

The Ups and Downs of
SKEETER KITEFLY



a disturbingly hilarious novel

by P. S. Ehrlich

The Ups and Downs of
SKEETER KITEFLY

a novel

by

P. S. EHRLICH



www.SkeeterKitefly.com

2003

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living and dead, is entirely coincidental.

Portions of this book have appeared, in somewhat different form, in *Arnazella*, *Culebra!*, *The Sidewalk's End*, *Cherry Bleeds*, *Ten Thousand Monkeys*, *October Moon*, *The Shadowshow*, and *Lynx Eye*.

Cover design and artwork by the author

The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly

Copyright © 2001, 2002 by P. S. Ehrlich

Split Infinitive Edition September 2003

A Split Infinitive Production

All Rights Reserved

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission.
For information contact the author at **psehrlich@gmail.com**.

Contents

| | |
|--|---------|
| ONE: MARBLE ORCHARD | 7 |
| 1 <i>O Say Can You Skeet</i> | 9 |
| 2 <i>Two Points</i> | 19 |
| 3 <i>The House in the Trees</i> | 29 |
| 4 <i>Brownie Like Me</i> | 39 |
| 5 <i>Power & Light</i> | 45 |
| 6 <i>Sister Sadie What Have You Done</i> | 53 |
| 7 <i>Buying the Farm</i> | 61 |
| TWO: DEMORTUIS | 69 |
| 8 <i>The First of the Svens</i> | 71 |
| 9 <i>Visions of Sugarbongs</i> | 83 |
| 10 <i>Spookacious</i> | 95 |
| 11 <i>Initially Illustrated</i> | 101 |
| 12 <i>Projectile</i> | 107 |
| 13 <i>Little Artful Antics</i> | 117 |
| 14 <i>The Clearing Stage</i> | 127 |
| 15 <i>ELOHSSA DECAFTIHS</i> | 139 |
| THREE: WINDOHWA | 171 |
| 16 <i>Really Weird Dreams</i> | 173 |
| 17 <i>Near Dowels</i> | 183 |
| 18 <i>Otherwise</i> | 191 |
| 19 <i>Taking Avail</i> | 197 |
| 20 <i>Ring Around with RoBynne</i> | 203 |
| 21 <i>Kitefly in the Ointment</i> | 213 |
| 22 <i>Merely SAD</i> | 223 |

TO THE PETITE

of whom the world is ever short

One

MARBLE ORCHARD

Life is short; live it up.

—NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV

Chapter 1

O Say Can You Skeet

Is it dark enough?

Is it dark enough yet?

Is it dark enough for you?

Hiding Christmas presents from a not-quite-six-year-old was child's play compared to hiding fireworks from the same not-quite-six-year-old, given that child's incendiary interest in all things flammable.

A family conclave was held to decide where to conceal the explosives, with every closet and Grampa Otto's gun room being dismissed out of hand. Finally the crawlspace was selected, the fireworks were smuggled there in the dead of night, and at dawn the next day Kelly Rebecca was found (in her Roger Ramjet jammies) struggling to open the crawlspace hatch.

It then became necessary to explain again and again why all the rockets were not going to be set off right away. "Not till tonight, hawney; it's got to be dark. First we put up our decorations, and then we have dinner, our big Fourth of July family cookout—"

"Burgers *and* wienies?"

"That's right, burgers *and* wienies, and just wait till you taste our homemade ice cream, better than any you can buy in a store," etc.

But Kelly Rebecca remained unconvinced as to the day's whens and wherefores, and had to be turned over to her Uncle Buddy (home on vacation from postgrad dramatics at Northwestern) for entertainment or at any rate diversion. Buddy was copacetic with his little energy bundle of a niece; moreover he had studied puppetry, and brought home a pair of marionettes designed to survive a not-quite-six-year-old's hyperdrive.

But throughout their punch-and-judging, throughout the arrival of the Hungerfords (Aunt Ollie and Uncle Walt with their three boisterous boys), the setting up of patriotic décor and dinner, the contested spitting of watermelon seeds and the repeated refusal of Kelly Rebecca's mother to come downstairs and put in an appearance—through it all bounced the unsinkable refrain: *Is it dark enough yet?*

Now with dinner done, the paper plates scraped and placed in the incinerator to contribute smoke to the Glorious Fourth, Gramma Addie Otto and her sister Emmy sat down to share a pitcher of iced tea. Out in the yard Uncle Buddy and the Hungerford boys could be seen setting up the fireworks, supervised by Grampa Otto (overweight he was, and inclined to perspire) from the back porch glider. Farther off, kept at a supposedly safe distance, Kelly Rebecca gamboled about with a sparkler alight in her hand.

Her Great-Aunt Emmy (no Kansas farmwife but an urban copyreader nearing retirement) stirred at the sight. "How that child can go jumping around with a full stomach on a day hot as this, beats me."

"She's young," Gramma observed. "She doesn't feel it yet."

"She will, soon enough. Just as well she's not in here asking questions." Emmy detached her glass from its clinging coaster and took a sip. "So. What's to be done about Carrie?"

Gramma exhaled. "She'll file for divorce, I suppose. I can't see them working things out, not now."

"Well. And then what?"

"Last night she was talking about moving to Demortuis, finding a job there. Starting over. That might be best."

Snort from Aunt Emmy. "And just what sort of job does she expect to find, eight years out of college? Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief? Cocktail waitress, more likely."

"Now Em, you always said she showed the most potential—"

"I always said that before she upped and married a Marine jet jockey whose only thought is outer space and how to get himself there."

At which point the telephone rang. Uncle Walt answered and listened a laconic while. Then, to Gramma: "It's him. Wants to talk to her."

Gramma traded significant glances with Aunt Emmy before calling up the stairs. “Carrie?” (Muffled, negative response.) “CaroLINE?” (Muffled again, somewhat louder.) “Olivia! Tell your sister her husband’s on the phone and will she kindly pick up the extension! ...What now, I wonder.”

“Begging her to come back,” guessed Emmy. “Divorce would scuttle any chances Gower Kitefly’d ever have of making astronaut. Can’t be such a thing as a divorced astronaut; *Life* magazine wouldn’t stand for it.”

“That’s so,” said Gramma. “Yes, he’ll try to sweet-talk her around same as always, and when that doesn’t work—”

“—*if* it doesn’t—”

“Not this time, I think.”

Nor did it, as Aunt Ollie revealed when she came down to relate the latest. “She wouldn’t speak to him, wouldn’t even take the phone to hang up on him; *I* had to do it, and you know what else?” asked Ollie, looking like a parakeet escaped from its cage but uncertain where to flutter. “Now she’s talking about getting a nose job.”

“A *what*?”

“A *nose* job.”

And with that and a couple of iced teas, Ollie fluttered back upstairs.

“Did you ever hear the like!” Aunt Emmy wanted to know. “Somebody ought to give that girl a good talking-to... I suppose you think I’m volunteering.”

“Well, it was you helped pay Carrie’s way through school.”

“Yes, and look how much good it did.”

“Think of it as an investment,” said Gramma. “And if she did move to Demortuis, you could maybe keep a good close eye on your investment—”

“—and save it from cocktail waitressing; yes, I get your drift. Hum. I expect I can talk to her about it, anyway. I’ll go up in awhile then, and give Ollie a breather, and we’ll see. But it won’t be easy, you know, with the child and all.”

Gramma turned her glass in a twiddly circle. “Well,” she said, “Bert and I were thinking we might keep Kelly here. Put her in Aunt Livy’s old room.”

“Were you, now!”

"It'd just be for awhile, till Carrie gets all this put behind her. Bert and I are fixed okay, and besides Kelly's our only granddaughter. I mean it's not as though Ollie and Walt have room for another 'un."

Uncle Walt glanced up from the Booth County *Roundup* long enough to leave no doubt about that.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," glared Aunt Emmy. "I've had more conversation with that child Kelly in this one day than I've had these twenty years with Walter Hungerford... But did it occur to you, Addie, that you're sixty years old and have maybe done your full share of childraising?"

"Oh well, Buddy's still just a big kid even if he is twenty-three. And try to look at it from Kelly's point of view: been a Marine brat all her life, always moving, never a chance to settle down; no wonder she gets so bouncy."

"Hum," said Emmy. "Even so, she's not-quite-six—"

"Makes no difference. Child ought to have a chance to grow up properly. And in case it's slipped your mind, let me remind you that Grandma Wunderlich raised the two of us—"

"—in this very house, and did it a sight better than Dad could've after Mama died; yes, I know how that song goes. But just you keep your eyes open, Adelaide. There's something about Miss Kelly Rebecca—"

"She's a darling and a sweetheart!"

"Oh, she's a lively little thing all right. Headstrong and highstrung, that's what that child is, and too much of both. She doesn't get it from Carrie either; that's Gower Kitefly all over, with his Jimmy Cagney look-alike act-alike song-and-dance... All I'm saying is, you and Bert had best watch your step."

"Well!" went Gramma, finishing her iced tea double quick. "All the more reason, then, why we mustn't let her be upset by any of this—whatever happens. She mustn't get an inkling that there's any trouble or blowup going on; not an inkling."

They looked out the kitchen window at the small girl wearing a red T-shirt and once-white shorts (now thoroughly grass-stained) with a blue ribbon in her bright blonde hair, and a fresh sparkler expostulating in her hand.

*

Bounce bounce bounce.

Running round and round Gramma-and-Grampa's house, lookit all the porches! Back porch side porch front porch *roof!* Big silver mailbox out front with B.L.OTTO on it, the sight of which made Great-Aunt Emmy shake her head and cluck her tongue; maybe she'd been expecting a letter that wasn't there. Big front lawn and even bigger back yard, full of what Grampa called "fouracres" though it looked like ordinary grass, except for the great big garden with all sorts of flowers and veggies and things—"the envy of the neighborhood," Grampa boasted, and Kelly Rebecca repeated the phrase with a relishy drawing-out as she launched herself on another lap round the house: "The ennnnvyy of the nnnneeeigh-bor-hood!"

Tall pole in the back yard with a big bell on it that she'd gotten to pull, summoning everyone to dinner—"We can't eat till you ring the bell, hawney"—because she was the youngest member of the Wunderlich family there, even if her last name was really Kitefly. Anyway, it meant Cousin Jerry Hungerford couldn't ring the bell this year, which caused him to have a jealous fit, which was just fine with Kelly Rebecca since Cousin Jerry was a creep.

Garage full of cars, shed full of tools, another littler shed that Grampa said used to be a chicken house in the olden days and which Kelly wished still was, so she could feed the chickens and hear them cluck and watch them making eggs. Farther out back was a long ladder with a too-high what-a-gyp bottom rung, leading up to some lucky tall person's house in the trees. Then there was a little brook without any fishies, though this was supposed to be "the country," and all the stories and TV shows about "the country" claimed it was supposed to Teem With Nature. Well, at least there was a set of railroad tracks teeming beyond the brook and an occasional real live train running over them, trailing a red caboose to wave to.

The sound of the trains reminded Kelly Rebecca of the planes back home, and the sound of planes always got her even more excited than she ordinarily was. She'd been superexcited all through the plane ride here from California, and had to keep asking to go to the cuuuute little potty in the back of the plane, which hadn't improved Mommy's mood any. Kelly had assumed her Daddy was piloting the plane and wanted to go up to the cockpit and watch him doing it, but Mommy just went hush.

The thought of Mommy saying “hush” reminded her of some of Mommy’s other words, like “obsession,” the sound of which never failed to make Kelly laugh. Even now, thinking about it—“obsession!”—she fell to the ground and rolled in the grass, her burnt-out sparkler tossed ecstatically aside. “Ubbbbb-session!”

It was times like this, when Kelly sent herself into gigglefits at the mere thought of the sound of words, that Mommy would say things like “I can’t take any more!”—though she’d never say any more of *what*. Probably dessert, since Mommy was always on a diet, or supposed to be, and in fact hadn’t come out to have any of the yummy burgers *and* wienies and baked beans and corn-on-the-cob and watermelon and homemade ice cream, better than any you could buy in a store. Maybe she’d had hers upstairs on a tray.

It was getting really, really dark now and Kelly Rebecca started back, lingering by the old chicken house since Dougie Hungerford had swiped a cherry bomb from the fireworks supply, and had whispered to her that later on they were going to try blowing up the old chicken house with it. Kelly could hardly wait. Being involved in an explosion wouldn’t faze her at *all*, nossir! Never a skinned knee nor a bruised finger despite all her antics; and though she’d broken collarbones by falling out of trees, they had never been *her* collarbones.

Fiery stuff was just like the sound of airplanes to Kelly Rebecca. When her sixth birthday came in three weeks and two days she planned to demand twelve candles on her cake, unless she could talk Mommy into more. Or maybe Gramma: Kelly had gotten the idea they might be staying with Grampa-and-Gamma for awhile. Which was just fine with her, since their house had so many porches, and on the back porch was a “glider” even though it couldn’t fly, and in the glider was Grampa Otto all by himself till Kelly Rebecca jumped up beside him and got a great big Grampa-arm roundabout her.

*

There were more empty Falstaffs down by the glider than perhaps was strictly necessary. Grampa always referred to these as “dead soldiers,” and over the next several years, whenever Kelly would hear Vietnam casualty figures announced over the radio or on TV, she would picture a field full of vacant beer bottles.

Now Grampa was examining his latest, revolving the last few drops around the bottle bottom. “Care for a taste, Miss Skeeter?” he asked, and Kelly Rebecca accepted with a

grand air, careful to take the bottle using only one hand, not two like an infant.

“Bert!” exclaimed Gramma, coming out just then with Uncle Walt and Aunt Ollie relieved of her upstairs vigil, plus a freshmade pitcher of lemonade. “Bert, you’ll be the ruination of the child.”

“Rubbish. This little girl was born to do nothing but laugh. Am I right, Skeeter?”

“RIGHT!” said Kelly Rebecca. “Is it dark enough *now*?”

“Why, I do believe it is,” said Grampa, and “Let ’er rip!” he directed Uncle Buddy and Mickey, the oldest Hungerford boy, who were serving as detonators. They started off less than incandescently with snakes and squibs and torpedoes, but even these gave Kelly the leapin’ jumpies; and when the Roman candles began their rackety auto-da-fé, Grampa found it necessary to haul Kelly onto his lap.

“You stay put,” he ordered. “Let the boys handle things. Don’t want to get yourself hurt, now do you?”

“I don’t *ever* get hurt!” she insisted. Squirm squirm squirm, little Ants in Her Pants, first called “Skeeter” by Grampa Otto when as a two-year-old she’d shown hellbent determination not to be carried into the Market Square A & P that once upon a time had been Wunderlich Bros., the family grocery. Nossir, Kelly Rebecca was going to *walk* in on her own two tiny feet, which hit the floor with a ZAP and a FLASH when she was set down for a mere moment by her tuckered-out mother. And by the time they caught up with her, she’d managed to knock over an entire display of tomatoes and be the cause of a hapless stockboy getting a bump on his head when he slipped on the tomatoes trying to clean them up.

“Well, you *are* a handful,” Grampa’d said on that occasion, and repeated here and now. “I expect that’s because you’re really a great big amazing colossal girl, scrunched and packed down into a little ole bitty Skeeter-type doll.”

“Like a firecracker!” said Kelly, cackling through his scrunch-and-packdown re-enactment. She returned the favor by grabbing a napkin and mopping the many sweatbeads from her grandfather’s face.

“Careful now!” he told her. “Leave me my nose.”

“Hold me Grampa!”

“I gotcha.”

With the old man securing her knees, Kelly flipped backwards and hung upside down. “Grampa leggo!” Stubby legs snapped up straight, and Kelly Rebecca stood neatly on her blue-ribboned head.

“Oh hawney!” wailed Gramma. “Not after all the fuss we had getting your hair washed!”

Kelly executed a Marine-clean somersaulting flip and ended up on the glider beside Grampa again, just in time for the launch of the first rocket. WHEEEE-OOOP! it sang with a hottentot bang, and “That’s the kind of rocket my Daddy wants to ride!” Kelly announced as it splattered against the sky.

“Just about what *would* happen if Gower was flying it”—a thought Gramma Otto kept to herself, wishing Grampa had done likewise with his ironic cough.

Aunt Ollie for her twittery part was deeply moved, having been bothered all day by Kelly’s showing no great curiosity as to where her father was or why her mother was spending so much time indoors upstairs. But moved though Ollie might be, she didn’t altogether approve of the child’s gleeful aplomb. “Kelly—”

“—RebecCA! That’s what Mommy says. She goes, ‘Kelly RebecCA!’ and you know what I say? I go, ‘Yes ma’am!’ like that... Mommy gets mad sometimes.” Which remark brought all the adults quiet discomfort; even the fireworks seemed briefly muted. But Kelly RebecCA! remained blithe as ever, mind and body pingponging along.

Aunt Ollie tried again. “Aren’t you just a little scared by all this, Kelly?”

“Scared! Only *babies* get scared.”

“That’s right,” said Grampa, while Gramma gave Ollie’s ribs an elbowing. “And this little girl’s no baby, are you? Next weekend your Uncle Walt and I’ll take you down to the range and show you all about skeet shooting.”

Small round startle-you-blue eyes turned upon him and stared. “Skeet shooting? Are you going to *shoot* me?”

Grampa laughed and opened up another beer. “Well, do you feel like a clay pigeon? Like to get flung out of a trap to be shot at by hunters?”

“Now, Bert—” went Gramma, and “Wow!” went Kelly, who could hardly wait. Blowing up chicken coops with cherry bombs seemed like baby stuff in comparison. She’d

have to act very grownup if she hoped to stand a chance of being skeet-shot. “I’m going to *first* grade in *this* many months!” she hastened to remind everyone, making a V-for-victory à la the recently deceased Winston Churchill. Then: “One, two—*buckle my shoe!*” she gigglefitted, extending her bare foot for Grampa to pretend to buckle.

Gramma saw this as a natural-born opportunity. “*Where* are you going to first grade, hawney?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Well, we have—”

“I went to kindergarten in Califorrrr-ney.”

“Well, you know—”

““They said Califorrrr-ney is the place you oughta be—””

“We’ve got a pretty nice grade school right here in Marble Orchard.”

““So they loadied up the truck ‘n’ moved to Beverleeee.””

“Course, that’d mean you’d have—”

““Hills, that is. Swimmin’ pools—movie stars—””

“Kelly, listen a minute—you’d have to move in here with us, and live here year-round. Would you like that?”

“Could I have a horse?”

“Um—well—a pony, maybe. Your Mom and Aunt Ollie had a fine one, name of Junebug—”

“Could I have *two* then? So the first pony won’t get lonesome?”

“Don’t see why not,” said Grampa.

“YIPPEEEEE!” cried Kelly Rebecca, and went cart cart cart wheel wheel wheeling down the driveway, bright blonde hair a-flap.

“How come *we* don’t get two ponies?” Jerry Hungerford was demanding as Kelly galloped back on Invisible Timmy, not to be confused with Real Life Timmy, who at that moment was shedding his meager stuffing on Kelly’s pillow upstairs, next to a bunny rabbit so discolored by distemper that it was known as Rusty Bugs. These provided the child with companionship as well as entertainment or at any rate diversion, much like Kelly Rebecca’s abrupt diversion from being an equestrienne to becoming a buzzbomb, and not just any

buzzbomb but one targeted for close encounter with the skyrocket to whose fuse Cousin Mickey had recently applied a match; and there was a split second of consternation for everyone to share, and just enough time for Grampa Otto to shout “*Skeeter—*” in a grey grackle voice before the rocket went SHWEEEEEE-OOOOP with a whizbang KABOOM!

Then followed a flurry of terrified uncertainty in the smoky too-damn-darkness.

From which Kelly Rebecca emerged characteristically unscathed, spared even the terrible legscar anyone else would have sustained if not deserved; and she was promptly enveloped by relatives hugging her and kissing her and giving her backside smart openhanded wallops for behaving like a reckless jugheaded fool. “Ow! make up your mind!” Kelly was saying, when she caught a glimpse of the still life in the back porch glider.

“Is Grampa okay?” she asked.

Chapter 2

Two Points

Item: little blonde girl in a sickbed.

Item: little blonde girl in a little hand mirror, checking out what she could see of herself *in* the sickbed.

What've we got here? Small round pink face, small round blue eyes. Buttony nose and chin each coming to a point—*there she is! there she is!* “Rather diminutive altogether,” as Uncle Buddy said. And all of it made littler still by a great big whomp of hair the color of a goldenrod Crayola.

Not to mention the mouth you could open stuPENdously wide and almost fit your fist inside. Grimace with admiration at the gaping gap in that mouth: look, Ma, no front teeth! The two babies that used to be there had turned into a couple of Hershey's Semi-Sweet chocolate bars, after a short spell as Tooth Fairy dimes.

Grimace again and chafe chafe chafe—the old springs beneath you squoinketing *eeeenh eeeenh eeeenh!* So what about the sickbed? It was a four-poster, to begin with: not very big but plenty long enough and wide enough for the likes of Skeeter Beeter Bodeeter Kitefly. Clothes and stuff could be hung on the bedposts when Gramma fussed about them being strewn over the carpet. And the posts came in extra handy when the bed had to serve as a sports car or sailing vessel, dance hall or trampoline—each equipped with an identical velveteen patchwork quilt, adaptable to various purposes. Right now it was just a quilt.

Beneath it were a blanket and sheet keeping their hospital corners even after ten hours of playing nocturnal Twister. Gramma the ex-RN (for Extra Really Nursey) knew the fine art of bedmaking: *smooth* that sheet, *smoooooth* it out and double-fold with a tuck tuck tuck (last one for luck).

Sheets and pillowcases of a silly-looking frilly print, as though they were made from leftover underwear material. The pillows themselves, which had to be punched every night before sleep could come: one! two! three! a leery postman! Sometimes this caused a feather to escape and float off, tra la, to Feather Adventureland—

—leaving Skeeter stuck in this bed with a case of the German measles.

Again she used the little mirror to examine her fading rubella spots. Red was her favorite color too, the brighter the better, and she'd found her spots not unbecoming; but now they were un-becoming.

Skeeter had no sooner landed in a sickbed than she'd entertained high hopes of ambulances and oxygen tents, her life being despaired of, all her friends at school chipping in to buy flowers that could double if necessary as a funeral wreath. But what a gyp: nothing but a week of tucked-in isolation and denial of TV rights, since Gramma wouldn't move the family Magnavox upstairs.

Confined like this, you might just as well catch up on your reading (sigh). Couch yourself in proper storybook terms:

"A land there was in days of old, called the Great American Middle West. And in that land, a state there was called Nilnisi; and in that state, a city there was called Demortuis; and in that city, a Certain Person's mother lived but enough about *her*—this story's about the Certain Person, who dwelt in Booth County, in Marble Orchard, in the House With All the Porches—"

—alone in this bed with what was left of the German measles. And old Timmy the half-stuffed horse.

Rusty Bugs had disappeared some months before, having become so grossly oxidated as to require laundering and hanging out to dry. Gramma'd pinned him to the clothesline by his ears—unfortunately on the day of a big windstorm, at the end of which only the ears remained. But Gramma had salvaged the situation by making up a series of bedtime stories about Earless Bugs, his wild-dust-bunny companions, and all their inattentive adventures in the land of Whiskaway. None of which got written down and that was a darn shame too, particularly at this stuck-in-bed-with-no-TV moment.

Actually Skeeter liked to read and owned quite a few books, some of them old family legacies, others precociously requested from Uncle Buddy and other literate-minded folk. *Stuart Little*, of course. *Beezus and Ramona*. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. *Henry Reed's Journey*. *The Marvelous Inventions of Alvin Fernald*. *Misty of Chincowhatsit* and her horsey friends. *Mary Poppins*, *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, *Mary Poppins Opens the Door*. All these and several more were on the shelf above Skeeter's bedside table; or at least there was a shelf above her bedside table where they belonged. After the past week's isolation they could be found strewn over the carpet and heaped on desk and chair. One was in bed with her now, the very best book of all time: and that, of course, was *Bagelanna*. Pick it up and find your place; settle down with a squoinketing bounce.

When last we left our heroine she was still a-wandering in the Forest of Galagonya, a-carrying her emptying bagelbag. (Skeeter wished she had that bagelbag right here and it full of savory bakery munchables, and them in her mouth in place of Gramma's thermometer. You could pretend it was a cigarette for only just so long.)

Suddenly Bagelanna spied a light in the darkness and made for it. She came to a clearing, and in that clearing was a dwelling-house, and through the window of that dwelling-house could be seen a hearthfire glowing red. Bagelanna knocked on the dwelling-house door, and then she rapped on it, and then she pounded—

—and then she was confronted by a Gobbogoki! A frightful big Gobbogoki too, with three monstrous heads, each wearing a tasseled nightcap of hideous design. In one hand the Gobbogoki bore a flaming candelabrum; the other knuckled the eyes of each head in turn, none of them looking pleased at being roused out of bed.

"Who might you be thinking you be, waking me up in the midst of night?!" roared the Gobbogoki—

PWAH! went Skeeter as she spat out the thermometer, almost following it up with a shriek. But the unexpected creature in her doorway turned out to be Gramma Otto in noiseless nurse-type shoes, with a trayful of breakfast and not just any breakfast but a proper chowdown of eggs and bacon and biscuits and gravy and OJ and Nestlé's Quik.

No need for Gramma's "Now I want you to eat every bit of this, and drink every drop of your juice," since Skeeter despite her bitsy-smallness could and did eat like a couple of horses, and was tucking in with a happyhazard will and way. "Tastes better with a napkin," Gramma added, dodging between forkthrusts to drape one in front of Skeeter's T-shirt nightie. (Which was red, of course, and a shade particularly selected to set off rubella spots in their prime.)

Gramma inspected the pwah'd thermometer. "Hawney," she said, "just for once, just to be different, I wish you'd keep this in your mouth till I take it out... hum. Ninety-nine point six. Well, considering what a whirling dervish you are, I'd say that's just about normal..."

She sat down on the double-folded bed-edge and blew her nose. Skeeter looked up from the last of the over-easies. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Is it Grampa?"

"What? Oh, no. I just got some sad news is all. My Uncle Stanley passed away last night."

"Which one was he?" asked Skeeter, pointing her fork at a framed photo of the Wunderlich Family Quartet circa 1913, when its renditions of "No Night There" and "Nearer My God to Thee" had not their match in all Booth County.

"Don't point," said Gramma. "Uncle Stanley's not in that picture. He was never one for music or singing."

"Guess he didn't go to Heaven then."

"Kelly Rebecca! That's not respectful!"

"Sorry. So what did he do?"

"Practiced dentistry in Demortuis."

Skeeter choked on a biscuit and came up cackling. "DEN-tiss-tree in Duh-MORE-tew-uss!"

Gramma grinned too, a trifle ruefully. "Wipe your mouth, and try chewing next time... Don't know why I should have the sniffles, at that. Seventy-seven he was, and the most boring person in the state of Nilnisi. Unless it was his wife Minnie."

"Minnie! Was she a mouse?"

“No, she was a pill. A Real Pill. *And* they put on airs. Would phone you up of a Sunday afternoon and hold forth till heck wouldn’t have it. Still, there it is—he’s gone; the last of my aunts and uncles. Does make a body feel old.”

Skeeter, having conquered her juice in one long chug, came up for air and asked whether Uncle Stanley had always been a dullard.

“That’s not very respectful either,” Gramma chided. “It wasn’t entirely his fault. He was the baby of the family, for one thing, and kind of got spoiled by Grandma Wunderlich and Aunt Livy.”

“*I* remember *her*,” Skeeter boasted, meaning Aunt Livy, and she practically did; at any rate there was an image in her mind of a wispy white-haired lady trying to teach Baby Kelly how to whistle. (Baby had no trouble making the necessary pucker-and-blow, but could produce only bubbles.)

“But there was one person who never spoiled Uncle Stanley,” Gramma continued, “and that was my father. They were just so different, there was never much hope of their getting along. In fact they—well, they hated each other. It’s a terrible thing to say about brothers, but it happens.”

Stanley, it seemed, was always kind of fat and slow and fussy, an indoors-type who couldn’t abide being out in the sun, while his big brother Lou was a born athlete. “More than anything else, my Dad wanted to be a pro baseball player. And he was good, too, good enough to play in the county league. But all that came to an end when he tried to steal third sliding and tore up his whole left side—hip, leg, foot. Broke his foot something awful. They wanted to fetch a doctor, but Dad wouldn’t have it—said just to take him home, he’d ‘sleep it off.’ He was that mule-stubborn.”

“Sounds like Grampa,” said Skeeter, attending to her saved-till-last Quik.

“Hum. Well, they did take Dad home—couldn’t get him up the stairs, so they put him on the horsehair sofa in the parlor, and there he lay groaning. Uncle Stanley came down to complain about the noise, took one look at Dad’s foot and fainted away. Dad never let him forget it, of course.”

But the last laugh was on Gramma’s father, who walked with a limp for the rest of his life. Which he chafed away, out of sheer frustration. “Towards the end Dad had ulcers and

high blood pressure, wanted everything right-this-minute, shouted at you when it wasn't. Scared the beejeebers out of your poor Aunt Ollie when she was a little girl. Your Mommy probably doesn't remember him at all; she was only three when he died."

"I wouldn't've been scared of him," Skeeter said, too loudly.

"Shush!... No, I expect you wouldn't." Gramma frowned at Skeeter's pushed-aside tray, its plate and glasses emptied of the last crumb and drop. "When a man gets like that, he needs a woman to look after him—knock some sense into his head, if that's what it takes. Didn't help that my Mama died so young (a weak heart, she had) and then when Dad remarried it was to a—well, let's just say she had a *bad* heart."

"You had a wicked stepmother? Neat!"

"You can find those outside of storybooks, true enough. But never mind, she never did me any harm; my sister and I were raised here in this house, by our Grandma Wunderlich. And *she* always said, 'If you learn nothing else in this life, it should be two home truths.' And one of them was: 'When you fall down, get up and dust yourself off, apply sticking plaster, and move on.'"

"What's sticking plaster?"

"Old-fashioned bandaid. Anyhow, that was one lesson my poor Dad never learned. I'm trying to teach it to your Grampa. And he's trying, hawney, trying as best he can to keep going and be like he was. But it's hard... You know yourself, now, that being sick in bed's no spring picnic. We have to help out, and understand, and overlook what we can."

"Knock some sense into his head," Skeeter suggested.

"That too," said Gramma. "Don't be afraid to tell me, hawney, if Grampa ever disturbs you."

Skeeter said she wouldn't, again too loudly, and again got shushed.

Gramma stood up and smoothed out her housedress. Old reflexive habit made her inspect the sheets on her patient's bed, and give a clinical glance to its bitsy-sized occupant. Not as specklefaced after the past week's isolation, but Skeeter's eyes were still undimmed: blue they were, blue as a cloudless country sky, like...

"Did you know your Grampa ran away from home when he was just fifteen? Well, he did. And he was big for his age, so he could lie—well, fib—about how old he was, so the

army took him on, and off he went.”

“Where?”

“Why, over there—to France, of course. Came back determined to work his way across America. Made it as far as Booth County. Took a job with Power & Light when he was just eighteen, and never left.”

Every life had its ups and downs. On the one hand, you had your burdens; on the other, your blessings; and it was up to you to count the blessings if you wanted to count *on* them. So: if Bert Otto hadn’t stayed on in Booth County, he would never have met Addie Wunderlich, wouldn’t have charmed and wooed her with his ways. Big for his age he was and remained. Everything he did had a sort of expansive flair.

“Used to take me dancing,” Gramma recalled. “Three times a week when we first kept company; my Grandma didn’t quite approve. Can you imagine your Grampa dancing the Black Bottom? Well, for a big man he did it mighty fine. Light as a feather he was...”

So it’s off to Feather Adventureland again we go, tra la—such were life’s blessings. As for its burdens: well, keep your sticking plaster handy.

“Hum!” said Gramma. “High time I stopped gossiping and headed downstairs. There’s the ironing to attend to, and lunches to fix, and by then I think I’ll have earned me a couple of stories.” (Meaning *As the World Turns* and *The Edge of Night*, of course.) “And no you can’t come down to watch *Dark Shadows*; dreadful show. Absolutely not, young lady.”

“I wanna go out and play,” grumped Skeeter. “It’s been a whole weeeek...”

“Well, if you feel lively enough, you can always—”

“Clean my room (sigh).”

“Aunt Livy kept this room in apple-pie order every day of her life, even when she was over eighty. Now it looks like a landfill with a door on it. At least you could pick those books up off the carpet and put them where they belong.”

She was turning to go when Skeeter asked, “What was the second thing?”

