stands. Nancy B was deadset certain this meant those two had reconciled, "cause he's out for SPITE and knows she's one of my best friends and never got over her giving him to me in the first place!"

"*And* the boys don't call her 'Hot Pants' for wearing out-of-fashion short-shorts," added Nancy S.

"She won't be able to help herself if he *throws* himself *at* herself," Nancy B mourned.

"She's 'jist a girl who cain't say no,'" Nancy S agreed. "But say the word and we'll trick ol' Chewderhead into thinking Thirsty K's parched for his lovin'! Then his sorry keister'll get keelhailed by Jacuzzi Jake, and you can either fish him out of the drink or watch while he goes gurgle-gurgle glub-glub..."

"That's not funny! Some things shouldn't be laughed about," reproached Nancy B.

"Not around *here* they shouldn't never," Nancy S triple-negated, with a swirl of her Filbert's ginger ale in the one-ring circus that was the Sykeman rumpus room, decked with Second City posters of Del Close, Betty Thomas, Andrea Martin, John Belushi and Gilda Radner. "Here your booty ain't shakin' till your sides are achin'!" (Salutatory chug of Filbert's.)

No one would call Nancy S pretty in any conventional sense; her face was too broad-featured, too high-colored, and continually open-mouthed. ("Guess how many fillings I've got! Guess right and you win one!") Yet it had a liveliness and sprightliness that lent her immense appeal; and the only reason she wasn't with a non-BLZ Bub boyfriend right now

was so she could Be There for poor Nancy B, whom Nancy S had caringly mentored since grade school—much as Mumbles Metcalf had done for Alex, and Vicki wished Jenna Wiblitz’d been able to do for her. On the other hand, Jenna had neither a car nor a license nor much interest in learning how to drive (“That’s what Lisa’s for”) so Nancy S was extra-appreciated when she offered to ferry Joss over to Jupiter Street, dropping Vicki and her empty stomach at Pearlwort en route.

Vicki tried to phone Tony to let him know she was on her way, but the Sykeman line was already in use by Nancy’s kid brother Bolivar (“I call him that ‘cause he’s plotting to conquer South America”) deep in conversation with Beth Murrish, no less. They were both on VW’s 7-Z team this year, and Beth had lured Bolivar into the bizarre labyrinth of *Ulysses*:

“Broken hoops on the shore; at the land a maze of dark cunning nets...”

“And on the higher beach a dryingline with two crucified shirts...”

“Beth, hang up!” ordered Joss, having grabbed the extension out of Vicki’s hand.

“Bolivar, call her back later! Vicki needs to use the phone *right now*!”

“JOSS...” went Vicki, with a contrite glance at Nancy S.

“Fine by me,” said Nancy, draining her ginger ale. “Better than Boli ringing up Chile collect, to have a heart-to-heart with Augusto Pinochet.”

“*And* it reduces the threat that he ‘n’ Beth’ll breed a whole weirdo generation,” added Joss. To Vicki: “Here ya go—phone’s free.”

Nothing but a busy signal at Tony’s, which probably meant he was calling around town trying to track *her* down. Vicki threw on coat and scarf and started up the rumpus room stairs, but was brought to a halt when Nancy B burst into a fresh batch of tears.

“It’s all that stupid slug of a snoop’s f-f-fault! *That’s* why Chewy came unhitched and d-d-drifted away, I j-j-just know it!”

Back downstairs to do more comforting (and tummy-growling) while keeping a nervous eye on a ticking wristwatch.

What slug of a snoop? Nancy B wouldn’t say. Skinner of course sprang to mind, insofar as anyone that sluggish could spring; and so did Split-Pea Erbsen, though *sneak* was more applicable than *slug* to his style of snoopery. Presumably it wasn’t Holly Brollis in her *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown* role, even if she was the one who started calling Pete

DeWitt “Chewy” after his disastrous experiment with Red Man tobacco.

Then too, *what* had been snooped? *How* had it cut Chewy loose? And *why* was Nancy B pining for such a Chewderhead? No answers to these questions either. (Talk about deep dark secrets.) At any rate, by the time they calmed her sufficiently down to leave Sykedelic Acres, it was almost seven o’clock and Vicki’d tried twice to let Tony know she was running late. Both times she again got a busy signal, plus the feeling he must be thinking she’d stood him up.

Well good! See how HE likes having that shoe on HIS other foot for once!

Two minutes later, antsy with guilt, she asked if the Klown Kar couldn’t go any faster as it waddled southward on Eugene G. Green Road.

“Not on these tires, cookie!” said Nancy S, pausing in her singalong with a Dr. Demento tape. “They’re balder than an absurd soprano! Be prepared to hydroplane when we cross the Bridge—”

“No hurry! No rush!” cautioned Joss from the backseat. Though not as averse to motoring as Alex the equestrienne, she had a terror of skids and fishtails that not only made her reject Hansel Hitchens as date/chauffeur, but forego Driver’s Ed (and persuade Vicki to do likewise) till next Easter at the earliest. “No way should we try to steer a two-ton toboggan through wintertime traffic in *this* slick ‘burb.”

“We don’t have to rush,” said Vicki, “but it *is* after seven...”

“At least you can be glad you’ve got a guy waiting for you who *cares* whether you’re late or not,” Nancy B sniffled in the shotgun seat.

“Whaddaya mean, *late* or not?” asked Nancy S, swerving off Panama onto Pearlwort.

“NOT ‘LATE’ LIKE THAT! GAHD, NANCY!”

“Well then, be thankful for no small blessings.”

“Ooh!” went Joss. “I wish *I’d* said that.”

““You will, Jossicar, you will...” This the place, cookie?”

(*Please don’t call me “cookie” when I’m so famished.*) “Yeah—thanks, Nancy—feel better, Nancy—wish me luck!” Vicki rapidfired, vaulting so precipitously out of the Rambler that she forgot to give her overnight case to Joss for their Saturday sleepover in the Queen Anne aerie. No choice now but to lug it up to a front door wreathed by... ew, what *was* this?

Ivy? Moss? Seaweed? Something decorative, she hoped; not symptomatic of moldy decay. She reached around it to give the bell a hesitant poke.

(B-Z-Z-Z-Z.)

“S’OPEN!” from inside.

Okay. Twist the knob. Push the door. Step through the wreath into... smokiness? From a blaze in a living room fireplace with, apparently, a defective damper. No alarm was sounding; maybe the Pierros hadn’t installed a smoke detector. (Goofus liked to “test” the ones at Burrow Lane.) Vicki, coughing a bit and fanning the hazy air, found herself being stared at by a large gray cat curled atop the back of a couch that faced away from the front door.

“You moving in?”

“Scuse me?” said Vicki, before peering over the cat and seeing a large gray lady with a large brown bottle in one hand and an off-the-hook phone in the other. Her small red eyes gave Vicki’s overnight case an incurious look before returning to a TV screen on which the Bionic Woman was getting a shampoo.

“Um... no... sorry... is Tony...?”

“Back there,” said the large gray lady.

She hadn’t been present when Vicki’d come here for *Cicada* staff conferences, but must be the mother Downtown referred to as “Lotta Grief.” According to Robin and Fiona, Downtown’s father (“the Immoral Mr. Tays”) had dumped Lotta when he got ensnared by a young chippie who became Ms. Tays-the-Tease of the VW science faculty. Meanwhile, Lotta’s pubescent daughter Doris went shopping for arts-and-crafts supplies at a Kresge store whose assistant manager was Tony Pierro’s Half-Great-Uncle Beppe. He no sooner caught sight of the future Downtown than he wooed and married Lotta, adopted Doris, and renamed her Petula for reasons that *might* ’ve been benevolent but *felt* awfully disquieting—even (especially) when Robin said “Naw, she’s crazy about him!”

Vicki felt an odd urge to offer Lotta belated condolences. But then the large gray cat pounced onto the carpet at her feet and, with a come-hither stare, led the way into what had been the dining room when Vicki was last here. Now she nearly let out a cry of horror at seeing Tony GROWN OLD (or at least middle-aged) amid a welter of hobby-shop bric-a-brac.

Plus multiple streams of smoke: one from a cigarette in middle-aged Tony's mouth, more from butts smoldering in a plastic cup, and the longest from the engine of a model train that was trundling over miles and miles of track, connected by trestles from table to sideboard to credenza and back.

"PET??" gasped the stationmaster, gazing through the smokestreams with an eager if rheumy yen.

"No... I'm Vicki... here for Tony..."

"Oh." (Downcast *hack hawk hoff*.)

Uncle Beppe, in the deceptive flesh: taking the Ambulatory Ashtray title from Mr. Folz the Pre-Algebra teacher. If Doris/Petula/Downtown/Tayser really *was* crazy about Beppe, it must be because he provided her with freightcars of thin French coffin nails and taught her how to chainsmoke them. Even now he was lighting a fresh cancer stick from the last one's butt, which joined the others smoldering in the plastic cup.

"Tony's in there," he croaked. "All a-*boarrrrrd!*"—and away went his train around another series of bends.

Vicki's shin got bumped by the big gray cat. Together they entered a kitchen where (thank heavens!) the still-young, still-smoke-free, still-a-puddyboy Tony was using several decks of cards to build an elaborate skyscraper on a formica snackbar.

"I'm *so* sorry I'm late—I mean, that I didn't get here as early as I—"

"Sssshhhh," from Tony as he edged a nine of diamonds into the skyscraper's turret.

Vicki, tormented by remorse and the odor of finished-and-done-with lasagna, wondered miserably if the other cardplayers had already come and gone; and if so whether she ought to go coax the phone away from Lotta Grief long enough to call Joss's dad for a premature lift to Jupiter Street—

—but then the back door swung wide and in charged Buddy Marcellus, wearing a Tyrolean hat too small for his head and bearing a vast cardboard box.

"Here we are! Free-of-charge delivery, diiii-rect from the Sammitch Shoppe! This one's got *my* eats—the rest of you can share what's in the *other* box." Meaning the petite parcel being toted by the diminutive girl at his chubby heels.

“Hope you’ve all got a hankering for day-old head cheese!” caroled Josie Nygren, the Reverse Streaker of Archbishop Houlihan.

As one of Sheila-Q’s parochial pals she was familiar from parties at Castle Quirk and the Grand Parade, plus that volleyball match where she refused to get lost in Boomer Wrang’s shadow despite being less than five feet tall. Docility was not a word in Josie Nygren’s vocabulary; nor was fear, restraint, indecision, or prudence. S-Q said she never had to take a dare because she always beat you to it, most notoriously with a vow to re-enact “Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight” by swinging from the clapper in St. Benedict’s belfry. It had taken the combined efforts of Sister Loretto and Brother Huntley to thwart her—“for now!”

*No matter when that curfew rings
We’re gonna swing toooonight!*

“Is head cheese really all you brought?” Vicki asked.

“It was *supposed* to be, but they tossed in some ham and turkey and tuna salad by mistake,” said Buddy, unloading his box on the drainboard.

“Oh, yum! Can I have two? I’m like dying of hunger here.”

“Just keep your mitts off Tony’s pastrami,” leered Josie, looking like a naughty teen version of Little Dot in the old Harvey comic books. She sure didn’t appear to be Nordic, though the Nygrens were as Scandinavian as Nanette Magnus or Tina Korva. Maybe her black hair and eyes, like Vicki’s, stemmed from having a Polish great-grandmother; which could also account for Josie’s being a Catholic schoolgirl instead of a nail-it-to-the-door Lutheran like Nanette. Whatever her ancestry, she was supercute as she licked mayo from itty-bitty fingertips; and Vicki (wolfing down corned beef) began to worry how immune Tony might be to Josie’s reckless charms. He’d done no more than nod at the newcomers, leaving that pastrami sub untouched to continue work on his highrise house of cards; but it couldn’t hurt to pin down whether a belfry clapper was swinging his way.

(Swallow.) “So um tell me, Buddy—are you two like a couple now?”

“I’ll say we are! She gave me this to *prove* her love,” Buddy boasted, tipping his too-small Tyrolean hat.

“Found it lost in the lost-and-found at the Sammitch Shoppe,” said Josie, who worked there on weekends. “When he asked me to your Homecoming Dance, I just *knew* it was his.”

“But she wouldn’t agree to go with me unless I came up with a better name for her than Josie—”

“—*sick to death* of ‘Pussycats’ jokes—”

“—and it couldn’t be a ‘sexy’ name or a ‘cutesy’ name—”

“—nothing sticky-sweet—” (another lick of fingertip-mayonnaise)

“—so I had a brainstorm and dubbed her *Junior!*”

“Why *Junior?*” asked Vicki.

“Exactly my reaction,” said Josie.

“‘Cause Junior’s a whole year ahead of Sophomore!” Buddy summarized.

“How can you NOT get hooked by a line like that?” sighed Josie (make that Junior) as she wrapped itty-bitty arms as far around his rotund midriff as they would reach. “So *I* started calling *him* Big Ziggy, after the elephant at the Zoo! ‘Member how all us kids saved our quarters to raise the money to give him an outdoor home?’”

“Make mine the tenpin alley!” chortled Buddy (make that Ziggy? no, too peculiar) as he opened his semi-embraced mayo-stained sweater far enough to display a PACHYDERMS bowling shirt.

“Heffalump boobs!” squealed Junior, grabbing hold and burying her naughty Little Dot face between them as Buddy made trumpety grunt-noises into the top of her glossy black non-Nordic head.

Ewww went Vicki, slowing her consumption of a second sandwich, and rolling eyes toward Tony who gave no evidence of paying attention to anything but his pasteboard tower. “I, um, don’t think I remember seeing you two at Homecoming...”

“We didn’t make it,” Junior muffle-snuffled into Buddy’s bosomdepths.

“Not to the *dance*, anyway!” Buddy guffawed.

EWWWW. And Vicki’d felt *sorry* for turning him down when he’d asked *her* to the dance, knowing how badly Buddy’d been hurt by Laurie’s abandoning him. It ought to be pleasant to see him now with a new girlfriend who gave him uninhibited endearments and a Tyrolean hat, but this was verging on the *gross*—

“We gonna play cards here, or what?”

So said Tony: his first words tonight aside from “Ssshhhh.”

Plucking a four of clubs out of his skyscraper, he caused it to collapse jackstraws-style into a pile that got swept off the snackbar into the emptied sandwich box. A fresh deck was produced from the shelf behind him, as well as a trilby with a squashed-flat crown that Tony set firmly on his brow like a gambler’s eyeshade. Buddy cocked his own Tyrolean at a pugnacious angle as *The Godfather Saga’s* opening theme could be heard moaning out of Lotta Grief’s TV.

“When did I ever refuse an accommodation?” Buddy asked in a Brando accent.

“But I thought that when it was *your* time, *you* would be the one to hold the strings.”

“Another *pezzonovante*,” answered Tony, suddenly looking like Al Pacino with murder on his mind.

“So what’re we playing?” Junior wanted to know. “Too cold in here for strip poker.”

Amen to that, blushed Vicki. Back in Pfiester Park she and the Peaches had indulged in Old Maid and Go Fish; she’d also learned the fundamentals of canasta by watching her grandmothers, though all she could remember now was the word “meld.” Here in Vanderlund the Murrish girls preferred board games, while Alex of course went in for actual sports. “I’m afraid you’ll have to teach me whatever you decide to play,” Vicki confessed.

“Rubber bridge,” said Tony. “Played by two teams of partners.”

“Oh, me ‘n’ you against them?”

“No, partners get picked by drawing cards. The deck is spread face down. High card picked deals the first hand. Second highest partners with the dealer. They sit across from each other. So do the other two, north/south and east/west. The player to the dealer’s left shuffles the deck. The player to the dealer’s right cuts the deck. The dealer deals one at a time clockwise, starting with the player on the left. Each player gets thirteen cards. When play starts, each player plays a card in turn. The four cards that are played are called a trick. The player who plays the highest card wins the trick. Ace is highest, two is lowest. Before any cards are played, bids are placed in an auction. You bid how many tricks you think you and your partner will win. You can name a suit like spades to be the trump suit, or bid no

trump. No trump is the highest suit, then spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs. Next player can bid the same number of tricks in a higher suit, or more tricks in any suit, or pass. Next player after that can bid higher or pass. You go on with the auction till three players in a row pass. If nobody bids, you deal again. Otherwise the highest bid wins the contract. That player is the declarer. His partner is the dummy. They need to win as many tricks as were in the highest bid. The player to the left of the declarer plays the first card to lead the first trick. Then the dummy lays down all his cards face up and the declarer plays for them both..."

Vicki ceased to hear anything but *blah blah blah*, spoken in a squashed-flat voice like Michael Corleone telling a *caporegime* how to rub out the heads of the Five Families.

She tried to take refuge behind what remained of her second sandwich, but its taste reminded her of the bruschetta she'd eaten at Il Sachetto with Roger Mustardman. ("Nice work, Lou." Always wanted a chance to say that line. That and "Paulie? You won't see him no more..." Then Roger'd said her entire life was but a dream; as was his, as was everybody she knew's. Shortly after which he'd lurched off to the washroom, and Vicki'd never seen him again except IN her dreams...)

Now she wanted to reach across the kitchen table and touch Tony Pierro with her sandwichless hand, grasp him and clutch him as she'd done to Roger's yellow Pet Rock while she chanted *This is real—I am real—the dreams are fake, are false, are lies*.

But Tony was corleone-ing on and on about drawing trumps and using finesses and establishing the dummy's long suit; and it all sounded to Vicki like *Don't ask me about my business, Kay*.

Meanwhile Buddy and Junior were feeding each other morsels of BLT (Bub?) along with the stickiest of sweet nothings, burbled to and fro like a pair of addlepatented lovebirds. And if that weren't bad enough, up onto the shelf behind Tony's trilby'd head climbed the large gray cat to sit and stare and GRIN at Vicki, like the ancient stuffed Cheshire animal whose phosphorescent teeth used to glow at her in the eerie darkness.

*

At that very moment a mile and a half to the northwest, Fiona was huddled inside PoonElly's maxicoat along with Poon herself as they stood in the posh driveway of the stately Lingerspiel manse on Velvetleaf Road. The view of Lesser Park across the street

(imposing even at night, by streetlamp) was slightly impeded by three parked cars: Poon's Le Heap, Cramps Aplenty's Gremlin, and Robin's Sweet Babboo.

The members of Downbite were engaged in a heated coldweather outdoor debate on how they were going to drive to the AnaRCHonda Pit, where the Oxidations and Lepperzee were scheduled to perform. Parking near a downtown punk venue was bound to be a bitch, so the fewer vehicles the better; but there were seven Downbites including sullen Sheila Quirk (who'd broken up with Avalanche Dobbs that afternoon over his slothful execution in the loss to Triville). Even if all seven could've fit inside a '61 Plymouth Fury, Robin would not allow Epic Khack anywhere near it; her "*Back off, Khack!*" was rattling the Velvetleaf streetlamp. So the multipart question was: [a] which two cars should they take, [b] who would ride with whom in which, and [c] who might be trusted to drive into The City without imperiling cars/passengers or attracting The Law.

"You're a HYGIENIST, Quirk!" Tayser was howling at S-Q, who'd pointblank refused to enter the same automobile as the unbathed Epic. "Next thing you know, you'll be making us all FLOSS!"

"Blow it out your knothole, DORIS," retorted Sheila. Which earned a Robin-snortle, followed by another when Tayser took a swing at Q with a rolled-up *Gabba Gabba Gazette* ("The City's only punkzine").

These snortles were almost the first uttered by Robin in a disillusioned fortnight. For five long years she had coveted Craig Clerkington, only to find out his favorite musical genre was *country pop* and his record collection ran heavily (make that lightly) to Glen Campbell and Kenny Rogers. He demeaned punk rock and said the Dopester/Dartle interpretation of "True Grit" should be relabeled "Screw This." Consequently Robin had spent much of the two weeks after the Homecoming Dance drumming her *fortissimo* heart out through "Razzlin' Blues" and "Bring Out Your Stupid."

Meanwhile Tayser'd been listening nonstop to the just-released *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*, which she called a template-from-the-mountaintop for Downbite's own endeavors. Fiona, though, was fed up with Tayser as their self-styled "designer" or "visionary"; nearly a month had passed since Robin's Jambalaya, with nary a gig booked and hardly even a full-group rehearsal. Feef wished there was some way to put

Vicki back in the managerial saddle—not that Vicki knew anything about promoting a punk band, but at least then they wouldn’t be awash in Petula-the-Purist’s poppy-with-thorns froth:

“Shaddup shaddup shaddup! Let’s just pile in and get our asses *going*, people! We coulda *been* there by now if you’d quit giving me this codswallop! And remember Epic has to have the window cracked so he won’t get carsick—”

(Oh for some bona fide spume from the New Wave, to bring the Scene back home...)

“Let me know when you KIDS make up your minds,” interjected the shivering Cramps as she withdrew into her Gremlin. Cramps took an occasional I’m-an-upperclassman-and-you’re-not stance despite being only three months older than Robin, while Epic actually outranked her as an alleged senior.

Okay: it would make the most sense (or the least codswallop) for Epic and Tayser to go with Cramps in the Gremlin, and Feef and Poon and Sheila-Q with Robin in her Babboo. Poon was willing to leave Le Heap parked on Velvetleaf, where there’d be a better class of car thieves than downtown or back home in Athens Grove. But before they could act on this plan, their numbers swelled by one as Tippi Lingerspiel (technically grounded and thought to be moping in her bedroom) popped up among them.

“Can somebody gimme a ride to Annika’s house?” she asked, blazing up a doobie of what smelled like primo weed.

“*Annika?*” went S-Q. “So what’s your name, Tippi or Pippi?”

“Piss off!” said Tippi, who’d suffered through more Longstocking jokes than Josie Nygren had Pussycats. “Gimme a ride or I’ll say you sold me this.” (Drag on her doob.)

“Hell, you could at least offer to share it,” gnarled Robin.

“You guys got your own. This is *mine*. Travis, I’m riding with you. *Gahddammit!*” she swore as her big brother lobbed a loogie across the driveway that almost landed on Tippi’s platform clogs. “Spit at me once more ‘n’ I’m gonna staple your mouth shut!”

Applause from Robin and Sheila; vehement disapproval by Tayser; hushing of Tayser lest anyone else in the Lingerspiel manse be stirred to investigate what was happening outside.

“(You gone to sleep on me, Sugar Pop?)” PoonElly mumbled to her maxicoatmate.

“(Enough with the tickling,)” mutter-objected Fiona. “(You know you can’t make me laugh.)”

“(Gloomy Gussie! Long as you’re in there, whyncha fish me out a smoke?)”

“(Got anything better than Marlboros?)”

“(Could be. See what you can find by feeling around.)”

Fooling around, and right there in front of everybody. Feef shook her brain free from dalliance and concentrated on tonight’s show. “(Tell me again about your friend with Lepperzee.)”

“(Told you fifty times already.)”

“(So make it fifty-one.)”

“(SIGH. He goes by ‘I.M.A. Camera,’ his real name’s Amadeo Camara, we were in the same junior high art class when I was a sevvie and he was a freshman. Ol’ Hayzoose was horrible to him too, and not just ‘cause Cam’s gay—he’s also Cuban and there’s some sorta blood feud going on between the Cubans and Mexicans. Anyhoo, Cam hung out with oddfuckingballs like Jeanine Greeley’s brother Geyser and Dolph Turkenkopf whose whole family is tattooed like sideshow carnies. Cam ‘n’ them’d get wasted on Thunderbird and play what they called ‘shitfaced rock’ on dimestore geetars. That’s how Lepperzee got started, but don’t be jigswiggered if they’ve changed their name again by the time we get to the Pit. *If* we ever get there.)”

Fiona’d heard a few other things about I.M.A. Camera from her connections at Cobwebs & Strange: that he was a composer of sorts, who tried to blend (or *churn*) the decadence of Weimar Berlin with that of pre-Castro Havana in songs like “Gemütlich Orgía” and “Totenrumbatanz.” Which demanded SOME degree of subtle virtuosity, and meant punk music COULD be more than *Let’s all go run with scissors / Yes, all go run with scissors / We’re gonna run with scissors / All day long*. Which got old fast, as Feef had said from the get-go. Look at the Oxidations, who by every account were a passel of speedfreaks who popped diet pills by the handful as they adlibbed rapid-yet-vapid lyrics onstage.

(As you might expect, the Oxidations ranked right behind the Sex Pistols in Petula Pierro’s tayser’d estimation.)

“(Wish we were going to see Krewel & Unusual Punishment,)” Fiona muttered as Cramps honked the Gremlin’s horn and people finally started moving toward the cars.

“(Or *anyone* at Starwood or the Whisky,)” grumbled Poon. “(With an afterparty in the Vault at the Mayerling. *After* we go back in time and fucking well luck out into finding where Aunt Maybelle hid her coke stash.)”

*

At that precise same minute a mile and a half to the northeast, Virginia Leigh Pyle was gargling with unflavored mouthwash in the claustrophobic bathroom off Roald Bjelke’s pint-sized bedroom in what felt like the sub-basement of his family’s house on Axel Crescent in Hereafter Park.

(Rinse. Spit. Repeat.)

What a gyp. Not even a medicine cabinet door to slam. Nothing in here worth swiping, either. Upstairs she’d noticed a beautiful big floor globe (the Bjelkes owned a travel agency, lucky them) but Gigi could hardly sneak it out of the house under her coat.

Pilferage: a pastime the so-called Great Dane had trained her in to perfection. She’d always been nimblefingered, and back in Refineryland had been taught some legerdemain by her Grampy Orpington. He was a factory-town cardsharp (described by Gigi as a riverboat gambler) who could make a deck do cartwheels and handsprings. Too bad for Lizabeth Ann that such coordination had skipped a generation; it helped make Gigi not simply a good cheerleader and first-rate actress, but superb at shoplifting, pocketpicking, and general petty theft.

Case in point: last Thursday morning in the school’s Foreign Language wing. Usual crush of students as Second Hour classes let out. Usual clot of drooljawed hornyboys surrounding—*almost* surrounding—Odious Isabel, who hadn’t secured her Bottega Veneta bag over her shoulder like any sane woman would, but was letting it dangle from her hand. Easy as pecan pie for Gigi to hook a foot around Isabel’s thick ankle and send her sprawling, with bag dropped and bootable away from the crowd as it watched her pay the fat-assed price for wearing a miniskirt in November. Quick as a wink, a coinpurse wallet got fished out of the bag before the latter was booted back into the gawking crowd.

Alacka-damn-zam.

The only downside to this artful feat was the wallet's containing no credit cards, nothing better than chump change. Plus a bunch of stupid photos and keepsakes that Gigi had pleurably reduced to ashes. A pity the wallet itself couldn't be kept as a souvenir, like a scalp upon her belt; or better still planted on that colored Rebounder girl, to blacken *her* reputation (haw). But the wallet was a nearly-new Fendi Zucca, eminently fenceable, and so got handed over to Roald the Dane who had associates for liquidating anything from eiderdown ski jackets to imported silk lingerie.

No cash for Gigi; no cash wanted.

Credit only, for obtaining more of The Stuff.

Same thing went for items boosted out of department stores and the random private home. Unbulky clothing and low-risk jewelry were child's play for nimblefingers skilled at misdirection. Particularly if, of late, you'd lost a few pounds and had room to spare inside your own loosening clothes. Incredible what could be stashed within a push-up C-cup bra if its natural-born contents had shrunk (a bit) in the wash (as it were).

Same thing went for "hand-to-mouth" favors done for the Dane, who wasn't that Great endowmentwise but responded appropriately enough—*below* the waist. Above it was a different matter. Gigi expected guys she favored to gasp and groan and do some pleading; Roald Bjelke just sat or lay there wearing a phlegmatic expression, impassive except for a slight bob-bob-bob to his chin. As if he were listening to an unheard beat through invisible headphones. Which was something all the Traversers seemed to do.

(Stand. Wipe. Flush. Repeat.)

Worth it, though. Worth it for The Stuff. The hand-to-*nose* return favors of magic pixiedust, that made you feel like Wendy up-up-and-on-her-way to Never Never Land. Not by stage-harness flying—no, it was like racing on ice, skating faster and more acrobatically than Renee Shackleton: your unstoppable blades *slicing* through the surface, *cleaving* the bone to reach the marrow, *gouging* long thin lines of the finest whitest pulverization.

Britt had clued her in how to convert a lipstick tube into a secret-compartment receptacle; though a cosmetic compact would seem more apropos, and lend more meaning to the clichéd phrase *I've got to go powder my nose*.

So I can think lovely thoughts, and take off flying—skating—racing—beating the world. With a bob-bob-bob to its subliminal beat.

As Gigi had done two Saturdays ago at cheerleading practice. It was the first one Margo Temple'd attended since getting clobbered in the Powderpuff match. (O blessed Mauly Carstairs for knocking the peroxide off Margo's contemptible head!) That had been on a Wednesday; Margo stayed home sick on Thursday; the Homecoming Parade and Game took up Friday; cheer practice didn't resume till Saturday afternoon, with some girls still fretting about Willowhelm vengeance and others still apprehensive that the Homecoming Dance would be canceled. Ms. Royston the JV pep squad coach, who'd served in the military, whistled them all to *ten-hut*; she was intent on wrapping up football season at the tiptop of their form, regardless of how lousily the JV football team might play.

Margo claimed to have fully recuperated from Powderpuff grogginess, but everyone could tell her cheering was below par—especially compared to the pixiedusty *tour de force* put on by nimblebodied limbertorsoed Gigi Pyle. Never had she kicked such superlative butt, outleaping and outlunging and outshouting even Bionic Becca Blair. Which didn't outrage Becca (nothing ever did) but royally honked off Maleficent Margo, who blew her bottle-blonde top when Gigi rose from a perfect split without using either hand. "Aw, knock off that showboating!" she seethed—and got whistled down in front of the whole squad by Ms. Royston, who snapped "That is NOT the attitude of a captain! *IS* it, Margaret?"

"(...no ma'am...)"

"*I—CAN'T—HEEEEEAR—YOU!*"

"NO MA'AM."

It then took tremendous willpower for Gigi to channel ultra-energized jubilation into an air of injured dignity, which she took into the locker room where Margo pursued her for what was intended to be a vindictive tête-à-tête but (thanks to Gigi's adroit stage blocking) got overheard by Ms. Cliffhouse the *varsity* coach, who considered enmity to be a violation of school spirit and called Margo into her office for a private dressing-down while Gigi oh-so-forlornly told Ms. Royston and the other JVs it might be best if she (Gigi) quit the squad rather than cause more conflict which was repeated when Ms. Cliffhouse called *her* in to hear *her* side which she (Gigi) nobly *didn't* give but asked her (Ms. Cliffhouse) to *please* bear in

mind that she (Margo) had been brutally blindsided in the Powderpuff scrimmage just a few days ago which they (Ms. Cliffhouse and Ms. Royston) said was no excuse for abusive leadership but no further mention would be made if they (Gigi and Margo) would agree to forgive and forget and shake hands.

“Mah pleasure,” Gigi agreed, gracefully extending nimbler-than-usual fingers.

You could practically hear Margo’s blood vessels straining to erupt.

Back in the locker room the varsity girls had begun to arrive for their practice and hear about the fracas and join the JVs in taking sides with most on Gigi’s led by Cheryl Trevelyan and also junior JV Valerie Frid who urged Gigi not to quit since (unsaid aloud) her staying might drive Margo over the edge into demotion and so give the captaincy to Val along with an almost-guaranteed spot on next year’s varsity squad.

Then Delia Shanafelt toddled over acting as if the clique hadn’t broken up six months ago to invite Gigi to join her and Nanette and their dates for that night’s Homecoming Dance *if* it wasn’t canceled but she (Gigi) told them (Delia, Nanette and the entire locker room) that after what’d happened today she no longer felt like going and Graham Aleshire (whom she’d already eighty-sixed) could take whomever he chose (*Lisa Lohe*, for crying out loud) which shocked most of the cheerleaders (except Becca) who couldn’t imagine opting out of any semiformal social occasion and seemed to convince even skeptical Nanette of her (Gigi’s) authenticity meaning Margo was boxed in every which way and Gigi held the whip hand.

V-I-C-T-O-R-Y, THAT’S VIRGINIA’S BATTLE CRY!!

Yet by the time she got home, all her pixiedusty euphoria had dissipated.

Instead of skimming over ice, she was sinking back into slushy muddy woe.

At least that gave artistic verisimilitude to telling Ma about practice and possibly quitting the squad and not going to the dance but spending the night at Britt’s instead. As Gigi left for the latter, Lizabeth Ann was frantically trying to phone Ms. Royston, Ms. Cliffhouse, and Margo’s mother to keep the pot a-biling. No objection though to Gigi’s slumberpartying at Sunny Squash Court, the home of Fleur Groningen—yes, *THE* Fleur Groningen! (The fact that Fleur was long gone to Connecticut made no difference; nor that Britt aspired to none of Fleur’s gilt-edged goals, but had blue-gaslight designs of her own.)

(Which she made *your* own.)

