



VICKI IN VANDERLUND

Book Two 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>

2015

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

FORTHCOMING

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

Cover design and artwork by the author

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

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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

Two

VICKI IN VANDERLUND

She was looking about for some way of escape, and wondering whether she could get away without being seen, when she noticed a curious appearance in the air: it puzzled her very much at first, but, after watching it a minute or two, she made it out to be a grin...

—LEWIS CARROLL

18

Split Level

Vicki Volester, having gotten very tired (not to mention sick) of sitting beside her brat of a brother on the Civic's back seat, almost offered to get out and *walk* the rest of the way to Vanderlund. But the weather that day, the last day of June, was stew-pidly hot (as they *used* to say, back in Pfiester Park) so Vicki stayed put. Sickly/tiredly.

"Oh, what's the use?" she sighed aloud.

"Mah-umm! Vicki's gonna kill herself!"

"That's not amusing, Christopher."

"Hey, I'm just trying to *warn* ya. Betcha she'll do it by jumping in the canal, if ya make a stop on Panama. We could pull over there for her to jump when we get off the Expressway—"

"That," said Felicia, "is enough!"

"Really!" Vicki agreed. "If I wanted to drown myself I'd do it in the *Lake*, not some gross-out sanitary canal—"

"Victoria Lorraine! What is the MATTER with you children?? Anybody'd think we were on our way to the morgue! I don't want to hear another word about suicide from either of you, not even in jest!"

"Sorry Mom," went Goofus.

"It's just that it's, y'know, such a hot day for moving and all," added Vicki.

"Don't you worry about that, kids!" smiled their father. "Our new house has central air conditioning! No more balky wall units! It'll be cooler than any igloo in Eskimo Town!"

“Y’know what’d be *really* cool?” said Goofus. “If we had our own pool there!”

“What, like a wading pool?”

“No, a *real* one, deep enough to go scuba diving in! Please, Dad? I’ll help dig it.”

“Well, I’ll make you kids a deal: no more talk about drowning, no more rhubarbs between you two till we get ourselves good and settled, and...”

“And?” asked Vicki.

“And then we’ll give the matter some serious thought.”

Not much of a promise; yet not completely dismissable. Enough incentive, anyway, for an unspoken truce on the Civic’s back seat—and for maintaining it even when Goofus cleared his throat (loudly) while the car idled at a Panama Boulevard stoplight.

“Uh-HEM!” he went.

Do that again, twerp, and you’ll be scuba diving through the sewer.

(Silently vowed with a sweet sisterly smile, for anyone who might happen to glance in the rearview mirror.)

This time, knowing there was no turning back, Vicki paid closer attention to their final approach on Lesser Drive. What were the cross streets called? Check out the signs speeding past: Mullein—Knotgall—Black Knot—Oakapple—something Green—Cedarapple—Velvetleaf—Nutsedge—Foxtail: turn right.

Too many apples and too many knots. How could you ever get them straight?

“Velvetleaf” was a pretty name, though; and at least they wouldn’t be living on “Nuts Edge.”

(Hopefully.)

Around then to Burrow Lane. Into their new cul-de-sac. Up the driveway of 3132, a split-levelly sort of number: thirty-one, thirty-two. All the little cows go *moo moo moo...*

Ozzie opened the garage by remote control, using a Genie gizmo that Goofus fell in love with and had to be forcibly kept away from. “All this space!” Felicia said divertingly as they parked inside an enclosure that, to City eyes, looked big enough for a barn dance. “I’m going to get a car of my own—a ‘sporty roadster,’ like Nancy Drew drove. I’ve wanted one since I was a little girl.”

“Get a Jag, Mom!” advised Goofus. “An XK-E! They don’t come any sportier than that.”

“Son, I’m gonna pretend you didn’t say those words,” said Ozzie the Honda dealer, leading them out of the garage and along a flagstone walk to 3132’s front door. Vicki lagged behind, convulsed at the thought of her mother solving earnest mysteries with Bess and George and Ned Nickerson. *The Secret of the Old Sanitary Canal. The Clue in the Booger-Filled Scuba Mask.* “Oh Ned! You are my special friend!”

“Lookee here—they forgot to take this knocker,” said Ozzie, regarding a fat brass lump inscribed THE EISENSTEINS. “Oughta file that off and put ‘VOLESTER MOTORS’ on top.”

He wrestled with key and lock while Goofus pressed the doorbell, snortling as the first six notes of *Peter and the Wolf* echoed within. Re-echoing as Goof re-jabbed and re-snortled, till Vicki swatted his finger off the buzzer.

“Aroooo!” he howled. “Ya better not wear a red riding hood in *this* house, Sis!”

“Christopher Blaine—” warned Felicia.

“Hey, that wasn’t a rhubarb!”

“Way to go, runt! Now we’ll never get a pool!”

“Would you all just—ha! gotcha!” said Ozzie, achieving entrance; and the four Volesters filed on in. To be dangled on in the foyer by a pendant light like a giant snowball, hanging from a thick icicle chain. “Aw-reeet!” went Goofus, aiming imaginary projectiles at this target and making explosive noises, till a firm parental hand routed him to the foyer’s far end. Two staircases on the right: one going up, the other down. Beside the latter was a balustrade with an overview of what Ozzie called “the-family-room-unless-I-make-it-my-den.”

Gallop down into it before he makes up his mind.

Wall-to-wall shag carpet. Sliding glass doors looking out onto a flagstone patio. A long countertop on which many cold drinks had evidently been set without using coasters. (“We can refinish that,” Ozzie assured them.) One inner door led to the garage; another to a laundry room with its own little half-bath—handy if you got stuck doing a big wash or heap of ironing. As was bound to happen to Vicki, the only daughter left in this household.

Back upstairs to the main floor, and a breakfast nook by the balustrade: it had naugahyde seats like a drugstore booth and sat under a skylight. Beyond it was the kitchen,

really modern-looking compared to their old greystone scullery, with a picture window above the sink. You'd always have something to stare out at while loading the dishwasher. Which would probably also fall to Vicki's lot, more often than not.

Past the kitchen was a dining room with a high ceiling and slick floor. Ozzie and Felicia confabbed lengthily about Persian rugs and gripper pads, while Goofus tried to skate over the hardwood in his sweaty bare feet (eww!) and Vicki peeked through another set of sliding glass doors. These opened onto a flagstone terrace or veranda, upslope from the patio below. Split levels in action!

At the front of the house, the living room had an even higher ceiling than the dining room and was twice as long, with a monumental fireplace at one end. Vicki hoped she wouldn't have to sweep its chimney. Mantel-dusting was sure to be one of her new chores, along with hearth-brushing and ash-shoveling. Plus having to polish those fat brass andirons that the Eisensteins must also have forgotten, no doubt deliberately.

Might as well change my name to Cinderella and be done with it.

An open doorway connected the front room to the foyer. Goof started ogling its big white snowglobe again, but was compelled to climb the other staircase to the second—or would it be the third?—floor.

Master bedroom to the left. It had a walk-in closet, a white-tiled private bath, and access to a genuine balcony shaded by authentic oak trees. Which was better than the bay window they'd left behind at the greystone, since here you didn't have to look out at cruddy old Walrock Avenue.

Down the hall was a built-in linen cabinet, a bigger bathroom tiled in aquamarine, and three more bedrooms over the garage. One at the side of the house was assigned to Goofus; another, in the front corner, was designated as Vicki's—even though the third room, like Baby Bear's bed and chair and porridge, was Just Right for her. Its closet had sliding doors like the terrace and patio—but instead of clear glass, these were made out of *mirrors*.

Vicki'd never seen anything so absolutely necessary for a teenage girl's pursuit of happiness.

Yet this wonderful closet (and accompanying bedroom) had been reserved for *Tricia*. Who, at the moment, was *across an entire ocean*. And who, even when she came back,

would be vamoosing off to college in a completely different state for the *next four years*. Meaning these beautiful mirror-doors would simply go to waste, when Vicki could be putting them to constant beneficial use instead of staring at the SHALLOW ALCOVE-LIKE JOKE OF A CLOSET (THAT DIDN'T EVEN *HAVE* A DOOR) in the corner room. No! Unh-unh! Let *that* one be Tricia's room, on such occasions when she'd breeze through town for a holiday visit or to collect a tuition check.

Any other arrangement would be terribly, horribly, monstrously UNFAIR.

But before Vicki could present this well-thought-out argument to her temporarily misguided parents in a persuasive, grown-up-sounding voice—

—the moving van arrived. And the battle was lost.

Her belongings were stacked in the corner bedroom, while the Just Right room became Absent Tricia's storage depository. You could barely *glimpse* its magnificent mirror-doors afterward. And even if you could reach them and remove them and try to reinstall them in the corner room's pitiful inadequate hole in the wall, they wouldn't fit properly: not tall enough.

UNFAIR.

Felicia made some murmurs about finding similar doors of an appropriate size, but Vicki knew this could never happen; it was the red-patent-vinyl-platform-shoe fiasco all over again. Probably whoever manufactured magic mirror-doors had gone belly-up during the recession. Though not before outfitting every *other* girl in Vanderlund's closet first! Vicki's would be the only one lacking a full-length reflective surface. And all the other girls would know this immediately, thanks to the embarrassing gaffes she'd be sure to commit in how she wore her clothes and hair and makeup.

It was enough to make you burst out crying.

If you weren't thirteen years old, that is, and doomed to be practically mature.

*

Fortunately (or un-) there were no girls (or boys) her age living in the Burrow Lane cul-de-sac. Some of the neighbors did have children—the Baumeisters, the Rouses, the Sweeneys—but they were all little kids, younger than Goofus, with parents eager to know how soon Vicki might be available to babysit.

Might as well be now. It wasn't as though she had anything better to do, other than gradually unpack while helping Felicia repaint the corner bedroom. "Her" room. At least it was her paint choice: a light lavender that Sherwin-Williams called *wisteria*. Which pretty much summed up Vicki's current mood.

She did find a kind of satisfaction in plying rollers and brushes, and a slightly illicit enjoyment in the smell of fresh paint. Though that got a tad overpowering at times, particularly when you were trying to fall asleep. Which wasn't made any easier by Vicki's curtains having been boxed by mistake with the winter quilts and not turning up till midweek. Meaning "her" bedroom windows had no covering those first few nights—the Eisensteins, while abandoning andirons and door knockers, had made off with all the shades and blinds.

Vicki (already in a snit of victimization) decided to hit the sack unshielded from Vanderlund's prying eyes. Yes, let the whole *world* bear witness to her distress! Though not to her bareness: she changed into summer PJs behind the aquamarine bathroom door.

And nearly suffered heart failure the first night when she returned to the exposed bedroom and found a HUMAN FACE staring in at her through the opposite window.

(Good thing you'd just emptied your bladder and had nothing left to lose.)

Whew. It was her own face, obviously, in the dark uncovered glass. No Peeping Tom or domestic spy or overeager babysitter-seeker. Not even Goofus playing wolf; nobody out there at all.

Unless... just maybe... Steph had snuck away to catch a train at Pfiester Park Station, travel the dozen or so miles to Burrow Lane, locate number 3132 at this time of night, climb a tree and pull a *Mirror of Danger*-ish prank. That would be so like Steph.

But nobody answered when Vicki opened the window and made cautious inquiries.

(Dammit.)

(Talk about feeling *wisteria*...)

(Never would've believed it if, a year ago, you'd been told you could miss Stephanie Lipperman this badly...)

Vicki spent much of Tuesday preparing a postcard for her father to mail to Tendone Avenue on Wednesday. Postcard rather than letter, which Steph would definitely throw

away unopened—or tear to shreds and grind underfoot. *That* would be so like Steph. A postcard was harder to leave unread: you basically *had* to read it while checking to see who sent it.

One side of the card shouted GREETINGS FROM VANDERLUND! On the other, Vicki wrote her new phone number in bold black digits, followed by:

*Here we are—please call me
I want to stay friends with you
Love, Vicki*

Running out to the garage on Wednesday morning as Ozzie was getting into the car, to retrieve this and underline the *please*.

But hearing in her mind's ear a forecast of her GREETINGS being shredded into confetti, the instant this postcard reached its unforgiving addressee.

*

Okay. It might actually be a good idea to have a closet with no door(s). So you could survey your complete wardrobe at a single glance, assuming everything got picked up off the floor and put on hangers first.

Vicki's only lasting complaint, as she lightly sanded "her" alcove prior to applying primer, was that it shared a back wall with Goof's closet—whose reek was guaranteed to seep through and pollute her clothes.

Heave...

Sigh...

And *Hunh?* at the sight, on this same alcove wall, of two letters hand-printed in bold black marker: **L.E.**

Lost Entry? Last Exit? Or somebody's initials?

"Mom?"

"Hmm?" went Felicia, painting the window trim to match the rediscovered curtains.

"Did the Eisensteins have any kids?"

"I'm not sure. I think they mentioned a daughter."

“Did she live here, in this house?”

“Well I suppose so. The Eisensteins were about our age; I guess any children they’d have would be about yours. Why?”

“Um, just wondering.”

L.E. It looked like a girl’s printing, not crude and splotchy like a boy’s, and done at the exact level where Vicki would mark a **V.V.**

So let’s say “L.E.” was a fellow thirteen-year-old, the same height as yourself, and had slept in this very bedroom—initialing this very closet after cleaning it out for the move to California. Which, presumably, she’d tried to talk her parents out of, and would regret for years to come. *This will ALWAYS be my room*, the initials implied.

(Poor L.E.)

What L-names went with Eisenstein? How weird if she’d been a Lorraine—maybe even a Lorraine Victoria! Talk about your inside-out sensations. Which weren’t eased any by an abrupt remembrance of the only other Eisenstein you’d ever heard of: an old Russian guy who made a silent horror movie.

Bizarre memory from three summers ago. Vicki, unable to sleep, out of bed to get a drink of kitchen water. (Not bathroom: eww.) Her mother up watching late-night PBS. Not *Masterpiece Theater* or *The French Chef*, but a little boy getting TRAMPLED by a grainy black-and-white mob. Right onscreen! Literally *STOMPED* on, while somebody filmed it!! And Vicki’s own mother calmly sitting in front of the TV with a glass of wine, watching such a thing happen.

“What IS this??”

“Eisenstein,” Fel had said. Adding “It’s a classic” as Vicki fled back to bed, her kitchen water abandoned.

The next morning Vicki’d wondered if it’d all been a gruesome nightmare. But why should she dream up a name like “Eisenstein”? Reluctance to ask her mother or Tricia about it. Seek answers instead from Sarah-Jill Shapiro. Learn much too much about *Battleship Potemkin* and the Odessa Steps—also the fact that Sergei Eisenstein was from Russia.

So it stood to reason that an “L” Eisenstein should have a Russian first name, suitable for the ballerina Vicki figured “L” (like any normal girl) aspired to be. Ludmila? Lizabeta?

No—*Lana*, short for Svetlana, embarrassed by the *Svet*. Also by people who misrhymed her name with “Hannah,” no matter how often she’d remind them it was pronounced like “Donna.”

Poor Lana. She too must’ve endured mockery for closet-doorless fashion blunders. Yet somehow Vicki knew she’d wanted to stay here in this house, and not be uprooted to California.

(You don’t suppose that was *her* face peering through the window the other night?)

(Course not. Don’t be silly.)

(It wasn’t like the Volesters were *intruders* or anything. Ozzie and Felicia’d bought 3132 fair and square. If any ex-occupants chose to hang around the premises in ghostly form, *they* were the ones doing the trespassing—not you. No way.)

Nevertheless. No point being provocative.

It wouldn’t hurt to put a masking-tape frame around the initials on the alcove wall, and avoid obliterating them with primer or paint.

Call it another split level.

*

Vicki could’ve filled her cow-shaped piggy bank (dear old Mildred Milkpail, still in use after all these years) that Friday evening. The Rouses wanted her to babysit Baby Rance; the Baumeisters offered double to sit with two kids, Nova and Pippin; while the Sweeneys outbid them both in hopes of landing a keeper for their demonic son Todd.

But Ozzie wanted the whole family (minus Tricia, across that entire ocean) to spend the 4th of July at Vanderlund’s Maine Street Beach. There was a parade with floats, and a twilight concert by a Dixieland band with bagpipers, and fireworks over the Lake that Ozzie claimed were really being set off to welcome the Volesters and celebrate their arrival.

And there were crowds. Sweltering crowds. A potential mob, in fact. Lucky thing no Odessa Steps were nearby. If Goofus went and got himself trampled underfoot, who do you think would be blamed for it? Not the mob, that’s for sure. Oh no, it’d be Big Sissy’s fault for failing to look after Little Brother. And how many babysitting gigs could she be able to get *then*?

(Stew-pid Goofus.)

Here, at least, were a great many girls (and boys) Vicki's age. Probably a lot of her future classmates, potential schoolfriends, even a conceivable sweetheart or two—milling about, fooling around, yelling up at the sky and its pyrotechnic marvels.

Out here in the actual palpable open at Maine Street Beach, they didn't seem so intimidating. Young teens were young teens, whether City or suburban.

The problem was that Vicki remained a stranger to them all.

She was in EXILE.

Like Gran Schmelz had confessed to feeling. Sometimes slightly, sometimes excruciatingly, but *always* in exile—from the first day she and the other Sennmanns left Vilnius (when Gran was thirteen!) to the last night of her death on Fiddler Key.

Tricia, on the other hand, couldn't wait to expatriate herself from Pfiester Park. And Goofus would be like PopPop, never looking back: "Let's talk about *now*." Mom and Dad were parents and thus unable to understand anything. So there was not a soul in all Vanderlund for Vicki to turn to—no one except Lana Eisenstein. And *she* belonged on the far side of the bedroom window, back on Burrow Lane.

Wisteria...

19

The Bridge of Green

7/5/75

(That ought to be a significant date. Fateful, even.)

Dear Diary she nearly proceeded, catching herself just before ballpoint touched notebook. Whoops! Write the word “diary” and Goofus-the-Pest would sense its presence like a bloodhound picking up a scent.

You’ll have to put this notebook in code, imitating Tricia—who hadn’t even bothered to hide her histrionic journals, knowing you wouldn’t be able to decipher them. Meaning you’ll need a key that’s cryptic enough to baffle Goofus, yet not so obscure as to hamper your own ability to translate it later on.

Such as...

D.L.E. ~ gng > solo #1 ☀ 2 loc (jh ≠) & ☺ it ≥

~ hp (≠) hs ± trk 4 rung!

Or, in plain English:

Dear Lana Eisenstein [really My Diary] ~

I'm going out on my own for the first time [or day]

to find the Junior High School and look it over ~

hope the school has a good track for running!

Or, in the Reader's Digest condensed-for-mothers version:

"Going out for a jog—back in a couple hours."

"Hold it," Felicia told her.

"Mom, I'll help you with the kitchen after I—"

"Do you know *where* you're going, and how to get there, and how to get home?"

"Yes, Mom! I've been memorizing the map, a little every night. I know all the street names by heart. Foxtail—Nutsedge—Velvetleaf—"

"You know Daddy took Goof downtown just now, to see about the new rugs. He won't be able to come find you for hours if you get lost—"

"MUTH-er! I will not 'get lost.' That only happened once in my life, back in kindergarten!"

"You got LOST in kindergarten? I don't remember anything about that."

(Mental kicking of self for divulging this escapade after so many hushed-up years.)

"It was like y'know the first time me 'n' Hayley ever walked home by ourselves and we took like this wrong turn no big deal we found the right way right *uh*-way and I woulda forgot all about it 'cept it *was* the only time I ever got lost y'know and it's never happened again *since* then. 'Kay?"

Felicia, with pained eyes: "Brownie—you are a very bright girl. *Why* on earth do you talk that way?"

"Like what way?" asked Vicki. "Mom—I am *just* going over to Lesser Park. Maybe on down to Green Bridge. I haven't gone running for a WHOLE WEEK. D'you want me to turn all flabby and feeble and gross?"

Felicia, opening a can of sand-colored paint (*jonquil*, Sherwin-Williams called it), denied wanting a flabby/feeble daughter. "But I don't want to *lose* another one, either." (Sigh heaved. *Jonquil* dabbed on brow with heel of hand.)

Vicki, hesitating in the foyer doorway: "Well... I'm sure Tricia knows where she is."

(Wry adult snortle.) "*And* where she's going. She always did. You always stuck close by me wherever we went, but Trish'd take off and expect us to play catch-up. Setting a fine example for your little brother—I half-expect Daddy to call and say Goofy's found a flying carpet, and is joyriding it to Istanbul." (Rueful, *jonquil*-spattered headshake.)

“Um,” went Vicki. “Do you, like, need anything from Jewels or Osco? I can get it on my way back, if it’s not too heavy.”

“No, darling, you run along. Have a good jog. I ought to start exercising myself, once we get this house in order. Maybe we could go jogging together sometime.”

“Um sure that might be fun,” said Vicki, beating a rapid retreat out the front door and not pausing to shudder till she reached Foxtail Road.

Perk up: no remarks had been made about the amount of cosmetics you were wearing, or the T-shirt and shorts that some would call becomingly snug. Out on your own, after all, for the first time [or day] in Vanderlund. En route to a junior high that probably had its own football team. Whose players *could* be there on a Saturday in early summer, practicing drills or whatnot. And if, during their whatnot, they chanced to see a New Girl go jogging past—well, she really ought to look her very best.

(No question about it.)

Oh but it felt GOOD to be out again, running freely in the sunshine before the day got too hot. Lesser Drive was ideal jog-turf: wide smooth parkway between sidewalk and curb, ground nice and level, grass well-mowed. Other runners sprinting to and fro; nod at the pleasant ones, dodge the unfriendly.

Nutsedge. Velvetleaf. Cedarapple. Turn right at EUGENE G. GREEN ROAD—quite a lot to squeeze on a single streetsign. Who was Mr. Green? What did he do to warrant having a road of his own? Why had he allowed so many trees and telephone poles to be planted in its parkway (and in Vicki’s way)?

Heading south now. Yarrow Drive. Jimson Drive. Pearlwort Drive. And Panama Boulevard cutting through at an angle, with the EUGENE G. GREEN MEMORIAL BRIDGE crossing it to span the canal. (Which, thank Gahd, didn’t smell any worse than an average river on an average morning in July.)

Disappointment, though, that the “Green Bridge” you’d memorized on Vanderlund’s map was not in fact green. Just the usual dull industrial hue you could see on any bridge in The City. How much trouble would it be to give a *Green* Bridge a matching rail? Or to hang greenish banners at either end? That was the sort of effort you’d expect a suburb to make, without having to be asked. But here even the stoplights stayed red for too long, making you

mark time on both sides of Panama Boulevard.

Finally you were allowed to jog ahead into the Green Bridge Shopping Center, and this was more like it: several blocks of outdoor shops, artfully arranged in a color scheme of mint and pistachio. Enough to make you start craving an ice cream soda. And hey! Right over there's a Zephyr Heaven Dairy Bar, practically demanding that you step inside and order one.

But no—be strong—don't want to get flabby/feeble. Detour through Jewel Foods instead; have a free water-fountain slurp. *Maybe* indulge in a Filbert's float on the way home. And take a tour of the other shops: there was a restaurant, and a bank, and a florist, and a beauty salon, and a sporting goods place, and a drive-in launderette, and the Conga Line Cocktail Lounge, and an outpost of the Cathedral of All the Stores, and plenty of others that Vicki could only glance at momentarily as she resumed her run.

Down Oakapple Road now, one block east of Green. Cecidia Drive. Chirosia Drive. (Who *named* these streets?) Knopper Drive—and suddenly there it was, behind a padlocked chain-link fence:

V W

VANDERLUND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Home of the Beetles

(Ewwgh!)

Though Vicki didn't know it then, "VW" was a prime example of Early American Brutalism: big heavy stack of irregular concrete slabs, three stories high, with three parallel wings jutting out like fingers on a giant robotic gauntlet. Skinny little windows wedged between the slabs, with stark stone walkways wrapped around the upper floors.

(Sheesh!)

Vicki circled this eerie mausoleum's outer fence at a measured pace, but no football players were there to whatnot her. In fact nothing much of *any* sort was stirring—except a swarm of homebody beetles! GROSS! What an awful mascot!

Yuh-uck. Were creepy-crawlies destined to lie in wait for her, no matter where she went to school? Would they even go so far as to include another W-w-w—

—another Wer—

—another Wernie Ball?

(Whew. At least she could *think* his name again, without breaking into a sick sweat.)

(But *eww* nonetheless.)

Well, no point getting all anticipatory about it. Almost two months till you have to enter “VW”—plenty of time to find the right footing. Right now, let your feet take you back to the Green Bridge Shopping Center, and Zephyr Heaven, and that frosty ice cream soda.

What street are we on? Is this Knopper or Oakapple? The sign says “ALEPPO.” Must be some junior-high vandal’s monkeywork; more sophisticated than mere grade-school graffiti.

Imagine, as you run along, what a Vanderlund vandal might be like. Picture a Kyoop Minsky without so many flaws and shortfalls. Imagine catching him red-handed in the monkey-act, chiseling his name (or yours, or *both*) into a stark exterior walkway slab. Imagine, instead of ratting him out, that the two of you start this really torrid outlaw affair, and—

—whoa! why has this street begun to *curve*?—

Knopper hadn’t done that before. Nor had Oakapple or Eugene G. Green.

Optical illusion? No—the street really did make a continual bend, ahead and behind, and VW was already out of sight.

Okay. Must’ve taken a wrong turn. Maybe there really *was* an Aleppo Drive. Trace your steps back to the school, and regain your bearings.

Which would be a lot easier to do if you could *see* the school. If all these trees weren’t so tall, and thick, and suburban. So *Sleeping Beauty*-ish: a forest surrounding a castle, hiding it from view.

Never mind. You came from *that* way, so by turning yourself around you are therefore returning *that* way. And the school’s massive bulk will suddenly show itself... now!

Or... now.

Or...

...why is this street going DOWNHILL?

Wait just a damn second. We are *not* in a forest. There are rows of ordinary homes on either side of you. Well, maybe not so ordinary—somehow they’ve gotten bigger and fancier, set farther back beyond wider lawns, closed in by pointy-topped iron. Reminding you of...? Manderley Avenue: grand and gloomy. These trees even have the same sort of twisty, gnarly, face-flicky branches. And just like in kindergarten, you stare between them at what are probably haunted houses.

On a Saturday morning when there’s no traffic. Or other pedestrians. Or evidence of any people *inside* the Manderleylike houses.

Not even a dog or cat or squirrel to be seen; no birdies chirping in the tall thick trees. Just a constant *b-z-z-z-z*, as if from unseen insects. (Beetles? Could you follow them back to VW, like a trail of creepy-crawly breadcrumbs?)

Pull yourself together. You definitely don’t want to go downhill. So rotate your little ass once more and head back up... into increasing weirdness. Darker shadows. Intense shafts of light. *Twilight Zone*-y contrasts. And still no indication that anyone else is around.

Look: a signpost ahead. On what would be a corner, if these stew-pid streets would quit curving and go straight. But now, at least, you can pinpoint where you are. Which is—

CARAVAGGIO PLACE. At its junction with VERMEER.

Neither of which had been on any part of the map you’d memorized.

Pound pound pound goes your heart, drowning out the insistent beetle *b-z-z-z-z*.

Stop it. Just a little blunder. A disorienting misunderstanding. Another practical joke by that Vanderlund vandal. Wrench off the CARAVAGGIO sign, and find the real ALEPPO displayed underneath.

Can’t. Too short to reach it. And dwindling further as you try to fend off panic, as the twisty gnarly trees lean toward you without a wind to make them sway, oh Gahd oh Gahd oh Gahd—

Blink your eyes and be all grown up. You’ll fearlessly knock on doors to ask for guidance. Or maybe find it waiting at your feet: *Eat me. Drink me. Smoke me.* Magically transform me out of this alien dimension I somehow wandered into, away from the rocking-horse-flies and snap-dragon-flies of Looking-Glass Land—

WHERE THE HELL **IS** EVERYBODY? SOMEBODY? ANYBODY?

Gran can see what I see, and hear what I hear.

So?...

Follow the yellow brick road.

Well. It wasn't yellow, or made of bricks, but Vermeer did start with a lucky-V. So, yes: let's follow it as far as it will go, ignoring the other cross streets—Rembrandt, Rubens, Brueghel. (The boogie-woogie Brueghel boy of Company B.) Hum to yourself and keep marching onward, curlicuing downward at a steepening slant—as the light through the clustering leaves above turns pearly-bright to show you the way.

Opalescent: another shade of paint, selected for the kitchen trim.

Mom would be wondering where you'd got to, worrying why you weren't home to help like you promised. She must never find out what kept you so long or you'll be grounded forever, assuming you ever *do* find your way home or at least off this endless hill, or bluff, or mountain—

—*plop.*

Shunted out of the pearly-bright tree-tunnel. Onto a long and winding country road that trailed away in either direction, utterly empty for miles upon miles under the wide-open sky.

...I wonder if we're in Vanderlund anymore?...

Forget the "we're"—it was high noon, the sun directly overhead, her own shadow had deserted her side. No way to gauge east or west or anything else.

This is like a thousand times worse, Gran!

Who to ask now? What to do next? Even if a car miraculously appeared, would she dare try flagging it down? Suppose its driver offered her a lift, only to abduct and subject her to hideous sex crimes? Oh Gahd! Should she hide in the bushes? Conceal the rank desperation streaming out of every pore, reducing her to depths of misery unplumbed since that day Goofus had toddled out of the greystone and off down the alley?

Oh, wouldn't HE be ecstatic to see her like this, a quivering blithering puddle of crud—"Hey, lookit what the Kitten dragged *HERSELF* in!" Just the sort of humiliation Goof was prone to spot and shout about.

But Vicki would grant him a full pardon if he did so now.

It could happen. He and Daddy might choose this anonymous country road for hauling home the new Persian carpets. Daddy might not recognize her, looking like a crud-puddle, but Goofus certainly would. And she'd forgive him for everything—even his usurping Julie the Raindrop's entire lifetime—if only he'd appear out of nowhere to find her here now.

But he didn't.

No one ever would, except predators and degenerates.

That dimly-recalled sensation of Something or Other watching her from the secret darkness. Scrutinizing her till nothing was left but a violated skeleton, moldering in an unnoticed ditch...

"You okay?"

SHRIEK from Vicki, whirling around to confront a woman on a bicycle. Who flinched at her reaction, rolled back a few inches, and shoved a pair of Ray-Bans up onto a mass of light brown curls. Revealing not a woman but a girl about Vicki's age, with what Felicia would call an interesting face.

Not that it was homely or anything; quite the opposite, though its only enhancement was suntan lotion. By "interesting" Felicia meant just that: someone you knew you could talk *with*, instead of simply *to*. Besides the face and curls, the girl on the bicycle had Brenda Pomerantz's sturdy height, and small blue twinkly eyes like Hayley Tamworth, and some of Kris Rawberry's insouciant freckle-wealth (despite the lotion) upon her nose and cheeks.

"*Are* you okay?" she asked.

"No!" wailed Vicki, "I'm new and lost!"

The girl gave her a smile, a closed-lipped lagniappe shaped exactly like a V, and Vicki's heartbeat slowed to its normal thumpage. The girl offered her a paisley bandanna; Vicki scrubbed away tears and molten makeup, and some of her embarrassment.

"Okay then—where do you *want* to be?"

"Home. Burrow Lane. We just moved there. I went for a jog. I wanted to see the school. I'm gonna be in eighth grade—"

"Me too. Where's Burrow Lane?"

“Up there,” said Vicki, gesturing vaguely at the haunted hill/bluff/mountain behind her. “Y’know, like west of Lesser Park?”

“Oh you lucky! I’d love to be an inlander. Is it a new house?”

“Pretty new. What’s an ‘inlander’? Do you live east of the park?”

“Way the hell east,” said the girl, tossing her curly mane at the far side of the road.

“In an OLD house that was built by my *great-grandparents*. ‘Inlanders’ live west of the Expressway—‘shorefolk’ live east of it. I’m Joss, by the way.”

“Hi! My name’s Vicki.”

“Actually, mine’s really Jo—my mother was a *Little Women* freak. *Just* Jo too, not short for Josephine or Joanna or whatever. I got tired of that, so I lengthened it to Jocelyn. But you can call me Joss. Want a ride home?”

“Oh Gahd yes, thank you!” She hesitated, though, at climbing on the banana seat behind her benefactress. “Um, are you sure? I’m all... icky.”

“Hey, I’ve got a kid sister—named Beth, of course. She’s frequently icky.”

“*I’ve* got a little *brother*—he’s nothing *but*.”

Vicki took her seat and a politely light grasp on Joss’s baggy T-shirt, which featured Stevie Wonder wearing 3-D glasses. Joss glanced back to make sure she was firmly situated, then over at the hill/bluff/mountain.

“Don’t feel bad if you got lost up there—that’s Baroque Vista. I’ve heard tell of old ladies who went there to sell cookies when they were little Girl Scouts, and never found their way out again. Hold tight now—don’t want you slipping off.”

She eased her ten-speed onto the country tarmac and slowly pedaled north, while Vicki obediently tightened her hold and worried about being a bike-burden.

“What street is this?”

“Hunh?”

Vicki lifted enough curls to uncover Joss’s right ear, and repeated her question.

“Petty Road—South Petty. That’s the Petty Hills Golf Course over there, behind that wall—” (head-gesture to the east). “This used to be Petty Creek, before they dammed it up when they dug the canal.”

“The canal? You mean Vanderlund Channel?”

“Sure! Petty Road’ll take us up to Panama Boulevard.”

“Oh good, I know where that is,” Vicki sighed with relief. “I didn’t know *where* I’d got to after I left VW. Why do they call it that? Do you really go there?”

“Oh hell yes. *Everybody* goes west to VW (that’s what the ‘W’ stands for) unless they’re in prep or parochial or whatever. Then we all flip over east for high school. It’s a dumb arrangement, but great for me; I love being inland. Everything’s so *new*.”

“Is VW nicer inside? The outside’s so spooky-looking.”

“That’s just ‘cause it’s modern—don’t let that bug you. Now, I just got back from a month of Youth Music Camp, down at the State U. Ugh! Old, *old* buildings there, inside *and* out. I mean, Jeez! Give me a toilet that wasn’t first christened by Mary Todd Lincoln!”

That gave Vicki a gigglefit, followed by another when Joss explained why she’d taken up the cornet: “When you play a piano or violin, there’s nothing to *blow*—and what fun is *that*? Do you play anything?”

“No, I’m too bashful,” Vicki twittered, earning an elbow-bump for her impertinence.

“You’re a nut, you know that? And here I was thinking you were some tragic-romantic runaway.”

“Me-ee? I just *got* here!”

“Well,” said Joss, “welcome to Vanderlund.”

The ominous mountain to their left had gradually diminished to a mundane hill as Petty Road wound upwards. Joss and her ten-speed ascended it effortlessly, scaling an embankment and crossing the canal over Petty Bridge. And by the time they swung west on Panama, the world was reassuringly commonplace again: there was traffic, there were pedestrians, the sunshine lacked any spectral intensity, and shadows provided welcome shade from the heat.

“Oh coo-wull!” Joss exclaimed when they arrived at 3132. “You may not believe me, but I *dreamed* about a house like this my last night at Music Camp! Except it was covered with brambles instead of aluminum siding, so I couldn’t get close enough to look in the windows. Don’t laugh! Brambles freak me out.”

“That’s ‘cause you’ve got hair like Rapunzel,” said Vicki, giving it a shy facetious tug as they parked the bike and trooped indoors. “Mom? I’m back! This is Joss, I mean

Jocelyn, er—”

“Murrisch,” said Joss. “Very glad to meet you, Mrs.—”

“Volester,” supplied Felicia, giving Vicki a critical once-over, but (in a guest’s presence) making no comment about unkempt unpunctuality. “Glad to meet *you*, Jocelyn. Please excuse all the mess, we only moved in last Monday.”

“I really envy you, Mrs. V!” said Joss, sounding uncannily like Cynthia Dollfuss. “This is such a dream of a house!”

“(Even without brambles,)” Vicki murmured, and the girls shared a shut-up-no-you-shut-up twitter.

“Well,” said Felicia, “bearing in mind that it’s also a work in *extreme* progress, Jocelyn, let me show you round the downstairs while Vicki goes up and—”

“Um, yes,” Vicki concurred. “Can you stay awhile, Joss?”

““Me-ee? I just *got* here!””

“Oh yeah? *Now* who’s the nut? I’ll be quick as I can.”

Fel launched into her yes-I-might-become-a-real-estate-agent spiel, while Vicki galloped upstairs (still a novel activity) and peeled off her sodden jogging apparel. Rushing through shower, shampoo, token hairdrying, and fresh selection from open-air wardrobe, she struggled with the absurd yet inescapable fear that when she went downstairs Joss would be gone—or never have been there (“*What* tall curly-haired girl? You came home by yourself!”)—or, worst of all, that she herself would blink and be back on Petty Road, all alone. Or lost again in a blind Baroque Vista panic, this time with no shafts of light to dispel the gathering darkness...

Yet every time Vicki blinked, she blessedly remained on Burrow Lane; and when she clattered down to the kitchen, Joss still existed and was thoroughly at home, helping Felicia paint the trim *opalescent*.

“Hey, you clean up cute,” she told Vicki.

“Thanks! I’ve been dying all day for an ice cream soda—wanna go to Zephyr Heaven, my treat?” A bizarre impulse prompted her to turn and add, “You too Mom?”

“No, darling, another time. Your father phoned to say they’re finally on their way with the rugs. Jocelyn dear, you’re more than welcome to have dinner with us, if you two

don't completely spoil your appetites—"

"Mom!"

"I'd love to," said Joss, "but Mrs. Driscoll's coming over and I can't get out of dinner with *her*—she's the VW Principal. *And* an old friend of my folks. (I don't tell that to just anybody,)" she murmur-added to Vicki.

"(Can she get us in the same classes this fall?)" Vicki murmured back.

"(You just gave me a *great* idea—lemme work on it.) Well, I guess I'll be seeing you later, Mrs. V."

"I hope we'll be seeing you often, dear!"

"Oh, don't worry—I'll pack my bags and move right in. *She* won't mind sleeping on the floor, will you Vicki?"

"Actually we've got this practically *spare* room my sister Tricia'll hardly ever use," Vicki was hinting as Felicia shooed them out to the garage. There Vicki unearthed her own Sears Free Spirit bike, and off they rode down to the Shopping Center—which Joss explained was generally called "*the* Green Bridge," as opposed to the surrounding neighborhood (just "Green Bridge") or Eugene G.'s memorial (just "The Bridge").

So at last to aptly-named Zephyr Heaven, and two gloriously refreshing Filbert's floats. While these were devoured, and rounds were made of every other shop at the Green Bridge, Vicki and Joss improved their acquaintance—except that it felt like they'd always known each other, and were simply getting caught up after an extended time apart.

(Joss, however, refused to say another word about the great school-related idea Vicki'd allegedly given her, other than "Quit asking, you'll jinx it!" She did tell Vicki not to launder the crust off her borrowed bandanna: "Leave it like it is, and maybe we can turn it in as an art project.")

One topic they caught up on in depth was that of ex-best-friends.

"Kim Zimmer," said Joss, her twinkly little eyes turning into hard blue marbles. "All through grade school it was her 'n' me. Whatever we did, wherever we went, it was always us two together. But then last year we started at VW—same team, classes, Band, everything just like before—right? Like hell! We spent seventh grade 'drifting apart,' if you believe my big sister (Meg, of course): 'You and Kimmy are just driff-f-ting apart.'"

“Well,” said Vicki, “that happens...”

“Yeah, but Kimmy was using a damn paddle to *hurry* her drifting! And why? ‘Cause she got a whiff of the popular crowd, and decided nothing was more important than becoming a cheerleader, and pretended she couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t buy into that bull-oney. I mean, Jeez! We used to make *fun* of girls like Gigi and Delia and Nanette Magnus—but never to their *faces*, right? You can make fun without being completely” (lowered voice) “bitchy about it, right?”

“Course!”

“Well,” said Joss, with hard blue marbles gleaming, “Kimmy Zimmer forgot that. She *chose* to forget it. And friends don’t bitch out their friends in front of snide-ass bitches—especially not their BEST friend, their best friend since FOREVER. Right?”

Vicki, amazed and infuriated, wanted to track down Kim Zimmer and give her a bitchworthy talking-to. How *dare* she do something like that to someone like Joss!! Yet Vicki also felt profound gratitude that Kim *had* been so idiotic, since otherwise Joss might not have gone biking idly solo down Petty Road. And she herself might still be stuck out there, new and lost and wasting away.

She told Joss about Stephanie Lipperman, and how theirs had been the exact reverse sort of best-friendship: unable to abide each other from kindergarten *until* seventh grade.

“Then when I told Steph we were moving, she bitched ME the hell out—over the phone at the Pfister Park Library! I hate to think what people there must’ve thought I’d done. I was too scared to tell her in person. But she *was* my best friend, and I was worried about her—she ticks off so many people—so I sent her an extra-nice postcard, asking her to please keep in touch. Don’t suppose she’ll ever answer it.”

Joss looked like she wanted to go have a few well-chewed words with Steph. “If she does, what’ll you do?”

“Well... I guess I wouldn’t mind having her for like a pen pal,” said Vicki. “But y’know, you’re absolutely right: best friends don’t do what she did to best friends. Not in public, with other people listening. Not ever.”

“Not ever,” Joss agreed; and on that note they linked their pinky fingers.

Joss insisted on accompanying Vicki back as far as The Bridge of Green, saying she wouldn't be able to digest her dinner with Mrs. Driscoll if she thought Vicki'd gone astray again. They exchanged phone numbers (Joss penning hers on Vicki's forearm, with instructions not to bathe till committing it to memory) and finalized plans for Joss to spend Sunday morning at Burrow Lane, then escort Vicki to the Murrish house on Jupiter Street that afternoon.

"And I'll have my eye on you every step of the way there, young lady!"

Try as she might to look annoyed, Vicki couldn't help but grin. "You're *never* gonna let me hear the last about what happened today, are you?"

"Not if I can help it," said Joss, giving her another closed-lipped V-shaped lagniappe-smile. "I'm really glad you moved here."

"I'm really glad you found me! See you tomorrow."

"See you. Call me tonight; then you can wash that arm."

"I will—but you better tell me what happens with the Principal and your great idea!"

"*Shush!* You ARE gonna jinx it!"

Vicki mimed zipping her mouth shut, and waved bye-for-now from the far side of The Bridge.

*

"I'm so happy you met Jocelyn," Felicia told her when she got safely home. "What a very sweet girl she is. And such an interesting face!"

20

Latter-Day Women

“That one there’s Barney Barnabas, my—let’s see—great-*great*-grandfather. He was a college drug dealer,” Joss boasted.

The man in the tintype on the picture gallery wall wore a suitably furtive expression. Or maybe just dubious about divine providence: Barney having fled the Belfast riots in 1857, only to be shot through the calf at Chickamauga and then burnt out of The City by the Great Fire of 1871. Finally he limped north to Vanderlund and opened a pharmacy near the Lakeside Central campus, where he peddled Parke-Davis cocaine products—“They make the coward brave and the silent eloquent!”—to town and gown alike.

(Barney himself preferred Old Bushmills, requesting that a full bottle be tucked into his coffin “for a wee dram now and again.”)

Next to the tintype hung a portrait of Barney’s eldest son, Dr. Hugo Barnabas, who made a mint not so much from being an eminent surgeon as by marrying an affluent grande dame, “Duchess” Hermione McGonigle. Here she was, glaring at the viewer from an elaborate frame, looking very stiff in the neck and tight in the corset.

“But she must’ve unlaced it once in awhile,” Joss conjectured, “‘cause they had like a dozen kids.”

Over whose dozen heads the Duchess and Doctor Hugo put the roof of this house, originally their country retreat: a double-turreted Queen Anne at what got platted as 1008 Jupiter Street. In Vicki’s fascinated eyes it was a gingerbread mansion if not palace, with two steep-peaked towers flanking sunburst gables above a wide screened porch that stretched

across the whole front and around both sides, featuring all sorts of classy brackets and spindles and scrollwork.

Even better bric-a-brac decorated the indoors, at which Vicki gaped with open mouth. Walnut paneling and stained-glass windows—antique furniture and chenille portieres—a carved mantelpiece over a cherrywood fireplace—a real chandelier reflected by a gleaming grand piano—ceiling-high bookcases that had an upholstered rolling ladder to reach their upper shelves—and *three* different vases full of peacock feathers. Every room looked freshly swept, waxed, and polished too; as though each belonged behind a museum’s red velvet rope.

Vicki never wanted to leave this house.

Joss thought it a tiresome place to live, tinged as it was with sorrow.

The picture gallery, for instance, had been her Grandpa Mac’s front-tower den, and his belongings still filled much of it. Professor Malcolm M. Barnabas had chaired a department at LCU, written a six-volume history of English literature, and upheld the academic tradition of absentmindedness. Addressing his daughters as “Beh-Sally,” “Sah-Jean,” and “Jea-Betsy”; greeting his grandchildren (even those who lived there in his house) with “Which one are you now?”; needing reminders of how old they currently were and what grade they were presently in.

“Eccentricities of genius,” Grandma Sadie would say. “He has so much going on in his head, you know.”

At least until he retired from Lakeside Central. Then Grandpa Mac began to leave his pipe alight atop a heap of magazines as he wandered out and away, having to be tracked down hours later and miles from Jupiter Street.

“Trying to find my pipe,” he’d explain. “Can’t think where I saw it last.”

Hiding his matches only sent him rambling out in search of more.

Grandma Sadie was insistent she could take care of Mac singlehandedly, and that might’ve worked had she (who’d always looked and behaved half her calendar age) not become crippled by multiple sclerosis. Unable to move without pain, despite her state of denial: no need for any assistance, thank you very much! If she happened to tumble downstairs, that was her own affair and she could pick her own self up. Enough with the fussing, Elizabeth! Let me look after your father in peace!

So the stress levels doubled and redoubled, taking their toll not just on Sadie and Mac but also their youngest daughter.

Betsy Barnabas Murrish. There on the picture gallery wall: a head-and-shoulders-and-violin painting of Betsy, aged twenty-one. With coiled black braids rather than loose brown curls, yet the same interesting face and V-shaped smile as Joss.

“She had rheumatic fever when she was little, and a heart murmur. Had to spend almost six months in bed. That’s how she got to be a *Little Women* fanatic—identifying with Beth, of course. My aunts say she drove them nuts with her ‘I think I’ll be homesick for you even in heaven’ routine, besides scaring them half to d—

“Well anyway. Then she got better, and started taking music lessons, and fell in love with the violin, and could play it like an angel—if you can imagine angels fiddling around instead of playing harps. She wanted to be a concert soloist and tour the world. But after only one year at Juilliard, she came home and went to the local Kickshaw Conservatory instead.

“‘Cold feet,’ she called it; as if they never got cold here. Her hands too, all the time—we’d ask her to give us rubdowns every day in summer. It felt so thrilling! She’d sing ‘That Old Black Magic’ while she did our backs, and we’d sing along...”

At one of Betsy’s Kickshaw recitals she captivated a lonely law student named Raymond Murrish, who had plenty of judicial promise but no family left in his native Decatur. He was welcomed to the Barnabas house, an almost-empty nest by then, since Mac and Sadie’s other children had all left; so there was ample space for a newlywed couple, and plenty to spare for their eventual offspring—Meg and Jo (not yet Jocelyn) and Beth. For whom life would be a comfy-cozy peasy-posy, till Grandpa Mac lost his wits and Grandma Sadie tossed her splits.

And Betsy’s beleaguered heart took its own tumble downstairs. With no picking up at the bottom.

“The hospital didn’t want to let us kids in to see her,” Joss said matter-of-factly, “but she threatened to haunt the joint and spook away all their patients unless they did. That’s what my dad said she whispered in his ear, anyway, and it sounds just like her. So they did let us in, and her hands and face were cold as ice, but she smiled real big, and I *know* she was

reciting that line from *Little Women*, even if she couldn't do it aloud... It's okay, Vicki."

(Who'd slipped a warm hand into the crook of Joss's elbow, while struggling for the second time in as many days to not burst out crying.)

(Joss remained dry-eyed, and a year would pass before Vicki ever saw her dissolved in tears. Then it'd be over Constance C. Greene's oddly-titled *Beat the Turtle Drum*, in which the narrator's little sister—a character actually named Joss—fell out of a tree, broke her neck and died instantly.)

("I *knew* it was gonna be a tragedy," Joss would sob on Vicki's shoulder—or the top of Vicki's ear, given their comparative heights. "But she was crazy about horses! I thought she'd get a pony of her own and it'd break its leg or something and then they'd hafta shoot it—I *didn't think SHE'D die!!*")

Here in the present Joss was still caught up in the past. Four years had gone by since Mac and Sadie'd been put in a nursing home—same one, separate wings. On good days Sadie would have herself wheeled over to Mac's wing; on better days he'd seem to recognize her. But Sadie was being steadily consumed by grief as well as pain, and worst of all by guilt—about Betsy, about Mac, about her own absence from Jupiter Street where she was needed by her motherless granddaughters. Who, in her presence, maintained their father's compassionate fiction that this was a temporary arrangement; assuring Grandma her bedroom was just as she'd left it, ready to welcome her home any day now.

"Grandpa too," Sadie'd always respond. "He's not going to be trapped in this place forever."

"So that means *we're* trapped in this house," Joss growled. "If we even *tried* to sell it, she'd 'know it in her bones' and that'd be the end of her. Or if we *did* sell it and move west like I want to—what if she miraculously recovered? We'd have to turn right around and move back here!"

"I guess there's no way you could, like, jack the house up and maybe have it towed over to Burrow Lane?" Vicki asked.

"Don't I wish! But even if we *could* do that, we still couldn't because—"

Turning to climb the broad oak staircase, Joss collided with a lanky man who looked like he'd stepped off a \$5 bill: thoughtful, sage, and melancholy, though without whiskers.

Also without the five Sunday newspapers he'd been carrying, parts of which were fluttering away to the ground floor.

"Sorry Dad!—sorry sorry sorry—"

Vicki scampered down to retrieve the lower sections as Joss scooped up the uppermost, while her father crossed long knotted arms and tapped a long slippered foot. But when Joss offered to sort the papers out and put them in order, Mr. Murrisch gave her a humorous moue and gentle chin-chuck.

"I can take my news goulash-style if needs be, JoJo. Who have we here?"

Joss introduced Vicki, laden with bits of *Trib* and *Sun-Times*; and both Murrishes had a mild laugh at her semicoherent rhapsodies over their home.

"Much appreciated," went Raymond, patting Vicki's head with a long placid hand. "If you've a liking for Late Victorian architecture, I daresay this is the place for you."

"I think so too!" Vicki gushed. "I mean I really, really hope so! I only met Joss—Jocelyn—JoJo—just yesterday, but already it seems like forever!"

"High praise," Raymond nodded, "and well said. *Unsere Königin Anna ist Ihre Königin Anna*. Now, if you young ladies will excuse me, I have all this goulash to stir." He tapped each girl's nose with a folded Sunday supplement, and moseyed off.

"(I really like your dad,)" Vicki whispered, "(but what's he mean by 'cone again Anna'?)"

"(He really likes you too—that was 'Our house is your house' in German or something.) And that's *another* reason why we can't move west!" Joss flared, switching from filial devotion to grumpy resentment. "He went and got elected alderman for this ward—and as a Republican! A 'Rockefeller' Republican he calls it, but I think he's taking the Honest Abe business too damn serious. Even if he *is* friends with Senator Percy."

(Mutual snortle at that name as the girls trooped upstairs.)

"Well, *I'm* glad you live here," Vicki said stoutly, "even if it is so far from my house. You can come over there anytime you wanna feel like a new inlander."

"Okay, and you come over here whenever you wanna feel like an old shoreperson! (But PLEASE don't call me 'JoJo'—I might have to clobber you.) Here's my room. I was *asked* to move to the third floor when I started playing cornet."

Her teenage-tone suggested she'd been forced up here against her will; yet Vicki knew at a glance that this was the best room on Jupiter Street. Back in the good old days it'd been part of the guest suite, with its own miniature bath. Nowadays visitors were accommodated in Mac and Sadie's master quarters, but those lacked the spacious view from Joss's gable windows.

Into Vicki's mind popped the word *aerie*, previously associated with John Denver and a brainstorm-on-birds in Mr. Brown's class. Now it meant this room: Joss's rear-tower apartment, Queen Anne's crown. Where you could gaze out at the wide world beyond the sheltering elm trees, and almost expect to see an eagle fly past.

The inner walls were covered with a tapestry of posters, calendars, and glossy photos. Miles Davis—Freddie Hubbard—Herbie Hancock—Curtis Mayfield—Barry White—Isaac Hayes—Richard Roundtree—Fred Williamson—Melvin Van Peebles—Billy Dee Williams—

"I like black guys," Joss remarked. Looking rather pink about it; a final fleeting vestige of *can-I-trust-you?*

"Yeah?" said Vicki. (Suppressing a wild urge to giggle.)

"I mean, y'know, REALLY like 'em. If y'know what I mean."

"Well sure, I'm a City girl," Vicki urbanely reminded her. "Except there was like hardly any black guys *to* like in Pfiester Park. We did have this one Indian guy named Yash—*Indian* Indian, not the American kind—and all the girls, y'know, really liked *him*."

"Did you? *Like him* like him?"

"Well," Vicki began; but was spared having to fib a great passion for Yash Pramanik, by an irate voice from below:

"Jo! Did you take my new *Cosmo*?"

"Oh, Jeez," groaned Joss, collapsing across a big brass bed that Vicki immediately wanted an exact duplicate of. "Prepare yourself for Meg."

"Jo?? Don't make me come up there!... *Jo??* I won't ask you again!"

"GOOD!"

Wrathful stamping up the broad oak stairs, and into the aerie charged an *I am blonde and have my driver's license* type of girl. Who'd probably be considered very pretty if she

weren't burdened with an innate, inescapable foolishness.

"When I ask you a question, I expect—oh!" went Meg, catching sight of Vicki.
"Hello."

"This is Guadalupe Velez," said Joss, shooting Vicki the merest squint of a wink.

"*¡Si, mi nombre es Guadalupe!*" Vicki improvised, thankful Mrs. Lundgren had taught some elementary phraseology. "*¡Hola!*"

"Um," said Meg. "So, how'd you two—?"

"(Mrs. Driscoll asked me to have a talk with her,)" Joss confided.

"(Talk about what?)"

"(Meg! Don't ask me right in *front* of her!)"

Meg clapped a hand over her mouth. Mumbling "(Sorry)" through it, and giving Vicki a flustered yet contrite smile around it. "Yeah, well, *bienvenida*," she mumble-added, backing out of the aerie.

Joss raised a finger to silence Vicki's reaction, then counted off two—three—four—five—

"*Wait* a minute!" Meg exclaimed, charging back in. "You don't even know Spanish! You took French last year!"

"Gosh, Meggy, I guess you're right," said Joss, ostentatiously producing a *Cosmopolitan* from under her pillow. "Hey, here's an article for you: 'Love Addicts—Those Girls Who Must Be Totally, Hideously In Love.'"

"Gimme that! Keep outta my things from now on! And *you*—who are you, really?"

(Mid-gigglefit:) "V-V-Vicki..."

"Vicki Velez?"

"N-n-no, V-V-Volester—"

"Oh I'll bet!" snapped Meg, stalking out again and back downstairs.

Gales of mirth. "N-n-no offense," Vicki observed as she caught her breath, "but *my* big sister could completely wipe the floor with yours!"

"Hey, I'd only be offended if I couldn't watch her do it! Except all she'd have to do is feed Meg enough bull-oney, and Meg'd wipe the floor with *herself*. She makes it so damn easy. And inviting. And satisfying."

Vicki was about to tell Joss about Tricia and Patty “Small Fry” Kuchenesser, when a little girl materialized in the doorway. She held one arm out sideways, as though suspended from marionette strings, and had an inscrutable look on her solemn little face.

“*What?*” Joss demanded.

“What what?”

“Don’t start with me, I am not in the mood. Go freak out Meg, I already got her all warmed up for you.”

Owlsh little eyes swiveled Vickiwards. Then back to Joss, who heaved a martyred sigh.

“Vicki, this is Beth.”

“And...” Beth prompted.

(Deeper, more dolorous sigh.) “And our *other* sister. Invisible Amy.”

“Um, hi,” Vicki told Beth and her outstretched arm. “I’m, er—”

“Vicki-Guadalupe-Velez-Volester,” Joss rattled off. “Okay? Now go take Amy and do invisible stuff somewhere else.”

“Aren’t you going to practice?”

“Later! I’ve got company right now, Beth!”

“Don’t let me stop you,” Vicki said hastily. “Not if you mean practice like music. I’d love to hear you play! I was just about to ask you to, honest.”

“Duet?” Beth suggested.

“Oh *all* right. But hurry up, I won’t wait all day for you.”

Beth lowered her arm and nodded at the space beside her before running off. Vicki could almost see a rump-sized indentation appear on Joss’s bedspread.

“W—”

“It’s all right,” Joss griped. “She was *always* a weirdo, even as a baby. Drove my mother nuts. Especially when Sadie and my aunts’d tell her, ‘Now you know how *you* made *us* feel.’”

“Um, what does she play?—Beth, I mean,” said Vicki, peeking at Invisible Amy’s bedspread-imprint.

“Violin, same as Mom. And I gotta admit, she’s doing really great with her lessons—a lot better than me at her age. Maybe Beth’ll be the concert soloist and tour the world. Then, of course, she can get away with all the weirdnesses she wants.”

Beth rematerialized, carrying a violin, bow, and sheet music. Joss rose and tenderly unpacked a shiny-bright cornet, while Vicki arranged herself as their practice-audience.

“The Prokofiev?” asked Beth, briskly professional.

“No,” said Joss, shooting Vicki the merest squint of an inscrutable wink. “The Harold Arlen.”

And counting off two—three—four—five, the Murrish sisters struck up a soulful *adagio* rendition of “That Old Black Magic.”

*

When she got home that evening, Vicki alarmed Felicia by giving her a prolonged hug.

“My goodness, what’s happened??”

Vicki, not loosening her grip, told her about Joss’s mother. “*You* feel all right, don’t you? You and Daddy? Except if you don’t, I don’t think I wanna know—but you *do*, don’t you?”

Felicia kissed her anxious brow. “Yes, darling, I expect you’ll be stuck with us for a long time to come.”

“Don’t joke about this, Mom! I bet that’s bad luck!” Orphanhood would probably mean ending up with Aunt Fritz and Gross Uncle Doug (eww!) down in the state capital, maybe even having to share a room with *Goofus* (ewwww!)—

“Well,” said Felicia, “it’s nice to be wanted.”

Vicki remained on edgy tenterhooks for a week or more. Watching both parents for signs of imminent mortality: every cough was lung cancer, every puzzled glance was terminal dementia. She nearly phoned for an ambulance the day Ozzie came home early from The Lot, “feeling kinda rundown.” But as time passed and nobody keeled over, Vicki reverted to normal teen-to-parent alternation between mellow love, stoic tolerance, and grumpy resentment.

She mostly loved all the Murrishes—even Beth, even Meg; sometimes even Invisible Amy. And on her second visit to Jupiter Street she met the Murrish housekeeper, Mrs. Twofields (aka “Toughie”), who played Calpurnia to Raymond’s Atticus and his three Scouts.

They’d had a dreadful time trying to cope, that grim first year after Betsy’s death and Grandma Sadie’s departure. Aunts Sally and Jean came to help for awhile, but they had families of their own in Minnesota and Cincinnati and couldn’t stay forever. A series of live-in domestics got hired, to quit or be fired in rapid succession. And Mary Poppins, though ardently wished for, didn’t volunteer her services.

Then Augustine Twofields arrived on a windy day with an inside-out umbrella. “None o’ *that* now,” she informed it, and the umbrella humbly submitted to rehabilitation—nary a spoke bent out of shape.

She arrived without luggage, other than a mock-alligator handbag; intending to live offsite and commute to Jupiter Street from nine till six, Mondays through Fridays. During these hours the Murrish roost would be hers to rule; at night and on weekends, her influence would remain very much on duty.

Toughie hammered a nail into every third word spoken. “*Well*, girls, I’ll *tell* you: so *long* as you *clean* your rooms *properly* and on *time*, they’ll stay *your* rooms and I’ll not interfere. *But* let ‘em *slide* a single *day*, and you’ll *find* they become *MY* rooms—to *do* with whatever *I* choose. So *you* decide which *it’ll* be.”

She prepared most of the meals in advance; Meg and Joss and Beth were expected to handle the thawing, the heating, the dishing, the serving, and to eat every bite after a prescribed amount of chewing. Report cards were handed to Toughie for preliminary inspection before being forwarded to Raymond. Pop quizzes were given on Mondays concerning Sunday School lessons and sermon-topics at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. Manners, conduct, homework progress, behavior with boys—all got monitored from afar by Toughie’s clairvoyance. Do anything you shouldn’t, and she was bound to find out about it; the girls initially suspected each other of spying and snitching, but tests proved neither was necessary. Toughie saw everything, heard everything, knew everything—apparently without the use of hidden cameras or electronic bugs.

And before long, the girls found themselves trying to live up to the highest (i.e. Twofieldsiest) standards.

Vicki's open admiration for those standards, for the Queen Anne house and its inhabitants, helped her gain Toughie's approval. But that could only be fully earned during what Mr. Murrish would call indirect examination: "Come over *here*, child, and *lend* me a *hand*. I could *sure* use some *assistance* grating these *carrots*."

"I'll help too!" Joss offered; but she was in hot water for flunking her St. Paul's pop quiz, having ditched church Sunday morning to bike over to Burrow Lane. Toughie's sentence for this infraction was a hamperful of laundry in the basement, to be dealt with now and no delay; leaving Vicki to take the indirect witness stand and demonstrate how well she could grate. Not to mention quake: terrified she'd be deemed unworthy as a guest or friend. She was after all a lifelong church-ditcher, an historically-oppressive-race-member, a girl who'd *never* liked carrots no matter how many children might be starving in China—

Abrupt flashback (or was it *déjà vu*?): being a tiny carrot trapped on a plate, pushed around by a fork, sensing the merciless scrutiny of two black stars glittering overhead—

"Now then, you're *doing* that just *right*. The girls *here*, they can't *grate* no matter *how* often I *try* showing 'em. *This* one chops *off* whole chunks—*that* one can't *hardly* scrape the *peel*. If you'll *excuse* my saying *so*, child, you *don't* have enough *flesh* on your *bones*."

That was an ominous-sounding segue; but Toughie bade her sit and taste a slice of freshly-assembled raspberry shortcake.

"You started eating cake without me??" gasped Joss, staggering into the kitchen with a vast basket of folded linen.

"If you snacked *less*, you could *tote* that basket *with* a straight *back*. Here you *go*—don't gobble. *Think* about maybe *jogging* like your *friend* here."

("Did you tell her I'm a runner?" Vicki asked Joss.)

("Didn't have to—Toughie's a know-it-all.")

All, that is, except why the household's youngest member was expecting to give birth when a trained clinician had been paid good money to ensure she wouldn't.

"I told Dad we should've sued that dumb vet instead of asking for a refund," Joss grimaced. "'Spayed' my ass!"

Brief mirth-gale at this juxtaposition; then Joss lugged Mittens (the pregnant calico) out of her room and halfway downstairs. “For the last time, you are *not* dropping that litter in my closet or under my bed. Go do it in Meg’s room!”

But before Joss could return to the aerie, Mittens was up there ahead of her and nestled in Vicki’s lap.

“You’re encouraging a cat-slut!”

“*Shhhh!*” went Vicki, covering Mittens’s furry ears. “Look, I promise I’ll take all the kittens—or at least one. My folks won’t mind, now that we’ve got a house and yard and so on.”

And-so-on or not, her folks *did* mind. “I’m sorry, Brownie, but your father’s allergic to cats.”

“Oh I don’t believe it! Daddy, stand up—” Vicki gave him a prolonged hug and kiss, then held him at arm’s length. “See? I was petting Mittens all afternoon, *and* it’s shedding season. If you were really allergic, you’d be sneezing or turning all green.”

“And I *would*, if you put a cat in my arms,” Ozzie told her.

“*Anybody* would, if YOU kissed ‘em,” added Goofus.

“Christopher Blaine—” went Felicia.

“Besides,” Ozzie declared, “you’re the only Kitten I’ll ever need.”

“But Daddy! If we don’t take Mittens’s kittens, the Murrishes’ll hafta *drown* them or something!”

“I’m sure the Murrishes would do no such thing,” Felicia said firmly. “They value mothers too highly for that.”

“Can I have a dog?” Goofus interjected. “You’re not allergic to *them*, are you?”

“That’s not *fair!*” Vicki began, but was forestalled when her parents cited the time-honored need to demonstrate responsibility first (and not be such a smartmouth).

“Aren’t I demo-ing okay with the Firebird?” Goof countered, referring to Fel’s slightly-used new roadster, which he considered his own and adoringly washed twice a week.

When she could pry the car away from him, Felicia would strap Joss’s bike to the roof rack and drive her home from Burrow Lane. Vicki—nudged by another of those bizarre impulses she’d been having lately—would usually stay behind to give them a little

“surrogate” time. Fel might come back red-eyed, but feeling less lonesome for Tricia and Cynthia Dollfuss; while Joss, when phoning Vicki later that night (they always talked on the phone before bedtime, no matter how many hours they’d spent together that day) might have to clear her throat before she could say, “Your mom is so great.”

If she were REALLY great she’d find some way to let me have a kitten, Vicki didn’t retort out loud. You don’t argue with your best friend when she’s grappling with emotions.

And Jocelyn Murrish *was* her best friend, the best one she’d ever had or ever would. Obviously they’d been best friends in all their previous lives (if those existed) and just needed thirteen years to meet up again in this one. For the rest of that summer, scarcely a day went by that Joss wasn’t at the Volesters’s or Vicki at the Murrishes’s, with increasingly frequent sleepovers.

Vicki particularly enjoyed being at Jupiter Street on weekday afternoons at 6 p.m. Just before the grandfather clock struck the hour, Joss would replace her trademark baggy T-shirt with a closefitting tanktop and dash down to the side porch, there to witness Toughie being picked up by her son Lamar—a Mustang-driving high schooler and Johnny Bristol lookalike, with a tremendous ‘fro.

“Night, Mrs. Twofields!” Joss would call.

“*Good* night to *you*.”

Standing in profile: “Hi-ee, Lamar!”

He would thrust his Johnny Bristol chin at her, and Joss would sag euphorically against the porch brackets and spindles. It was one of the few times she didn’t act embarrassed by what she called her “flopperos.”

“I mean, Jeez! I don’t think a single guy at school looked me in the face all last spring!”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about,” sighed Vicki. “At least you’re not FLAT-chested.”

“Oh neither are you—you’re *perky*. Believe me, you wouldn’t wanna jog with jugs a-bouncin’. Though *I* might try it if Lamar lived around here.”

When *Mandingo* opened, Joss made every conceivable attempt to bluff or sneak their way in to see it. None worked, not even distracting the ticket seller with a jailbait cleavage-

peep; but for months afterward she could crack up Vicki by seething or even mouthing the word “Mandingo.” (This would prove to be a disadvantage when school started, and Vicki had to deliver oral reports in classes shared with Joss. No matter how nervous she might feel, she couldn’t look to her best friend for support:)

(“You were gonna do it! You were gonna say ‘Mandingo!’”)

(“Was not!”)

(“Were too! Your lips were all like this—*mmmm*—”)

(“I was *biting* them, you nut! I was worried about you!”)

No worries, though, about the resilience and durability of their friendship. That was proved in August at the New Sherwood Theater in Willowhelm, where the Volesters would’ve moved if that Colonial homeowner hadn’t welched on his handshake. Vicki blessed him now for being so fickle. Willowhelm was just a few blocks south of Jupiter Street, but any encounters a Willowhelm-Vicki might’ve had with Vanderlund-Joss would have been casually anonymous.

Like right here, right now at the New Sherwood: they could be seated far apart and unaware of each other’s existence, instead of watching *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* side by side (after again failing to sneak into *Mandingo*). Vicki could be eating this extra-butter popcorn all by her pathetic self, having no one to share it with.

And that unthinkable fate might have befallen her, were it not for the idiocy of a certain ex-best individual.

Whom they chanced to bump into right there, right then at the New Sherwood.

Vicki and Joss had come out to the lobby, discussing how unsatisfactory a movie-ending that was—the knights rounded up by modern police, the film simply running off its sprockets—when Joss halted in her tracks. Face to face with a girl who, to Vicki, looked like a latter-day Daisy Duck minus the hairbow.

“Jo,” said this apparition.

“Kim,” said Joss.

OhmyGahd it’s Kimmy Zimmer. OhmyGahd I bet she saw the movie alone and Joss’ll feel sorry for her. OhmyGahd I bet they’re gonna make up and be friends again. OhmyGahd please don’t let Joss “drift away” from ME now—

“Come ON, Kim!” demanded a couple of spritely-pep-squad types.

“Just a sec!” went Daisy Duck. Who had on a cutesy midriff-baring halter top, and was eyeing Joss’s shapeless Leroy Hutson T-shirt. “Still trying to hide your boobs, hunh? From *white* guys, that is.”

Joss crushed her empty pop container but made no reply.

Daisy, with a quacky sneer, focused on the dropjawed Vicki. “What’re *you* looking at? *You* s’posed to be somebody?”

Joss took a bristling step forward, but Vicki knew exactly how to react:

““We are the knights who sayyyyyyy—*NI!*””

“*HEE!*” went Joss.

“No—*NI!*” Vicki corrected her, before proceeding to logical philosophy. “If *she* looks like a duck and talks like a duck, that means...”

“She must weigh the *same* as a duck,” Joss chimed in, “and *that* means...”

“She must be made out of wood, and therefore—”

“A WITCH! A WITCH!”

Who, before she got further burned, turned tail and speed-waddled away after the spritely pep squadders. Leaving Vicki and Joss to clasp triumphant hands and sing “*Kim Zimmer ran away—bravely ran away, away!*” in perfect harmony.

“Don’t mess with City girls,” Vicki concluded.

“Or their very best friends,” Joss agreed.

21

Locker Combination

Eugene G. Green's bridge and road were posthumous tributes for having served as mayor while Vanderlund Channel was dug and Panama Boulevard was laid out on its two banks. The sanitary canal did its job well, draining sewage from the Lake to the Fourth Fork of the North Branch; Mayor Green did his job less adequately, hindering the canal's progress with general misguidedness. To get him out of the way, he was diverted to the State Senate and there dreamt of challenging Woodrow Wilson for the presidency. Defeated in his run for a second term, Eugene G. dedicated the rest of his life to dabbles in real estate and insistence on being addressed as "Senator."

His son Lyman T. Green took land development far more seriously and lucratively. Lyme's thumb was in every verdant pie subdivided after World War II: some as independent communities—Triville, Athens Grove, Emery Ridge—and others annexed to Vanderlund, including Petty Hills and Lesser Park. Baroque Vista was Lyme's pet project; he lived there himself on Rembrandt Place in a chartreuse chateau. Lyme memorialized his late father with public works (at personal profit) and almost got a public high school named in his honor.

It was obvious by the mid-1950s that Vanderlund Township High would soon be crammed to the rafters by the Baby Boom. A new school, to be called "Vanderlund West," was proposed for the inland side of town; but protests rose from both directions. Inlanders objected to being removed from venerable Vanderlund High, renowned for its outstanding curriculum and high-quality teaching. Shorefolk would not permit this citadel of knowledge

to be downgraded to “Vanderlund East,” any more than an FFV would hear of the Old Dominion being renamed East Virginia.

Lyme Green’s suggestion that they compromise and call the new school “Eugene G. Green High” was dismissed as lily-gilding.

Instead, the Board of Education chose a solution worthy of Eugene G.’s general misguidedness. A three-year junior high would be built on the inland side; it would relieve overcrowded elementary schools of their seventh- and eighth-graders, and Vanderlund High of its freshman class. VTHS would retain its senior status, for tenth through twelfth grades; and every kid in town, regardless of how far he or she might live from either school, would have to comply with this dichotomy—unless his or her parents could afford Archbishop Houlihan’s parochial fees, or private tuition at Startop Academy (girls) or Front Tree Country Day (boys).

Thus did VW open, its “West” left unspoken, just south of the equally new Green Bridge Shopping Center. And from both projects did Lyme Green extract thumb-plums (a share of the school bus franchise, a share of the Brutalist architect’s contract) plus a share of vicarious stardom. His granddaughter Ginny—Eugenie Guinevere Green—was the very first pupil enrolled at VW, to the sound of flashbulbs popping and ribbons being cut.

(Ginny would go on to VTHS, Mount Holyoke, and Wharton, where she received her MBA just this past spring. Several Ginny photos adorned VW’s largest trophy case; the caption below the most recent read “*How Green Was My Vanderlund.*”)

*

Seen from overhead—while looking at a floorplan diagram, or out of a hovering whirlybird—Vanderlund Junior High School was a thickset **W** with a squared-off base. Its three parallel wings, the outer two canted at slight angles, had been intended to house a grade each: seventh, eighth, ninth. That plan being insufficiently misguided, the late-1960s School Board hit upon “teaming” as a surefire monkey wrench.

Each grade was split into three interdisciplinary teams, “to make a large junior high a little smaller for every student.” This would “reduce anonymity, promote relevance, and foster a sense of belonging.” The teams, like the wings, were labeled A, B, and C; and team membership was determined by complicated formulae.

Much sweat then had to be shed, trying to convince angry parents that such labels did *not* indicate intelligence levels—a C team assignment would cast no blight on their children’s future prospects. When *that* load of sunshine failed to sell, the Board switched to a tricolor scheme: Red, Blue, and Yellow, with every wing hall and classroom repainted accordingly. *This* bright idea got scuttled by Yellow team parents who suspected their patriotism was being impugned—and by the discovery that the School Board Comptroller (who lacked Lyme Green’s finesse) had received a kickback from the bid-winning paint vendor.

Ultimately they settled for X, Y, and Z, with team membership determined by geographical location. Seventh-graders who’d attended Vanderlund’s three easternmost elementary schools were auto-assigned to 7-X; those from the three central schools to 7-Y; and those from the three westernmost to 7-Z. Transfers between teams could be requested for eighth grade, and by ninth (according to Meg Murrish) the school secretary tossed everybody’s punchcards in the air and raked them into three piles.

Seventh-grade classrooms were on the ground floor of each wing. Eighth-graders occupied the second floors, and freshmen luxuriated up on the third. It was considered uncool to use the wing stairways for anything except smoking, making out, or exiting the school; so to access your team’s floor, you had to conform to protocol. The front staircase in the main building (“Home Base”) was reserved for niners, by niners; the back staircase was claimed by eighters; and sevvies, of course, had no business setting foot on any stairs at any time.

While academic courses were team-restricted, students could mingle at Home Base for other subjects, plus grade-wide lunch periods and all-school assemblies. Aside from that, though, X and Y and Z pupils could just as easily have been attending three different schools. Many remained in a single wing their entire time at VW, bitterly resenting the other two wings for all the advantages and preferential treatment *they* undoubtedly got.

This then was the chasm on whose brink Vicki trembled that August.

Yet she had a significant safety net: a new best friend whose old family connection just happened to be the chasm’s principal, able to remove banana peels from the footpath ahead.

“What’d I tell you about my great idea?” Joss gloated, waving a scribbly sheet of notebook paper.

“You haven’t told me ANYTHING, except not to jinx it!”

“Well guess what—you didn’t! Mrs. Driscoll’s okayed my transfer from Y to Z!”

“Where I’ll be?? For sure??” cried Vicki, hugging her and crumpling the scribble-sheet.

“It won’t be absolutely for sure till we get our schedules in the mail, probably next week. *But* I got a sneak preview—” (uncrumpling) “and we’re in all the same ‘academic’ classes—English, Science, that sorta stuff.”

“What about lunch?”

“That *is* for sure—all the eighth-graders have Lunch B.”

“Oh thank Gahd!” Vicki gasped, collapsing into Joss’s beanbag chair. “Just last night I had this horrible dream that nobody’d let me sit at their table, and the tray of food I was carrying weighed like a ton ‘cause it had all these full plates on it that kept nearly falling off.”

“Sounds like a sex dream to me. Did you have your clothes on?”

“I guess. At least I don’t remember worrying I didn’t.”

“Hey, if you show up in the VW cafeteria even *half*-naked, your only worry’ll be how to fight off the guys.”

“Aw,” said Vicki, flattered by this accolade. “Or wait—me half-naked, or *any* girl?”

“Well you, of course! But yeah, pretty much any girl. Who’s not a total dog. And even some of *them*. Anyway—” (back to the scribble-sheet) “—you’re not the only one thanking Gahd here. *I* get to escape from Kimmy and her duckweight gang in the Y-Wing. At least most of the time—there’s still Band and Gym, what they call ‘non-academic’ classes. Jeez, I wish you could play *some* sorta instrument.”

“What can I say?” shrugged Vicki. “Our neighbor back on Walrock Avenue, Mrs. Partridge? She tried to give me piano lessons, but it felt like I had no hands and was playing with my *wrists*. Didn’t matter—I was always more into dance.”

Joss pointed to a scribble. “Hope you’re not ‘too bashful’ to sing—you’ve got Vocal Music with Mrs. Weller. She has this really weird daughter our age named Fiona—”

“*Fiona?* Sounds like she oughta be a Schmelzette cousin of mine. How really weird is she?”

“Actually pretty cool. I know her from Band; she plays clarinet. If I remember right she was on 7-Z last year, so maybe we’ll have her in some of our classes.”

“Maybe she’ll make them weirdly cool.”

“Maybe. She wore these freaky outfits, like glitter rock gone to its own funeral.”

And she plays the CLARINET? Vicki thought but didn’t say, being suddenly and guiltily reminded of Stephanie Lipperman’s having to give up *her* clarinet lessons. “No-longer-affordable since not hand-me-downable.”

But no—she wouldn’t feel sorry for Steph, who’d never responded to her *Please call me* postcard. Big surprise, that. Over-and-done-with. And anyway, the mention of “freaky outfits” reminded Vicki that she and Joss had to re-discuss how they should dress and arrange their hair on the first day of school.

Re-discuss? Make that re-debate: Joss needed re-convincing that [a] one of her hang-loose T-shirts, [b] plain old jeans, [c] ditto gym shoes, and [d] a few random bobby pins was [e] wholly unacceptable.

“Joss! I owe you too much to let you do a thing like that to yourself.”

“A thing like *what* to *whoself*?”

“Dressing all casual on the first day! Remember it’s *your* first day on the Z team, same as me, so we both gotta make the exact right impression. And I *know* you can be gorgeous without even half trying.”

“Aw,” said Joss. “Or wait—doesn’t ‘gorgeous’ mean I’ll have guys staring at my front all day?”

“You know they’ll do that even if we go to VW wearing, like, *overcoats*. Your front and my behind.”

They shook their heads at male piggishness, and shared a sigh at the trials of being so attractive.

August meant Back-to-School season; but for the first time in a decade, not downtown at the Cathedral of All the Stores. This year Felicia was staying suburban, taking her girls to the Green Bridge’s miniCathedral, and to larger stores at the New Sherwood

Shopping Center (which was enclosed and had uninterrupted air conditioning).

Also, this year Felicia's girls included Joss and Beth Murrisch—though not Invisible Amy, who as Beth remarked had no need for new clothing. Mr. Murrisch provided a generous bankroll and Mrs. Twofields detailed advice. Meg politely declined any shopping assistance, other than her father's funding; but Joss and Vicki plotted to buy some item that Meg would feel compelled to purloin, hopefully like a blatant slyboots.

"Hey! How 'bout a pair of boots?"

"Yeah—knee-high zippered platforms! She won't be able to resist those!"

Then it'd be wipe-the-floor easy to convince Meg she'd been given her next-year's birthday present. ("I already *got* you those knee-high zippered platform boots, remember?")

"Big sisters," Joss snortled. "Go figure."

"Yeah," said Vicki.

*

Tricia had breezed through Vanderlund just as Vicki'd anticipated, sporting an unprecedented unburnt suntan. She'd regaled parents and siblings with dramatic tales of her European adventures—some of them, at least. But she'd scarcely glanced at Burrow Lane, the new house or her new room or the mirrored closet doors that Vicki still yearned for.

"Yeah, looks great," was Tricia's stock reaction. "What is that, a Firebird? Looks great, Mom. Can I borrow it tonight?"

Vanishing then till the wee hours, when she jostled Vicki awake by flailing around in the dark like a blind-man's-buff contestant. One who took the game so literally as to play it *in* the buff.

"(Tricia?? Are you okay? Where's your clothes?)"

"Where t'hellza *bagno*?"

Vicki sprang up and bundled her into a terrycloth robe. "(You mean the bathroom?)"

"*Hurry.*"

Lead her to the aquamarine *bagno*; guide her onto its aquamarine throne; take her back to the room of enviable mirrors. Shocked yet somehow not surprised by Tricia's faltering gait. *Drunk, or stoned, or both—can you BE both?* "(Where's Mom's car?)"

Vague out-there gesture.

Vicki opened the curtains, looked out apprehensively, found the Firebird parked in the precise middle of the driveway. Neat as neat could be. Unlike Tricia's clothes, which lay scattered over the carpet—along with the terrycloth robe, as Vicki realized when Tricia joined her nudely at the window. Vicki pulled the curtains closed, but Tricia yanked them apart and stretched her unburnt self for insomniacs to eyeball.

“(Dammit! Put on some jammies!)”

“Unh-unh. No jammies f’ me. Keepin’ it *real*.”

“(Well, don’t keep it where everyone can see it!)” Root through the moonlit bureau, grab a set that were scanty yet opaque, bully them on above and below. “(You’re lucky Goof didn’t catch you like that.)”

“‘Like that,’ haw—word’s *nayyyiked*, Vic. Say it wimme—”

“(Ssshhhh! Tricia! There’s no way Daddy’ll let you run off to college if he thinks you’re, you’re...)”

“(I’m, I’m—wha’? Stayin’ here? Not for *damn* sure. *I am gonna Go Places ‘n’ Be Somebody*. ‘S a big-ass world to do it in, too.)”

Vicki shifted inside her own jammie bottoms, wondering if that last line was an under-the-influence dig. But Tricia slid an arm around her waist and leaned against her, peering out the window with unfamiliar emerald blear.

“(Hunh. Kinda miss the ol’ view. Lamp inna alley. ‘Member?)”

“(Course. I like this one better, though.)”

“(We’ll get there, me ‘n’ you. ‘N’ then we’ll have such fun...)”

“(Um. Okay.)”

“(‘S my brave li’l sis?...)”

“(Here... I am...)”

“(‘Member that,)” whispered Tricia. Consenting then to be put to bed, her old familiar bed, brought here from Pfiester Park; reflected now in luminescent closet doors.

Two mornings later the Volesters found a brief note announcing that Tricia’d taken off for Ann Arbor, having caught a midnight ride with eastbound friends. She would try to detour by Beansville to visit MomMom and PopPop; otherwise, love to everybody there and here. *Arrivederci, au revoir, auf wiedersehen*.

*

And say hello to Seat 38 in Homeroom Z205, outside which you've been assigned Locker Z2230. Combination (check the instructions again: get it by heart) spin right three times, stop at 14—spin left one time, stop at 9—turn right, go directly to 26.

14-9-26. Okay. Fourteen: the age you'll be next birthday. Nine: the number of years you lived on Walrock Avenue. Twenty-six: um... your homeroom number, if you leave out the zero and add a one?

“(Oh ssshit! oh ssshit!)” hissed the popeyed kid in Seat 40, pawing frantically through a jumble of forms on his desk. “(Where *iss* it, where *iss* it??)”

“(You tell ‘em, Gollum,)” muttered the girl in Seat 39.

“(Where’sss my *name*?)” gnashed Gollum.

*Hi-ho the derry-o
the cheese stands alone!*

Here sat Vicki, a Zeekid again: ready to start her Happy March through Vanderlund Junior High School. Clad in a nifty little mock-jacket dress with a big white collar and blouse-like insert—“the layered look” they called it. Without too many actual layers, this still being a summer day.

Joss turned around from two remote rows forward, two faraway desks to the right, and gave Vicki the latest in a series of reassuring looks. Joss herself looked nifty in crinkle-weave pants with 26-inch flares (hey! a perfect memory aid!) whose fashionably high waist, according to Joss, practically overlapped her bra. To compensate, she'd disregarded Vicki's pleas and put on another extra-large T-shirt. At least this one was pretty, screen-printed with the pink-on-teal words

c'est moi
it's me
it's me
it's me

For which Vicki again said *Thank Gahd, thank Gahd, thank Gahd*. Even if the Almighty hadn't seen fit to let them sit together in Mr. Gillies's Homeroom Z205. Which, being an alphabetical racket, deposited Vicki in the middle of the very back row.

To reach Seat 38 she'd had to wriggle past (and partly through: eww) a bunch of guys huddled in front of Seat 37, on whose desktop perched a girl in a Halston skimp that had apparently shrunk in the wash. The girl was chipmunk-cute like April Tober, and even had a similar name—Carly Thibert. But April never would've crossed her elevated legs like Carly was doing, except perhaps in a junior lingerie catalog spread.

Vicki's own legs and rear garnered some attention as she wriggled past/through Carly's fan club, wishing she'd dressed more like Joss or even worn the aforementioned overcoat. It took Mr. Gillies several minutes to disperse the fan club to their assigned seats, and several more to persuade Carly to shift her supercuteness down off the desk and into its chair.

"Do I hafta?" chirped Carly.

"Yes and *now*, please," said Mr. Gillies.

"(Jump!... jump!... jump!...)" mutter-urged the girl in Seat 39.

"But I can see better this way."

"Yeah, so can we," observed a squat guy sitting behind Joss, raising thick black brows above thick square glasses.

"That'll do, uh Roger is it?" said Mr. Gillies. Who was reminded he hadn't yet called roll; and whose tongue slipped when he did so, saying "Carly THIGHbert." Which made the class hoot and their teacher blush behind an improbable moustache he must've grown in an effort to look older than his students. He reminded Vicki of skinny young Miles J. Benedict Jr. in *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*—except no girls were apt to find Mr. Gillies crushworthy. (Unlike Cousin Miles Carlisle, whom "Miles J. Benedict Jr." usually put Vicki in mind of.)

The muttersome girl in Seat 39 was skinny to the point of being gaunt. Roll call revealed her to be Fiona Weller the Weirdly Cool, which Joss had probably been trying to signify via mouthed words that weren't "Mandingo."

Fiona seemed more weird than cool; certainly not glitter-rockish, unless you counted her faded New York Dolls T-shirt. Taking sidelong ganders at Fiona was like being transported back to last September and seeing Stephanie Lipperman space out in the aisle, all distant and clammed-up and split-endy.

Was Fiona Weller prone to washroom blubberfests? Would she heedlessly ditch a class to go have a smoke by the school dumpsters?

The bell rang for first period. As the three girls strode over to Home Base, Joss had just enough time to make a formal introduction—"Hi," said Vicki; "(Y'think?)" muttered Fiona. She and Joss stayed on the second floor, for Band class with Mr. Redo; Vicki was obliged to go downstairs with sinking heart and stomach, for Phys Ed with Ms. Swanson.

In the locker room she was assigned a teensy cubbyhole (number 142) for which she supplied the Master Lock (combination an insultingly accurate 29-23-33) along with the hideous gymsuit she now had to change into. Hoping her new mock-jacket dress wouldn't get permanently wrinkled in teensy #142. And wondering if that was Ms. Swanson herself changing at her elbow, since you sure didn't see too many eighth-graders stacked to such an extent. Not Joss, a flattie by comparison; not Tricia when she was thirteen; not even bountiful Cynthia Dollfuss.

Do you get backache? Vicki wanted to ask.

"Scuse me," said Miss Terrific Torso in a loud cheerleaderish voice, nimbly dodging Vicki's elbow as she zipped the HG (hideous gymsuit) over her TT(s). She did look more like a cheerleader than a Phys Ed teacher: goldenhaired, honeyskinned, creamy-aura'd. But her eyes, as they swept over Vicki, were like red LED optics out of an electronic calculator: they scanned you and filed you away for later analysis.

"Becca!" cried another cheerybabe, leaping gazelle-like across the bench to exchange hugs and how-was-your-summer's. Vicki left them to it and headed out to the cavernous gymnasium, feeling awfully alone in a crowd of HG'd females, at whom the real Ms. Swanson barked orders and blew whistles for the rest of first period. The real Ms. Swanson, though by no means a bad-looking woman, had a German shepherd's bark and a military factory's whistle. You could anticipate her making the whole class stay late, doing jumping jacks till somebody'd confess to swiping towels from the locker room.

But not today. So much time was spent establishing ground rules that the girls didn't work up a sweat, and were excused from having to shower. Even so there was a rush to get re-dressed, and Vicki found herself chasing Becca and the gazelle-like cheerybabe up the back staircase and over to the Z-Wing. Vice Principal O'Brien was unfairly stationed outside

the wing doors, eager to penalize truants *and* runners-in-the-hall; so the three didn't reach Z202 till the second period's second bell finished tolling.

A dry stick of a teacher pointed a dry stick of a ruler at them (Vicki instinctively covering her knuckles) and prepared to hand out tardy-marks. But Becca briskly requested that Miss McInerney have a word with Ms. Swanson before the day was through—that is, if she (Miss McInerney) didn't want her (Ms. Swanson) to make them (Becca and fellow Gym students) arrive late for Language Arts *each* and *every* day for the *entire* semester.

The gazelle, whose name seemed to be Alice, let Becca do the talking while she beamed and waved at her many friends in the classroom. Vicki hid behind them both, peering around Alice to roll eyes at Joss. Meanwhile, squat Roger from homeroom had begun a not-so-*sotto voce* chant of “Heeeere they come, here come Speed Racers, they're all demons in heels...”

“Awreet!” went a pimply girl sitting in front of Joss. “*They're busy revving up the powerful Mach FIVE!—*”

“*Go, Speed Racers!*” the class chorused, recalling lyrics learned in kindergarten. “*Go, Speed Racers, go!*”

“That will be QUITE enough,” Miss McInerney announced, before diluting her discipline by giving in and allowing the three Speed Racers to be seated without penalty. Vicki vaulted into the empty chair beside Joss—and behind Fiona Weller, who mutter-asked “*(Is adventure waiting just aheeeeeeead?)*”

Not today it wasn't. Miss McInerney spent the rest of the period laying down the same ground rules Ms. Swanson'd already established, though with greater emphasis on reading/homework and less on showers/towels.

Most of the Language Arts students then moved across the hall to Z205 for third period Social Studies with Mr. Gillies. He was absent when they arrived, so Vicki and Joss and Fiona chose their own clump of seats, together with the pimply awreet! girl whom Joss introduced as Robin Neapolitan, another buddy from Band.

True to her surname, Robin had chocolate-colored eyes, vanilla-tinted hair, and a strawberry complexion resulting partly from acne but also from a volatile temperament. Like Fiona, Robin was a Z team veteran, and champed at the bit to brag about Z's dismal state:

“You’re in for it now, Murrisch. Now you’ll see how bad this school can *really* be. You had it made on Y team—”

“Like hell! Z’s on easy street, compared to Y—”

“Oh horseshit,” Robin said right out loud. “You’re thinking about X team; they get the best of everything. Then you guys on Y—”

“—not *me* guys, not anymore—”

“—and Z gets stuck with whatever’s left over!”

“(The crumbs. The dregs,)” Fiona mutter-agreed.

“Hunh!” scoffed Joss. “No Y teacher’d *ever* let a kid get away with blaming another teacher for making them late for class.”

Hey! Vicki wanted to protest, before sensing that Joss and Robin were simply ranking on each other to pass the time entertainingly. She asked Robin about Miss TT and the gazelle, neither of whom was in third period Social Studies.

“That’s Becca Blair and Alex Dmitria. They pretty much ran 7-Z last year.”

“Isn’t Alex a boy’s name?”

“Short for ‘Alexandra’—she’s a Russkie.”

“(Mexican,)” Fiona mutter-objectioned. “(Short for *Alejjjjandra*.)”

“Oh go *jjjjan* yourself,” Robin grouched. “She can be both, can’t she?”

“So are they snots?” asked Joss. “They didn’t act like snots.”

“Maybe not, but nobody says ‘can’t’ or ‘won’t’ to Becca Blair and makes it stick,” Robin told them. “Guys especially. With that bod I bet she could be a domiwhatchamacallit, y’know—”

“(Dominatrix,)” Fiona mutter-suggested. “(Like *Ilse the She-Wolf*.)”

Vicki turned an awestruck *Really?* into a nonchalant “Hmm... What about Alex?”

“(Ultranice,)” went Fiona, sounding mutter-disgusted.

“Just as I thought,” said Joss. “All the true snots are on Y team!”

Robin, while grinning, would’ve vehemently disputed this if Mr. Gillies hadn’t put in a breathless appearance. Wheezing through a third going-over of the ground rules, he was interrupted every few sentences by the outstretched hand of a popeyed boy—not Gollum from homeroom, but a kid named Lenny Otis, who kept asking for further clarification in

deeper detail:

“Ooh! ooh! when you say we gotta put covers on our books, do we gotta make the covers ourselves? like outta paper sacks? like in grade school? or can we *buy* book covers? like at a store that *sells* book covers? that’re like already made? that all we gotta do is buy and put on our books? and *not* make ‘em ourselves first?”

Squat Roger, sitting beside Lenny at the far side of the room, eventually raised his own hand and was called on by a grateful Mr. Gillies.

“Yeah,” said Roger with a thick black brow-waggle, “I think Lenny has another question to ask.”

“*Ooh! ooh!* when you say you want us to bring pens ‘n’ paper every day, does that mean—”

For fourth period, most of the class shifted next door to Z204 for Math with Mr. Folz. Having listened to Mr. Gillies wheeze, they now got to hear Mr. Folz rasp through a larynx corroded by decades of tobacco and chalkdust. After bestowing more ground rules, he plunged into a guttural prologue to Pre-Algebra: *skreeeeek* went examples onto the blackboard, *hack hawk hoff* went Mr. Folz, *nudge nudge nudge* went Joss to Vicki and Robin to Fiona. Lookit!—over there!—near the corner!—by the windows!—in the sunlight!—

Check out A Hunk With No Name.

A regular Vincent Van Patten, right off the cover of *Tiger Beat*.

Who’d somehow snuck into Z204 under the radar of a dozen adolescent girls. Bringing so much fair hair and bright eyes and manly-modest face and rippling musculature to be all distractive during Pre-Algebra—a hard-enough subject without some nameless hunk charming your pants off with his reddening cheeks and diffident smile.

“I saw him first!” Robin claimed, the moment the bell rang.

“Oh yeah?” said Joss. “So where’d he go, then?”

Hunky Dory seemed to have dissolved into dustmotes, bewildering the dozen adolescent girls who sought to pounce upon him.

“A ghost?” asked Vicki. “Is VW old enough to have a ghost of its own?”

“(Noooo,)” Fiona droned. “(Just an ultravirgin. And inspiration.)”

“Uh oh,” went Robin. “*She’s* done for, you guys. See you at lunch?”

The eighth grade had a free half-period during Lunch A, but couldn't use it freely till honor passes were awarded in early November. Till then, they had to return to their homerooms and play Study Hall.

Detour by Locker Z2230 (age you'll be next birthday—years lived in Pfiester Park—width of Joss's flares) to stow the morning's textbooks. Then back to Z205 for the third time that day, and say hello to an exhausted-looking Mr. Gillies.

"(Poor guy,)" Joss whispered. "(Bet he wishes he went into the plywood business.)"

Rather than disturb Mr. Gillies with audible conversation, she and Vicki passed notes while Fiona hunched over a spiral of staff paper, beating out quiet cadences on her desktop.

What's she doing? Writing a song?

Probably about ultravirgin

Don't call him that!

Hey I think it's sweet he's saving himself

For me you mean. Isn't he too blonde for you?

Blondes are GIRLS — boys are "towheads"

Ha! All the boys in this school are so far except him

Yeah but I'll make you a deal

What?

Find me a Super Fly and you can keep ultravirgin

Quit calling him that!

At noon they collected Robin from Miss McInerney's homeroom, went back to their own to retrieve the oblivious Fiona, and hurried off together to the cafeteria. Vicki wasn't sure yet how she felt about these two girls, but it was a relief to eat as part of a group rather than turn nightmare into reality, wandering around with nowhere to park her friendless tray.

She and Robin risked buying the hot meal—cheeseburger, hash browns, pickle chips, coleslaw and fruit cocktail. Robin got an extra milk for Fiona, who didn't look up from her composition as she shoved coins Robin's way and washed down a snackpack of Super Sugar Crisp. Joss, who'd brownbagged a savory Toughie lunch, swapped some of it for Vicki and Robin's desserts.

"You honestly want this? Gloppy fruit out of a can?"

"But *such* glop! Toughie thinks it's poison—I know it's maraschino paradise."

There was a brief kerfluffle at a nearby table when Squat Roger stood and bellowed "HE'S A PIMP!!" at a guy (later known to be Dino Tattaglia) who came barreling over to join him and Lenny Otis. The teachers on Cafeteria duty hesitated, then chose to pretend they hadn't heard the bellow since it wasn't repeated during that particular Lunch B.

There was another kerfluffle at Vicki's table when Robin found out Volester Motors sold Japanese cars. Robin's father (Fat Bob Neapolitan) had a Harley-Davidson dealership and frequently declared he wouldn't spend a thin dime on anything not 100% red-white-and-blue made in goddam America!—as Robin told Vicki with considerable strawberry heat.

"Would you cool it, Robin?" Joss requested. "*She* doesn't sell Hondas."

"Let her speak for herself!"

Vicki reacted as an I'm-a-City-girl-you-can't-intimidate-*me* should. "Oh shut up! We sell plenty of American cars—used ones. My mom even bought herself a Pontiac."

"Well okay then," Robin subsided. "Don't mind me," she added with a pickle-chippy grin. "I'm a drummer, y'know. We all fly off the handle—lookit Keith Moon."

"Robin's a great drummer," Joss told Vicki. "Last year in Band—"

"—don't say it—"

"—we called her 'Melody,' 'cause she—"

"—don't *say* it—"

"—reminded everybody of the airheaddrummerinJosieandthePussycats!—"

"I'll get you for that, Murrisch!"

"(Will you guys pipe down?)" Fiona muttered over the cafeteria bedlam. "(Trying to work here.)"

Ultravirgin full of gypsum
sifting like bellybutton lint
raindrops pounding rocks into silt
cover nipples with dusty cups
fill young navels up with diamonds
in skin soft as honeymelon

Tall stick figure with white socks on
putting crystal tracks upon mirrors
melt with the night, slide to the floor
limbless dwarf with knife in his teeth
waddles to you through freakish mud
full of gypsum, Ultravirgin

They got another free half-period during Lunch C, but the entire non-ditching eighth grade had to spend it shuffling through the school library (here called a Media Center) in an irksome cropfull snakedance tour.

Once that was over, Vicki's friends returned to the Z-Wing and left her in Home Base for fifth period Vocal Music with Mrs. Martha Weller. Who didn't look remotely like her daughter, being an ever-smiling clarion-voiced Up With People person:

"It is *so* good to see you all here again at dear old VW! I hope everyone had a restful and refreshing summer vacation, and is just as keen as I am to raise our voices in song! Let us begin by sitting up straight and tall as can be—good posture plays *such* an important part in Vocal Music! Yes!—that's right!—*much* better! And now, let us touch upon a few key ground rules for the semester ahead—"

(Vicki wondered whether Fiona was adopted, or just *felt* adopted.)

Not many familiar faces in the choral throng. There was Alex the Gazelle, whose cheerybabe-itude fit right in with Mrs. Weller's Swinging-on-a-Starriness. And that stunner over there, the one languidly fanning her brow, had been pointed out by Joss at lunch: Gigi Pyle, last year's Queen of 7-Y, who fancied herself a Dixie belle because she lived on Clubroot Drive (Vanderlund's southern border with Willowhelm).

“I wish Gigi *was* in the land of cotton,” Joss had grumped. “Then I never would’ve had to hear her say ‘Mahh *laa*-und!’ or ‘Fiddle-dee-dee!’”

And never had to see Kim Zimmer become a double-dealing traitress. Gone almost overnight from sneering at Gigi Pyle’s clique to currying favor with it, to bitching out Joss in front of the snide-asses *on purpose*. As if one of the Peaches had suddenly done all she could to kiss up to Melissa Chiese—a thought that curdled the cheeseburger in Vicki’s stomach.

You Scarlett O’Duckweight! Try messing with me or Joss, and I’ll make you go “Fiddle-dee-dee” with a Peachy nectarine!

(Oog—there goes the coleslaw. Better make a pitstop before heading to Z201 for sixth period Spanish.)

As she left the washroom, who should she encounter entering but Joss: just come from fifth period French (“*C’est moi*”) and hoping not to begin Phys Ed with a tummyful of fruit cocktail.

“At least if I upchuck I’ll get to leave early.”

“Don’t you dare leave this school without me,” said Vicki. “¡*No dejar la escuela!*”

Since she couldn’t be in Joss’s second-year French class, it made sense to stick with Spanish, though the *poco* she’d learned from Mrs. Lundgren wasn’t a whole lot to build on. Not that it mattered the first day—Señorita DeStefano recited the same *reglas básicas* Vicki’d already heard from five other teachers, this time in bilingual form.