“Hum?”

“The other home truth your Grandma said to know.”

“Oh—ha! ‘You can always catch a husband, but with men so lazy you’d best get an education first.’ Remember that, hawney, and study hard.”

So: back to *Bagelanna*. Pick it up and find your place. When last we left our heroine, she was being roared at by a Gobbogoki; and who might she be thinking she be?

“I might be thinking I be Anna o’Jrebma,” replied that staunch-hearted baker-girl.

“And what might you be wanting here, poking your unwelcome nose into my private ghaankland?”

“I might be seeking food and shelter,” Bagelanna told him. “And prepared I am to work for both, as a baker-girl of some talent and repute.”

“Well!” said the Gobbogoki, looking her down and up with each of his horrible shortsighted heads, and finally grinning with two. “No need have I for baking, but I could use just such a spirited lass as yourself to look after my ghaanks...”

And so forth. Bagelanna was about to meet her fellow ghaankherdresses, who would turn out to be those dumb Damsels in Silver and in Gold and in need of rescue, when Skeeter heard a *whump!-tump-shuffa*, coming down the hall.

Put down your book, throw back the covers, be prepared to jump.

Whump!-tump-shuffa. Whump!-tump-shuffa.

The old man appeared in the doorway with another *whump!-tump-shuffa*, and Skeeter leaped out of bed with a squoinketing *eeeenh*. The old man paused then, leaning heavily on his walker, one hand knuckled and the other alight; sweatbeads stood on his brow and ran down his face. But when he looked at Skeeter, it was with eyes every bit as undimmed a blue as her own.

“Back for more?” Skeeter asked. “I’m gonna wipe you out.”

“Ho,” went her grandfather. He drew himself up to his full height—still big for his age, despite it all—and plowed through the carpet-strew, making gradual way to Skeeter’s little desk chair. There he stopped, reached down with the hand retaining a sound grip, and got hold of a couple of books, placing them on the already crowded desktop. (A third book slipped and fell; the old man chose to ignore this.) Chair cleared, Grampa Otto lowered

himself onto it by slow degrees.

Skeeter had meanwhile been emptying her wastebasket and balancing it atop the cluttery dresser. From one of its drawers she grabbed a hidden collection of regulation papercrumps. Half she heaped on her desk, within the old man's easy reach; the other half she hugged to her happyhazard bosom as she hopped back into bed.

Which was now a four-postered basketball court; the velveteen quilt, its polished hardwood floor; and for the next half hour Skeeter and her Grampa engaged in a one-on-one freethrow contest, each going "Hey" and "Ho" when baskets were made—

—but shushedly, and with fingers often raised to lips, so that Gramma might not be disturbed.

Chapter 3

The House in the Trees

Yes-or-no, it-might-be-so, then-again-it-mightn't-but-you-are-IT.

Of course you are; that goes without saying. Unfortunately nobody else is available to play.

You'd compared notes with the gang this morning in Sunday school, and the results were just gruesome. Janey's mother had grounded her again for sassing, and Laurie'd started clarinet lessons and needed to work on her scales; Cathy Sue had the sniffles (Cathy Sue *always* had the sniffles) while Amy the second-grade arithmetic genius was off studying for tomorrow's multiplication test. (Good grief!) So there was nothing else for *you* to do but hang around the house.

Clump clump up the stairs, creak creak down the hall. Accidentally-on-purpose undo your stupid braids as you go. What a day it'd been already—all that jabber about the Sabbath, a word that always made you picture Bible characters crying. Moses with tears running down his long white beard: "What's the manna, Moses?" the Israelites would ask.

You had to get all gussied up, your hair braided just so, and allow Gramma to hold your hand crossing the streets as if you weren't a capable mature individual of almost eight. (Well, nearly seven-and-three-quarters.) And then at church you had to wallow through Sunday school under the heavy thumb of Mrs. Mills the choir director, whom you in a burst of clever brilliance had named "General" Mills since she was square and flaky like a cereal box. I'm-keeping-my-EYE-on-you-Kelly-Rebecca! *And* she took her own sweet time awarding you the colored stickers you earned getting Bible verses by heart. Today you'd recited:

That which the palmermoth hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten. Awake, ye drunkards, and weep; and howl, all ye drinkers of wine, because of the new wine; for it is cut off from your mouth.

All that without a single mistake, a bigger tongue-twister than “Peter Piper picked a peck,” and did General Mills hand over your blue sticker-star? HA! Perfectly disgraceful for a Sunday school teacher to hold a grudge. Especially against an innocent little girl who’d just found out all her friends were going to waste their afternoons *not* in her company. (Though it was pretty neat that caterpillars were mentioned in the Bible.)

So you had to go join Gramma and stand up and sing, before sitting down for a *very* long time while the Reverend Hall put stray thoughts in your head of Moses blubbering in the wilderness. The Reverend Hall ought to be called “Howell” since he looked just like the millionaire guy on *Gilligan’s Island*, though he sounded more like Mr. Mooney on *The Lucy Show* and that was entertaining to think about every Sunday for a minute or two before it all got really BOring. Then you had to stand up and sing again. And you couldn’t openly fidget. So let’s make up for that, here and now:

WOULDN’T *it be nice if we were older?*
Then I wouldn’t have to go to church!
And I could fidget all I really wanted...
Da da da da... Gomez, Pugsley, LURCH—
“You rang?”

Not too loudly, though, or Gramma’d be scandalized. And you mustn’t scandalize Gramma if you’re ever going to land that pony, instead of the thirdhand two-wheeler you’d been given in place of horseflesh. So *da da da da* under your breath and dance around a bit. Do your versions of the Freddie, the Watusi, and the Jerk (twitch twitch)!

You’re not supposed to change into play clothes till after dinner, but that’s been delayed while Gramma tends to Grampa so you might as well get comfy. Lose the stupid old Sunday dress and the starched crinkle-inkly petticoat. A shame to take off your shoes—genuine patent-leathers, the pride of your life, but Absolutely Not To Be Scuffed Young Lady and so hardly practical as regular footwear. Add ’em to the heap on the floor and

dance around in your sockhop feet, *da da da da*: get a load of the stripper in her Sunday undies! (Which truth to tell come out of the same drawer as your everyday undies, and what would the Reverend Mooney Howell have to say about *that*?)

Wrinkle your pointed-button nose and look down it at the rest of you. Someday soon you're going to be big, with boobies out to here, and wear stylish unmentionabubbles to tote them around in. Lawnjer-*ray*, lawnjer-*ree*, lawnjer-*RAH*-hahaha—and pose in tight sweaters with an arched back like Ann-Margret. Speak of the devil! Guess who enters the room just then, to be scooped up and squeezed tight and walloped with the end of her own orange tail?

Owwwrrr?

Here thanks to Ruthie Mundt, the most enviable girl on the entire planet or at least in Marble Orchard because her folks owned a whole barnful of horses, plus a pudgy momma cat who kept getting fatter and kept having kittens. And *finally* after weeks of pleading and coaxing, the ponyless Kelly Rebecca was allowed to choose the orangest kitten and name her Ann-Margret. But then Uncle Buddy'd chortled "Kitten with a whip," so she came to be called Whip or Whippy or Old Whipper.

By any name she was now a half-grown kittycat "with the bulgiest damn eyes ever seen on a live animal in these parts," according to Ruthie Mundt's father. (Who probably ought to know, having so many horses in such an enormous barn.) So let's drape your discarded slip over slippery Whippery's orange head, and sing:

*Heeere comes the bride,
She's a FEEl ine,
See how she flips
When you fill her with wine—
Flippy!
"I call her Flipper, Flipper, psychotic kitty..."*

"Psychotic" being the latest hilarious word you've added to your collection. First there was Batman—then there was Robin—and then the psychotic Psycho Tick, who preys upon helpless kitties! Oh no! But Psycho Tick hasn't reckoned with the likes of Catwoman (secret identity Ann-Margret) in her utility flea-collar belt (the petticoat becoming a superhero cape) who goes flying across the room to do battle with Timmy the half-stuffed

horse, take that! and that! ZAP! POW!

Meanwhile, tragically unaware of the furious struggle, you pull on a sweatshirt that has NILNISI POWER & LIGHT and a smiley-faced bolt of lightning on it. Next jump into your jeans, which would involve leaping off the dresser if you wanted to do it properly. But Gramma found that as objectionable as what she called dungarees (*dungarays*, dunga-RAH-hahahas), forbidding you to wear them to school even in cold weather. Lace a pair of Keds over your Sunday socks and you're ready to fly—once you rescue Whippy from the white cotton Starchmonster.

Now comes the dangerous part: out we go on extreme tiptoe and “Not a peep out of you” to Secret Agent D.O.G. (so called to throw off the scent) as we creak creak down the hall.

Your room—“Aunt Livy’s old room,” they always called it—was the little one back by the linen cupboard. At the hall’s other end was the biggest bedroom, and from behind its closed door came a constant RUMBLE *nebbish* RUMBLE *nebbish* BUM-BUR-UMBLE *nebbish*. The room across from that used to be Uncle Buddy’s, but now that he lived in Chicago all the time “and since your Grampa snores, hawney, something fierce,” Gramma had moved into it. (Did you yourself snore? You’d been trying to catch yourself at it, but kept falling asleep.)

The younger Hungerford boys, Doug and Jerry, said a little girl in the olden days had coughed herself to death in that room. Her ghost was supposed to come out of the closet from time to time, always at the stroke of midnight. When you’d asked Uncle Buddy about that, he’d laughed and laughed. “Midnight’s the *best* time to do that, darling! But don’t tell your Gramma I said so, she’s got enough on her mind.”

Which was a darn shame because otherwise you’d have volunteered to stay up late and catch the girl-ghost. If you weren’t snoring your head off when she finally came out.

“You couldn’t catch her anyway, she’s almost invisible,” Doug had explained. “She’s more like a kind of *feeling* that sneaks up on you—”

“Yeah, but with a stink too,” Jerry the Creep had added, “like rotten eggs and sewer gas—”

Then Mickey Hungerford had come out of Grampa's room in his new uniform (that wasn't one like Marines wore, because Mickey was "an ordinary grunt") and ordered Jerry to knock it the hell off. "Are you telling her that damnfool ghost story? You wanna give the poor kid nightmares? Leave her alone."

"Yeah, you heard the grunt!" you'd added.

Now an *owwwwrrr?* was coming from under your arm. Pipe down, pussycat, don't blow our cover; let's pretend we're hunting wild dust bunnies. Though the best place to find those was in closet-corners, among the mothballs and girl-ghost innards. But sometimes you got the idea they were fluttering around out here in the hall, especially in the "wee" hours when you had to make a potty run. Sometimes Grampa would let loose a snore before you'd finished, and since his snores came out *Oooohhhh*, the dust bunnies did a lot more than go hippety-hop.

Grampa stayed in his room most of the time nowadays. He called it loafing, no different than lying in the hammock outdoors. (At least that's what it sounded like; it took longer nowadays to figure out what Grampa was talking about.) Every Saturday he declared he was going to get up Sunday morning and escort them to church. He'd have Gramma lay out his good blue suit on the chair by the bed where he could see it, together with a shirt and a tie and his hat. One of your own chores was to keep Grampa's shoes shined; he would have you bring them over for what sounded like "inspection" on Saturday afternoon, and if they weren't gussied up just so, you had to fetch the polish and do them over. Then they too went by the bedside chair.

But every Sunday morning Grampa would wake up "feelin' middlin'," and back on the hanger the blue suit would go. Then he might get a case of what Gramma called the *frets*, though it sounded more like ordinary worrying. How would the P & L bowling team fare without him that season? How could they hope to overcome the Water Department? Why didn't his hunting and fishing pals come over to shoot the breeze more often? How come Uncle Walt Hungerford never had boo to say when Grampa wanted to hear exactly where they'd gone and how they'd done and what they'd bagged and what had gotten away and why? Cousin Mickey was better at this sort of talk; what had he gone and joined the Ordinary Grunts for?

RUMBLE *nebbish* RUMBLE *nebbish* BUM-BUR-UMBLE; the *nebbishes* turning into *Now Bert, now Bert*.

Scoot past the door, gallop downstairs to the kitchen. Sunday dinner warming in the oven, sniff sniff sniff—ham loaf again, yum. Your duty to check on it: Gramma had been giving you lessons in the fine arts of stirring and tasting. The Whipcat was a born expert at tasting, and would stand on extreme tiptoe to lick butter from a spoon; better plop her in the corner with her dish and bowl while you climb onto your personal footstool, pull on your personal potholder, and peek carefully into this and that.

A slice gone from the ham loaf; presumably on a plate upstairs, with Gramma trying to get it inside Grampa. Give a stir to the mashed potatoes, give a stir to the lima beans, and what’s this? Rhubarb pie. GROHsss. Lucky for you there were still a few fudge brownies in the octagon-shaped tin (hee hee! “octagon”) with verses from “America the Beautiful” on its eight sides.

*O beautifully patient sides
Forever wave to Spain,
I will not eat this rhubarb pie
It would give me a pain—
(No, better:) Unless I lose my brain—*

“Needs a soupsong of garlic.” And you’d sing it one, too, had Gramma not taken to hiding the garlic and horseradish and onion salt.

Ham loaf or no, you wished you could go downtown to Sidney’s Diner and hop up on one of the tall round stools and order a couple of peanut butter sandwiches from Agnes, who always said, “You remember me to your Grampa Bert,” and spread on extra jelly.

Well, there was no point hanging around till Gramma came down. Your work here was done, except for the sweeping of floor and setting of table and emptying of trash. All of which had to be finished by bedtime if you were going to get your quarter-a-week allowance; though it was hardly worth emptying trash into the burner if you weren’t permitted to strike the match and set it ablaze.

So haul Whippersnapper up from her water bowl in the middle of a lap, and it’s out the back door we go. Jump, skip, hop. Pop, crackle, snap. Head for the colossal twin oaks that must have been planted in prehistoric times by Indians or Israelites, and make your way

up the long ladder to the house in the trees. Which was no mean feat with a half-grown bug-eyed cat now over your shoulder, now under your arm, digging in with claws like little needles (ouch).

The House in the Trees, like the One With All the Porches, had been built about a thousand years ago by a bunch of your ancestors; but the treehouse was obviously for kids and not grownups. Everything here was on a smaller, closer scale than in the grownup house, yet the place as a whole was huge—what Uncle Buddy called a “suite.” (Hee hee! a Hershey’s *semi*-suite.)

And today it all belonged to you alone. You were just kind of borrowing the bedroom back by the linen cupboard, but the treehouse was practically all yours. The younger Hungerfords only came over once in awhile; Cousin Mickey was away at grunt camp; Uncle Buddy had moved to Chicago; and you could just picture your mother trying to climb up here in one of her tight Ann-Margret outfits.

Gramma would come as far as the feet of the trees, to remind you of things. When you’d first figured out how to manage the ladder, it was always “Kelly hawney! I don’t want you going up in that treehouse all by yourself do you hear?!” Now it was “Absolutely not, young lady!” when you proposed spending the night aloft in a sleeping bag, with the big new flashlight you were officially saving up to buy if you could ever save anything from your allowance, which was another good reason why that ought to be raised to fifty cents a week like *all* the girls got, even Janey whose parents kept grounding her for acting sassy.

It was such a neat House in the Trees too. Real shingles on the roof, real glass in the window frames. The front door was on genuine hinges, as were the cupboards inside. Behind one was a tiny space perfect for somebody your size to hide in, even when no one else was around to seek you. If only there was a secret passageway to somewhere! But Uncle Buddy had shown you the panel that *would* have led to *his* secret passage, and that was practically as good.

Names and dates and initials were carved or drawn all over that panel and every other wall in the house. Uncle Buddy’s name could be found in several places. “Carrie V-E Day” adorned one cupboard, meaning your mother *must* have been up here at least once. Across the back of the front door, cut in deep dark letters with what looked like a woodburning set,

was LOUIS WUNDERLICH JUN 14TH 1892 FLAG DAY. But you had to look sharp, down near floor level, for the hard-to-read lines:

*Way down here
Out of sight
Was the only place
Lou would let me write*

—Ha-ha Willie W. age 8.

You yourself weren't yet allowed to pack a knife or chisel, much less lay your hands on a woodburning set; so SKEETER KELLY REBECCA KITEFLY was printed in Magic Marker along the windowseat. And was partly hidden at the moment by the Elmer's glue you'd used last week to attach a Dixie cup to the palm of your hand for Show 'n' Tell at school. Miss Gibson of course had refused to understand the clever brilliance of this invention, which was bound to save her hours of second-graders slurping at the water fountain; but like Janey said, Miss Gibson was a pig woman.

Over *here* was the cuuuute little ladder leading through a trapdoor to the treehouse roof. Doug Hungerford said that from the rooftop you could see all the way to Market Square and the County Courthouse; or at least you could when it was wintertime after all the leaves had fallen. Aunt Ollie had loudly forbidden Doug and Jerry to go up on the roof last Easter, but they'd gone and done it and laughed down at the rest of you; and Gramma'd had to make you swear on the family Bible not to join them—not to even *touch* the trapdoor till your tenth-yes-your-tenth-all-right-your-*ninth* birthday. And since you'd sworn this on a Sunday, and it being Sunday now, you (sigh) probably ought to wait till then. Or at least a little longer. (Though it would be a killer place to play Snoopy vs. the Red Baron.)

In the meantime there was always The Rope.

Outside the windowseat was a sort of balcony, a platform that was really a blastoff launchpad. On it lay a long thick coil of rope. One end of this rope had been lashed stoutly to the farther-away oak tree; at the other end was a heavy knot, big around as a basketball and worn smooth by the bottoms of your assorted ancestors as they'd straddled it, held on tight with all their might—and jumped off the platform, pushing away with their feet at the same time.

When you'd do this you would plummet earthward between the oaks, swinging to and fro (depending on just how you'd jump and push away) and finally you would touch down where the ground was all bumpy and gnarly with tree roots. It was a good idea to make a soft landing there and so far you always had, though it was lots of fun to let go of the rope before you'd quite arrived.

Then you would climb back up to the treehouse and heave-ho the rope back to the balcony for another turn. Now and again you had tried to shinny all the way up the rope, but truth to tell you hadn't even gotten far enough to make Gramma put it on the Absolutely Not list, which was kind of humiliating. And funny that she'd let you swing on the rope when you'd had to swear a Bible oath about the trapdoor.

"Why Kelly, I used to swing from that rope my own self when I was your age," Gramma'd said. Giving you a mental image so weird it beat blubbering Moses all hollow.

So strap yourself into the cockpit knot-seat, draping Whippy around your neck like a pilot's scarf—a very much *alive* scarf with pins still in it or rather in *you*, owweee owweee owweee—detach the cat, replace her under your arm, get a good firm grip with both hands on the rope and both feet on the edge—

5-4-3-2-1—*blastoff!*

And another croak-meow from Old Whipper.

It was what riding Invisible Timmy used to be like when you were little, but this was a hundred times better: you were on top of the world, flying high above everything and everybody, at the center of the universe—then with a *shwoooooop* you hurtled down down down, racing like the wind, the ground rushing up at you HA! missed you that time! and back up up up you went, looking out over all creation in the first burst of new-green springtime, it whirling one way while you twirled the other.

SWING *low*, GO *tell Aunt Rhody*,
Comin' round the mountain when she comes—
SWING *low*, FROM the town of Bedrock,
Have a yabba-dabba-doo time.
I looked for my accordion, what did I see
Comin' for to give a dog a bone?
A band of Monkees comin' down the street—

*Gettin' funniest looks from ev'ryone they meet—
Hey hey! the old grey goose is dead!
Swing HO—*

Chapter 4

Brownie Like Me

“I don’t think this is gonna work,” said Skeeter.

“Oh of course it is,” snapped Janey Orrick, who was her best friend and very intense.

“Don’t be such a scaredy-cat.”

“I’m not a scaredy-cat!”

“You are! I oughta start calling you ‘Scaredy’ Kitefly.”

“You do and I’ll give you something to be scared about.”

“Never mind, forget it. Hand me the knife.”

“What knife?”

“How’re we supposed to cut this up without a knife?”

“Use this,” said Skeeter, producing the backboard from a Big Chief tablet.

“Oh for Pete’s sake!”

“Try it, it’ll work. Just like on *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*”

Shaking her intense head, Janey thrust the backboard into the pan-sized brownie-slab that Skeeter had smuggled out of Gramma Otto’s deepfreeze and up to the treehouse.

“Well, I *guess* this’ll work...”

“Be careful! You’re cutting them all raggedy—here, let me—”

“*I’ll* do it! *You* load ‘em in the shoeboxes.”

Skeeter complied, though not without grumbling. “I still think we could probably get into a whole lotta trouble doing this.”

“Oh of course if you’re CHICKEN...”

“Who’re you calling CHICKEN, Miss—Miss Yellow-Bellied Jellyfish?!”

(Shrieks of eight-year-old laughter.)

“Okay! Hide the evidence while I go on the lookout,” said Janey, peeping out the front door. “Okay—coast is clear. Ready?”

“Ready!—no, wait a sec—” Skeeter smoothed her hair back, straightened her uniform, tugged her vest into place.

“Oh *quit* primping. Come on!”

“Yessir Sergeant, right away Sergeant. Your beanie’s on backwards again, Sergeant.”

“Good!” said Janey, preceding her down the ladder. “I like it like that!”

“I guess you must,” Skeeter agreed, jumping to the ground. “(Oof.) You had it on backwards when we toured the fire station, and you had it on *sideways* when we sang at the old folks’s home—”

“Oog! I don’t care what the troop leaders say, I am *not* going back there anymore. Not even at Christmas!”

“I thought you liked to sing.”

“What’s that got to do with it? Anyway, who could like singing after that time we played Musical Desks and Cathy Sue had a *nosebleed* all over mine?”

“Oh yeeeahhh,” Skeeter said reminiscently. “She really oughta quit picking it.”

“She didn’t even wipe it all up!”

“Well how could she? They sent her to the nurse’s office—”

“*Never mind*, let’s get going!... Okay. Chestnut Street. Let’s try the Hacklanders first.”

“I don’t like the Hacklanders.”

“Well neither do I, but they’ll buy anything,” said Janey. She started marching up their front walk, but Skeeter hauled her back.

“We’re gonna get arrested like a couple of crooks! We’ll end up in reform school and have to make license plates—”

“Look: we’re Brownies, right? And *these* are brownies, right? And we’re not SAYING they’re Brownie Girl Scout brownies, are we? It’s not *our* fault people jump to conclusions, is it?”

“Oh all right already. But you do all the talking.”

(Knock knock knock.)

“Hello! Would you like to buy some brownies? They’re very delicious... No, we’re not taking orders for cookies just yet; we’ll come back later about those... Thanks, Mrs. Hacklander, that’ll be fifty cents. Bye-bye...”

“WHEW!” went Skeeter, safely distant. “I can’t *believe* that worked!”

“Told you so! Told you! Lookit this—two quarters! We are going to be rolling in dough.”

“Hee hee! ‘Rolling in dough.’”

“Let’s try Amy’s house next—”

“*No*, not Amy’s! Her mom knows the Sheriff.”

“Oh will you cool it? We’re wearing the perfect disguise.”

And impeccably camouflaged they made their illicit way down Chestnut Street, up Sycamore, and over to Locust.

“Who lives here?”

“The Thorpes used to. Did you know Marilyn Thorpe? She was all the time picking on littler kids. Once at a picnic she pushed Laurie clear into Welmer’s Lake and then told Mrs. Mills that Laurie *fell* in.”

“Gosh, I sure am sorry I missed knowing *her*. So who lives here now? Let’s find out!... Hi there! Would you like to buy some brownies? We’ve got with and without nuts; they’re both extra good. Just one? That’ll be twenty-five cents... Yes, ‘the fourth part of a dollar,’ hee hee... Thanks!... GEE what a creep.” Then, elaborately nonchalant: “Say, let’s try the Scolleys next.”

“I know why!”

“You do not!”

“You wanna sell Jeff a browwww-nie!”

“I do not!”

“*Yes* you do—you wanna make him your BOYfriend! ‘Skee-ter’s in luh-uvv’—”

“You take that back, Janey Orrick! I don’t particularly care one way or the other about—what did you say his name is? ‘Jeffrey,’ is it?”

“Well *I* heard *he* thinks *you’re* cute.”

“Really? WELL! I never! You can just go tell whoever you heard *that* from that *I* think *Jeff’s* got cooties!”

(Shrieks.)

(No one answered the Scolleys’s doorbell.)

By the time the girls reached Market Square, they had accumulated four whole dollars while reducing their shoebox contents to crumbs. So on they hurried to the drugstore, outside which Ruthie Mundt—ultrasophisticated at age ten—was casually loitering.

“You two look like a couple of geeks in those getups,” said Ruthie, with wrinkled nose.

“Never mind that. Have you got the stuff?”

They went around the corner into White’s Alley, away from passers-by, to conduct their transaction. Glancing left and right, Ruthie opened a paper bag and unveiled a carton of Pall Mall Menthols.

“Come to the forest-fresh taste,” Skeeter giggled.

“Five bucks,” said Ruthie.

“FIVE! You told me four!”

“Pipe down, will you? It’s five bucks, take it or leave it.”

“Laurie’ll sell us a carton for *lots* less than that!”

“So why aren’t you buying from her, then?”

“Well, hers are unfiltered,” said Skeeter. “And we’ve only got four dollars.”

“Tell you what—four packs for four bucks.”

“You must be kidding!” snapped Janey, with intensity; and she proceeded to haggle Ruthie Mundt down to \$2.50 in quarters and dimes.

“Hunh! Don’t bother me again till you’ve got some *folding* money. Okay, kiddies, hold out your grubby little paws: two for you, two for you. And now, ta-ta—I’m going into the drugstore and buy some Yardley Slicker.”

“Yeah well that sounds like a raincoat!” Janey sneered after her. “Darn that Ruthie! *I* hear she puts out.”

“Puts out?”

“You know—gives tongue to guys she’s kissing.”

“EWWGGKH!” Skeeter observed; though not without speculation as to what “putting out” to Jeff Scolley might taste like.

The girls had already done plenty of experimental smoking, despite a lack of material. Janey’s mother had been raised Mormon, and wouldn’t allow tobacco in her house; and Gramma Otto, while puffing through quite a few cigarettes, was nobody’s fool and kept them under literal lock and key.

“When we get BOYfriends, we can take *their* cigarettes,” Skeeter’d decided. “Till then we’re on our own.”

So, prematurely embosoming themselves by hiding their Pall Malls down the front of their uniforms, the girls retreated to a shady spot by the railroad tracks to strike another blow for capable maturity.

“Hey—what about matches?”

“Oh HELL!”

“*Jane-ey!*”

“Dammit, dammit, dammit to pitchforks!!”

Skeeter clapped a grubby little paw over her own stuPENdous mouth and goggled at her. “What you *said!*”

“I mean it, too! We’re never gonna learn how to smoke right.”

“No, wait a minute. We’re practically Junior Girl Scouts, aren’t we?”

“I guess. So what?”

“So we’ll smoke ‘em like Girl Scouts do! Let’s rub a couple of STICKS together—”

Chapter 5

Power & Light

“—so then she took this sheet of paper and made like a black border around it and wrote, ‘If that’s the way it’s going to be, what’s the point of being alive?’ And then she swallowed a whole bottle of aspirin. But it only made her throw up a jillion times, all *white*.”

“Good grief!” said Uncle Buddy. “And how old did you say she is?”

“Janey? She just turned nine, same as me.”

“And all this because—”

“—her folks wouldn’t let her watch *Laugh-in* anymore. (That’s my suitcase, coming down now.) Anyway: I kept thinking about her every time I looked out the plane window and saw those lumpy white clouds.”

“Talk about your Valley of the Dolls!” said Buddy. “Marble Orchard style, of course—if there could *be* such a thing as ‘Marble Orchard style.’ Now, is this all your baggage?”

“Well I wanted to pack a hatbox too, only I don’t have any what you’d call hats. What I should’ve done is bring two or three *empty* suitcases, and fill ‘em up while I’m here.”

“Attagirl! This way, darling.”

It was the week before school started and Skeeter was supposed to be spending it visiting her mother; but that lady, preoccupied with a brand-new gentleman friend, had suggested instead a week in Chicago with Uncle Buddy, who was happy to oblige. The flight here had been great: stewardesses and fellow passengers showing her lots of attention, the captain or co-pilot (somebody in a scrambled-egg cap, anyway) coming back to hope she was “finding everything to her satisfaction.” Plus they gave her a bunch of free souvenir

goodies, stuff she probably would have missed out on had Mom or Gramma tagged along.

She'd acted properly blahZAY about traveling alone by air, as though it hadn't been three whole years since her last plane trip and the first time ever by herself. The only thing she'd been afraid of was it ending way too soon, but the flight took longer than expected and arrived a couple of hours late. Even then they didn't let them get off ("disembark!" hee hee) for awhile; rumor was that the Vice President of the United States had just landed and was hogging their place at the terminal. You'd think a Vice President would have his *own* place. But this being a man named "Hubert Humphrey," nothing about him could be too astonishing.

The airport in Chicago was complete chaos, just as a big city airport ought to be; but Buddy Otto stood out among the mob. He and Skeeter both started hopping up and down when they spotted each other, Uncle Buddy hopping with what he called True Effect since he now weighed upward of 250.

"How you've grown!" she told him, and "What boss threads!"—extra-large paisley shirt, vast striped slacks, and a Fu Manchu moustache on his plump round face. This actually make him look like a young blond Oliver Hardy (as opposed to his sister Aunt Ollie, who come to think of it kind of resembled Stan Laurel).

"I'd planned to give you a little tour of town to kick things off—if your plane had been on time, that is." Buddy checked his watch and clucked his tongue. "But now—that is, if you're not too tired—"

"No, look!" (*Bounce bounce bounce.*) "I can keep this up forever! I tried timing myself so I could tell the Guinness World Record people, but I keep having to quit to go to bed or school or things."

"Well then, here's what I propose we do—"

"Oh! oh! Uncle Buddy! can we please go see *Rosemary's Baby*?"

"What? That is a FILM."

"A scary one, too! I just love scary movies and I never get to see enough. Or howzabout *2001*? I hear that's *really* weird. They say this bunch of monkeys dance around a big black slab that makes waa-waa noises at them, and then this computer kills a bunch of astronauts in their sleep!"

THUD from Skeeter's suitcase as Buddy let it drop to the ground. "Child! You are in *dire* need of Live Drama. Happily I have tickets for *Gypsy* at the McGurn at eight. We have just enough time to catch a bite first, so let's hustle; the car's this way. (Slabs that make waa-waa noises!)"

They hustled along gigantic corridors and down a gargantuan escalator, Buddy fussing en route about movies and what he called their corruptive effect on acting. Then they were brought up short, and made to wait with a group of other airport-exiters till the Vice President's limo departed.

"There goes Hubert Humphrey," Skeeter informed her uncle.

"And his middle name is Horatio," he replied.

"*Stop* it! Hee hee hee!"

She recovered in time to admire Buddy's cuuuute little candy-apple-red MG. First from the parked outside and then from the convertible inside as they raced down the expressway, their hair blowing in the August wind—or Skeeter's, anyway; Buddy's was a tad too sparse.

"Is that why you grew the Fu Manchu? Are you going to try a beard next?"

"Hmm? Sorry, darling, this is only the second time I've driven this car on the freeway, and I'm just the least touch nervous... Here's where we'd turn off if we were going home."

Buddy lived on Devon Avenue (which he said the natives pronounced DEEEvawwn) not far from a school called Loyola that Skeeter thought sounded Hawaiian. Buddy shared his apartment with an equally fat roommate named Gig, and even someone Skeeter-sized might have found it a bit of a pinch if Gig weren't going to be down at the stockyards all week, working at a big convention.

CRACK!

"*What was that??*" went Buddy.

"I just snapped my bubble gum."

"Oh my stars and garters! I thought my time had come. DON'T do that again, please, this car is temperamental enough... Well, we've made it as far as the Loop."

A confusion of sights, an agreeably rollercoastery effect: skyscraping towers on either side, and a rumbling train up on a track like an endless bridge.

“That’s the El,” said Buddy.

“And this is an MG,” said Skeeter. “Guess we know our P’s and Q’s.”

They hustled on to Gusenberg’s, a little steakhouse on Dearborn, where it took Buddy no more than ten minutes to put away a medium-rare T-bone smothered in onions. Skeeter had a slightly smaller version of the same, followed by a shpritz of Buddy’s Binaca “to take the curse off.” Then out along a grey concrete sidewalk between grey concrete buildings under a grey concrete overpass or viaduct or something high in the air, anyway; and so to the McGurn Theater and mezzanine seats for *Gypsy*.