(And led to your standing in this claustrophobic bathroom in this dank sub-basement, shpritzing 4-Way Long-Acting Nasal Spray into each nostril to ease their inflammation.)

(But not restore exuberance or vitality.)

(That would take stronger Stuff.)

So: time to get a move on for another Saturday Night Enlivening. Each one was at a different Traverser hideaway—the first at Jive Mansfield’s, five weeks ago; then at Renee’s, then Lynndha’s, then Britt’s, and last Saturday here on Axel Crescent. Tonight Gigi hoped they’d go to Shoreward Circle, for another and more lucrative shot at looting Odious Isabel’s possessions. (Maully could take the rap.)

But Dane drove his Buick Invicta not east to the Lake but westward, out of Hereafter Park through Triville to Emery Ridge, then south into Athens Grove: more and more distant from any known Traverser stomping ground.

Gigi began to clench her fists and grit her teeth. She’d been counting on a fix (or more euphemistically a refill) in the nearest future, and now Lawdy knew how soon it might come *if ever*—maybe Dane was scheming to take her down to The City and sell her into white slavery! Her Everglade-eyes started darting around the Invicta, looking for anything she could use as a weapon—

—when Dane pulled up somewhere outside someplace and into the backseat piled two somebodies, girl bodies: one resembling a pony and the other an Eskimo squaw. Silent Dane, letting the motor idle, checked them out in the rearview mirror.

“Hey,” the pony whinnied. “I’m Gina.”

“Nadine,” grunted the Eskimo squaw.

Dane nodded and stepped on the gas. Gigi kept her lips clamped tight, resenting the pony for having a name too similar to her own. All they needed now was to run into Ginger Snowbedeck... wait a dadgum minute. Gina? In Athens Grove? She must be one of those Four Genies of the Apocalypse, about whom Gigi’d heard a thing or two that sure weren’t sports-related. Unless your sport was *inverted*—and not by transposing a chord’s bottom note up an octave, either. Lawdy! What sort of Saturday night was this turning out to be?

Now they were driving past the Carrefour Shopping Center onto Paillis Road, which would become Clubroot Drive after they went through the Expressway overpass. Gigi thrust away a craven temptation to bail out and run home; nothing replenishful awaited her *there*. Probably they were just going to pick up Gwen Cokingham, though she usually rode with Mauly. Well, it'd serve Gwen right to bunk in the backseat with boondaggers; she might as well face facts and sign up on the lezzy line.

But the Invicta turned left on Grouseland, passing the cross streets toward where Kim Zimmer used to live, and McGrum Elementary School...

...and stopped just long enough for HARELIP HARRISON to climb into the car.

Gina the pony, scooting over to make room for her, went "Hey! You play volleyball for Vanderlund, right?"

"Yeah."

"You rocked in the tournament."

"Thanks."

"Played hard," said Eskimo Nadine on Gina's other side.

"You too. Good match."

"Took Melina a week to quit limping after you socked her."

"Same for Pebbles, after your last spike."

"How 'bout the one with the busted ankle?"

"Dory? Still in a cast."

"Tough break."

"She's used to it. On crutches all semester—"

"WHUT TH' HAYL'RE YEW *DEWIN'* HERE, HARELIP??"

Bursting through clamped lips and gritted teeth, despite Gigi having resolved to show no sign of recognition.

Silence inside the Invicta as Dane drove it up the onramp to the Expressway.

Then a fistful of Gigi's raven hair got nearly yanked out by the roots as her head and shoulders were slammed back over the shotgun seat and she found herself staring upward at the Invicta's unlit dome light, while a voice rasped into her magnolia ear:

"Be nice, Dixie Cups."

Another wrench to make her blench. Then the profaning hand was out of her hair, and the profoundest pain was into her neck.

Heh heh heh went the Athens Grove boondaggers.

“Good one.”

““Dixie Cups?””

“S’what we used to call her in grade school,” Harelip told them.

YOU DIDN’T!! YOU NEVER DID!! YOU WOULDN’T’VE DARED!!

But the whip hand had been thrashed by whiplash, and raven eyelashes failed to keep hot tears from scalding down magnolia cheeks.

Speechlessly, to Dane: *ARE YOU GONNA LET HER GET AWAY WITH THAT??*

Wordlessly, from Dane: a lane change without use of turn signal.

Gasp. Groan. Voiceless pleading. Cautious testing of spine and skull, same as that time you got jolted off the top of a human pyramid at summer cheer clinic. No fractures or paralysis then; evidently none now. But also no beaker of sulfuric acid to fling into Loathsome Laurie’s face, no jagged dagger to plunge into her throat, no .38 Special to fire cyanide-tipped bullets through her pestilential plague-rat’s heart.

And no one to turn to for sympathy or protection. Trapped once again with hostile strangers in an ugly car heading to who knew what hellhole on a Saturday night... instead of being arrayed in a Scarletty gown as the sure-enough belle of a Homecoming Dance. So many many *many* people were to blame for this—Graham and Margo and Jeff Friardale and Odious Isabel and Lizabeth Ann and all the Traversers and all the faithless ex-cliquers but most especially and immediately Laurie the Harelip Harrison who was going to PAY for what she did and who she was and not just with that money-clipped wad that Britt wouldn’t help figure out how to nab oh no “Let it be a challenge to you” she kept saying all through Spirit Week and midterms week as if this were a production of *Up the Down Staircase* but what goes down must have its comeuppance and it will yes it will just as soon as The Stuff’s refilled ‘cause then Wendy will shed her skateblades and borrow the pirate captain’s grapnel to cleave Harelip to the brisket and throw her shredded flesh into the gaping maw of a passerby crocodile!

*Naught's left upon your bones
When you have shaken hands with Hook!*

*

(Listen...)

(Listen up...)

(Listen here...)

(As the still small voice speaks from the middle distance of your inner ear...)

*Our all-capitals **TIME** is coming. Bide yet awhile.*

While what? Laurie briefly wonders, before tuning back in to what's going on in the backseat and the frontseat and outside the car.

Three weeks it took since the first Drop in the second-floor washroom. Lola Svoboda kept tabs and gave counsel on when to bear down, when to ease up. Antoinette and Bootleg McGillah kept their distance. Ditto Wanda Lynn, whether from fear of them (and Juicer Lynch) or wariness of Latter-Day Laurie. Wariness is key to survival and success; so are patience and perseverance. All these factor into the right strategy, whether you're playing volleyball or basketball, or operating on behalf of what Lola calls an "extramural" crew.

Sometimes you can operate on impulse without losing momentum or drawing a penalty—such as by acting chiropractic just now with Gigi Pyle. FLASH went the lightning in your heart; CLATTER went the hail before your eyes; *bang bang bang* went the hammer nailing a rearranged pecking order into place.

(*Oohs* and *ahhs* from the sixth-grade ghost of So-Dumb Laurie.)

Nobody rose to Gigi's defense; no one protested or complained, not even Dixie Cups herself. Maybe she's planning to tell on you to Britt, but that shouldn't interfere with any of *your* planning—short-term or long.

Three weeks spent planning. Neither Gigi nor Britt are in any of your classes or have the same lunch period, or can be counted on to use the second-floor washroom between Third and Fourth Hours. Other encounters needed to be set up. Their length didn't matter—a single glance can be more effective than a thousand words. Gigi entering the cafeteria as you leave it; two hours later, you entering the locker room as she leaves it. Between those pathcrossings you sometimes pass Britt on the stairs, you climbing up as she comes down—

in spite of her having Lunch 5D on the *first* floor. Which tells you something right there.

It was Britt, not Gigi, who rose to the three-week-old bait and summoned you over the phone to a Saturday night “shindig” at a place to be determined. Your folks—relieved you were going out at all, after boycotting Homecoming—jumped to the conclusion that Britt would be hostessing this at the gated-community home of Hoyt Groningen (Action Weather) and Dr. Hilde Krühler (*STAYING Cool with Your Public School*).

Susie, who remembered Britt from the '75 Ladybugs, suspended both belief and relief. “I hear she runs with a pretty fast crowd,” Susie remarked in the privacy of your shared bedroom.

“Maybe we’ll start a cross country team for next year,” you replied.

Cross country by car if not on foot, as a raucous little sportster comes shrieking up behind and then around with scarcely an inch of leeway. Its driver leans out of an open window (on a frosty night) to give your car a one-finger salute. Your big blond broad-shouldered driver doesn’t sound his horn or step on the brake but pulls up alongside the sportster, racing so closely in tandem you can peer through parallel windows at its passengers. They appear to be Mauly Carstairs and Gwen Cokingham—yes, that’s the Mauler behind the wheel, mugging like a bloodthirsty maniac instead of watching the road. So you roll down your window and give her a chopper-baring Dimancheff grin, plus a birdflip in return.

“Hey... don’t...” goes Gina beside you, sounding pretty nervous for a Genie of the Apocalypse.

“We there yet?” cracks Nadine beside her, beating you to the wiseass punch.

No response from Big Blond, but you can tell you’re way beyond Hereafter Park and out of The County as the car starts scaling Dowager’s Bluff, that high ridge overlooking the Lake As Big As An Ocean—maybe to go sailing off it into the air to land in the Lake and see how far you can float? Or to explore the luxury haunts of the very rich, wealthier even than Britt; the Groningens don’t own a castle like the one bulking on the horizon at the end of the road. A genuine castle, not ironic like Castle Quirk that Sheila calls a “swollen overgrown distended shanty.” This is a massive pile of roughly-finished stone and brickwork, thick and

weighty and forbidding, that could double as Frankenstein's watchtower.

Cobbler Topping

reads the floodlit sign above a tall round rugged arch, through which the sportster hurtles just ahead of Big Blond's car. Mauly almost plows into some shrubbery before hauling herself out (not bothering to switch off her ignition) and careening up the walk to an immense front door beneath another round rugged arch. This she deals a resonant SLAP with a gloatful "HAW!" at the rest of you trailing behind—Gwen bitching at Mauly, Gina sticking next to Nadine, Gigi hiding on Broadshoulders's far side while mumbling to herself and giving you the stink-eye.

Which you catch. And flex prehensile fingers at.

Causing Dixie Cups to shrink further away.

You're admitted into the castle by a French maid, or at least somebody (who has some body) *dressed* as a French maid, complete with fishnet stockings and four-inch heels. Underneath a shellacking of makeup her face seems familiar, and yours seems to strike her likewise before she steps aside to let you be greeted by a ghoul on the grand staircase:

"Welcome, my poppets. Welcome to the Grindhouse."

You've never seen an authentic albino in pigmentless person before, but did glimpse *this* ghoul at the Vinyl Spinnaker when he tape-recorded that Rosa Dartles concert birthday party for You Know Who. Elsewhere too since then, always in Britt's company, though they haven't behaved like a customary couple. Not that they easily could, being lookalikes for Johnny Winter and Sissy Spacek—*Carrie Captured Live!*

Here he is ghoulishly kissing your hand with cold damp lips as he fixes eggshell eyeballs on your red vinyl coat and brunette drooptails. "Dear Dyna Girl," he calls you, pronouncing it *dine agh hurl*. "So glad you could make it—"

"HAH there, Flake!" Gigi practically yells at him, probably to emphasize her frequent-flyer credentials; but the mottled bruises surrounding his bonked-out eyes don't even twitch her way. Nor do they shift to Gina (though she's fairly attractive) or Nadine (though she's certainly coldblooded). No, they remain on *you* as he twines a ghoulish arm about your red vinyl waist and leads you up the stairs. You mobilize your own sangfroid to

give him a steady unwavering C-H-I-L-L and see how *he* likes it.

(Quite a lot, so far as you can sense masculine reactivity.)

“Refreshments in the projection room!” he calls out to the French maid.

“‘*Giddy-yap giddy-yap giddy-yap let’s GO!*’” sings Mauly. “I wanna watch those chestnuts POP!”

“No chestnuts tonight, poppet,” the ghoul tells her. “No coffee or pumpkin pie. Just a happy feeling nothing in the worrrrld can buy.”

While you and the others are conducted through richly-furnished halls and down richly-decorated corridors, you consider what you’ve heard tell concerning Newley Hasleman, alias “Flake.” Only child of H.R. Hasleman (“Pufnstuf” to his son) whose family cornered The Cityland’s rock salt market. A junior at Front Tree Country Day School. Was accused of ridiculing hunchbacks when he went to a school cotillion (not a costume ball) garbed as Riff Raff from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, escorting Britt who went as Squeaky Fromme. Is regarded in certain circles as something of a tech wizard—

—though it’s Britt who’s threading film into a Bell & Howell in the castle’s heavily-draped projection room. Tonight she’s wearing her “ravishingly pretty” face (if you don’t mind umpteen freckles) and a sexy expensive outfit of skintight sweater and disco pants. She comes forward to greet you and introduce you (plus Gina and Nadine) to a twosome of oddities slumped in the front row of a dozen plush movie-theater seats.

One of the weirdos is obviously a teen witch, and not named Sabrina either. Instead of a platinum bubble cut her hair is lank and stringy, and in place of a broomstick she clasps an ornate leatherbound book (obviously of sorceress incantations) whose occult gravity has shriveled her down to skin and bones. This is Linda (spelled L-Y-N-N-D-H-A) who takes it upon her rigid dogmatic self to present you to her companion guru. This appears to be a homeless young hobo given charitable shelter and cleanish dryish clothes, though he could do with a shampoo and shave and twelve-step program. (He’s devoidly absorbed in an unseeable movie on the projection room’s blank screen.) Lynndha-the-witch reverently refers to him as “Parnell,” but no one is home when you probe for an occupant—neither a paragon nor a paranoid, nor even a paradox.

The French maid hands out small cups of what smells like syrup, and saucers of what looks like Turkish delight. Gina, beside you, hesitates at putting either in her mouth. Gigi, beyond Gina, frankly gobbles down both; as do Mauly and her cousin Jive Mansfield and a Startopper named Renee who's been furiously chomping a big cud of gum. You (sensing watchful eyes upon your every movement) take a sample from cup and saucer and taste only sticky sweetness. Somebody's idea of a joke, and probably not the some-bodied maid's.

With refreshments served, showtime is announced and Flake's poppets are directed to specific plush seats. As tonight's newbies you and Gina and Nadine are sent to the back row along with sputtering indignant Gigi. Jive, Gwen, Mauly, and Renee occupy the middle row, while Broadshoulders joins Lynndha and Parnell up front. As does Flake, who nods at Britt to douse the houselights and start the projector, while telling the conclave:

"Be warned—the nightmare has not gone away. We give you... *Eraserhead*."

What follows onscreen might've given So-Dumb Laurie lifelong horrors, but strikes the New You as bizarre black-and-white stupidity. You suspect it makes some of its viewers uncomfortable (Gina's squirming, Nadine emits short annoyed grunts) while others act increasingly impatient for a helping of goodies more robust than any dished up so far.

"We got chicken tonight," says a man in the movie. "Strangest damn things—they're man-made. Little damn things, smaller than my fist..."

Then in the front row a gurgle-glubby voice is raised:

*Y'put y'r left arm up 'n' y'r right arm too
Lemme tell y'just what y'gotta do
Start both of 'em flappin', y'r feet t'kickin'
Then y'know y'doin' the Funky Chicken!*

This gets screechily echoed by Lynndha, with a "Harkee—so be it" finale.

("Come, we shall have some fun now!" pops into your head from the Mad Hatter's tea party.)

"Do I just cut them up like regular chickens?" asks the eraserheaded-haircut guy onscreen. "Sure, just cut them up like regular chickens," he's told. And while the tiny stabbed chicken bleeds and writhes, and the black-and-white people in the bizarre movie

react stupidly, good old Gurgle-Glub resumes:

*This is th' kinda stuff t'make y'feel
Like y'wanna do sump'n nasty
Like waste some chicken gravy
On y'r white shirt right down front
Here w'go y'all!*

Raising your back-row voice, you chime in:

*Y'work both arms 'n' y'work both feet
Use a dabba gravy, y'right on the beat—*

“WHO’S DOING THAT??” screams Lynndha Splintertonsils.

“I am,” you retort, standing up to leave no doubt about it.

“THIS IS NOT A BAPTIST CHOIR REHEARSAL!! WHEN **HE** SPEAKS, YOU HEARKEN!!”

“If **HE** gets to sing, WE get to sing!” you insist.

“**GET OUT!! GET OUT!! SOMEONE THROW HER OUT!!**” Lynndha castigates your blasphemy, continuing with diminished coherence when you throw your saucer of Turkish delight at her and she’s smacked squarely by a cloud of powdered sugar.

“**AH DIDN’T BRING HER! AH DIDN’T WANT HER TO COME!**” Gigi blathers as Big Blond Dane steers you through the mêlée, over Flake (rolling on the carpet with ghoulish laughter) and past Britt (giving you another sleepy-smily-sounding “Later”) on out of the projection room.

“You going to drive me home now?” you ask the Great Dane.

He shrugs his broad shoulders, shakes his head *no*, then returns inside.

Well, here’s a howdedo. Not only have you blown your infiltration mission (meaning Antoinette will be displeased) but you mustn’t blow it worse by calling Lola or Bootleg for a ride, not even to arrange pickup somewhere down the road—not using an eavesdroppable Grindhouse phone. Nor can you call Mom or Pa, who think you’re at Sunny Squash Court. Susie’s years away from her license, Jason’s doubtless whooping it up down in Carbondale, and most of the car-owning students in your mental Rolodex are currently at the

Homecoming Dance. So...?

“Come on,” says the French maid, shrugging into an ulsterette. “I’ll take you home, but we’ve got to be quick.”

“Thanks. I live on—”

“Grouseland. Right?”

Now you know who she is. Though she doesn’t confirm it till you’re in a brand-new-scented Diplomat Medallion and it’s rolling down Dowager’s Bluff, away from the castle. Only then does she exhale and say “Laurie...?”

“Yeah. Doodles?”

“Yeah.”

A decade ago she was Deirdre Weiner, the Big Girl Next Door, who babysat you and Ingrid (but not Wanda Lynn, whose parents didn’t trust teenaged sitters). Maybe not the brightest girl on the block, yet enviably built and with artistic aspirations: encouraging you and Ingrid to wear out entire Crayola boxes coloring inside and outside the lines.

“Draw what you see,” she’d tell you. “Doodle till you see it.”

(Many a wishful self-portrait of growing up to look like Deirdre.)

Her departure for college was one of the many tragedies befalling you between fifth and sixth grade. Soon afterward the Weiners moved away, so Doodles never came back even for a visit. Tonight’s the first time in four-and-a-half years that she’s returned to Grouseland Street—gazing through the Diplomat windshield at what’s now the Clevinger house, from whose side yard rises the usual late-evening barks.

“What...?”

“German shepherds. They work in shifts.”

“Hunh,” goes Doodles.

“Well—” you say, unbuckling your seatbelt.

“Wait. We’ve got to talk. Not now, not here. Is Jewel Foods still on Sendt?”

“Sure.”

“Can you be there tomorrow morning, say about ten?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Find me there then, but don’t act like we know each other.”

““Kay. Thanks.”

You climb out of the Diplomat and watch it swoop away. Then the Baxters’s Vista Cruiser arrives, so Big Sue can drop Susie off from her date with Punkin’ Patrick. Who dares not kiss her in front of their sisters, but mimics gallantry by getting out and running over to open Susie’s door for her; fooling no one including Susie. (Big Sue didn’t go the Homecoming Dance; she spends Saturday nights at her gun club’s shooting range. Highlight that in your mental Rolodex—possible availability for a future undercover ride.)

“So?” Susie asks as you head into your mud room. “What’d Britt say about cross country?”

“She said ‘Later.’” (Nothing but the truth).

*

*Oh the world is your snohhhhball, see how it grohhhhws
That’s how it goehhhhs whenever it snohhhhws...*

Now it’s Monday morning. First Hour Girls Chorus for those who didn’t pass the audition to get into Mr. Frazee’s Advanced Vocal Music, and so are stuck singing Miss Sickles’s selections for next month’s Winter Holiday Concert. “A Marshmallow World” might be tailor-made for Isabel’s voice, or Delia’s or Madeline Wrippley’s or even Chookie Yentlebaum’s; but for you at this particular moment it’s *quelle ironique*.

Eyes on your music folder. Ears open to what’s underway in the rest of the room. Leaving your mind free to review the report you compiled last night: not in code, but with misleading abbreviations (TC for Cobbler Topping, HL for yourself, etc.) and the key on a slip of different-colored paper. Both hidden in your folder, ready for submittal to Lola.

Yesterday morning’s rendezvous went without a hitch. Again you dragged Susie out of bed for a nice cold Sunday sunrise run. Again you outpaced Big Sue sprinting to the sanitary canal. Then after breakfast you took a grocery list and biked to the Jewels on Sendt Street, reaching it just as church bells bonged ten.

(You and Ingrid used to go to the Congregational Sunday school, learning more about Joyce Usher’s superstitions than any psalm or parable. You quit going after Ingrid moved away and all the other bad things happened, irrespective of your prayers. When the Zanes

came, they said they'd been *de*-churched—a sanctimonious cleric having censured Pa for the sins of the First Mrs. Zane, then trying to chastise Susie for kicking him on the kneecap. Henceforth your combined household worshiped informally, with scuzzy Jason idolizing *Penthouse* Pets.)

The Diplomat Medallion was waiting for you in the Jewels parking lot. Doodles, wearing a non-French sweatsuit and no-inch gym shoes, entered the store while you chained your bike and casually caught up. Joss Murrish wasn't on bagger duty yet—*she* still went to church—and you saw no one you knew as you each pushed a basket up and down the aisles, Doodles whispered earnestly and urgently, peeking around for spies. You brought all your Good Listener powers into play, even acting So Dumb to draw Doodles out about *why* you must never have anything further to do with Flake Hasleman and his fringe elements. Don't end up as Doodles had, dropping out of college after a few unhappy liaisons and in mounting debt, getting chased back to The City to degrade herself by—

The bell rings (at school today, not church on Sunday) and out you go, leaving Miss Sickles in mid-rebuke of three altos who slouched during a crescendo: almost as heinous a choir crime as ruminating on Juicy Fruit.

There's little chance of running into Britt or Gigi now, since Mr. Frazee's musical sanctum sanctorum isn't even on the same floor as the Girls Chorus room; so you can saunter over to Contemporary Living and nonchalantly slide your report onto Lola's desk. "Here's those notes on no-fault divorce," you say, later sneaking her the different-colored key while Ms. Derwent dissects courtship and wedlock (plus a few alternatives) in the Late '70s. Jot a few notes on these while mentally recounting the bullet points of what you elicited from WD [Deirdre Weiner] yesterday at FJ [Jewel Foods]. Sorted chronologically:

- After quitting college, she got a menial housekeeping job at The City's flagship IS [Scrimpton Inn]
- There she added to her meager income (and mental depression) by "servicing" male travelers
- One of whom, HB [a guy calling himself "Buzz Hovercraft"], offered to pay her with CN [nose candy] instead of cash

- CN was such a (temporary) blues-dispeller that WD began stealing from hotel guests to buy more of it from HB
- And was caught in the act during an IS convention by its local host, HP [Pufnstuf Hasleman]
- Who gave her a choice: arrest and jailtime, or a new job as the latest in his series of “personal maids” at TC [Cobbler Topping]
- At first she found this an improvement, having to service only HP (whose wife didn’t care, so long as his personal maid could actually clean house)
- But though WD tried to kick the CN habit, her need was too great, so she tried to steal a few items from TC
- And got caught in *that* act by HF [Flake] who blackmailed her into servicing *him* [ugh]
- As well as providing his EF [fringe elements, the Traversers] with their own CN connection
- So now HB was peddling CN to rich high-schoolers as well as at CL [Lakeside Central] and PM [the Magnetic Pole, a superexclusive new disco] which HL [yourself] should also avoid at all costs

Report delivered; mission accomplished; job well done.

Except for one loose end.

Nowadays Susie leaves her closet unlocked since you rarely use the pink touchtone Princess anymore, letting the Phone-Mate record thirty-second messages from any incoming calls. Among yesterday afternoon’s was one with a coldish dampish dissonance:

“Hello, my Dine Agh Hurl... this is your friendly Flake... hoping you weren’t miffed by last night’s little tiff... you’re still my kilowatt cutie... be seeing you sooooooon...”

Had he cottoned onto Doodles’s tipping you off about him and the Traverser nose-candy connection? And even if so, aren’t your tracks sufficiently covered so Antoinette will get what she asked for?

You know now what he’s capable of. We must be on our guard.

(When the still small voice speaks from the middle distance of your inner ear, you hearken.)

*

Meanwhile, alphabetic is as alphabetic does. *When* it does, which isn't always.

For example: GROH, JANE ESMÉ came right before GRONINGEN, BRITT REGAN in every alphabetic roster from seventh grade to tenth, but the two were always on separate academic teams at VW. Not till senior high did they have a class together, and that was Third Hour Biology with Doc Plassy (Gustav Plassmann PhD) who said there were so many better things to be concerned about in This World Of Ours than arbitrarily paired-up lab partners. So Spacyjane wasn't matched with Britt by virtue of their juxtaposed surnames, or indeed at all—which was rather a shame, since Britt had one of the most fascinating auras Spacyjane'd ever perceived.

Working at a neighboring lab station did enable Spacyjane to keep a star sapphire on Britt and her aura, though Britt seldom corresponded with one of her flickering gaslights. Their stations were at the front of the lab, which was beneficial since Doc Plassy'd had a stroke a few years ago, and this (on top of his softspoken Westphalian accent) made him intermittently enigmatic, as well as less energetic than when he'd led wide-ranging field trips through Auldforest to watch birds or find wild mice for mazework. Happily Spacyjane was partnered with Ryan Purvis, who might be doleful yet could decipher Doc Plassy when he got inscrutable, as happened more and more often with their current unit on genetics. Spacyjane enjoyed hearing how Gregor Mendel experimented with pea plants, but Ryan did much better translating this into genotypes and phenotypes, dominant and recessive genes, and using a Punnett square (instead of Tarot cards or a Ouija board) to make predictions.

Britt's aura was unperturbed by anything Biological. That included her partnership with Dino Tattaglia, who kept biting the heel of his hand and going *gnnnnogg* at every reference to stamens and pistils, male and female gametes, or cross-fertilization. Doc Plassy rarely got through a lecture or lab without shaking an already shaky post-stroke finger at Dino, who'd once secreted a fetal pig into Lyle Wilkie's pocket at a meeting of the VW Science Club.

Britt was able to bring Dino to heel, jerking on a psychic leash. Spacyjane'd seen her do this, most recently last Thursday when The Embodiment fell down in the hall after French class. T.E.'d put on a skirt much shorter than Floramour's, so this immodest spread-eagling

might've been just another of her fleshy-possession violations. But Spacyjane had witnessed T.E. getting *tripped*—and deliberately too, since she (Spacyjane) then saw something being stolen from her (T.E.'s) kicked-away-then-back handbag.

To mistreat The Embodiment, *while* she was Embodied, was to mistreat Floramour.

But who could have done the tripping and kicking and stealing? It all happened so quickly and in such a crowd: there was the flash of a foot, the flash of a hand, and a prolonged flash of T.E.'s garish underpants (the sort Floramour would NEVER wear) for Dino Tattaglia to *gnnnnong* at till Britt tweaked his psychic leash and led him downstairs to Biology.

Yet Spacyjane was fairly certain Britt had observed the same trip and kick and theft.

Half a dozen solicitous guys were helping The Embodiment up to her feet as she *gradually* tugged that too-short skirt down over those too-brief panties. Intimate exposure put Spacyjane in mind of her own bodice-popping at *Carnival's* undress rehearsal, which in turn reminded her of Swee'Pea (deep heartfelt sigh) and also Gigi Pyle, who'd made such an impresario-fuss about the Spring Musical in general and that rehearsal in particular.

Could Gigi have been the tripper/kicker/thief? She'd been there in the hall outside the Foreign Language classrooms, and made no secret of her dislike for The Embodiment. Plus Gigi had undergone quite a few vicissitudes since leaving junior high—some before then, too. Recall that supper party to which she'd invited the VW Drama Club (and then the entire freshman class) last Presidents Day, only to see it pre-empted by the disco concert at the Vinyl Spinnaker for Vicki Volester's *Quinceañera*. Everyone (apart from Gigi and Kim Zimmer) had gone to that instead, including Britt...

...and the Boo Radley doppelgänger remanifesting itself right now outside the open door of Doc Plassy's lab.

Unless it was a *genius loci*: the protective spirit of Vanderlund Senior High. Some upperclassmen said Whielding Wheaf, the school's first principal, would step out of his portrait in the main lobby to roam the Pantheon he'd envisioned but not lived to see built. However, in that portrait Mr. Wheaf had short hair and a beard, whereas this doppelgänger had long hair and a gaunt bare chin. And why would a *genius* have left its *loci* to go visit a stripmall disco, even on the night before Mardi Gras?

“Zee failure of homologous chromosomes to separate during meiosis,” Doc Plassy was slightly-slurredly saying, “issss called... vhat?”

“Nondisjunction,” Ryan plaintively answered.

Whereupon an image began to generate in Spacyjane’s farsighted mind.

Return to last Thursday. She’d gone home to check on Floramour, who (as per usual) had gotten there first and been restored to her normal form, as well as the proper-length skirt and proper-sized lingerie she’d had on before school. No sign of abrasion or contusion from trippage or fallage while Embodied. Nor was anything missing from Floramour’s best purse—not that it was large enough to contain more than a tiny comb and brush. T.E. would’ve loaded *her* bag with lots of other things, so there was no telling what might have gone in and been stolen out.

No telling on Thursday... but *showing* now on Monday, in the farsighted mind’s eye. Of whatever-it-was getting handed over to the doppelgänger (or some secondary phantom) and then being turned into a pillarette of salt. Or sugar. Or flour. Or cornstarch.

Or snowflakes...

At ten past eleven Doc Plassy’s desk alarm buzzed, signaling the students to tidy up the lab and receive their homework assignment on abnormal chromosomes. At quarter past the corridor bell rang; Ryan trudged off to have lunch with Kathleen, Dino was hard on Irina Saranoff’s heels, and Britt *ambled* out to join the doppelgänger (whom Spacyjane decided should be thought of as “Haint”) and take a stand near the stairwell around the corner from the lab. Standing and waiting there, as if for a bus or train.

Until somebody tore down the stairs from the third floor to the second, whirled across the landing, and vanished inside the girls washroom.

Spacyjane, lingering behind Britt and Haint, blinked her star sapphires. Could *that* have been Gigi Pyle? Clad not in a chic stylish ensemble, but nondescript jeans and a camouflage-patterned pullover?

Britt and Haint, without so much as an exchanged nod, took their leave from each other: Britt ambling away to Fourth Hour Geometry, Haint to whatever plane of existence he otherwise occupied. Spacyjane, having a couple of minutes till Study Hall, took a step toward the washroom—

—and was taken in hand, literally, memorably, unforgettably: a can-it-really-be arm around her waist, a please-let-it-be-true finger against her lips, as she got transported down the hall and through a door into the auditorium balcony. Which was supposedly off-limits when no assembly or adult-supervised activity took place; but locks and bolts (not to mention inhibitions) yielded without a struggle when handled by...

...her Swee'Pea.

His first touch, his first feel since the Homecoming Dance, sixteen barren days ago.

Spacyjane gave a thousand thanks to the whim that'd made her don a cute outfit this morning: orange and yellow like on Socks-and-Hat Day, but with more of a harvest-ballish quality—hot apple cider spiced with cinnamon and cloves. And buttered rum. Alone on a balcony with her rustyheaded Romeo:

*My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite—*

But Sidney Erbsen hunkered vigilantly by the not-quite-closed door, his camera lens pointed outward past the jamb like the Beast of East Bay on the alert for paparazzo-quarry. Even as Spacyjane arranged her cutely-outfitted self on a balcony seat: *I am your prisoner. Hold me hostage. Keep me captivated. Enslave my tenderest affections.*

“Later,” said Split-Pea.

*

(Meanwhile...)

Keep your eye on the ball and your mind on the game.

So spoke the s.s. voice: sounding like Ms. Raye the JV basketball coach, or Beverly Kelly the JV basketball captain, or Maureen “Strudel” Muller the JV basketball manager, who rumor had it was carrying on something fierce with—

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL AND YOUR MIND ON THE GAME.

(Easier still-small said than here-and-now done.)

Third Hour English with Miss DuJardin. You and Samantha had expended a lot of effort trying to get transferred into the same class, but the authorities wouldn't relent and you

remained in Third Hour while Sammi stayed in Sixth. Same teacher, same textbook, same lesson plan—nothing different except variant quiz questions, so Third couldn't tip off Sixth at midday. Not that it'd mattered much during the past month or so, when the only tipping-off you'd done with Sammi was on a gym court. Still... it would be better to have her here, now, in *this* class, instead of Carly Thibert and Tess Disseldorf and those stoner-boys Skully Erle and Matt LaVintner.