There were two boys in Spanish class who should’ve been crushworthy, but fell short. Craig Clerkington, already pushing six feet tall, might be a Crushin’ Croatian contender: he had mean little eyes and a mean little smile and larger-than-thigh-sized arms. As for the other boy, Vicki felt sorry for his sisters if he had any, since Bradley Faussett was clearly a blowdryer-monopolizer. A bit of humility would’ve done wonders (think of Hunky Dory) but Brad offered only ego:

“The name’s Faussett, baby, ‘cause you are turnin’ me *on!*”

SQUEEEEEAL went Carly Thibert.

No thank you, thought Vicki. *One Kyoop Minsky a year is more than enough.*

Señorita DeStefano soon had to move Brad and Craig away from Carly and up to the front row where she could keep an eye on them. Which was just fine with Brad and Craig,

she being enough of a *mamacita caliente* to warrant keeping their eyes on *her*. Vicki got relocated back beside Carly, who gave her a chipmunk-smirk as though to say “What a couple of towheads”—making Vicki wonder whether Carly Thibert was quite as *ingenua* as her behavior till now would imply.

At last came seventh period in Z203, the Science Lab at the end of the wing. Craig and Brad followed her there (minimize your rump-wiggle!) and Joss stormed up after them, fuming about the indignities of Phys Ed.

“I’d like to fill that damn gym with a thousand gallons of tapioca pudding!”

“OH yeah!” Craig Clerkington boomed. “So y’can *rassle* in it, right?”

“Count me in,” dripped Brad Faussett. “We got us a coupla tag teams right here.”

“Back off, bozos!”

“Like I said,” leered Brad.

“Like he said,” added Craig with a mean little snortle.

“Go tapi- your own -ocas,” Joss retorted, giving them her hard-blue-marble stare.

“Like *SHE* said!” crowed Vicki.

After that, the only difficult thing about Science was staying awake in spite of rotund Mr. Dunn, who droned much longer and less intriguingly than Fiona Weller. Tiny shopworn jokes got cracked at clockwork intervals—did you hear the one about Sir Isaac Newton’s brother Fig? or the one where an electron tells a neutron, “For you there’s no charge”?

The suckups laughed; the boorish jeered; the puzzled asked “Why’s he so interested in newts?”; and Vicki tried to prove scientifically that you can yawn through your nose.

Till the final bell at 3:15 p.m., sounding sweeter than any song by Neil Sedaka.

Spin your combination one more time. Encumber yourself with books required for tonight’s homework. Slam the locker shut as 2,142 other VW students were trying to do simultaneously. Accompany Joss down the Z-Wing stairway (acceptable, since you’re exiting the building) and run with the mob to Zephyr Heaven—a place adults knew better than to venture near at this afterschool hour.

Then, licking cones-to-go, meander up Eugene G.’s road to Eugene G.’s bridge and lean wearily against its rail.

“Y’know what?” Joss asked with a (slurp).

“After today? Not enough.” (Slurp.)

“Ice cream’s like education.” (Slurp.)

“‘Cause it’s good when you ‘get it’?” (Slurp.)

“Well that too. But also ‘cause a lot of it lands on hot sidewalks—”

“—and turns to instant sludge,” Vicki agreed. *Melt with the night, slide to the floor, waddle through the freakish mud of eighth grade.*

(Slurp.)

22

Groundbreaker

“I said I’ll come cheer you, and I will,” Joss reiterated later that week. “But you know how I feel about *me* running. And you also know I’ve got my cornet lesson then. So good luck, Gahdspeed, and *don’t* break a leg!”

“Wise guy,” said Vicki.

“Call me when it’s over. Like, if you need another bike ride home—”

“Oh go blow your horn already. I hope you have to hit high C.”

“Hey—you’re gonna wow ‘em.”

“Well... hope so, anyway.”

“*Know* so. Every way.”

“Yeah, well, thanks... Are you SURE you won’t come with me?”

“La la la la, I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you—”

“(Jo! Will you ever let anybody else use the damn phone??)”

“Ooh, Meggy’s getting crabby—and grabby!—gotta go—call me!” (Click.)

So Vicki had to jog down to school by herself on Saturday morning. She’d known perfectly well Joss wouldn’t react favorably to Friday’s homeroom proclamation that, contrary to rumor, VW *was* going to start a girls cross country team this year, and everyone interested should sign up at noon on Saturday.

Mrs. Driscoll’s P.A. communiqués weren’t open to doubt; yet Vicki still turned to Fiona and asked, “Did she say cross country?”

“(Nooooo—*Crawdaddy*,)” muttered Fiona, rustling the pages of that magazine.

Noooo chance Fiona would try out. Vicki'd never actually seen her with cigarettes, but she certainly looked *and* sounded like a precocious smoker—one who'd cough like Mr. Folz if she survived as long as he had. Nor was there any point inviting Robin Neapolitan to try out: Robin objected (forcefully) to any sport not involving internal combustion engines, with a high crash-and-burn likelihood.

Which Vicki's cross country career might very likely have.

What were the odds of her making the squad? Or even being seriously considered? She could envision a hundred Olympic-level sprinters looming ahead of her, vying for the honor of membership on a groundbreaking sports team.

It was to have been launched that summer by the ninth-grade Phys Ed teacher, Miss Gibb, who liked to remind people she had the same name as the first woman to run the Boston Marathon. Miss Gibb had chosen a team captain, freshman-to-be Frieda Pieper, who was obscurely related to the longtime announcer at the Friendly Confines. (At any rate she'd been excused from classes a year ago to go attend his funeral.)

In June, Miss Gibb had worked closely with Frieda's family to organize the new team—so closely, in fact, that Frieda's mother had sued Frieda's father for divorce in July, citing Miss Gibb as co-respondent. Mrs. Pieper'd also yanked Frieda out of VW and away from Vanderlund, while Miss Gibb submitted her resignation to Mrs. Driscoll (and now, some whispered, was carrying Frieda's half-sibling-to-be).

Net result—no girls cross country squad.

Or so rumor had it, till yesterday's proclamation.

Vicki neared the now-familiar corner of Knopper and Oakapple, summoning all her courage as she anticipated a throng. But the only person on the corner was Alex the Gazelle, who started waving vigorously the moment she noticed Vicki's approach.

Me? Vicki mouthed, pointing to herself, then slowing to a halt as shouts of laughter seemed to greet her.

"Cross country??" Alex hollered across the street and over the shouts.

Vicki nodded a tentative yes and jogged up to the school gate.

"*Yay!*" went Alex. "Mumbles, we've got seven!"

“S’nice,” said a soft little drawl, belonging to an older girl with a sweet round babyface like a happy Buddha. She gave Vicki a quick smile, then resumed flirtation with a tall guy in a Tequila Sunrise T-shirt. Despite his height he too had a babyface, one that didn’t appear to have yet felt the scrape of a razor, and “Mumbles” was reaching up to fondle his smooth babycheek.

Four other girls in running garb were hanging around inside the fence. One, deeply tan and robust, stood with stoic folded arms like Sacajawea waiting for Lewis & Clark to make up their minds. She was being chatted to by a long-legged black girl in a BEEP-BEEP! Roadrunner tanktop. (Vicki wondered if she might have a brother for Joss.) They, like Mumbles, looked like freshmen; as did a narrow-visaged ascetic type who stood apart from them, frowning intently at a clipboard.

The fourth girl, younger than the other three, was a brass-bold ringer for Mary Ellen on *The Waltons*: ready to wham John-Boy, Jim-Bob, or any other guy reckless enough to get in her way. Probably including the serpentine individual *she* was busy flirting with, who badly needed a soap and shampoo for the oily-natured. (Eww.)

Had those laugh-shouts come from Snake Oiler? Or Mary Ellen? Or both?

“NO WAY!” Mumbles abruptly erupted, giving Tequila Sunrise a playful shove.

“Nelson, you are so *FULL* of it! **HA!! HA!! HA!!**”

As echoes bounced off the school wall, Alex asked Vicki a question.

“Sorry, what??”

“Which team are you on?” repeated Alex. Still on vigilant sentinel duty, yet somehow giving Vicki her full attention.

“Me? Um, well, I’m trying out for this one...”

“No, I mean are you on 8-Z? I thought so! You’ve got second period English with Miss McInerney, right? And Gym before that? I knew I’d seen you before. I’m Alex Dmitria—sorry I haven’t introduced myself till now—I try to get to know everyone in all my classes, but time goes by so fast, y’know?”

Vicki felt proud to be recognized by such a luminary. Alex had to be the most *radiant* person she’d ever met in real life: tall, slim, glowing with vibrant health. Her hair and eyes were as dark as Vicki’s, but Alex had a short pixie cut instead of a waist-long braid,

and enormous supernovas instead of almond-shaped stars. Along with this incandescence came a worrisome glimmer that Alex Dmitria's mainspring might be wound a trifle too tight:

"I am *so glad* you're signing up, we really need seven to compete properly, I mean we could *run* as a team with just five but you need seven to displace, and anyway if you've only got five runners and one gets sick or hurt, y'know, you can't run as a team. I mean there must be *nine hundred* girls in this school! If just *three percent* would show, we'd have another twenty here and not a thing to worry about. But where are they? Doesn't anybody *listen* to the morning announcements? Ohmygosh what time is it?—it can't be noon already, we can't have only *seven*—Mumbles, how much longer can we wait??"

"Calm downwwwn," Mumbles drawl-advised. "S'not time to freak yet."

"I *am* calm," Alex maintained, pacing back and forth, making a steady-handed Girl Scout sign to prove her composure. "See that? Calm as a *rock*. So Vicki, did you transfer to Z? Which team were you on last year?"

"Me? Not any—I just moved here this summer. To Burrow Lane, off Foxtail Road."

Alex's face lit up even further, if that were possible. "You're kidding! I live on Sprangletop, just a couple blocks from Foxtail. That is so cool! Hardly anyone else lives so close. We could go running together—do you run to school in the morning?"

"Um no, haven't had to yet—"

"Oh but you oughta! And before school's a good time for me, if it's not inconvenient for you. I could stop by your house Monday and—*hey!* Cross country??"

Vicki waved with Alex (if not quite as vigorously) at a Vega Notchback pulling up to let out two girls. The first one resembled a bunny rabbit—nervous expression, quivering nostrils, hair plaited in two thick pooftails—with a pooftail-tip caught between her teeth, being nibbled like a carrot. (Reminding Vicki of Eileen Agnew's fingernail.)

Her friend seemed barely old enough to be in junior high: no sign yet that her chest or hips had heard about puberty. However, she possessed an air of blithe self-confidence that Flopsy Mopsy decidedly lacked; plus a sense of affectionate discretion, with which she tugged the pooftail-tip out of Flopsy's mouth and tucked it back behind Flopsy's ear.

Hi's were exchanged, then more waving done at a Dodge Monaco bearing two more youngsters. This pair detested each other so palpably you had to boggle at their traveling in

the same car—from which they exited out opposite doors, one coming around the front of the Monaco, the other heading nose-in-air around the back.

The frontcomer was a woolly baa-lamb, with a sheepish face and docile gaze (when not glaring sidelong at her companion); she chomped ruminatively on a fat wad of Dubble Bubble. You'd have to call the backheader a pretty girl (and envy her layered-look 'do) though she did nothing *but* glare: sidelong, straight ahead, over the fence, down at her feet. As though she'd been forced to breakfast that morning on pickled eggs and sour grapes, and being here now was the very last straw.

More *hi*'s, then a great big wave at a Coupe de Ville cruising up for all to admire.

"Oh Lord," snortled Mary Ellen Walton, "it's Britt! I mighta known she'd make a hooptedoodle entrance."

"Check out the guy driving," said her oily boyfriend. "Zat who I think it is?"

"You know it—'Hoyt Groningen, Action Weather!'"

It really was The City's favorite TV meteorologist behind the Caddy's wheel, returning their wave with a sorry-no-autographs grin. The girl sitting shotgun waited for this celebrity-furor to ebb, then hooptedoodled out of the car and through the gate. She was slightly built, sleepy-eyed, and had dark red hair—all like the Squeaky person who'd aimed a loaded pistol at President Ford just yesterday. But her shirt, her shorts, her gym shoes all seemed to breathe "Diane von Fürstenberg."

"Sheesh!" went the Roadrunner. "Killer threads! She gonna *run* in those?"

"Sorry if I'm late," said Britt, with a *now-that-I'M-here-we-can-get-started* smile.

PHWEET went a whistle, and they were confronted by a thirtyish man in light sweats. He wasn't much bigger than Britt Groningen and had already gone half-bald, but was empowered (like Mr. Brown back in sixth grade) by an encyclopedic mastermind—on the subject of long-distance running, at least.

This was Mr. Heathcote, dubbed "The Minute-and-a-Half Man" after an ancient cartoon. He'd attended Elmhurst's York High and run for their legendary coach Joe Newton. True, Mr. Heathcote had graduated before York won the first of their many cross country championships; but still.

“Gentlemen,” he told Snake Oiler and Babyface Nelson in a reedy yet steely voice, “unless you plan to sign up for the girls team, go elsewhere. We will delay proceeding till you are out of sight. Starting... now!” He clicked a stopwatch and stood waiting while the boys sauntered off—picking up speed when Mr. Heathcote observed, “I trust you ladies can move faster than *those* two.”

(Superior snortles from the dozen girls.)

(Silenced when their coach turned and faced them.)

“If you’re here expecting tryouts, you are mistaken. By *being* here today, you have made the team. Whether you *remain* on it is another matter.

“I won’t lie to you, ladies: we’re starting from scratch, and we’re starting late. We’ll be building our team from the ground up, more for future seasons than this year’s. You ninth-graders, who won’t be back next fall, will contribute more than your fair share.

“Nevertheless, I expect that when you look back on your time at VW, one of your finest memories will be of having been a member of this school’s first girls cross country squad!”

(Ragged cheer, led with vigor by Alex Dmitria.)

From the ground up entailed a whole new set of ground rules. To stay on the team, you had to attend practice four days a week after school and at noon on Saturdays. One unexcused absence meant missing the next meet; two meant you were off the squad. Tardiness counted as absence; so did detention. Smoking, drinking, drug use, academic ineligibility all meant instant dismissal. Good sportsmanship was a requisite, with teammates and opponents alike; you were to behave as a responsible representative of your team, your school, and your community.

“The most essential rule is dedication to running. In every kind of weather, over every kind of terrain. You must commit yourself to doing everything you can with everything you’ve got. If that means coming in dead last in a field of a hundred runners whose Personal Best is faster than yours, so be it—as long as you finish every race without quitting, constantly test your limits, and always strive to improve your own Personal Best. Do that, and we’ll be as proud to have you on our squad as you’ll be of yourself.

“Now’s the time to sign up if you’re ready and willing. Freshmen first, then you eighth-graders, then you in seventh. Give us your names and academic teams as I assign your numbers—”

- #1: Lisa Lohe, 9-X (the ascetic clipboard-holder)
- #2: Rhonda Wright, 9-X (the Roadrunner)
- #3: Yvette Metcalf, 9-Z (Mumbles)
- #4: Susan Baxter, 9-Y (Sacajawea)
- #5: Alex Dmitria, 8-Z (ever the Gazelle)
- #6: Sheila Quirk, 8-X (Mary Ellen Walton)
- #7: Vicki Volester, 8-Z (hopefully as lucky a number as legend would have it)
- #8: Britt Groningen, 8-X (Squeaky von Fürstenberg)
- #9: Laurie Harrison, 8-Y (Flopsy Mopsy)
- #10: Susie Zane, 7-Y (the blithe prepubescent)
- #11: Karen Lee Bobko, 7-Z (the woolly baa-lamb)
- #12: Caroline Appercy, 7-Z (sour-grapier than ever at bringing up the rear)

Mr. Heathcote led them through a warmup of stretches and calisthenics before staging the team’s first time trial. Six laps around the track: a mile-and-a-half, 2640 yards, or 2400 meters for the metric-conscious.

The twelve runners happened to finish in the same order they’d signed up. Vicki, who’d never run to a stopwatch before, was glad she hadn’t disgraced herself; though she suspected 13:23 was far from her best potential Personal Best. (But easy to remember, being her street address turned inside-out.)

She made some initial observations of her teammates during that time trial, and would fill in some blanks about them over the next two months.

For Lisa Lohe, coming in first was of overriding importance. This applied not only to sports but grades, ballots, milestones (leg-shaving, bra-donning, period-getting)—and even gossip: Lisa had to be the first to hear good news from her friends or slander about her enemies.

Just how much satisfaction Lisa derived from this was an ascetic mystery. Vicki would watch her run an individual trial, her narrow face a rictus of exertion, veins standing out on her narrow neck, and see no thrill of victory when a goal was achieved. Far more likely was the agony of defeat—from falling a few steps behind or going a few seconds over a clipboard-goal. Vicki admired Lisa Lohe, and tried to avoid her.

Rhonda Wright could move like the BEEP-BEEP! emblem on her tanktop, often reducing Lisa to Wile E. Coyote woe. The other girls would chant “*Road—runner, Road—runner,*” as Rhonda zoomed exuberantly past. She also took the lead in cracking jokes about her unique status on the team—such as that her people were accustomed to outrunning packs of white folks, and having natural rhythm was a many-splendored thing. Vicki never knew whether to laugh at these sallies or smile sympathetically, and so tried to do both.

(“Honey, they’re *all* my brothers!” Rhonda guffawed when Vicki got up enough nerve to ask on Joss’s behalf.)

How anyone with a name as lovely as Yvette could stomach being called “Mumbles” was another unsolved riddle. Less surprising was that Mumbles ran like she talked: a fancy-free canter with bursts of hard galloping. She preferred being on horseback than her own two feet, and could indulge this partiality since both her parents were MDs. (The Metcalfs lived on Caravaggio Place in Baroque Vista, and boarded their horses at Pony Paradise Stable.) Since VW lacked an equestrian team, and Mumbles wouldn’t attend an all-girls (no-boys) school like Startop Academy just because it *did* have one, running cross country was the closest alternative.

Susan Baxter—inevitably “Big Sue” on the same team as little Susie Zane—loved anything that occurred outdoors. She devoted every summer to wilderness adventures: camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, general roughing it under the sun and stars. Big Sue disliked sleeping under any roof except a tent’s, and hated any errand that involved a trip into The City. Her running gait wasn’t as swift as the other freshmen’s, but she made up for that by each stride being as long as a broadjump.

Alex Dmitria proved herself a natural-born gazelle every time she took the track. She had some characteristics in common with Lisa Lohe, yet invariably lined up behind Mumbles Metcalf, who’d been her mentor in grade school. (Snead Elementary—named for George

Bernard Snead, developer of the Green Bridge Shopping Center, though boasting a signed photo of Sam Snead on its lobby bulletin board.) Alex went riding with Mumbles at Pony Paradise most Sunday afternoons, and Mumbles was the first to say Alex would've made an excellent Cossack.

Britt Groningen, contrariwise, attached herself to Lisa Lohe's coattails—though not to her apron strings. Vicki seldom knew what to make of Britt, since Britt seldom wore the same persona two days in a row. Just as she seemed to discard her silken running togs after wearing them but once, so did she fluctuate from Subdeb of the Netherlands to obsequious brownnoser to mystical acolyte to freckly smart-aleck. Lisa might count on Britt as a disciple and adherent; but if Vicki were Lisa, she wouldn't let down her guard for more than a second. You only had to glance at Britt Groningen to hear the theme music from *Jaws*—some of the time, anyway.

Glance at Sheila Quirk and hear an all-night Irish slip jig. She came from a clan even huger than the Waltons, and claimed that every time a child of theirs began parochial school at Archbishop Houlihan, the nuns would moan: "Saints preserve us! Is it *another* of you Quirks??" When the recession struck, Mr. and Mrs. Quirk ran short of tuition funds and gave their children the option to switch to VW. Sheila-Q (who wouldn't answer to "Quirky," a nickname that'd been done to death in her household) jumped at the chance:

"I just knew there'd be a better selection of guys here—all kinds, right? Like going to school in a candy store, right? So who'm I going with?—another ex-Houlihanian!" (Snake Oiler, alias Roy Hodeau, who left grease stains on Sheila-Q's shirtfronts and pantseats.)

"Um, y'know, don't you think you could maybe do, like..."

"What? Better? Better'n Roy *Hodeau*? You bet I can!" Sheila-Q beamed Mary Ellenishly. "And don't I let him know it, too!"

Susie Zane and Laurie Harrison turned out to be stepsisters. They'd actively conspired to unite Susie's dad with Laurie's mom, and now contentedly shared a bedroom. Little Sue was a year younger in age (and younger than that in appearance) yet she played the big-sister's role in their relationship; Laurie looked up to her in every way except literally. She was dependent on Susie for advice, stability, even protection. Attractive enough as a

bunny-girl to be preyed upon by cads and rotters, Laurie could (and did) thank Susie for saving her from multiple heartbreaks.

Susie in turn benefitted from having an older kid sister. Laurie insisted she share in every rite of adolescent passage—wearing makeup, getting ears pierced, going on double dates—much sooner than her less-fortunate peers. A lot of Little Sue’s confidence stemmed from having Laurie in her life, as roommate and best friend and number one fan: sweeping away any doubts that Susie would outknockout ‘em all when (*not* if) she finally blossomed.

While those two were a shining example of kindred spirithood, the Bobbsey Twins covered the other extreme. Karen Lee Bobko and Caroline Appercy had loathed each other from the moment their expectant mothers became bosom chums in an obstetrician’s waiting room. Born a few days apart, deliberately given similar first names, raised side by side (the Bobkos moving into the Appercys’s neighborhood) in identical bassinets, they’d spent twelve futile years trying to convince the world they were not and never would be each other’s dearest pal.

A grim sort of *Defiant Ones* association evolved, with both Bobbseys counting the days till they turned eighteen and were free to separate forever. Till that glorious time came, they grudgingly participated in all the activities their chummy moms made them do in tandem. However, a permanent record was kept of each annoyance suffered by one Bobbsey and gleefully witnessed by the other, whether or not the other’d *caused* it to happen.

For instance: Karen Lee exhibited baa-lamb delight when their homeroom teacher misread Caroline’s surname as “Appleseed” (which Caroline could not abide). The very next day, Caroline got to rejoice when Karen Lee’s lap was daubed by magenta paint in Art class, due to Terry Blitstein being a butterfingere*d* idiot.

“And him your own sweetiepie!” Caroline jeered.

“We are *not* ‘sweetiepies,’” Karen Lee sheepishly insisted, tying a jacket around her waist. “For the millionth time, Terry and I are Just Good Friends.”

“Hunh! Just Good Friends don’t give you a crimson crotch!”

“Oh, like any guy’d go anywhere *near* YOUR crotch—and besides, it was magenta!”

Following the first time trial, Mr. Heathcote led them through a cooldown routine. He then distributed a sheaf of paperwork (with Lisa Lohe flourishing her clipboard); urged them to recruit additional runners from their Gym classes; announced their first official practice would start Monday afternoon at precisely 3:30 p.m.; and dismissed the team with a final PHWEET.

After all that, Vicki wouldn't've minded *walking* home.

But Alex, planning their Monday pre-school run, wanted to see where she lived; and playing pedestrian with Alex Dmitria meant doing The Hustle nonstop. Even when checking traffic before crossing a street, Alex would mark time with arms pumping and knees up high; so Vicki did likewise, trying not to puff or gasp replies to Alex's ongoing chatter:

"I guess we lucked out getting Mr. Heathcote as coach, but I sure tried to coax Ms. Swanson into doing it after Miss Gibb had to leave. She said (Ms. Swanson I mean) that she's too busy gearing up for basketball season even though that doesn't start till cross country's over with, and I know for a *fact* some girls didn't sign up today just *because* we've got a man for our coach. Like they're afraid he'll barge into the locker room and, y'know, hang around with us or something—"

"He *won't*, will he?" Vicki gasped.

"Oh I'm sure he'll knock first. There's my Papa's store—" said Alex, waving at Double-A Sporting Goods as they jogged through the Green Bridge. "Have you been in it yet? Well don't shop anywhere else, we've got the best of everything and I'll make sure you get a discount."

"Thanks!" Vicki puffed.

"Oh don't mention it, that's what friends are for not to mention teammates. Let's go this way—"

Across the Bridge, take a left on Bedeguar and run (Alex ran; Vicki had to sprint to keep up) past Cedarapple, Velvetleaf, Nutsedge, Foxtail, Scotchbroom, to Sprangletop Road. Marking time with knees up high, Alex pumped one arm and waved the other down Sprangletop toward an exotic specimen of Mission Revival architecture.

"That's our house, isn't it neat? I want to have you over when we've got more time, well *all* the girls on the team of course but you'll be the first 'cause you live the closest."

Relatively speaking. Back to Foxtail, then leg it northward past Pearlwort, Jimson, Yarrow, Lesser; Alex chattering continuously, hardly taking a breath despite the fact they were going *uphill*. Asking what other extracurriculars Vicki would be involved with—reeling off her own lengthy catalog, plus an additional list of non-school pursuits—till you had to wonder whether she'd budgeted any time for minor things like sleep.

"I hope you'll try out for basketball—"

"Me???"

"Oh I've seen plenty of girls your size who can play the game, it's how you move not how tall you are—"

"I'd have to climb" (puff) "on your shoulders" (gasp) "to make a basket!"

They reached Burrow Lane and found Felicia scowling at the state of the front garden. Vicki (after refilling her lungs) presented Alex, whose radiance must've been restocked en route; Felicia blinked bedazzledly as Alex pumped her hand.

"Won't you come in for a cool drink?"

"Sure will—oh YIKES!" went Alex, with a frantic look at her wristwatch.

"Ohmygosh it's almost two! I'm gonna be late at the animal shelter!"

"Do you need a ride?" Felicia began, but Alex was already hightailing it out of the cul-de-sac—running politely *backwards*:

"No thanks Mrs. Volester I'll take a raincheck on that cool drink see you again real soon oh Vicki I'll be by Monday about 7:15 *put all your stuff in a knapsack that's what I do and it's a good idea to pack a towel VERY NICE TO MEET YOU BOHHHHTH...*"

Around the corner and out of sight.

"My goodness!" said Felicia. "That girl looks like a young Audrey Hepburn!"

She does not! Vicki nearly protested, before remembering Audrey wasn't the one with the la-de-da cheekbones Vicki'd never liked.

"What was all that about packing towels in knapsacks?"

Vicki explained before going indoors, phoning Joss to let her know she was home, and taking a shower while Joss biked over from Jupiter Street.

After giving capsule lowdowns (the sort Joss relished most) on her new teammates and their boyfriends and Mr. Heathcote the Minute-and-a-Half Man, Vicki went into

super/sub mode. During the summer, she and Joss had developed a private means of parallel communication: part body language, part “vibes,” it allowed them to introduce distinct subtext to spoken dialogue. Thus if Goofus happened to be eavesdropping, he would hear Vicki super-say:

“So, Alex Dmitria? She lives pretty close to here, like six blocks down and four over, and she asked if I wanna go running with her before school—to school, y’know, so we’re gonna try it on Monday. Do you have a knapsack I can borrow, to put all my stuff in? She’s like the busiest person on the planet, Alex is—belongs to every club at VW, rides horses, takes care of sick dogs and everything. But if she ever has like a free afternoon, y’think maybe we could hang out with her?”

Joss alone heard Vicki sub-say:

I don’t want you to think I’m “drifting away” from you, that will never ever happen in a thousand years, but Alex really IS “ultranice” and practically a neighbor and I bet we—that is, ME ‘n’ YOU—could have some good times with her. But if you’d rather not give it a try, I’ll just stick to running with Alex and leave it at that.

Similarly, Joss could be overheard super-replying:

“Sure, sounds like fun. I can’t wait to see you two come charging into VW, like across a finish line. Be sure you wear your shortest short-shorts.”

While only Vicki heard her sub-uttering:

Don’t be silly, I want you to have lots of friends, I’M sure as hell not gonna run to school with you, and of course I know you’d never pull a Kimmy Zimmer on me. But just the same I’m glad you asked first, and though we’ll play it by ear with Alex, I reserve the right to yank the plug on any dy-no-mite “good times.”

With that super/sub-said, they resumed their regular tête-à-tête already in progress.

*

In later years Vicki would say she’d helped invent the school backpack, and had lost a fortune by not patenting the idea in 1975. Certainly she and Alex stood out from the crowd on Monday morning, racing up the eighter staircase with knapsacks on their shoulders.

“What do you need a *knapsack* for?” Ozzie’d asked. “Did you go out for cross country or mountain climbing?”

A little of both. Running to school had drawbacks, especially after you got there. Lucky thing that Phys Ed was first period, giving you an adequate chance (thanks to Becca Blair) to clean up afterward, throw on a good top and skirt and touch of cosmetics, *and* make it back to Z-Wing before Miss McInerney started splitting infinitives. But what an embarrassment to enter homeroom looking less than your best—damp with perspiration, despite the towel Alex had wisely suggested bringing—and then have to sit there in starkly uncute contrast to Carly Thibert.

(Vicki limited her recruiting efforts to Carly, since there was no point re-asking Joss or Robin or Fiona. And Carly lost interest when informed there were no boys on the girls cross country team. “If you had boys, you wouldn’t need knapsacks,” she reasoned. “That’s what boys are *for*—to carry your books. That, and—giggle!—other stuff.”)

(“This is how the Marines train, running with loaded backpacks,” said Alex. “And *their* backpacks are loaded with BRICKS!”)

Vicki might not be ready to enlist in the USMC, but after a week of running knapsacked to VW, she no longer gasped or puffed upon arrival. The afterschool practices helped too: from 3:30 to 4:30 Monday through Thursday plus noon on Saturday, these were designed to build up stamina and endurance. Various lengths were run at varying speeds; long steady lopes alternated with faster-paced sprints. Only thirty seconds of rest between 220-yard dashes; a minute between quarter-miles; two minutes between half-miles.

Mr. Heathcote warned them not to try increasing their mileage too rapidly. “Learn how to control your breathing first—how to keep an even pace—achieve consistency—and always persevere.”

No complaints about bad weather were permitted. You ran in rain; you ran through mud. If there was an early cold snap, you ran in sweats and caps and gloves. You ran on grass, dirt, concrete, asphalt. You learned how to keep going when you felt dog-tired, by focusing on your form—and that of your running buddy, for which you were as responsible as your own.

Vicki was paired with Sheila Quirk, whose company she enjoyed, even though S-Q could run with all her Mary Ellen Walton hair blowing loose in the wind, and *not* get slowed in the slightest. Vicki’s own tresses were so long by now that if she didn’t braid them

beforehand, they would drag her around like a parasail when the wind blew off the Lake.

“Check out Britt hogging the sidewalk,” Sheila-Q snortled one afternoon.

“How does she *do* that?” wondered Vicki. “She’s littler’n me!”

They watched Britt outflank her running buddy Karen Lee Bobko—to the left, to the right, down the middle. Karen Lee might be able to cope with Caroline Appercy, but she was totally out of her depth in Britt Groningen’s tidepool.

“Her *mouth* isn’t littler’n yours,” said Sheila-Q.

“Aw,” went Vicki, who often worried that her mouth was too wide; lipsticks seemed to get used up awfully quickly. But she knew what S-Q really meant, and fully agreed.

“D’ja hear her badmouthing Mumbles before warmup?”

“Does she ever *goodmouth* Mumbles?”

“She goodmouths Lisa—to her face. Not so much behind her back.”

“With Moana Lisa, how can you tell which side is which?”

“*LET’S TAKE IT ON HOME, LADIES!!*” yelled their captain from the head of the line.

“Lord!” went Sheila-Q.

“I know,” said Vicki as they quickened their pace. “I mean, I really like Mumbles and everything, but our *eardrums*.”

“And it’s not like we’ve got spares.”

Kick it up for the final 220 with a mutual “*Beat Britt*,” their standard end-of-buddy-run vow. But by the time they caught up with Groana, she’d already started her cooldown with Moana, leaving Karen Lee looking extra sheepish.

“Hold on, you guyyys,” Mumbles was telling them at drawl-volume. “We’re supposed to do cooldowns as a teeeeam.”

“Sorry? Say what? Can’t hear you, chief.”

(This from Groana. Moana slowly froze in mid-stretch, looking mid-pinched.)

Mr. Heathcote had told the team to elect a captain, subject to his approval, stipulating only that it must be one of the ninth-graders. Rhonda and Big Sue promptly took themselves out of the running, saying they were there to *run* but not run *things*. So Britt nominated Lisa, Alex countered with Mumbles, and each delivered a sixty-second speech.

Or, in Lisa Lohe's case, a sermonette. Cross country was part of a higher calling: to climb life's mountain (wearing a knapsack?) and attain not simply a Personal Best but *PERFECTION*. Yes, every step might be a lonely challenge, but one that could be overcome by making a 110% effort and accepting nothing less. Do that, and we'll *all* be winners.

The team then dealt with the challenge of listening to Yvette Metcalf—leaning in to hear the drawlier parts, rearing back during the shoutier. We're gonna work haaaard, and we're gonna *play* haaaard, and we're gonna haaaave ourselves an *OUTTASIGHT LONG-DISTANCE BALL! HA!! HA!! HA!!*

She and Lisa stepped out while the other girls deliberated. It was felt that Lisa'd be more inclined to find fault than things to praise; the team'd probably never be deemed good enough to carry her clipboard, much less climb Mount Perfection. Mumbles, on the other hand, would be more encouraging and supportive (at the cost of a few eardrums) and maybe with her in charge, they could still get other runners to sign up.

So Mumbles won 6-to-4, backed by all the Z's and Y's except Caroline, who (to spite Karen Lee) voted with the X's for Lisa. Having discharged their X-duty, Rhonda and Sheila congratulated the new captain; Britt sleepy-smiled like a hatchetgirl honing a blade; Caroline copycatted Britt; and Lisa, binding herself to a martyr's stake, became Moana of Arc.

But she stuck with the program, as did the rest of the original dozen. None of their recruits, though, stayed for more than one practice; they found cross country too exhausting, too time-consuming. Mr. Heathcote talked a lot about Proper Time Management—how you had to put schoolwork first while not “sloughing off” training (which invites injuries) or getting less than eight hours of sleep every night.

Vicki couldn't help but peek at Alex Dmitria every time this was mentioned.

Alex came by Burrow Lane every weekday morning without fail. She and Vicki ran to school together; met up again in Phys Ed; raced to English with Becca Blair, respectfully defying Vice Principal O'Brien's orders to not run in the hall; waved *Hi* in Vocal Music. And that was the extent of their friendship: Alex never had leisure to spare, never loitered at Vicki's house longer than to swig a glass of water or juice while Vicki secured her knapsack.

She always pledged to return sometime for a good long visit, get to know all the Volesters really well, have Vicki over to the Dmitria home just as soon as things let up a bit.

Vicki offered to come by and meet Alex there some mornings, but oh no thanks I really need the extra mileage—hey we’d better get a move on don’t want to be late—thanks so much for the OJ it was delicious—

Vicki’s feelings might’ve been hurt, had she not seen Alex act the same way with everyone else. Even Becca, even Mumbles; hyperactivity always took precedence.

Not so for laidback Joss Murrish.

She joined the VW Brass Ensemble, which rehearsed after school on Mondays and Wednesdays. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons she hung around the Media Center, studying or listening to tapes. All four days she’d wait for Vicki to finish practice, then escort her home—Vicki gamely jogging (“Never walk when you can run”) while Joss demonstrated just how slowly she could ride a bicycle. Most Friday nights Joss slept over at Vicki’s, and got driven by Felicia to her Saturday cornet lesson. Vicki, after that day’s cross countrying, would run or bike the three miles from school to Jupiter Street, and zonk out there most Saturday nights.

Thus she and Joss nurtured their friendship, keeping it freshest and best, while not barricading the garden against others who might drop by.

“Um hi, you guys—okay if I sit here?” Laurie Harrison asked one lunchtime, clutching a tray and looking adrift as she tended to do when Susie wasn’t around to provide ballast.

Joss and Laurie were already longtime classmates: they’d been in the same room for most grades at McGrum Elementary, and Laurie’d witnessed the rise and fall of Joss’s bond with Kim Zimmer.

“So,” Joss asked her, “how’re things back in the old Y-Wing?”

“Better’n for us in Z, I bet!” sniped Robin Neapolitan.

“Well okay, I guess,” Laurie offered, edging her stool away from Robin’s, and averting big brown bunny-eyes from Fiona Weller’s spectral stare. “We all miss you, Joss.”

“All?” Joss scoffed. “Sweet but *untrue*. I could name a couple exceptions who didn’t cry themselves to sleep when I transferred.”

“Um well, about them,” Laurie began, pausing to deal with a mouthful of lettuce.

“Vicki, can I ask you something? 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?”

Metcalf-caliber laughter shook their cafeteria table, and milk actually shot through Robin’s nose.

“*Shhhnnnnit!*” she reacted, causing a jocular aftershock.

“I’m sorry,” Laurie quailed, but everyone except Robin assured her this was a noteworthy accomplishment.

“(Means it’ll be a lucky afternoon,)” explained Fiona.

“Okay, so who spilled the beans about Vicki’s wicked past?” Joss demanded.

“*Joss!*” went Vicki.

“No, it wasn’t me. ‘Fess up, Laurie—you heard that from Kim Zimmer, right?”

“She didn’t tell *me*,” Laurie hastened to say. “Like Kim’d ever talk to *me*. But well, I kinda think, that is, she *might’ve* said something *like* that to, um y’know... Gigi Pyle.”

“Typical!” humphed Joss. “Gotta admit, though, this time she’s absolutely right—”

“*Joss!*”

“Yep, you’re looking at Guadalupe Velez—that’s her real name. (We don’t have to keep it a secret anymore, Vicki.) They used to call her ‘Loopy the Enforcer’ when she ran with the Pfiester Park Pherrettes—”

“Will you shut UP?” Vicki howled. “Gahd, Joss! *Ferrets?* What kind of gang name is that?”

“Better’n Ladybugs,” said Robin, still wiping her strawberry face.

All female sports teams at VW were called the Ladybugs. Feminist jockettes thought this childish if not demeaning; girlier ones (like Laurie Harrison) reveled in the title.

Or at least they did till squat Roger Mustardman got hold of it.

To the tune of “Rag Mop”:

L! L, A, D, Y!

B, U, G—B, U, G, S!

L, A, D, Y, B, U, G, S—

L A I D - B U G S !!!

Followed by a variation on “Lydia the Tattooed Lady”:

*Ladybugs O Ladybugs
Say have you seen Ladybugs?
Ladybugs run GIR-ulls cross country!
They have legs that flash like lightning
And their speed’s completely fright’ning...*

Although Mr. Heathcote posted their practice schedule for anyone to see, they were always startled to find Roger Mustardman lurking along the route du jour. Very soon he was accompanied by Lenny Otis and Dino Tattaglia, on the routes *and* in his chants. One day they even climbed a large tree on Oakapple Road, to “roto-root” from overhead as the L-Bugs passed below.

“**HA!! HA!! HA!!** (Ignooooore them,)” ordered Mumbles.

People started calling this trio the Smarks Brothers. Which reminded Vicki of the Three Marks back in kindergarten—one tall, one short, one dumb, all obnoxious.

Roger had a special knack for baiting Robin Neapolitan into speechless frenzies. They were studying causes of the Revolutionary War in Social Studies, and Mr. Gillies assigned Robin to do an oral report on the Stamp Act. Robin (outspoken about her “libertarian” Harley-Davidson views) turned this report into a demand for repeal of mandatory helmet laws.

Mr. Gillies asked the class for commentary.

Roger raised a hand. “So, was Gregg Allman quoting Samuel Adams when he wrote ‘Midnight Rider’? Like when he says ‘I got one more silver dollar,’ or was that from George Washington across the Potomac? And that line about ‘the road goes on forever’—do *hobbits* ride Harleys? Did Bilbo Baggins oppose paying for stamps, or just licking them?”

“That’ll do, uh Roger,” said Mr. Gillies.

Roger nodded penitently and turned to Lenny Otis. “Hey, is that Bilbo’s ring you’re wearing?”

“Uh huh!” chimed in Lenny. “‘I met him at the candy store! You get the picture?’”

“‘Yes we see,’” Roger responded. “‘That’s when we fell for the Stamper of the Act.’”

Mr. Gillies terminated their rendition, but at lunchtime Robin was still frothing at the mouth.

“Seriously, you can’t let him get to you,” Joss cautioned. “You’ll bust a blood vessel or something.”

Which seemed imminent as Dino Tattaglia arrived at the Smarks Brothers table, heralded by “HE’S A PIMP!!” from Roger and Lenny. “That’s *pimp*, not *pimple*,” Roger added, waggling eyebrows in Robin’s direction.

“What IS it with him?” Robin snarled.

“(Obvious,)” offered Fiona. “(He’s warm for your form.)”

“OH! GROSS!” gagged Robin. “You take that back right now if you expect me to ever buy milk for you again!”

“(Who’m I to deny a guy’s passion?)”

“What guy’s passion?” asked Sheila Quirk, plunking down between Vicki and Laurie. Sheila-Q played the flute, so Joss and Robin and Fiona knew her from Band, but they hadn’t talked to her that much before now.

“Roger Mustardman—the one over there, in the glasses,” said Vicki.

“(He’s got the hots for Robin.)”

“*Will you quit saying that out loud??*”

“Mustardman, hunh? I know all about him,” said Sheila-Q, digging into her macaroni salad. “Family’s got a lot of dough—big house on the lakefront.”

“Do they sell mustard?” asked Laurie.

“Nope—they’re major-league plumbers.”

“And live in a house by the *Lake*?” went Joss.

“With a mind in the SEWER,” frothed Robin.

“Pretty much,” Sheila-Q nodded. “They say Roger got kicked out of Front Tree after sixth grade, and I *know* he tore up 7-X last year with Dino Tattaglia. They started assigning THEMSELVES detention, ‘to save time for the teachers.’ That’s how you lucky Z’s got him this year, Roger that is—we still have to put up with Dino in 8-X. Who’s the googly-eyed guy with the fright wig?”

“Him? That’s Lenny Otis.”

“(Says he’s the reincarnation of Lenny Bruce,)” added Fiona. “(Goes around yelling ‘Two thousand tubes of airplane glue!’)”

“Cute.”

“Ooh, Sheila!” squealed Laurie.

“Really! What’ll Roy say?” wondered Vicki.

“I didn’t mean *he* was,” Sheila-Q spluttered, while Joss began planning how S-Q and Lenny could double-date with Robin and Roger—“Somewhere elegant, y’know, like *Bowling for Dollars*”—till both girls were ready to take a sock at her.

“We’re trying to like *eat* here!”

“Honestly!”

“Hey lookit,” said Laurie, directing their attention to the Smarks table. Over which Britt Groningen was now hanging.

“Gahd,” went Vicki.

“Really!” Sheila-Q concurred. “Believe me, Britt can do better.”

“Is she as big a bitch as I hear she is?” asked Robin. “I hope so! I hope she’s the *Queen Bitch*, and makes Mustardman fall the hell in love with her, and leads him on and teases him crazy and then dumps his blue balls in front of the whole freaking school!”

“(Sounds like somebody’s jealous,)” remarked Fiona. Who avoided a sock on the arm only because the bell rang just then.

*

Thursday the 2nd of October. A coolish afternoon, but clear and dry.

A school bus crossing Chubb Avenue into Athens Grove, west of Vanderlund. Heading for Timonoff Park and the Ladybugs’s first dual cross country meet.

First meet, but second visit to Timonoff Park: they’d gone there last Saturday to check out the course. 1.5 miles—2640 yards—2400 meters—up Eureka Way, around the Timonoff Fountain, and back via the Kasser Trail. Mr. Heathcote led them around once at a steady jog, pointing out significant features; then sent them around again at race pace, critiquing performances and suggesting improvements.

By now everyone’s particular strengths and weaknesses were fairly well documented, and the latter addressed. Lisa pushed herself too fast too soon; Susan had problems kicking it

up in the home stretch; Laurie could run like a jackrabbit, sometimes, but got discouraged too easily; Vicki was overconscious of her Klumsy Klutzer past, and kept reliving it with stumbles. Alex tied herself into unnecessary knots; Rhonda believed a pastime like running shouldn't be "practiced into the *ground*, honey!"; Susie couldn't understand why her future potential didn't translate into immediate results; Caroline and Karen Lee sometimes (okay: often) seemed interested only in compelling each other to eat her dust. Mumbles, while unfailingly well-disposed, could make even a "*GREAT JOB!!*" or "*NICE PACE!!*" painful to hear; and Sheila-Q habitually swore she'd never been told anything she didn't want to listen to in the first place.

As for Britt, Mr. Heathcote had issued repeated warnings that any interference with competitors—be it physical contact, causing them to break stride, or trying to block them from legally passing—would result in disqualification.

Yet they'd trained as a team, helping each other to improve, as their numerous time trials could attest. And now they had a common foe: the Lady Arcadians of Athens Grove Junior High, who outnumbered VW's girls eighteen to twelve, and were clad in uniforms of blue and white. Ladybugs, naturally, wore red and black: gallant honorable colors, though you had to be careful laundering them.

The L-Bugs studied the Arcadians, picking out their Four Genies of the Apocalypse—Jeanne, Gina, Jeanine, and Jeannette—who were putting Athens Grove on the cross country map. (Though none of them had light brown hair.)

"Hey, there's Frieda!" said Big Sue, jolted out of her usual taciturnity. "Rhon, look—it's Frieda Pieper!"

"Man!" went Rhonda. "She looks like a *zombie* chick. I'da thought they'da moved *way* farther away than Athens Grove."

"This is bad, you guys," moaned Lisa. "Frieda was the fastest runner VW ever had, the very fastest. We'll never beat her."

"C'mon, everybody, waaaalk it off," drawled Mumbles. "Focus on our warmup."

Vicki, while stretching conscientiously, took several ganders at the famous Frieda. Who did seem stupefied by all the upheavals she'd had to withstand since July—and might be eager for an opportunity to flee from them, trampling roughshod over the team she was

supposed to have led.

(Ouch.)

Warmup done, Vicki surveyed the meager troupe of spectators and was rewarded with a glimpse of light brown hair—not one of the Four Genies, but her own freshest-and-best friend. So Joss had made it (thank Gahd!) brought by Felicia and probably Goofus; Ozzie too had vowed to leave the Lot early and catch her in action.

Other parents and siblings were also present: Susie’s dad and Laurie’s mom, some of the Quirk clan, whichever Dr. Metcalf wasn’t on call; maybe one of Rhonda’s brothers for Joss to entice. The L-Bug Auxiliary would be there too—Roy Hodeau, Babyface Nelson Baedeker, and Terry Blitstein (Karen Lee’s Just Goonish Friend).

Plus, no doubt, the Smarks Brothers. Yes: Vicki could hear the *ooh! ooh!* of Lenny Otis. Had he acted like a Horshack even before the premiere of *Welcome Back, Kotter*? Why was she thinking about a thing like that at a time like this? To keep her mind off her big fat feet, that’s why—the image of them tripping over each other, making false starts and feeble finishes.

“C’mon, you guys, all together now! This is it!” chattered Alex.

Mumbles extended an arm, palm down; Alex clapped her hand over the captain’s; the other ten L-Bugs piled theirs on top.

“GO-O-O-O-O VANDERLUND!!”

Their battle cry was answered not by Athens Grove, but a Smarksist perversion of *The Student Prince*’s drinking song:

Britt! Britt! Let the chase start!

Lay-dee-bug breaks your heart!

Britt! Britt! Britt!

Let ALL Roto-ROOTers say SHE

Will go faaaaaAAAARRRR—

(Unclear whether they ended that last line with an R or a T.)

“Gee, *Britt!*” Lisa masticated. “Who’re we supposed to be—*You* White and the Eleven Dwarves?”

Sleepy sigh, followed by a Groano Ono haiku:

*Oh Lisa, you think
Clowning makes a difference?
And besides, it's DWARFS.*

Just enough time for Vicki and Sheila-Q to trade “Beat Britt” vow-nudges before the starting gun.

And they’re off. We are; you are. Fast but not too fast to begin with; nobody wins by wasting energy on the first quarter-mile. Run strong, keep it even, stay on pace while you jockey for position in the pack. Some are far ahead by now, red shirts you recognize: Rhonda the Roadrunner and Alex the Gazelle, Susan plowing up the turf and Lisa pumping furiously through blue-shirted obstructions. No sign of Britt, but S-Q’s right there matching you stride for stride as you leave Eureka Way, swing round the Fountain and head for the Trail. Thankful it isn’t raining; neither of you are good mudders, and the Kasseri Trail’s all dirt.

This is what it boils down to: a month of training, of avoiding Zephyr Heaven, of no milk or pop or junk food but fruit and veggies and all that pasta for the carbs, all that water! water! everywhere! to keep you hydrated not to mention inside washrooms when you aren’t out running, and when are you NOT out running? hour after hour, day after day, breathing deep and slow through nose *and* mouth, staying straight and smooth with every step, hoping you can really do this—hope so? KNOW so—acting relaxed as you pass one blue shirt and then another, making them think you’re daisy-fresh and can run faster forever, making yourself think that as you leave the Trail and launch your final kick, chest hurting, lungs bursting, keep on going don’t quit now never give up finish the race *oh no you don’t you skinny-assed Arcadian you’re not about to pass ME—*

I am a butterfly: I float, I glide.

Run run run LEAP.

With a flawless *grand jeté*: soaring past the skinny-assed competition and over the finish line.

Into the chute then, single file, nearly colliding with Mumbles ahead of you. Being told to keep walking, keep your head high, unlike some of the girls who were doubled over or staggering on rubber legs—Lisa Lohe having to be held up by Susan and Rhonda, Mr. Heathcote watching her closely, an anxious spectator calling Lisa’s name, her mother maybe, narrow-visaged like Lisa who *would* do a thing like that to herself, bolting at the beginning into agony at the end.

All in less than fifteen minutes.

“M’okay, m’okay,” Lisa gasped. “How’d we do, did we win? What was my time?”

“Sweats on,” Mr. Heathcote commanded the other L-Bugs. “Cooldown now—results later.”

A cross country team is scored by where its first five runners place, with the lowest total winning the meet. Ideally yours would be the first five across the line: $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5$ equals 15, a perfect score. Your sixth and seventh runners are also awarded points—not added to the total, but they can *displace* slower opponents. So if your girls were the first *seven* to finish a dual meet, the other team would score $8 + 9 + 10 + 11 + 12$ for a dismal 50—the worst possible total.

In the meet at Timonoff Park, the Four Genies of the Apocalypse finished 1st (Jeannette), 3rd (Jeanine), 4th (Gina), and 8th (Jeanne).

The first five L-Bugs were Rhonda (2nd), Lisa (5th), Alex (6th), Big Sue (7th), and Mumbles (9th).

Vicki’s *grand jeté*—which she expected Mr. Heathcote would call “overstriding,” a cross country no-no—landed her in 10th place, displacing no less than Frieda Pieper to Skinny-Assed Zombie Chick (11th).

Final results:

Athens Grove Lady Arcadians $1 + 3 + 4 + 8 + 11 = \mathbf{27}$

Vanderlund Ladybugs $2 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 9 = \mathbf{29}$

Winner: Athens Grove by two points.

Fresh agony for Lisa. Sheila-Q, who finished 12th, literally kicked herself for not keeping up with Vicki and further displacing Frieda; though the L-Bugs would still have lost.

(Britt, who came in 19th, basked in the extraordinary feat of outpacing Laurie and the sevvies.)

Vicki came out of it with a new Personal Best—1.5 miles in 11:58—and momentary immortalization, thanks to finishing-line photos snapped by Joss and Ozzie. There, caught on film from two different angles, was proof positive she'd taken five years of ballet lessons.

"You shoulda seen your *face!*" Joss had exclaimed after the meet; and now Vicki *could*, along with everyone else at her cafeteria table. If there really had been a gang called the Pfiester Park Pherrettes, and their sergeant-at-arms really had been "Loopy the Enforcer," she'd've had the exact same dagger-dangerous expression as Vicki doing her aerial split.

"Wish I could leap like that," sighed Laurie Harrison.

"You'll be unstoppable on the hurdles when we run track in high school," declared Alex Dmitria. (Alex liked to circulate the lunchroom, eating with different groups of her many friends, and today she was sitting with Vicki's.)

"If you can pull off one of those every time, I'll start going to your races," promised Robin Neapolitan. "Okay now, where were we? Oh yeah!—"

She and Sheila Quirk had begun having epic arguments, starting these during first period Band, then picking up at lunchtime where they'd left off; occasionally switching sides to see how well they could argue from the opposite viewpoint.

Today's topic was Rocker of the Year: Robin saying Bruce Springsteen, Sheila-Q holding out for Paul McCartney. (Fiona Weller insisted both were wrong—no one could outshine David Bowie.) As per usual, voices were raised on both sides and tempers teetered on the verge of being lost.

"*Baby we were born to run!*" proclaimed Robin.

"*Listen to what the man said!*" retorted Sheila-Q.

"*F-A-A-A-A-A-A-M-E!!*" thunderclapped Fiona, of all people; and a hush fell over the dumbstruck cafeteria.

Broken by the Smarks Brothers answering, "*What you get is no tomorrow! What you need you have to borrow!*" and a general eighth-grade laugh-shout.

"(I win,)" concluded Fiona.

“We’ve got a pretty good lunch-bunch,” Vicki told Joss.

“That’s all you, y’know.”

“What, don’t you think so?”

“No—I mean yeah, I do—I *mean* it’s ‘cause of *you* we’ve got it.”

“What *do* you mean?”

“You’re like the magnet that’s drawn us all together. If you hadn’t left the Pherrettes and moved to Vanderlund—”

“—*will* you shut up about that?—”

“—*I’d* still be marooned over on Y team. I’d still only know Robin and Fiona in Band, and we’d probably still not talk that much to Sheila Quirk. You’d *never* have seen Fiona and Laurie Harrison eating lunch together. Face it, Vicki—you’re our two thousand tubes of airplane glue!”

“Gluey Guadalupe!” said Vicki. “Hey... do I really look like a Guadalupe Velez?”

“More’n *I* do,” said Joss.

23

Cossack Holiday

The first sign that something about Alex Dmitria was seriously amiss came when Robin Neapolitan invited their lunch-bunch to what she insisted was *not* a birthday party, despite her turning fourteen that same week.

“Birthday parties are for little kids. This is gonna be a *jam session*.”

“Yeah whatever,” said Sheila Quirk, following Robin along the cafeteria steam counter. “You’re *sure* it’s happening, this time?”

“I said so, didn’t I?”

“You’ve been saying so for the past two weeks—when you aren’t saying it’s off again.”

“Well now it’s on again, this time for sure. With *guys* there, too.”

“What sort of guys?” Vicki asked.

“*Cool* guys. *Rockin’* guys—”

“—is who we want,” quipped Sheila-Q. “But we’ll settle for *Band* guys. Just as well I haven’t finished dumping Roy yet. Guess I better go eat with him,” she sighed as they paid the cashier.

“What about our argument?” Robin demanded. (Question of the day: were the Bay City Rollers retarded?)

“You shoulda thought of that before throwing a party with only one day’s notice.”

“It’s a JAM SESSION,” Robin flung after her as Sheila left them.

“What is?” asked Alex Dmitria, passing by with a selection of jocks.

“Party tomorrow night, my place—wanna come?” Robin asked, directing the invite not so much to Alex as the musclemen, particularly Craig Clerkington, whom Robin’d had a surly thing for since fifth grade.

Alex’s predictable answer: “Oh sorry, I’m busy tomorrow.”

“Aw c’mon, *live* a little!” Craig advised her, giving Alex a hearty swat on the tush. Which apparently packed the zappage of a 220-volt joy buzzer, given Alex’s “*AIEEEE!!*” and pivot-thrusting a tray of spaghetti, meat sauce, and tossed green salad into Craig’s solar plexus.

Mild *oof* from Craig.

Whirl and begone by Alex.

What the hell just happened? from the witnesses.

Hoot by Brad Faussett: “You’re supposed to put the food in your *mouth*, dummy!”

“Hunh?” from befuddled Craig, staring at the messy tray clutched to his midsection like a recovered fumble.

Becca Blair strode up and took charge. “Only an accident,” she informed the faculty monitor. “Get napkins—lots of them,” she ordered Brad and other laughing jocks. “Take that to the tray return,” she instructed Craig.

Her red LEDs caught Vicki’s stunned gawk for a brief second.

She saw it too.

How blanched Alex’s face had gone. Eyeballs white all round the irises. Mouth in a rictus like a bad Lisa Lohe imitation (something you’d expect from Britt Groningen, but never Alex).

“C’mon, your slop’s getting cold,” said Robin, annoyed at having lost an opportunity to mop Craig off. “Guess what!” she told their lunch table, “Clerkington hit on Dmitria just now, and she hit him back!”

Startled gasp from Laurie. Raised brows by Joss. “(Where’s my milk?)” asked Fiona, hunched over her staff-paper spiral.

“What happened? Is Alex okay?”

“He goosed her—she creamed him with Chef Boy-ar-dee—he went ‘oof’—she ran off—they’re hosing him down. Just as he was about to say he’d be at my jam session, too.”

“(Sure he was,)” muttered Fiona through a mouthful of Froot Loops.

“He coulda been!”

“(Did he goose *you*?)”

“Oh never mind. You don’t understand how hornyboys think.”

“None of us do, ‘cause none of them *can*,” said Joss. (Sub-inquiring *What DID happen?* to Vicki.)

(*Tell you later.*) “So anyway, about this ‘jam session’—what do you want us who aren’t in Band to bring?”

“An ass you can dance off, baby!” Robin told her. “We are gonna get *down* at Villa Neapolitan!”

“And I can come, right?” asked Laurie Harrison, bouncing with hesitant excitement.

“I thought you *WERE* coming!” Robin answered, as though Laurie were trying to weasel out of an RSVP.

“Oh! Well yeah, *I* am, but what I meant to ask is—can Susie come too, y’know my sister? She really loves par—I mean jam sessions.”

“I dunno,” mused Robin, twirling spaghetti onto her fork. “Might be too much for her to handle. Once we get going, things could turn pretty damn rowdy—”

“(Riiiiight,)” went Fiona. “(No beer—no weed—and Fat Bob’s old lady chaperoning? Be lucky if it just gets *loudie*.)”

“Are you done with that new song yet?” Robin growled. “It better have an extended drum solo.”

“Susie can take care of herself,” Laurie bravely persisted. “And she really wants to be there. So... um?...”

“Will you *both* bring me presents?”

“Jam session presents, that is—*not* birthday,” Joss interposed. “A nice jar of musical marmalade, or harmonious preserves—”

“No sandwich spreads,” said Robin. “Make it one present each and you can bring anyone you please—so long as none of ‘em are named Mustardman, Otis, or Tattaglia.

Don’t say it—” she warned Fiona, to forestall any HE’S-A-PIMP-ing.

“(‘Breaks a new heart ev’ry day,’)” Fiona sang instead.

The bell rang and the girls gathered themselves for departure. Vicki was set to grab Joss and hurry her off to discuss the goosing/creaming, when Robin leaned in between them.

“Er, Volester—can I talk to you a sec, like in private?”

She must know something about Alex! Vicki sub-alerted Joss, who took the hint.

“C’mon Laurie, c’mon Feef—I got a bunch of other ideas for jam session gifties.”

“(Jambalaya,)” Fiona proposed. “(With brine shrimp.)”

“You better NOT give me sea monkeys!” Robin hollered after them, before leading Vicki to the second-floor Home Base washroom and bullying their way to one of its mirrors. There, her voice lowered to almost Fiona-volume, she said:

“(You’re good with makeup—can you give me any tips? And before you say anything, *yes*—I do drown myself in Clearasil every night.)”

What’s this got to do with Alex freaking out? Vicki nearly said aloud. “Um—you mean for tomorrow? What’ll you be wearing?”

“Well gee, I’m fresh outta evening gowns, so same as I always dress.” (Jeans belted with a heavy-duty buckle, scuffed combat boots, and a black leather jacket over a primary-color T-shirt.) “Why? Does it matter?”

“Well of course it does! Your makeup should always complement your outfit.”

“Really?” said Robin, sounding very unRobinlike.

It had taken Vicki awhile to warm up to this Hell’s Angel-in-training. “(She’s an acquired taste,)” Fiona once put it while sitting right next to Robin, who snapped “I am *not*!” But when you got past the zits and peroxide and belligerence, there was a lot about Robin worth befriending—not least her common sense, as shown in choosing Vicki for makeup consultation. (Joss was a cosmetic minimalist; Laurie played it oversafe; Fiona was frankly out to startle if not unnerve onlookers; and Sheila-Q would prefer to argue than advise. “You’d have to be a Dainty-Drawers to wear that shade of blush!” she’d say.)

So Vicki tried to be helpful and patient, even though Robin kept them in the washroom through the entire free period. “If anybody catches us, I’ll act sick and you act like you’re gonna take me to the nurse.”

Reminding Vicki of how Alex had looked before she’d vanished.

Worries upon worries.

While Vicki played Avon Lady, and Robin took notes about how to lay it on thick.

“Thanks, Volester! You’re a pal. Bet I land a fella at *least* as good as Oily Roy Hodeau. Whaddaya suppose Quirk sees in that slimeball, aside from his French horn?”

“ROB-in!”

“Oh don’t be so dirtyminded. I’m talking about his Band instrument, not the one in his pants.”

On which note they parted: Robin for fifth period Science with Mr. Dunn, and Vicki for Vocal Music with Mrs. Weller—and Alex Dmitria, who slipped into the big Home Base classroom just before the tardy bell. Vicki, a soprano, could only peek surreptitiously at her among the altos during forty minutes of pitch-matching; but she caught up with Alex for a fleeting minute on the way back to Z-Wing.

“‘Kay?” asked Vicki.

“Course,” said Alex.

She didn’t look ‘kay, though: still very pale, with supernovas turned to black holes.

“Do you—” Vicki began.

“See ya,” Alex ended, disappearing into Z204 for Advanced Math.

Vicki’d had her fill of Plain Old Math for the day and did not follow her in. Becca Blair did, though, giving Vicki another cybernated eyescan as she passed by.

(Brrrr...)

Retreat across the hall to Z201 and spend most of Spanish giving *el mal de ojo* to Craig Clerkington. Who still seemed perplexed by the cafeteria incident, plus having a meat-sauce splotch on his shirt. Vicki hoped this was a new shirt, his *best* shirt, and Craig’s mom would give him hell for ruining it, while Brad Faussett laughed until he choked—just as he was doing now.

“What’s so funny?” Carly Thibert wanted to know.

“HE is!” gargled Brad.

“*En Español, por favor,*” Señorita DeStefano requested.

“Uhhhh... ¿*El es?*”

“*Muy bueno.*”

“¡HA!” went Brad.

“Aw, quit it,” whined Craig.

By seventh period Joss was agog for updates on all the goings-on. But Mr. Dunn started droning right away about forces and motion, so Vicki put the headlines on hold; Science, for whatever reason (sheer boredom?) had become her least-understandable class.

After school, she sub-told Joss.

Special! Joss sub-answered. Later adding “Is that all?” when Vicki explained about Robin’s makeover research—which Joss still found more interesting than the state of Alex’s buttocks or psyche.

“But she got so upset!”

“We’ve all had to get over Craig’s meatheadedness,” shrugged Joss. “*You* did, that day he made those piggy-snorts at your ‘hind-riders.’”

“*All* my pants are ‘hind-riders,’” Vicki grumbled. “As soon as cross country’s done with, I’m wearing a skirt to school every day. On top of half-a-dozen petticoats.”

“Like a clog dancer?” said Joss. “Don’t worry about Alex—she’s strong, she can take it. And if Craig pulls any more piggy-stunts, you two can clog long-distance over *his* ass!”

“Incredibly gross,” Vicki told her.

*

The Ladybugs had no practice that Thursday afternoon; they were tapering down training before the big Cityland Invitational a week from Saturday. So Vicki had to wait till Friday morning to see Alex again.

Wait. And wait. And *not* see. Because Alex didn’t show for their run to school, and that had never happened before: not a single morning missed or late till now. Vicki looked up her phone number on the L-Bug team roster, and twice tried calling Sprangletop Road: both times the line was busy.

Finally it got so late she had to beg a ride from Felicia, who wasn’t pleased to be kept waiting while Vicki got a jump on her new resolution and changed into a skirt. No time to hunt for a half-slip or pull on pantyhose, so she took a pair of L’eggs out to the Firebird and wriggled into them there—lying on the back seat with feet in the air, skirt round her waist, and Bicentennial panties patriotically exposed for any passing driver to admire.

“Victoria Lorraine! WHAT do you think you’re doing??”

“Um... trying not to snag my hose?”

“Well, also try not to give your poor old mother a stroke!”

“Aw, you’re not so *poor*,” Vicki pertly ventured (and was relieved to get a smile).

Friday meant Health & Hygiene in first period Phys Ed, so no need to get hideously gymsuited, but Ms. Swanson still maintained her bark and whistle as she called the roll:

“Denvour!”

“Here.”

“Disseldorf!”

“Here.”

“Dmitria!... Dmitria?... Where’s Alex??”

Surprise rippling through the gym bleachers, except for Vicki and those who’d already heard no answer from Alex in Mr. Folz’s homeroom. Absence lists weren’t distributed till second period, so Ms. Swanson’d had no tip-off that the longest perfect attendance streak in Vanderlund Township School District history was broken.

Redoubled worries upon worries. Not simply for Alex’s wellbeing, but that of the Ladybugs: an unexcused absence counted as missing a team practice, even on Fridays when none was held. Which would scratch Alex from The Cityland Invitational, and hobble any hope of the L-Bugs distinguishing themselves there.

Becca Blair beckoned Vicki over at the end of Ms. Swanson’s don’t-abuse-drugs lecture. Vicki felt irritated with herself for complying at once, and for feeling as undeveloped as Susie Zane in Becca’s presence—and for letting Becca interrogate her in transit to the Z-Wing, mostly to confirm things Becca already seemed to know.

Yes, Vicki and Alex regularly ran to school together. Yes, Vicki’d tried and failed (twice!) to get in touch with Alex that morning. Yes, Vicki *had* seen what she’d thought she saw yesterday, and been worrying (upon worrying) about ever since.

“Do you know Mike Spurgeon?” Becca tersely queried, halting just outside Z202.

“Um, I’ve heard the name,” said Vicki. Now irritated with herself for standing at attention—and at her pantyseats for wedgie-ing upward, L’eggs and Bicentennials both: threatening to take her skirtbottom with them and make it a hind-rider. (A hazard Little Sue

never had to deal with.) She contrived a discreet pluck-out while vowing to locate every petticoat in her wardrobe the moment she got home.

“Rowr rowr,” went Roger Mustardman as he swaggered into the classroom.

(*Gahd!* Boys were such piggy-snorting tush-disrespecting animals!)

“I’ll tell you something about Mike and Alex,” Becca was saying, ignoring both Roger and Vicki’s nether predicament. “Meet me out on the walkway after fourth period. You’ve got Mr. Gillies for homeroom, right? I’ll let him know you’ll be with me during study hall.”

Ma’am yes ma’am. Robin was correct: no way could you say “can’t” or “won’t” to Becca Blair. Barely in her teens, yet indistinguishable from a student teacher; dater of guys in high school, who felt lucky to be so favored; co-captain of the eighth-grade Pompon Squad with haughty Gigi Pyle—who had three of her personal clique (including Kim Zimmer) backing her up; yet they all knew Becca’s cheer was law. She was a clique unto herself.

Which made it all the odder when she sighed and murmured, “Damn I hate English,” as they entered Miss McInerney’s class.

Vicki tucked that away to ponder later as she praised Robin’s remade face; rolled eyes with Fiona at this same remake; and sub-informed Joss, *Boy have I got a lot to tell YOU!*

“I bet it’s bull-oney,” Joss snortled between second and third periods. ““Something to tell about Mike and Alex’—ha! Obviously Becca wants your beauty-salon guidance. She saw the wonders you worked with Robin, and—”

“Blah blah blah. Who is this Mike Spurgeon?”

“Him? He’s King of the Towheads—got more hair than *I* do. There was a big fuss last year whether he could play football without going to a barber. I forget what happened, except he *did* get to be the sevvie quarterback even though he *didn’t* get a haircut. He was a Z, but I haven’t seen him over here this year—maybe he transferred out.”

“Disappointed?”

“Nahhhh—he’s a towhead, remember. Too blond for *me*.”

*

“I’ve known Alex since kindergarten” (said Becca Blair, examining her fingernails on the stark stone walkway) “and she’s always been like she is now. The good part, I mean.

Always into games—kickball, softball, tetherball, you name it. Boys liked her for that, years before they took any notice of her looks. Not just letting her play on their teams, but picking her first when choosing up sides.”

(Fishing a bottle of Chanel polish out of a Gucci bag.)

“That should’ve driven me crazy. But how can you be jealous of someone like Alex? She loved everybody and we all loved her. She’s always been that sort of person.”

(Pause for nail-painting: gold lamé to correspond with her pumpkin-colored sweater-dress.)

“You said... the good part?” Vicki timidly probed.

“Mmm. In grade school, she and Mike Spurgeon were like best buddies. The other guys never gave him a hard time about ‘playing with a girl,’ ‘cause it was Alex and they all wished they were him. It seemed so obvious, him and Alex being together. Mike was always great-looking too; girls had crushes on him back in *sandbox* days. But again, none of us was ever jealous, ‘cause we all knew they were bound to be a real couple when they grew up.”

(Pause to blow on wet nails. And keep pausing. And keep blowing.)

“Something... bad happened?” Vicki prompted.

“Mmm. Last April, during spring break. I’m not sure exactly what—either Mike made a move on her, and she freaked and fought him off; or he got Alex to go along with it, and her dad caught them. Have you met Mr. Dmitria yet? Well, don’t be in any rush to—believe me.

“Anyway, she’s been a bundle of nerves since then. Especially when guys hit on her. Which of course they’re always doing. Not all of them as dumb as Craig was yesterday, but Alex gets jumpy even when it’s a nice guy. She wouldn’t go out for Pompon Squad even though she’d’ve been a shoo-in. Said it was because we can’t be on any other sports teams, but really it was ‘cause she didn’t want a crowd of guys watching her lead cheers. You know, the way guys do. And even if *she* did, her ‘Papa’ sure as hell wouldn’t.”

(Pause for renewed nail inspection.)

(A teacher patrolling the walkway started toward them, recognized Becca, and passed by with a courteous nod.)

“I was hoping she’d get better over the summer,” Becca continued. “But now she’s out sick, for the first time ever. Alex doesn’t get sick, even when everybody else does; she plays nurse. She really cares about people. And dogs, birds, trees, you name it. The only one she won’t take care of is herself. She *thinks* she does. But only runs herself raggedy.”

Vicki squirmed on the stark stone bench. “How can I help?”

“Maybe she’ll listen to you. You’re new here. You’re her neighbor, her teammate. She picked you to run to school with.”

“But... what can I say to make her feel *better*?”

Becca shouldered her bag and rose to her feet: honeyskinned, creamy-aura’d, golden-lamé’d. Vicki scrambled up too and reached deferentially for the Z-Wing door, but held off opening it for Becca till she received an answer.

Junoesque sigh. “Something that won’t keep her clammed up in a shell.”

*

“You okay?” Joss asked Vicki four hours later.

“Yeah... thanks again for coming with me.”

“Hey, it’s Friday—your *casa* is my *casa* tonight. And once we’re done here, we’ve got a party (‘scuse me, a jam session) to get ready for. Think she might wanna go with us?”

“Alex?? To Robin’s??”

“You said Robin invited her, before Meathand got ass-slappy—Jeez Louise! Is this where she lives?”

240 Sprangletop Road: the Mission Revival house.

“You inlanders!” Joss said appreciatively. “Never a dull homestead!”

“I guess,” said Vicki. She pressed the Mission Revival buzzer, and a series of shrill *yip yip yips* resounded inside. “(Gahd, I hope that’s not Alex.)”

The door opened. “Yes?” went a lady who hopefully also wasn’t Alex, grown a quarter-century older and harder-faced overnight.

“Um, hi! Is Alex Dmitria here? I mean I’m sure she is, this is her house—we knew she was out sick today—but could we see her, please? I run with Alex, y’know like to school and cross country and so on, this here’s my friend Joss uh Jocelyn and *my* name’s Vicki and

look, we brought Alex's homework."

Yip yip yip at a distance.

The lady smiled, which made her look much more like present-day (or at least yesterday) Alex. "Please, come in. I am Alejandra's mother. She will be glad to see you—and her homework." Latin accent, with a parched tone to it: like freeze-dried guacamole.

The same was true of the Dmitriyas's interior decoration. It resembled a fairly exclusive yet aridly austere hotel lobby in Odessa (Texas or the Ukraine: take your pick).

They found Alex in a spartan bedroom, not at all like Joss's aerie or Vicki's cozy corner. One wall was dominated by a truly spooky poster of a masked hockey goalie—The City's own Mr. Zero, signed by his own bold hand; but still.

Alex, in a tightly-knotted kimono, was staring not at this prize possession but out a window, with an *I'M-UNJUSTLY-GROUNDED!* posture and attitude. Clutched in her arms was a Chihuahua who yipped at the visitors with a *JESUS-SAVE-ME!* tenor and expression.

"Vicki! Ohmygosh!" cried Alex. "I am soooo sorry about this morning, you would not *believe* the silliness I've gone through today, all I can say is it *wasn't my fault*, my PARENTS overreacted and jumped to all kinds of conclusions when really I was *perfectly fine*, but they went and made me ruin my perfect attendance record for NO reason—"

She stopped long enough to inhale, and Vicki seized the opportunity to give her the folder of homework assignments. "I got your Health and English and Music—Becca got your Math and Science and Social Studies—"

"—and *I* got your French from Monsieur Blumer," said Joss, catching the Chihuahua as it plunged headlong out of Alex's loosened grasp.

"Oh thank heavens, this is *such* a load off my mind, I was soooo afraid I was gonna fall behind and never catch up again—thanks, you guys! and thank Becca for me too!"

"Um... you remember Joss Murrish," said Vicki, who'd hastily introduced them that one time Alex bolted through lunch at their cafeteria table.

"Sure! Hi, Joss! We're so glad you're here—that's Tonio, he's my baby" (who was trying to hide inside Joss's baggy T-shirt) "—and that's Yermak, he's my sweetheart" (a handsome Borzoi stretched out by a Windsor chair).

Joss deposited the Chihuahua on the floor, where he took shelter under the bedcorner farthest away from Alex. “Tonio, hunh? Typical male, going straight for my ti—throat,” she said, neatly sidestepping dangerous topics.

“Oh no, not Tonio, he’s supergentle! Please don’t think bad of him, he’s just the sweetest little dog—”

“Um, I was only kidding—” Joss faltered, before Vicki stepped up to the line as a responsible Ladybug should. Removing the homework from Alex’s hands; placing it on a severely organized desktop; making Alex sit beside her on the bounce-a-quarter-off-its-coverlet bed. Mr. Zero stared down at them from one wall, while rows of eyes in framed group photos peered out from another. Joss, counting the many teams and clubs and Girl Scout troops Alex’d been in over the years, retreated to the Windsor chair and there had her shoes sniffed by Yermak. “(Jeez, dog, you too?)”

Meanwhile Vicki told Alex “a little story.” Modifying the past to fit present needs and not forgetting melancholy Paulette Schoop, she led Alex to believe that a recklessly neglected sprain had cost Vicki a career in ballet, which might’ve been salvaged had she not overdone her ankle before its ligament could heal.

“But I don’t have a sprain!” Alex objected. “*Nothing’s* the matter, why won’t anyone believe that? You know me, Vicki, I’m calm as a *ROCK*—”

“Alex, now listen: you have got to start taking things easier.”

“Oh don’t you start, not you too!”

“*You’d* say the exact same if you saw me or Laurie or Sheila or any of us wearing ourselves out. I’ve *heard* you do it, Alex—to Susie before Athens Grove; you told her not to push herself too hard like Lisa does, or she’d end up hurting herself.”

“She *would* ‘cause she *was*, and Laurie wasn’t going to warn her in time ‘cause she’s so close to Susie she didn’t notice it.”

“Well,” said Vicki, “*I’ve* noticed what *you’re* doing, so let *me* warn *you* in time. Either promise to start easing up, right this very minute, or else I’m gonna run outta here and go SNITCH on you! To Mumbles and Mr. Heathcote!”

Joss, who’d kept her mouth shut till then, lost it at SNITCH and had one of her silent gigglefits that were impossible to resist joining in. Even Alex unknotted enough to share

some of the mirth; and Yermak trotted over to rest his noble head on her knee.

“Um,” said Alex, scratching him behind his noble ears. “Maybe. I sure don’t want Mumbles yelling at me. But there’s so many things I need to *do*—”

“Which you *can*,” said Vicki, “if you get in a little rest and relaxation first.”

“What do you think I was *doing*, cooped up here all day today?”

“You don’t look rested and you’re not acting relaxed.”

“I tell you what,” said Joss. “You two’ve got practice tomorrow, right? I’ll bike down to school after my cornet lesson—you guys get changed after your practice—and then the three of us’ll go do the Green Bridge.”

“That’s a great idea!” Vicki applauded. “Alex, didn’t you say you get a discount at all the Green Bridge stores ‘cause of your dad?”

“*What?*” went Joss. “And I’m only hearing about this now? Well, you’ve got no choice, Alex; this is gonna happen.”

“Oh but I can’t, not tomorrow afternoon—I’ve gotta be at the animal shelter by two!”

“No you do not,” announced her mother, entering with a platter of cups and saucers. “I have telephoned them already to say you will be indisposed.”

“Mama, you didn’t!”

Rapidfire confab in Spanish, of which Vicki could translate very few words—other than Mama Dmitria’s having the last one on the subject.

“*Te de canela*,” she offered. “Cinnamon tea. Best in the mornings, but very healthful all the day. And here are *polvorones*—shortbread cookies.”

“Mama! We’re in training!”

“We’re tapering down,” Vicki quickly reminded her.

“Oh, yum! I’ll eat yours, Alex,” said Joss.

No need. Tonio, drawn by the smell of cinnamon, came out from under the bed to spring atop it and wheedle a cookie from Alex. (“Just this once,” she consented.) Yermak was too proud to beg, but nobly accepted half a *polvorón* from Joss.

“Forget it,” Vicki told both dogs. “I’m eating *all* of mine.”

Over their tea, she and Joss talked about that night’s Band Jam—being extra careful not to call it a “party” lest Alex be reminded of yesterday’s invitation/incident. They told her

instead about Fiona Weller, whose father Lem had spent the past decade going from folk music to folk-rock to psychedelia, and was now on the road fifty weeks a year “still hoping to become the next Van Dyke Parks.” His wife Martha (Mrs. Weller of Vocal Music) had moved in with her sister Polly (an uplifting weaver), brother-in-law Cass Rumpelmagen (an optimistic architect), and their five wholesome little Rumpelmagens (to whom elder cousin Fiona was “Fee Fi Fo Fum”) in a house mostly made of Plexiglas—at which you shouldn’t throw stones, though “Feef” did hurl verbal brickbats.

“She must be so unhappy,” murmured compassionate Alex. “I would be, if my Papa was always out of town. Though I’d love it if I had a lot of little cousins living with me.”

Vicki produced a sheet of paper from the notebook in her knapsack. “These are the lyrics to Fiona’s new song—me ‘n’ Laurie ‘n’ Little Sue are gonna sing backup when she debuts it tonight.”

*Take me to your empty attic
and show me the dust on your mirror:
then I can make it my business
to find a highway out of here*

*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*

(Fiona, tipped off by Vicki, had read Pamela Sykes’s *Mirror of Danger*.)

“Gee!” breathed Alex. “That’s... I don’t know what to say. It’s hard to believe she’s really Mrs. Weller’s daughter.”

“Yep!” said Joss, setting down a drained cup and cleaned plate. “Weirdly cool, that’s our Feef. Well, not to eat and dash, but we really gotta get going if we’re gonna be at the Band Jam in time. Alex, you rest up for tomorrow, and don’t forget to bring your card or badge or whatever gets your Green Bridge discount—”

A heavy door thumped open and shut.

Tonio, letting out one constricted *yip*, hopped back under the bed; Yermak squeezed himself beneath the Windsor chair.

“Papa’s home!” said Alex. “Come meet him before you go.”

A great slab of a man, sorting through a fistful of mail in the arid austere living room. He almost reminded Vicki of Telly Savalas—same big bald head, tinted glasses, and a toothpick not unlike a Tootsie Pop stick protruding from between his lips. Then he glanced up, and Vicki abruptly recalled *The Beast of Yucca Flats*.

Deep rumble of a voice: “You are feeling better, Alexandra?”

“Oh Papa, I’m just fine. These are my friends, Vicki and Joss; they brought me my homework, wasn’t that nice? Is it okay if I go with them to the Green Bridge tomorrow after cross country practice?”

“To do what?”

“Why, visit the store, of course—”

“—and all the other stores—” Joss couldn’t help interjecting.

“—to *window-shop*,” Vicki volunteered, just in case money *was* an object.

Behind the tinted glasses, Mr. Dmitria’s big bald eyes did not shift from Alex as he took a fresh bite on his toothpick. “Shopping, you say. Or perhaps—to meet somebody?”

Stillness in the living room.

“No, Papa,” Alex murmured. “It’d just be me ‘n’ my girlfriends here. Nobody else.” (Swallow.) “Doctor said, y’know, I’m s’posed to... um... lighten up.”

Joss and Vicki sub-nudged each other. *A doctor said.*

“Lighten up, yes. That you can do at home. As you did today. I do not like the idea of you slacking off.”

“*¡Dios mio!*” from Mrs. Dmitria, listening in the kitchen. Delivering a stream of what didn’t sound like Spanish so much as an angry tape recording played in reverse.

The tinted lenses turned kitchenward for a moment, then were trained on the other girls. Joss feigned sudden interest in whether her bike was still parked safely out front.

Vicki wanted to run join Tonio under Alex’s bed.

Then she remembered something Gran had said one day back when Vicki, no older than six, had been frightened by a brusque druggist in the Schmelzes’s old neighborhood:

Never mind, Miss. He is only a Russss-ee-an.

So, drawing herself up like a proud Litvak, she returned the big bald glare; and it was Mr. Dmitria who looked away first.

Alex cleared her throat with a piteous *ahem*. “Please, Papa?”

Toothpick-bearing lips widened, in an approximation of a smile. “Very well. This once, you may go.”

“Oh THANK you, Papa!” went Alex, bounding into his arms.

“Well, we’ll be skedaddling,” said Joss, tugging Vicki to and out the door, retrieving her bicycle and holding her breath till they were safely distant from Sprangletop Road. Only then did she exhale a tremendous “JEEEEEEEEZ!!”

“Joss...”

“And I thought *Robin* was a daddy’s girl!”

“*Joss...*”

“I mean I love my father too, but not with my hips and tongue!”

“JOSS! *Sssshhh!*”

“That had to be the scariest damn man I’ve ever seen—and I just got over my *Devil’s Rain* nightmares, too!”

“Now, it wasn’t... that bad...”

“It wasn’t that *good*, either!” said Joss, shaking her mass of curls. “Poor Alex! We really do hafta help her.”

*

Robin Neapolitan’s being a daddy’s girl was freely acknowledged *and* put on exhibit that evening in their heavily-soundproofed basement (bigger than the Villa above it) on Pottage Road. Two snapshots blown up to square-yard size: one of baby Robin in a tiny helmet and leather suit, perched happily in front of Fat Bob on his tricked-out Sportster; the other at age eight, inspired (however hotly she might deny it now) by Melody on *Josie and the Pussycats*, trying out Fat Bob’s drum kit for the first time.

And here was Robin at fourteen, live and in person and looking pretty good all told: partly due to laid-on-thick makeup, partly to the excellent turnout (and male-to-female ratio) for her birthday jam. There was even a *high school junior* here, Susie Zane’s brother Jason,

who'd given her and Laurie a lift to Villa Neapolitan and then hung around when he saw all the Harleys in Fat Bob's garage. Not to mention the free pizza, cake, gelato, and nymphetry in the heavily-soundproofed basement.

"Jason's such a scuzz," Little Sue confided to Vicki. "Always taking advantage of Laurie!"

"Like *how*?" gasped Vicki.

Like cajoling her into doing his chores and lending him money, which he'd repay by snapping her bra straps and pantybands. Which never failed to send Laurie into an ardent step-amorous daze.

"He knows better'n to try that with *me*," said Susie. "He knows I'd give him a knee in the ding-dongs—and that I'll do it if he tries anything else with *her*, too!"

Not much of an illicit nature got undertaken that night, by Jason or anyone else, thanks to the presence of Fat Bob's old lady Charlotte Pauk. She was a heavysset fortyish diner waitress who'd seen it all, joined in a lot of it, and could nip damn near anything in the bud with piercing squawk-talk:

"Okay, you kids, if you feel like you're gonna upchuck? This is what you do, see—take ten deep breaths, and with every breath take a giant step this-a-way, see, and when you *make* it over this-a-way you can either use this here can that *flushes*, or this here bucket that *doesn't*. But if you want someone to hold your hair *while* you upchuck, see, you better bring along a friend, 'cause I got on a new pair o' corkheels and NO WAY are any o' you gonna *decorate* 'em for me! See? Ain't that right, Bob?"

"You got it, Charlotte! No aimless puking!"

Nor any beer, weed, Seven Minutes In Heaven, or sneaking out behind the garage to indulge in any of the above. Or sneaking *in* to crash the party if your name was Mustardman, Otis, or Tattaglia. (Robin had supplied her father with descriptions of all three Smarkses, and Fat Bob went on periodic picket duty armed with a pool cue.)

Jamming *was* permissible and in constant swing; ditto dancing to same. Robin got to show off her extended percussion chops; Joss played keyboard as well as cornet; Sheila Quirk swapped her flute for a rhythm guitar; Roy Hodeau went on a horny French toot; and a starveling guy called "Skully" Erle revived the late Paul Gonsalves with chorus after

chorus on tenor sax. Fiona, who'd been teaching herself the electric bass, performed "Dust On Your Mirror" and "Ultravirgin" plus a cover of "Someday, Little Girl" (the theme song from *True Grit*) as it might be interpreted by Suzi Quatro rather than Glen Campbell:

YOU'LL! FIND! THE! SUN! WUNNNNNNN-DAY! (YEAH!!!)

(No muttering done when there's a song to be sung.)

Vicki, huddled with fellow backup vocalists Sue and Laurie, told them: "TOO BAD MUMBLES ISN'T HERE—SHE'D FIT RIGHT IN."

"WHAT?" they replied. "DID YOU SAY SOMETHING?"

*

"Unh-unh!" said Alex on Saturday afternoon. "I can't eat ice cream—we can't, Vicki! My Mama's shortbread's one thing, but we've got the Invitational next week!"

"Right—next *week*," Vicki replied. "And we don't have to order ice cream—"

"I do," said Joss.

"—Zephyr Heaven's got this fizzy lemonade that's supergood. They make it with a special syrup—no ice cream."

"It's carbonated? That cuts down your wind."

"Not if you burp it out," said Joss.

"Just one glass," urged Vicki. "While we watch Joss torture us, slurping a cone—"

"Blah blah blah," scoffed Joss.

"There's at least 250 calories in an ice cream cone," Alex calculated. "It can take half an hour to exercise that off."

"And you guys exercised for *over* an hour," said Joss, triple-chaining her bicycle to one of the Green Bridge racks. "So you're entitled to a couple cones each—and I'll be glad to eat 'em if you won't." (Click. Click. Click.) "There now! Anybody wants to steal this bike, they'll have to put in some exercise too."

The L-Bugs, prepped by Mumbles (over the phone: more earaches), had made no big deal of Alex's sick day. Mr. Heathcote questioned her privately about the doctor's diagnosis, but went ahead and put Alex through the full workout, which she completed without mishap or vacillation.

Now at Zephyr Heaven they were able to grab one of the outdoor bistro tables—no small feat on a pleasant Saturday afternoon—and have their refreshments al fresco, watching the world (or at least part of a suburb) roll by.

“Ooh!” went Alex, sipping her lemon fizz, “this *is* good. It tastes like champagne!”

“Hunh?” went Vicki. “*Mine* doesn’t.”

“What I mean is, it’s been so long since I’ve had a pop—it’s like all these bubbles up my nose, y’know? Not that I drink a lot of champagne, of course.” She looked around at the rolling-by suburbanites, and heaved a sigh that was half-titter. “This is—it’s so—I feel like I’m ditching school, or something! Even though it’s the weekend. And not that I’ve done a lot of ditching, either.”

“Of course,” Joss slurped. “But c’mon—you live right across the canal, and your dad manages one of the stores here. Don’t you ever just *hang out* at the Green Bridge?”

“I help out at Papa’s store sometimes,” said Alex, finishing her drink. “Shall we go there next?”

“Let’s wind *up* there,” Vicki suggested, “after we’ve checked out everyplace else.”

So she and Joss ushered Alex through Bonnachoven’s, and the Della Verita Boutique, and Tanya’s Fine Shoes, and the juniors department at the miniCathedral. Persuading her that yes, you could bring a knapsack into the shops, so long as it was zippered shut and no unbought merchandise got stuffed inside it. And yes, items could be taken off hangers or from folded stacks, to be held up in front of you or tried on in a fitting room—even if you had no intention of buying it that day, or indeed ever.

They coached her on the subtle arts of determining whether this garment or that accessory would go with anything already in your wardrobe (or your best friend’s, from which you were entitled to borrow); whether the same item could be found more affordably elsewhere; and, if not, whether you could sustain its purchase out of your own pocket, or had to cadge an extension of parental funding.

It felt like they were introducing a foreign exchange student to upper-middle-class American merchandising, and how to cope with this on an eighth-grader’s budget. Here was Alex Dmitria, tall/slim/poised/lovely enough to be a model; yet taking no more than an am-I-tidy? interest in her personal appearance. Still content at nearly fourteen to be outfitted by

her *mother*, for crying out loud! It seemed like such a waste—a betrayal of teenage capability.

However, their Young Grasshopper wasn't an honor student for nothing. By the time they reached the miniCathedral, Alex could zero in unassisted on a pair of fancy red-and-black tricot pajamas, bedecked not with ladybugs but tiny dancing Cossacks.

"Oh, wouldn't these be perfect? I wish I could buy them!"

"How much are they, \$12? Do you need some money? I can lend you—well, a little," said Vicki, poking dolefully into her pocketbook.

"Oh no, that's sweet of you, with my discount they'd be \$10 and I've got that. It's just... I've never... bought my own PJs before. It seems like such a *grownup* thing to do. Or does that sound stupid?"

"Well, I've done it," Vicki pointed out, "and you're older'n me." Alex's birthday was December 19th: not the best of all possible dates for well-distributed gift-expectations.

"And *I've* done it, and *she's* older'n *me*," added Joss, whose birthday was April 11th.

"Only by six weeks," Vicki responded. (Irksome to be reminded while surrounded by lingerie that somebody six weeks younger, even your dearest friend, could have so much more bustline. Which long-distance running did nothing to enhance—even Alex the Gazelle couldn't quite fill an A-cup.)

"*Anyway*," Joss continued, "we've been buying as much of our own clothes as we've had money to spend on, for a long time now. Course, me 'n' Vicki have older sisters who 'greased the skids' for us, shoppingwise—"

"Yuck!" went Vicki. "That sounds like something Roy Hodeau'd do."

"Eew!" went Joss. "ANYWAY, Alex: consider us your personal fashion guides, even if we are younger'n you."

"That's right!" Vicki agreed. "And we won't let you outta here till you buy those pajamas."

"Oh, you guys," Alex beamed. "Okay, you talked me into it! But it'll be your fault if I start dreaming I'm doing the *kazatsky*."

"The what?"

Alex glanced this way and that. Then, in a graceful swoop, arms were folded and haunches squatted upon; legs were kicked out left—right—left—right—with a leap up high for a final “HEY!”

And a peal of cheerybabe laughter, only semi-abashed.

*

They weren’t *ordered* to leave the miniCathedral after that, since the irate saleslady recognized Squat-Kickin’ Alex; but it was generally agreed they should ring up their Cossack pajamas and move along. Doing so, they encountered Fiona Weller and Robin Neapolitan coming out of Carry-a-Tune with a flat plastic sack.

“Hey there! How’s the hangovers?” Joss inquired.

“(The what?)” Alex asked Vicki.

“(Just a joke,)” Vicki replied.

“My ears’re still ringing, if that’s what you mean,” Robin said complacently. “And *she’s* gonna be incoherent for a week,” nodding at Fiona. “That’s what she gets for singing full-tilt like a boogie diva.”

Feef, her eyesockets raccoonified with fatigue and Maybelline, muttered something unintelligible but less than sprightly. *Moana, Groana, and Fiona...*

Robin’s lunch-bunch had chipped in to buy her a big Carry-a-Tune gift certificate (after debating Sheila’s suggestion that a set of teensy certificates, individually wrapped, would be more hilarious) and Robin had lost no time converting it to LPs. She’d bought *The Who by Numbers*, Deep Purple’s *Come Taste the Band*—despite Ritchie Blackmore having bailed the previous June—and *Bongo Fury* by Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, featuring Captain Beefheart.

Alex, though smiling as these albums were debugged for display, did so with foreign exchange-ish mystification.

Joss and Vicki, by dint of facial contortions, were able to dissuade Robin from asking if Alex’s ass had recuperated from Craig’s slappage; and Fiona, though heedless of deterrence on this and every other question, was fortunately too hoarse to be heard.

“Well *ciao*, babies!” said Robin, climbing onto her chief birthday present: a secondhand Margutta scooter. Fat Bob had been able to rationalize this gift because [a]

Italian-made, to a Neapolitan, was the same as 100% American; [b] he'd taken the scooter in trade *from* an American, born and raised in Kenosha; and [c] it wasn't a goddamned undernourished moped.

Alex, who rode real live horses without a qualm, shied away from the Margutta as Fiona took her seat and Robin revved it up.

"(Is she really old enough to drive that thing?)" Alex asked.

"(*She* thinks so,)" Joss answered.

"We're gonna go play these records at Skully Erle's house," Robin smirked over the vrooming. "And maybe play a little *house* too, if he and his brother get lucky!"

Fiona leaned forward and made a mutter-observation in Robin's ear.

"Hunh? What? Really? Where? Uh oh," said Robin. "Better watch out, you guys—it looks like you got a daytime Night Stalker."

Vicki's trio wheeled around and caught Mr. Dmitria dodging behind an ornamental sapling.

"Why, that's Papa!" went Alex, giving him a vigorous wave. "Hi, Papa! Come meet more of my friends!"

Mr. Dmitria didn't budge.

"See ya Monday—if you survive!" Robin called over Fiona's shoulder as they buzzed off down Bedeguar Way.

Vicki and Joss trailed after Alex to Mr. Dmitria's sapling, behind which he tried to reassert his Yucca Flats beastliness.

"I thought you told me, Alexandra, you were not meeting anyone here."

"You mean Fiona and Robin, Papa? We just ran into them—they're in our English class, and Fiona's mother's my Music teacher—Vicki's, too. Mrs. Weller, remember? You met her at Open House."

"Are you saying they are your age? Riding a motor scooter? Perhaps taking one that does not belong to them, stealing it for a joyride? And you call them your friends?"

"That scooter's a birthday gift to Robin from her father, who loves her very much," said a voice: crisply civil, with no-nonsense authority. Vicki wondered if Mrs. Driscoll or Becca Blair had joined the conversation—before realizing *she* was the one who'd spoken.

Now she wondered how much it was going to hurt when she fainted on the sidewalk.

But Joss (chiming in with a “S’right!”) took her elbow encouragingly, and Alex piped up with gentle yet unmistakable reproach: “Papa, I’m surprised at you. That wasn’t a very nice thing to say at all.”

The toothpick dropped from Mr. Dmitria’s gaping mouth, as though he’d had a plateful of spaghetti thrust into his considerable gut.

“Now, I know you didn’t mean it,” Alex smiled. “You were afraid *I* might take a ride on Robin’s scooter, weren’t you? That’s silly, Papa, you know I’d never do such a thing—give me a pony any day. C’mon, let’s all go to the store! Oh and look at the pajamas I bought, Papa! Aren’t they darling? I picked them out and paid for them myself!”

She led her buffaloe Beast back to his lair at Double-A Sporting Goods. Joss and Vicki followed a few steps after them, Joss still supporting Vicki’s elbow as she moved forward on wobbly legs.

“(You okay, champ?)”

“(Did I really say that? To him? Was that really me talking?)”

“(Unless you’ve got somebody else throwing their voice out of yours,)” said Joss.

*

So much progress was made that Saturday afternoon, and more followed on Monday morning—before lightning struck a second lunchtime.

Craig Clerkington, to his credit, apologized for ham-handedly upsetting Alex; and she graciously forgave him—though with a foreign exchange-y air, as though for some long-ago antic that had no connection to her caboose.

Then during study hall Becca took a red pen to Alex’s extracurricular list, paring down its breadth and depth. This semester Alex was Secretary of 8-Z and on the Eighth Grade Executive Board; a leading alto in both the Mixed Chorus and Girls Glee Club; a vital figure in the negotiations to merge the French and Spanish Clubs (whose memberships were flagging) and the campaign to expand the Math Club into basic computer programming. This on top of being in three advanced-level classes; an aide in the Media Center during free periods; a current cross country and upcoming basketball Ladybug; a Silver Award-winning Cadette Girl Scout; teaching little kids elementary sports at the Petty Hills Country Club;

working at the SPCA animal shelter on Saturdays; horseback riding with Mumbles Metcalf on Sundays; and giving serious thought to taking up racquetball.

“But *Becca*—“ Alex protested, as the red pen reduced her duties and cut back on hours.

“You still get to do everything on this list—just *less* of it. With more time to rest and relax, every day of the week.”

“I know, but—”

“Do you *want* to be home sick more often?”

“Homesick? No...”

“Well then!” went Becca. Deaf, as usual, to the words “can’t” and “don’t.”

Earlier that morning in the locker room she’d informed Vicki, “You did good—she seems a lot better—but I need you to keep tabs on her—make sure she doesn’t start overdoing it again, first chance she gets—or the next time something bad happens.”

“Will it?” asked Vicki in dismay.

“Always does,” said pragmatic Becca, toweling down her terrific torso.

And she was proved right that very day in the cafeteria.

Alex, resuming her lunchroom rounds, dined again at Vicki’s table. This time she ate at a leisurely pace, chewing each bite more than twice; making easy conversation with the whole bunch, not just her fellow L-Bugs; and getting less alarmed than before by Robin and Sheila-Q’s daily quarrel. (Today’s subject: could *Seventeen* magazine remain pertinent till its title age, or did it wear out its suitability in junior high?)

“Oh, Jeez,” groaned Joss, not at this debate but as a latter-day Daisy Duck hove into view. Hauling a guy in tow—a towhead, in fact, sporting an inordinate amount of fair hair—with whom she practically started slowdancing right where Joss and Vicki couldn’t help but see them. *Snuggle cuddle nuzzle* they went, almost in your face as you were trying to eat.

Joss made a big production of repacking her half-finished lunch.

So who was Kimmy Zimmer’s smitten sucker? Could it be the Hunk With No Name, whose apparition still haunted Pre-Algebra? Nope—this guy looked less like Vincent Van Patten than his *Three for the Road* brother, Leif Garrett. Not quite as twerpy-faced as Leif, yet nowhere near as heartthrobbable as Vince. A towhead, all right.

Laurie Harrison, peering around to see what Joss and Vicki were *eww*-ing at, let out a bunny-squeal. “Mike Spurgeon! With Kim! I *knew* they’d start going together, now that he’s on Y! Oh, isn’t he dreamy?”

Vicki glanced at Alex seated on her other side. And found her turned to stone.

She’d pushed her stool back as though to stand and depart, only to stay where she was. Eyes down. Head bent. Hands visible in her lap, scrunching a napkin with whitening knuckles.

Vicki scooted over to block any view, then laid her own hand atop Alex’s.

Which let go of the napkin, swiveled up, and clasped Vicki’s.

They never spoke of this occurrence afterward; nor would Alex so much as allude to who or what had triggered it. But Vicki began to worry-upon-worry about her all over again, trying to keep tabs on Alex without getting on her fragile nerves, or Mr. Dmitria’s—

—or, increasingly, Joss’s.

Back up a step. Jog down to Sprangletop Road on alternate weekday mornings to meet Alex at the Mission Revival. Always warm greetings from Mama, slipping Vicki a baked goodie to take to school. Papa, when encountered, would nod at Vicki and widen his lips and avoid meeting the Litvak look in her Polish eyes.

On the other weekday mornings, Alex came up to Burrow Lane but without her former frantic hurry. And Goofus—never one to willingly get out of bed—began rising of his own accord to scrub hands and face, dress with fourth-grade spruceness, and wait by the window for Alex’s approach.

“Hey there, Slugger! Love your hair,” she’d greet him, rumpling his orange locks; making Goof react as the boys in Miss Durbin’s class had when Nina the Gypsy Infanta’d shown them any attention.

He’s getting to be THAT AGE, you know.

(Oh grohhssss...)

“What a sweet little guy,” Alex remarked one day as they left for VW.

“He *isn’t!*” Vicki insisted. “It’s all an act, ‘cause he’s crazy about you.”

She clapped a mental hand over her yap the instant these words left it, fearing they might trigger another freak-out. But Alex, though blushing beet-red, looked very pleased.