This proved to be a funny-enough musical with familiar-sounding songs. Not as good as a computer killing spacemen, of course; but it made for engaging entertainment (or at any rate diversion) as did the whispered sarcasms she traded with Buddy about the actresses’s legs and the chorus boys’s faces.

“What was all that mumbling about?” Buddy asked out on the mezzanine, after the final curtain call.

“*What* a bitch. *Oh* I hated her.”

“Who? Rose? She’s supposed to project that sort of—”

“No, not Rose!—that Dainty Baby June!

*If Momma was married I’d act like a bitch
Just like I do now all the time—*

—as if she was the mincy-pincy Queen Bitch of the World... hey! You didn’t say, ‘Don’t say bitch.’”

“Well,” said Buddy, “if the leash fits, wear it.”

“All right!” Skeeter cheered. “Bitch bitch bitch bitch bitch—”

“The word’s not a cow, darling. Don’t milk it.”

A tall young man with long white hair and a Nehru jacket brushed past them on the stairs. “Hi, Buzzy. Who’s your little chum?”

“Who was *that*?” asked Skeeter.

“Just a friend. A rather careless friend.”

“He called you ‘Buzzy.’”

“Yes he did. Don’t tell Gramma, okay?”

(As if Gramma would care whether a trendy-looking guy in Chicago pronounced his D’s like Z’s.)

The McGurn had been heavily air-conditioned, but outside there was actually kind of a chill in the air. *And* gusty blasts of wind off the Great Lake only a few blocks away. Skeeter almost began to wish she’d packed a sweater like Gramma’d advised. Maybe she could run after careless Mr. Nehru and borrow his jacket.

“Getting back to Baby June,” Buddy resumed as they reached the MG, “I think that’s a role *you* could play.”

“Me? Oh puhLEEZE. You’ll make me upchuck like Janey Orrick.”

“Alas, poor Orrick. And here in the Big City we say ‘upcharles,’ darling.” He wrestled his sizable bulk behind the wheel while Skeeter giggled herself silly. “Now, I’ve heard you sing, and I’ve seen you bounce around—”

“And now you’re going to make me a star! Even before I show you what I learned when I was a Brownie! We drove our troop leader insane and freed her to become a professional belly dancer. Before she left town she taught us how to bump ‘n’ grind like teeny-boppers.”

“You’re making that up! Oh, what a story!”

“No, honest!—just like Gypsy Rose Lee, but with *impact*.”

“I think you’re still a few years shy of *impact*,” said her uncle, revving the car. “Right now it’s more like *compact*, and that’s better in keeping with Baby June. Think you could kick your leg over your head like she did?”

Skeeter did so then and there in the moving MG, causing Buddy to swerve and kill the engine.

After a moment of quiet: “I asked did you *think* you could.”

“Oh. Sorry about that, Chief. Yes: I *think* I might be able to.”

(*Rrr rrr rrr* from the MG.)

“So, any other acting experience” (*rrr rrr rrr*) “besides bumping and grinding with the Brownies?” (*Rrroooooomm.*)

“Well remember in second grade I played the duck in *Peter and the Wolf*, and then last fall we put on *Columbus Sails the Ocean Blue* and I was one of Queen Isabella’s attendants. I rolled my eyes and made these oh-really? faces when Columbus talked about the world being round. I guess you could call that acting bitchy. Oh and at camp I did the Noxzema Girl: ‘Take it off. Take it *all* off. The closer you shave, the more you need—NoxZEEEm!’”

“I’m convinced,” said Buddy, miming shaving with his free hand. “Every little role helps.”

On the other hand, look at Buddy’s own stage experience. From boyhood he’d wanted to play the romantic and the doomed: Tony in *West Side Story*, Othello and the whole Shakespearean tragedy gang, plus any number of Tennessee Williams characters. Yet he’d invariably gotten stuck with chubby sidekick roles. So he’d gone behind the scenes, concentrated on set design, contrasting scenery with reality: hanging paper moons over cardboard seas. And maybe it was nothing more than make-believe, but after all, darling...

Buddy found he’d lost his audience to the show of Chicago by night: the Windy City of Light! (As opposed to Paris, which was merely breezy.) So he drove Skeeter around and then around some more, looping the Loop down Clark, up State, back over to Dearborn, under the El screeching overhead—

—and lookit all the burlesque houses! the pawnshops! the saloons! the drunk-looking man staggering out of that one! This must be the genuine authentic BAD part of town! But “Wait, it gets better,” Buddy was saying, swinging them roundabout again and heading off in a new direction.

“1-2-3 Red Light!” Skeeter sang—and all at once the world lit up like the carousel at the Booth County Fair. But a thousand times brighter and a million times better: everything was *enormous*—the billboards! the streetlamps! the honks and snarls of traffic! And on every side, in all directions, were these buildings like what cathedrals might be if you plugged them into a starmaker socket: dazzling glass palaces, massive shafts and cones and pillars of power and light. And looking at them you could *feel* the carousel starting up, a Strawberry Fieldsish merry-go-round of neon and freon and shivaree bewitchery—feel it

leaving the ground, taking off with a great blast of trumpets like in *Mary Poppins Does Something or Other*—taking you with it, too, so you’d better hold on tight while it spins and soars and psychedelices...

But in the mundane meantime Uncle Buddy was demonstrating that every generation has its own gap. Acting like a tour guide: that’s Marshall Field’s, and there’s Picasso Plaza where just last Friday a pig called Pigasus got nominated for President. This drawbridge crosses that river and takes us to the Magnificent Mile along North Michigan. Over there’s where Hugh Hefner lives (ooh! naked bunnies!) in a mansion he never comes out of. Now we’re on the Gold Coast, on Lake Shore Drive, and we’re pulling over to take a peek up at those ritzy highrise apartment buildings.

“The most elegant in the world. The envy of (snort) New York.”

“Which one is yours, Uncle Buddy?”

“All of them. Meaning none just yet, darling. But you wait and see; we’ll end up there someday, and have the lights at our feet.”

“I wanna move in right now.”

“Well, so do I. But tonight I’m afraid we’ll have to settle for a more humble abode up on—” (Skeeter chiming in:) “—DEEEvawwwn... and it’s high time I got you there. Getting late. Been a long day for you. And there’s a curfew or something,” he added vaguely.

But it couldn’t be over, so way too soon; the night must still be young, must never end. “I wanna see some hippies!” she announced.

“Tomorrow, darling—”

“I wanna see some hippies *now!*”

“Well,” sighed Buddy, “they’re mostly over in Old Town. Or wait, I know—we can run through the park, I know a shortcut. They say Allen Ginsberg’s there; we might hear him chanting *Om*. ”

“*Om*? Like in ‘Ommmm, you don’t go to chur-urch?’” Skeeter cackled.

The MG sped along Buddy’s shortcut, and no sooner entered the park than it had to dodge a skinny guy wearing nothing above the waist but love beads. He carried a placard proclaiming YIPPIE! VOTE PIG IN ‘68!

“Yay!” Skeeter agreed. “Hooray for Pigasus.”

“I prefer Pat Paulsen myself,” said her uncle. “Gig, of course, is down at the stockyards playing ‘Clean for Gene’—I don’t know who he expects to fool—”

All of a sudden their way was blocked by a dimly-seen crowd of people. Some were taking picnic tables and building what appeared to be a fort. Beyond it a whole new set of lights was shining through the darkness, red and blue ones this time, flashing over and over as they revolved atop more police cars than Skeeter could possibly count.

For one split second everybody kind of paused and turned to glare at them—as if they’d interrupted a dress rehearsal, Buddy would say later.

Then “DISPERSE” crackled a huge electronic voice, “YOU WILL LEAVE THIS PARK IMMEDIATELY,” countered by cries of *Dump the Hump!* and *Hey hey LBJ!* from the picnic-table fortmakers. There was just enough time for an “Uh-oh” from Uncle Buddy before the first of a series of F-O-O-M-P-S as these big fat cans came crashing down through the tree branches; and then in nothing flat there was instant fog that made your eyes smart and throat tickle like you were catching a summer cold. People began chasing each other, and some of them had clubs and some of them wore helmets and before you knew it the whole reeking shebang was stampeding directly towards you!

“*Sweet Jesus!*” went Buddy, throwing the car into reverse and spinning it around a hell of a lot faster than any psychedelic carousel. And so they made an agreeably hellbent getaway a step ahead of the mob, laying rubber along a solid mile of Clark Street (so Buddy later estimated) and not stopping for breath till they were halfway to Skokie.

“That was so COOwull!” Skeeter exulted, kicking a leg over her head. “Was that tear gas? Were they teargassing us? Damn! Wait’ll I tell Janey what I did on my summer vacation! This is what *I* call being ALIVE!”

“There’s probably a great lesson to be learned in all this, somewhere,” said Buddy, and went back to mopping his face.

Chapter 6

Sister Sadie What Have You Done

Actually there were a lot of eligible young women who *could* have become Skeeter's stepsister, but here and now there was only a fifteen-year-old coppertop with the arguably regrettable name of Mercedes Benison, whose look of eager welcome turned to one of moderate fury when Skeeter rolled on the floor in ecstasies when they were first introduced.

So at the very beginning of their acquaintance Skeeter got treated to the extremes of Sadie B.'s expression-range, and not for the last time either.

Skeeter had come to Demortuis to visit her mother and meet Carrie's getting-serious gentleman-friend Arnold Benison. He turned out to be bashfully affable and the father of two daughters, the elder of whom was undergoing an old-fashioned Lithuanian wedding in order to become Alexis (Mrs. Lenny) Czolgosz. The reception took place at the Benison house on Oswald Avenue, where the everyday atmosphere yielded to one of rice and cake and orange blossom and the groom's Brut and the best man's Aqua Velva and the photographer's Hai Karate.

Now, Mercedes Benison applauded ethnicity as much or more than the average Demortuisian. But when the receptionists went so far as to put a stack of Frankie Yankovic records on the turntable, she could take no more and had to escape.

"C'mon," she said to wedding guest Skeeter, who followed obediently and not just because Sadie B. was a tallish fifteen and Skeeter a shorty not yet ten. Nor just because she admired Sadie's red hair, or the slinky oyster-colored minidress and Nancy Sinatra boots that Arnold had thought unsuitable for a wedding but was too softhearted to forbid her to wear.

No: Sadie B. was a take-charge type, a would-be toppler of barricades, sayer of "Let's go this way" and meaner of "Let's go my way." She could contain contradictory

multitudes; what Sadie assumed, *you* should assume. So she went and Skeeter tagged after in her own midget pink party frock, rubbernecking to left and right.

The city of Demortuis (to quote its Chamber of Commerce) was the “thrivingest” spot in the entire Middle West. You could not have proved it by Oswald Avenue, once a genteel thoroughfare, now rankling into kitschdom. “Bummerburg,” Sadie termed it. “This place is a tomb.”

“I like it,” said Skeeter. “I think it’s far out.”

“Far out! Kiddo, you wouldn’t know the difference between ‘far out’ and a fart-out.”

“Would so!” said Skeeter. It was *too* far-out, so nyaah to you Sadie Benison.

Whose mood was not improved by being all dressed up in her most devastating outfit with nobody around worth showing off to. No one but a crusty old bunch of jaspers lumping the afternoon away on their crusty old front stoops. Bug off, creeps. And even *they* didn’t whistle or go “rowrowr” at her, disgusting as that would have been. What a fart-out life was.

“Where are we going? Is there a McDonald’s around here? I want a Big Mac.”

“Gag! I should’ve left you at the reception. We’re not going anywhere. The park maybe. Just keep on truckin’.”

Skeeter approximated truckin’ down the sidewalk in her little pink pumps till Sadie told her for God’s sake to quit it.

“Oh all right... am I walking *silent* enough for you now? And this park we’re going to, how much farther is it? What’s its name? Any hippies hang out there?”

“I wish,” Sadie sighed. “God do I wish. It’s called Whitman Park and it’s at the end of the block and God am I going to blow this burg just as soon as I can and take off for somewhere *real*. Where things *happen*. Where I can *do* things, my *own* thing, and where they haven’t even HEARD of McDonald’s! But look at this place—”

She gestured at a stretch of common greenery turning grey in May.

“Saturday afternoon in the park, and nobody here.”

“What about them?” said Skeeter, indicating a smooching couple. The male was in Bermuda shorts, the female in culottes, and Blood Sweat & Tears oozed out of their transistor radio.

“Oh wow! Free love! Here come the hippies!”

“Well,” said Skeeter, “maybe everyone else is at a wedding reception.”

They wandered on to the playground area, where Skeeter promptly claimed a swing.

“C’mon Sadie!”

“That’s kid stuff.”

“I am a kid! I like to swing! Look, I’m a swinger!”

Sadie broke up a bit at that and took the next swing over, rocking on her bootheels and displaying a good deal of healthy teenage thigh.

“I wish *I* had long legs,” said Skeeter. “And red hair too. And freckles. And bosoms. In fact I wish I looked exactly like you.”

“This is understandable,” said Sadie. “Well, don’t worry, kiddo, give yourself a few years. I mean I sometimes wish *I* could wear pink. Or had blue eyes like yours. And you’re almost strawberry blonde, that’s kind of like red; we could make you an honorary redhead—”

But Skeeter was too busy swinging with careless abandon to pay heed. “Faaaar out!” she swooped, down and out and up: “Helter Skelter! Comin’ down faaaast!” Party frock and petticoat fluttering, down and in and back: “Tell me tell me tell me the answer—”

“I know the answer,” Sadie assured her. “I know all the answers. You got any questions about Life, kiddo, just pass them on to me.”

Skeeter immediately wanted to know why she had to chew with her mouth closed while eating seafood, did Sadie get it? “See” food? Like “for all to see?” Cackle-ackle-ackle!

Her companion maintained tightlipped silence for a minute or two, then went “Knock knock.” Who was there? Howard. Howard who?

“How *weird* of you to ask that question,” said Sadie, gratified when Skeeter fell off her swing in hysterics. “You okay?”

“Hey! I *never* get hurt.”

“You live with your grandmother, right? Out in Marble Orchard?”

“Yeah, but not just with her,” said Skeeter, resuming her swinger career. “There’s Supertimmy and New Junebug, my two ponies.”

“Oh you lucky! God I’d love to have even one pony.”

“Well, I’ve also got a cat that *I* call Whippy but my Gramma mostly calls Margaret ‘cause she started off as Ann-Margret (the cat not my Gramma). Then there’s this guinea pig named William, I was going to call *him* Billy Boy ‘cause I thought he’d be great to play hide-‘n’-seek with, you know, ‘Ohh-ohh where have you been, charming Billy?,’ but he’s really dull even for a guinea pig and won’t eat anything but graham crackers. You can have William if you like.”

Sadie chose not to pursue this handsome offer. “So how long haven’t you lived with your mom?”

“Oh, I dunno. Three or four years? She’s only got this apartment, see, on Harding Street, with this kitchen sink that backs up every so often. (Yuggh.) You should hear her yell at the landlord. Gramma says I’ve got her tongue, what do you think?” Skeeter exhibited the tongue in question in Sadie’s direction, then paid another visit to Gigglesville.

“So what happens...” went Sadie, crossing her legs and attracting the eye of Bermuda Shorts even as he smooched Culottes. “What if, say, your mom and my dad were to get married?”

“I hope they do,” said Skeeter, who hadn’t thought about it. “Your dad’s a sweetie. He blushed when I kissed him.”

“Well, he *is* nice,” Sadie allowed. “For a drugstore manager. I mean that’s such an Establishment job.”

“What do you want him to be, a drug dealer?”

“What do you know about dealers, kiddo?”

“Hey! I get around,” said Skeeter, swinging up and down.

“Oh wow, I bet... Your mom seems like fun. And Dad’s been so lonesome since my mother died. What about *your* father?”

“Oh, he’s a major or something” (swing high) “in the Marines. He sends me” (swing low) “cards and money and stuff.”

“Is he in Vietnam?”

“Probably.”

“That’s disgusting!”

“Hey, he wanted to go. They kept turning him down, see, when he wanted to be an astronaut.”

“An astronaut! That’s disgusting too, all those millions of dollars spent on the moon instead of down here on Earth.” And Sadie held forth for some little while on her opinion of Project Apollo, from which Skeeter might have learned a lot had she not been paying closer attention to the park fauna.

“I love squirrels,” she remarked.

“What?”

“Squirrels! They’re so cute ‘n’ stupid, I could look at them all day.”

These enormous red ones had appeared in Marble Orchard during a raging blizzard the previous December, the day of her Grampa Otto’s funeral. Like giant flying Rockys they had flung themselves out of nowhere onto the Otto birdfeeders, and looted them.

“I stood at the window all day long watching those squirrels in the snow, and just laughed and laughed. Everyone thought I was being weird and my mom got *so* mad, but it *was* funny... I wish I could get a squirrel to come eat nuts from my hand. But I can’t ever keep still long enough, and anyway I don’t have any nuts.”

Sadie, uncrossing and recrossing her legs, suggested that Skeeter needed to learn yoga. And (despite her exasperation at Skeeter’s immediate “Yoga! What if I make a boo-boo?”) she demonstrated the basics of *om mani padme hum*, which soon had Skeeter rolling on the ground again.

“Oh forget it! You *are* being weird! Come on, we might as well go.” They left the playground and started back. “Our folks shouldn’t get married anyway,” Sadie added.

“Why not?”

“What they really ought to do is live together. You don’t need a piece of paper from the City Hall to guarantee you happiness.”

“No, but a Big Mac’d sure help.”

“Gag! You are one crazy kid, you know that? Still... it’d be kind of nice to have a sister.”

“You *have* a sister.”

“Oh, Alexis. And you think your guinea pig’s a bore.”

Alexis, it seemed, had spent years acting as though she were Sadie's mommy—Arnold's, too. And even that wouldn't have been so bad had Alexis not been so awfully dress shields and pantygirdle and Julie Eisenhower about it, so essentially "Mrs. Lenny Czolgosz"—

Pause in midphilippic to laugh. "She made me go with her when she was picking out her patterns and stuff, right? God you should've been there—I found this big white maternity smock and shouted, 'Alexis! This is just what you'll need for your wedding gown!'"

Even so: it might be nice to have a *little* sister of one's own. To show and tell and teach things about Life—

"You mean one you can boss around," said her intended. "You think you can boss *me* around, do you? No way!"

Sadie lapsed into speechlessness and remained there the rest of the way out of the park, till just at the verge where they encountered some newcomers and Skeeter blurted, "Wow! Real live Negroes!" right out loud.

"SSSHHHH!... Get *over* here! What is the *matter* with you? They *prefer* to be called 'Blacks,' or 'Afro-Americans!'"

"I like the way they dress," said Skeeter.

"You got that right," said one of the newcomers.

Sadie was still lecturing about race relations and social injustice when they reached the edge of Oswald Avenue. Here Skeeter found it necessary to punch her on the arm.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"Slug-Bug went by," Skeeter explained, pointing to a passing Volkswagen. "Look, there goes another—"

"Ow! Quit it! Who do you think you're punching, squirt?"

"Gee, Sadie, I thought it was you."

"Well cut it out! I mean it!"

"Are you bossing me again? We're not sisters yet, so nyaah."

"You're not going to live long enough to be anybody's sister when I get hold of you—come back here!"

The Whitman squirrels were then treated to the spectacle of a leggy young redhead chasing a cackly pink midget back into the park, and losing her in the underbrush.

“All right, where are you?... Aw, come on, kid—your mom’s not going to like it if you go disappearing.”

Skeeter popped out of the shrubbery with a sudden “YAAAAA,” causing Sadie to gasp and fall to her knees.

“You little bozo! If you’ve ripped my pantyhose I’ll strangle you with ‘em!”

“I didn’t rip them, *you* fell. I was only trying to give you a hug.”

Sadie, her knees still bequeathed to the dirt, held out a solemn pair of freckled arms that Skeeter approached and nimbly dodged as Sadie lunged and missed and landed on her elbows this time.

“Well tsk,” went Skeeter in response to the fallen one’s profanity. “Look what you’ve done. Made a mess of your pretty dress. What *am* I going to do with you?”

The question, for a murderous moment, seemed rather what was going to be done with-and-to Skeeter Kitefly. But then Sadie unbent her coppery brows and said, “Oh well. I guess I can always tie-dye it.”

“That’d be COOwull! Can I help?”

Sadie glanced at her, jocosely and twinkle-eyed and not yet ten. “You can help me up. No, no, come back and help me, I’m too tired to fight, and I’ve got these damn boots on... uffff. Thanks.” She went through the motions of brushing herself off, with Skeeter’s energetic assistance. “Ow. Stop!... okay. So: if my dad and your mom do get whatever’d, what about you? Would you move here and live with us?”

“Sure!”

“What about your grandmother and cat and what’s their names, your two ponies?”

“Oh,” said Skeeter, and considered. “Well, I could always go visit them. Except William; he’s too dull. Besides, I won’t need two ponies when you teach me how to *drive*.”

“I haven’t learned myself yet—”

“And I wouldn’t mind having a sister either, a big sister, think of it! I could borrow all your clothes when I get big enough, and your makeup and jewelry and stuff, and then when you split for Somewhere Real I’ll get your room and furniture and everything. Maybe

your car too, and all your old boyfriends.”

“Oh really! You’ve got a lot to learn about Life, kiddo.”

“And you’re going to teach me! Oh Sadie! You can teach me all about sex and drugs and yoga, and you’ll try to boss me and I won’t let you, and we’ll have *such* freakin’ fun. This is going to be great! We’ll get our folks together, and be sisters forever and ever. I can hardly wait!”

And if Sadie B. had any second thoughts at this point, they didn’t get aired as Skeeter went skipping off, afoot and lighthearted, truckin’ on through a patch of dandelions and kicking into puffereens all those as had not already inherited the wind.

Chapter 7

Buying the Farm

So a year later Arnold Benison, widower, and Caroline Wunderlich Kitefly, divorcée, decided to take a second trip around the marital block and this one together. Theirs was to be a June wedding with all the trappings, the better to “do it right this time” as Carrie insisted, and Arnold readily agreed. He was the most agreeable of men, the most unassuming, even self-effacing; but also a solid rock and resting place for Carrie, who on her own had tended toward blindfold flightiness.

She and her only child, except for brief visits, had not cohabited under one roof since their abrupt departure from husband/father and the Santa Ana Marine Corps Air Station; but now Skeeter was to come and stay and not go away ever again, or at least not until she grew up: whichever came first.

ARnold, as Skeeter always called him, took shy pride in showing off his stepdaughter-to-be, and never minded when she’d justify her status by breaking into a tapdance or cakewalk. But he shelved tentative adoption plans out of deference to Major Gower the Jimmy Cagney look-alike; so in name as well as nature, Skeeter remained the Kitefly she was born to be.

Though not in Marble Orchard. Come June she would be moving to the Benison manse in Demortuis, and this brought no joy to Gramma Addie Otto. Losing her little hawney to the bright lights of a middlesized city! A gaping vacancy would be left in heart and at hearthside—though not, perhaps, for long. Great-Aunt Emmy would be (*might be*) seeing to that, despite her eyes not being quite what they once were, and small wonder too after forty years on the Demortuis *Daily Memorial* copy desk.

Fully retired now, high time too at sixty-nine, and if Emmy never had to read another reporter's gobbledegook it'd be double soon enough for her. Retirement, raising the question of what to do with one's days—soon answered, with Addie being left to rattle around Marble Orchard all by her lonesome. Just when *she* needed a little looking after, too: only sixty-five, but beginning to act vague and twittersome. Not that Addie ever could come to the point without taking all day about it. And you could scarcely count dumb animals as company, especially not that cat—"Margaret" was it?—which had an unnatural pop-eyed look.

Only went to show what having children got you. Couldn't expect diddly from Carrie, with her track record: throwing away her hardbought college education to bat lashes at a would-be spaceman, then (after dropping Gower like the botched potato he was) unloading her daughter on the Ottos and dancing up the next five years like a good-time girl. Five years! And now she and her *second* husband were reclaiming Kelly Rebecca and depriving poor Addie of what little companionship she did have.

Nor could you expect much from Ollie, who'd never had any smarts to throw away in the first place: birdbrained from the word go, settling right out of high school for a truck driver who grunted no more than twenty words a year and even mumbled grace at Thanksgiving so you scarcely knew when to say Amen. No, forget about Ollie and Walt Hungerford; their hands were full enough getting their own bratboys out of delinquent scrapes every weekend. (Though Mickey the eldest would come home for good before the spring was out, after buying the farm in Cambodia.)

And then there was Bertram L. Jr. alias Buddy alias "Buzz," whose idea of a grown man's career was to prowling around theater catwalks, and him overweight as his late father to boot. Never mentioned any girlfriends either, and Lordy you knew what *that* implied.

So much for children. Undependable, one and all; might as well have stuck to raising chickens. Never in her life had Emily Wunderlich found the slightest use for flightiness. No, down-to-earthiness was what she put stock in; planting both feet firmly on the ground.

Obviously it would be up to her to see to everything—looking after Addie and her animals, managing the rattly Victorian family homestead in Marble Orchard. Ever methodical, Emmy wanted to give the town a good proofread before finalizing negotiations; and this she came to do one weekend in mid-April, that being one of the few tolerable times

(the other being mid-October) for outdoor inspection of Good Old Heartland USA.

Emmy had a walking tour all mapped out. They would head downtown, stroll around Market Square (where the Booth County Courthouse clocktower proclaimed perpetual quarter-to-four) and take a good look at it all. The Wunderlich Bros. grocery, absorbed long ago by A & P; the Dairy Queen that used to be the drygoods place where Aunt Claudia'd kept the books; the ShortKut convenience store on whose site, in former times, had been the boarding house where Uncle Willie'd lived so many years.

"What was his landlady's name? Penrod? Dunlap?"

"No—Mrs. *Damrell*. Widow of a livery stableman."

"That's right," said Addie. "Oh, I'll always remember Grandma finding Uncle Willie's deck of cards. He was feeling poorly, had a touch of flu—"

"Grippe," said Emmy. "She always called it the grippe."

"So she did. Suitcases, too. Anyhow we took him over some soup and jelly and a mustard plaster. 'Bachelors won't take care of themselves,' you know, and lo and behold Grandma found this deck of cards. 'William! What's this *deck of cards* doing in your chest of drawers?' And Uncle Willie, forty if he's a day, said 'I play *solitaire*, Mama'... Not a sweeter man ever lived than Uncle Willie."

"Grandma always called him a lazybones and that's just what he was. Frittering and frivolling his way through life."

"Hum," said Addie.

Women have to be strong because if you don't keep an eye on men every minute, they lose themselves in shiftlessness. So Frieda Wunderlich had taught her daughters and granddaughters, and Emmy for one had found it true as true. Those editors at the *Daily Memorial*! Running around half the time like so many King Charleses with their heads cut off.

But like all maxims it could be taken to extremes. Look at Aunt Claudia! Abrasive teetotal temperament. Chivvying that dull tool Uncle Ned into an early grave; then went more than a little batty herself. Took to visiting Rosewood Cemetery every day, joining all the funerals and acting as permanent star mourner. Umm umm umm.

And dear old Aunt Livy, who'd spent her entire life caring for others—even she lost her grip towards the end, and I don't mean the flu or a suitcase either. Getting down on hands and knees at eighty-three, to teach the Hungerford boys how to shoot marbles properly. Lordy! That had been a sight to give a body pause.

“Did you know Kelly named her guinea pig after him?”

“After whom?”

“Why, Uncle Willie. I think he would have liked that.”

“*Who* would have?”

“Why, Uncle Willie...”

Time, all too obviously, was getting on; they had best be on their way. Was it warm enough to go out without a sweater? And what was Addie calling up the stairs?

“Kelly hawney, we're leaving! And you're coming along—oh yes you are, young lady!”

“Not now, Gramma, I'm PRACTicing.”

(Skeeter had discovered a ukulele in the attic, and on this relic of Grampa Otto's courting days she could plink out a facsimile of “Singin' in the Bathtub,” unless it was supposed to be “Singin' in the Rain.”)

“She is going to *have* to leave that be while I'm here,” Emmy announced. Whatever else happened, she was not about to move back to Marble Orchard until her plinking little great-niece had moved well out.

It distressed Addie that Skeeter seemed to feel no regrets about leaving her home, her schoolmates from grades one through five, even her beloved cat and long-sought, finally-got ponies. Regrets? Skeeter was shamelessly involved in plans for her own going-away party, egging her friends on to vaster extravagances, wishing aloud that she could leave a dozen times so they could plan a dozen such sendoffs.

“Okay!” she'd run home to inform Gramma, “here's the latest: I'm going to hitch the ponies up to Jeff's uncle's neighbor-that-used-to-be-a-milkman's cart, and do it up like Cinderella's pumpkin, right? and get driven to school my last day, and be *hahnded* out at the door in this red velvet gown cut low front 'n' back—”

“Absolutely not!” her mortified grandmother would say. Not that there was a lot for a lowcut gown to show in either direction yet.

Skeeter did not disguise her lack of patience with having to “look upon” Market Square. She’d seen it every week for the past five years; the place was carved as though in stone in her memory. And besides, she wasn’t leaving town for six whole weeks yet and then she’d be coming back to visit later that summer and any old time in the future, so what was the point?

“I gotta take a ride on the wee-wee train,” she reported from upstairs.

“*Where* does she pick up those horrid phrases?” Emmy wanted to know. Television, she supposed; rock ‘n’ roll. Still and all, a wise precaution: the lack of a good clean accessible public toilet for women on weekends in Market Square was too well known. A disgrace, in Emmy’s opinion, considering this was the county seat. You could stand in line at the Courthouse or you could develop concentration. Men, of course, didn’t seem to mind more squalid outlets.

“Daddy used to go in Rosewood,” Addie recalled as they waited on the front porch. “He’d find some tombstone away from everybody and stand up close, like he was praying, and just go.”

“Addie! Don’t give the child ideas!”

“Oh, she can’t hear us out here.”

They stared awhile down Tawe Street with its double row of blossoming trees, all pink and white and scenic.

“Exquisite. Always is, every spring. When I was no older than Kelly they looked just the same.”

“Trees weren’t as tall then,” Emmy objected.

“Well, neither were we. I guess we all kind of grew up together.”

Sixty springs before, in pinafores dyed black, they had been brought to the House With All the Porches to be raised by their grandmother, who’d borne seven of her own and buried two in Rosewood. Sixty showery Aprils later, and the trees *were* taller. Some superannuated, like the twin oaks out back. Others planted by Gustav Wunderlich, whose abruptly-pointed chin had been passed down unto the fourth generation and sharpened even

Skeeter's roundish jaw. That big shade tree on the front lawn: planted in memory of firstborn George, who'd died of typhoid. The goodsized sycamore nearby: for the original Emily Wunderlich, who'd succumbed to TB at the age of twelve.

When Bert Otto married Addie, he moved in and took over caring for the lawns and garden, never reluctant to boast of the results. Bert's trees were planted on birthdays: a flowering dogwood by the back porch for each of the children, Ollie and Carrie and Buddy; three crab apples for the three Hungerford grandsons, in a row near the old chicken house that had survived the grandsons's attempts to blow it up with cherry bombs. And out by the brook, overlooking the railroad tracks: a redbud sapling for Kelly Rebecca.

Who was still loitering upstairs, plink-plank-plunking her ukulele, when Emmy and Addie came back indoors.

"Well, we might as well put our feet up while we wait for her," said Emmy, sitting down at the kitchen table. She took off her sunglasses, produced a stoppered vial and put in her eyedrops, glaring ceilingwards all the while.

"Warm today," sighed Addie.

"Hum?"

"Going to be an early summer, maybe."

Emmy was in no position to shoot her sister a glance as Addie attended to two small bowls, one of German chocolate squares, the other of Kraft caramels. "Too much for my bridgework, of course. But Kelly likes them. Eats them as though there's no tomorrow." Her strong old ex-nurse's fingers lingered on the bowlrim, running round and round it in a twiddly circle.

"I could use an iced tea, Addie. Or some lemonade."

"Oh—yes. There's lemonade..." Calling up the stairs: "Kelly? Want a glass of lemonade?"

"Sure!"

"Well, come down and get it if you've still got legs! I'm not climbing all those steps just to play waitress."

"I should think not," said Emmy, and put away her drops.

Skeeter and ukulele galloped downstairs, the one to fill a glass and noisily empty it. “But it’s so goood,” she said when admonished.