This week's assigned reading material was *A Dream to Touch*, the sort of book tailor-made for Samantha who devoured all those *Young Love* romance comics. It was holding your interest too, more than *Silly Ass Marner* ever did. *A Dream to Touch* was set in The City twenty years ago on a slummy street where Marya Rose, a teen girl from a poor immigrant family, yearned for escape while worrying that her boyfriend and kid brother were getting involved with a street gang. So what, you might ask? Yet there were passages that stirred the stagnancy of your time-biding, stirred it in ways that smacking a ball or yanking some hair or even giving a gut-poke hadn't and couldn't.

Climb up to the tenement roof with Marya Rose on a hot summer night, seeking sleep but feeling your spirit expand and be set free under bright stars and a rising moon. Gaze with Marya at the Lake As Big As An Ocean, your body inert yet your spirit taking wing like a seagull as it dips and soars over the wild blue waves.

Silly ass, maybe.

But you used to feel things like that.

So did Sammi, and Susie, and even Rachel (though she'd take a more scientific interest in things like stars and waves). *Unlike* Carly, trying to tease admiration out of wasted Matt; or Tess, trying to score discount weed from stingy Skully.

You and Sammi had the same assigned reading. You could drop a casual comment about *A Dream to Touch* during afterschool basketball practice. It'd be a nice change from dropping bogusly-loaded money clips. You'd earned some points toward badassification, and maybe it was time to take a break. (While, of course, keeping eye-on-ball and mind-on-game.)

The 4A bell rang and you descended from the fourth floor to the second. Better check out the washroom to see if Britt and/or Gigi were there, and if so how they'd react.

Nope. Nobody you knew well. Typical mirror-hoggers fixing makeup, fluffing ‘dos; typical smoke-snatchers taking furtive puffs, tamping unfinished cigarettes. No impulse to bum one right now, not in school where Bev or Strudel could get wind of it and tattle to Ms. Raye. But as long as you’re here, you might as well make use of the plumbing before Study Hall. A stall was vacated, you headed on in—

—sudden motion behind you from a body hurtling out of the neighboring stall to *slam* into your back and *wham* parts of your front against the partition and TP dispenser and toilet bowl wedging you tight as you feel seizure of a drooptail and shoulderbag-strap but you haven’t forgotten Charlotte Pauk’s self-defense lessons in the Villa Neapolitan cellar so you kick backward aiming for a kneecap like Susie would which de-wedges you enough to jab with the same elbow you planted into Lenny Otis’s kidney and *that* opens up enough space for you to do a fullbodied mule kick that makes contact and produces an **OOF** like the one from Mumbles when she got bombed by Boomer Wrang at the Houlihan volleyball match—

—but by the time you finish pivoting around, the **OOFer**’s vamoosed and the washroom door is swinging shut.

Sit down heavily on the toilet seat and take a few deep breaths.

WHAT THE HELL KIND OF WHACK JOB WAS THAT??

Sonny Corleone got mowed down by machine guns. Luca Brasi and Carlo the brother-in-law were garroted. Moe Greene was shot dead *through his glasses*.

You didn’t even drop your lunchsack.

(Though it’s considerably smushed and starting to leak.)

By now the 4A tardy bell’s rung, no one’s in the washroom, there’s no reason to rush as you assess other ambush-damage. First on the pot, then in the mirror.

Probably a bruise or two. Sore scalp where your drooptail got tugged (by what hardly qualifies as a *yank*). Half-snapped shoulderbag-strap. Slight trickle of blood from one nostril; plug it with tissue. Lip starting to fatten on that side; maybe a small mouse under that eye. Teeth unchipped; tongue unbitten; inner ear undeaftened.

Stare into yourself while hearkening to the s.s. voice.

Then step out into an almost-empty corridor being patrolled by a portly teacher—Mr. Prout of Social Studies, who points at a wall clock and pontificates that the late bell has rung,

young lady.

Assume your So-Dumb persona and tell Mr. Prout you tripped and fell in the too-bashful-to-say-the-word-aloud, indicate-washroom-with-your-head.

“*Slipped* and fell?” says Mr. Prout, fretting about potential litigation, embarrassed to think what could be slipped on inside a girls john. No no, you reply; just tripped over your own two feet and bumped your face on the tile wall. Can you please go see the nurse now?

Mr. Prout would never believe such an allegation if made by a boy; but since girls don’t beat each other up at VTHS—except with words, glances, and ostracization—he buys it and leads you downstairs to ensure you do no more tripping en route.

(Showing no sign, before you leave the second floor, of having heard a distinct CLICK from the door to the auditorium balcony. Not of its closing; more like a camera shutter.)

In the nurse’s office you nod abashedly at student aide Nancy Buschmeyer and, while waiting your turn to be treated, analyze the botched ambush. Gigi’s your obvious suspect, but Wanda Lynn might’ve decided to defy Antoinette and wreak delayed revenge. Or maybe it was Mauly? Gwen Cokingham? Both were erratic enough during volleyball season to make their blowing a Traverser dry-gulch believable. Yet none of the above are here in the nurse’s office, and you *know* you left an **OOF** mark on whoever it was.

Ms. Rathbone, remembering you from your visit last September, is slower to accept the tripped-and-fell story. But Monday lunch periods are a busy time for her; so she gives you cotton for your nostril, an icepack for your lip, and a note for your homeroom teacher (or rather the sub filling in for cracked-up Mr. Watford).

4B has come and gone and 5C’s bell is clanging as you’re discharged, so no lunch today; you already discarded your mangled leaky sack. Yet out in the lobby your name is called and here’s Britt Groningen lounging against a trophy case, giving you a sleepy little hatchet-honing smile: *dart—flick—gash*. “Come have a bite to eat,” she says.

“Can’t. Got to get to Bio before Dimancheff locks me out.”

“Ditch it. Just this once.”

Never in your life have you intentionally ditched a class, and Mr. Dimancheff’s is the last one you ought to begin with. Britt, though, is turning up the gaslight under her heavy lids and bringing it to bear on you, as if bent on fridgifying any resistance you might put up.

Poor Britt.

Can't she guess that freezeouts are futile?

Your sangfroid has automatically kicked in: that steady unwavering C-H-I-L-L that *kewwwwls* your mind even as it gooses your flesh.

But you put on a so-dumb show of being intimidated and follow her bold egress through the school's front doors. (Lola the master forger can emend Nurse Rathbone's note to cover Fifth Hour as well as Fourth. Assuming you live long enough to use it tomorrow.)

"Where we going, Britt?" you ask in a scared-wittle-wabbit whimper.

"You'll see..."

Lengthen your gait. Pick up the pace. Pull out ahead—Britt wasn't an impressive cross country runner at VW and hasn't been on a sports team since eighth grade, so she lags behind as you leg it toward—what? which? *there*—a Toyota Cressida loitering on Pandean Street, with a wannabe albino lurking in the driver's seat.

"Lookit, there's Flaky!" you holler and take off at a gallop, leaving Britt to eat your dust as you reach the car and give its roof a hail-fellow THUMP, call "Shotgun!" and fling open the passenger door, barrel in beside the disconcerted driver and punch the power locks so Britt has to rattle a rear handle till Flake can gather his ghoulish wits and let her into the backseat.

"*Not* cool," she remarks, a trifle breathlessly.

"Uh hi there, Dine Agh Hurl," Flake attempts to reassert; but you snatch an unlabeled cassette from his cold damp hand, inquire "Is this a mix tape?" and pop it into the dashboard deck. Stabbing the PLAY button, twirling the VOL knob, you inundate the Cressida with the sobby sound of a woman begging for mercy. Or *acting* like she's begging, with audible vexation as if this were Take Thirteen of an all-night recording session.

"LAME!" you react. Is this supposed to make you quake with fear that you've fallen into the clutches of the Mad Bludgeoner? More like the clammy paws of Pitiful Tom Sawyer, playing at being a big mean pirate attending his own funeral! "Black Avenger of the Spanish Main *your snowy-white ass*, NEWWWW-LEEEY!"

Flustered Flake hits the OFF button and the car falls silent as your fattened (despite the icepack) eraserlips widen and broaden and amplify into something akin to a smile or maybe a

smudgepot as a fine gray mist fills the Cressida till even Britt's abysmal gaslights go dim, her face as drained of blood as Flake's so its freckles stand out like polka-dots.

*OUR ALL-CAPITALS **TIME** HAS COME.*

Let Marya Rose watch the waves and stars to her so-dumb heart's content.

You have risen above and beyond them. Throw off every subterfuge, and woe betide any misguided ignoramus who dares try to top your badassery—be it Mr. Dimancheff, or Dennis Desmond, or Antoinette O'Toole herself.

"COME, WE SHALL HAVE SOME FUN NOW!" you inform the car and the street and the 'burb and the world, with a crashing peal of blistery shivaree laughter.

43

Wintersault

My name is Virginia Leigh Pyle.

I've got to keep hold of myself.

Because the Gobble-uns 'll get me if I don't hold tight...

When she came round, she found herself flat on her back in a narrow canoe or watery coffin: buried at sea but still afloat, adrift, with a pair of humansized DUCKS staring down at her from either side.

“Quackup” they went; or maybe that was all she could make out through the pulsing throbbing ACHE that laid her low. “We all weigh the same as a duck” chanted the pair as they underwent alteration into Kim Zimmer (who’d always looked like Donald’s Daisy) on her left, and Diana Dabney (in pre-swannified ugliform) on her right. Together piling more and more WEIGHT upon her as she lay wracked in the bottom of the paddleless boat or openlidded casket: didn’t they notice how *unwell* that made her? or that it added to her shadowed sickness by half? “Thank Shalott” went the one on the left, dissolving into rustyheaded Sidney Erbsen (definitely not a Lancelot) while the one on the right became a spaced-out live-action puppet singing *Yum ticky ticky tum*.

Between them they managed to dull her pain (maybe by simply being tedious) and extract her from that coffinlike canoe, to sleepwalk through the rest of the week. Did she go to classes, cheer practice, choir rehearsal? If so it was on all on blurry autopilot, with no appetite for food or drink or even The Stuff—

—at least until Saturday night, when no one would tell her where the Traversers were gathering. Not that they ever seemed to know this themselves beforehand; but Britt had turned to speechless soapstone, the Great Dane wouldn't respond to her calls, and every message she left at Cobbler Topping went unanswered—

—at least until an unknown voice phoned to say she'd run out of credit and had done nothing that week to warrant an extension. A sentence that might've been pronounced by Parnell himself, so astrally slackered did it sound before a terminal CLICK—

—at which point all her hungers and thirsts kicked in and starvation craving was brought to the very forefront of constant awareness.

Cash on the barrelhead was needed, at once, in abundance. But she'd been overdrawn for a tapped-out month or more; nothing readily sellable or hockable was left within reach, and doing extra chores would only result in a slight reduction of debt.

"You—you have yourself," prompted Scarlett O'Hara, whose solution to a similar predicament had been to convert velvet portières into a beguiling gown and offer its contents to Rhett Butler. He may have been a hateful skunk, but one with half a million dollars salted away; and *that* was a sum to make the parched mouth water—

—till the notion of obtaining it by carnal hookery spawned a scream-yourself-awake nightmare of lurid debasement by Lenny Otis and Dino Tattaglia—*oh Lawdy!*—two pariahs *non grata* she'd told to stare their loser eyes blind while diddling themselves miserable, but now... but now...

No—*no*—NO—NO—

Truly a fate worse than death.

Even if they could muster up anything *close* to half a mill. (Scarlett hadn't gotten a red cent out of Rhett Butler.)

So: fall back on the five-finger discount. In a place where her face wouldn't be readily recognized, which ruled out all the better boutiques and emporiums. And explained why she was entering a *Sears*—the sort of outlet she normally wouldn't be caught pushing up dandelions at. But they were open Sundays from ten to six "for your holiday pleasure, now through Christmas"; meaning she'd have to load up on quantity to compensate for the lack of quality. Hence the baggy beige bra beneath the saggy taupe top beneath the plain brown ski

jacket, whose eiderdown wasn't doing its job to keep her from shuddering. Hands especially as she shoved them deep into plain brown pockets, willing her fingers to be nimble.

Mosey over to the jewelry (more like "trinkets") counter. Check out the revolving rack atop it. Heart-shaped pierced set with 14K gold posts: a pitiful \$9.00 retail. The sort of doodad Squintilla Stott would wear, lacking the insight to distinguish tacky from tolerable. Even so, hold them up to a trembly lobe and act as though gauging the effect in a countertop mirror. Then, oh-so-casually, deftly, NIMBLY allow the earrings to slide down inside the taupe top's saggy V-neck—

"Beg pardon, miss—"

BUSTED! Caught in the act by a short fat security guard with a straggly combover! Nabbed for swiping a pair of cheap junky earbobs, at a *Sears!* Where she was now going to be subjected to ruthless invasive stripsearching and criminal prosecution!

"No *no* NO NO," she stammered, clutching her bosom as it began to heave. "They *fell* in, just slipped out of my hand, yew gotta beeleeve meeee—"

"Glory HONNolulu ay-loha ay-men, *I* beeleeve!" yakked a maniac charging over to seize her by the wrist, haul it off her chest, and exhibit its damp hand palm-forward. "Have you *ever* in your storied career as a department store constable be-HELD such a moisturized display of cold-sweat clamminess? It's taking all my strength to keep this wetly woebegone paw from slithering out of my own grip altogether! Imagine how saturated the REST of this poor perspiring girl must be—how she'll have to wring the saltwater out of all her sweltery garments, outer and under, upper and lower, exactly as if she'd been washed overboard from a transatlantic steamer and taken a forcible dip in the ever-loving deep blue sea!"

Deep blue as opposed to the cherry-tomato-red blush suffusing her face at the picture these words must be unveiling in the security guard's straggly combover mind. Which he wrenched back to the matter at hand with an obvious conjecture that *two* shoplifters were working in cahoots here—

—till a heavily-packed shopping sack (trailing an ostentatious register receipt) got hoisted onto the jewelry counter, and a business-type calling card was produced for the guard to inspect:

"MORRIGAN FOLEY-DESMOND STUDIO / GLOAMING AVENUE / VANDERLUND?"

“‘Is that his dear old mither?’ you’ll be wondering, and ’tis right you are to think so! Am I here to purchase supplies for her photographic endeavors? you’ll be asking next, and right again I’m compelled to say! Then you’ll be guessing that Miss Pie here is one of our choicest modeling prospects—”

“*Pahhhhl!*” she reflexively corrected.

“*Pyyyyle*, of course—as in Gomer.”

“NO-ew! As in Ernie the war correspondent!” (Whom her father J.W. claimed obscure kinship with.)

“So, correspondently speaking, perhaps you could trouble one of your lovely lady staffers to assist Miss *Pyyyyle* in retrieving the merchandise in question (which I scarcely need mention WILL be paid for IN full IN cash) from the depths of her B-U-S-T-L-I-N-E, and then we’ll be on our merry way out of your accommodating hair.”

The security guard, reflexively stroking his combover, summoned a prison-matronly saleswoman to accompany Miss *Pyyyyle* into a fitting room, where the heart-shaped earrings were recouped along with many apologies and acknowledgments of her bra’s being baggy and references to recent unwellness and citations of the strap malfunction that’d caused her to be labeled “Lopsy” and insistence that all she’d wanted to do was some early Christmas shopping. (Though not for the earrings, which got flung into the heavily-packed shopping sack after nine-dollars-plus-tax were tendered.)

Then: sweet freedom. Escape from that infernal Sears, clinging to the arm of Dennis Desmond—a looney screwball maybe, but the absolute opposite of Unlucky Charms so far as Gigi was concerned. Infinitely preferable to those *ooh! ooh! gnnnnogg*-ing Smooch Smarks; and he’d alluded to a chance of earning some genuine moolah modeling for a professional artist—albeit an outré one, who’d taken a series of photos of the Carstairs sisters that had yet to be shown to the general public, but was extensively whispered about.

No matter. Gigi’d go as far as necessary or could be gotten away with, given her underage status; further than Odious Isabel ever would. Ditto when it came to drawing upon Dennis’s own resources—though his reputation as “One-Shot Thanks-a-Lot Untie-the-Knot” meant great care would have to be taken. There might be no second chance, if the first opportunity got wasted.

But there was so much in his favor besides the thickness of his wallet. He frequently harassed Diana Dabney and Valerie Frid, and had tipped an entire cup of pop (cracked ice and all) down the back of Margo Temple's blouse at the climax of *their* only date. That deed alone would make him kissworthy, even before she felt the rippling musculature under his sleeve and over the shoulder she suddenly wanted to rest her head upon. If only her outfit wasn't so drab and makeup so muted, and she hadn't made both worse by coming here on a smelly bus through November wind and rain...

"Can't tell yew jes how grateful Ah am for rescuing me," she murmured out in the New Sherwood parking lot as they headed not for his snazzy orange Camaro, but an (eww!) Wagonmaster pickup truck. Even so, gaze soulfully into his topaz eyes: "Hope there's some way Ah can *reward* yew for being such a chivalrous gentleman..."

Dennis responded by pulling open her ski jacket, grasping her saggy V-neck, and stretching it far, far forward while he took a lingering (yet offhand) glance down her quavering front. "Looks like you need a heap of fattening up and fillering out in there—a *couple* of heaps, not to put too fine a point on 'em."

Outraged modesty vied with wounded vanity as she twisted away and crossed wrists over her dishonored tatas. "Ah do *not* need any figgering out!"

"FILLERING, not figgering—though your figger will get fillered a lot fuller in the process. Hop in, gorgeous—I'll feed you a Sunday dinny-din-din that'll stick to your shall-we-say-'ribs,' and best of all I won't even count it against you as a 'date.'"

Outrage, vanity, and unquenched avarice all gave abrupt way to tearful weariness. "What Ah *really* need is someone t'take care of me..."

"What you *really* need is a hearty helping of German cuisine at the Lebkuchenhaus!" announced Dennis, tugging her by the crossed wrists up and into his Wagonmaster. "It's run by the Hitchens family, you know—Gretel pretends to be a hostess and Hansel impersonates a waiter—and they'll stuff you like a GOOSE with sauerbraten and sauerkraut and bratwurst and knockwurst and best-of-all *spätzle*."

"Ohhhhhhh," Gigi groaned. "Ah don't know 'bout that..."

"If you clean your plates (note the plural) I *might* stake you to a teensity-weensity taste of your favorite snotsugar for dessert."

Upset reluctance gave way to avid interest. “Have yew—have yew got some?”
“You’ll find out,” said Dennis Desmond.

*

The day before Thanksgiving, Cityland radio and television broadcasts were interrupted by a SPECIAL BULLETIN that the Mad Bludgeoner Task Force was questioning “a person of interest,” and had obtained a warrant to search said person’s premises. The general consensus was that a break in the case had come at last after three harrowing months, so extra thanks should be given on Turkey Day.

This was of meager comfort to the family and friends of the Bludgeoner’s latest victim—Estela Mantillo, an honor student at unhappy Multch East—whose mangled remains had been found in a leaf-clogged culvert and caused her mother to have a heart attack while identifying the body. Nor was there appreciative gratitude in the Athens Grove home of Bruno Turkenkopf, whose eldest son Wilmer’s name was quickly leak-linked to the “person of interest.” Wilmer, besides being grossly tattooed like all the Turkenkopfs, owned a vast collection of blunt instruments which the task force carted away for forensic examination after ransacking the house for evidence. Although no arrest or charge would be reported that four-day weekend, the news media did imply that a psych ward jail cell was as good as occupied; so festive merriment and soothing relief continued to prevail, despite a four-inch snowfall that hampered the official start of holiday shopping.

Few were stirred to lighter-heartedness than Mrs. Dr. Lafayette Carstairs V. Quaffing straight bourbon as she watched the white stuff pile up outside the Shoreward Club’s cocktail lounge, she declared that the Mad Bludgeoner’s apprehension ought to be celebrated with a *bal masqué* for all-our-safe-again-little-gals and no-longer-under-suspicion-little-guys. Why a *bal masqué*, less than a month after Halloween and a month before Christmas? Because back in 1952 when she was Miss Winifred Altdorf, she’d played Juliet (with an exotic Texas twang) at the joint Startop-Front Tree Shakespeare Festival, and its masquerade ball had been her favorite scene. “We need another hoodang just like that, and I’m here to see we get one!” Opposition cut no ice with whiskeyfied Winnie; she overrode it as per usual, and the concierge duly scheduled her masked hoodang for Saturday the 10th of December (weather permitting).

Daughters Millicent and Isabel wasted no time in shoveling out invites. Each was allotted a specific number to issue, and each used a Xerox machine to multiply her share until (if weather permitted everybody to show up) the Shoreward Clubhouse was doomed to become a jampacked madhouse.

Yet even if that were to happen, it was beaten to the bedlam punch by last Saturday's Junior Harvest Brawl at Petty Hills Country Club. Two years ago the bloodshed there had been limited to Sonny Lorgnon's nose when it smote the dance floor; this time the entire joint got shaken by a battle royal between Chipper Farlowe and Mack "The Arm" Pittley. Both combatants went to the hoosegow by way of the hospital, where both were diagnosed as having ingested an illegal mindblowing substance. Both pled innocence, alleging their refreshments must've been spiked; yet no other Junior Harvester had gone off the deep or even the shallow end, unless you counted Buddy Marcellus and Junior Nygren's freestyle jitterbugging. (Ginger Snowbedeck even complained that the Petty Hills punch was so watered down it could be used to bathe guppies.)

Vicki wasn't present at the Brawl, due to [a] Buddy's having wangled Tony a temp job at the Harvesting and [b] Tony's unwillingness to see Vicki boogie with anyone else while he was confined to busing dirty dishes. So she missed [c] Chipper and Mack's fistfight, [d] Buddy and Junior's unbridled rugcutting, [e] a censorious chaperone's attempt to pry Nanette Magnus off Boffer Freuen during a slowdance, and [f] Cheryl Trevelyan's blowup at Stuart Nugent for being hamstrung with swimmer's knee.

Tony didn't have much to tell about any of these goings-on, but Vicki heard volumes from Cheryl and Nanette and others who'd been there. The highest volumes were about the Farlowe-Pittley fracas and what had triggered its first punch, if as Ginger said you couldn't blame it on spiked guppy-bathwater.

Mack and Chip each mumbled vaguely about a whitehaired weirdo (who looked like one of the Winter brothers, Johnny or Edgar) whispering wantonly that *he* (Mack/Chip) would be in-like-Flynn if *he* (ditto/ditto) asked Kailey Cravath to get down with *him* (echo/echo) and the sooner the better, 'cause Kailey was steamin' for a creamin' from HIM (reverb/reverb).

Yeah right was the logical response. Kailey Cravath, while summer-vacationing in California, had taken impulsive part in a commercial cattle call and been cast as the new “face” of Salvacreme antibacterial skin cleanser—a product Robin Neapolitan swore should be banned from the market as more toxic than pHisoHex. Be that as it may, Kailey’s blemish-free countenance was all over the airwaves that autumn, even outRebounding Shucks Smith; and the fact that she was barely thirteen, an eighth-grader at VW when not shuttling to the coast, hardly excluded her from adolescent male fantasies—particularly when ogled in a zitless décolleté party gown at the Petty Hills Harvestfest.

So *Yeah right* stood no chance against hallucinogens, spiked or otherwise: Chipper and Mack wound up pounding each other with knuckles and elbows and a couple of chairs after they approached Kailey simultaneously on the same dance floor Sonny Lorgnon had stained with nose-gore, and now bore the sanguine marks of Farlowe-Pittley mayhem.

“Even Boffer couldn’t pull them apart, and he’s on the wrestling team this year!” Nanette told Vicki. “It took four policemen to break it up and put them in cuffs, calling them ‘Mad Bludgeoner copycats.’ I wish they’d taken a swing at that nasty chaperone who made such a fuss when Boff and I danced to ‘Love’s Grown Deep’—I mean, that’s *our song*.”

“Did they find the whitehaired weirdo guy?” asked Vicki, recalling a character of that sort whom Britt had brought to tape-record the Quinceañera disco concert. (What was his name? Freak? Quake? Quisp?)

“Oh, I think Chip and Mack just dreamed him up—y’know, from whatever it was they were on. It must’ve been something *potent*—they both sure acted like they were out of their gourds. I’m just glad only *their* drinks got spiked, if that *is* what happened and they didn’t shoot up or snort up or whatever they did do to go so crazy.”

“I just hope it wasn’t something in the air that the rest of us could catch!” said Vicki.

This hope was evidently dashed the Wednesday after Thanksgiving, when a noxious end-of-November fog rolled in off the Lake to smother Vanderlund. People groped their way to school (some of the boys literally groping—“Oh, was that your boob? Sorry, thought it was a doorknob”—and all the Gym classes stayed indoors, which they would’ve done anyway since basketball season had begun.

The Third Hour tardy bell clanged; Ms. Goldberg started discoursing about the Renaissance; and Vicki was taking diligent notes when the sound of a siren split through the fog. It was rapidly followed by another and another as all the windows in Room 416 got crowded by the inquisitive. “Everybody please keep their seats till we sound the all-clear,” crackled Mr. Stabeldore’s terse voice over the P.A.; which convinced Alex the Girl Scout and Rachel Gleistein the Red Cross worker that their services were sorely needed, most likely in Doreen Jobling’s Home Ec class (again). Ms. Goldberg had to bar them at the door, though not seatkeeper Becca Blair who (as always) appeared to know exactly what was going on and be unfazed by it as well as unforthcoming, though she shook her regal head at every mention of Dory’s firebuggery.

“Space aliens!” Marked-Down Mark Brown told Claudia Thurman. Mark, a dedicated member of the Alpha Centauri Club like Egghead Skinner, was counting the days till Spielberg’s *Close Encounters* movie went into general release. ““We are not alone!””

“Mmm-hmm,” went Cloudy.

“I’m serious! That fog’s a dead giveaway—either it’s exhaust from the mothership, or the secret government UFO patrol’s using it to throw us off the scent!”

“Mmm-hmm,” repeated Cloudy, looking ready to throw off Mark and *his* scent.

After awhile the sirens ceased, all-clear was sounded, the 4A bell P-E-E-E-E-A-L’d and other rumors flew, each more outlandish than the last. Leave it to Jerome Schei to discover the ultraoutlandish truth and circulate it before Sixth Hour: Madeline Wripple, absent from Advanced English for the first time that semester, had been spotted (how, in the fog? and by whom?) dancing naked on the VTHS roof! Then when the rescue squad and suicide-prevention staffers made it up there, Maddie went into convulsions and collapsed in a coma!

“(That’s taking *The Crucible* WAY too much to heart,)” Fiona mutter-observed to Joss and Vicki, who couldn’t help but peek at Split-Pea Erbsen. *Door to the roof is open* he’d told Vicki and Tony a mere month ago; *Just saying* he’d added. Here and now he was no more forthcoming or informative than Becca Blair; his only reaction to Jerome’s *latest* latest was to sail a paper airplane (like one of Jenna Wiblitz’s grotesque airgoyles) across the room to land with a spittoon-PING in Mrs. Mallouf’s wastebasket.

Mrs. Mallouf herself arrived then, late and out of sorts and equally silent on the Maddie topic, apart from saying she'd need a new student assistant for the foreseeable future. Not even Jerome was eager to enlist for that narc-duty, so Mrs. M arbitrarily checked which name was next up from WRIPPLEY at the bottom of the class roster.

"Vicki Volester, thanks for volunteering."

"I *knew* you had it in you!" Joss applauded.

"(Glad you kept it out of *us*,)" Fiona muttered.

"Am I supposed to go get you a cup of coffee now?" Vicki tried to ask politely.

"You can start tomorrow," said Mrs. Mallouf, with a decaffeinated sigh.

Meaning Vicki'd have to fetch it from the faculty lounge after each Lunch 5D. *That* part would be convenient; but she would have to carry a heated beverage—one of her least-favorite commodities—up four stories without any spillage or burnage. Maybe she could coax Mrs. M into switching to a nice glass of iced tea?

"At least it's not strained carrots," said consolatory Joss, who knew her too well.

As for poor Madeline, the obvious assumption was that she'd finally snapped under the stress of being an uptight killjoy. Obvious, that is, until cops began to grill the girls basketball team about their ongoing fundraising bakesale, at which Maddie'd bought a big frosted cupcake to nibble on each Zero Hour that week. Now the sale was cut short, all unsold merchandise had been confiscated, and the police interrogated every supplier from Crystal's *pâtissier* mother to combustible Doreen. (Who burst into blubbery flames: wasn't it enough that she'd broken *both* her legs, lost her eyelashes *and* gotten dumped by a disloyal boyfriend, without being given the third degree??)

By Friday morning the Gossip Brigade could broadcast a SPECIAL BULLETIN that lysergic acid diethylamide (i.e. LSD) had been detected in Madeline's bodily fluids (eww) and was most likely derived from Wednesday's Zero Hour cupcake. Maddie wasn't accustomed to consuming processed sugar—her parents shopped a lot at Uni-Nute and kept a strictly health-conscious pantry—but that alone wouldn't account for her behaving oddly in First Hour Choir, ditching Second Hour Latin, and ending up bare-assed on the school roof. No other bakesale customer had been affected (at least not to such a noticeable extent) so the question was: Who'd slipped Madeline Wrippley a cupcake laced with Orange Sunshine?

She had no outright enemies on the varsity or JV basketball squads, and once even got thanked for handing Dory an elusive crutch; so no mortal feuds there. The paramedics found no sign of sexual assault or even hypothermia, despite her fogbound nudity; Maddie's clothes and shoes were all piled neatly beside the parapet. She disapproved of stoner-boys like Skully Erle and Matt LaVintner, and certainly wouldn't have accepted any sweet-tooth edibles from them; even if she had, it was far more likely they'd have been doped with hash than acid.

However: less than a fortnight had gone by since an acid trail was blazed at Petty Hills Country Club, so Chipper Farlowe and Mack Pittley (back in school on probation) were prime contenders. Each, though, could prove he hadn't been anywhere near Maddie on Wednesday morning, and Mack ungallantly added that he'd sooner chop off The Arm than make any move that might result in seeing Madeline Wripley naked.

Who else? A number of Junior Harvesters had identified Newley Hasleman of Dowager's Bluff as the "whitehaired Winter Brotherly weirdo." He'd been tracked down (or rather *up*, his father being a rock salt tycoon) to Cobbler Topping, and there gotten quizzed about his role in the Brawl:

"Why, I was just trying to break the ice for that sweet little Salvacreme Queen—all her sudden celebrity has made Kailey *so* shy—and I guess her wholesome clean appeal drove those roughneck boys right up the wall. Oh, you're telling me it was LSD that did it? My my my—wouldn't you say that's rather a QUAIN drug in this day and age?"

Maybe so; but the investigators of the cupcake freakout took note when Spacyjane Groh mentioned having seen a Haint (whose description tallied with Newley Hasleman's) "standing and waiting" by a VTHS stairwell on the Monday before the Brawl, at a time when he should've been at his own Front Tree Country Day School. So back the gumshoes went to the Grindhouse for a new pop quiz, this one conducted via a high-dollar family attorney. No, his client had definitely been where he belonged on Wednesday the 30th. No, his client was entirely unfamiliar with anyone by the name of Madeline Wripley. No, his client was wholly uninvolved with lysergic acid diethylamide and knew nobody who might be.

Again, maybe so; but acting on a hunch the cops called on Linda (alias Lynndha) Ednalino of a prominent pharmaceutical clan, whom Newly *did* documentedly know. They

soon concluded that Lynndha would be suitable casting for any of the Three Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, yet had no traceable connection to Maddie's doping.

That left Sidney Erbsen, whose previous contretemps with the dopee was cited by several of Mrs. Mallouf's students. Yet that same Spacyjane Groh was able to vouch for every step Sid took from the moment he arrived at VTHS that morning. During Zero Hour they'd bypassed the bakesale to evaluate Snap-It-Yourself contest submissions with Mr. Szot and Nancy Buschmeyer. They'd remained together in First Hour Photography; then Sid had ushered Spacyjane upstairs for Second Hour German and French respectively. No, they couldn't have seen Madeline outside Grandma Ivy's Latin classroom, which predated the Foreign Language wing and was up on the third floor (closer to the roof). They'd remained on the second floor for Third Hour Geometry and Biology respectively; and Spacyjane said her Swee'Pea'd had no clue at the time why all those sirens were sounding, unless they were foghorns to warn sailors not to beach their boats on school grounds.

(Thank you, Miss Groh.)

The least helpful of everyone questioned was Madeline Wripley herself. While understandably bewildered when she came out of her coma and realized she was in a hospital bed, her disoriented eyes took on an impenetrable rodentlike glint when asked if she knew any whitehaired Winter Brotherly weirdos.

"I don't remember. And I'm not going to remember anything either, about what may or may not have happened. So don't ask."

"But *Maddie*—" went her uptight killjoy mother.

"Not anything. Anytime. To anyone. And that's final."

("She will have her little joke," said Split-Pea Erbsen when word of this got out.)