“I’d love to have a kid brother—I always wanted one. Actually I always wanted a *lot* of brothers, like Sheila has. Life’d be just about perfect then.”

“You can help yourself to mine. I’m serious, Alex—rent him by the month, if you won’t take him for free.”

Alex laughed. “Wish I could, but Papa’d be jealous.”

Vicki jogged the rest of the way with a sagging jaw. *Don’t gape, Miss, or your tongue may not fit inside your mouth...*

“Hey, I’d like to have a whole lot of ‘bruthas’ too,” gibed Joss when Vicki relayed this chatter.

“Hardy har har. But honestly—wouldn’t having a dad like that make a girl turn, y’know, all *twisty* inside?”

“Don’t ask me—Robin’s our daddy’s-girl expert. Though *she* seems okay, so long as Charlotte only sleeps over but doesn’t move *in* with her and Fat Bob. Anyway, now she’s interested in that stoner Skully Erle, except *I* think he and Fiona’d make a ‘cuter’ couple—”

“Joss! I’m talking about Alex!”

“Yeah, I noticed.”

“Well, I don’t mean to go on and on about her, but I’m worried!”

“So’m I,” said Joss with a dry sigh. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t gossip about somebody else for awhile, does it?”

“It’s just that, y’know, every time I think she’s gonna be okay, she says something—”

“‘Twisty’—I *get* it.” With a louder, longer, drier sigh.

For the first time since they first met, Vicki felt herself to be on thin ice with Jocelyn Murrish. She considered sub-repeating her vow to never drift away in a thousand years; but suppose that made Joss sub-react with *We’ve been THROUGH this, can you please do me a favor and quit BROODING about it already??*

Which, even sub-unsaid, wasn’t conducive to that happening anytime soon.

*

The Cityland Invitational was run: VW finished midway in the pack, not a bad showing for a first-year program. Cross country season ended: the L-Bugs held a banquet at Mumbles’s house, where Mr. Heathcote awarded special pioneer letters to Captain Yvette

and Roadrunner Rhonda and Moana Lisa and Big Sue, while Alex and Vicki and Sheila-Q rounded out that year's varsity seven.

Alex then had a free afternoon before basketball practice started. She dropped by Burrow Lane for some R&R while Joss was there—

—and suddenly nerves were gotten on. Spurred into a furious high-speed gallop.

It was all Goofus's fault (Vicki decided later) for trying to horn in on a girls-only get-together. Vicki sent Joss and Alex up to her bedroom while she notified Goof that if he persisted in poking his head where it didn't belong, she would samsonize it and leave him no orange hair to be tousled by *any* teen-idol-of-his-heart.

"Kid brothers! Go figure," she grouched to herself as she headed upstairs. And found her guests had gotten *way* ahead of her, grousewise: both standing very tall and very opposite each other and very bristly-bellicose.

Joss (as Vicki subsequently reconstructed) had sparked it off by calling Alex "Al"; to which Alex took exception, saying "That's a boy's name!" "What, unlike *Alex*?" Joss retorted, citing the heroine of Constance C. Greene's *A Girl Named Al* and *You Know Me, Al* as another short-for-Alexandra. At which point Alex blurted that she didn't like fiction because it was "all make-believe" and therefore untrustworthy; which wounded Joss on behalf of fine artists in every medium, so she made a comment on what jockminded people didn't know they were missing; and that provoked a remark from Alex about the benefits of exercise for those who needed more support than Maidenform could provide.

On which note Vicki entered her bedroom.

And flash-forwarded five minutes or so. Seeing the future unfold with a terrible hard-edged clarity, as on the night her ballerina dreams were smashed:

Alex and Joss ignoring her mute appeals for peace. *This isn't working—yank the plug on "good times"—you'll have to choose between us.* But HOW? There was absolutely no way she could do without Joss; yet she didn't want to lose Alex either, so try hemming and hawing and patching things up, and fail dismally. After a dead-silent moment both girls would go "FINE" and walk out, searing Vicki with glares of such withering damnation she would be branded and stranded for the rest of her life, while Joss abandoned all hope forever and Alex dissolved into permanent freaked-out fragments, for which *everybody* would hold

Vicki responsible and drop her like a soggy potato—she'd be shunned, ostracized, left in utter isolation just as she'd dreaded would happen the day she came to Vanderlund, but now it'd be a trillion times worse because she'd known the communion of true friendship and would never, ever, experience anything remotely close to it again—

“*PLEASE don't fight!!*” she begged out loud in the here-and-now, covering her eyes and bursting into sobs.

Joss and Alex traded looks of complete horror before rushing to comfort her.

“Oh, Vicki... we're not fighting... just a little disagreement... like Sheila 'n' Robin have... we like each other, really we do... that's right, and we both love you... never do anything to make you feel bad... please don't cry...”

Vicki tried pretending she wasn't, that this jag had been a clever reconciliation ruse, but succumbed to hiccups instead which made them all laugh (shakily) while she bathed her face.

They went out then to play keepaway with Goofus and his football, still feeling shy and ambiguous with each other, yet light enough to take off and soar through the air.

“Maybe my flopperoos *could* do with some exercise,” Joss allowed. “Like a couple of push-ups, or something.”

“Would you mind lending me your AI books?” asked Alex. “If they're about an Alexandra, I guess I *ought* to read them.”

“*Hic*,” went Vicki, with deepest relief; though Goof kept leaping at her and yelling “BOO!”—to cure her affliction, he claimed; because he was a horrible little Halloweenie, she rebutted.

*

Thus the girls became a triumvirate, like Snowy and Bev and Puddles in Ruth Doan MacDougall's *The Cheerleader*—one of the franker novels on Joss's bookshelf, right up there with Judy Blume's *Forever...*, which kept Joss from tossing it even after Kim Zimmer turned its title into an overweening ambition.

Joss and Vicki's friendship proceeded as freshly/bestly as before: pre-bedtime phone talks every night, rotating sleepovers twice a week. Alex's acquaintance-circle remained much wider than theirs, encompassing many groups and individuals; yet the rounds she made

were now far less feverish. Stress levels dropped, blood pressure improved, and radiance shone without flickering—even when Kim flaunted her capture of Mike Spurgeon.

During R&R interludes, Alex gravitated toward but did not intrude upon Vicki and Joss's company; and this worked out well for all concerned. There was increasingly less need to keep tabs, and more time for them all to have fun together. Alex's discount at the Green Bridge came in handy, but Joss introduced her to broader-scale sprees at the New Sherwood Shopping Center—though Alex wouldn't set foot in its sporting goods emporium, not even to scout out the competition.

"What would people say?" she demurred.

"That you're an undercover spy," said Joss. "How well can you *slink*?"

"Never you mind," Alex laughed.

And it was Joss who told Vicki it was up to them to remedy Alex's being stuck with a birthday the same week as Christmas. So in early November they guided her oh-so-casually to New Sherwood's Chapeaux-To-Go, where Alex was presented with an already-paid-for-and-giftwrapped hat. And not just an ordinary everyday hat, but a *ushanka* of fake white fur that Vicki'd spotted while window-shopping. With the giftwrap, it cost as much as the miniCathedral's pricey pajamas; but was worth every penny to see Alex bury her nose in it and shed happy tears upon it and beam glowingly as she tried it on.

"Oh, you guys... you two are my most special friends!"

The triumvirate enjoyed a big sisterly all-around hug, till Joss asked: "Wait—do you mean like special *ed*?"

"Joss!" Vicki and Alex chided.

"That's me. Hey, I know!—let's get a picture of us wearing the hat!"

So they wedged themselves gigglishly into the New Sherwood photo booth: Alex and Joss ("you two Amazonesses") side by side and Vicki balanced pettily atop their knees, her arms back behind their necks. The resulting four-pic strip made them all look so radiant they stayed in the booth for two more, so each girl could have a special/best-friends set—each one showing *her* wearing Alex's Cossack holiday topper.

24

A Beetle at VW

Creeping upstairs on tiptoe *at school* was a stupid Nancy Drew-y thing to do. And completely against the instincts of a runner: you should be *leaping* up these steps, taking them two at a time, since time was of the essence (as Nancy Drew might say).

But no—not on the Z-Wing stairway. Not heading *up* it, which nobody would do under normal circumstances; entering VW via a wing door was Just Not Done. Yet desperate measures were necessary on Friday the 7th of November, last day of the grading period, with Mr. Dunn accepting extra-credit reports if turned in before homeroom. The clock was ticking down to 8 a.m., and you needed to guarantee getting a C in Science; thus your clenching this scraped-together essay on FRICTION—WHAT IT MEANS as you tiptoed surreptitiously up these uncool (but shortest-distance) stairs to the second floor. Freezing on the landing as a peremptory voice said:

“What’s *this*?”

“Mmm?” went a second voice.

“This word here, what is it?”

“‘Putridity.’ Originally ‘putrescence.’”

Eww thought Vicki, staring halfway up the next flight of steps. Where Becca Blair sat side by side with Roger Mustardman. She frowning at some papers held in one hand, while the other hiked the bottom of her turtleneck jersey collarbone-high. As if to air out her white lace bra cups, and all the rosy cleavage jutting over them.

Roger regarded this generous display as a gourmand might contemplate a double helping of Baked Alaska.

Vicki didn't linger to hear how many stars he might award the dish.

She sprang through the door into 8-Z, retaining just enough presence of mind to head for the Science Lab and hand in FRICTION. Then she wandered away down the corridor, trying to take off her windbreaker without first unstrapping her knapsack. Fortunately Joss and Alex came by before she strangled herself.

"Vicki?" said Joss, waving a hand in front of glassy eyes. "You okay?"

"Um... sure..."

"I *knew* you should've come up the Home Base stairs with me!" Alex scolded. "See now why we only use the wing stairs to *leave* school?"

"Unless you're a smoker," Joss remarked. "Or have a boyfriend. Not one who smokes, I hope; their teeth get so gross—"

"Joss, be serious!" said Alex. "Vicki came into school the wrong way! Now she might act backwards all day long."

"That's jinx talk! Saying it aloud'll *make* it happen."

"It already has! You saw how she was taking off her jacket. Thank goodness it's Health day in Phys Ed," Alex added as they led Vicki to her locker and got her outfitted for morning classes. "You don't want to shoot hoops before a whammy wears off. Think positive thoughts, Vicki!"

Alex left them for Mr. Folz's homeroom as the bell rang. "Whammy," Joss snorted, guiding Vicki into Mr. Gillies's. "Seriously, though, you do look kinda weird. Just how late did you stay up working on that extra credit?"

"Um," answered Vicki. "Joss, would you tell me if, like... I kinda started, y'know—hallucinating?"

"I might. If I didn't start doing it first," said Joss, depositing her in Seat 38. "Just mellow out. Report cards are like poop—they happen, they get flushed, no big deal. At least not till *semester* finals. Oh look: Feef's absent again. Must be a day with an R in it."

She went off to Seat 25, crossing paths with Roger Mustardman as he sauntered by to Seat 26 behind her: he leering at her own behind, not to mention her before. (As if he

hadn't feasted his peepers enough today already!)

Mr. Gillies distributed something-or-other that had to be filled out, and Vicki realized she didn't have her ring binder or zipper pouch. With Fiona AWOL and Joss two rows away, she turned to Carly Thibert and whispered, "(Can I borrow something to write with?)"

"Sure!" chirped Carly. "Anybody got a pen?"

A dozen boys lunged forward to offer Bics and Papermates. Carly accepted all of them, leaning way forward to give the donors a gander down her neckline. *Gahd!* What was this, Flopperoo Friday? Vicki got the pick of the litter, but Carly wouldn't return the rest till Mr. Gillies intervened; and by that time homeroom was almost over.

Roger Mustardman kept his pen between his teeth, like a cigarette holder, even as he binocularly reconnoitered the contents of Carly's top. You could almost see more notches being added to his thick square glasses, and to the waggle of his thick black brows.

Boob scrutiny: it was the sort of thing every girl could intuit, whether she herself or a fellow female was the ogle-object. So Vicki and Joss had concluded, anyway, with Robin and Sheila-Q agreeing (for once). Laurie refused to believe boys were really that rude, even when they practically unbuttoned her bunny-blouse. Fiona swore she didn't give a rat's ass whether guys checked her out or not; but even she agreed this simply wasn't a topic to discuss around Alex.

Who perched protectively beside Vicki on the gym bleachers that Friday during Ms. Swanson's don't-abuse-alcohol lecture. Which didn't accentuate the positive, describing how evil-minded men would ply an unwary girl with liquor in order to reduce her inhibitions and subject her to unnamed outrages.

Such talk should've put Vicki on her tabkeeping toes, anxious how Alex might react. Today, though, she could only think of Becca Blair—sitting further down the bleachers with majestically straight back, her turtleneck jersey in decorous pulled-down place.

Becca did not peek back at Vicki.

Nor pass her a note saying *It's not what you think*.

Nor suffuse her creamy aura with a hot blush at the thought of that scene on the stairs.

If anyone was turning crimson, it was Vicki herself. How *could* you explain the scene on the stairs? *Had* it all been a mirage, brought on by staying up too late sweating out

500 words on FRICTION? Causing her to think she'd seen Becca in a compromising position with Squat Roger Mustardman?

Preposterous.

It'd be easier to believe that Robin Neapolitan had been up there flashing her bra at him. (Robin's friends had a secret betting pool on whether her animosity for Roger would turn into passion, and if so how soon.)

Suppose, though, it hadn't been delusion but actual reality... how could you account for THAT?

Evil-minded Roger plying unwary Becca with liquor? Slipping her a seductive drug of some sort? Or what about hypnosis—like that what's-his-name guy, Svengali? Vicki shivered at the thought (making Alex apprehensive) because that was the sort of thing a Mustardman would sell his squat soul to be *able* to do. And who more obvious for his first victim than Becca Blair? But he'd never be satisfied mesmerizing just one. Nobody's before would be safe, not even the modestly-endowed—and that included Vicki and Alex.

"You're shivering. I'm taking you to the nurse's office," Alex announced the moment first period ended. "Do you feel dizzy? Can you walk?"

"I'm okay, really I am," Vicki told her. "It was all that talk, y'know, about guys putting drugs 'n' stuff in your drinks when you're not looking. I mean, that could even happen in the cafeteria."

"Ulp!" went Alex, racking Vicki with guilt at having jabbed a sore spot.

But then Alex brightened as Becca hurried out of the gym, as if challenging them to a race back to Z-Wing. "C'mon, let's catch her!"

"No running in the halls!" said the Vice Principal, his bristling goatee stationed as usual where it could oversee all three wing entranceways.

"Hi, Mr. O'Brien! How's Mrs. O'Brien?" smiled Alex as they sped past.

"She says Top o' the mornin', Miss Dmitria."

Their pace didn't slacken, yet Becca beat them to Z202. Which was just as well since Vicki wouldn't've known what to say to her, or even how to *look* at her.

Today marked the end of both the grading period and their Edgar Allan Poe unit in Language Arts. Everyone'd had to deliver an oral report on a work by Poe—Joss covering

“The Pit and the Pendulum,” Alex reciting “The Bells,” Fiona giving her interpretation of “Hop-Frog,” Robin transforming “Descent into the Maelström” into another anti-mandatory-helmet editorial. Vicki’s nervous attempt to discuss “The Cask of Amontillado” was one of those occasions when she accused Joss of trying to crack her up by mouthing *Mandingo*. Roger Mustardman discarded most of “The Black Cat” to concentrate on the Spirit of PERVERSENESS, till Miss McInerney said he’d gone into sufficient detail and could sit down immediately.

Today they were treated to Becca Blair’s recounting of “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.” Which she did in front of the class, statuesquely, frowning at the report in one hand while the other strayed to the *bottom of her turtleneck jersey*—

DON’T DO IT! DON’T DO IT! Vicki sub-pleaded.

Trying telekinetically to grab Becca’s hand and restrain Becca’s jersey from getting re-hoisted. Her own ears were filled with the pounding of her own heart as she strove against the occult, so Vicki missed out on most of Monsieur Valdemar’s gruesome Facts. The rest of the class *urghed* and *aaghed* over what happened when his suspended-animation trance was broken:

His whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity.

“That is,” Becca annotated, “a condition of being decomposed. Originally Poe wrote the word ‘putrescence.’ That is a condition of *becoming* decomposed; but Valdemar finished doing that almost instantly. You see the difference.”

Her jersey-gripping hand twitched upward, just far enough to let her belly-button peep forth.

“Aagh,” Miss McInerney cleared her throat. “Thank you, Becca. That was most vivid.”

The jersey-gripping hand relaxed, and rust-colored acrylic again veiled Becca’s navel.

Vicki's heart relaxed too. Yet her eyes swiveled over toward Roger Mustardman, whose thick square glasses and thick black brows were lying in wait for her. As though they *knew* she would look, and *planned* for her to look, or even *made* her look his way—meeting her gaze with one as piercing as X-ray vision.

Causing Vicki to cross her arms over her chest.

*

But by bedtime she was back to wondering whether she hadn't hallucinated it all, after all.

Nothing else remotely supernatural happened the rest of that day. Roger paid her no particular attention in Social Studies or Math. At lunch he baited Robin in passing and got frothed at in response: both as per usual. Vicki had no more encounters with Becca Blair, except at a distance in the corridors. And in Science Mr. Dunn confirmed her C for the grade period, "though you are capable of better than that."

"I hope so," she told him.

Joss came to Burrow Lane for her regular Friday night sleepover, and Vicki confided everything that had or might've happened.

"So... *was* I just freaking out about grades 'n' stuff?"

"Dunno," Joss said soberly, wrestling an Afro pick through her fresh-from-the-shower curls. "That'd be some serious freaking."

"Tell me about it... (You know that's gonna make your hair go frizzy.)"

"(Not if I use a pick. Not while it's still wet.)"

"(You always say that and it always frizzes and you always go to bed mad.)"

"Ow," went Joss at the pick, "I have a right to sleep detangled... And maybe I *like* it frizzy, more like a 'fro... Anyway, we're talking about you and *your* madness."

Vicki sighed as she stared at the vanity mirror. Close examination found neither blemishes nor insanity, so go ahead and pat on Noxzema. "What if it keeps happening?"

Joss dropped her pick and gnawed a thumb-tip. "Are you *sure* it wasn't really Robin you saw with Roger?"

"Yes I'm sure and of course it wasn't. In her *dreams* is Robin built like that."

“Well hell,” grumped Joss. (In their secret betting pool, she had the earliest date for Robin-will-admit-falling-in-love-with-him. Sheila Quirk held the opposite extreme—Robin-will-slash-her-wrists-and-die-an-old-maid-first.) “Okay, how ‘bout this: he helped Becca with her report, maybe even wrote it for her, and she repaid him by showing her boobs. That almost makes *sense*—any guy would ask for that instead of money.”

“Yeah, but then in class I was almost positive she was gonna flash the whole room! It was so weird! And the way he looked at me after that...” Vicki drew her knees up to her chin. “If that could happen to Becca, what’s to stop it happening to us?”

“Hey—maybe it *was* a hallucination, but one that *FIONA* was supposed to have. You got it by mistake ‘cause she was out sick.”

“Y’think? Can that even happen?”

“Why not?” asked Joss, taking her turn at the blue Noxzema jar. “Though Feef’s more likely to hallucinate giving an oral report on a putrefying guy.”

“Oh *yuh*-uck! Way to give me sweet dreams, Jocelyn.”

“Feel sorry for Feef—she’ll hate having missed Becca doing that.”

“I wish *I* had,” Vicki told her knees.

*

That Saturday was the day they took Alex to New Sherwood, gave her the early-birthday *ushanka*, and sat for their special/best-friend pictures. The rest of the weekend basked in that radiance, and Vicki began to mellow out.

Fiona was back in school on Monday, though weller in name only. She suffered from menorrhagia, bluntly mutter-describing this as “(I need a whole damn *quilt* when I’m on the rag.)” It also made her anemic, which Mrs. Weller and the Rumpelmagens treated by force-feeding her liverwurst. “(So now I reek like a deli and get followed around by alley cats.)”

Who might mistake Fiona for one of their own, so thin and pale was she. Vicki tried to tempt her with a cherry *pan dulce* received that morning from Mrs. Dmitria, but Feef would eat nothing at lunch except a snackpack of Alpha-Bits.

(Too bad the cafeteria didn’t serve beefsteak tartare...)

Speaking of blood: Lang Arts began a new unit on *Lord of the Flies* that same Monday. This time the students were divided into groups of four and assigned characters to

pursue through the twelve chapters they'd be reading over the next twelve days. And just like at the Reulbach Science Fair, Miss McInerney created these groups artificially with two girls and two boys in each. Vicki groaned in wonder that teachers were still pulling this stunt.

Her friends got scattered to the several winds: Robin was assigned to the Jack group, Alex to Simon, and Joss to Ralph—which almost sent her rolling on the floor, thanks to Judy Blume's *Forever...* having associated “Ralph” with what polite girls referred to as “a guy's Thing.” (Vicki could hardly wait for Joss to say the word aloud in class, hopefully repeatedly. Vengeance at last for all those mouthed *Mandingos*!)

Fiona got stuck in the Piggy group with LeAnn Anobile, Dwight Whitehead, and Arlo Sowell. During the Poe unit, LeAnn had shared her inside-out thoughts on “Annabel Lee” and been confounded by everyone's laughter. Dwight, who'd somehow escaped from Remedial English, would read *Lord of the Flies* only as far as page seven—on which he'd find and adopt “SUCKS TO YOUR ASS-MAR!!” into his personal phraseology. And if there were a VW contest for Most Likely to Become a Sumo Wrestler, Arlo Sowell would win the *shiroboshi*; his vocabulary might be limited to earthy grunts, but Fiona seemed to find him fascinating on a mountainous scale, to the point of losing some of her pallor.

(Joss and Vicki sub-agreed that Feef and Arlo deserved their own secret betting pool.)

“Finally we come to The Beast,” said Miss McInerney. “The Beast group shall be Becca Blair—Roger Mustardman—Vicki Volester—and Byron Wyszynski.”

“Oh shsss!... oh shsss!...”

Fiona might still call Byron Wyszynski “(Gollum)” but the occupant of Seat 40 in homeroom was now generally known as “Tail-End”—and not just because of his alphabetic placement on a Z team devoid of Zanes and Zimmers. He was also, invariably, the last one to surrender his test paper in every class, scribbling words or figures even as the teacher pried it out from under his frantic pencil.

Miss McInerney told them to read “The Sound of the Shell” for tomorrow and plan for ten-minute group discussions of that chapter. She then moved on to talk about grammar, but Vicki's mind kept spinning in place like a gerbil on an exercise wheel.

Her being in Becca's group must mean Becca *intended* her to be there. Not even Miss McInerney could thrust anyone unwanted upon Becca Blair.

Unless Roger was the hypnotic impetus behind this choice. Though you'd think, if his lust weren't slaked by Becca's bounty, he'd've picked a more "upfront" girl like Joss or LeAnn Anobile. Or if he was out to humiliate as well as be titillated, who'd be a better victim than Robin Neapolitan?

Except it was Vicki he'd X-rayed, in this very classroom, just last Friday.

Which made her clap her knees together. And rethink whether it might not be safer to wear slacks to school—even if they did hind-ride—instead of a skirt.

*

Many eighth-grade girls had steady boyfriends, while those like Carly Thibert played the field; and some like Laurie Harrison spent hours tracking each rumored fluctuation in every possible relationship on all three teams at VW. If you wanted the latest on who was going with or breaking up with or being dumped by, Laurie was the person to ask.

Gigi Pyle and her clique on Y team—they all had boyfriends. Britt Groningen and her Squeakylike cult on X team—they all had boyfriends. But Becca Blair was unique in that she had *suitors*—three, in fact, in court-paying rotation.

The first (and least substantial) was 8-Z's own Brad Faussett. Since Mike Spurgeon had transferred to Y, Brad was considered the handsomest Z-jock and so automatically gravitated toward the most bodacious cheerybabe. Yet everyone except Brad knew that Becca only tolerated an eighter suitor for on-hand convenience.

The second (and least likely) was Lyle Wilkie of 9-X. His unlikelihood stemmed from being a Dilton Doiley type, presiding with erudition over the VW Science Club. But Lyle and Becca had a common interest in the practice of medicine: both intended to be future surgeons, whereas Brad Faussett simply wanted to *play* doctor.

The third, and reportedly most serious suitor, was (roll on the floor!) another Ralph. His grandfather—Ralph Waldo Emerson Lorgnon, Sr.—owned a considerable number of tenements in The City, from which Ralph Jr. (commonly called "Waldo") amassed a moderate fortune. The Lorgnons sent Ralph III (addressed as "Emerson" or "Sonny") to Vanderlund's private Front Tree Country Day School, and there he amassed a considerable

number of nicknames.

In childhood he'd been derided by his peers as "Auntie Em" till demonstrating a claim to the title of "Anteater." At the end of sixth grade, when the first *Godfather* film was released, he'd asserted his birthright to "Sonny." That lasted till the end of eighth grade, when *The Lords of Flatbush* came out and a striking likeness was noted to "Chico," the one Lord who (despite that moniker) didn't look Italian.

Unfortunately for Ralph Waldo Emerson III, he got tagged as "the Slumlord of Front Tree" by a younger prepmate who was departing for VW: that future Smarks Brother, Roger Mustardman.

To whom the Slumlord remained less than grateful.

Nevertheless, he was deemed this year's prime catch by the sophomore girls at Startop Academy, who longed to run their fingers through his wavy Lorgnon hair and their lips along a cleft chin that Kirk Douglas might envy. These girls resented Becca Blair for luring Sonny away with her public-school wiles; the fact that she was a doctor's daughter, with brains to match her looks and a bearing that outswanked anything at Startop, didn't add one jot or tittle to her acceptability as a Slumlord-snatcher.

Such was the state of Becca's suitordom on Monday the 10th of November.

By Thanksgiving, Laurie Harrison could gossip that all three suitors had gotten mangled.

First to feel the bite was Bradley Faussett, during the football team's season-closing IHOP brunch. This wasn't closed to the pancake-eating public, so Lenny Otis was able to topple in and stir Brad to imitate his *ooh! ooh!*s with a fake epileptic attack. Brad happened to be passing Becca Blair a pitcher of mulberry syrup at the time, and only Becca's gymnastic dexterity saved her from getting doused. Brad did splatter himself, to the vindictive joy of Craig Clerkington and appalled distaste of Becca, who said:

"You are so IMMATURE!!"

Next to be bitten was Lyle Wilkie, at the Science Club's bimonthly kaffeeklatsch. In mid-November this was held in the 8-X Lab, which Dino Tattaglia had been ordered to clean up after mouthing off in class. This cleanup was still going on as Lyle began a demonstration of how to measure blood pressure. No one was surprised that he chose Becca's lovely arm

to demonstrate upon; nor by his donning a labcoat, reaching into its pocket, and proclaiming “This is a sphygmometer.” Everyone except Dino got stunned, though, when Lyle produced a fetal pig instead and (with a squeal) flung it away. Only Becca’s deft flexibility prevented the pink embryo from landing in her lovely lap.

“This is NOT FUNNY, Lyle!!” she informed him.

The third and worst chomp came when Sonny Lorgnon took Becca to the Petty Hills Junior Harvest Ball. She was the belle of that cotillion, and her arrival on the Slumlord of Front Tree’s dapper arm did her no discredit. At least not till his sampling too much of the wrong kind of punch made him keel over during a Hustle dip, land face first, and stain the dance floor with his nose-gore. Only Becca’s lithe surefootedness saved her from being yanked down on top of him.

“What the hell is **WRONG** with you??” she bellowed at Sonny’s fallen carcass.

“Look how they massacred her boy,” added Roger Mustardman.

Who by sheer coincidence happened to be there, see it all, and bribe a *North Squire* magazine paparazzo to take snapshots of the carnage.

Vicki, when she heard about this, had a flashback to the Reulbach Spring Dance (just six months ago? seemed like six *years*) and Jim Maxwell’s alleged adulteration of its punchbowl with Old Style Lager.

But she was determined to ask no questions about how the Junior Harvest chomp happened (or the bite at IHOP, or the crunch at Science Club) when she was invited to Becca’s home for a Beast group meeting on Sunday the 23rd.

The Blairs lived in a penthouse condominium on Panama Boulevard, and Joss was dying to know every detail about their high-on-the-hog inlander lifestyle:

“You have GOTTA sneak a look at Becca’s bedroom! Oh I bet it’s all futuristic, lots of chrome and fiberglass, and she sleeps in one of those *Space Odyssey* hibernation pods—”

“Eww, that sounds *Stepford Wives*-y! Now I bet Becca has a great big old-fashioned canopy bed, with satin sheets and velvet curtains—”

“No no no no, *that’s* the sort of bed *Stepford Wives*’d sleep in! Spacyjane Groh would *fantasize* about sleeping in a bed like that.”

(Joss and the Ralph group had met Friday afternoon at Spacyjane's chalet on Cecidia Drive. "Jeez!" Joss said afterward, "it's so ootsie-cutesy-cunning it makes all the other houses in the neighborhood want to dry-heave.")

The Aguadulce Condominiums could not be called cutesy *or* futuristic. It was a garden-variety brownstone at the corner of Panama Boulevard and Rhedde Road, with pseudo-hacienda touches—clay tiles here, stucco arches there—like Alex's Mission Revival. Except *that* was exotic if austere, whereas the Aguadulce gave you the impression of a vanilla tortilla.

Buzz in, ride the elevator to the top floor, knock on the Blairs's door, and be greeted by a longdrawn "Yyyehhhhssss? ..."

From Roger Mustardman, playing butler.

"DO step this way IF you please. Madam's mouthing off on the phone, but will join us when she's good and ready. May I remove your... coat?"

"I'll do it," said Vicki, unwilling to be disrobed even to that extent.

The Blair condo was startlingly like Bob and Emily's apartment on *The Bob Newhart Show*, which'd make it easier to describe to Joss. You took two steps down into a combination living-and-dining room, with a sizable couch flanked by sizable armchairs (and Tail-End Wyszynski teetering on the extreme edge of one). Then, beyond a sizable table surrounded by armless yet still sizable chairs, were two steps up into a visible kitchen on your right; what was probably a den in the middle; and definitely a deck on your left, overlooking the canal. On the room's other side, an arch doubtless led to bedrooms—out of one of which came a distraught thrum.

"Telling her troubles," Roger interpreted. "Such a *lot* she's had lately, dontcha know!"

Not dignifying this with a reply, Vicki and her doffed overcoat took the extreme edge of another armchair. Trying not to watch Tail-End squeeze his hands under his knees or into his armpits or against each other, all while emitting little noises like a faulty radiator.

"Swiss Miss?" suggested Roger, extending a steamy mug.

"Um—shouldn't we wait?—I mean, is it right to—"

"I don't believe we'd be violating the Sabbath," he said piously.

Guys putting drugs 'n' stuff in your drinks when you're not looking. Maybe Becca wasn't on the phone at all—maybe she was bound and gagged after being given knockout drops! “Why aren't *you* having any?”

“Drank three cups already—and ‘drained the main vein’ twice, if you’re really interested. Tell her why you’re not drinking yours, Wyszzo.”

“It’sss not brown, it’sss RED!” gollumed Tail-End. “How can it be cocoa if it looksss like HOT TOMATO JUICCCCE??”

“That would be what we call ‘soup,’ Wyszzo,” Roger informed him, taking a swig from Tail-End’s untouched mug. “Ahhhh... you can taste the yo-de-lay-hee-ho! And here she comes, too.”

Becca entered and Vicki boggled at her idea of casual weekend wear: a double-knit pantsuit of mauve polyester with a cranberry beret. “Why’re you sitting there hugging your coat?” Becca asked peevishly—no *Hi Vicki*, no *Welcome to my home that you’re visiting for the first time*, no *Thanks for worrying I was in drugged danger just now*. “Go hang it on the portemanteau.”

“The what?”

“Those pegs over there! C’mon, let’s get this over with. DAMN I hate English.”

“But we *need* English, don’t we?” said Roger. “That is, if we want to get into Yale and be an Ivy League cheerleading medical student.”

Becca gave him a cold scowl. “Where’s *my* hot chocolate?”

“In your kitchen. Powder’s in the packet and water’s in the kettle.”

“You can have mine, Becca, I haven’t tasted it or anything,” offered Vicki. (Never in her life had she been able to drink a hot beverage without burning her tongue.)

Becca accepted the mug and took a big unblinking gulp. “C’mon, let’s do this stupid report. Byron, quit twitching! You’re making everybody sick!”

“Oh shsss!...” Tail-End gnashed apologetically.

Roger cracked his knuckles, then his elbows, then his *neck*. And then, while the other three scrawled in their notebooks, he reeled off paragraph after paragraph about the nature of The Beast in *Lord of the Flies*. Loss-of-innocence, civilization-vs.-savagery, evil-as-an-internal-force-present-in-every-individual, and Symbolism Symbolism Symbolism.

Vicki, while scrawling assiduously, couldn't keep her mind from wandering. To Bob and Jerry and Howard and Mr. Carlin, drunkenly ordering moo goo gai pan on last night's *Bob Newhart Show*. To a tearful Alex phoning on Thursday after wading through "A View to a Death," and realizing saintly Simon had been killed: "This isn't making me like fiction any better!" To the glints in Roger's thick square glasses and the gloats in his derisive voice as he pontificated on Beelzebub, as though they were the best of chums.

"Okay then," went Becca. "Vicki, you've got good handwriting—when you try, that is—" (frown at Vicki's squiggly notebook) "—so you write up the paper we'll turn in, and I'll give the oral report in class. Byron, you keep your mouth shut and *try* to act normal."

"(Shsss!...)"

"What an awful book!" Becca added, as if this had only just occurred to her. "Why would anybody *write* a book like this?"

"Wickedness, my angel," said Roger Mustardman. "In-es-cap-a-ble wickedness."

*

A blizzard plopped seven inches of snow on Vanderlund just before Thanksgiving, which scuttled Tricia's plan to come home from college for the holiday—assuming Tricia'd entertained any such plan, which Vicki rather doubted. Ozzie and Felicia had counted on it, though, so the Volesters's first Turkey Day in Burrow Lane was more downcast than thankful.

Monday, the 1st of December, marked the start of Winter Concert rehearsals by the VW Mixed Chorus. Vicki'd promised Mrs. Weller she'd join this gleeful ensemble next semester, but right now was glad she didn't have to arrive by 7 a.m. to sing an endless medley from *Lost Horizon*—"Share the Joy," "The World Is a Circle," and "Living Together, Growing Together"—every Zero Hour for the next two weeks.

("That's a snow job set to music," Joss snortled, and Fiona had her Piggy group croon "Grunting Together, Squealing Together." Alex, unamused, said the original arrangement was "delightful" and ensured she'd be at school on time for every rehearsal.)

So Vicki slogged in alone that first Monday of December, setting out early—though not Zero Hour early—in case she ran into any unshoveled snowbanks. Lesser Drive and Eugene G. Green Road were both plowed clear, so she made it to VW well before the

homeroom bell, going in the orthodox entrance and up via the conformist backstairs like a good eighter. Yet with Alex off singing and Joss not yet arrived (Band rehearsals didn't begin till later that week) there was time to kill after she'd hung up her coat, collected her books, and stashed them at Seat 38.

So what harm could there be if she just stuck her cautious head through the EXIT door to the Z-Wing stairwell?

Plenty, if you didn't anticipate staring straight into Roger Mustardman's widespread gabardine crotch.

"Oh!"

"Ho?" responded Roger, not looking up from an open manila folder.

The lack of eye contact kept Vicki from retreating. "Um—so—where's Becca?"

Engrossed in his folder: "Riiiiight heeere."

Vicki crept out onto the landing. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"She is here and they are here and we are all together. Booboo j'boob."

Altogether? As in *the*—? "Show me!"

"Come and look," waggled the folder.

"Just turn it around, I can see it from here—" (advancing to the foot of the stairs).

"I've got good eyes."

"And not ashamed to boast about them! Well, bring 'em on up... *all* the way up. As our friend The Beast put it: 'close, close, clohhhhse!'"

She edged up onto the same step as Roger. Which was slush-free, thanks to the four-day weekend and access taboo. Staying as far apart as the staircase would allow, she craned her neck his way—and got a crick in it when he whipped the folder around, displaying paparazzo photos of Becca at Petty Hills Country Club. All extremely décolleté as she bent over a body on the gory ballroom floor.

"Is that...?"

"That WAS our dashing Slumlord. Bruised his snout and augmented that trench he keeps in his chin. Now it can hold more drool from the fair tongues at Startop! Yaaaas," Roger drawled, re-immersing himself in the photos. "There's nothing like really *deep* cleavage to wet your whistle on."

“I—I gotta go,” said Vicki, scrambling to her flustered feet.

“Nice blush,” Roger observed over the folder. “And, as you boasted, good eyes. Especially good when your face gets so brightly, hotly red—rowr rowr!”

“Shut up!” Vicki spluttered, plucking the seats of her jeans, longjohns, and Lollipops out of her own deep cleavage. Backing away into 8-Z; leaving him to crouch shroudedly on the stairs.

Scamper off to homeroom and big hugs with Joss, unseen since last Wednesday when Lamar Twofields rescued her from the snowy school at Toughie’s request.

(“Damn that blizzard!” Joss had grouched on the phone with Vicki that night. “If it’d just started sooner, I might’ve got marooned with Lamar and had a *real* Thanksgiving! Meg told me, ‘You were lucky to get home at all’—I told Meg, ‘Yeah but it wasn’t *good* lucky.’”)

Good good g’joob.

See how your pants ride up in a trance.

You’d have to be a Dainty-Drawers to wear that shade of blush...

“What?” said Joss in the here-and-now homeroom. “You been having another hallucination?”

“No,” said Vicki, “more like a bat in the belfry...”

*

12/1/75

D.L.E. ~ uu & ♣ w/ ~~Rog~~ MOSTAZA ≤ (≠)

~ ♂ “drooling” ^ BB’s bbs (↓↓↓ i666!)

Or, in plain English:

*Dear Lana Eisenstein [really My Diary] ~
Sat and argued with ~~Rog~~ MUSTARDMAN
before school ~ he “drooling” over Becca Blair’s
boobs (what a [superderogatory] Beast!)*

It seemed safest, for the moment, to relate this to Lana Eisenstein alone.

Joss, though Vicki trusted her more than anyone else, couldn't be wholly depended on to *not* blurt something to Robin Neapolitan about the stairwell contretemps. And if Robin heard about it, there'd be strawberry-faced fireworks blown *way* out of proportion—

“You mean you SAT NEXT to that buttbrain and LOOKED at his dirty pictures? Are you out of your freaking *GOURD*??”

—and then Alex would get rattled and Becca'd be ticked off and Fiona'd have Arlo Sowell grunt a “Share the Jugs” ditty that the Smarks Brothers would adopt, and then Becca'd be ticked off even worse.

No thank you.

This would be her and Lana's little secret.

Well, and Roger Mustardman's.

Whom Vicki wasn't the least little bit scared of or impressed by.

So on Tuesday she went straight to homeroom and studiously reviewed last night's homework.

In English they had a dozen new vocab words and were starting a unit on *The Diary of Anne Frank*. (Couldn't they ever read anything that ended *cheerfully*?) In Social Studies, it was why the Articles of Confederation hadn't worked; and there was a Math quiz today on recursive patterns. Which made you want to do some recursing of Mr. Folz: *hack hawk hoff!* “The Ambulatory Ashtray,” Roger called him—

(Dammit.)

She could *sense* when he entered Room Z205. Though he didn't approach her or throw any remarks her way or indeed say much of anything, which was highly unusual. Could his feelings have been hurt?... Oh don't be stupid—pay him no-never-mind. Ditto Lenny Otis in third and fourth period. Double ditto Dino Tattaglia at lunch.

Even if such intentional disregard made you bump into people in the corridors. And alarm not only Alex and Joss but Robin and Laurie and even Fiona, whose Lucky Charms you attempted to drink instead of your own milk.

“Magically delicious,” Sheila-Q brogue-snorted. “*Somebody's* acting all lovesick.”

“SAYS WHO??” Vicki fulminated, making Fiona choke on her regained green clover marshmallows.

“(Just for that, I’m taking this,)” she mutter-declared, confiscating Vicki’s roll and butter-pat.

“*You* eating bread in school?” Robin scoffed.

“Good for you, Fiona!” Alex said supportively. “But you need meat and vegetables too—”

“I’m sorry, Feef,” sighed Vicki. “It’s just that I know I blew that Math quiz is all.”

“Uh hunhhhh,” Laurie skepticized. Blenching when Vicki gave her a squint, but standing her ground nonetheless; no one could outromantic Laurie Harrison. “Think of it this way,” she said. “Being in love and having a boyfriend would get your mind off quizzes.”

“How *is* Chipper?” Joss asked before Robin could say, “*You’re* sure proof of that!”

Chipper Farlowe was perhaps the least objectionable of Laurie’s caddish wooers; yet the whole lunch-bunch sighed dismally to hear her gurgle distractedly about his putative virtues, knowing Chipper had little interest in anything above Laurie’s shoulders. Vicki threw in an extra half-sigh of relief—but withheld the other half, since Joss was now owed a disclosure.

So, at the Media Center during free period:

Okay ~ dish!

I think ~~Mostaza~~ Roger M. is blackmailing B.B.

Brigitte Bardot? You mean the Penthouse Pet?

If you can call it a penthouse

I told you he acted like he lived there

And I told you of course he would. How is that blackmail?

I think he’s got these pictures of her

What kind of pictures?

Not Penthouse but the kind she won’t want people to see

Wow ~ how do you know?

He kind of showed them to me before school
wow ~ why you?
I guess because we were in the same English group
DON'T tell Robin!
Why not? Think she'd be jealous?
She'd tell and B.B. would die ~ after killing us first
Oh hell ~ now I wish I didn't know about it
Me too ~ here comes Alex don't tell her she'd FREAK

They covered these tidings with their Science homework and waved at Alex the Media Center aide, radiantly reshelving books; while Vicki let go of that other half-sigh.

*

Next morning, Vicki sheltered herself inside a bulky shawl-collar cardigan and knee-high zippered platform boots. At school by 7:30, she marched straight from her locker past the 8-Z classrooms to the door marked EXIT, and opened it, and marched on through.

"Nice goosetstep," commented the figure halfway up the stairs. "Nicely *goosable* step, I should say."

"That's none of your beeswax!" Vicki blustered. "I want you to leave me alone!"

"Why, I never laid both hands on you. Not at the same time, anyway. You may well ask Why."

"Why nothing! And you better not try, either! Pick on Becca if you gotta pick on anybody."

"Ah, but she picked *me*, you see," said Roger, flourishing a glossy magazine: the new issue of *North Squire*.

"OhmyGahd—THOSE pictures aren't in there, are they?"

"Come see for yourself."

"No! I won't! Just—show me from there."

"Now, you know the rules. 'Close, close, clohhhhse!'"

Vicki gritted her teeth, inching forward till she was again ensconced on the step beside him. Only then would Roger reveal a photo spread of the Petty Hills Junior Harvest Ball, taken *before* Sonny Lorgnon's nosebloodying. He grinned slumlordishly in one picture with stately-smiling Becca and a glamorous lady Vicki recognized from many local TV commercials.

"That's Mimi McLaine, isn't it?"

"Alias Mrs. Dr. J. Calvin Blair, Principal Anesthesiologist."

"What, is she like Becca's stepmother?"

"More like her *brood* mother."

"What! She can't be more'n thirty."

"Just turned ripe old thirty-seven. Same age as Dawn Wells, who represented Nevada at the Miss America pageant where Mimi strutted her stuff for Nebraska. Doc Blair took one look at that stuff and unloaded his missus who'd put him through gasser school. So First Missus taught him how to spell 'alimony'—which explains his making do in a dump like the Aguadulce, and why Our Becca doesn't attend Startop. Mimi's the one *I* feel sorry for—she completely missed the boat to *Gilligan's Island*."

Vicki tried to cinch up her sagging jaw. "How do you know all this?"

"It's my PREROGATIVE" (one of this week's vocab words) "as Becca's ghostwriter. A *ghost* has the *right* to do a bit of hauntwork along with homework."

"What're you talking about?"

Roger reflourished the magazine with a leer so sidelong it was cockeyed. "How blessèd she art, to be sure—all those assets 'n' foresets from Mama Mimi—but a nose for prose 'n' poetry ain't among 'em."

"Oh. She does say she hates English," Vicki murmured.

"Yes, we all have our bald spots—some in the most intriguing places," Roger waggled. "So she engaged my services as literary gigolo, at what *I* consider reasonable rates."

Like flashing her bra on demand? Vicki shrank a little more within her bulky cardigan, grateful for its matching scarf. "Why you? I mean, you talk a lot in class, but your grades're nothing special."

“I came to VW to MITIGATE my education” (another of this week’s vocab words). “If I wanted to live up to my impotential, I wouldn’t’ve parted company with Front Tree.”

“Yeah well, Sheila Quirk says they kicked you outta there.”

Roger’s off-center leer widened. “Hotcha Sheila? Dino-the-Pimp’s been trying to lay a hand or two on her since their *first* communion, if-you-get-my-meaning-if-you-catch-my-drift.”

“I don’t believe it!” gasped Vicki. “Not those two!”

“It happened back at Archbishop Houlihan: she had on a white dress and veil, and he splashed her with wine. Can’t get more Symbolic than that.”

“Oh, you mean... like a church thing.”

“What were you thinking I meant?”

Glint went his glasses. And though Vicki couldn’t see the eyes behind them, she got the squirmy impression they were penetrating her scarf and cardigan, boots and skirt and thermal tights—

—as the homeroom bell clanged and she leaped down to the landing, whirling to hunch behind her arms and hands and purse. “*You* go out first!”

He took his time about it, putting inordinate amble into his perambulation—so much so that Vicki, who’d intended to wait a couple minutes so they wouldn’t be seen together, found herself not only following close-close-clohhhhse but with her eyes glued to the back pockets of Roger’s plaid flares.

(Dammit!!)

(With damnation to spare, since he apparently had eyes in those squat back pockets. Eyes that could see through purse/hands/arms and take palpable note that, instead of plain white cotton Maidenform and Lollipops, Vicki’d worn her most frivolous set of party undies to school today.)

(Why on earth had she done such a thing?)

(*Trust me—just knowing you have them on will make you feel prettier, and BE prettier. Works every time.*)

(*Shut up, Tricia! Princess Smartysnoot! Big College Hotdog!—*)

(—hotdog??—)

(*Oh GAHD—now you’re thinking about his **RALPH**—stop it stop it stop it!!!...*)

*

It was surely no coincidence that Dino Tattaglia chased Sheila-Q from the X-Wing to the cafeteria that lunchtime.

She shrugged it off as an annoyance unavoidable by hotcha girls, and in fact Sheila looked exceptionally Mary Ellenish in a new pair of embroidered corduroy overalls. Vicki—knowing they’d look even cuter on *her*—resolved to buy a pair as soon as she received \$20 in Christmas gift checks. \$10 for the overalls, and \$10 for another set or two of fine lacywear to go beneath them.

(There was, after all, no earthly reason not to *want* to feel pretty.)

(Tricia’d sung a whole showtune on that very subject.)

“For a varsity Ladybug, you sure weren’t trying too hard to outrun Tattaglia!” Robin jeered at Sheila, launching today’s argument: just how fast *should* a girl run from a guy, in assorted situations?

Vicki listened carefully but came away uncertain.

The Band was now involved in Winter Concert’s Zero Hour rehearsals, so Joss and Robin and Fiona were as absent as Alex from 8-Z before 8 a.m. Minimizing the threat of being detected going into and out of the stairwell; so Vicki spent seven of the next twelve Zero Hours there, with Colonel Mustard and his candlestick.

She always found him waiting on the same step, halfway up the next flight to the third floor. Always by himself, though the rest of the day you’d see him in the company of Lenny or Dino or both.

“Bodyguards,” Roger bragged. “Button men to shield my butt from Drippy Brad Faussett and Wee Willie Wilkie.” He broke into song:

Rumblin’ tumblin’ roon about, crawin’ like a COCK

Skirlin’ like a kenna-what, waukenin’ sleepin’ FOCK—

“—that’s Wee Willie for you. Future podiatrist, dontcha know: most attracted to Our Becca’s bare *feet*.”

Vicki, with scarlet cheeks, could only murmur, “You oughta be rehearsing with Mixed Chorus.”

“No, that’d be Living Up To My Impotential—can’t be done. Besides, then I wouldn’t have the pleasure of watching your subcutaneous capillaries widen.”

“*Hunh??*”

“Blush,” said Roger.

Which she did till she thought the earrings would burst out of her lobes.

It made no sense at all. He wasn’t a handsome guy, unless you found beetle-browed squatness handsome. No worse groomed than the average eighth-grade boy, yet there was something inherently *unclean* about him—not like snake-oily Roy Hodeau, but impossible to ignore. Unlike Babyface Nelson Baedeker, he’d obviously started shaving on a regular basis—and slapping on a redolent cologne, Hai Karate or Aqua Velva. And he kept brandishing that pen in his teeth, never using it to write with—“Sorry, I’m trying to quit.”

Being in his presence made Vicki feel like Becky Thatcher: lost in a cave full of bats.

“Chapter 20 of *Tom Sawyer* is an excellent example of sadomasochistic literature,” Roger remarked. “Very much like *Venus in Furs*.”

“What’s that?”

“A dirty, dirty book. Not fit for little-girl-eyes to see.”

“Well then, it can’t be anything like *Tom Sawyer*.”

“Oh no? Becky finds a picture of a stark naked man and tears it down the middle. ‘Oh what shall I do?’ she cries, ‘I’ll be whipped, and I never was whipped in school!’ That comes after Tom imagines how he’d ‘trounce’ Becky if she were a boy, and her being impatient to see Tom ‘flogged.’ And when he is, it’s a ‘merciless flaying’ that she watches with adoration.”

“But he took her punishment!” Vicki protested. “She tore the teacher’s book, and Tom said he did it!”

“His exact words were, ‘*I* done it’—emphasis on the selfish ego. Which she interpreted as ‘being noble.’ Don’t tell *me* that’s not sadomasochism.”

Vicki wondered if he talked like this to Becca Blair: rubbing in that she had a similar name as Becky Thatcher, if not similar pantalettes.

"I've got to meet with my English tutor first thing tomorrow," Becca told her that same morning in the girls locker room. Casually, yet with an imperious undertone.

"Oh?" said Vicki. "Oh! Um, all right."

She stayed away from the stairwell next Zero Hour, trying not to conjecture how much underwear was being exposed. Or dwell on Becca's knowing about her and Roger—not that there *was* a her-and-Roger—not that it mattered, since Becca was the only one who guessed there even might be.

Or so Vicki thought till after lunch, when Carly Thibert leaned over from her neighboring locker to smirk: "You 'n' Roger Mustardman, hunh?"

Vicki nearly unswallowed just-eaten fish sticks. "W-where'd you get that idea?"

Chipmunk-cackle. "The way you two were, y'know, *looking* at each other in the cafeteria, when you didn't think the other one was looking. I'm right, aren't I?"

"I... dunno," Vicki confessed. "I hope not..."

"Go out with him," Carly advised, using her locker mirror to reapply lipgloss.

"That's the best way to tell for sure."

"Would *you* go out with him, Carly?"

"Depends. Where?—to do what?—'n' how much'll he spend? A guy with money doesn't have to look that good."

Slam of locker doors. "Just don't... spread it around, 'kay? I mean, about me 'n'... anybody."

"Hey, I'm cool," said Carly. "I won't if *you* won't say anything about my new fake ID. Lemme know if you want one—my cousin Lola does good work. Makes everybody believe you're sixteen."

Head for Vocal Music as Carly heads for Art, till you come back together for Spanish and a bunch of reflexive verbs that were simply obscene: *desvertirse* ("to undress"), *bañarse* ("to take a bath"), *acostarse* ("to go to bed"), *divertirse* ("to have fun"). Carly cackled and Craig Clerkington guffawed as each verb was presented by Señorita DeStefano. Brad Faussett chimed in too, but Vicki sensed his guffaws weren't authentic.

After Spanish, following Brad and Craig down the hall to Z203, she thought she overheard them bandy the names *Becca* and *Mustardman*—but then Joss strode up bitching

as usual about sixth period Phys Ed, drowning out the jockthread Vicki was trying to unravel.

“Are you even listening to me?” Joss carped.

“Course!”

“So what’d I say last?”

“‘Damn I hate Gym.’”

“Well... okay, that does kind of sum it up.”

Joss hated Phys Ed; Becca hated English. Vicki wasn’t terribly fond of Science, or of Mr. Dunn as he blathered on AND on about “geochemical cycles.” Which sounded like laundry, and duller-than-normal laundry at that:

“The Earth contains a fixed amount—that is to say, *essentially* a fixed amount, of each atom or element—that is to say, each *stable* atom or element, that can exist in several different reservoirs—that is to say, natural *resources* such as land, water, atmosphere, organisms—”

“*SHSSS!*” went a gnash directly behind Vicki—from Tail-End Wyszynski, living up to his nickname too literally, and reminding her of third grade when Wernie Ball occupied the same place vis-à-vis her undefended backside. Which wasn’t a fun surprise to discover, then or now.

Tail-End-bugs... Tail-End-germs... Tail-End-cooties...

(Eww.)

*

The next Zero Hour, on Friday the 12th, Vicki marched into the stairwell and planted herself next to Roger, taking care not to sit on the loose folds of his trench coat or opera cloak or whatever it was he was wearing: dark and flappy, like batwings.

“Why do you sit out here, anyway?”

“Seclusion,” he said, not glancing up from a heavy book with KAFKA on its spine.

Vicki wasn’t about to ask who KAFKA was or what “seclusion” meant. “How’d your ‘tutoring’ Becca go yesterday?”

“Tut,” went Roger, turning a page. “A gentleman doesn’t tute ‘n’ tell.” He went on reading and Vicki, in a snug purple pullover atop an equally snug pink blouse, increased her disgruntlement.

“I heard Brad Faussett say something yesterday about her ‘n’ you—I couldn’t hear exactly what, but it didn’t sound good.”

“He thinks I’ve got a diabolical ‘hold’ over Our Becca. So does Wee Willie—so does the Slumlord—and they all want to save her, like three knights or stooges of old.” (Another page turned.) “She won’t disabuse them of that bullshit—beg your pardon, that ‘*adult male bovine*’ shit—because she’d rather they abuse themselves, instead of hassling her to do it for them.”

Vicki felt her blatant cheeks again go hot. “That’s... *sick* is what it is.”

“Think so? Commonplace adolescent hormones. Nothing new under the sun, which makes an apt acronym: NNUTS. Becca gets the brunt of our NNUTS because she blossomed so very, very fully so very, very early. *Too* very-very—that much blossom’s not likely to last. Fortunately for her, she’s got plenty of brains and bearing and money behind her, so she’ll do well enough. Better than Mama Mimi, who’d still be twirling batons at county fairs if she hadn’t landed Doc Gasser.”

“That’s mean! You’re so mean!”

He tucked a bookmark in KAFKA, laid it aside, and regarded her straightforwardly. “Now, now. Tut, tut. This happens all the time to the yellow-haired. They rise and they shine till the sun sets. Then comes the night, black and silken—”

His hand snaked out and took a pinchful of Vicki’s tresses, where they draped down the front of her snug purple pullover.

Under which her heart stopped for an eon before pounding like a bass line at the realization that Roger’s knuckles were resting on her left breast—his index upon her nipple.

With the intervening three layers of fabric providing no buffer whatsoever.

OhmyGahd I’m being FELT UP. OhmyGahd it’s happening at SCHOOL.

OhmyGahd am I being SEDUCED??

Most of Vicki wanted to go burn her pullover, boil her blouse, and reinforce her bra with lead shielding.

But some of her struggled not to turn his hand around and press herself into it, and grab his other hand for righty and lean into that one too.

“Darkness never fades away,” he said: that glint in his specs again. “It keeps spreading, vaster and vaster...”

*

“I’ve got something to tell you,” Vicki said in Joss’s aerie that weekend.

They were sitting crosslegged on Joss’s brass bed with a big bowl of sleepover popcorn, watching Richard Pryor host a new show called *NBC’s Saturday Night*. It was supposedly broadcast live from New York, but the nervous network put it on a five-second delay in case Richard said anything bleepable.

Live or delayed, Joss was in heaven: screaming with laughter (into a pillow) at Richard and singing along with bluesologist Gil Scott-Heron on “Johannesburg.” Vicki, however, had been uptight since a skit where a samurai (working as a hotel clerk) was played by a squat white beetle-browed guy; and pressure grew till she could keep her yap shut no longer.

So, during a commercial where Mimi McLaine pitched Canfield’s Diet Chocolate Fudge pop, Vicki divulged:

“I think Roger Mustardman’s kinda got a thing for me.”

“‘Cause he showed you naughty pictures of Becca?”

“There’s more to it than that.”

“Like what?” Joss asked through a mouthful of popcorn.

“Like he... kinda felt me up, I think.”

Popcorn spit-take. “You THINK he felt you up? When did THIS happen??”

“Um—yesterday morning.”

Joss gaped at her with saucer-sized eyes and mouth, till Richard Pryor came back on the aerie TV.

“HOLD that thought!” Joss stipulated.

Vicki meekly held it while Richard engaged in a word-association skit with a white guy whose cleft chin made him look like Sonny Lorgnon’s older brother. They soon had Joss screaming into the pillow again, as Richard escalated from *honky!* to *HONKY honky!* to *DEAD honky!* to *yo’ MOMMA!!* to *yo’ GRAN’MOMMA!!!*

As his fury rose, it seemed to defuse Joss's. But at the next commercial break all she'd say was, "Help me clean up the popcorn. You know Toughie'll know if we leave any on the floor."

Vicki used a flashlight to check under the bed and there flushed out Fingers, one of the two Mittens-kittens the Murrisches had chosen to keep. Fingers, even pre-weaning, appeared to enjoy cornet music and so became Joss's personal cat. The other keeper-kitten—a born weirdo, attached to Beth and Invisible Amy—was called Thumb.

"Tom Thumb? Or Thumbelina?"

"Neither," Beth said decidedly. "Just Thumb. *All* Thumb."

(Their mother Mittens was keeping watch downstairs like Toughie's sentinel, to see if Meg would again break her Saturday dating curfew, and if so by how many minutes.)

Vicki got Fingers to chase the flashlight beam around the aerie, further alleviating Joss's exasperation. All the same, Vicki was told to keep *HOLDing* that thought till Richard Pryor said good night and the TV set was switched off.

Then Joss took Fingers onto her crosslegged lap, fixed Vicki with a hard-blue-marble glare, and said: "Spill."

Vicki duly spilled every bean of the past two weeks. Using her own awkwardly curved hand to re-enact the move Roger'd made on her, she disclosed her contradictory reactions: repulsion on/of the one hand, versus—what exactly? Curiosity? Compliance?

Or craving, as if for an ice cream soda on a hot summer day?

I wanted to tell you everything right away, I was just ABOUT to tell you last night at my house, but then I was like: "If I do tell, maybe that'll mean it really DID happen."

What—do you think maybe it really DIDN'T?

I don't know... Maybe I'm still hallucinating.

(Fingers kitten-clambered off Joss's thigh and nestled next to Vicki's.)

So... will you keep going to see him, in the mornings before homeroom?

I don't KNOW. Part of me never wants to see him again, anywhere, ever. But then—

"THAT'S why you wore your sexy top yesterday!!"

("Myeep!" went Fingers, jumping off the bed and running behind the beanbag chair.)

"It's not a 'sexy' top, it's my *purple* top."

“Your *sexy* purple top. Don’t you see? You kinda have a thing for him, too.”

“I do not!... Do I, really?”

“No wonder he couldn’t control himself! You’re lucky he didn’t try anything except copping a feel. Does doing that backhanded still count as ‘second base’?”

“You’re asking *ME*? Why would he even want to, with *ME*? It’s not like I’ve got Becca’s flopperroos.”

“That doesn’t matter to a hornyboy. Look at Laurie—she’s hardly top-heavy, but guys are always grabbing at her. Even Jason, and he’s her own stepbrother!”

“Oh, he just snaps her bra straps, and she’s so dumb she thinks that’s flirting. *No*—I didn’t mean that—Laurie’s, y’know, like *innocent*. If Roger ever got hold of her, she’d just think he was being ‘romantic’—and he’d *keep* her believing it, too. How can I have a thing for a guy like that?”

“Laurie *is* dumb. I’ve liked her since first grade, but she’s always been gullible and naïve and picked on—at least until Susie came along to protect her. You’re not like that at all.”

“Well... that’s ’cause *you* came along to protect *me*.”

“Aw... shut up, you nut.”

“*You* shut up. And wear a sexy top on Monday, so Roger’ll forget about me and *I* can forget about *him*.”

“Hey! How hard do you wanna get clobbered, Loopy?”

CLUMP from downstairs; a righteous yowl from Mittens; and Mr. Murrisch saying, “Meg? Do you have any idea what time it is?” in a stern-yet-weary Lincolnian voice.

“(Busted!)” Joss whisper-exulted: scooping up Fingers, snapping off the light, and hopping back into bed. “(Meg-gy’s so bust-ed!)”

“(She’s a *DEAD* honky!)” Vicki agreed.

“(Yo’ *MOMMA!!*)”

“(Yo’ **GRAN’MOMMA!!!**)”

Vicki wasn’t sure they should be whisper-yelling such things, given the condition of Joss’s mother and Grandma Sadie; but Joss had started it, relishing the streetwise aspersions. And—far more importantly—she’d forgiven Vicki for keeping mum. (So to speak.)

*

Discipline at VW was lighter than normal the week before Christmas vacation. Even so, on Monday afternoon the Smarks Brothers succeeded in being sent to the Principal's office from three separate classes. While there, they posed for a group photo with Mrs. Driscoll—or rather *around* her, she being constructed along what Roger called “operatic battleship” lines. As she stood with a look of Wagnerian bafflement on her dreadnought face, Roger held a sprig of mistletoe above his head; Lenny peered out from behind the Principal, making grisly goo-goo eyes; and Dino, wearing his forbidden “pimp cap,” brazenly concealed Mrs. Driscoll's Rolodex inside his parka.

“Who TOOK this picture?” Vicki wanted to know when Roger showed it to her.

“I blame Society. Pretty high society, too—the higher the better. ‘Higher than *kites* they fly by *nights* till you can see the *whites* of their potato *blights*...’”

He did not pick up where he'd left off, move-making-wise; and Vicki found that almost as offensive as a flagrant fondle. She dreaded that he'd bring out the mistletoe-sprig and compel her to forfeit a kiss—then fretted over what he must think was wrong with her, that kept him from trying.

On Wednesday evening VW's Winter Concert took place in the Home Base auditorium. Vicki, in the audience, envied Alex and Laurie and Little Sue onstage with the Mixed Chorus—but was relieved she didn't have to be up there too, singing the endless *Lost Horizon* medley.

She sat with Beth Murrish (who gravely critiqued the Band's performance) and Invisible Amy (who seemed to concur). “That drummer's frowning at us,” Beth stated.

“Robin Neapolitan? You know her, don't you? She's kind of a constant frowner,” said Vicki, glancing at the percussion section. Robin did have on her strawberry glower, and mouthed a word at Vicki that wasn't “Mandingo.”

What? Vicki mouthed back.

Robin had to participate in the Band's spirited (if not completely on-key) rendition of “Sleigh Ride”—then looked at Vicki again, and mouthed *Turd!*

WHAT?? Vicki nearly reacted, before remembering that one of Robin's favorite maxims was *You can't say “Mustardman” without calling him a TURD.*

“(Beth?)” Vicki breathed through ventriloquist-lips. “(Is there a guy sitting behind me?)”

“Plenty,” answered Beth, her owlish little eyes on the Band.

“(I mean one with thick glasses and thick eyebrows, and maybe looks like he needs a shave.)”

“Oh, that one. He *was* there for awhile. He scared off the other guy.”

“(What other guy? How do you mean, scared off?)”

“Amy saw the other guy sitting behind you. He was a fidgeter and did squeezey things with his hands. Then when your guy came in, the other guy got up and ran away and your guy took his seat. Amy didn’t see when *he* left, but he’s gone now.”

Vicki wished she could communicate directly with Invisible Amy. “(Why do you keep calling him ‘my’ guy?)”

“You knew what he looked like, didn’t you?” said Beth.

The Band struck up “Winter Wonderland,” transporting Vicki back to the Norroway Theater a couple years in the past; and again the strings of her heart went *twang*.

*

Alex left the concert with a sore throat that turned into a runny nose overnight. No argument this time about staying home sick: she was determined to recuperate before her birthday on Friday and its big celebration on Saturday. So on Thursday Vicki went to school alone once more—and extra early too, so as to brush her hair and check her makeup before *beating* Roger to the stairwell. She arranged herself on their step (no, not *their* step—just the one he and she both tended to occupy) and sat waiting to see how he’d react when he got there and found *her* expecting *him*.

Why no, she’d say (with her eyes)—she didn’t have on anything special. Just felt like wearing a dress today: a little black wool dress, such as belonged in every teen girl’s doorless alcove closet. When it wasn’t being worn to school for the first time. Because it matched her just-brushed hair and always-good eyes. Not to impress anyone in particular.

When anyone finally showed up.

If anyone ever did.

Maybe *he* had a sore throat too?

Vicki's was beginning to feel a bit scratchy, so she popped a Sucrets lozenge from the tin in her purse. *This sucks...*

"Patty Hearst, I presume."

PWAH! went the lozenge out of her mouth, to ricochet off the bannister and adhere to the exact spot over Vicki's left nipple.

"Bravo," Roger applauded from the landing above. "These stairs don't just go *up*, you know. I could've snuck down and kidnapped you forty times before you cottoned onto that. Or, excuse me, before you *woollied*—"

His hand parted her just-brushed hair to infiltrate the back of her neckline, give the dress a tweak—and, purposely or not, undo the hook at its zipper-top.

Causing the Sucret to pop off Vicki's front and bounce giddily away.

"You shouldn't be g-g-going up there," she stuttered. "To the freshman floor, I mean."

"When I 'g-g-go' to a school, I go *to* it. All over it. Every inch of it. Nothing's off limits." (Did he still have hold of her zipper-slider? Was it starting to *zssssk* downward?)

"Were—were you at the concert last night?"

"Why? I don't sing their songs or play their instruments. 'Only my lonely own...'"

"Well, someone said she—*thought* she—saw you there. Chasing away Tail-End."

"Whose tail-end am I supposed to be chasing?"

"Not *whose*. TAIL-END, y'know—Byron Wyszynski."

(*Zssssk*. Down to just above her bra's backstrap.)

"Don't mind Wyszzo. He's a clown with a yen for a ballerina."

Vicki twisted herself away and around to where he squatted Moorishly: a figure off the *Jambe de Bois* music box Gran had given her. "That—that's *Petrushka*."

"No, that's 'real life' imitating Art. Speaking of which—" He removed a manila envelope from his trench coat and thrust it at her. "In token of the holiday season, my little *schmetterling*. See you in the trenches."

He dodged past her, his coat batflapping her face, and was through the wing door before she could react.

Reach dazedly back to rezip and rehook; then pick up his envelope with gingerly fingertips. Upon it, in teensy-tiny print, was the answer to a question she hadn't been able to ask:

SCHMETTERLING (noun, German)

1. butterfly (insect)
2. butterfly (swim stroke)
3. butterfly (anti-aircraft missile)

*

“(Who died?)” Fiona mutter-asked in homeroom, seeing Vicki's black dress.

“Hshsss!” gollumed Tail-End from Seat 40. Vicki doubted he was trying to make eye contact with her, but she didn't check to be sure. Roger, she knew for certain, wasn't.

Which did nothing to quell the *schmetterlings* in her tummy.

She'd looked up the equivalent word in her Spanish dictionary: *mariposa*, much prettier and more appropriate. *Yo soy una mariposa: yo floto, yo planeo*. A long-distance runner could float and glide like a butterfly—and better than a ballerina, since you could outpace any clown who might be after you.

But what about a Moor?

Joss once claimed the name Murrish meant “Moorish” and explained her partiality for black guys. Well, maybe there were two kinds of Moors: Afro-American ones, and then the squat white beetle-browed type.

What had he given her in that envelope?

More photos, probably. Maybe snapshots of Becca's bedroom, which Vicki hadn't been invited to tour. Or could the pictures be of Vicki herself? Delivered in a “plain brown wrapper,” as if they were something shameful? Photos taken in a school where she had to remove her dress and replace it with a hideous gymsuit, then take *that* off AND everything else AND take a bare-naked shower, elbow-to-elbow with VW's most Terrific Torso!!

Not that Roger Mustardman'd be peeping at their *elbows*.

“(He gave me something!!)” Vicki seethed in Joss's ear between second and third periods.

“(Like... what?)”

“(Like in an envelope! *Sealed*, even!)”

“(Don’t worry. We can steam it open.)”

Leave it to Joss to make a joke out of what was probably *blackmail*. “If you don’t want everyone at school to see these bare-naked pictures, you’ll have to pose for more—this time right in front of me.” Oh Gahd! That’d be what the cover note would demand! And what mercy could she expect from a guy who’d actually started *UNDRESSING* her in the stairwell that very morning??

“(I can try to sneak it back into his locker,)” Joss offered between third and fourth periods. Which was a feasible possibility, Roger’s locker being right next to Joss’s. She’d seen a little placard he kept inside its door that said:

*Be careful with the sexual stuff
There are knockers on the warpath
—H. L. Mencken*

“(Well... not till we see what’s *in* the envelope,)” said Vicki.

“(I bet it’s a luhvvvve letter!)”

“(Oh shut up!)”

“(*You* shut up. Loudmouth guys are secretly shy around girls they’ve got a thing for. They write in letters the stuff they can’t say aloud.)”

“(Yeah right.)”

“(What’s with all the muttering?)” asked Fiona, on her way to Pre-Algebra.

As soon as that bothersome class was over, Vicki and Joss took the envelope to the remotest carrel in the Media Center and there, warily, as if they were defusing a bomb, used a nail file to pry it open. Allowing them to extract:

A BITE TO DRINK

ACT ONE

A bell tolls twelve times as the curtain rises on a vaulted crypt. Center stage is a large coffin (closed) with tall iron tapers standing at each corner. Behind the coffin is a six-foot-high headstone reading:

HERE LIES
ZACHARY T. CROCKAPUT

Below the name on this headstone is a peg on which hangs a sign saying DO NOT DISTURB. After the bell's twelfth toll, there is a long pause. We hear the sound of snoring. Then a loud alarm clock goes off and keeps clanging. The coffin opens and ZACHARY T. CROCKAPUT climbs out. He wears an oversized nightshirt and nightcap. Yawns and scratches himself, then takes the alarm clock from inside the coffin and whacks it silent.

CROCKAPUT

Five hundred years old, and this clock is still slow.

He pulls off the nightcap and nightshirt, revealing a standard Dracula costume (creased and wrinkly) underneath. Tosses nightwear and clock into the coffin and closes it. Takes a cigar and match out of a pocket, strikes the match on a tall iron taper, lights the cigar and takes a drag.

CROCKAPUT

I thought everything around here was undead till I sampled this cheroot.

He picks up a handbell from behind the headstone and rings it vigorously.

CROCKAPUT

Oh Gigoletto! Come hyah, boy! And bring my evening spittoon!

Enter GIGOLETTO in bellhop costume, carrying a big brass spittoon.

GIGOLETTO

You're too late, boss—checkout time was midnight! [*laughs at his own joke*]

He holds the spittoon for CROCKAPUT to throw the cigar into. They start tossing the spittoon back and forth like a medicine ball. The one not holding it makes exaggerated quote marks with fingers during the following:

CROCKAPUT

Has Roachez the coachman picked up our “guest” from the “inn” yet?

GIGOLETTTO

Well, our “guest” was out of the “inn,” so Roachez picked him up from the “outhouse” instead. Here he comes now—hey, Roachy!

Enter ROACHEZ in coachman costume, using a long bullwhip as a jump rope. He takes another sign from behind the headstone and hangs it on the peg in front of the DO NOT DISTURB sign. The new sign reads, WATCH THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL / WITH WOLFMAN JACK.

ROACHEZ AND GIGOLETTTO

[howling at each other] AROOOO!

CROCKAPUT

[putting down the spittoon] These two aren’t children of the night—they’re fallout from the wee hours. And I do mean “whee.”

ROACHEZ AND GIGOLETTTO

[howling at CROCKAPUT] WHEEEEE!

CROCKAPUT

Say, what’d you do with my “guest” that was “out” of the “inn”?

ROACHEZ cracks his whip toward the wings. Enter YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD, puffing and wheezing as he carries in as much luggage as one actor can hold.

CROCKAPUT

Is that all his?

GIGOLETTTO

No, I had Roachy claim all the abandoned bags. You know, the ones sitting around unwanted in people’s rooms.

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD steps in the spittoon and drops all the luggage. ROACHEZ and GIGOLETTTO start to open and go through it, laughing at some items, trying on

others. YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD *pats his foppish brow with a folded handkerchief while trying to discreetly remove the spittoon from his foot.*

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

Count Crockaput?

CROCKAPUT

You're thinking of my cousin, Chocula. I'm just a Know-a-Count. But I am [*in a Dracula accent*] Crahhhk-uh-put-t-t-t.

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

Ooh, it's really good to see you.

CROCKAPUT

Well, it's nice to be seen, if you want to "make the scene." Just don't ask to see my spleen.

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

Allow me to introduce myself. I am your new lawyer, Young Fellow-Me-Lad.

CROCKAPUT

Yes, I remember your great-grandfather, Old Fellow-Me-Coot. His sister married a lawyer—that made him an attorney-in-law. [*In Dracula accent*] I trossst you hoff kept your commmingk here a seeecret?

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

I followed your instructions IM-plicitly.

CROCKAPUT

EX-cellent, Mr. Fellow-Me-Lad! EX-cellent way to say IM-plicitly!

ROACHEZ and GIGOLETTO *take a large rolled-up poster out of YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD's briefcase. They unroll it and hang it on the headstone over the Midnight Special sign. It is a demure pin-up of a small dark beauty showing off her legs in a swallowtail ballerina costume. ROACHEZ, GIGOLETTO and CROCKAPUT crowd in*

to admire her up close. Excited whistling and “ooh! ooh!s” from GIGOLETTO and ROACHEZ.

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

[still struggling with the spittoon] Please be careful with that! It’s a portrait of my sweetheart back home, Mabel Maydone.

CROCKAPUT

A Maydone, you say? Called Mabel? Reminds me of a fine old ballad:

[singing bass] What’s yer name, little girl?

[singing falsetto] Name is Mayyy-bel.

[singing bass] Gimme a kiss, little girl!

[singing falsetto] Mayyy-bel layyy-ter.

At which point the Lunch B bell rang, jolting Vicki and Joss back to the “real life” world of the remotest carrel in the VW Media Center.

“He wrote you a play!” said Joss.

“He wrote me a play...” said Vicki.

*

And the last place she wanted to be right then was in the same cafeteria as its author. At least not till she found out what happened to the “small dark beauty” with admirable legs.

But Joss was famished, and wanted to trade some of her savory Toughie lunch for the school’s ooey-gooey mac’n’cheese; so to the cafeteria they did go, Vicki hiding *A Bite to Drink* inside her music notebook. Needlessly: Roger was absorbed in playing pinochle—not for money, the Smarkses assured the faculty monitor, but to “unsettle” which one would have to eat the other two’s mac’n’cheese.

It being the Thursday before Christmas vacation, the monitor let the game continue. *Snap!* went the cards as the Smarkses trumped each other—and as Brad Faussett got up from his stool, ran a comb through superbloodried hair, put on a grimly resolute countenance, and started over to the Smarks table. With some of the air escaping from his balloon when he

turned to nod at his followers, and found he didn't have any.

Come on, he head-jerked at the nearest jock table. *Come ON*, he head-jerked again when nobody got up.

"Bradley and the Spasmodics, ladies and gentlemen!" Roger resounded.

"Bradley *has* the spasmodics!" went Craig Clerkington, looking proud of himself for cracking that wise.

HEY! from Bradley, rejerking his head a couple more times. *Come ON, will ya?*

But Craig wasn't budging: he thought Brad's theory that Roger possessed a hypnotic "hold" over Becca Blair was a dumpee's excuse. If Brad wanted to compound this by making a dip of himself, let him do it solo; and if Craig wasn't going to back Brad up, none of the other jocks (who all had designs of their own on Becca) would either.

Aw C'MON, you guys! from the Lone Faussett, nearly dislocating his neck with a final *Let's DO this!* head-jerk.

"Brad," put in Becca herself from the nearest cheerybabe table. "Be sweet, okay?" (Titters from Gigi Pyle, Kim Zimmer, and other cheerybabes.)

"Yeah—you can always try out for the 'A' Suite *next* season," Roger added, loudly. (Guffaws from Craig and the jocks at this witty reminder of Brad's benchwarming role on the varsity football squad.)

Steam oozed out of Brad's ears and around his superblowdried coif. He stomped past the Smarks table to throw something nonexistent into the garbage bin; then made a circuitous retreat to his stool through more titters and guffaws.

"What a wimp!" grumbled Robin Neapolitan. "The least he could've done was knock Mustardman's block off first."

Snap! went Roger's trump card.

*

After lunch, Vicki and Joss rushed to the empty auditorium balcony and there ran through the rest of *A Bite to Drink*. Or at least the rest of Act One, which was all Vicki'd been given; its last page had the handwritten postscript

to be continued

The girls were quickly glad they hadn't read the next scene *before* lunch:

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

[*taking papers out of his briefcase*] Here is the lease to Dearey Abbey, sir, all ready for your hand and seal.

CROCKAPUT

I'm fresh out of seals, we'll have to use an otter. We otter use an otter. Since we can't seal our deal, I porpoise we dolphin and have a meal together. [*rings handbell*]

GIGOLETTO, *in chef's hat and apron, wheels in a tray of covered bowls. Sets one bowl on the coffin lid in front of YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD, and uncovers it with a grand gesture.*

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

Uggh! What's in this bowl? Is it roaches?

ROACHEZ *cracks his whip, jumps on top of the coffin and starts to dance.*

GIGOLETTO and CROCKAPUT *clap rhythmically, shouting "Hey! Hey!"*

CROCKAPUT

Okay, that's enough of the table show—save the rest for the floor show.

ROACHEZ *jumps off the coffin, dances away with his whip, and resumes going through the luggage.*

GIGOLETTO

Don't worry, boss, this is our national dish—Spiders Paprikash.

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

Spiders? But they're alive! They're alive!!!

CROCKAPUT

Certainly they're alive, do you think we're inhumane? But they need something to swim in. Gigoletto, you forgot the wine sauce!

GIGOLETTO

The wine sauce! The wine sauce! [*uncovers a bottle, pulls the cork, and pours it over the Spiders Paprikash. The “wine” comes out like ketchup, and GIGOLETTO has to pound the bottle to make it flow*]

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

[*to CROCKAPUT*] Uggh—er—aren’t you having any, sir?

CROCKAPUT

I never drink—wine. I sometimes wink blind, though. Depending on what I do drink, and how often.

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

I—I—thank you, but I’m not really hungry right now.

CROCKAPUT

You wouldn’t insult us by refusing to taste our national dish, would you?
Gigoletto! My dueling gauntlet!

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD *hastily takes a spoonful of spiders and puts it in his gagging mouth.*

CROCKAPUT

See? I knew you’d relish it. Just wait till they start spinning webs for all the unwary flies in your stomach.

Joss and Vicki, full of ooey-gooey mac’n’cheese, had nearly quit reading by then. But Roachez found another poster in Young Fellow-Me-Lad’s bag: this one “a centerfold, as EX-plicit as theater management will permit, of a bigsome blonde”—Clara Klean, the bosom chum of Mabel Maydone. Clara’s father, Dr. Klean, operated a sanitarium next door to Dearey Abbey:

CROCKAPUT

Are you saying I’ll be neighbors with an insane asylum?

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

In a manner of speaking.

CROCKAPUT

Well, that's a relief.

The scene switched to Dr. Klean's asylum, where Clara ("dressed Brunhilde-style in winged helmet and ample breastplates") entered in a chariot drawn by a Mounted Chorus:

THREE CHORAL SUITORS

[*harmonizing*]

Oh, we're three boys on a horse,

We hope we might get fed!

Through veins our blood does course

Until it all gets shed!

The three suitors—Drippy, Snippy, and Flippy—each proposed marriage to Clara, as did their horse; but she rejected them all, lest wedlock interfere with her ambition to be the world's best-endowed singer:

CLARA

Though my curves are quite emphatic

And my sex appeal's invincible,

I'm not very operatic

So I can't be a school principal!

The Mounted Chorus slunk dolefully off stage left, and Mabel Maydone danced on stage right (Vicki's heart starting to thump) as *Swan Lake* played "in swelling stereo." Without a word and while still dancing, she gave her bosom chum a letter; and Clara related its good news—the greatest voice teacher in Europe was coming to volunteer his services! Zachary T. Crockaput, who'd be staying right next door at Dearey Abbey, said he was not acquainted with anyone by the name of Young Fellow-Me-Lad, whom he definitely hadn't driven insane by feeding him Spiders Paprikash, and whose sweetheart back home was of course perfectly safe from any nefarious designs by the aforementioned Know-a-Count.

CLARA

Well, isn't that splendid, Mabel? I shall get the musical tutoring I need, while you await Young Fellow-Me-Lad's return from his mysterious secret mission abroad! And then when you two plight your troth, I shall sing at your nuptials!

Spotlight on MABEL, and we go into a Dream Ballet to "Ochi Chyornye." Enter YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD, still holding his bowl and munching spiders like popcorn. He is plainly insane as he dances after MABEL. She avoids his twitchy embraces and keeps dancing out of reach, even when he starts to stalk her with a butterfly net. CROCKAPUT enters on a raised platform, riding on ROACHEZ and GIGOLETTO's shoulders. They look out over the ballet, laughing uproariously as the song ends.

Curtain

to be continued

*

Alex was back in smooth-throated trim on Friday, her fourteenth birthday, effulgently anticipating its (and the start of Christmas vacation's) big celebration tomorrow. She accompanied Vicki to school that morning, leaving no time for a visit to the stairwell—and no certainty what Vicki might've done while there, had there *been* time.

The thought kept recurring that she "otter" give Roger a little something in token of the holiday season, to thank him for his play.

An in-es-cap-a-bly *wicked* thought kept recurring, that this otter be a mistletoe-sprig. (Redden tingle blush.)

She waited for Roger to make the next move—in homeroom, or English, or Social Studies, or Math, or at lunch—

—which he didn't, because he was absent that day. As, apparently, were Lenny and Dino. *What've you done to him (them)?* Vicki wanted to yell at Brad Faussett; but he looked

like a hound who'd trailed a fox for many hours over many miles, to an empty lair.

*

Alex's birthday bash was held at the newly-opened Triville Indoor Ice Center. Joss, suspecting this wouldn't be the best venue to attract black guys, had pushed for group attendance of a NBA game; but Mr. Dmitria got a discount offer from Triville, so onto the ice they (mostly Caucasian) went.

The skating party put Vicki in uncomfortable mind—and body, when she slipped and landed tush-first—of her own twelfth birthday at the Pivotal Roller Rink; and all the people she'd known then who were gone from her life now.

The Volesters had exchanged Christmas cards with the Tamworths and Rawberrys and Hulls and the two Mrs. Partridges, and Hanukkah cards with the Pomerantzes and Franks; but these cards were full of bland good wishes and no news updates. The one exception came from the Shapiros in New York, who reported how Sarah-Jill was excelling in school there; and that was hardly a bombshell bulletin.

Vicki'd debated whether to send a card to Stephanie Lipperman. She chose not to, felt guilty about it, then angry at her guilt. How hard would it've been for Steph to respond to her previous olive branch, extended way last July? How difficult would it've been to maintain at least a pen-pal bond?

No—Vicki's Vanderlund bunch were her true friends. Alex had them out caroling every night before Christmas: a joint venture by Chorus and Band to raise money for the needy while making music and having fun. All of which were done in abundance, till you could truly taste the peace and goodwill and joyful triumph of suburban skies.

So thrust the past behind you, where it belonged.

Tricia rocketed through town for 48 Yuletide hours. The gifts she brought smacked of last-minute shopping at the university bookstore, yet were still highly appreciated. Vicki got a maize-and-blue Wolverines track suit that made her feel like a collegiate runner, and Goofus declared his U-of-M ashtray to be the best present he'd ever received. (Felicia declared it'd be his *last* present if she caught him putting it to other than decorative use.)

Tricia borrowed the ashtray for the rest of her stay at Burrow Lane—largely spent in “her” bedroom, hogging the upstairs phone. (Ozzie would explode when he got the

December long-distance bill.) Vicki'd hoped to gain some sisterly advice, not so much about Roger Mustardman *per se* as guys-who-have-a-thing-for-you in general. Tricia could write a whole textbook on that subject.

Yet Vicki scarcely had a moment alone with her.

"You still wearing your hair like that?" Tricia asked in casual passing, en route to the bathroom.

"Like *what*?" Vicki demanded; but Tricia turned on the shower and made no reply.

Vicki was now entitled, on behalf of little sisters everywhere, to go tattle about Tricia's smoking. She scrapped this impulse, though, before getting halfway downstairs. The person in the shower stall might be the same emerald-eyed blonde beauty Vicki'd always loved and feared and envied and resented—but she was now practically a stranger, a temporary guest in the house, about to check out and go elsewhere.

So return upstairs. Wait the usual half-hour. Then confront Tricia as she left the steamy bathroom, toweling her own blonditude.

"Okay, what *should* I be doing with my hair?"

"Hell, I don't know—cut it or something. It's so long you could trip on it. And don't use the phone for the next couple hours, 'kay?"

Back into "her" bedroom went Princess Smartysnoot, behind a firmly closed door.

"D'you think I should cut my hair?" Vicki asked Joss that night, when she finally had a chance to get a call out edgewise.

"Are you crazy? In wintertime?"

"Well, Tricia said I otter..."

"You're listening to your big *sister*? You ARE crazy. Where'd you think my hair'd be if I paid any attention to Meg? She'd probably put me in pigtails."

"Oh, you'd look so cute in pigtails! You gotta let me braid you—"

"Shut up," said Joss.

"*You* shut up," said Vicki.

"And *I* shall sing at your nuptials!" they chanted together.

New year, new month, new week, new day—but same old semester till finals ended on January 23rd. These were the big-deal, go-on-your-permanent-record sort of tests you had to *cram* for, and Vicki anticipated them with keenest trepidation.

Her previous grade card may have landed her an honor pass, but it'd started off better than it ended: the opposite of good long-distance form. A's in her first three classes (Phys Ed, Lang Arts, Soc Studs) followed by B's in the next three (Math, Voc Music, *Español*) and then that C in Science. Joss had gotten the same average, though with A's in Band, Lang Arts, and French; B's in Soc Studs, Math, and Science; and C in fill-that-Gym-with-tapioca-pudding.

Alex, like Becca, had aced everything except English. Vicki'd volunteered to help Alex overcome her fictionphobia, partly in return for Alex's coaching in Spanish and Math; but scientific enlightenment remained elusive.

"It's like my brain turns into, y'know, a desert or pothole or something."

"*Pot* hole, hunh?" insinuated Joss.

"Don't be silly," Alex bridled. "She's a Ladybug, and wouldn't do stuff like that."

"Maybe it'd help," Joss reasoned. "Call it herbal extra credit."

"You're lucky I know you're just kidding—"

"Oh don't be such a little Girl Scout—"

"I hate it when you guys fight," Vicki intervened.

"We're not fighting!" they rapidly reassured her.

"You'll do better in Science," Alex promised. "We'll find a way to make it clear and easy for you."

"That's right," Joss agreed. "Like memorizing rock types: say *Isn't Meg Stupid?* I-M-S—igneous, metamorphic, sedimentary."

Alex tried to say, "That's terrible!" but was giggling too much to speak.

One of the Media Center's Zero Hour aides had moved away during vacation, so Alex switched shifts to free up her half-periods before and after lunch. This would give her more time for mutual cram-coaching with Vicki—

—and also, incidentally, leave Vicki's Zero Hours "unsupervised."

So: back to the stairwell on the first Monday in January. Having struck a happy medium, outfitwise, by wearing her shawl-collar cardigan (open) over her snug purple pullover. Which began to heave, bosomwise, when she found Roger sprawled supinely on the stairs. Glasses off; eyes shut; looking like he might've lain there for the *past two weeks*.

OhmyGahd!

Wait—wouldn't the custodial staff have found him by now? But maybe they didn't sweep stairwells over the holidays! Did she dare touch him to find out if he might still be breathing? What if he *wasn't*? Suppose this was a stone-cold CORPSE?? *OHMYGAHD*—she'd never, ever, get over seeing it and *touching* it and then having to tell someone about it—testify before Mrs. Driscoll, the school superintendent, the police and probably a coroner, and then what if they decided he'd killed himself because he had a thing for Vicki???

"I can seeee you," went the body on the stairs.

Clap both hands over your yap to stifle the shriek.

"That's some nice heaving you're doing," he added, putting on his glasses and nibbling a ballpoint-end.

"Gahdammit, Roger!!" she detonated, yanking her sweater closed and wrapping shaky arms over its front. "You freaking scared me half to—how long have you been lying there?"

"All your life, *liebchen*."

"Oh, I otter kick your... your behind!" (No way was she going to let him hear her say *ass* or *butt* aloud.)

"You *otter*, hey?"

"Oh—yeah—um—right. Thanks, y'know, for the play. We really enjoyed it, me 'n' Joss."

"More where that came from."

"Well. That's good. Um. Did you have, like, a nice... Christmas, or whatever?" (Maybe he was Jewish, or an atheist, or something.)

"Got called on by my old prep school hero, the Slumlord of Front Tree, who wanted to talk 'maaan to maaan.' Said I was 'making a nooosance' of myself with Our Becca, and why didn't I wise up that she'd never 'fall for an oaaaf' like me. I asked him if what Becca

said was true—that he cries when he shall-we-say ‘blasts off.’”

Vicki’s vestal-virgin mind took a moment to catch up. Then her jaw dropped and hit her crossed wrists.

“She’d NEVER say that! She’d never tell YOU that!”

“No, that’s a direct swipe from *Lords of Flatbush*. I doubt Becca would give Sonny Boy anything more intimate than *un beso francés*.”

Vicki translated this and rolled her eyes. “A French kiss? Why’d you say it in Spanish?”

“Well, you don’t know Hungarian, do you? (*Nyelves csók* if you do.) Anyway, my trusty button oafs were there too, and pelted Sonny Boy with iceballs. That’ll teach *him* to try talking ‘maaan to maaan.’”

“So you’re gonna keep tutoring Becca?”

“Long as she keeps REIMBURSING me,” said Roger: another recent vocab word.

“Would you... um... y’know... do like the same for me, in Science?”

Roger cracked his knuckles, elbows, neck. “In return fooodor...?”

Vicki uncrossed her wrists. Reached into her cardigan pocket. Took a deep trembly breath. Produced a carefully-preserved sprig of mistletoe. And held it over her head.

*

She didn’t have a whole lot to compare this to (as was later confided to Joss). A single unremarkable post-dance cheek-peck from Ordinary Mark Welk, last spring: hardly what you’d call *un beso francés*. Much less a *nyelves csók*.

Roger Mustardman, after removing the Bic from his kisser, nonchalantly pressed his lips to hers. Introducing his tongue between them, and her slackjawed teeth, to give *her* tongue a single nudge. Then backing away just far enough, as the homeroom bell rang, to tell her:

“Deal sealed.”

Vicki had several immediate concerns.

One of the foremost was preventing Robin Neapolitan from getting the slightest inkling of this deal. She didn’t want to lose Robin as a friend—*definitely* didn’t want to gain her as an enemy—and, either way, wanted to avoid the onslaught Robin would subject her to

as friend *or* enemy if the deal was revealed.

This meant also keeping the rest of the lunch-bunch in the dark. Fiona, who'd stir up trouble for trouble's sake; Sheila-Q, who'd use the news to jab Robin during one of their daily arguments; and Laurie, who'd hyperromanticize the deal-sealing smooch. Vicki was fairly sure Roger could be trusted to stay circumspect about this. She only hoped the same could be said for Joss.

"I won't blab!"

"You swear?"

"Hell yes."

"I mean it, Joss!"

"Okay—I swear I'll do my best not to blab."

"Hey! You didn't say anything about 'best' before!"

"I wasn't under an *oath* before."

Another immediate concern was how Becca Blair would react when Vicki ahem'd that, "I'm gonna um see my um like Science tutor first thing y'know tomorrow morning."

Over the locker room clamor of girls getting changed into hideous gym suits, Vicki could hear distinct cyborg noises as Becca's golden head emerged from her rust-colored turtleneck (worn again today) and concentrated those red LED optics upon her.

"Um... is... that okay?" Vicki quavered.

More *beep-boops* as Becca reviewed her track record, her having carried out the assignment to declammify Alex. It was like something out of *The Six Million Dollar Man*, on which Lindsay Wagner had twice portrayed a Bionic Woman who was about to get her own spinoff series.

Here at VW, a mental punchcard went *tic-tic-tic-tic-tack*.

"We'll work out a schedule," said Bionic Becca.

Bringing us to our third immediate concern: just how much advantage of this sealed deal would Roger take? Did he assume she'd be a pushover, an easy-sleazy? Well, if so he didn't know Victoria Lorraine Volester. She might let him kiss her—might even kiss him back, if she had to—but either way her hands would be on his chest the whole time, ready to fend him off. NO—on his *shoulders*, not his chest; hands-on-chests were not permissible.

This would going to be an academic relationship. Except that kissing was involved. But no different than to thank a guy for asking you out, buying you a burger, taking you to a movie. Or in this case, boosting your chances of a better Science grade.

Only that and nothing more.

Vicki wondered if Roger would ever ask her out for burgers or a movie.

And how'd she ever keep *that* quiet, if he did and she said yes?

And what in the world would she WEAR?

Tuesday she struck a conservative pose in a long quilted skirt over *two* half-slips, and a ruffly recital blouse borrowed from Joss that was far too big for her and so could hide any relapse into "heaving." This ensemble made her look primmer than Sarah-Jill Shapiro—
—yet did nothing to turn Roger off: he took one gander at her in it, and requested "Payment in advance."

Meaning Vicki had to kiss him, *forward* instead of back.

With hands firmly braced against his shoulders. And him not touching her, apart from his mouth.

Until they were seated on "their" stair and he claimed he couldn't see the notebook she'd opened, remedying this with a sudden arm around *her* shoulders that hauled her bodily over till they were hip-to-hip and thigh-to-thigh, with his hand sliding smoothly down her silky hair from the top of her head to the back of her neck and down the length of her spine—

"Don't! Please? Mr. Dunn's not grading me on *that*."

He hooked his thumb into her waistband, as if to mark its place (minimally-distantly above her heinie)—then reeled off paragraph after paragraph about geochemical cycles, making them perfectly clear and easy to understand. Even by someone preoccupied with the whereabouts of his extremities.

"Wow," Vicki murmured with such breath as she had left, "you otter be a teacher. A teacher *and* a playwright."

"Playwright. And neither one," Roger insisted. "That'd mean living up to my impotential."

"Quit saying that!"

"Saying what?"

“That word!”

“Which word?”

“(The one you know isn’t true,)” Vicki whispered uneasily.

“Liffingk?” Roger asked in a Dracula accent, making her laugh—and then gasp, as his cold thumb caressed the bare flesh within her two half-slip waistbands: precisely between her tender susceptible back dimples.

“Wuh-h-h-h!” she went, squirmingly; but did not bat his hand away.

*

By that weekend’s sleepover in Joss’s aerie, Vicki was skimming through *The Cheerleader’s* hotter passages in search of makeout guidance.

Joss had indexed these passages inside the book’s back cover, tracing the progression of Snowy’s triumvirate from boys Getting Fresh (in capital letters) to using prophylactics (in lowercase). And these were *nice* girls, mind you, living back in the Fifties! See here, how shocked Snowy was at French-kissing on a first date. Of course, that came after the boy of her dreams had put his arm around her and stroked her ponytail: “the most romantic moment of her life.”

Okay, that was a little soppy. A reaction for the Laurie Harrisons of the world, then and now.

Yet that didn’t make it untrue.

Or make your own body more resistant to having liberties taken with it.

Or stop your brain from concocting treacherous fantasies, by day and by night, of liberty-taking she might try herself—on *his* self.

“What am I gonna DO??” Vicki wailed. “I don’t *wanna* have a thing for him! I can’t help it if he’s got one for me.”

“Yep, all guys have Things,” Joss agreed, dragging Fingers around at the end of a captured yarn-strand.

“Well it’s not fair!”

“What, that they’ve got Things?”

“No! That I’ve gotta be—y’know—*thinking* about them. And look at all the gross stuff we’re expected to DO with them! Here, on page 184—I couldn’t ever—not with

Roger—oh, YUCK... I otter just fess up to Robin and let her slaughter me.”

Hee-haw from Joss, now dangling Fingers on kitty-tiptoe. “Y’think Robin’s done anything with Skully Erle’s Thing?”

“Eww! That’s disGUSTing!”

“Not as much as Sheila with Roy Hodeau’s—or Feef with Arlo Sowell’s!”

Prolonged giggle-gagging from Vicki. Then a sigh: “Alex’d have a fit if she knew what we’re talking about.”

“Yeah, well, Alex. She’s got her own hangups.”

On cue, Fingers relinquished the yarn-end and dropped to the carpet, bouncing over to the beanbag and curling up for a nap on Vicki’s lap.

“*There’s* one solution,” said Joss. “Neuter ‘em at birth and keep ‘em for pets.”

“Well... let’s not fall TOO overboard.”

“You’re right—there’s better ways to handle guys. Remember *Mandingo!*”

““Expect the Savage!””

““The Sensual! The Shocking! The Shameful Truth!””

(Extravagant yawn from Fingers.)

*

What Vicki didn’t expect was an exhibition of Roger’s spleen.

“Here,” he coughed Monday morning, as he thrust another envelope at her advancing lips.

“Oh!” she recoiled. “*Oh*—is this Act Two of your play?”

“Far as I got. Typewriter broke last night. F-key stuck. Main spring went haywire. Piss-poor piece of junk. Shoulda got a Coronamatic.”

Vicki’d never seen or heard him act like this before. Downcast, almost literally: as if he’d dropped off his own yarn-strand, but without catlike reflexes or resilience. None of the sardonic amusement or mocking diversion she’d become accustomed to. You’d think a Mustardman’d be wealthy enough to cope with a typewriter setback, unless...

“Is that gonna mess you up for finals?”

“Finals my ass. Messes me up, period.”

Tentatively she sat beside him; hesitantly she tried to soothe. “Well... it’ll be okay. I mean I’m sure I’ll like what you got done. I, um, have—faith in you.”

A great SNORT from Roger, dwindling to a snortle as he turned and smiled and leaned over and kissed her quite nicely. “*Gute Stunde Null, hübschen Schmetterling.*”

“Um... is that something butterfly?”

““Good Zero Hour, pretty butterfly.’ Or, if you prefer: *Buena hora cero, bonita mariposa.* Or *Bonne heure zéro, joli papillon.* Or *Jó nulla óra, szép pillangó—*”

“How many languages do you know??”

“As many as you like. Pretty butterfly in all of them. Except maybe Icelandic; they prefer longfaced Nordic types.”

He does think I’m pretty. He said so in five different languages.

Redden and tingle and push a warm upper arm against his. “Why can’t you be like this always?”

“You wouldn’t enjoy it.”

“I might!”

“Well, *I* wouldn’t. Too much like living up to my impo—”

“GAHD! If you say that word again, I’m gonna...”

“Do whaaaat, exactly?”

Prove you’re a liar by giving Ralph a big old squeeze.

YIKES.

Her hands began a Tail-End impersonation: under her knees and into her armpits and against each other. “Uh—shouldn’t we be talking about Science? Becca’s got you tomorrow and, y’know, I still can’t really figure out compound elements.”

He detached one of her clammy hands from the other and held it in his, again quite nicely. “Think of elements as single—and compounds as couples who’ve become so close, so in-ti-mate, that you stop thinking of them as ‘him’ and ‘her’—‘cause they can no longer... come... apart...”

*

Act Two (As Far As He Got) of *A Bite to Drink* was rougher-draftier than Act One. Curtain rose on Clara Klean taking a bubble bath while the Mounted Chorus sang a rousing

ode to “How Clean Is Our Clara.” She spent the rest of Act Two wearing nothing but a towel, despite repeated efforts by her comic maid Pistachia to put some clothes on her.

There was a role for Vice Principal O’Brien as the goatee’d vampirologist Dr. Van Helfast, who tried to unmask Crockaput by using a large framed mirror. But Gigoletto stole the mirror right out of the wall, and Roachy—disguised as Crockaput on the other side—did a wild Charleston as the Know-a-Count’s “reflection.”

CROCKAPUT

[Dracula accent] Your vill iss stronggk, Van Half-assed.

DR. VAN HELFAST

That is Van HELL-fast!