“Well, that’s so,” said Gramma Addie. “Lemonade does do a body good. So does coming home; there’s no place like it.” And she added some highly original sentiments about your heart’s desire being in your own back yard, because if you couldn’t find it there, you hadn’t really lost it in the first place.

“That,” said Great-Aunt Emmy, “doesn’t make a *speck* of sense.”

Skeeter, far from realizing sensibility, was chainpopping caramels when there came the *wooooot* of a freight train’s approach. Gramma and Emmy automatically checked the kitchen clock. Hum. Getting later and later it was. And there the child went, running down to the brook to wave at the passing caboose. Always was a flighty child. She’ll be her mother and the rest of them all over again; mark my words.

“YAH-HOO!” went Skeeter, excited as ever by trainroar. And mingled with it was a squoinketing *eeeenh* like the sound of a ukulele string breaking.

Two

DEMORTUIS

*Short people got no reason
Short people got no reason
Short people got no reason to live.*

—RANDY NEWMAN

Chapter 8

The First of the Svens

By the time she moved to Demortuis, Skeeter Kitefly was a woman—insofar as eleven-year-old anatomy went. To her mother she remained the same problematic little girl as ever, and to the running tab of maternal worries was now added *How would Kelly Rebecca cope, being a provincial New Girl in Town?*

Her mother need not have fretted; at least not about that. Fling Skeeter Kitefly into a dungeon, and inside of a week she would be on happycamper terms with all the other inmates. Move her to a middlesized city, plop her down among eleven-year-old Demortuisians, and inside of a month it would seem like she'd always been a natural-born one of them.

Not that she was a blender into the crowd. Too immediately noticeable for that, for somebody well under five feet tall and less than ninety pounds. Nothing subdued or anonymous about Skeeter Kitefly, by cracky! Her comical doll-like looks fell a trifle short of beautiful, or even unquestionable prettiness; but scarcely a month passed without some matron taking Skeeter's upper cheeks in a single squinchy handful and cooing what a cute, what a darling, what a *precious* little face!

Boys phrased it somewhat differently.

And so did Mrs. Maybrick, teacher of sixth grade at Oswald Elementary, and putter-up with none of this newerfangled nonsense. Her pupils got flunked on the spot for gumchewing; they rose en masse each AM to pledge hand-over-heart allegiance, under God of course and no exceptions made. Strict alphabetic seating too, which placed Skeeter's desk directly behind that of Ginny Kirschwasser, who *was* unquestionably pretty (if you liked the lost-in-the-woods-and-raised-by-deer type).

The girls's first vis-à-vis encounter came when Ginny turned to pass back that week's spelling test, and found a Grand Guignol funnyface being made for her benefit. The sight caused Ginny to let out a shrill sharp bleat, like a lambkin tossed in a blanket; for which she received her first-ever reprimand from a teacher in front of everybody.

Unshed tears of shame blurred Ginny's spelling as she vowed to dislike the madgirl behind her, to never acknowledge or even glance back at her again. But when the test papers were handed forward, Ginny couldn't resist taking one cautious peek—which Skeeter and a goggle-moue were waiting to pounce upon.

No malice intended, of course. Skeeter simply delighted in Ginny's sheepish exclamations, and in surpassing them with her own cackly giggles; even in earning more frequent by-name reprimands from Mrs. Maybrick. And inside of a month Skeeter and Ginny were each other's very best friend, in class and out.

Not that they were kindred spirits, even insofar as eleven-year-old womanhood went. Ginny had been terrorstricken by her menarche, and turned scarlet at the mention of periods and colons and other marks of punctuation. Skeeter, contrariwise, had welcomed her time's arrival; and she collected nicknames for it, such as high tide, That Midol Moment, and "riding the cotton bicycle." (In future years she would sometimes punch men in the stomach—playfully, but *punch*—and say, "THAT'S for being a guy and not having cramps!")

Ebb and ebb, flow and flow. In next to no time the girls were skipping together to Ginny's house after the next to last day of school. Ginny rather dreaded the imminence of seventh grade, and having to leave familiar Oswald for Whitman Junior High and a bunch of strangers; but Skeeter the veteran transplant could hardly wait.

"Don't forget," she was cackling, "we'll have *teenage boys* there—"

—when out of Fate's box, cranked a tad too figuratively, came popping a prime-example jack.

"Yo!" said a Cool Boy, schwinning by on his Cool Boy's bike; no way was it cotton, man. Over the curb he bounded to circle the girls ("Yeep!" went Ginny) and check out their budding prospects before/beside/behind; rewarding them, as he took off down the street again, with a nonchalant over-the-shoulder "Yo-de-ho!"

Then he was gone.

But not before Skeeter, brought to a halt some little while already, uttered a kind of inhaled squeal with glottal twist.

“Did you *see* that?” she wanted to know. Skeeter herself lacked the proper focus. Her bantam blue eyes might have been brighter and clearer than Ginny’s doe-browns, but like all the Kitefly features they fell a trifle short. Glasses took up the slack, but Skeeter’s were “dorky spastic” hornrims that she made a point of continually losing while she lobbied for stylish metalframes. As a result she spent a lot of the meantime squinting.

“Oh,” said Ginny, “that’s just Troy Janssen showing off.”

“Janssen! He must be Swedish!”

“Is not. He’s always lived around here.”

“You know what I mean. Ooh he’s a Sven! a Bjorn! a Lars! He is a *Laplander!*”

Skeeter and Ginny were experts on all things Lappish, having been partners on Mrs. Maybrick’s big Social Studies project with Scandinavia as their assigned topic. When it came to Troy Janssen, the Bambi-fostered Ginny might be slower off the mark, but she had one authentic advantage:

“You KNOW him?”

“Sure. He goes to my church.”

An instant-convert’s hand shot out and clutched Ginny’s arm.

※

The announcement that Kelly Rebecca Kitefly would be accompanying Ginny Kirschwasser to JayCee (the Oswald Avenue Christian Gospel Church’s Wednesday Evening Youth Group) was variously received.

Ginny’s mother, who volunteered to give the girls rides there and back, thought it So Nice and What a Good Idea. Mrs. Kirschwasser was very devout, a church pillar, her devout church pillary hand administering the such-a-*precious* squinch to Skeeter’s upper cheeks. Regular attendance at Sunday morning worship, she predicted, would soon follow; and another tenant be gained for Abraham’s bosom.

Representing the agnostic side were Skeeter’s mother and stepfather ARnold, who preferred to spend their Sunday mornings sleeping late, and counted neither churchgoing nor

churchabsence as a worrywart on the parental running tab. But what with school letting out, and three unoccupied months of summer vacation ahead, well, maybe it would be okay...

For the contrariwise, of course, there was Mercedes Benison, who at seventeen had seen it all. Overtly suspicious of organized religion, Sadie feared that Skeeter trembled on the verge of Jesus Freakishness, which was much verged-on that spring:

“I’m telling you He’s soooo neat! So outtasight! He’s such a gaa-aas! *The Lord is just such a turn-on!*”

Sadie took up sentinel duty in a chair opposite the front door on the night of Skeeter’s first JayCee. A fine old Black Mass thunderstorm showed up for the occasion, complete with cracks and booms and banshee howls. Sadie found it difficult to concentrate on her Tarot cards: any moment she expected the earth to yawn and a glassy-eyed zombie to emerge, spouting Scriptural quotations as had Huckleberry Finn after Tom Sawyer’s measles fever.

CRACK! The door opened and in sloshed Skeeter—no umbrella, of course; uncooler than hornrims. Sadie scanned her for signs of piety, genuflection, crossbearing, or denunciation of the peace symbol as a diabolic pentagram.

“So?” she demanded.

“‘A needle pulling threaaad...’ O! dear sister! I pray the Lord your soul to keep/ when you lay you down to sleep.”

“*Cut—it—out.* How’d it go, really?”

CRACK! Tremendous flash of lightning. “Look!” cried Skeeter, “God’s taking pictures of us!”

Sadie chased her up the stairs. “That’s not a bit funny! What *did* you do? Sing hymns and psalms?”

“Yeah! Listen to this one:

*We don’t eat fruitcake ‘cause fruitcake tastes GROHsss
and ‘gross’ will make you puke till you’re a ghost.
Can you imagine an awfuller sight
than a man puking fruitcake? O God what a fright!”*

This was actually a relic of Brownie troop bacchanals. When it came to group crooning, JayCee made an honest attempt to accommodate popular music—if it could be wedged into the fisherman’s shoes of Christian interpretability. So “Bridge Over Troubled Water” was deemed acceptable, as was “What the World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love” (but not “One Toke Over the Line, Sweet Jesus”).

JayCee was there, after all, to provide young people with an outlet for good old cleanlimbed middleclass fun: a wholesome alternative to iniquity dens like Whitman Park, where Sadie Benison and other bad influences did their hanging out. (Not to mention their rumored drug trafficking, or their indulgence in Lordonlyknowswhatallelse.)

To counteract such dangerous kookiness there stood, like a rock, the Christian Gospel Church; and in its basement, like a cave, was a gymnasium where JayCee got together on Wednesday evenings to play run-around-but-don’t-get-sweaty games. Then following a soda pop social break the boys and girls were separated, split up into small groups, and given Heartfelt, True-Life Examples to Follow by counselors with names like Curtis and Bev, who had the above ‘n’ beyond look of people who asked everyone believing in fairies to clap their hands.

But whether or not Tinker Bell lived, Skeeter Kitefly did experience epiphany at her first JayCee. She and Ginny were perched on the gym bleachers when Troy Janssen, like a Sven! a Bjorn! a Lars! put in an Appearance. The girls lost no time in clutching each other.

“Get him to come over here.”

“Me! You’re the one who’s goopy about him.”

“You’re the one who knows him. *I’m* a perfect stranger. Dare you to wave at him!”

“Oh right. Like I’m sure he’ll come running if *I* wave at him. *You* wave at him if you want him to come over.”

“Like you don’t, hunh? Okay, how’ll I get his attention? Strip bare naked and do the Funky Chicken?”

“SKEEter!”

“Dare you to *wink* at him if I can get him over here.”

“Oh yeah right.”

“Dare you!”

“Well (giggle)...”

So Skeeter waved and beckoned with crooked finger while Ginny threw in assorted blushes and blinks, and the object of their preteen desire cracked his born-for-poppin’ knuckles—before heading for the bleachers oh my God *squeal!*

Tall he was, for an eighth-grader-elect. Fair he was, with carefully casual flaxen hair and Nordic-colored sideburns. Suave he was, sporting a dimple in his chin and a reputation as stylemonger, fieldplayer, and general stud-in-the-making. Possibly he shaved; probably he smoked; certainly he was anointed with whiffable Right Guard and Vitalis Dry Control. This, in short, was indeed a Laplander: the first to enter Skeeter’s love life, though by no means the last.

Closer he came, and closer!—and then he was stiffarming the wall by their bleacher seats, lounging against it as he glanced up at the girls with one flaxen eyebrow cocked, the other a-doodled.

His mouth opened.

He spoke.

“Hey there,” Troy Janssen said, and sauntered away.

But not before Skeeter felt her sissybritches curl up and head for high hog heaven.

*

The following Saturday—Tricia Nixon’s wedding day, of all the good days in the year—the girls were sprawled tummy-down on the Kirschwasser patio, eating Screaming Yellow Zonkers and trying not to get fingerglop on their borrowed *Target*. This was Whitman Junior High’s yearbook, obtained so that Skeeter might moan and Ginny sigh over Troy Janssen’s seventh-grade pictures.

Behold! He looked so much more sophisticated, mature, *finished* than the bratty bra-strap-snappers they’d had to endure in Mrs. Maybrick’s class.

“Think about kissing him.”

“(Sigh.)”

“I bet every kiss would leave a hickey.”

“SKEEter!”

Three whole months till they could consort as schoolmates! Four whole nights till the next JayCee, and who knew if Troy might be there—if he might show up again all summer long? Measures would have to be taken, and directly. They turned to the Demortuis phone book and combed through its columns, whittling the possibilities down from twenty-seven to nine, to three, to one address... and one telephone number.

“Let’s do it. Let’s call him.”

“Oh, I don’t knooooow—my mother says a girl should never call a boy on the phone.”

“Oh Ginny get with it. These are the Seventies! We’ve got to be liberated-type women! Besides, don’t you *want to*?”

“Well (giggle)...”

Indoors then. The telephone. The dial. The ring. And another. And another. And—

“Yes?” Testily abrupt voice.

“Um,” went Skeeter, till now a stranger to qualms. “Um, is Troy there?”

“Oh,” said the voice. “This’s me.”

Both girls struggled to apply an ear to the receiver.

“Yeah... sure, I remember you. What’s happenin’?... oh yeah? Both of you, hunh? No kidding... well, you could always drop by my place... yeah, both of you... naah, there’s nobody here but me tonight... that’s right... yeah. You got it. Second house from the corner. It’s stucco. *Pink* stucco.”

“GEE WHIZ!” went Ginny.

The next half-hour saw the girls doing their all-too-level best, given Ginny’s limited cosmetic and wardrobe resources, to enhance budding anatomy into endowments. Not that Jolly Dame Nature had been stingy with either, given Ginny’s unquestionable prettiness and Skeeter’s immediate noticeability. But the age of twelve does not a teenager make; nor yet cause cups to overflow.

Was there stuffing? Would be telling.

Skeeter, though, would have cheerfully laid Demortuis waste if she could have gone to Troy’s house in height-of-fashion hotpants rather than dorky spastic shorts.

Adorned if not augmented, the girls set off (“to the movies and back by nine,” Mrs. Kirschwasser was told) with jaws at work on Juicy Fruit to offset the last residue of Screaming Yellow Zonkers. In less than twenty minutes they had struck pink stucco and were rapping on Troy’s front door. And when Troy opened that door with his own hands, each girl uttered a little glottal-twisted squeal.

Resplendent he was, in an apple-green Van Heusen Body Shirt for the Feelings in Your Head, topped off by a genuine brass medallion. And O! there was Right Guard (whiff) and O! there was Vitalis (whiff) and O! there was...

Chef Boy-ar-dee?

No matter. His mouth opened. He spoke. “¿*Que pasa?*” Troy said, and “*Entrée.*”

The girls were given to understand that their host’s parents were away on a weekend camping trip, leaving Troy to batch it out on his lone own—something he’d done “lots of times, sure, all the time,” which was a baldfaced lie right there. His kid brother was in fact away at summer camp, but Mr. and Mrs. Janssen were merely enjoying a Saturday night on the town and would be back about midnight. In the meantime Troy’s grandmother had called to check if he was “all right.” Hence Troy’s testiness.

And would he be feeling testy again tonight?

The little brunette chick (decent face, skinny legs, doubtful chest) looked scared and skittish and went *hee hee hee* whenever she couldn’t resist taking a peek at him; while her little blonde friend (shorter legs, better butt, funnier face) poked around the living room and began this weird gabble about how much the Janssen house reminded her of someplace she used to live, it was so much alike, just so exactly the same my GOD it was the *very same house*, she had been *born* in this house and raised here too, wasn’t that curious how very bizarre and what a coincidence!

“Now wait a minute,” Troy tried to object, but the crazy little blonde was tear-assing through the dining room, the breakfast nook, the kitchen, making up all sorts of stuff en route like “There’s where the piano was!” and “That used to be a china cabinet!” and “Where was it we kept the rubber plant? Oh, I remember—it was *upstairs!*”

“SKEEter!” went the brunette.

“Rubber plant, hunh?” said Troy. “Well, maybe we oughta go check this out. You never know—could be your rubber plant’s still up there.”

Toward and up the stairs he maneuvered his little guests, a carefully casual hand on each. Blondie matched his nonchalance but was clung to by the brunette, whose *hee hee hees* were getting shriller. Troy wondered if he wasn’t rushing things, maybe he should feed them a couple of Scotches first? But if he swiped that much more than usual he risked his old man’s realizing there was an in-house whiskey leak. And yo-de-ho! Was it even necessary?

He’d taken part in make-out parties and had his way (to an extent and degree) with several seventh-grade girls, but not with two at once, and *never* in his very own pinch-me-Jesus bedroom! Maybe these two weren’t teenagers yet but who the hell cared? They were going to have themselves a slumber party and the possibilities boggled Troy’s Lappish mind. Through it ran riotous thoughts, crass male thoughts such as no woman was ever safe from, not even Tricia Nixon:

—man these chicks are hot for it man do they want it man these babes are beggin’ for it man oh man—

And the ultimate: *God, wait till I tell the guys about THIS.*

His bedroom was filled with standard-issue junk and a powerful Spaghetti-O aroma, Troy having dined in.

“Mmm, sure smells good in here!” said Skeeter. “We sure would like some Spaghetti-O’s, and I bet you didn’t save us any. You *owe* us now, Troy.”

“Oh, I’ll pay you back,” Troy grinned at her, at Ginny demurely awash in perfumed perspiration. “You know, now that you mention it, I think I got some sauce here on my shirt. Guess I better take it off.”

“*Yeeeeeep!*” went Ginny, her lips stretched out in a *hee hee* rictus; she would have made for the door had Troy not suavely blocked it. “Don’t worry,” he told her. “I won’t be embarrassed.”

Unbutton. Unbutton. Unbutton.

Skeeter waited till he had that apple-green Van Heusen halfway off his shoulders before making her move. Then instant-convert hands shot out, took hold of Troy’s hairless

pecks and copped a double feel before giving them a big fat shove. Troy staggered back with arms entangled and landed flush against Ginny, whose doe-browns bulged out of their sockets Whipcat-style as she shoved him back toward Skeeter—pickle in the middle!

But not for long, as the girls with unspoken consensus sent their pickle tumbling facedown onto his unmade bed. And before the astonished Troy could do more than go “Hey!” and “Wha’?”, Skeeter had her eighty-eight-pound self astride his legs while her cute little darling little *precious* little fingertips made themselves immediately noticeable against Troy’s ribcage.

“We’ll be going to Whitman too this fall,” she breezily informed him as he bucked and winged. “So are you gonna ask us out, Troy? You gonna ask us to dance? Say you’re gonna ask us out, Troy-ee! Ask us to dance!”

The bed beneath them went *eeeeenh eeeenh eeeenh*, and the shirt on Troy’s frenetic back went *rip rend tear*, as pinch hitter Ginny came sailing off the bench to help pin down Troy’s medallion-stabbed upper half.

“If he doesn’t say yes he ought to be spanked!” Ginny suggested: the most daring, above ‘n’ beyond words she had ever uttered aloud. Skeeter, contrariwise, was already yanking at Troy’s back pockets with apparent if not authentic expertise.

“Are you gonna, Troy-ee? You gonna you gonna you gonna?”

What Troy was gonna do, if truth be known, was let fly the contents of his bladder as his flares flopped and a Fruit of the Loomy moon arose. “*Are you gonna?*” the spanking twosome above him chanted. “You gonna you gonna you gonna you gonna—”

“YES!” came the word from the man in the moon. “YES YES YES JUH-HEE-ZUSS YES!”

*

All that summer and the following fall Skeeter and Ginny waited for Troy to call them, ask them out, invite them to dance. But he never did, and in fact was never the same again: no more a stud-in-the-making but a furtive displaced evacuee, the sort of ex-Cool Boy who goes prematurely flabby and develops a stoop. The girls were unforgiving about this, and for the rest of their very best friendship they would regard Troy Janssen as a Heartfelt, True-Life Example to Avoid.

“Men!” Ginny would fume at his memory.

“No,” Skeeter would correct her. “*Svens.*”

Chapter 9

Visions of Sugarbongs

“Madwoman!” cried Skeeter.

“Madgirl!” cried Mercedes.

And each fell on the other’s neck, as though they hadn’t just spent Christmas together or driven down to Keening in the same car.

Their parents had given Skeeter permission to spend New Year’s Eve at Sadie’s college dorm, already open again for residents. What with Skeeter being halfway through the eighth grade, it was thought she ought to get a preparatory taste of collegiate life; also that her folks might get a peaceful quiet weekend in the process. So on Saturday the 30th the girls climbed into Sadie’s Gremlin and zooped off to the University of Nilnisi, a hundred miles away from adult supervision.

Skeeter knew she was expected to act bedazzled by this. Like an adult herself, in practical fact; or at least Sadie was, so Skeeter could be one vicariously. (Rooty-toot-toot on a blue kazoo.) Hence her *Madwoman!* cry and fall-upon-neck when they arrived at the dorm and Sadie said, “Well, this is it: La Pad.”

But after that first flush of dramatics, Skeeter took a look around and found La Pad not only crowded but no bigger than her own bedroom at home. Which was definitely smaller than Sadie’s old bedroom, which Sadie wouldn’t let Skeeter move into despite Sadie’s being here at college for most of the last four months and, presumably, most of the next four years. Which was like a really hoggish stance for Sadie to take *and* stick to, if you asked Skeeter.

The girls had never actually shared a room before, unless you counted that ill-fated family vacation to Fort Lauderdale three summers ago, when they’d had to share not just

motel rooms but motel beds and ended up having an outright punch-and-pummel fight one night, when neither would own up to having been the first to kick the other.

But now here they were, practically adults, the old team together again and occupying the narrow spaces between a couple of bunks and a couple of chairs and a dollhouse desk and a cupboard or two (three if you included the closet) plus a “bathroom” containing a sink and toilet but no fuller-length facilities.

“Kind of small, isn’t it?” said Skeeter. “You must get cramps in here a lot.”

“Don’t be gross! I didn’t bring you down here to hear you being gross.”

“Did you bring me down here so I could be *frigid*? Why’s it so cold?”

“It’s winter, stupid. You’ll warm up getting unpacked.”

La Pad had a radiator that produced a lot of noise but little else, and neither girl had yet taken off a coat or glove or scarf or the green tam-o’-shanter from Sadie’s red shagcut or the cerise beret from Skeeter’s blonditude.

A suitcase was hauled onto one of the slender beds, which received it with a shriek.

“How can you sleep on that thing?”

“Oh, you know me—like a log, every night. Of course I get some help down here—”

“From guys? Who? How many? How often? What’s their names?”

“God what a sordid little mind you’ve got. Hurry up and get unpacked.”

Not about to be bossed around at this late date, Skeeter wandered over to a window and glanced out at a gravel lot. Some dead-looking trees. Certainly no strapping young men, higher-educated or otherwise. She breathed on the glass and with a still-mittened finger wrote her initials, the date, and WASH ME on it.

“Cut that out, you’ll leave streaks. Why aren’t you unpacking?”

“It sure was nice of you to coax Mom and ARnold into letting me come down here to freeze my patoot off.”

“Oh shut up, it’s not that cold.” Sadie stashed her empty valise and joined Skeeter at the window. “C’mon, kiddo. We’re going to have a good time. *You* always manage to have fun no matter what, or where, so I don’t know what you’re worried about.”

“Worried! Who’s worried? I’m not worried. I just wish I could feel my *feet* is all. I bet they’re turning baby blue.” Her small round face lit up. “Actually that’d be COOwull! Think how my feet would set off my eyes! And what I could do with toenail polish—”

Sadie gave her a hug, less formal than fall-upon-neck. “I tell you how we’ll warm the place up. We’ll have a party, a New Year’s Eve party here tomorrow night, and I’ll invite all my friends over.”

“A college party! Will there be smoking and drinking and lots of making out?”

“You better believe it,” Sadie assured her. “Of course, how much of each depends on who comes.”

They went out to lay in party provisions before it got too dark, and Skeeter took her first prolonged look at Keening or “Tearytown” as it was called in the underground press.

For several years now, the University of Nilnisi had been in both underground and streetlevel news notoriously often; and what with rallies and demonstrations, symposia and moratoria, clashes between students and the administration and students versus the police, Skeeter halfway expected to be caught in some uprising melee.

But no such luck. The campus seemed deserted; there was hardly any traffic; a few frayed McGovern posters fluttered from telephone poles in the nippy wind. Of course it *was* between semesters, and Sadie said things were very different when classes were going on, but still...

Then too the Nilnisi Epitaphs, “them Fightin’ Eppies,” had failed to make a Bowl for the first time in seven seasons, and that couldn’t be doing much to boost local liveliness, but still...

It was Saturday night (almost) in a bonafide college town! Weren’t things supposed to be *happening*? Where were the embroilments, the kegs of brew on tap? And why was Sadie sucking back happy breaths as if she couldn’t get enough of this funkily rundown neighborhood? It looked just like Oswald Avenue, which Sadie’d always despised and dismissed as Bummerburg—“pieds-à-terre in need of paint,” she’d called it only last week, trying to sound like a rooty-toot college student.

So what was the marvelous difference between there ‘n’ then and here ‘n’ now?

Wotta Lotta Krappa.

At the mom-and-pop co-op, Sadie wouldn't buy Fritos or Ruffles or anything that Skeeter considered party food, but filled a basket instead with fruit and cheese and carrots and celery and some timid-looking mushrooms. All the while there and on the way out she lectured (as she had on Christmas Eve and again on Christmas Day) about the virtues of organic fat-free vegetarianism.

"All *right* already!" said Skeeter. "From this moment on I'll eat nothing but turnips. Mashed turnips, and a patchouli sandwich or two, and of course Hawaiian Punch."

"God I almost forgot," said Sadie, and stopped in a ShortKut to add three flavors of Boone's Farm.

They encountered no strapping young men on the way back to the dorm, nor anyone else for that matter. The students of Nilnisi had wrestled the University into keeping its dorms open between semesters, but few appeared to be taking advantage of this. Not that Sadie seemed aware of any absence, or bothered by it, or in any hurry to send out invitations to tomorrow night's party.

Her own roommate Winky was still away for the holidays, leaving a bed vacant for Skeeter's use. On the wall above it was a poster of an old Chinese man asking where W. C. Fields would sleep, and the Great Man replying, "On my right side, with my mouth open."

Skeeter arranged herself and mouth accordingly beneath a heap of blankets. "Hey—just how many people do you know around here, anyway?"

"Plenty," said Sadie around a pasted toothbrush.

"Yeah, but I mean you've only been here since September."

(Spit.) "Don't worry about it." (Rinse.)

"I'm not worried! When's your roomie coming back?"

"Tuesday, I think. Or Wednesday. I don't know." Sadie turned off the overhead and caused another bedshriek by climbing undercover. "If she *was* back, there wouldn't be room enough for you, so why hurry her up?"

Pause in the chilly darkness. Then: "*What's* her name again?"

Sadie, knowing very well that Skeeter knew the answer, kept tightly silent; and Skeeter uttered her first cacklelaugh of the visit.

“What kind of name is Winky, anyway?”

“What kind of name is Skeeter?”

“Hey! Skeeter is a *magnificent* name. Six queens of Belgium were named Skeeter.”

“Oh yeah? Which ones?”

“Skeeter the First, Skeeter the Second, Skeeter the Third...”

Madwoman suggested she shut up and go to sleep, and Madgirl said hey! Sadie’d started it, by rudely being born first.

*

Twenty-one hours later Skeeter clomped up dorm stair and down dorm hall in one of her Christmas presents, a pair of blood-red Superclunky platform shoes that increased her height to a full five feet (almost).

She and her sister had gotten up at noon and spent the rest of the day redecorating La Pad. With balloons inflated and streamers strum, candles lit and lava lamp installed, their attention turned to personal appearance. By nightfall one girl was primed and the other pumped up.

Even to Skeeter’s accustomed eye Sadie looked a sophisticate in her emerald tam, mohair top and twenty-four-inch bells; while Skeeter was her usual buttoncute self from beret down to Superclunks. The only obvious obstacle to their throwing a really bitchin’ New Year’s spree, besides the lack of hardstuff, was the shortage of guests counted on to provide it.

Ahem.

By 10 PM Sadie’s behindhand invites had brought forth only Bridget Costello, a placid plumpish friend from Freshman English, and another bottle of Boone’s Farm. Of course there was also Bernie Farkas the partial Marxist, whose ongoing pursuit of Bridget might have seemed lupine had Bernie not been so dorkesque.

He had sacrificed all other body hair to raise a set of radical muttonchops, but clad in these he reminded Skeeter not so much of Ché or Fidel as of Rabbit in *Winnie-the-Pooh*: busy days, busy nights, never let things come to you, always go and fetch them. Sadie disliked Bernie for interrupting their English teacher with many beggared questions, and for trying to

seduce Bridget (who was into macramé and biofeedback) by extolling the Irish Republican Army.

He went lengthily on about a Sean O'Somebody who was fasting in prison, while Bridget sipped Strawberry Hill and nodded a lot and their hostess stood over the telephone dialing, dialing, her miffed snit growing, growing: she had promised her little sister a college blowout, by God! and a blowout they were going to have, by God! even if that meant inviting by-and-large strangers, and dispatching Skeeter to go do so.

Hence her clomping up stair and down hall, knocking on unresponsive door after door, feeling like she was in some really weird dream. And after each knock the same stillness, the same echoless hush.

Till Skeeter reached the very last door on the top floor. This opened to reveal a yawning Third Worlder in striped pajamas and polka-dot robe, with a vague idea something was amiss.

"...a fire drill is this?"

"That's right!" said Skeeter. "A Chinese fire drill!" And not bothering with further ado, she carried him bodily off.

Very young-looking and thin-looking he was, having escaped from a despotism somewhere east of Mecca and west of Manila, only to end up in the University of Nilnisi's Foreign Exchange program. Watching hours of American TV in order to choose himself the ideal American name, he had stumbled across *All in the Family*.

"Please be calling me Archie."

"Okay! You can call *me* Jughead!" said Skeeter, smacking her lips; and "Look what I found! Isn't he cuuuute?" she demanded of Sadie and company.

"Oh, is a party here?" said Archie, politely retying his robe-belt.

An older man—perhaps as old as thirty—had arrived while Skeeter was out scouting, and Sadie introduced him with uncharacteristic fluster as João. He was an art major; a self-exile from Lisbon, whose estranged father was something big in cork; he wore a rakish corduroy jacket with ultrawide lapels; had a flask of clear liquid to mix with the Boone's Farm; and kept toying with the pompon on Sadie's tam. João murmured rather than spoke, and sounded like a cross between Sugar Bear and a Portugese Pepé Le Pew.

Sadie, presenting this combo to Skeeter, took hold of her arm in a manner instantly recognizable as the hot-puppies grip, the thank-you-Santa! clinch, with thumbnail pressure translatable as “We are in the presence of the essence of Cool.”

Well fiddle-dee-dee. Skeeter had her own exotic man-of-the-world-type escort (and him already down to his jammies) so nyaah to you, Mercedes Benison.

Bernie Farkas tried to catechize João about guerrilla warfare in Mozambique, and ended up waxing froth till Sadie got pissaway red in the face and even Bridget looked alarmed. But João was at ease in tight situations, having a natural affinity for bottlenecks. He lounged in Bernie’s abandoned chair; found accommodation on his knees for Sadie’s fair bottom; bobbed a nodding wink at Bridget; and turned Archie into an icebreaker by asking if he’d seen any good movies lately.

“Indeed yes, the one called *1776*,” said Archie. “What an education it was besides an entertainment too. I liked best the Benjamin Franklin, he did a funny dance.”

This last word made Skeeter leap for the radio—dish up some dance music quick!—no, not Donovan’s “Epistle to Dippy”—but Elton John’s latest, aw-reet! Lay hands on Archie and do the Crocodile Rock, oh lawdy momma with a-hoppin’ and a-boppin’ and a YAAAAA yah-yah-yah-yah-yah—

It was just as well that Skeeter and Archie were both of smallish build, as there was no room in La Pad for more than miniature boogaloo.

“You are perhaps sixteen?” Archie ventured.

“Thirteen-and-a-half!” said Skeeter. “You’re dancing with jailbait here!”

“Now, about Mozambique—” Bernie insisted.

“Suppose we change the subject,” murmured João.

“We are talking here about the repression of a movement! I can’t put it more clearly than that—”

“*You* are talking there and you *are* a movement!” Sadie told him; but João shrugged and winked and encouraged everyone to have more wine: “I have, let us say, goosed it up a little.”

On which note there popped in a couple of changelings known to Tearytown as Waif and Stray, the Stonehenge Twins. They regarded the partiers with protuberant eyes (on

Waif's part) and languid lids (on Stray's).

"Halloo halloo—"

"—and who are *you*?"

"My sister Skeeter," Sadie gnarled, "and you guys took your own sweet time."

"Lotta parties tonight, Miss Mercedeeez—"

"—lotta calls to make—"

"Like *where*?"

"Oh—over there—"

"—outta town—"

"—but here we be: New Year's Eve tea party mix. Primo. Enjoy."

Sadie gaped at the minute offering. "This is your idea of a nickle bag? Since when?"

"Since this stuff's special—"

"—comes from outta town—"

"—not the usual boo a-tall."