*

ROSEMARY HEMPSTEAD, AGE 21 stated the newest fake ID picturing Rula "Erotic" Hradek, age 17. Namewise this was an homage to Miss Rosamond Ambrose and her purportedly torrid Twenties liaison with a Guggenheim on Long Island. Fakewise it was almost *too* authentic, as Rula'd groused to the ID's creator.

"What can I say? I'm a fine artiste," bragged Lola Svoboda.

Best friends since nursery school, they were the DoubleCzech Twins of North Crocker Street—"a little slice of suburban heaven for upscale Bohunks," as their lodge-brother fathers billed themselves. Mr. Svoboda had gone so far as to wed the sister of a college professor, whose daughter Carly Thibert would be a pesky tagalong kid-cousin to the DoubleCzechers till they got her out of their hair by encouraging Carly's early interest in boys, and enhancing her natural-born attractivity thereto.

Lola had always been the expert with such enhancements. From a very young age she'd treated Rula as a lifesize Barbie doll to dress up and make up and style coifs for. And Rula had always been a fitting subject for such ministrations, recognizable from a very young age as The Next Kim Novak. (Or, if you preferred brunettes, The Next Julie Newmar.)

She enjoyed gymnastics and choreography and taking the drill/pompon/cheerleading route to indulge these pursuits; but Rula had no interest in becoming an actress, reciting lines scripted by *other* people. As soon as she learned to write she began filling Big Chief tablets with stories of her own, advancing to spiral notebooks and then an electric typewriter bought by her well-meaning father: "This way you'll have a skill to fall back on, even when you lose your looks."

To which Rula silently replied: *Looks might not last, but spooks are forever.*

And she should know. Her story-subjects never varied; each was composed of suspenseful mysterious dark matter with a stealthy erotic overlay. (Limited to kissing in the Big Chief tablets, yet even there the smooches were bestowed by ghosts.)

These literary experiments were kept secret from everyone except Lola (who sometimes illustrated them) and Carly (who got off on their content) until halfway through eighth grade, when a New Bohemian Girl arrived disguised as a Bad Irish Broad. Bunty O'Toole, hearing of Lola's skill in forging excuse notes and hall passes, sought her out and offered to subsidize her enterprises. The DoubleCzech Twins were wary till they visited Bunty at the Vacamonte and met her supercool Aunt Hay—Helene Favray the deluxe courtesan, who had a skill to fall back on *because* of her looks.

"You've got to keep the kettle boiling or the kettle won't boil," she sagely advised the DoubleCzechers.

“Rula here writes a lot of Hot Stuff,” Lola confided. “Obligatory sex scenes and everything, but with *phantoms*.”

“(Lola! That’s supposed to be private!)”

“Well, I’m proud of you.”

“You mean like demonic possession?” scowled Bunty. *The Exorcist* might be all the rage that year, but it was far too Catholic-clichéd for her taste: like fighting vampires with garlic, mirrors and sunshine.

“Well, um, have you... heard of incubuses?” Rula reluctantly asked.

“*Incubi*,” corrected Aunt Hay. “Incubi and succubi, dropping by while you sleep.”

“Yeah—but with no pea soup or fooling around with crucifixes.”

Nondenominational otherworldly love? “Hunh,” went Bunty. “I bet there’s publishers that’d print Hot Stuff like that. You interested in selling yours?”

“*Mine*? How? I’m just a kid.”

“Leave it to me,” said Agent Antoinette, ready to skim fifty percent off the proceeds and donate a share to her multiconnected Uncle Alley Mushmouth.

Thus was launched the professional pulp-fiction career of “Darlene Crandall,” a pseudonym that would appear (with AGE 17) on the inaugural fake ID devised for Rula by Lola under the savvy direction of Bunty (all age 13).

“Not bad,” said Bunty after close inspection.

“Not bad! With that pinned to her tit, she could win Miss America!” boasted Lola.

“*Phantom Passion at the Possessed Pageant*,” mused the visionary Darlene Crandall.

Four lucrative years later her phantastic smut continued to be sold, mostly in Cityland headshops and adult bookstores. Not precisely fodder for a college application; but Rula anticipated signing her own name to *Spirit Within*, *Spirit Away*, that Lois Duncanesque *roman à clef*-in-progress. Scott Grampian even hoped to sneak an excerpt past the censors into this year’s *Aqueduct* magazine, perhaps (as Spacyjane Groh suggested) by translating it into unglossed French. “Either way, it’s bound to send sales through the roof,” said Scott.

So over-the-counter marketability might be on her horizon; yet it was Rosemary Hempstead (Age 21), not Rula Hradek (Age 17), who clandestinely followed up on Harelip Harrison’s “nose candy” report. Spending two weekends making the rounds of Campus bars

and hangouts, asking “Seen Buzz lately?” in a careless casual not-all-that-interested way. Pickings were sparser than usual during the Thanksgiving holidays, but she still received too many *I’LL give yuh a buzz, baby!* replies.

Finally a tug on her hook: “Buzz Hovercraft? Yeah, I ran into him just the other night at the Pole—the Magnetic Pole, y’know. Been there yet? I can get you in, no prob—their bouncer knows me ‘n’ owes me a favor.”

Sure he does. This from Chad the Grad Student, futzing around with an MBA while he worked in “entertainment promotion” (i.e. booking halftime acts) for Carmel Sanborn Chiese, whom Chad later let slip wasn’t simply his boss but also his *mother*. Even so, he seemed to be a viable connection and Rula set up a trip to the Pole on Friday the 2nd—

—only to see the scheme get threatened with derailment on Wednesday the 30th. Cops swarmed over VTHS after some high-as-a-kite sophomore went on a nudist rooftop spree; and the O’Toole crew tread choppy waters till word came that it was due to an old-fashioned acid trip. Had it been a coke jag, all their prep work would’ve gotten wasted (so to speak) in the resulting crackdown. As it was, the incident might be appendable to *Spirit Within*, *Spirit Away*—if, say, it’d been caused by paranormal acid from an extrasensory pusher.

At any rate the trek to the Pole took place as planned on Friday, following a cheerless varsity basketball loss at Multch West that got capped off by Tommy the Torch Dwyer’s setting himself on fire with malfunctioning skyrockets outside the school, in *December*. (Any punishment meted out by his Presbyterian minister father or Calvinist God would be a kiss-on-the-brow compared to what Bunty would do to him for being such an inflammatory fool.)

Rula’d arranged to have Chad collect her at the Vacamonte, to augment his impression that Rosemary Hempstead was a *femme of fatale* means. Aunt Hay loaned her a Halston gold lamé halter dress, an expensive tweed overcoat and a new pair of calfskin platform boots; sighing ruefully that they all fit Rula better than herself.

Along came Chad in a Cardin knockoff outfit and a bought-used 911 Carrera; and away they drove to The City’s newest smackback variation on the Studio 54 theme. It had been converted from an indoor skating rink by Pucey Waslewski, onetime ethnomusicologist

and birdcall-imitator, who could snub would-be patrons with captious impunity and piercing whistles: “My Magnetic Pole is too slippery a climb for peckerwood *whip-poor-wills!*”

That didn’t dissuade a block-long queue of yearning-to-be-shaken booties from lining up at the Pole’s plush stanchion rope; behind which loomed a titanic doorman with a cold appraising eye and hard unbending heart. Not the slightest indication did he give of knowing Chad the Grad Student or owing him one thin dime, much less anything approximating a “favor.” Yet the stanchion rope parted like a plush Red Sea for Rosemary Hempstead; and in she swept with the begrudgingly-admitted Chad at her platform bootheels.

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pulsed a ventricle-vestibule and atrium-cloakroom where Rula checked Aunt Hay’s tweed coat and Chad shed his nondesigner outerwear.

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beat a massive bassline beyond the walls and floor and ceiling of this cardiac setting; which for all its palpitating cadence was an obdurate reminder of a Fitzgerald story Rula’d read in her 20th Century Lit class, “The Diamond As Big As The Ritz.”

Except that *this* place was clearly constructed of that new mass-produced diamond substitute, “A Cubic Zirconia As Big As The Blackstone.”

Except that everything here was blue: a glittery frostified blue, as if carved from a glacier. Bringing to mind another Fitzgerald story setting—“The Ice Palace,” inside whose labyrinthine tunnels a transplanted Southern chick had gotten trapped. And speak of the Dixie devil: who did Rula spy when she stepped into the cavernous dance hall but Gigi Pyle, that *soi-disant* Confederate belle, whose imbroglio a month ago with Margo Temple had

disjointed the entire Pep Club. Then she'd dropped out of sight the past couple of weeks—only to pop up here, far more underagedly than Rula, wearing an apple-green catsuit... and getting force-fed what looked like a *Twinkie*, by some seen-from-the-back man in a carrot-colored leisure suit. Then they were engulfed by the multitude and lost to view as the Brothers Gibb raised their falsettos in an exhortation to do what everybody'd come here *to* do, roundabout this magnetic maypole.

Chad wanted to dance, “wanted to” in the sense that he plainly didn't know *how*; but Rula/Rosemary effortlessly offset his gaucherie and became the centerpiece, the cynosure, the focal point of the whole pulsating Ice Palace—

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underneath the swirling flashing strobes, at one of the last moments of “unadulterated” disco before the mainstream dam got kaboom'd by an imminent Stigwood detonation starring that guy from *Welcome Back, Kotter*, who just last year had dumped a bucket of pig's blood over Sissy Spacek.

Whirling off the dance floor then, led by Chad to a glittery-blue alcove where a lizard lounged in a leather bomber jacket, white silk scarf and aviator glasses: Buzz Hovercraft in the flyboy flesh. Here Chad was at least marginally truthful: sufficiently acquainted to buttonhole Buzz and initiate an introduction. He could then be jettisoned like a spent booster stage as Rosemary/Rula maintained ascent to orbital velocity, with Buzz zeroing in on her focal points and the perfumed cleavage between them: wherein was tucked a crisp new century-note bankrolled by Bunty O'Toole to trade for a gram of Hovercraft tinsel.

'Tis the season, after all. And whatever happened next was bound to become a dynamite chapter à clef...

*

“(Okay, I know you're a great stage manager, but this is even *less* what I had in mind,)” Vicki murmured.

“(Maybe so, but you’re still saving my brisket,)” Jenna Wiblitz murmured back.

They were on a Saturday evening group date at the New Sherwood, waiting while their escorts purchased eight tickets for a sneak preview of *The Goodbye Girl*. (Agreed upon after dismissal of *Heroes*, *Bobby Deerfield*, and the R-rated *Rolling Thunder* which would’ve obliged the only over-17 group-dater to serve as group-guardian.) Another couple was busily canoodling till they could head for the candy counter, while the fourth couple (if you could call them that) bickered in front of the preview poster: *THANK NEIL SIMON FOR MAKING US LAUGH ABOUT FALLING IN LOVE... AGAIN.*

Richard Dreyfuss and Marsha Mason, meet your quasilookalikes Hillel Schiller and Lisa Lohe, as they fall into a mangle-wrangle... again.

“(Double vision. Uncanny,)” sighed Jenna, blinking behind frames dotted with tiny vanity-mirror lightbulbs. “(And the worst of it is, Ike *likes* ‘Killer.’)”

Lisa’s big brother, the collegiate operatic tenor and standby adult guardian, was home for tomorrow’s first night of Hanukkah. He’d graciously offered to host his sister, sister’s best friend, and sister’s “cavalier” (to say the least) on this jaunt; but even though Jenna was officially in love with Ike, she wasn’t sure he alone could help her survive an evening in Hillel Schiller’s proximity. So she’d pounced on her own little sister when Vicki’d flounced into Spanish yesterday morning, ticked off at Tony Pierro for acting densely unromantic:

“I told you, didn’t I, that Petty Hills took him on regular-parttime after the Brawl? So he called me last night to say he’d put in so many hours they were giving him tomorrow night off, and he’s got money in his pocket again and his self-respect back so *finally* it’s time for us to go on our First Real Date, right? Just the two of us, him ‘n’ me, ‘a night out by ourselves’ like he *promised*, right? HA! He takes it for granted we’re gonna *double* with Buddy ‘n’ Junior AGAIN ‘n’ when I go ‘But—but—but—’ *he* goes ‘I thought you liiiiked them’ ‘n’ ‘Bud’s my best friennnnnd’ which he sure wasn’t during the Trial last spring ‘cause Buddy didn’t excuse himself off Tony’s jury so don’t ask *me* when they got so palsy-walsy he’d rather hang out with *him* and *his girlfriend* instead of JUST me JUST for once ‘n’ I’ve got a good mind to stand HIM the hell up once ‘n’ for all, except... I really *do* want him as a boyfriend, if he’d *behave* like one for a single solitary night, is that so awfully much to ask for??”

Jenna, finishing a sketch of Vicki as an indignant kitten savaging a ball of yarn, proposed an alternative. “Don’t get mad at him—but don’t get even, either. Take it to the *twice-as-much* level. Not by two-timing Tony—more like FOUR-timing.”

“Hunh?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Course!”

“Then say ‘yes’ and I’ll handle the rest.”

Jenna, though diminutive, could be as domineering as Princess Tricia Smartysnoot; so Vicki meekly yielded and by lunchtime was assured by the Great Stage Manager (with Lisa and Hillel’s tacit concurrence) that everything had clicked into place for tomorrow’s four-timing. Which allowed Vicki to concentrate on getting that styrofoam cup of hot java up all those stairs to Mrs. Mallouf unspilled, before T.A.-ing a discussion of “The Told Fortune”—Rowland Thornford’s saturnine tale of a melancholy gypsy’s ironic premonitions.

(Nonique, when consulted about this, confessed she’d never read any of Thornford’s stories, and—given her history with Eddie Ray Anderson—didn’t want to hear about one featuring a *gypp-see woman*...)

Premonitions mixed with recollections of last September’s washout at the drive-in. It was just Vicki’s luck that her new big sister had to be a rabbi’s granddaughter and thus unavailable on a Friday night for further reassurance over the phone. Of course Episcopalian Joss was right there at Burrow Lane for her weekly sleepover; and Vicki tried to wheedle her into giving Slim Jim Khim a second chance, making tomorrow’s group date a five-timing tensome.

“Forget it! What kind of Korean chooses a bacon cheeseburger over bulgogi with bamboo shoots? I was so ashamed! Nope, I think I’ll hit the town with Robin and Sheila and see if we can’t pick up a hunky jazz trio. Or at least three guys who aren’t Slim Jim, Craig Clerkington or Avalanche Dobbs.”

“Robin and Q’ll just spend the whole night arguing. In German!”

“Ooh, you’re right—better make that a hunky *gesangstrio*.”

As for Vicki’s premonitions, Joss recommended calling Cecidia Drive and having Spacyjane bring over her Tarot deck to forecast the future; but Vicki chickened out and

decided instead to be “fatalistic,” a vocab word from yesterday’s Thornford confab. *Fatal charm* the gypsy kept chanting: *FAY-tull-charm* like some bird that hadn’t migrated south for the winter but tarried in Vicki’s subconscious all that night...

By Saturday morning her fatalism had dwindled to a Doris Dayish (not Doris Taysish) *que sera, sera*: which may have sub-nudged Tony Breachofpromise into phoning to say Half-Great-Uncle Beppe would be bringing him over to be formally presented to Ozzie and Felicia—not to mention Joss, whom even a *gesangstrio* on three wild horses couldn’t have prevented from witnessing this “nostalgic re-enactment” of the night Roger Mustardman came a-calling in a penguin tuxedo and Silver Cloud Rolls Royce.

Uncle Beppe drove a vintage Mercury Montclair with Flo-tone color styling. Ozzie scrutinized it a lot more closely (as he and Beppe puffed on Lucky Strikes in the chilly Volester garage) than he did Tony, even though thirty-seven Saturdays had passed since This Boy first asked out Ozzie’s Little Girl. Now This Boy was belatedly here and open-to-question; but Ozzie knew Felicia would take care of the questioning with far more finesse than he ever could.

Vicki died a hundred deaths of mortified embarrassment, stretching beseechful eyes toward watch and clock as the minutes ticked by and Felicia touched on every unexplained concern regarding Tony’s school record, work record, living situation, etc. To every question Tony made a low-key noncommittal reply that, while deferential, didn’t quite satisfy mother *or* daughter (who’d been waiting a long, long time for him to “explain all about everything—no more interruptions”). He was SO appealing, though, as he awkwardly squashed that flat-crowned trilby to his coatfront (not a tux but a nice gabardine Balmacaan). So Felicia took pity, eventually, and gave their date her blessing with a formal hope that he would often return to Burrow Lane.

So we can debrief him again! sub-gushed Joss, her face crimson with suppressed mirth as she teetered on the verge of blabbing about that stupid fake wedding announcement.

SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!!

YOU SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP (hee hee hee)!!

“Hurry now, you don’t want to be late for your dinner,” said Fel—as if dawdling here had been *their* idea! So out into the subfreezing evening, where Tony opened a Flo-tone

door for Vicki with one courteous hand while shaking Ozzie's with the other, and still somehow keeping that hat crushed to his chest.

Uncle Beppe, cramming half a pack of nicotine gum inside one cheek, backed the Montclair out of the cul-de-sac onto Foxtail. In the backseat, Vicki gently disengaged the trilby from Tony's grip and placed it on his sleek dark puddyhead; then took his clenched fist, undid it finger by finger, and clasped it with her own mitten; waiting for him to deal the first conversational card. (So long as it wasn't about boring old rubber bridge.)

Finally a longdrawn exhalation as they sped down Eugene G. Green Road and crossed the canal. Not a word said, though—not that any could be easily heard over the sports recap show blasting out of Beppe's radio.

Then Vicki saw Tony's lips move. *What?* went her eyebrows as she tugged an ear out of her stocking cap and reached it toward Tony's mouth.

"Duck's okay," she heard him say.

"Scuse me?"

"Don't mind a duck dinner."

Well! Withdraw that ear (unkissed, unblown-in) and let go of his densely unromantic hand. Here she'd begun to think—make that *dream*—they might ditch this group-date thing and go off somewhere on their own, like he'd *promised*.

Before long (though it sure FELT long) they were pulling up outside La Sauvagine, a semifancy French restaurant on the Willowhelm lakeshore that specialized in waterfowl. This was favorite food of their host Ike Lohe, and Jenna'd booked two adjacent tables for four since a single one for eight wasn't available at such short notice.

Along came the East Bay quartet right on cue (great stage management) in the Lohes's Chrysler Cordoba. Ike the Tenor stepped out from behind its wheel, every bit as handsome as advertised, to give Vicki's mittened knuckles an operatic buss. She couldn't help but giggle as she dodged a mock-jealous thwack by Jenna... while Tony Baloney gave Ike, Lisa, and Hillel Schiller a short silent nod each before standing aloofly aside.

(Make that Tony Cold-Cut Olive Loaf.)

"Do you think we might *possibly* thaw our popsicle-asses *inside* La Spoon-de-Grease?" suggested Hillel the Head Cheese.

“Language!” snapped Lisa the Noodle Kugel, sounding like she wished she’d said it first.

Ike the Kielbasa took the lead, piloting them (Tony bringing up the rear) through a semifancy door into La Sauvagine, which was filled with Gallic field-and-stream murals and concertina music. “Reservation for Lohe, party of eight,” Ike warbled to the *maître-d’*, who suavely responded that theirs was a party of *six*: word had been received that Mr. Marcellus and Miss Nygren wouldn’t be able to join them for dinner, but might make it to the movie. Regrettably, a table for six was equally unavailable; but they could be seated at once at their adjacent tables for four-and-now-two. Vicki and Jenna were petite and Lisa was slender, so it *might* have been possible to fit all six of them at a table meant for four; but the *maître-d’* wouldn’t permit them to try, so Vicki and Tony were relegated to what Hillel called “the children’s table.” He then saw *canards* on the menu and started speculating (at length) about what sort of baseless falsehoods had been quacked and how such untruths would affect the flavor of their slow-cooked confits.

Ike laughed resonantly; Lisa narrowed already-thin lips; Jenna drew a doubtless libelous sketch on her semifancy French placemat; and Tony crumbled a breadstick into his water glass while staring blankly into space.

Vicki sat and stewed, trying to think of ways this night might yet be salvaged. Tony’s self-respect could be (re-)restored by offering to split the check with Ike; or he could pay for the movie tickets, his and Vicki’s at least, plus afterdinner popcorn should they have any appetite once they got to the New Sherwood. Assuming he and Vicki made it that far, since transport was supposed to have been furnished by Junior Nygren’s family; now there was only a Cordoba in which six group-daters couldn’t all squeeze at once, even if two were petite and one some-might-say skinny.

Crumble crumble crumble went another breadstick into what was now a slurryglass.

“(Look, d’you wanna just leave?)” Vicki hissed across the children’s table.

Tony flinched and dunked what was left of his stick. “Who, me?”

“(Us! Forget dinner here. Call my folks or your uncle and let’s get out.)”

“(Oh no you don’t!)” clucked sharp-eared Jenna, fluttering over to dig birdy-claws into their collarbones. “(No running off—I can’t make it through this night without you!)”

“What’s all that whispering about?” barked Lisa.

“Trying to decide whose slow-cooked leg would taste better—Donald’s or Daffy’s,” Jenna retorted.

That set Killer Schiller off on a fresh declamation, fortunately interrupted by the arrival of their meals. Tony, for the first time that evening, seemed to lighten up as he dug into his duck. Conversation at the two tables gave way to chomps and slurps, between which Vicki could hear a too-familiar voice rise from a smaller table further away:

“No mundane run-of-the-old-mill-stream hors d’oeuvre will do for *our* entrée, my good servingperson—bring us a five-gallon tub of your secondbest *pâte de foie gras*, and garnish it with a sprinkling of string beans!”

“Aw, Ah don’t know...” went another too-memorable voice. “Isn’t pahh-tayy like *goose liver*?”

“The live-live-liveliest liver that ever honked a swansong to a Livingston seagull, *ma chouchou*!”

“Aw, Ah don’t knooooow...”

Vicki stole an over-the-shoulder peek and, sure enough, there sat a pair who could well and truly be said to deserve one another: Dennis Desmond and Gigi Pyle. The latter’s face was as bright a red as Joss’s had been trying not to bust a gut at Burrow Lane. It also looked a lot rounder and fuller than Vicki remembered it, so maybe she *would* do better with a daintier appetizer. Not that Vicki gave a hoot whether Gigi binged or starved; but if this was her One & Only Date with Mr. Unlucky Charms, she might as well make him pay through the nose for it. Which reminded Vicki—

“Tony’s paying for our movie tickets,” she informed the East Bay table.

“I am?” from Tony.

“Not *all* of them,” Ike insisted.

“Feel free to pay for mine, either of you,” Hillel interjected. “Hers too, if you feel like it.”

“Thanks a freaking lot!” went Lisa.

“Still got to get you guys there. Let me go work the phone,” went Jenna, dabbing her birdy-beak with a semifancy serviette and darting off to the public booth.

By the time the group daters were declining a sample from the dessert cart, Jenna's cousin Hyman (also home from college for tomorrow's first night of Hanukkah) rolled up in a Jeepster Commando. Not exactly the horsedrawn carriage of a schoolgirl's fantasies; but its backseat wasn't too frigid and Vicki could snuggle up to Tony for a warming moment that soon cooled off as Hymie and Ike lollygagged in La Sauvagine's parking lot, swapping conservatory war stories (Hymie was a violin major at the Cleveland Institute of Music) till Jenna leaned on the Commando horn just as she had on the Wagonmaster's during that flash flood at the drive-in. And by the time Hymie got them out of the lot and onto the road, Tony'd gone back to gazing mutely into the remote distance and Vicki to sinking into unsatisfied discontent.

This is even LESS what I had in mind...

Buddy and Junior, both amorously disheveled, made it to the New Sherwood not *too* much later than the other three couples, and volunteered to collect refreshments for everyone (Buddy could juggle half-a-dozen popcorn bags with one hefty arm) while Tony went halvesies with Ike on the sneak preview tickets, and Lisa and Hillel bickered noisily beside the poster for *The Goodbye Girl*.

Jenna, leaning heavily (for such a birdlike person) upon her supportive little sister, gave murmured thanks for "saving her brisket" staminawise and sanitywise—so far, at least, for now.

But not for very much longer.

Into the theater. Handful of popcorn. Coming attractions for *Semi-Tough*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—as if the world needed another Richard Dreyfuss film, so soon after the one now starting on the big screen. As an obnoxious soundalike voice launched an unsolicited running commentary from the row directly behind Vicki, punctuated by kneebumping the back of her seat.

"(Quit it, Hillel!)"

"Neil Simon is nothing but a gagman! As in he makes you *gag* on an endless run of one-liners!" [Kneebump] "Look at *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, if you can bear it, and you'll feel like you're in a Death Row toilet bowl! As he strains for pea-sized chuckles with constipated humor!" [Kneebump]

“(QUIT it, Hillel!)” repeated Vicki, flashing back to Didi Lipperman's nonstop critique of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (“That horse is pooping!... That man stepped in it!... That one said ‘hell’!... He said ‘balls’!... He said ‘pecker’!... *He’s* got a hairy chest!”—this in disgust at a shirtless Richard Dreyfuss).

“Not to mention *Murder by Death*, which is manslaughter without any laughter!” [Kneebump] “A snuff movie, boring you to tears and into the grave, killing you with stale clichés!” [Kneebump]

“Hey, pipe down, we’re trying to watch the picture!” went others in the vicinity.

But the commentary persisted, turning to *The Goodbye Girl’s* plotline and portrayals and cinematographic style, rising in pitch and volume as demands to stifle it came from every part of the theater.

Jenna would later theorize that Hillel’d hoped for a general cry of “Good heavens, is that Dreyfuss Himself we hear amongst us, freely imparting perceptive wisdom?” If so, he must’ve been disappointed when management shut off the projector, brought up the house lights, and sent in a couple of mall security officers to extricate Killer Schiller from the angry movie patrons, one of whom dealt a lethal blow by jeering “Who do you think you are—*Albert Brooks?*”

“C’mon, we’re leaving!” Hillel told the group daters.

“As far as *I* care, you can CRAWL home!” fumed Lisa, to a smattering of applause. Ike, though, got up (still grinning at the Schiller witticisms) and shrugged on his overcoat, then helped Jenna into hers. Vicki and Tony, however, stayed firmly put; while Buddy and Junior didn’t pause the making-out they’d been obliviously up to since midway through the coming attractions.

“You’ll be okay?” Jenna asked Vicki.

“Yeah, I’ll call Joss’s dad to pick us up. Will *you* be okay?”

“Better than I was,” said Jenna (as Lisa propelled Hillel into the aisle with an unforgiving clout on the arm). Her vanity-bulb specs frowned down at Tony: “You better treat Vicki right, or I’ll give *you* one of those myself!” she admonished.

“Um, sure,” he replied.

“G’night—oh, and Happy Hanukkah,” said Vicki.

“Happier than it would’ve been. May all our candles burn brighter, Little Sis.”

Jenna followed Ike and rictus-faced Lisa up the aisle after Hillel and the mall cops. Theater management then extended an apology for the disruption, brought down the house lights and restarted the projector; but Vicki found she couldn’t stomach any more Richard Dreyfuss or indeed any more popcorn. So she left the bag, gathered coat and cap and mittens and purse, and excused her way past everyone in her row—including the still-at-it (don’t-they-ever-come-up-for-*air*?) Buddy and Junior.

She was slightly surprised to find Tony tagging along with her to the lobby. Out there she swung around and gnarled: “Was this our First Real Date?”

“Hope not,” he said, with the first glimmer-hint of a smile he’d shown since the one displayed to Vicki’s mother, with that same old diffident dutiful charm-your-pants-off distractability...

Pull yourself together and try (unsuccessfully) not to whine: “You *promised* it’d just be the two of us, by ourselves.”

Glancing left and right: “Well... here we are. You, me—us. Do you have to call Joss’s father right away?”

“Well... he doesn’t have to *pick us up* right away. If you really DO ‘wanna do the right thing’ by me. Like you said. If you remember.”

“Guess there’s a first time for everything,” he observed, putting on his crushed-crown trilby. “Or a *best* time,” he added, taking it off and leaning in for another long sizzly kiss.

FAY-tull-charm FAY-tull-charm FAY-tull-charm...

“How do you feel about masked balls?” she asked. “Oh *GAHD!* Forget I said that!”

“Slowly but surely,” smiled Tony Pierro.

*

One of Bunty O’Toole’s advantageous traits was an absorbent retentive memory. She only needed to skim through a textbook to ace its subject’s final exam—and without cheating: that was for Traversers.

Aloysius Walsh made occasional use of this skill, Bunty being the secret weapon in his own personal arsenal. When he came to spend that weekend with Aunt Hay at the Vacamonte (as was still his occasional habit) he told Bunty to stick around instead of

retreating to Lola's or Rula's on North Crocker Street. There was a lot of work to be done, capitalizing on the valuable info Rula'd obtained at the Magnetic Pole. (Plus a remnant of the coke she'd purchased there, which was sent off for purity analysis.)

Rula's score came in the nick of time, given how pissed off Al Walsh was by Tommy Dwyer's skyrocket antics at Multch West—all too near the Hudden & Dudden Pub. Illegal fireworks setting a juvenile asshole ablaze garnered the sort of publicity Alley Mushmouth neither wanted nor needed nor intended to pay for.

But Bunty could make amends by absorbing, retaining, digesting and collating all the cryptic phone calls made to and from the Vacamonte that weekend. Which she did, impeccably; and before Al Walsh departed early Monday morning, a complete cocaine supply chain had been laid out for the North Side Gang to infiltrate.

Start with street dealers like "Buzz Hovercraft," born Bryce Meadowcroft in Grosse Point. While attending the Cranbrook School he'd stolen a football from George Plimpton at the *Paper Lion* training camp and sold "it" multiple times afterward. From there he'd gone to Pepperdine in Malibu, where he'd learned to fly planes (among other means of getting high) at Manhattan Beach and dated fellow freshman Celeste Schwall, taking her up a couple of times in a two-engine Cessna. Then she'd broken off their relationship, saying Bryce was too "unfocused"—possibly because (unbeknownst to Celeste) he was helping to smuggle marijuana by air from Mexico to California.

Bryce/Buzz's flying instructor and smuggling employer was John Carlowe Buell III, scion of a cartographic family that had been employed for several generations by Rand McNally. John, uninterested in selling maps and atlases, went into The Cityland waterbed business; and as Jackie BMD (for Blow Me Down) he would also become a cocaine retailer, distributing ten ounces at a time to street dealers like Buzz Hovercraft. Those ten ounces translated to 280 grams, with approximately twenty snortable lines per gram; and could generate almost \$30,000 in street sales.

Jackie BMD in turn acquired his coke from Martin Kempton, an appraiser of antiques and sponsor of art galleries, who last summer had been established as the wholesale purveyor for the entire Midwest. Martin won this plum after an encounter at the Playboy Mansion with an individual known as "Boston George," who was a key member of the evolving

Medellin Cartel in Colombia where The Stuff came from in the first place.

Connect all the dots and you get a supply chain.

"I had my doubts, kid, but you done good," Uncle Al told Bunty before a bodyguard walked him down the Vacamonte backstairs. More to the point than forgiveness, he handed Bunty an envelope of unmarked Christmas bonus, some of which would go to Rula as a reward for her derring-do. (Though Bunty didn't forget that Rula'd inhaled a sizable amount of the gram bought with the O'Toole crew's C-note.) As for Tommy the Torched, he might get a complimentary bottle of Bactine in his fireplace stocking.

One peripheral screw remained loose. Among the messages Lola'd phoned in on Sunday was a plea from Maureen "Strudel" Muller, a Vanderlund junior who had a passion for basketball but was too short and chunky to do more than manage the JV girls team. That is, until she started "carrying on something fierce" with Lola's younger brother Hobie Svoboda, a six-foot point guard for whom short chunky chicks were hotness personified.

("So?" went shortish chunkish Bunty. "Wait," went grimvoiced Lola.)

It had been determined that Strudel was the one who'd sold Madeline Wripley that cupcake with acid-laced frosting last Wednesday. When questioned by the police, Strudel turned into a moustacheless Sergeant Schultz and spluttered that she'd seen nothing, heard nothing, knew nothing. "Think about it and let us know if you can remember any detail," the cops requested. After racking her rattled brain, she seemed to recall needing a fresh supply of cupcakes just as Maddie'd stepped up to the bakesale table. Hadn't another hoopster handed her (Strudel) a nice big one for her (Maddie) to buy? And hadn't that other hoopster been... Laurie Harrison?

If so, Strudel was hesitant to share this detail with the police or anybody else, least of all Laurie, whom most of the JV squad (except Alex Dmitria) found intimidating; even the varsity captain, Demandin' Amanda Pound, handled her with care. Laurie was probably the first visiting player in NESTLÉ history to *not* get whistled for a foul by the crooked refs at Hereafter Park, even when she elbowed every Blue Angel on the H.P. court. Referees and Angels alike were cowed into averting their eyes and carrying gingerly on.