CROCKAPUT

Well, helf a fast is better than none. Your will may be strong but this wall is all wrong. *[climbs through hole where mirror had been]*

Mrs. Driscoll or Mrs. Weller could play Madame Duckingham, Clara’s singing teacher. Madame, “opening an operatic vein,” lamented her doubts that Crockaput was the musical maestro he claimed to be—while Clara (in her towel) and Pistachia (trying to dress her) were chased all over the set by Roachy and Gigoletto. They took tag-team turns foiling the Mounted Chorus, who rode to Clara’s rescue like three Dudley Do-Rights; the horse soon tired of this farce and exited, leaving Drippy, Snippy, and Flippy to their perilous pratfalls.

Then Mabel Maydone danced onstage, ignoring her straitjacketed fiancé as he hopped after her:

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

[laughing maniacally] I tell you what we’re going to do, darling! We’ll get married today and leave this place! We’ll forget about these silly dreams, and think of something cheerful! *[snaps teeth as if at passing flies]*

MABEL, *paying no attention, continues dancing.* CROCKAPUT *enters stage left.*

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

No, no, Master! I told her nothing! I'm loyal to you, Master!

CROCKAPUT

Come, come, Fellow-Me-Lad! Here, here, Fellow-Me-Lad! There's a dumptruck at the asylum loading dock full of assorted rodents—all these will I give you, if you hop on down and unload them like a good looney.

YOUNG FELLOW-ME-LAD

[*ecstatic*] Oh rats! Thank you, Master! [*exits stage left, hopping*]

CROCKAPUT

[*to the audience*] If you're deadset on catching flies, roadkill catches more than honey or vinegar. And now, like a good Know-a-Count, I'm going to count me some hickeyes.

He advances on MABEL, who remains unaware of him until he f

At which point Roger's F-key evidently stuck, before his main spring went haywire.

*

A heavy winter storm bore down on Vanderlund, raising hopes of early dismissal on Tuesday if not closure for the rest of the week; yet this useless tempest "spared" the northern suburbs and hit The City instead. So Vicki had to go to school on Wednesday and take the pre-final, grade-your-neighbor Science quiz she'd been shrinking from—

—but which she aced.

Not a C. Not a B. A great big eleven-answers-right, only-one-wrong A.

(Oh, did *she* know a tutor who was going to get a great big gratuity!)

Congrats from Joss, who scored her habitual B and had to leave right after class for a Brass Ensemble rehearsal. Vicki took her own sweet time in the hall; sharing the triumph

with Alex, who added kudos before hurrying off to a Math Club summit. If Roger'd been spotted, he might've gotten that mmm-wah gratuity right there (not to mention a nice "bonus," reddened tingle blush)—but he was nowhere to be seen.

So twirl your locker combination, unlatch the door, swing it open and utter a SQUEAK as something thin and white fluttered out, floated down, and landed between Fiona's boots.

"(Wha'...?)" went Fiona, who looked pretty thin and white herself and was already half-stooping.

"Sorry, that's mine," chirped Carly Thibert, snatching up the note. Not that Fiona showed more than listless interest in it, or Carly's sneaking it to Vicki with a cackle-smirk. Vicki gave Carly a stealthy thanks-nod and Fiona a worried lookover.

"Feef, you better get some sleep or something."

"Get *or something!*" Carly recommended.

"(Yeah sure,)" Fiona mutter-answered, drifting away more wraithily than even her usual norm.

"She really *needs* 'or something,'" Carly observed. "C'mon, gimme a peek, you OWE me a peek, I just love reading 'mash' notes!"

"It may not b-b-be that at all," stammered Vicki, unfolding the paper to expose:

Ø hr 1/15 no zee
HB back minus 1

"Hunh!" Carly pouted, before a gaggle of hornyboys swooped off with her. "I'da thought even Roger Mustardman could write a better love letter than *that*."

*

Joss, consulted by phone that evening, deciphered this Lana Eisensteinish cryptogram as follows: instead of going to Z-Wing for Zero Hour on Thursday the 15th ("Ø hr 1/15 no zee") Vicki was to head down the backstairs to Home Base's basement ("HB back minus 1").

Which made more sense than anything Vicki could deduce; but still creeped her out.

"You want me to come with you?" asked Joss.

“Um... how early can you get to school tomorrow?”

“Probably not very, if it snows tonight. Too bad you can’t take Alex—she’s bound to be there by seven, no matter what.”

“Gahd, can you imagine even asking her?”

“Sure—‘Alex, I’ve been secretly meeting this guy, wanna be our basement chaperone? She’d love it.”

“Hardy har har. Oh wait—I can *pretend* you’re with me, and talk loud like you’re there, and yell if I have to.”

“And give him a knee in the ding-dongs.”

Right. She *otter* ask Susie Zane to be her bodyguard—except Laurie’d hear about it, and then the whole school would know.

So: scuttle through the Home Base lobby at quarter past seven, face hidden by a knit toque worn low in case Alex should happen to step out of the Media Center. Scuttle to the backstairs and down them, into a basement you’ve never set foot in till now since it had no classrooms or gym facilities. Just tiles on the walls—pipes along the ceiling—dimmer fluorescent lights than the upper stories—and no human inhabitants to speak of. Or speak to.

“‘I dunno, *Joss*,’” Vicki twittered. “‘I don’t see anybody down here just like you don’t!’”

(Silence.)

“Um... h-hello?”

“We’ve got to start meeting like this,” said Roger’s voice, as Roger’s hand extended from behind a door to beckon her in.

Vicki halted at the threshold. “A *janitor’s closet*? I am NOT making out with you in a janitor’s closet!”

“How you talk. That might be the furthest thing from my mind.”

“I’ll bet!” said Vicki; but he seemed positively glad to see her, glad she’d been able to decode his message. So in she grudgingly stepped, leaving the door slightly ajar behind her, yet still confining them to a close, close, clohhhhse cubicle. Filled with shelves of coarse-grade toilet paper and industrial-sized jugs of Drano: every girl’s reverie of an amorous hideaway.

She took off her toque and shook out her hair, but kept her coat securely on (albeit unbuttoned). “Okay then—what *are* we doing here?”

Roger leaned comfortably on the handle of a yard-wide pushbroom. “Wee Willie Wilkie cottoned onto where Our Becca’s been spending her Zero Hours. He probably planted miniature tracking devices in her toenail polish—I told you he’s a foot fetishist. ANYhoo, he’s staging an ambushade to save her soles, right about” (checking his watch) “now. But what he’ll find up on 8-Z is Dino pretending to be me, with Lenny wearing his old lady’s blonde wig and stuffed bra. I’d be there too, with a camera, if you and I hadn’t sealed a deal for CLANDESTINE tutoring.” (Another recent vocab word.) “Can’t get more CLANDESTINE than a janitor’s closet in the basement.”

Vicki breathed a bit easier. “I got an A on yesterday’s quiz. Eleven out of twelve!”

“Well done. (Medium rare for me.) And you’re welcome.”

“Yeah. I mean, thanks. I mean, I owe you one.”

“Oddly, I’d say we’re even,” said Roger. “Or *almost* even”—reaching inside her unbuttoned coat to clasp Vicki and draw her to him. Not grabbing her rear end but doing it properly, around her ribcage; so she slipped her muffled arms around his neck. And found that, for a squat guy, he could give lessons on how to hug.

Kissing she was already pretty good at.

“Okay, *now* we’re even,” he went after awhile, before breaking into song:

Know much now about Chemistry?

Know much ‘bout Biology?

Know much now ‘bout your grade-creator?

Wanna go to a dinner theeAYter?

“A what?”

“The Holdahl Dinner Theater, on Maine Street. They feed you and put on a play. I thought we might go there a week from Saturday, after finals are over.”

“Are—are you asking me out? Like on a date?”

“No, like on an electric-typewriter-repair cruise—we sail from Olivetti to Underwood on the good ship *Lexmark*.”

Oh wow, thought Vicki as they sealed their new deal. *I guess I AM being seduced.*

*

She might have burst trying to keep this a secret, were there not a traumatic distraction later that morning when Fiona passed out in Band class, breaking her clarinet as she collapsed off her chair.

Joss and Sheila-Q saw it happen and got badly shaken up—"We thought she was *dead*, till she started crying!"—while Robin simply ditched the rest of the schoolday, regardless of adult mandates or decrees as she followed Feef to the nurse's office and then home. They had been best friends since fifth grade, when both were new at Dopkins Elementary and formed their own two-girl gang, the "Dopkins Dopesters"; so Robin was sticking by her side in spite of anything Mr. Redo, Mr. O'Brien, or Mrs. Weller might say.

All through Thursday rumors flew of overdoses on various drugs, possibly in connection with pregnancy. A lot of glancing was done at Arlo Sowell, and a lot of prattle that if those two *had* gone all the way, no wonder Fiona'd looked so thoroughly crushed.

None of the remaining bunch had any appetite for lunch, and nobody told them anything verifiable about Feef till that night when Robin kicked off a round-robin by phoning Sheila, who phoned Laurie, who phoned Joss, who phoned Vicki, who phoned Alex to report it was nothing worse than foolhardy eating habits. All the girls pledged to keep tabs on Fiona from now on and ensure nutrition guidelines were adhered to. (Alex volunteered to draw up a chart customized for Feef's height, weight, and gynecological problems.)

Robin was back in school on Friday, truculently serving detention for having ditched. Fiona was back on Monday, chafing under the new guidelines plus everybody's embraces; yet actually giggling to hear how she'd been suspected of carrying Arlo's sumo love child. And both Dopesters were proud to learn, courtesy of Goofus Volester, that teachers at Dopkins still cited them as bad examples of worse behavior.

"(Makes you feel you've accomplished something,)" Feef told Vicki. "(Just wish I didn't have to get a new clarinet.)"

She lingered on the bunch's front burner during finals week, alongside the semester tests themselves; allowing Vicki's date with Roger to stay under the radar. No one had a clue about it, other than Joss and Carly Thibert. Vicki wished she could tell Alex, but couldn't

guess how Alex might react to news of that nature; so best to say nothing for now.

Which left the minor matter of gaining parental approval.

Mention had been made that Vicki'd been doing extra Science drillwork, though she'd restricted her trainer's identity to "this guy on 8-Z who helps tutor people." The A-level results were magnet-attached to the Volester refrigerator, giving Vicki a solid underpinning to build on; and she wisely built toward Felicia, in hopes of forestalling a kneejerk veto by Ozzie.

(Vicki bore up fairly well during her mother's damp-eyed *Your first date!* exclamations, but bet that Gran had kept *her* cool when Teen Felicia'd been asked out for the first time.)

Ozzie did not explode outright, or pull a Beast-of-Yucca-Flats as Mr. Dmitria would've done. Yet he had to be talked out of several counterproposals, the most frightful being "We can give you and This Boy a lift to the dinner theater, and stay to enjoy it ourselves! The whole family'll go, me and Mom and Goof."

"Oh Daddy, NO!!"

Then why not double-date with Joss? The more the merrier, safety in numbers, etc.?

Kneejerk veto by Joss—who, despite readiness to do almost anything for Vicki, drew an indelible line at going out with Lenny or Dino. "Besides, I know you two wanna be alone ooh-la-la."

"Hey! Don't think just 'cause you're tall I won't slug you if I have to."

Finally Vicki's father agreed to let her go, contingent upon Roger coming to Burrow Lane beforehand and passing inspection. Ozzie capped this by telling Vicki the same Fact Or Two About Real Life And What Boys Are Capable Of, nearly word for word and euphemism for euphemism, as on the day of her first makeover.

She laughed less at it this time, though she loved her father almost as much as before—and prayed he wouldn't rerun this old vaudeville routine every time she had a date.

Assuming Roger ever asked her out again, after having to meet her parents when he picked her up on Saturday.

Assuming he *was* planning to pick her up, and could do so despite being a couple years away from having a driver's license.

Maybe they could borrow a motor scooter. “Hey Robin, would you lend me your Margutta this weekend? I need it for my date with Roger Mustardman. Yes, he’s my boyfriend now—didn’t I mention that? Must’ve slipped my mind, what with all the necking we’ve been doing down in the basement janitor’s closet.”

(Well, that’d be *one* way to spring the scoop on Robin Neapolitan.)

*

On Friday the 23rd, Vicki’s lunch-bunch celebrated the semester’s conclusion by divvying a Toughie-baked sponge cake brought in by Joss. Even Fiona had a slice of this, recounting how Tail-End (still “Gollum” to her) had jackknifed over his desk in French yesterday, while Monsieur Blumer wrenched the test paper out of his twitching hands:

“(Shsspas encore!... shsspas encore!...)” she mutter-mimicked.

Everyone laughed at having Feef back in mordant form. But Vicki’s hilarity lodged in her esophagus as the crowd parted momentarily, to unveil Roger giving something to Carly Thibert—who, from her stance, was in full coquette mode as she took the something with one hand, while using the other to toy with a button on Roger’s shirt—

Then the crowd shifted back to re-veil this monstrosity.

How COULD he?? Knowing you’d be there in the same cafeteria, during the same Lunch B? Had he been two—no, THREE-timing you AND Becca, by tutoring Carly too? And how could SHE? Your homeroom-neighbor and locker-neighbor for the entire past semester! The only one besides Joss who’d known there was—or might be—or might HAVE BEEN a Vicki ‘n’ Roger! Oh, you could see it all now: “a guy with money doesn’t have to look that good,” and Carly spending Christmas in Bermuda just to turn all caramel-colored with no tan lines (as she’d confided to every male, even Mr. Gillies!)—eclipsing your own olive complexion till the sponge cake in your tummy started soaking up bile...

(Urgh.)

Pretend to take no notice. Don’t let the others think anything’s wrong. Plot revenge through free period, but keep it bottled up till you can get a clean shot at Carly when she comes smirking into Spanish—

—and slips you the new note Roger asked her to deliver.

With a mischievous “Y’know, he *is* kinda cute.”

Which in Thibertese meant *flirtworthy*. As was exemplified by his missive:

*You doll up by five
We'll be there by six
Before we arrive
You'll need fresh lipstick(s)*

*

Even if it weren't Friday, Joss would've slept over so as not to miss anything, and to keep Vicki from overagonizing.

They both knew she'd ultimately "doll up" in her little black wool dress over frivolous party lingerie, with knee-high zippered platform boots and hair worn down loose in case Roger wanted to stroke it. Knowing this, however, did nothing to deangle Vicki's nerves. She and Joss devoted much of the night to thrashing out every conceivable events-chain that could hinge upon Roger's arrival at 5 p.m. on Saturday.

If that happened.

After the bathing, the blowdrying, the outfit-donning, the makeup-applying, the Wind Song-spritzing, and the clock on Vicki's bedroom bureau flipping a digit to read 5:01.

She knew it: she'd been JILTED.

Then a rich hoot from the cul-de-sac, and a "Hey! check out that car!" from Goofus (supposedly banished to the family room). Vicki and Joss leaped to the front window and goggled at the long glistening apparition pulling into the driveway.

Forget making a vivid debutante descent; gallop down the stairs as the first six notes of *Peter and the Wolf* rang out and Ozzie opened the door, asking: "Is that a Rolls I see out there? A Silver Cloud??"

"None other—"the Cloud that Flies,"" said Vicki's gentleman caller. Who needed only to swap his glasses for a monocle and don a tall silk hat to complete his costume as the Penguin in *Batman*. He was clad in an honest-to-goodness tuxedo, carried a tightly-furled

umbrella over one arm, and brandished a cigarette-holderlike ballpoint pen.

Joss's hand closed on Vicki's elbow. *Shut up* Vicki sub-ordered, knowing Joss was succumbing to a silent but deadly bust-a-gut gigglefit.

"Oz, the door—!" Felicia remonstrated, as Ozzie leaned out for frosty rubbernecking at the automative marvel. Goofus ran up to join in: "Is it yours?" he demanded.

"Belongs to the household. Go ask Driver and he'll pop the hood for you—or 'bonnet,' as the Rolls folk call it. V8 engine, overhead valves, four-speed Hydramatic transmission."

Goof and Ozzie hustled outside, saying "Lemme at it!" and "Oh, *man!*"

"MUSTARDman, actually—Roger Mustardman," announced Vicki's date with Bondlike intonation.

"Put on your *coats*—" Fel entreated in vain, before closing the door and trying to inject a degree of traditional hospitality. "How do you do, Roger? I'm Vicki's mother, Felicia Volester, very glad to meet you. Those were Vicki's father and brother, and I'm sure you know Jocelyn."

"To—be—sure," Roger bowed. "Jocelyn keeps us in constant stitches on 8-Z."

—he's gonna make me wet my PANTS, I'll kill him if he does—

—hey! watch what you sub-say! and wait till after the date—

"What a nice tuxedo," Felicia was continuing. "But isn't it a bit, well, dressy for a dinner theater?"

"Not really, Mrs. Volester—I got this at an everything-you-can-stuff-in-a-sack-for-five-dollars sale at the Junior League Thrift Store." (That would account for its unusual appearance: the lapels, instead of stretching from shoulder to shoulder as per contemporary fashion, were thin as ribbons.) "Found the bow tie in a pocket—its owner must've been ashamed to donate it."

"Why, I think it's a very fine bow tie," said Fel; but before Vicki could die of embarrassment, Roger took her hand—tucked it over his non-umbrella-bearing arm—and led her to the living room fireplace.

"I presume you want us to do some posing."

Fel sprang into action with a camera she'd stowed behind a lamp.

“Mom...” went Vicki, ready to sink through the floor.

“Oh, just a couple for your grandparents.”

“One sec,” Roger interjected, magically producing a small tissue-wrapped object.

“Rather than a corsage, may I present you with—”

A mustard-yellow Pet Rock.

Smothered *whoop* from Joss.

Vicki, holding this petrified lemon as the camera flashed, did not dare catch Joss’s eye. It would be like a million mouthed *Mandingos*—one tiny tweak, and they’d both start rolling on the carpet.

The girls had talked about Joss hitching a tag-along ride to Jupiter Street (just off Sendt) to balk any instant shenanigan-moves by Roger, while clueing in whoever drove him as to where Vicki should be taken post-date. But with Joss hanging onto the couch in mute hysterics, that scheme was scotched; Felicia would take her home in a few minutes, and Vicki could join her there “No later than 10:00.”

“Mother—”

“I’m afraid the show won’t be over till 10:15,” said Roger. “It’s Mimi McLaine in *The Kissing Bug*, you know—she enjoys curtain calls.”

“Well...” Fel was hesitating, when Ozzie and Goofus charged back inside. Dancing with the cold, yet jubilant from their brush with auto splendor.

“That is one sweet machine, I’m telling you!”

“If we ever trade it in, Volester Motors will get first crack,” Roger promised. “Driver and I’ll bring Vicki to Joss’s by eleven.”

“Fine, that’s fine—you kids have a great time,” said Ozzie, clapping him on the back.

“Wait a minute!” went Goofus. “If ya got a car like that, what’re ya taking *her* out in it for?”

“Christopher Blaine!—”

“Why, because she’s the loveliest young lady I know,” Roger told him. “No offense,” to Joss, who gasped the equivalent of *None taken*. “And for now, we bid you sayonara.”

Holding Vicki's coat for her; the house door for her; the Rolls door for her.

She melted into sumptuous upholstery. "Am I? Really?"

"Am-you-what, really?" asked Roger, re-inserting the ballpoint end between his teeth.

"What you said," she blushed, peeping at the back of Driver's head in the front seat.

One trifling letdown—he looked more like a City cabby than an affluent chauffeur, even as he maintained discreet reticence.

"What I said? Oh, I get it—we're on a *fishing* trip. Well then: aren't you?"

"Me? More'n Becca? Or Alex, or Sheila, or Carly?"

"Carly's a tease, pure and simple. (Make that just simple.) You, *liebchen*, only offer what you're ready to give."

Was that a compliment? She glanced sidelong at his pen. "I thought your note said I'd need fresh lipstick before we get there."

"Plenty of time for that," he said as the Silver Cloud swung from Lesser onto Panama. "There's been a slight schedule change."

"Hunh?"

"Hold on," Roger told her, and "*Here!*" to Driver—as the Rolls made a sudden screechless swerve to the right, while inferior cars honked and blared. "'Nice work, Lou,'" went Roger. "Always wanted a chance to say that line—that and 'Paulie? You won't see him no more.'"

"W-where're we going? Why're we on the EXPRESSWAY?"

He put an arm around her and stroked her hair as she started to tremble. "Now, give me *some* credit. Would I try to kidnap you right after meeting your parents?" He took the pen out of his mouth, and Vicki flinched.

"I—I—I—"

"—*am* the loveliest young lady I know; yes, we covered that. And you're being taken to a little restaurant in Willowhelm called Il Sacchetto, that's run by Dino's Uncle Virgil. He's another pimp, but bakes a mean lasagna."

She considered relaxing. "*Where* in Willowhelm? There's nowhere there you have to take the Expressway to get to."

"You do if you're trying to cover your tracks, in a car like this."

Edge of panic again. “What’re you *talking* about? What happened to the dinner theater?”

Stroking her hair again. “Believe me, you don’t want to watch Mama Mimi attempt to act while you digest the Holdahl’s buffet. Every time Mimi speaks, *The Kissing Bug* loses some of its pucker.”

The limo left the Expressway and meandered through the streets of Willowhelm. “So why all this huggery-muggery?” Vicki asked. “Oh quit it, you know what I mean,” as Roger hugged her more snugly. “Why didn’t we just tell my folks we’re going to this restaurant?”

“Lenny’s at the Holdahl—he can field any questions if they call there, ‘checking up on you.’ Dino’ll be at Il Sacchetto and can relay them to us.”

Which didn’t remotely answer her question, as Driver darted into a parking garage.

“Here’s where we bail out,” said Roger. “We’ll hoof it the rest of the way—only three blocks—well-lighted—plenty of foot traffic—witnesses as you need them.”

Exactly the sort of trust-me line he’d use if he *did* intend to rape, murder, and/or sell her into underage sex slavery.

“Is there such a thing as OVERAGE sex slavery?” she blurted aloud.

Discreetly reticent cough from Driver.

Roger’s thick black brows rose. “Now, *there’s* a hot topic for class discussion!”

She reddened and tingled and melted and let him tug her gently out of the Rolls, out of the garage and away from Driver, into the weekend foot traffic which *was* plentiful. At whom Vicki smiled and said occasional smoky-breath’d *Hi’s*, in case her presence *might* need to be remembered for police testimony. But Roger held her hand as if this were in fact a real true date—and gave her, under a streetlamp, one decisive lipstick-absorbent kiss as if he were in fact her real true boyfriend.

IL SACCHETTO on a looming window; and on the awning-border above it; and on a sign hanging above the entrance. Inside, a balding man surveyed their approach through deepset eyes over a broken nose over a pencil moustache.

“Dino here?” Roger asked him.

“He better be.”

“Table ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Need my Diners Card?”

“Yeah.”

Roger surrendered this and the man (Uncle Virgil?) did things with it. Then a cursory nod at a waiter, who conveyed them to a table for two in a far corner. A relatively posh far corner: this restaurant was fancier than a pizza joint or spaghetti house. Linen tablecloth and serviettes rather than checkerboard tarp and paper napkins; candle in an elegant Chianti bottle. Other patrons, mostly older couples, wearing suits and ties and nice dresses, turned to watch them being seated. Vicki was glad to have on her best outfit, and that her date was in formal garb—*too* formal, perhaps, maybe even absurdly so—but not inappropriate. People might take him for a maître d’-in-training.

“Order the works—all taken care of,” Roger said after Vicki’d visited the Signorinas to restore her lipgloss, while he parleyed with Dino in the kitchen or wherever Uncle Virgil’d said he better be. ““Try the veal, it’s the best in The City.””

“The best?”

“No idea—never tried it. That’s just another line I always wanted to say. Trust me enough to order for you?”

“Sure,” said Vicki, feeling relief. (Alex, though not a vegetarian, lobbied against the consumption of baby animals: so no veal, no lamb chops, no slow-roasted suckling pig.)

Roger, after solemnly requesting two Canfield’s Diet Chocolate Fudges, settled for cranberry juice cocktails. Then: “*Bruschetta al pomodoro per antipasto, poi linguine al pesto con patate e fagioni.*”

“Ver’ good,” commented the waiter, who brought their cranberry juice in genuine wine goblets.

“To the LYLIK,” Roger toasted. Adding “Acronym for am-you-what-really,” when Vicki looked puzzled.

Redden-tingle then, touch goblets, take a loveliest-young-ladylike sip. “I wish we were old enough for this to *be* wine.”

“Oh, you’ll be intoxicated AND stimulated by the food,” Roger told her. “They put fresh basil on everything—not easy to do in January—and garlic of course, with parsley to

save your breath. Then the pesto's full of pine nuts, with a dash of anise seed—all well-known aphrodisiacs.”

“How you talk,” blushed Vicki.

Bruschetta, the appetizer, turned out to be diced tomatoes on garlic toast. Vicki ate it carefully, using a fork, on guard against the ingredients reducing her inhibitions. Ms. Swanson hadn't warned them against eating basil or pine nuts or anise seed, so maybe Roger was just trying to stir her up. (Further up, if truth be told: *tingle tingle tingle...*)

If so, the *linguine al pesto* had the reverse effect: a plate of horrible green-gooped noodles, like leftovers from *The Exorcist*.

“Are you kidding?” she said, once the waiter was out of earshot. “I can't eat this!”

But she was too shy to send the plate back and Roger wouldn't do it for her, daring Vicki to taste the stuff first. She'd've refused if he'd quoted the old “Try it you'll like it” Alka-Seltzer ad—overdone by Fel and Tricia and Goofus during Vicki's fussier dining days, long before Fiona Weller scared her straight. So she closed her eyes, accepted the forkful Roger was holding out (awfully intimate, but you'd shared tongue-kisses) and found it surprisingly delicious, if you didn't have to look at it.

Which irresistibly reminded her of page 184 in *The Cheerleader*.

Which hot-doggy thought caused a blood rush to every part of her body: cheeks and ears felt on fire, throat so engorged she had trouble swallowing.

“Too hot?” Roger inquired.

Oh you bastard.

She ate without speaking for awhile, as silverware clinked and Mantovani cascaded and blood rush diminished (somewhat). With several hours to go till she was due at Joss's, and no dinner theater to occupy them.

Yet maybe still a kissing bug?

For several HOURS?

Or he could take her to a movie—a good, safe, regular first-date-activity. What was playing? *The Black Bird*. *Barry Lyndon*. *Lucky Lady*—that title had a nice ring to it. And there'd still be time afterward (though not so open-endedly) for them to act like grown-ups, with tongues and so on. If not all the way to page 184.

(Leave that sort of Thing for the later teen years.)

For now, fish the yellow Pet Rock out of your purse and set it by the elegant Chianti bottle. Patting it as you would a live animal pet, so Roger wouldn't think she was giving it back—just prompting him to confirm they were officially Going Together. And that he knew some failsafe way this could be publicized (*that* part would be easy: tell Laurie Harrison) *without* Alex freaking or Robin erupting. He could also ask her out again for Valentine's Day, just three weeks off, and be planning something for her birthday two weeks later—

He *ya-da-da-da'd* "When You Wish Upon a Star" as he signaled for dessert.

"Why'd you do that??"

"So they'd bring the cannoli to our table, and not make us get it ourselves."

"No—I mean, y'know, why the... singing. That song."

He glinted at her in the candlelight. "Enjoy your meal?"

"Oh yes, it was yummy."

"Genoese cuisine. Northwest Italy, clear across the country from Trieste. No reason why your grandfather should object to your eating it."

"Hunh?" Had she ever mentioned PopPop? That he wouldn't allow so much as a can of spaghetti in the Beansville ranch house, not even Franco-American? "How do y—"

"I know everything about you."

Said flatly, matter-of-factly, with no insinuating brow-waggle.

"You do not," smiled Vicki.

"Ah, but I do."

Pause while dessert was served.

"Leave the gun—take the cannoli," Roger recited, biting into his. "It's easy to know everything, because nothing is real. 'And nothing to get hung about,' since it's all make-believe. Or if you prefer the Pointer Sisters, 'a great big fairytale'—though I prefer the word *phantasm*. Much classier than 'wet dream.'"

She sucked in her saved-from-garlic-by-parsley breath while he took another bite. Studying her over it with perverse tenderness.

"When you first saw me with Becca, you wondered if you were hallucinating. Well, I'm here—as it were—to say your whole existence is an imaginary figment. So's mine. So's

everybody you know's."

"Why're you *being* like this?" she tried not to whine. "We were having such a good time! I thought we might even be..."

"What—'falling in love?' Well, that's true enough, so far as it goes. But it'll go too far and you'll end up like this so-called cannoli." (Chomp.) "Believe me. Every time you feel what you think is pain, you get prettier; and that only brings you more pain. I'm hurting you now, talking this way, and you're prettifying before my eyes. It's something in *your* eyes (which *are* good—or would be, if they existed) and your mouth (which isn't too wide, whatever you might think) and especially your hair. 'Like the night, black and silken, darkness never fades away.' That's a plummy line, but not without merit. I'll stop there, unless you'd like me to go lower."

His glint sharpened on her little black neckline. And Vicki felt chomped.

Ogle-pawed, ogle-groped, ogle-suckled—sensing again that unclean aura that, like his fadeproof darkness, spread vaster and vaster till the air seemed full of gray mist.

"(You're spoiling everything,)" she whispered.

"Nature of The Beast, I'm afraid." His face twisted: a wry grimace at what remained of his cannoli. "And that nature's calling. Some things are less unreal than others, even here." He got to his feet, gave her a discomposed leer: "'You gotta go, you gotta go'—as Captain McCluskey said just before Michael Corleone shot him through the throat."

Lurching off, he disappeared into the hall leading to the Signorens.

She found her hand gripping the yellow Pet Rock.

This is real. You could clout him with it. Smash his glasses, split his head open—and you otter do it, too! How can he break us up this way, here, now? Just when you're ready to—WERE ready to—never mind what.

Dimly she felt like Fingers the kitten, chasing a flashlight beam or dangling from a yarn-strand.

It *couldn't* end like this; she wouldn't let it. When he came back from the washroom, she'd...

Do what? Keep staring at her untouched cannoli? While the clock ticked and the Mantovani gushed and the idea stirred that "it's all taken care of" was a lie—or at least a

mistake—Diners Card gone wrong, perhaps—sending Roger out the washroom window, sticking Vicki with an unpaid check?

Now hold on. Don't go to pieces. Remember the ten-dollar bill Mom slipped you, calling it "mad money"—something girls used to take on dates just-in-case, for-emergencies-only. And when Joss heard about this she threw in an extra five: "You know how worried I get when you're out of my sight." So you're not doomed to scrub saucepans if Roger added the injury of running out on you, to the insult of saying you don't exist.

The bastard.

Which you'd forgive him for being, if he'd hurry up and come back.

"That's what *I* call 'living up to his impotential!'" said a voice; followed by a hard rattle of caustic laughter, in triplicate.

Vicki swung round to see the horseless Mounted Chorus pass before her in ultraslow-motion, heading toward the exit. Brad Faussett giving a *We DID this!* head-jerk to Dilton Doiley from the *Archie* comics, wiping fastidious hands on a paper towel; and cleft-chinned wavy-haired Chico from *Lords of Flatbush*, who wore an anteater-grin as he whistled "Life is but a dream."

Ultraslow they might be moving, but away they went before Vicki could do more than let her jaw sag.

WHA-A-A-AT?

Where the hell had *they* been while she was having dinner?

Hanging out in the bar, utilizing fake IDs from Carly Thibert's cousin Lola?

Or hiding in the washroom, planning to stage a united-we-stand ambushcade on—

ROGER.

What've you done to him? she wanted to yell (not for the first time) as the gray mist reappeared and turned pink. *Through veins our blood does course / until it all gets shed!*

Oh Gahd oh Gahd oh Gahd she faltered by the Signores door, knowing she lacked the courage to peek in or ask some kind-looking gent to do it for her. And anyway nobody else was dithering outside the washrooms, not a man or woman or child—till Dino Tattaglia hurtled up in a dishwasher's apron and rubber gloves, still sporting his pimp cap as he barreled smack into Vicki.

“Roger—” she tried to say.

“Get your fat *culo* outta here!” he snarled, shoving past and making her stagger on her platform heels as he slammed into the Signore. Out of which no sound could be heard... except an insistent *b-z-z-z-z*, as if from unseen insects.

Vicki did a twirl worthy of Mabel Maydone, seeking a witness or better assistance but fearing she’d blink and find herself back last July, new and lost in Baroque Vista, blundering alone down a creepy-weird mountainside into utter-emptiness where even her own shadow deserted her.

Could Roger have been telling the truth? or anti-truth? that this WAS all a delusion she was having, or being, or both? Had she really died that day on Petty Road—been violated by degenerate predators, left to molder in an unnoticed ditch and this psychotic limbo?

No. She had called on Gran, and Joss had found her, and everything had turned out all right.

So take a deep trembly breath. Return to the table. Collect your things, including the Pet Rock. (Leave the cannoli.) Walk to the cashier’s counter with chin up and head high, like the Loveliest Young Lady you are.

Very good, Miss.

Weigh your options with every step. Stay here and see what happens? Not after what Dino told you to do. Go find Driver? He wasn’t likely to take you anywhere in the Rolls by yourself, even if you found him at the parking garage. Go call Daddy? The resulting hullabaloo would last for years, even supposing Mom answered the phone. Arrange with Joss to have Meg pick you up? Maybe if it weren’t Saturday night; but Meg was no longer grounded for last month’s curfew-bust, and had surely gone out to try busting it anew.

So: dip into your “mad money.” Assuming you won’t need it to pay for your food.

“Can you please call me a cab?” she asked Uncle Virgil in a smooth steady voice.

Deepset once-over. Would he say *What happened to the boy what brung you, why’d Dino run into the crapper?* Or *Who’s gonna cough up for that cranberry juice, tomatoes on garlic toast, green-gooped noodles and left-behind dessert?*

“Sure,” said Virgil. “Where to?”

(Thank Gahd for Diners Card.) “1008 Jupiter Street, in Vanderlund. Um... do you think it’ll cost me a lot to get there?”

Uncle Virgil seemed incapable of smiling, but his pencil moustache betrayed entertainment. “Naah. Unless you’re a big tipper.”

She thanked him with a dollar and waited up front, staring now at the backwards neon IL SACCHETTO sign in the window. Mildly surprised to realize she wasn’t verging on tears *or* nausea.

A taxi pulled up and Lenny Otis tumbled out. Toppling through the vestibule as if summoned by some arcane Smarks alarm. Vicki sidestepped past him, hardly astonished by Lenny’s entry—or his cabby’s resemblance to the affluent chauffeur she’d expected Driver to be. His cabby; now hers.

Before climbing into the taxi she turned back for a parting glimpse, in fleeting hope the whole affair would be a ludicrous practical joke—that Roger’d be there riding on Lenny and Dino’s shoulders, laughing uproariously as in *A Bite to Drink*.

But all she caught sight of was a face in the window, watching her leave. Not Lenny’s, though it was popeyed; not Dino’s, though it had on a clownish cap; not Roger’s, though its gaze pierced Vicki like X-ray vision.

For an ephemeral moment, like Petrushka’s ghost thumbing its nose at the terrified Magician.

Before twitchily vanishing, like Gollum in his cave at the very roots of the Misty Mountains.

*

Over the next few days Vicki bent more truth than in her entire life hitherto.

At Jupiter Street, with Joss’s help, she crafted responses to parental questions. Yes, the date with Roger went all right, y’know. Yes, riding in that limo was fun, pretty much. Yes, Mimi McLaine was certainly beautiful, but Vicki wasn’t sure she could really act. Or whether the Holdahl could be recommended for dinner *or* theater. But yes, *maybe* she’d say yes if-and-when Roger asked her out again (shrug) who knows?

“A very sensible attitude,” said Ozzie and Felicia.

Then there was the semi-enlightenment of a most special friend. Hey Alex, wanna hear a secret? I got that final B in Science ‘cause I was tutored by *Roger Mustardman*. Yes! Sorry I had to keep it all hush-hush, but y’know Robin’d never’ve let me hear the end of it. And now Goofus thinks I’m *dating* Roger! He’s so silly. Don’t believe anything he says, ever! Oh hey—this is just between me ‘n’ you ‘n’ Joss, ‘kay?

“Girl Scout’s honor!” said Alex.

Much harder to craft was what Vicki should say to Roger when next they met.

Make that if-and-when. On Tuesday the new semester began with a thunderbolt: Roger was gone from 8-Z. He’d been transferred over to Y, an almost unheard-of midyear shift.

Laurie Harrison would search avidly, but report to the bunch that he was in none of her classes and never to be seen in the 8-Y hall. Nor did Roger lunch in the cafeteria with Lenny and Dino anymore; there were rumors he loitered alone in the school basement, like a Phantom of the Opera (or Sock-Hop).

Robin Neapolitan acted as triumphant as if she’d personally booted him off Z.

Vicki suspected Becca Blair was the one responsible for the transfer, as a boon if not blessing. Not that this was a hot topic for locker room discussion: Becca did take her aside that first Tuesday, with Vicki tensing up in anticipation of being grilled, but all Becca wanted to know was if she would run for Z205’s representative on the second-semester Student Council. Which Vicki dutifully did, winning the election and serving as a trusted cog in Becca’s bionic political machine.

(Noticing her boss had a whole new set of suitors that semester—none of them named Brad Faussett, Lyle Wilkie, or Ralph Waldo Emerson Lorgnon III.)

(And wondering whether Becca ever slunk down to the basement janitor’s closet for further English tutorials.)

Carly Thibert was briefly indignant that Vicki’d had to find her own way home from a date; but she shrugged the matter off when Vicki didn’t seem inclined to bitch or mope about it.

Not *openly*, at any rate.

Though she nearly fainted that same first Tuesday at 3:15 p.m., when she opened her locker and a new thin white note floated out.

Unfolding it was an ordeal. Not half as bad, though, as trying to decipher a mess of spider-scratches apparently made by a bone-dry ballpoint.

Just wait till they start spinning webs for all the unwary flies in your stomach...

A ray of cheer was raised that evening by the premiere of *Laverne & Shirley*, which would prove to be a reliable cheery-upper for years to come. But that ray got doused by a series of awful nightmares, jolting her awake hour after hour—

—Roger lying on the stairwell steps, squashed like a beetle; Roger having a tightly-furled umbrella hammered into his heart; Roger lurking in the sewer with a skeletal face behind shattered glasses—

Her old Cheshire Cat doll wasn't enough to calm her down or soothe her back to sleep. Finally she took the yellow Pet Rock to bed, clutching it like an undercover talisman, chanting *This is real—I am real—the dreams are fake, are false, are lies.*

To which a perversely tender voice replied: *Call them Art. Make-believe's nothing to get hung about. A vamp by any other name would bite as deep.*

Which was as close as Vicki'd ever get to reading the rest of *A Bite to Drink*.

Other spidery scratch-notes would appear in her locker from time to time, none more legible than the first. Eventually she'd throw them away without bothering to unfold them.

And after the Winter Olympics, prepping for her fourteenth birthday, Vicki got her waist-long hair cut into a sassy Dorothy Hamill wedge. Joss wouldn't accompany her and Alex to the Green Bridge salon ("Oh no you don't! I'm *keeping* my 'fro!") but Alex, while her own nifty-pixie coif was being trimmed, re-convinced her how much easier short hair would be to wash and dry and care for. (And save from being stroked.)

"Not to mention run in!" Alex added. "Or is it run *with*? Or run *under*?"

"Run along," quipped Vicki: feeling like a newly-emerged butterfly as she got up and stretched out her young wings.

25

Whistle Against the Din

It happened when Fiona Weller was down in the heavily-soundproofed cellar at Villa Neapolitan, watching an old *Twilight Zone* while doing bong hits with Robin. (Whose father threatened all sorts of punishments if he EVER! caught EITHER! girl smoking ANY! kind of substance. Shaking his kosher-dill-sized forefinger at them both: “Just let me find *one* pack of Zig-Zag papers—ONE! SINGLE! PACK!—well, you better hope I never do, that’s all!”)

(Whereupon Fat Bob mused aloud about how much safer a water pipe was than hand-rolled joints; how much cooler and healthier, “not to mention more ladylike.”)

(Hence: untrammelled bong hits in the basement.)

On the TV a rockabilly asshole strayed into an eerie backwoods time-warp, evoking a shrouded apparition who took form as a sad-eyed chick. She let herself be seduced by the asshole’s slick blandishments, evidently not for the first time: *It’s always happened that way / ‘neath an old willow tree*. Imploring Rockabilly not to run away THIS time, but stay with her—hiding someplace so they could always be together. Yet away he ran (the asshole bastard) and Sad Eyes was left in her time-loop or -cycle or -limbo, reenacting the same old story of forsaken betrayal:

You said you’d buy me things—bells and bonnets and bright beads—

Bright beads...

Two words that caused Fiona to do a Billy Pilgrim. Unstuck her from the Seventies; removed her from Robin’s basement; returned her to jingle-jangle sunrise on the road—

*Bucephalus the Big Blue Bus
takes me and you and them and us
all ev'rywhere: no fuss, no muss.*

Her very first song. Written before she could actually write.

She had loved her parents then, loved everything about their musical vagabond life. Lem claimed they really were Gypsies, the family name had originally been something like “Wladimir” and their ancestors had rolled around Europe in a caravan, playing violins and cimbaloms and tamburicas:

*Cross my palm with silver
and I'll tell you all your fortune;
cross my palm with gold
and I'll make your fortune mine.*

The Cloudland Atmosphere made do with two guitars, a bass, keyboards, drum kit, five acid rockers (six if you counted Moth) and one child in a pair of rattletrap Volkswagen vans. Blue and Red they were, Bucephalus and Rocinante: transporting the band up and down Bay Area hills and along the coast to their next gig over the winding horizon. Little Fiona never grew tired of the trips, the views, the nomadic nature of eating and sleeping. When she did consent to nap, Moth would croon plaintive lullabies—“House of the Rising Sun,” “Maid of Constant Sorrow,” “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll”—that seldom failed to send Fiona off to pleasant dreams, whatever their lyrical content.

Her parents had come out of the Berkeley folk scene, “The Back of Beyond” as Lemuel Weller styled it: blending his sanguine tenor with Martha Dunlop’s crystalline melancholy. Joan Baez might wear burlap but Martha garbed herself in chiffon, fluttering even on breezeless stages. Lem penned “The Moth and the Star” as his ode to her when they first became an acoustic duo, Lem ‘n’ Martha making the rounds of local coffeehouses, then graduating to “Lemon Moth” at the hungry i, the Purple Onion, the Cable Creamery:

*Black-Bordered Lemon Moth
framed up against the sky—*

*paean to the break of day
from the sweet by-and-by.*

Followed by “Lo! the Fairest Flower Girl” when Fiona was born. Bringing her along to performances when no babysitter was available, Lem’s open guitar case (lined with Moth’s rain slicker) serving as a crib. From which Fiona would yowl if they pluralized HER song, applying it to all the young pure-of-hearts who boycotted *Hootenanny* for blacklisting Pete Seeger.

Then the British Invasion overwhelmed the folkniks and turned the world electric. Lemon Moth, taking a cue from the Byrds down in La-La Land, joined forces with Scudder Columbia and Cheeky Jowell to form the Cloudland Atmosphere: picking up ever-ripped Overcast Max to play keyboards, and the first in a long series of short-staying drummers. Had the Atmosphere ever achieved a consistent beat, they might’ve released more than one lone single on the White Whale label—“Freeze the Breeze” backed with “Body Snatcher’s Blues.” Autumn Records did express interest in signing them, but went bankrupt before a contract could be inked; and that was the Atmosphere’s last brush with vinyl posterity.

We’re not in it for the bread alone / while we can live by soulful tones.

Over the winding horizon to the next gig. Opening for Count Five and Sopwith Camel and the Chocolate Watchband at the Matrix, the Avalon Ballroom, the free concerts in Panhandle Park: melting together in Fiona’s memory, scented with jasmine like the pages of the *Oracle*, having a tang like the Diggers’s bean soup. It must’ve rained sometimes, been foggy sometimes—certainly been *dark* a few hours every night; but all she’d recall was the sunshine. Pouring through van windows, beaming down from above, feeling like poetry and patchouli oil.

Hey, kiddo! Love your beads! a smiling hoarse-voiced woman (obviously Janis Joplin, in retrospect) told her at Monterey Pop. And Fiona looked and found them gleaming like a string of starry gumdrops round her little neck.

“I do love my beads,” she told the Pearl.

(“Oh, poor Janis,” was all Moth would say when asked in later years.)

(Grace Slick? “Such a lovely face.” Jerry Garcia? “Very good at bluegrass.” Country Joe McDonald? “Oh, he could get so angry.” Sum total of Moth’s insights into the San Francisco Sound.)

Moth never got the hang of singing with an electric band. She couldn’t abide what the so-called Summer of Love brought to town—bad dope, bad trips, bad junk and smack and speed. It was a great relief to her when Lem quarreled with Scudder Columbia, causing the Cloudland Atmosphere to break up (in the same month that Country Joe left the Fish, the Grateful Dead got busted for possession, and the Diggers held their funeral for Hippie: Devoted Son of Mass Media).

From this scene the Wellers fled in Bucephalus, with Cheeky Jowell leading them to a fresh start in Oregon. There they had four different apartments in as many years, and Fiona attended four different grade schools; yet Portland was pleasant, home of Beverly Cleary and Ursula K. LeGuin as well as the duo known variously as Lemon Cheek, Weller & Jowell, or Well Well Well—depending on what kind of gig they landed and whether Moth sat in on it.

But Moth wanted to teach music to others rather than make it herself. Being a professional substitute required “Clean for Gene” adherence to the straight and narrow; so she rehearsed being Mrs. Fairly Squarely to a classroom of squeaky-cleans, making Fiona’s sides ache with her staccato rendition of *It-is-so-good-to-see-you-all-here-at-dear-old-[fill-in-the-blank]-school-I-hope-everyone-is-just-as-keen-as-I-am-to-raise-our-voices-in-song—*—sounding exactly like a Disney automaton.

After four years of this, Moth figured she’d earned a full-time teaching post, but none was to be found in Portland. An offer did get dangled by Seattle, and Moth talked of renting a houseboat so they could “repose on the bosom of Oceania”—i.e. Lake Union, with a view of the Space Needle—but the Boeing Bust intervened, and the Seattle dangle fell through.

Then Cheeky Jowell ran off with the Jesus Movement, and Lem went into a dispirited funk. He raised no objection when Moth pounced on an offer from California; it meant they could return home (sort of) and closer to the coast than Portland or Seattle, which seemed far more auspicious than knell-of-doomish. No hint that it’d be consignment to a year of sheer hell (YOSH) in aptly-named You Reeka.

A place Fiona would do her damndest to blot from her psyche.

But its stagnant malodorous murk permeated the very fiber of her being. She began the YOSH as a fairly quiet, fairly watchful, well-enough-adjusted child—and emerged a closed-off, shrunk-down bundle of scar tissue. Rarely speaking above a mutter. Staring spectrally at the outer world. As might any fugitive refugee, at whom “freaky” and “fruitcake” were the kindest epithets flung.

Worst of all was the sense of isolation. Fiona had seldom felt alone before, or minded it much when she did; but in You Reeka even Bucephalus deserted her—throwing a rod, cracking its block, being hauled away to the junkyard. Moth retreated further and further within Disney automatonishness till finally getting trapped inside it, like an *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* pod-person. And did that make Lem run down the streets of You Reeka, shouting *You’re next! You’re next?* Hardly: not while he had Humboldt State to hang out at and get high at and return from no earlier than the wee hours, if then.

Thus the YOSH passed.

And when it was over Moth lunged for a lifeline. Miss Rosamond Ambrose, longtime choirmistress at Vanderlund Township High School, acknowledged Martha Dunlop as her particular protégée, and had promised to help find her a local faculty position once she’d gained some fulltime teaching experience. With that now accomplished (and a veil drawn over the Cloudland Atmosphere *entr’acte*) Moth presented her credentials to Miss Ambrose and got hired to teach Vocal Music at Vanderlund Junior High.

“It SNOWS out there,” was Lem’s reaction.

To him, anything east of Death Valley was *out there*; and out of nowhere he announced that *he’d* be heading down to La-La Land, picking up work as a session guitarist.

“Fine,” said Moth.

“Fine,” said Lem.

Their saying it twice didn’t make it even half-true.

Fiona waited to be asked which parent she wanted to go with, live with, stay with; but that decision was reached without consulting her.

“You need your mom, and your mom needs you,” Lem remarked. Making no allusion to any needs involving *him*.

“(Well... I can come be with you summertimes, right?)”

“Tell you what—I’ll come Out There and visit *you*.”

Cut and dried.

It would be inaccurate to say this added fresh scar tissue to Fiona’s bundle. Even as she launched her tentative trial balloon, she knew there was more flop than fly to it; and a year later, watching *Paper Moon*, she could envision what a summer with Lem would be like—relegated to the back seat like Addie while Lem/Moze attended to some Trixie Delight in the front, largely thanks to *her* front.

So adapt to survive, if not thrive. Quickly learn how to guilt-trip goodies out of Lem, starting with *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* as a parting gift when they all left You Reeka. Ensure, with a few well-chosen mutters, that he *would* come visit a couple weeks every year, bringing more gifts and a wealth of stories about his musical adventures on the road.

(But still.)

(When she’d asked, he hadn’t so much as said *We’ll see*.)

(And that was an omission she would not forget.)

Moth shed private tears all the way to Vanderlund, doing this behind closed doors so Fiona could pretend unawareness. Her own eyes remained dry, the better to remain quietly watchful with. There was other conjugal fallout to observe Out There: her grandfather Jock Dunlop (longtime reporter for the *Daily News*, acquainted with Turkel and Algren and “that kid” Royko) had recently divorced Grandma Marietta and departed with a Trixie Delight of his own. And Marietta, though tempted to match him remarriage for remarriage, preferred to pump Jock for alimony and scandalize her sewing circle by shacking up with a beau named Herbert.

Ah! Sweet mystery of life, at last I’ve found you...

This escapade opened up a bedroom in Vanderlund. Moth’s sister Polly (an uplifting weaver) had married Cass Rumpelmagen (an optimistic architect) and produced five wholesome children, for whom Cass had just finished building the Plexiglas Palace on Windy Poplar Lane. One room had been designed for Marietta, but now would nicely accommodate Moth; while Fiona could bunk in with cousin Chloe and “look after” the four

younger Rumpelmagens—Patches, Smarty and Bootsie (twins) and Baby Chuckles.

(This was another decision Fiona took no part in reaching.)

Chloe, aged eight to her ten, looked and sounded like a Tweety Bird timorously eager to please Sylvester. Professing gratitude that Fiona had taken over half of her brand-new bedroom. Forever offering to brush Fiona's hair, a shaggy mop compared to Chloe's sleek canary locks. Vowing "I am *so* glad you've come—now it'll be two-to-one against Patches! I know he's only six, but like Mommy says he's 'such a handful.'"

Which was to say a thrower of tantrums, intent on usurping Chloe's primogeniture and dominating the Plexiglas Palace.

"(Don't let him get away with it,)" said Fiona.

"But what can I do? He gets so crazy and noisy—"

"(Watch and learn.)"

You-Reeka-ites were one thing; this was a brat just out of kindergarten. Stroll over to where he was ringleading Smarty and Bootsie in tumult and turmoil.

"(Quit it,)" she advised Patches.

"Quit *what*?" he sassed back with outthrust tongue.

"(THAT, to begin with,)" said Fiona, in a mutter as hard and flat as hammered tin.

Patches retracted the tongue but stood his ground. "You're not the boss of me! You're too *skinny* to be the boss of me! This is MY house, not yours!"

"(Quit it,)" repeated Fiona, her mutter now like a pair of tinsnips chopping through a coffee can.

Visible gulp by Patches. Followed by an outraged yell as Chloe bounded up to give him a shove that tumbled him backwards onto his bratty butt.

"What's happening in here??" Aunt Polly wanted to know.

"They knocked me down!" roared Patches.

"I did it!" Chloe declared. "*I'm* the big sister here, and *I'm* the one in charge when we're by ourselves, and it's about time *you* remember it, too! All of you," including Smarty and Bootsie. Sideways glance at her impassive cousin. "Right, Fiona?"

"(Like you said,)" Fiona told Chloe. "(You heard her,)" she told Patches and the twins. "(Everything's under control,)" she told Aunt Polly.

“Fiona’s so good with the kiddies,” Aunt Polly told Moth and Uncle Cass.

Fee Fi Fo Fum, Patches started calling her—behind her back, from a safe distance.

When she wasn’t helping Chloe enforce law ‘n’ order, Fiona spent the rest of that summer cloistered under stereo headphones, listening to LPs no one else was permitted to remove from their sleeves. *Ziggy Stardust*, *Hunky Dory*, *The Man Who Sold the World*; *A Beard of Stars*, *Electric Warrior*, *The Slider*. Of these albums the first and last were new, but the rest had been her faithful companions through the YOSH: glittering glamtastic ramparts against stagnant malodorous murk.

Marc Bolan and David Bowie were the opposite of all things You Reeka.

Fiona’d first heard Bolan when he and Steve Peregrin Took were an acoustic duo (much enjoyed by Moth) who sang folkie-psychedelia with titles like “Aznageel the Mage” and “She Was Born to Be My Unicorn.” Fiona hadn’t wholly tuned in till Took split and Bolan electrified and the band’s name got abbreviated from Tyrannosaurus Rex to just plain T.Rex. Except that *nothing* was plain about Marc Bolan: a wizardy-warlocky rider of white swans, flying o’er the astral plane with curls and feather boas blowing in the elf-wind.

Yet he was surpassed and transcended by his friend David Bowie the Pretty Boy-ee, the Altogether Otherworldish—reaching his swank extraterrestrial hand to you through moon age daydreams. Lifting you up and up till you could press your spaceface to the Starman waiting in the flashdazzly sky: a cosmos where only “freaks” need apply.

Making you almost believe your beads were stellar-bright again.

Until summer ended and another school year began.

With no reason to hope that Dopkins Elementary, though two thousand miles east of You Reeka, would be one iota better.

First morning in Mrs. Gutenkauf’s fifth-grade class. Fiona cringing as all newcomers were instructed to stand and tell a little about themselves. Very little, so far as Fiona was concerned; she planned to mutter the tersest-acceptable memoir and sit back down fast.

The girl ahead of her took a different tack. Striding to the front of the room and giving it a cantankerous scowl, singularly at odds with her rosy-cheeked Campbell’s Soup Kid face.

“I’m Robin Neapolitan and no, my dad *doesn’t* make ice cream, so *don’t* ask me if he does. He just opened a Harley-Davidson dealership on Triville Road, and *don’t* ask if he’s a Hell’s Angel, ‘cause I wouldn’t tell you even if he was. We *don’t* like people talking about that kind of thing, understand? Just say we’re bikers and leave it at that.”

(Which would account for the little leather jacket she hadn’t taken off to hang in the cloakroom, though it was quite a warm day.)

Fiona felt like an emboldening match had been struck and held to her waxlumpy wick.

Mrs. Gutenkauf admonished Robin for saying “hell”—as if Archie Bunker didn’t broadcast that word every week—before calling on Fiona. And repeatedly asking her to speak up, please, which Fiona did for a token syllable or two before reverting to her habitual monotone:

“(My name’s Fiona Weller) AND (me ‘n’ my mother just moved out here from California my) FATHER (didn’t come with us ‘cause he’s a guitarist at least that’s what he) DOES (but since he’s on the road so much he may have joined the) **HELL’S** (Angels ‘scuse me Mrs. Gutenkauf I can’t say for sure ‘cause we *don’t* like people talking about that kind of) THING.”

Robin Neapolitan’s rosy face turned the color of strawberries flambé.

She seethed at Fiona through eyes like frothing milkshakes; but Fiona, as she passed Robin’s desk on the way back to her own, calmly muttered: “(Okay, your turn—try to top *that*.)”

The flambéed froth subsided like a mollified volcano, and Robin gave her a bubblegummy grin. “You’re on, Spooky! Double or nothing!” she snap-crackle-popped.

“Miss Neapolitan! No gumchewing is allowed!”

“Aw hell, can’t we do *anything* in this class??”

So Robin had to stay after school her very first day at Dopkins.

Fiona, unbidden, waited for her out on the playground; Robin acted unsurprised by her doing this; and together they walked to Robin’s house on Pottage Road. Quite a small house it was, attached to an oversized garage, in which they found Fat Bob Neapolitan fussing over several disassembled motorcycles.

He looked like a less-than-fastidious Oliver Hardy, with a thick black beard but no spicurls. “There’s my baby doll!” he shouted, wiping meathook-hands on an oily rag before grabbing Robin and swinging her eight feet high, just shy of the garage ceiling.

“Daa-aad! Not in front of Fiona!”

“Oh hey! You brought home a little friend? Well, Fiona, this is how we say *hello* at Villa Neapolitan!—” and Fiona let fly an uncharacteristic squeal as she too got seized round the waist and swung ceilingward.

“Aw Dad, quit showing off.”

“Is this is why you’re late getting home? I expected you here an hour ago.” Abrupt Robinesque scowl. Kosher-dill forefinger pointed and shaken: “Dammit, I better not find out you got into trouble your VERY! FIRST! DAY! of school—”

“Be cool, Dad, we were just fooling around,” Robin blithely jived. “Whaddaya want tonight, ravioli or tortelloni?”

“Watch it with your ‘fooling around,’” Fat Bob huffed. “And tortelloni, with mushrooms. Have we got any mushrooms? I want mushrooms!”

“Me ‘n’ Fiona’ll go *pick* some then,” Robin answered, dodging the oily rag Fat Bob snapped in her direction. “C’mon, Spooky, you’re staying for dinner. If you don’t like homemade tortelloni, eat it anyway—it’s good for you and I make it *right!*”

Thus began what turned out not to be friendship, nor even best-friendship, but full-fledged sisterhood. A blood tie soon cemented by pressing together pricked-open thumbtips, while reciting “No Fun” (by Iggy & The Stooges) and beating out its rhythm with free hands:

Hang awwwwn / don’t-uh lemme gohhhh

No fuhhhhn / to be uh-lohhhhne

As sisters, they could snipe and gnarl at each other without leaving a mark. Robin almost always pulled her punches when socking Fiona on the shoulder, and Fiona usually knew just how far she could push Robin before earning a punch. Neither sister probed into the other’s unvolunteered past—such as what’d happened in You Reeka during the YOSH, or why there was no mother at Villa Neapolitan nor any trace of one.

Fiona never felt afraid of anything when Robin was nearby. Which should have been *always*. Fat Bob played the drums; if he'd crossed paths with the Cloudland Atmosphere back in the beginning, and gotten signed as their first and only drummer, she and Robin could've been together since toddlerhood. The band wouldn't have broken up, and today they'd all be traveling to gigs up and down the coast—Fiona sometimes riding with her parents in Bucephalus, sometimes in the sidecar on Fat Bob's tricked-out Harley...

*Over the winding horizon
racing ahead of the wind
tune out the pursuing sirens
and whistle against the din*

She did ride in the sidecar sometimes, though just around Vanderlund, and only after reluctant permission was coaxed out of Moth. The Neapolitans could put the charm pedal to the metal when they chose, and Fat Bob swore profanity-free oaths that he'd protect Fiona from any roadrash harm. Robin rapidly captivated everyone on Windy Poplar Lane: Chloe hero-worshiped her, Patches clamored for a chance to wear her leather jacket, Aunt Polly and Uncle Cass granted her *carte blanche* whenever she offered to cook in the Plexiglas kitchen.

But when Robin and Fiona formally ganged up as an outlaw duo (the Dopkins Dopesters: "Never met a weed we didn't like") their parents were summoned to a conference with Mrs. Gutenkauf, who had Serious Concerns about their daughters's attitude.

Moth's response was to swamp her with citations from *Free to Be... You and Me*, while Fat Bob scared the living tar out of Mrs. Gutenkauf for even hinting that his baby doll and her best friend might be out of line.

"Dammit, you girls!" he harangued them afterward, yanking at his beard like a giant angry dwarf. "You think I've got nothing better to do than GO! BAWL! OUT! your teacher??"

"Now Bob, now Bob, let's not be disheartening," fluttered Moth. "When *I* see how the girls 'empower' each other, I can tell it's going to be Oh Kay"—her affirmations spacing out between syllables, as per usual.

"Well, it better STAY okay!" went Fat Bob. "Or else you don't even wanna KNOW what else, Robin! You hear what I'm telling you??"

“Dad, my ears are like a foot away from your mouth; what *else* can I do?”

“W—!!”

“Oh Kay, Oh Kay!” Moth interceded. “I know what—let’s all hold hands and *visualize* our feelings—”

“(Let’s not and say we did,)” Fiona muttered against the din.

The Dopesters decided to tread a bit more softly in class. Or *deftly*, by testing just how far they could misbehave; and *subtly*, by inciting others to misbehave without risking official punishment themselves.

Some patsy-pawns hardly needed egging-on. Such as Artie Rist the Anarchist, who pretended to read Hardy Boys books while devouring the Weather Underground tracts he’d hidden inside them. His arm would shoot up at the slightest Dopester provocation to demand “BUT *WHY?*?” Mrs. Gutenkauf’s “Because I say so” cut no ice with Artie, and his grades were so impeccable that she would try to convince him *WHY* with persuasive rationales. A whole hour a day could be wasted this way.

Craig Clerkington, another favorite patsy-pawn, was already a big lout at age ten. He took pride in bullyragging the entire school: even sixth-graders avoided confronting him, while younger students resignedly agreed their lunch-and-milk money was Craig’s by rights. The Dopesters would dare him to break marksmanship records with straws and spitballs, or rubber bands and paper clips, or (one memorable morning) with his bare hand and a lump of realistic-looking fake dogdoo.

Robin nursed an enormous hidden crush on Craig. He in turn awarded her his idea of the ultimate accolade: “Y’know, sometimes I even forget you’re a girl!” She managed to stomach this by resolving to bide her time: “Soon as I grow boobs,” she told Fiona, “he’ll remember all right!”

But disaster struck a couple years later, the summer before seventh grade. Along with boobs, pubes, and other hallmarks of adolescence, Robin got a whopper case of *acne vulgaris* that didn’t just invade her rosy face but shoulders, back, even her ass. She demanded a complete skin transplant that Fat Bob refused to countenance, insisting Baby Doll was more beautiful than ever—though she should quit all that picking and squeezing, lest she end up covered with pockmarks.

A heroic Clearasil effort was mounted prior to their first day at Vanderlund Junior High. Only to have Craig Clerkington guffaw “Hey, dummy! You’re supposed to *wash up* after eating pizza!”—and never really look at Robin again.

She got through the rest of that day on sheer guts, not breaking down till Fiona guided her home. Then, sprawled prone on the old couch in Villa Neapolitan’s soundproof basement, she let go utterly-abandonedly till cushions got sogified.

It made Fiona’s heart bleed to witness this, especially since it was such a stupid thing to get so upset about. She tried to give sisterly comfort with pats on head and strokes of hair, plus a suggestion that Robin dye the latter. And an offer to help her do it. And a brave promise to stand by her during Fat Bob’s reaction. (They selected a truly Dopester shade of vanilla, taking pains to leave Robin’s roots naturally chocolate.)

Puberty proved no kinder to Fiona when her turn came; nor was her heart the only part of her that bled. Worse yet, she first experienced menorrhagia while Robin was in South Dakota at the annual Sturgis Rally. There was only Moth to offer support as Fiona got taken to the gynecologist, and waited to be seen, and underwent initiation into the wonderful world of stirrups and speculum.

But Moth emerged from her automaton to hold Fiona’s hand through the ordeal. Crooning all the old tunes (like “Maid of Constant Sorrow”) to distract her from dying of grossest-possible humiliation, if not blood loss. If not from subsequently being stuffed with giblets and braunschweiger, to offset anemia.

Adolescence plainly sucked. As did junior high school.

So the Dopesters, like many another of their generation, sought sustenance from bong hits and loud music.

Robin was born to be a drummer, not simply as her daddy’s girl but because percussion provided a handy frustration-outlet. She took to carrying drumsticks wherever she went, whaling a beat on every kind of surface and in all manner of circumstances, the less suitable the better.

When Fiona was asked to choose an instrument, she felt drawn to the muttersome bassoon. Moth countered with a flute, which Fiona flat-out refused—*cutesy* girls played flutes. A clarinet, on the other hand, lent itself to multiple styles and genres. From Uncle

Cass's collection of jazz albums Fiona sampled the work of Noone and Shaw, Bechet and Giuffre—and particularly Russell, whose unpredictable spontaneity she replayed so often Robin started calling her “Pee Wee Jr.”

Robin preferred heavier music. Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Black Sabbath were perpetually stacked on her basement turntable; John Bonham and Ginger Baker replaced Craig Clerkington as her prime crushes. She didn't share Fiona's esteem for David Bowie (“Puddyboy,” she called him) but they both embraced the Stooges, the New York Dolls, and Alice Cooper. *Raw Power! Too Much Too Soon! Billion Dollar Babies!*

From these variations on the glam-rock theme, Fiona developed a guise of her own. Though lacking the build or inclination to go the whole Glitter Lolita route, she added tarnished lamé to her wardrobe, scuffy platforms to her feet, and enough Maybelline to starken her eye sockets. The overall effect was unnervingly funereal: a graveside line drawn in the dust of suckdom. A flickery candle set alight as you cursed the dorkness. A transcendent sidestep to evade entering Teenage Wasteland.

As *To Kill a Mockingbird* put it: “From the mud to the stars.”

Or as Deep Purple put it: *Ride the rainbow / crack the sky.*

(Bingo.)

(*If we be freaky, we be calling our tune.*)

Dopesters still, though the old games were played no more; Artie Rist wasn't in any of their classes and Craig Clerkington was a lost cause. Dominating the “7-Z team” at VW were busty Becca Blair, whom even Robin hesitated to flout, and Alex Dmitria the Russkie-Chicana, whose wholehearted ultranicensness was almost as intolerable as overt spite. Others on 7-Z were vapid nonentities like LeAnn Anobile, or bogus shams like Spacyjane Groh (spacy by nature, not from substances). And seventh grade proved conclusively that the *last* thing worthy of a twelve-year-old girl's attention was 99% of twelve-year-old boys.

Particularly when that twelve-year-old girl had taken a spookified glam-stance against malodorous murkitude.

Which really seemed to rile the jockstrap element.

Craig basically ignored Fiona (“Aaah, she was always like that”) but Brad Faussett didn't, calling her “Weirdona” every chance he got; Mike Spurgeon shared a superior snigger

with whichever peppette was clinging to him when they passed Feef in the halls; and the very worst was an oversized salamander named Gary Sedgemoor, who occupied the homeroom seat directly in front of her. Each morning without fail this turdball would twist around and go “HUBBA-BABOO!” or “CHINNY-CHIN-CHIN!” in Fiona’s face, followed by some far-from-complimentary commentary. Which somehow wouldn’t have been half so bothersome if not prefaced by these aromatic war whoops.

“Next time he does it, give the *stronzo* an ‘accidental’ punch in the nose!” advised Robin. This might’ve been effective if *her* mighty drummer’s fist delivered it; but Robin and her fist were unfortunately assigned to a different homeroom, so Fiona (lacking knuckles of brass) could only try to maintain a menacing silence, and hope to quell Turdball with vengeful voodoo hexes.

(Which finally struck home when Sedgemoor, who’d razzed Mike Spurgeon all year for having shoulder-length ringlets, made some sort of dig about Alex Dmitria that resulted in Mike’s kicking a sizable amount of crap out of him. Good riddance to the residue of Gary Turdball as he vanished from Vanderlund, winding up—with any luck—in hell or You Reeka where he belonged.)

(“Some *stronzos* float, some *stronzos* sink, but they all get flushed in the end,” Robin philosophized.)

Band class, at least, was broader-minded than the so-called norm. There the three academic teams mingled, somewhat improving student tolerability; Fiona even met a girl from 7-Y who could correctly identify Pee Wee Russell. This girl played cornet, not clarinet, but had heard him on *Miles & Monk at Newport*.

“Miles Davis is my man!” said Jo Murrish. “Well, one of my men. They aren’t all trumpeters, but most of them blow.”

Jo was actually pretty cool. Without asking anybody’s permission, she changed her first name to “Jocelyn” because she got tired of its being only two letters long.

“So why not make it Johannesburgsouthafrica?” Robin asked, having sweated through a Geography quiz before Band.

“Nahhhh—too heavy on the apartheid. I’d rather go jostlin’.”

She was full of jostly witticisms. Mr. Redo scolded her one day for hunching over her cornet; Jocelyn confided to the Dopesters that bad posture, like too-big T-shirts, was a defense mechanism to deflect male squints from her progressively expanding bustline.

“I mean, Jeez! It’s like I’ve got this double goiter that’s slipped down low!”

(Which caused Robin to snortle through a whole rehearsal of “Tijuana Taxi,” and earn a scolding of her own from Mr. Redo.)

The only thing wrong with Jocelyn Murrish was her best friend, Kim Zimmer, a cutesy-poo peppette-in-training who tooted the flute as though she were riding it sidesaddle. Kim had no interest in buddy-banter with the likes of Robin and Fiona; she’d physically dragoon Jocelyn away from their vicinity, haughtymouthing “Come ON, Jo, we’re gonna be LATE! Why are you *talking* to them?”

“(She really isn’t like that,)” Jocelyn would whisper-apologize, to begin with. Then it became a despondent “(She didn’t *used* to be like this.)”

And then, one lunchtime in May, Joss stalked stiff-leggedly over to the Dopesters’s remote cafeteria table with crimson face and swimming eyes. “You guys mind if I sit here and NOT talk?”

“Ow!” went Robin. “Why the hellja kick me??” to Fiona. “Sure, knock yourself out,” to Joss. “See? I can be polite!” to Fiona. “You don’t have to tell us why you’re pissed off,” to Joss. “I’ll get you for that kick,” to Fiona.

Who silently shoved a clean napkin across the table, so Joss could blow her nose.

There were infinitely many reasons why a girl who’d just turned thirteen should feel like crying. But the Dopesters needed no stool pigeon to pin this rap on Kimmy-the-Poo Zimmer; nor did they disbelieve it later when they heard Kim had butt-smooched her way into the snottybabe set by dumping (and dumping *on*) her ex-best friend in front of a Y-Wing audience.

This was a breach so You-Reeka-y that Fiona nearly threw up at the thought of it, and Robin had to be restrained from side-saddling Kim’s flute into orifices other than her big fat *boccaccia*. Maybe Jocelyn wasn’t a member of their two-girl gang, but she was definitely a Band buddy and more than welcome to take refuge at their uncrowded table for what remained of the school year.

“(So what’s the book about?)” Fiona ventured to ask one day, when Joss finished flipping through Susan Beth Pfeffer’s *Rainbows & Fireworks* and closed it with a sigh.

“Look at the title, idiot,” Robin advised.

“Well no,” Joss said wryly. “It’s really about these twin sisters who write each other poison pen letters.”

“(Hey, they stole *our* story,)” Fiona told Robin; which made Joss laugh for the first lunchtime since her breach.

Good deed done for the day. A casual quip, quickly dismissable.

Yet the notion behind it kept bobbing up in Fiona’s subconscious, as May yielded to June and July parboiled to August.

Our story COULD be stolen. From us; from me; and just like (snap) that.

Because even if Kim Zimmer’d been a treacherous bitch from birth, there was little reason to doubt that she and Joss *were* best friends for most of their lives—from kindergarten through sixth grade at McGrum Elementary.

Was the VW environment responsible for Kim’s going rotten? (Junior high sucked, after all.) But if *that* were true, what would prevent the same thing from happening to Robin and Fiona?

It wouldn’t even have to result from bitch-rot. Suppose Robin’s skin cleared up and she landed a guy—or a *bunch* of guys she could play off against each other? Suppose she and Fat Bob took a high-speed tumble off their Harley (a thought to shudder away from) or Fat Bob lost his dealership and they had to move to Detroit or Indianapolis—what then?

How would Fiona survive?

Joss Murrish, though a cool buddy-type, was on a different VW team and lived way the hell out east. Chloe, though a dependably loyal cousin, wouldn’t start junior high for a whole ‘nother year and then would be a mere sevvie to Fiona’s niner. Lem, even if his exact whereabouts could be tracked down and Fiona ran away to join him there, would only pack her back to Vanderlund.

And the isolation chamber, all over again.

Another YOSH, this time prolonged into an abysmal indefinite future.

Don’t run! Don’t run!

—begged the sad-eyed chick on the TV in *The Twilight Zone*.

Reverting to a shrouded apparition as she knelt before the rockabilly asshole. So off he fled, to be obliterated by shadows; abandoning the unhappy chick-phantom to her eerie time-warp or -loop or -limbo. Without even the “bells and bonnets and bright beads” he’d pretended to promise her.

“Will you take the damn bong already?” Robin growled, having held out the weighty pipe for a full minute. Adding “What’s eating *you*?” when Fiona slowly shook her head, fingering the glittery trinkets strung around her thin neck.

*

First farting day of gassy eighth grade.

She and Robin were again assigned to separate homerooms, recalling efforts by Mrs. Gutenkauf (and *two* teachers in sixth grade) to divide-and-conquer the Dopesters. Futile, of course; but that was Dopkins and this was what Moth would soon be calling Dear Old VW: *I-hope-everyone-is-just-as-keen-as-I-am-to-raise-our-voices-in-song—*

Robin planned to raise *her* voice in Miss McInerney’s homeroom, and test how immediately she could be sent to the Principal’s office.

“Betcha fifty cents I can beatcha there,” she challenged Fiona.

“(Fifty cents? You forgot to bring a lunch,)” Fiona guessed. “(Or enough money to buy the hot meal—)”

“Look, do you wanna bet or not?”

“(Bet they wouldn’t hear me if I *did* yell.)”

“You’re on, Pee Wee! See you in Band,” went Robin, pressing knuckles to Fiona’s upper arm; which from Robin Neapolitan was the equivalent of a warm hug.

Alphabetic seating in Mr. Gillies’s homeroom, which exiled “Weller, Fiona T.” to Seat 39 in the rear row. With Slobbery Gollum Whatshisname at one elbow, and Carly-in-Heat Thibert a couple desks away from the other. Robin despised Carly for having the sort of sex appeal *she’d* give a kidney to possess—not to mention the cluster of hornyboys panting to plant themselves in Carly’s pants.

(Blecch.)

Same reaction on the face of a girl squeezing through these he-groupies to reach Seat 38. A short dark girl with long dark hair, all dolled up for First Farting Day. Body of a dancer or a gymnast: legs and ass distracting the sleazoids (for a moment) from Carly Thibert's.

She looked like a very young, slightly Mediterranean Mary Tyler Moore—narrow eyes above a wide mouth that hung open to display many bright white teeth. And her post-blech expression recalled Mary's opening sequence—not *Who can turn the world on with her smile?* (a version beloved by Moth) but the first season's ominous *How will you make it on your own? / This world is awfully big / and girl, this time you're all alone...*

Except that Fiona's new neighbor evidently wasn't. "(Joss!—)" she stage-hissed from Seat 38—

—and who should swivel round a couple rows ahead but Jocelyn Murrish, mouthing the word *Relax* at Newbie Tyler Moore. Then *Hi!!* at Fiona, giving her a big smile and wave. *That's Fiona Weller*, she mouth-informed Newbie.

What? Newbie mouth-replied.

Joss must've transferred from Y to Z team, which would be a very good thing. She must also have told Newbie about Fiona, which was... kind of unsettling. Newbie seemed to think so too, as roll was called and (after Mr. Gillies got a big unintentional laugh by saying "Carly THIGHbert") they heard each other's names:

"Victoria Volester?"

"Um. Here. Can it be Vicki?"

"*Vicki* Volester. Fiona Weller?"

"(Yeah.)"

"...Fiona Weller?"

"(YEAH.)"

"Speak up, please. Byron Wiss—Whiz—Wyszynski?"

"SHSSS!" from Gollum.

Fiona, making a show of wiping off her elbow, pretended to take no notice of Can-It-Be-Vicki's narrow sidelong glances. Answering her tentative "Hi" with a noncommittal "(Y'think?)" when Joss introduced them en route to Home Base. There Vicki left them to go

downstairs for Gym, while Robin caught up (“Okay, hand over my fifty cents!”) at the Band room door.

Then, whenever possible during first period, Joss sang Vicki Volester’s praises: how wonderful a friend she was, what a great mom she had, such a dy-no-mite house she lived in. How Joss had found her wandering lost around Baroque Vista “like Jane Eyre on the moors,” but really it was Vicki who rescued *her* from all that mess [hard-eyed head-twitch toward Kim Zimmer] and oh! they’d run into [head-twitch] at the New Sherwood where Vicki completely *pulverized* [head-twitch] like Wonder Woman against Morgana the Witch! hard as it was to believe someone so petite could be so bad-ass but wow! you guys should’ve seen her in action—

“Who the HELL are you talking about?” asked Robin.

Rap rap rap rap rap went Mr. Redo’s reproving linemaker on the chalkboard.

They all had Language Arts second period, but Vicki-the-Paragon played truant. Fretful Joss wanted to rustle up a posse (“She got lost again, I *knew* she would!”) till the late bell rang and in barreled Vicki on the heels of Becca Blair and Alex Dmitria, no less. Then the whole class started chanting the *Speed Racer* theme (!) as Becca lectured Miss McInerney and Alex beamingly welcomed everybody back to school while Vicki, peeking out from behind them, rolled her eyes at Joss like the littlest clown in a circus act.

Not the sort of First Farting Day you’d anticipated.

Least of all in Pre-Algebra, where a hunky-dory mirage manifested itself like Our Prettyboy of Lourdes. “I saw him first!” Robin said hoggishly, but the visionary guy retreated into *his* time-warp or -loop or -limbo, leaving a dozen girls grasping at otherworldish nothingness.

Fiona spent the next hour composing a free-verse song about him. Dimly aware that Joss and Vicki were leading her from study hall to cafeteria; that Robin brought her a milk for her snackpack of Super Sugar Crisp; that Robin then went into one of her standard rants, but Vicki stood up to her and Robin backed down and everyone made too damn much noise while Fiona was trying to thrash out cadences.

Ultravirgin full of gypsum / sifting like bellybutton lint...

She had mixed feelings about attraction/repulsion.

She herself did not like to be touched.

Those close to her were aware of this: Chloe being extra careful when brushing Fiona's hair, Robin knowing not to overdo the shoulder-punches. Visits to the gynecologist were agony, even though it was a lady doctor; and the thought of being "interactive" with a guy ranked right alongside watching the Neapolitans have a motorcycle accident.

*Limbless dwarf with knife in his teeth
waddles to you through freakish mud*

But 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...

*Fill young navels up with diamonds
in skin soft as honeymelon*

Toying with such thoughts, she used the rest of the day to refine and polish "Ultravirgin." There were no further sightings of Hunky Dory; nor, for that matter, of Vicki Volester, till the last bell sounded and they briefly stood at adjacent lockers. Vicki gave her a *whew* and half-smile and "See you tomorrow" before departing with Joss.

And Fiona belatedly realized: that girl stood up to a Robin-rant and made Robin back down. Like a bad-ass Wonder Woman in a petite package, or Mary Tyler Moore throwing an ecstatic hat in the air.

She might just make it after all.

*

"I um don't suppose you um run a lot?" Vicki asked her a week later.

"(Only in my nightmares.)"

"Ooh, I have those too—where you try to hide, y'know, from Something or Other? But no, I mean... like... see, we need more girls to go out for cross country—"

"(Good luck with that.)"

"Oh. Yeah. Thanks. Um, you don't suppose Robin...?"

"(Only if you plan to run on gasoline.)"

The new cross country team survived Fiona and Robin's nonparticipation. It also survived being nicknamed "Ladybugs"—who began filling up the Dopesters's cafeteria table like ants at a picnic, till they became a veritable lunch-bunch.

The first L-Bug to drop by was Laurie Harrison, an odd compound of *Watership Down* doe and apprentice Playboy Bunny—the sort who'd spill drinks on keyholders. "Okay if I sit here?" she humbly asked Vicki and Joss, who promptly made room for her as though they *owned* this table.

Laurie did furnish some entertainment as a gossip, unerring about everyone's romantic affairs except her patsy-pawn own. She often trembled on the brink of soap-opera heartbreak, from which she'd be saved by her vigilant stepsister Susie Zane. But Little Sue was a sevvie and couldn't stand guard during school hours; so the lunch-bunch (according to Joss and Vicki) had to help out.

Fiona contributed by staring fixedly at Laurie through an entire lunchtime, till bunny-nostrils quivered and nervous hands grew damp.

"Would you quit it, Feef?" laughed Joss. "You're scaring her to pieces."

"Ohnoshe'snotdoinganything!" went Laurie, dropping fork and spoon.

"(Just looking out for her,)" Fiona observed.

The next Ladybug to barge in (rather than fly away home) was Sheila Quirk, who played the flute and was vehemently cute, but no-way *cutesy* much less *-poo*. She had plenty of pals over on X team and an oleaginous boyfriend named Roy; yet Sheila-Q kept returning to the Dopester table because she and Robin discovered they loved to argue like a pair of junkyard dogs.

One Sunday evening at the Plexiglas Palace, Robin grabbed the phone. "Gimme a sec, gotta call Quirk... Yeah, lemme talk to Sheila, 'please'... S'me—so what'll it be tomorrow?... Use *what?*... Oh you are so fulla shit, Quirk!... Well, say your prayers tonight, baby, 'cause tomorrow I will make you RUE! THE! DAY!... *yeah* I said 'rue'!"
Slamdown of phone.

Stare of startlement (leaning toward jealousy) from Fiona.

"Okay, think fast," Robin told her. "What's the absolute worst thing that can happen if you use Bonne Bell Lip Smackers?"

“(... ‘scuse me?)”

“That’s tomorrow’s argument—weren’t you listening? You were standing right there! Are you gonna help me or not? C’mon, Pee Wee!”

They decided that applying fruit-flavored lip gloss was bound to cause eventual heroin addiction.

No jealousy necessary: still Sister Dopesters. Core of the lunch-bunch and hardcore at that.

Even Alex Dmitria, Queen of the Ladybugs, paid visits to their cafeteria table; and Miss Ultrance got a lot more interesting when she freaked out from a public ass-slap by crass Craig Clerkington. Fiona could relate to such a freakout—though not to Robin’s envying the slap or brooding over why *her* butt went untouched, or asking Vicki Volester for cosmetic advice.

(“Hey, I’d come to you if I wanted *raccoon* eyes,” Robin told Fiona.)

Joss didn’t wear much makeup, saying it made her skin itch; Laurie favored a good-li’l-girl look that’d be grotesque on Robin; Sheila-Q would use a consult as a skewer in their daily debates; and Robin wasn’t about to seek assistance from Fat Bob’s new old lady, Charlotte Pauk. (Fat Bob was permitted to have old ladies so long as they knew who was Boss Girl at Villa Neapolitan.)

That left Vicki, who had the right chops for the job and came through like a powder ‘n’ paint trouper. Vicki did trade eyerolls with Fiona afterward, when Robin strutted around like a cover model; but self-satisfaction undeniably enhanced the effect. Robin was happy, so they were happy, though Fat Bob blew his stack at her laying it on so thick and threatened to cancel Robin’s birthday-party jam session. But Old Lady Charlotte told him to back off:

“All she’s doing is being like a woman, see—trying to put her best face forward. If you don’t let her do that in *front* of you, she sure as hell will behind your *back*. See? And bug you for plastic surgery besides!”

So the jam session was on, and Fiona composed a new song for it. Here too Vicki Volester made significant input, after hearing how the little Rumpelmagens had derived “Feef” from *Fee Fi Fo Fum*.

“Have you ever read this?” Vicki asked, offering Fiona a book before homeroom. “My best friend in Pfiester Park gave it to me. You kind of remind—I mean, you both have the same—well anyway, I think you might like it.”

Mirror of Danger, by Pamela Sykes. Written on the flyleaf: *U & me / from S to V!*

Strange to think of Vicki having an “S” that Fiona could remind her of. Or that Vicki’d act hurt next morning when Fiona returned the book. “What, aren’t you even gonna look at it?”

“(Finished it last night.)” Under the blanket, using a flashlight.

“Oh yeah? Okay then, who was Flo?”

Bad question for anyone with menorrhagia. “(Alice’s maid. Had a bedroom in the attic.)”

“Wow, I guess you *did* read it. All the way through?”

“(It was good.)” And understandable why Vicki thought she’d enjoy it—living as Orphan Lucy did, with a crowd of boisterous cousins. Though the Plexiglas Palace lacked an abusive girl-ghost like Alice, trying to shanghai you into joining her in the distant past.

Abrupt question: “(You sing, right?)”

“Well—I’m in your mom’s Vocal Music class. I don’t know that I sing *right*.”

“(I started writing a song, kind of about the book. If it’s done in time for Robin’s jam session, would you sing it with me? As backup?)”

Um and well and sure from Vicki, flustered by this lengthy favor-asking mutter. As if she knew it was a big deal: not just a new song, to be performed in front of all Fiona’s for-want-of-a-better-word friends—

—but the public debut of her bass, the used Fender she’d guilt-tripped out of Lem and was teaching herself to play. “We got us a rhythm section, baby!” Robin had exulted after their first bass-and-drums duet at Villa Neapolitan. “All we need’s a pair of hunky-dory gee-tars, and we can GO! ON! TOUR!!”

Her birthday jam was a great success, despite Charlotte Pauk’s riding herd on the basement throng and Fat Bob’s patrolling its perimeter. Robin and Fiona did a hardcore set, opening with “Ultravirgin” (choral support from Vicki, a tittering Laurie, and tougher-minded Little Sue) followed by “Dust On Your Mirror,” the new tune inspired by Vicki’s

book. This song inherited a phrase from that old unfinished biker-sidecar anthem:

*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—*

—as the Fender’s steel strings shed the skin off Fiona’s fingertips. Yet pain never felt so right, so indispensable to laying down a heartbeat or building up a backbone or digging out a groove. Her throat ached likewise as it went full-tilt boogie-diva, keeping just enough in reserve for the grand encore finale—“Someday, Little Girl” from Fat Bob’s favorite movie *True Grit*—as it might be performed by dynamo steamroller Suzi Quatro: Fiona belting out thunderbolts to Robin’s hailstorm of bashes and crashes till they crescendoed with

YOU’LL! FIND! THE! SUN! WUNNNNNNN-DAY! (YEAH!!!)

And though Fiona would be hoarsely incoherent for the whole next week, in that moment she bestrode the world and beheld all creation.

For a moment, before the world and all creation imploded upon her.

*

It happened by gradual increments.

She’d often seen the undemonstrative name “Patti Smith” in magazines—*Creem*, *Rolling Stone*, *New Musical Express*—even last September’s *Mademoiselle* (borrowed from Joss Murrish). First as a byline on verse and reviews, then in critiques of her own shows as she advanced from poetry readings to fronting a band to releasing a way-out cover of “Hey Joe,” backed with the wayer-out “Piss Factory.” *Rolling Stone* claimed she exuded an aura of street punk and mystic waif; *Mademoiselle* called her Rock ‘n’ Roll’s Lady Raunch.

Now Patti Smith was due to release an album, combining graphic fantasy with surreal violence via stream-of-consciousness redemption. Which was precisely what Fiona required, to cope with having been put on The Pill.

“(But—I—don’t—need—It,)” she tried to inform the gynecologist, only to be told It could help balance her hormones and regulate her periods. Which had gotten even heavier

lately, disturbing Fiona's sleep—forcing her to get up at 3 a.m. and change her “didies,” like an incontinent hemophiliac.

So: this was It. At ultravirginal age thirteen. Dead certain every boy in school could tell what she was popping, and so getting Ideas about her—guys like elephantine Arlo Sowell in English class, who'd seldom shown the least awareness of Fiona before. But now she was on It, and they were in the same group studying Piggy in *Lord of the Flies*, and Arlo'd begun grunting earthily at her—*without* satirical overtones. More like a guy who'd gotten Ideas.

(Oh bleccchhhh...)

She dared not divulge her It-hood to Robin. Who'd be sure to say “What?? You're on THE PILL?? Way to go, Pee Wee! Hey, lemme bum one—they say It works wonders clearing up acne. Aw c'mon! Since when do *we* hold out on each other?” et cetera.

Robin might even try to take advantage of Its chief purpose. She kept whizzing over to Pfenniger Street on her new secondhand scooter (dragging Fiona along) to hang out with the Erle brothers. Or at least so Robin could hang out with big Diesel Erle, leaving Fiona in the company of meager Skully. Whom she had no wish to “accompany”—except maybe on bass to his tenor sax—even if Skully *did* supply the Dopesters with primo weed.

Which did nothing to help regulate flow.

Hence: Fiona's need for stream-of-consciousness redemption.

To fill it, she went not to Carry-a-Tune at the Green Bridge, but Cobwebs & Strange down in The City. There every form of recorded music could be found in mass quantities—reel-to-reel, 45s, LPs, eight-tracks, tape cassettes; also posters and blacklights and incense and concert tickets. Cobwebs & Strange had unearthed some obscure Cloudland Atmosphere memorabilia for Fiona in the past, and they were able to obtain an advance copy of the new album now in her hands.

On its cover: an unshrouded apparition in black and white. Three words above it:

Patti Smith Horses

“Aw c'mon,” Robin scoffed over Fiona's shoulder. “That's just Keith Richards clowning around—y'know, with a drag name like ‘Alice Cooper.’”

“(No it is *not*. And you don't have to listen to *her* if you don't want to.)”

“Now don't get all snippy-assed on me. C'mon—”

Back they whizzed to Pottage Road. To the basement, and the turntable, and the hiss of the needle, and the opening declaration that *Jesus died for somebody's sins—*

—but not Patti Smith's.

And off they were taken to the graphic/surreal/fantasy/violence races: G-L-O-R-I-A. Suicider alternating with suicidee, distorting each other radically askew; transported through a pointblank Mirror of Danger to eerie passion, and alien menace, and intense ambiguity, and sore thumbs in stuck-out flux. As fickly extemporaneous as anything by Pee Wee Russell; more profanely transcendent than anything by Edgar Allan Poe.

Horses, meet Hop-Frogs.

“(This shit is seriously weird,)” whispered Robin.

*

And seriously disabling.

Fiona spent the rest of November under the headphones, parsing every nuance of Psmith's craft. This was a whole new species of singing-songwriting, at an extreme remove from the sort Moth wanted Fiona to emulate. Putting Joni Mitchell's *Blue* or Judy Collins's *Living* or Laura Nyro's *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession* on the Plexiglas stereo, Moth would send Fiona hopeful free-to-be-you-and-THEM vibes. And Fiona would listen, picking up useful bits here and there; but rarely getting struck by a Seriously Weird chord.

She wanted to feel *rasp*. To hear the banshee and taste its anarchy.

So: start cramming staff-paper spirals with inspiration. Which was how “Ultravirgin” had been captured, its lyrics and melody pouring out of Fiona's unplugged brain down through her fingertips and onto the page.

This time, however, no mirages manifested themselves. Only indigestion from Thanksgiving dinner. Because nothing she composed could hold a candle to Psmith.

Not that anyone should *expect* it to. No eighth-grader could achieve banshee anarchy on the first farting try. Turn to a fresh page and give it another shot.

And another, *and* another, through a seriously disabling December.

Every morning the Band killed off a few more braincells, rehearsing inane banalities for VW's Winter Concert. (*Don't blame ME for this*, Fiona disclaimed each time they had to plow through Moth's *Lost Horizon* medley.)

Disablement spread beyond Band. One lunchtime Vicki picked up Fiona's snackpack of Lucky Charms and tried to *drink* it—then flew into a tizzy when Sheila-Q razzed her for acting lovesick. That got Laurie Harrison all agog and gossipmongerish, till *she* had a tizzy when Chipper Farlowe started openly canoodling with Delia Shanafelt, and Laurie (refusing to believe her own braincells) broke out in what Joss called “denial hives.”

“They are *not!*” Laurie whimpered. “It’s just a reaction to my new wool dress!”

“On your *forehead?*” said Robin, expert in all things blemishful.

Then, as if Winter Concert weren't bad enough, Alex Dmitria marshaled the lunch-bunch to go out Christmas caroling in the cold dark snow. Moth and Aunt Polly made Fiona take part *and* take Chloe, who was thrilled to be involved. She now hero-worshiped the Ladybugs and pledged to go out for cross country next fall.

(Dismal sigh heaved by Fiona.)

It was too much like that chapter in *Mirror of Danger* where Alice the ghost inveigled Lucy the orphan to go sing carols in the previous century—and then wouldn't let Lucy return to her own time, chasing her down a gaslit Victorian road through echoes of “Silent Night” and Alice's demands that she *Come back! Come back!...*

Something ought to be creatable out of such a scene. Maybe not Psmithworthy; falling short of the bar set by “Redondo Beach.” Yet it smacked of abduction by a succubus, and *that* had to be a promising lyrical start.

*Take me to your time-warp, let me lose my shroud
 Christmastime seductions come but once a year
 reenact the same old fatal betrayals
 that always happen 'neath an old willow tree—*

(Blecch. Muddling your material.)

*There's spiders on Mars and snakes in Nirvana
 hellhounds in mangers and slaves in Utopia
 running and hiding from Something or Other
 through a nightmare neither Silent nor Holy—*

(Double bleech. Pap on tap.)

*Doors barred and windows latched
she slithers down the chimney
bringing gifts of shed your blood
scratch my back and I'll slash yours
shedding gutterfuls of red slush
from overregulated Flo—*

(Make that a triple. Beyond nausea now.)

*Helen Keller's locked in an attic
'cause the cellar's too democratic
sterilization of the unfit
by neutering their stillborn wits—*

(Tear out the pages and scrawl inside the spiral's back cover.)

*Psmith took me up to her mountaintop
gave me a taste of her consciousness stream
struck me undumb with the rasp of her tongue
but too late to say anything she got to first
so heartburn from the ashes in my mouth
indigestion from no wannabes being wanted
cramps from the unspoken already broken in
and pits from the future being pre-empted*

(You said it.)

Before now, Fiona'd never truly contemplated a future for herself. Present prospects were grim enough: go to school, come back "home," bleed indiscriminately every month unless pills were popped to dry things up. Mental as well as menstrual.

And hereafter this? Would she wind up teaching, like Moth (horrors) or seek jobs as a session musician, like Lem (as if female bass players would ever be given a chance)? Would she mutter streetcorner poetry out of self-published chapbooks—*All My Own Work*,

written before I went blank at age thirteen?

Or might she take Robin's birthday jam and spread it onstage for audiences able to appreciate full-tilt banshee-divadom? Her bass line backed by Neapolitan percussion, with a couple of prettyboy guitarists playing by her remote control? And the anarchic songs they would spout—

—remained hidden in the constipated whale that had devoured her imagination.

(Ain't nothing deeper than whaleshit. Even unshat.)

For what could she say or sing, now or hereafter, without sounding like a copycat? Psmith had called dibs on all the good din, leaving Fiona to go whistle. What could she write that'd shout *Fweller*—or better still FTW, telling the world exactly what it should do to itself: thus spake Fiona Teodora!

Except there was nothing left for her to spake.

Laura Nyro'd retired from performing, so maybe Fiona could swipe *her* spake—stoned soul music presented with unplucked sullenness. She had the shaggy brows for it, though not Nyro's plumpness; soul singers tended to pack plenty of flesh. Fiona didn't (poor soul) so instead of Motown, she belonged in Notown. Yes, she'd be a real Nowhere Girl, draining down a nowhere swirl: no wear, no tear, no air...

If you didn't count empty flatulence from that anal-retentive white whale.

First Farting Days of the New Nowhere Year. Sneak food into napkins, flush it away untasted; don't eat and you won't toot like a cutesy-poo. Dine on darkness instead as you lie awake, listening to Chloe make nightly noises. (All the Rumpelmagens produced these.) Hold your breath and count ten sheep... then ten more... then a hundred, backwards...

And when you do drift off it's to awake in Bucephalus, bumping over summery hills under patchouli sunshine. Beaming upon Lem and Moth and the Cloudland Atmosphere: *me and you and them and us / all ev'rywhere: no fuss, no muss—*

Just a vast unutterable howl as your poor soul gets sucked back into this shriveling teen carcass, trapped within a Windy Poplar winter that stretches every which way till there's nowhere left to run, nowhere right to hide, you're already Nowhere and swirling down its barren wasted drain...

"Feef?"

Black stars. Two of them, shining through the gloom; resolving into Vicki Volester's narrow eyes.

"You okay? I mean, you look like a—like you've *seen* a—y'know, ghost."

(Meaning: was she an Alice or a Lucy? And on which side of the looking-glass?)

Any answer Fiona might have given was staved off by a SQUEAK from Vicki as she unlatched her locker and a white-whaleish winged thing fluttered out, floating down to land between Fiona's boots.

"(Wha'...?)" Crazy impression that Moth had taken origami form and been caught inside the wrong locker.

"Sorry, that's mine," chirped Carly Thibert, snatching whatever-it-was off the linoleum. Vicki gave Carly a tiny head-bob and Fiona a searching gaze of renewed worry.

"Feef, you better get some sleep or something." Sounding so full of uncertain concern that Fiona felt tempted to reply, try to explain, ask for support—Vicki was strong, a miniature Wonder Woman, able to run fast and leap far and stand up to ranting strangers, and she'd said Fiona reminded her of a lost best "S"—

But Carly's despicably cute face intruded to giggle "*Get or something!*" and add "She really *needs* 'or something'" when Fiona muttered "(Yeah sure)" and turned away, trudging off to what passed for home. Alone in imploding isolation.

Robin was having one of her daddy/daughter Wednesdays with Fat Bob. Chloe'd gone somewhere to play with sixth-grade cronies. The littleuns went *Fee Fi Fo* but kept Fiona at *Fum*'s length as she sat by herself in what passed for her room. Stereo off, radio off; listening to internal music that took the place of food and drink and sleep. Afternoon passed, dinnertime too (plate to napkin to toilet), evening night and dawn. Feet no longer connecting to carpets or sidewalks or stairs, but gliding like a pair of origami moths that might fly her aloft to a paper hereafter:

*How many more days
must I cross off the page
till my body catches up
to the rest of starvation?*

(such a diet you should try it)

(such a diet you should try it)

(such a diet you should

collapse off your chair onto the Band room floor with a CRACK of your clarinet and a THUD of your skull reverberating till you come to with a sense of Robin crouching close by as a shield from the clamor of laughter rent by an *Oh Jeez! is it her heart? oh Jeez! is she DEAD??* that sounded like Joss and doused the laughs to a murmur plus somebody's tears apparently yours thick as blood gushing from beneath sullen unplucked brows

(oh sweet blindness)

And a sour blur of hazy movement, in which Robin's disembodied voice could be heard yelling *Where she goes, I go! You'll have to lock me up to stop me!*

Then some sort of exam room, being gently questioned by a woman in white as to habits and intentions. Mildly chided for these, but more for not having told anyone anything about being so troubled. "Anxiety and depression can be side effects of some birth control meds."

"(I'm not... taking them... for that...)"

"For whatever reason, it doesn't matter. We can try a different prescription."

(What, both of us?)

Back into the blur. From which she muttered a (sorry) to frazzled Moth, and an (I just wanna go home) that didn't mean Windy Poplar Lane. Yet that was where the blur took her for a lengthening-shadowy interval, till she woke up not in Bucephalus but her own bed. With her own sister pacing agitatedly between it and Chloe's.

"What the **HELL** is the matter with you???"

Forget mild 'n' gentle: Robin laid it on thick as the makeup on the face flushing red and white behind evaporating cosmetics. Ranting fatbobbishly that *If you ever pull a stupid stunt like this again, YOU! BETTER! HOPE! you drop dead, 'cause I swear to Christ I'll KILL you if you don't!!!—*

Brandishing a fist that compressed Fiona's spindly upper arm in a tight Dopester embrace.

“*Vaffanculo*, Spooky!” Not translatable as a loving endearment, unless it came from Robin Neapolitan. And followed by a growlish “I got detention tomorrow, thanks to you!”

*

It took Robin’s mighty drummer-hand to propel Fiona and a borrowed unbroken clarinet through the school doors on Monday morning. Up the backstairs, over to the Z-Wing, into a concerted cry of “*Here she comes!*”—

—(*oh crap*)—

—feeble attempt to dig in bootheels; but “Go on!” Robin pushed inexorably—

—and there was Joss Murrish wrapping long arms around her (“Dammit, Feef, you scared me half to pieces!”) and Sheila Quirk and Laurie Harrison and Susie Zane come over from X and Y to greet and hug her, and Alex Dmitria bearing a chart of nutrition guidelines drawn up specifically for Fiona’s needs. Last of all there was Vicki Volester, who’d been concealing Fiona’s locker on which they’d taped tacky plastic flowers around the goopiest get-well card available at Osco, signed by the whole bunch.

And much as Fiona disliked being touched, there was euphoria and elation and a (*See this? See this?*) aimed two thousand miles west at the YOSHers of You Reeka.

Her bunch kept close throughout that morning, and at lunch they scrutinized her every mouthful like a passel of Jewish or Italian mothers. A healthy sandwich (turkey and provolone on whole wheat) got chewed and swallowed, though the bunch undermined this by suggesting how she should respond to rumors that Arlo Sowell had “broken her heart.” (A euphemism for Alex’s benefit; more people suspected him of *impregnating* Fiona.)

“(How?)” she’d asked Robin.

“(Hey, don’t ask me—this is *your* rumor,)” Robin’d replied.

So she tried to chew and swallow while Joss and Sheila recommended she give Arlo reproachful glowers, caressing her midriff in a tender self-sacrificial way, till Fiona had to drop her sandwich and giggle like an imbecile.