"Not your usual oregano, *you* mean. Well all right. Um... you guys'll stay for a bit, won't you?"

"Shall we?" said Waif.

"Surely," said Stray. "Brought the bong along."

So load it, light it, pass it around from hand to lip; don't be bogarting but toke away! toke away! And most of them did, though João declined a turn at the ceramic trough, preferring to roll his conical own Continental-style; and "Thank you please," yawned Archie behind a courteous hand, "I am not being a smoker."

Skeeter on the other hand was wild to take her very first hit, her best shot at getting high like a practical adult.

"Slow and deep and hold it in," Sadie instructed.

"I know that! I'm not some dumb kid!" She applied herself to the mouthpiece slowly, deeply, with a steady *sssucckkkk*—gag! choke! HUCK HUCK HUCK, sounding like runaway Jim on the fogbound raft.

There was genial laughter from her elders and somnolent concern from Archie.

“Mmmm *boy* that’s good grass,” coughed Skeeter. “So how soon before I’m ripped? Does it happen instantaniciously? Or when?”

No response from Sadie or João, who’d moved on to debate the designs and color schemes of La Pad’s wall posters. That one on the bathroom door: *I Can’t Believe I Ate the Whole Thing (You Ate It, Ralph)* in flaming DayGlo purple, yellow, pink, and burnt orange.

“Powerful. Vivid.”

“Lurid, even.”

“Cosmic,” declared the Stonehenge who dabbled in bathroom-stall graffiti, mostly seaside vistas full of Joshua trees and coyotes going *arooooo*.

“Quadraphonic,” objected the other Stonehenge.

“Like how?”

“Like scrubwomen. Cockeyed scrubwomen.”

“Ooh yass... that is it, man. Cockeyed old scrubwomen. Look at ‘em looking through the window.”

“Where?” said Skeeter. “I wanna see!” She strained to make out the poster’s hidden tenants with small round eyes that were unimpeachably bright clear blue but a trifle shortsighted, even at the best of times.

“Without a doubt,” Waif was saying. “Unless—”

“—are you seeing?—”

“—cello players. Fat ones.”

“Blind ones?”

“What do *you* think?”

“Fat blind cello players? Li’l bit better no doubt.”

“A little bit *better*?” cried Skeeter. “Are you guys kidding or what?” She turned to her sister for assistance, but Sadie and João had disappeared behind the bathroom door to extend their debate.

Placid Bridget held out her plumpish wrist, on which Spiro Agnew’s hands pointed way the hell past midnight; so the remaining partiers wished each other *Feliz Año Nuevo*. Archie had fallen asleep, so Skeeter didn’t get an entirely satisfactory New Year’s kiss out of him, or out of the bong either as she took her third and longest-held pull.

“Nothing’s happening!” she wailed. “I’m not high yet! I don’t see any scrubwomen or cello players! When is the *rush* going to hit me?”

“Don’t sweat it, li’l babe,” said Waif. “You don’t ever space out the first time.”

“What do you mean? Why not?”

“Well... like, you don’t just pick up an ax and sound right away like Jerry Garcia, dig? Gotta keep at it, practice—”

“—like playing the cello—”

“—no lie. Else how you gonna tell your ragweed from your Mexican, am I right? Yo—” (to Stray) “—remember Momma Sleeze? Used to take her old kitty litter—”

“—’n’ call it ‘hash.’ Yeah. Talk about your bad shit, man...”

This was entirely too much for Skeeter. “Are you saying you gave me *catpoop* to smoke and sat there watching me *inhale* it? How the hell’m I supposed to practice getting high on goddam CATPOOP?”

She might have sprung upon the Stonehenges then and there, had her stomach not let out a terrible caged-beast growl.

“I,” she discovered, “have got a serious case of the munchies.”

Waif grinned, and “You’ll get used to ‘em in time,” said Stray.

“I mean it! I want pizza,” Skeeter told them. “I want Chinese,” she said to Bridget and Bernie and the fast-asleep Archie. “I wanna hot dog bag o’ popcorn chocolate bar—”

She fetched up against the desk with its plates of wilting saladstuff (yuggh) and wrinkled her retroussé nose. “Okay, that’s it. That’s it! That’s—everybody gimme all your nickels and dimes. I’m going out and score us some candy, right? C’mon c’mon! Sadie’ll never have to ever have to know!”

A double handful of spare change accompanied Skeeter’s stomp-clomp off in search of undefended vending machines.

“Maybe one of us should go too?” Bridget wondered.

“Keep an eye on her,” said the bonged-out Bernie.

“Transcendental,” agreed the Twins, and turned their own lids inside out.

Baby Ruth and Butterfinger, Hershey's this and Nestlé's that, Snickers and a Bit o' Honey, all of which Skeeter crammed into her gullet on the way back upstairs. The results would probably be atrocious. Sadie and Sugar Bear better be done with the bathroom, tee hee hee!

So first-timers couldn't get high, hey? ho? hee? Hell, the writers of that rulebook hadn't reckoned with the likes of Kelly Rebecca Kitefly. In Belgian that meant *I can get high on an Eskimo Pie*, by George and Jove and the Crocodile Rock. Cling to that bannister! Her feet just wouldn't stay stood; they'd never had them a better time and she guessed they never would. Oh lawdy momma! Make way for the Madgirl Wonder!

She found decidedly fewer people in La Pad. The bong was gone and its keepers with it; but João lingered to kill off balloons with a conical roach, and across Winky's bed lay Archie on his right side with his mouth open.

Even at this wee hour Sadie retained her green tam-o'-shanter, and over her shoulders was João's rakish art-major's jacket, but she'd mislaid her mohair somewhere and Skeeter noticed Sadie's chestfreckles forming a definite pattern. Coded message of some sort? She set out to decipher it but got sidetracked by goosebumps the size of *bumblebees*, so far out!

Archie sat up rubbing his eyes. "The party is over? Time to go split?"

But Skeeter was tee-heeing too hard to answer, wiggled out on a sugarjag that escalated into a total flipflop spaz attack, oh woe! can't breathe! Bent over backwards she collapsed off her Superclunks, João and Sadie kneeling by her side: was she okay? was she okay?

"No way!" Skeeter gasped, "*I think I'm in labor!*"

So push! push! they cried as one, and with a YAAAAA yah-yah-yah-yah—
—she delivered a little invisible baby, swatting his or her little invisible butt.

I can't believe I ate the whole thing. DayGlo by lava lamp: vivid, even lurid. Futuristic purpleface turning to nausea, mouth contorted, distorted eyeballs bulging hubcap-huge, their veins as thick and spirally as telephone cords. Oh, ulp! Somebody hasten with the basin! "*I can see I had your funnnnn...*"

"You can see what I've had to put up with," Sadie grumbled.

"A student of the finer arts she'll be," murmured João.

“Excuse please,” said Archie, “but is she drunken?”

And Skeeter Kitefly, looking through all kinds of windows, threw back her head and burst out anew.

Chapter 10

Spookacious

Skeeter had no intention of ever growing up, of course, or old, or fat (yuggh) but adults were always asking what she wanted to “be” when (not if) she did the first of these.

Yeah—right. Like she was ever going to be five full feet tall, or would ever *want* to be. Grownups couldn’t be buttoncute, or have any authentic fun, or even take a proper bathtub wallow. Forget it.

But the adults kept on asking, and for a long time in pubescence Skeeter would tell these buttinskies she was going to “be” a nurse. For quite a long time she believed it herself. Gramma Otto had been an RN and a good one, leaving no doubt that being a nurse was where it was at. Smoothing fevered brows seemed a decent enough way to make money, and candy stripers got to wear peppermint-stick uniforms besides.

But then Skeeter entered high school, and learned that to become a Health Care Provider you had to chop up worms and frogs and—get this!—*fetal pigs*, which was so completely gross a notion you knew they must’ve made it up as a joke, right? Pukey the Fee-tal Pig, tra la lolly: th-th-th-that’s all, folks.

Where could such a road lead in the end but to morgues and corpses? Skeeter had no problem dealing with the diseased or infirm, but getting involved with The Dead—to the point of slicing them open and groping inside—was just too utterly spookacious. Like being forced to assist your mother in disemboweling a raw Thanksgiving turkey: GROHsss. Skeeter preferred ham anyhow; it came decently outfitted in tin, and was such a yummy shade of pink to boot.

So in her very first month of high school she managed to divest herself of all professional ambition; and when the kibitz crowd persisted in asking what she wanted to

“be,” Skeeter would say a gameshow contestant. Meanwhile there were far more pressing questions to answer, like what to wear to the Halloween dance.

After much biting of knuckle and creasing of brow, she decided to go as a vampire. Skeeter Kitefly was probably the least vampirish-looking creature ever born, but how better to beguile guys than in chalk-white fright makeup and a long black wig, plus a ghoulish gown that by dint of pinning here and unpinning there could be made lowcuttier and skintightier once she was out of parental eyeshot.

This took rather longer than anticipated. Living only seven blocks away from school, Skeeter was ready to walk there and/or back and maybe score some extracurricular trick-or-treat goodies en route; but ARnold would not hear of it. He was aghast at the idea of a young girl out alone after dark in that neighborhood of wizening grotesqueries, sure to be laced with razor blades on October 31st.

So good old ARnold agreed to drive Skeeter to the dance, together with three of her eighth-grade gang retained on holding-pattern option till they got settled and could strike up high school friendships. ARnold approved of this arrangement and called it carpooling; aghast or not, he’d sighed at the idea of driving one girl a mere seven blocks. There was a war going on in the Middle East or somewhere, with a lot of talk about embargoes and shortages, and ARnold—normally the sweetest-hearted of stepfathers—was always sending Skeeter back upstairs to make sure she’d turned off her lights or radio or hairdryer.

“Don’t you know there’s an energy crisis?”

“Maybe we should take more than One-a-Day vitamins,” Skeeter would say.

She blew him a Theda Bara kiss as he dropped them off with repeated reminders that he’d be waiting at this same corner no later than the compromised-on 10 PM. Tomorrow, after all, was another school day. Making this a school night, and oh! what a night she’d make it!

Here in the gym—no, not a gym; a fabulous palace ballroom!—well, hardly fabulous; more like an orange-and-black pandemonium. Well anyway: here at the Halloween Monster Masque, where Red Death might be a no-show but there’s freaks aplenty vying with goblins and skeletons and witches and ghosts and Legends of Boggy Creek and Richard Nixon fresh from his Saturday Night Massacre.

Skeeter wondered who everybody was. Some were unmistakable, like that little dribble Droan Webster: a straitjacketed lunatic with hands left free to squeeze and pinch. Must've thought it was a come-as-you-are dance. And over there, costumed as a Fifties chick (ha! a Fifties *tease*) in cotton-candy angora and a poodle skirt short enough to qualify as a poodle tutu: Pamela Pillsbury, Skeeter's archest rival. Talk about your Dainty Baby Bitch-Queen Junes—

All through junior high they'd bristled and bridled and dismissed each other as "funny-looking." In fact they were assembled from the same compact snookums kit, being equally blue of eye and yellow of hair, damask of cheek (when not whited-out) and short in the leg department. The significant difference was that Pam, though a tad prettier by Lydia Languish standards, made a peevish Fifties chick; while the more comical-faced Skeeter was a cross-your-heart kissable vampire.

"Scuse me. Oh Kelly, *hi-ee*, I didn't notice you standing there."

"Why Pam-e-la, same here."

"Ooh I like you as a brunette. Is that a wig? Looks so much naturaller."

Ms. Pillsbury ("The Dough Girl") had a syrupy singsong voice that Skeeter ("Mosquito Mouth") could imitate to unkind perfection. She did so now, asking if poor Pammy'd lost her skirt again.

"Why don't you go suck on something, DracuLETTE?"

And Pam stamped her little saddle shoe before turning on its heel and traipsing away. (She was the sort of girl who traipsed.) Thus the dance got off to a satisfying big bang start, and promised to get even better.

One of the truly aw-reet features of high school life was the presence of men aged sixteen and upwards, who had their own cars and parttime jobs and income above and beyond allowances; all of which were good and improving things and made your average ninth-grader look really premature.

Pamela Pillsbury was dancing with Malcolm Twist, an average ninth-grader (dressed as a burglar? no, a terrorist) who six short months ago had been an acknowledged catch, but tonight was reduced to a dancin' stand-in while Pam jockeyed for a licensed if not licentious junior if not senior.

What a bamboozle. Skeeter took a dim view of trifling with and stringing along and malicious delusion—as opposed to dalliance, which was almost entirely good-natured. Playful. Recreational. A fun way to spend an evening or an hour or a few minutes between classes or while waiting for the bus or riding *on* the bus or skipping the bus altogether and getting a lift from some guy with his own car.

Skeeter was an accomplished flirt and no shrinking violet in any sense but sizewise. She stalked around the gym acting gaunt and broody over her undead status, and burst out laughing; attempted then to gad about like one famished for a strapping young man’s blood, and again was overcome with a case of the cackles. Finally she stuck to one spot and struck a few poses, conscious of being checked out by several eyes—

—at least two of which belonged to a guy (definitely not a preemie) who’d come as Dr. Jekyll *and* Mr. Hyde, having transformed half of himself into each. So COOwull was this combo that Skeeter went right up and asked him/them if he/they wanted to shake it.

They did; and they did.

“Rattle and roll,” said Jekyll & Hyde.

Skeeter wasn’t absolutely sure but had a hunch J & H were/was junior Lonnie Fesso, who could shake it without a doubt or pause and seemed to have a thing for Morticias-in-miniature with startle-you-blue eyes. Wicked wicked! At any rate she was reclaimed for dance after dance, for “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” and “Bad Bad Leroy Brown” and “Frankenstein” à la Edgar Winter and extracts from *Goats Head Soup*.

Sometimes Jekyll led, and sometimes Hyde.

They were semi-through the *American Graffiti* double-album soundtrack, with J & H singing “The Stroll” in Skeeter’s ears and making it sound like “This Troll,” when the Masque’s Monster Mash was announced.

No Midwestern high school Halloween dance could be complete, of course, without the breaking of a Jack-o’-lantern piñata; and one was hung from the gym ceiling awfully close to the more customary glitterball. A space beneath this was now cleared, and lucky contestants’s masquerade names were drawn from a fishbowl disguised as a black cat.

Me me me Skeeter pleaded, *pick me pick me pick me* she demanded of Fate, aching to the roots of her chalk-white teeth for a chance to be the center of ALL eyes, not merely

several! A chance that Fate indirectly gave her, as Jekyll & Hyde's names were called and Skeeter was entitled to squeal and clutch and carry on as though they'd been going together from way the hell back.

Which she did, boy howdy! with open relish, putting Pamela Pillsbury's nose so out of snubby joint that she quarreled with her terrorist stand-in Malcolm Twist, and to such an extent that Malcolm laid the foundation for years of future psychotherapy by bursting into tears before everyone and running out of the gym.

"Exit smiling," said the alleged Lonnie Fesso, submitting to the blindfold with half a fiendish grin.

J & H at the piñata plate, taking a couple of leisurely warm-up swings; then a single open-and-shut CLOUT that broke the Jack-o'-lantern's crown wide open and sent a jillion cheapsweets tumbling down.

No shortages, no embargoes; just an unplanned rush en masse to plunder the Hershey's kisses and candy corn and saltwater taffy tidbits. And there was shoving and jostling and trampling and squeezey pinchy groping (by Droan Webster) till a regular student riot resulted, Jekyll & Hyde spurring it on with demonic piñata stick.

And all was orange-and-black pandemonium, till sirens sounded and cops arrived and red and blue lights flashed through the high gym windows, revolving and bouncing off the glitterball and making Prince Prospero's party look really premature.

Th-th-th-that's all, folks. Temporarily satiated, Skeeter Kitefly vamped her way into the night and down to the corner where good old ARnold was supposed to be waiting. There instead she found a seedy pumpkin squashed in the gutter.

"Oh my God!" Skeeter cried. "That was our CAR! *Fairy Godmotherrrr! ...*"

Chapter 11

Initially Illustrated

When Skeeter the Sophomore was merely fifteen she pledged a sorority (actually more of a skag-gang) called the Buzzettes, whose sense of togetherness ran toward sharing packs of smokes while hanging out with overboard dudes in underslung cars.

There was some concern on the part of parents, teachers, and the like that she was thereby lapsing into sloth and indolence—hanging out in polyester blouses that were uncommonly loose, and denim jeans that were uncommonly snug. (An ensemble completed by a laidback poke of a purse that would have been big enough to fit her entire stuPENdous self inside, were it not already crammed full of everything a Buzzette wannabe could lay her hands on.)

These were the Derelict Days of '74, after all, and Skeeter wanted to do her small part in contributing her fair share to the national backslide. So she was put through mystic rites of initiation as were laid down in the deeps of time by Isis and Osiris and Rosie Crucian. Skeeter and the other pledgling (Natalie Horndt, her waspish very best friend) became Boozettes, by chugalugging till they chuckalucked up; and Boszettes, by papflashing a meter-reader or other agent of a service profession; and Bowzettes, by testifiably French-kissing Charlene Webster's bull mastiff.

(This last ordeal, all the girls agreed, was a lot more palatable than doing the same to—or, worse yet, *with*—Charlene's kid brother Droan.)

These hurdles cleared, the two enlistees were pronounced Buzzettes in good standing, sitting, and squatting. But Skeeter said:

“Is that *all*?”

“Hunh? Whatcha mean, ‘all?’”

“I mean really! We ought to have to shave our heads or pierce our noses or jump out of helicopters or *something*. Otherwise we’ll look like a bunch of wissy-wusses!”

“Yeah,” Natalie Horndt chimed dutifully in.

And right there in the Webster basement she and Skeeter began thinking up more requirements for fullblown Buzzettehood, some of which caused even the most been-around skaglet to blanch and flinch.

It was not till after school the next day, surrounded by Skeeter’s scotchaped rockstar posters and half-hidden ashtrays, that they hit upon the absolute necessity of getting tattooed.

“That’s it!”

“I love it!”

“Tattoos!”

“Too-oo much!”

“We’ll show ‘em where being a Buzzette is really at!”

“Tattoo-oo much!”

“Besides,” Skeeter said, “it’s either that or letting our ‘pit hair grow and *braiding* it—”

(Shrieks of teenage laughter.)

“Kelly RebecCA!” from the kitchen.

“Yes ma’am!”

“What’s all that racketing about up there?”

“Homework!”

Come Saturday morning the studious girls pooled their allowances and headed downtown. Natalie’s pocket money was not as abundant as it used to be, thanks to the recession’s effect on Mr. Horndt’s Buick dealership. Everything had gone subcompact.

And so it went: lowering standards, loss of what was once held dear. In Natalie’s brother’s case this included a couple of dy-no-mite bomber jackets that Nat and Skeeter liberated from his closet (yaaaay Buzzettes!) and which he never saw again, or damn seldom anyway.

There had been an early killing frost that fall, so the girls were glad to be clad in leather as they swaggered down Lincoln Avenue, puffing on Pall Malls, their footsteps

unexpectedly echoing. Kind of gave you the creeps being downtown on a Saturday: the modest Demortuis skyscrapers were locked tight and abandoned-looking. Some of the old store windows had bars over them, and some had boards, and everything seemed to be a pre-Oz shade of grey—like a week-old bucket of fried chicken bones. (Yuggh.)

But on McKinley Street they found an oasis, an outpost of many colors: Madame Zelda's, which they entered after whispery debate and discovery that this particular tattoo parlor was empty except for its proprietress, who looked half a Gypsy and half Apache but was at least a fellow female.

(Even Skeeter the Shameless was unprepared to let some old sleazy-geezer get his implements on her bared flesh.)

Onward and inward, under Madame's inscrutable gaze, trying to choose between the scores of to-die-for designs: so many hearts and flowers and birds and beasts and ohhhh! a dragon and ahhhh! a mermaid and the cuuuutest little palm tree complete with coconut-bunch, and best of all a brand-spanking crimson smoochmark.

Mmmm-wah!

Natalie suggested that Skeeter (who clamored to go first) get this design placed squarely on her *derrière*, to indicate exactly where the ineffable They might kiss her.

"No, you goofus—here, between my boobs! Can't you just picture it: say you're in bed with this guy—"

"Back seat of his car, *you* mean—"

"—shut up—this guy, see, he's all hot 'n' bothered, he can't think straight, can't see straight, you're going Ooh la la at him and all that, then he gets your bra off and zowie! too-oo much! *he thinks you've got an extra nipple—*"

"PSYCH—HIM—OUT!" the girls chanted, giving each other resounding five.

Then Madame Zelda with solemn gesture sent them into a curtained alcove, there for Skeeter to shed appropriate garments and put on a hospitalish smock of uncertain laundering.

"Wait!" cautioned Natalie, acting as handmaiden. "What if when you're an old lady you turn all saggy and baggy and wrinkly—"

"Aw PEEshaw," Skeeter snorted, pausing in her doffing to punch Nat on the arm. She glanced down with fond complacency at her own unpropped upper deck, so obviously

firm for life at age fifteen.

Now Skeeter's skin was still without scar or mark, and of a sanguine-pink complexion that went achingly well with her strawberry-golden hair and tiny little bright blue eyes. "A heartbreaker," Gramma Otto had declared when the six-year-old Kelly Rebecca put on her first pair of black patent leathers. "That child is going to break a lot of hearts before she's through."

"Lookit me Gramma!" the heartbreak kid had shouted, thoroughly beside herself with stomp-on-the-floor glee. "Lookit! You can see my underpants in my *shoes!*"

Nine autumns later in Madame Zelda's changing alcove, Skeeter decided with a last-minute "ulp" that the beestung kissylips were just too risky—they might look like a sudden blemish, especially to male eyes blurred by lust. So after further consideration she settled on her baptismal initials, *K.R.K.*, and them to go on her right hindquarter after all.

To this end (and past it) Skeeter wriggled out of her fancy-free jeans and fire-engine-red brevities (for which she'd recently given up her virgin-whites), while helpful Nat kept her in staggering stitches by wondering aloud whether *Bless This Buttock* ought not to be added, or better yet a predictably-pointed arrow along with *Do Not Open Till Xmas*.

"Quit it, Natalie! I got my pants down!"

Out of the alcove then, their gigglefit dying away as Skeeter was directed up onto a gymnastic horselike apparatus. Madame Zelda proceeded to desmock and inspect the petite patoot to be tattooed; and Skeeter lay there prone and petrified.

"Wait!" went Natalie again. "What happens if you *do* get all old and wrinkly—"

"Shut up!" (somewhat muffled).

"No listen!—suppose your initials turn into like a *K.K.K.*?"

"Oh wow," breathed Skeeter.

And on the spot our ecstatic neophytes concocted this really cool story about Skeeter getting kidnapped by Ku Klux thugs, and branded when she wouldn't make out with hoods in hoods. The girls were eager to put a pillowcase on Zelda's head and so lend a touch of verisillymissitude to their story; but Madame picked up an electric needle and said,

"Still now."

Then followed the emblazoning, the deftly indelible application of curlicued letters, with Skeeter gritting stoic teeth throughout and not making mock-orgasm noises, so that Nat guessed it must be no-lie painful. And after Skeeter's underwritten tush was reclad and back out on McKinley Street, the rest of her let fly a tremendous

Yeeeeeee-HAWWWNNHH!

for the benefit of downtown Demortuis.

"Hurts, hunh?" asked Nat.

"What?"

"What! You know what!"

"Oh, that. What about it?"

"Does it hurt?!"

"Naah, not what you'd call 'hurt'—just *stings* a little."

"...really?"

"You'll find out," Skeeter grinned.

As had been foreseen, there was insufficient allowance left for Natalie to get ornamented that day, but more than enough for bus fare home. So Skeeter the Initiate revealed a last step towards achieving ultraBuzzettedom: you must go into a genuine bar and there order, receive, and drink down a bonafide cocktail.

Neither girl was absolutely certain how much an authentic shot would cost. But Skeeter led the way—sashaying, to the extent her poor stung rump would allow—to a likely-looking corner tavern, and inside it, and up to the bar, forthrightly demanding Southern Comfort on the rocks with a white wine chaser.

"Make it a double," she added.

"Yeah, both of us," said Natalie.

The countryboyish bartender carded them both, but of course each girl was armed with a fake ID. "Just a couple of dames wanting a couple of snorts," explained Skeeter.

"Well," went the nonplused barman, and (the girls swore afterward) was reaching for bottles and glasses when his grizzled colleague stepped over.

"Forget it, kiddies."

"Hey! We are *of age*."

“I bet you are. On your way now, before I call your fathers on you.”

“Aw, we weren’t doing anything—”

“Yeah, anything—”

“Outta here!”

“I,” Skeeter riposted, “shall take my boozing someplace high-classier from now on.”

“You do that, little girl. Show ‘em out, Vince.”

The young bartender escorted them to the doorstep, where Skeeter apologized for making him look like a dork in front of his boss.

“That’s okay,” said Vince, one big blush, and handed her a scrap of paper.

“What’s this?”

“M’phone number,” Vince blurted before hastening back inside.

Skeeter looked from the note to Natalie and back again in total wondrous puzzlement.

“What do you suppose he gave me this for?” she asked.

Chapter 12

Projectile

The first car that Skeeter was allowed to drive on her own, without an adult accompanist, was ARnold's big old Thunderbird that Skeeter claimed wasn't a Ford but a Fudd and so dubbed Elmer. It went "huh-huh-huh-huh-huh" while shifting gears and backfired a lot when driven in chains, as Skeeter kept discovering one Leap Day afternoon.

She herself had a tendency to stomp on the gas at the sight of red lights, taking them as a signal to *go girl go!* There being many red lights visible this Leap Day, Elmer went *skid crunch skid* and "huh-huh-huh-k'pow" all the way down South 48th Street to Penzance Boulevard, which was one of several (but the best of all possible) entries to

C O R N W A L L

as picturesque arches on each corner declared.

Beyond them, the snowfall acted differently—Camelotly, in fact. Penzance Boulevard was shoveled not just clear but immaculate, without anything so prosaic as "salt" or "sand" to account for such clarity. As though a troop of tiny elves had done it overnight.

Whoa thought Skeeter. *Here* were suburban niceties. Only the most presentable snow had been spared, left on display like decorative cloudbanks, with Penzance Boulevard a horizontal four-lane beanstalk climbing between them.

(Elmer, not used to jacking around Cloud-Cuckooland, threatened Fuddishly to snap a chain.)

What else did *CORNWALL* put you in mind of? Not game hens, anyway. Or the surrender-at-Yorktown question on last semester's history final. But—pixiedust, maybe. And pirates with hooks. *Fee fi fo* fum, yo-ho-ho and a bottle of—St. Ives Street: turn left.

Last house in the cul-de-sac.

Land's End.

Not a gigantic house, but you'd have plenty of room inside to swing a cat. A sack of cats. Make that seven sacks, forty-nine cats, together with however many kits—never mind, forget it. Pull into the spotless driveway. Park Elmer. Get out. Go on up to the not-gigantic door and ring the bell. Mustn't dilly, mustn't dally, don't be silly, just go ahead and do it...

"Oh. Um. Hello..."

"Hi! Skeeter? hi, Skeeter—I'm Sally Whistletoe!"

(As if there could be any doubt.)

"C'mon in!—lemme take your coat—are you frozen?—have some hot chocolate—careful, we make it *hot*—marshmallows too—here, have more—and whipped cream—*shpritz!* Don't worry, you won't gain an ounce in this house—I'll have you yelling it off—HA! just kidding—c'mon down here—bring your cup—watch your step—have a seat, and tell me—rats! there goes the phone again! Just a sec, I'll kiss 'em off—(hi! what? did he? really? great! you tell Vicki yet? why not? well, call her now and call me back tonight if I don't call you first, okay? yeah! right! good! you got it! BYE-bye—)"

Jeez thought Skeeter. *This* was how to Do the Hustle.

Once upon a time Skeeter'd thought she too knew how to Hustle not to say Bustle; but now she felt reduced to stumblebummery.

They sat (Skeeter sat, Sally bustled) in a rumpus room with far less room than rumpus. Those sacks of cats and kits would be safe down here, behind and beneath the wealth of posters and banners and party impedimenta and stereo system with shoulder-high speakers and shelves of albums and shelves of eight-tracks and a pingpong table and pet rock menagerie and megaphone collection and all sorts of pompons and all sorts of weightlifting equipment and, along the far wall, a fullscale Olympic-size balance beam.

"You're sure into a lot of things," said Skeeter; and it was so. Sally Whistletoe was immersed in all ventures great and small that the Middle West could offer wholesome energetic teenage girls in those Derelict Days, the mid-Seventies.

She was no taller than Skeeter but looked a titan in her thunderbolted leotard. Sally had apple cheeks and deep-dish dimples, cinnamon-roll hair in a freshbaked Dorothy Hamill

wedge, and a superimpressive bosom: the sort that appears to be pulling its owner along like a couple of dachshunds on abbreviated leashes.

“You gotta have a project!” she demonstrated with jutting jaw etc. “Gotta get with it—no time to waste!” You had to get a move on, get the lead out, get it all together and get your butt in gear, if you didn’t want to get nowhere fast. Sally certainly didn’t, and at Cornwall High this semester alone she was the Pep Club President, Spanish Club Vice President, Concert Choir Secretary, Tri-Hi-Y Treasurer, Student Council Sergeant-at-Arms, and Chairperson of the Courtesy Committee; none of which was a sinecure when Sally Whistletoe embodied it. In her spare time she tutored the youth of Demortuis in cheerleading, iron-pumping, self-defense, civic-mindedness, and especially gymnastics. Everyone agreed that Sally could have outgoldmedal’d the likes of Korbout and Comaneci if she hadn’t had so wide a range of interests, or perhaps been blessed with a tad less chest.

But who else in Cornwall could be spearheading plans for the local Bicentennial celebration? Or leading efforts to help victims of the Guatemalan earthquake? Or emergency-supervising the Winter Sports Dance Morning-After Clean-Up, when the girl supposed to be in charge didn’t show (having broken up with her boyfriend at the dance itself)?

Nobody Doesn’t Like Sara Lee

as the rumpus room abundantly testified.

“I know a lot of it’s kid stuff,” said Sally, “but some of it’s not—most of it’s fun—you gotta be a Hype if you don’t wanna be a Ciphe—so I say seize the moment! *carpe the diem!* and YOU—”

(zeroing in on Skeeter with shot-forward fist and shot-forward forefinger)

“—*your* project is to learn *how* to project—right? right! yeah! good! why?”

“What?”

“Why?”

“Oh. Um. Well...”

Skeeter was unaccustomed to going oh-um-well. Not so long ago she’d been a Whistletoe-in-training, hyperactive if not yet an active Hype; but today she paled and shrank in Sally’s comparative presence. A-squirm at the unspectacle she must be unmaking—she,

Skeeter Kitefly, who used to think nothing of jumping on a cool guy's back, with or without the benefit of prior introduction.

Skeeter a stumblebum? A wissy-wuss?

Yuggh.

Just last year she'd been a Buzzette. That had begun it; but what else to do? where else to go? given the state of Demortuis in the state of Nilnisi in the midst of the Derelict Days? Your choice: doodle or squat.

The Buzzettes had chosen both. Not as if they'd ever been an honest-to-God skag-gang, either. Just a gaggle, in whose company Skeeter had cultivated the blank stare and sullen indifference of a classic urban girl—only to remain a thoroughgoing cutiepie.

What/where else had the Buzzettes done/gone? They'd cruised around town when cars were available. Chugged Buds when Buds could be had. Smoked a lot. Hung out. *And* out. Till Skeeter began to feel like Mowgli among the Bandar-log, whose tails might be curved in the shape of a cupid's bow but hung down behind them even so. And never did what they set out to do.

So Skeeter'd bailed out *and* out of Buzzettehood, without much in the way of a parachute or safety net; and after an aimless summer had begun her junior year at looser ends than ever. Droopier drawers, too: no great pickings among her school's upperclassmen, whom Skeeter had already gone through grade after grade with. Their kisses, to her blasé lips, still tasted premature. (Double yuggh.)

Life, in short, lacked spice; and Skeeter, also short, lacked luster, till Mrs. Browning put her English class through the time-honored method of acting out assignments as little skits. Which hadn't jumpstarted Skeeter's academic interest; but she was a natural ham and took to the skits as if they were pineapple slices.

Before she knew it, Mrs. Browning had shanghaied her into school theatrics and Mr. Minie the music teacher had cast her in that year's operetta, *The Big Noise*, as Bitsy the third-lead-and-comedy-relief.

Skeeter was exactly the right type for this part, according to Mr. Minie; the librettists might've had her in mind when they wrought the play. For was not Bitsy bitesized, jocose and twinkle-eyed, with toothsome grin and roguish giggle and verve as big as all outdoors?