Hence Strudel's *not* wanting to get involved in a clash with Laurie the Intimidator. Yet she (Strudel) already WAS involved, as she (Laurie) already knew; so where could she

(Strudel again) go for help and protection? Not to her boyfriend, lest he too be threatened with who-knew-what. Hobie, though, had an older sister who just happened to be friends with a Very Dangerous Person, who ought to be able to strong-arm even an Intimidator. So Lola was implored to PLEASE ask Bunty O'Toole to resolve this quandary before push came to shove came to a flagrant (even fatal!) foul.

Bunty and Lola mulled the Muller matter over. One unaccountable element of the acid-induced-dancing-naked-on-the-roof was Madeline Wrippley's rumored association with the Traverser cheating ring. Could that doped cupcake have been payback for a cheatsheet deal gone wrong? Maybe inflicted by a Harelip gone rogue?

Even a single loose screw can cause a systematic breakdown; so tightening was in order and without delay. Bunty told Lola to tell Harelip, when they met in Monday's Second Hour Contemporary Living, that her ass should be planted on the backseat of Bootleg's Galaxie in the student parking lot at 11:25 am sharp. Since Harelip and Bootleg both had 4A Study Hall, Lola should prep the usual hall passes and excuse notes in case some faculty hall monitor had a bust-quota to fill. (Bunty herself had Fourth Hour Psych class with Mr. Leeway, but he'd be sure to chalk up her absence to "independent study.")

Monday the 5th of December was a dismal verging-on-bitter-cold sort of day. Bootleg showed no enjoyment at exiting a warm dry school at 11:20 to attend to some screw-tightening in a car whose heater wasn't in the habit of speedy response. Well, tough; the heir to a mortuary ought to be used to chilly temps by now.

A light noontide snow was trickling onto the beamers and beaters in the student parking lot. Threading through these, staying alert for potential adversaries, Bunty and Bootleg were nearly upon the Galaxie when they saw a figure leaning against the driver's door—or not so much leaning as *hovering*, as if suspended from an invisible trick rope. Despite the wintry drizzle, this figure wore nothing heavier than a thin gray hooded sweatsuit, and looked no more intimidating than a rabbit in a hunter's crosshairs.

Until you got up close.

Where the flurries *b-z-z-z-z-ing* about the thin gray hood suddenly reminded you of insects festooning a corpus delicti with rigor mortis.

Neither a sound nor a move was made as Bootleg approached, key in glove.

“You gonna let us in or what?” he growled.

Then two bare hands took abrupt hold of his head and dragged it down for a great big sloppy full-on-the-lips kiss, such as Bugs Bunny used to give Elmer Fudd regardless of his loaded shotgun.

Bootleg staggered back, his face an unhealthy shade of blue. “Whuttha fuhhhh?...”

“You go Uruguay and I’ll go mine,” said Harelip Harrison.

Bunty thrust Bootleg aside and stepped forward, that very dangerous GLEAM in her fearsome hawkish eyes, ready to rake and slash a hapless quarry with finely-honed talons—only to be caught and held by a basilisk-stare from within the thin gray hood.

There in a deep dark lair behind snow-dappled bangs lurked a creature that dined and supped on birds of prey: four-and-twenty falcons baked in a pie.

Come in! Come in and know me better, child! snorted a silver-scaled dragon poised on a vast mound of colorless gems: no holly or ivy or other trace of Christmas Present. The dragon-glance took her measure, drained her absorbent retentive memory, weighed up its contents and marked them down as belonging to a silly little schoolgirl who pretended to be badass. *Run away now—run away and play your childish games, and leave the bona fide badassery to Me.*

“Whuttha fuhhhh?...” went Bootleg again, through chattering teeth.

“I’ll have Juicer ‘talk’ to you,” Bunty managed to say with an extremely dry mouth.

“I’m afraid Juicer had a bit of an accident this morning,” Harelip replied, with a laugh that shivered the dim drear air. “On that Harley Super Glide you got him. So soon after Tommy the Torch, too. Poor Juicer.”

Bunty’s entrails, almost as ironclad as Alley Mushmouth’s, felt the whetted burn of acute frostbite. “Where... d’you get an idea like that?”

“Oh, I *hear* things. Not the best weather for bike-riding—black ice on the streets—things like that. But if you’re planning to blame anyone—like, say, Fat Bob Neapolitan—for Juicer’s spill, take my advice and think twice. Some people can get nasty when riled. Know what I mean? NASTY. When RILED.”

Another shivery laugh as the figure in the thin gray sweatsuit waved a barehanded bye-bye and strolled off through the *b-z-z-z-z-ing* flurries across the whitening asphalt: still

seeming to hover half an inch or so off the ground, and leaving no footprints behind.

*

Easy-peasy. And not at all queasy.

Rule #1: Tell, don't Ask.

Rule #2: Tell AND Show.

Example A: *Tell* Flake Hasleman to score you some acid, by hook or by crook—preferably by Lynddha Ednalino, to get her so-to-speak fingerprints upon it.

Examples B through D: *Tell* Flake to escort you to the Petty Hills Country Club Junior Harvesting; then to deliver a couple of drinks (spiked by yourself) to Chipper Farlowe and Mack “The Arm” Pittley; then to boost their competitive certainty of steamin’ creamin’ with Kailey Cravath.

Rule #3: Stir until Mixed.

Example Do-Re-Mi: Whip the batter of Mack and Chipper’s bust-up into a two-loser soufflé till it goes KABLOOEY and sinks into a sodden trodden puddle.

Such batter-whipping takes considerably more Craft and Guile than Talk and Show. But playing hostess to the mostest brings an escalation and intensification to—“vibes,” let’s say—that can accelerate the hell out of Stirring till Mixed.

And, evidently, leave a few so-to-speak fingerprints of your own for others to detect.

Gotta hand it to Lynndha-with-a-Y-two-N’s-and-a-final-*ha*: if she walks like a witch and talks like a witch, she must not be a duck however much she might weigh. Lynndha must have picked up your prints on her Craft and Guile radar—why else would a winged monkey have been deputized to run interference?

Or, if not a winged monkey, a prickly mouse.

“(You better watch your step,)” Madeline Wripley had preached in an ominous undertone before First Hour Girls Chorus, a few days after the Brawl at which, apparently, you were noticed hanging out with Flake.

Shift into So Dumb mode: “(He just gave me a ride there. Y’know, a *lift*. A *spin*. We’re not dating, if that’s what you’re worried about. He’s not my type. Y’know, my *sort*. My *kind*.)”

Unimpressed rodent-huff. “(Whether *you* watch it or not, *you* are being watched. Don’t say you weren’t warned.)”

“(Oh, I’d never say that. I *would* say ‘Have a Happy Thanksgiving!’)—if only to echo Maddie’s own sober Easter wish after the trial last spring.

“(Mmph,)” Maddie had gone before Miss Sickles summoned everyone to order for another swipe at “A Marshmallow World.”

Observation. Surveillance. On and off the Craft and Guile radar? Only of the hostess, not the Mostest. *You* might be watched preparing edibles for Thanksgiving dinner, but the Mostest went unseen as it concocted an oh-so-special cupcake identical in appearance to those baked by Crystal’s mother or (when not singed to a crisp) Dory Jobling. Its frosting, though, was a glaze of a different Stirrage-till-Mixage—making it a magic wishing cupcake! “One bite and all your dreams will come true! There must be something your little heart desires...”

Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.

Even as you reluctantly regretfully leave the snow outdoors, shake off its residue, change into a dry denim outfit and hit the steam-counter line for Lunch 4B. Untroubled by any liability of an immediate Bunty reprisal, what with Juicer and Tommy on the disabled list and “Uncle Al” unlikely to greenlight a gang hit on a fifteen-year-old girl. If Bunty couldn’t rule her own roost, she could go sleep with the fishes.

Load a tray with two Taco Joes and tater tots, coleslaw, butterscotch pudding, and a minicarton of chocolate milk. Who should be graced with your Mostest presence while the hostess gets fed? Such a temptation to go yank Fiona’s chain, or Wanda Lynn’s, or Hope Eckhardt’s, or even Becca Blair’s bionic anchor...

No. Plunk down beside unobtrusive Ann Hew, at a table where Split-Pea Erbsen is conversing with Gail Spruce and being hearkened to by Tim McDermid and Spacyjane Groh, though not Matt LaVintner whose bent-down head rests on folded arms. The five other heads (even nondescript Ann’s) gradually turn toward you; yet Spacyjane is the only one who behaves as though nothing has changed (“Hello, Laurie, you look neat”) and Split-Pea is the only one to acknowledge, if only obliquely, the existence of the Mostest:

“Comfy-cozy are we, snuggled up together like beasts in black leather?”

Oh go sleigh yourself.

Tim McDermid ducks his meek mild Schroeder-playing head almost as far as Matt LaVintner's, but Gail Spruce fairly quivers with suspense. A reporter for the *Channel* and fundraiser for the Red Cross, she's also a topnotch Gossip Brigadier who can't fathom your transformation. Gail likes to GASP, and how you'd relish making her suck breath and bulge out of sockets while relating how you helped at the bakesale table last week, maintaining distance from Madeline Wrippley as she stopped by for a pre-Choir cupcake each Zero Hour—giving you the stink-eye on Monday, a mousy squint on Tuesday, then no glance at all Wednesday when Strudel Muller said "Here comes our best customer!" and reached for a nice big *gâteau*, which you crafted-and-guiled into her chunky hand as dexterously as you'd Dropped that money clip for Britt and Gigi, but this time without seeking observation or surveillance.

Now take a bite. Don't let the wish grow cold...

Before the end of First Hour, Maddie began to look peculiar and miss a cue or two. Child's play to divert Miss Sickles from having her stay for a scolding. Child's craft to beguile the wobbly Wrippley into heading out and up and away, for further guidance by a person who didn't need to be Told *or* Shown what steps should be taken next.

Unlike Flake Hasleman, whom you *did* have to Tell to mail a carton of doctored skyrockets from Acme Athletic Equipment Ltd.—or so the label said—to Thomas J. Dwyer in Multch Township; after which nature took its explosive course.

No need for you to be outside Multch West when that happened.

No need for you to be on the roof for Maddie's *Crucible* danceathon.

No need for you to be on the scene for the next night of reckoning, either.

Just to finish your pudding, empty your minicarton, smack your lips and snag Split-Pea's eye behind its big glass lens.

"Tell Slappy to wrap things up," you say.

"Who's Slappy?" gasps Gail Spruce.

Resist the gratuitous yen to Show her the Mostest, if only for a moment. Simply remark: "He's the man who gives a big hand to little ladies."

One wish did grow cold that week while coming true: *it snowed, it snowed, it snowed*. With thermometers plunging down to zero and windchills to 48 below as howling gusts turned rush hours into crippled inch-by-inch crawls.

No school closures in Vanderlund, naturally—“(It’ll take the Coming of the New Ice Age for *that* to happen,)” Fiona mutter-grumped. But the Shoreward Club’s *bal masqué* got postponed from Saturday the 10th to Saturday the 17th, since weather *wasn’t* permitting.

This would make no difference to Alex Dmitria if her grandparents got their way. *Abuelo* Enrique Ramirez, a commercial advisor at The City’s Mexican Consulate, had to go to his native Cuernavaca on business for three weeks; and he and *Abuela* Amparo invited the Dmitrias to come along—not just to celebrate Navidad among relatives, but as a special treat for Alex’s sixteenth (on the 19th) birthday.

Alex, though moved to tears by the offer, of course *couldn’t* accept: it would mean missing two whole weeks of school and basketball and caroling and Scout work and the animal shelter and the Winter Holidays Concert and the Shoreward *bal masqué* (if that ever did take place) not to mention being away from her Papa who had to stay in town for the Christmas rush at Double-A Sporting Goods, etc. etc. etc. Everyone at VTHS from Mr. Stabeldore on down urged her to reconsider and not miss this golden opportunity—or, if she absolutely refused to go, asked for her ticket (“Esperanza” Eckhardt repeatedly) to go bask in the balmy sun.

Finally Mr. Dmitria hauled out Alex’s suitcases and ordered her to pack them. Yermak and Tonio would spend the holidays with their old playmates, Mumbles Metcalf’s dogs; Papa himself would catch a red-eye flight to join Alex and Mama and the Ramirezes as soon he closed the store on Christmas Eve. “So no more objections, Alexandra!”

“Yes, Papa.” But Alex conscientiously gathered all her class assignments for the two weeks before winter vacation, even soliciting an extra-credit project on Mexican history from Ms. Goldberg; and no one doubted this homework would be scrupulously completed before any indulgence in tourism or fiestas or riding her *gran tío*’s Azteca horse.

On Sunday the 11th (when temperatures warmed up to twenty degrees) Vicki and Joss came to the International Airport to see Alex off and pledge yet again that a belated local birthday/Christmas party would take place promptly upon her return. All three special

friends were apprehensive that Mike Spurgeon might make a dramatic Framptonesque entrance and croon “Putting My Heart on the Line”—but he didn’t, and nothing worse happened than Alex sobbing and clinging to Papa till the final boarding call. Even after she got carried onto the plane, nobody breathed easily till it was in the air and out of sight; at which point Papa swabbed his big bald head and took a bite of his protruding toothpick.

“*Bozhe, ya dumav, shcho vona nikoly ne pide,*” he grated in Ukrainian. “God, I thought she’d never leave.”

*

At that very moment fifteen miles to the southeast, Fiona hunkered down on a jouncing El seat and cinched her watch cap more tightly over her ears as PoonElly “sang” another chorus of Lepperzee’s latest tune:

*Fraggin’ at the frat house
Shootin’ up the keg!
Target ev’ry last souse
Chop ‘em down a peg!*

An ode penned not by I.M.A. Camera but Dolph Turkenkopf (stage name Adolf Turdminoff, “after the Park”) whose older brother Wilmer still hadn’t been formally charged as the Mad Bludgeoner, though he kept getting detained for more interrogation.

*Say “We know yer guilty
“Better fess it up!
“Fraggin’ all the frat boys
“Initiatin’ schtup!”*

(That last line deserved to be flushed, if it wouldn’t clog the pipes, and presuming you could find a sewer or cesspool that wasn’t frozen solid.)

Cobwebs & Strange was having a special Sunday sale in hopes of recouping some of the business they’d lost during the snowsocked week; so Feef and Poon were headed downtown to do a little Bah Humbug shopping, traveling via the El since Le Heap was currently out of commission. Okay, that made Poon cranky, but she didn’t have to take it out

on Feef by “singing” on the train, or claiming to know a stop to get off at that would get them where they were going twice as quickly.

“Unless you *wanna* walk for blocks ‘n’ blocks with chapped lips ‘n’ chilblains.”

“(You’re *full* of chilblains!)” Fiona mutter-jounced. “(I’ve been coming here for years and *know* where to get off.)”

“You never knew HOW to get off till *I* came along, Sugar Pop!”

Tell the whole El, why don’t you?

It’d serve Poon right if they got separated. Then she’d have to hitchhike home, probably thumbing toward the wrong direction and winding up in Yell County, Arkansas. (Ugh.) All right then, get off at Poon’s chosen stop... and find yourselves outside the *Greyhound bus station*, for crying out loud—

—no, make that SCREECHING out loud—

—as they heard, then saw, a beleaguered man being pummeled by a distraught cowgirl swinging a saddlebag with one hand while, with the other, she gripped a large musical instrument case decorated like Nefertiti’s sarcophagus—

“Holy shit, it’s Shudder Bugge!” yelled PoonElly, and they ran over to rescue or support her.

“Gawdam bassurd pimp!” she was piping in that Dixieland treble so out-of-synch with her Ming China face.

“Quit *hitting* me!” whined the man between pummels.

“If *she* quits, *we* start!” Poon threatened. “Whadja do to her?”

“Nothing!”

“*Nuthin’?*” Bugge screeched, setting down her cello case to swing the saddlebag with both hands. “Only tried t’*recrewt* me t’be a *hooker* fer him, the asshole bassurd!”

This was a grave and plausible charge. “Gentlemen of leisure” were notorious for hanging around the Greyhound station, on the lookout for newly-arriving naïfs who might be conscripted into prostitution. An Okie from Manchuria would be the *crème de la crop*—to amateur as well as professional panderers:

“I was just trying (ouch!) to pick her up! Just for *me* (ouch!) just for *tonight!*”

“Well, she don’t wanna get picked!” grimaced PoonElly. “So hop on the bus, Gus, and get *yourself* free!”

“(That song is so moronic,)” muttered Fiona, picking up the discarded sarcophagus.

Prying Bugge away from Make-a-New-Plan Stan and gawking Greyhounds, they took her down the slick street to a seedy bistro called Gibaldi’s, next door to the crumbling McGurn Theater. Feef and Poon’s fake California IDs enabled them to buy beer or wine, but they ordered three hot coffees with biscottis and took these to a table whose occupants (slow to go back out in the cold) were encouraged to depart by Poon’s jagged-pumpkin grin.

“Ew look, they were drinking *espresso*,” she winced.

“(Sludge in a demitasse,)” Feef agreed, sweeping the grubby little cups over to a corner of the table. “(Hope you don’t mind plain black java,)” she told Bugge, who was gulping hers down with both hands clutching the mug. Hardly garbed for a snowy City sojourn: nothing thicker than a buckskin jacket had been added to the cowgirl costume.

Poon skreeked her chair over and draped a maxicoated arm around Bugge’s shivering shoulders. “Got some flannel longjohns in that bag o’ yours? Go put ‘em on in the crapper, we’ll guard the door—”

Bugge peered over the tilted mugbrim at Poon, then at Fiona; then she wiped her mouth on her buckskin cuff. “Dew I know yew gals?”

“Sure! Last summer, on the Strip—I was Rerun then (call me PoonElly now) and this here’s FTW!” To Fiona: “Show her—”

Feef fished out the thin brass necklace with the small brass *FTW* pendant and Vicki Volester’s tiny electric-bass charm. “(‘Member giving me this? You said it was guaranteed to turn my neck green.)”

“Oh. Yeah. Way-ull... whutchew tew dewin’ way out *hyar*?”

“(We live out here—in the ‘burbs, at least. You still on tour with Krewel and the gang?)”

“Yeah, is ol’ Tawdry Meadows here too?” asked Poon.

“Dunno *whar* she is,” Bugge whimpered. “I’m skeered they got her, like they almost got me. That’s why I runned away”—covering almond eyes and biscotti face with splayed fingers.

She and Tawdry had returned from the K.U.P. tour to their Vault at the Mayerling and resumption of the Scenester lifestyle. Then, a few weeks ago, Tawd hadn't come home from an Elvis Costello concert at the Whisky. Bugge didn't worry at first, figuring she was off on another adventure; but days passed and news of the Hillside Strangler kept dominating the airwaves—body after body found raped, tortured, choked to death, and left to rot on the side of a hill. Some of the victims had been streetwalkers, others were students as young as twelve; and while Shudder Bugge never wanted to deal with the police at any time for any reason, her dread grew so dire that she finally reported Tawdry as a missing person.

Then, a few nights later on Hollywood Boulevard, she got beckoned over to an unmarked car by a couple of guys who weren't in uniform but flashed badges at her. Plainclothes cops, she thought, with news or questions—until they dragged her by force into the car. Out of which she fought with tooth and claw and cowgirl boots, making tracks with the latter as she ran like hell and hid till dawn.

“Still got bits of ‘em dug deep under these,” Bugge breathed, staring at her ten tremulous fingernails.

“(But you were able to describe the guys to the police?)” prompted Fiona.

“No no no no no, I *coont*—them bassurds grabbed m’camera case, it had m’name ‘n’ address inside the lid, I hadda git away jiffy-quick ‘fore they found me!”

She’d furtively circled the Mayerling for an hour, eyes strained for that unmarked car, before sneaking in to retrieve her big-ass fiddle and whatever else she could jam into a saddlebag; then hightailing it to the Greyhound station.

“(Did you leave Sleekie with the Baroness?)”

“?????”

“She means that black cat of yours,” Poon interpreted.

“Oh, him—he lives free all round the Mayerling, ever’body feeds him. ‘At’sa way it should be, too—lockin’ up kittycats is krewl!”

“(And unusual punishment,)” Feef muttered.

“Well, you’re safe now,” Poon said stoutly. “Better come home with one of us and get rested up proper—”

Way to leave you and me wide open AGAIN, Elly May! thought Fiona, who might be supersympathetic to Shudder Bugge's plight but knew Ardine wouldn't allow such a creature to cross the Pilchard threshold; meaning Feef would have to explain boarding her at the Plexiglas Palace.

"Oh no thanks, I got me a ticket to Milwaukee," Bugge replied, wiping her eyes on her other buckskin cuff. "I figger 'at's 'bout as fur from Hollywood as yew kin git. 'Sides, Erin/Aaron's thar 'n' kin he'p me git a job in a photo lab—we wuz in the same foster home back in Houston, when he wuz jes Aaron 'n' I wuz jes... aw shit, I'm gonna need a new name." Her wiped eyes darted around Gibaldi's, as if one might be lying in wait there.

"You can have 'Rerun,' I don't use it no more," said generous PoonElly.

"Oh no thanks... but mebbe Sleekie? Got a nice ring to it—Sleekie Nefertiti."

"(I'd pay to see an act with a name like that,)" Fiona told her, transferring much of the Bah Humbug shopping budget from grouch bag to Bugge/Sleekie's hand. Poon followed suit, and their ex-mistress of Scenester ceremonies shed a few more tears while tucking their money into her buckskin pockets.

"Whoa-kay then—gotta git goin'—thanks so much, yew guys, fer the drink 'n' the grub 'n' the loan—I'll be payin' y'back soon's I git t'Milwaukee—startin' with tradin' hats!" She yanked off Feef's wool watch cap and replaced it with her own miniature Stetson. "Thar y'go! 'N' yew kin have *this*"—pressing the key to the Vault into Poon's hand. "Walk me back t'the bus?"

They did, each giving her a hug and contact info before she boarded the Greyhound and took off for whatever fate had in store for her, cello and all.* Fiona and PoonElly stood watching the departure, then turned by unspoken consent back to the El stairway; Cobwebs & Strange would have to keep waiting.

"Nilla's gonna bust a gut when she sees you in that sombrero," Poon cackled.

"(If you say I look 'cute' in it I'll shellack you,)" swore Fiona.

*

* As told in "Bruise from Nowhere," Chapter 11 of *13 Black Cats Under a Ladder*.

At that precise same minute fifteen miles to the north, Dennis Desmond bellowed “*Spontaneous impromptu ad hoc* DEEEE-TOOOOUR” and, swerving his Wagonmaster off South Petty Road into the skeletal tree-tunnel that was Vermeer Place, began charging up its curlicue slope to Baroque Vista. Which might be better-plowed and more-thoroughly-salted (thanks to H.R. “Pufnstuf” Hasleman) than the average local neighborhood, but was still atop a glassy hill with a steepening slant. *GNNNNNOGG* went the Wagonmaster’s chained tires, sounding like Dino Tattaglia biting the heel of his swarthy hand: *GNNNNNOGG-NOGG-NOGG-NOGG...*

Lawdy Gawd prayed Gigi Pyle, her heart wedged in her esophagus, *don’t let me get killed in this crew cab pickup truck. If I have to die, let it be in a stretch limo—*

SKID-D-D-D to a halt outside a padlocked chain-link fence beside a sign reading **VW / VANDERLUND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL / HOME OF THE BEETLES.** (“*And Ladybugs!*” some jockette had graffiti-added.)

Out leaped Dennis, leaving the driver’s door wide open to the frozen air. “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; or cloak this joint up with our two-ply wipes! Cry God for Mister Whipple and let’s squeeze the Charmin!” (A roll of bathroom tissue unfurled as it got flung over the fence to enwreath a tall evergreen, no stranger to TP-ing.) “*Mon bon sapin! Mi hermosa abeto! Moya novogodnyaya yelka—*”

“Can we PLEASE get OUT o’ heah??”

Dennis leaped back in and halfway across the pickup’s front bench seat, mashing Gigi’s hip and thigh and calf against his own. “Such impatience! Such zealous hotheaded rarin’ to kick off our At Long Last Date! Such inability to wait till you get a figgy pudding plumbed by the thumb of What A Good Boy Am I!”

OH!! went Gigi’s viscera. Still capable of being scandalized, two months after that first snort at Jive’s place. Still susceptible, after three weeks of being stuffed like a *foie grassy* goose—though with only soupçons of *The Stuff*, doled out like gruel at a Victorian orphanage. (“Please sir, may I have some more?”) Even last weekend at the Magnetic Pole disco, where they could’ve and *should’ve* skipped directly TO *The Stuff*. Every nostril there had been percolating with It, except her own.

But no: everything had to be food, food, food—relentless gobble-gorging wherever Dennis took her on their not-a-dates. All the weight she'd shed had been regained, with more fleshy poundage added. *How* much was unverified; Gigi didn't step on any scales these days, or strike nude poses before the three-way mirror in her antebellum bedroom. And even if she had money to spend she wouldn't disgrace herself by buying larger-sized lingerie, though undie-elastic was digging into shoulders and armpits, leaving unsightly pink stripes on waistline and tops-of-thighs.

"He won't be satisfied till Ah have to borrow a dadgum *corset* from Alva Dee or Crystal Denvour," she'd lamented yesterday while wrestling a pair of skintight ski pants over frumpish thermal underwear over pink-stripping "briefs." Knowing Dennis wouldn't let that evening's not-a-date end without grabbing a double handful of *her* end through those layers of fabric, and treating it like twin rolls of Charmin.

The first time he'd done this (after their initial feeding frenzy at the Lebkuchenhaus) Gigi'd reared up with a vehement shriek and completely forgot the plantation-bred drawl she'd been cultivating since sixth grade. "DOOOO—YOOOU—MIIIIND??"

"Do I *mind* your *behind*? Isn't what I *signed* up for on the dotted *line* with which we're *entwined*, because it's so *fine* it gives you a *shine*—though not nearly RIPE enough for full-blown harvest moonery, YET."

Same pronouncement made after same heinie-groping done after each subsequent not-a-date. If Gigi showed signs of getting fed up with being felt up down back—on top of getting fed up and *up* and UP, though not with Stuff—Dennis would shift his topaz gaze from her bottom to her bosom and make Tab Tchorz-y melon-manipulation gestures. So gross! So vile! Let's ram a cherry-picking knee into his nutsack and see what color his eyes turn then, why don't we?

Except that Dennis remained her Great White Hope when it came to great white powder. Contact with the Traversers was as good as lost: Britt had reverted to a silent little she-gator pretending to be a bayou log; Mauly stalked the halls like an underfed tigress; Gwen pivoted away every time their paths chanced to intersect. No doubt others at VTHS (especially among the Footlight Players) would use The Stuff if it were available and affordable; but since It wasn't, they had to be (or act) content with booze and pills and pot.

Gigi couldn't be (or act either) anymore.

Least of all last Friday afternoon. She'd tried to transfer out of Honors Phys Ed following her resignation from the JV pep squad, but Ms. Cliffhouse wouldn't authorize this till the end of the semester. In the meantime Maleficent Margo had snatched back the whip hand: fending off Val Frid's challenge for the captaincy, promoting that devious little brown-noser Taffi Applebuff to be Gigi's replacement, spreading slanders that Gigi'd been *expelled* from the squad for unspeakable offenses. Which did nothing to cheer the atmosphere in Sixth Hour Gym; nor to buoy up Gigi's attitude, already deflated by the shortage of Stuff and freezedried by the inhumane weather.

Then last Friday Ms. Cliffhouse twice raked her over icy coals: first for slapdash halfhearted exertion, then for saying "Ah ASKED to be transferred out o' this few-tile class, didn't Ah?" Then Gigi's hasty exit through the locker room got blocked—deliberately, like a playground bully bent on swiping a lunchbox—by Harelip Harrison, who had to be humiliatingly dodged around; and THEN she ran headlong into that same uppity Rebounder skank, who had no business looking so complacent while Gigi was feeling so wretched.

"WHY DON'T YEW DEW US ALL A FAVOR 'N' *REE*-BOUND YOUR BLACK ASS THE HAIL AWAY FROM HEAH?" she yelled in Sheba Baby's smugly stuck-up brown-noser face—

—before shoving past prissy Vicki Volester (whose jaw was hanging off its hinges) and rotten Sheila Quirk (who shoved back and snarled "*Pass auf, Fettsack!*").

Wretched? Who's wretched? Wild fierce savage fury, all the way out to the hall.

Where her rage got snuffed by the bleak realization that she'd made a stupid unforced error. Prissy Vicki would be sure to tattle to Ms. Schwall the Seventh Hour Gym teacher, who was into cool things like aerobic dance and might've been a worthwhile ally against Ms. Cliffhouse. Too late now—another chance squandered, like at the Sears jewelry counter.

No way could Gigi climb all the way upstairs to the fourth floor after that. Not when nothing awaited her there but a speechless soapstone she-gator and two Smooch Smarks burbling "zaftig" comments about her T&A. *Plus* she couldn't remember if she'd done her English homework, or even what Mrs. Staghorn had assigned.

So she simply ditched the final hour of that foul-weather week: snuck out of school past the faculty monitors and endured hypothermia till she could catch a bus to Clubroot

Drive. Fully expecting to be busted once there, or soon after; but maybe everyone else was just as glad to see that horrendous week come to an end, deferring any disciplinary tasks till Monday. At any rate no calls came from principal, vice principal, teacher or Gruesome Twosome (Threesome with Taffi Applebuff) to accuse Gigi of dastardly deed-doing.

Lizabeth Ann already had that base covered. Oh yes: direct communication might've been broken off when Gigi quit cheerleading, but maternal reproaches could still be addressed to the open air, with cautionary clippings left on antebellum pillowslips—like Friday's "A spurt in weight gain is a danger signal," underscored in blood-red ballpoint.

(Elegant phraseology, Ma...)

So it was with multiple millstones encircling her neck (and skintight ski pants throttling her lower torso) that Virginia Leigh Pyle was taken to House o' Chopsticks Saturday night, and served every item from Column A *and* Column B till she feared she'd chuck it all up like Nanette Magnus used to disgustingly do on purpose.

Dennis wouldn't allow any of the mottos from her many fortune cookie to be read. His method of assessing Gigi's fortune was to elevate her by the seat of those ski pants and guess her wedgifying weight, out in the arctic Chopsticks parking lot.

"Ohhhh pleeeeee donnnn't," she moaned. *Just let me have my fragmentary dose of "dessert" and take me ho-o-o-o-ome...*

But his widespread paws tightened their grip through polyester and nylon, silk and lace and cringing skin and amplified fat, to clamp her very buttbones. "Yes! Yes! You are ready!—and *then* some!—for our At Long Last Date!—at my place tomorrow!—with, as a bonus, a profitable modeling job for payment in cash or EQUIVALENT—"

Her limp arms instinctively rose and wrapped around his millstone-free neck. *Miss Pie here is one of our choicest modeling prospects*, he'd told the security guard at Sears, but hadn't followed up on since. "Modeling? For your mother? For real?"

"The Old 'Un may be past her prime photographywise, but isn't resting on her laurels or her hardys. Whereas YOU (me heartie) have reached your *pumped-up plumped-out prime-of-times*, and can rest on this most succulent of moneymakers while being immortalized!"

"Just... how... would... she want me to pose?"

“Think *fin de siècle* overlaid with Gothic melodrama! Think Mae West as Red Riding Hood, strongarming a Snidely Whiplash werewolf! Think how richly rewarding the results might be—”

“With cash or... EQUIVALENT?”

“To quote Confucius, or his fortune cookie copywriters: ‘Not all snow falls from skies above.’”

So there you had it: despite the additional pink stripes he’d imprinted on her derriere, here Gigi was in Dennis’s truck. Arrayed in her Sunday best, or at least the best that could still be worn without cutting off circulation: a cashmere cowl-collared sweaterknit dress over a non-cling slip, over (Lawdy forgive her) an actual pantygirdle and merry-widow bustier, both pilfered from Lizabeth Ann’s wardrobe. The intended effect was hourglassy rather than *foie grassy*, accentuated by granny boots (now-out-of-fashion but loosely-lace-uppable) to lengthen the leg and readjust her center—make that centers, fore and aft—of gravity.

Plenty to readjust after the Wagonmaster *gnnnnogg*’d down Bedeguar Way and up Gloaming Avenue, to slam through a grandly gated porte-cochère and SKID-D-D-D into a murky courtyard, where Gigi stepped shakily out and slumped jellylike against the truck.

“Welcome to Foley’s Folly! Enter freely and of your own frilly will! You won’t find a more bang-on imitation of County Kildare’s ‘Wonderful Barn’ outside Ireland!”

She peered up at what appeared to be a lofty limestone anthill, several stories high, with a coiling exterior staircase. “This where yew *live*?”

“Live and love, sleep and snore, warp and woof!”