“I don’t get it,” complained Laurie. “If you weren’t ever going with Arlo, why do you still want him back?”

Fresh squall of giggles. Vicki explained they were only fooling around—“*Them*, I mean,” indicating the lunch-bunch. “*Not* Feef and Arlo.”

“Oh. Okay,” said Laurie, resuming her fixed stare at Fiona’s jaw as it took a bite of hard-boiled egg.

(Just looking out for me.)

Belief-stretcher: that she and Laurie Harrison should do that for each other. That Fiona could give enough of a damn to wish Laurie’d dump Chipper Farlowe’s sorry ass and find a guy who’d treat her right. That Vicki Volester had brought them together, all of them at this table, and adjusted each of them for the better.

(Sudden pause in mid-eggchomp.)

(Sharp inhale by Laurie. Everyone looking apprehensively over at Fiona.)

“(Anybody got paprika?)” she asked, popping the rest of the egg like an oversized Pill.

Laughter from the bunch; renewed chewing and musing by Fiona.

Look at Joss now, compared to last spring. Look at Alex, compared to a few freaked-out months ago. Look at Robin and Sheila, gleefully arguing whether Andre the Giant was losing his mind. Look at Laurie, no longer a lone lorn creetur when Little Sue wasn’t around. See them all, grouped improbably *en masse*.

And not just at lunchtime: this was semester finals week, so the bunch was hosting afterschool “cram sessions.” Alex covered Math at her Mission Revival house; Joss handled French and Spanish at her Queen Anne manse; Vicki tackled Science (where her grades had startlingly improved) at her split level on Burrow Lane. Robin volunteered to bring pizzas each night, “so long as you guys fork over the dough for your share. Haw!—‘the dough’—get it?”

And Fiona found herself MC-ing the Social Studies cramathon at the Plexiglas Palace. (Which sent Joss into raptures about “inlander architecture,” and a long side chat with Uncle Cass the inlander architect.) Moth and Aunt Polly made a predictably big fuss, and Chloe was in her lionizing element; they relieved Fiona of every hostess-duty, allowing her to sit back and quietly observe.

Watch the world gradually, yet unmistakably, revolve around Vicki Volester.

But *why??* (as Artie Rist might’ve demanded).

What made Vicki their “two thousand tubes of airplane glue,” to quote Joss quoting Lenny Otis quoting Lenny Bruce? What subtle elusive quality made her so special? And what underlying distraction was keeping Vicki from giving Social Studies her full attention, here and now?

Fiona wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

They reached the Revolutionary War, which made Joss start humming “Midnight Rider” and thus remind Robin (who often forgot but never forgave) of that “Do *hobbits* ride Harleys?” wisecrack; so 1776 was put on hold while she unleashed a Bicentennial diatribe against Squat Roger Mustardman. Most of the bunch grinned and nudged each other during this frothmouthing: the more froth from Robin, the more proof to them that she was in denial-love with His Squatness.

Fiona'd done some razzing in the past on this topic—“(He's warm for your form)”—“OH! GROSS!”—but had declined to place a bet in the bunch's secret pool on whether Robin would admit her wrath was throbbing *l'amour*. To bet would be to concede its possibility, and that Fiona could not accept. Not for Robin—

—nor for Vicki, hub of the Revolution, whose dark-star eyes went tell-tale-heartish during the Roger-rant. Though fleetingly, and noticed by no one but Fiona.

“C'mon, you guys, we got lots to go through here,” Vicki harrumphed, discreetly rehooding her eyes and heart. Robin settled down; the bunch returned to 1776; there was no further mention of Roger Mustardman.

Yet Fiona knew what she'd seen. With Gypsy Wladimir perception.

Not just an underlying distraction, but a threat of devastating revelations. Because *if* Vicki had a thing for Roger—and *if* it was reciprocated—and *if* they chose to go public with their going together—

—well, any reaction by Robin was bound to be regrettable. Probably resulting in the lunch-bunch's breakup, and that couldn't be allowed to happen.

Worse yet: Roger Mustardman might be a born-too-late-for-the-burlesque-circuit comic, but he was also a guy and therefore capable of despoilage. Not simply OH! GROSS! despoilage in the carnal sense, such as made you worry about Robin with the Erle boys or Sheila with Roy Hodeau or Laurie with every caddish male. This was Vicki Volester, and *if*

Roger screwed squatly with the hub of the Revolution... what would become of the orbiting world?

Fiona studied them surreptitiously next morning in homeroom. Detected a strange exchange of glances that Sinatra could've sung about. Felt pangs of revulsion and icicle-fear in the pit of her stomach.

And heard a voice at her elbow, speaking INTO her elbow rather than her ear:

Don't you worry. It'll be taken care of.

Not the elbow next to Vicki's desk, but the one beside Gollum's.

Spoken without sibilance, or a peep Fiona's way, or any variation from his typical Tail-End routine. That very afternoon in French class, Monsieur Blumer had to force him to relinquish his exam paper, to which Gollum clung with a spluttery "*Shsspas encore!... shsspas encore!...*"

Fiona shared that vignette (though not the elbowtalk) on Friday in the cafeteria. Where, again, she was the only one to spot Vicki getting perturbed: this time by a glimpse of Roger being brazenly flirted with by Carly-in-Heat Thibert. Which Fiona, sitting beside Vicki, glimpsed too.

(The caddish *bastard*.)

So: premature despoilage, causing Vicki to stalk out with masked fury. Fiona hoped this spelled the end of any threat to her or the bunch, not to mention the world; transferring any ruinous destruction to Roger and/or Carly.

But when the 3:15 bell rang, Vicki stood at her locker smiling all over her face, giving covert gloats to a slip of paper not quite hidden in one hand. Plans for revenge? No such luck—squatly instructions to doll up for going someplace, and a taunt that Vicki'd be needing fresh lipstick(s) before they got there.

BLECCH didn't even begin to convey Fiona's reaction.

"(Um... Vicki?...")

"Oh hey, Feef! Have a good weekend—keep eating right!"

"(Take care of yourself,)" Fiona tried to advise, as Vicki pranced off beyond earshot.

Roger the Hornswoggler must've found some way to appease her. Whatever would be, was now clearly going to be; and just as clearly needed thwarting. But how?

Asking Robin for help with anything involving Roger was out of the question. Joss would call her a buttinski, Sheila'd squeal to Robin, Laurie was too innocent and Alex too inhibited.

Only one other contender sprang to mind, and appealing to *him* felt like praying to a flounder in the sea. Nevertheless—

*O Gollum, Gollum, in your cave
or Tail-End, halfway to the grave,
take care of Vicki like you said:
on Roger Mustardman please tread!*

Chanted thirteen times in quick succession.

Leaving a stupid aftertaste in your psyche, all that three-day weekend.

And yet, by Tuesday, Roger was well and truly trodden upon.

Gone from 8-Z; gone indeed from everybody's sight and hearing, unless you counted some Phantom-of-the-Sock-Hop incidents that would crop up over the next year.

Hearsay *b-z-z-z-z'd* around VW like an upset hornet's nest. No questions were answered by glumly-dejected Lenny Otis or Dino Tattaglia; the Smarks Brothers ceased to exist, despite a lame effort to enlist Dwight Whitehead as their third leg. Robin took full credit for whatever'd transpired, huffing on her nails and buffing them on her leather jacket.

Byron Wyszynski (alias Gollum, alias Tail-End) never revealed a clue that he knew about anything except his own neuroses. Fiona decided to treat him, if not with more respect, then at least with greater wariness.

Vicki came through the Whatever outwardly unscathed, other than sometimes looking bothered and sometimes bewildered. Plus a great deal shorter-haired, after lopping her long-enough-to-sit-on coif into a tapered bob. It seemed to make her feel better; and Fiona, though tempted to trade eyerolls with Robin, wasn't about to mock anything that could lessen depression.

Invited with the rest of their bunch to Vicki's fourteenth birthday party in March, Fiona was inspired to compose a song for the occasion. It didn't quite pour out of her brain onto the staff paper, yet there weren't many hesitations and hardly any *blecchs*.

Someday her work would shout Fweller; someday it might scream FTW. But for the time being, thus spake Fiona Teodora:

Venture nothing, gain the same
Is a rule we're made to break
Color outside the crayon lines
Keeping your face unstraight
Indicate nothing precisely
Variety spices the swift
Occupy the navel's center
Left of what's right as you live
Enter the doors marked Exit
Satisfaction's lies are within
Truth we make up along the way
Every time you glue us together
Releasing us to be as one.

26

Ditchen

“Did you just laugh out loud?” Vicki asked, in some alarm.

“(Check this out,)” answered Fiona, passing her a magazine: *Who Put the BOMP!*’s Gala Girl Issue.

“Where do you *find* these things, Feef?” said Vicki, whose perusals were limited to the racks at Jewels and Osco. “I like her hair,” she ventured, referring to the cover girl’s feathery blonde shag.

“(It’s not about the *hair*,)” Fiona retorted, flipping the magazine open to an article titled “Are You Young and Rebellious Enough to Love the Runaways?” “(They’re a new band in L.A.—five high school girls. But hard rockers, not a bunch of cutesy-poos.)”

“So, not the new (Josie and the Pussycats?)” quipped Vicki, lowering her voice to Fiona-volume even though Robin was down the hall in a whole other homeroom, *presumably* out of earshot.

“(Hardly.)” Fiona took back the *BOMP* with a wistful mutter-sigh. “(Everything’s happening in L.A. or New York. Nothing even close to it Out Here.)”

“Yeah, but you did get Bowie,” Vicki reminded her.

Mr. Gillies rushed in then, disappointing those who’d hoped he’d quit during spring break; and the new grading period, last of the school year, officially began. Fiona gave it a tenth of her mind, devoting the other 90% to a month ago at the International Amphitheatre and David Bowie’s concert there, part of his *Station to Station* tour.

For weeks beforehand Robin had sworn that nothing could make her go see Puddyboy, live or otherwise. Finally at ticketbuying time she groaned, “I suppose I’ll *have* to go. Just to make sure you don’t get yourself trampled or kidnapped or anything.”

On the night of the concert Robin told Fat Bob she was sleeping over at the Plexiglas Palace, which was true; Fiona informed the Palace she’d be heading over to Robin’s “for awhile,” which was also true. If they neglected to mention that between these two truths, they were taking a train into The City and down to the Stockyards so they could squeeze into an arena full of sweaty stonehead whoopensteins—

—well, that was a minor oversight on their part.

“Why the hell couldn’t this be for Black Sabbath??” Robin grouse-shouted over the pre-concert yelling and chanting. But it was Robin’s breath that got sucked in during the opening eyeball-slice from *Un Chien Andalou*, and Robin’s awestruck “PORCA TROIA!” that got uttered at intervals through the rest of the show.

When Bowie appeared, Fiona’s reaction was profound disappointment. As if the promoters had hired some ordinary guy, a mere mortal from central casting, to go onstage and *portray* a Thin White Duke in thin white flesh. No, this couldn’t be Fiona’s flashdazzly Starman—just a stiff monochrome zombie-clone who seemed coked to the gills.

Heart failure. Soul collapse. General claustrophobic despair as the crowd hemmed in with malodorous You-Reeka-ish murkitude. Fiona closed her eyes and nose against this, trying to shut down her ears also—

—till they heard a familiar salvo of strings and horns and *Hey mannnnn! awww, leave me alone y’know / Hey mannnnn! oh Henry get off the phone—*

—taking her Back On Suffragette City, outta sight! all right! as that swank extraterrestrial hand reached out through the banks of bright white light set against stark black backdrops: reached out to lift her up above the fetid mob till she hung there suspended alongside her previous disbelief, bestriding the cosmos and beholding all creation.

Altogether otherworldish.

And for the rest of that concert Fiona hovered aloft: one shoulder anchored against Robin’s (“PORCA TROIA!”) and the other against Bowie’s (“TURN AND FACE THE STRAIN!”) as they addressed the audience side by side, manipulating the horde like masterful puppeteers,

making the stupefied hunky-dories sway and dance and respond howsoever she and Bowie chose—

“Shsss!...” from Gollum at her elbow, as the first period bell rang.

“C’mon, Feef,” said Vicki, nudging her back into the flusterful here-and-now.

“You okay?” Joss inquired as they left Z205. “You look positively pink-cheeked—”

“(Oh shut up,)” Fiona mutter-blushed.

“*You* shut up,” Joss smiled.

“Who’s telling who to shut up?” demanded Robin out in the hall. Already in a scowly mood that wasn’t improved during second period when Miss McInerney inflicted them with *David Copperfield*. To be read, in its entirety, all sixty-four chapters, at the rate of two per schoolday over the next seven weeks.

Poorly-muffled cries of anguish from the class.

Echoing those coming from second-period Language Arts students in 8-X and 8-Y, as they received the same assignment.

Even Becca Blair lost her creamy aura at the idea of sustaining so much literary absorption, while Alex Dmitria had to be detizzified with reassurance that anyone who could ride a real live horse couldn’t be spooked by a long old novel.

Lunching with the bunch later that day, Alex seized the reins. “What do you think about us divvying it up?

“What? The mac’n’cheese?”

“You can have mine, it looks supergross today—”

“No—*David Copperfield*! We’ll all take turns—I’ll draw up a schedule—each of us reads a couple chapters, then kind of boils them down for the rest of us. Like a *Reader’s Digest* condensation, you know? Miss McInerney even said she *wanted* us to work on our summarizing skills.”

Nobody suggested they run this scheme past any of their English teachers. It was a demonstration (the bunch implicitly agreed) of their initiative as soon-to-be-ninth-graders, led by an honorbound Girl Scout who *could*, after all, ride a real live horse.

Before long they were also exercising skills at haggle-barter: swapping days on the *Copperfield* schedule, exchanging them for goods and services. Some preferred to deal with

loaned-out clothing and accessories, but Fiona requested cold hard cash—and since she was adept at saying plenty in few words, she piled up a nice bankroll for future expenditures at Cobwebs & Strange.

Oddly enough, the book wasn't as onerous as Fiona'd expected; at times she even slowed her skimming to leaf-through. Even so, it ate up time that could've been spent on *Punk* or *Creem* or *Crawdaddy*, from which you could learn far more useful things—such as the Runaways having gone backstage to pay tribute to Patti Smith, and getting kicked out of her dressing room.

“She was being real rude to us for no reason! I mean, she was so disgusting with those saggy tits!”

Haw! Good for Psmith. Serves the little bitches right for landing a contract with Mercury Records while they were *still in high school*.

It just wasn't fair. People on the coasts hogged all the breaks and deals; they had access to so many cool clubs and happening venues. While you, stuck Out Here, were forced to settle for next to nothing. The City's northern 'burbs were overlaid with blight. Fourth Fork Landing in Multch Township had gone bust during the recession. B.Ginnings in Schaumburg didn't always check IDs, but it employed goonish bouncers with mob connections. And Vanderlund's only boast was a pathetic stripmall discotheque called “The Vinyl Spinnaker.”

(“Spittlecure,” Robin always rephrased it.)

For musical entertainment you had to go farther afield. Such as to the Jazz Showcase Sunday matinee at the Blackstone Hotel, where the bunch treated Joss on her fourteenth birthday.

She'd hoped they'd take her to an NBA playoff game, but the “Bull-onies” suffered through their worst season in team history that year and finished in the conference cellar. Vicki took charge then, planning the Jazz Showcase junket in deepest secrecy, even trying to blindfold Joss until their arrival—after first managing to climb inside Cass Rumpelmagen's Buick Estate Wagon with Alex and Robin and Fiona and Chloe and Laurie and Susie and Beth and Invisible Amy and Sheila-Q and her sister Mealy-Mouth, who wanted to know how many boys they intended to pick up en route.

“Where’re we gonna *fit* any boys?”

“Strap ‘em on the roof, like a boat.”

“Strap ‘em on the hood, like a deer.”

“Stash ‘em in the trunk, like a hostage.”

“Settle down back there,” Uncle Cass tried to holler above the tumult.

“Sit still and let me *tie* this, Joss—”

“How’re you supposed to blindfold me when none of us can move our *arms*?”

“I can move my toes!”

“I can move my *tongue*!”

“Awreet, bring on the boys!”

““Ninety-nine boys in the back of the Buick—””

Which lasted till they got to the Blackstone.

That Sunday’s matinee featured the Edgar Stubley Quintet, who toned their funk down to *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* level, yet dug enough of a groove to keep Joss swimming in bliss. Her acclaim for the Quintet’s “Midnight at the Oasis,” accentuated by her height and hair, was so conspicuous that Edgar Stubley himself took note:

“Awwww yeah—*she* got that one.”

“And it’s her birthday!” yelled irrepressible Sheila-Q.

“Well, many happy returns!” wished the Stubman. “Now then, this next one’s for the curly birthday girl who got the last one”—kicking off a spirited rendition of “Out She Blew.”

And Joss very nearly swooned.

“The best birthday I’ve ever, ever had!” she rejoiced afterward. “Last year all I did was worry why Kim Zimmer was acting so weird! Oh, I love all you guys, and *you*—” (crushing Vicki in a fullbodied hug) “—Loopy the Loop, you saved my life!”

“You saved mine first,” Vicki reminded her, after Joss relaxed her clinch.

Further lifesaving was necessary that same April, thanks to another form of musical entertainment: VW’s production of *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Vicki was on its publicity committee, tasked with selling program ads and distributing posters to local businesses. Plus coping with Candy Gates, who’d been cast (entirely to type) as Lucy.

“ATTENTION, PLEASE!” heralded her every entrance, each syllable distinctly audible. Followed by thoughts on how the program should be laid out (down to the specific font and point size) or what color combinations for the poster design would most quickly snag the eye.

Candy Gates was a high potentate in both the Mixed Chorus and Drama Club, renowned for her stage presence, vocal projection, and fearsome hissyfits. If reminded she was making so much fuss over a junior high school play or concert, Candy Gates (in distinct syllables) would say:

“That is EXACTLY the point I am TRYING to make! If you can’t get it right in junior high, how can you POSSIBLY do so later on??”

She was also considered one of the babes of 9-Z, and Vicki felt flattered (at first) when Alex and Mumbles and other people asked, “Are you like Candy Gates’s cousin or something?” As with her actual Volester cousins Barbara and Monica, there *was* a noticeable resemblance: all being eyesnaggable cuties with trim little figures, shining black eyes and silky black hair—though Candy Gates wore hers à la Prince Valiant, not Dorothy Hamill.

Her expressive shiners were unimpressed by their first glimpse of Vicki, sizing her up as a wannabe-groupie-fan in PITIFUL denim overalls and rainbow T-shirt. Candy Gates (in gauze-weave blouse and patch-print flares) opted to treat the poor thing with gracious condescension. Then Poor Thing exhibited talents for attentiveness and obedience, so Candy Gates commandeered “Velma” (as she generally got called) to be her personal press agent and gopher factotum.

“Velma! You’re the ONLY one I can depend on!”

While they rode herd on publicity, costumes, makeup, scenery, props, lights, sound, the rest of the cast, Chorus, Band, ushers, director, and Parent Teacher Association.

Vicki lacked the fortitude to resist Candy Gates’s relentless fusion of overweening ego and high-voltage charm. (“Velma! You’re the ONLY one I can trust!”) All those years in Tricia’s emerald glare left her predisposed to be deferential, no matter how often Joss might remonstrate.

“Quit letting her push you around!”

“I’m not and she isn’t! We’re just trying to put on the best possible musical is all.”

“‘Put on’ is right! She’s trying to con everyone into thinking she’s their boss! Just like she did last year with *Bye Bye Birdie*, except then she was an eighter and couldn’t get away with it. Now she’s running roughshoddy over everything and got YOU doing it too! Bail out now, while you can!”

“Bail out *how*? I can’t just quit.”

“Do like I do with Meg—make her think she’s going bonkers.”

“Bonkers?”

“Crazy, cuckoo, gaga, psycho—”

“I know what bonkers means, Joss!”

As did the *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown* company, whose rehearsals were beset by a series of mishaps that did nothing to pacify Candy Gates’s temperament. Peculiar problems with lights, sound, and scenery were attributed to the “Phantom of the Sock-Hop”—putting Vicki even more on edge as she half-dreaded, half-hoped that Roger Mustardman might re-manifest himself. Which didn’t happen, unless he took the form of a thirty-pound sandbag that fell from the flies during dress rehearsal, crushing Lucy’s Psychiatric Help (5¢) booth.

Candy Gates was nowhere near when this happened, but took center stage anyway to make an impassioned speech that Vicki was later told to transcribe and release to local media outlets:

“Do you think this will stop me?? Or any of us, as we struggle to give the public something better and finer?? And remind them that ‘YESSSS!! IT’S AMAZINGLY TRUUUUE!! / FOR WHATEVER IT’S WORTH, CHARLIE BROWN / **YOU’RRRRE YOOOOOOOU!!!**’”

“Whoa!” Joss told Robin down in the band pit. “*Somebody’s* been sniffing two thousand tubes of airplane glue.”

*

Who would ever want to do

a thing like sniffing airplane glue?

A group called the Ramones, that’s who—

Whose first album, released later that week, was soon in nonstop play on Villa Neapolitan's basement turntable.

Radical things were happening on the music scene. Psmith & Co. had appeared on *NBC's Saturday Night* ("Patti Smith, a new pop idol, wailed incomprehensibly," said the *New York Times*) and now her CBGB buddies had crossed the LP threshold. If you could call *The Ramones* "long-playing": thirteen songs in under thirty minutes, all played FASTER! LOUDER! BRASHER!—stripped down to their hardcore ass-kicking essence, then blasted out like a blitzkrieg chainsaw.

Small wonder that a windstorm tore through the 'burbs that weekend, causing power outages that temporarily halted replays of the new album, and gave Fiona a reprieve from its simpleminded lyrics.

"(Why couldn't they have bothered to *say* something?)"

"They say plenty! They just don't waste time blathering about it."

"(Y'think? '*Let's all go run with scissors / Yes, all go run with scissors / We're gonna run with scissors / All day long.*' That's what they sing like, over and over again! Gets old fast.)"

"It's *supposed* to be fast! You write something fancier, and we'll sing *it* fast. As long as you don't make it too farting Gilbert & Sullivan."

So: a challenge. Take Psmith's visionary free verse and pump it full of slam-bang speed. Experiment with a passage from *David Copperfield*—God knows there were plenty to choose from.

Some were packed with surprises. Laurie'd traded Chapters 27 and 28 to Sheila-Q along with a loaned pair of teardrop bead earrings. Next day at lunch, after checking to make sure Alex was off with the Math Club, S-Q opened her book to a marked page. "Get a load of THIS!"

As the step approached, I knew it, and felt my heart beat high, and the blood rush to my face, for it was Steerforth's... When he entered, and stood before me with his hand out, the darkness that had fallen on him changed to light, and I felt confounded and ashamed for having doubted

one I loved so heartily... “Why, Daisy, old boy, dumb-foundered!” laughed Steerforth, shaking my hand heartily, and throwing it gaily away. “Have I detected you in another feast, you Sybarite! These Doctors’ Commons fellows are the gayest men in town, I believe, and beat us sober Oxford people all to nothing!”

“MAN!” went Robin. “I’m surprised they *let* us read books like that in school, much less *make* us do it!”

“Oh, now I wish *I’d* read it,” sighed Laurie, giving Sheila’s earlobes a resentful glance.

“Hey, no takesie-backsies! I’m keeping these earrings till Monday, that was the deal.”

“Yeah, but what’re you wearing tomorrow?”

“Haven’t decided yet,” said Sheila-Q, tossing her head. “Doesn’t matter—teardrop bead earrings go with everything.”

“Do NOT!” Laurie protested, sounding ready to pinch-hit for Robin in the Argument of the Day. Which made Robin laugh so hard milk shot through her nose again.

“Another lucky afternoon!” cheered Joss.

“Is it my turn to read next?” asked Vicki. “I’ve completely lost track, and Alex’s got the schedule—oh Sheila, be careful how you digest that last bit for her.”

“Better say ‘the *cheerfullest* men in town,’” Joss agreed.

Fiona volunteered to do Chapters 29 and 30, in exchange for fifty cents and Vicki’s untouched tater tots.

“Way to go, Feef!” Sheila-Q applauded. “Way to scarf those carbohydrates.”

“Oh please don’t talk about nutrition!” Vicki moaned as the bell rang for free period.

“I’ve barely studied for that quiz, and I’m way behind in Spanish, and—”

“VEL-MAH?? VELMA, WHERE ARE YOU??”

“Oh, nooooo...”

“I thought *Charlie Brown* was all over and done with,” said Laurie.

“Some acts never leave the stage,” Robin informed her.

“*There* you are!” announced Candy Gates, striding down the cafeteria aisle. “I need to talk to you right away!”

“Uh, Vicki, don’t forget that uh stuff we gotta do,” Joss garbled.

“I won’t keep her forever,” Candy Gates airily assured them, grasping Vicki by an shoulder-strap of her overalls. “Come over to *my* table.”

“But I already just ate lunch—”

“Well, now you can have mine too. *I* couldn’t possibly eat a bite.”

Vicki watched helplessly as her friends had to leave while freshmen surged in for Lunch C. She saw Susan Baxter and Rhonda Wright and signaled wildly to them with her eyebrows, but they only smiled and waved and left her unrescued in Candy Gates’s clutches.

“Now then: the campaign for *Cicada* Queen. I wouldn’t dream of doing it without you by my side, Velma, you’re my strong right arm. Here are a few ideas I’ve had so far—” (opening a thick pocket folder and extracting a sheaf of pantyhose ads: *GENTLEMEN PREFER HANES*). “That will be our *Cicada* Queen theme—changed to ‘Gentlemen Prefer *Gates*,’ of course.”

Vicki retreated into bewilderment. “*Cicada* Queen” sounded like some disaster movie where a girl mutated into a gigantic bug that attacked The City. Then she realized Candy Gates was talking about VW’s Spring Dance, which was sponsored by the *Cicada* yearbook.

“I—I didn’t know you had to, like, *campaign* for Queen,” she stammered.

“Oh Velma, Velma, Velma,” tinkled Candy Gates. “What a lot you’ve still got to learn! Lucky for you, I’m here to do the teaching. There’s so much more than just showing up with the best dress, shoes, hair, makeup, jewelry, and date that can actually dance. (By the way, sweetie, those overalls are kind of cute but you might try wearing a skirt to school ONCE in a darn while...)”

*

Chapter 29 of *David Copperfield* brought a welcome reappearance by Rosa Dartle, Fiona’s favorite character. Rosa’s face had been maimed when Steerforth, in childhood, threw a hammer at it (what a prince!) and now she was “all edge” from constant self-sharpening and perverse insinuation. In Chapter 29, though, Steerforth set out to soften her

up and win her over (the seductive bastard!)—even persuading her to play a harp and sing an Irish song:

I don't know what it was, in her touch or voice, that made that song the most unearthly I have ever heard in my life, or can imagine. There was something fearful in the reality of it. It was as if it had never been written, or set to music, but sprung out of passion with her; which found imperfect utterance in the low sounds of her voice, and crouched when all was still.

At which point Rosa struck Steerforth, threw him off with the fury of a wildcat, and burst out of the room. (Good for her.)

Fiona copied this passage inside the cover of her current staff-paper spiral. *She* would write that unearthly song, and set it to music, and belt it out of the International Amphitheatre FASTER! LOUDER! BRASHER! than any Ramone—doing it for all the Rosa Dartles of the world, and none of the Agneses or Little Em'lys or poor dumb Doras.

Saturday was May Day, and Robin declared the sun would not set before they talked the Erle brothers into learning the guitar, once and for all, and forming a rock group with the Dopesters. “I’ll take Diesel and you take Skully, and we’ll turn ‘em into our very own punk toys!”

Fiona, though dubious, got on the scooter behind Robin and whizzed over to Pfenniger Street, since there she could dip into her bankroll and buy a fresh nickel bag of Skully’s primo weed.

“(You’d never learn to play a guitar, would you?)”

Skully stared at her out of starveling sockets. “I play the *sax*.”

“(Thought so,)” said Fiona just as Robin charged headlong out of Diesel’s room, her face absolutely purple with rage.

“OUTTA! HERE! NOW!”

“(See ya,)” Fiona told Skully, pocketing the bag and following Robin to the Margutta. “(So what—)”

“GET ON THE FUCKING BIKE!”

Yanking her aboard with one arm, revving up with the other, screeching off down Pfenniger Street with reckless heedless haste. Roaring around corners at acute angles—running past stop signs and through red lights—causing cars to test their antilock brake systems with screechy honks—till Fiona’s punyfisted shoulder-pummeling roused Robin from apoplexy long enough to turn onto Lesser Drive, into Lesser Park, and over to a gravel-scattering halt.

“I AM SO FUCKING! PISSSED! OFF!”

With trembly fingers Fiona got the nickel bag open, rolled a couple of bombers, and thrust one between Robin’s bared teeth. Not till it was half consumed, and they were sprawling against a stout black walnut tree, did Robin attempt to say more.

“Aaaargh...”

“(Okay. So... what?)”

“He said... and I quote... ‘*Chicks—can’t—rock.*’”

“(Ah...)”

“And then he said... this is another quote... that I remind him of motherfucking Melody and the motherfucking Pussycats.”

“(Asshole.)”

“I’ll pussycat *him*. I’d done it, too, if I hadn’t left when I did. He’d be dead meat and I’d be getting hauled off to juvie.”

“(Better that than turning me ‘n’ you into *roadkill.*)”

“...sorry, Spooky...”

“(...s’alright...)”

“I mean, I know how you wanted to start a band and all...”

“(Doesn’t have to be with *them*. We could, y’know, form an all-girl band. Like the Runaways. Or Isis. Or Fanny. Or the Ace of Cups, back in San Francisco—)”

“Ace of *Whats?*”

“(Cups. Like the Tarot card. They opened once for Jimi Hendrix, he said they were great.)”

“He told *you* that?”

“(...who told who what?...)”

“...ummmm... well anyway: what fun would an all-*girl* band be?”

“(Think about it. A couple *guy* guitarists’d take over, pay no attention to *us*. Probably bring in other guys on bass ‘n’ drums ‘n’ kick us right out.)”

“The sonsabitches... I bet you’re right. But where d’you expect to find a couple girl guitarists?”

“(Plenty of girls play guitar.)”

“*Acoustic*, you mean. I ain’t drummin’ for no folkie-damn-schmolkies.”

“(Hey, lookit who’s coming—)”

They stretched reddened eyes to see Vicki Volester run up the Lesser Park jogging path, clad in a snug little track suit.

“Volester! Perfect!”

“Hello?” went Vicki, stopping to peer under the walnut tree. “Hey, guys!... oh, *what’re* you two doing?? No thanks!” she added hastily as Fiona offered her a *toke*.

“(Oops—Alex isn’t with you, is she?)”

“No, you lucked out, she’s working at the animal shelter. *Please* tell me you guys aren’t gonna ride your scooter while... doing that.”

“I drive safer *when* I’m mellow,” Robin carefully asserted.

“Uh huh,” said Vicki, looking warily around for copcars or plainclothes narcs.

“Volester.”

“Yeah?”

“Volester.”

“*What*, Robin? Gahd!”

“Volester—you gotta learn to play the guitar, right this minute. We’re forming an all-girl rock band and you’re gonna be in it.” To Fiona: “There—see? I can make a rhyme too.”

“You know I can’t play anything,” said Vicki, stretching her arms and legs. “If you want a backup singer, fine, I’ll try my best. Have you asked Joss? She hasn’t said anything about it.”

“We don’t need a *trumpet*.”

“(It’s a *cornet*,)” Fiona clarified.

“She plays keyboards too! You are not forming an all-girl rock group without at least asking Joss.”

“Hey! Who died and made *you* our manager?” Robin wanted to know. “What we need’s a couple guitarists. That’re girls.”

“Okay then, did you ask Sheila-Q?”

Robin and Fiona stared redly at each other.

“Quirk *does* play guitar! She’s got that Silvertone axe! Awreet, now we’re getting somewhere.”

“(You ‘n’ Sheila’d just fight all the time.)”

“We do that already—and we do not ‘fight.’ We *argue*. Like in a debate.”

“Well anyway, be sure to ask Joss too,” Vicki told them. “Call her tonight—I’ll be over at her house, and that way I’ll know you got home safe and won’t have to worry about you all weekend.”

“Awww,” from the Dopesters.

“Shut up! I’ve got enough worries with Candy-Ass Gates on my back.”

Hoots at this coming from a nice-girl mouth. “(What you *said!*)” went Fiona.

“I mean it, too! I’m gonna tell her so the next time she makes me listen to another lamebrained pantyhose idea.”

More hoots, and “Yes, *Mommy*,” when Vicki reminded them not to scoot under the influence.

“Wish I had an ass like that,” sighed Robin as they watched it jog off along the path. “Betcha it’d make me drum better.”

“(How better?)”

“Y’know—more bounce.”

“(For the bucks?)”

And another round of high-flying hootery.

*

“Would you ever smoke pot?” Vicki asked that evening in Joss’s aerie.

“Why, you got some?”

“Joss—”

“You’re kidding, right? While I’m living here under Toughie’s roof? Even if I tried it down at Youth Music Camp, she’d find out somehow. No, all that’ll have to wait till my first day of college.”

“So—whaddaya think about this all-girl band business?”

“Sounds good to me. We oughta get a *black* chick, though, who’s got a lot of ‘bruthas.’ Does Rhonda Wright play guitar?”

“Not with nails as long as hers, she doesn’t. Big Sue wanted her to go out for basketball, and Rhonda said ‘You can take away my freedom, but spare me my manicure!’ ...Y’think Sheila’ll join the band?”

“You *know* she will. Any opportunity to gnarl at Robin. *And* outshine Mealy. *And* raise a ruckus in front of a crowd.”

They thought back to the Quirk clan’s Pre-St. Patrick’s Day party at their Grand Parade Bar & Grill. (The clan had been saloonkeepers since coming to The City from County Cork.) Private shindigs were hosted at the GPB&G on Mondays, when the many Quirk kids would provide FASTER! LOUDER! BRASHER! musical entertainment. Whether on flute or guitar, Sheila could rip through “Whiskey You’re the Devil” in sixty seconds flat, while her sister Amelia danced a jig with frisking petticoats and flashes of thigh.

Not to be outdone hotchawise, Sheila came to the Pre-St. Paddy’s party in a startlingly lowcut green gown.

“Sheila the Show-Off!” jeered Robin.

“Flaunt ‘em if you got ‘em, Robbo,” said Sheila-Q, shimmying her shamrocks.

Amelia popped up (and out) by her side in a sheer white turtleneck. She, like Rosa Dartle, had a talent for irritation-by-perpetual-hinting, most often directed at Sheila; for which Robin had adopted Mealy (now surnamed Potatoes) as an apprentice Dopester.

“D’you think K.C. thinks mine are big-ger?” she inquired, popping precocious shamrocks toward Sheila’s boyfriend K.C. Battenburg, an affable towhead with hair like a Komondor. (Roy Hodeau having long since been deep-sixed.)

“No I *do* not ‘cause no he *does* not ‘cause no they *are* not! And if that’s my best bra you’ve got on under that, I’m gonna strangle you with it!”

“Well, it’s not like *you’re* using it,” snortled Robin.

“We wear the same size,” Mealy confided. “But since I’m only twelve, doesn’t that mean mine are really big-ger? That guys think *I’m* the buck-some one? Which is why, when we go to the beach, they check out me ‘n’ mine first? I’m only asking...”

“You Mealy-Mouthed little—!”

Amelia took refuge behind Robin’s dramatically spread arm. “Hassle one Dopester, Quirk, and you hassle *all* Dopesters!”

Bloodshed was postponed by the Quirk sisters being called to join the rest of the clan in performing “The Night the Goat Broke Loose on Grand Parade.”

Seven Mondays later, Sheila-Q was agreeable to joining a Dopester rock group. But couldn’t say how much time she’d have free to play rhythm guitar, since she’d soon be starting work as a candy striper at St. Benedict’s Hospital.

Most of the bunch, having turned fourteen, had lined up summer jobs. Robin would be stocking shelves at the Triville Acme hardware store. (From which she’d nearly be fired her very first day, for reacting to a customer who asked if there were any *male* staff to answer his questions.) Alex had gotten Vicki a spot with her at Petty Hills Country Club, teaching children about physical fitness; and Vicki had referred her Burrow Lane babysitting clientele to Laurie and Susie, who planned to run a semi-official daycare center. Joss would be at Youth Music Camp through June, but then (mostly to annoy Meg) hoped to land a bag girl position at the Jewel Foods where Meg cashiered.

Fiona muttered about people who’d rather earn money than starve like artists in a new rock band. Yet that band remained conjectural till it found a lead guitar; and there were no prospects for one within the bunch.

Alex and Laurie were singers, and not the sort you’d associate with hard rock. Susie Zane would’ve been perfect: she had the right voice, a no-bullshit-allowed attitude, and had even taken guitar lessons. Or rather a lesson-and-a-half, having quit midway through the second one in sorefingered frustration. Mealy Quirk’s dancing talents weren’t required (especially not by Sheila) and Chloe Rumpelmagen, though she’d’ve loved to join, was certifiably tone-deaf. Beth Murrish had a reputation as a violin prodigy, but aside from Papa John Creach and Sugarcane Harris, there wasn’t a wide scope for rock violinists. Joss proposed Invisible Amy—“It’ll get her out of the house”—but gave no guarantee that I.A.’d

show up for rehearsals.

This left no recourse except to hold open auditions, and Fiona found that as unappetizing as the healthy salad she was picking at. Particularly since *she*, the jobless one, would have to set up the auditions and conduct them.

Glance hopefully at Vicki—wasn't she supposed to be the group's manager?—only to see her beckoned away by Becca Blair. Well, hell.

Robin and Sheila-Q began a heated argument over the humanitarian benefits of hospitals vs. hardware stores:

"The only reason to go to a hospital is if you're sick or hurt or having a baby!"

"That's three reasons! Plus going crazy, that makes four—"

"—you should know! But people need hardware *all* the damn time—"

"—*Lord*, you are so full of it! You're gonna O.D. from being so full of it—"

Fiona wondered if this was how the Ace of Cups got started.

*

"You need to lower a boom," Becca told Vicki out on the second-story walkway.

A broom? What broom? Vicki didn't ask aloud.

"Candy Gates isn't going to be *Cicada* Queen. Meredith Wainwright is." Said not as a prediction, but a simple matter of fact.

Vicki couldn't feel entirely convinced. Meredith Wainwright might be captain of the cheerleading squad and dynamite at gymnastics, but her face fell considerably short of Candy Gates's prettiness; in fact it reminded Vicki of the "if-you-choose-to-accept-it" chief guy on *Mission: Impossible*.

"If Candy'll step out of the way, she can be First Attendant. Otherwise, maybe not on the court at all."

Freshly-eaten grilled cheese burbled unhappily in Vicki's stomach. "The Queen contest isn't... *fixed*, is it?"

"Wrong word," Becca replied judiciously. "What's the right one? 'Arranged,' let's say. Yes: like an old-fashioned wedding."

Heavy sigh from Vicki, who sensed this arrangement was part of Becca's own campaign to secure next year's cheerleader captaincy over Gigi Pyle. "Well, she won't listen

if *I* try to tell her.”

Red-LED-optic survey by Becca. “You’re the only one she *will* listen to. If you tell her right. Then it’ll work out best for everybody.”

Probably not for ME, Vicki shuddered, thinking she’d rather fight some gigantic mutant buggette bent on devouring The City. “Okay. I’ll try.”

“Trust me,” said Becca, laying a regal hand on her arm. “Now then. Guys have been asking you to the dance?”

“What? Oh—well, yes. A few. Nobody special.”

“And you haven’t told any you’d go with them.”

How do you KNOW these things? “Me ‘n’ Joss are gonna go with Alex. That’s the only way her Papa’d let her.”

“She does love to dance,” Becca nodded approvingly. “Except slow dances, of course. Well: one step at a time... Did Byron ask you out yet?”

“Byr—you mean *Tail-End*? Gahd! I hope he doesn’t!”

(Sudden memory of Wernie Ball a year ago, shoving his inept head almost up her skirt: *Wouldja go... wouldja go with...* She clapped her thighs tightly together.)

“Guys like that, you have to watch out for,” Becca ruminated. “Not so much the hornyboys. But Byron—”

She did some shuddering of her own, visibly; unimaginable for Becca Blair. Unless she’d heard Fiona report that Tail-End, like Tommy Traddles, spent homeroom filling his ring binder with sketches of skeletons.

“Becca? D’you ever... I mean, lately, d’you ever see...”

Roger Mustardman, she badly wanted to ask. He having resumed his haunting of Vicki’s dreams—not to mention certain shameful waking moments, alone in bed or the shower. (Redden tingle blush.)

No reply from Becca; no sign that she knew who or what Vicki was squirmily thinking about. Except, perhaps, for her stately honeyskinned face turning the same bright vermillion hue as her double-knit, double-nubbled blouse.

Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance: each went swifter than Vicki'd feared. Candy Gates, for all her histrionics, was a wheeler-dealing pragmatist. Becca Blair and Meredith Wainwright were conceded to as "big blondes with big boobs, what can you expect?"—and satisfaction was derived from Candy Gates having wooed "Throb" Garrigan, VW's handsomest freshman jock, away from them both.

(Though Vicki'd heard from other sources that Becca had dated "Throb" only twice, before dismissing him a suitable suitor.)

The Spring Dance, thanks to overdone Bicentennial décor for its "Star-Spangled Rhythm" theme, failed to raise enough money to cover the *Cicada* yearbook's budget deficit. Meredith was duly elected Queen and Candy Gates her First Attendant. Vicki and her friends, garbed in red-white-and-blue, did a lot of boogieing down with a lot of different guys. Sheila went with K.C. Battenburg and Laurie with the re-forgiven Chipper Farlowe. Robin and Fiona stayed away but wanted to hear about the band, a clump of niner boys who called themselves "Bombshelter" and delivered the first syllable, at least.

"Best thing you could say about them is they were *loud*."

"(See, that could've been *our* gig,)" Fiona groused.

But not without a lead guitar. The open auditions had been a bust: Spacyjane Groh played an ootsie-cutesy-cunning "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" till Robin hurled wrathful drumsticks at her head, causing Spacyjane to slip out the back (Jack) and pixilate away.

"Make a new plan, Stan!" Robin fumed, tossing the broken sticks into a barrel half full of such fragments.

Then came Tina Korva, a 7-Y friend of Susie Zane, who "borrowed" her brother's Stratocaster (righteous move!) and wielded it with Finnishchutzpah as she launched into Kiss's "Rock and Roll All Nite"—only to demonstrate that she had two tin ears. Which, unlike Chloe Rumpelmagen, Tina refused to admit: blaming her brother's guitar, the basement acoustics, and the Dopesters's auditory range instead.

"I tried to warn you," said Susie.

"(Start taking guitar lessons again!)" snarled Fiona.

"Susie could play tambourine," offered Laurie.

"WE DON'T NEED A FREAKING TAMBOURINE!" commented Robin.

“So we’ll be a power trio. That also has a keyboard,” suggested Sheila.

“(Not enough chops—we’d come off like a novelty act,)” mutter-sighed Fiona.

Thus things stood till later that May when everyone, for once, was free to drop by Villa Neapolitan and hear the premiere spinning of *The Runaways*.

Fiona took a dislike to this disc the moment she picked up her special-order advance-release from Cobwebs & Strange. Only one face adorned the album cover, the same face *Who Put the BOMP!* had plastered over its Gala Girl Issue: Miss Feathershag’s. Fiona refused to unwrap the album till Sheila and Joss and Vicki arrived, Vicki coming partly to catch up on *David Copperfield*’s final chapter-digests. Not till then would Fiona split the plastic and open the gatefold, revealing all five Runaways—with Miss Feathershag in the center, her shirt widely unbuttoned.

(Criminey!)

Not a bunch of cutesy-poos, at least. You could believe these were bad-ass hard-rocking high school chicks. “They look like a Roller Derby team,” observed Vicki, giving the gatefold a quick peek. “Did anyone besides me use to watch the Gangbusters Game of the Week?”

“Yeah, I did,” Robin said reminiscently. “Those were fun! Except they shoulda used motorbikes as well as skates, like in *Rollerball*... Hey, this one looks like me!” (A big ominous blonde with back-off-Jack belligerence; but in her *dreams* was Robin built like that.)

“Check this out!” laughed Joss, taking the cover and reading:

This album is for the young of age and the young at heart. It’s for those who know it’s great to be young and who enjoy their youth in the best way they know how. Enjoy listening to this album as much as all of us loved writing, playing, singing, and creating it for you. When you listen to these songs, you’ll be reminded of all the fun you’re having being and staying young. After all, people say these are the best years of our lives. Well, we know they are and we make every minute count. Take this album, live it and love it. From The Runaways to you.

Appalled silence in the cellar. Then “*Gyack!*” went Sheila-Q, sticking a finger down her throat. “That makes *me* wanna run away, all right.”

“(Simmer down,)” said Fiona, despite a dismayed impulse to rewrap the album and take it home to Moth. “(Let’s give it a listen.)”

Hiss of the needle.

Nyaah-nyaah greetings to Daddy and Mom from their *ch-ch-ch-ch-ch*-Cherry Bomb.

Titters from the Dopesters as the singer promised to *Have yuh, grab yuh till you’re sore!*

“They play pretty good,” said Robin, picking out the beat on her practice pad.

“(If that’s really them playing,)” Fiona muttered darkly. “(Could be session musicians)”—maybe even her own father Lem! Which would be extra embarrassing since half the record revolved around what, given the Runaways’s ages, would be jailbait sex.

“You Drive Me Wild” (*you know I need you*); “Thunder” (*now our flaming love is gonna start*); “Lovers” (*make me scream, make it fast*); longdrawn orgasmic moans—

—by a session moaner?

Then, over on the B-side, came “American Nights.” Where everything clicked together for the first time and kept building, kept accelerating, with shouts and whoops and *yeahs!* instead of fake moans as the band went FASTER! LOUDER! BRASHER! ‘cause you kids are so strange and never gonna change, the Runaways are queens of *noi-i-i-i-SSSSE* and the answer to your dreams:

EV-RY-BUD-DEE WUH-NUH PAR-TEE?

EV-RY-BUD-DEE WUH-NUH PAR-TEE?

—with a true-climactic jangle-crash of strings and drums and keyboard.

“Now *that* is a *SONG!*” yelled Robin, twirling her sticks.

“Play it again!” went Sheila, who’d whaled along on air guitar with shaken hips and butt.

“And tape me a copy, I wanna learn it!” said Joss.

They replayed it several times, while Vicki scribblecopied Fiona’s boildown of Chapter 62, “A Light Shines on My Way”—curling her lip at pointing-ever-upward Agnes.

“Don’t forget the rest of the album,” she clucked absently.

It finished pointing completely downward, with what sounded like a bad *Saturday Night Live* breaking-out-of-juvie skit: *I’m down! My ankle! I can’t go on! I can’t leave you! Oh my God!* et cetera and so forth.

No matter. The Dopesters fell to their instruments and did some enthusiastic noodling, Joss on the rebuilt upright piano Fat Bob had hauled home from a biker bar, through whose window the piano had been thrown.

A tentative set list emerged, of favorite covers and Fiona compositions. Everyone except Vicki took this and a cassette copy of “American Nights” home to practice on their own, pledging to reconvene Memorial Day weekend for an honest-to-God jam session—winging their way around the lack of a lead guitar, if they had to.

But “Gotcha!” Sheila crowed on the phone the night before the jam. “I got us a lead guitarist, and just wait till you see her, and I ain’t tellin’ you *squat* about who it is, so you can just lie awake all night wondering, Robbo! Oh and be sure to wear your leather mini tomorrow, ‘cause *Burke*’ll be bringing me ‘n’ My Surprise over!”

Burke Quirk was Sheila and Mealy’s youngest older brother, nicknamed “Baa-Baa” for being the family black sheep, which Joss called false advertising since he was obviously Celtic-colored. Even as Joss tried to snag Lamar Twofields’s eye, so too did Robin try to snag Baa-Baa’s—slapping on a second layer of war paint, the aforementioned leather miniskirt, and a pushup bra that Fat Bob didn’t know she owned.

“Ooh, the Hoagmobile! Wonder what he hadda do to borrow it?” Robin marveled as a Mercury Cyclone whirled into the Villa’s driveway. This belonged to *older* older brother Hoagie Quirk, and was seldom allowed out of his sight. From inside it rose Burke, Sheila, and a hoopedoodling girl with a slightish build, sleepy eyes, and dark red hair.

S-Q bounded ahead to whisper: “(Robbo, I didn’t know he was gonna ask her out, it happened in the car just now, she hasn’t said yes yet, *please* don’t be mad—)”

Which was like asking Robin not to breathe. “(It’s the Queen Bitch!)” she exhaled, watching Burke trail after this sovereign, toting her guitar case and practice amp with one arm and Sheila’s with the other.

“Aw c’mon,” he cajoled, “pick you up around seven. We’ll grab some burgers and go see *Grizzly* or *The Missouri Breaks*.”

“I’m busy,” said his intended.

“Um Robin,” Sheila-Q interposed, “arntcha gonna offer Burke a nice cold uh *beer* for being such a good roadie?”

“Yeahsurehowboutit?” Robin grunted, knowing full well that Fat Bob kept a close inventory.

“Burke? Beer?” went Sheila.

“Hunh? Oh, no thanks, gotta split—where you want these?”

“Down here,” he was directed, just as Joss and Vicki pedaled up on their bikes: perspiring from their humid ride to Pottage Road, and perturbed at doing so in front of hunky Baa-Baa.

As well as the cucumber-cool Britt Groningen.

“Well hey, Britt!” Vicki twittered. “You look great! Love your hair.” While Vicki’d cropped hers short, Britt’s had grown long and loose to cascade over her shoulders like a burgundy waterfall.

“Thanks. You playing?”

“She’s our manager,” Joss explained.

“I’m the *audience*,” Vicki replied. “Britt, have you told Alex yet if you’re doing cross country next year? She wants us to train during the summer, and—”

“Maybe,” said Britt as they entered the Villa basement.

“She’s *bizzzy*,” went bitter Burke, setting down the girls’s gear. “Well, so’m I! Call Hoag or Dad when you wanna be picked up.” And off he stalked, to a chorus of “Bye-bye Baa-Baa”s.

“So anyway, this is My Surprise—Britt Groningen!” Sheila-Q announced. “I just found out last Friday she can play a helluva guitar! Britt, y’know Vicki of course—”

“Of course.”

“—and this is Robin Neapolitan the Superdrummer, Joss Murrish on keyboards and cornet if we need one, and Fiona Weller who plays bass and writes our songs. Welcome to the Dopesters!”

“Not so fast,” growled Robin. “Gotta hear her *play* this ‘helluva’ guitar first.”

“Fair enough,” said Britt, coolly opening her case and producing a chrome-plated Gibson SG with her name spelled out in mother-of-pearl letters. Plugging this into her amp, she strummed a power chord with a customized BRITT pick and asked: “What do you want to hear?”

The Dopesters, abruptly tonguetied, glanced at each other. Then at Fiona, who’d been unusually silent even for her, but stirred now to mutter: “(Uriah Heep.)”

“Sorry? Say what?”

“She said Uriah Heep!” snapped Robin. “Y’know their ‘Spider Woman’? Play that!”

Wham bam went its opening riff. Britt quickly proved her helluva chops, and that she’d mastered more than the three chords Sheila swore were all you needed to play any song. Also that she had a subtle yet penetrative little-girl voice, eerily articulating *I told her ‘bout my vision / but she laughed in my face...*

Fiona felt a diabolic chill, though the Villa basement wasn’t overly air-conditioned.

Britt Groningen: unremarkable to look at, other than the long burgundy hair and gaslight-blue eyes and freckle-constellations on her face and arms and legs. She, like the Dopesters, wore a standard summer combo of T-shirt and shorts, though hers seemed designed by Diane von Fürstenberg.

And silkscreened on the T-shirt was a scraggly unkempt head with vacant yawning peepers.

Not even St. Stephen had ever been so stoned.

This head, Fiona knew, belonged (or used to belong) to the infamous Parnell Travers. A couple winters ago he’d gone “zonk-tobogganing,” passed out in a drift, gotten caught up by a snowplow, been propelled for several blocks and left buried by the side of the road. Prior to excavation, Parnell was supposedly possessed by an entity from a separate plane of existence. This gave him paranormal powers that, most of the time, he was too lethargic to make use of. (Roger Mustardman had dubbed Parnell “the Astral Slacker.”)

A cult of susceptible students sought him out as their spiritual guide. Parnell’s desultory crypticisms were interpreted and turned into psalms by his high priestess Linda Ednalino, who’d restyled herself as Lynndha-with-a-Y-two-N’s-and-a-final-*ha*. She came

from a generous pharmaceutical family, and (if rumor was true) stoked Traverser orgies with bucketfuls of Quaaludes.

Britt Groningen's association with this cult did not disturb Fiona Weller.

At least not half as much as Britt's reminding her of the original Uriah Heep.

Regardless of her too-long hair, wrong-color eyes, and being a girl.

Nor was there any writhing "umbleness." On the contrary: Britt gave the impression she was slumming by auditioning in a Pottage Road cellar. Not through any snobbish stance or disdainful comportment; yet every move she made had a trifling, dallying patina to it. Which, when added to the Uriah Heep harkbacks—"like the blowing of old breezes or the ringing of old bellses"—meant you could definitely picture Britt Groningen breathing into a horse's nostrils (or your own) and covering them with her lank hand.

So Fiona felt chilled.

The other Dopesters—even Robin!—gave "Spider Woman" an ovation and invited Britt to join the band. Fiona was too afraid to veto this, especially after Britt's voice harmonized outstandingly with her own in the subsequent jam session. Fiona's throaty rasp sang lead; Britt's uncanny soprano danced around it, chiming in, chiming out, ringing changes all about.

She did raise her nearly-nonexistent eyebrows at one title on the Dopester set list.

"True Grit? Really?"

"That," Robin enunciated, "is my father's favorite song."

"My father's favorite is 'Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head.' Shall we do that one too?"

Tension was promptly defused by Joss's gigglefit, remembering Hoyt Groningen's televised antics on Action Weather; and the band went ahead with a kick-ass Bacharach jam.

Unfortunately, finals week intervened just then. Cram sessions replaced jams as every teacher claimed her or his subject was *the* one to study most for.

Alex Dmitria had a freakout, not of ass-slap magnitude yet still fairly serious: wailing that she'd forgotten all sixty-four chapter-recaps of *David Copperfield*, and what would she do after flunking Language Arts?? Vicki and Joss made her de-hyperventilate into a paper bag, but the bunch was shaken by this meltdown by an honor student, and started packing

paper bags for themselves.

In the end, everybody passed everything. Fiona won praise for her condemnation of Little Em'ly—not for running off with Steerforth, but writing that soppy uncle-fixated Dear Ham letter. (*Oh, if you only knew!... Oh, take comfort!... Oh, for mercy's sake!...*) Robin got an A in Social Studies, for nimbly comparing the antislavery movement to opposing a 55 mph speed limit. Joss aced French again (*Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir, mon grand homme noir?*) and Laurie the bunny-girl received a Home Ec prize for her carrot cake soufflé. Alex's final Advanced Math grade edged out Becca Blair's, but only when calculated to the second decimal point (Alex insisted on sharing top honors) and Sheila-Q beat out Kim Zimmer for first chair flute in next year's Freshman Band.

Vicki was elected to the VW Summer Council, which mostly entailed handling orientation for incoming sevvies like Chloe and Amelia. Far greater tribute was having her *Cicada* yearbook slathered with loving inscriptions from all the friends she'd made that memorable year.

(Though not Byron Wyszynski, whom she'd avoided since his crackup during the English final: gasping "*Goroo! Goroo!*" like the crazy pawnbroker in *David Copperfield*.)

And so eighth grade at long last ended.

Britt Groningen had kept her distance during finals week, but once school was over she extended a bid for her bandmates to come practice at Sunny Squash Court, a gated community north of La Cuna Bay and barely within the Vanderlund township limits.

Britt and her siblings could all have gone preppy at Startop and Front Tree, had their mother not been such a zealous advocate of public education. Dr. Hilde Krühler, professor at Lakeside Central University, was the author of *Being Cool with Your Public School* and its bestselling sequel, *STAYING Cool with Your Public School* (cited noisily by both sides of the busing-for-desegregation issue). Dr. Krühler retained her maiden name for professional purposes, but most people presumed she'd divorced Hoyt the happy meteorologist, so she often got hit on by academic colleagues and bolder grad students.

Her first two children excelled at being cool *in* their public school. Vance Groningen had been a star athlete and swathcutter at Vanderlund Senior High, the "Throb" Garrigan of his day, against whom no paternity suit ever went to court. He was now enrolled at the Air

Force Academy, learning further means of SERE (Survival Evasion Resistance Escape).

Fleur Groningen's face, at age seventeen, was well on its way to launching its thousandth ship. She was captain-elect of the VTHS cheerleaders, a stage-gracer in every theatrical genre, and her class's likeliest Most Likely to Succeed: idolized by Meredith Wainwright and Candy Gates alike. No need to "arrange" a tiara for Fleur's fair brow—she would seize it with both fair hands, not stooping to use pantyhose ads.

Fleur would also be the first to tell you her kid sister was Different. "Mother, can't you DO something about her??" she implored repeatedly, and Dr. Krühler brought numerous theories and strategies to bear. Britt took them all in chameleon stride, her heavy-lidded eyes giving away nothing but gaslight. She forever seemed to be enacting some elusive role—mystical acolyte, Subdeb of the Netherlands, or passive-aggressive little red-haired girl (like the one in *Badlands* who, before the year was out, would take the screen by storm as *Carrie*).

(No one's gonna laugh at me, Mama...)

It was the hottest day of the year so far when Fat Bob trucked Robin and her drum kit to Sunny Squash Court. They picked up Fiona en route and also Vicki Volester, very damp-eyed from saying goodbye to Joss, who'd just left for Youth Music Camp down at the State U. She and Vicki'd hardly gone a single night since last July without chatting on the phone; now, for almost a whole month, there'd be no communication except by letter or postcard! (Ozzie was still up in arms about that long-distance bill Tricia'd accrued at Christmas.)

Robin and Fiona had reproached Joss about her "desertion," but she considered herself a peripheral supporting Dopester at most. "It's not as if this was a mariachi band and I could play cornet," she'd told Vicki. "You keep me posted on what those Dopeys get up to—after all, you *are* their manager."

"I am NOT their manager! What do I know about managing a rock group?"

"Hey, you wrangled Candy Gates like a pro without knowing how! Besides, you're on Summer Council and they book the band for the Back-to-School Dance in September. By then, we might actually have a band people can *dance* to."

"Aw, the Dopesters won't want me hanging around. I'd just be in the way."

"Like hell—they'll need you there every minute to play referee! You'll be so busy managing, you'll hardly even notice I'm gone."

Like HELL. That could never ever happen, not in a thousand years—

Oh dammit! Don't you dare start crying, or you'll set me off—

They wept and hugged till passerby Meg remarked, "She isn't going to prison, y'know. Even if she *oughta*."

"Even if she *otter*," Joss and Vicki backtalked, sharing an eye-wiping last laugh.

Fat Bob's truck was denied entrance at the Sunny Squash Court security gate, where Fat Bob made Oliver Hardyish noises trying not to boil over and go ballistic.

"We're with Britt Groningen's band," Vicki said helpfully, adding (after Fiona whacked her shoulder) "Okay, *she's* with *our* band. Could you check with Britt, please?"

"Lemme call," went the grudging guard.

"YOU! DO! THAT!" Robin recommended.

"(Sorry,)" Fiona muttered to Vicki.

"(Hey, if I gotta be walloped, better by you than *her*,)" Vicki whispered back, as Robin started thumping the dashboard with mighty percussionist fingers.

The guard granted them reluctant access (Fat Bob requesting a handstamp to ensure readmittance when he came to retrieve his girls) and sent them down a luxury lane to an opulence spread. There under a posh loggia they were greeted by Britt, who wore oversized sunglasses and a string bikini of extreme abbreviation.

"*Santa Madre di Dio*," Fat Bob observed.

"Dad, she's fourteen, same as the rest of us," grated Robin.

Though slightish of build and thoroughly speckled, Britt had put on an inch or two everywhere men found appreciable; and she was keeping those inches buoyant, beguiling, and perspiration-free. *Offer you an Arrid Extra Dry?* her eyelids seemed to snortle, while the Dopesters drippily carried their gear into a vast den that Britt called the "playroom."

Here Fat Bob again invoked the Blessed Virgin as he spied a pristine Marshall stack. "May I? Just for a moment?" he asked, hesitantly reaching for Britt's guitar.

"Be my guest," said Bikini Britt; so Fat Bob plugged in the Gibson and strummed reverent riffs till Robin asked, "*Do I hafta unload my whole damn kit my own damn self, Daa-aad??"*

“So, Britt, you’ve got a pool?” Vicki wanted to know. (Along with why they hadn’t been told to bring swimsuits so she, at least, could work on her tan while the band rehearsed.)

“Pool’s over there—beach is out thataway,” said Britt through the tanktop she was stretching over her upper torso. A Traverser tanktop, on which Parnell’s stony-broke eyeballs suddenly became nipple-shaped. *Feel free to skinny-dip*, they seemed to tittify.

“*Lord* it’s hot out there!” puffed Sheila-Q, loping in to fan herself beside the nearest a/c vent. “I see *you’re* already half-naked,” she told her hostess. “We all gonna strip down? Bet we’d book a lotta good gigs that way!”

“Sheila-Q’s T&A Revue,” gibed Robin, having dispatched her father home with a flea in his ear. She bent over her drums like a paramedic, tenderly tuning each skin.

“Whoever’s standing by my elbow, STEP AWAY FROM IT PLEASE—”

“Drink?” went Britt, pressing an oddly-shaped green bottle against Robin’s elbow.

“Oh—thanks... Hey, what kinda pop is *this*?—‘Perry-urr.’”

“Perry-AY. Sparkling water, from France.”

“From *France*? You IMPORT water? What the hellza matter with AMERICAN water??”

“Oh, it’s bubbly!” Vicki deduced, taking an investigative sip from her bottle. “Like 7-Up, without the lemon-limes. Or sugar. Or... flavor.”

“Sparkling,” Britt said drily as she held out the last bottle toward Fiona, who declined it with a better-to-perish-of-thirst headshake. Britt shrugged that off and strapped on her Gibson, above which Parnell Travers’s face obtruded like a sky-high Lord of the Flies.

“Do you, um, really sing songs about that guy?” Vicki felt compelled to blurt.

“Heck, she *writes* songs about him,” said Sheila, dehydrating her ‘pits at the a/c. “Play us one, Britt—you ‘n’ Feef can have a composition contest!”

“Oh, you wouldn’t like my little tunes,” Britt objected, before presenting a number that Lynndha Ednalino omitted from the canonical Traverser psalmody:

*As your love grows icicles
it slowly freezes in my heart:
And we put our seasons in reverse*

*turning flowers back into seeeds
exchanging all our givens for neeeeds*

*Your hammer strikes MY sickle
red river freezes in my heart:
Who'll be the first to flag down a hearse
and sing the children off to sleeeep
underneath a snowfall drifting deeeep?*

Count

*me in
and let
the children come down 'n' out*

Count

*me in
and let
the children come down 'n' out*

Count

*me in
and let
the CHILLLL-dren come down 'n' out—*

Followed by a complicated series of balalaika-like riffs, as one heavy eyelid descended in what *might* have been a wink.

*

The following Wednesday evening, Vicki left work at Petty Hills Country Club and biked up the road to Panama Boulevard, remembering her first ride on the back of Joss's ten-speed, and writing tonight's letter to Joss in her head. Teaching little kids elementary sports was enjoyable yet exasperating, and had been from the very first day: Vicki'd gone home to proclaim, "I'm sure glad I'm not a mother yet!" (A thanksgiving her parents emphatically endorsed.)

So far she'd merely assisted Alex, whom all the kiddies adored and kowtowed to. But Alex—still mindful not to lapse into overloads—was taking the rest of the week off to organize her Scout troop's annual awards ceremony, at which she personally would "cross the bridge" to Senior Girl Scout status.

"Seems to me your troop should do the organizing *for* you," Vicki'd tutted. "Or get my Aunt Fritzi to help party-plan it."

"That'd be like asking her to pitch my tent and roast my marshmallows! 'A Girl Scout Is Self-Reliant'—"

"Well *I'm* a City girl and need lots of protection, and you're *abandoning* me, Alex! Suppose all those kids gang up on me at once?"

"They're not going to 'gang up' on you, for heaven's sake! Just pretend you're Ms. Swanson, blow your whistle if you have to, and give them time-outs."

Easy enough for Alex to say. She was leaving; Joss had already left; Vicki's parents were going out to dinner—it was the anniversary of their first kiss, or something (eww)—and Goofus would gallivant around town with Patches Rumpelmagen and other nasty chums till the twilight's last gleaming. So she'd have the house to herself for awhile, at least: eat whatever she liked, monopolize the TV or stereo, write her daily letter to stupid old Youth Music Camp.

Nothing new to tell regarding the Dopesters, from whom Vicki'd heard no word since Sunday's debacle at Britt's place. That session had broken up in clashing disharmony—Robin and Sheila-Q arguing about every song, then every measure, then individual *notes*. By the end it was like watching Kashka the Gangbuster take on Tonette the Renegade, with Vicki almost expecting one to fling the other over a banked-track rail.

While Britt assessed the fracas with evident amusement. Chugging a bottle of Jamaican ginger beer, and emitting a silent secret belch.

Which might, perhaps, serve as a final boildown-recap of the Dopesters All-Girl Band.

Vicki coasted into the cul-de-sac, braked at her garage door, and was frightened by a lean lynx-eyed creature looming up out of the oak tree's shade. *Don't gang up on me!* she began to scream, when the creature opened its maw and said—

“(Hey...)”

“*FEEF!* My Gahd! Are you okay? How long’ve you been waiting there?”

“(Not long,)” Fiona mutter-panted. “(I... I just wanted to talk to you...)”

“Well, come on in!—go sit in the living room!—lie down if you have to!—lemme get you some water!—”

Vicki’s fright ran with her to the kitchen, made her clumsy cracking the ice tray and twisting the faucet, grew worse at her guilty recollection of that January afternoon when she’d been too engrossed with Roger’s mash note to realize how bad a shape Fiona was in. But when she rushed back with a sweat-beaded glass, she found Feef sitting on the couch fairly healthily if worriedly. “(I’m okay. *You* okay?)”

“Yeah,” wheezed Vicki, handing her the glass. “Here. ‘American water.’ ‘Scuse me a sec—” Returning to the kitchen, pouring another glass for herself, again to the living room, bumping up the a/c, slumping onto a chair. “Whew! (Slurp.) So—how’d you get here? Did Robin bring you?”

“(It’s Wednesday—her ‘n’ Fat Bob’s daddy/daughter night. I walked over. Wanted to ask you something kind of private.)” Fiona reached into a wilted plastic sack, drew out *The Runaways* album and opened it. “(Could you—I mean, d’you *think* you could—maybe help me look more like this one here?)”

Vicki, bemusedly crunching an ice cube, glanced at the gatefold photo. “That girl on the left? Which one is she?”

“(Her name’s Joan Jett.)”

“Um... hold it up beside your face.”

There *was* a sort of dark, watchful, brooding similarity. Definitely something to work with. And yet: *FIONA WELLER’S asking me for a makeover!* Vicki giddily added to her mental Joss-letter. “Sure, we could try. I’m not sure about the hair—”

“(I’ll dye it. Jet-black. I’ve helped Robin dye hers before.)”

Vicki gave her a smile, and being a Vicki-smile it was wide and toothy and caused immediate being-laughed-at apprehension that had to be quickly allayed. “We’ll make you look great, Feef! I always thought you could do a lot with a face like yours—”

Even leerier: “(Don’t make me *cute!* I don’t wanna look cute!)”

“No no no, course not, more like—well—*striking*, let’s say. Or let’s not?” as Fiona flinched, looking now like haggard Patti Smith.

“(It’s just...)”

“Yeah?... ”

“(It’s just... I don’t wanna be shoved out of my own band, y’know? I mean... *she’s* the one who thought up the Runaways)”—pointing to Joan Jett—“(but all the attention gets paid to *her*)”—flipping over to Miss Feathershag, alone on the cover. “(And... I *know* I won’t be the one people look at first, I’m okay with that, I don’t want ‘em thinking I’m ‘cute.’ But... I don’t wanna be *invisible*, either. See? Or shoved aside. This is MY band; I’m supposed to sing lead; they’re supposed to do MY songs. Y’know?)”

Pause for glass-draining. Then an abrupt addendum:

“(D’you like Britt?)”

Vicki weighed words carefully. “I, um, well, don’t think she’s a *snot*. But I guess I don’t think I could call her a friend, either. You need to be able to depend on your friends.”

“(She scares me.)”

“Scares you—how? ‘Cause she’s part of that Parnell gang? You think they’re like the Manson Family, or those Symbionese Liberation guys?”

Fiona waved that away as she would a swarm of gnats. “(No! They’re just luded-out rich kids—and Britt’s not one of ‘em, not really. She’s only fooling around. Kind of.)” Another flinch. “(I mean, it’s the way she looks—and the way she acts—she *made* Robin ‘n’ Sheila fight, not just argue but FIGHT. And it’s how she sings and plays, too, and the way she writes—‘*Your hammer strikes MY sickle*’—yeesh!... But without her, we wouldn’t have a band. But we barely *do* have one, *with* her. And she just... scares me.)”

Vicki wanted to give her a hug then, though she knew Fiona wasn’t a touchy-feely person. It was like being with Steph again, Stephanie Lipperman morosely kicking against the bricks by the cafeteria dumpster; so hungry for companionship, yet twisted with mistrust.

The Dopester Bacharach jam had jogged an older memory—of Julie the Raindrop, Julie who should’ve been born instead of Goofus, Julie whose Raindrop was falling on Fiona’s head. *FIONA? Sounds like she oughta be a Schmelzette cousin of mine.* So Vicki had thought when she’d first heard the name, cut from the same cloth as “Felicia” and

“Francesca.” Now she felt a palpable, huggable kinship with this distressed genius who’d composed such a wonderful (if somewhat weird) song for Vicki’s birthday.

“Feef? Y’wanna come have a sleepover here, Friday night? We could work on your Joan Jett look then, do the hair and everything, without having to rush it.”

Fiona’s wan face lit up a bit—like Alex’s, in fact, which Vicki wouldn’t have thought possible. But then: “(I better ask this—can Robin come too?)”

Initial bumner feeling, followed by a flummoxed giggle at the idea of Robin Neapolitan as a house guest. “Does she snore?”

“(Her head off. But ask her nicely and she’ll cook for you.)”

“Um... you guys won’t... *smoke*, or anything—right?”

“(Only if Robin burns dinner.)”

Robin, needless to say, reacted as she had before the Bowie concert: nothing could induce her to go. Then, almost at the last minute—“*Ohhhh-kaaaay*, you talked me into it—but you owe me bigtime for doing this!” At Burrow Lane she was on her best behavior, charming all the Volesters as she ordered them around their kitchen, preparing butterfly pasta with shrimp and alfredo sauce—“*Mangiare! mangiare!*” She called Vicki “Velllll-ma” only once, addressing her as “Loopy” the rest of the time: a major step forward in their friendship. And it was Robin’s idea to bring Vicki a blacklight poster as thanks-for-having-us (though Fiona chose the kaleidoscopic vista over R. Crumb’s STONED AGIN! that Robin favored).

Goofus, like Patches, was starting fifth grade at Dopkins that fall, probably in Mrs. Gutenkauf’s class; and Goofus, like Patches, demanded troublemaking tips ‘n’ tricks so as to carry on the great Dopester tradition. Robin told Goofus (as she’d told Patches) that only girls could be privy to such mysteries. Goofus retorted scornfully, so Robin frogmarched him out of their presence and down the stairs.

“Oh, gross! I saw him grin when you did that!” said Vicki. “Now he’ll be as crazy about you as he is about Alex.”

“What can I say?” Robin philosophized. “My alfredo sauce drives men wild!”

Then the girls got down to serious sleepover business. Robin supervised the hairdyeing, then stood by as surgical assistant while Vicki handled the cosmetics, and Fiona chafed at these intimate ministrations.

“Tweezers,” requested Vicki.

“Tweezers,” responded Robin.

“(Ow. Ow. Ow,)” reacted Fiona, as her bushy brows got weeded.

“Try to sit still, Feef!”

“Do what she says, Pee Wee, or I’ll *strap* you down.”

Liplocked muttering from Fiona. Who did not know how to deal with the effect that Vicki’s gentle fingertips unexpectedly had upon her. Not just the usual chafing, but...

I felt my heart beat high, and the blood rush to my face...

“Ooh, Feef! You’re a fox!”

“She always was,” said Robin: proud older Sister Dopester.

“(You lie,)” Fiona demurred, gazing at the results in Vicki’s mirror. Dark; watchful; brooding. Her usual racoonery replaced by a deft domino mask. Beholding an FTW visage framed by blue-blackened fox-locks, with the mouth a refined scarlet slash.

Boogie Diva.

“(Not bad.)”

“Not *bad*? You’re BAD-ASS!” Robin told her.

And as a full-tilt bad-ass, she settled down—heart beating high, blood rushing up—between Vicki and Robin to watch that night’s installment of *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. Which they discussed afterward far more animatedly than any chapter of *David Copperfield*.

*

(EXTRACTS FROM CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN V. L. VOLESTER AND J. MURRISCH)

...So I called Sheila-Q and reminded her what Britt can be like (we used to say “Beat Britt” all the time on the Ladybugs) and Sheila promised to be more on the lookout for that since B has started going out with Burke, and S-Q said “With Baa-Baa’s luck I’ll be their kid’s aunt by next Easter”...

...Didn’t I say you’re born to be a band manager? You talked ME into buying that Electrapiano from Wendy—Dad’s wiring me the \$\$\$ to pay for it. I still don’t like that there’s no difference

soundwise whether you play the keys hard or soft, but it's a lot more portable than that old "py-anner" in Robin's basement...

...Went to band practice at Villa N, it sounded lots better—at least like they were all playing the same song at the same time. Hard not to laugh though, Feef stared Britt down every minute, you know the way she does. Remember that time she freaked out Laurie at lunch? I think it even got to B—she couldn't face up to our new Foxy Feef!...

...Can't believe that snapshot you sent of New FF. This guy looking over my shoulder whistled at it. I told him it was Meg after getting a nose job and her eyes uncrossed. Hope he spreads that story all over campus! Dare you to get Britt and FF to write a song together—I bet they'd have to do it miles apart, like playing chess by mail...

...Sleepover last night at FF's with Robin, who now has a thing for Hoagie Quirk—"He's got his own wheels and can buy beer." Sheila couldn't make it and Britt just said No Thanks. (Big Surprise.) Chloe wanted us to dye her beautiful gold hair to match FF's, but R said when she turns 14 we'll give her brown roots like R's! And they made her an "apprentice Dopester" like Mealy...

...Your Aunt Fritzzi's in town to party-plan that college reunion, and took me to dinner at Katsina's—I had Chicken à la Greque (yum). Boy are you right about your uncle Doug, he is GROSS. Had on an orange leisure suit and kept talking to me about water beds. Can't wait to get home to my own brass bed, and see you and Alex and Fingers and everyone. (Except Invisible Amy)...

*

By the time Joss returned home at the end of June, the Dopesters had been reduced to their original membership: Robin and Fiona, with Chloe and Mealy Potatoes as apprentices.

The all-girl rock group, however, lived on in rechristened form.

They had finished a mega-tempo version of “Venture Nothing” (Vicki’s birthday acrostic song) and were taking a substance-enhanced break. Vicki stuck to Mountain Dew, saying: “*Somebody’s* gotta keep a clear head here—guess it’ll have to be me.”

“Well after all you ARE our manager,” tra-la’d Sheila-Q.

“If you book us that Back-to-School gig, that is,” Robin put in.

“You knooooow,” drawled Britt, winding a long burgundy tress around a lank finger, “if you seriously want to get gigs in junior high, you can’t call yourselves Dopesters.”

Fiona bristled behind her vixenish getup. “(That’s who we *are*.)”

Britt, still twining hair with one hand, cupped the other behind an ear.

“(I—SAID—THAT’S—WHO—WE—*ARE*.)”

Sleepy little hatchet-honing smile. “Who you *are*, and what you’re *called*, don’t have to be the same thing.”

“(MEANING?)”

“Exactly,” said Britt, propping small bare feet atop an amp. “We *know* who we are. But we keep other people guessing. An all-guy band can get right up in your faces, barking like a pack of dogs. If *we* did that, they’d tune us out for acting bitchy.”

“That’s the whole point of what we’re doing here!” blared Robin. “Hard rock!—heavy on the metal!—no frills allowed! And we do it *as* girls, better’n any guys!”

“Better better better!” went Sheila-Q. “Bitter butter batter—hee hee! Better bother Baa-Baa—”

“(Gahd, Sheila, no more for you,)” Vicki cautioned.

“Exactly,” said Britt, wiggling ten wee toes. “Guys bark, and howl, and bay at the moon. Girls do it better by dropping hints. Y’know—*hint hint*?”

“Hint HINT hint,” hee’d S-Q.

“*We* know what we’re saying, but keep the guys guessing. You can’t do it hard ‘n’ heavy—you have to *dart* in and *flick*. Do that often enough, and they won’t know what’s happened till they’re all... cut... up.”

“That’s kinda gross-sounding, Britt,” said Vicki.

“*Flicking*?” snortled Robin. “You’re saying we should go out there and *flick*?”

“We could BE the Flickers!” Sheila enthused. “I saw that on a sign once, all in capitals, and the L and I together made it look like—”

“—like we wouldn’t be ‘hinting,’” warned Vicki. “Anybody got another name for an all-girl band?”

“Cowbelle!” cried Sheila. “With, like, an E at the end! It’s female, it’s musical, and only one word—y’know, like ‘Styx.’”

“Jesus Christ, Quirk, you couldn’t hint your way out of a paper bag!” went Robin. “We better get Mealy down here right away to give you lessons. I bet *she* never said anything straightforward in her goddam life—”

“ROSA DARTLE!” Fiona burst out, making them all leap; even Britt’s feet were jolted off the amp.

“*Gesundheit*,” said Sheila-Q.

“(We could call ourselves the Rosa Dartles,)” Fiona explained, giving citation-reminders of how

she never said anything she wanted to say, outright; but hinted it, and made a great deal more of it by this practice... Miss Dartle insinuated in the same way: sometimes, I could not conceal from myself, with great power, though in contradiction even of Steerforth.

Everyone rolled this name around in their brains. ““Meet the Dartles,”” Vicki mused. “I like it! I bet Joss will too.”

“Should we all wear a scar on our lips?” inquired Britt, her own curling.

“I got one on my knee!” Sheila informed them. “See? Right here. Got it rasslin’ with Baa-Baa when we were kids. Be careful, Britt—he fights dirty when he’s in a clinch!” Giggle-gale till she slipped off her chair onto the same scarred knee. “Owww...”

“Take my advice, Quirk, and stick to booze from now on,” said Robin. “Irishers can’t handle smoking grass.”

Thus it was as the Rosa Dartles that the complete band congregated at Sunny Squash Court on Bicentennial weekend. Joss brought her snazzy new (used) RMI Electrapiano, on which she sailed through Johnny Bristol’s “Hang On in There Baby” by way of demo.

“You’re lucky I don’t have a voice like Feef or Britt,” she remarked. “Otherwise I would *so* go solo on you guys!”

They set themselves up in the “playroom”: Robin behind her meticulously-retuned drum kit, Joss and keyboard off to one side, Sheila and her Silvertone on the other, Britt with Gibson and Fiona with Fender front and center. Vicki, as audience-manager, faced them from the room’s far end.

“ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR!” went Robin, banging her sticks together overhead; and the Dartles darted forth with

*Raindrops keep fallin’ on the dead
just like the guy who’s buried in a flower bed
pushin’ up day-zees...*

Moving on to Fiona’s “Grunting Together, Squealing Together” pastiche, and then an undermined interpretation of “Happiness” from *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*:

*Happiness is
needing a fix ‘cause
I’m going down, Joss
jumping the gun*

[KEYBOARD ARPEGGIO]

*Happiness is
getting all baddy
with a beef patty
on a warm bunnnn...*

“Eat your heart out, Candy Gates!” laughed Sheila-Q. “Let’s find out where Mr. Redo lives and play this under his bedroom window!”

Having warmed up, it was time for the Rosa Dartles to go innuendo. Foxy Feef had accepted Vicki’s challenge to co-write a song with Britt Groningen, each taking shots at the music and lyrics. Britt’s “Ready if *you* are” was riposted by Fiona’s “I want something with singing on it” (a Bowie quote from *The Man Who Fell to Earth*) and, after a week’s hither-

and-thither of staff paper between Sunny Squash Court and the Plexiglas Palace, their song was judged sufficiently ready for stab-taking.

Robin pre-awarded it five stars since she got to open with a solo cannonade on the tom-toms. Followed by the staccato:

*You say we go together
and tickle with your feather
Think too big with your britchen—
won't stop me from my ditchen
(tcha! tcha-tcha!)*

*Throw hammers like El Thorro
no worries 'bout tomorrow
You think that you're bewitchen—
won't stop me from my ditchen*

*Oh! but really, isn't it really, though?
(I want to know)*

*Accept it freely, isn't it always so?
(I want to know)*

*There's SOOOO much I wanna know—
(is-it-al-ways-so?)*

*Not knowing I've come A-part
pounds mistakes into YOUR heart
You say you'll do some snitchen—
won't stop me from my ditchen
(tcha! tcha-tcha!)*

*To drop the other shoe-ing
drop you is what I'm doing
Don't talk about religion—
won't stop me from my ditchen*

Oh! but really, isn't it really, though?

(I want to know)

Accept it freely, isn't it always so?

(I want to know)

There's SOOOO much I wanna know—

(is-it-al-ways-so?)

Uproot you like a tulip

last way I'm giving YOU lip

Let's watch you while you're twitchen—

won't stop me from my ditchen

(tcha! tcha-tcha!)

(time-for-some-switchen)

(don't-talk-re-ligion)

(can't-hear-your-snitchen)

(pigs-in-your-britchen)

(watch-while-you're-twitchen)

(WON'T-STOP-MY-DITCHEN)

27

Now You Don't

It came back to Vicki in a dream, from the deepest reaches of her memory.

That feeling of being lost, like Mole, in the Wild Wood on a cold still winter afternoon as dusk descended; lost among shadows of secret darkness and whatever they might conceal. Something or Other 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 talons and was *about to grab hold*—

—when the digital alarm went *b-z-z-z-z*.

And she awoke, panting and shaking, in her own tangled bedsheets.

Big girls could tremble. Big girls could whimper. Only babies cried.

Big girls could also hurt their hand clutching a mustard-yellow Pet Rock. This stupid so-called undercover talisman: “*I am real—the dreams are fake.*” (Yeah right.)

She rose and thrust the thing into her lingerie drawer. Then hastily retrieved it (Roger didn't deserve that gratification) and buried it beneath thermal tights in the bureau's bottom drawer. *Her* bottom wouldn't need longjohns today: a warm September morning, first of the new school year.

She'd already notified Alex she would be walking (briskly) to VW this first day. Time enough to run there tomorrow; today Vicki intended to arrive cool, dry, and

immaculate in her brand-new ecru tunic top, scooter skirt and T-straps. For *this* was the day (or week/month/semester) she was going to select a steady boyfriend—one who wouldn't dissolve into nothingness, after denying Vicki's very existence.

She was fourteen-and-a-half: ready/willing/able and pretty damn pretty, if she did say so to her reflectionary self. Joss could pine for a Great Black Hope; Alex and Robin could loiter in Daddy's Girl Land; Fiona could continue not giving a rat's ass whether guys checked her out (which they did a lot more since her Joan Jettification, making Feef shrink to Vicki's or Robin's or Joss's side); and Laurie Harrison could lower her standards to accommodate Mack "The Arm" Pittley, most caddish of Petty Hills caddies, who outscuzzed even her stepbrother Jason Zane.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND??" Susie'd reacted when she found Laurie and Mack in a sand trap, the Pittley Arm entwined around the Harrison hips, from which the Harrison shorts were in danger of being tugged down.

"He was helping me find my ball."

"DID YOU *HEAR* WHAT YOU JUST *SAID*??"

"Don't make me feel bad, Sue! You know I feel worse enough already!"

Laurie'd applied for a transfer from Y team to Z or X, only to learn that no transfers would be permitted that year. Enrollment was down again, had been dropping steadily through the Seventies; there were even rumors that one VW wing might be closed before the end of the decade, shifting ninth grade back to Vanderlund Senior High.

But not this year. No, today status remained quo, freshman perks and privileges were still intact, and you could take the *front* stairs (at long last!) up to the *top* floor. Traipsing pretty-damn-prettilly over to 9-Z and Mrs. Hurlburt's homeroom, almost identical studentwise to Mr. Gillies's: Joss was there, wearing the MAGNIFIQUE T-shirt you'd persuaded her to buy; Carly and Fiona were again your seat-neighbors and locker-neighbors; and Byron Wyszynski occupied his customary last desk of the last row—Tail-End, as usual.

Roger Mustardman, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

(Vicki wondered briefly if he still haunted the school basement—then resolutely evicted him from her conscious mind.)

All morning she evaluated the guys who glanced appreciatively at her gauzy new top, leg-exhibiting skirt, and olivaceous summer tan. *I might just be available, boys; fill out your applications to prove yourselves dateable.*

First period she stayed put in Z304 for Mrs. Hurlburt's Algebra class. Robin had this too, as did Craig Clerkington (eww! out of the question) and Tail-End sticking around like a gum-glob on a shoe-sole. Vicki grabbed the desk next to Robin's at the opposite side of the room, behind Buddy Marcellus who turned and gave her a complimentary leer. Hmm now, Buddy Marcellus: great dancer, lively sense of humor, fun to be around; not unlike Jimmy Maxwell back at Reulbach. But (again like Jimmy) Bud was rather hefty and inclined to sweat, even at 8:20 a.m. Still—let's count him as a possible dateable.

Second period was Earth Science in Z303. Tail-End followed her there and nearly took a place at Vicki's work station, but Fiona and Carly were also present and quickly claimable as lab partners. Earth Science was taught by Ms. Tays-the-Tease, a thirtyish divorcée who made male lips smack as she discussed the "heavenly bodies" they'd be studying in their astronomy unit. Brad Faussett (eww! out of the question) smacked his lips the loudest, much to Carly's outteased indignation. Not quite as noisy was John Alphonse, naturally known as "Phonsie" in that *Happy Days*-dominated year, but who didn't let the name go *too* much to his head. Even though that head was far more crushworthy, if less thoroughly blowdried, than Brad's. Chalk Phonsie up as another possible dateable.

Third period Vicki had Advanced Civics in Z305, where old Mr. Koehler made them observe a moment of silence for the late Senator Dirksen "on this, the seventh anniversary of his passing." Nobody said *Gas?* out loud, since this was an honors class that included Alex and Becca and Artie Rist the Anarchist (eww! out of the question, though even he didn't say *Gas?* aloud) and, somehow, Tail-End again. But also Tony Pierro, a very definite possibility: like the Hunk With No Name repackaged in darker, sleeker, compacter form, keeping the same diffident charm-your-pants-off distractability. However, Tony came from a seasonal contractor's teeming family, and held down several afterschool/weekend jobs to help contribute to it. Admirable, but not leaving him enough time or money to seriously date.

Fourth period was Advanced Language Arts in Z302, to which Vicki was *yet again* trailed by Tail-End—who'd better not be checking out the back of her scooter skirt en route.

(Oh Gahd! Did it show visible panty lines? Detour to the washroom and do a survey.)

In Honors English she and Joss *finally* got to share a class, their only one together all morning. Here Vicki felt tinglishly “appreciated” by the suave Continental regard of Mr. Erickson, who filled the fantasizable role for girls that Ms. Tays did for guys. He had a voice like an FM DJ, exactly right to caress you with spoken sonnets; you could imagine him pledging to whisk you away to Paris, three-and-a-half years from now, for a passionately mad affair.

“(Ain’t gonna happen,)” Joss snorted at her elbow.

“(Shut up. I can dream.)”

“(You shut up. And quit talking in your sleep.)”

“Gir-r-r-rls?” purred Mr. Erickson, raising a S-I-G-H from females all over the room.

“Did you have a question?”

Yes, are you married? When’s your birthday? What’s your favorite color? (Please let it be violet.) Do you appreciate visible panty lines on a really cute derriere?

Ooh la la! c’est très français!

Ooh la la la la, I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you—

“Gir-r-r-rls? Any question?”

“No, Mr. Erickson,” Vicki demurely answered.

Then came a full 45-minute free period that she had to spend in the third-floor Home Base Art room. Summer Council was holding one of its final sessions before the fall semester Student Council got elected; and this meeting had actual significance, since a vote would be taken on which band to book for Back-to-School Dance. It might even be a *binding* vote, if enough members showed up to constitute a quorum—which had happened precisely once since June. They’d spent the summer subdivided into “task forces,” with a few of the people doing most of the work—and sharing ALL of the credit with the Council President.

Bennett Fayne was the sort of guy who, back in kindergarten, introduced himself with a jocular lookit-us-acting-like-big-kids (yet still firm) handshake. He always wore an ear-to-ear smile, much like the Georgia peanut farmer currently campaigning for the White House. Bennett had launched his VW political career with a smiling speech to 7-X, freely admitting

that others might be idealistic but *he* was an unabashed sell-out, ready to compromise any means for a “greater good” end. This was chastised by adults, yet thought to be refreshingly candid in that Watergateful year, so Bennett got elected by a landslide—and tagged by Roger Mustardman with the enduring epithet of “Sell-O” Fayne.

This past summer Sell-O’d delegated all Council duties to underlings before heading off to the beach, returning in time to accept congrats for any mission accomplished. Vicki knew this from her own efforts on the Orientation Day task force: she and Crystal Denvour had done the bulk of notifying sevvies-to-be about this event, where new kids were introduced to life at junior high and (hopefully) had their fears and uncertainties alleviated. So it was a genuine public service, one in which the “Orientationers” took pride and a sense of achievement—

—despite knowing Sell-O would hog the plaudits and receive the heartiest administrative handclasp.

“*Then* you’ll see him—*now* you don’t,” as Crystal Denvour remarked.

Entering an Art room already redolent with paint and clay after a single morning’s classes, Vicki did a quick headcount and hopped onto the tall stool beside Crystal. After exchanging *Hi’s* and *Cute outfits!*, Vicki asked: “Is this all who’s coming? Where’s Rags?”

“He’s got Gym fourth period, but he’ll be here. *If* he knows what’s good for him,” said Crystal with curvaceous complacency.

She was a dimpled dollybabe, rivaling even Becca Blair as the embodiment of well-roundedness—as Vicki could enviously attest, from having taken showers in their Clara Klean company four mornings a week all last year.

“Wish *I* had Gym fourth period,” she gnarled. “This semester it’s right after lunch! How’ll I keep anything down?”

“Well, that’s one way to stay in shape,” said Crystal. “I usually barf from nerves before every concert.”

She was the star soloist of VW’s Mixed Chorus, and had sung “America My Country, O What You Mean to Me!” before the Maine Street Beach Bicentennial fireworks. But though the *Herald* hailed her as a future Beverly Sills, Crystal’s personal favorite tune was Janis Joplin’s “Try (Just a Little Bit Harder),” and she’d helped Vicki canvass Summer

Council for the Rosa Dartles.

“Okay, so here’s my guesstimates for the vote. We’ve got you, me, Rags, K.C.—”

“Y’think? He ‘n’ Sheila agreed to see other people.”

“They didn’t break up from having a fight, though, so he’ll want to keep on her good side in case they get back together.”

Nanette Magnus and Delia Shanafelt strolled in unhurriedly. “Lookit those two,” glowered Vicki. “How can they not wanna dance to an all-girl band?”

“You have to ask?” said Crystal.

The top-seeded band for Back-to-School bookage was Chinese Fire Drill, fronted by Mike Spurgeon, King of the Towheads. (Who justified his group’s name by drummer Slim Jim Khim having Korean grandparents.) And if Laurie Harrison’s hearsay was accurate, Gigi Pyle had *ordered* Kim Zimmer to give Mike up—“You’ve had him long enough”—to the rest of her clique. Mike’d dated Nanette last winter, Delia last spring, and then (“once he got fully tenderized”) was appropriated by Gigi herself, as a consolation prize for her losing the cheerleader captaincy to Becca.

Speaking of prizes: Rags Ragnarsson tumbled through the door, like a Norwegian elkhound transformed into a ninth-grade jock in some ancient saga or Disney movie.

“Bay-ubb!” he barked, giving Crystal a resounding smackeroo.

“About time, slowpoke!”

“You know it, lover gal!” gloated Rags, leaning in for a second kiss.

“Ladies and gents, we have us a quorum!” smiled Sell-O, *thunk*-ing the art mallet serving as gavel.

Summer Council sat through the solemn hoopla of moving, seconding, and approving the previous session’s minutes. That done, they advanced to yeas and nays on which band, based on submitted demo tapes, would play at Saturday evening’s dance.

Six voted for the Rosa Dartles; six for Chinese Fire Drill; twelve were absent.

Sell-O Fayne grinned so widely his face’s upper half almost detached. “In cases like this, the chair can cast a tiebreaker,” he informed the Council; pausing so long they despaired of finishing in time for lunch. “However, in *this* case, Ms. Yehle **AND I** came up with a little ‘scheme’ we’d like to share with you. Ms. Yehle?”

Their faculty advisor struck a pose: half Rhoda Morgenstern, half that silent film star burlesqued by Carol Burnett.

Ms. Yehle's talents had mowed a wide swath at many different outlets—advertising agency, repertory company, fashion magazine, Channel 7's TV station—before “leaving the rat race for the mouse race” by teaching Art at VW. She wore handsewn jumpsuits and headscarves, created Kabuki posters on consignment, and addressed her students with a great deal of expressive mouth-mobility:

“My dear young friends—a way lies before us to resolve this deadlock—yes, a way that can fan enthusiasm to FEVER PITCH—and that will happen if we agree to stage a...”

“Battle of the Bands??” squawked Robin Neapolitan, in line at the cafeteria steam counter. “Seriously? Just a fistfight, or do I get to use my sticks?”

“You alternate half-hour sets,” Vicki explained, “and at the end of the dance, the judges decide who won.”

“What judges?” asked Sheila-Q, paying the cashier for a Sloppy Joe, creamed corn, and sliced peaches.

“Ms. Yehle, Coach Smitty—y’know, the chaperones.”

“*Uffa!*” went Robin. “What the hell do *they* know about rock music? I won’t forget this, Loopy.”

“Robbo, you can’t even remember to brownbag a lunch,” said Sheila.

“Don’t remind me,” Robin growled at her gloppy tray. Adding “Sorry, boys, no spare change,” as Mike Spurgeon and Slim Jim Khim sauntered into step beside them.

“None needed,” said Mike, who’d been cultivating a Peter Frampton mien, manner, and shoulder-length tow-colored ringlets that he now shook at Robin. “Just wanted to wish you gals a whole lotta *luck*. May the best man—I mean, the best *band*—win.”

“Spurgeon, we’re gonna make you eat those words before you can swallow that Sloppy Joe!”

She and Vicki and Sheila turned toward the bunch’s table, but Slim Jim piped up behind them. “Yeah, we’ll give you the first set—ladies go first, y’know.”

“Like *hell!* We ain’t your opening act,” fumed Robin, handing Vicki her tray (“Here, take this”) and advancing on Slim Jim knuckles first. “Let’s me ‘n’ you settle this like a

coupla drummers—if you’re UP to it, that is!”

“OoooOOOOoooh” from the gathering crowd.

“Robbo, can’t we eat first?” from S-Q.

“And *soon?*” from Vicki, trying to balance two trays.

“Come *on*, Mike, it’s getting late!” from Gigi Pyle’s cliquish table.

“Oh Jeez, what *now?*” from Joss at the bunch’s.

“Tell ya what, we’ll flip a coin,” said Mike, fishing a quarter out of his jeans. “Call it in the air—”

“Wait! Why should *I* call it?”

“It’s my quarter.”

“Okay then,” Robin grumbled. “HEADS!” as the coin got flipped.

Slap of coin on back of hand. “TAILS!” Mike trumpeted.

And, as if in response, there was a crash that shook the cafeteria and temporarily subdued its hubbub. Byron Wyszynski lay sprawled on the linoleum, his face in his tray, off which flowed streams of brown and yellow and orange and (from Tail-End’s nose) red.

*

At noon on Saturday thirty girls signed up for cross country, to the satisfaction of Captain Alex and Mr. Heathcote. Britt chose not to run this year, concentrating instead on music; and Sheila-Q might’ve done the same, if her sister Amelia hadn’t decided to “see what long-distance stuff feels like.” No way would Sheila yield the track to Mealy, so back she came. As did Laurie and Susie and Karen Lee Bobko and Caroline Appercy—though the Bobbsey Twins were no longer on speaking terms:

“Susie, would you please tell *you-know-who* to quit slamming my dad’s car door?”

“Sue, would you kindly tell *a certain person* that’s the only way to make sure it stays shut as she knows perfectly well?”

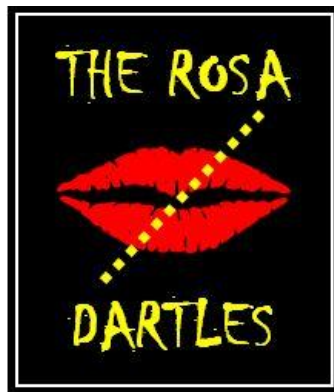
Chloe Rumpelmagen and a batch of other sevvies signed up too, trooping off after practice to get their hair done for that night’s dance. Though “casually informal,” it was these pre-teens’s first excursion into junior high social affairs, and their excited anticipation made Vicki feel a trifle elderly. Once, long ago, she’d’ve been just as carefree; now her brain had to be all executive and managerial.

There were the Rosa Dartles to look after. According to Joss, they'd nailed every number at their last rehearsal, locking into a groove so hard and tight "I was afraid the vice squad might bust us!" But if a *bad* rehearsal meant a *great* performance, what did a nailed-and-locked one foretell?

There was the dance itself, Summer Council's closing act. Vicki and Crystal had spent the week taping up what felt like a hundred publicity posters throughout Home Base and the three wings—even as they pictured Sell-O Fayne taking a solo bow for each one.

There was the question of how Vicki should prioritize guys *at* the dance: Buddy Marcellus had the best moves, Phonsie Alphonse had the most flair, Tony Pierro had the highest potential, not forgetting Mr. Erickson if he subbed as a chaperone...

At least there was no doubt what she and her band were going to wear. Britt had designed a group logo—crimson smoochmark scored through by a line of DayGlo diamonds, with a splattery DayGlo *THE ROSA* above and *DARTLES* below—



—which she got screen-printed on the front of black T-shirts and the rear pocket of black bermudas. (Decorous length for both: Fiona'd refused to go to a summer Runaways concert in Prospect Heights after Miss Feathershag started wearing a bustier corset onstage.)

After cross country practice Vicki ran home, stepped out of her varsity uniform, hit the shower, and changed into this casually informal I'm-with-the-band ensemble. Joss, returning to Burrow Lane from her cornet lesson, put on the same costume; and at six they were collected by Robin and Fiona (also black-clad) in Fat Bob's truck. They communicated via CB radio with Burke Quirk as he convoy'd Britt and Sheila (similarly sable-garbed) plus Mealy and three of her friends. The bands would be using the school's amps, mikes, and

drum kit, so there was much less gear to transport than usual; but Fat Bob was staying to help them set up, check amp levels, and—in an XXL Dartles T-shirt—see his Baby Doll make her debut.

(Baa-Baa dropped *his* passengers off on Knopper Drive before hightailing away.)

At VW the dance decoration task force gave them early admittance, along with Martha Weller who'd brought Chloe and three of *her* friends, and was serving as one of the chaperones. She would abstain from Battle judgment due to maternal conflict of interest, but treated the band to a pep talk ("Good posture plays *such* an important part in good music") while Fiona succumbed to quiet mortification.

The other chaperones were Mr. "Mispronounced" Martincich, the speech teacher; Ms. Yehle, in a hoppity-skippity jumpsuit; Mr. and Mrs. Hollinger of the PTA, who'd had to cope with a decade of Ted Bessell jokes; and Coach Smitty, monitoring the state of his gym floor. The big accordion wall separating the boys and girls gymnasiums had been folded open, creating a vast expanse festooned with streamers, balloons, and a

SHAKE SHAKE SHAKE • SHAKE SHAKE SHAKE • SHAKE *your booty*

banner. Refreshment tables were placed at one end of the combo-gym; a portable platform, imported from the auditorium for bandstand use, stood at the other; *GO BEETLES!* declared the inlaid sign above the boys bleachers; *GO LADYBUGS!* countered the sign on the opposite wall; and up near the ceiling, small rectangular portholes allowed the setting sun to supplement interior fluorescence.

At seven the playing-field doors were thrown open, and in (at a dollar a head) surged the students of Vanderlund Junior High. Ms. Yehle had been right about a Battle of Bands whetting their enthusiasm (if not—as yet—to FEVER PITCH) and Sell-O Fayne, calculating the night's intake, mentally boosted future ticket prices to \$1.25.