All of which Skeeter was, had, or could readily approximate.

The Big Noise troupe included her longtime overarch rival Pamela Pillsbury, equally bitesized and a veteran theatricer to boot (though she never booted, not even after dress rehearsals). Disdaining the role of Bitsy, Pam aspired to stardom as Darlin' Da-a-rlene but had to settle for Mamselle, the second-lead-and-(implied)-town-pump. Da-a-rlene's part went instead to LaFayette Smith, a dead ringer for Donna Summer, who was no sooner cast than Mr. Minie announced his intention to "bring out the essential Fiftiesishness" of a 1944 musical for reasons he went on about at tiresome length.

"How Fiftiesy are we going to look with LaFayette as Da-a-rlene?" Pamela snippy-dripped, not quite under her breath.

Which made Skeeter (a) admire LaFayette all the more, (b) remark that some people looked fif-teasy ALL the damn time, and (c) surname Pam's character "Hepzibah" after *Pogo*'s svelte French skunk.

Alas! As it happened, not even LaFayette's elegant voice could salvage Essential Fiftiesishness from Bonum High School's *Big Noise*. Half the cast came across as imitation Fonzie's, their lines littered with *aays* and *yo!s*. Pamela Pillsbury totalbitched her Dainty Baby way through every run-through. And Skeeter, though a treat to see onstage, could not be heard beyond the orchestra pit.

Bitsy might not be the titular Big Noise but she *was* supposed to have a loud mouth, as exemplified in the madcap ditty "I've Got a Clue" and the production number "Bombshell Conga." Skeeter brought Bitsy grin, giggle, verve, happily on-key warble, and that stuPENdous mouth she could still almost fit her fist inside. *Plus* the same regrettable tendency to stomp on the gas and go too fast, swallowing her words or letting them drown in the ensemble.

Mr. Minie tried to help, but like a parent giving driving lessons he gnashed his teeth and tore his hair and ultimately announced, "I don't need you to *quack like a duck!*" Which delighted Pamela Pillsbury no end, and caused Skeeter to feel outright embarrassment for perhaps the first time in all her sixteen years, not excluding that otherwise-dull party last summer when her spaghetti straps had come unstrung.

So she didn't sound right. So what. Tough noogies.

But never before had Skeeter Kitefly been unable to dish up the consommé when push came to shove came to kick down the stairs. It was simply a matter of getting a grip on the saucepan-handle. All she needed was a crash course on how to get it.

Ethel Merman wasn't available. Mr. Minie was a waste of breath. LaFayette Smith lent some friendly advice but tagged each pointer with an *umm-y'know?*—and Skeeter didn't. But after the quack-crack Mamselle Hepzibah took to calling her “Daffy,” which of course you knew meant war.

She'd have to go straight to the top.

And in Demortuis that wasn't some guru's mountain peak or Kung Fu academy, but the Land's End house in the Cornish cul-de-sac off the Street of St. Ives.

Where Sally Whistletoe, burrowing through umpteen albums and eight-tracks, came up with the original Broadway cast recording of *The Big Noise*. And soon her shoulder-high speakers ditted forth with:

*Y'ever seen a concertina
played like he can play one?
Like an accorDEEon,
wishin' it was you?
For a squeeze or two?
How're you s'posed to get the most
squeezes when he's weary?
It's a myster-eery—
but I've got a clue!
(Ooo-wee-ooo-wee-ooo!)*

“Know it! know it! love it!” Sally enthused. “Okay! On your feet now, here we go! First of all—very important—physical conditioning—gotta warm up properly! Breathe IN through the nose, deep! deeper! deeper!! Fill ‘em up and *hold it—find it—feel it—blow it* OUT through the mouth!”

Skeeter blew it PERIOD end of sentence.

“Quit laughing!” Sally smiled. “Start over! INhale—deeper—hold it—EXhale, like this: *foooo!* Like there's a bunch of birthday candles you've made a wish on! OverexAGgerate! Yeah! right! good! now do it all *again—*”

And again, *and* again.

Skeeter the bootcamp neophyte had to amplify her lung capacity for quite some little while, extinguishing imaginary candles with a *fee fi fo* fum, yo-ho-ho and a bottle of—

“Okay, take a breather—HA! just kidding,” said Sally. “No really, relax a minute, you’re doing great! That’s the basics—do ‘em every day—your lungs’ll love you for it—boys will too, when you can hold a kiss till they’re blue in the face!”

“Wherever,” Skeeter gasped.

“Now stand back and gimme room—here’s where the fun begins—I’ll show you what else you can do, when you know your projection!”

Eyes closed, fists clenched, legs straddled, Sally sought her innermost bosomdepths and from them extracted a reverberating

LA!

that you could’ve heard clear across the Ipsissima River.

Upstairs too, where somebody stomped three times.

“They oughta be used to that by now,” said Sally, not even breathing hard. “Anyway, that’s how you project—directly from the diaphragm!”

Oh sure thought Skeeter. In her case it’d be from the diaphrag-ments.

But no time to quail, as one after the other the girls went:

“Ooooh...” (“Ooooh...”)

“Wheee...” (“Wheee...”)

“Ooooh-wheee...” (“Ooooh-wheee...”)

till you’d have thought a hogcalling duel was going on.

Not once did Sally glance at clock or watch. She acted like all the time in Land’s End was at Skeeter’s disposal—except the occasional phone-ringing interval, when Sally would kiss ‘em off while expanding plans for the Pep Club’s Spring Spirit Picnic, or Tri-Hi-Y’s character-building retreat, or the Spanish Club’s authentic ethnic dinner at a Mexican restaurant.

Finally Sally took the phone off the hook and told her trainee to let herself go.

And Skeeter quailed. Visibly.

There followed a moment of silence, as though some infinite Being had sucked all the rumpus room's acoustics IN through its infinite Nose.

And Skeeter suddenly noticed that Sally Whistletoe's eyes, for all their freshbaked cinnamon warmth, could be as penetrating as her voice.

"Don't worry about your throat. This time, when you hold it and find it and feel it, bring it *all* back up—let it *all* hang out—shoot the works and let it FLY—"

So close your eyes, bitsy Skeeter, clench your fists and reach within, rummage about, pray for pixiedust and bid those fears goodbye: you can fly, you can *fly*, you—

Can/could/did shoot the works and bring forth an

OOOOH-WHEEEE-OOOOH

that must have achieved genuine resonance, since it turned her mood ring ruby-red, and touched off a fresh stomp from upstairs.

Consommé!

"Attaway to go!" Sally applauded, exhaling. "Nothing to it when you know how! Just practice practice practice—treat sore throat with honey and lemon and menthol-eucalyptus—works wonders! Now," (consulting a fat Week-at-a-Glance) "*what* night does your show go on? and *what* time? oh damn, I'll be rehearsing myself then, and there's a Pep meeting after that—well rats! I'd've loved to come and hear you knock 'em dead, 'cause that's exactly what you're gonna do! Trust me! Guarantee it!"

"What do I owe you?" Skeeter wheezed.

"Owe me! Tell you what—we'll Indian wrestle, the two of us, and if you can beat me you can pay me!"

Skeeter declined, Sally being uncommonly strong in the arms. As she proved with her farewell bearhug, before alley-ooping onto the balance beam to reinforce equilibrium.

No time to waste.

Skeeter got with it without delay: got a move on, got the lead out, got her butt in gear. She began to practice practice practice on the way home, projecting down the four-lane beanstalk-length of Penzance Boulevard and stirring up those sacks of cats.

It took her mother less than the rest of Leap Night to banish "all that yodeling" from the house; so most of Skeeter's vocal exercises took place in the garage inside Elmer, with

the heater on and the door left open to discourage asphyxiation.

Steamy exhale after icicle inhale: each breath held—found—felt—brought up—hung out—let *fly* to rattle the windows as an OOOH-WHEE-OOOH, Elmer chiming in on huh-huh-harmony.

And by dress rehearsal Skeeter could bounce a quarter-note off the balcony railing. Can/could/did outbelt Merman, out-ham Jolson, leave no scenery unchewed; leaping into the arms and onto the backs of various chorus boys, and generally carrying on like Miss Amphie Tamine of 1976.

The Big Noise troupe exclaimed over Skeeter's untying-of-tongue, though Mr. Minie said no more than "That's getting there," and Pamela Pillsbury disappeared from view during take-fives till Skeeter ran to a remote restroom for an undisturbed smoke and found Pam there in one of those awful stalls, on her knees, genuflecting as she upped and chucked and booted away.

Skeeter's immediate reaction was disgusted satisfaction, for which she chided herself; Sally Whistletoe wouldn't react like that. No, Sally would march in and hold Pam's head and save her from choking on lumps, oh GROHsss! Sorry; Skeeter wasn't that hyperadvanced yet.

But when Pamela finished, and flushed, and got up, and turned around, and saw Skeeter, and burst into tears, and wailed, "*Why* does everything always have to happen to meeee?"—Skeeter would not have gloated openly for cash on any barrelhead.

"Oh don't cry, stop crying, come here and rinse your mouth."

"Shut up! Get lost! Don't hassle me!"

"Oh calm down," said Skeeter. "This is what happens when you scarf junkfood. C'mon. Let's tidy you up."

Pam submitted to spitting and rinsing, to having the front of her costume mopped down with coarse brown paper towels, and being told to "Wipe there—you've still got some there." Skeeter offered her a cigarette ("Oh go ahead, they aren't doped") and both girls smoked while inspecting each other in the smoggy mirror.

"What's got *you* so cordial?" Pam wanted to know.

“Acting!” Skeeter bravura’d, and thrilled to hear the ancient johntiles quiver. So stench or no stench, IN through the nose, reach! rummage! repeat:

ACTING!

And there were echo effects worthy of Wagner or The Who.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” breathed Pamela.

“Well, there’s this deformed phantom lives in the school basement who’s been giving me private lessons—HA! just kidding,” said Skeeter. “Actually it was my fairy godmother taught me how to bibbidi-bobbidi-boo—and now I’m going to the *ball!*”

With lip sucked in and eyes rolled, so that Pam could hardly help but laugh.

“C’mon!” Skeeter told her. “We’re gonna knock ‘em dead—the band’ll be one big boner!”

“Awp!” went Pam. “I was *going* to say, ‘Break a leg.’”

“Oog!” went Skeeter. “Painful!” And they laughed and headed back to the auditorium, where despite their newborn camaraderie Pam still tried to upstage Skeeter in every scene.

But to no-way-José avail. The night belonged to brass-bold cutiepiety. And if that meant Mamselle Hepzibah had to be blown out of the water together with Darlin’ Da-a-arlene and Mr. Minie and both choruses and the one-big-boner band—well, *c’est la show business*.

Skeeter Kitefly stole the operetta blind, and not just blind but immaculate. When all was said and sung, she took a solo curtsy with ears full of raves, arms full of Uncle Buddy’s roses, and throat only slightly inflamed—utterly convinced that musical comedy was now to be her forte in life.

It was, and it wasn’t.

Chapter 13

Little Artful Antics

“Hi hi hi and *thank* you for that applause, considering I haven’t done anything yet except appear before you as my knockdown-gorgeous teenage self [*pose*]. My name *is* Skeeter Kitefly and speaking of famous tennis players, I was up extremely late last night (whooooop)—

“Actually I was watching this old Hitchcock movie called *Strangers on a Train*, about these two guys who don’t know each other. Now that I’ve *ruined* the plot for you, I’ll go on with my joke. (It will too be a joke, a hilarious joke; Bjorn Borg laughed at it and *he’s* a famous tennis player. You don’t believe me? You can look it up: fa-mous ten-nis play-er. And-such-a-hunk.)

“You know who else is a hunk is Farley Granger. That’s right! Sounds like a farmboy, doesn’t he? Out there with the alfalfa and buckwheat and other Little Rascals. Well, Farley’s one of the *Strangers on a Train*: he plays this guy called Guy who’s a famous tennis player and so cuuuute—he has this dark, wavy face and these full, sensuous lips and oh! these little white tennis shorts! To *die* for, and a lot of dying goes on in this movie though none of it happens on a train or to a tennis player.

“Actually this all happened twenty-five years ago so Farley Granger probably isn’t that much of a hunk anymore; which only goes to show you...”

*

Kelly Rebecca, blue-smocked and SKEETER-nametagged, lounged behind the register at Kleinsteins in blightiful midtown Demortuis, killing time till college started. Two more weeks of this meaningful ‘n’ fulfilling job at a real-life I’m-not-kidding drugstore. And boy was this ever one dog day afternoon.

Here because she's here because she's here, three summers now; ultimately because her stepfather was the manager and that facilitated re-entry. Which was easier than bothering with finding something someplace else.

Skeeter's attention span, like most of the rest of her, was short but intense while it lasted. She might concentrate, say, on grinning hugely at the customers—Who Can You Freak Out? Spook this one and win *a new car!* When grin-muscles start to ache, turn to coining nicknames for the familiar irregulars: Gunkhead, Baby Huey, Framptona, The Admiral.

"Where do you keep your sponges?" asked an old lady all wattled and dewlapped, with bottle-bottom spectacles. (Gertrude, maybe. Or Hortense.)

"I keep *mine* in Ancient Greece," Skeeter grinned at her, hugely.

"Oh, my! You mustn't do that; you should wring them out." (Definitely Gertrude.)
"What I'm looking for is a new loofah."

"A loofah? For your sofa? Oh, for your *bawth*. Try Aisle Five. And don't forget: for only \$1,200 more you can get a pre-plumbed Hot Tub delivered to your bathroom door, complete with hydromassage booster joints!"

This last a little louder, as Definitely Gertrude disappeared fast down Aisle Five.

Oh for a smoke. Good way to hit on cute-guy customers: bum a fresh-bought one from them, and if they're truly cute—or if they smoke Pall Mall Filter Kings and at least aren't uggoes—try talking them into a little something artful.

Gertrude avoided Skeeter come ring-up time, taking her new loofah to Loretta's register instead. Big mistake! Too late. Served her right for coming in at 4:30 on a Friday afternoon. No escape for Gertrude now! No need either to ask about the black-on-black armband; Loretta would be sure to fill her in.

*

"Okay, show of hands—how many cried when Elvis died? I know I did [*burst out laughing*]. Where I was working at the time there's this crazy-lady Elvis-freak who couldn't afford to take off for Graceland prostrate with grief, 'cause she'd used up all her sick leave and vacation and life savings already.

“So Loretta (not her real name—actually it *is* her real name, so don’t use it when you tell this story to your friends, okay?) so Loretta did the next best thing, which was come to work in full mourning, and wait on customers while singing ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ to herself. Through her tears! Or was it ‘Love Me Tender’? Hard to tell *what* she was singing, through her tears and that big black veil; might’ve been ‘All Shook Up.’ I know I was.

“Hey, Benjamin Franklin would’ve laughed at that joke, and *his* face is on the hundred-dollar bill; so there...”

*

Home at last to shake the dog day blues with a dash through the shower: hop in, hop out, drip dry, boy howdy! Let those with eyes that can see catch a double peepful of Skeeter Kitefly dehydrating her peachy fuzzy coif, which unlike the rest of her was *not* short and which unlike prevailing teenage fashion was only somewhat Farrahfied. But still intense, flickering like a flamethrower in the blowdryer while Skeeter pranced about picking out dancin’ clothes with her free hand.

Firmly attached to bright red underwear, in theory but not yet reality: which to choose? Was there a single pair she hadn’t failed to sling into the carefully-loaded washing machine and so turn her mother’s once-blonde hair a trifle greyer?

“Kelly RebecCA!”

“Yes ma’am!”

“*Where* is my best white blouse?” Carrie might demand, knowing full well that thanks to Skeeter’s brand-new panties this best white blouse was now blush-pink.

“Why Mother! That shade’ll look deeLISHus on you! It’ll bring out roses in your cheeks!”

“I’ll put some roses in *your* cheeks if it happens again!”

“That’s okay, Mom—no need to thank me.”

One of the perks of being petite was having room to cram that much more into a standard-sized bureau drawer. Transform it into a field of scarlet poppies, “attractive to the eye and soothing to the smell,” each a blossom that’ll bewitch the boys without putting them to sleep.

One a penny, two a penny: hot cross buns. Aha! These with the pattern of tiny yellow Tweety Pies, whose tinier-still blue eyes tawt dey taw a puddytat. (And dey did! dey did!)

*

“I graduated last spring from Bonum High School and yes I’ve heard all the jokes, all the puns and clever wordplay, hey: I made up a lot of ‘em myself.

“Like what’s the most popular class at Bonum High? Advanced Voyeurism. (Lots of field trips.)

“We’re not talking extraoveractive hormones, but over half the guys at Bonum High *were* named Randy.

“And yes, I dated a few of ‘em; you could even say I dated ‘several.’ (Whooooop)—that’s right! You’re looking at a friendly ‘n’ sociable person here! I spent four years being a Bonum Vivant, saying ‘Hi’ to the guys in the halls, and maybe I did jump (or pounce, more ladylike) on one or two. I mean they had to be cute! A lady doesn’t pounce on just any old uggo.

“My friend Tanya Totalbitch never understood that. She’d say to me, ‘Skeeter: is there a guy in this school you *wouldn’t* hit on?’ Well, that made me indignant, so I grabbed this guy passing by that I’d never seen before and I told Tanya, ‘Yes! *This* one! As God is my witness, I’ll never hit on this guy!’

“Then I took a closer look at him and said, ‘Oh *what* the hell.’

“He was a real hotshot too. His name wasn’t Randy, it was Lank, and he liked to set things on fire. [*sing*] ‘My boyfriend’s Lank and he’s really into arson, hey la! hey la, my boyfriend Lank!’ Made for a lot of fun dates. I’d say, ‘Let’s go out to dinner,’ and Lank’d say, ‘Let’s BURN dinner!’...”

*

Dancin’ clothes: something with a bit of cling and slink to it, fit for the Welsh-witch dreams of Stevie Nicks. (“Actually this dress makes Stevie look more like *me*.”) Blue, no-way smocky but marine/marine: aqua where it clung, ultra in its wicked-twitching slink and flow. Ooh yass.

Dancin' shoes: sandals, basically, and not too much heel. No falling off these puppies while doing the Hustle or Salsa or Bump, and spraining somebody else's ankle or kneecap or thigh.

Dancin' makeup: no big deal, what with Jolly Dame Nature having provided so very very much. Just keep those Winged Monkeys flying with a little touch here and another touch there and a shpritz of Prince Matchabelli.

Dancin' warmup: wheel out the TGIF circus artillery! Bring on Kiss and The Tubes! Breathe that fire, spit that blood, special those effects, gusto that panache! Crank it up and check it out, that outRAYgeous specTACuular music; let those with bods that can boogie go swing it! hit it! knock it right out of the park! Put your hands together and thrust your chests for tonight's star attraction: DOLLY-GAYLE RONSTADT!

*If yew just wanna hold hands
I'll be yer friend, o' coe-wurse,
but oh! yer love would choke to death
a full-grown hoe-wurse—*

*

"Everybody here's seen *Star Wars*, right? Okay, how many've seen it half-a-dozen times and are going again next weekend? Same here! Show of hands—how many's favorite character is Han Solo? Aw-reet, mine too! I always identify with smugglers.

"My sister Sadie's into smuggling. A few years back she had this Portugese boyfriend who took her backpacking up down and sideways through Portugal. While they were doing the sideways part, she got a taste of this fancy expensive wine called Fonseca that you're supposed to drink with walnuts. Good crunchy wine. Had Sadie dancing on café tabletops. Pulling all sorts of artful antics.

"Now, you can't get this stuff from Boone's Farm. So here's Sadie in the customs line, trying to smuggle home a couple of fancy expensive bottles of Fonseca and acting oh-so-nonchalant but all the while absolutely *spooked with dread* at the idea of ending up in a Portugese women's prison (yuggh).

"I wasn't there to advise her; she didn't have Han Solo or Chewbacca for moral support—not even Chewbacca!—so finally Sadie compromised. She stashed the bottles and

smuggled just the corks.

“Tried to hide ‘em down her front [*coyly demonstrate*] but she had to go put on a bigger bra first...”

*

God (hee hee!) Sadie would track her down and kill her dead if she ever heard that one. Wasn’t even all that true: Sadie was no flattie, just a bit—wiry. But one of the perks of having a creative license was being able to improve on reality.

Skits, spoofs, and humorous vignettes: a shortening attention span. Intense while it lasted. Why trudge through all the scene-blocking line-conning unspontaneous overrehearsedness of sitdown drama—as opposed to standup comedy! Hijinks off the top of your head! The look of Monty Python, the feel of *Saturday Night Live*, the spur-of-the-moment improv of Second City—and the homegrown equivalent awaiting her at college: Nilnisi’s Nothingbutt Theater, whose company Skeeter aspired to join. Local girl makes it up good as she goes along!

Anything for a laugh. Ad-lib skits and spoofs, slapstick and sight gags; quick, brisk, soon over and done with, so on to the rampaging cast party. Let Pamela Pillsbury go off to dance in France (in nothing but her underpants, *you bet*)—Skeeter’s here to make the greasepaint roar! Why “break a leg” when you can break ‘em both? Get those people grinning hugely!

*

“My sister Sadie’ll do just about anything to have a good time, and that includes drug-smuggling. Starting with those Fonseca corks, she went right on to the hard stuff—cherry-flavored cough syrup. (My personal favorite.) She still has trouble smuggling bottles, but now she throws away the caps and pours the cough syrup down her front. (Hey, try it some time; it feels so goooood.)

“Sadie’s my role model, but I’m not much of a smuggler yet. To do it right you’ve got to travel, see other lands, big cities! big mountains! big oceans! Take one of those grand tour package dealies and rip off the Crowned Heads of Europe.

“The only place I got to go last summer was Mime Camp. You know, at that famous theme park Marcel Marceauland, where on the roller coaster they all go [*pantomime scream*].

I got kicked out of Mime Camp for refusing to take off my Ray-Bans. They said aviator shades ‘dissipated the ambiance.’ Well, they didn’t *say* that, of course, they went [*mime trapped in glass box*] but you could tell what they meant.

“And all along I was just trying to spare them, like I’ve been trying to spare you [*whip off glasses*] THE SCORCHING BRILLIANCE OF MY SUNSPOT-BABY-BLUE EYES! [*reel about grimacing, as though blinded by flashbulbs*]. Hey, with eyes like mine you can see all sorts of nasty-nasty things [*peer at audience*] ...”

*

Hot August night, spoiling for a thundersquall, all of Elmer’s windows cranked open driving hither to yon. Fooling around till it got dark, till the air got electrified by silent lightning flashes and the wind came wailing through the car: see you in heaven, kid! Getting there’s half the fun!

Make that two-thirds—make that three-quarters—

The rush, the roar of planes trains and automobiles, the heavy metal boffola! Excitement since earliest childhood, right down unto the latest *va-vavoom*. Picking up the gang, hard-partyers all, each on pleasure bent with a sixpack or bottle of Jack or half a lid of puffy stuff: bring on the night!

And in it charged! A windy howl, blowing up Skeeter’s Farrahfications layer by layer into a peachy fuzzy mushroom cloud, rising, twining, undulating: “Medusa you say!”

But Skeeter a gorgon? Just look at that face, deeLISHus round winsome pink peeping out of the boy-howdy cloud; how could it petrify anybody? Then look again at the abruptly-pointed chin, the tipped-up buttony nose, and listen to the peals of cacklelaughter—oh my God she *was* a witch! Beware, lest she turn you all into newts! Who could say a house wasn’t being dropped on her sister at this very moment?

O sassy saucy sorcery, bringing out the Salsa in your cheeks, the Disco-Ducking in your butt: gonna fly now! getting high now! Don’t think we’re in Nilnisi anymore—we must be up inside a cyclone, riding round and round that dizzifying carousel as the baaaand plaaaays onnnn—

So close your eyes, my child, be in tune with the infinite; a little touch here, another touch there and what do you get but one fine gold-hatted high-bouncing Winged Monkey

lover?

And why stop at one? Make that two or three—make that three or four—

*

“There’s this guy (not Guy; the *other* guy, Bruno you know) in *Strangers on a Train* who has these wonderful theories about how you should do EVERYthing before you die. Get into all kinds of escapades, be terribly irresponsible; drive a car blindfolded at 150 miles an hour. My kind of guy.

“Even if he isn’t as cute as Farley Granger, and even though he does strangle this girl at an amusement park.

“Oh her glasses, did I mention her glasses? I must tell you about her glasses. The terribly irresponsible guy says [*suave Robert Walker voice*] ‘Is your name Miriam?’ and the amusement-park girl goes, ‘Why yes, how did you AWKKGGH—’ [*throttle self*]. She drops her glasses and you see her being strangled in them. Now, that’s how I’d like to be choked to death—so I wouldn’t miss any of it, and feel left out.

“Is there anything about *Strangers on a Train* I haven’t given away yet? Oh, the ending: the merry-go-round breaks down, just like in the cartoon song. [*sing*] ‘You feel so looney-tuney, with Farley in your head; anyone for tennis? I think I’ll go to bed’...”

*

Déjà vu and me want-to-go home.

(I mean, what with *Déjà* being so irresistibly cute and all...)

Perhaps she *was* a wee bit pie-eyed—Tweety Pie-eyed, in fact (I *did* tee a puddytat!)—but Skeeter had a distinct impression of having done all this before, once upon a time. Sloshing home through the rain to find none other than Sister Sadie on sentinel duty, waiting up in a chair opposite the front door.

Sadie hadn’t done that (if she ever had) for a long time now, not least because she hadn’t lived here for the past five years. First college in Keening, then art school in Elsew, with time off trotting the globe on student-discount rates: Portugal, Italy, Australia, the Caribbean. Back to Demortuis only for the occasional holiday, and today wasn’t that occasional.

Could she have come back to wreak revenge for that harmless little cork-joke Skeeter hadn't even told anybody yet? Possibly: there were pins and needles in Sadie's eyes, which seldom boded any good. So pale in the face that her freckles seemed to hover like a granulated aura. A Pippi Longstocking apparition: Pippi goes to the South Seas and turns into a wire-eyed zombie!

The sisters stared at each other, pins versus pies, till Skeeter got gigglefitty and said, "This is really fun! Let's do this all night!" At which point Sadie's wiry expression went awry; up she jumped and off she ran toiletwards, with Skeeter wobbling after.

Not a year seemed to go by without Skeeter catching someone in the act of upchuck. (Excuse me: the act of *upcharles*.) "Is it me?" she wondered aloud while Sadie heaved away. "My breath? body odor? bellybutton lint?... boy, this brings back memories. 'Member that New Year's Eve, Sadie, when you were first at the U. and I came down to Tearytown and at the stroke of midnight you had to go puke? Or maybe that was me. Or maybe it was both of us, taking turns at the bowl—"

"Will you *shut UP??*" Sadie interjected. "God this is awful."

"Artful," Skeeter corrected.

"I think I'm pregnant."

"You always think that, every time you urp."

"Well this time I'm sure—I have *reason* to believe it, okay? God (shniff) what am I going to do?"

"You could flush it."

"You mean abortion?"

"I mean the john. One step at a time." By way of demonstration, Skeeter's aqua backside slid off the tub-edge to go plump on the floor. "Owwwwwww, FUH—arley Granger!... Guess I better watch my mouth, in case I become an auntie."

Sadie laughed, though not for long. Laugh, then spit; look ready to retch again, but turn instead to crawl across the tiles and be enfolded.

Role model Mercedes, Madwoman to sidekick Skeeter's Madgirl, crying that she *couldn't* have a baby, she was an *art* student, what would she *do* with it?

Hey it occurred to Skeeter, maybe this was all a really weird dream, and they'd wake up and—wait a minute—who'd be waking? Was she a guest in Sadie's dream, or the other way around? Let's find out with a simple test—

“Ow!” Sadie squealed. “Who do you think you're pinching, squirt?”

Both still here on the bathmat.

So this was reality.

Improve on it, then.

*

“What happened was my sister took this economy cruise to the Caribbean, right? And the very first night she jumped (excuse me, *pounced*) in the sack with this Ramon-like individual who had a dark, wavy face and full, sensuous lips that she'd never seen before *or* since, and whose last name she didn't even catch. And two months later there were Consequences.

“Morning sickness, pickle cravings, the whole (you should pardon the expression) enchilada.

“Then it was week after week of should-she/shouldn't-she, which isn't as fun a game as Who Can You Freak Out?, which Sadie won anyway when she told our folks.

“She put off having an abortion till it was too late; then she put off deciding whether to give it up for adoption till *that* was too late, 'cause she had this beautiful little girl with a dark, wavy face and—well, you fill in the rest.

“So now Sadie's a Mommy and I'm an Auntie and we have this permanent person to play Pong with. She's a smart little baby, too; knows how to have a rockin' good time already, and cries along with The BeeGees.

“Sadie named her Desirée. I think that is so COOwull, being named after a famous streetcar like that....”

Chapter 14

The Clearing Stage

It was the fourteen dead guinea pigs that brought home Skeeter's lack of destiny to be an improv comic. It wasn't that she *wasn't*, merely that she *couldn't*; and you could blame some of that on Joe Biggins, who had bad skin and gross teeth but indubitable comic destiny. Not to mention more characters than Sybil had split personalities: there was Marvin Hanker the lickerish anchorman, and superhero Bud the Wonder Janitor, and Gary the Circus Geek of PBS telethon fame; Disco Sniper, out to get you in his crosshairs, and Doctor Ronald (with his Scienterrific Show for Young People) and Doctor Ronald's assistant, Suzi Kreemkups.

When, midway through their sophomore year at Nilnisi, Skeeter and Joe Biggins auditioned for the Nothingbutt Theater, Joe played a fastfood clerk and Skeeter his indignant customer. *What's this?* Skeeter began, and Joe said *That's your refried Sluggoburger, ma'am! with onions tomatoes and extra relish, together with a chocolate Sluggoshake to wash it down with, and fourteen dead guinea pigs in hollandaise sauce.*

Whereupon Skeeter should've gone *Fourteen dead guinea pigs?!* so Joe, all earnest determination, could've said *In hollandaise sauce—that's right, ma'am*, so Skeeter could've insisted *I didn't order fourteen dead guinea pigs in ANY kind of sauce*, so Joe could've then explained that *Ah! you DID order a refried Sluggoburger with onions tomatoes and extra relish; and with every Sluggoburger we give away a side bucket of fourteen free dead guinea pigs in hollandaise sauce—sorry, ma'am, quantities limited; only fourteen per customer.*

Or words to that effect.

But the improvident Skeeter had long since doubled over with a laughing gas attack, such as people often suffered when Joe Biggins got going. And helpful Joe could not resist

heaping it up and piling it on, seeming to spill Skeeter's chocolate Sluggoshake with a realistic SHPLORT and asking *Do you still want that, ma'am? I'd be glad, no PROUD to fetch a fresh new Sluggocup for it, and a Sluggoshake's the very thing you need to treat those nitrous oxide overdoses—say! as long as you're down there on the floor, ma'am, would you mind looking for my Sluggocontact lenses? I lost all three of 'em when I dropped your shake; and there was an old gypsy in this morning who left behind his glass eye and crystal ball and I think they're down there, too—*

By which point Skeeter was rolling around the stage in helpless ecstasies, and not just ecstasies but a closefitting tush-accentuating red spandex jumpsuit. Which saved Skeeter from fizzling there and then, and kept her for the moment in Nothingbutt contention.

(Shameful it might be, but accentuated tushes do play their part in show business success.)

To its credit, the Nothingbutt Theater didn't do its casting on a couch. But never enough young women tried out for improv, and cute ones were scarcer still. As Steve Martin aptly put it, *Comedy Was Not Pretty*. Too often it had bad skin and gross teeth.

Nobody doubted Skeeter's stage presence, or her knowing where she was coming from. It was the going-to that kept tripping her up, especially when interacting with comedians liable to pull the unexpected. Joe undertook to coach her, but all for naught; as an improv comic, Skeeter made a damn fine audience. She would get agog and engrossed in what her partners were coming up with, then miss the ball altogether when it was thrown her way, or burst out cacklelaughing fit to die.

There was still the standup circuit to turn to, if you didn't mind sleazy nightclubs full of drunks and hecklers defying you to paste a smile on their Blue Meanie faces. And if you wore a nice short skirt to show off your nice short legs, the BMs only stared at and up them and provided running commentary en route. (Yuggh.)

Tuesday was open-mike night at the Nothingbutt and Skeeter seldom had any problem there as a solo, gabbling with the customary collegiate crowd. Allow me to get *cozy* with you; taste your intoxicating applause! No worse than your average wet T-shirt contest. Though of course Nilnisi U. had its full quota of BMs.