The Foley family had been famous for affluent eccentricity almost as long as the Carstairs clan, and Morrigan Foley-Desmond had maintained this tradition by converting the Folly into what her adopted son called a Starmaking Planetarium of Sideshow Abnormalities. Anyone would get abnormally starmade if they tried to ascend that exterior staircase in weather like today’s; luckily the anthill had a front door on the ground floor, and this was opened by the spitting image of Lewis Carroll’s Frog-Footman—except he wore a black suit instead of livery, and had a shoe-polished scalp instead of a powdered wig.

“Zur,” he croaked at Dennis.

“Howdy, Jaeger! Say *buenas noches* to Miss R here!”

R? “Um... it’s P, or G—”

“Miss Arrrr,” went Jaeger, sounding like a Frog-Pirate as he removed Gigi’s down jacket. (*ARRRR you to get in at all? That’s the first question, you know...*)

But she *was* in, and being towed by the hand up a staircase paralleling the corkscrewy one outside. The wall beside it was decked with oversized enlargements of black-and-white photos, each almost palpable in focus, and each of something Gigi didn’t want to look at much less touch. A sinkful of soiled dishes from which flames were rising; a toothless old woman captured in mid-sneeze; a young male amputee stump-straddling a runaway baby carriage. “Hypersurrealistic,” Dennis described their style: “the Widow Foley-Desmond’s trademark, brand name, theme song, Batsignal-against-the-night-sky!”

And she wants ME to pose for her? Doing WHAT, exactly?

Never mind. If Morrigan was inclined to share her wealth, who was Gigi Pyle to decline taking part? Glamour might not enter into the bargain, but plain old barrelheads could be laden with cash (and ordinary panes of glass with lines of EQUIVALENT).

Remember your vow to go as far as necessary—or can be gotten away with, given your underage status—further than Odious Isabel ever would...

“This is the Wintersault Room,” Dennis was saying as he let go of her hand and cupped her girdled haunch. “On the opposite side of the Folly from the Summersault Room, in case you were anticipating acrobatics—not that those *never* took place within these four walls.”

Darkly shadowed walls till he flipped a switch and revealed a hearteningly familiar backstage-type chamber, full of framed scenic drops. Plus a black lacquered chair beside a black lacquered table on which sat an empty brandy snifter, a bottle labeled “VSOP,” a radio or tape player or something acoustic, and a small geometrically-patterned wooden box.

“By any chance, was the question ‘Did Dennis ever have a governess?’ on the tip of your tongue? If so, you can use that tip to lick those lips because yes I DID have a governess, and a Japanese one to boot—not that I booted her all that often. *Nor* was she a dead ringer for Mrs. Livingston on *The Courtship of Eddie’s Father*: no indeed, Masako Fujisaki was a live young lady in an abbreviated miniskirt, which I’d just begun to appreciate at the time. She gave me this *himitsu bako* or ‘box of tricks’ to remember her by—as if I were likely to

forget the least little detail, down to her teeny-weeny toenails.”

Opening the wooden box with a series of intricate moves, he took out two items and placed them side by side.

“We’ll dispense with what’s behind Door Number Three and cut right to the mustard. Here on the *left* is a stack of \$250 in nonsequential bills; there on the *right* is an equal-value Baggie filled with two-and-a-half grams of high-quality snotsugar. Sign this release” (produced from a back pocket) “and pose cooperatively, and you can take your pick.”

Gigi cautiously unfolded the sheet of paper and read:

For consideration of TBD, I, Aline Renoir, give the Morrigan Foley-Desmond Studio the irrevocable right to use my picture, portrait or photograph in conjunction with my name or a fictional name in all forms and manners, including composite and distorted representations, and I waive my right to inspect or approve the finished product that may be used in connection with it. I am over the age of 18 years and have read this release and am fully conversant with its contents. Date December 11, 1977

Again that visceral outcry. “Uhhhh... how much trouble... could I get into... by signing this... with that name... at that age?”

“Oh, no more than you might imagine—no more than Masako Fujisaki ever did. HER *nom de guerre* was ‘Kushinada Hime,’ the Japanese equivalent of Andromeda. Did a whole lot of Greek-mythological-type modeling, right here in this room.”

“But... wasn’t she over eighteen when she was your governess?”

“Well, eventually.”

Enough of this. Muster up the old Tara-talking hauteur: “Ah would lahk tew speak tew yore mother puhsonally ‘fore Ah put mah signature tew *any* setch dockewment—”

Dennis, for the first time since they’d begun going together (if that was an accurate summary of their relationship) lost his ear-to-ear smirk. Plopped the money-stack and Baggied coke back into the box of tricks. Went through the elaborate motion-series to shut it back up. And said: “You’re free to go. Trot downstairs and ask Jaeger to call you a cab; we’ll pick up the tab. Don’t be afraid of that mark on his face, it’s only a dueling scar—”

“NO!!” Gigi blurted, her heart pounding so hard and fast it nearly burst through the merry-widow bustier and cashmere sweaterdress. “Ah’ll sign! Ah will! Ah’ll do what she asks!” Nearly scrawling *Virginia Leigh Pyle* on the release before spelling out *Aline Renoir*, letter by careful letter. “There! See? Okay?”

“Very good, Miss R. May I start calling you Aline?”

“Um... there something special ‘bout that name?”

“It belonged to a Rubenesque *poseur* (I should say *poseuse*, she being decidedly feminine) of the previous century. Who, so far as I know and unlike Masako alias Kushinada, was NOT obsessed with portraying Kushinada alias Andromeda. Speaking of whom, here’s the proper backdrop—”

Selecting one showing rough gray rocks by a foamy blue sea, he positioned it beneath something Gigi hadn’t noticed till now: an iron ring screwed into the ceiling.

Through which Dennis looped a pair of padded manacles.

That did not look like a breakaway prop.

“Wh...?”

“You *have* heard of (or read about, or been exposed to) the legend of Andromeda, right? Ethiopian princess—mother boasts she’s hotter than nymphs—pissing off Poseidon, who sends a giant serpent to ravage the kingdom—they decide to sacrifice princess (*not* mother) to the monster—she gets chained to an ocean rock—Perseus comes to the rescue, but not till a thousand B&D artists have a ball illustrating her wearing less and less and finally nothing at all but flecks of foam. Today we’ll make it a thousand-and-one—artists, that is or rather are; *not* foamflecks.”

Rapping on the door behind him, which swung open to admit big glasses on a big nose atop a paltry figure—

—OH LAWDY—

“*Wie hängt es, fräulein?*” asked Sidney Erbsen, glancing at the manacles dependent from the ceiling hook.

“Th-that’s n-not y-your m-mother!!” Gigi babbled at Dennis.

“It’s NOT? Why land o’ Goshen, you’re correct—it’s our apprentice paparazzo! But where’s his lovely aide-de-camp?”

Spacyjane Groh poked her unbraided-Wednesday-Addams head around the jamb, then lugged in armfuls of photographic gear and laid them down beside Split-Pea.

“Let’s get more light in here,” he told her, his specs trained on Gigi. “Got a *lot* to illuminate.”

Gigi may have evaded paralysis when she’d been jolted off that human pyramid at summer cheer clinic, but it overtook her now; she was barely able to move mouth and tongue and larynx enough to ask “Muhhhh-ther?”

“Oh, the Old ‘Un’s away visiting Masako Fujisaki. Who tried to hang herself after leaving our employ—“*It’s all for you, Dennis-san!*”—but only succeeded in confining herself to a wheelchair. Still makes a living, though—the Old ‘Un shells out *mucho dinero* for paraplegic posing.”

In a miniskirt? Gigi absurdly wondered. Then a hypersurrealistic vision shot through her agitated brain, of Kim Zimmer as Daisy Duck with a noose around her throat *and* one dislocated shoulder, while her Tropic Island Cruise sarong slithered off a drooping flaccid body plucked of every feather. *Why aren’t you wearing a bra, young lady??* demanded Mrs. Zimmer, to which Kim could only reply with a W-A-A-A-A-I-I-I-I-L-L-L-L—

“Fascinating,” Split-Pea said in his pseudo-hesitant Woody Allen nebbish-voice, pointing that complicated camera at Gigi’s face as it blushed cherry-tomato-red from raven hairline to cashmere cowl-collar. Hypersurrealistic FLASHback to that first ambush last February in the VW lunchroom, when he’d rooted her to the spot like a naked bondmaid on a Gorean auction block—

Got to keep hold of myself.

Because the Gobble-uns’ll get me if I don’t hold tight...

One cashmere-sleeved arm came unfrozen and was used to frantically wave Dennis over while Split-Pea directed Spacyjane in the setup of lamps and tripod.

“YAYess?” said Dennis, again cupping a haunch.

“(—please please please can’t we do this just the two of us Ah won’t mind if it’s just me ‘n’ yew but not him please not him yew take the pictures Ah’ll model any way yew want just make him leave first Ah don’t want him here *please—*)”

The toothy Joker-grin went upside-down with comic remorse. “Woe is me and wurra the day—I don’t know one end of a Kodachrome spool from the other. Young Erbsen may be a callow soph, but he knows his Stuff” (significant pause) “and the Widow’s given him the run of the studio when she’s not here to be run into. But never fear: I’ll hang around in a soo-per-vie-zer-ee cuh-pah-sit-tee. And don’t forget: *you* can yank the ripcord and bail out of the chopper any time you choose. Yet bear in mind: your cash-or-EQUIVALENT payment will *only* be tendered if *you* hang around till the time *we* choose.”

Struggle not to hyperventilate (surreally or otherwise) as Spacyjane turned on every lamp in the Wintersault Room, aiming their shades at the Andromeda backdrop. “(But... but... but...)”

Dennis gave each nethercheek a girdled pinch. “Never can predict reactions. Now Millicent, she dropped her drawers while climbing the stairs—Jaeger found them later in the umbrella stand. Her sister Isabel, though, proved to be bashful even after getting a hashful. Amazement for everyone concerned with *that* photo session.”

“Meaning *him* and *me*,” Split-Pea nebbished.

“She wouldn’t accommodate us till we let her wear a sequined Mardi Gras mask which then went missing—I presume it’ll be part of her costume at next week’s Shoreward BALL.” (Pinch. Pinch.) “No, you can’t anticipate what anybody’s liable to do. We’ve even been stupefied by all-out stripteases performed on foggy rooftops!”

“*One*,” said Split-Pea.

“And that *one* was inspired beforehand by others than ourselves. Regrettably, Jaeger didn’t whip up any encouraging cupcakes” (PINCH PINCH) “but I’d be glad, no *proud* to pour you a finger or two of cognac.”

I’m not eighteen, no matter what that form says. Selling nude photos of underage girls is illegal. Even TAKING them will land you in jail... unless they can be called Art.

“(If... Ah... let yew... take pictures... of me... wh-wh-what’ll... yew do... wi-wi-with... them?)”

“Enjoy,” said Dennis, holding the snifter to her lops; then seating himself in the black lacquered chair and twirling a dial on the radio or tape player or acoustic device, from which *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* pipe-organ’d forth.

“Okeydoke,” went Split-Pea. “Let’s get under way and down to fundamentals. I suppose you could go somewhere to change,” he told Gigi, “but since you won’t be changing *into* anything, what would be the point? Or, the rest of us could turn our backs while you ‘brace yourself’—but that’d be so *rude*.”

OH!! OH!! OH!! screamed every atom in her mind and body. *This isn’t happening, this can’t be happening—not to me, not for real! It must be a bad dream, a scream-awake nightmare, a sick probing intrusive hallucination of lurid debasement—*

“If you’re SHY,” Dennis interjected, “and require assistance getting DOFFED, I believe Miss Groh here has OODLES of experience as a lady’s maid.”

“Though on what you might call a much *smaller* scale,” Split-Pea added.

“AH’M NOT AFRAID O’ YEW, SID ERBSEN, OR ANY MAN IN SHOE LEATHER!” bawled Gigi, stung by what she took to be a heft-allusion. Do your worst, losers! Anything Odious Isabel (or *Madeline Wrippley*) could get away with, Virginia Leigh Pyle could do better!

Except she couldn’t. Not in front of them—in front of HIM. All she could do was start to perspire, as when busted by that straggly-combover security guard at Sears.

Then a spaced-out live-action puppet came forward, stooped down, and began to unlace Gigi’s left granny boot.

The audacity! The effrontery! One well-placed cheerleader’s kick would punt her right through the Wintersault doorway—

...but what then? Ripcord yanked, but no parachute. A plummeting free fall till you go to pieces, disintegrate, burn up on re-entry. Cut off by Old One-Shot Thanks-a-Lot Untie-the-Knot, so no more soupçons of orphanage gruel—

(WHUBB goes the right boot as it’s painfully extracted. *Yowtch!* you cry, followed by a *yipe* as your swollen stocking foot touches the cold tile floor. Silence from Spacyjane as she starts unlacing the other boot.)

*Think—THINK—THINK—**THINK**—use that nimblebodied limbertorsoed brain so skilled at misdirection.*

Okay... okay... get your hands on that Baggie, take it home and hide The Stuff where it can’t be found, then go to the police and act up a storm about how you were *coerced* from the very beginning—*compelled* by Flake Hasleman to take that first snort, then *forced* to

shoplift AND be debauched by Roald Bjelke, then *blackmailed* into undressing and posing ALL BARE for a couple of brutish high school boys with a complicated camera!

Oh, Ah KNOW Ah should've called yew sooner, officer, but Ah was so frightened—those boys come from such rich families with the fanciest lawyers, and they threatened to dew the most SHAMEFUL things to me if Ah snitched, but (sob) Ah jes can't bear it any longer (sob) Ah'm jes a sadly embarrassed UNDERAGED li'l gal...

In one fell swoop everything will be fixed, resolved, explained at home and school. You'll be the Brave Suffering Heroine, the Poor Bedeviled Ingenue, forgiven for all your transgressions. By New Year's Day you'll be on top again, with a brand-new clique and everyone's envy and a shining future on the stage and maybe even no more *need* for The Stuff, save as a recreational pastime—rubbing Margo Temple's and Diana Dabney's and Taffi Applebuff's gruesome noses in it—

(WHUBB goes the other boot with an *achier Yowtch!* and chillier *yipe.*)

“Step away,” Split-Pea tells Spacyjane; then a sudden *FLASSSHHHH FLASSSHHHH flassshhhh* that re-roots you to the cold tile floor. “For referential purposes,” you're informed. “Nylons next?” to Dennis.

“Easier later, I should imagine,” Dennis replies, sipping from the snifter as the pipe organ moves on to *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*. “Pray continue, Miss Groh.”

This is just a part I'm playing, a role I've been cast in, be glad it's not Joan of Arc as Spacyjane undoes your ribbed tie-belt, grasps your cashmere hem, and lifts the sweaterknit dress up-up-up till your arms are raised to the ceiling as they'll have to remain when your wrists get MANACLED but right now they surrender the dress and leave you in a so-called non-cling slip that in fact is plastered to your amplified figure by cold-sweat clamminess and another referential *FLASSSHHHH FLASSSHHHH flassshhhh* but if Spacyjane will vouch for your story to the cops they'll be bound to believe it, two girls's words will count for twice as much—

“(PSSSSSST)” you microwhisper in Spacyjane's ear as she begins to pull up and peel off your sweltery slip. “(WAIT—NO—LISTEN—AH GOT A PLAN—)”

“(You made Nonique cry,)” Spacyjane microwhispers back.

Nonique? Who the hell is Nonique?

“(And you made Vicki and Joss mad. I used to think Isabel was to blame for everything, till I saw you steal that wallet out of her purse. Then I knew the truth.)”

Up go your arms, off goes the slip, leaving you in nothing but your mother’s hideous unmentionables with more cleavage flubbering above the bustier than Becca or Crystal or even Alva Dee possess much less exhibit to be *FLASSSHHHHED FLASSSHHHHED flassshhhhed* at as the pipe organ starts to play *The Merry Widow Waltz*.

“*Told* you your figger would get fillered a lot fuller by a couple of heaps of fattening up! Let’s see how fine a point we put on ‘em—”

HELP ME you soundlessly mouth at Spacyjane: no breath left even for a microwhisper. *HELP ME—*

But those star sapphire eyes give you an entirely hypersurrealistic look, and she utters six words that make no sense whatsoever:

“You have to answer for Floramour.”

44

Duck Shutters

“*Sugar*,” Mr. Prout intoned the following Friday, “was a luxury in 16th Century Europe—very scarce, very expensive, highly in demand. *Portugal*,” [tapping the map on the overhead projector with a wet-erase marker] “established a colony on the coast of *Brazil*,” [map-tap] “with many sugarcane plantations and processing mills, but failed to turn the native Brazilians into a labor force. Therefore, from their colony in *Angola*,” [map-tap] “the Portuguese shipped thousands of enslaved Africans across the *South Atlantic*,” [route-trace] “to toil in the fields and mills. So: colonizers to Angola” [trace] “slaves to Brazil” [trace] “sugar to Europe” [trace] “setting the pattern for the Triangle Trade, which later involved British colonies in *North America*,” [tap] “as we saw televised in the miniseries *Roots*.”

Pious glance at Vernonique, seated at the side of the World History classroom; and at Gabriel Bailey, slouched next to wrestling teammate Ewan Dobbs in the back row, where they’d spent Sixth Hour triangle-trading knuckle-taps to each other’s upper arm.

[TAP] Gutbucket: “(Made yuh flinch.)”

[TAP] Haystack: “(Did not.)”

Internalized SIGH by the outwardly impassive Nonique.

She wouldn’t mind being in Brazil right now. Summer was just starting there, and it was 5,000 miles away [trace route] from Vanderlund Township High School (SIGH).

As for *Roots*, she’d been too preoccupied with Grandma’s stroke last January to feel like watching more than a few depressing minutes of Kunte Kinte’s adversities. When not in

school or church or at the hospital, she'd spent most of that awful month cloistered alone at home with her oboe.

Most of this past week, too.

*Away in a manger
The dog hogs the bed
No room for a stranger
To rest her sore head...*

Hush now. Try to blot out everything except tonight's Winter Holidays Concert.

Yesterday's dress rehearsal had been the proverbial disaster. Mr. Frazee'd told the Chamber Choir: "If that's the best you can do with the *Wassail Song*, you may as well all drop out and find jobs in a plywood factory!" Miss Sickles, not to be outdone, had thrown her vocal score into the orchestra pit after the Girls Chorus coughed their way through Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*; and temperamental violinist Alma Battenburg, hit by the thrown score) pitched a bow-brandishing tantrum.

But Nonique's own performance as second oboe in Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* had earned a nod of approval from Mr. Conzelman, plus a "Guess I better enjoy first chair while I can" from Beau Guthrie. (Who could afford to act gallant since he and Nonique both knew she didn't yet have the chops to challenge him—and even if she did and won, *some* people would be sure to say it was only because she had a *black ass so why not do the Orchestra a favor AND REE-BOUND IT THE HELL AWAY FROM HERE???*—)

(Steady. Steady.)

(Not so unready.)

(SIGH...)

(And write down Monday's World History assignment. Wishing it could be done in Mexico, like all of Alex Dmitria's assignments.)

A whole week, almost to the very minute, had passed since the "Incident" happened; but Nonique's head and stomach still hurt.

Now, as the Seventh Hour bell rang, she had to return to the scene of the crime for the fifth time in five days—

—but her way out of Room 419 got blocked by what looked like a big gray tortoise with an ashen pigeon’s head poking out of a turtleneck.

“Um... yeah... so...” it went.

Oh sweet mother, what NOW?

“You, um, posed for my *Phantaphyre*, right? That was you?”

‘Scuse me? she silently bristled.

“In Auldforest?—Jenna drew you?—playing music?—anyway, with her being home sick” [cracked pigeon-*hrew* on the last word] “and me not able to find the other two she drew—could you give this to Vicki Volester?”

A sealed letter-size manila envelope.

“Best do that yourself,” Nonique said with hackles ascendant.

“She wouldn’t want to see me,” the Mock Turtle replied, its pigeon-eyes round with consternation. “Not after I... the other morning... well anyway. Please? It’s something I kind of overheard backstage today—might be nothing, but maybe not—could be *critical*.”

Heave another **SIGH** and, like Dionne Warwick, walk on by. But the Mock Turtle pursued her out of Room 419 and down the same flight of stairs Jenna Wibnitz (working intently on a sketch two days ago) had lost her footing on and tumbled to the bottom of. No injuries worse than a few bumps and bruises—that is, until she got sneezed at in the nurse’s office and contracted acute bronchitis.

“Please—” huffed the breathless Turtle, nudging Nonique with the envelope’s pointed corner. “Please—”

Oh all RIGHT. Snatching the stupid thing, jamming it in her satchel, and making it to Gym just as the tardy bell clanged. Steeling herself for the fifth consecutive afternoon to undergo another snottyviciouscruelconceited showdown...

...which, once again, didn’t occur. No appearance, once again, by the perpetrator.

And since this was Friday, with a major concert slated for that evening, Coach Celeste devoted most of the hour to yoga. Deep inhalations through the nose (one, two, three, four, five); hold them for the same count; complete exhalations through the mouth (five, four, three, two, one).

Think: *embouchure*. Think: *Choral Fantasy, Gloria in Excelsis Deo, Hallelujah Chorus*. NOT: getting bushwhacked last Friday in the locker room. NOT: taken by surprise, unprepared, her guard let down. Which would NOT have been the case if it'd happened in September, when such a contretemps had been anticipated every moment of every day.

Ironical that, till last Friday, her harshest set-to had been with another black girl—Claudia Thurman, whom Nonique still couldn't abide. And it wasn't like everybody hadn't warned her to watch out for Gigi Pyle, who sashayed around school like the reincarnation of Hannah Hoopskirt. But up till Friday there'd been nothing worse from her than lipcurled brushpasts; and Nonique wasn't the only one who got those from Gigi.

Then: WHAMMO. Delivered out of nowhere, with the impact of a fist in the gut. Even more excruciating were the hot tears that sprang forth and dripped down Nonique's face, betraying her and the entire race. Jackie Robinson hadn't wept when taunted and insulted; nor had Joe Louis nor Jesse Owens—at least not while surrounded by half-dressed white girls.

Most of them had rallied around Nonique right away—easing her onto a bench, bringing her a paper cup of cool water, running to fetch Coach Celeste who'd insisted on writing up the Incident though Nonique tried to beg off. No such reluctance from Sheila Quirk, who'd gone into caustic detail describing what Gigi Pyle had said and done. (Sheila might be Burke Quirk's sister, but after his boorishness at the Homecoming Dance she'd put itching powder in Burke's jockstrap. “Not that you'd notice any difference—Baa-Baa scratches down there nonstop as it is.”)

A few holdouts sided with Gigi, then and since; particularly her disciple Enid Stott who squint-sneered at “all this fuss being made over next to nothing,” and Irina Saranoff who wasn't bothered by skintones but disdained what she called “nappy” hair.

The real eye-opener, though, had been Laurie Harrison.

During the first weeks of school she'd been a sillier, chatterboxier version of sweet shy Helen on *Room 222*. Then she'd clammed up tight and withdrawn behind sheepdog bangs, leaving her friends torn between worry and thankfulness for the quietude. Lately Laurie's shadow had grown longer and wider and deeper, with people sidestepping away from its umbrage—but last Friday it got cast across Nonique as she recuperated in the

coach's cubbyhole. Everyone else was out on the gym floor; Nonique'd said she just needed to be on her own for awhile. (Sneer-squint by Eeny; toss of The Hair by Irina.) Now she was cubby-isolated in Mean Mary Jean's opaque shade, with any sign of mercy concealed by those dense dark bangs.

Please, no more... please, just let me be... please, I've had enough—

"Don't worry," said Mean Mary Jean. "She'll get hers."

Merely that and nothing more.

Yet nobody'd seen Gigi Pyle anywhere at VTHS all this week.

But even assuming Gigi *was* the one to Get Hers, Nonique felt increasingly dubious about her own life. Also mistrustful, like the Old Brandoffer Place had seemed when the Smiths first moved into it, and now began to seem again.

She should never have relaxed her vigilance. Or taken anything about Vanderlund for granted. Or forgotten how it felt to be the only brownskin person visible on Lilywhite Lane. Or stopped living out of suitcases, ready and able to move away at a moment's notice. Or thought she'd overcome constant jitters and endless uneasiness about the hazards ahead. Or *tried to unburden herself*—it couldn't be done.

And her having been lulled into thinking it *COULD* was only one person's fault:

Vicki Volester's.

She was to blame for it all.

Even more than "Magnolia Puss" (as Robin Neapolitan reputedly dubbed Gigi Pyle) for the shock and pain of last Friday's slur.

Because Vicki had misled Nonique up the garden path. Duped and deceived her into believing everything might be, *would* be all right—when it *wasn't*, and never *could* be.

So Nonique staved off Vicki's presumptuous offers of bogus comfort and support. Saying "Just leave me alone!" last Friday; refusing to see her when Mrs. Volester brought Vicki to the C.O.D. (Creepy Old Dump) on Saturday; not eavesdropping on Alfreda's explanatory talk with both Volesters. Or believing Freda afterward when told "they understood" Nonique's need for time and space to recover. HA! She'd kept her black ass re-covered from the instant it was taken out of the coach's cubby. Mighty safe bet it would *stay* re-covered till she could re-move it from Vanderlund forever.

So this week Nonique hadn't shared a morning bus seat with Vicki, though they'd been doing that since Alex left for Cuernavaca. In Biology they were still lab partners, but Nonique restricted conversation to nucleic acids and protein synthesis. In Study Hall she shifted to the desk at the back of the room left vacant by Bunty O'Toole; and in the cafeteria she took the stool next to Lisa Lohe from which Hillel Schiller had been banished. (This made room for Link Linfold and Sammi Tiggs to sit next to each other, once Holly Brollis persuaded them to return to their table; and it removed Vicki from Nonique's eyeline at lunchtime, since they now sat on the same side of the table separated by Lisa and Jenna when the latter wasn't sick at home.)

Through it all, Vicki gave her space as well as time as well as no whining "I thought we were friends." Once or twice Nonique caught sight (and sound) of Vicki clenching her jaw with apparent frustration, and thought to herself: GOOD—SEE HOW *YOU* LIKE IT!

Monday through Thursday, rehearsals for the Winter Holidays Concert had been held during extracurricular Eighth Hour; after which Nonique got driven "home" by Reverend Fowler, Willamene's pastor father. Kessell Road was pretty far out of his Happel Land way, and the Reverend deplored the Rebounder's media image; but he was also a big basketball fan and proud to shake Shucks Smith's hand the one time he found Taw at "home." Taw in turn commended Willamene Fowler as a paragon for all teen black girls, since she thought (or claimed to think) that any of life's dilemmas could be ironed out by prayer and/or a cold shower.

(That's a Baptist for you, Grandma Cat would have remarked.)

(Right back where we started from, Maxine Nightingale might've added.)

You could talk to Willamene for only so long before she turned the topic to religion. You could talk to Rhonda Wright for only so long before she began yukking it up. You could talk to Darren Buckley for only so long before he steered the subject to touchy-feeliness. (Boys *will* be boys.) And you could talk to white people for only so long before wondering what this-or-that one REALLY meant by saying such-and-such to you.

Take Pigeon-in-a-Shell and his sharp-edged manila envelope. What could be so *critical* about its contents? Nonique had half a mind to throw the fool thing away as she left school and boarded the bus to Kessell for the hardly-worth-going-"home" pre-concert dinner

interval. Vicki was not on this westward bus; nor had she been in Gym, having been excused for an emergency dental appointment. (GOOD—SEE HOW YOU LIKE *THAT* TOO!)

Stupid useless message. If not discardable, it could at least be set aside till Monday and handed over then. In the meantime, ignore its unexplained presence. Yes. Right.

Or...

Maybe the envelope could be opened and whatever might be inside it given a quick lookover. Just to determine the proper course of action—scrap now or save for later.

To: Vicki Volester

I was getting the wings ready for tonight when I heard this girl (I didn't see her face or know her voice) say your name and describe you to this guy (I did see him, he looked like one of The Omega Man mutants) and say he should "tape you screaming," her exact words, I don't know what she meant by that but maybe you should watch out and be careful, I know Jenna will tell you the same.

From: Steve S.

Ohhhh-kaaaay...

Slide this crazy message back into the envelope back into the satchel, awaiting the nearest trash receptacle. Forget about it—think of *Choral Fantasy* instead:

When music's enchantment reigns

Speaking of the sacred word

Magnificence takes form

The night and the tempest turn to light...

And the silhouettes overclouding the mind coalesce into stern implacability. Broad and high and black as the *Space Odyssey* monolith.

Are you planning to drop that letter in a wastebasket when it was ENTRUSTED to you, child? Is that how you were raised?

Okay, okay, I'll keep it over the weekend and hand it over Monday morning.

You'll do no such thing! You done wrong reading it in the first place but now that you have, take it out and read it again.

Why? Why should I lift a finger, except to give her the middle one?

Because you got a duty and responsibility here, child. And don't think I can't still take a strap to your seat if you sassyrass me.

...wouldn't dream of it, Grandma...

No one was “home” when Nonique reached the Rented House. Freda had a substitute teaching gig but would be back in time to share a light meal before the concert. Salad, yogurt, fruit—none of which Shucks or Randle would touch if either of them showed up. But before hitting the kitchen, best take a hot shower (sorry, Willamene) since one hadn't been needed after Yoga-Gym. So head up the wide Tudor staircase, down the dimly-lit Tudor corridor, and into her Tudor bedroom—

—make that “her” Tudor bedroom—

...except, dammit (sorry, Grandma) it WAS her bedroom, and had been for going on three months now. She felt safe here, not spied on by the watchful walls like last September. She could take off all her clothes here without the least self-consciousness, unlike the locker room at VTHS. So let's do that and grab a shower while there's plenty of hot water—

Not yet you won't. You're purely a Curry, child, and Currys always do their duty.

What about Uncle Mackerel?

Don't you mention that player of the Devil's music when you'll be playing the LORD's music in just a few hours! I aim to see you do it with a clean conscience AND a clean body!

(SIGH...)

It just so happened that an extra-long phone cord (befitting a household with an adolescent female) had been added to the extension in the upstairs hall; meaning it could be hauled into Nonique's bedroom with the door *nearly* closed for privacy.

And rumination.

She could simply dial Burrow Lane and find out if Vicki'd returned from the dentist. If Vicki hadn't, that'd be a sign that the letter should be left undelivered till Monday. Okay? Okay...

Ring. Ring. Ring—

"The domm-icile of Volester!" went a cheerful voice.

"Uhhhh... Vicki there?"

"That you, Nonique?" said Joss Murrish. (Of course: *she* always spent Friday nights at Vicki's house, including before major concerts.) "Hey girl! Yeah, Her Majesty's here and full of novocaine, but she's halfway coherent. Wanna speak to her?"

"Please." (Interpret *that* word as you will.)

Pause. Background murmurs. Then a cottonmouthy, somewhat tentative "Hi?"

"...how you doing?"

"Me? Got a temp filling. How *you* doing?"

"Me? Getting ready for the concert."

"Good... good... oh Gahd, I'm so glad you called!"

"...yeah, well..."

"I mean, dissecting frogs'll be that much harder if you're not talking to me."

Once again, a ladylike SNORT trembled on the brink before tipping over into a reluctant yet unmistakable snortle. "Dammit, you *always* make me laugh!"

"Yeah? Are you daring me to make you do it *while* we're dissecting? Bet you a pop I can."

"Well anyway—why I called was to say... um... that... you've got a secret admirer."

"Oh no—I'm afraid to ask who."

"He asked me to give you a love letter. It's signed 'Steve S.'"

"*Steve?* Do I know a Steve?" (To Joss: "Can you think of any Steves at school?")

("Steve Austin, the Six Million Dollar Sophomore?")

("Oh shut up.")

("You shut up.")

To Nonique: "We can't think of any Steves. What'd he look like?"

"A big turtle with a pigeon's head."

“OH GAHD! That’s Lumpy Skinner, the ASS! ‘Adlai Stevenson’—and he calls himself *Steve*? Ohhhh noooo, not *him*... wait a sec—he’s in love with Jenna, he *can’t* be my secret admirer too!”

“Well, he cares enough to write you this,” said Nonique, reading her the letter aloud.

Long pause. Then: “Did you say ‘Tape me *screaming*?’”

“S’what he wrote.”

“But what...? I mean, who...? Sheesh! The mutant guy sounds like that whitehaired weirdo at the Harvest Brawl, and *he* sounded like Britt’s boyfriend at our disco concert.” (To Joss: “What *was* that freaky guy’s name at the Quinceañera—Quisp or Quake?”)

(“How would *I* know? I’m eating Puffed Rice here, so I can blow my cornet better.”)

To Nonique: “Why would Britt tell him to ‘tape me screaming’?”

Opaque thoughts crossed Nonique’s mind, but were blocked by a grandmotherly monolith. “Don’t know Britt, other than her having a good voice in Choir. Maybe she wants to audition you for a duet?”