Just before showtime, Vicki joined her group behind the platform. "Well, um... go kill 'em dead, you guys."

Britt, of all people, pulled an Alex Dmitria: extending a freckly arm, palm down, and saying "All together now—this is it!" as her bandmates piled their hands on top.

"OH!" they chanted, "*BUT REALLY, ISN'T IT REALLY, THOUGH?*"

“ROCK ON!” concurred their roadie Fat Bob.

Vicki sidestepped away from the platform as Sell-O climbed onto it. S-m-i-l-i-n-g-l-y introducing himself (“For those of you who *don’t* know me, ha ha ha!”), welcoming everyone to VW and its Back-to-School Dance. “And now, without further ado, let’s begin our first annual Battle of the Bands! Here’s our opening act—” (snarl from Robin) “—ladies and gents, put your hands together as I present to you the ROHHH-SAAA DARRR-TLES!!”

Who struck up an explosive “Keep A-Knockin’ (But You Can’t Come In),” made famous by Little Richard but recently covered by Suzi Quatro. Unsubtle lyrics by Fiona’s standards, but the Dartles deemed it a kick-ass kickoff to loosen up the gym.

All hell got loosened instead.

A volley of boos, jeers, and taunts from certain boys in the throng’s front ranks—slimeballs like Lenny Otis and Dino Tattaglia, Dwight Whitehead and Roy Hodeau—who also launched a salvo of popcorn and other small items at the band. The Dartles responded true-rocker-style by pumping up their volume—and got targeted by larger, wetter debris.

Vicki, standing with Alex at the side of the platform, heard some voices raised in protest—Coach Smitty’s *What the hell is going on here?*; K.C. Battenburg’s *Hey c’mon, give ‘em a chance!*; Arlo Sowell’s *Yeah, shuddup ya dicks!*—that were drowned out by EARSPLITTING FEEDBACK as a heavy airborne object collided with the biggest amp. She watched openmouthed as Fat Bob, charging forward from behind the platform like a maddened hippo, got enmeshed by cables that tripped him more spectacularly than Tail-End in the cafeteria as he went bellydiving into the horrified audience while FEEDBACK screamed up into a *HOWWWWLLLL*—

—and then the gym lights winked out.

“*Stay calm! Stay calm, everybody!*” Alex shouted, vanishing before Vicki could grab her hand.

“*Wait! Wait! Alex? Alex? Joss?? Joss?? FEEF???*”

Unheard in the bedlam, she fumbled for the bandstand but got bumped and shoved by anonymous nonentities till all bearings were lost in a darkness broken only by neon EXIT signs and scraps of portholed twilight. Vicki teetered on the verge of panic—

OW! What the—? Had someone pinched her *butt*? Try to whirl round and confront him, but the world was in slo-mo and by the time she got pivoted, her assailant had shifted likewise and begun tweaking *both* cheeks. “QUIT IT!” she cried, swatting backwards yet making no contact with a hand or arm *even though the nipping persisted*—squirm left, wriggle right, lunge away from a full-blown GOOSE gahdammit “DON’T!” she shrieked, sounding beseechful despite her outrage and to no avail as that unswattable hand started sliding down the *front* of her bermudas, trespassing where nobody’s fingers belonged except her own—NO! NOT THERE! NOT *THERE!*—why the hell couldn’t she get a grip on this bastard’s hand, stop its creeping and crawling unseen like the Mad Man of her nightmares?? screaming “LEAVE ME ALONE!” as she windmilled fast as possible with sluggish arms to fend off the terror *that kept grabbing hold*—

—till daylight flashed through the dark.

Sort of. More like dusk-descending light than day.

Yet vivid enough to frame a tall silhouette in the opened playing-field doorway.

Alex! was her first thankful thought. But this silhouette was taller and broader and shaggier and unAlexier. It leaned in to offer Vicki a hand—a visible, tangible hand—that she took and was drawn outside by. Feeling suddenly free of any other hand, with nothing but fabric between her thighs.

Chaperone-voices were urging everyone to watch their step, take their time, not be in a hurry; but cross country instinct told Vicki to run strong, jockey for position, stay on pace. Her escort too showed the moves of a track star, striding away from the horde as he guided her to an isolated spot by the Oakapple fence. There, illuminated by streetlamp, she got her first look at his face.

“OhmyGahd—*Jonathan?* *Jonathan DOHR?* What’re *YOU* doing here??”

His free hand rose to rub his nose, obscuring his mouth as he said: “The name’s Dave. I don’t go here. Just passing by.”

Vicki stared up at him, her strings twanging as they’d done back in Pfister Park. Surely there couldn’t be *two* teen Nureyev lookalikes on the North Side or its suburbs! And the increasing nightfall only highlighted his familiarity—the pensive expression, the somber eyes, the flowing-alooof hair.

His voice, of course, was a novelty.

Though it had the enigmatic stillness Vicki would've expected from Jonathan Dohr.

"Walk you home?" he asked.

Yes! went her body and soul; but the managerial brain overruled them. "Oh—no—I hafta find my friends, y'know—see what's happening 'n' all..." Tugging at his wrist:

"Come with me?"

"Can't. Gotta be going."

"But—when'll I see you again?"

"Tomorrow morning," he told her, mouth still finger-shielded. "Early, though. Be all right?"

"*Yes!*" she exclaimed, and was about to give him directions to Burrow Lane when she remembered this was Saturday. "I'm staying at my friend's house tonight. 1008 Jupiter Street? Just off Sendt?"

"I'll find it."

"Promise?"

He lowered the hand from his mouth, bent down and kissed her on the brow.

Okay, more like a peck—touch of teeth as well as lips—BUT STILL: *pound pound pound* went her heart, *thump thump thump* went her soul, up tilted her head to invite a second helping...

...and watch him withdraw, emptyhandedly, to the school gate.

After him! commanded heart and soul. *Before he gets away!* added brain.

But it was feet that failed her now, resistant to go where shadows were thickening.

Please don't leave yet.

Don't worry. You'll see me in your dreams.

In my—? You ARE Jonathan Dohr!

The name's Dave, he reiterated, disappearing from view.

Deeply-heaved depths-of-bosom bra-strap-straining **SIGH**, such as she'd never exhaled for Mr. Erickson.

Then reality rushed in to engulf her. Reality and an aimless crowd of meandering students, against whose drift Vicki gradually swam back upstream, steering clear of any

scuffling roughhouse types who might've been her molester. No one was recognizable, even in the undimmed blaze of VW's exterior lights; and Vicki encountered none of her bunch till pushing through to the black hole of the gym doorway, where a Senior Girl Scout stood on sentinel duty.

"Alex! Have you seen Joss or Feef or any of 'em?"

"I think they're still inside, a lot of people didn't come out—whoa there, Vicki!" said Alex, overlapping "Just a minute, young lady!" from Mr. Hollinger of the PTA, who'd had a taxing last half-hour and now barred re-entrance to the school.

"But my *friends*—" Vicki pleaded, daring to put one executive Adidas over the threshold—

—at which point all the indoor lights winked back on.

"How'd you do that?" asked Alex.

Vicki almost retracted her foot, to see if they'd turn off again; but took advantage of Mr. Hollinger's gaping disbelief to duck under his arm and hustle in.

Bracing herself for a scene from a disaster movie (*Return of the Cicada Queen?*) yet the banner, streamers, balloons all hung merrily undisturbed from the ceiling. The gym floor was a different story—snacks and drinks had been dropped and trampled on, which meant a long night ahead for the clean-up task force; Coach Smitty'd see to that.

Vicki found the Rosa Dartles huddled on the platform. Joss, blinking in the sudden brightness, leaped off to prove her best-friend infinitude with an enveloping hug and "*Are you okay?*" Sheila-Q was in K.C.'s arms, her head resting on his shoulder, as if they'd had a little blackout makeout. Britt, with a face so drained of blood its freckles stood out like polka-dots, was slowly testing and repacking the instruments. Fat Bob had a frightful gory cloth pressed to his button nose, which he'd landed on after his bellydive; Alex galloped up to doctor it with ice salvaged by Arlo Sowell from the refreshment table. Robin clung to Fat Bob's side, her makeup turned molten by rabid bawling. Fiona crouched next to them, offering the Neapolitans frail comfort with one hand, and the same to whimpery Chloe and shellshocked Mrs. Weller with the other.

So far as the Dartles were concerned, FEVER PITCH had proved to be a bean ball.

Meanwhile Chinese Fire Drill surrounded Sell-O Fayne (“Hey! What about *our* set?”) even as ticketholders began to utter the dread word “refund.”

Then a stage hiss penetrated the gym-din: “*Psssst... Vicki!... psssst... Vicki!...*”

Who contemplated fainting as she held onto Joss.

Who head-twitched “Up there!” toward the top of the boys bleachers.

Not letting go of each other, they warily ascended to discover a redfaced Crystal Denvour hunkering down by the wall, halfway out of her sundress.

“Can you help me? I’m stuck...”

“Um,” Vicki commented as she got Crystal’s zipper unjammed and refastened, while Joss screened them from display. But Crystal’s face was red with wrath, not shame, and she hadn’t been caught having a blackout makeout with her boyfriend... or anyone else.

“What happened? Where’s Rags?”

“*He’s* late *as* usual!” snapped Crystal, adjusting her ample breasts back into their cuppage. “And ‘what happened’ was I got haul-assed up here and squeezed more completely than a damn roll of Charmin! I thought at first it *was* Rags, acting boisterous—but I *know* what his hands feel like, and these weren’t them! I tried to yell, but everyone was yelling, and the groper kept on groping, and what was REALLY weird about it? The hands didn’t seem to, well, *belong* to anybody—”

Vicki’s jaw dropped. “OHMYGAHD—YOU TOO??”

*

Never had she been so grateful for a Jupiter Street sleepover than on that particular Saturday night.

Every time her haunches got the notion they were being treated like loaves of Wonder Bread and kneaded into wanton fishbait, she awoke to realize Joss was there beside her in the big brass double bed, making her *no-I-do-NOT-snore-you’re-thinking-of-Meg* slumberland noises. And the only Fingers to fret about was the cat snuggled in between them, who didn’t enjoy buffeting by restless bedmates.

So: try to settle down. And dream about Dave (if that truly was his name).

See him at last, after most of the night had passed. Standing in a gray hooded sweat suit and racing flats, under a streetlamp, with one hand raised as if to wave. Or was it to

beckon? *Here I am. HERE I AM. **HERE**—*

Sit bolt upright. Ease out from under the covers. Stealth-step to the aerie window. Lift the edge of the curtain, the side of the blind. And take a cautious peep over Jupiter.

No Great Red Spot. No *Space Odyssey* monolith.

But, yes! There *was* a gray profile beside the lamppost on the corner of Sendt Street. Lifting a hand before her goggling eyes.

“Whussmatt?” from the bed as Vicki stealth-rushed into and out of the bathroom, out of her jammies and into her track suit.

“(He’s here! Out there! That guy!)”

“The *groper* guy?”

“(Shhhh! No—the guy who said his name is Dave!)”

She had confided the whole happenstance to Joss, who sat up now and whisper-demanded, “(Where do you think you’re going?)”

“(Myeep!)” added Fingers.

“(To see him, talk to him.)”

“(Now??)”

“(Look, it’s after six.)” Brandishing a luminescent watch that showed 6:01, meaning the local curfew for kids-unaccompanied-by-adults had ended a full minute ago.

“(The *sun*’s not up yet—hold on a sec!)” Joss rose, slipping on a lightweight robe. “(C’mon—we’ll use the kitchen stairs—you go out the back door—I’ll watch through the front window.)”

“(Whaddaya mean, *watch*?)”

“(Do you *know* this guy’s not the groper?)”

“(Yes I do!)”

“(Well *I* don’t, which is why I’m keeping an eye on you both.)”

No disputing Jocelyn, even if it did put a damper on the romance of the moment. So they snuck down to the kitchen, Vicki stealth-exited and tiptoed round to the front of the house, glancing back at Joss’s windowframed face trying to see past the porch brackets and spindles.

Dash over to the lamppost then, as the beckoning hand lowered... to again shield his mouth.

“Up for a run?” came his voice from behind it.

“Yeah,” said eloquent Vicki. Turning to give Joss an exaggerated A-OK and two-fingered *run run run* signal.

You are entirely crazy! Joss sub-glared from clear across Jupiter.

Maybe so, she sub-admitted, but I can't help myself.

And off they ran up Sendt Street.

A few blocks north—a few blocks east—back to the north—back to the east—varying direction whenever a jogger or dog-walker or Mass-going pedestrian loomed on the horizon. Dave took the lead and set the pace, cutting Vicki no slack; not that a varsity L-Bug needed any, thank you. Vicki pulled ahead on this zig and that zag, to show off her fleet feet... and finey heinie, if truth be told. Off-limits to perv-pinches, but proudly hailable in the dawn's early light. (Redden tingle blush.)

Then, side by side at the deserted Maine Street Beach shoreline, they beheld sunrise over the Lake As Big As An Ocean.

Which, for Vicki, was no mere experience, but absolute hallelujah communion.

Which she felt more than ready to celebrate.

Which could certainly involve hugs and kisses.

Dave put his near arm around her shoulders—and raised his far hand to his mouth.

“How often do you stay at your friend's?” he asked, behindhandedly.

“Oh, most every Saturday night. And Sunday morning.” *Put down that hand and kiss me. I'll kiss you back.*

“We could go running every Sunday. If you don't mind being early.” *You wouldn't like kissing me back.*

“Early's good, I like early. If it's not too dark out.” *I bet I would. Let's try it and see.*

“Well—hate to leave. But I gotta be going.” *Trust me. Not a good idea yet. Be patient and it'll happen.*

“I'm not in any hurry.” If I told YOU that, you'd call me a “tease.”

“You will be when I run you home.” *I wouldn’t. You don’t have a mouth like mine.*

On the way back (now south, now west) Vicki deliberately reduced her pace, slowing Dave just enough for one of their conversations to continue:

“So... what’s your last name?”

“Solovay.”

“Is that like French?”

“Russian. Means ‘nightingale.’”

“Oh pretty! Er, I mean, that’s nice... Do you know *my* name?”

“Yep.”

“So what is it, then?”

“Don’t *you* know?”

“Yes, *I* do. Can *you* say it?”

“Yep.”

“*Will* you say it?”

“Vic-to-ri-a.”

“All right then. But call me Vicki. So where do you live?”

“Down south.”

“What, you mean like Florida?”

“Not that far.”

“Where do you go to school?”

“Same place.”

“*Aargh*—what is this, Twenty Questions?”

“Sure. You got ten left.”

“*What?*”

“Make that nine.”

“Oh... kay. Are you, like, seeing anybody?”

Glance toward her; then face forward again. “I am now.”

Awreet! “Can you see this somebody after school tomorrow?”

“Nope.”

“Later this week?”

“Not till Sunday morning. Early.”

“Why??”

“Got things to do I don’t want to do, but have to do. Five to go.”

“Hunh?”

“Five more questions. Except now it’s four.”

“That’s not fair! And not very nice, either.”

Silence as they changed from zig to zag.

“Have you stopped talking to me?”

“You didn’t ask a question. Till just now.”

“*WHA*—are we playing *Jeopardy* now?”

“Twenty Questions. You got two left.”

“Grrrr!... Okay: when’s your birthday?”

“Fifteen years ago.”

“(Sigh.) What’s your favorite color?”

Glance at her hair, then down at her eyes, which his deep-set regard caught and held.

Black, black, black—you know the rest of that song.

Ohhhhhhhh... GOOD answer.

They turned the corner onto Jupiter and came to a halt by the streetlamp (now off) across from Joss’s Queen Anne.

So does this mean you “love the ground whereon I stand?”

Sorry—you ran out of questions.

She could tell he was smiling behind that big long stumbling-block of a hand; and, emboldened by ballad-lyrics, she grabbed it and tugged it but couldn’t dislodge it. So drew it *and* his head down far enough to imprint a consummate buss upon the knuckles.

“Mmm,” went Dave.

“C’mon in and meet my friend, have breakfast with us—”

Dave used his free hand to stroke the side of her face, the nape of her neck, the length of her arm through its sleeve (*ohmyGahd keep going*) before bestowing a single squeeze round her waist. She mashed her face against his gray chest, scented like a lightly used sports sock full of pennies.

Then he detached himself and stepped swiftly away.

See you next Sunday. Same time in the morning.

See YOU in my dreams. Then, dipping into the past, she added: *Shouldn't that be the other way around?*

And, just as before from Jonathan Dohr, came the echo: *It already is.*

*

Laurie Harrison spent that Sunday glued to the phone for twelve hours straight, grinding the gossip mill.

Her call to Villa Neapolitan got fielded by Fiona at Robin's request ("*ANSWER THAT WILL YA??"*") while Boss Girl remained in a stew over Fat Bob's schnoz.

"(You'd think she thinks he's never busted it before,)" Fiona told Laurie.

"What?"

"(His nose.)"

"*What?*" went Laurie, cramming a bunny-ear into the receiver.

"(I SAID, YOU'D THINK—)"

"Okay okay okay, I'm sure you're right—but listen to *this*, Feef!—"

Rumors were being spread that the Dartles had [a] caused last night's "riot" by playing so badly, and [b] blown the gym's fuses by getting wires crossed while setting up. There was even scuttlebutt that [c] "damages" would be levied against the band, to compensate for fuse replacement and ticket refunds.

"(BUT WE DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG!)"

"*I know that, I was there!*" Laurie hastened to agree. "I'm just saying what I'm hearing. And that isn't all, either!—"

As gleaned from the grapevine, parents were calling Mrs. Driscoll (at home on a Sunday) not just to complain about the dance melee (promptly dubbed "Feedbackgate") but what'd happened to some of their daughters when the lights went out.

Laurie had details to dish about two of her 9-Y teammates. One, Samantha Tiggs, was very tall and sturdy-shapely and sporty-cute, but painfully shy around boys her own age, many of whom she towered over. Sammi'd declined to go out for cross country because it was coached by a man, despite Alex's assurances that Mr. Heathcote respected Ladybug

locker room privacy. Alex *had* been able to coax Sammi into “just passing through” the Back-to-School Dance at the comfortably familiar gym, wearing a comfortably informal gym-type outfit. This included a Free Swing Tennis Bra, whose contents got extensively double-faulted in the dark by a pair of audacious marauding hands... that didn’t seem connected to anyone’s arms.

Then there was Rachel Gleistein, who shared Becca Blair’s aspiration to be a future physician—with an imperial effect upon spectators, Rachel having Queen-of-Sheba looks and Hadassah-soirée deportment. Her resemblance to Becca figurewise was partly gaugeable at yesterday’s dance when the lights back went on, since the seat of Rachel’s skirt had been stuffed into the rear of her prim white underpants after the latter got yanked up into a divulgent wedgie. Which was the sort of milestone Rachel’d planned to reach on her wedding night, in the bridal suite with her fellow-doctor bridegroom, rather than in front of ass-aficionados at a school dance. Thanks to a perpetrator who’d seemed to be a roving pair of unattached hands; which offended Rachel’s scientific sensibilities almost as much as her maidenly modesty.

Laurie’d also spoken to 9-Z gropee LeAnn Anobile, who—though not the brightest bulb in any chandelier—was the first to conjecture whether her curves had been manhandled by the Phantom of the Sock-Hop. “Even though we, like, kept our shoes on to dance in.”

Fiona was glad to’ve been stranded on the platform, encircled by bandmates.

“(What about *you*?)” she asked Laurie. “(Did *you* get felt up?)”

“*No!* Well, not by any Phantom guy. I mean I *know* who was there with *me*—”

Mack “The Arm” Pittley: ewwgh. Fiona’d prefer abuse from a Phantom any old time. “(What about Alex?)”

“Oh I *hope* not!” gasped Laurie. “But no—she was racing around telling everyone to calm down, remember? And putting ice on Mr. Neapolitan’s nose? All the things she normally does. Whew! That’s a relief!”

So it was. If a single butt-slap freaked Alex to pieces, how would she react to indecent pawing from someone (or something) other than a stray dog at the animal shelter?

Fiona reviewed and rearranged last night’s puzzle pieces, paying less than full attention to Laurie’s gabble that Becca Blair hadn’t shown up till the “riot” was over, y’know

how she makes those fashionably late entrances, so *she* was okay though Laurie'd bet not even a Phantom would dare lay a finger on *her*—

“(Yeah,)” Fiona interrupted, playing impatient air bass on the phone cord. “(You talk to Vicki yet?)”

“I tried, but she'd left Joss's house when I called there and hadn't got to hers yet when I called *there*, y'know she runs back and forth between their houses now that cross country's started, it's about three miles or I should say five kilometers, the metric system y'know, and—”

“(OH KAY,)” went Fiona, spacing out like Moth. “(*I'll* get hold of Vicki. And then *we'll* come up with a way to break all this to Robin. Unless *you'd* like to do it?)”

“Ulp no thanks!” choked Laurie. “Um good luck with that Feef see you guys at lunch tomorrow by now—”

(Click.)

*

And *click click click* went Vicki's angry heels at quarter to noon on Monday the 13th, as they marched from 9-Z to Home Base and down to the main office. With Joss and Fiona and Robin attempting to keep up, and met midway by Sheila and Britt out of 9-X. Only Joss had ever seen Vicki this infuriated before, and Joss hadn't seen it for such a duration; so everyone was treading carefully, even Robin Neapolitan who wrote the book on umbrage.

Yesterday evening Vicki's blissful sunrise-on-the-beach glow had gotten doused by Feef's briefing on Laurie's tidings. Sleeping solitary that night, she'd been plagued by ghostly floplimbed puppets jerking fitfully at her pajama bottoms—now up into a wedgie, now down into a moonie, *nuhnuhnuhnuh*—

Running to school that morning, Vicki'd brought Alex up to date about unpleasant truths, guesses and misgivings. Alex's radiance had clouded over, but she was more resilient than a year ago and didn't break stride as she said:

“Things *did* get out of hand—but none of it was you guys's fault. Except maybe Robin's papa falling off the platform, and *he* was the only one who got hurt—I mean, badly enough to need bandages. Mrs. Driscoll knows that, doesn't she?”

“All *I* know is what she told Joss’s dad yesterday on the phone—the whole band’s supposed to go see her during free period, to ‘plead our case.’ At least that’s what it *feels* like, and OOH IT MAKES ME MAD!”

So Alex ran carefully the rest of the way to the girls locker room, where they freshened up and Vicki put on her most mature summer dress: a sleeveless mauve wrap-look (that thankfully hadn’t gotten wrinkled in her knapsack: hooray for polyester) plus a pair of open-toed pumps whose heels now *click click clicked* into the faculty conference room.

Mrs. Driscoll, slightly worse for wear after a Sunday full of parental calls, took the head of the long polished table; Mr. O’Brien and his goatee took the foot; the dance chaperones lined up on one side, while the Rosa Dartles arranged themselves on the other. Sheila and Joss flanked Robin, planning to seize her if necessary to prevent mayhem; Vicki sat between Joss and Fiona, with Britt on the end acting bored.

The band had resolved to let Vicki do most of their talking. And Vicki, who would’ve been petrified to go through this alone, drew irate strength from their bolstering presence—and from reminders that *Gran can see what I see and hear what I hear*.

Crisply and concisely she responded to questions from the adults, recounting what she’d witnessed. Seldom hesitating to name names, or to use frank language in describing what she herself had undergone (which caused most of the men in the room to cough and avert their gaze). Joss made an occasional sub-suggestion, and Feef muttered prompts that only Vicki could hear; so she felt like a true executive providing a managerial affidavit.

“We know about some other girls who got hassled just as bad or worse,” she grimly concluded, “and we’ve told them to come talk to you about it—confidentially, of course.”

“Of course,” the Principal nodded, then shook her dreadnought head. “I’m sure I speak on behalf of the entire school in conveying our deep regret at what happened Saturday night. Such behavior by an audience is inexcusable, and you have my word it will be investigated and punished appropriately. Does anyone have anything to add?”

“Yeah, *I* do!” said Robin, making the other Dartles cringe. Yet she kept her temper, channeling rage into righteousness: “There was a lotta *little* girls there, twelve-year-olds at their first dance, and they hadda put up with goings-on like THAT? Well, I say we oughta start having self-defense classes here—and if the school won’t do it, we’ll organize ‘em

ourselves!”

Mrs. Driscoll expressed noncommittal interest, thanked the Dartles for their time, and sent them off to no-damages-levied lunch.

They didn’t quite carry Vicki on their shoulders to the cafeteria, and Britt peeled off separately before they arrived; but Victorious Vindication was in the air—mingling with the aroma of lasagna and green beans.

Then Laurie Harrison came wobbling up to the bunch’s table with eyes like glazed doughnuts.

“I—I—I—I—”

“Laurie? Are you all right? What’s happened?”

“She told off Kim Zimmer!” reported Alex, who’d heard all about it from Y teamers. Kimmy had snortled some allegations about Samantha Tiggs’s bra, Rachel Gleistein’s panties, and their accessibility by the general male public. Laurie—stabbed with guilt for yesterday’s scandalmongering—had stood up in front of everyone to rebuke and berate her, leaving Kim totally donnerblitzened.

Kim spent that lunch period in a forlorn washroom stall, wracked with angst (having already been informed by Gigi that no freshman cheerleader should play in the Band, even though it wasn’t a Marching Band; but the Zimmers had spent a fortune on her flute and would refuse to let Kim quit) while Laurie was being bunny-lionized. Rachel and Sammi both wanted her to dine with them, and from that day on Laurie started tablehopping from one lunch group to another like Alex did. She began to acquire aplomb and self-esteem, and best of all Sammi and Rachel helped Susie convince her she could do far, far better than Mack “The Arm” Pittley. Whom she duly dumped: the first time in her life that Laurie Harrison’d initiated a breakup.

Mrs. Driscoll officially exonerated the Dartles of any responsibility for Feedbackgate (aka Fondlegate) at an all-school assembly, laying the blame instead on disruptive male chauvinism. As would be further exemplified when an aberration in a layered blonde wig, with double-baseball bustline and tennis-racket guitar, sought Dartle membership:

“HI-ee, Weirdona! I’m Fradley Faussett-Majors.”

“(Dragley Falsetto?)” Feef mutter-snarked. “(Big surprise.)”

“Maybe Dragley’d like to add a false set o’ TEETH to that getup,” interjected Robin.

“Oh gee, girls! Don’t *knock the daylights out* of me!”

BATTLE OF BANDS TURNS ROWDY read a minor squib in the *Vanderlund Herald*, ascribing all the turmoil to electrical malfunction. Vicki suspected Ms. Yehle of planting this whitewash, but kept her yap shut about it after Ms. Yehle urged her to join the *Cicada* staff. Yearbook editors needed just the sort of demeanor Vicki’d shown in the conference room:

“A strong steady hand is essential—one that can sense precisely WHAT TO CUT—like a surgeon, or a seamstress, or a hairstylist—without taking the false snip that can drop a bloody EAR to the floor...”

Vicki and Joss got the reluctant Crystal to tell Mrs. Driscoll (confidentially) about being haul-assed and Charmin-squeezed, though not about Crystal’s making Rags feel culpable for her ordeal by showing up late for the dance. Consequently he *tried* to be more punctual and attentive, even plunking his Ragamuffin buns down at the bunch’s cafeteria table when Crystal began lunching there.

Fiona regarded Rags’s attendance as though he’d intruded into a boudoir. “(Do you *mind*?)” she mutter-objected—doubly so after K.C. Battenburg started taking the stool next to Sheila-Q’s.

“*Hey!* We’re trying to have an argument here!” Robin told him.

“’Bout what?”

“Your horning in!”

“He’s *good* at that!” Sheila giggled, trading lover’s-nudges with K.C. “Don’t worry, Robbo, you can cuss your head off around him.”

“And I’ll keep my mouth full while you argue,” K.C. vowed, suiting deed to word by chomping his cheeseburger.

“Okay then—let’s talk self-defense,” Robin told Sheila. “Which hurts most when it’s *rammed* into a guy’s groin? Your foot, your knee, or your fist holding a roll of nickels?”

Gagging groans from K.C. and Rags.

“(Let’s find out,)” exhorted Fiona.

Their first self-defense seminar took place in the Carlsbad-sized cellar at Villa Neapolitan. No males were allowed; even Fat Bob stayed upstairs. Besides the bunch and

new friends like Crystal, Rachel, and Samantha, a few sisters and cousins and even mothers came to hear Charlotte Pauk lecture on the subject:

“All right, you girls, you may not wanna hear this? But back in the day, see, I looked a lot like you do now—and I didn’t just get hit on, I got *clobbered*. Not just by boys my age either but all sorts of men, and some of ‘em were disgusting. Maybe you think things’ve changed for me, and I don’t hafta worry about none of that anymore? Well, I’m here to tell you, see, that things’ll *never* change. Ain’t that right, moms? Not for me *or* for you girls—so long as we got these” [*solid clap of hands on boobs*] “men and boys’ll act like *dogs* around us. You can train good dogs to sit and beg and roll over, see, but the mean ones you got to be ready to get mean BACK AT, if you get my meaning. See?”

By the end of the seminar, consensus was that a knee would be the handiest hurtmaker—though a roll of nickels, of course, always came in handy.

*

The Auldforest Woods were in Willowhelm, a mile or so south of the Vanderlund border. Auldforest was not a park but a “preserve,” which Joss said sounded like God had put it up in a celestial Mason jar. Actually it’d been saved from countryclubbification by Angus Auld of Ayrshire, who’d condemned golf as “the worst atrocity foisted upon Scotland and the world”—after pitching his own clubs into the Firth of Clyde, then emigrating to make a fortune as a railroad pioneer in The City. When golf pursued him there in the 1890s, Angus retreated north to his Willowhelm estate and studied High Calvinism while collecting hundreds of tin toy trains. Dying heirless in 1915, he deeded Auldforest to The County on condition that “no infernal links be ever laid out or located upon it.”

Thus: 200 acres of sanctified forest preserve, coveted by developers as Willowhelm billowed into a bedroom suburb. Lyman T. Green had to make do with the periphery, where he built a popular model train museum for Angus’s collection; the New Sherwood Shopping Center, between the Woods and the Expressway; and Downsborough Junior High on Auldforest Road. DJH and VW were archrival schools, and this year Downsborough was launching a girls cross country program—laggardly copycatting Vanderlund, as per usual.

On Saturday the 18th (a *very* long week after VW’s Back-to-School Dance) the Ladybugs ran down Oakapple to Paillis Road, then east across the Expressway overpass to

Clubroot Drive and along it to Sendt Street, then south into enemy territory (boo-hiss unless you were headed to New Sherwood for an afternoon's shopping) till they entered Auldforest Woods. The preserve had picnic groves, birdwatching spots, trails for hiking and biking, plus in winter a famous sledding hill called Dead Man's Slope, under which Mukatapenaise the Potawatomi chief was said to be buried. There was also an unpaved 1.5 mile jogging path, on which the Downsborough Lady Whitecaps would host their first dual meet next Thursday—already whining that it wasn't *fair* for them to run against the Ladybugs, since VW was a three-year school and DJH had only sevvies and eighters. Alex Dmitria generously offered to let them enlist freshmen from Willowhelm High, but no one there would revert to junior-high status for as long as a single hour.

Even so, the L-Bugs didn't hold a prodigious advantage. This year's team keenly felt the absence of Rhonda and Lisa and Mumbles and Big Sue; only three of last season's varsity seven remained. And though they were captained by Alex the Gazelle, with good reliable sprinters in Vicki, Sheila, and up-and-coming Susie Zane, their star power shone a lot less brightly. Or maybe not a *lot* less: Laurie'd prevailed upon Samantha Tiggs to give cross country a whirl, though Sammi still blushed from head to toe around Mr. Heathcote, and took her post-practice showers draped in a towel.

The Auldforest jogging path was unlike any the Ladybugs had ever trekked as a team. Four girls could run it shoulder to shoulder, but the bordering trees were so big and close, their branches forming such a dense canopy overhead, that the way seemed narrow. Alex the Girl Scout could name every tree and shrub and flower growing around them, including invasive ones like buckthorn and thistles. Vicki could identify only oaks, maples, and predictable willows by the Auldbrook, which babbled at the L-Bugs as they tromped over its footbridge.

Until last month, this bridge and brook and path and much of the rest of these woods had been overrun every weekend by stoners and dealers, partaking in what journalists called "a smorgasbord of drugs" as well as rowdy harassment of the preserve's more temperate patrons. So hectic had it gotten that an elite posse of forest rangers conducted a summerlong crackdown, chasing many (though not all) of the wastrels westward to Busse Woods or Deer Grove. Now things were relatively pastoral again, except for the trees being so tall and near

and thickset: hiding who knew what from uneasy sight. Vicki for one was glad to be traveling in a group as they circled a hollow dell reminiscent of Eeyore's Gloomy Place (rather boggy and sad) and returned to the Sendt Street entrance—running smack into the Lady Whitecaps, about to commence their own boo-hiss practice.

Mr. Heathcote greeted Downsborough's coach while Alex shook cordial hands with Whitecap captain Lillie Guldbaer, who was already a champion swimmer and so had no business running cross country too.

"(I hear she never wears a suit in the pool if she can help it!)" Caroline asked Susie to tell Karen Lee.

"(D'you think that's a bad idea?)" Amelia whispered to Chloe. "(Wouldn't you say that'd let chlorine do stuff to your *insides*?)"

"Vicki! Sheila!" called Alex, telling Lillie Guldbaer, "These are two of them."

"Hey, are you guys with that Darbies band?" inquired Lillie, looking too damn blonde, built, and bright-eyed for an eighth-grader. "Oh wow, I heard you caused like a *riot* at a dance last week."

"That's not *true*—"

"It wasn't our *fault*—"

"Do the Darbies play parties?" Lillie wanted to know. "How much do you cost? Would fifty bucks be enough?"

*

Nine dollars per musician (after deducting the manager's 10%) ought to be adequate, considering the band would probably play for a slice of cake apiece. But Vicki had more immediate concerns that Saturday night:

"I'm your very best friend, right?" Joss was asking.

"Course you are!"

"Well then, understand why I don't want you going out with That Guy again till I get a chance to talk to him, face to face."

"I can't ask him in here at six a.m., can I? What would your dad say, and Meg?—and *Toughie*?"

“I’m not saying it has to be six a.m. Does he turn into *stone* when the sun comes up, like a troll? Why can’t we meet him somewhere later in the day? Don’t you *want* to see him whenever you can?”

“Yes,” Vicki moaned. “But he said he’s got things to do he doesn’t want to do but has to do.”

“What things?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Did you *ask*?”

“I ran out of questions.”

“You’re a *nut*, you know that? You ought to by now, I tell you often enough! He could be a drug dealer! He could be a drug *addict*! He could be a sneakthief or cat burglar, stealing stuff to sell or swap so he can support his drug *habit*!”

And Joss wouldn’t be talked around on jollied out of this huff, especially when Vicki’s painstaking efforts to *not* wake her at dawn on Sunday proved futile.

“...gr-r-r...”

“(I’m sorry—I’m sorry—back to sleep now—sweet dreams—lullaby, lullaby—)”

Joss, balefully scratching herself through a baggy Edgar Stubley T-shirt, got up and trudged over to the aerie window. “(He out there?)”

“(Um, yeah.)”

“(You going?)”

“(Just for a run. I’ll try to talk him into coming back later, when he can. *If* he can.)”

“(This is insane, you know.)”

“(Yeah... but kind of fantastic.)”

Throwing on jeans and a sweater, Joss accompanied Vicki out and around to the front porch, from which she stared undauntedly at the gray silhouette by the lamppost across the street. Where Vicki joined it, gesticulating earnestly, pointing back toward Joss—at whom the shady shape waved...

...as it spirited Vicki away.

South they headed this time, past Clubroot and into Willowhelm. “Are you taking me to see where you live?”

“Home away from home,” said Dave.

Straight down Sendt they went, to the sign on the chained gateway stating
AULDFOREST WOODS / FOREST PRESERVE / CLOSED SUNSET TO SUNRISE.

“I was just here yesterday with my cross country team! How long will we have to wait before going in?”

Dave, dexterously clasping her slender middle, vaulted them both over the chained gateway and Vicki past the rapture point as they set off into the Woods. Risking arrest by forest rangers (for a little while longer, at least) or a contretemps with a covert dope peddler!

Vicki, breathing fairly hard for so early in a run, said: “We’ve got a meet—here next Thursday—four o’clock—I’d really like it—if you can be there—I mean here—so can you?”

“Wish I could.”

“Oh pleeeeeease?”

“Sorry.”

“But aren’t we *ever*—gonna see each other—except on Sunday mornings?”

“Told you. Got things I don’t want to do—”

“—but *have* to do, yeah yeah yeah—like what, exactly?—do you go running with a bunch of *different* girls?”

“(Snortle.) Nope.”

“So what then?”

“Earn my keep.”

“Your keep? Do your folks make you work?”

“Got no folks. Not real ones.”

OhmyGahd is he an ORPHAN? Living in a foster home with cruel persecutors, like David Copperfield and the Murdstones? Did they force him to wash empty bottles while he suffered secret agonies of the soul? Vicki shed hot tears at this image, faltering as they reached the footbridge, babbling like the Auldbrook below it:

“Y’wanna come live with us? (shniff) we’ve got an extra room (shniff) my sister hardly ever uses (shniff) she could sleep in mine we used to share (SOB) I don’t want you to be all hopeless and miserable from having to work with Mealy Potatohhhhes...”

Hey. Hey now. Don’t cry...

I don't mean Amelia Quirk, you don't know who that is, oh Gahd I must be a mess, stop looking at me—

You're the loveliest girl in the world.

Away from the bridge he led her then, off the trail toward Eeyore's Gloomy Place, into what Alex called a copse of ashes—perhaps because they rose from the dew like plumes of smoke. And there he took her in his arms and held her mistily enfolded, his sharp-tipped lips now on her cheek, now on her brow, now sinking into her silky wedge-cut hair: each kiss making her reverberate like the peal of a carillon.

*

Vicki's parents hadn't humiliated her for a commendably long time, but they jumped in with all four feet when Lillie Guldbaer wanted to book the Rosa Dartles for a party. Before the band could seal the deal, Ozzie and Felicia convened the other Dartle ancestors at Burrow Lane to thrash out just which/when/where gigs could be undertaken—For The Girls's Own Good, and Because We Say So.

Fat Bob Neapolitan came, and Martha Weller and Raymond Murrish and Gloria Quirk (though not her husband Ross, who had the evening shift at the Grand Parade) and Dr. Hilde Krühler (though not her husband Hoyt, who had the evening weather to report). The Volesters ushered them into the lower-level family room, from which festive wingding sounds soon wafted to annoy the Dartles, banished upstairs when not taking turns to slink down and eavesdrop.

"They forgot all the hell about us!" groused Robin. "We coulda brought our instruments and played a damn party gig right here!"

The girls were in Tricia's room, which Vicki was tidying in case Dave changed his mind and, somehow, *did* move in. Though tidying wasn't easy when three of your friends were slouched on bed, chair, and rug, watching a fourth friend brass-boldly doff her outer clothes to try on Tricia's high school wardrobe.

"Sheila! I'm trying to clean this place up!"

"So stick my stuff in a corner. Ooh I like this one!" said Sheila-Q, admiring her bod in the mirrored closet doors after wrestling on a red dress that'd been a mini on Tricia, but didn't quite cover Sheila's crotch.

“Yeah, that’s a nice *top*,” Joss observed.

“So I’m tallish! *You’re* one to talk. Oog!—uh, can you help me take it off? Careful now—*don’t tear it!*—”

“How often do you say that to K.C.?” wondered Robin as they extracted Sheila.

“Your bra’s got pit stains, Quirk. Haw! Made you look!”

“No you *did* not ‘cause no it *does* not, this is brand-new. I’m breaking it in before Mealy can steal it.”

Britt edged through the bedroom door, rolling heavy eyelids at Miss Unmentionables.

“Have they booked you to jump out of the party cake?”

“Yukkity yuk,” went Sheila, selecting a marginally longer green dress.

Fiona heaved a sigh and got up to take her stakeout turn. “(Anything happening?)”

“Somebody’s put on a mambo record,” said Britt.

“Oh *Gahd!* That means my dad’ll dance with all your moms!” cried Vicki. “I am so sorry, you guys!”

“Mambo on shag carpet? This I gotta see,” said Joss. “Is there film in your camera?”

“If not, grab Goofus’s.”

“Tell him we’re taking cheesecake shots of Quirk here.”

“Will your sister mind if I borrow this? Like until further notice?” asked Sheila, shake-shake-shaking round green booty at the closet mirror.

“She might, if she ever stopped by long enough to check,” said Vicki. “That week she was here in June? I think I saw her maybe fifteen minutes total.”

“Lucky!” chorused Sheila and Britt, burdened fulltime with Mealy and Fleur.

“*Yes I’m ready / so come on Luckie,*” belted Fiona, settling back on the bed as Joss pre-empted her slinkdown turn. Serenading the room with the opening number from *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*, her bandmates chiming in when the complex chords and lyrics permitted: “*I’m gonna go get Luckie, I’m gonna go get Luckie...*”

*

Lillie Guldbaer’s fifty-dollar overture was rebuffed, since Lillie couldn’t guarantee an adult would be on her party premises. The Dartle parents clucked a-plenty about that, making it an ironclad proviso for any future gig.

As if any'd be forthcoming *now*, the girls thought; but then Fat Bob reserved the Grand Parade B&G for a private shindig—all grill, no bar—on the Monday before Robin's fifteenth birthday. The band was invited to make FASTER! LOUDER! BRASHER! music there within realistic bounds—no cover charge, yet orders could be taken for Dartle T-shirts (and buttons, stickers, and decals: Britt had been busy) while birthday gifts were acceptable so long as cash didn't exchange hands.

The place was packed, the show went well and even better in embellished retelling, so the Dartles gained a greater name for hardcore bad-assery. Which almost offset Fleur Groningen's *not* engaging them to play at her Homecoming Queen election-celebration; nor were they asked to perform at VW's Halloween Dance. (Which subsisted on prerecorded entertainment, meaning Chinese Fire Drill also got skunked, so it was almost worthwhile.)

But other party-planners approached the Dartles at school, at the Green Bridge, at cross country meets—*Aren't you with that all-girl band? Did they really call the cops to bust you guys? Can you play at my house a week from Friday?*—though each deal had to be fielded by a Dartle parent.

"I bet the Ramones don't hafta run everything past *their* daddy and mommy!" Robin carped.

On the cross country circuit, the L-Bugs did tolerably well. Vicki finished fourth on the varsity squad, after Alex and Sammi and Sheila (who ran extra fast to outstrip Mealy) and before Susie, Karen Lee and Caroline. Laurie missed the cut but wasn't devastated, cheerfully applauding her friends and stepsister, then going out for basketball with Sammi and Alex even though she'd spend the season mostly warming benches. Meanwhile Rachel Gleistein got Laurie involved with Red Cross Club, where her "powers of communication" were invaluable in organizing the annual canned food drive. Everyone in the bunch was proud of Laurie, even those who still thought her dumb.

Once cross country was done with, Vicki focused on *Cicada* and Mixed Chorus and Student Council (to which she'd been re-elected as homeroom rep, to counteract further underhandedness by Sell-O Fayne) plus pesky distractions like homework and household chores.

She got asked out periodically. Buddy Marcellus wanted to feed her burgers; John Alphonse proposed they go see *Shout at the Devil*; Tony Pierro mentioned part-time openings at his various workplaces, and willingness to help Vicki fill them. Even Mr. Erickson seemed to call on her more often than other girls, and smile more appreciatively at her answers—or her panty lines, whose visibility resisted concealment no matter what she wore.

“Guess you’re just fated to be a sexy tease,” Joss remarked at Burrow Lane, after Vicki wrenched off and stamped on the latest in a series of ineffective half-slips.

“Well I don’t wanna be! A *tease*, anyway—I can’t compete with Carly or Ms. Tays.”

She turned down all date/job offers, citing lack of available time, which was true enough—though, needless to add, not the sole reason. There were eleven others: the eleven Sunday dawns she shared with Dave Solovay.

Sometimes they ran through Auldforest Woods; sometimes to Maine Street Beach or Spanish Castle Square, around the fountain modeled after Seville’s Torre del Oro. Vicki could never lure him back onto her own inland turf, west of the Expressway—“Got to keep near the Lake,” he’d say, giving no explanation why. So they remained close to the shore, where running was like sailing or soaring or swooping to alight and bask in the sunrise, greeting daybreak with a little cockcrow.

(So to speak.)

On such occasions Vicki wished she were bolder, more assertive, like Sheila with K.C. or Crystal with Rags, or Carly with her playing field: swapping clinchy smooches in the halls and stairwells. She yearned to throw herself on Dave’s neck (a phrase found in books) and twine her legs round his waist (as depicted in *other* books) while they stretched out on the beach, or by the footbridge, or IN the fountain with waves sloshing over them like in *From Here to Eternity* (which she and Joss had watched on TV).

But instead of Hawaii or Spain they had the northern ‘burbs in November, and temps falling along with the leaves. Vicki was obliged to raid that bottom bureau drawer for thermal undies, and fortify her upper self with gloves and scarf and stocking cap before sneaking out. Which may have enhanced her cuteness, but didn’t quite evoke passion ‘neath the surging tide.

“Warm me up?” she politely requested on November 21st, their eleventh Sunday, as she hopped from one foot to the other: both wearing waterproof gym shoes over wool socks over cotton socks, yet still numb.

Dave—bareheaded, barehanded, in his regular racing flats and sweatsuit with hood *off*—picked her up and held her firmly. Not as tightly as Vicki would’ve enjoyed, given her layerage; yet warranting a deeeep smoky exhalation in his copper-scented ear.

“I won’t be able to come next Sunday,” she murmured. “*Running*, I mean, around here—Thanksgiving weekend, y’know. My sister ‘n’ grandparents’ll be at my house, and Joss’ll have family at hers too. But I could get out if we do it—*run*, that is—around Burrow Lane? West of Lesser Park? Next Sunday we could maybe run there? And over to the Green Bridge and around my school—”

We’ll see.

Oh yay!

She pressed vestal tummy and thighs against his amplified awareness, with a POUND POUND POUND of her heart as she timidly THUMP THUMP THUMPED with her hips—

“—go west on Panama to Lesser Drive take that about a mile to Foxtail turn right then left on Burrow Lane it’s a cul-de-sac I live at 3132—”

I said: We’ll see.

Which would’ve been a bummer note, had his hands not stroked slowly down till each cupped a pantylined nethercheek. Handling these with gallant tender consideration—no pinches, no geeses, just strong smooth steadiness. To-have-and-to-holding till Vicki’s thumps quickened into from-this-chafe-forward—

FRICION—WHAT IT MEANS... WHAT IT MEANS... WHAT IT MEEEEANS—

OhhhhhmyyyyGahhhhhhhddddd...

(So who needs Hawaii or Spain?)

*

Tricia’d last been glimpsed in August on her eighteenth birthday, for which her family’d had to visit Saugatuck where she was doing summer stock.

“Hey,” she’d said then.

“Hey,” Vicki’d replied. “Happy birthday.”

“Cut your hair?”

“Yeah—*six months* ago.”

“Looks nice.” (Her intonation implying that “nice” was no longer a goal on Tricia’s looks-agenda.)

(Big Princess Smartysnoot.)

She did fly home for Thanksgiving, together with MomMom and PopPop on their first-ever trip by plane. PopPop needed a heap of convincing why travel by car was not an option; MomMom’s “Walter! The roads! The weather! Your age!” didn’t do the trick, but Tricia’s “We fly or I don’t go” got them onboard.

“Hey,” she greeted Vicki at the airport.

“Hey. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Cut your hair?”

“Yeah—last *February*.”

“Maybe you should grow it out.”

Oh really? I’ll have you know me and my hair made out with a real honey of a guy last Sunday—SERIOUS making out, by Spanish Castle Fountain, where tons of people would’ve seen us if it’d been later in the day.

That’s what Vicki wanted to boast, but Tricia limited sisterly chitchat to demanding the whereabouts of her swiped green dress. Not that she was inclined to ever wear it again; yet no dragon kept a more comprehensive inventory of its material possessions.

“How should *I* know where your stupid old clothes are?”

Dragon-blast of emerald glare: “It was IN that closet last June.”

“Well I’ve got my *own* clothes in my *own* closet—and you know I don’t look good in green. You *used* to know that, anyway.”

Fleeting mutual remembrance of Tricia teaching Vicki what colors did and didn’t go with a cherish-and-treasurable olive complexion.

“Oh forget it—I don’t have time for this.” Sashaying off to the bathroom like a Big College Hotdog.

“You think *you*’ve got troubles?” Joss unsympathized over the phone. Her Aunt Sally was in town too, with five children who got quartered in their cousins’s rooms like Redcoats

before the Revolution. Joss had been assigned twelve-year-old Georgette alias Georgy Girl, who spent the whole long weekend acting neurotic:

“Do we HAVE to be on the top floor? What if the roof leaks? How do we escape if there’s a fire and we can’t get to any stairs? And what is WITH Beth? Who is this ‘Amy’ she keeps talking about? Why does she keep using the word INVISIBLE?”

“Jeez, I wish you were here,” Joss lamented.

So did Vicki, though only in part for Joss’s sake.

At any rate, on Sunday the 28th she occupied her own bed at Burrow Lane till digitally buzzed out of it at six a.m. Out of bed, out of the house, out of the cul-de-sac... finding no gray silhouette waiting anywhere near the vicinity. Finally taking a virgin-spinster run by her lonesome self in Lesser Park.

He could’ve shown. He knows your address. You gave him your phone number, too—he could at least have said he wouldn’t be here.

Didn’t letting him squeeze you That Way count for ANYTHING? If he really, truly, thinks you’re the “loveliest girl in the world”?

No sooner do they call you that, than they vanish forever.

And this one didn’t even give you a lousy Pet Rock.

*

So: Thanksfornothing. Followed by a very cold week of below-zero windchills that frigidified body heart and soul; then a Friday afternoon snowbardment snarling the Expressway, till it took Ozzie three hazardous hours to commute home from The Lot.

Toughie again sent Lamar to retrieve Joss from VW, bringing her back to Jupiter Street safe and sound—and discontented: “Just ONCE in my life, is getting stranded in a car overnight with Lamar Twofields too much to ask??”

So: no sleepovers for the second consecutive weekend. Joss semi-promised to rise at dawn on Sunday to check for Dave, but she and Vicki and Fingers were all aware that *nobody’d* be leaving that brass bed till nine at the earliest. The aerie had a phone but not its own line, and if Vicki tried calling before sunrise she’d wake Mr. Murrish for sure—or, worse yet, Meg.

Picture poor Dave out by the lamppost, snow piled up past his knees, waiting for someone confined three miles away. But, hell! It was his own damn fault! Vicki had no clue where he lived (other than “down south”) or with whom (other than not “real folks”) whereas *he* could contact *her* whenever he chose. And the fact that he *didn’t* was scarcely an encouraging thought.

Another snowstorm struck on Monday, making the rest of that week’s Winter Concert rehearsals superdelightful. It was such fun slogging down Eugene G. Green Road behind Alex, for whom Zero Hour was practically sacrosanct and late arrival akin to blasphemy:

“C’mon, let’s get cracking!... let’s get the lead out!... let’s get a move on!... hey, wouldn’t it be great if we could cross-country *ski* to school?”

(Spiffy.)

And then, slog done, such fun to stand on the Mixed Chorus risers and croak sixty minutes of holiday tunes. Culminating in Mrs. Weller’s yearly homage to Burt Bacharach—this one being “Turkey Lurkey Time” from *Promises, Promises*, and so ootsie-cutesy-cunning it should’ve been a solo for Spacyjane Groh, onstage by herself. While the rest of Chorus spent Zero Hour warm and dry at home.

Vicki felt blah all week long: the crummy sort of blah that doesn’t worsen into unarguable illness, yet won’t clear up and go away. Goofus claimed she’d come down with swine flu—“You’ve had all the symptoms for *years!*”—but Felicia diagnosed it as a teenage case of winter doldrums.

“When you’re little, snow is something to play in. As you get older, it’s more of an obstacle. And (sigh) that’s true about more than just snow.”

“So... it’ll *never* get better?”

“Well, darling, as you grow up you find ways to cope.”

“Can I start having a glass of wine with dinner?”

“Nice try, Brownie.”

By Friday afternoon everyone was sufficiently acclimated to the weather for Joss to resume sleeping over at Vicki’s, on the air mattress she liked to inflate by mouth with Dizzy Gillespie gusto.

“Mmmmmmm, that’s good lung power!” (Sub-adding *You okay?*)

(*No, I'm new and lost.*) “We’re ‘nice’ girls, right?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Why can’t we fall for nice guys, then? Ones we can *go* with, ‘n’ who’ll *go* with us—all day every day of the week?”

“*I’m* looking for a nice ‘brutha.’ Maybe I’ll find him when we take Alex to that Bull-onies game for her birthday. But even if he falls for me at first sight, what’ll happen if he ‘n’ I try getting lovey-dovey anywhere around here? We’ll have to go move someplace like France.”

“Don’t you dare!—not unless I can go with you.”

Felicia wouldn’t authorize their emigration, but did drive them (Firebird tire chains clanking) as far as Jupiter Street on Saturday. Immense relief for Vicki to see the Queen Anne again—and, on the opposite corner, an untenanted lamppost.

I won’t look out the window tomorrow morning. Let HIM come knock on the 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 I’d be a wonderful girlfriend and these are not unreasonable things to wish for.

Even if I am too old to believe in Santa Claus.

Um... thank you and amen.

*

And then: the twelfth Sunday. On the twelfth day of the twelfth month.

She awoke shivering, though for no worse reason than Joss and Fingers were a couple of blanket-hogs. Before tussling back her share, Vicki detoured to the aerie bathroom (wincing at the toilet seat’s chilly touch) and glanced at the trumpet-shaped novelty clock that hung above its tiny nightlight.

Straight-up vertical line: little hand on six, big hand on twelve.

I won’t do it. I don’t have to. I can’t stand this.

But still.

Stealth-step. Curtain-edge. Blind-side. Just one cautious peep...

At a world still black with night, yet white with snow.

And a gray lamppost beside a gray profile lifting a long gray hand. To display what appeared to be a knight errant's shield—if those were constructed like Flexible Flyers.

Oh, for crying out loud...

"It's too early to go sledding," she told him.

"Missed you too," he replied.

She hadn't intended to get washed or dressed. Hadn't brought gym shoes this inclement weekend, so wore boots that were sinking into white stuff on the street corner.

He laid the Flyer at her feet, then used that gray hand to shield his mouth once again. "Get on," from behind it. "Give you a ride."

"Gahd, don't you ever listen? It's—too—early."

"After six. C'mon. Got something to show you."

Her clothes would get soaked, she'd contract pneumonia, no way would she climb on this bundle of boards—

—and go zooming down the snowpacked sidewalk as Dave ran ahead, towing the sled at the end of a long knotted rope. How could he RUN in this weather, in those thin racing flats? With no skidding, no wading, no freezing despite its being maybe twenty degrees out?

"Duck," he said, dropping the rope and leaping over the Auldforest gateway as the sled sailed below it, Vicki flattening herself with a strangled shriek and barely making clearance.

I can't be doing this, it doesn't feel a bit romantic, just c-o-l-d and creepy and like it'll stay dark forever—

He regained the rope, dragging her now toward Dead Man's Slope: notorious as a hill where "Flexible Flyers came to die." And, sometimes, take their riders with them—hurled off on highspeed bumps, pitched against tree trunks or into ravines. It was not a place for the fainthearted even at the height of day, much less for interlopers before sunrise, so no sledding was allowed till noon.

We're not here for sledding.

"Wh-what? Then wh-why...?"

"Told you. Something to show."

Hauling sled and occupant to a highpiled snowbank at the side of the hill. There, behind a heavy-laden clump of bushes, leaned a large white board; and behind that was a—

“Snow cave,” Dave unveiled. “Dug it for you. Big enough for us both.”

Bending down, reaching in, snapping on a Coleman lantern. Igloo interior, near at hand; shadows further off.

Was THIS where he lived? Buried under snow like Parnell Travers the Astral Slacker? Enticing girls into his lair for luded-out orgies? WAS he a junkie, a candyman, the wicked Willy Wonka of Willowhelm?

“Go on. Look inside.”

But this was Dead Man’s Slope, there’d be a tomb full of bones, that old Indian chief’s skeleton bricked up like “The Cask of Amontillado”—

“Please... don’t make me go in there...”

“It’s safe. Good roof, good walls. Packed firm. Pads to sit on. Vent hole for breathing.”

I’m scared...

I’m here with you...

Bent over at the icy threshold, reaching out his free hand, while from behind the unextended other came words of a song:

Ochi chornyye, ochi strastnyye,

Ochi zhguchiye i prekrasnyye...

Black eyes; passionate eyes; burning and beautiful eyes...

Grasping her then by the multilayered wrist—tugging her through the hole and into the cave—

NO!!!

Trying to recoil, to break free, to plant bootheels on the hole’s hardpacked snowsill, only to have them slip out from under in a slapstick pratfall as her arms flailed and his caught hold only to be pulled down on top of her along with the Coleman lantern irradiating Vicki’s first full view of Dave Solovay’s uncovered face—

OhhhmyyyyGAHHHHHHHDDDD

—mouth an abandoned graveyard of bucktoothed yellow fangs all jagged and crooked encased in barbaric wire dripping spittle he sprayed saying things she couldn't hear over the POUND POUND POUNDing in her ears head heart soul pinned on her back him spreadeagled atop pressing unbudgeably down that mouth an inch away those teeth braces spittle can't so much as squirm—

—till she recalled the consensus about knees being handiest.

To cross-garter this twelfth night.

And then take off running, endless relentless running like a terrified kittycat.

Somehow, sometime after that, she got back to Jupiter on her own without killing herself. However much she might want to die.

She'd been given her own Queen Anne key by Toughie (“*You need to be able to come and go, child*”) but this hellish morning her gloves were so palsied she couldn't fit the key in the lock, and was about to collapse on the mat when the knob turned and the kitchen door swung open.

Joss?... Meg?... Mr. Murrish?...

Nobody there.

Except for Beth, way over at the stove. Keeping her back to Vicki as she owlishly remarked: “We got up early too. Care for some scrambled eggs?”

*

Ten evenings later, Fiona Weller sat disgruntledly in a Home Base washroom stall—the same one Kim Zimmer used for angst-wracking—and wondered if Dr. Drogue, her gynecologist, could ever prescribe some med with no side effects.

Such as rampant constipation.

She checked her watch, weighing the odds of doing any “business” (ewwgh) before intermission ended. It was bad enough *being* here at Winter Concert, playing clarinet instead of electric bass, without having any surplus afflictions.

Last night had been even worse: taking her “log jam” (ewwgh squared) down to The City for an honest-to-godawful NBA game. And it wasn't like she and just-turned-fifteen Alex Dmitria were bosom chums; a polite invite and gracious beg-off should've been satisfactory. Except that Alex personally appealed for her to come:

“I need you there to keep me from yelling so loud I’ll lose my voice before Winter Concert. *You’re* the expert on how not to do that! Please, Fiona?”

Then Joss had privately seconded this request, saying Vicki was in a deep dark funk (as Fiona’d noticed) and ought to have as many friends around her as possible—especially Feef, their expert on this topic too.

Then Robin got into the act, reversing her hell-no-not-gonna-happen stance, adding that if *she* could go see a team that’d lost every game it played in November—thirteen straight!—then Spooky damn well better also.

So she and her “cloggage” (ewwgh cubed) *had* gone, to supply uppage for Vicki and downage for Alex and sidekickage for Robin. While a crowd of extremely tall, extremely sweaty men bounced basketballs back and forth and back and forth and back and forth into interminable double overtime.

Fiona’s presence hadn’t even made a measurable difference: Alex cheered her lungs out, then had to swill honey and lemon so they’d be in working order for tonight; and Vicki remained adrift on some separate plane of existence, far more dismal than the one frequented by Parnell Travers.

Fiona knew what life was like on the Dismal Plane: innumerable fathoms below any other.

Ain’t nothing deeper than whaleshit. Even unshat.

(Speaking of which...)

(Sigh.)

Go through flush-and-handwash motions. Pondering what she—hardly a little ray of sunshine—could do to rekindle the stars in Vicki’s eyes. Which led toward a line of speculation that Fiona didn’t want to pursue just then. Particularly with the second half of a Winter Concert to sit through, in her current cloggy state.

At least the finale might *not* be as excruciating as everybody’d feared. “Turkey Lurkey Time” had driven Band and Chorus to the brink of mutiny, before Amelia Quirk stepped up to volunteer an accompanying dance by herself with Karen Lee Bobko and Caroline Appercy (a pairing at which many marveled) wearing leotards, Santa hats, and shakable tailfeathers.

It took the combined forces of Joss, Robin, and Fiona to dissuade Sheila-Q from murdering her showoff sister every time this got rehearsed and “Taters” (as she’d asked to be billed) practiced accepting bouquets.

“You just *had* to call her ‘Mealy Potatoes,’ DIDN’T you?” Sheila seethed. “Like ‘Mealy-Mouth’ wasn’t *accurate* enough already?”

(Turkey Lurkey with Tater Tots.)

Fiona left the washroom, wiping hands on a coarse brown paper towel, and was very nearly cured of constipation right there in the corridor when her way was blocked (as it were) by a strange guy. An ashen beanstalk of a guy who had somber-pensive eyes, flowing-alooof hair, and an aura of inscrutable stillness.

They stared each other down for a long brooding moment.

Think like Vicki—talk like Robin—laugh like Joss—

“(I can scream louder than anyone in this school if I have to,)” Fiona muttered.

The wayblocker went her one better, responding through shut-tight lips:

Do you know Vic-to-ri-a?

*

Pay no attention to that girl behind the curtain.

Who was not listening to the Band play selections from *Mr. Magoo’s Christmas Carol*, but heard only a perverse voice from a year past:

Every time you feel what you think is pain, you get prettier; and that only brings you more pain. I’m hurting you now, talking this way, and you’re prettifying before my eyes.

If that were true, she must be the loveliest girl in the whole damned world.

For ten days now, people had been telling her “How nice you look.”

Not *feel*, though; nobody’d mentioned that.

Nor had anyone been informed about the twelfth of the twelfth. Not even Joss, though she could sub-sense enough to stay nearby and ask nothing—two crucial attributes of a very best friend.

As Vicki, again and again, by day and by night, relived that scene at the hole in the slope.

Now she valiantly saved her own life and virtue; now she botched and bungled and misconstrued. Now her knee merely lifted long enough to wriggle out from under; now it dealt a vicious mortal blow, deservedly or not.

Either way: pain. Klumsy Klutzer pain. However much it became her.

The Band finished its medley (*will winter ever be warm as it was then?*) and Mixed Chorus returned to its risers. The curtain went up and Crystal Denvour began her *a capella* solo, “King David” as sung by Judy Collins on *Bread and Roses*. The rest of the Chorus provided ahhh-ahhh backing vocals for this *pièce de résistance* (as Mrs. Weller accented it) while Vicki tried to résist absorbing the *pièce*’s lyrics.

Why couldn’t they have picked a different king, like Cole or Arthur or Wenceslas? Why did it have to be DAVID—a sorrowful man with no cause for his sorrow, which a hundred harpists couldn’t charm away? Why did he have to walk alone in a moonlit garden where a nightingale “jargoned” in a cypress tree?

Thou little bird (King David asked) *who taught my grief to thee?*

And as Crystal’s prizewinning soprano swooped and soared above the ahhh-ahhhs, Vicki’s grief welled up to blur vision and endanger mascara.

Willing the tears not to spill or trickle, she tipped her head back a few inches... and thought she saw a silhouette loom grayly just inside the balcony door.

So, while King David hearkened to the heedless nightingale’s song till his own sorrowfulness was gone, Vicki recited silent lines that Mr. Erickson had made them learn in Language Arts:

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen

And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget

What thou among the leaves hast never known...

(Lots of snortling during class discussion—“What sort of drink? What kind of leaves?”—and lots of scribbling by Vicki of the word *nightingale* in her notebook.)

Solo over, Crystal stretched out her arms to share the ovation with Chorus and Mrs. Weller. Then the house got brought down by the Bobbsey Triplets, dancing to “Turkey Lurkey Time,” and Vicki seized this opportunity to dab at her lashes—

—but when she peered again at the balcony, no silhouette could be seen.

Of course.

And yet...

As soon as the final curtain call was taken, Fiona raced up onstage like a varsity Ladybug, hustling Vicki off to a secluded corner of the wings.

“Feef? What the—?”

Panting: “(There was this guy... out in the hall... and he asked me... if I knew you... and he gave me... this to give you... said he made it.)”

Vicki goggled at the sack she was holding. “He was here? In the school? You talked to him? Where’d he go? Did he limp? Or, y’know, kind of hunch over and walk careful?”

Fiona’s turn to goggle as Vicki jabbered that maybe he *had* been Jonathan Dohr but got all humpty-dumptyed in some horrific accident and put back together again like *The Six Million Dollar Man* except they’d run out of funds before they could finish the mouth—

“(VICKI—)”

“—what?”

Rattling the sack: “(He said to tell you he made it.)”

Eyeing the sack: “Anything else?”

Thrusting the sack: “(He said to tell you Cool Yule.)”

Dodging the sack: “Anything else?”

Placing the sack in Vicki’s hands: “(Yeah... he said... to tell you... good-bye.)”

Not—not for keeps?

Dunno—he didn’t say.

Back welled the tears as Vicki opened the sack and found a little figure sculpted out of copper tubing. With a key on one side, which when wound made its arms and legs move up and down, like a jogger’s.

At the bottom of the sack was a Hans Christian Andersen picture postcard. One side showed an old Chinese man in a silver bed wreathed in black, weeping as he watched a bird

on a green branch outside a bright red casement. The other side bore four words executed in Magic Marker:

Till we meet again

28

Born to Spittlecure

“Why did you name me after THIS??” Vicki demanded, shoving an open textbook under her mother’s nose.

Felicia glanced down at a Bassano photo of Queen Victoria, who appeared distinctly unamused. “Actually, we named you after your Daddy.”

“???”

“He’s never really liked the name Oswald. He wanted to be called ‘Vic’—‘Vic Volester’—and if our first baby’d been a boy, we were going to name him Victor. But I wanted to name a girl after Elaine Staehle, my best friend in college. (Which reminds me, I owe her a letter.) She’s Elaine Patricia, so we switched that around for Patricia Elaine. Then when *you* were coming along, we agreed you’d be ‘Vic’ whether boy or girl.”

Vicki tried to envisage herself as a boy named ‘Vic’ and dismissed it as too gross for contemplation. “Where’d you get Lorraine from?”

“A pretty song by Nat King Cole—‘When it’s raining I don’t miss the sun / ‘cause it’s in my baby’s smile / something-something-something, My Sweet Lorraine.’”

“‘Something-something?’”

“Well, I’m not a lyrics encyclopedia like your sister. Who insisted we name Baby Number Three after a *Sound of Music* star, Julie Andrews or Christopher Plummer. We said okay to Christopher but followed it with Blaine, to rhyme with Elaine and Lorraine.”

Flinch from the old wound, never fully healed, of Julie-the-Raindrop’s having been nipped in the bud by Goofus-the-Poopheap. Return to your original point: “I think I’d rather

be just Lorraine than go around knowing I've got the same name as THIS."

"She didn't always look like THAT, you know," smiled her mother, pulling Elizabeth Longford's *Queen Victoria: Born to Succeed* off a shelf. "She was only eighteen when she took the throne, just a few years older than you are now. And after her coronation she ran home and gave her dog a bath! Here, read this—it might make you feel prouder to be a Victoria." *And stop moping around every minute of the day*, Felicia didn't add aloud.

"Fine," Vicki sniffed, taking the paperback upstairs along with her Lang Arts textbook. She'd read this stupid biography instead of Mr. Erickson's Victorian poetry assignment, or doing *any* of her other homework, and flunk all her classes and have to repeat ninth grade. Oh yes, she'd read a whole damn chapter every time she "took the throne"—

Don't be foolisss, Miss.

Went a voice in her head, with an accent.

But not an English accent, so probably not from the jowly monarch on the cover.

Of a book with, let's see... 635 pages! Thicker almost than *David Copperfield*! And reading it won't give US any crown to wear when WE'RE eighteen! As we'll prove by flipping the thing open to a passage picked at random, and find:

*I NEVER NEVER spent such an evening!!! My DEAREST DEAREST
DEAR Albert sat on a footstool by my side, & his excessive love & affection
gave me feelings of heavenly love & happiness, I never could have HOPED to
have felt before!*

(Whoa...)

(Queen Victoria did It? On a FOOTSTOOL? And wrote about It afterward?)

(Maybe we'd better start at the beginning.)

And soon be immersed in *Born to Succeed*. Tagging along with the little princess known in childhood not as Vicki but "Drina" (short for Alexandrina, making her an Alex too). And what a lone lorn childhood it was—her father promptly dying, his casket jammed in the vault entry; then the beneficial influence of Lehzen the Baroness Governess being overshadowed by Sir John Conroy's dastardly sway; then the race to reach her eighteenth birthday and come-of-age before King William IV pegged out; then her triumphant

succession, instant dismissal of Conroy (“Yes!” went the Vicki in Vanderlund) and adoption of Lord Melbourne as mentoring father-figure; then the Lady Flora Hastings scandal, the Bedchamber Crisis, the head-over-heels tumbling for Prince Albert—

*So excessively handsome, such beautiful blue eyes, an exquisite nose, and
such a pretty mouth with delicate mustachios & slight but very slight
whiskers: a beautiful figure, broad in the shoulders & fine waist—*

—it was as good as a TV soap opera.

More accessible, too; Vicki seldom got to watch *The Young and the Restless* or *Ryan’s Hope*, or *A Lover’s Question* on which Delia Shanafelt’s big brother Schuyler was a semi-regular. But she could dip into *Born to Succeed* any time she chose, so long as she didn’t get caught by meddling teachers.

This fixation provoked a bit of fun-poking by the bunch, who addressed Vicki as “Highness” and “Majesty” and asked if the cover photo was like looking in a mirror. Yet they were all glad she’d begun to recover from her deep dark funk, to revivify their lunches and lives during a truly brutal January.

Even for seasoned Cityland dwellers, the winter that year was HARSH. Temperatures stayed below freezing for *forty-three days* after Christmas, a record stretch; and twelve of those days were subzero. Almost five feet of snow fell, and the Lake As Big As An Ocean nearly froze over.

Against this arctic backdrop pranced impish Carly Thibert, who spent the holidays in Barbados and came home a coffee-colored angel (no tan lines, natch) in the company of a dusky devil called Gumbo. This infernal creature was listed on the *Cicada* yearbook masthead as “Morey Krauss ... Design Editor,” ranking above “Vicki Volester ... Business Manager”—which wasn’t half so bothersome as Gumbo’s similarities to Kyoop Minsky. Same tight swarthy skin, same tight curly hair, same lips full *and* tight *and* spouting ¿*Que pasa, Señorita?* lines that might’ve been charming from an authentic Latino, but were simply obnoxious coming from a Krauss.

Post-Barbados, he compounded his Gumbohood with Gross Uncle Doug’s complexion—same hue and texture as a buttered cigar—while presenting the *Cicada* staff

with souvenir coconuts, and pitching a piña colada yearbook theme to Ms. Yehle. He and Carly were clearly meant for each other, as shown by their unplanned Caribbean rendezvous and returning to VW joined at the hip—an anatomic marvel, given that Carly was on 9-Z and Gumbo on 9-Y. And together they maintained their beachy skintones that bitter January: Carly using a sunlamp, Gumbo by lavishly-applied bronzer lotion.

(So no, we're not talking Young Prince Albert here.)

Vicki felt aversion but no alarm till the lunchtime Joss craned her head Gumbowards, sighed at length, and said: "Jeez... he's so *different*," in an ominously interested way.

Luckily Laurie Harrison wasn't dining with them that day; she would've taken Joss's molehill observation and mountain-sized it jiffy-quick.

"What do you mean?" Vicki probed.

"Dunno," mused Joss. "Back when I was on Y team he seemed so—*colorless*, I guess, compared to now. For somebody called 'Gumbo,' that is."

Mutter-snort from Fiona. "(Scrape off all that Man-Tan and he'll be a honky again.)"

"Oh shut up, this isn't about honkiness—ooh! *nice* cupcakes!"

"*Joss!*" exclaimed Vicki.

"You bet she has!" slavered Rags Ragnarsson, as Crystal head-bobbed "Why thank you!" and finished unwrapping the dessert prepared by her freelance *pâtissier* mother: *petits gâteaux* frosted to look like peeled tangerines.

"Those better be free samples you're offering, Denvour," Robin graciously remarked from the end of the table, where she and Sheila-Q were arguing whether Gary Gilmore should be executed by firing squad or prolonged exposure to the song "Disco Duck."

"No worries," Crystal assured them, divvying the treats into dainty segments.

"Here's a little taste of sunshine for everyone. Just remember to book my mom if you have a party or whatever, and want to get happy-fat really fast."

"I bet she can use the DOUGH," commented Sheila, and K.C. Battenburg (always her best audience) let fly a crumby guffaw.

"Hey, man! Chew it, don't spew it!" Rags advised.

"Quirk, we oughta have you crack jokes at Gary Gilmore all night—that'd kill him quicker'n anything," said Robin.

Vicki smiled at these sallies, at the cupcake slice's tangy savor and hint of winter-free (though frosting-topped) existence; but her teeth turned cold at the sight of Joss re-craning toward Gumbo's table, and again sighing "So *different*..."

Fortunately, semester finals squelched all reveries for a blustorous week. The bunch held most of their cram sessions at school during free period, since the weather discouraged offsite get-togethers. (Some of their houses, like Villa Neapolitan, weren't hard-winter domiciles; even the Plexiglas Palace was showing signs of strain.)

Vicki had to limit her *Born to Succeed*-dipping to a few pages at bedtime, after her nightly phone-in with Joss; but she still carried the book everywhere, saying *If THAT Victoria could be a Queen and Empress, I should be able to get a B in Algebra.*

Which she did, coached by Alex and also Robin, for whom equations were a tributary branch of auto mechanics. Vicki scored a second B in Earth Science, despite momentary flashbacks (a stairwell wrangle here, a lakefront sunrise there) during the exam. And she aced all her other classes, including Typing where extra credit was earned by unwedging Laurie's poofail from behind an Olivetti roller.

"I was trying to get my paper in straight, and leaned too low!"

Vicki's bunch racked up satisfactory-to-excellent report cards, but Carly Thibert took the opposite route and tanked across the board. Not from being a dummy—she could be sharp as well as cute—but by treating junior high as a nonstop partypalooza.

"Carly-in-Heat," the Sister Dopesters tartly called her, yet Vicki felt more neighborly after three semesters of bumping locker elbows. She and Carly'd always had a sort of proximate friendship, if you overlooked that *IS SHE FLIRTING WITH ROGER??* afternoon a year ago; and it was painful to hear Carly, in shniffles, describe how her father'd blown his stack:

"So now I'm grounded like *forever* as if I'm a prisoner in some *dungeon* or locked up in a *convent* 'cause I can't see Gumbo or ANY OTHER guy till I'm I dunno like *fifty* 'n' even when they call on the *phone* I can't answer just let it ring like I'm a *deaf* person or in solitary *confinement* except I have to keep coming to this rotten old sucky *school* and do nothing but *study* and never have any fun *again* so I might as well be *dead*—"

"(Sounds like you're taking it in stride,)" interjected Fiona.

"Oh don't YOU start picking on me!"

“(Hey, be glad you don’t have Da Mare haunting your dreams.)”

Which The City’s late Man-On-Five had been doing to Fiona’s each night since his pre-Christmas demise. Clad in a shroud, Hizzoner vowed to not lift the killer ice wave till Feef composed him a suitable requiem:

We shall reach greater and greater / platitudes of achievement...

“And now my dad says he’s gonna make me see a TOOTer!” blubbered Carly.

Provide me a place among the sheep / and separate me from the goats...

Professor Thibert, who chaired the Foreign Languages Department at Lakeside Central and was one of the foremost authorities on Bohemian literature outside Prague, could usually be twisted round Carly’s pinky finger. But he found across-the-board tanking unacceptable, especially from her acting like a wenchette; so immediate steps had to be taken on academic *and* behavioral levels.

Thus, the TOOTer.

Keiko Nakayama, a middle-school honor student back in Yokohama, had easily qualified for Startup Academy when her family moved to Vanderlund; but they couldn’t afford Startup’s tuition and felt insulted by its condescending scholarship offer. So Keiko’d gotten enrolled at VW, assigned to 9-Z, and bombarded with curiosity—hey, a real live Japanese girl!—that faded when she didn’t eat raw fish with chopsticks or wear exotic geisha outfits. Every day she dressed like a recruit in some old-fashioned women’s navy: sailor-collared middy blouse, knee-length pleated skirt, sensible kneesocks and serviceable loafers. Not the most flattering ensemble, particularly when topped off with antiquated hornrims.

Keiko spoke what *seemed* to be flawless English, though you couldn’t be sure since she pitched her volume even lower than Fiona and outbashful’d even Sammi Tiggs. When questioned about boys and dating in Yokohama, her reply (if heard right) was an apologetic “I am not allowed to know.”

The girls of 9-Z felt sorry for her and rapidly lost interest. Alex, of course, did all she could to welcome and befriend Keiko, prevailing on her to visit VW’s International Club (product of last year’s French and Spanish merge) and give a presentation on Life in the Land of the Rising Sun. Keiko brought a carousel of slides and ran the projector with downcast hornrims, but Alex had to narrate the travelogue off Keiko’s fastidious index cards.

Since her father was serving as a Japanese instructor at LCU while working on his doctorate, Professor Thibert was acquainted with the Nakayamas and considered Keiko the perfect academic/behavioral role model for wayward Carly. Who sullenly planned to mock and flout all TOOTery efforts, till she faced Miss Shining Example at their first confab—

—and (being sharp as well as cute) detected a latent streak of envy pining beneath Keiko's muted dowdiness.

"I bet your folks don't ever let you put on makeup or show yourself off, hunh?"

Dejectedly: "No. It would not be permissible."

"But you'd like to try it, right? Get all dolled up, fix your hair, do your nails, then go out and have a ball? That means, y'know, like go to a party—"

"I understand what you are saying," Keiko frowned. "Why say it, though, when my parents would never give permission?"

Chipmunk-cackle: "S'pose we make sure they don't ever *find out*?"

All at once Carly overcame a tendency to tardiness on school mornings. For this Keiko was praised—and rightly so, since the girls were going in early for clandestine restylings of Keiko into a Wild Western babe. Not in one fell swoop (Carly being crafty as well as cute) but little by little, making Keiko look less and less repressed and more like Carly's cousin Lola of fake ID fame. Only during school hours, though, retreating back into her frump-shell after the final bell; but for those seven-and-a-quarter hours each weekday, Keiko got to emerge in ways she'd scarcely dared dream of before. And Cinderella-san started having an Occidental ball, with Carly Godmother providing the bippity-boppity-boo. Girls resumed taking notice of her; boys went from careless glances to loitering nearby, enlarging their Carly-cluster to encompass Keiko too.

(A notable exception was Artie Rist the Anarcho-Syndicalist, who'd been spellbound by the original uptight Keiko. This accounted for his inattentive nonresponse on the first day of Civics, when Mr. Koehler'd requested that moment of silence for Senator Dirksen. Artie, instead of staging a filibuster against the Wizard of Ooze, had been busy staring holes through Keiko's chaste white sailor suit. But when she started borrowing Cousin Lola's clothes, revealing sexy bits of breast and thigh, Artie turned up his anarcho-nose and flung up his syndicalist-hand with a fresh series of truculent "BUT *WHY?*?"s.)

Efforts were mounted by increasingly jealous girls to matchmake Keiko with Slim Jim Khim, to whom she did not cotton. (*Korean* grandparents? Please!) All her flirt-courage was reserved for dallying with towheads—tall, brawny, muscular towheads.

“Maybe she’ll steal Mike Spurgeon away from Gigi, and he’ll change his band’s name to ‘Japanese Fire Drill,’” Vicki forecast.

“Don’t joke about guys getting stolen!” Joss scolded. “That’s too much like slavery!”

She’d just completed a week riveted to the TV watching *Roots*, which convinced her she MUST have African blood in her veins. Not on the Barnabas side, which wasn’t even Black Irish; but maybe Murrish really did mean “Moorish,” or was derived somehow from Mauritania or Madagascar or Mozambique—

—or, better still, from *Mandingo*.

The fact that Joss and her sisters all had blue eyes, fair skin, and hair ranging from blonde to light brown didn’t count for squat as an imagination-obstacle.

Nor were there any inconvenient known facts to hamper fantasy. Raymond Murrish had been orphaned early and raised in Decatur by a great-aunt not unlike Betsey Trotwood. All he knew for certain was that his forebears had German connections, though who and how and when were long forgotten.

Joss, delving into the encyclopedia, invented a great-grandmother and gave her a backstory of suitable adventures. These soon filled three speckle-covered composition books, each paragraph being shared with Vicki as it was penned:

In Westphalia, in the suburb of Übercologne, a girl was born (precisely a century before Joss) named Johanna Desdemann, who joined the Rhenish Missionary Society and embarked for Southwest Africa in 1884. There she met, fell for, and repeatedly gave herself to local potentate Kaggen Khoikhoi, who blew a torrid kudu horn (immensely seductive on summer nights) but was scorned as a “Hottentot” by German colonists. Johanna made feverish plans to go native in the bush with Kaggen, till she was betrayed by fellow missionary Cunegonde Zimmer and forced to break tryst with her true love! Expelled from the Rhenish Society, sobbing into corset covers as she packed her steamer trunk, Johanna could hear Kaggen playing a kudu threnody (not unlike “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat”) that forgave her no-show even as it bade farewell.

En route to exile in America, Johanna was befriended by kindly Romulus Murrish. They got married on shipboard, settled in Decatur with Rom's Trotwoody sister, and had a son named Remus whose blue eyes would be passed down to future generations. But when Johanna passed away at three score and ten, she had Kaggen Khoikhoi's name on her lips and the echo of his kudu horn in her ears.

Joss seriously wanted to call this epic *Toots*.

"*TOOTS?* Are you dedicating it to Carly and Keiko?" asked Vicki.

They agreed on a more romantic retitling—*The Horns of Africa: One Toot Is Not Enough*.

"Now we have to figure out how to get Lamar to pose for the illustrations."

"As if Toughie'd let him take his shirt off in front of you—"

"Hey! Lamar is a *grown man*. He can strut around barechested anywhere I like."

Joss took pardonable pride in writing a full-length novelette while still in ninth grade; and though it wasn't sophisticated enough for professional submission, she wanted it to be typed up, mimeographed and circulated. *If* a receptive market was out there. Some of their bunch (Robin, for instance) weren't well-known for racial sensitivity. And the burn inflicted on Joss by the real-life "Cunegonde" was nowhere near assuaged, even after upward of two years.

Still: *if* they could find a readership for *Horns*, Vicki would handle its promotion and distribution as she was already doing for *Cicada* '77. Being the yearbook's Business Manager meant a lot of hard work as the staff moved into high gear this new semester. Even though she could dole out sales and advertising tasks to assistants, supervision was necessary to ensure the assistants didn't shirk or lallygag.

On Summer Council, Sell-O Fayne'd done the delegation *and* the lallygagging.

Cicada's Editor-in-Chief took a far more hands-on approach. "The Big Picture's propped on my easel," she liked to say, "and I intend to fingerpaint the hell out of it."

Petula Pierro ("Call me 'Downtown!'") was kin to diligent dutiful Tony Pierro, but in a half-step-once-removed way. Rather than take a slew of part-time jobs to help support her side of *la famiglia*, Downtown invested every cent of her pocket money in art supplies, fishnet stockings, studded accessories, and thin French cigarettes. Her freehand abstract still

lives (some indeed fingerpainted) had won regional contests; she smoked more than anyone at VW except Mr. Folz; and she *hack hawk* hobnobbed with Fiona Weller about the revolutionary new bands cropping up in England—groups actually calling themselves Buzzcocks and Sex Pistols:

“—goes by ‘Sid Vicious,’ he’s got a grudge against the Damned and threw a glass at ‘em onstage, but missed and put this girl’s eye out—”

“(—yeah, he’s the one who drummed for Siouxsie and the Banshees on their jam of ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ and ‘Deutschland Über Alles’—)”

“What kind of name is PETULA for a paisan?” Robin Neapolitan wanted to know.

“It’s *‘Downtown,’*” she was reminded. “And most of all in the suburbs!”

Paisan Downtown pledged to book the Dartles for that spring’s *Cicada* Dance, if springtime ever came and a majority of the staff could be won over, which would be no easier than with Summer Council. Crystal Denvour could again be counted on, here as one of the yearbook copyreaders; but again they’d be opposed by two of the Duckweight Clique—Nanette Magnus (Activities Editor) and Delia Shanafelt (Underclass Editor).

Vicki’d had minimal interaction till now with the Duckweights, who were all on Y team; even in Summer Council they’d been on separate task forces. But thrown together with two Duckweights on *Cicada* and two others on Frosh Board, Vicki began to do some wary surveillance (without benefit of duck blind) of Those Who Must Be Made Of Wood, And Were Therefore Combustible Witches.

“I suppose *you* must be Jo Murrish’s FRIEND,” Nanette scoffed at their first vis-à-vis run-in.

I suppose YOU must have a fat Scandinavian SKANK trapped inside that skinny body, Vicki sub-replied—loudly enough for Nanette to bridle.

Given free rein, she’d probably be a very pretty plump girl, vying with Crystal or even Becca for top zaftig honors. Yet Nanette allegedly starved and puked herself into thinness, barfing not from occasional nerves but the deliberate insertion of birdflipper down throat. (Blecch.) Hard-ass tennis in warm weather and racquetball in cold reinforced her bone structure, lending bounce if not shine to her ash-blond coif. A nail-it-to-the-door Lutheranism glimmered in Nanette’s eyes, which were shaped like downward crescents of

icicle-gray—but, try as they might, couldn't chillify Vicki Volester. Not after she'd endured a freeze-dried decade with Melissa Chiese, compared to whom (odd twinge of Reulbach pride) Nanette Magnus was a mere Swedish marshmallow.

"I'm *one* of JOCELYN Murrish's *friends*, yes. I bet YOU know Kimmy Zimmer."

"We do!" Delia Shanafelt beamed.

Catch Delia on her clique-free own and she could be sociable company, if you had a high tolerance for simpering. She was the youngest of a brood distinguished (like the House of Hanover) by milky-blue, slightly-bulbous blinkers, and a predisposition (like the House of Grass Roots) to *sha-la-la-la-la-la* live for today.

Take firstborn Schuyler Shanafelt, aka "Skye Shane": dropped out of UCLA Law School after just a month, because he'd been cast as Enrico on the hot new soap *A Lover's Question*. Take eldest daughter Kaylene Shanafelt: entered Sweet Briar as an economics major and exited, two years early, as a catalog swimsuit model. Take their father, Colfax Shanafelt: resolute that *one* child follow in his corporate-attorney footsteps, and pinning big-ticket hopes on Delia as a mover and shaker—

—so far mostly of body and pompons at VW sporting events.

Not that cheerleading disqualified her from lucrative prospects; no one at VW could be More Likely To Succeed than squad captain Becca Blair. Delia, however, was burdened with thoughtlessness, and in every sense of the word. Seldom did a day pass without her blurting "SorryIforgot" or "OopsguessIdidn't." Sometimes she was the only one discomfited by this (e.g. neglecting to close curtains in her well-lit bedroom before undressing) but often others were inconvenienced too, if not given the old heave-ho.

Take trustful Laurie Harrison: for a few weeks of seventh grade she'd thought she'd found a kindred spirit in Delia. They'd made a lot of best-friendly plans that all slipped Delia's mind when more popular offers came her way, and Susie Zane never forgave her for Laurie's ensuing heartache. Nor for the "denial hives" Delia caused a year later by openly canoodling with fickle Chipper Farlowe:

"They weren't! He wouldn't! She's not like that, not really!" Laurie protested.

"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 persisted. “They’re *all* like that in that clique of snobbysnots, that won’t even admit they *know* you!”

“We *do* know Kimmy Zimmer!” Delia would beamingly remember to tell Vicki.

Maybe so, but not as well (or ill) as Joss did. Nor as aware as Vicki’s own guts became, of being angst-wrackedly teeth-gnashingly quack-toxically HATED by the Cunegonde in question.

Kim had given her a wide berth since their first altercation at the New Sherwood, the summer before last. But now Vicki was elected second-semester Secretary of 9-Z, making her chief recordkeeper for the entire Z-Wing, and placing her on the Freshman Executive Board with eleven other niners—among them Kim Zimmer, new Secretary of 9-Y, who sat gimleting stilettos into Vicki through Frosh Board’s inaugural conclave.

“Did she *say* anything??” Joss flared.

“Naah, just blew steam out of her nostrils. I gave her my ‘Loopy the Enforcer’ squint and hummed the Pfiester Park Pherrettes Phight Song—”

“How does *that* go?”

“Um... *dum de dum dum / you can’t scare ME / Pherrettes whup ducks / all the damn time?*”

Joss applauded, while expressing doubt that Feef and Britt could now retire from the lyricwriting business.

You can’t scare ME. Yet a menacing sensation pursued them out of school that Friday and into the weekend, “phight” as they might to disregard it. Joss finally faced it head-on after they watched *Saturday Night Live* and shiver-jumped under the bedcovers. Toughie wouldn’t permit camping out by a roaring fireplace (“*Sends all the heat up the chimney*”) so the girls buried themselves and Fingers beneath a heap of quilts on the aerie brass bed, huddling and shuddering. Normally they would’ve rehashed Fran Tarkenton’s performance as comic host and Jane Curtin’s ripping open her blouse on live TV, but tonight menace seeped into the aerie like frosty fetid fog.

“(I know why she hates you,)” Joss murmured, not naming the *she*. “(It’s ‘cause I didn’t shrivel up and disappear when she stabbed me in the back. If I *had*, she coulda forgot she did it—pretended I moved away or ceased to exist. But I didn’t. I found *you*, and you

saved my life—)”

“(—shut up. You saved mine first—)”

“(—*you* shut up. And we got us a really good bunch of friends, all sorts of good people, while *she*’s stuck in that little clique of)” [lowered-even-from-a-murmur] “(bitches. That *she* chose to hook up with. And stabbed *me* in the back to do it. But in *her* brain, y’know, it’s all *your* fault—‘cause she can see how much better off I am now...)”

“(...not as better off as *I* am...)”

Myeep went Fingers: as in close-your-yaps-and-go-to-sleep-already.

Which they did.

To share Joss’s incoming dream, via Vicki’s sub-sense.

Watch little JoJo and Kimmy hit it off in kindergarten. Watch them go through the years as a double act, Lefty and Righty playing in harmony, never knowing what it was to *not* have a best friend you could entrust with every private thought and secret. Kim’s parents might fight over all things great and small, staying hitched only for her sake (meaning, of course, that *she* was to blame) and Jo’s whole world might come crumbling down—grandparents crippled, mother dying, then a year of pre-Toughie housedumpers. Yet no matter how grim life got, Kim ‘n’ Jo knew they could rely on each other without question or qualm.

Even in sixth grade, when Jo was the first to need Kotex *and* Playtex. Kim was still the cuter one, the graceful one, the adept one at gym where Jo was awkward—and, thankfully, not *too* overdue in receiving her own ticket to the puberty train.

But sixth grade also saw the arrival at McGrum Elementary of Virginia Leigh Pyle—or, as she pronounced it, *Pahhhhl*. Who hailed, if “Gigi” was to be believed, from some locale between the Mason-Dixon Line and the Rio Grande—or from Refineryland southeast of The City, as Meg Murrish ascertained from Gigi’s older brother Riley. Depending on who you listened to, their father had either moved the Pyles north after selling a cottonpickable plantation, or because he’d made good as a chemical engineer with CB&I and traded in his blue collar for white.

Jo started referring to Gigi as “Dixie Cups,” saying her drawl was as bona fide as the tissues stuffed in her bra.

Kim agreed, but cautioned that *they* should keep such affronts to themselves: “We’re better than that.” Anything Gigi Pyle could do, K’n’J could do better, *and* without her haughty airs-and-graces hassling of those further down the pecking order. (Such as poor Laurie Harrison, who got dubbed “Harelip” just because she looked like a bunny.)

It was also during sixth grade that K’n’J first read Ruth Doan MacDougall’s *The Cheerleader*—Jo for its evocative nostalgia, sardonic humor and uncensored sexuality; Kim because she could picture herself as the rah-rah center of all eyes, idolized by girls and fantasized-about by boys.

This image blurred, though, when you factored in Gigi Pyle, who unlike her Scarlett o’heroin *was* beautiful—raven hair, magnolia skin, Evergladesy irises, and all that preteen cleavage (natural or augmented). How could *you* stand out in comparison? Who’d gaze transfixed at you if *she* was around?

When they began junior high, Kim wanted Jo to try out for the sevvie drill team with her (and that damn Gigi). Jo declined, saying it was too much like gym, but came along to root for Kim—and provide a shoulder to sob on, after an ill-timed sneeze spoiled Kim’s trial march.

“Don’t cry, you still made alternate, you’re *part* of the team—”

“That... isn’t... HELPING!”

And so far as Kim was concerned, Jo kept not-helping all through seventh grade. Pulling pointless stunts like elongating her name to “Jocelyn.” Hanging around with people who didn’t count, like Robin “Angry Acne” Neapolitan and Fiona “Complete Whackjob” Weller. Assembling a ludicrous *black guy* tapestry of posters and photos in her bedroom, that Kim dreaded would extend to Jo’s locker at school—

—it was like she was trying to DOOM your chances with her weirdness! Like some delayed reaction to her mother’s death, which of course had been tragic and you missed her badly too, Mrs. Murrish had always been way nicer than either of *your* parents—but even so, it could only excuse so much for so long. Here you were, sweating bullets every minute to do all the right things around all the right sorts, currying favor with the drill team leaders who happened to include Gigi Pyle, who with just a *nod* could promote you to the eighter pompon squad and make you a practical shoo-in for freshman cheerleader, so WHY THE HELL

was your best (or at any rate oldest) friend snortling about these ambitions behind your back as you were almost positive she sometimes did? Her and those “Dopesters” who threatened to tar you with their weirdo-brush just by having a mutual acquaintance—

“Do you, lahk, *know* those gals?” Gigi would drawl with delicately raised brows; “We’re just in the same Band is all,” you’d reply; “Oh, Ah *see*,” Gigi would conclude with a delicately raised shrug—and, BANG! down to the bottom rung of the cheerleading ladder you’d be chucked.

Utterly, totally, hook-line-and-sinkeredly *unfair*.

Yet not irredeemably so. Not yet.

Which was why you gave Jo an acoustic megaphone for her thirteenth birthday. The perfect gift for a cornet player, and one enabling a subtle segue to your discreet request that she PLEASE try out for the pompon squad with you next month.

“Yeah right.”

“I mean it!”

“For the hundredth time, that’s *your* thing, not mine.”

“But it *could* be yours! You’ve got the lungs for it, you’ve got the height—they can use more height—and heaven knows you’ve got the boobs—”

“Hey! Leave my flopperoots out of this! It’s bad enough being stared at and leered at, without taking them out in a tight sweater to *jiggle* them in front of everybody.”

“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??”

Which might explain why, when Gigi casually inquired if you’d talked “that friend of yours” into trying out, you might possibly have given some indication that Jo wasn’t behaving like a real friend should. And Gigi might then have stated that a *true* cheerleader needed to combine femininity with iron and steel, as demonstrated by undergoing a sort of pre-initiation ritual like, oh, Gigi didn’t know—maybe disclosing some deep dark secret

about that onetime friend, who really deserved being taken down a peg or two for those wisenheimer cracks about tissue-stuffed Dixie Cups.

Which you'd *warned* her about at the time, hadn't you? *Hadn't* you told her so?

So it was practically Jo's own fault. *She* was the one with a unusually "dark" secret, if you know what you mean. And she'd never made you pinky-swear to *keep* it a secret, like any sensible regular normal person would.

Iron and steel. That's what you were made of, that day in May when you did the disclosure. And if it came out in *To Kill a Mockingbird*-type language... well, that was due to Gigi's being a born Southerner.

And it was justifiable means to desirable ends. You *did* make the pompon squad. You *were* admitted into Gigi's exclusive clique, axis of the school's in-crowd. You *have* advanced to freshman cheerleader, with high school and college and the pros beckoning ahead. You *will be* the rah-rah center of all idolized fantasies.

As you grow up, you have to put away childish things. That's in *the Bible*.

Everything would be perfect if SHE'D gone and done just that—boxed herself away out of sight, up in an attic with the dolls and toys they used to play with all those ages ago.

Instead of swaggering around school and town, flaunting her pathetic excuse of a friendship with a sawed-off squint-eyed big-mouthed outsider/gangmember from some slum in The City who thinks she's *soooo* popular even though she doesn't have a boyfriend and you know what *that* means so HAW HAW! the sun *doesn't* shine out of her huMONGous fat ass that people ought to be kicking instead of kissing 'cause it belongs to a NASTY LITTLE **BITCH OF A NOBODY!!!—**

—blasting Vicki and Joss out of the aerie brass bed with a shakening awakening J-O-L-T that reduced Fingers the cat from nine lives to eight.

*

One casualty of this nightmare was *The Horns of Africa*, which Joss hastily shelved on a remote ledge at the back of her closet. Someday, she promised, it would be retrieved and revised and released to a world better suited to embrace it.

But on that same Sunday at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Joss was inspired ("by a Voice like Mr. Erickson's!") to *Write what you know, my child*. And what did she know

better at that moment than what she'd been unwillingly reminded of by last night's menace-dream?

So put it to use. Channel it into cathartic novelistic form, and a fresh set of speckle-covered composition books. Give Johanna Desdemann a latter-day incarnation as "Dez," and Cunegonde Zimmer a more ingenious one as "Constance"—called *Connie* as a child but *Conn* in drifting-apart adolescence. Then, after the backstabbing betrayal (here for "daring to be unconventional," with the racial aspect downplayed) enlist Guadalupe Velez and Svetlana Eisenstein to stand by Dez and redeem her from deceitful treachery.

Title: *Connstung*.

This manuscript—minus its obligatory sex scenes—could be shared with Alex, who was touched to tears and full of wonder that one of her most special friends could create such a story right out of her head, and at such *length*. (Alex's own Lang Arts efforts were brief moralistic fables about someone doing a good deed and oughtn't we all?)

Fiona, reading *Connstung*, thought two or three songs might be extracted from its more poetic passages; and the rest of the bunch clamored to be put *in* the book, so they too could have literary escapades *à clef*.

The Duckweights had no choice: their thinly-disguised blemishes were stripped bare for anyone to read. Vicki almost felt a dollop of pity for Kim Zimmer, even while huffily turning her back on Miss Flat-as-a-Board-Butt every time their paths regrettably crossed. (*I'll show YOU who's freaking huMONGous!*)

She wished, though, and not for the first time, that an inch or so could be painlessly relocated from down below to up in front. If not deleted entirely, the better to deter Gumbo Krauss from following her *down* from the yearbook office *below* to the cafeteria. In line behind her at the steam counter he kept blathering about ad-space layouts, but Vicki knew his mind was really on spit-licking *checkouts*—of belows, upfronts, and everything-in-betweens.

What IS it with hornyboys? she asked herself, and not for the first time.

"Well. See you LATER," she told Gumbo at the cash register, paying for a tossed salad rather than the hot chili she couldn't risk eating. (Stupid fifth period gym!) But he plopped a bowl on his tray and blathered right after her to the bunch's table, purloining a stool from across the aisle (almost out from under Artie Rist's rump) and seating himself at

the corner.

“Ragnarsson, my man! Battenburg, my other man!”

Leaning over to slap palms with Rags, trade soul-shakes with K.C., and interfere with Fiona’s pouring ribollita from thermos to cup. (Robin had cooked gallons of this hearty soup for the bunch, and Vicki would’ve brought her own thermosful to school today if Ozzie and Goofus hadn’t scarfed the last drop last night.)

“What’s happenin’, Krauss?” K.C. garbled around a chili-laden spoon.

“A universe gone coconuts, man—let’s turn this dump into a tiki bar!” Grinning at them like a swarthier, beardlesser, but equally Jewfro’d Eric Bloom of Blue Öyster Cult. *Don’t fear the Reaper* Vicki was thinking as Gumbo’s shaded eyes shifted to Joss: “Well heyyyyy there! Remember me?”

Vicki, digging into her salad, waited for a Murrish comeback like “Sorry, I just this minute managed to forget about you!”—only to hear Joss fluster girlishly that *sure* she did, although Gumbo was so *different*.

Choke on iceberg lettuce.

Realize how much prettier Joss was looking since she’d dispatched past anguish into *Connstung*: how much brighter the twinkle in her eyes, the lagniappe in her smile, the upfrontness of her flopperos—

Oh Gahd. “How’s Carly?” spluttered Vicki, who’d seen Carly Thibert in homeroom and Earth Science, and at their lockers an hour ago. “Um—are you two still going together?”

“Not since her old man told me to quit darkening their doorstep,” Gumbo told Joss, as though she’d posed the question. “Did I say ‘told’? Make that ‘yelled’—in Czechoslovak or whatever the hell he yells in. ANYhoo, *I’m* free this weekend. Howzabout *you*?”