But to go pro, to be a permanent part-time dues-paying opening act, treated to scattered chortles if not deadly silence, honing and polishing ten minutes of material over and over again for months if not years, until one fine discover-me-bigtime day—

No. Encores were one thing; monotony another.

So (not for the first time) Skeeter found herself devoid of all practical professional ambition. If not theater, what then?

Fencing maybe—she enjoyed prancing about with mask on and foil in hand: *Hey! ho! get off the flo 'l avast, me hearties!*

Or she could major in German like her roommate Missy Trace, who must've been a chipmunk or hamster in some former life and retained the squeaky voice, timid eyes, and tendency to nibble her food. This mouselike linguist was in utter awe of Skeeter, who graciously allowed Missy to become her personal idolatress and source of flexibly-repayable loans. She sometimes had Fräulein Trace recite Goethe or Brecht in the original, mystifying Missy with her fit-to-die cacklelaughter. (German was such a hilarious language. You always sounded like you were having a fit.)

Missy herself suffered shrill fits at the hands of Joe Biggins, who would creep stealthily up behind her to shout *Where have you been, my lost love!* while putting Missy in a headlock and sticking his unspeakable tongue in her poor chaste ear. Joe knew better than to try that with Skeeter, who would have bombarded him with Dynamints while demanding to know whether he kissed his mother with that nasty-nasty mouth.

Maybe she should become a dental hygienist. (Oh *yuggh.*)

Maybe she ought to chuck college outright. Look at sister Sadie: dropped out of Nilnisi after not-quite-two years to be whisked away to Portugal; then out of art school in Elsew after *another* not-quite-two years, this time to have baby Desirée.

And now Sadie the single parent was twenty-five and chafing under her folks's roof. Seething every time Carrie or Alexis lent well-intentioned advice about when and where and how a child should feed itself, wash itself, take its naps, take walks vs. being pushed in a stroller, endure teething, speak in complete sentences, and embark on toiletrization. She even snapped at ARnold, sympathetic as ever but not entirely reconciled to having a single-mother daughter. *His* onetime mother-in-law, who went by the voodooish name of Nana

Gubel, wouldn't recognize Desi as her great-granddaughter any more than she would accept Skeeter Kitefly as anything but a step-interloper. Which was peachy-fine with Skeeter, who regarded Nana Gubel as a dismal old snuffdipping crone of a bitch.

It was during Easter dinner, after grace was disposed of and ARnold began to carve the ham, that Sadie dropped her casual grenade of a plan to move self and child out of house and home (as soon as damn possible) and relocate in Rassiére Bay—a couple hundred miles away, across the broad Ipsissima. There she would help run a daycare center with her old college chum Gwendolyn (Winky no more, not since out from under *her* parental roof).

Cheers, dears.

During the ensuing hullabaloo Skeeter helped herself to a big plateful of ham and yams. Extracting Desirée from her highchair, she took babe and plate out to the back yard—hello sun! hello sky!—where they could eat in relativeless peace, play peekaboo and toddle around the meager garden, touching each struggling flower—hello crocus! hello tulip!—with one finger only.

Skeeter had never understood Sadie's longing for an over-the-rainbow place where she could *do* things; probably because Skeeter, wherever she might be, did *do* things and without a whole lot of Judy Garlandizing about it, or even much in the way of forethought.

Whenever Sadie flipped her lid and flew the coop—staying out all night with some guy called Dingus, or getting super 'luded at a motorcycle rally, or notifying the folks by picture postcard that *Hi guess what I'm in Aspen [or Lisbon, or Melbourne] and God is it beautiful here I'm all out of bread but not to worry I can find work as an au pair or something Later Lotsa Luv—*

—well, Skeeter took pride in herself as a madcap example-setter. Yes, that was how you *did* things: with the same GERONIMO! satisfaction you felt when Baby Desi made her very first unprompted request for *bobbahs* [Pop Rocks].

And no sooner did Skeeter return to the U.N. than she decided she wasn't going back to the U.N., at least not after wrapping up the spring semester; barely a month left and then she could boast of going to college two full years in a row. (Nyaah to you, Mercedes.)

As a consequence she coasted through finals and got okay-enough grades and bade farewell to the Nothingbutts and never saw any of them again; and wished Joe Biggins the

best of knock ‘em dead luck and never saw him again either. (Except maybe once on *The Merv Griffin Show*; she was a bit swacked at the time and might’ve imagined it.) Missy Trace wanted to drop out too and go on being Skeeter’s roomie, but her parents wouldn’t let her do either and this sent poor Missy into a *waah-boo!* crying jag.

Skeeter’s parents didn’t learn of her decision for some little while, thanks to Skeeter’s desire to spare their feelings. Or maybe just because it slipped her mind, there being other matters for them all to deal with. No sooner were finals over than everybody had to hustle out to the Booth County Hospital, where Gramma Addie Otto had been an RN fifty years before, and where she lay dying now.

But perfectly at ease, as Gramma kept assuring them; or what would have been ease were it not for the cancer. She took educated interest in her treatment, was friends with all the present-day nurses, and never missed *The Edge of Night* as long as she was conscious.

The last time Skeeter and her mother and Aunt Ollie got to see her, Gramma was drifting merrily-merrily down the gentle stream, wishing only for a taste of Wunderlich Bros.’s potato salad—still the only true potato salad on the face of God’s earth—and recalling when little Kelly Rebecca would run up to the Courthouse water fountain and turn the knob as far as it would go, the highest possible spray (which was pretty darn high coming from a county appliance) and with her precious little face all bright and shining, goYEAHHHH!

Gramma had hold of Skeeter’s hand but clutched it then, turning with the utmost urgency in eyes and voice to say *Hawney—at the house—upstairs—in the sewing room—that big dresser—not the one by the closet—but next to the window—there in the third drawer—from the top—toward the back—*

Skeeter couldn’t figure out what Gramma had wanted her to get, or find, or realize. Nor could her mother; nor could Aunt Ollie; and it became a subject of recurrent family speculation. There *was* a big dresser by the window in Gramma’s sewing room, and it did have a third drawer and that drawer was full of bobbins and safety pins; but that was about it.

So they buried Gramma in Rosewood beside Grampa and generations of Wunderlichs going back to pointed-chin Gustav and maxim-coining Frieda. It was a June funeral such as only the Middle West can dish up, too hot and glaring for anyone to wear black and not soak

it through. Skeeter thought with so many nurses in attendance they should have all been in white anyway. Gramma would've wanted a brisk and cheerful funeral, not like Grampa's during that raging December blizzard when they'd kept having to wait till the wind died down.

With Gramma gone, the question arose of what to do with the old house in Marble Orchard. Great-Aunt Emmy had lived there too for the past nine years, but during Gramma's final illness she'd been placed in a nursing home and brought out only for the funeral. Relatives took it in turn to lead Emmy, blind and mad (not insane, just mad), around Rosewood. When Skeeter was on duty Emmy would say no more than *It's come to this has it child?*—over and over, as though it were a honed-and-polished punchline worth learning by heart.

Back to the house: Aunt Ollie and Uncle Walt didn't want it, having nearly paid off their own mortgage; and of their two surviving sons, Doug lived in rehab centers when not in jail, while Jerry had taken his creepshow to law school in Cleveland. Uncle Buddy-Buzz refused to ever set foot again in Marble Orchard; but Skeeter's mother, astonishing everyone, felt differently.

Oswald Avenue was changing, according to Carrie; the neighborhood simply wasn't safe anymore. (Which Skeeter, with a snort, interpreted as *Too many Hispanics and blacks oh my!*) But there was more to it than that—more of a middle-aged longing for some under-the-rainbow place where you didn't have to DO things.

ARnold posed no objections. He liked the idea of having a This Old House to renovate, and four acres of lawn and garden to rescue from neglect. He even liked the old cat Margaret (Whippy no more at age thirteen), who might be stiff and somnolent but needed only one glimpse of Skeeter to bug her eyes out as of yore.

ARnold had worked for the Kleinstein Drugstore chain all his life in one capacity or another; now, by cashing in a career's worth of IOUs, he got the Kleinsteins to make him a sort of overseer for their ShortKut convenience stores in Booth, Herold, and Surratt Counties. So a FOR SALE sign went up on Oswald Avenue, though not before Carrie insisted on repainting the entire interior with Skeeter's suborned help and long-distance applause from Rassiere Bay, where Sadie put Desi on the phone to cheer in her auntie's ear. Skeeter was

only mildly wounded by this (it not being Joe Biggins's tongue) and even less touched by the pangs of cleaning out her room, emptying her closetful of jackets and sweatshirts borrowed from guys she'd batted lashes at during adolescence, most of whose names she no longer remembered.

Least wounding of all was ARnold's knocking shyly at her door with a request to have a Serious Chat, revealing that though he'd fully intended to pay Skeeter's way through college—which would have been a first-time accomplishment for him, what with Sadie's gadabouts, and Alexis opting to marry Lenny Czolgosz and shuffle off Buffalowards to produce babies every other year (five so far, with number six due in November or should we say six-and-seven as it was or rather they were likely to be twins)—

Skeeter lassoed ARnold with a big hug and told him not to fret; she'd been thinking of taking some time off from school anyway, getting a job and paying her own way when she went back. Which ARnold protested, though not to the point of talking Skeeter out of it.

To ease the exodus for all concerned, Carrie suggested that Buddy-Buzz invite Skeeter up to Chicago for a week's vacation. This he readily did, and escorted her to a number of shows, vast and dapper in his tailored three-piece summer suits.

At thirty-seven he now resembled Oliver Hardy in his bacon-grabbing prime (though with fewer spicurls). But the same grandiose eloquence decorated his rhetoric as he too sought a Serious Chat with Skeeter, urging her to reconsider and not turn her back upon the stage. True, it was nothing more than make-believe, a magic shadow-show round which we phantom figures did but come and go. But after all, darling, what was Reality? Nothing more than everyday life—the workaday world—artlessness.

Buddy-Buzz had realized this when he was Skeeter's age and went behind the scenes to become a designer. Yes, it was only a paper moon hanging over a cardboard sea, mere scenery, not Reality; but that's where the magic came in. With a dab of paint here and papier-mâché there, you could *make* people make-believe just as much if not more than the actors out front (who could and did flub and freeze in midscene).

And even we poor tech folk, darling, can achieve a certain renown. Who could forget Buddy-Buzz's set for the Off-Loop production of *God's Codpiece*, with its fire-eating green-nudes motif? *And* we can earn a comfortable living. (Expansive envy-of-the-neighborhood

glance around his highrise suite—if a two-bedroom-kitchen-and-bath could be called a suite.)

(Buddy-Buzz always did, with feeling.)

But at Marshall Field's Crystal Palace, over enormous ice cream sundaes to soften the blow, Skeeter broke the news that she was auditioning for a clerical role at the Nilnisi Mutual Savings Bank (main branch) in downtown Demortuis.

Her uncle took it gracefully enough, with a your-life-my-love shruggy gesture he'd picked up not from Oliver Hardy but a prop man called Milt, whom Buddy-Buzz had known in his youth. (Which one's youth Skeeter didn't find out.)

She aced her audition, though, and got cast as a file clerk in the bank personnel department. It would be impolite to speculate whether accentuated tushes played their part, Skeeter having sat on hers through the bulk of the interview.

At any rate she began to feel like an adult. Turning twenty in July, she wasn't a teenager anymore but a mature woman with a real job and real wages of \$650 a month to do with whatever she chose. Such as pay rent, which was a real high priority with the house on Oswald almost sold and Skeeter in need of her own place as soon as possible—somewhere neither over nor under the rainbow, but movable-into and fast.

The Nilnisi Mutual (main branch) personnel department consisted of several older women and several her-own-age women and one indeterminate fellow with the wonderful *Wrinkle in Time*-y name of Charles Wallace, who had little in common with Madeleine L'Engle's uncanny character other than a willingness to make people sandwiches.

Charles did have an unusually protuberant brow like the Littlest Conehead ha ha ha (as he usually phrased it) and a tight fixed smile that remained on his face, Cheshire style, even while he was in tears. As Skeeter discovered her very first workweek when a maintenance hunk came to replace some burnt-out fluorescent lights, and Trish the bitch receptionist said in a loud callous voice *It sure is nice to have a man around the office for a change*, which Charles overheard whether it was intended for his ears or not. Thus Skeeter found him in the fileroom, ducked head grinning and dripping.

She lost no time in treating Charles to afterwork drinks, proposing this conspicuously in front of Trish's desk. Over the drinks Skeeter made a few remarks about the authenticity of Trish's hair color, bustline, and personal virtue; but Charles was so nice and

magnanimous, saying *Oh well Trish can't help having those bubbling hormones ha ha ha*, and Skeeter replied *She sure can't, that's her whole problem*.

So that topic was disposed of, fresh drinks were served, and Skeeter went on to strike up a very best friendship with Charles that marked something of a first for her, and perhaps for him too.

He lived in an unpretentious little walkup on Garfield Street, as Skeeter learned not in the usual your-place-or-mine manner but because an apartment was open for rent there and Charles, hearing of Skeeter's circumstances, hastened to tell her all about it. The building wasn't far from the bank and only a block or two away from McKinley Street, where Skeeter had gotten butt-tattooed what seemed like a billion years ago by Madame Zelda, who'd since gone on to a better world or maybe just a better locale.

Make that a *different* locale. Skeeter saw nothing to disparage in a neighborhood so replete with happy funky bistros and boutiques. The apartment for rent was quite as delightful, recently repainted and with a new lime-green shag carpet laid. All this plus heat and water would be Skeeter's for one-fifty a month; and dispensing with forethought she converted her first week's paycheck into a rental deposit.

Her folks sold their house in August and that was that; they all packed up and left Oswald Avenue for the last time. On moving day ARnold and Carrie lugged some redundant furniture over to Garfield Street in the station wagon they'd bought to replace Elmer the Fudd Ford Thunderbird, also bequeathed to Skeeter who in her own mind had owned Elmer for years.

The furniture outfitted her new apartment to the point where Skeeter could host her folks at a combination housewarming/sendoff, and partly allay their worries about her being on her own in such a part of town—alongside such curiosities as Charles Wallace, who lent Skeeter his blender for mixing up yummy stuff ha ha ha.

Skeeter's mother in fact got so sentimental on strawberry daiquiris that she delivered a speech about her baby girl being all grown up and what would Carrie do without her? Which was a change from twenty years of wondering what to do *with* her. But all that was done and done with and Carrie actually wept when the time came to part, ARnold ahem-ing and jingling car keys during mother and daughter's embraces, and blushing when Skeeter

kissed him goodbye. Then the Benisons were out the door and down the stairs and in the station wagon after exchanging final waves, and away down Garfield in search of the Interstate and the long road home to Marble Orchard.

Skeeter felt she'd burned her britches that night. It felt so good she gave over most of the remaining summer to doing it again and again. Accentuating her tush in Calvin Kleins, topping herself off with a satin disco jacket (borrowed, of course) and heading out to shake booty at Pleasure Island or The Nosferatu. Or strapping on skates so she could giddown to the Roller Boogie Rink-o-theque on Lincoln Avenue, where love on wheels was all the rage.

On wheels or in heels, Skeeter got to dance with a great many guys wearing shirts open to their waists and expecting her to flash and drool over their flaunted chest hair, their fourteen-karat Zodiac medallions. And Skeeter was human: she could flash, she could drool, and she could do both now without being confined to some disco sniper's Mercury Capri.

Your crosshairs or mine?

Allow me to get *cozy* with you; taste your intoxicating applause while Donna Summer sings about how she needs Hot Stuff. (Some just need it but others of us ARE Hot Stuff, so nyaah to you Donna.)

Skeeter meant to send Missy Trace her new address but forgot all about it, and her ex-roomie's letters ended up forwarded everywhere except Garfield Street. Come September Skeeter almost remembered, but the deeLISHus feeling of perpetually ditching class swept everything about the U. right out of her head; and she never saw Missy Trace again either.

She did see lots of scary movies, though, on nights not spent dancin' or skatin'. With her series of snipers and occasionally Charles Wallace she went to see *Alien* and *Phantasm* and *Love at First Bite* and *Dawn of the Dead* and *The Amityville Horror* and *When a Stranger Calls* and Steve Martin as *The Jerk*, several times.

During the autumn she filled her new apartment with M. C. Escher posters and Edward Gorey posters and Loren Salazar posters and crystal prisms and crystal snowflakes and B. Kliban cat pillows and other neat junk found at local trinketries or mail-ordered from *High Times* magazine ads.

Not that all was beer and skittles, of course. She had to wage a running battle against these little tiny bugs that weren't roaches thank God but occupied the inner corners of her

kitchen cabinets, and kept leaving their little tiny bug crap that looked like pepperspecks all over the damn place (yuggh).

Then there was this bizarre case of pimples, almost the first Skeeter'd had to deal with in her nearly unblemished life, and these in a most inconvenient place; but she went to a clinic where she was prescribed an ointment that chased the rash away jiffy-quick, to Skeeter's thorough relief. She blamed it all on her first and last drink of Perrier; from now on, she told the girls at work except Trish, she'd stick to wholesome healthy Piña Coladas.

And Skeeter resolved to touch bases with herself more often, especially when no strapping young man was handy. At such times, say of a Sunday morning, she might even get up before noon and have a leisurely brunch of Golden Grahams and Cheetos, gazing out the window at Garfield Street, and the modest skyscrapers of downtown Demortuis peeping over it at her.

If she woke particularly early she could catch mists rising like dry-ice effects over a Buddy-Buzz set, and be reminded of Pip's going off to London with all his Great Expectations spread before him. That was one of Skeeter's favorite scenes in one of her favorite books, stumbled across in one of the English classes she'd taken back when she was in school.

Those were the Seventies, my friend, fast coming to their end; and if they'd been one big blast, just think how much bigger and brighter a blast the imminent Eighties would be!

At any rate, as with Pip, it was too late to turn back now.

Chapter 15

ELOHSSA DECAFTIHS

The heart of the city Demortuis on a mid-May midmorning, everything tra la lolly *alive!* for once, the spring sun beaming like a happyface eyeball in the sky; downtown a teeming flow of business breakers and the occasional fast-tracking indigent—by golly if that one’s not Westport Willie, his yellow breath infiltrating Lincoln Avenue earlier than usual—no change right now, Willie, catch me at lunch—

—through it all bzzzz’d Skeeter Kitefly, playing grownup in her robin’s-egg blue suit and tictactoe pumps. Checking out her reflection in the streetlevel windows: *there I am—there I am—there I am—lookin’ sharp!*

Dress for Success was still a fresh concept, but Skeeter’s businesswear was bought off the petite rack and resisted tuck-taking. Too often the sleeves ended up overlong and so did the skirt, preventing that proper nudge-thrust that allowed a rounded knee to greet the day at every step.

Well tough patootie. Work that skirt! Nudge and thrust and jaunt along, glad the office logsheets were still on indefinite back-order so you were *forced* to skip out at 10 AM and hop down the block to the corner copy shop.

And when Skeeter got there her gladness redoubled, for behind the counter was no less than the Ultimate Sven! out-Bjorning Borg himself! Like a Viking god of old he looked, Siegfried or Woden or one of those boys: head of unruffleable curls, Dudley Do-Right chin, and *oh* what a butt! Duly noted as its owner took Skeeter’s logsheet and turned to his big megacopier.

Time’s a-wastin’! Skeeter struck up an immediate flirtation, unbuttoning her blazer and striking profiles to allay any doubt about her own compact perkitude. And even before

Mr. Viking finished cloning her order, she gained possession of the names he went by:

James James Morrison Morrison (commonly known as Jim) Midge.

“So Jim Midge, do you eat? If so when? If not why?”

He took his time replying, as though this were a question worth serious mull-over.

“Yeah, I eat,” he concluded. “Lunch. In a couple of hours.”

“In a couple of hours where?”

“Across the street,” said Jim, pointing his chin out the window at the catty-corner Pizza Hut.

“Well! I might be planning to eat there myself—in a couple of hours. And *if* I do and *if* you’re there and *if* I see you, I might just stop by ‘n’ say ‘hi.’”

They arranged billing and Skeeter made way for the next in line but lingered awhile at counterside. Tilting her robin’s-eggy gaze up at Jim through glasses wide as coffee mugmouths, in a look of not-so-mock seduction.

“Can I bum a cigarette?” she asked.

“Sorry. Just out. Be seeing you,” he said, but with a smile that weakened Skeeter’s knees and sent her wobbling back to the office. Later than expected, but hey! the duplicators flubbed a bunch of copies so she’d made ‘em redo ‘em and throw in a few gratis to cover mental anguish (and there was this *guy* there, *oh* my God, *what* a gasp-at-able butt, *I* am not kidding, I have not BEGUN to tell you about his butt so catch me after lunch and I’ll go into detail then *if* he shows up *which* he’d better, O Curlylocks! Curlylocks! Wilt he be mine? He need not wash dishes nor yet feed the swine...)

At noon Skeeter hustled to the Pizza Hut, forgetting to spare Westport Willie any change in her haste. Which was well worth it since Jim Midge not only showed up but was waiting for her in a saved booth and—get this!—had already ordered *for them both*, taking the liberty of guessing her favorite toppings.

“I like just about everything,” she informed him, and sat openmouthed while Jim stood, Jim turned around, Jim collected their pizza and beverages, Jim produced a genuine knife and fork from his jacket pocket and tucked on in.

“What are you *doing* to that poor pizza?”

“Eating it,” he said. Cutting, forking, chewing.

“I mean why the silverware? This is finger food!”

“Don’t eat fingers.”

“Not even ladyfingers?” Skeeter wanted to know, surfacing from her amazement to play Puckish Pookie but only briefly as Jim smiled again, casting her back into lustdaze. There she remained while he made a merciless scrutiny of every forkful, as though each were part of a police lineup.

“Wish we could have a real drink here,” said Skeeter, chugging her 7-Up, stifling a belch with spritely apology. “Um—busy tonight?”

Again the mull-over. “Well, yeah. But not tomorrow. Shall I pick you up Saturday night?”

“*Shall* you! All my life I’ve dreamed of meeting a guy who says ‘shall.’”

Again the smile, wider, smoother, bringing out a little chip in his nose that symmetricized with his chin-cleavage.

“You have got the COOwuldest smile,” Skeeter sighed. “Where shall we go?”

“Leave that to me. Where do you live?”

Not trusting to memory, she scrabbled in her oversized poke for pencil and paper, for a nonexistent diary of stone to carve tomorrow’s date upon, getting tangled and flustered till Jim picked up a napkin, pulled out a ballpoint, jotted down Skeeter’s address and phone number, plus incidentally her name.

Call it mawkish but there was something magical about how a fresh new pack of Salems appeared out of nowhere in his big Nordic hand; how he ripped it open and offered her a smoke, which she readily took despite her preference for Pall Malls, so that their fingers might touch. And when they did—

—Skeeter felt drawn apart and alone with JJMM, in a Pizza Hut on some private island on an infinitely extendable lunch hour, and it was *so* romantic: like a movie dance sequence, where the two leads single one another out and boogie by themselves in an exclusive cone of light, the only couple in all the isolated cosmos...

Blink and it was Saturday and Bob Seger was singing “Betty Lou’s Gettin’ Out Tonight!” as Skeeter zipped herself into a little red pixie not-to-say dixie number. No nudge-thrust problems with this bit of snuggery, which did display-justice to a lady’s knee and thigh

and arm and shoulder and fair share of perkitude.

For his part Jim Midge came clad in spotless white shirt and slacks. He picked Skeeter up in a matching white van, though she'd pegged him for sure as the Corvette Stingray type.

"Hunh! Too low down," he disallowed, loftily driving them to Mr. Slater's Parrot, a word-of-mouth nightspot less well known than the Echo Theater next door (where *Bedtime for Bonzo* played every midnight on a double bill with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*).

Skeeter had never heard of Mr. Slater's, it having played no part in the Demortuis disco scene; but that had pretty much evaporated everywhere so the last squawk could be said to go to Mr. Slater's. Which did boast a couple of live parrots in cages, plus a big mechanical one at the door that said "HEL-lo... HEL-lo..." in piratic accents.

"What to drink?"

"I'm sick of piña coladas," Skeeter decided, lighting up her latest Salem. "What're *you* having?"

"A zombie."

"Ooh macabre! Make me a zombie too! (Cackle.) Are you Scandinavian? You look Scandinavian. Like a ski instructor from Lapland."

"Did use to ski," said Jim. "Kept breaking bones."

"Your own?"

"And other people's."

"Me too! What a coincidence. Except I haven't broken any of mine yet."

Their drinks arrived, and Jim gave his glass and its contents a once-over before saying, "Bottoms up."

"This is *great*. What's in it—rum?"

"And apricot brandy."

"Well from now on I'm a zombie addict. (Slurp.) So where are you from, if not Sweden?"

"Close. Southern California."

"Hey, me too! Not exactly lately, though. Ever been to Santa Ana? The Marine air station?"

“Just so happens I was in service at Santa Ana.”

“Me *too!*—I mean my father was,” cried Skeeter, and went on (around zombie slurps) about having been a Marine brat born in Cherry Point NC, so Jim shouldn’t be alarmed if she started drawling and twanging like Andy Griffith ‘cause it came naturally, for a couple of years anyway, till she and her folks got transferred to Arizona and then Hawaii where Skeeter (according to Skeeter) got babysat one night by young Bette Midler.

“In harlequin glasses, too—even then she was divine. Did you see *The Rose*? I did. Did you like it? I didn’t, much, except when she was being funny, but it got too soppy-sad. Yes you *can* freshen my drink, if you can freshen up a zombie—put it in a tux and top hat. (Slurp.) How old are *you*?”

“Old enough,” said Jim.

“No really.”

“About twenty-seven.”

“About! Don’t you know? Well *I’m* going to be twenty-one in a couple of months, since you’re dying of curiosity, and yes I do accept presents on first dates. Where shall we be going next? Howzabout a movie? A scary one? *Bedtime for Bonzo*, for instance—”

On she happily drank and gabbled, Jim being a generous date and good listener, seldom laughing, often smiling, often wiping wet rings off their table and emptying Skeeter’s ashtray into ones at neighboring vacancies. And before she knew it, the hour was so late it was early, and shrouds were being hung over the parrot cages.

No hope to be terrified by Reagan and the chimp tonight. They still might have popped next door for *Rocky Horror*, but Skeeter by her own admission was “kinda blotto” and Jim in fact had to half-lug her out to the van.

All the way back to Garfield Street she bounced to some intoxicated syncopation, lecturing Jim on the conveniences of living downtown: not having to drive to work with the bank so nearby and downtown parking so goddam costly which was a goddam ripoff with all the vacant lots around where office buildings had been torn down, so she usually took the bus instead and on la-de-da fine mornings even walked on her li’l flat feet. It was real gallant of Jimbo not to make her walk home on those feet from Mr. Slater’s though a *born* gentleman would run out and lay his coat over any potholes en route. Did she sound as

pixilated not-to-say dixilated as she was hearing? well DOOdah! gonna bounce all niiiiight...

She was all for having Jim come on up and come on in.

“Another time.”

“Awww...”

“Later. Depend on it.”

He bent and put lips to her small crestfalling face, which perked up in an instant as she wrapped arms around his neck and got swept not only off her feet but out of her *shoes* when he straightened up, GOD this guy was romantic! Skeeter simply had to respond with some serious facesuck, by no means excluding the cleanshaven cleftchin and jutjaw. Jut away O Curlylocks! Ooooh *firm* as he hugged her round the waist, held her as though guessing her weight.

Skeeter’s hundred-and-one-pound perkitude was pretty firm too, but pressed against Jim Midge it turned to molten oleo and slid down till her face was buried in his shirtfront and its aroma of English Leather.

“Like your shirt,” she mumbled.

“Yes,” said Jim, “life *is* short.”

Then he and the van were gone and Skeeter was twinkle-toeing up the stoop, up the stairs, loose shoes in hand, to unlock her apartment door without too much extra effort, thank you kindly. Inside and unzip and wrestle out of the little red number which chose to fight back: oh you would, would you? well take that! and that! Flipping on the stereo, not too loud lest her neighbors’s slumbers be disturbed and cause them to pound on walls and floor and ceiling as they sometimes felt the need to do, when Skeeter and her assorted beaux devoted the wee hours to carrying on.

Well! Those beaux could go forgotten ‘cause this Mr. Viking might very well be THE one AND only and hark! from the stereo came unexpected Judy Collins who didn’t get much airplay anymore, but here she was singing snatches from *Sweeney Todd*. So Skeeter and her combative dress began to dance, to waltz and twirl, adapting lyrics as they liked:

*O those Sven-boys are a wonder
how they make your heart squeeeeal
da da da da*

da da da da
pretty Sven-boys...

*

Come Monday morning Skeeter raced back to Lincoln Avenue on her li'l flat feet and experienced what would have been anticlimax, had there yet been a climax to anti. She lunched with Jim Midge that day and a couple more times that week, but he was too busy "wrapping up some work" to go out datewise.

"Should be done by Friday. Then, whatever you like."

"Ooh-wee, *whatever?* I'll hold you to that, James."

In the meantime she absolutely had to have his home phone number, which she'd been too lustdazed to ask for before; but he told her to call him at work.

"Why?"

"My phone's disconnected."

"Well you've got to get it hooked up again right away. I like to talk on the phone to my sweeties, sometimes more than in person—well, not *more*, but after a date I'll call them up and talk for hours, if of course they're not there beside me—hey! you're not making this up, are you? It's not that you don't *want* me calling you at home, is it? Afraid I'll upset your six wives and twenty-seven girlfriends?"

Jim explained that his phone had rung with wrong numbers at every insomniac hour. No point wasting money on unwanted wakey-wakey, so one night he'd yanked its umbilicus right out of the wall.

"What about your folks? How does your mom feel about you having no phone? Isn't she afraid you'll slip in the tub and fracture your skull and not be able to call for help?"

"No mother either. She's disconnected too."

"Oh Jeez I'm sorry!" said Skeeter. "Um... if you don't mind my asking—how is she 'disconnected too'?"

"Haven't seen her since I was three," said Jim, grinning gravely.

So on Friday morning (their first week anniversary) Skeeter had to call the copy shop to ask if big strong Jim would come help move her refrigerator.

Skeeter's kitchen suffered from bugs on an *Empire Strikes Back* scale. Some had invaded to escape last winter's weather, others moved in with the spring; still more lived there all year round. Energetic fumigation had routed most from the drawers and cabinets, but Skeeter felt certain they'd all taken refuge behind her ancient Frigidaire. No way would she be able to enjoy the Memorial Day weekend, knowing they were back there *lurking* at her.

"Sometimes they have gang warfare too, and haul the killed ones up and leave them in my sink. (Yuggh.)"

"Sure," Jim agreed, after weighing his decision. "I can move your icebox. Tonight?"

"Yay-ess, yay-ess!" Skeeter exulted, and ran to tell Charles Wallace that *his* shifting assistance would no longer be necessary.

("What a relief ha ha ha," went Charles. "A fellow can hurt himself hauling furniture about, you know. And trusses are so unflattering.")

Jim would be over no later than seven, which gave Skeeter ample time to race home, strip, shower, shampoo, shave legs and 'pits, blowdry, re-scent and -cosmeticize herself, and get bedecked in customary summer mufti of bare feet, snug short-shorts, snugger T-shirt, and bright blue ribbon in her wealth of saffron hair.

As seven struck Jim appeared in (oh my God *moan!*) tank top and cut-offs; and together they surveyed her refrigerator, outside and in.

"Gotta defrost this," Skeeter apologized. "I'm always meaning to. Maybe I'll do it over the long weekend—pull the plug and eat everything before it spoils and rots. Are you hungry? I make a mean junket—just vicious—it's in there somewhere, swaggering around. I mean you'll need all your strength to budge this monster, I swear I don't think it's ever been moved, even when they repaint the place they just slop around and dribble behind—"

"Let's hop to it," said Jim.

She started bouncing on one foot while he laid hands on the fridge and took its measure.

Skeeter noticed one of his fingers had a knotted knuckle. Before she could ask whether this was a badly-mended ski-accident breakage, Jim pulled the refrigerator free from the linoleum with a horrid CRACK, like a statue being wrenched off its pedestal.

“That’s the hard part,” he remarked. “Rest is easier.”

“Okay! I’ll rest easy here and direct you.”

“No you won’t. Lend a hand.”

She got obedient hold of the fridge-front and began tugging at it with many *grrrrs* and *unnnnhs*. Jim, at the side, stopped pushing and stood watching her struggle alone; and just as Skeeter realized this, she yanked the door wide open and would have landed on her accentuated tush had Jim not caught her.