“Hardy har har... oog, I think my novocaine’s worn off.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be! Thanks *so* much for calling. And, y’know, for letting me know.”

“Right. Um, well. Got to go, it’s getting late... You gonna be at the concert?”

“Course! Cheering you ‘n’ Puffed Rice Girl here—”

(From Joss, through a mouthful of cereal: “That’s Puffed Rice *Woman*.”)

“—and Space and Feef and Q and Robin and Crystal and all you musical marvels.

Lucky Alex too, singing away in Mexico.”

“...listen, girl... maybe you *better* watch out and be careful. Like, don’t talk to any mutants.”

“I’ll try. You ‘n’ your oboe knock ‘em dead tonight—in a Christmassy way, I mean.”

“We’ll try.”

“...luvya, Nonique...”

“...yeah... me too...”

As irresistible beams filtered through her overclouded brain to shed a lot more light and cast a lot less shadow.

*

(TRANSLITERATED FROM THE “DEAR LANA EISENSTEIN [REALLY MY DIARY]” CODE)

12/17/77

My name is Victoria Volester.

This is real—I am real.

The dreams are fake, are false, are LIES.

All that week she'd been having the same old dreams, dredged up from the deepest reaches of her memory. That same old feeling of being lost on a cold winter afternoon as dusk descended, lost among the shadows of secret darkness and whatever they might conceal. Such as that same old Something or Other which was spying on her, creeping and crawling unseen till it sprang up and *raced* toward her, a furious violent hate-filled face with lacerating eyes—it was the Mad Man! out to get away with murder! and Vicki tried to yell for her Gardening Angel, tried to hide but could only take off running, endless relentless running like a terrified kittycat chased by a savage dog or wolf or Beast that stretched out its claws and was about to GRAB HOLD—

run run run LEAP

run run run LEAP

run run run LEAP

—while at the same old time Roger Mustardman kept reciting *Your whole existence is an imaginary figment, figment, figment. So's everybody you know's, you know's, you know's...*

By Friday night she thought she'd be free at last of this monotonous dream, after reconciling with Nonique and enjoying the Winter Holidays Concert. Instead she had it worse than ever and finally got J-O-L-T-ed awake, panting and shaking and lost like Becky Thatcher in a cave full of bats. Then, recollecting where and who she was, she climbed out of tangled bedsheets to step around Joss on the nearby air mattress (*no-I-do-NOT-snore-you're-thinking-of-Meg*) and dig through the bureau's bottom drawer till her hand found the yellow Pet Rock, clutching it like an undercover talisman.

Big girls could tremble. Big girls could whimper. Only babies cried.

Big girls could turn a nightmarish *run run run* LEAP into a flawless mental *grand jeté*.

See that? Feel that? I AM a butterfly: I float, I glide.

To which a perversely tender voice replied: *Make-believe is nothing to get hung about.*

Gahdammit, I'll make YOU believe I'm a Real Live Big Girl who can be a butterfly!

And any lingering qualms about attending tomorrow (actually tonight)'s *bal masqué* at the Shoreward Club were resolutely quelled.

When first invited by Isabel, back on the Monday after Thanksgiving, Vicki had toyed with possible costume ideas. In Pfiester Park she'd been a ballerina every Halloween till she was eleven; then she and Hayley Tamworth had dressed up Junior Hull (NOT to be confused with Junior Nygren) as Frankenstein's monster, with Goofus riding his shoulders as Igor and the girls escorting them as two mad scientists. The next year she and Stephanie Lipperman had trick-or-treated in quasi-19th-Century-garb as Lucy and Alice, the protagonist and predator from *Mirror of Danger*. And for the past three Halloweens in Vanderlund she'd helped Alex (always a Cossack horsegirl) at the country club's kiddyparty, awarding prizes for the funniest/scariest/ugliest/cutest/most-original costumes. Knowing she'd be stickified by candy-coated children, Vicki'd worn easily-cleanable oilcloth outfits—sailor, pumpkin, waterproof ghost.

From her toyed-with notions for the *bal masqué*, Jenna'd sketched a butterfly costume with variant wings—stiff spinal attachments (beautiful but impractical) vs. soft capelets sewn onto sleeves (easier to fit undamaged inside a coat or car). Either way, they evoked misty watercolor *schmetterling* memories—

—that got shunted to the backburner by Madeline Wripley's acid freakout; then by the four-timing "date" with Tony & Co.; then by the marrow-numbing cold and snow and wind; then by Gigi Pyle's appalling attack on Nonique; then by Nonique's alienated hands-off reaction; then by making sure Alex got and stayed put on the plane to Mexico. All in all, by an exhausting couple of weeks.

Then this past Monday Isabel'd pleaded with Vicki to come to the rescheduled *bal masqué* and help save its guest list from being swamped by Mauly's Traverser cronies.

Well, why not? If nothing else, it'd be a welcome diversion from giving Nonique "time and space" with no sign this had any effect other than Vicki's being slighted on the bus, snubbed in homeroom, and rebuffed at the cafeteria table.

"Got those butterfly designs?" Jenna'd asked her at lunch on Monday (while Nonique sat out of sight on the far side of Lisa Lohe, who was glaring across the table at Link Linfold). "From the week before last? Vicki? Still got those butterflies?"

"Hunh? Oh! Yeah—course."

Coldshouldering [SNORT] from Nonique.

Jenna, taking no notice of the [SNORT], said "Give them to Spacyjane Groh's friend Kathleen. I can never remember her last name but she can whip up a costume in a tearing hurry, so long as nobody watches her do it. Classic basket case. *She's* the one who should be called 'Jenny Wren!'"—with a birdy-sowl through gaudy glasses at three-months-ago Dennis Desmond.

Vicki still didn't know what Jenna meant by that; nor who Kathleen the Basket Case might be, unless she was the mysterious contributor of so many tissue-paper flowers to AA's Homecoming float. But New Big Sister had spoken, so the butterfly sketches were entrusted to Joss who'd be seeing Spacyjane at Monday's Eighth Hour concert rehearsal. And after that was done with and everyone'd gone home and dinner'd been eaten, Vicki found herself at Spacyjane's chalet on Cecidia Drive.

"What a darling house," said Felicia, who'd given her a ride over despite it being a "school night," which Goofus had loudly protested because *he* was being denied attendance at Wednesday's *Close Encounters* opening because *that* was on a "school night."

"Darling?..." Vicki stared at the alpine cabin, set apart among suburban split-levels. "So this was built to look like this?" she wondered aloud. *It's so ootsie-cutesy-cunning it makes all the other houses in the neighborhood want to dry-heave*, Joss's voice echoed from way back when. Joss had revisited here since making friends with Spacyjane at Summer Youth Music Camp, but somehow Vicki'd never seen the place up close till now—

—or gone inside let alone upstairs to this VALHALLA OF THE DOLLS which Floramour shared with every conceivable make, model, and material of poppet figurines, not to mention Spacyjane's velveteen-curtained canopy bed. ("I KNEW she slept in a *Stepford Wives*-y bed

like this!” Joss had exclaimed after her first admission to Valhalla.)

Here too was Kathleen I-Can-Never-Remember-Her-Last-Name, who’d been on VW’s Z team with Vicki for two whole years and might’ve even had some of the same classes—but if so, altogether unmemorably. Clothed in olive drab, her eyes downcast in an inexpressive face, Kathleen made Ann Hew seem like a glamorous standout and Sammi Tiggs like a gladhanding extrovert. She responded to all of Vicki’s questions and proposals with a tiny little nod or headshake or *mmm*—yes, pockets could be added to the costume for stowage of necessities; no, the caped wings wouldn’t billow too badly so long as they weren’t flapped too fast.

“She made a neat set of wings for my Superprincess doll,” said Spacyjane, “though we couldn’t get them to stay cloaked until needed. And check out these stockings she sewed for Floramour’s masquerade costume—I’m still not sure they’re proper, you know, but Isabel was so unbudgeable...”

(Spacyjane had talked Isabel into going to the *bal masqué* as a lion tamer, for which Floramour had an existing outfit from a past dolly circus opera; but Is would only agree to this if she could wear hotpants and fishnet tights instead of trousers. Now Brad Faussett and Rags Ragnarsson were competing as to who’d be the front and rear halves of her lion.)

Vicki, trying to admire Floramour’s hosiery while having her own measurements taken by *mmm*’g Kathleen, was distracted by the sight of an honest-to-goodness pantygirdle tacked to a bedroom bulletin board like a hunting trophy with dangling garters. It looked much too big for Spacyjane, who didn’t care for binding underwear anyway, as everyone who’d been at that bodice-popping *Carnival* rehearsal knew.

“How was Nonique today?” Space asked—not quite out of the blue, since she’d heard about last Friday’s Gigi Incident from Joss who’d heard about it from Vicki; yet it was a definite subject-change from fishnet nylons, human or dolly.

“She’s still mad... mostly at *me*, it feels like.”

“She got hurt. But she’ll heal,” said Spacyjane, thrusting another pushpin into the bulletin-boarded pantygirdle.

Vicki tried to dismiss voodooish thoughts and turn her attention to the girl kneeling at her inseam. “So Kathleen, about how much do you think this costume might be likely to

cost?”

(Tiny little headshake and wounded-sounding *mmm.*)

“Oh, she never charges a cent,” explained Spacyjane. “Her mother’s a manager at Mary Lester Fabrics. Her closets next door are filled with bolts of everything imaginable.”

“But what about your time and labor and all that?”

(Not so tiny, not so little headshake; much more vigorous *mmm.*)

“Well... I guess if you’re going to *give* it to me, like a present, I’ll do my best to give *you* something just as nice in return,” said Vicki. “Y’know, like as a Christmas gift.”

For the first time Kathleen raised her head and looked Vicki in the eye, giving her a tiny little rapturous “(Thanks.)”

Oh good grief—what do you give someone who can sew anything and already has closets full of fabric? A duck dinner for four at La Sauvagine?

Spacyjane seemed to award that notion a glance of beatific approval—which, given those hocus-pocus thumbtacks pinning the pantygirdle to the wall, was probably something else to be grateful for.

At any rate Vicki began looking forward to the *bal masqué*, and Joss agreed to come too as a zootsuited bebop hipster. Vicki’s improved mood lasted till Study Hall on Tuesday, when Tony Pierro swung around from the desk in front of her and went into his unsmiling Michael Corleone schtick: “What’s this I hear about you going to a masked ball?”

“(Ssshhhh! It’s the one I told you about at the New Shoreward—Sherwood, I mean. This Saturday at the Sherwood—I mean Shoreward Club.)”

Lowering his voice without lightening up: “(If you remember, *I* told *you* I didn’t think I’d be able to get another Saturday night off for awhile.)”

“(I remember *you* didn’t actually ask *me* out again, then *or* since.)”

“(Well, I *can*’t get this Saturday off.)”

“(Well, I’m going with Joss and Spacyjane anyway.)”

“(Well, I don’t want you going at *all* if I can’t take you.)”

“(Well TOUGH!)” went Vicki—glancing askant at Grandma Ivy muttering “‘Twas the Night Before Christmas”; at Samantha thumbing through a Harlequin romance at Nonique’s desk; and at Nonique, seated in the back row apparently engrossed in homework but with her

antennae aquiver. “(I don’t need your permission or consent or say-so!)”

Tony, showing not a trace of diffident puddyboyishness: “(If you go to this ball without me... I’ll be disappointed in you.)”

Gnash of white teeth and blast of black lasers: “(*You* might remember bailing on *our* track meet date last spring so *you* could ‘study’ with your guess-you-can-say-she’s-your-girlfriend, Kinks Farghetti—and not wasting a thought on whether *I* might have been disappointed in *you*!)”

His big brown eyes wavered and fell before her laserblast. “(Uh... that’s not why I couldn’t go then... I didn’t ‘study’ with her till a couple weeks later... and I *did* ask you for a raincheck.)”

“(Well, until you get your sh—*spit* together, Mr. Baloney, that raincheck is NULL and VOID!)”

Ideally-timed CLANG by the 5D bell, enabling Vicki’s strident march out of Room 325 and away to the cafeteria. Not waiting for Sammi and certainly not for Nonique, who (as her tied-with-Fiona-for-third-best-friend-after-Joss-and-Alex) ought to be here by her side, offering the same consolation and support *she’d* been offered last Friday *and* Saturday only to go on a slighting/snubbing/rebuffing toot—and at least Nonique had a *reliable* boyfriend if Darren Buckley was filling that bill as he should, and even Sammi had Link though he might not be her beau ideal, while Jenna had Ike (sort of) plus Ken Keezer, and Holly had Nelson and Cheryl had Stuart and Mary Kate had Frank and Vicki was left on the breakup bench with Joss and Robin and Sheila-Q and *Lisa Lohe*, for crying out loud—

—but at least she wasn’t pining after Split-Pea Erbsen, like Spacyjane. Or engaged in who-knew-what-kind-of-a-relationship with Mike Spurgeon, like Alex.

Oh, this would be an ideally-timed moment for Dave Solovay to reappear: a year and a day after their fateful sledding excursion to Auldforest Woods. Ideal, that is, if all his teeth had been straightened and capped since then. (Clenching her own at the grisly memory.)

No, forget ideal timing. What *did* happen next was Jenna’s [a] falling downstairs, [b] being sneezed at by Gabey Sundheit of the girls swim team, and [c] catching Gabey’s viral infection that [d] quickly turned into acute bronchitis which [e] *sounded* like a mortal ailment, though Vicki was told it was “only a chest cold.” In any case, Jenna’s calamity on

top of everything else worsened Vicki's own jawclenching into [f] a clearcut toothache.

By the end of the week this became *so* clearcut that an urgent leave-school-early visit had to be scheduled Friday afternoon with Dr. Hoffman, the Unitarian lady dentist who looked like Endora on *Bewitched*. She was a far more proficient practitioner than old Dr. Boyle back in Pfiester Park, whom Goofus still wanted to be treated by since Doc Boyle had a wealth of sea stories from when he'd yanked teeth on a battleship. Vicki preferred Endora, who could sorcerize a temporary filling into a cracked molar without a twinge of pain—though her saying a *mouthguard* should be used at night if Vicki continued to clench or gnash sounded grossly droolsome. Felicia, though, had bonded with Dr. Hoffman at church and felt bound by her incantations; so pretty soon Vicki would most likely be chewing on a plastic crucible. And even a gumful of novocaine didn't prevent her from grieving on the way home: "Might as well stop by the pet store and buy me a rubber bone."

But Joss proved yet again that *she* was Vicki's very best of friends. Instead of nipping down Sendt Street after school to spend the pre-concert dinner break in her own Queen Anne aerie, she came all the way out to Burrow Lane to keep Vicki company—"and mooch a big bowl of Puffed Rice. Toughie, y'know, swears by *hot* cereal but *I* swear it's 'grits' and I say the heck with it, at least before a concert. *You'd* better eat something that hasn't been shot out of a cannon—say a nice tureen of jellied consommé."

Bleahhh. Fortunately the ringing phone interceded just then; even better, it was Nonique calling to reopen hailing frequencies. Vicki was so happy to hear from her she nearly sniveled with relief, despite "Steve" Skinner's bizarre message about being *taped screaming*. A joke? A put-on? A leftover snub/slight/rebuff? But then Nonique handed over the original note at the Winter Holidays Concert, where she accepted (*and* returned) a hug from Vicki, plus ones from Joss and Spacyjane—wishing them all well (especially Vicki) at tomorrow night's *bal masqué*, though choosing not to go herself.

"You wouldn't catch *me* there," rasped Jenna on Saturday, convalescing in a dormer-room daybed heaped with sketchpad, art pencils, *manga* books and used tissues, alongside a spearmint-misty vaporizer. "That Shoreward Club (cough) would've sicced the dogs on my grandfather (cough) when he first came here, if they hadn't (cough) all been out foxhunting."

“*Please* don’t make yourself worse!” begged Vicki from the doorsill she’d been ordered not to cross lest she be contaminated. “*Acute* bronchitis is bad enough—”

“It’s a CHEST COLD (*hack hawk tooey*) ‘scuse me,” went Jenna, her birdy-chirp an octave lower and hoarser than usual. “Ignore it—but don’t come any closer (cough). Tell me more about how that ASS (cough) screwed up last night’s show.”

As was customary, the annual Yuletide musicale concluded with Handel’s *Hallelujah Chorus*; but this year the Concert Choir and Symphonic Orchestra had only reached their second *And He shall reign for ever and ever* when the stage curtain began to be rung down, inch by inch. The robed singers on the risers instinctively leaned forward to stay visible; then when everybody was bent over belting out *King of kings! and Lord of Lords!*, the curtain came to a grinding halt. After the last *Hallelujah*, as all the laughter and applause died away, the departing audience could hear senior Stage Manager Dexter Rist tearing Lumpy Skinner a new orifice behind the scenes.

“The blind berating the lame!” scoffed Jenna, whose opinion of Dexter—a doctrinaire zealot with a rod up his rump, like all the Rists—was scarcely higher than her whalepoop estimation of Lumpy. “Pay no attention to any note that ASS may pass you (scoff) or any kidney stone, either. He’s a sneak and a snoop (scoff) and too much of a slug to do more than leave a trail of slime behind.”

“Hey, do you think he was the one who made Chewy DeWitt come unhitched and drift away from Nancy Buschmeyer?”

“Wouldn’t put it past him! Though Chewbacca (scoff) is no great prize either. Now let me see you spread those wings again (cough) this time wearing the mask—”

Vicki, strapping on a swallowtail-with-eyeholes vizor, stepped far enough into the forbidden room to raise her bright cape-sleeves and display their iridescent gossamer.

“Good. Good. Told you What’s-her-name knows what she’s doing. But mask or no mask (cough) don’t do any more crying”—as Vicki’d done at the sight of Jenna sick in bed—“‘cause I won’t be at that Shoreward Club (cough) to fix your face this time”—as Jenna’d done at VTHS during the Homecoming Dance.

“I’ll try. Or, um, *not* try. *You* try to get all well by Monday.”

“Yeah, leave it to me to have a chest cold (cough) on a *warm* December night.”

(The Cityland, which had barely edged above zero a week ago, today set a record high of SIXTY degrees.)

“Feels just right to me,” said Spacyjane, balancing on the doorsill in a star-spangled midnight-blue leotard worthy of Celeste Schwall.

Jenna, fumbling through the clutter on and by her daybed, found a pair of gaudy glasses and focused her 20/20 vision through them. “Oh heavens to Murgatroyd (cough)! *Who* are you supposed to be?”

“Maia from *Mary Poppins*”—displaying a wispy wrap of indigo gauze to validate this.

“JOSS-UH-LYNN??” went Jenna.

“Here, Jen!” Joss piped up, perspiring a bit in a bebop hipster zootsuit better suited for a cooler climate.

“Keep both eyes peeled on these two (cough) every minute you’re at that club, or they’ll land in a peck of trouble (*hack hawk tooey*) ‘scuse me, sure as you’re standing there and I’m lying here, flat on my back with my legs in the air!” (Though her birdy-legs were in fact tucked beneath a lightweight quilt.)

“I’ll do what I can,” said Joss. “Assuming they don’t fly off into the wild McJinglepockets yonder.”

“Fill their pockets with rocks,” Jenna harrumphed.

“I don’t have any pockets,” said the pirouetting Spacyjane, extending a dainty ballet flat. “Does this shoe count? It’s got some folding money wrapped in plastic under my foot, but I wouldn’t want a rock to get in there.”

“Urrgghh,” Jenna reiterated.

Vicki’s costume did include pockets, produced on request by clever Kathleen Prindle; and one of those pockets did contain a rock—indeed, *The Rock*. It bumped her thigh when she walked, but without bulging too obviously or dragging down the fabric like Skinner’s stage curtain, and Vicki was glad to have it at hand. For some reason she hadn’t wanted to let the thing go ever since unearthing it from her bureau in the wee hours.

It rocks me like the Rock of Ages.

(Hoodoo, who do you think you’re fooling? ...)

*

At that precise same minute, a mile-and-two-thirds to the southwest:

“How do I look?” asked Susie Zane.

“Like you’re going bowling”—in a Pindoras team jacket and regulation shoes, with a mask from the Halloween tournament at the Red Devil Bowl where everybody’d wound up looking like Mr. Dimancheff.

“Maybe we *oughta*. Might just as well,” grumbled Susie, since Punkin’ Patrick Baxter had opted out of the *bal masqué*. Same went for Jed Wainwright, whom Tina Korva was dating; so Susie and Tina were being taken to the Shoreward Club by Jacuzzi Jake and Thirsty Kirsten. “Sure you won’t come with us, Lo? There’s room in Jake’s car—”

“I’ve got a ride coming. Go wait for yours downstairs.”

“Can’t I at least get a peek at what *you’re* gonna wear?”

“No. It’s a surprise. See if you can pick me out of the pack. Now go.”

“But...”

Honk from below, setting off the Clevinger shepherds.

“Get a move on. Now. And keep your nose clean.”

Hurt-feelings hesitation by Susie till she got pushed out of HARRISON & ZANE HQ and had its door shut in her Red Devilish face. Long pause, and a repeated *honk*; then footsteps went down the hall, down the stairs, out of the house (to louder *woofs*) and away into silence as the Korva car drove on up Grouseland Street.

Alone at last. Off with the bathrobe; finish donning battle armor. The boots. The belt. The gauntlets. The wig, or more amusingly the *scalp* with long flowing locks, whose shade of red had been selected with great care even though it might not be totally evident in the night’s diminished light. Lastly a double-peaked cowl drawn down over scalp and eyes, conjoined to a serrated shroud draping the torso from throat to ankles.

Regard this ensemble in HARRISON & ZANE’s full-length mirror.

Mummy dust, black of night, old hag’s cackle, scream of fright. A blast of wind to fan my hate—a thunderbolt to mix it well—now begin thy magic spell...

With a deep inhalation through the nose (one, two, three, four, five) held for the same count, and a complete exhalation through the mouth (five, four, three, two, one).

Strive to overpower a tarrying reluctance to embark upon this final confrontation with a foe who, in her own quiet way, could be as daunting as Siegfried or St. George.

But a hidden image bobbed up unbidden: Samantha in high heels, standing on tiptoe to kiss her Dream Guy on the lips. *It's sooooo romantic! I can see it happening! Not at any school dance, though—more like a fancy-dress ball—out on a terrace, under the moonlight—*

—then a lashing and thrashing, as if by some silver-scaled reptilian extremity, beat this memento back underwater to sink into the buried depths.

Fancy dress, schmancy dress: a BALL would be had tonight. So stalk down the stairs of the empty house, Mom and Pa Zane having left that morning for Carbondale to bail Jason out of some scuzzy scrape that hadn't even needed to be stage-managed from afar; he'd gotten into it on his own. And if he gets brought home in disgrace, dish out a little retribution for all those pantyband-snaps—say a superatomic wedgie, hung from the garage rafters. There'd be no target left for a knee to the ding-dongs after *that*.

Breathe in again through the nose (one, two, three, four, five); hold it for the same count; breathe out through the mouth (five, four, three, two, one). As a jeering derisive voice sangsung from the middle distance of the inner ear:

I am so damned. I am so damned. I am so damned—

No, YOU are. I'M just along for the ride.

On which cue a Toyota Cressida glided to a stop out on Grouseland, with an apparition behind its wheel. Step over the threshold and slam the door behind you, hard enough to goad the Clevinger dogs into clamorous howls. No turning tail now, canine or otherwise: it's onward to Shoreward to finish off your adversary. *Her breath will still, her blood congeal; then I'll be the fairest terrorist in the land...*

*

There is a steep lakebluff on the north side of La Cuna Bay whose paramount yardage was laid out, exclusively and restrictively, as Shoreward Heights. At its midpoint a Connecticut Yalie built a replica of the Skull & Bones “Tomb” to serve as club-hub for the élite of Vanderlund; enclosing this with a Stonehenge of detached greystone townhouses, one of which—Number 9 Shoreward Circle—doubled as Casa Carstairs for Lafayette V (DDS) and his clan.

Butterfly Vicki, heading clubward in the Murrish Lincoln Continental and passing the turnoff to Sunny Squash Court, was starkly reminded of the day Fat Bob Neapolitan trucked the Rosa Dartles to that gated community. Its security officer hadn't wanted to let them in till Vicki'd said "We're with Britt Groningen's band"—amending this (after Fiona whacked her shoulder) to "*She's with our band*. Could you check with Britt, please?"

Why in the world WOULD Britt describe you to Quisp-or-Quake, backstage at VTHS, and say he should "tape you screaming"?

Vicki couldn't recall having a single conversation with Britt this entire semester. Their only class together was Geometry, and there Britt hung out with Gigi Pyle—though not this past week, when Gigi'd been absent every day and so avoided Vicki's denouncing her head-on for that sneak attack on Nonique. (Robin and S-Q said she'd also gone missing from German, where a denunciation would be far more multisyllabic.)

Well, never mind about Gigi—concentrate on Britt. Remember that strange phone call a couple months ago from Feef, who (of all people) had been concerned about Laurie Harrison becoming a henchgirl for Bunty O'Toole in some kind of complicated dispute with the Traversers. "(I told Bunty that Britt'd eat Laurie alive,)" Feef'd mutter-fretted. *That* hadn't happened, so far as Vicki knew, not that Vicki *would* know if it *had*; mentally kicking herself yet again for always meaning to worry more about Laurie, and postponing it over and over... but now was not the time to fuss about that either. Focus on Britt.

Spacyjane'd told the cops investigating Madeline Wrippley's rooftop freakout that she'd seen a whitehaired weirdo "Haint" standing by a VTHS stairwell, the week before his manifestation at the Petty Hills Harvest Brawl. Vicki turned to ask Space (softly singing "Stardust" beside her in the Continental's backseat) if this Haint had been standing by the stairwell with Britt Groningen—

—but just then the gate to the Shoreward Club swung open for them. Taller and grander than Sunny Squash Court's; reminiscent of the pointy-topped iron fence that had shielded curious kindergarteners from probably-haunted houses on Manderley Avenue, back in Pfiester Park. You almost expected to hear the Wicked Witch of the West's sentinels chanting *OHH-EEE-OHH YOHHHH-OHH*—

—till the gate stuck open with a portentous SKRONNNNG, followed by City-style cursing by the gatekeeper that dwindled in the distance as Joss’s father sped them through and around the Stonehenge Circle.

“Jeez, I didn’t know Skinner worked here too,” quipped Joss in the frontseat.

“‘*Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome,*’” sang Spacyjane.

They were a few minutes early (habitual with Raymond Murrish) yet part of a growing crowd as they drew near the entrance of the “Tomb.” To Vicki this looked like a lugubrious ivy-covered prison or fortress, nothing like the rambling convivial clubhouse at Petty Hills. Why would anybody want to shell out megabucks for membership here? Hardly what you’d call an inviting hangout—

—yet its lobby was already crammed with incoming guests, thanks to the Xeroxed hospitality of the Carstairs sisters. A line from *The Great Gatsby* popped into Vicki’s head—“I like large parties, they’re so intimate”—which she and Joss had laughed over in Mrs. Mallouf’s class. The youthful mob thronging this foyer might’ve been transported here from Gatsby’s mansion, half a century ago and halfway across the continent; except that at Shoreward everybody wore “fancy dress” instead of Twenties chic, and soon would be dancing not to Charleston-y jazz but the WHUBB WHUBB WHUBB of deejayed disco. That is, if they weren’t all chucked out on their ears first: the club’s staff, outnumbered more and more every minute, seemed like docents at a museum or art gallery faced with busload after busload of hyperactive schoolchildren. Even a crew of industrial-strength bouncers might’ve struggled to ride herd on this lot; Shoreward had only a dozen or so butler-and-parlormaid types, so the club’s regular Saturday night habitués damned Winifred Carstairs for this raucous incursion as they barricaded themselves inside the card room and smoking room and library.

“Barbaric beargarden!” thundered one old stormcloud as he shot the bolt in the library’s lock.

But there was more to it than uncouth immaturity. *Disquiet* reigned in the clubhouse lobby and on the staircase leading up to the ballroom; not simply NOISE (though that was escalating and intensifying) but restless oppressive *agitation*—“a pervading harshness” like at Gatsby’s last blast, the one Daisy came to but didn’t have a good time at. And a lot of the

fancy-dressers here tonight gave Vicki the impression they were jumping to a similar conclusion as Daisy, though the party hadn't really gotten underway yet—

“HIIEE,” went Isabel, loudly but flatly, with little of her characteristic oozy-coo. Though subdued, she looked a luscious treat in her sequined Mardi Gras mask and lion tamer's outfit, sporting a white top hat on her goldilocks and black fishnets on her goldilegs, plus a realistic whip and miniature chair to curb the hornyboy *hoi polloi*. “YOU GUYEES SEE MY STUPID LION ANYWHERE?”

“I’LL HELP YOU HUNT FOR HIM,” offered Spacyjane, sounding positively proud for once of Izzy-Whizzy as Floramour's Embodiment; and in a twinkling they disappeared into the crush.

Oh Gahd we've lost Space—Jenna's gonna kill us! thought Vicki as she got a firmer grip on Joss's zootsuited arm. *Kathleen won't appreciate it either, and I went and promised HER a nice Christmas present...*

“C’MON!” hollered Joss, who'd been here before on a more decorous occasion. “IT WAS SO WARM TODAY, THE DOORS TO THE GARDEN MIGHT BE UNLOCKED—”

Vicki wished she'd worn a reinforced chrysalis costume as Joss tugged her through the traffic jam of motley fools, none of whom she recognized; umpteen had come in *Star Wars* regalia or as extraterrestrials from other enterprises. The five-note *Close Encounters* motif rang out as if to herald these aliens, rattling windowpanes and deafening eardrums: **bum BUM bum bum BUM** it went, again and again, before segueing into the bass line (WHUBB WHUBB WHUBB) of Shoreward's too-late-to-stop-it-now *bal masqué*.

All at once the club lights dimmed and the disguised phalanx began to boogie. It felt like a topsy-turvy replay of that Back-to-School Debacle at VW, where all hell had broken loose and Vicki'd been shoved and groped by anonymous nonentities till she teetered on the verge of panic—except *that* had happened in power-outage darkness, from which Dave Solovay'd arisen to rescue her. Here at Shoreward there was still illumination enough to see by, sort of, for a short girl like Vicki hemmed in on every side by gamboling Skywalkers and bunheaded Leias. And here she maintained her grip on Joss who gasped “MADE IT!” as they reached the garden doors but didn't exactly *escape* through them, since there was a sizable populace outside too and the disco beat there was almost as loud.

You can't turn me off
(no you can't turn me off)
Not in the middle of turning me on
(in the middle in the middle)
I can't suddenly stop—

—but you *can* let fly a sudden GASP of your own at the sight of a six-foot-tall effigy sculpted out of copper tubing! Or so it appears in the nebulous garden lamplight: a lifesize version of the diminutive knickknack Dave gave you, whose arms and legs move up and down like a jogger's when wound with a key. And no sooner do you tallyho this coppery C-3PO than it (he?) goes into action, jogging away beyond the pack of Barbarellas and Obi-Wan Kenobis; so you can't help but start in semivoluntary pursuit—

—only to emit a strangulated YELP as you run up against a couple of honest-to-God *circus freaks* with monstrous deformed faces! One of which twists repellently toward you, seething “BACK OFF” in Millicent Carstairs's maulicious voice—

“Do we *have* to keep this crappy-assed pantyhose over our heads *all* damn night?” the other freak beefs, with Gwen Cokingham's inflection.

“A piss-poor bank robber YOU'D make!”

“Hey, don't blame *me* 'cause your precious Buhhhhzzzz went and screwed us over!”

“He—is—just—LATE—is—all!! *If* he fucking well knows what's good for him!!”

“*Th' sun came out last night 'n' sang to me!*” gurgles an oracular gargle, and the freaks move far enough apart to unveil a scraggly Astral Slacker perched upon the garden's dry fountain. At its base stands a string-and-bones High Priestess who echoes his words and copies the maxim into a thick logbook. “Harkee—so be it!” she amens.

“REPENT!” counters Gwen, and “KILL THE WINO!” adds Mauly.

“SNOTRAGS! SNOTRAGS! SNOTRAGS!” Lynndha Ednalino lambasts them, till Mauly slaps her upside the head and *into* the fountain which *isn't* dry and causes Lynndha to yowl like a scalded cat when her ornate Traverser logbook, though leatherbound, proves not to be waterproof. “SACRILEGE! SACRILEGE! SACRILEGE—”

“Ever ’thin’s ready hyah on th’ dark side o’ th’ moon,” comments vacant-peeper’d Parnell Travers from the fountaintop.

You shrink back as far as possible against the garden wall, willing your butterfly outfit to blend into shadowed stucco like camouflage—but nearly spring *over* the wall when a THIRD misshapen circus freak lopes grotesquely through the lattice.

“He’s here!”

“You SURE, Jive?”

“Seen him! At your place!”

“Has he got the *goods*?”

“Says so! You got the *dough*?”

“Once we shake ‘em down we will!”