A hush fell on the bunch’s table, even its far end where Robin and Sheila-Q were arguing over the most obscure sign of bad luck. (Robin’s: turning a loaf of bread upside down after slicing it. Sheila’s: letting the word “pig” pass your lips while deep-sea fishing.) At the girls basketball team’s table, Laurie Harrison half-rose to point quivery nostrils toward Gumbo and Joss; even if nothing happened now, there’d still be gossip about it.

“Am *I* free this weekend?” Joss meditated. “Well, that depends. Free to go where? And do what? And how much’d you be planning to *spend*?”

Which was so imitative of Carly Thibert's flirt-style that Vicki had to chomp on a celery stick to keep from gasping aloud.

Oh Gahd oh Gahd oh Gahd—

"But you GOTTA come too!" Joss implored her that Friday afternoon on the way to Burrow Lane. "I've never been on a real date, but you've gone out with guys—"

"Oh yeah right! *One* dance in seventh grade! *One* dinner that ended up a disaster! Running around town on Sunday mornings, and that wound up *another* disaster! I oughta write a book—a how-NOT-to date guide!"

"Aw c'monnnnn—any guy in school would go out with you, if you dropped him a little hint—"

"*Whoa!* I'm all in favor of women's lib, y'know, but I am *not* asking any guy out on a date! This isn't a turnabout and my name's not Sadie Hawkins! And besides—who would I ask?"

"What about Buddy? What about Phonsie? I *know* you've had your eye on Tony Pierro for like months now. Or maybe Gumbo's got a friend who'd go—"

"On a *blind* date? With a guy *Gumbo Krauss* picked out for me? Are you INSANE?"

"Oh pleeeeeease, Vicki! I can't do this without you! And I really, really want to—Gumbo's as close to a 'brutha' as I'm likely to find before college, probably. If you won't go I'll have to ask Meg and you *know* I couldn't survive a double-date with her!"

"Look," sighed Vicki. "What if Alex came with me, and we went to the same place as you two but just like as a coincidence? We'd be there if you needed help—like *I* needed that time I asked *you* to double with me 'n' Roger, and you said 'Nooooo, you'll wanna be alone with him ooh-la-la'—and you remember how well *that* turned out. I really coulda used you then!"

"And I really could use you 'n' Alex now," Joss said meekly, but with a sub-P.S.:
I put up with YOUR going out with a guy I didn't approve of, for like MONTHS.

Which, of course, was all too true.

And, for the time being, a moot point. Shortly after the girls made it to Vicki's house, news came of a horrible rush-hour accident in The City—one crowded El train rear-ending another to send four cars off the rails, two crashing onto the street. Meg Murrish almost

eyewitnessed this (she'd gone down to interview an Orchestra Hall acoustician for the Vanderlund Senior High newspaper) and returned so quasi-traumatized that Joss had to go home and play nurse.

"As if Beth and Invisible Amy couldn't've handled it!"

In any event, Joss's date with Gumbo got postponed till the next weekend, by which time an unexpected new couple was available for doubling: Arlo Sowell rocked VW to its foundation by asking Robin Neapolitan to the Valentine Sweetheart Hop.

"Who put you up to this?" was her initial enraged reaction.

Arlo, blinking ponderously, rumbled that he'd been wanting to ask her out "forever" (*aww*) and had finally worked up enough pluck to do so.

Susie and the bunch almost had to bind and gag Laurie to prevent her spreading word that Robin'd "stolen" Arlo from Fiona. Who'd never displayed the faintest amorous interest in him, other than a passing fascination with his mountainous scale—no matter what feelings he *might* have nurtured toward her before "forevering" Robin.

As it happened the Dartles were boycotting the Sweetheart Hop, since its Pep Club sponsors had booked Chinese Fire Drill to play without entertaining any rival bids. So Joss & Gumbo & Robin & Arlo arranged to see the same showing of *Silver Streak* at the New Sherwood, on the same day as the dance: Saturday, February 12th. Alex couldn't make it—crisis at the animal shelter—so Fiona was deputized to go with Vicki as the other duenna.

"(I knew this was gonna happen eventually,)" Feef gloomed.

Robin gave brusquely profane reassurance that however many guys might be in their futures (or at least Robin's) *they* would remain Sister Dopesters beyond "forever." That said, she climbed onto Arlo's shoulders and rode him up and down Z-Wing like a conquering mahout.

Inevitable, of course, that such a devoted daddy's girl would latch onto somebody constructed like Fat Bob. Whose own initial enraged inclination had been to lock Robin in the cellar while he applied a pool cue to Arlo's predatory nethers. But Arlo pluckily went to see him at the Triville Harley lot, full of respect for Fat Bob and his daughter, exhibiting knowledge of and appreciation for American-made motorcycles; and by Saturday Fat Bob was asking, "Is that my future son-in-law?" whenever he saw Robin on the phone.

“*Daa-aad!*”

Vicki did not enjoy *Silver Streak*. In light of last week’s El derailment, a movie about murder on a train that smashes spectacularly into a terminal didn’t seem to be in the best taste. Yet Joss adored Richard Pryor, Robin reveled in the highspeed havoc, and Vicki and Fiona needed *some* good cheer while slumping unescortedly in the row behind them.

“Anyway, the weather’s not so awful,” Vicki said before the coming attractions.

“Did you finish your requiem for Da Mare?”

“(O look at Our Lord’s disciples: / one denied Him, one doubted Him, one betrayed Him; / if Our Lord could not have perfection / then how are ye going to have it in City government?)” Feel mutter-chanted.

“You got that right. Frosh Board sure as hell doesn’t have perfection.”

“(He’s on that, isn’t he?)” Fiona nodded toward Gumbo Krauss, who was sampling Joss’s popcorn directly with his spit-lickerish mouth.

“(Bleahhhh,)” Vicki whisper-gagged. “(He’s the Y Treasurer. That Y team must be something else—besides him they elected Kim Zimmer, Mike Spurgeon, and Gigi Pyle.)”

“(Sounds like they have *putrefaction*.)”

“(Eww, Feef!)”

“(Exactly.)”

They watched Arlo offer Robin half of his Almond Joy, and Robin loftily accept it.

“(Eww,)” Vicki re-wriggled. “(Oh, never mind. *We* coulda had dates too, if we’d wanted. I mean, we’re a couple of foxy ladies.)”

Fiona, minishrugging, offered Vicki half of her Mounds.

*

Speaking of good cheer—

At quite a wee hour the next morning, Virginia Leigh *Pahhhhl* stood before a three-way mirror in her antebellum bedroom on Clubroot Drive, watching herself undress with far more scrutiny than vanity. As each valentine garment was removed, it got placed in or on a proper receptacle: Gigi abhorred sloppiness. More than one clique candidate had been rejected at trial sleepovers for leaving their clothes unfolded. (Delia Shanafelt had nearly

been debarred after her open-curtain stripshow, but was pardoned for at least having done it efficiently.)

Inspect throat and bosom in the three-way mirror for any discoloration caused by Mike's greedy lips. He, like a carton of milk kept too long in the fridge, was getting spoiled and in need of replacement.

Take views of both nude profiles, over each shoulder, and then full-frontal. Yes: at fifteen she was surely better built than Scarlett O'Hara'd been at sixteen. *And* with a proportional bustline, unlike *some* pumpkin-patchers we could mention. Score one for Gigi.

Score another for the Sweetheart Hop? Had it not been carried out unerringly as she'd directed? Thanks to Bionic Becca's dental emergency—"short-circuited molars," Gigi'd told the clique—and absence from the Pep Club planning session, Gigi's forces were left a clear field to sow and reap. Choosing the theme ("So Red the Rose") and the band (Chinese Fire Drill, with no unseemly "battle" nonsense) and the décor (plenty of papery flowers and lace). The clique had tolerable dates: Nanette with Hank Hickey, from her Lutheran youth group; Kim with Norman Lesser, of the Lesser Park Lessers; Delia with Brad Faussett, who might be one of Becca's exes but had first-rate hair. And since Mike spent so much of the dance up on the bandstand, Gigi'd had ample scope to preside over all as Grand Sweetheart.

The only fly in the ointment was a nagging notion that Becca'd *let* her triumph by default, because *she* no longer went out with junior high boys. As opposed to juniors in high school like Curtis Weatherly, who'd lounged just outside the gym jingling his car keys while Becca made a token stopover at the Hop. To scan "So Red the Rose" with those insensitive electronic optics she kept under her eyelids; find it all tacky and callow and trivial; and file her reaction away as CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET—CLEARANCE AUTHORIZATION LEVEL 6.

Well, fiddle-dee-dee.

Ointment always comes with flies.

Or is it flaws? (Yawn.)

Crank up the radiator. Slip on a nightgown in case brother Riley's prowling around. Pad into the bathroom, brush hair and teeth, wash face and put on night cream. (Clarins, imported from France; *not* Noxzema.) Back to the bedroom, lock the door, discard the

nightie neatly, reposition yourself before the mirror, and begin to massage.

You don't have to *start out* as the best.

The imperative thing is to *end up* that way.

Transcend the low life of Refineryland, where children were brutish and the very air reeked, to join the haute monde of Vanderlund. Blossom as a result, every inch of you, like a repotted camellia, and become belle-of-the-ball at McGrum Elementary. (No competition *there* worthy of the name. "Harelip" Harrison? Hardly!)

But VW had been a different ball of wax. On the drill team there was Becca Blair to contend with; in Girls Glee Club, it was Crystal Denvour; in Drama Club, the one to take heed of was eighth-grader Candy Gates. None of them, though, were with you on the 7-Y team. So from that citadel you spent seventh grade carefully, guardedly, assembling your clique of handpicked partisans.

Tomorrow may be another day—but the best-laid plans are outlined much further in advance. And can be adapted to adversity.

Even with three of your clique on the eighter Pompon Squad, you couldn't overpower Bionic Becca to win the captaincy, or even retain co-captaincy, of the freshman cheerleaders. That had been a bad day and worse night.

But so be it: more time free to wrest control of Drama Club away from Candy Gates's designated successor. And to scotch idle chatter about staging some comic opera (*The Marriage of Figaro*? hardly!) as this year's spring musical, to "capitalize" on Chubby Crystal's stout pipes. *She'd* had featured solos in every Mixed Chorus concert for the past four semesters, so let's save the spring musical's lead role for someone who can actually *act*.

Such as Gigi. As Gigi, in *Gigi*.

A few years back there'd been a Broadway version of the Leslie Caron film. It hadn't had a very long run, but won the Tony for Best Score and was tailor-made for present purposes—or *would* be, if the faculty didn't claim it was impossible to sugarcoat courtesan-training for junior high parents to digest.

So change two consonants and play Lili in *Lili*: likewise based on a Leslie Caron movie, even if they'd foolishly retitled it *Carnival*. Which would mislead people into thinking it *was* a school carnival, with cotton candy and fried pickles for sale at intermission.

Production was set to kick off at Drama Club's meeting a week from Tuesday, after the Presidents Day holiday. (Make that Washington's Birthday—you don't observe Mr. Lincoln's.) And here's an idea: why not throw Drama Club a supper party *on* Washington's Birthday, here at Clubroot Drive? Attendance not mandatory but "de rigueur" (*rub rub rub*) as an unmistakable intimation that derrieres better be there (*rub rub rub*) if they're not to be left out like Massa in the cold, cold ground?

A supper party on your own home turf—showtunes on the stereo instead of callow boys caterwauling—none of the hindrances or disadvantages of a junior high Hop—so that this time you win *outright*, not by forfeit or default—

(RUB RUB RUBBBB)

Ah. Yes.

Now, the casting of the other leads. Nanette would have to be The Incomparable Rosalie; Delia couldn't be trusted to memorize a part that large, and Kim had been going to gradual pieces since Harelip Harrison grew a backbone and bit her head off—

(—Kim, in fact, was verging on a sloppy precipice: all that foofaraw about your reasonable request that she step away from Band and concentrate on cheerleading—)

(—nonetheless, there was use to be made of someone so desperate to be in the clique that she'd sell out her own best friend, that snidely wisenheiming colored-cuddler—)

(—no: make that "darky-devotee"—good one! score three for Gigi—)

(rub-a-dub-dub)

Then, to play Marco the Magnificent magician, Jerome Schei who had a good build and fine voice even if he was a flit; and as Paul the bitter puppeteer? Less certain there—pickings were leaner when you needed someone *meaner*. Like who? Owen O'Leary? Got a nasty streak, all right, but he's a classic Irish tenor: unsuitable. Matt LaVintner? Still hung-up on Bionic Becca (blub-blub) *three years* after she dumped him: a basket case straight out of Daphne du Maurier.

Under *no* circumstances would it be Odious Morey Krauss. After Christmasing on the Barbary Coast or wherever, he'd started carrying on like some hopped-up Negro—first with that shameless Carly flooze, then (big surprise!) with Jo Murrish the coonie-groupie, while grabbing every opportunity to hit on you yourself! *Literally* grabbing, sometimes, with

Thump on the wall by brother Riley. Who's probably had his perverted ear pressed against it for the last half-hour.

(Yawwwwn.)

Tidy up. Re-don nightgown. Lie down in your antebellum bed. And waft off to hoopskirted slumberland, where you're swiftly encircled by a dozen beaux at a genteel barbecue that will *not* be cut short by some silly old outbreak of war or zits.

*

Vicki had a wearisome Saturday night at Jupiter Street, listening to Joss go on and on about everything Gumbo'd said and everything Gumbo'd done and what it all might *really* mean. No way for Vicki to bail out of the conversation, though, or demand a topic change, knowing how many times she'd put Joss through the same wringer last autumn.

Nor could she bring herself to broach the subject of Gumbo's sliding an unsolicited arm around *her* shoulders, just before the *Cicada* staff's official yearbook photo got taken on Thursday—scarcely forty-eight hours before his date with Joss! And of course Vicki was wearing her toothiest smile when it happened, as if she *loved* being hugged for posterity by spit-licking Morey Krauss. And when she'd tried to tackle the photographer to make him take a do-over, HE evaporated from view. (No wonder people called him "Split-Pea.")

But Vicki had no intention of allowing that picture to go into the yearbook, even if this entailed bribing Downtown Pierro or Ms. Yehle—or, better still, putting *Gumbo* through a wringer.

Some Sundays she accompanied the Murrishes to St. Paul's, if the choir was doing something special or to earn Brownie points with Toughie. This Sunday morning she opted out, went home, fixed lunch, and was setting the breakfast nook table when her mother returned from Unitarianizing.

"Guess what I heard!" said Felicia. "You know that discotheque at Panama Plaza?"

"What, the Vinyl Spinnaker? I've only seen it from the outside. Looks kinda cheesy."

"Cheesy what?" went Goofus, charging up from the family room where he and Ozzie were watching the NBA All-Star Pregame Show. "Cheesy pizza? Hand it over! *It's pizza, Dad! I'll bring it down—*"

“It’s not pizza, it’s corned beef gyros, there’s yours and Daddy’s, mop up any mess you make and I mean it.”

“Thanks, Sis! *It’s gyros, Dad! I’m bringing ‘em down—*”

“So what about the cheesy disco?” Vicki asked Felicia in the breakfast nook.

“Yes! Well—(mmm, this is good: tastes like Greece blended with Ireland)—their business slacked off terribly this winter, what with the freeze and the snow and then a roof leak. So now instead of being closed on Mondays, they’re available for private parties like the Grand Parade. And I was thinking, maybe your band could put on a show there.”

“In a real disco? We could never afford it, Mom, even one with a leaky roof—”

“Oh, that’s been repaired, and Daddy and I can pay for the rental. If we did it on the 28th, that’d be the night before your birthday and you could make it a party concert, like Robin had.”

Vicki mulled this over, chewing corned beef and pita bread. “The 28th? Two weeks from now? Won’t that day already be booked?”

“Well, I can call and ask. Remember the roller rink party you had when you turned twelve? That was easy enough to arrange quickly.”

Vicki began to feel swept up by her mother’s impresario enthusiasm. “Let me check with Joss and the others, see what they think—”

“Oh my goodness! I completely forgot to ask how Jocelyn’s date went! Did she have a good time with Gummo?”

“Gumbo—rhymes with *Dumbo*—and don’t get me started,” Vicki groaned, dishing up an edited-for-maternal-ears version of recent events.

On Monday Felicia contacted Mr. Poliakoff, who ran the chain (if three constitutes a “chain”) of stripmall discos including the Vinyl Spinnaker. As luck would have it, he’d just been hung up on by the Tri-Delts of Lakeside Central, calling to cancel their Spinnaker reservation for a Presidents Day bash. Mr. Poliakoff was eager to fill this sudden vacancy, though not so much with a ninth-grade combo catering to an underage clientele. So a heftier-than-usual cleaning-and-damages deposit was added to the rental fee, and the Volesters would have to be responsible *and* accountable for security. With these bases covered, the place was theirs for 180 minutes on February 21st—one week away.

Vicki revved into full-dress manager mode. An appeal for help was made to Aunt Fritz, but her schedule was packed with planning a benefit for the state capital's Municipal Opera ("Our theme is 'When the Muni Comes Over the Mountain'—not that there's anything but prairies down here, darling") so the Dartles were left to their own devices.

Mrs. Driscoll's permission was sought and granted to publicize the disco concert party at school. Here Gumbo proved to be legitimately useful, since the Krausses operated a print shop and could get things for you wholesale. "I expect a nice *commission*," he disgustingly told Joss, and she revoltingly tootled a few saucy bars of "Afternoon Delight" on her cornet.

You SHOULD be playing him "Don't Go Breaking My Heart," Vicki wanted to scream.

But she bit her tongue and lips and the insides of her cheeks, kept silent, and was rewarded on Wednesday at Zero Hour when Gumbo brought in a rush-job stack of fliers and posters, designed by himself after Britt chose not to collaborate. ("I've got something else in the works," she informed Vicki.) And obnoxious as Gumbo was, insufferable as your best friend's boyfriend, you had to admit his layouts snagged the eye.

LIVE AT THE VINYL SPINNAKER—one night only—three hours only—soft drinks only—**THE ROSA DARTLES** (VW's premier all-girl rock group) would be saluting Vicki Volester's **QUINCEAÑERA** (a term borrowed from Alex's birthday in December) on Presidents Day—Shrove Monday—*J'ouvert*—The Night Before Mardi Gras: **MON FEB 21st 5:30pm-8:30pm** (no cover charge—donations appreciated—free parking at Panama Plaza).

"Who's 'Shrove' and what does *J'ouvert* mean?" Vicki had to ask.

Sheila-Q, with kibitzing from Robin, explained the pre-Lenten calendar; while Joss (who'd asked Gumbo the same question) provided info about Carnival in the Caribbean, and Britt lobbed in a few facts about what she called "Nickanan Night" (the same evening before Fat Tuesday) which sounded a lot like a Ding Dong Ditch marathon.

"I hope nobody's gonna do that to *us*," Vicki sighed as they put up their promos all over the school.

"What the heck is THIS about?" Nanette Magnus ding-dong'd at noon, waving a flier as she blocked the *Cicada* office doorway.

“Just what it says,” Vicki retorted, trying to get past and collar “Split-Pea” before he and his camera vamoosed, as they’d done every time she’d drawn near them since last Thursday.

“Well, you can’t do this!” Nanette declared unbudgingly.

“Can’t do *what*? Turn fifteen?”

“Gigi’s already having a party for Drama Club that night.”

“I’m not in Drama Club and the Dartles aren’t either, so no problem. *May* I go in now, *please*?”

“Y’see, Gigi wants everybody at *her* thing,” Delia Shanafelt tried to explain. “Ooh, I like your skirt!”

“(Don’t tell her that!)” Nanette hissed.

“But I do! What is that, tweed? Is it new? Where’d you get it?”

“Thanks—yes—Bonnachoven’s. And about Presidents Day: you guys do your thing and we’ll do ours.”

“We spent all day yesterday handing out invites!”

“And *we* spent all Zero Hour taping up posters. Now, if you wanna hang out here in the hall for the rest of free period, be my guest. *I’m—*”

“*We’re* heading on in,” announced Gumbo, propelling Vicki between Delia and Nanette with a hand that had no business on her new tweed skirt’s back-waistband.

Fleetinglly she recalled Roger Mustardman hooking a cold thumb into a similar place. But that had been a frissony turn-on, and this smacked more of Back-to-School grope-in-the-dark. So Vicki shook off the hand with minimized hip-wiggle as Downtown (smelling strongly of foreign tobacco) called the *Cicada* staff meeting to order.

No sign of Sidney Erbsen, probably off “on assignment” again. Come to think of it, Vicki couldn’t quite recall what he looked like; most of the time he kept that camera in front of his face.

Which fleetinglly recalled a different, much-missed hand: one that *did* belong on her waistbands.

“(This isn’t over,)” hissed Nanette Magnus.

After the meeting, Vicki marched Crystal Denvour off to the washroom till the coast was Gumbo-clear.

“Should we shimmy down to the cafeteria on a rope?” Crystal queried.

“*Shinny*, not shimmy—I’m sure as hell not doing any shimmying around That Guy! I mean it’s *scandalous* the way he acts with other girls, when he’s supposed to be going with Joss—”

“One date doesn’t make them going together.”

“Tell that to *her*! She acts like Victoria did about Prince Albert, all head over heels.”

“Shouldn’t that be ‘heels over head’?”

“Oh GROSS! I don’t even wanna think about that happening!”

“Sorry if I made you lose your appetite. C’mon, let’s go downstairs. You still want that cupcake order from my mom?”

“Oh Gahd yes. Half chocolate with ‘RDs’ in bright yellow frosting, and half vanilla with ‘VV’ in violet. You’re sure she can she do violet?”

“My mother can frost anything in any color. And each VV’ll *be* a V V, not a W.”

“Doesn’t matter. Everyone always sees W’s.”

“You could do like Downtown and start calling yourself ‘Westside’—then you’d have your own Story.”

In the cafeteria Vicki nearly spilled her tray when Becca Blair (decked out in regalia that beat Bonnachoven duds all hollow) murmured “Something’s going to happen” in her ear.

“What, after lunch?”

“No. Right here. In a minute or so.”

“Um... something bad?”

“Yes. But not how you think.”

With that sphinxy statement, and causing palpitations in those unaccustomed to her adjacency, Becca took a stool back-to-back with Vicki. Which did little to restore Vicki’s lost appetite—and it went wholly AWOL when Kim Zimmer approached, carrying no tray or brownbag or anything except a large vein pulsing on her Daisy Duck forehead.

“Well?” said Joss, who’d arrived with a grinning Gumbo. Having him by her side, with his new paste-up for a *Connstung* dust jacket in her ring binder, put some mellow into

Joss's voice as she added, "Did you want something?"

Kim ignored her. Ignored Gumbo, ignored Fiona and Robin and Arlo and Sheila and K.C. and Crystal and Rags and Laurie and Alex and even Becca, plus everyone else in the vicinity, to aim that Daisy vein squarely at Vicki as she quacked:

"Gigi wants to see you. Now."

Glance over at the table where Scarlett O'Duckweight was seated with Delia, Nanette, Mike Spurgeon, and a selection of other jocks.

Give Gigi a brief Pfister Park Pherrette wave.

"Well, 'now' she has. I guess you can run along."

The vein popped bigger and pulsier. "She—has—something—to SAY to you!"

"Well, she's a cheerleader, isn't she? I bet I can hear her from here."

Clear-cut snortle from Becca at her back.

Kim (evidently five minutes away from a stroke) wheeled around and stomp-returned to Gigi's table, while various degrees of laughter broke out at the bunch's.

Vicki (appetite somewhat re-whetted) was nibbling at her salad when she felt a clear-cut nudge from Becca.

"Here it comes..."

It being Gigi Pyle on her own two feet. Already getting into character as Lili in *Carnival*: an innocent country orphan wearing a simple unsullied frock, not unlike the sailor uniforms that Keiko Nakayama took off and replaced with Carlygarb first thing every morning. Toward the bunch's table came this simple innocent It Girl with measured tread and upright stance—apropos for ordering a passel of damn Yankees to begone from her property, even if such a scene was missing from the *Carnival* libretto.

But whatever Gigi intended to say to Vicki went unuttered.

As up between them sprang a shock of rusty hair atop a paltry figure holding a small dark object that went FLASH in Gigi's face, at Gigi's body: *FLASSSHHHH FLASSSHHHH flassshhhh...*

—before the paltry figure split-pea'd down and away out of sight.

Anyone, even a stunner, would be startled by this happening.

Gigi Pyle—on the other end of the stun gun, for once—stood rooted to the spot. Eyes and mouth gone okeefenokee; one arm clapped across her chest, the other hand over her underbelly; face blushing cherry-tomato-red despite body being fully (indeed primly) dressed, rather than caught naked in a shower stall or on an auction block.

Various degrees of laughter arose from every corner of the cafeteria, along with catcalls and wolf whistles.

“*What happened?*” asked anxious Alex, who’d missed the paparazzing since she still averted her attention from anywhere near Mike Spurgeon. “Who did WHAT to Gigi?”

Before anyone could answer, people started laughing *with* instead of *at* this apparent caricature of a burlesque pose, and some even applauded. Gigi’s sense of stage presence snapped her back to magnolia hauteur, and she made a deep curtsy to renewed whistles.

“Thank yew very much! Ah’m throwing a li’l supper party for Drama Club NEXT MONDAY AT FIVE-THIRTY P.M. SHARP—and y’all’re invited to come see what *else* we can get up to!”

Which gave the Lunch C crowd the winky-dink impression that *Gypsy* or *Hair* (if not *Oh! Calcutta!*) might be this year’s spring musical.

“Have to hand it to her feet,” Becca said clear-cuttily. “She always lands on them.”

*

After basketball practice that evening, Laurie phoned Vicki to report that all the Dartle fliers and posters had vanished from Y-Wing.

“Me ‘n’ Susie found out when I had to go back to my locker for my math book. I checked the third floor, Susie checked the second, we both checked the first, and all we saw were torn-off taped corners. I think a lot are gone from Home Base, too.”

So battle stations were called for; and here the bunch showed the superiority of their extended numbers over the clique’s ostracizing exclusivity.

Gumbo had another four reams of fliers rush-jobbed and hand-delivered to VW on Thursday. Once the final bell rang, these got folded and stuffed through the vents of 2,400 VW lockers (of which fewer than 2,070 were occupied: down 3½% from last year). This mass mailing required participation from everybody connected with Vicki’s bunch, but they took willing part—paper cuts and all—so long as it was a one-time endeavor.

Meanwhile, Gigi Pyle came to comprehend how much more adroit she was at long-term planning than short-range improv. Having inadvertently welcomed the entire freshman class to sup at Clubroot Drive, she had to recommend that her mother lay in additional gala provisions for Presidents Day. Mrs. Pyle got all negative and Hoosierly about this, so Gigi tried to end-around her father with a hug and kiss and shoulder-shiatsu when he came home from a hard day of formulating oil tanks. Goal scored! Way cleared!—until her “*Pa says it’s okay!*” was trumped by “*WHAT did you agree to??*” and “*I said IF you had your Ma’s permission!*” and “*BUT me no BUTS, young lady!*”—and then the rug being Hoosier’d out from under any supper party whatsoever.

(The Gobble-uns’ll git you ef you don’t watch out.)

On Thursday it was the clique’s turn to frustrate Gigi by failing, one and all, to find a alternative venue. The Magnuses thought Presidents Day too solemn an event for frivolity; the Shanafelts were hosting their own “Casino Night” fundraiser; and the Zimmers flat-out said no.

Then on Friday morning the students of Vanderlund Junior High opened their lockers to be showered with DayGlo leaflets touting the disco debauch, to which Mike Spurgeon actually wanted to go. His Chinese Fire Drill was still picking its teeth from last Saturday’s Sweetheart Hop, so “What’s the big deal?” Mike philosophized. “Probably be a few laughs, watching ‘em try to rock. *I’m gonna go, anyhow—I hear there’ll be free cupcakes.*”

Well GO, then, and don’t bother coming back. Consider yourself bequeathed to that Nook-Nook Nip who’s been sniffing round your imbecilic Frampton ringlets. Leave Virginia Leigh Pyle to a three-day weekend of decreased self-satisfaction... and sleep disturbed by split-pea visions FLASHing through her head.

*

“Man, was I ever wrong to call this place the ‘Spittlecure,’” said Robin. “*I’m sure ready to spit up!*”

Charitably speaking, the Vinyl Spinnaker was best viewed by strobe lights and ceiling glitterball and *not* under cold fluorescence, such as illuminated the Rosa Dartles’s setup at 4:30 p.m. on Monday the 21st. If the disco’s exterior looked cheesy, its interior was more like yogurt, with bacterial fermentation affecting all the naugahyde and formica furnishings.

“Quirk, forget anything bad I ever had to say about the Grand Parade.”

“Exactly *what* bad did you ever ‘have’ to say about the Grand Parade?”

“You *just* this minute heard me tell you to FORGET it, didn’t you?”

“You *better* not have told me anything I NEED to forget, Robbo—”

Joss, gingerly plugging her Electrapiano into a yogurtish outlet, played the opening of “Try to Remember” from *The Fantasticks*, and Fiona crooned along: “*Try to dismember the kind of pretender / who spends his nights at cheesy discos...*”

“Soundcheck,” Joss matter-of-factly into her microphone. “Soundcheck—”

“Taste check! *Feel* check!” suggested Gumbo, serving as roadie; and Joss toodled him the chorus from “Afternoon Delight.”

“Keep your pants on, Murrish,” Robin advised. “There’ll be plenty of oddballs here for you to flirt with.”

“Hey,” went a guy who, if not a genuine albino, was at least a Johnny Winter wannabe. All the color in his face had pooled into two mottled bruises surrounding eggshell eyes.

“This is Flake,” said Britt Groningen. “He’ll be recording us tonight.”

Flake Hasleman had reputedly snuck in to see *Carrie* thirteen times in the past four months. Small wonder that such a guy would have bonked-out eyeballs; even smaller wonder that he’d be going with Britt, who’d boosted her Sissy Spacek resemblance during the same four months. (Ravishingly pretty half the time—roughly carved out of soapstone the other half.) Flake, like Britt, was said to hang out with the Traversers; and, like them, he seemed to listen to esoteric music through invisible headphones.

“Here... there...” he told a person lugging in a pair of open-reel tape decks.

“What is all this, Britt?” Vicki asked briskly.

“Cassettes we can sell,” Britt sleepy-smiled, “if the quality’s good enough.”

“Won’t be disappointed,” said Flake Hasleman, head bobbing to that unheard beat.

Excited buzz from the other Dartles, but Vicki stayed skeptical. “So, you’ve done this sort of thing before?”

“Backwards and forwards,” went Flake, tinkering with one of the tape decks.

“Hshsss!” chimed in his assistant, slinging back a parka hood to reveal Byron Wyszynski, snuffling noisily onto the second tape deck.

“How’s anybody gonna hear us over that hock-tooey, Groningen?” Robin griped.

“If we play loud enough, we drown him out,” said Britt. To Vicki: “Concessions?”

“Hunh? Oh—we can use that table there to sell your stuff.” (The T-shirts, buttons, stickers, decals, and now mugs and caps: Rosa Dartle merchandise kept expanding into new lines.)

“Cool,” said Britt, taking her chrome-plated Gibson to set up with the rest of the band, leaving Vicki to deal with sample items and order forms.

She *was* supposed to be the business manager, after all.

It occurred to her that a *real* manager would seek a full accounting of income from these souvenir sales. But since Britt handled her own bankrolling (not that she couldn’t afford it) and contributed a share of the proceeds to group coffers after every significant gig, no one’d ever asked how *sizable* a share they were getting. Certainly Britt was entitled to make a profit (not that she needed one) on every item bearing her scored-through smoochmark logo. Even so...

Dismissing this worrit, Vicki turned to more immediate ones as the clock neared 5:30. She strode around the disco, clipboard in hand like Lisa Lohe, checking off to-do’s. Susie Zane took charge of Britt’s “concessions”: check. Crystal, Rags, and Mrs. Denvour arrived with boxes of *petits gâteaux*: check. Half, as promised, had a beautiful V V in the perfect shade of violet frosting. No time, though, to feed one to the butterflies congregating in her stomach. *Oh Gahd—*

“Feef!” she called, twirling a finger in the air; and Fiona went over to glare at Vinny the Spinnaker DJ, with whom she’d entrusted three just-released LPs: the (semi-forgiven) Runaways’s *Queens of Noise*, the Ramones’s *Leave Home*, and Television’s debut album *Marquee Moon*—for spinning between Dartle sets.

“Honestly?” whined Vinny, who preferred Leo Sayer to any of the above.

“(Be glad I didn’t bring Patti Smith’s *Radio Ethiopia*,)” Fiona muttered.

Vinny was also on hand to ensure the joint didn’t get trashed by delinquent juveniles; as was a sourfaced Spinnaker bartender, there to dispense soft drinks. Ozzie and Felicia were

present to chaperone their investment, while Fat Bob worked security with My Boy Arlo Sowell. Other Dartle parents would take supervisory shifts later on, to spare the Volesters from early-onset deafness. (Fat Bob, of course, had titanium eardrums.)

Half past five: *oh Gahd oh Gahd oh Gahd*—

The fluorescents dimmed, the strobes came on, the ceiling ball glittered; *Queens of Noise*'s titular tune chugged out of the P.A. with a pinch of rock and a dose of roll.

Throw the doors wide open.

And find no one waiting to come inside.

Close the doors, since it's pretty cold out.

Kids were still having dinner. Some might be doing homework, left till the end of the three-day weekend. 5:30 or not, it was undeniably a School Night: they should've done this on a Friday or Saturday—except the disco wouldn't've been free for their use then, not that it was “free” now OH GAHD her folks had spent so much and think of those *two thousand fliers* and now nobody was coming, the Duckweights had won the day and night after all and this was a personal disaster of the first magnitude—

Well... tough.

“Let's get going,” she told the Dartles. “We've gotta be outta here by nine.” Barking at Flake and Tail-End: “You guys ready to record?”

“Standing by.” (More like bob-bob-bobbing.)

Honkshsss into a wad of kleenex. (Yuh-uck...)

“We'll edit out any cover songs,” Britt noted.

Okay then. Time to be Mistress of Ceremonies. Swivel round to survey your loyal bunch: pretty much everybody you'd invite to an orthodox birthday party. Not counting Flake and Tail-End, or scuzzy Jason Zane (who'd brought Susie and Laurie; otherwise Fat Bob would've barred him at the door) or Gumbo Krauss, getting a Filbert's from the sourfaced bartender. Turning to grin and *chkk-chkk* his tongue and point a pistol-finger in your direction.

(Be *very* glad you hadn't eaten a cupcake.)

Signal Vinny to fade out *Queens of Noise*. Cup satiric hands around your mouth and say: “Thanks, everyone, for being here. I guess we could go around the room and introduce

ourselves” [laughter] “but since we don’t have all night” [more laughter] “let’s do what you do at a disco. And so—here’s our friends—here’s our band—the Rosa Dartles!”

“ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR!” banged Robin’s drumsticks.

And the girls picked up where they’d left off last September: *YOU KEEP A-KNOCKIN’ BUT YOU CAN’T COME IN (x3) / COME BACK TOMORROW NIGHT AND TRY IT AGAIN!!!*

“*Très ironique, non?*” Vicki sub-caught Joss commenting under the din.

More than they sub-knew. For no sooner did the Dartles tell the world to go jump in the Lake As Big As An Ocean, than the world took a U-turn and started showing up at Panama Plaza. And as the world sought entry to the Vinyl Spinnaker, it got a slotted coffee can (“DONATIONS APPRECIATED!”) shoved under its nose by Fat Bob or Arlo Sowell. If the world jokingly deposited a penny, Arlo or Fat Bob would growl “That’s a *start*,” and keep a-shovin’.

Bradley Faussett, one such joker, coughed up a whole buck on behalf of himself and Delia Shanafelt. She breezed in, simpering happily, and ran to the washroom with Carly Thibert to help Keiko Nakayama change into red-hot partygarb. No other Duckweight made an appearance, but Mike Spurgeon came stag and could later be glimpsed dancing elbow-to-elbow with Alex Dmitria—who’d be glimpsed *not* veering away from his proximity, for the first time in two very troubled years.

By the end of the band’s fourth number (“Dust On Your Mirror”) the recording was in full swing, every table had an inhabitant, and the Spinnaker dance floor was being swarmed. Not so much with disco couples doing sambas and merengues, but a jiggety-joggety consortium that didn’t dissolve into twosomes till the Dartles took their first break and Vinny re-spun *Queens of Noise*.

Sheila, Joss, and Robin laid aside their instruments to do some dancing with K.C., Gumbo, and Arlo (the latter cutting an extra-wide rug) while Britt consulted with Flake about his tapes of “Count Me In,” and Fiona had an aesthetic argument with Downtown Pierro:

“This is *pitiful* punk! (*Hack hawk hoff.*) You guys are playing like you’re draped with doilies, and this herd belongs on Tony Orlando & Dawn’s *Rainbow Hour!*”

“(What do you expect? In case you haven’t noticed, the joint is crawling with parents!)”

Which wasn't strictly accurate, though some moms and dads were sticking aged heads through the door to take a fretful gander as they dropped off their lambs at this potential slaughterhouse. The sight of Downtown wouldn't allay any apprehensions: her once-sleek hair was up in Johnny Rotten spikes, and a large safety pin dangled from each earlobe.

"If this was England, you guys wouldn't be gobbed at even *once!*"

"Gobbed at?" said Vicki.

"(Spit on,)" Fiona translated. "(English punk fans spit on bands they like.)"

"You're not gonna do *THAT*, are you?" Vicki gasped at Downtown.

"Not the way *this* gig's going! I won't spit, chickies, but I've got to *split*—see you in school tomorrow." And off she went, lighting up another one of her thin French cigarettes.

"(Petula the Purist,)" snorted Feef.

"Nobody else'll 'gob' us, will they?" Vicki worried, and Fiona pressed tentative knuckles to her upper arm.

"(Hey—we're at the Spittlecure, remember?)"

Before the second set, Vicki gave the now-full house greetings and salutations; went "Quit it!" over her shoulder at Joss (making her *Mandingo* "mmmm" face) and introduced each Rosa Dartle by name. Glad she began with Fiona, since the other girls's boyfriends—even Flake!—staged an impromptu bellow-whoop contest for their individual sweethearts. Arlo won by trumpeting like Hathi in *The Jungle Books* (Joss applauded his resonant tone) and Robin responded by singing lead in a wham-bam cover of "Born to Run," substituting *boy* for "girl," *baby* for "Wendy," and *champs like us* for "tramps like us."

(Take *THAT*, Melody Pussycat!)

Cupcakes were distributed during the second break; a promo was aired for Dartle souvenirs; and adults circulated with wastebaskets to gather all the empty cupcake wrappers. Vicki almost relaxed after that, joining in the general jiggety-jog, finally tasting one of the "V V" *gâteaux*; yet keeping frequent watch on the fast-moving clock, so they could wind things up with "Ditchen" no later than 8:15, allowing time for one encore.

Which was duly and loudly called for. But first Joss wrapped a long arm around Vicki and emotionally presented her to the Vinyl Spinnaker:

“All of you oughta know who this is—she’s our manager—she’s your hostess—she’s my very best friend—and she’s about to turn fifteen—”

“¡*VIVA VICKI!*” Alex hollered from the dance floor. “¡*FELIZ QUINCEAÑERA!*”

“—like Alex says! So we got together, the rest of us Dartles, and wrote her a song for this occasion, and we’re gonna play it for you now before we say good night, but first you all gotta give Vicki Volester three cheers!”

Which they did, led by Becca Blair herself, who’d arrived fashionably late as per usual.

And Vicki, incapable of a coherent reply, raised her own arms in a Nixonian double-V-for-victory; wondering if the quintessential Victoria’d felt this way on her coronation day, prior to running home and giving her dog a bath.

She was too mindblown to follow the new song’s lyrics—something about Mardi Gras and merrymaking and fifteen minutes of fame—or to believe her eyes as they seemed to behold Gumbo Krauss brandish a detached wooden leg (???) as he chased floppy-limbed Tail-End through the multitude on the dance floor.

Did you SEE that?

*Did **I** see that?*

Why would that even be happening TO see?

What was IN that violet frosting?

She looked around for answers, but caught only the glittering FLASH of disco lights.

29

Trial-End

“(When did Earth Science turn into *Sex Ed*?)” Carly Thibert whisper-grouched to her lab partners.

Vicki and Fiona swapped sidelong eyerolls before refocusing on Ms. Tays-the-Tease, who had a loose blue pump suspended from her nylon toes as she roosted leggily atop the front lab counter. No one could say she lacked the class’s full attention; though how many students were *listening* to her might be a smaller subset.

“Your meteorology papers” (*fiddle diddle twiddle*) “are due Friday morning” (*diddle twiddle fiddle*) “and I want everyone to contribute his or her fair share” (*twiddle fiddle diddle*) “since these projects count for 25% of this unit’s grade—whoopsie!” (as the pump dropped off the toes, and four male students banged hornyboy heads scrambling to retrieve it).

“Oh, am I gonna be nauseated!” Carly proclaimed.

“(Wait’ll after class, please,)” muttered Fiona.

“You guys wanna get together free period at the Media Center, and start on this thing then?” Vicki proposed.

“(I’ll bring the book,)” said Fiona, meaning *The Weather Conspiracy: The Coming of the New Ice Age*, which she’d obtained an advance copy of via Cobwebs & Strange.

“Yeah sure okay,” Carly chirped, adding “HEY WAIT UP!” as the bell rang and she pounced on Byron Wyszynski, hanging onto his scrawny arm as though he might twitch tail-first through a window before she could hustle him out of Z303.

“What the *hell*? ...” went Vicki.

“(Now *I’m* gonna be nauseated,)” went Fiona.

Whose stomach grew more unsettled that free period at the Media Center, as the clock ticked forward till she and Vicki had to acknowledge Carly wasn’t coming.

“(That’s it! If she can’t be bothered to put her butt in a chair and do any work, *I* can’t be bothered to put her name on any report of *ours*. Period! End of sentence!)”

“Take it easy, Feef—”

“(Easy nothing! Let her do her report with Gollum—he’s probably the only guy in school she *hasn’t* ‘done it’ with by now!)”

Ssshhhh went a librarian, the first to ever make such a entreaty to Fiona Weller, and sounding a lot like Tail-End as she did so.

The girls buckled down then to research whether indiscriminate use of aerosol spraycans had triggered an epoch of global cooling—which was all too credible after the past winter. Vicki, who’d anointed her hair and body with several separate spritzes that morning, tried to reassure herself that a few stray puffs of Secret or AquaNet couldn’t possibly wreck the whole world’s atmosphere—

—when she felt a petrifying chill.

And, looking up, spotted a head stealthily protruding out of the fiction stacks. Its rigid unblinking gaze and sinuous, almost prehensile tresses would’ve been ideal for a stage Medusa, if the Drama Club had chosen to do *Persée et Andromède* as the spring musical.

Vicki, stretching her mouth to its widest extent, silently announced: *I—AM—NOT—DATING—HIM!*—

—and the Medusa head slowly retreated behind shelves of make-believe.

“(Kinks?)” asked Fiona.

“(Kinks,)” sighed Vicki.

*

One month to the day had passed since the concert party at the Vinyl Spinnaker: a Lent-ish letdown month for everyone, even the irreligious.

Sheila-Q had devoutly renounced her relationship with K.C. Battenburg, saying half a year was her limit for going with *any* guy. Whereupon Mealy’d swooped in to snap up K.C.

on the sisterly rebound; and now Sheila was threatening to transfer back to Archbishop Houlihan and take the veil.

“You wanna be a nurse, not a nun!” Robin argued.

“I can be both! Most of ‘em are, in Catholic hospitals!”

“Quirk, you wouldn’t last two weeks in a convent! You’d be dragging the paperboy into the bushes—”

“Why would a convent have a *paperboy*, Robbo? Do I have to start lighting candles for your *brain*?”

Sheila, a-wallow in romantic abnegation, wouldn’t join the bowling team Robin was forming as sister squad to Arlo Sowell’s Pachyderms at the Red Devil Bowl in Triville. Most of the bunch was unrecruitable: Alex couldn’t risk a relapse into overbooking her schedule; Laurie was already on a team with Susie, Sammi Tiggs, and Tina Korva; Crystal was too busy preparing for her next solo recital; Britt didn’t seem the sort to trifle with tenpins; and nothing would be more pointless than to ask Fiona.

“(Do you *truly* expect me to handle balls for you?)”

That left Joss and Vicki, who agreed to a trial-run triple-date with Robin and Arlo at the Red Devil. Joss was squired there (eww) by Gumbo Krauss, and Vicki by Buddy Marcellus, the Pachyderms’s set-up man.

“That means I’m the one who has to set up the pins when the machine’s on the fritz!” Bud snorted robustly.

“Does *not*!” Robin objected. “It means he’s the second-best bowler after Arlo, the team anchor—”

“Gahd, Robin, don’t flip your lid before we even get started.”

Vicki hadn’t gone bowling since sixth grade at Aaron’s Lanes, where her “approach” had always been much smoother than her “release.” But she was game to try again, hopefully keeping out of the gutter as much as possible.

She wished the same could be said for Gumbo Krauss, who kept giving Joss what he called “hands-on” instruction—guiding her delivery with both arms from very close behind, *so* close it was a wonder she could ever let go of the ball, except when gigglefits shook it loose from her grip.

This peeved Robin and Arlo, who took bowling—even a friendly weekend scratch match, as this was alleged to be—as seriously as Downtown Pierro did punk rock. The only permissible humor was to deride your opponent’s performance; but it had to be a make-an-effort performance by a take-it-seriously opponent. *Unlike* Gumbo, egging Buddy Marcellus on to cut hefty capers or do his Fred Flintstone “twinkletoe” routine—or knock an extra-large malted milkshake over Vicki’s coat as it lay defenseless on a chair.

Bud was just as profuse with apologies and promises to pay for the dry-cleaning, as soon as he’d saved up enough allowance. Even so, Vicki didn’t leap at his offer of a second date.

Instead she accepted John Alphonse’s appeal (which was considerable) to join him and Joss ‘n’ Gumbo the following weekend at Chez d’Arlequin. This Chubb Avenue eatery specialized in Cajun, Creole, and Caribbean fare, and so was home-away-from-home for Gumbo Krauss. Phonsie too seemed to be in his element:

“Y’might like a po’ boy sandwich? Served on a baguette? Don’t be ‘fraid to try the crawfish, they serve it with rémoulade sauce? Mighty spicy, y’know? The kind that makes y’wake up right?”

“Wake *upright*, hunh?” smirked Gumbo.

“You shush now,” chided Joss.

“I’m just sayin’, ask for extra sauce?” said quizzical Phonz.

Before *Happy Days* hit the heights, he’d been known as “Sleepy John.” While Britt Groningen’s periodic somnolence might be a put-on, you were never quite sure whether Phonsie wasn’t really about to nod off in class. Teachers would try to catch him napping, yet Phonz could generally solve the equation or select the correct synonym or identify the right amendment—invariably answering in question-form, like a contestant on *Jeopardy*.

“Mr. Alphonse,” his father was told, “we’re concerned about John. He always seems so drowsy—”

“You damn betcha! That’s from my boy acting like a red-blooded boy OUGHTA act, by damn!”

Indeed, the fair sex had been crushing on Sleepy John since co-ed snoozetimes back in kindergarten. Rarely was he seen in VW halls without some female head pillowed on his

manly chest—but unlike Mike Spurgeon, Phonz achieved this without lettering in any sport, or even going out for any team. (“Too lazy, y’know? To do all that runnin’ ‘n’ jumpin’?”)

So indolent were his playboy habits that some said he must be Batman in disguise, or one of the Teen Titans—Aqualad, say, trolling the bayou for AquaNetted girly-fish.

“Better wear your bait-proof bloomers,” Joss advised Vicki in the aerie that Sunday morning. “Unless you want ‘em to get *hooked* on your very first date!”

“Hardy har har,” said Vicki, trying not to sub-add *That sounds like something out of GUMBO’S yap*.

She did dress a bit more conservatively than usual (“Well, I’m going with you to church first, aren’t I?”) and applied less makeup than a first date might warrant—though not so little as to cast doubt on her basic desirability.

“Don’t *you* look fine?” went Phonz at Chez d’Arlequin, helping Vicki off with her laundered coat. For a moment she thought her head was about to get cushioned on his collarbone; but Phonsie kept himself under control, as much as any ninth-grade guy could in the presence of attractive ninth-grade girls. “Leastways I don’t go hog wild like my brother, y’know Sloppy Joe? Last month they were havin’ a kegger at his frat house? ‘n’ bet Slop he couldn’t eat a whole family-size pizza in two minutes flat? Done it too, didn’t he? But izzat any way to *taste* what it is you’re eatin’? Like these po’ boys here, dontcha know?”

The foursome was tucking in (less rapidly than Sloppy Joe consumed pizza) when Gumbo grinned around his Andouille sausage and said:

“Coupla your exes’ve dropped by, man.”

“Yeah? Gigi, I bet? Ain’t she always eatin’ here?”

(In seventh grade Gigi Pyle had appointed Phonz to be her personal Ashley Wilkes, before discovering his non-exclusive nature: “*What* were yew doing to that gal with your arm??” “Huggin’ her, right? Gotta be nice ‘n’ pally, don’t I?”)

Vicki and Joss could see Gigi facing away from them, one hand clasping the wrist of her luncheon companion as it went up and down, up and down, conveying spoonfuls of stew from bowl to mouth, and carrying Gigi’s hand along.

Is that SPLIT-PEA she’s eating with? Vicki sub-wondered.

If it is, why would he order OYSTER STEW? Joss sub-replied.

“Take a guess at your other ex,” Gumbo super-snortled.

“Aw crud?—don’t tell me it’s KINKS again?” Phonsie ultra-groaned.

Pivot around to find Miss Medusa alone at a corner table, crunching breadsticks, her eyes fixed on Phonz and her hair on labyrinthine end.

Hear Phonz tell how he’d hitched up with Kinks Farghetti at last year’s Halloween Dance, to which she’d come costumed as a grasshopper—or more likely a praying mantis, given her subsequent devouring obsession with All Things Alphonse. His moving on a few weeks later (non-exclusive, dontcha know?) had only intensified Kinks’s Phonzmania—phoning him day and night, staking out his house in all weathers, even sifting through the contents of his family’s trash cans; she would not quit with the trick-or-treating. Phonsie’d tried to dissuade her gently, firmly, sternly, harshly, but had no more luck than Clint Eastwood in *Play Misty for Me*.

“DO I GOTTA START BOOTIN’ HER SKINNY ASS OUTTA EVERY PLACE SHE FOLLERS ME??”

“Ssshhhh!” went Joss and Vicki.

“Naah, she’d just get off on that,” said Gumbo, chewing sausage.

“Aaah, who needs her? Ain’t I moo-hoovin’ on up?” asked Phonsie, leaning over to plant a crawfish-flavored kiss on Vicki, who was too surprised to dodge it.

Kinks Farghetti’s reaction (if any) got masked by Split-Pea Erbsen (if that *was* Split-Pea) brushing past as he exited Chez d’Arlequin, leaving Gigi with her raven head in her magnolia hands above an untouched bowl of oyster stew.

Vicki, annoyed by Phonsie’s stolen smooch, declined his bid for a second date. This gamble paid off on Wednesday when Tony Pierro reminded her that NESTLÉ’s indoor track meet was being held that Saturday at the Timonoff Park Fieldhouse. Tony’d pulled a lot of strings to clear his part-time job-slate for this event—and he would be very pleased if Vicki’d come with him as his guest.

Now, this was an OFFER.

Joss couldn’t go, since the meet was the same time as her cornet lesson; which meant Vicki could finally enjoy a Gumbo Kraussless date. Plus, Tony Pierro was a much catchier catch than Buddy or even Phonsie: certainly the one you’d want to be alone with soonest, the one most welcome to give you a kiss or embrace or commitment to full-fledged couplehood.

“Mr. and Mrs. Oswald Volester,” Joss meditatively composed while breakfasting at Burrow Lane on Saturday morning, *“request the honor of your presence at the marriage of their daughter—”*

“Will you shut up? It’s just a track meet.”

“You shut up, this is how it all begins—their daughter, Her Highness/Majesty Victoria Lorraine—”

“Joss!”

“Oh right—attended by beautiful Maid of Honor Jocelyn Murrisch—to Anthony Whatshismiddlename LetssayPetulascousin Pierro—”

“She’s just KIDDING, Mom,” Vicki told the crease-browed Felicia.

“Well, I hope we’ll get to meet this young man before you elope with him.”

But meeting and elopement were both deferred indefinitely, as the phone rang and Vicki answered and Tony Breachofpromise dolefully confessed that the strings he’d pulled had come unstrung. He would have to work at the deli today after all, and ask if Vicki wouldn’t mind giving him a dating raincheck.

“Yeah sure okay,” she coughed.

Stood up! As good as stood up, anyway!—no, make that BAD as, and call it the last straw! Sheila-Q’s vow to become a nun suddenly made a lot more sense. Enough was enough; no more waiting to be asked out by jive turkeys! She’d go to Timonoff Park with Alex and Mumbles Metcalf, and they’d enjoy girls-only entertainment by NESTL(É) boys at a safe distance—no strings attached.

NESTL(É) stood for the Northeast Suburban Townships League—“Our Accent’s on Excellence!”—in which Vanderlund Senior High competed. Girls teams hadn’t been invited to take part in this meet, otherwise Mumbles herself would be out there; she and the rest of last year’s freshmen Ladybugs had made this year’s VTHS varsity track squad. Mumbles bragged about Ms. Grigoryan, coach of the Lady Gondoliers, whose drills and strategies were bound to bring Vanderlund the state championship:

“Or regional, for sure. Or NESTL(É), at least. But I bet you we’ll win staaaate, ‘cause the Grigster’s that goood—even though she KEEPS CALLING ME YUHHH-VETTE! HA!! HA!! HA!!”

You almost had to speak that loud to be heard inside Timonoff Fieldhouse: it resembled a three-ring circus, with contests going on simultaneously and almost overlappingly. Forget “safe distance”—quarters were cramped, and one pole vaulter who veered too far to the right nearly whacked the baton out of a relay-racer’s hand.

Then a Multch North Hurricane accused a Multch East Screaming Eagle of deliberate bumping during the high hurdles, and before you knew it their teammates had joined in an all-out brawl. Not only were Multch North and Multch East archrivals in NESTL(É)’s Shoreside Division, but there was a rumor that the two schools might be consolidated and one of them closed. Nothing more outrageous could be imagined in Multch Township—except trying to merge the Multch West Tomahawks with the Multch South Buccaneers.

“Never date a runner!” Mumbles advised Vicki and Alex over the melee. “Give ‘em the least little head staaaart, *and I guarantee you WON’T BE ABLE TO CATCH UP WITH ‘EM!* **HA!! HA!! HA!!**”

It was the most fun Vicki’d had since Presidents Day.

Or would’ve been, had she not run into the Bobbsey Twins out in the parking lot.

“Vicki! Do you know Kinks Farghetti?” asked Caroline Appercy, a couple steps ahead of Karen Lee Bobko.

“I saw her at a restaurant last Sunday. She was staring her eyes out at Phonsie Alphonse—”

“Well!” Karen Lee broke in, “she’s been asking me if I know you—well not *you*, but somebody who sounds a whole lot *like* you—”

“She’s been asking *me* about you,” Caroline interrupted, “and *I*, unlike *SOME* people, kept my mouth shut and didn’t tell her who you are—”

“Ha! *Some* blabbermouth whose name starts with ‘C’ told her, all right—”

“Make that initial a ‘K’ and it *will* be *ALL* right—”

“The *MAIN* thing is, maybe you’d better be kind of careful, Vicki, so *you* ’ll be all right—”

“‘Cause Kinks can get sort of *weirdish*, y’know, when she thinks she’s jealous—”

(The Bobbseys had gone to school with her since third grade, when she was known as Annamaria; and Kinks still lived in their neighborhood on Whierry Way.)

“Well,” said Vicki, “tell her she’d be wasting her time being jealous of *me*. I am *not* dating John Alphonse anymore.”

“Really?” chorused the Bobbseys, who both had crushes-from-afar on him.

“I’m not dating *anyone* anymore, for awhile. I’m sick and tired of how guys act.”

“Well, if you’re sick of guys you should date a SWEETIEPIE like Terry Blitstein,” suggested Caroline.

“He is not my SWEETIEPIE! We are *Just—Good—Friends!*” insisted Karen Lee.

“ANYWAY,” went Vicki, “tell Kinks her best bet for winning Phonsie back would be to leave him the hell alone.”

The Bobbsey Twins pledged to pass this along; but Kinks evidently heard only the last five words, and took them as a challenge.

That night at Jupiter Street, Vicki and Joss watched the final episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and found it a bit of a fizzleflop. After seven seasons, couldn’t Mary have come up with a better bow-out than “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”? Joss was unpacking her cornet to demonstrate how much better “Never Can Say Goodbye” would’ve been, when the aerie phone rang.

“Murrisch residence... yeah, she’s here... s’for you,” to Vicki, handing her the receiver.

“Hello?”

Silence at the other end; then a dial tone.

When the same thing happened twenty minutes later, she got mildly worried and called Burrow Lane, where Goofus grumped that some dumb girl had been asking for Vicki and he’d notified her that his dumb sister had gone over to her dumb friend Joss’s house. Now could everyone stop bothering him? *Starsky and Hutch* was about to start!

Click from Goofus. *Mmph* from Vicki as she hung up too. RING from the phone while it was still in her hand. *Yelp* and *thump* as she dropped it on the floor. Dial tone by the time she picked it up.

The girls had begun a game of Sorry! with Beth and Invisible Amy, when the phone rang yet again.

“Is this Kinks Farghetti??” Vicki snarled into it.

“(Why the hell would I want to be *that*?)”

“Feef! Oh—hi! Did I drop the phone on you awhile ago?”

“(Did you do what to me when now?)”

Fiona’d just returned to the Plexiglas Palace after buying *The Weather Conspiracy* at Cobwebs & Strange, and dining on Polynesian eggrolls at Shanghai Lil’s. Vicki commended her expanding appetite, then told Feef about Kinks’s potential weirdishness.

“(You think *you*’ve got problems? At least you don’t have to share a bedroom with Tweety Snot!)”

Chloe Rumpelmagen, newly teenaged, had landed her first official boyfriend: a fellow sevvie named Bart Schtapp. If that alone weren’t enough to convulse Patches and her other brothers, the heart-enclosed “C.R. + B.S.” motifs Chloe was doodling everywhere were sure to cinch their hysteria.

And Chloe’d begun putting on what Fiona considered snippy-assed airs, treating Feef with pity and condescension instead of timorous reverence. Chloe had a boyfriend now; Fiona had none. Chloe was going out on indubitable dates; Fiona stayed home alone, trying to compose *songs*. Singlehandedly too, without a collaborator, as in the good old days before Britt was admitted to the band—

—and having no more success than in the bad old nights of Psmith-block.

She’d set one passage from Joss’s *Connstung* to music, but with next to no lyrical input; and then Robin whistled down her attempt to play it before Feef got halfway through.

“Jesus, are you writing for Helen Reddy now?”

On which dismissive note, Robin changed the subject to how utterly unsatisfactory Arlo Sowell was at all things *l’amour*—curtailing this diatribe so she could don rubber hipboots, head for the Lake, and go smelt-netting with Arlo.

(It took more than a plate of Polynesian eggrolls to disremember a thing like *that*.)

“SORRY!” said Beth at the gameboard, on behalf of Invisible Amy.

*

The first week of spring saw snow return to The Cityland, astonishing no one there except the imprudently optimistic. (Such as Cass Rumpelmagen, who’d planned to put in a new bed of bare-root roses.)

It also saw Vicki trying to wriggle off Kinks Farghetti's hook—if you could call it a “hook” when it felt more like a smelt-net, shapeless yet restrictive; or a fishbowl, through which two lidless gorgon-eyes kept scrutinizing her. Vicki'd felt *that* sensation before, and hadn't savored it then, and didn't relish it now.

Especially not when it emanated from an eighth-grader. Kinks belonged down on 8-Z with the Bobbseys, but didn't let that inhibit her from sneaking upstairs to spy on the third floor. Back in Vicki's day (a year ago) only the boldest or most reckless eighter (e.g. Roger Mustardman) would've dared do such a thing! And it was no joy having a bold-or-reckless Daytime Night Stalker on your disrespected tail, even if all Kinks did was reconnoiter. Who knew what *that* could spiral into?

Try to confront her—try even to draw near her—and Kinks transformed from gorgon-fish to kitchen-insect, scuttling into the sink and down its drain. (Eww...) Stretch your mouth to its widest extent and repeat: *I—AM—NOT—DATING—HIM!*—which only compelled temporary retreats.

How to get RID of her? Tattle to Mr. O'Brien or Mrs. Driscoll?—and charge Kinks with *what*? Trespassing, voyeurism, making you squeal like a paranoid fruitbat?

No! Not Loopy the Enforcer, pride of the Pfiester Park Pherrettes.

But before you could arrange a hit job, John Alphonse took a non-exclusive trot round the bases with LeAnn Anobile, who might be none too bright but was extra cuddlesome in a cold snap. Surely *that* qualified as an off-the-hook (out of the fishbowl, away from the smelt-net) wriggle opportunity!

So Vicki, pulling rank as Z-Wing's chief Secretary, obtained the number of FARGHETTI, ANNAMARIA's second-floor locker; and through its vent inserted a cease-and-desist ('cause-you're-barking-up-the-wrong-tree) order, as authoritative as she could contrive it—with technical assistance from Gumbo Krauss.

“Haw haw haw haw!”

“Quit laughing about this! Quit it, Gumbo, or I'll have Joss clobber you!”

“Oooh, please *do!* With rawhide, while dressed like a cowgirl—”

(Aargh! Of all the degenerate lowlifes Joss had to throw herself away on...)

The cease-and-desist's postscript—*And for your information, Phonsie's going with LeAnn Anobile now*—cost Vicki a pang of conscience. But LeAnn was such a dimbulb she probably wouldn't even realize she was being stalked; and as the snowy week wore on, Vicki did sense gradually diminishing gorgon-scrutiny.

If she still felt ensnared by a net, it was just the old grab-bag of imminent midterms.

She and Fiona wrote their meteorology paper without Carly, who (given Vicki's blessing and Feef's good-riddance) defected to do her project with Tail-End. Carly's ex-lab-partners suspected *he* wrote every syllable of "How Air Masses Collide," in exchange for her warm front bending over his homeroom desk every morning in a half-unbuttoned blouse.

Mrs. Hurlburt finally commented on this phenomenon, saying: "I have a supply of safety pins here, Carly—feel free to avail yourself."

"(Instead of *unveil* herself,)" Fiona muttered to Vicki.

Other than exhibitionism, the impetus behind this was Keiko Nakayama's fall from tutorial grace. Her parents had heard how pretty she'd looked at the Vinyl Spinnaker; and since no daughter of theirs had any business looking pretty at disco concerts, they'd given Keiko a dressing-down and severed her ties to Carly Thibert, even the academic ones. Or so they believed: Keiko and her Carly Godmother continued hanging out on the defiant sly, with schoolwork the furthest thing from either of their minds.

No such frivolous for Vicki's bunch as midterms descended like a swarm of hungry hornets. As per usual, each teacher behaved as though his or her course were the ONLY one on your book-hitting, oil-burning menu. It hardly seemed possible that studying for tests in senior high or even college could be a greater ordeal. (In college, at least, you'd be able to empty a keg or two at your cram sessions; here and now you had to wash down erudition with Mr. Newports and Dr. Peppers.)

Algebra: review exponents, polynomials, factoring. Language Arts: reread grammar, vocabulary, poetic analysis. Earth Science: go over world climates, wind and air pressure, weather prediction. Civics: memorize, in their entirety, the executive and judicial branches of government.

This last class was especially fiendish for Mr. Koehler's third period honor students. "Advanced placement," as Mr. K stated twice a week, "imposes higher benchmarks of

thought and conduct.” Meaning there’d be no facile true/false questions on *his* midterm, nor readily-guessable fill-in-the-blanks. Even the multiple-choices would be boobytrapped with options like “A and C” or “All but D”—so you could know *most* of an answer and still get the question wrong.

Then too, old Mr. Koehler was the kind of teacher whose viewpoint you’d do well to parrot in your mini-essays. Pile it on by agreeing that Jimmy Carter, in the ten weeks he’d occupied the White House, had brought America to the brink of calamity by:

- A) *Walking* down Pennsylvania Avenue during the inaugural parade
- B) Pardoning all Vietnam War draft dodgers
- C) Appointing Communist sympathizers to high office
- D) Offering Red China a discount on peanut exports
- E) Calling for bans on saccharin and nuclear testing
- F) All of the above but D
- G) A, B, and E

Artie Rist, though no fan of Jimmy Carter—“Exploiting the masses with fake populism!”—was not about to toe that line, and spent more time preparing a strident protest of his anticipated grade than in actual study for the test. Howard Ullmann, contrariwise, had an A+ locked up—unless he forfeited the “+” through mind-numbing turgidity.

Blame the alphabet for seating this stodgemaster next to Vicki in the back row of Advanced Civics; and blame the apathetic voters of 9-Z for electing him their Vice President, simply because Howard Ullmann (NO relation to Liv) was the sort to seek such a position. His idea of a pickup line was to read aloud tidbits from *National Review* or *American Spectator*; and every time Howard mounted one of these tedious come-ons, Vicki wished Fiona were seated on her other side so they could trade eloquent eyerolls.

But Feef didn’t have Civics till sixth period, so Vicki had to make do with Madeline Wripley. This was a sober little mouse of the Sarah-Jill Shapiro species, and just as inept at understanding jokes. When Buddy Marcellus told her to change a couple letters of her last name so she’d be entitled to a Field full of chewing gum, Maddie’s reaction was deadpan puzzlement.

As Mr. Koehler's student aide she really belonged in the front row with Alex and Becca; but Maddie was a stickler for alphanumeric order and kept to the back row, even if that meant being seated next to Tail-End and having to bear constant witness to his spluttery missteps. Each time he'd drop something or knock something off his (or her) desk, Maddie would give Tail-End a teetotal glance, an abstinent headshake, and a parsimonious *it's-down-over-THERE* fingerpoint.

"Seriously, doesn't he drive you distracted?" Vicki asked her once.

"Distraction is a trap to back away from," deadpanned Madeline: looking fifteen and sounding fifty.

To compensate for these neighbors, the alphabet placed Vicki behind Jerome Schei, who'd adopted Charles Nelson Reilly as his role model and was second only to Laurie Harrison as VW's topnotch gossip. (Susie Zane'd had to gently edify Laurie why Jerome, despite his handsome physique and better-than-average hygiene, might not be conventional boyfriend material.)

He tended to spend the first minutes of third period twisted around in his chair, filling Vicki in on all the *latest* latest. Mr. Koehler'd learned not to ask, "Do you have something to SHARE with the rest of us, Mr. Schei?" since Jerome would reply, "YES I DO!" and spring up to spread the *latest* latest wealth.

But at 10 a.m. on Thursday, March 31st, Jerome was as face-forward-focused as Mr. K could ask, poring over his notes on War Powers and Cabinet-Level Officers and the Electoral College and Federal/State/District Courts and Marbury v. Madison; as were his classmates in their individual ways, ranging from the superorganized (Alex, Becca, Madeline Wripley) to the bombastic (Artie Rist, Howard Ullmann) to the carefree (Keiko Nakayama, shuffling her index cards like a riverboat shill) to the popeyed (Tail-End, pawing through his jumbled ring binder when Tony Pierro asked to borrow a pencil)—

THOCK! THOCK! THOCK! went the gavel in Mr. Koehler's hand.

His Civics students gathered all books and folders and non-writing-instruments, stuffing these into the wire racks beneath their desks.

Mr. K assessed the honors class briefly yet cuttingly, like a well-honed guillotine blade. (THOCK!)

“Do not begin until I give the word,” he decreed, passing out the exams facedown for good measure. Another steely-sharp gaze raked the room, and then: “Begin!”

Over flapped the papers; *groan* went the class; *skritch skritch skritch* began their various writing instruments.

Vicki was picking her way through “Define these types of jurisdiction: Original, Appellate, Exclusive, Concurrent,” with a sub-grumble that *Gahd! we’re in NINTH GRADE, not law school!* and vague cognizance of Mr. K patrolling the aisles between the desks, when there came a sudden “ulp” from the side of the room—

Two dozen heads swiveled *ulpwards*.

“EYES DOWN!” sliced Mr. Koehler’s ice-edged voice.

Two dozen necks got hasty-compliance cricks.

“(All right—both of you—out of here,)” sotto’d Mr. K.

Two dozen peripheral visions strained four dozen sockets as Tony Pierro (deathly pale) and Byron Wyszynski (twitching fitfully) removed themselves from Z305.

Mr. K shadowed them to the doorway and straddled its threshold, one rheumy iris trained on his deportees in the hall, the other circling his two dozen holdovers like a ravenous hawk.

Which did not make it any easier for those holdovers to give suitable examples of ambassadorial duties, or differentiate the Interior Department’s function from the Agriculture Department’s.

Had there been an accident? A medical emergency? That could account for the “ulp,” the twitching, the pasty-white face. Had Tail-End, succumbing to stress, thrown *ulp* like Wernie Ball back in fifth grade? Who’d barfed tuna noodles over his desk and Eileen Agnew’s beside it, sending her into a panic frenzy—“*Is it on me?? Did he get any on me??*”

“TEN MINUTES LEFT,” announced Mr. Koehler’s visible half, his visible hand holding what appeared to be a broken writing instrument.

Aargh! This wasn’t doing anything to relieve your own tummy-tension. Treat it like you would a home stretch in cross country—breathing deep and slow, staying straight and smooth with every *skritch* of your #2 Ticonderoga:

Habeas Corpus *The right of an arrested person to be brought before a judge or court, and given a reason why* [erase erase erase] *a legal reason why he or she should be given detention* [erase erase erase] *remain in custody* [ERASE ERASE ERASE] *stay in jail.*

*

Jerome Schei's handsome physique nearly got ruptured over the next hour, trying to contain its snoopiness about what had happened. During free period Jerome nabbed Laurie (in a Just Good Friendly way) and together they pumped the cafeteria crowd at lunch; but by final bell all they could say for certain was [a] Tony and Tail-End had been escorted to Mr. O'Brien's office, [b] neither'd been seen leaving it, [c] or in any of their afternoon classes.

On which unsatisfyingly inadequate note, midterms ended and spring break began at 3:15 p.m.

Vanderlund Township only got Friday and Monday off, so you could scarcely call this a vacation; but Alex Dmitria would be heading downstate on Saturday to attend an orientation workshop for the Wrangler-in-Training job she'd have at Summer Horse Camp. ("We Make Everyone a Whinny-er!")

Before she departed, Alex joined Vicki and Joss for their Friday night sleepover at Burrow Lane, to which she brought her remaining stock of Scot-Teas and Lemon Crèmes. Vanderlund's Stop-ERA Committee had declared a cookie boycott after the Girl Scouts endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment, but a counterprotest boosted sales dramatically; Felicia Volester'd ordered six boxes of the new Cheddarette crackers, donating some of these as sleepover nosh-goodies.

The girls persuaded Fiona to come bunk in too. She was raring to escape from Chloe's conceits for a night, even while thinking it an April Fool's joke to be paired with Alex in Tricia's room—Feef taking the bed, Alex the carpet in her trefoil-emblazoned sleeping bag.

"We are gonna have such a blast!" Alex enthused.

"(If I wake up brainwashed into going on a hike, I'm blaming you two,)" Fiona warned Joss and Vicki.

Besides cookies, Alex brought a breaking news bulletin from Marshall McConchie, President of 9-X and the Frosh Board, which doubled as VW's Student Court. Marshall (who looked and sounded like Gregory Peck in *The Omen*) had phoned Alex and Mike Spurgeon, his fellow team presidents, to alert them that Student Court would hold a special meeting Tuesday afternoon, followed by a hearing next Friday of the school's case against Tony and Tail-End—accused of conspiring to cheat on the Advanced Civics midterm.

"I'm sure this is all a big misunderstanding," said Alex. "Student Court'll clear it all up, but till then we'd better not talk about it—"

"AL-ex! We're only human, y'know!"

"And *girl* humans, too—we HAVE to talk about it!"

"No no no no, we've got to keep absolutely impartial! Vicki and I do, at least!"

"Well, Feef and I don't!" Joss retorted.

Fiona raised a hand to affirm indifference. "(There's a Late Movie on tonight that you Justices can watch, about trials and testimony—no it is *not* boring; I've seen it before and want to watch it again. But for right *now*, can we please make some music?)"

She'd brought her Fender, Joss got out her cornet, and Alex and Vicki looked over Feef's score for "Salvage Me," the *Connstung* extract that Robin hadn't liked.

"Could it be more like a ballad, do you think?" asked Alex.

"(Dartles don't do 'ballads,')" Fiona muttered.

Vicki ahem'd and Joss went "Well..." but Alex said, "Why not try it a few different ways and see?" Though not opera-voiced like Crystal Denvour, she had a flair for tempo changes and put this to use singing variations on Feef's rock-'em-sock-'em-no-way-Helen-Reddyish beat. Joss played the alternate takes receptively, Vicki sang them diplomatically, and Fiona performed with a chip on her shoulder under her bass strap.

Yet even she took active part in rearranging "Salvage Me" along jazzier, bluesier lines. The result was seductively rhythmic, not unlike Joni Mitchell's new *Hejira* album:

No regrets, Coyote; a strange boy is weaving dreams and false alarms...

"(Not bad,)" Feef allowed.

"Not *bad*? It was FANTABULOUS!" Joss rejoiced. "If I'd had a tune in my head when I was writing the words, *that* woulda been the tune! And Alex! You just earned your Girl

Scout *chanteuse* patch, if they have those!”

“Really!” Vicki agreed. “Course, you’ll have to sew it on a slinky lowcut nightclub gown—”

“Yeah, with a slit up one side so you can stretch out on top of my piano—”

“Oh stop it, you guys!” Alex blushed. “I do like how that song’s turned out, but you’ll have to be real careful to pronounce the L in ‘salvage,’ or else it’ll sound like you’re singing ‘*Savage Me*.’”

(Smothered snortles by those who’d read or written *The Horns of Africa*.)

Music having been made, the girls opened fresh boxes of Scot-Teas and Lemon Crèmes and settled down for *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, after evicting Goofus from the family room. He claimed he’d had a “bad dream” and needed snuggle-comfort from Alex, who would’ve gladly supplied it if Vicki hadn’t chased Goof’s fraudulent butt upstairs.

“Aw! Why’d you do that?” went Alex.

“‘Cause he’s never gone to sleep before midnight on a Friday in his life! He was just pulling another April Fool on you,” said Vicki, sparing her from the gruesome truth that Goofus, at going-on-eleven, was groping ever closer to hornyboyhood.

(Oh grohhssss...)

“What’s this show about again?” asked clean-living Alex, who normally hit the hay by 10 p.m. The others gave her a bowdlerized lowdown on Fernwood USA, little suspecting that before the month was through, Louise Lasser would quit and *Mary Hartman* be cancelled: *sic transit syndicated gloria mundi*.

Then came Fiona’s Late Movie, *Witness for the Prosecution*, during which she sat complacently back while the others roared at Charles Laughton and Elsa Lanchester, gasped “NO WAY!” at Marlene Dietrich’s *tour de force*, and agreed that Tony Pierro would probably look like Tyrone Power in twenty or thirty years. Also that his character’s being named Leonard *Vole* must be a sign—obscure, yet unambiguous—that Vicki and Tony were destined to wind up together.

“But *we* get to pick out our bridesmaid outfits,” said Joss.

“With slits up the side, so we can sing in them,” laughed Alex.

“(You guys are talking weird,)” muttered Fiona.

Talking about Tony reminded the girls of the indictment against him, yet Alex still wouldn't permit any chitchat on such a delicate matter.

"And for heaven's sake, *please* don't let Laurie hear a word about it till AFTER I leave town tomorrow morning!"

*

Needless to say, Laurie's bunny-ears were extra-busy during spring break, and she came to school on Tuesday the 5th with a bushel of plausible rumors. *This* somebody'd heard Mrs. Pierro had taken to her bed when Tony got suspended! *That* somebody'd seen Tail-End wandering around with a black eye and bloody nose! *T'other* somebody'd said Student Court's special meeting would be held in HB226—Miss Stabeldore's Home Base Typing room—where Laurie and Vicki just happened to have their seventh period class.

Laurie was bursting with schemes to hide under this/that/t'other to eavesdrop on the proceedings; but Vicki was bursting with too many trips to the drinking fountain (to dampen down tummy-butterflies). At 3:15 she had to make a mad dash for the washroom, and ended up being the *last* person to enter HB226 for the 3:30 meeting. Laurie, though, was the last one to be chunked *out*, and even then loitered nearby with Susie, Tina Korva, and Jerome Schei.

"We're just talking about bowling!" Jerome dissembled.

"Kindly close that door behind you, Miss Volester," requested Mr. O'Brien.

Vicki did so, then edged through rows of covered typewriters and aisles of freshman potentates. Marshall McConchie (President of 9-X) stood up front, gravely parleying with Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Koehler; Howard Ullmann (Vice President of 9-Z) hovered weightily at their elbows. Gumbo Krauss and Buddy Marcellus (Treasurers of 9-Y and 9-Z) were guffawing in one corner; in another, Mike Spurgeon (President of 9-Y) carried on a full-scale flirtation with Irina Saranoff (Treasurer of 9-X) while she tossed and twirled and tantalized her hair. You never saw Irina *not* doing this; she even referred to her crowning glory in the third person—"Don't touch *the* hair," rather than "*my* hair"—as if it were some tawny jungle beast that she alone could tame.

(Speaking of a third person: Irina and *the* hair were supposedly going with Sell-O Fayne, yet here they were shaking their stuff at the King of the Towheads! So whatever else

might happen, Vicki'd have a juicy nugget to feed the Gossip Brigade outside.)

Fast Eddie Wainwright (Vice President of 9-X) was glancing impatiently at his watch as he tapped restless gym shoes on the floor, wanting to bolt for baseball practice. Sheila-Q and Crystal had each dated Eddie in the past, but only briefly because he was a come *ahn!* come *ahn!* cut to the damn *chase* already! sort of person, like all the Wainwrights.

Gigi Pyle (Vice President of 9-Y) seemed every bit as eager for this affair to be over and done with, as she sat fretting over how many minutes would be stolen from *Carnival* musical time. Kim Zimmer (Secretary of 9-Y) crouched by her side, glaring acidulously at Vicki; who paid Kim minimal mind as she took a seat next to Alex (President of 9-Z) and Hope "Esperanza" Eckhardt (Secretary of 9-X).

"¡Hola Victoria!" they greeted her, Hope adding "¿Estás listo para juzgar?"

"Um, hi, sure," went Vicki. (*Am I ready for... what now?*)

Hope was a large and somewhat disheveled girl, who somehow always smelled like hot vegetable broth. She also reigned as VW's *campeóna de español*, her accent as true or truer even than Alejandra Dmitria's, despite not having a drop of Latin blood.

"¡No puedo creer que alguien pudiera ser tan estúpido como para hacer trampa en un examen!" Hope exhaled soupily.

"Ahora, no sabemos todavía si alguien hizo trampa," cautioned Alex.

What does "trampa" mean again? Vicki wondered. *Could they be talking about Irina Saranoff?*

"We'd better get started," said Marshall McConchie, every inch a teen Atticus Finch.

The Freshman Executive Board met twice monthly: once as itself, and two weeks later as VW's Student Court. In the latter guise it meted out "kangaroo jurisprudence," as Roger Mustardman quipped whenever the Smarks Brothers got hauled before it. There was a lot of rhetoric (high-blown and feather-layered, like the Saranoff coif) about "resolving disputes through interpretation of school bylaws by one's peers"—which meant that [a] miscreants could appeal detentions and suspensions, [b] Student Court could review these, usually *after* they were served, and either [c] uphold the disciplinary actions or [d] send them back for the faculty to modify. If no miscreant bothered to file an appeal in any given month, Vice Principal O'Brien would arbitrarily pick a case for "learning purpose" appraisal.

The chief justiceship rotated monthly between the three team presidents; two prosecutors and two defense counsels were selected by lot, along with a bailiff who doubled as court clerk. The other six members filled in as that month's associate justices, putting them next in line to be saddled with a more demanding job next month.

Before this semester, Vicki's bunch's involvements with Student Court had been limited to [a] when Robin'd appealed her detention for ditching school after Fiona passed out (Chief Justice Lisa Lohe expressed formal sympathy but sustained the punishment) and [b] last fall, when they'd thrown the book at those slimeballs who caused the Back-to-School Dance debacle. (Lenny Otis, Dino Tattaglia, Dwight Whitehead and Roy Hodeau each received a week's suspension, which suited them just fine.)

Then Vicki'd been elected to Frosh Board and picked as bailiff/clerk for the February Court hearing. Howard Ullmann had prosecuted four sevvies caught smoking in a john, and Chief Justice Alex lectured them for so long about the perils of tobacco that the sevvies cried foul: they'd done time for their crime, and now had to put up with THIS?

In March a habitually tardy eighter got tried (in absentia) with Chief Justice Mike obliging prosecutor Eddie by rushing to judgment in the least amount of time permissible. Vicki, an Associate Justice for that hearing, barely had time to cast her vote before Court was adjourned; and now in April she was liable for assignment to a busier role in a messier case.

As this month's Chief Justice, Marshall called on Mr. Koehler to present the facts of VW vs. Pierro & Wyszynski. This Mr. K did in a funereal voice, wearing a black bow tie instead of his trademark blue polka dot:

Tony, just before the midterm started, had asked to borrow a pencil from Tail-End, who sat directly behind him. Tail-End had handed over a Scripto mechanical pencil, which Mr. Koehler later spotted in a state of disassembly on Tony's desk, with a thin slip of paper tucked inside the barrel. Upon this slip, in tiny yet legible printing, was a condensed recap of the Advanced Civics third-quarter syllabus.

(Gumbo, Buddy, Fast Eddie, and Mike all appeared impressed by this subterfuge.)

Further facts: Tony and Tail-End were given automatic F's on the test and a week's suspension for cheating. Both boys denied the charge, Tail-End saying he hadn't prepared the cheatsheet or placed it in the Scripto, and Tony that it'd "just come apart" in his hand to

reveal wholly unexpected innards.

“Thank you, Mr. Koehler,” said the Vice Principal. “I need not remind you young people how very seriously we take all forms of cheating, including *plagiarism*—” (making everyone jump and squirm, including those who thought “plagiarism” was some kind of Biblical epidemic).

Howard—who, like Vicki and Alex, hadn’t witnessed enough of the alleged transactions to be recused—put up a heavy hand. “Did they plagiarize too, Mr. O’Brien?”

“As I see it, Mr. Ullmann, anyone who cheats on a test is stealing credit for someone else’s work. To do this, or to assist another student to cheat or steal—these are bad enough. But then to *lie* about it doubles the infraction, particularly in a class of HONOR students!”

(Another group jump-and-squirm.)

“The penalty for that,” Mr. Koehler crisply interjected, “can be expulsion.”

“Even so, we are prepared to extend some leniency,” said Mr. O’Brien, though his goatee seemed to disagree. “If the boys admit their guilt, there will be an additional week of detention starting next Monday; a failing grade for the third quarter of Advanced Civics; and demotion to a standard Civics class for the fourth quarter. We leave it to you, their peers, to convince these boys this is more than fair.”

Alex, raising her hand, asked a question only she would pose: “What if we find them *innocent*?”

Short pause. Then Mr. Koehler replied, “We’ll burn that bridge if and when we have to cross it.”

Longer pause. Then Marshall put the names of last month’s associate justices in Eddie’s varsity Beetle baseball cap, and drew forth five designees:

BAILIFF/CLERK	<i>Alex Dmitria</i>
PROSECUTION	<i>Morey Krauss and Hope Eckhardt</i>
DEFENSE	<i>Vicki Volester and Gigi Pyle</i>

“WHAT??” went Gigi. “*No!* Ah don’t have TIME for this! Pick somebody else!”

“The selection has been made, Miss Pyle,” frowned the Vice Principal.

“Well, can’t we just go ahead and find ‘em guilty now?”

“That is hardly the right attitude for a defense counsel, young lady!” exclaimed Mr. Koehler.

“You *may* be excused,” said Mr. O’Brien, “providing you resign from the Freshman Executive Board.”

Hesitant lull in Gigi’s storm.

Marshall (like Gregory Peck as the *Marooned* flight director) took advantage of this lull to move for adjournment till 3:30 p.m. on Friday the 8th. Eddie Wainwright loudly seconded, and Student Court dispersed before Gigi could rally and object.

“Ah do NOT have time for this!” she futilely reiterated.

“This is *important*, Gigi, and won’t take that long,” said Alex the advocate, with everyone sidestepping around them except Kim, Hope, and Vicki (who wanted to leave but was stuck behind bulky “Esperanza”).

“You’re so raht,” Gigi swiftly do-si-do’d. “‘Scuse us Alex, ‘scuse us Hope—Ah got to *confer* with mah other defender.” Making room for them to withdraw, which they promptly did; leaving Gigi (and Kim) to *confer* with Vicki alone.

“Okay, WHAT?” Vicki bravely pherretted.

“Oh, it’s *yew!*” went Gigi, connecting the face to the name to the past. “All raht then, looky here: yew *owe* me one, bigtime—”

“Do not!”

“Do *too!* Ah hadda give up a whole dinner party ‘cause of your stupid disco concert!”

“Yeah!” contributed Kim.

“But here’s the deal,” said Gigi. “Yew handle this Court gobbledygook without me having to do anything, and Ah’ll call it even. ‘Kay?”

Vicki contemplated asking if this wouldn’t be cheating-or-plagiarism, but thought better of it. “You’ll have to *say* something on Friday, y’know—”

“Oh that’s easy—just jot down mah lines and Ah’ll read ‘em like Ah’m checking mah notes.” Her beautiful Everglade eyes widened, then narrowed. “Yew were the one helped Candy Gates with last year’s musical, weren’t yew?”

“Well, sort of...”

“We should talk about *Carnival*. Maybe yew could help out again—”

“HEY!” quacked Kim Zimmer.

“Hey *what?*” went Gigi.

“...nothing...”

“Maybe I *could* help, but only if you do ME a favor,” Vicki said stoutly. “Next time you talk to Sid Erbsen, tell him to quit giving me the runaround!”

Gigi’s Everglades bulged like twin swampbubbles, as they’d done that day she’d acted naked-on-an-auction-block in the cafeteria. “(How d’y’know ‘bout *him?*)” she breathed.

“Hunh? He’s the *Cicada* photographer—I’ve been after him for weeks now to retake our staff yearbook picture. Pretty soon it’ll be too late!”

“Ohhhh,” went Gigi, smoothing down the front of her dress (another simple unsullied country-orphan frock) with a deep relieved sigh. Then, re-narrowing: “Why’d yew think *Ah’d* be talking to him?”

“Well,” said Vicki, “he’s part of Drama Club, isn’t he? And—um—didn’t I see you two the other day at that ‘Darlykin’ restaurant? I mean it kind of *looked* like Sid Erbsen, the guy you were with...”

“(He wouldn’t be in the musical,)” said Gigi, drawl sinking back to a whisper. “(Ah asked ‘n’ asked, but... but... he just kept saying no.)”

“Hmm,” went Vicki, surprised that any male could resist Gigi Pyle and her but-butts; even Jerome Schei kowtowed to them. “Guess he’s giving us both the runaround.”

“(And the thing of it is? Ah didn’t *want* him. Isn’t that crazy? Ah didn’t even *want* him,)” Gigi reverie’d, drifting out of the Typing room.

Kim Zimmer lingered a moment longer, small fingers curled into small claws, to see the at Vicki: “She’s MY friend! *MINE!* And don’t—you—forget it!”

Stamp of small foot, whirl on small heel, and scuttle after her drifting friend.

*

Vicki was glad not to have to work with Gigi on a day-to-day basis, especially since Kim had taken to the manic-demented warpath. But *someone* was needed to divvy up the defense work with, because—after all!—she had a life of her own to lead this week,

culminating Saturday in a Led Zeppelin concert at The City's most famous Madhouse.

"I still can't believe Meg 'n' Brooksy are taking us!" Joss raved that night during their pre-bedtime phone call. "Even if it *is* my birthday present and the rest of you had to pay for your tickets. But I can't believe Brooksy wheedled Meg into letting us go *with* them! Too bad he's such a drip at being her boyfriend—otherwise I might try to swipe him out from under Meg's nose (which sounds really gross) like 'Taters' did to Sheila-Q!"

"Dare you to try it!" said Vicki. "Wear your turquoise tanktop to the concert, and—"

"I can't, you know I can't, I mean I *could* (especially in that tank) but I *can't*, he's asked her to the senior prom and everything. And besides: SPEAKING of Gumbo—"

"—who's speaking of Gumbo? I wasn't speaking of Gumbo—"

"Uh hunh, sure you weren't—so *anyway*: I really do wish I could help you with the trial and all. But (sigh) I suppose you'd better watch what you say to me about it, till the whole thing's over."

Too true: your dearest, most faithful friend was dating half the prosecution team. And apt to spill anything confidential she might hear regarding the case, if it struck her as sufficiently funny.

Entrust Joss with a solemn secret, and she'd keep it mum even under torture. But let it be funny-haha, funny-strange, or funny-sick (like sealing a deal by French-kissing Roger Mustardman) and she could only swear to do her *best* not to blab. Joss was aware of this—"my only fault"—and vowed to join Blurters Anonymous the moment such an organization got founded.

Likewise unavailable to help the defense was Alex, who'd self-administered an oath of strict neutrality in her role as bailiff/clerk. So Vicki turned to Fiona, who might not lose any sleep if "Gollum" sold himself up the river, yet would leap (insofar as Feef ever leaped) at a chance to assist if it meant getting away from the Plexiglas Palace.

"(This'll save Chloe's life, y'know. Her *neck*, at least. And me from being sent to jail for wringing it.)"

"Oh please don't—not *this* week! I've got enough criminals to defend as it is."

And just three days to goad two guys into taking the rap for their misbehavior. Or, possibly, three days to prove their innocence. Either way—three days.

Wednesday after school Vicki and Fiona took the bus to the Columbine Delicatessen, where Tony Pierro had one of his part-time jobs—the one, in fact, for which he’d good-as-stood-up Vicki the day of the indoor track meet. On the bus, though, Vicki indulged in a bit of fantasizing: she would play Nancy Drew and uncover a clue in some old clock or hidden staircase that would totally exonerate Tony, making him more grateful than words could express—so he’d have to do his expressing with *deeds*. Such as lip-upon-lip.

(Yum...)

There was a new Nancy Drew TV series on Sunday nights, alternating weekly with the Hardy Boys, but Vicki’d only been able to stomach a few episodes. They’d smushed George and Bess into a single character, eliminated Hannah Gruen and made Ned Nickerson a nearsighted nerd! It was like nobody involved had ever read a Nancy Drew book, even the wishy-washy recent editions.

Joss had all the blue-covered originals, inherited from her mother, and (being Joss) had indexed every unintentionally suggestive scene. Some were mild—in *The Clue of the Tapping Heels*, Nancy “half expected to see a colored man leering at me”—but there was an actual line in *Password to Larkspur Lane* where “men ejaculated in astonishment” when Nancy told them “I promise nothing.” Even more hilarious was Joss’s re-enactment of asking Meg, “What does THIS word mean?” and Meg’s discombobulated response. Vicki’d howled for half an hour the first time she’d seen this, and still cracked up at the memory.

“Hee hee hee hee hee!...”

You okay? mouthed Fiona, inaudible over the bus noise.

They found Tony Pierro staunchly pushing a broom around the somnolent little corner deli on Whierry Way, whose drab walls were hung with once-cheerful, now-faded mottos. YOU’LL NEVER SEE PASTA WHIPPED UP ANY FASTA, boasted one; MORE THAN STARS MAKE YOU DROOL WHEN YOU TRY OUR FAGIOLI, emoted another.

“All right if I take five, Mr. F?” Tony asked a granite-gray man at the butcher block.

“No schmoozing. Keep sweeping.”

“But they’re here about me and school.”

Mr. F sized up Vicki and Fiona: a couple of foxy ladies. “When *I* went to school, one plus two equaled a crowd.”

“We’ll buy a couple of pops,” said Vicki the businesswoman, reaching for her purse.

“Please, let me,” offered Tony, pouring two root beers on the rocks and carrying them to an empty booth. “Five minutes, Mr. F.”

“Keep it *about* school and make it snappy.”

Tony slid into the booth across from the girls. “It sure means a lot, you helping me straighten this out.”

“(They picked *her* name out of a hat,)” Fiona informed him. “(I’m just along for the ride.)”

“Feef!” went Vicki.

“Sorry?” went Tony, blinking big brown diffident-puddyboy eyes, before which Fiona’s wavered and fell. “Look, I didn’t *need* to cheat on that test! Except for losing my pencil after second period, I was ready for it! I studied the whole night before—Annie helped me, she can tell you!”

“Annie’s your sister?” asked Vicki.

“No, she’s—well, I guess you can say she’s my girlfriend. Yeah!” smiled Tony as the bell over the deli door went CLING. “Here she is now! Speak of the dev—well, I don’t wanna call her a dev—”

As onto the seat beside him undulated Kinks Farghetti.

“*Ciao, piccola colomba!*” called Mr. F from the butcher block.

“Hi Dad,” replied Kinks, flatly.

“Isn’t she great?” beamed Tony, sneaking an arm round her circuitous waist after checking that Mr. F(arghetti) couldn’t see it happen. “We’ve always kinda known each other, specially since I began working here, but we didn’t get together till our study date last week. Hey, that was a Wednesday too! This is sorta like our anniversary!”

Giving Kinks an extra squeeze, which did not budge her stone-cold stare at Vicki one iota. Her hair, on the other hand—Irina Saranoff would be running both hands through *her* (make that *the*) hair, twining the tresses into long coils before letting them slowly unwind. Kinks could do all that without lifting a finger, causing every lock and strand to rise and point Vicki’s way.

While Tony displayed nary a trace of embarrassment.

OH!! You asked ME out on a Wednesday, Mr. Anniversary-Rememberer—just THREE weeks ago! And then asked for a “raincheck” I don’t hear you mentioning to me OR your “girlfriend” who just TWO weeks ago was obsessed with John Alphonse—so much so, I had to stick a cease-and-desist through her locker vent! Then she started stalking YOU, and you let her CAPTURE you, and now expect ME to defend you from accusations of CHEATING??

“(Aren’t you in eighth grade?)” asked Fiona.

“So?” went Kinks.

“(So what do you know about Freshman Civics?)”

“I can open his book and read it, can’t I?”

“Yeah, she opened my Civics book and quizzed me about it,” Tony confirmed.

“Okay then—define ‘appellate jurisdiction’ for us!” demanded Vicki.

“I don’t have the book *on* me—”

“C’mon, she doesn’t have it *on* her,” Tony corroborated.

“—but, since you ask: it’s reviewing and maybe changing a lower court’s decision when it gets appealed,” said Kinks, with Tony chiming in on the last two words.

“*Isn’t* she great?” he repeated adoringly.

Vicki took a long swig of root beer, its ice no colder than Kinks’s inflexible gaze; while Fiona, shoving her drink aside, got to her feet with a sigh.

“(Long as I’m here, I might as well check out the liverwurst.)”

*

Vicki went *aargh aargh aargh* all the way home.

This was why Tony’s strings got unpulled, the day of the track meet! It was Kinks’s revenge for Phonsie’s kissing Vicki at the Darlykin restaurant! Miss Medusa had sensed that Vicki really wanted to date Tony—which any *sane* Phonz-lover would’ve encouraged and helped to happen, thus clearing the Phonsie-field for herself (if not LeAnn Anobile). But no! Kinks *Faargh*-etti had to play jinx and steal Tony’s heart—PLAGIARIZE it away, before Vicki could exercise her entitlement to it—and now go be his cheating-alibi to boot!

Fiona meanwhile was downer-in-the-mouth than usual, despite Mr. F’s giving her a good bargain on *salsiccia di fegato*. It was almost as if she too had nursed (insofar as Feef ever nursed) a covert thing for Tony Baloney, weird as that might be to imagine.

But no! He was a darker-sleeker-compact repackaging of that Hunk With No Name who'd inspired Fiona's "Ultravirgin" ode. And if he could be seduced by Miss Medusa (*aargh*) why SHOULDN'T he have fallen for Foxy Feef? Or for Alex, who had a soft spot for guys named Tony—like Mr. Zero the hockey superstar, and her own baby/chihuahua? Or if not Feef or Alex, why the hell not Joss who badly needed wooing out of Gumbo's clutches?

Not that Baloney Breachofpromise was remotely good enough for ANY of your three best friends—or the rest of the bunch either, for that matter! If he thought Kinks was so "great," let *her* save his bacon from being tossed out of the frying pan and into the fire!

Unfortunately, that happened to be *your* duty.

"Wish I could drop out for the rest of the week," she told Feef as they left the bus.

Fiona pinched thumb and forefinger together and held them up to inquisitively puckered lips.

"Not like that! Gahd, Feef!"

"(Good for what ails you. Better'n *this*,)" she said, jiggling the bag of liverwurst.

"I'll take your word for it."

And take a leaf from Alex Dmitria's tree as you run to VW on Thursday morning. (Or was it a leaf from Alex's *book*? Except "book" makes you think of Frozenface's taunt that she could "open" Tony's and "read" Tony's and "quiz"—)

Stop right there! Be like Alex: aim for absolute impartiality as you reach school, change clothes in the locker room, say "See you in Civics" when Alex takes off for a quick shift at the Media Center. Maintain it all the way upstairs to 9-Z, thinking about other things—the Pythagorean theorem, *Romeo and Juliet* (which Mr. Erickson just HAD to assign, didn't he?), whether Lance will ever wake up from his coma on *A Lover's Question*, what'll you wear to the Zeppelin concert and to St. Paul's on Easter Sunday, how about those crossed-vamp ankle-straps you saw at Tanya's while shopping for Joss's birthday present—

—and whatever *had* become of that Hunky Dory guy, anyway? Had he dissolved into dustmotes, or one of Mr. Folz's chalkdust clouds?

There ought to be a market for powdered instant boyfriend mix. And not just as a birthday present: you could dial your locker combination, reach for a packet of Hunk-in-a-Cup, add boiling water, stir it and presto!—

“You wanted to see me.”

AARGH you go, heart nearly stopping at the indistinct sight of big glasses on a big nose that materialized between you and the window.

But no—this guy was slight, not squat, with rusty hair instead of black, and had a complicated camera hanging around his neck.

“Gahdammit, Sidney!! Do you have to creep up and jump out at people like that?!”

“You do if you want to be a *true* paparazzo,” said Split-Pea Erbsen. “Only *fake* ones wait for invitations. They can go their whole lives without getting a ‘gotcha.’”

Vicki closed her locker and took a step away from his lens. “You better not be planning to take any ‘gotchas’ of *me*.”

“Isn’t that what this is about—the *Cicada* staff photo? Sorry, no retakes; Old Yehler likes her profile in the one we have. You can quit worrying about Krauss’s arm, though—I took care of that.”

“You took care of... Gumbo’s arm? The one he put around me in the picture?”

“Unless you’re worried about his *other* arm. The first one’s gone. I took it out in the darkroom, during development.”

“Really? You can do that?”

“Can and did. Nobody’ll see it in the yearbook.”

Vastly relieved exhalation, like Gigi’s in the Typing room—

—before Split-Pea’s camera went FLASH in her face, at her body, like Gigi’s in the cafeteria.

“*HEY!!!*”

“You’re welcome. The light was just right for you, just then,” explained Split-Pea.

“Well—be seeing ya.”

Rubbing dazzled eyes: “Wait just a damn second!”

Through the afterflash: “Can’t—shouldn’t be here yet—still too early. By-the-bye,” (came his already-distant voice) “you’ll find Byron in Lesser Park. Whether you want to see him or not...”

Byron? Who’s Byron?

Oh. Right. Tail-End.

But the nerve! The gall! Snapping your picture without warning, or giving you a chance to check your hair first! And you don't want to *begin* mulling over what he intends to do with that snapshot, or the ones he'd ambuscaded of Gigi Pyle.

Give your eyes a last rub as the corridor suddenly filled with Z-frosh. Among them was Fiona, clanging the locker next door after spending the previous night sniping at Chloe, gnarling at Robin, having an unsettling dream about Tony Pierro, and starting her rat's-ass period; so not disposed to be overly cordial this particular a.m.

"Feef?"

"(No.)"

"But Feef—"

"(Forget it.)"

"I only wanted to say good morning—"

"(Right.)" *Slam* went the locker next door. "(And then what? Ask me to go see Gollum with you, down in some cave under a mountain? No thanks.)"

Trot after her to homeroom. "Honest, Feef, I was just saying 'hi' is all! And offer to buy you a lemon fizz at Zephyr Heaven after school—y'know, as thanks for helping out yesterday."

Take your places in Mrs. Hurlburt's back row, where Seat 40 was conspicuously vacant. "(Well. Okay. Sorry.)"

"Is it the usual?"

"(BOY howdy!)"

"Well, hang in there. Course, if you'd like to get your *mind* off it, I could still really use your help this afternoon..."

Fiona, burying her face in her music spiral: "(I *knew* I should've ditched today!)"

*

They found Byron Wyszynski slumped on a bench by the Lesser Park jogging path, across from the black walnut tree under which the Dopesters did fine-weather dopestering.

His arms were stretched out, left and right, along the benchtop behind him; his head sagged sluggishly backward, then slothfully forward; from a distance he looked like a hobo taking a nap. But as the girls (sucking fizzy lemonades-to-go) hove into nearer view, they

could hear his offkey whistle-serenade of “Paper Moon” segue shakily into “Paper Doll”:

...it's tough to love a doll that's not your owwwwwn...

There was space enough to sit on either side of him, with room to spare; yet Vicki and Fiona chose to remain standing, separated from his bench by a coo-coo flock puttering round the new spring grass at their feet.

“Pigeons,” Tail-End observed. “On the grass. At last.”

One eye did sport a blue/green/yellow shiner, and there was a motley stain on his shirtfront that might have resulted from a nosebleed. Vicki quickly diverted her attention sideways to the jogging path.

“So,” she said. “How’s it going?”

Hrew hrew hrew went the feathered bevy.

“Really. Good to. See you...” Tail-End fellowmeladded.

“Um well—I’m supposed to, like, *defend* you tomorrow? At the Student Court hearing? Y’know, from them saying you um well cheated on the Civics test?”

Back and forth lolled the head: “Them saying?... About me?...”

“Well, that you helped Tony Pierro *try* to, at least—by giving him that pencil with the cheatsheet inside. *He* says he didn’t need it—”

“Sommme hide it under their watchband,” Tail-End sangsung to the overcast sky. “Sommme hide it inside their waistband,” he sangsung to the milling pigeons. “Sommme write it down on their hand, their wrist—” (lewd snortle) “—‘n’ girls in skirts write it *up* on their leg, their thigh... *I* don’t get to write it for ‘em, no no no...”

Hrew hrew hrew counterpointed the bevy.

Vicki exchanged eyerolls with Fiona. “Okay then,” she persisted, “what DID you do?”

“Meeee? Finish last. Always, always. Even at ring-around-the-rosie. ‘Ass-shes! ass-shes! all fall downwn!’”—his noggin plopping backward as if riven by Mr. Koehler’s guillotine-glance.

Fiona slurped the last of her fizz through a noisy straw.

Vicki took a deep unsustaining breath and tried once more. “So—are you telling us the same as you told Mr. O’Brien—that you didn’t write that cheatsheet, or put it inside the

pencil you gave Tony?”

“I’m just the paper boy. Give paper dolls to paper moons. Get it? Paper boys don’t write ‘em, read ‘em, ring ‘em up, rosie on down...”

“Okay! But if *you* don’t, who *does*? Do you know?”

(Silence, broken only by *hrews*.)

“Look! If somebody *told* you to do it, or *made* you do it, that could help get you off the hook! You’ve already done your suspension—”

(Wriggle of arms along benchtop, floppily yet silently.)

“Tai—*Byron!* You’ve got to *understand!* They could EXPEL you for this, kick you out of junior high with just a couple months left! That’s something worth snitching over, so c’mon—”

Tail-End’s head rosie’d up, only to join the flock’s in a *bob bob bob*.

“(Don’t say ‘snitch,’ say ‘stool pigeon,’)” muttered Fiona. Crumpling her empty Zephyr Heaven to-go, she asked pointblank: “(You there!—are you a Traverser?)”

Abrupt rattle of creepy glee, like dice shaken in a skeletal fist.

“One of *them*? One of *them*? Gooble-gobble! Hangin’ out their laundry’s all *I* do—‘n’ so do *you*! You *two* do! You got ‘em on your *chests!*!”

Reflexive looks downward, with instinctive scowls at what seemed a vulgar allusion to brassieres. But no cups or straps were detectable: Vicki had on her varsity Ladybug sweatshirt, Feef wore a buttoned-up denim jacket, and these had nothing in common except for scored-through smoochmark Dartle pins.

“What do you mean by that?” went indignant Vicki.

“(Money laundering. By a cheating ring,)” Fiona deciphered. “(You there!—cough once for yes.)”

HUFF went Tail-End. Possibly a cough; possibly a laugh; possibly a sniff at Feef, despite her liberal use of Summer’s Eve. Or perhaps it was a private aside to the pigeons, who all looked up in mid-*hrew*.

Then two large tears seeped slothfully past the blue/green/yellow shiner (none out of the other eye) to roll sluggishly down one cheek.

“Ew, don’t cry about it,” Vicki said with queasy compassion. “We’ll get you off—”

A second, slightly lewder HUFF, followed by a dark shadow of a dull sigh.

“You I expected,” he told Vicki.

“You were a surprise,” he told Fiona.

“There’s a joke for you,” he told them both.

“What do you mean, a *joke*?” Vicki wanted to know; but Tail-End’s eyelids closed, both wet and dry. His head sagged back and stayed there, giving no further word or whistle.

Feef tugged Vicki’s sleeve and they tiptoed off toward Lesser Drive, half-anticipating some melodramatic denouement—pigeons taking sudden flight, sunburst blazing through the clouds—

—yet the flock kept milling round the bench, and the sky above stayed gloomy.

“What was he ON?” Vicki quietly exploded. “He *was* ‘on’ something, right?”

“(Luded out of his gourd,)” diagnosed Fiona. “(Just like the Traversers. Weird that it stopped him from spluttering.)”

“But Tail-End, one of *them*?”

“(I’d wondered why he helped Flake Hasleman tape us at the Spittlecure.)”

“And they run a cheating ring, too?”

“(Heard there’s one at the senior high, and Front Tree; maybe Startop. They don’t get *all* those high-GPA awards by studying.)”

“Wow!... And the Travers gang runs the rings?” Striding faster: “So d’y’think that means Britt...?”

“(Wouldja *slow down*?)” Fiona HUFFed. “(Some of us don’t run cross country!... I still say *she*’s not one of ‘em, not for real. But I bet you she handles their money laundering, at least at VW.)”

“What exactly is that, anyway?”

“(Cooking the books, so money you make crookedly looks like you made it straight. Such as,)” Feef added grimly, “(by selling rock band T-shirts, and stickers, and *pins*—)”

Vicki gaped down at hers in dawning horror. “Oh *Gahd*, Feef! This is awful! We could all go to PRISON—”

Fiona caught hold of her elbows as Vicki careened into the Foxtail Road streetsign. “(Be cool! Be cool! The pins *are* legit, remember? All the Dartle stuff is! And Britt took

care of everything, right?—the supplies ‘n’ orders ‘n’ payments? *You* didn’t do any of that, did you?)”

“I, I, I—helped her sell the stuff when we first got started. Y’know, at the Grand Parade, and those house parties? I always set up her ‘concessions,’ made sure the order forms got handed out... I *meant* to ask her how much we were making—”

“(She was making—)” Fiona corrected.

Fear morphed into fury: “Well, now I’m gonna TELL her a thing or two! Soon as we get to my house I’m gonna grab the phone ‘n’ call Miss Britt ‘n’ say—”

“(What, exactly? ‘We think you drugged Gollum into delivering cheatsheets for you’?)”

“Hunh? What’s Gollum got to do with... oh. Right. Um. Well, I could ask...”

“(Face it—we got nothing to go on but guesswork. Britt’s rolling in dough, probably gets more allowance a week than we make in a month. All those Traversers do—and Lynndha Ednalino keeps ‘em stocked with ‘ludes, so they don’t even need to pay for *that*. They could afford to dish out *free* cheatsheets with cherries on top, and give away whole basketfuls of Dartle stuff! There’s no way we can prove a damn thing—)”

Pause in mid-tirade to inhale.

“Hey!” went Vicki as they let themselves into the Volester foyer, below the pendant light hanging from its icicle chain like a Snowball of Doom. “Suppose I tell Britt my dad says we need a copy of her Dartle accounts for *tax* reasons? He’s been sweating over our taxes all week. And if Britt really *is* cooking her books, this’d tip her off that we’re on to her shenanigans!”

“(SheNANigans?)”

“But before I do that, I better call Becca Blair—there’s nothing goes on at VW that she’s not on top of. Though I can’t believe she wouldn’t blow the lid off any cheating ring.”

(Flashback, though, to deep cleavage jutting over a full white bra exposed for “tutorial” reimbursement.)

(And to your own kisses in a stairwell, with or without benefit of mistletoe; and making out in a janitor’s closet, among the Drano and coarse-grade toilet paper...)

“That’s completely not the same thing at all!”

“(What isn’t?)” asked Feef.

“Hi, Fiona! How’s your mother?” Felicia asked as the girls raided the breakfast nook’s fruit bowl.

“(H’lo Mrs. Volester, fine Mrs. Volester.)”

“Can Feef stay for dinner, Mom? We’ve got some business to take care of.”

“Oh, you’re more than welcome, dear. Just don’t mention ‘taxes’ around Vicki’s father.”

“See?” Vicki told Fiona, who poked fragile nostrils into the kitchen.

“(Having?...)”

“Chicken fricassee and rice pilaf,” said Felicia. “Do you like it?”

“(Long as it’s not *cooked* goose.)”

“Hardy har har,” went Vicki.

Before and after a tax-free dinner, three calls were placed to Sunny Squash Court. Busy signal the first two times; then Fleur Groningen picked up briefly to insist the line be left clear for *her* use. (No, she neither knew nor cared where Britt might be.)

All attempts to contact Becca got fielded by the joint answering service for Mimi McLaine and J. Calvin Blair MD.

“Okay,” sighed Vicki, “we’ll just have to talk to them at school tomorrow, before the trial. Thank Gahd that’s almost done with! Then we can have *real* conversations with Joss and Alex again, and get ready for the Led Zeppelin concert!”

“(Good Times, Bad Times,)” Fiona mutter-prophesized.

*

Friday the 8th of April.

Vicki garbed herself for combat in a safari jacket, sage-green gauchos, and knee-high zippered platform boots. Thus clad she approached Becca Blair (wearing a geometric shirtdress rather than her cheerleading uniform, since basketball season was over) and requested an audience during free period.

They met out on the Z-Wing’s third-floor walkway, and sat on a stark stone bench.

“I told you, didn’t I?” tsk’d Becca, toying with her geometric scarf and sash. “It’s guys like Byron you have to watch out for.”

“Yeah, but—”

“This is his way, you see, of asking you out.”

“W—!! *How* is this like that? My name got picked out of a *cap*!”

“Everything’s arranged for a purpose,” Becca predestinated, applying an emery board to her fingernails. “Y’know, like an old-fashioned—”

“—wedding, yes I remember. Yuck!... All right then—does ‘everything’s arranged’ mean there IS a cheating ring here?”

Skritch skritch skritch.

“Becca? D’y’think Tony Pierro paid the Trav—*somebody* to get him a cheatsheet for the Civics test? Or that Tail-End had it for himself, or maybe someone else, and gave it to Tony by mistake? Tony says he didn’t need one.”

“And Byron says...?”

“Oh, you know him—just a lot of gibberish. I don’t think he’s right in the head, or ever was! ‘Member that time at your place when he wouldn’t drink Swiss Miss ‘cause he thought it looked like hot tomato juice?”

Golden brows soared high above red LED optics. “When did *that* happen?”

“When we were doing that Beast group thing for *Lord of the Flies*. You told him to quit twitching, he was making us all sick; then Rog—well... never mind what happened then. What’s important *now* is who’m I supposed to defend at this trial, and *how*?”

Junoesque sigh from Becca Blair as she reGucci’d her emery board and rose to creamy-aura’d feet. “Just see what you can see, and hear what you can hear. Then you’ll know what to do.”

*

During that same free period, Fiona Weller (dressed in her denim jacket, an old *Physical Graffiti* T-shirt, and punk-rocker dungarees) acted on a hunch and headed for the remotest carrel in the Media Center, where she found Britt Groningen and Flake Hasleman sharing a pair of headphones. From the sound seepage, they were listening to a tape cassette of the Doors.

Not to touch the earth, not to see the sun...

“Hey,” Britt sleepy-smiled.

Nothing left to do but run run run...

“(Hey,)” went Fiona into Britt’s free ear, behind the burgundy waterfall. “(Thought *he* goes to Front Tree.)”

“He who?”

“(Him who.)”

“He’s taking a break.”

“A Flake break,” said Mr. Hasleman.

Run with me / run with me / run with me...

“Heard you wrote a ‘ballad,’” Britt remarked.

“(More or less. Heard *you* can help people with grades.)”

“Oh,” said Britt, subtle yet penetrative, “I always try to be helpful. More or less.”

Fiona buttoned her jacket against a not-unanticipated chill. “(Cost a lot? Being helpful?)”

“Depends.”

“On the subject,” elaborated Flake, his eggshell eyes twinkling like starlit flurries.

“Geometry’s e-e-easy. History’s dre-e-eary.”

“(How about—Civics?)”

The minister’s daughter’s in love with the snake...

“Didn’t think you needed help,” said Britt. “With—Civics.”

“(Asking for a friend,)” Fiona replied, thrusting trembly hands into jacket pockets.

“(You going to that Student Court thing this afternoon?)”

Casual gaslight from under heavy lids: “Should I?”

“(Might find it... interesting.)”

Hoot from Flake Hasleman. “Sounds duller’n Civics, even.”

“(Could be. Could be not.)”

Soon-soon-soon, moon! moon! moon!...

Britt turned up the gaslight then and brought it to bear on Fiona, who felt no warmth in this regard. More fridgifying than Kinks Farghetti’s *malocchio*; more clammifying than Uriah Heep’s lank insolence; more abysmal than the mouth of The Beast in *Lord of the Flies*—

—it took all her strength to not visibly shiver, or turn tail and run run run.

But she conjured an image of Vicki to stand beside her, and Robin who'd never been afraid of any Queen Bitch, and Joss and Alex and Sheila-Q (and Tony Pierro wearing a dog collar, as he had in that unsettling dream) who together helped her collect every ounce of endurance, stamina, and True Grit she'd accumulated since the YOSH in You Reeka—

—and fling it, like an El Thorro hammer, at the hooptedoodling face opposite.

Which didn't get scarred or scored through, yet reverted to roughly carved soapstone.

I am the Lizard King: I can do anything.

Remove hands from pockets and unbutton your jacket; red river thawing in your heart.

"Put it this way," said Britt, quite mildly. "Do I *need* to be at the Student Court thing?"

"(Probably not,)" Fiona admitted. "(This time.)"

"So," bobbed Flake, "how much help with your Civics grade *do* you want?"

Swap the eternal female reaction to perpetual male oblivion.

Then see a shade of something akin to regret dart out and flick over the soapstone.

"Suppose I'll see you around," said Britt. "Sometime."

"(Pleasure doing business with you,)" said Fiona. "(Almost.)"

"Break a leg with your 'ballads.'"

"(Same to you, with your 'little tunes.')

And on those notes they parted.

*

"Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!" Alex yodeled at 3:30 p.m. "All persons having business before the Honorable Student Court of Vanderlund Junior High School are admonished to draw near and give their attention, for the Court is now in session."

"(Come *ahn!* Come *ahn!* Let's cut to the damn *chase* already!)" mumbled Fast Eddie Wainwright, barely managing to convert an *Oh shit!* addendum into a fake sneeze at the sight of Kinks Farghetti, who'd made him the object of her obsesso-affections for a brief yet memorable spell last spring.

“(It was like one of those old-timey plagiarisms of crocuses!)” Eddie grimaced to Buddy Marcellus.

Student Court was sitting, legally and literally, in Room Z305: the Scene of the Crime, as described-in-his-own-words by Mr. Koehler to co-prosecutor Hope Eckhardt. Portraits of Washington, Madison, Lincoln, and Eisenhower monitored the hearing from on high, seeming to nod approval of the charges and Eddie’s push for accelerated judgment.

Tony Pierro formally appealed his automatic F and week’s suspension, pleading not guilty in-much-the-same-words he’d used at the Columbine Delicatessen.

“Tell us, Mr. Pierro,” said Hope (clearly wishing she could interrogate as *Esperanza: Decirnos, Señor Pierro*), “if you needed to borrow a pencil for the test, why’d you turn all the way around and ask for one from the student sitting *behind* you? Wouldn’t it’ve been easier to ask the people next to you or in front of you?”

“Objection!” declaimed Gigi Pyle in a thrilling voice, as if this were an audition for *Inherit the Wind*.

“On what grounds?” asked Chief Justice Marshall McConchie.

“Grounds?”

“What are you objecting *to*?”

“Uhhhh... how ‘bout ‘leading the witness’?”

“Mr. Pierro’s a *defendant*,” Marshall corrected her. “But objection sustained.”

“Oh, I don’t mind answering,” Tony said cooperatively. “See, my desk here’s next to the wall on one side, and Artie Rist sits on the other. *He* never lends anybody anything, though he’ll take all day telling you *why*.”

[Laughter] in the Court from those who knew what Artie Rist was like.

“And I couldn’t ask the girl who sits in front of me for a pencil—Keiko Nakayama there—”

“Hi!” called Keiko from the back of the room, where she and Carly Thibert were being spectators with Joss, Fiona, and the avid-eared Laurie, Susie, Tina, and Jerome.

“Order,” Marshall gaveled.

“She just said ‘Hi!’” objected Carly.

“Please refrain from saying *anything* unless you’re called to testify,” said Marshall.

“Oh, I’m gonna be!” chirped Carly.

“*Why* couldn’t you ask Ms. Nakayama to loan you a pencil, Mr. Pierro?” queried Hope. (*¿POR QUÉ no se puede pedir la Sra. Nakayama a prestarle un lápiz, Sr. Pierro?*)

“‘Cause she never has any pencils—she takes all her tests in INK!”

[Giggle-gale] from the back of the room.

[GRUNT] from Howard Ullmann, itching to seize command of the prosecution.

Which, if Hope had been on her toes, would have called Tony’s half-step-once-removed-cousin Petula as an anticharacter witness. “Of *course* the little tool was trying to cheat! He needs top grades to win a scholarship ‘cause that’s the only way he’ll ever be able to go to college, and of course he botched it ‘cause he’s such a little choirboy he couldn’t shoplift a pack of *gum* without screwing up—”

—was what Downtown would’ve told the Court, had she been called.

Gigi Pyle, reciting from Vicki’s defense script, established Tony’s good track record in Advanced Civics up till the midterm, and then had Kinks testify about helping him study for it “the whole night before.”

“What would you say is your *relationship* to the defendant?” Hope cross-examined.

“Objection!” trilled Gigi.

“Overruled,” went Marshall. “I’ll allow the question.”

Another [*Oh-shit!*-fake-sneeze] from Fast Eddie.

“We’ve ‘always kinda known each other,’ is what he tells people,” quoted Kinks.

“Aren’t you in fact his—GIRLFRIEND?” suggested Hope. (*¿No es usted de hecho su—NOVIA?*)

“Objection!” Gigi tried again.

“Sustained,” said Marshall.

“He works for my father,” Kinks overrode them in a rock-hard monotone, even as her hair wafted agitatedly about. “So I helped him study. That’s all.”

“But *Annie!*” went Tony, only to be ignored by Kinks and silenced by Marshall.

The cases pro and con Anthony Pierro rested then, and Student Court moved on to the second appeal.

Gumbo Krauss, taking over the prosecution, made an entrance à la Apollo Creed in *Rocky*: sporting an Uncle Sam hat and ta-ta-ta-ing “From the Halls of MontezuOOHma!” For this he was gaveled down by Marshall and reprimanded by Mr. O’Brien; yet Gumbo justified his conduct as befitting a future Marine.

“Since *when*?”

“Since three years, two months, and a day from today—then it’s Parris Island for me! Like Jimmy Cagney says in *What Price Glory*: ‘It’s a lousy war, kid, but it’s the only one we’ve got!’ So *Semper Fi*, do or die, from here to eternity!”

“Very commendable,” said Mr. Koehler, who had two sons in the Corps, “but not really relevant to the matter at hand. Please dispose of the hat.”

“*Sir yes sir!*” Gumbo saluted, sailing Uncle Sam over to Joss in the back row, where she used it to cover her jubilant face and so preserve decorum.

(Vicki, feeling a bit sweaty and a tad nauseous, fished out a monogrammed VV handkerchief and started to dab her own brow and lips.)

Gung-ho Gumbo cracked his knuckles, his elbows, and a smile whose width Sell-O Fayne might’ve envied. It was a grin that filled Room Z305 like a flooding basement, a grin from which gray mist rose to becloud the portraits of Washington, Madison, Lincoln, and Eisenhower.

“Calling Carly Thibert—*come on down!*”

Carly frolicked forward to beam at her ex-boyfriend. Agreeing to tell nothing but the truth, she hopped atop the desk serving as witness stand; was redirected down into its chair; and showed off as much of her legs as possible in the process. (*Teenage* legs: eat your thirtyish heart out, Ms. Tays!)

“Mizzzz Thibert,” began Gumbo, tenderly addressing the peppermint-striped triangle peekabooing between those legs, “who’d you do your last Earth Science project with?”

Fresh gigglespaz by Carly: “Make her quit LOOKING at me like that!”

“I am not LOOKING at you any wrong way!” protested the laughing Keiko.

“You are *so*! She is *too*! Make her *quit*—”

“This is neither the time nor the place for levity!” bristled Mr. O’Brien, scowling at Carly’s lower torso. “Compose yourself, Miss Thibert, and answer the question.”

Carly yanked at her skirt while stating for the record that she'd written "How Air Masses Collide" with Byron WhizIdunnohowtosayitright.

"Has Mr. WYSZYNSKI been your lab partner the whole semester?" asked Gumbo.

"No, just for that project."

"Why you didn't work on it with your regular lab partners?"

"Hunh? Well, they were doing the New Ice Age or something and that sounded gross, y'know, so they let me do Air Masses with Bryan—Byron, I mean."

"Why'd you choose Mr. WYSZYNSKI to Do It with?"

"Gumbo!" squealed Carly, echoed by Keiko from behind the borrowed Uncle Sam hat. "Y'mean do the *science project* with, right? I dunno—he just knew about Air."

"Did he invite you to work on this project with him?"

"Oh come on! *Tail-End* ask a girl? No, it was my idea—he's a smart guy, y'know, brainy I mean, and always gets good grades—"

"So you chose Mr. WYSZYNSKI to do this project with, so *you'd* get a good grade?"

"Well sure! D'y'think I'da picked a *dummy* to do it with?"

[Laughter] in the Court, another [GRUNT] from Howard, and an inquiry from the bench as to whether this line of questioning was germane.

"Well sure, your honor!" grinned the prosecutor. "Ms. Thibert: tell us what grade you and the defendant got on that Earth Science project."

"An A!" preened Carly.

"And the same day you got that A, did you not give Byron WYSZYNSKI a twenty-dollar bill?"

[GASP] from the Court.

"Ob—" went Vicki, but Carly interrupted to shrill: "I bought him a pizza is all, the poor guy's so skinny he never looks like he eats enough—"

"Did you go out with him and share this pizza?"

"Go OUT with Tail-End? No! I mean, I didn't really wanna eat *with* him..."

"So you treated the defendant to twenty dollars's worth of pizza, all for himself?"

"Well... he helped me get an A, and... why're you *being* like this?"

“In other words, the twenty dollars was a reward—a premium—*payment*, shall we say?—for Byron WYSZYNSKI getting you that A?”

“Objection!” Vicki succeeded in saying this time, over her dab-dab handkerchief.

“Sustained!” said Marshall. “The witness is not on trial here.”

“*Really!*” concurred Carly, looking ready to cutely cry. “Can I resent how he asked me that? Ooh, my dad was so right about him!”

“Noooo further questions,” Gumbo bowed, the better to take another gloat at her peppermint triangle before Carly clapped reproachful thighs over it.

Vicki, rising to cross-examine, balled up her damp hanky as she glanced back at Fiona. What could you ask without landing Carly in more trouble?

(Articulate shrug by Feef.)

Did you bet the defendant he could eat a whole family-size pizza in two minutes flat?

“Um... okay. When we were all working on our meteorology papers, didn’t I see you talk to Byron every morning in homeroom?”

Carly, brightening with gratitude: “That’s right! You did! I was!”

Hanging out of half-undone blouses—payment in advance, shall we say? “Were you talking to him about your Air Masses project?”

“ObJEction!” went Gumbo. “Lee-ee-eading the witness!”

“Er—sustained,” decided Marshall.

Unball the handkerchief, wipe dewy palms. “What, exactly, were you talking to Byron the defendant about, every morning in homeroom?”

“Our science paper, of course! Why else would I wanna talk to a guy like him?”

Quit while you’re ahead—or at least not further behind. “No more questions.”

Carly escaped from the stand and was replaced by Madeline Wrippley, the sober little mouse who sat between Vicki and Tail-End in Civics. She came dressed for testimony in a very proper, very modest outfit; looking in fact rather like Marlene Dietrich as the *Witness for the Prosecution*, minus the gloves and beret.

(A sub-snortle from the back row confirmed that Joss thought so too.)

“Mizzzz Wrippley,” said Gumbo, adjusting his Blue Öyster Cult shades and Jewfro, “where were you at 10 a.m. on Thursday, March 31st?”

“Wight heeuh,” went Maddie, in a far-from-normal Fuddish accent.

[Laughter] from the Court, and [“*Baba Wawa!*”] fake-cough by Buddy Marcellus into a cupped fist.

“Order!” barked Marshall McConchie, THOCK-THOCK-THOCKing Mr. Koehler’s gavel. “People, let’s *act* like we’re supposed to *act*, and wrap this thing up!”

“Bravo!” applauded Gigi Pyle, who’d lost all interest in the trial till Marshall started brandishing his Chief Justiceship. (Was it too late to cast him as a bitter puppeteer?)

“Beg pardon,” said Madeline, clearing her demure throat. “I was *right here*—in this room, about to start the Advanced Civics midterm.”

“Who was sitting at the desk to the left of you, at that time?” asked Gumbo.

“Byron Wyszynski.”

“Did you hear anyone say anything to Mr. WYSZYNSKI, at that time?”

“Yes: Tony Pierro turned around and asked Byron if he had a pencil Tony could borrow.”

“Did you see what the defendant did then?”

“Yes: he gave Tony a pencil.”

“Did you notice if he gave Mr. PEE-erro a *choice* of pencils?”

“I saw Byron take some out of a zipper pouch, sort through them and choose one for Tony. A few others fell onto the floor between our desks; I picked those up and gave them back to Byron.”

“When Mr. Koehler *apprehended* the two defendants, as he’s described to the Court, did he ask YOU to do anything?”

“Yes: he touched my shoulder, and nodded at the boys’s desks.”

“What did you take that as meaning?”

“That I should gather up their things after I finished the test, and bring them to the Home Base office.”

“Why do you think Mr. Koehler would ask YOU to do that?”

“I’ve been his student aide all year, helping him prepare handouts and alphabetize assignments, that sort of thing.”

[*Teacher’s narc!*] several spectators and members of the Court didn’t say aloud.

“After finishing the test, did you gather up those things and bring them to the office?”

“Yes: Mr. K took the boys and the pencil, and I took their books and ring binders and so on.”

“What happened then?”

“Mr. K gave me a late pass for Gym. Then during free period I came back here, and he told me what was going on.”

“And that was...?”

With a priggish Mary Poppinsish countenance: “Byron and Tony had both been suspended. For cheating. On the midterm.”

“Nooooo further questions!”

“Your witness,” Marshall told Vicki, away from whom Gigi edged as a new bout of perspiration spouted.

My “wetness,” all right—Gahd! Anybody’d think I’M the one on trial, Vicki blushed, tugging at her safari jacket in hopes of detaching the polo shirt beneath from her armpits, and wishing she had one of PopPop’s immense bandannas instead of this wispy hanky.

Glance again at Fiona’s dark watchful brooding. At Joss’s blessed lagniappe smile. At Carly trying to happify herself by wearing the oversized Uncle Sam hat. At Keiko sending flirt-vibes toward Mike Spurgeon, much to Irina Saranoff’s toss/twirl/tantalize annoyance. Up front at Alex, taking absolutely impartial minutes as bailiff/clerk.

At Madeline Wrippley sitting patiently, with petite hands enfolded.

What to ask? ... Anything at all? ...

“Maddie—do I sit on the other side of you in Civics?”

Polite little smile: “Yes.”

“All year long, I’ve thought you’re a superorganized sort of person. Would you call yourself that?”

“Well, I try to be.”

“Is that a big reason why you’re Mr. Koehler’s student aide?”

“I suppose so.”

“Would you say that Byron the defendant is superorganized?”

Petite hand raised to suppress a mild titter: “No: I don’t think I could say that.”

“Is he usually the first person in class to finish tests and turn in papers?”

“No: he tends to be the very last.”

“So did it surprise you to see Byron fumbling through his stuff and spilling things off his desk, when Tony asked to borrow a pencil?”

Petite hand lowered, re-enfolding the other; mild mirth quelled.

“Well. No. Not really,” said Maddie, with a slight deadpan headshake that oscillated to and fro, to and fro, as if to the rhythmic cadence of an unheard beat—

OHMYGAHD.

IS SHE ONE OF THEM?

MADELINE WRIPPLEY, A TRAVERSER??

Of course not; that was ridiculous. You might just as well suspect Alex or Rachel Gleistein, girls who’d never stray from straight-and-narrow propriety (unless their asses got slapped in the cafeteria or exposed at a dance). Maddie was simply shaking her head “no” in a superorganized way.

Yet the thunderbolts kept coming, each flashier than Carly Thibert’s underpants:

I bet SHE wrote that cheatsheet and put it in that pencil—

‘Cause SHE’D know all the answers, even if she weren’t Mr. Koehler’s aide—

And SHE’S got itsy-bitsy fingers that can print teensy-tiny letters, and fit a slip of paper inside a mechanical pencil’s barrel—

And if Tail-End had any other “loaded” pencils in his pouch, SHE could’ve grabbed them and hidden them away for later use—

And if I say a single word about this... they’ll lock me up in a loony-bin.

Maybe I AM loony. Maybe that’s why I’m sweating like a PIG. Maybe they SHOULD be coming to take me away ha-ha to the funny farm—

Except for one thing.

Even though Kinks Farghetti was in the room, with Gigi Pyle and Gumbo Krauss and grunty Howard Ullmann and manic-demented Kim Zimmer—

—not one of them was looking at Vicki with less goodwill or benevolence at that precise moment in time, than rodent-eyed Madeline Wrippley.

Back away from the distracting trap.

NOW.

“No more questions,” Vicki told her wet handkerchief.

Up jumped Gumbo. “For my last witness, I call—BYRON WYSZZZZZZYNSKI!!”

Who duly emerged from out of nowhere to take the stand. Or flobber down onto it, with a Gollumesque *ach* and *sss*.

“Byron, my man!” Gumbo greeted him. “Long time no see!”

Tail-End lifted his noggin, stretched his spindly neck, and made no reply.

Gumbo turned into a drill sergeant then, giving a jarhead recruit the third degree:

“You’re here to appeal being suspended, isn’t that right? For conspiring to help another student cheat on a midterm exam, isn’t that right? By passing him a cheatsheet smuggled inside a mechanical pencil, isn’t that right? Which at VW is considered just as much cheating as if you’d used that cheatsheet yourself, isn’t that right? For which the penalty is an automatic F and week of suspension, isn’t that right? Which you’re appealing because you say you didn’t prepare that cheatsheet or place it in that pencil, isn’t that right? And if this Court decides you’re lying, the sentence could be immediate and permanent expulsion from school, isn’t *that* right?”

“F’you hssay hssso,” fizzled Tail-End.

“Objection to—to the manner in which those questions were being put!” balked Vicki, recalling a line from *Witness for the Prosecution*.

“Sustained! Counsel will tone it DOWN!”

Gumbo, tenting repentant fingertips at chin-level, let his Man-Tan glow above them like a jack-o’-lantern. “Byron my man, tell us something,” he purred. “What do your *parents* think about all this?”

Cringe and flinch by the defendant. Then, with that dice-in-a-skeletal-fist rattle:

““Well, hain’t he got a father? Yesss, he’s got a father, but you can’t never find him these daysss—he uuussed to lay drunk with the hogsss in the tanyard, but he hain’t been hsseen in theesse partsss for a year or more!””

“I think we’ve heard enough,” Mr. O’Brien began; yet Gumbo forged ahead with a gloat more profound than any engendered by Carly’s peppermint stripes:

“Byron my man, tell us THIS: isn’t it true you believe yourself to be another Red King or Little Nemo? That you think this room and school, this entire world and everybody in it, are just figments of your imagination? That they exist only in a dream you’ve been having—a sort of *phantasm*, shall we say?”

“Hsso YOU hssay,” responded Tail-End, tongue lolling out to lick his teeth.

“Objection,” went Vicki, more in wonder than in anger; but she was drowned out by sudden hubbub, with the Vice Principal demanding explanations and the Chief Justice seeking to get a gavel in edgewise.

“Just trying to make the defendant **WAKE UP!!**” yelled Gumbo, flipping a hand at the witness stand, on which Tail-End tilted droopily to one side like a rag doll propped on a careless child’s chair.

“This farce has gone on long enough!” raged Mr. Koehler on behalf of Messrs. Washington, Madison, Lincoln, and Eisenhower. “I am ashamed of each and every one of—”

“Wait!” snapped Vicki, in a voice that cut through the hubbub and gray mist. Though weltering from every pore, she stood and stared them into silence: Kinks and Kim and Keiko and Carly, Gumbo and Gigi and Howard and Hope. “I have a question, if... you... please...”

Mr. O’Brien nodded at Marshall, who told Vicki to proceed.

For a moment she *déjà vu’d* being new and lost in Baroque Vista, a place that even now she wouldn’t venture into alone. *Pound pound pound* went her heart again, over the disorienting beetle *b-z-z-z-z* from rocking-horse-flies and snap-dragon-flies of Looking-Glass Land—

—or from Byron Wyszynski, fizzling and grizzling to himself.

“Byron? Do you have anything to say in your own defense?”

Tail-End, glancing at her then with foolish fare-thee-well fondness, opened his yap and hoarsely croaked:

“LOOK—AT—ME—I’M—AS—HELP—LESS—AS—A—KIT—TEN—UP—A—TREE—”

He was still regaling the room with “Misty” when he got carried out of it by Mike, Eddie, and Buddy as instructed by the Vice Principal, with Alex hurrying after to plead

“Don’t hurt him! Don’t hurt him!” and Mr. Koehler slinging back “*NO PHOTOGRAPHS!*” at Sidney Erbsen—who showed up just then out of the dissipating gray mist, to behold the passive-resistant soles of Tail-End’s Earth Shoes as they (and he) were dragged out of sight.

Split-Pea took no pictures, but stooped to retrieve a Scripto pencil that must have fallen out of someone’s pocket. “Oh cool, a fringe benefit,” he Woody Allen’d. “I always wanted something I could write with.”

Laurie and Jerome ran off in search of phones to start spreading their *latest* latest. Kinks Farghetti departed in the opposite direction, trailing incredulous Tony Pierro (“But Annie!... but Annie!”) while Gigi Pyle went to comfort Marshall McConchie, who had his Gregory Peckish head in his gavelless hands. And Madeline Wrippley, calmly wishing those who remained a Happy Easter, removed her sober mouselike self from the scene.

“Yours, I believe?” said Gumbo Krauss, picking up Vicki’s crumpled sodden handkerchief and rubbing it oh-so-grossly over his *ignis fatuus* face.

“What the hell is THIS?” fumed Joss, plucking the hanky away.

“A little whiff of heaven!” leered Gumbo, plucking it back to bury an artificially bronzed nose in what had once been neatly-ironed folds. “Vickeee knows what I mean—dontcha, Vickeee?”

She recoiled from Joss’s anger, trying to stammer denials; but Joss wouldn’t listen to a one.

“I *knew* I should’ve held out for the real thing!” she griped, snatching back the hanky once and for all, then wrapping a long arm around her very best (albeit all icky) friend.

“Let’s get the hell out of here and go the hell home!” she told Vicki—meaning Burrow Lane, it being a Friday—and “C’mon, but leave that damned HAT!” she told Fiona, who was depositing a wad of Beemans inside Uncle Sam’s brim.

“(Not exactly Led Zeppelin, was it?)” muttered Feef as they headed down the hall to their lockers, and there found Tail-End’s already yawning open and empty.

30

Gonna Fly Now

An hour into Saturday's concert at the Madhouse on Madison, Jimmy Page collapsed midway through "Ten Years Gone"—suffering from a bout of gastroenteritis, according to Robert Plant—and the rest of the show got called off. "Hang onto your ticket stubs!" the crowd was told. "This show will be rescheduled and all your tickets will be re-honored!" (But Robert Plant's five-year-old son Karac would die shortly before the makeup date that summer; and Led Zeppelin came never again to The City as living men.)

*

*The Song Remains the Same...**Over the Hills and Far Away...**Dazed and Confused...*

So Vicki felt when a pretty geisha poked a sharp-cornered book into her chest. "This is about ME, isn't it?" demanded Mam'selle Butterfly, gesturing at *Connstung* on the cover. "What did I do to deserve *this*?" (poke) "I thought we were friends!" (poke) and Vicki tried to ask "What're you *talking* about, Keiko?" between (pokes), before realizing this wasn't Keiko Nakayama but Connie Tang from the Fischel Ballet Academy. "We *were* friends!" Vicki asserted. "Honest, Connie, it's just a coincidence—I never told Joss anything bad about you—I haven't even *thought* about you for years!" Stricken look from Geisha Tang, who turned aside sorrowfully murmuring "What I wouldn't give for foam-rubber butt-falsies..." Vicki tried to run after her, but was blocked by Beth Murrish standing hand-in-hand with another inscrutable owlish girl—ohmyGahd! could this be Amy, Visible at last? "Of course not," said Beth, "don't you recognize Thumb? Not Tom Thumb or Thumbelina

—just Thumb. *All* Thumb. ‘Cause we’re IN the Thumb—”

—and indeed this was MomMom and PopPop’s Beansville ranch house, where Vicki was now impeded by glass panels twenty yards wide and two inches thick that had to be unlatched on the double because, look! there was/were Dave Solovay and/or Jonathan Dohr sitting outside on the patio, singing to opossums. *After him/them!* commanded heart and soul; *before he/they get away!* added brain; but her mouth was full of spider-eggy Bubble Yum gum, and her hands were full of Easter baskets heaped with miniature snowmen that kept falling out to smash on the welcome mat and turn into brimming mugs of boiling cocoa that looked like hot tomato juice—

—*which would be what we call “soup,” little schmetterling—*

—as you J-O-L-T awake on an Easter Sunday in a big brass bed in a gable-windowed room in Queen Anne’s crown.

Dancing Days...

Trampled Under Foot...

Nobody’s Fault But Mine...

Except it WASN’T your fault. Yes, you and Connie Tang had liked each other from the first week of Level Three at the Fischel Academy; yes, you’d been buddies at the barre and partners in *Winter Wonderland*, but had never seen each other outside the Norrway Theater. Different grade schools, different neighborhoods, separate lives and circumstances. Distance, if anything, was to blame for Connie’s having slipped your mind; remoteness in space and time.

So too for your friends in Pfiester Park, unseen for almost two years now. When you thought about Hayley Tamworth and Kris Rawberry, they were little kids playing croqminton or hanging out at Brenda Pomerantz’s bakery, and you smiled at the memories but didn’t miss their current selves all that much. As for Stephanie Lipperman, the old ingrained dislike had crept back to tarnish her remembrance: best friends do *not* do what she’d done to a best friend, in public, with other people listening, and then refuse to acknowledge an extra-nice *please call me* postcard. Not ever.

Thus—as you’d concluded the Christmas before last—your Vanderlund bunch were your true friends. And none truer than the long tall curly girl by your side in this big brass

bed: Miss I-Do-*NOT*-Snore-You're-Thinking-of-Meg—

—except that Joss wasn't snoring but crying, quietly yet openly, and for the first time since she'd read about her namesake's breakneck death in *Beat the Turtle Drum*.

Vicki, shifting the displeased cat Fingers out of the way, snuggled spoonwise against Joss and reached a hand around for her to clasp.

“(I just thought... I just thought I was gonna have a boyfriend for my birthday...)”

“(I know,)” murmured Vicki. “(Same here.)”

“(What is *wrong* with guys, anyway?...)”

“(Dunno. Gastroenteritis?)”

Snortle-through-her-tears. “(Sheila says they think with their Things.)”

“(Well, she wants to be a nurse and a nun, so I guess she'd know.)”

Louder snortle. “(Sheila Quirk—Nun of the Above!)”

“(Never gonna happen. Too much of a hotcha.)”

“(...guess I'm too cold-blooded for a guy, then...)”

“(No way! The right one's out there, waiting for you. Remember *Mmmmandingo!*)”

Tear-free laughter and a hand-squeeze. “(Hey... I ever tell you how really glad I am you moved here?)”

“(Not as really glad as *I* am that you found me.)”

“(Aw, shut up.)”

“(*You* shut up.)”

And a *myeepish* yawn from Fingers, slinkily intruding back between them.

*

A week and some hours later, Smarty Rumpelmagen—or maybe it was Bootsie: still can't tell them apart, even after five years—called Fiona to the Palace phone.

“Sounds like Robin... I think,” said Smarty or Bootsie.

“(Yeah?)” Feef muttered into the receiver.

“CAN YOU COME OVER HERE, *NOW?*”

Scarcely identifiable, except for the unequivocal Neapolitan timbre.

“(Gonna pick me up?)”

“*I—CAN'T. JUST GET OVER HERE FAST, 'KAY?*”

Catch a ride to Pottage Road with Aunt Polly. Only eight blocks, but it was already 80 degrees (in the middle of April!) and your feet *still* hurt from that mile-and-a-quarter walk to Burrow Lane last June. Vicki must have soles of steel—she’d even wanted to walk from school to Whierry Way the other day, as if bus fare wasn’t only 35¢.

“Tell Robin hi!” said Aunt Polly in the Villa driveway.

Robin was in no mood for “hi,” hauling you into the cellar and battening its hatches before retreating you both behind the cold furnace to gutturally confide:

“(SPOOKY—I THINK I’M PREGNANT.)”

Stabilize yourself against the basement wall. (“What?... When?...”)

“(Last night.)”

“(Where? *Here?*”) Aghast peek around the furnace at the old couch. “(Arlo?...”)

“(Well of course Arlo!)”

“(Did he... did he make you?...”)

“(Naw, naw, nothing like that, we got carried away is all, except he used a rubber—)”

Cover your ears with both palms and slide down the wall. “(Don’t! Just—don’t tell me... Wait a second: last *night*? Doesn’t it take longer to know, y’know?...”)

“(Are you KIDDING? Don’t you pay any attention in Health class? It only takes ONE sperm! And this is ARLO’S we’re talking about, so even with a rubber—)”

Cover your mouth with both palms, barely managing to hold back that morning’s Cheerios. Robin meanwhile was covering her whole strawberry-blotched face as she slid down too and leaned heavily against you.

“(Dad is gonna *kill* him, Spooky! And then they’ll send Dad to Joliet for *life*! Can I come live with you?—me ‘n’ the *baby*, I mean? OH PORCA TROIA!!—HOW CAN I HAVE A BABY WHEN I ONLY JUST GOT MY LEARNER’S PERMIT??)”

Do what you can to provide comfort, as on that grisly day when Craig Clerkington’d maligned Robin’s complexion. This was your sister, your *sorella maggiore*, who usually channeled fear and grief into wrath—as when you’d starved yourself into a fainting fit, and when Fat Bob broke his nose at the Back-to-School Dance.

So choose your words carefully in suggesting, “(You better go see Dr. Drogue.)”

“(What good would THAT do?)”

“(She’s a gynecologist! Tell your dad you’ve got ‘female troubles’—he won’t want any details—)”

“(Can you absofuckinglutely guarantee she won’t tell Dad I’m pregnant?)”

“(If you’re.)”

Time to muster reinforcements: one in particular.

By dint of some well-timed phone calls, Feef had Sheila Quirk waiting for them when she and zombie-visaged Robin got to school at Zero Hour on Monday morning.

“You *TOLD* her?? You told *HER*??” Robin frothed, planting a murderous punch on Fiona’s shoulder.

“(Only that you needed medical advice,)” winced Feef, rubbing the whackspot.

They were due in the auditorium for Band’s rehearsal of *Carnival*, but Sheila-Q drew the Dopesters into a washroom, closed the door and set her back against it, giving Robin a clinically speculative once-over.

“Redo’ll have buttkittens if we’re late,” Robin grumbled.

“Never mind that, Robbo. Okay: do you *think* you have a problem, or *know* you have a problem?”

“Know it,” conceded Robin.

“(Thinks it,)” corrected Fiona.

“Would it be a short-term problem, or long-term?”

“(Long,)” whispered Robin with a very red face.

“(Ultra long,)” muttered Fiona with a very white one.

“Oh,” went Sheila, with a slightly green one. “Um... how long have you known?”

“(She *thinks*! She doesn’t *know*!)” went Fiona. “(She doesn’t want to see my gyn, but she’s dying to tell *somebody* about it and that somebody’s not gonna be ME, so—)”

Try to sidle away, only to feel Robin’s clutch. “No! Don’t go!...”

S-Q stepped forward then with brass-bold devotion, to disengage Fiona and take Robin gently by the wrists. “C’mon, Robbo, anything we say in the powder room *stays* in the powder room. And you *know* Feef won’t wanna hear the questions I’m gonna ask, so—”

“(I’ll go square things with Redo,)” said Fiona, scurrying out before another syllable could be uttered.

In the auditorium she withstood Mr. Redo's YOU-ARE-TARDY glare, letting him know that Sheila (future RN) was tending to Robin (female-troubled) and hey, why didn't the school nurse's office open until eight a.m. when students were here at seven for Zero Hour?

(*Harrumph* from Mr. Redo.)

By the end of the day, Sheila'd convinced Robin to go see Dr. Drogue; and when the appointment rolled around, S-Q accompanied Robin into the waiting room, where they entertained the staff by having an argument about menstrual moods. Feef stayed out in the truck with Fat Bob, trying to hold his anxious hand.

“(She’ll be all right.)”

“I know she will, of course she will... HOW! MUCH! LONGER! till we know for sure??”

“(Dr. Drogue’s quick as she can be.)”

“Of course she is, I know she is... but there IS stuff you can take for these-kindsa-troubles, isn’t there??”

“(All sorts. *Believe* me.)”

“Good! Good! Nothing but the best for my baby doll—IS THAT THEM NOW??”

Burlyng out to crush Robin into his vast midriff (“Daa-aad! Not in front of Sheila!... look, I got this stupid prescription we have to fill”) while S-Q lugged Fiona behind the truck.

So—so is she? asked Feef’s eyebrows.

Listen to THIS! answered Sheila’s. “(She went and started her ‘flow’ right there in the stirrups! I could hear her yell ‘THIS IS A FALSE PERIOD, ISN’T IT?’ clear out in the waiting room!)”

“Whatever you’re telling her, shut up!” remarked Robin from in front of the truck.

“What’s this prescription *for*, anyway?” Fat Bob inquired, peering at the pharmacy slip.

“It’s for DRUGS, Dad, they want you to buy me DRUGS—”

“You watch it with that mouth of yours—”

“(Anyway,)” Sheila continued in Fiona’s ear, “(they’ll run tests on her wee-wee, but if you wanna start a pool—so to speak—on ‘is-she-or-isn’t-she,’ *my* money’s on swing-and-a-miss!)”

“(You can NOT hold this over her head, no matter what happens!)” Fiona ordered.

“(I know, I know, but *Lord!* Deliver me from temptation!)” exulted Sheila-Q.
“(Guess I can’t transfer back to Houlihan, at least—I’d never have this kind of fun without you guys.)”

“Shut up and I mean it!” blustered Robin, shaking her mighty drummer’s fist.

*

The Spring Musical turned out to be a train wreck, ranking right up (or down) with February’s El accident. No time for Gigi to coax Marshall into playing Paul the puppeteer, so they’d had to stick with Matt LaVintner in that role, despite his needing no eyejab from Miss Medusa to be transformed into a stoner. Matt came to school baked so often that the counselors categorized him with John Alphonse:

“Mr. LaVintner,” his father was told, “we’re concerned about Matthew. He always seems so drowsy—”

“Nonsense! It’s early to bed, early to rise for *my* son—and we keep the liquor cabinet locked in *our* house, thank you!”

This “house” was a condo at the Aguadulce, where the LaVinters were already living when Becca Blair moved there three years ago. She was twelve then but looked fifteen (now, at fifteen, she looked twenty-one) and enthralled Matt at first sight. Feeling displaced away from Snead Elementary and Alex Dmitria, Becca was susceptible to Matt for longer than her usual wont. She dated him for most of the summer between sixth and seventh grades, not putting Matt on waivers till their first week at VW—where he, after taking numerous stabs at winning her back, told anyone who’d listen that *he’d* dumped *her* when Becca began “two-timing” him. She had never given Matt the time of day since, at school or the Aguadulce; and he now loathed her as much as he loved her as much as he got sky-high every day to cope with having lost her.

So: “*Pretend I’m Becca!*” Gigi urged at every rehearsal.

This would elicit all the crippled cruelty and jealous insults needed for *Carnival*—till Matt’d sneak out, blaze up more of Skully Erle’s primo weed, and return to warble:

“*Look my friend I’m outta, outtuhhhh... step? step—look my friend I’m outta step, she’s steppin’ out on me, out with the rest of you... oooh...*”

Nor was that the half of it. Gigi'd conscripted an assortment of jocks to portray jugglers, stiltwalkers, and acrobatic clowns; but the most skillful of these were the least reliable about being on time, or there at all. Nanette Magnus and Jerome Schei launched a feud to rival the Bobbsey vendetta, each accusing the other of hamhanded upstager; and whenever this subsided, Owen O'Leary (cast against type as nice-guy Jacquot) took pains to whip it up again. Meanwhile the Phantom of the Sock-Hop made its presence felt all the way through dress rehearsal, at which several girls underwent embarrassing costume glitches. Spacyjane Groh (playing the live-action puppet Marguerite) had her bodice pop open during "Yum Ticky," verifying all suspicions that she preferred to go braless. This upset Spacyjane less than the faculty's insistence that she be firmly Maidenformed from now on.

("But that wire *pinches!*")

On opening night, every possible thing went wrong—from the curtain's repeated failure to rise, to the backdrop's rackety downfall at the climax of "Always, Always You."

Split-Pea Erbsen, taking photos of the wreckage for the yearbook, was heard to quip that Freddie Prinze needn't have committed suicide by self-inflicted gunshot, when all he'd've had to do was come see the VW Spring Musical.

*

Gigi had changed her mind about enlisting Vicki's help with *Carnival*, reasoning that anyone who dripped so copiously at a Student Court trial could not be relied on for theatrical support. Yet even if Gigi'd asked, Vicki would've had to say no, being otherwise occupied since Petula Pierro's precipitous resignation as *Cicada's* Editor-in- Chief.

"*Career opportunities are the ones that never knock—I won't open letter bombs for you!*" Downtown had declared, quoting the Clash's debut album, and crediting it for her decision to immerse herself in political punkdom. From now on it'd be BOLLOCKS to mainstream junior high school annuals, and every other facet of the Claustrophobic System!

Meanwhile Gumbo Krauss quit fulfilling his design duties. He'd ceased to be "so different" the minute Joss relinquished him, shedding his Man-Tan, cropping his Jewfro down to leatherneck length, and resuming his previous colorless personality (now tinged with khaki and olive drab). He told Ms. Yehle enough layout work had been done for *Cicada '77* to "coast home" to publication. "I did my part and am done with it—now I'm gonna go *do*

my part To Serve And Protect! *Oorah!*”

(“DEATH BOLLOCKS DISHONOR!” raspberried Downtown Pierro.)

At an emergency staff meeting, Old Yehler promoted Vicki to Editor-in-Chief and Crystal Denvour to Design Editor. “A strong steady hand *is* essential, my dear young friends—one that will *keep* its finger *on* the button, consistently—unshakably—like an audio engineer, or a rocket scientist—never letting it falter at the critical instant when leaving it *unpushed* can put your final DEADLINE at risk...”

“So,” Vicki asked Crystal as they left the Art room, “*do* we have enough to ‘coast home’ on?”

“Why sure—just like a shopping cart with two jammed wheels.”

“What the heck does THIS mean?” hissy-snitted Nanette Magnus, pursuing them down the hall. Talk about jammed wheels: Nanette had gone from trying to be Incomparable in a dramatic fiasco, to seeing her boyfriend Hank Hickey fall for a *Methodist* girl, to being forced (as a result) to binge-and-puke a whole pint of buttercrunch ice cream; and now THIS. “Do you want *us* to quit *too*?”

“Ooh, cute swimsuits!” added Delia Shanafelt, leafing through the new *Vogue* she’d peeked at through the emergency meeting. “They ought to’ve used Kaylene, though, instead of these bony types—”

“There is nothing wrong with being slim,” Nanette snapped.

“Are you calling my sister *fat*? Kaylene’s got a great bod! I wish I had her thighs—”

“DEE-LEE-UHH! We’re trying to talk yearbook here!”

Milky-blue bulbous-blink. “Still? I thought we were finished.”

“Well, maybe we *are*! What do YOU say?” Nanette crackled at Vicki.

“Let’s make a deal,” offered the new Editor-in-Chief.

“Oh I love that show!” said Delia.

“If you two’ll stay on the staff” (*and give me no bull-oney*) “you can be in charge of the *Cicada* Dance—as long as you make us more money than you spend.”

Nanette’s downward-crescent eyes elevated as she pondered this. “Would we have to use *your* band?”

“I think there’s been too many goings-on about bands this year,” said Vicki. “Better to just play records, like at the Halloween Dance—don’t you think? Less expensive too.”

“We could have a beach party theme!” gushed Delia, waving her *Vogue*. “Wouldn’t it be fun, y’know, to ‘Boogie All Night in Bikinis’?”

Even Nanette smiled at this notion. “We should’ve done that last year for Summer Council, at Maine Street Beach—Sell-O wouldn’t’ve had anywhere to run off to! For now, though... maybe like a cruise-ship theme? So people could dress up Hawaiian-y?”

“*Mahalo!*” went Crystal, who loved luau food. “Sounds good to me!”

“Me too,” Vicki nodded. “Can you give me a guesstimate by next week on how much it’d cost?”

“Less than the Sweetheart Hop did, *that’s* for sure.”

“Oh, but that was so pretty,” said Delia. “‘So Red the Rose’—all those paper flowers—it was like being in a *movie* garden.”

“A *tacky* movie garden,” retorted Nanette. “I bet we can do better at half the price, *and* without me having to sing with an upstagey fruitcake! C’mon, Delia, let’s go check out party stuff at Trimmings—we’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

Which, from Nanette Magnus, was an amiable adieu.

“See ya! (Nan, will we be *singing* at this dance? And having Hawaiian *fruitcake*?)”

Which, from Delia Shanafelt, was par for the course.

Crystal gave Vicki a noogie-nudge. “Smooth moves there, ma’am!”

“It’s called *appeasement*,” snorted Vicki, using a vocab word. “And don’t call me ‘Ma’am’—‘Boss’ will do nicely.”

*

The shaken-up yearbook staff had a hectic April-into-May. Vicki brought in Joss to take over Crystal’s job as copyreader, and relegated Gumbo and Downtown to the bottom of the masthead among “Additional Contributions by...”

Also appearing there was Spacyjane Groh, Split-Pea’s new “accessory” (as he put it). By incidental chance his camera had been focused on her puppet-bodice when it popped open, but gallant Sid said this exposure would never be developed (“as it were”) even if Spacyjane didn’t go with him to see *Annie Hall*. Which she gladly did, several times,

quickly yielding to his proposal that she adopt Diane Keaton's bowler hat, vest and necktie (all as charming on her as they were on Diane) and start assisting with his photographic endeavors. Some people wondered if these involved Spacyjane posing for him in just the tie and hat; but Gallant Sid would only say, "She's excellent at setting up tripods (in a manner of speaking)."

"Doesn't he talk neat?" twittered Spacyjane, kissing the top of Split-Pea's rusty head.

"Can you guys please make out on your *own* time?" requested Vicki the Editor, sounding very much In-Chief.

A "take-charge" person was not how she would have defined herself. As a Ladybug, she'd deferred to Mumbles and Alex; even as the Dartles's manager, her job had been to implement and facilitate—not be their Leader.

"Are you joking?" scoffed Joss in Vicki's bedroom. "Who *led* us into the Vinyl Spinnaker?"

"That was for my birthday! I was the *hostess* of that—you said so yourself."

"Okay then, who LED us into the faculty conference room after the Back-to-School Dance? It was all we could do to keep up with you—"

"That doesn't count either, I was *mad* then."

"“Oh, you can't help that. We're all mad here,”" said Crystal Denvour, citing the Cheshire Cat; and Vicki glanced at the shelf on which her old stuffed animals were arrayed—among them one with a few surviving fluorescent teeth, that still (if feebly) gleamed in the dark.

You must be mad, or you wouldn't have come here.

Wrestling with *Cicada* paste-ups, listening to David Soul plead "Don't Give Up on Us" and Thelma Houston add "Don't Leave Me This Way," Vicki flashed back to Tricia in their Walrock Avenue bedroom, doing similar editwork on Pfiester High's *Magic Harp* yearbook, with "Lady Marmalade" on the radio and Cynthia Dollfuss having a joyous horselaugh over *Voulez-vous coucher avec moi (ce soir)?*

"Gahd," went Vicki. "All of a sudden I miss my big sisters."

"Sisters?" said Crystal. "I thought you just have one."

“Her best friend was like one too, to me—*more* like one, most of the time.”

“One big sister’s too many,” grouched Joss. “I’m so looking forward to missing mine!”

(Meg was camped out by the Jupiter Street phone and mailbox, hoping against hope for a late acceptance off Smith College’s waitlist, since her best alternative was Overton in Ohio—and Meg was already sick of telling people “No, not *Oberlin*.”)

“Well, I suppose I miss Flint,” said Crystal, active with scissors, “though it sure is nice not having to wait for a mirror till he finishes making goo-goo eyes at himself in it.”

(The bunch had seen Crystal’s collegiate brother do this at the Denvours’s Christmas party.)

“Better goo-goo than gaga,” said Joss.

“Okay, here’s the new layout for the Sweetheart spread,” Crystal continued, a tad too casually.

“Whoa! What happened here?” asked Vicki, indicating a luscious photo of Crystal in a décolleté gown—with all of her escort scissored out. “That was a pretty good picture of Rags.”

Crystal’s dimples disappeared. “Since IVAR is not speaking to me, I think this is only appropriate.”

(Sidelong sub-talk between Vicki and Joss:)

“Not speaking?” Wasn’t that Rags at our lunch table yesterday, jabbering away?

I guess “that was then”—it’s never a good sign when she uses his real name.

(Weighty silence, broken only by “Hotel California’s” minor chords.)

“All right, if you must know, he hasn’t asked me to the *Cicada* Dance!” exclaimed Crystal. “And why? ‘Cause he takes it for granted I’ll be going with him! Probably won’t even mention it, till he shows up that night to *fetch* me like a *dog*—in his dad’s car! with his dad driving! OH I need to start dating older guys—especially *mentally* older!”

“Well,” said Joss, “there’s only four months till we start senior high.”

“You could do like Becca and get a head start dating those guys,” said Vicki. “I mean, you ‘n’ Becca already sort of *have* a head start, y’know...”

Crystal stuck out her tongue at being twitted about pulchritude, but simmered down to dimply normal. “I ought to do the opposite and seduce some *younger* guy. Do you know Jed Wainwright, Eddie’s brother? He’s pretty cute, and big for his age—”

(Sardonic cough from Joss.)

“—oh hush—and it’d drive Eddie crazy, as well as IVAR. I still owe Eddie some crazy-driving, he was such a Quick Draw McGraw—”

(Louder cough, more sardonic.) “You really want to date an eighter named after a *hillbilly*?”

“A *rich* hillbilly.”

“This is all very fascinating,” said Vicki, “but we’ve got a long ways to go, so—”

“Yes Boss,” went Crystal.

“Your Highness/Majesty,” added Joss.

“Oh shut up—”

“*You* shut up—”

*

The Dopesters spent April-to-May in limbo, holed up (or down) in the Villa cellar. Robin splintered drumstick after drumstick whaling away at her skins, while Fiona and her Fender sought some new outlet for them to plug their music into.

Sheila-Q’d reacted as you might expect to the news that Britt Groningen had parted company with the Dartles. “Lookit, everybody has tiffs, they’re nonstop in my family, we hafta use scorecards to keep track of who’s fighting who, so lemme give Britt a call, we’ll patch this up in a jiffy—”

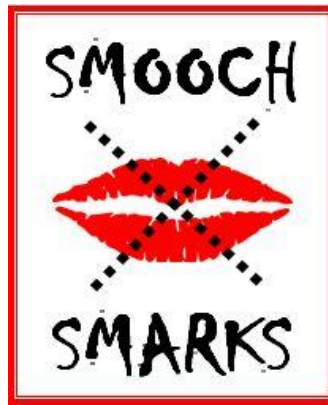
“(Forget your tiffs and jiffies. We don’t *want* it patched up.)”

“Feef, don’t be such a sourpuss! Why should *we* care what Britt gets up to, so long as she rocks-‘n’-rolls right with *us*? We NEED her, you guys, if we wanna GO ON rockin’ right—and if she does gets in trouble, the rest of us can just play dumb. I’m gonna run over and see her—”

Coming back from Sunny Squash Court to glumly report that Britt was forming a group of her own—“‘Smooch Smarks,’ she’s calling it! ‘Feel free to audition for rhythm guitarist,’ she told me!”—with Flake Hasleman on keyboards, Dino Tattaglia on bass and

Lenny Otis on drums. “In other words, Queen Bitch & The New Smarks Brothers!”

All the same tie-in merchandise would again be for sale, using a variant on her old logo—same crimson kissylips but on a white background, X’d through by crossed lines of black diamonds, with a splattery black *SMOOCH* replacing *THE ROSA* above and *SMARKS* instead of *DARTLES* below—



“(Can she DO that??)”

Raymond Murrish’s considered opinion, as an attorney and alderman and father of the Dartle Electrapianist, was that yes Britt could.

Sheila had no intention of auditioning for any group, troupe, or ensemble that included Dino Tattaglia, so that was that: the breach was complete. And the Rosa Dartles were back where they’d been a year ago, except that now they had a name and rep as a band, and insufficient means to capitalize on either. No lead guitar; no souvenir concessions; no open-reel tape deck for recording cassettes...

...and no eagerness to remedy any of this.

Robin was too morose to even argue with S-Q about it.

Nor was her dejection lightened by Arlo Sowell’s lumbering around school and town, wearing a ding’d heart on his dented sleeve.

Having no clue how to let a guy down gently—particularly an unswayable sumo-type like Arlo—Robin had been bluntly *Noli mi tangere*-ish with him, till he got the message that he was being heaved overboard in concrete galoshes. Not that this made Robin feel any happier, or more appreciative of the irony that Dr. Drogue’s prescription was beginning to

work wonders on her zits.

“Can you help me with this?” she asked Fiona one downcast afternoon, chucking a clump of blotchy scribbles at her. “It’s s’posed to be, y’know, like a song...”

(Silent *Oh crap.*)

Occasionally Robin took it into her head to do a crossword puzzle: which was to say that she’d start one, ram straightaway into frustration, curse the newspaper in English and *Italiano*, bellow for Feef’s assistance, then kibitz carpingly while Feef deduced the answers and filled out the grid. Much the same routine occurred that Saturday in the Villa basement, till Fiona almost yearned for the days of collaboration-by-mail with Britt. But by nightfall, after many pulls at the water pipe and harangues at each other, the Dopesters had achieved a joint composition in aggressive melancholy:

*You met yourself a razzlin’ man
and let yourself be caught
You got yourself a lesson learned
without a second thought
Forgot that men will act like dogs
in collars but unleashed
To savage you ‘cause that’s (you knew)
The Nature of The Beast
Think twice about the road you choose
and where you might be led
Or else you’ll have the Razzlin’ Blues
that fill your heart with dread*

“(Can you take me home now?)” Fiona mutter-moaned at the end of this grueling onslaught.

“Aren’t you sleeping here tonight?”

“(I would if I *could*. But *you*’ll be up till all hours, trying to rewrite everything we just got done.)”

“Will not!” Robin vowed, even as she picked up her sticks to reassess AGAIN which melodic line they should skew toward, “Smoke on the Water” or “House of the Rising Sun”—

“(Please let it be!)” Feef beseeched. “(Let it be, let it be, let it BE...)”

“If I take you home now, will you quit with the Paul McCartney?” asked Robin, sounding a good deal more like her typical self; revving the Margutta’s engine with jaunty belligerence as she scootered Fiona the eight blocks to Windy Poplar Lane, and a three-point landing in front of the Plexiglas Palace. “Hey, get this!—five months from now, I’ll be driving you wherever in my new used *car!*”

“(Just make sure you get a black-and-blue one.)”

“Why?”

“(To match what you make the rest of us.)”

Robin socked her on the shoulder as Fiona slithered off the scooter. “*That’s* for being a wiseass! *And* a partypooper!... but maybe I’ll go drop by Arlo’s. Me ‘n’ him could still be pals, dontcha think? Long as I don’t let him razzle me?”

“(Try it over the phone first. To stay on the safe side.)”

Robin socked her again, lighter and longer. “You better always be there when I need you, Pee Wee!” she said; making an endearment sound like a threat, as was her knack.

Away she vroomed, leaving Fiona to hoist her weary self over the Plexiglas threshold and be hailed with surprise by Moth and Aunt Polly. It was another wild ‘n’ crazy Saturday night for the Dunlop sisters, watching “Uncle Kup”—Irv Kupcinet, an old journalistic chum of their father Jock—on the Palace TV.

“Fiona? Is that you?”

“We thought you were spending the night at Robin’s.”

“Is everything okay?”

“You’re not feeling poorly, are you dear? Do you need to lie down?”

“(Just to sleep. Busy day. Bed now.)”

“Well, if you’re sure you’re all right...”

I should live so long thought Feef as she trudged up to her room. Which should’ve been empty but was full of lamentations from a half-dressed Chloe, who lay sprawled on her

bed in a sobbing twisted heap.

Oh for crying out loud, not YOU now!—and you better not think YOU'RE pregnant, at barely thirteen—

Tweety Snot, in the literal sense of the words. Peeling a face smeared with tears, phlegm, and cosmetics off an equally splotched pillow, to waah “Deww deyy dohhhh...?”

Dammit. “(Does who know what?)”

“Momm’n’AuntMarrthuhh! Iznat why deyy maydja come hooooome?...”

DAMMIT—rewind the clock and bring back the Margutta! “(F’they knew you’re spazzing out, they’d be up here themselves”)—YAWN—“(so whyncha go down ‘n’ cry on them? I’m tired...)”

Chloe only wept afresh. No longer a condescending snippy-ass, but a wretched little creature in padded bra and day-of-the-week panties. “*Ohhhh, I’mmm soooo MIZZ-rubble!*”

And soooo likely to thwart Fiona from getting any shuteye.

Plunk a large box of kleenex by the sopping-wet pillow and, with a pretense of interest, ask “(Why?)”

Because Chloe’d gone to a party where Bart Schtapp, her alleged boyfriend, had flirted his ass off with Another Woman, that’s why! And not just any Other Woman, but “*Tippi Lingerspiel!* of all people! who thinks she’s soooo hot ‘n’ SOOOO fine ‘n’ SOOOO—”

“(I get it already!... Okay. Go wash your face and put on pajamas, and I’ll do you a favor.)”

“...whutt?...”

“(I’ll—brush your damn hair.)”

Tweety-tears boggled back into their ducts, and mucus back into its membranes. “*Hack hawk hoff!*” went Chloe. “Y-you’d r-really do that?... y-you n-never do that...”

“(And I won’t now, if you talk anymore. Hurry up! And change that cruddy pillowcase before it makes us both sick!)”

Off shuffled Chloe to bathroom and linen closet, while Fiona slouched into her ancient Ziggy Stardust T-shirt/nightie. Straining to stay awake, lest she dream about Tippi Lingerspiel (of all people!) being interviewed by Irv Kupcinec about being SOOOO fine.

Snot-free Tweety reappeared with a clean face, pink PJs, newly-cased pillow, and boar-bristle hairbrush. Handing the latter over with timorous caution: would it be applied to the seat of her pajama bottoms?

But Fiona just groped for the handle, then for Chloe's head, to draw boarish bristles through finespun goldilocks as she quietly crooned three choruses of "Razzlin' Blues."

(Along the melodic line of "House of the Rising Sun.")

(*Not* "Smoke on the Water.")

*

Cicada '77's final proofs were rushed to the printer on Friday the 13th of May, clearing the way for concentration on May 21st's Spring Dance. This would get its own yearbook insert (separate and unbound) *if* it generated enough profit to cover the annual budget deficit.

Nanette was deadset on making this happen. In organizing "Tropic Island Cruise" she cut every corner and stretched every penny, leaving no belt untightened (her own always cinched-as-could-be) and discounting each of Gigi's suggestions to two cents's worth.

She was just as cost-effective in choosing a date to take her *to* the dance. Staked out on the front steps of Calvary Lutheran Church, modeling a new spring dress whose skirt fluttered in the Sunday morning breeze, Nanette took a dispassionate survey of the congregation's younger males. Too tubbish—too shortish—too nerdish—too much of a fickle-pickle (that one being Hank Hickey)—

Finally bestowing a cool *you'll do* smile on William "Boffer" Freuen, a ninth-grader at Multch East, who'd been a recent Silver Gloves contender before getting KO'd in the semifinals. Boffer was also out a bit of a lout (his mother *made* him come to church that day after catching him swiping a ten-spot of her purse) but he had a nebulous resemblance to Sylvester Stallone, so Nanette was inclined to overlook a few character flaws. Such as Boffer's grabbing the back of her fluttery skirt in the Calvary vestibule, and evaluating it as "Kinda skinny-assed but she might put out, and anyhoo she's a rich chick."

(Mr. Magnus being a well-to-do canner of frozen orange juice.)

Delia, following Nanette's lead, went fishing in foreign waters and reeled in Dalton "Salty" Pilchard, a freshman at Athens Grove. His parents owned a racing sloop called the

King Oscar, from which various ideas and items of gear were taken for “Tropic Island Cruise”; plus Salty gave Delia a recipe (pungent yet economical) for pineapple-anchovy pizza that he swore would not cause *mal de mer*.

Kim Zimmer was still going with Norman Lesser, who might be a lamebrain but whose branch of the Lesser Park Lessers had an outlet warehouse of slightly irregular fabrics. Many of these were in bright Aloha patterns intended for muumuus or Honolulu shirts, but serviceable as gym-wall drapery; and these (in Kim’s estimation) absolutely consummated the “Tropic Island Cruise” theme.

Which, in Gigi Pyle’s estimation, was a load of nautical hoohaw. Leaving her far from certain that she’d even buy a ticket—or, rather, have Marshall McConchie buy one for her—to the Spring Dance.

It wasn’t like anybody in *her own clique* showed the least curiosity what Gigi might think of their plans, even though she’d masterminded an entire Sweetheart Hop a mere three months ago. Proving yet again that the planet was populated with unreliable fly-by-nights—as had been repeatedly demonstrated at every performance of *Carnival!*

Yet there remained the question of who’d be this year’s *Cicada Queen*, and Gigi had not yet abdicated her right to that title. If rumors were true, Bionic Becca wouldn’t be making even a token stopover at this dance. Add Gigi to the no-shows, and *Nanette Magnus* might win the tiara—as good as REWARDING her for the bickersome egg she’d laid playing The Incomparable Rosalie!

Fan your fevered brow, and perish that ignoble thought.

“Marshall honey? Yew bought our tickets for the Spring Dance yet?”

“Oh—are we going, then?”

“Why sure, sugar! Ah wouldn’t go with anyone else.”

“I’m not really much of a dancer.”

“Baby, we don’t go there to *dance*—we go to be *seen*. It’s practically a costume ball, with a silly desert-island theme. Ah ‘spect we could dress lahk Ginger and the Perfessor.”

“Oh. Well then (heh!) I’d better ‘shell out’ for those tickets. ‘Shell out’—”

“Yes, Marshall, Ah get it.”

“Did you know my sister Mavis used to sell seashells by the Lakeshore?”

“...that’s funny too...”

“No, honest! She hand-painted them for tourists. Now she’s in New Mexico, carving cactus-sculptures.”

“Really?... How much do those cost? Ah got me some friends Ah really oughta GIVE things lahk that to...”

*

As per usual, the only way Papa Dmitria would allow Alex to attend a school dance was in the company of her most special girlfriends; and since Vicki and Joss were “temporarily *sans beaux*” (to quote Joss) they were happy, or at least willing, to oblige. But an attempt to rib Fiona into joining them did not tickle Feef pink.

“(If you want to see *me* dance, put me up on a stage with a bass in my hands and a mike at my mouth.)”

“Ooh! Would Mike *Spurgeon* do?”

“(Spurge YOU for even saying that!)”

Joss and Vicki were more successful in alerting Rags Ragnarsson that he should do his romantic duty, or risk losing Crystal to the Mystery Man they hinted she had her eye on. Rags, never one to *not* go to extremes, went so far as to present Crystal with a gaudy corsage in front of the whole cafeteria. The fact that it would wilt long before dance night was not held against him—unlike Crystal’s bosom, after Rags lovingly pinned the corsage upon it.

(Watched with mass envy by niner girls and boys alike.)

Vicki did another good deed by matchmaking Laurie Harrison with Buddy Marcellus, who *was* a nice guy and fun to be around, plus a great dancer—though Vicki did warn Laurie to steer him away from any spillable dairy-bar beverages.

Laurie in turn did all she could to link up her stepsister and Patrick Baxter, Big Sue’s brother, whom Little Sue’d been smitten with since they began working together on next fall’s cross country program. Patrick, captain-elect of the new boys squad, had just enjoyed a growth spurt and begun shaving once a week; but Susie, captain-elect of the girls squad, despaired of ever reaching puberty or being seen as more than a fellow long-distance runner.

“You are gonna outknockout ‘em *all* before you know it!” Laurie reaffirmed.

“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!”

Laurie made secret contact with Big Sue, who let Patrick know in curt unequivocal terms that he WAS going to ask out Susie Zane, or cough up a good reason to the contrary.

“Aw c’mon, she looks like a kid!”

“Look closer,” advised Big Sue, administering a cuff to the back of Patrick’s head.

Patrick happened to do a lot of fantasizing about Laurie Harrison, and thought a perfunctory date with her twig-of-a-sister might somehow be a springboard to intimacy with Laurie herself. But when he offhandedly asked Susie to the Spring Dance, she let out a shriek, threw her arms around Patrick’s neck, and gave him such a massive MWAH that his fantasies got rearranged to a remarkable extent.

Blossom time!

On a more jaded (though still zesty) level, Sheila Quirk and John Alphonse decided to take a short-term whack at each other; yet even on this provisional one-time basis, they couldn’t cajole Robin and Arlo into doubling with them to the dance. Robin’s lunchtime declaration that she and Arlo were now Just Good Friends made S-Q choke on her sweet’n’sour meatballs, before starting an argument over whether Robin had thereby earned the rank of Bobbsey Quadruplet.

Amelia Quirk (the Bobbsey Triplet, aka Mealy aka Taters) did a good matchmaking deed of her own. Having a long queue of boys on her dating string, she generously delegated K.C. Battenburg to ask out Chloe Rumpelmagen; which he dutifully did, being not just an affable guy but aware of how pretty Chloe could be when not in a sobbing twisted heap.

His offer—a bolt from the spontaneous blue, so far as Chloe knew—sent her over the moon and halfway to Venus. Scheming all the way how she’d rub Bart Schtapp and Tippi Lingerspiel’s noses (not to mention Patches and Smarty and Bootsie and Chuckles’s) in her being asked out by a FRESHMAN! and a CUTE ONE! who used to date the QUIRK SISTERS! yet chose *CHLOE* over them and every other girl in school, to *ask out to the Spring Dance!!!*—

(She was careful, however, not to gloat too obviously within Fiona’s ear-or-eyeshot.)

Down Oakapple Road, one block east of Eugene G. Green's. Cecidia Drive, Chiroisia Drive, Knopper Drive—and suddenly there it was, behind the chain-link fence. Big heavy stack of irregular concrete slabs, three stories high, with three parallel wings jutting out like fingers on a giant robotic gauntlet. Skinny little windows wedged between the slabs, with stark stone walkways wrapped around the upper floors. And out front the sign read:

V W

VANDERLUND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Home of the Beetles

And the Ladybugs it ought to add, but didn't. A change that Vicki'd fought for in vain through two terms on Student Council, one on Summer Council, and one on Frosh Board.

Which kind of summed up the not-quite-two years that had passed since the first day she'd come running by this place. And gotten lost in Baroque Vista. But then had met her very best friend. Who'd been by her side the first time she entered Home Base—climbed the back stairs to 8-Z—gone down to eat in the cafeteria where she'd feared being shunned and ostracized—but instead had broken bread with the *Dopesters*, no less, after just a few hours's acquaintance! Robin and Fiona, whom Vicki might've been too scared even to talk to had Joss not known them from Band and made introductions. Now it was difficult to imagine them not being part of her bunch, her life.

And that same first morning, in the gymnasium to which they were currently headed, she'd encountered the gazelle-like cheerybabe who would become her second-best friend. Alex Dmitria, whose hyperactive mainspring was less tightly-wound nowadays, yet not a jot less amazingly radiant as she hopped out of Felicia's Firebird and bopped toward the playing-field doors:

"Thanks, Mrs. Volester! C'mon, girls, shake your legs! '*I feel like dancin', dancin' / dance the night away!*' I bet I could, too, and not need a wink of sleep!"

"While *I* may choose to snooze in these shoes," grumped Joss, never at her merriest when weather was this muggy. "Ninety degrees out and spoiling for a thunderstorm—so hey, let's put on long skirts and hoof it all round the gym!"

“Hoof it? This isn’t Horse Camp, Joss! We’re wearing nice light sundresses, the gym’ll be air-conditioned, it’s the last dance of the school year, and we’re going to have superfun!”

Vicki, lagging a step behind, listened to reverberations from the past. *Here’s where we bail out—we’ll hoof it the rest of the way—well-lighted—plenty of foot traffic...*

Never got to dance with Roger Mustardman, unless you mean metaphorically. Nor with Dave Solovay or Tony Pierro; and Ordinary Mark Welk back in seventh grade counted for zilch. All the dancing she *had* done was insignificant jiggety-jog—no magic to it, no allure. She might as well have been one of those dime-a-throw taxi-types in the olden days, like Barbara Stanwyck in that *Ten Cents a Dance* Late Movie.

Well...

Maybe tonight would be different.

Tickets at the door; date-stamp on the hand; both services an Additional Contribution by Spacyjane Groh, who was attired in her Annie Hall collar/tie/hat despite the heat. Which Vicki’s trio didn’t escape from as they went into the “air-conditioned” gym, and found it decorated as if for the opening scene of *Lord of the Flies*.

Red and black were predominant, aptly so for the Home of the Beetles (AND THE LADYBUGS!) but also evocative of fresh blood and dark shadows. Other colors were vivid on the walls, hung with slightly irregular bursts of purple, yellow, hungry-jungle green. Tie-dyed bedsheets shimmered like sky-blue mirages flapping over the South Pacific; and from cardboard palm trees dangled artful bunches of Gumboesque coconuts. No pig’s heads on sticks, or with apples in their mouths; but the night was young.

“And we didn’t go a nickel over budget!” boasted Nanette.

She and Delia were sheathed in hibiscus sarongs from just below their armpits to just above their knees. Mrs. Driscoll had forbidden any wearing of swimsuits, halter tops, or chest-baring open shirts (by either sex) but sarongs must have passed muster; and they made Delia and Nanette—and Kim Zimmer, lurking in the undergrowth—look a lot cooler than Vicki *felt*, temperature- or fashionwise.

She had to commend them, though, for a thrifty job well done. Not even Aunt Fritzzi could’ve silkified so many sow’s ears using frugal VW resources. Turnout wasn’t shaping

up badly either, even at \$1.25 a head, and without a Battle of Bands to whet student enthusiasm.

Ms. Yehle was there as chief chaperone in another of her handsewn jumpsuit/headscarf concoctions, along with Coach Smitty and Mr. “Mispronounced” Martincich and Miss Stabeldore the typing teacher, plus a genuine celebrity to help them judge the *Cicada* Queen competition: that star of local TV blurbs and dinner theater, Mimi McLaine.

Which had to mean automatic ineligibility for Becca Blair—didn’t it?—even if Becca *did* show up? Which she hadn’t yet and what would be the point, if she couldn’t be crowned Queen of a Dance judged by her own mother?

Thus reckoned a multitude of niner girls, none more so than Gigi Pyle, who’d come in a stunning (even for her) gownlike garment of spangly coral-pink: far removed from all those unsullied country-orphan frocks, and farthest removed from much of her chest and most of her back.

Lawdy, pass that muster!

As up popped Split-Pea, camera in hand, to capture this cheesecake for the unbound insert; while his own Spacy girlfriend was swaddled à la Annie Hall, and in a steambath atmosphere too. It almost made Vicki head for a pay phone to call for a ride home.

But no: even if Joss was prepared to split, they’d never be able to pry Alex loose this early. So sigh and stay put till the P.A. blasted forth the theme song from *Rocky*, during which her hand was grasped and she got hauled in amid the jiggety-joggers—

—by who? Chipper Farlowe, oh Gahd—

—for a pugnacious bob-and-weave to *Gonna fly now / flying high now / gonna fly, fly, flyyyy—*

(Would that she could now / away, away, awayyyy—)

Oh well: at least she wasn’t doing this with Mack “The Arm” Pittley.

Numerous other guys asked her to dance, to get down and shake it with them, just as they had at that “Stairway to Heaven” dance two years ago. Many wanting another turn, each guy making the right moves, yet every one of them rooted in the mundane—no spills taken; no thrills given.

Between bouts of the Bee Gees, Trammmps, T-Connection and Love Unlimited Orchestra, her partners offered her cup after cup of Hawaiian Punch, slice after slice of pineapple-anchovy pizza, and invite after invite to go see the big new space movie premiering next week. Its special effects were supposedly out of this world—"a spectacle light-years ahead of its time!"—but except for playing Astro Co-eds with Hayley Tamworth, Vicki'd never been that much into science fiction, and politely deflected the invites along with the pizza.

(Goofus, needless to say, was wild to be first in line to behold the film Joss had already started calling *Mars Bars*, and he'd postponed his eleventh birthday celebration till next week to coincide with this momentous opening.)

On and on went the dance. Gloria Gaynor; Donna Summer; Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band. At last they ran short on time and had to crown a *Cicada* potentate. Vicki thought no one could outqualify Kinks Farghetti for such a title, but all the freshmen girls were summoned to go jig around the judges's platform, while ABBA's "Dancing Queen" was spun.

Vicki took her jog with Jerome Schei, who kept giving her the *latest* latest about Mike and Irina's "cuckolding" of poor Sell-O Fayne who *oh my Gahd was s-m-i-l-i-n-g right this minute at Rachel Gleistein even as he boogied with Irina* (DON'T LOOK!) ooooh, Miss Don't-Touch-The-Hair had to be skating on thin ice now, 'cause everyone knew Mike'd be here with Keiko Nakayama if her scandalized parents hadn't put her under virtual house arrest which was a real shame since Keiko would've been a sure shot for the *Cicada* court if only so the judges could validate their ethnic open-mindedness—

While four Swedes sang *You can dance, you can jive / having the time of your lyyyyfe...*

The tune ended; Mimi McLaine tapped on the microphone; Buddy Marcellus called out, "Show us how to do the hula!"

[Laughter] from the gym.

"I'm afraid I didn't bring my grass skirt," smiled Mimi.

[Whistles] from the boys in the gym.

“We hope you’ve all had a night to remember,” Mimi went on in her best Canfield’s Diet Chocolate Fudge voice. “It is now my honor, on behalf of the judges, to announce your four *Cicada* Court Attendants.”

[Inhalations] by the girls in the gym.

“Miss Gigi Pyle!”

[Shockwave] across the combined gymnasiums.

Since the finalists were being presented in reverse order, this meant Gigi’d come in FIFTH. Thunder crashed overhead, as if to express Mother Nature’s disbelief, and the lights flickered (*oh Gahd not again*) as though to hide Gigi’s degradation as Marshall led her to the platform and boosted her up onto it. A plastic lei was tossed over her head, a plastic flower was thrust into her hands, and *FLASSSHHHH FLASSSHHHH flassshhhh* went Split-Pea’s camera as Gigi stared glassily into the abyss.

“Miss Crystal Denvour!”

Tremendous yell of triumph from Rags as Crystal swept past Gigi, displaying the nonchalance of a soloist accustomed to plaudits for her voice, her bearing, her dimples, her cleavage, her general virtuoso starshine.

“Miss Nanette Magnus!”

Darting swiftly up as if on a tennis or racquetball court, to accept her lei with a great flounce of ash-blonditude. Miffed at not scoring better than the bronze, yet taking infinite satisfaction at eclipsing *one* specific cliquety-clack who shall remain nameless—while reserving the right to snitty-hiss whoever *did* win.

“Your First Attendant—Miss Vicki Volester!”

Screams from Jerome, from Joss, from all her friends and fans: outnumbering (or at least outloudening) the utmost quantity in her wildest dreams.

Dreamwalk onto the platform. Nod at catatonic Gigi, trade civil smiles with Nanette, swap noogie-nudges with Crystal. Receive *two* plastic leis from Mimi McLaine; notice that the matching flowers were just like the ones they’d taped on Fiona’s locker around her goopy get-well card. Blink at the *FLASSSHHHHHing* (gahdammit Sidney!) and reflect that Candy Gates had mounted a whole Hanes pantyhose campaign to achieve what Vicki’d accomplished without even trying.

“Finally, this year’s *Cicada* Queen—Miss Alex Dmitria!”

Krakatoan reaction. Every cheer she might have led for Beetle teams, every shout she might have rallied from a crowd at football or basketball games, erupted in a volcanic tsunami for Alex herself. Surfing it like a born wahine, Alex landed on the platform and arched into Vicki’s embrace.

“I can’t believe this!” she cried, touching the tiara on her brow with shaky fingers. “I *cannot* BELIEVE this!”

“Believe it, champ!—you’re our best ‘n’ brightest,” said Vicki, raising Alex’s arm as a ref would a prizefighter’s: Alex(andra the Great), Queen of the VW Cossacks, beaming like a brilliant supernova unto the world.

Which did not stop raucous sobs from tearing through the gym, or Kim Zimmer from doing the same as she emitted them.

Joss (being Joss) reached out as Kim ran past and turned to go after her, regardless of old betrayals; but Kim threw her off and dodged around a figure in the doorway—a shapely gray shape with red LED optics, one of which gave Vicki the merest squint of a wink.

Everything’s arranged for a purpose.

*

Or maybe not.

Laurie and her Gossip Brigade had to put in another twelve-hour shift that Sunday, spreading the word on what Mr. and Mrs. Zimmer discovered when they came home from a hostile Saturday night out. Up rumbled their garage door to reveal Kim hanging from the rafters, a noose around her neck—and one hapless armpit, exactly like the old Charles Addams “Can’t you do anything right?” cartoon. Her sarong had come undone and fallen off, revealing even more of Kim to her parents and a group of neighbors drawn by the tumult, since the garage door jammed open and resisted Mr. Zimmer’s efforts to yank it shut.

“Will you help me get her down from there??” Mrs. Zimmer demanded. “And YOU, young lady!!—why aren’t you wearing a bra???”

“W-A-A-A-A-I-I-I-I-L-L-L-L,” went Kim.

Physically she sustained some rope abrasions and a dislocated shoulder; emotionally, her plug had been pulled. Arrangements were made so Kim could complete ninth grade

without having to return for the last three weeks of school. She refused to see anyone from VW, even Delia who'd also missed making the *Cicada* court, but certainly hadn't felt suicidal or cry-for-helpish about it. Nanette went to see Kim too, thinking it her Christian duty; as did compassionate Alex, with Rachel Gleistein from Red Cross Club—though Rachel hadn't forgotten the crack Kim had made concerning her Phantom-wedgied backside. All were rebuffed. Gigi Pyle might not have been; but she (after regaining consciousness and hearing about Kim's escapade) washed her magnolia hands of Miss Manic-Demented, blaming her own fifth-place finish on Kimmy's psycho discipleship.

“What *can* yew ‘spect from someone so fly-by-nighty?”

As for Joss, she alternated between feeling terrible and giggling uncontrollably. “I shouldn't laugh about it, I *know* I shouldn't, but HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE! Oh, Jeez! If only she hadn't weighed the same as a duck...”

*

On June 2nd, Vicki and many of her schoolmates went to Vanderlund Senior High's commencement ceremony: Meg Murrish was graduating, as were her boyfriend Brooksy and Hogan Quirk and Riley Pyle and scuzzy Jason Zane, not to mention Fleur Groningen the valedictorian. Joss had gone down to The City the night before to watch Lamar Twofields graduate from his West Side high school, swearing she was going to give him a big hug and kiss after the final procession. When her chance came, Joss chickened out (“Well, Toughie was standing right *there*, wasn't she?”) and had to settle for squeezing Lamar's big brown hands. (“But even that was fantastic!”)

There were no caps and gowns or beribboned diplomas for VW's departing freshmen; just an assembly at which the results of the class ballot were broadcast:

<i>Most Athletic</i>	<i>Samantha Tiggs</i>	<i>Eddie Wainwright</i>
<i>Most Dramatic</i>	<i>Gigi Pyle</i>	<i>Matt LaVintner</i>
<i>Most Artistic</i>	<i>Britt Groningen</i>	<i>Sidney Erbsen</i>
<i>Most Studious</i>	<i>Keiko Nakayama</i>	<i>Marshall McConchie</i>
<i>Most Talkative</i>	<i>Laurie Harrison</i>	<i>Jerome Schei</i>
<i>Best Hair</i>	<i>Irina Saranoff</i>	<i>Brad Faussett</i>

<i>Cutest Couple</i>	<i>Crystal Denvour</i>	<i>Ivar Ragnarsson</i>
<i>Class Flirt and Wolf</i>	<i>Carly Thibert</i>	<i>John Alphonse</i>
<i>Class Clowns</i>	<i>Petula Pierro</i>	<i>Morey Krauss</i>
<i>Personality Plus</i>	<i>Alex Dmitria</i>	<i>Mike Spurgeon</i>
<i>Most Likely to Succeed</i>	<i>Becca Blair</i>	<i>Bennett Fayne</i>

And special recognition was given (though no engraved plaque or trophy) to Vicki Volester for “stepping up” and bringing in the yearbook on deadline.

Cicada '77 came out not only as scheduled but in fairly admirable shape. By then Vicki was sick at the sight of its contents, including the separate unbound insert that had to be manually stuffed behind each front cover. Plenty of other folk found plenty to praise, or so they said: staff, students, faculty, administration, and eventually parents.

The yearbooks were distributed on the last day of school. Everyone had to report to homeroom for attendance-taking, but then discipline slackened and a degree of hall-roaming was tolerated. Pens weren't used to fill out final exams or extra-credit reports, but to inscribe countless *Have a nice summer!*s.

Vicki wore out two new Flair markers as she rambled round the wings and over to Home Base. *Cicada* after *Cicada* got poked into her chest with requests for her signature; her own copy was in constant demand, sometimes circulated from hand to hand till she almost lost track of it.

(Again and again she heard her two-year-younger self telling Hayley Tamworth, *I've got to start over again as a New Girl. First day of school, I'm gonna be all alone...*)

(Well, look at her now.)

(Look at the clumps of little sevvie girls, same age as she'd been that last week at Reulbach, approaching her with eyes all deferential and wanna-be-like-you, to basically ask for her AUTOGRAPH. Who'da thunk it?)

Guys of all ages dogged her trail, their eyes no doubt upon her *tail*; but that was nothing new. Nor was there much novelty in the way they smudged her yearbook with ill-spelt memorials. Some were sweet: Rags's *To the SECOND prettiest chick in this school*; K.C.'s *Your [sic] a real neat gal & cute lookin [sic] too!*; Mr. Erickson's *Being your teacher*

has been a joy, Vicki, you do excellent work—

(S-I-G-H...)

Some were well-meaning: Jerome's *I only hope someday you'll find the right guy, oh what am I saying? of course you will*; Howard Ullmann's *Sorry I didn't get to know you too well this semester*; Artie Rist's *Finally we're free of this bourgeois [sic] hellhole torture chamber—*

And, big surprise, more than a few verged on the indecent: such as Brad's and Craig's and Fast Eddie's variations on *Have a great sex life, babe! you sure could use one!—*

(Proving yet again that boys think with their Things.)

Vicki cordoned off the inside back cover for her bunch to sign, the better to treasure their sentiments at a single glance:

V.V. (not "W") — *Getting to know you's been one of the best things that happened this year! Thanks again for shaking up Rags (I know it was you & Joss who did it). Let's have some classes together next year—*

Luv, Crystal

Hey Steppin' Up! — Well this year's been a blast and ½! Let's get the Dartles back on track this summer and make next year a blast and ¾! Will then I bet I'll beat you to the beach every weekend! See you there —

God Bless You, Sheila-Q

Vicki — *After Susie and Alex, you're my hero. Having you as a ~~friend~~ friend (to the end!) has made me a better person, I think, or at least a happier one. Hope I'll see ~~a whole lot of~~ you a whole lot this summer—*

Anyway, Lotsa Luv, Laurie ☺

Loopy ! — That's what I call you cause that's what you are
 and don't ever change ! A great manager and greater pal !
 Just make sure your dad finds me the best used
AMERICAN-MADE car for less than \$500—
 Catch ya on the flip side ! *Robin*

[quickly drawn music score for the closing bars of “Venture Nothing”]

Truth we make up along the way
 Every time you glue us together
 Releasing us to be as one

♥ *Fiona (FTW)*

Dear Vicki — You were wrong, you know — YOU'RE
 our best and brightest. I don't know how I'd have
 gotten thru jr. high (especially Lang Arts!) without
 you being my most special friend. You light up my
 life, you really do, and everybody else's too! What
 more can I say?

All my Love, *Alex*

Well, I could fill every inch of every page in this book with
 how I feel (and I will, when I write my bestselling tell-all
 “VICKI AND ME”) but seriously, I'll just say this is a
 beautifully indexed yearbook (hooray for the Copy Editor!)
 and you will always be in my heart, from now until forever
 after, as my Very Super Extra ultra Best Friend—

Loving you muchly, *Joss*

Vicki was wiping her eyes after the fifth or sixth private reread of these feelings (whoa whoa whoa) when for the first time she spotted something in the bottom corner—a tiny mess of spider-scratches, apparently made by a bone-dry ballpoint. Poring over them through a tremulous magnifying glass, she thought she could decipher seven words:

STILL THE LOVELIEST
YOUNG LADY I KNOW

*

Mr. Murrish had some business to tend to in the state capital, so he undertook to drive Alex downstate to Girl Scout Horse Camp while ferrying Joss to Youth Music Camp at the State U. Vicki would've tagged along and maybe stayed awhile with Aunt Fritz and Gross Uncle Doug (eww) but the Carlises were up in Canada, imitating Pierre and Margaret Trudeau. That left the shotgun seat open for Beth—though not Invisible Amy, who'd reputedly hitched a ride with Meg to Brooksy's family's summer place in Wisconsin. Mittens, Fingers, and Thumb would spend a day and night fending for themselves, well supplied with food, water, litter, and windows to sun themselves in.

Vicki planned to catch plenty of rays herself later that month, when the Volesters went to Florida (gonna fly now!) to visit Diamond Joel Schmelz, who'd moved to Fort Lauderdale just before a hurricane wiped out Fiddler Key.

"The luck o' the Irish rubbed off on a Galitzer!" Dime had crowed over the phone. "*Kopf oder Zahl*, eh Dillydoll?"

"Take my advice and don't get *too* tan," Joss warned Vicki and Alex as they loaded bags into the Murrish Lincoln Continental. "Looking hotsy today can mean being wrinkly tomorrow!"

"Well, maybe not *tomorrow*..."

"Think about it! Picture Carly Thibert in thirty years—she'll blend right in with a box of Raisin Bran."

"I'll try to pack a parasol," Vicki promised.

"One thing's for sure," Alex told them. "Soon as we're all back home, I am getting you two up into saddles—no ifs-and-or-buts about it!"

“‘No butts’ is right, if you mean mine on top of a horse,” said Joss. “Find me a nice tame *panther* to ride—”

She and Vicki had gone a couple times to Pony Paradise Stable and watched Alex be an equestrienne— though not up close, neither wanting to get within trample-range of the livestock. Joss thought horses might be bad luck—her namesake in *Beat the Turtle Drum* had been crazy about them, and look what’d happened to *her*. Vicki couldn’t even bear to watch while Alex fed an apple to Mumbles Metcalf’s palomino, a monstrous brute named “Dandelion.”

“Aaagh!—it *bit* you, didn’t it? I heard it bite you!”

“For heaven’s sake, Vicki! That’s just Dandy chewing her apple!”

“If you ask me, there’s enough horse apples around here already,” sniffed Joss.

“I am not giving up on you two,” Alex declared then and repeated now.

“You better never,” said her special friends.

Luggage stowed, the triumvirate shared a big sisterly cuddle-clinch.

“Don’t you guys fight too much along the way,” said Vicki.

“We do not fight.”

“‘Cept over which of us’ll miss you the most.”

“Oh *don’t*—we won’t have time for that—we’ll keep those cards ‘n’ letters coming ‘n’ going, y’know, so it’ll be just as if we’re right there with each other. ‘Kay?”

“Yes, your Highness/Majesty,” they chorused.

“Oh go and get out of here already!”

She stood waving in the Queen Anne driveway till the Continental vanished from sight; then collapsed in tears on Toughie’s shoulder.

“*Child*, get a *hold* of yourself—*they’ll* be back *soon*.”

To rub further salt in her wound, Vicki dropped by Windy Poplar Lane and bade farewell to Fiona. It’d taken Lem Weller five full years, but he’d finally agreed to be visited on such home turf as he was presently renting in Los Angeles.

“(I just wish I wasn’t going to La-La Land with *her*,)” muttered Feef, meaning her mother. “(She’ll never admit it, but I *know* she thinks he’s ‘come to his senses’ and they’ll get back together.)”

Sudden panic: “You don’t mean you might *stay* out there, do you?”

“(According to Lem, ‘out there’ is right here.)”

“But you can’t, Feef! What’d we do without you?”

“(Dunno—have lousier lyrics?)”

“I *mean* it! We can’t let our bunch break up till college, at least!”

“(Noooo, don’t worry, I can’t see it happening—me back in California, anyway.)”

Vicki gave her a hug then, as cuddle-clinchy as the one she’d shared with Joss and Alex; and Fiona emerged looking positively pink-cheeked for only the second time in their acquaintance.

“See that? Check us out!” Vicki commanded, yanking Feef beside her in front of a Plexiglas Palace mirror. “The two foxiest ladies in town! Those guys in senior high won’t know what hit ‘em once they get a load of us!”

“(Um, Vicki?...)”

“Yeah?”

“(...nothing...)”

*

In May the Volesters had delayed Goofus’s birthday for a week; now in June they advanced Ozzie’s a week early, so he could enjoy it at home and not on the road. (Father’s Day would have to be “split” with Dime in Florida.) A costly set of golf clubs, obtained from the Cathedral of All the Stores, was hidden in the Burrow Lane laundry room to await Ozzie’s wowing his fellow linksters at Petty Hills. Though not before noon; he traditionally slept late on his birthday or equivalent, giving Vicki a chance for an early run beforehand.

It was a beautiful Sunday, recalling similar mornings last September, which might explain why she took her Adidases over toward the Lake. Running from Burrow to Foxtail to Lesser to Panama; crossing Petty Bridge to the south side of the boulevard; dashing through the open-air “Tunnel of Sighs” (beneath the Expressway overpass and its cloverleaf ramps) to penetrate a pine grove, turn onto Wheaf Avenue, run past the massive-pillar’d facade of Vanderlund Township High School (see you *next* September!) and then another mile or so east to Spanish Castle Square. Taking a breather by the fountain modeled after Seville’s Torre del Oro.

In whose shadow lurked no tall broad shaggy silhouette.

At least not to her naked eye. (Redden tingle blush.)

Too much to hope for, maybe.

But why not hope for as much as you could, and then some? Wasn't that the whole *point* of hoping? Or praying? Or wishing again, with a flip of a copper penny into Spanish Castle Fountain?

As PopPop said: *You've got to be strong to get along.*

And so run onward to Fortitude Road, that great shoreside thoroughfare, which bordered beaches from The City limits all the way north to the state line. Down it Vicki sprinted (*I am a butterfly: I float, I glide*) with the Lake As Big As An Ocean at her left elbow, and all of Vanderlund at her right.

To anybody's naked eye (except maybe Lana Eisenstein's, on the far side of the bedroom window back on Burrow Lane) it would appear she had the road largely to herself.

Yet Vicki could sense other selves hovering at those elbows, matching *her* self stride for stride: intent on peeling hers off—swerving hers away—and plunging them all endlessly, relentlessly, everlastingly into/onto/unto the Dismal Plane of Existence.

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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.