“Let’s go then! On the fucking double!”

“REFRESHMENTS, PEOPLE!! EVERYBODY TO NUMBER NINE!!”

“NUM-BAH NYE-UNN... NUM-BAH NYE-UNN...” drones a milling horde of migrant zombies, transported maybe from Undead Fort Lauderdale—look at the funhouse-mirror facsimiles of Joe Silvertooth, Oh Belvedere and Peeling Preppy!—whose erratic drift accelerates into a gradual stampede around Stonehenge Circle. You’re swept along with it, your wrist grasped securely (thank goodness for Joss) as a big rectangular pillar of a townhouse looms out of the turf for the horde to converge on. Its windows, unusually for a greystone, feature exterior shutters; and all the shutters appear to be closed *over* those windows, as if boarded up against a braineater invasion. Even more extraordinarily, each shutter has a decorative central cutout shaped like a DUCK, as though Donald and Daffy busted clean through them seeking escape—

—UFFFFF stumble without warning across an old-fashioned bulkhead door slanted as if over a storm cellar or bomb shelter at the precise instant you realize your arm is being held not by a bebop hipster but a black-clad BATGIRL who flings open an unbattened hatch with her free arm and *hurls you down the interior steps with the other*—

—yet your drilled-deep volleyball training reawakens to save you with a perfectly executed dig-and-roll—go into a crouch / tuck hands and chin to your chest / dip one shoulder / roll over onto your back with knees bent / keep rolling till your feet make contact

with the floor / give a push with your legs and spring up to standing—relatively unhurt since the steps feel shag-carpeted though you’re still shaken up or rather down and left tonguing a destabilized temp filling in WHAT THE HELL?? darkness—

—till it’s dispelled by flickering fluorescence—

—and you find yourself between an opulent furnace and a posh water heater.

Whirl around and blink behind your swallowtail vizor at MR. FREEZE, chilling idly on a different set of carpeted steps that probably lead to the townhouse kitchen or pantry.

He wears a space-type suit and space-type boots, holding a long cryogenic raygun in his space-type gloves, and has a clear bubble helmet over what you *hope* is a skull-with-staring-eyeballs mask. Through this he wheezes Darth Vaderishly, his jawbone unmoving:

“Looook at the pretty butterfly that’s fluttered by! (HAWWWW) Call me a Collector and break out the chloroform! (HAWWWW)”

“Get on with the taping,” says Batgirl in a serpentine voice—could she be Kinks Farghetti??—blocking off the bulkhead steps as Mr. Freeze rises from the other set to expose a pair of open-reel tape decks behind him: not the ones from the Vinyl Spinnaker disco concert, but of greater size and apparent sophistication.

“Yes, let’s,” he HAWWWWS, cocking a glove beside where his ear would be if it were visible inside the skull mask and bubble helmet. “Hear any noise upstairs? There’s a-plenty, I assure you. (HAWWWW) Hear any noise outdoors? There may be a dozen police sirens, soon if not now. (HAWWWW) Yet *we* can’t hear them. And *they* can’t hear us.”

“The Neapolitans don’t have the only soundproof basement in town,” Batgirl reports, folding sinuous gauntleted arms over her Bat-emblem’d chest.

Nonna nonna nonna nonna goes Rags Ragnarsson in your dazed memory; but this sure isn’t Jenna Wiblitz out of her sickbed. Nor is it Britt Groningen despite the long red hair cascading from her cowl, since Batgirl’s noticeably taller and sturdier than Britt. More like Kinks with a rigid Medusa gaze through those cowlsockets from which you can’t tear your own eyes even as Mr. Freeze gets his tape decks rolling with a gelidly unctuous “Vicki Volester, take wunnnn... annnnd... ohhhnleeee...”

“Wh—?” you go, followed by “—utt?” when Freeze’s raygun discharges a sudden B-Z-Z-Z-Z—has it gotten a helluva lot colder in here??

“*‘Poor Butterfly, ‘neath the blos-soms way-ting,’*” Freeze croons, compelling your complete attention away from Basilisk Batgirl. “(HAWWWW) I believe we can teach your friend Desperate Desmond a lesson on how to have REAL fun with a captive girlie (HAWWWW) using the RIGHT kind of medium. *Audible trumps visual* any old night—”

“Oh would you get ON with it?” snaps Batgirl.

“No, let’s get OFF with it—meaning your costume, Mam’selle Butterfly,” crackles Freeze. “(HAWWWW) I’m certain you’ll be even prettier without it, and much more open to REAL fun! Start with those caterpillar shoesies—toss them over here (HAWWWW) then work your way upward, leaving the mask till last. If you find it necessary to SCREAM (HAWWWW) at any time, feel free to do so—the higher the volume the better! Try to send my recording needles into the red zone!”

All the blood drains out of your body.

Before surging back in a full-frontal blush till ladybug earrings nearly burst out of your lobes as they almost did that time Roger unzipped your little black dress in the Z-Wing stairwell.

Followed by a tidal wave of perspiration from the roots of your hair to the soles of your feet that drenches every garment you have on and adheres them protectively to your horrorstricken gooseflesh as you relive that traumatic moment when you saw Tricia’s Girl of the Big Ten glossy print and told Joss *How horrible the first day of senior high’d be if all the guys there were pointing and leering at you* (—they do that already to pretty much every girl—) *yeah but suppose it’s ‘cause they know your sister posed THAT WAY and what she looks like THAT WAY even if it IS nothing like the way YOU look—I would die, absolutely DIE OF SHAME if that ever happens—*

—but this is ridiculous you *can’t* have fallen into the clutches of the Mad Bludgeoner he’s in custody and you can’t be facing rape or worse by some other supervillain no not in a utility basement at The House of Duck Shutters where the real Mr. Freeze might bind you to a comical conveyor belt feeding a ginormous popsicle machine right up to the cliffhanging *Tune in tomorrow same Bat-Time same Bat-Channel* but then the director would yell *Cut* and *That’s a wrap people* and the mob of extras would melt away Studly Trio and all like they did at the beach in Florida this is just a silly joke you’re perfectly safe unlike Fortunato who

had no suspicion Montresor was going to brick him up alive in “The Cask of Amontillado” as you told Miss McInerney’s class back in eighth grade while Joss tried to crack you up by mouthing “Mandingo” claiming she was only biting her very-best-friend lips *You nut! I was worried about you—*

—another *B-Z-Z-Z-Z* from the raygun J-O-L-Ts you back to the present—

—as Freeze draws a bead on your scarlet-behind-the-vizor face then aims it at your heaving-behind-the-bodice bosom then suggestively zeroes in below your waistline saying “Think of me as Abe Omminable, Snowman—Yeti and the kids send their warmest personal regards! Now are you going to lose those shoesies yourselfie, or do you require a helping hand?—”

—*don’t scream don’t give him the satisfaction—*

—*GRAN CAN SEE WHAT I SEE AND HEAR WHAT I HEAR—*

—then as Freeze leisurely paces forward under the flickering fluorescence who should pop up but Fiona (of all people) from a different soundproof cellar where she took their self-defense seminars in deadly earnest mutter-rebuking Joss and Sheila when they cracked jokes and mutter-reciting Robin’s mantra about *which hurts most when it’s RAMMED into a guy’s groin? your foot, your knee, or your fist holding a roll of nickels?—*

—as one of the open-reel tape decks goes SPROING and shoots out a long brown ribbon in a proliferating snarl that’s matched by Batgirl’s “*You idiot!*” and Freeze’s own “*Buggeration!*” as he turns his helmeted skull toward the entanglement—

—leaving an unguarded groin open to your fist which holds a mustard-yellow Pet Rock that produces a high-pitched whinnying *HAWWWW* and doubles Freeze over as you keep him between you and the advancing Batgirl long enough to wrench the raygun out of Freeze’s convulsive gloves and swing it by the barrel like a softball bat to CRACK the side of his bubble helmet sending him sprawling onto the other tape deck knocking it over as he CRACKS the *front* of his helmet whose plastic fragments get deposited into his staring eyeballs which he grapples with while you reverse your batting stance and take a swing at Batgirl who dodges it and seizes the raygun by its stock fighting you for possession even as you both tumble over Freeze’s writhing legs and land with Batgirl on her back you prone on top and the raygun between you like a barbell she bearing up on it you bearing down MORE

WEIGHT! MORE WEIGHT! the raygun making occasional *B-Z-Z-Z-Z-es* and a gray mist slowly rising but not so foggily that you can't peer through the cowlsockets below you to the fastbatting eyes which aren't gaslight-blue like Britt's nor gorgon-green like Kinks's but deep dark brown like a newly-dug grave filled with furious violent hate—they're the Mad Man's! out to get away with murder! and there's nowhere to hide or take off running for and just like Tricia'd predicted long ago your Gardening Angel will come too late to save you from hideous destruction nothing will be left but a few bloody bones—

—*help*—

—goes a still small voice penetrating the now-constant *B-Z-Z-Z-Z*—

—*help me Vicki*—

—no no no it's a trick a feint a ruse keep bearing down MORE WEIGHT—

—*please Vicki help*—

—and just for the splittest fraction of a second the pupils in those mineshaft eyes dilate far enough for you to see inside and glimpse the dominated hostess of the Mostest—

—who scrunches the hostlids shut and shakes the hosthead NO NO NO till you take your hands off the raygun/barbell bearing down on it now with your forearms while you grab both sides of the Batcowl and dig your thumbs into its socketcorners with an unyielding clasp as you shout "*Look at me Laurie LOOK AT ME LAURIE LOOOOK AAAAT MEEEE*—"

—and when the hostess forces her lids open the teeniest tiniest crack you blast forth black laserbeams like you did at the Varsity volleyballers and at Gigi and Britt when they made Isabel erupt and at Dennis Desmond who barely had time to parry them with his dental shock-absorbers but *that* was a single shot across the Spanish classroom and *this* is prolonged at extremely close quarters bearing down beamwise as you're doing barbellwise "*LOOOOK AAAAT MEEEE LAUUUURIEEEE*—"

—till out of the Batmouth comes an unearthly reverberating **SCREEEEAMMM** that will definitely make those tape deck needles burst off their dials if any of them are still operational which isn't likely as the gray mist swells into a vast icy miasma that you'd think would be welcomed by Mr. Freeze but no no no he leaps to his booted feet and charges blindly up the far steps yelling "*NOT ME! NOT ME! NOT ME!*" smashing through what sounds like a locked door like Donald and Daffy did to those closed shutters vanishing into the

townhouse kitchen or pantry or wherever those far steps go and taking the *B-Z-Z-Z-Z-ing* miasma away with him...

...while the girl in the Batcostume beneath you ceases resistance to the raygun while dissolving into the same shuddery spastic sobs she gave way to last summer on Joss's half-mown lawn.

"(I'm sorry Vickeeee... I'm sorry Vickeeee... I didn't meeeean it...)"

"I know," you tell her, rolling off onto your back to lie exhaustedly beside your favorite blabberyap, taking her slack hand in your cramped own...

Sometime later somebody yells "*She's down here!*" before you've had a proper chance to let your lasers cool off. Blearily you look up and squint at Glinda the Good (speaking in Angelique Anstruther's voice) and a female Hamlet complete with Yorick relic (speaking with Valerie Frid's inflection). Then they're joined by a frantic bebop hipster (who sub-cries *I let you out of my sight for ONE freaking minute*) and a curious Christmas starlet (*Ooh the auras in here are so remarkable*) plus, most unexpectedly, a baggypantsed puddyboy who falls to his baggyknees next to you, squashing a flat-crowned trilby to his coatfront.

Looks like somebody got another Saturday night off from Petty Hills and came to the *bal masqué* after all.

"Well hey there," you greet him. "Who're *you* supposed to be?"

*

The police did come to Shoreward Circle that evening; as did an ambulance, to retrieve Newley Hasleman after he blundered up to the greystone's third story, barged into Isabel Carstairs's bedroom and plunged out through a window, carrying one of its duck shutters with him. Isabel (who was there at the time, lion-taming Dr. Zaius from *Planet of the Apes*) told the cops that this shattered-looking astronaut or deepsea diver or hazmat worker wreaked havoc in her boudoir, overturning the vanity table and a costly assortment of perfume bottles, before making his airborne exit with a shriek of "*I'M MELTING, MELTING!...*"

"It was awfully unpleasant," Is testified.

Useless to question Laurie Harrison: she'd suffered a complete nervous breakdown and could do no more than hold onto her stepsister for dear life, blubbering inarticulate

apologies into Susie's Pindora collar till they were taken to St. Benedict's ER.

Vicki thought it best to minimize mention of Batgirl's role in the utility room fracas. She blamed herself for not *practically* worrying about Laurie when that might've done some good—in the Girls Gym, say, after stepping aside from the volleyball team, or when Laurie'd unbent long enough to warn her about going out with Dennis Desmond. So Vicki told the police an unidentified hijacker had shanghaied her into the townhouse cellar, where the girl in the Batcostume (not then known to be Laurie) might or might not have already been; it was hard to remember. Likewise, the Abe Omminable assailant could've been targeting them both, not just her, with his lewd demands to strip or be stripped naked while screaming into his tape decks; it was difficult to say. Vicki did detail these obscene ultimatums as crispy-clearly as she'd once described the groping undergone during the Back-to-School Blackout; but she recounted her self-defense efforts against Mr. Freeze without reference to the Batwrestling aftermath. (Cops, she guessed, would prefer NOT having to deal with potential possessions by or exorcistic banishments of any demons, dragons, or *dybbuks*.)

Vicki too got taken to St. Benedict's—though not handcuffed to Joss, despite Joss's pleas to the police: “If anybody *else* tries to kidnap her, then they'll have to take us both!” At the ER Vicki was again treated (in overdue course) by Doctor Younghunk, who either recognized her from three months ago or *pretended* to, which was even more gentlemanly. Tending to her bruises and contusions, he pronounced her to be “in fine shape”—his very words! delivered with a dreamboat wink!—and certainly she was in far better shape than the Melting Flake (not Quake or Quisp) detained in an ICU coma and police custody.

Flake, as it turned out, was the only *bal masquer* caught with cocaine on his person or in his bloodstream. No drug bust took place at Shoreward; Jive Mansfield had been mistaken concerning the arrival of “goods,” so the Traversers were left bereft. And not just of “goods”: Parnell himself disappeared from the fountaintop that night and would never be seen in Vanderlund again. According to Lynndha Ednalino, he'd obviously hitched a ride on some astral mothership or other; therefore she began to recompose his Book of Maxims and prophesize his Foretold Return.

As for allegations that Flake had attempted to sexually abuse Vicki and/or Laurie, the Haslemans's high-dollar attorney would float a notion that *multiple* Mr. Freezes might've

entered Number Nine and gotten their bubble helmets damaged in a variety of circumstances. That trial-balloon line of defense would be deflated by [a] Lumpy Skinner's cautionary note, [b] further particulars reluctantly provided by a Cobbler Topping maid named Deirdre Weiner, and [c] an offer by the Carstairs family to help subsidize legal costs for the Volesters and Harrison-Zanes, in exchange for release from liability for anything that had or might have occurred on their premises.

Meanwhile the Mad Bludgeoner Task Force would write off Flake, calling him a wannabe trying to ride the M.B.'s rapacious coattails. At the same time the T.F. regretfully declared Wilmer Turkenkopf to no longer be a Person of Interest, despite a month of questioning and finetoothcombing. Wilmer's father Bruno promptly hired a low-dollar lawyer to sue the Task Force for property damage, and every kind of news media for character defamation.

Thus the Mad Bludgeoner remained unknown and at large. Even so, Vicki Volester was widely regarded as having struck a blow (*wham! bam! make a new plan, Stan!*) for endangered femininity. Even her kid brother expressed admiration (albeit skeptical) and wanted to hear all about how she'd wielded her raygun-saber against that buckethead stormtrooper like a badass Jedi she-knight. Ozzie and Felicia, who'd scarcely left off smothering Vicki since her release from the ER, told Goofus to quit aggravating her "post-traumatic stress"; they wanted her to speak to a counselor or therapist or maybe a clergyman, such as the Unitarian minister or old Father Phelps of St. Paul's. But Vicki, somewhat to her own surprise, felt in as fine shape mentally and emotionally as Dr. Dreamboat had pronounced her to be physically (S-I-G-H)—and definitely more so than she'd been after last year's Auldforest frightfest with Dave Solovay, about which/whom her parents had never heard an inkling.

She rather suspected she hadn't seen the last of that Mad Man Out to Get Away With Murder, by bludgeoning or otherwise. Still, for once in her life she hadn't tried to run or hide from him, but stepped up to the plate and slugged her way out of peril like a true Gardening Angel. As a result she received nine days of fame and celebration by her friends and acquaintances, at home and at school.

For the first time Vernonique initiated an embrace, extending this through Vicki's renewed thanks for putting her on guard before the *bal masqué*. "It was that Skinner guy who wrote you the letter—I only passed it along," noted Nonique. "Well, I don't want to hug *him*, now do I?" Vicki replied.

An equally-long cuddle from Fiona (inconceivable when they first knew each other) was even snugglier, making Feef's mascara run again when Vicki told her how she'd inspired the counterattack using the Pet Rock. So another "(Oh—ugh...)" at black-stained fingers, followed by Vicki saying "You really ought to try that waterproof Regime brand"—a product endorsed by Jenna after Vicki's own cosmetic liquefaction at the Homecoming Dance.

Jenna herself *hack hawk tooey'd* big-sisterly sustenance over the phone every evening till her bronchitis abated; by which time a portrait of Vicki as an *onna-musha* (female samurai) had been painted in acrylics and presented as an interdominational Christmas gift. Its title: *Beware My Naginata* (pole weapon) and *Don't Forget to Duck*.

Robin, while giving Vicki an approving sock on the upper arm, hogged all the credit for Flake's punishment since their self-defense classes had been *her* idea and conducted in *her* basement. Besides, she'd never liked his "washed-out weaselface" and had known from the retrospective start that Flake meant nothing but trouble. Sheila-Q, diagnosing this as a blatant case of after-the-fact-itis, rekindled old arguments that Robin's frothmouthing *proved* she had a secret crush on Flake, just like she'd been in denial-love with Roger Mustardman. "OH! GROSS!" gagged Robin, exactly as of yore; and she and Q kicked off a vintage donnybrook that lasted all through the winter holidays.

Alex, phoning long-distance from Cuernavaca on her December 19th birthday, got distorted wind of Vicki and Laurie's Shoreward turmoil and had to be talked out of cutting her Mexican trip short so she could hurry back and nurse them both. Laurie was in fact doing a little better: Samantha, Rachel, and Jerome had each visited her at Grouseland and made their separate peaces with the convalescent, who even squeezed a few drops of gossipade out of the *latest* latest rumorfruit. (Crystal was supposedly splitting up with Judd Courtney in order to restart her intermittent romance with Rags Ragnarsson.)

At VTHS Vicki was congratulated by Coach Celeste, Ms. Goldberg, Mrs. Pentire, and Mrs. Mallouf, though the latter wouldn't excuse her from T.A. duties. She was stopped in the hall long enough for the Principal to ask "How're you doing?" and be told "Fine, Mr. Stabledore." Becca Blair and Lisa Lohe, Nancy Sykeman and Rhonda Wright, Holly Brollis and Mumbles Metcalf, Carly Thibert and Tess Disseldorf, Nanette Magnus and Delia Shanafelt, Natalie Fish and Chookie Yentlebaum all paid tribute in their several fashions; Cheryl Trevelyan savored Flake's fate with the greatest relish, while Mary Kate Hazeldene put in a pitying word for his having fallen so low. Even Bunty O'Toole, who'd be graduating next month at semester's end to take over the Vinyl Spinnaker and two other stripmall discos, gave Vicki a nod of formidable acknowledgment.

Boys mostly parroted Goofus's ovation—"Hey, Badass!" "Way to go, Badass!"—usually with at least one eye on Vicki's tush. Soon, though, she was able to shield it with an extra-long cardigan of amethyst cashmere, presented by Santa via MomMom and PopPop when they flew in from Beansville for the Christmas weekend.

Both seemed to have grown older and shrunk smaller since last summer's reunion, with slower responses and unmoored attention spans. They, like Burrow Lane, had received a no-return-address Hallmark card of a potted poinsettia with the inscription

Merry C from T

—but whatever the grandparents might have been told about Tricia's unreachability went unspoken. The younger Volesters were just as closemouthed; Goofus even refrained from saying he'd heard poinsettias ranked right up there with poison ivy. Of course everybody kept mum about Vicki's recent exploits, though MomMom did mention how pleased Babcia Brygid was with "Wiktor's" gift—a blueberry pie from *La Boulangerie de la Ruelle*.

(Kathleen Prindle, even more gratified by *her* pie-gift, was working its constellation of crème Chantilly stars into a pattern for Floramour's new navy-blue negligée.)

Joss would've been tickled pink if Meg hadn't come home for Christmas from Overton-not-Oberlin—or so Joss asserted, not *quite* right in front of Meg, who claimed to be happier to see Vicki than either of her sisters. Particularly since Beth was setting *Ulysses* to music, in a fantasia for strings and vocal octet:

*Of the twoheaded octopus, one of whose heads
Is the head upon which the ends of the world
(sing: tirra-lirra)
Have forgotten to come while the other speaks
With a Scotch accent: the tentacles
(sing: tirra-lay)*

“Ohhhh myyyy Gahhhhd,” Meg whined, “WHY didn’t I let Brooksy take me with him to Wisconsin??”

“‘If only in your dreams.’” warbled Joss. “So, Meggy—got a lot of coke dealers out there at Overton?”

“What? No! I mean, how would *I* know?”

“Too bad Great-Great-Grandpa Barney Barnabas isn’t still in business. I bet he’d be ‘shoveling snow’ all *over* Lakeside Central—”

“You are so WEIRD!” huffed Meg.

Which phrase (a familiar one from Meg’s lips) sent Vicki wafting back in time to her Close-Up Encounter of the First Kind with Dennis Desmond, surrounded by the volleyball team on the Yellow Submarine:

*Hail, hail our gal-Gondolieri
Benvenuti! Tutti-frutti!
Accept our love, our homage and our duty
Benvenuti! Oho-rootie!
A-wop bop a loo bop a lop bam boom—*

(Give it a rest, Dennis.)

(Yes: she had a few regrets.)

The police wanted Vicki’s Pet Rock as Exhibit A or B or C in the Hasleman case, but couldn’t locate it in the Carstairs basement or embedded in Mr. Freeze’s space-crotch or popped out onto the greystone’s grounds. Isabel, who’d probably never set foot in a utility room before, tried to find it too (if only so Mauly wouldn’t) but turned up no mustard-colored trace.

“Don’t worreee,” she marshmallowed to Vicki, “I’m *sure* nobody’ll think you made it all up. Not after the mess *he* made in my bedroom!”

(Thanks, Is.)

(Well, maybe her Pet Rock had served its purpose and moved on, like Mary Poppins or Parnell Travers.)

Then there were some anticlimaxes, if that was the correct plural. Gigi Pyle was again a no-show the whole week before Christmas break, as was Madeline Wripple—and, annoyingly but not altogether astonishingly, Tony Nowyouseehimnowyoudon’t Pierro.

“You *did* see him there that night in the storm cellar, right?” she asked Joss and Spacyjane and Angelique and Valerie. Three out of four said yes; so as Nonique put it, if he was a hallucination it must be contagious.

Unlike Dave Solovay a year ago, Vicki knew where Tony lived and where he worked and could’ve tried to séance him back into contact by one means or another; but to hell with that. *Let HIM come knock on my door and ASK to see me. Let HIM call me on the phone and make a real true date. Let HIM mail me a Christmas card and sing me a Christmas carol and kiss me on the lips between verses. ‘Cause I AM a nice girl and a heroine-of-the-moment and I’d be a wonderful girlfriend and these are STILL not unreasonable things to wish for.*

Even if I AM too old to believe in Santa Claus.

Thank you once more and repeat that amen.

*

It took a heap of coaxing before Vicki’s folks would let her go to the New Year’s Eve blowout at Villa Neapolitan. Felicia was afraid that being in another soundproof basement might trigger a post-traumatic flashback; but Joss assured her the only risk Vicki could run at “Nilla’s Villa” was of temporary deafness, since Downbite would be performing there all night. Fat Bob and his vigilant pool cue would be on bouncer/sentry patrol, and Felicia herself was welcome to ferry everyone to-and-fro in her Chrysler T&C station wagon.

Luxury Liner, forty tons of steel

If I don’t find my baby now

I guess I never will—

harmonized Joss and Spacyjane, with Vicki warning them against a segue into *The Love Boat*'s theme song as they cruised into port unfashionably early (*not* habitual with Felicia) since snow was again falling, temps were again dropping, and Old Man Winter was again descendant upon The Cityland.

Robin put her premature guests to work completing the setup for New Year revelry, while she resumed a toe-to-toe rhubarb with Petula Pierro who'd chosen this of all occasions to book Downbite for a different gig elsewhere.

"And you shoulda been there half an hour ago, too!"

"In case you haven't noticed, *Doris*, I'm having my OWN! party HERE! right NOW! Which I told you about a week ago, and you said and I quote: 'Cool!'"

"Well, this helluva-lot-cooler other spot just opened up and I jumped on it. *You're* welcome, *my* pleasure, *DE nada*—so get your gear loaded and follow us there. We'll be in Cramps's car—"

"(Follow you *where* in Cramps's car?)" mutter-inquired Fiona, entering the cellar with her Fender bass, a miniature Stetson, PoonElly Scales, and a couple bottles of Lasser's champonette.

"Old Town, north of North—"

"(*OLD TOWN?*)" went Feef.

"*DOWNTOWN?*" went Robin.

"No—TAYSER!" snapped Petula.

"'North of North' sounds like a fairytale setting," Spacyjane observed to PoonElly, who'd wandered over to check out the buffet.

"'East of East' sounds like a Chinese soap opera," remarked Poon. "Where's the cheese puffs?"

"Will you ditch that carbonated Pepto-Bismol and move your asses already?" Tayser was telling Robin and Fiona. "C'mon, we gotta make tracks—"

"*Uffa!* Have you pissed away the last little dribble of what's left of your mind?"

"Don't waste *your* mind or *my* time with bollocksy questions!"

"(Answer me this,)" gnarled Fiona. "(Ever heard of such a thing as 'prior notice?')"

“*Schmior schnotice!*” sneered Tayser. “Ever heard of SPONTANEITY?? Have you learned NOTHING from punk??”

“Not if you SERIOUSLY expect us to pack up everything and truck it on down to some dump at the drop of your damnfool hat—*use the fucking can, Lingerspiel!!*”

“PTOOEY,” went Epic Khack, not entirely into his gob-spittoon.

“Ooh, are those Vienna sausages?” Poon was asking at the buffet.

“Italian pork—my friend LeAnn’s dad imports them,” Space was answering.

“Am I sensing a certain LACK OF APPRECIATION here?” Tayser wanted to know.

“(If you SMELT it, you DEALT it!)” Feef exerted.

“So DEAL with it, DORIS!” Robin added.

“‘*Well the danger on the rocks is surely past,*’” chorused PoonElly and Spacyjane, essaying a Steely Dan duet over the platter of Italian sausages.

“Oh that is IT, chickies!” Tayser notified the Sister Dopesters. “Me ‘n’ Epic are OUTTA this dump and OUTTA this band! Buncha pitiful doily-drapers, from womb to tomb—Cramps!—where’s Cramps?—put your damn coat on, Cramps, we are *splitting!*”

“Not now,” replied Ms. Aplenty, in mid-flirtation with Hahhhnsel Hitchens.

“‘*So long hey thanks my friend / I guess I’ll try my luck again...*’” chimed in the buffet duo.

“OH FOR SHIT’S SAKE!!—you there, you got a car?” Tayser grated at the just-arriving Zal Tergeist and his ten-o’clock shadow. “Good! Guess what: you won the New Year’s sweepstakes and get to drive us to Old Town!”

Exit Petula Pierro, Epic Khack and bewildered Zal.

“AAY LOOP-AAY!” Robin exploded over the rising crowdnoise.

“YEAH?” from Vicki, holding a ladder steady while Joss hastily hung the last of some leftover black-and-orange Halloween streamers.

“LOOPY, YOU’RE OUR MANAGER AGAIN!”

“*Hunh?*”

“Start booking gigs for Downbite, beginning tomorrow—just give us fair warning ahead of time!”

“Robin, I don’t know the first thing about punk rock!”

“Then it’s about time you learned! Oh yeah, we’ll need a new lead guitar—”

“Got that covered!” hollered Sheila Quirk as she swooped into the basement. “Just like before, Robbo! I *told* you, didn’t I, we never shoulda let this one get away—”

Cue the theme music from *Jaws*.

As a cucumber-cool redhead with a slightish build, sleepy eyes, and hatchet-honing smile surfaced alongside S-Q.

Yeesh! It’s the Great White Queen Bitch!

“Heighdy-ho,” said Britt Groningen.

“*YOU*, hunh?” reacted her gracious hostess. “Oughtn’t you to be in mourning by your boyfriend’s sickbed, like Jill after Jack fell down and broke his damn crown?”

“Nothing to do with me,” disclaimed Britt. “I don’t ‘go tumbling after.’ Just dropped by for some Auld Lang Syne, and maybe kiss a few fellows at midnight.”

(Hornyboy ears pricked up all around the cellar at this temptatious prospect.)

“Always bring your guitar to smooch sessions?” Robin growled as a chrome-plated Gibson SG with BRITT spelled out in mother-of-pearl letters was unpacked and strapped on.

“Forearmed is forewarned,” said Britt. “Got an amp free?”

Vicki found Fiona huddling blankfaced at her elbow, and harked back to that summery day when Feef hiked a whole mile-and-a-quarter to confide that Britt scared her.

“‘Cause she’s part of that Parnell gang?” Vicki’d asked.

“(No! They’re just luded-out rich kids—and Britt’s not one of ‘em, not really. She’s only fooling around... I mean, it’s the way she looks—and the way she acts—she MADE Robin ‘n’ Sheila fight, not just argue but FIGHT... But without her, we wouldn’t have a band. But we barely do have one, with her. And she just... scares me.)”

Nor was Feef the only one. All very well for Britt to renounce Flake Hasleman in his custody-coma; that hardly guaranteed she wouldn’t seek revenge of some sort for Vicki’s having consigned him there. It’d be entirely typical for Britt to do so—even if every move she made *still* had a trifling, dallying, fooling-around patina to it. No way should Vicki try to have anything to do with a band that had Britt in or even *near* it; not again.

Yet Feef clearly needed Vicki for bolstering support, now as much as then—“(I don’t wanna be INVISIBLE. See? Or shoved aside. This is MY band; I’m supposed to sing lead;

they're supposed to do MY songs. Y'know?)" Especially when PoonElly bounded up to ask Sugar Pop for the score of "Seventy-Seven Tromped Bones," Downbite's new elegy to the year just ending: "I want that Spacygal to sing backup on it."

"(NO.)"

"YES," insisted Poon, grabbing the score and bounding back to Spacyjane.

"(There goes my last nerve...)" Fiona mutter-moaned to Vicki.

"Go on and tell them to do it *your* way—I'll back you up," Vicki tried to reassure her.

"(And don't forget to duck,)" Feef quoted Jenna.

In the meantime Buddy Marcellus commandeered the cellar turntable, putting on *The Who by Numbers* so he and Junior Nygren could boogie to "Slip Kid." They had immediate dance-floor competition from Patrick Baxter and Susie Zane, who'd been asked to come by Laurie who wasn't up for partying yet but longed to be there vicariously. (Nonique, on the other hand, had politely declined Robin's openminded secondhand invite: "Tell your Cocoa Krispie she can feel free to look in on us.")

FLASSSHHHH went a paparazzo in Vicki's face.

"Gahdammit, Sidney!! *Will* you quit creeping up and jumping out at me like that!!"

"You're welcome. Be seeing ya," said Split-Pea Erbsen, moving off to snap candid of the New Downbite prepping for their inaugural jam.

"Felicitations," Joss super-told Vicki while sub-*hee-hee-hee*-ing at her. "First Mrs. Mallouf's substitute T.A, then regaining your manager's tiara—what further splendors await you in 1978?"

"Oh shut up. Tell the truth, though—doesn't *this* year seem to have gone on forever and ever?"

"*You* shut up. We've had ourselves a *www*hale of a time!"

Be convulsed by that, as per usual.

And as for the year ahead?

Let there be *lights! camera! action!*—

P. S. (Paul Stephen) Ehrlich was born, raised, and educated in Kansas City, Missouri. After enduring thirty-one summers and winters there, he exchanged Middle Western climate for Puget Sound's in 1988. Employed by the University of Washington (not necessarily as an instructor) he lives with himself outside Seattle.

As the author of *The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly*, *Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor*, *13 Black Cats Under a Ladder*, and *Bolster, Not Molest Her*, he has since 2002 administered the Skeeter Kitefly Website and its Split Infinitive Productions at www.skeeterkitefly.com.