“What’s the idea?!”

“Just testing your strength.”

“Oh yeah? Hey, I’m tough—I’m mean—put up your dukes, leatherneck—” and she jabbed at Jim’s stomach till he smiled, told her to stand back, and singlehandedly shoved the refrigerator across the violated lino.

“Oh Jeez I can’t look!” wailed Skeeter, seizing the moment to hide her face against Jim’s tank top. But—

“Nothing back there. Except dust.” He took a dishcloth and made as if to mop it up.

“Not with that!—*mmmmmmmm*... your hands are cold. I like that in a man. Especially in summertime.”

“Not really summer yet.”

“Feels like it. But you, you’re COOwull. (Cackle.) ‘The Iceman Cometh.’ Shall we defrost you along with the freezer?” And she tilted another not-so-mock look up at him.

Jim smoothed his curly locks with a knotted-knuckled hand; then bent his head down to hers.

(Just like Neleus the Marble Boy in one of Skeeter’s favorite stories in all the *Mary Poppins* books. As a little girl she’d imagined herself running across the Park with Neleus, his marble fingers growing warmer in her grasp; as a somewhat older girl she’d imagined this rather differently, taking credit for the Marble Boy’s coming to life and not through prayer either, nyaah to you Pygmalion.)

They adjourned to the lime-green shag carpet, which was almost like lying in a summer field; and worked their way by cotton-pickin’ stages to bare-assity and bed. Skeeter’s little body was predictably scrumptious, while Jim’s proved to be rigidly muscular

everywhere including the butt and that bothered Skeeter not at all.

She had always found sex a big tickle, laughing immoderately during foreplay, having gigglefits throughout intercourse. But Jim Midge remained nonchalant, applying himself with the finesse of a Swedish masseur, and in a very short while had Skeeter doing the Horizontal Bop with all stops pulled out.

“You oughta be a CHIropactor!” she exclaimed, achieving oh-gee (i.e. Orgasms Galore) in record time. Whereupon she promptly fell asleep, as was her amorous habit; and commenced to snore in the grand *honk phoo beebabeebee* manner.

Some of her past bunkies found this so outrageously unfeminine that they got out of her bed, put on their clothes, laced up their shoes, and left in a huff. But Jim Midge took it in casual stride—or casual crouch, laying low and awake for many minutes after Skeeter succumbed. Every so often she would float up towards consciousness, only to have Jim tuck her back under.

They devoted most of Saturday to re-enacting the chase and getting to know each other better.

“Where’s your tattoos? You were a Marine, you should have hundreds. My dad had a big one of these gamecocks having a fight on his chest.”

Jim held up his papercut hands for her to see; and there, in the teensiest-tiniest letters on thumbball and fingertip, was spelled out M A R N I (left) and I N R A M (right).

Skeeter was immediately jealous. “Who’s that? Your old girlfriend? Or should I say your *other* girlfriend?”

“Both.”

“You mean you’re still seeing her?!”

“She won’t see me anymore,” said Jim.

“W—” went Skeeter. “Um... would you ever tattoo any part of *my* name on any part of your body?”

“Could happen.”

“Well I’ve already beaten you to it!” She rolled over to show off the curlicued *K.R.K.* on her right buttock. “Jimmy crack corn and I don’t care.”

Finally out of bed about noon, she wanted to share a shower but Jim said ladies first.

“That’s no fun. At least come in and keep me company.”

“I’ll wait till you’re done.”

So Skeeter went alone into the “head,” as Jim politely euphemized it, but left the door open to continue her gabbling. “Boy do I feel tickled to death!” she shouted over the roar of the spray. “I’m never awake till I take a shower and brush my hair and teeth. When I get old and bald and toothless I bet I’ll be asleep all day long... hey! before I forget again, would you go unplug the fridge so it’ll defrost? Open the freezer door and spread out some paper towels to catch the drip, but leave the big door closed and I guess my junket’ll survive...”

She emerged, brushes in hand and mouth, to find herself alone.

Though only momentarily. Before she could react to her solitude, Jim strolled back in from the outside world, reading a Demortuis *Daily Memorial*.

“Says here there’s a Hitchcock movie on tonight,” he reported.

By which time the fridge was thawed out and back in its accustomed spot, so that Skeeter could get to the stovetop and rustle up a mountain of Jiffy-Pop.

“Didn’t he just die, Alfred Hitchcock? He must’ve been a fun guy to hang out with.”

“He was a painstaker,” Jim said solemnly. “Premeditated, too.”

“Aren’t we all,” said Skeeter. “Did I tell you I love scary movies? Well I do. They make my flesh go creepy-crawl and goosey-bump and do the Mashed Potatoes. If I faint will you catch me? Even though we’re already in bed? And what’s this called again?”

“Shadow of a Doubt.”

“Oh no! There goes my flesh!”

Except for her flesh they settled down to watch the story of a girl and her uncle, both called Charlie. From the start Skeeter thought Charlie-the-niece a bitch, amending this to “stupid bitch” as niece gushed and goosed over widow-throttling uncle; then to “fickle bitch” when niece realized the truth and (in Skeeter’s opinion) overreacted.

“I don’t want you to touch my mother!’... actually I *don’t* and why would you want to, Jimbo? with me right here already? Things could get kind of crowded.”

Joseph Cotten’s declaring the world “a foul sty full of swine” provoked some satirical oinks, as did the stupid fickle bitch’s bursting into sobs at the news.

“That wasn’t very scary,” Skeeter concluded. “I mean nobody even died!”

“What about Uncle Charlie?”

“Oh get real, it was obvious he didn’t really fall under that train. Have you ever seen *Strangers on a Train*? Now THAT’S a good scary movie—”

And she recounted its plot while Jim did the crossword and anagram puzzles in his paper, setting it aside to watch *Saturday Night Live*. It was the last show of the season and maybe the last of all time, since the whole cast was quitting and moving on. Not before letting off a few final kabooms: there was a rococo costume sketch about the inventor of the douchebag, and Roseanne Roseannadanna held forth on Gloria Vanderbilt’s alleged rectal itch till Skeeter fell out of bed and rolled on the floor.

“Jeez she cracks me up!”

Jim reserved judgment.

And after another night of oh-gee till the wee hours, Skeeter awoke to find him making ready to leave.

“But there’s so much (yawn) long weekend left. Can’t I come with you?”

“Later. Another time.”

“That’s right. I *am* coming over to your place, y’know—‘later. Another time.’ (Yawn.) And pretty darn soon, too.”

He gave her his wider-smoother-nosechip smile, and Skeeter jumped up pretty darn fast for someone not used to rising at dawn on Sunday mornings. She got him round the neck again, converted his smile to a pucker-purse, and delved down into it in search of change.

*

For the next couple of weeks Skeeter played the Bachelor Ex-Marine Dating Game, lavishful as always with her attentions and affections; but Jim didn’t ask for many favors.

He brought her bottles of rum and apricot brandy, so she might zombiefy herself at will; and introduced her to the use of benzocaine cream and honey dust, for enhanced canoodling. In return he wanted only a picture or two of Skeeter, which of course was perfectly understandable.

None of her unmounted clown-around snapshots was deemed appropriate for installation in, say, a silver frame on a boyfriend's desk or wall. Jim proposed instead to take his own professional portrait photos, developing and printing these himself in his own private darkroom.

"Ooh-wee! Will they be erotic?"

"Automatic," said Jim. Which Skeeter chose to interpret as a compliment.

Jim owned a fancy camera with various lenses and attachments and a tripod or two and Skeeter didn't know what else, except that he toted it all over to Garfield Street one Friday and prepared to capture her likeness.

Now Skeeter, despite her shameless lack of inhibition, was "typically female" about being photographed; so that when Jim pointed his Pentax at her for a trial focus, she let out a shriek and insisted on doing minute things to her face and hair and clothing before allowing them to be posterity'd. After all: when your *boyfriend* takes your picture, you have to look your best to keep yourself uppermost in his mind and heart—not to mention make all his pals hotsy-envious, and cause rival girls to wilt in comparison. Hence Skeeter's prolonged squinting in the mirror, repainting her eyelids.

Satisfied at last with her skindeep self, she broke into song: "Shall I go put on my red dress (mama)? Or be a devil with a *blue* dress *blue* dress *blue* dress devil with a—"

"Got a leotard or something?"

"Oh Jimbo! I knew we'd get around to this! Tell you what—I can model you my new swimsuit, if you've got plenty of drool to spare."

And before you could say James James Morrison Morrison, she was prancing about in a lobster-red-indeedy bikini that set off her Skeetership to compact perfection.

Jim looked it rather than her over, and critically.

"Well?" she demanded. "*Wha*-utt? Isn't this a cute suit? Aren't I gorgeous? Couldn't you die?"

"Red," he said. "It'll come out dark."

"No it won't, it'll come out red."

"Using black-and-white film," he told her, but nodded. "It'll do."

Sven Svengali took over then, coordinating lights, camera, and background with the utmost precision—very much unlike how a Norseman photographing his spunky-nubile lovergirl ought to act, in said lovergirl’s opinion. He might have been Neil Armstrong taking pictures of the moon, for all the human interest he exhibited in her exposed booty. I mean!—he’d seen it all and more before, and she wasn’t *unduly* conceited about her looks, but HEY...

Skeeter was willing to be naughty, to be racy; but every time she tried, Jim put her firmly in his idea of her place. And that seemed to be a series of stiff military stances: *‘ten-SHUN! right-face, left-face, ‘bout-face, AT-ease!*

Was this any way to treat a lovergirl well-versed in the strutting of her stuff?

Maybe not but even so, Skeeter was impatient to see the results; and for several days at shortening intervals she called Jim at the copy shop to ask, “How did they come out what do you *mean* they haven’t yet?”

“Don’t be in such a hurry.”

Jim wasn’t, for sure. Twice he reshot certain stances, saying the first results were unsatisfactory but they would get it right this time, if Skeeter would keep stiller. So more bright lights, more hot flashes—

“I can’t keep my eyes open! I feel like I’m in a tanning booth!”

“Don’t worry,” said Jim. “Looking sharp.”

“Well of *course*...”

Towards the end, getting steamed at one *‘bout-face* too many, she waited till just before the shutter snapped to do some flashing of her own.

“I wanted my tattoo in the picture,” she explained.

Finally Jim announced the prints were ready for viewing, and invited Skeeter to his place (at last! at last!) to see them and it and have a Midge-cooked dinner too.

His was not the most wholesome of neighborhoods. Down on the South Side it was, on Swift Street, overlooking the old pre-Interstate highway. There alongside nudie bars and B & D bookshops was an aged aged house, predating even the old highway: once the mansion of some slaughterhouse magnate, perhaps, or—given the gingerbread décor—of Hansel & Gretel’s Witch.

Here Jim rented an attic room, well-swept and -dusted but sparsely furnished. And gloomy, due to both windows being painted over.

“Neat,” said Skeeter, turning her versatile mouth into Jaggerlips: “‘I see a window and I go and paint it black’... seriously, how can you *breathe* in here on summer nights?”

“Only moved in last fall,” said Jim, pointing his chin at a jury-rigged ceiling fan. “Hooked that up. And I leave the trapdoor open.”

“For just anybody to climb in, while you’re asleep? I’m jealous!”

No need to be; he seldom had company over, or got much in the way of sleep.

“Well then I’m honored. Gimme a kiss... how can you of all people live like a hermit? Until I came along to fulfill your every fantasy, didn’t you have to beat the girls off with a stick?”

“Not with a stick.”

“Oh you nasty-nasty man! Gimme another kiss (*suh-mooch*). But really, it’s too bare in here—we’ll have to load you up with knickknacks and whatnots and guesswhos. What’re these charts on the wall? ‘The Human Muscular System.’ ‘The Human Skeletal System.’ So, you *are* studying to be a chiropractor! Good deal... hey! you really *don’t* have a phone, do you? I couldn’t live without one myself, it’d drive me crazy. But James! Suppose you did slip in the shower, and—where is it, anyway? Your ‘head’?”

His chin bobbed downstairwards.

“What, you share one, like in a dorm? How collegiate. Must be awful for a grownup, though—every time you have to go, at night, having to—”

“Come see my kitchen,” said Jim.

This doubled as the darkroom and consisted of a faucet and makeshift sink, together with a table, hotplate, toaster-oven, and workbench with racks of photographic trays and tools and jars. Plus a stool and a chair, with Skeeter as guest being given the latter.

There was also the cuuuutest little minifridge, from which Jim took out a couple of chicken potpies and airline-sized wine bottles. Unscrewing the wine (“I figured white with chicken”) he filled two immaculate glasses, clinked his against Skeeter’s, and handed her a manila envelope full of herself.

There I am—there I am—there I am—

“These are good!” said Skeeter aloud. “But they’re ALL black-and-white.”

“That’s why they’re good.”

“Well maybe, but I thought you’d do *some* in color. These don’t—they make me look so, um—”

“Photogenic?” Jim politely suggested.

No, clinical, Skeeter wanted to say. *Anatomical*. “Where’s the one of me mooning the camera?”

“Didn’t come out.”

Did so. Thumbing again through the prints, Skeeter happened upon a semismiling front-and-center almost-likeness, declared it the best of the lot, and carried it around the garret looking for the ideal hanging place. Plenty of grotesque cracks in the walls that could do with a coverup. The worst was directly over Jim’s pallet bed: Rorschach-type patterns of what might have been simple discoloration but were probably outright stains. (Yuggh.) She wondered if roadkill imagery ever haunted him at night.

Below the inkblots, printed neatly on the wall like a daily affirmation, were the words **EMIT EGADNOB**.

“What’s *egadnob* and how do you emit it?” Skeeter asked. “Is it anything like alpha waves?”

(Shrug.)

“Seriously, if you’ve lived up here since last fall you must be made of concrete. Not that I’m complaining, but what made you move here from California?”

“I didn’t.”

“You didn’t? Well where *are* you from then?”

Jim, for once, looked less Swedish than sheepish. Skeeter sensed revelation a-coming, and tried to sit encouragingly.

It was like this. He *had* been in the service there, but was born and raised in Nilnisi. Out west. Small town. Very small. Getting smaller all the time that Jim was growing up. And not just because he was getting bigger, either. No, it was one of those places people leave as soon as they’re able. Jim had. And never been back. Wanted to; been thinking of going, but—guess he was kind of—sort of—well. Didn’t much want to do it, to “risk it”

alone. Would Skeeter...?

She was supersympathetic, pressing his hand, squeezing his elbow, ready to take off and go west with him right away, that very instant if he so desired, if it'd be any help. But right then the toaster-oven buzzed and he had to go dish up the potpies, which came out still frozen in their middles.

"Bachelor cooking!" Skeeter snorted, taking over the kitchen with competent flair. When she was finished the pies were baked through and through, though Jim ate his with habitual inspection of every bite.

"Honestly, Jim! You sniff your food like an old dog."

"Don't sniff old dogs," he said.

*

On Friday the 13th Skeeter got one of her wishes: she and Jim went to see what promised to be a bonafide dyed-in-the-wool Scary Movie, on a wide screen (as God intended) and on opening night to boot.

They stopped first to dine on leisurely Mexican, which Skeeter could never eat without recalling Lupe Velez the Mexican Spitfire, who—when spurned by the father of her unborn baby—had committed singularly inept suicide, ending up with her head down a toilet.

Jim Midge reserved judgment on that anecdote, but otherwise went so far happywise as to play wordgames with Skeeter on the way to the movie. Together they concocted a *Dallas* takeoff called *Sallad* whose star, the dastardly dressing magnate R. J. Gniwe, pursued control of the nation's oil-and-vinegar wells till he fell victim to a mysterious assault; so that now all the world was asking the question, "Who Tossed R.J.?"

At the cinema they encountered a stubblechinned demonbrowed face leering at them from a hole in the door in the lobby still.

"No more weeping, no more whining!" Skeeter sang, "we are going to see *The Shining*... this is going to be so cool! Jack Nicholson doing Stephen King! Did you see *Carrie*? or *Salem's Lot*? They were great but think of Jack Nicholson doing them—I'll probably puke from suspense!" She dashed to the refreshment counter to prepare for this eventuality, leaving an image in the air of McMurphy in a bloody prom dress.

As it happened, Skeeter kept down her cookies but did a lot of high-volume cackling. At one point when the audience was relatively silent, she let out an OH MY GAW-UDD that set off mass hilarity.

Occasionally she hid her face against Jim's chest, not necessarily at the scariest moments. It did get graphic at times onscreen, but hey! it's only a paper moon, bleeding into a ketchup sea...

Before long, amidst the isolated eeriness and gory apparitions, Jim began to scratch his chin. Even while drinking his Coke and chewing its ice and finishing Skeeter's Sprite and chewing its ice too, he scratched and scraped and furrowed as though to dig the chin a second cleft.

Brusque and restive afterward, paying scant attention to Skeeter's "Heeeere's Johnny!" and "*Redrum! redrum!*" mimicry, he all but shoved her into the van.

"Hey, watch it! I'm fragile and petite!"

"Sorry."

"That's okay. *Dumb* ending, though. I mean was Jack supposed to be reincarnated, or what?"

(Shrug.)

For awhile she crooked her finger and croaked her voice like the little telepathic kid's invisible? imaginary? friend, but there was no more wordplay; Jim said his throat was too dry.

"Well then"—croaking—"let's go home and have us a nightcap, Mr. Midge."

(Bob-nod.)

Could the film have bothered him? No, he liked scary movies, Hitchcock and all that, and had picked this one for them to see; if anything, Jim was probably disappointed. *Dumb* ending, after all. Hence his brooding moodiness—craving consolation, but thinking it unmanly to say so. Of course! Well, he'd come to the right provider in Skeeter Kitefly, Li'l Lady Lavishful. She snuggled up against him as far as the van's front seat and his own rigidity would allow.

Back at Garfield Street she fixed them each a zombie before unveiling a small giftwrapped package that Jim didn't ask or look curious about, concentrating instead on

gulping his drink. So Skeeter fixed him another and killed some time telling Jim how wondrous he was, especially when compared to some of the guys she used to go out with—the one who'd sent her roses with creepy *mea culpa* notes; the one who'd claimed to've been her slavemaster on a different world in a former life. By midnight she was waxing damn near poetic about it:

*Oh don't you know how you affect me?
Like Shatner affects a Star Trekkie!
To pieces I go, so collect me...*

Which at least got Jim to stop scratching at his chin.

Finally twelve o'clock struck, and it was Saturday the 14th. "Happy Valentine's Day plus-four! Months, that is. Since I didn't know you in February. Just a little something for your apartment—the very thing for a bachelor-man (besides me of course). Well go ahead, open it!"

He did, revealing a little potted cactus with a red ribbon round its little cactus-throat. Hanging from the ribbon was a tiny heartshaped Valentine candy that said SWEETIE PIE.

"Say hello to Spiny Norman! You know, like the giant hedgehog that Dinsdale Piranha thought was following him around London."

"...what?"

"Oh, *you* know—the Piranha Brothers! Who used to nail people's heads to the floor? 'Murderers are only extroverted suicides'?"

"...what?"

"Um... didn't you ever watch *Monty Python's Flying Circus*?"

"Oh," said Jim, relaxing somewhat.

When Skeeter embraced him, he hugged back, and when she went on to kissing and from there to serious facesuck, he tagged along; but kept his eyes open.

*

After dreaming that bugs were crawling over him all night long, Jim spent the rest of the weekend a trifle under the weather. And when Skeeter called the copy shop on Monday to wish him Happy One-Month Anniversary, he still didn't sound his usual facile self.

“Yeah. One month? You sure?”

“Sure I’m sure. There’s a party tomorrow night at my place, actually at Charles Wallace’s but in the same building, you know my neighbor? Oh sure you do, I’ve told you about him, we work together here at the bank and he helped find me my apartment—”

“Oh,” said Jim. “That *elohssa*.”

“That *what*? Be nice! It’s his birthday, you have to come, he has the best parties, I want to show you off anyway and—”

“Sorry,” Jim broke in. “Busy.”

“Busy! Doing what?”

“Feeling lousy. Cold in my nose. Head’s stuffed. Probably go home early.”

“Oh no! Well, the party’s not till tomorrow night anyway so take care of yourself. Are you feeling snotty or coughy? Want me to come over? I can brew you some chicken noodle soup—”

“Not today. Be okay.”

“Well *call* me, James, if you need anything.”

He grunted, which could have been unnerving if you’d let it. But Jim after all was a big strong grownup, though of course he lived in a gloomy unventilated attic with no phone or bathroom of his own, and hadn’t seen his mother since the age of three.

Next morning Skeeter called the copy shop at 8 AM and was told that Jim had already called in sick.

“Well tell him to call *me*, will you? if he calls back? Home, work, wherever.”

She lunched with Charles and the girls at the bank except Trish the bitch receptionist (who—had you heard?—was carrying on with another married man); finished up the day, went home, saddled up Elmer and drove over to the South Side. Where there was no response to her knocks on Jim Midge’s door or her calls of Jim Midge’s name. Nary a cough or sneeze or snore or moan; no sound of any sort from inside.

So she went back to Garfield Street and Charles Wallace’s “natal soirée,” where she confided in the birthday boy while helping in the kitchen.

“Maybe he was out,” said Charles.

“You mean like passed out?”

“Or knocked out, ha ha ha—oh don’t worry your little head, I mean maybe he *went* out. Sick people can, you know. One time I had a fever of a hundred-and-something and developed this midnight craving for pistachios. Had to go out and buy some, and you can guess the terrible time I had finding any at midnight around *here*. (Pass me that cream cheese, please-please.)”

It was a fun party as were all at Charles Wallace’s, and before long the other neighbors were pounding on ceiling, walls and floor. Skeeter consoled herself that her moody brooder just needed a moment on his own to cool off, after a month spent in her undeniably hotsy company; but thoughts of MARNI INRAM kept recurring.

Wednesday: yes he’d called in sick, no it hadn’t sounded terminal, yes the copy shop had relayed Skeeter’s message, no *you* have a nice day.

And Skeeter tried, what with worriments coming and going as she came and went, as she left the bank and rode the bus home (alone, Charles off having a squash lesson).

Wondering as she climbed the stoop whether to Elmerize back south again—

—when a sudden instinct came and stayed and Skeeter turned and looked and there, standing on the catty-corner, was Jim Midge staring and silent unlike Skeeter who with a heedless shout ran across the intersection, causing cars coming from four directions to *skreeek* and honk. Not that Skeeter gave a hootly damn as she jumped herself up and threw herself on her sweetie pie’s neck. Which, like his jutjaw, was less than impeccably shaved for once.

“Are you feeling better? Were you coming to see me?”

“Yes. And yes.”

“Well you *look* awful. Haven’t you been shaving? Haven’t you been eating? Aren’t you ravenous?”

“*No!* no food!” he said, stepping back a couple of paces.

“*Wha-utt?*” went Skeeter, half-lugged along. She let go, slid down, peered up.

“Have you gone off me?”

“Off you? Had a touch of flu is all.”

“Oh poor sweet baby! Not *stomach* flu?”

“Well. Yes.”

“Oh no, the boot ‘n’ poots! But you’re over them now, right? I should’ve asked before I hugged you—”

“Told you already! Twenty-four-hour bug. Nothing more.”

“Well good. C’mon, Jimbo, let’s go up, I promise not to force-feed you. Just a little taste of something—”

Jim was somberly unresponsive. What he’d come to see Skeeter about was the trip, their trip to his old hometown out west; it was definitely on. Starting a week from tonight, lasting a couple of days. Would Skeeter have any problem getting those couple of days off work?

Well no, but why start in midweek, why not wait till—no, it *had* to be next Wednesday? All right then, Wednesday it would be, what was Jim getting so pissed about? Haste makes w—

He wasn’t peeved at anything, not at all. Just a little cabin-feverish. All work and no haste makes Jack a dull boy. And it *did* get kind of hot and stuffy in his garret, at night, in June.

And when Skeeter clucked and cooed and pressed and squeezed, he did let her take him up to her place and fill him full of junket.

So that was settled (as Jim kept saying) and all was well. Though it wasn’t till the summer solstice weekend that Skeeter thought to ask exactly where they were going to be going.

“It’s called Guiteau.”

“After Father Guido Sarducci?”

“No. T.E.A.U.”

“Oh. Doesn’t that mean ‘brown water’ or something?”

Jim didn’t find that very funny, and was far from enchanted when Skeeter tried to enlist his help with the brown water in her bathtub.

“Should I use Drâno? Will it hurt my pipes?”

“How should I know?”

“You’re a guy, this is a guy thing! We women have enough trouble with our *own* plumbing. I need you to act like a gangster and machine-gun the clog in my drain. I suppose

it's just hair and goop and stuff—at least it hasn't backed up like my mom's sink used to do when she was living on Harding Street. Jeez what a mess that made! (Cackle.) One time Mom forced me to help her scoop out a turkey's innards and I was going, '*Oh God, do anything to stop my having to scoop out this turkey's innards,*' when SHAZAM! the sink backed up and overflowed and just engulfed the drainboard, picking up the turkey and carrying it far far away—”

She cut herself off as Jim, looking peculiar, began to gasp and wag a speechless tongue.

Skeeter made him lie down and stretch out while she ran to the kitchen for a paper bag for him to wheeze into. *Oh God*—two four six eight, let's all hyperventilate, open all the drawers and cabinet doors—*yuggh!* the bugs were back!—find a suitable sack, hold it to Jim's nonplused face like a carbon dioxide mask. Same competent flair she'd given to the potpies, letting show no trace of panic but making small talk about Piglet's Grandfather Trespassers W, who'd suffered from Shortness of Breath in his later years...

...till Jim lay breathing quietly, resting steadily. Handing back the sack with laconic thanks. Yes, on second thought, she might try Drâno. Yes, the foregoing had been a mere fluey relapse. So no, they *would* be proceeding with their trip as planned.

Though not in his white van, which came to a dead halt on Monday in the middle of a rush hour express lane. Skeeter wasn't a direct witness, but heard an inordinate amount about it the next morning from a Jim Midge who'd lost all sense of proportion about this hardly-vital trip to visit nobody in some bitsy-shrunken ghost town. No question of postponement, of course; it “had” to start tomorrow and it “had” to be in the van and if it didn't or it wasn't, Jim might start looking peculiar again—

So Skeeter, by process of elimination, chose to be reasonable.

She offered and re-offered the use of Elmer, who'd had a recent checkup and was in pretty good shape for a geriatric T-Bird. To prove it, she put Jim behind the wheel and let him drive her around downtown.

“Pay no attention to that *huh-huh-huh-huh-huh*, that's just Elmer being Elmer. So Jim, whaddaya say? C'mon, we can stay in some little out-of-the-way Shady Rest type place. It'll be fun.”

He gave “fun” a serious mull-over, reversed himself, pried off his pout, became agreeably wide and smooth and chipped of nose. And all systems were go for the junket to Guiteau.

*

Urban Cowboy was creating Western Chic and, with more time to prepare, Skeeter might have invested in an entire Bonanza Jellybean outfit: miniStetson, yoked satin blouse, boots direct from handtooled Texans.

“Ought I try to become a cowgirl?” she asked Jim. “Even I can get the blues. Picture me on mechanical bullback—”

Eee-hah. As things stood that sultry Wednesday evening, she had just enough time after work to exchange her humidified businesswear for lightweight mufti, throw a few toiletries into her poke, scotchtape her key to a note saying *Please water my plants*, and shove it under Charles Wallace’s door.

Take off with James James Curlylocks Curlylocks in the driver’s seat: this was how to Go West. Leave urbanity behind! Return to the simpler-more-natural life! Fewer towns, more farms; fewer hills, more plains; less green, more brown; spaces widening open.

And so on into the sunset.

Jim wasn’t driving all that fast, though they had quite a ways West to Go—at least supposedly; Skeeter couldn’t find Guiteau on any map in her glove compartment. But so much the better! Why be in a hurry? The usual roadside cattle sure weren’t, nor the occasional horses—and oh look! *hoggies*! Skeeter begged Jim to stop, get out his camera, take pictures of her shouting halloos to Wilbur and Porky and Napoleon, the whole swinish gang.

“Haven’t got *sound* film, you know. No one’s going to hear you.”

“Oh what a killjoy!” said Skeeter in her best Miss Piggy voice.

They paused further on to refuel and eat more leisurely Mexican, though Skeeter wasn’t sure Jim should be dining on flying burritos given his recent condition. But he seemed serene enough, buying her several drinks to wash down her guacamole while himself sticking to ice water, glassful after glassful, as befitted a safe driver with a strong bladder.

“You gawldern better be safe,” Skeeter said, switching from Muppetish to Mayberry twang. “I ain’t got the faintest notion *whar* we’re headin’.”

Other than West. Cruising down the freeway at no more than sixty, cars and trucks pulling around them with scornful hornblasts. As Skeeter twiddled the radio dial in search of relief from “Polly, Pretty Polly, come go ‘long with me,” she stumbled across a voice like Hank Williams on helium:

*I’m a-goin’ to the Lordy, I am so glad,
Goin’ to the Lordy with all my soul,
Goin’ to the Lordy: glooooory hal-le-LOO-yah!
‘Cause I love the Lordy: glooooory hal-le-LOO-yah!
And that there’s the reason
I’m a-goin’ to the Lordy, I am so glad...*

“So go already!” Skeeter suggested, giddily a-cackle, joining in on the *LOO-yahs!* and nudging Jim, who smiled and kept his eyes on the road.

It was one of the year’s longest days but not so long as Nilnisi was wide, and the sun finished setting before Elmer left the Interstate for a lesser highway. Then that for a gravel road whose environs were black and white and grey in the twilight: regular *Last Picture Show* shades.

“Oog!” said Skeeter. “Nowhere Land.”

“We’ll stop here,” said Jim. He pulled into the lot of a truly backwards-looking hostelry, like a set of barracks that had lost its surrounding base. The sign read:

GUITEAU INN
VA ANCY

“Fa-ancy that!” Skeeter remarked as Jim parked by the barracks-side. “Looks like a cheap motel all right. Oh-so-quaint. Bet it’s all cuspidors ‘n’ chamberpots inside.” She fumbled with her doorhandle, turned accusingly to Jim. “I don’t see any other cars.”

“Don’t go blaming *me*. ”

“I’m not! But maybe it’s an *abandoned* cheap motel.”

“You’re the one who wanted ‘out of the way.’”

“Jeez. Bet they don’t even have TV. Or a Coke machine.” Again she groped for the handle, while Jim got out easy as potpie.

“I’ll go. You wait.”

“Me Jane, oogah-boogah... you’re going? ‘N’ leaving me here all helpless ‘n’ alone? *Wha-utt*, you want the single rate?... well go ahead then! Say heighdy to your bass-ackwards kinfolk for me!”

He disappeared around the corner.

Skeeter at last wrestled the door open (take that! and that!) but remained buckled in, smoking a Salem, listening.

Lots of crickets or tree frogs or rural whatever’s out there.

But no sound of humanity; not a hint of chat or song except for distant automotive whirs. Before Skeeter could decide whether or not to be at ease about this, Jim was back and unloading their bags, key in hand.

“Oh, you’re the bellhop? *Chawmed* I’m sure. Bet you get buried with tips every day. Don’t forget your camera, you’ll wanna take lotsa pictures of Guiteau to remember it by.”

“That’s right,” Jim grinned, his nosechip and chincleft symmetricizing.

He led her to the room at the end of the barracks-line. Inside wasn’t overbad, to Skeeter’s surprise: not too dingy or decrepit, and featuring a fullscale bathroom instead of a washstand and bedpan. Okay so far. She put down her poke and fished out a bottle of zombie mix she’d brought along for going whole-hog with. “Howzabout a drinkeepoo, Jimbo? See an ice bucket anywhere?”

“Posts,” he was muttering. “Where’d they go?”

“Hunh?”

“Used to be bedposts.”

“Well, call room service and order some more,” Skeeter said. Gabbling on about the little four-poster she’d slept in at her grandparents’s place, while Jim went over to the bed and looked at it and in it and under it, pulling off the counterpane, the blanket, the sheet, even the contour—

“What’re you *doing* to that poor bed?”

“Mattress handles,” he sighed. With a smile.

“Ooh! do you wanna carry it outside ‘n’ Do It under the prairie moon?”

“Could be,” Jim said. Rubbing his hands, cracking his knuckles, turning to find Skeeter halfway through unpacking his bag.

“Hey what’s this?—a necktie! Why’d you bring a necktie? I’ve never seen you in a necktie—ooh is this silk? Yum!...”

He took a measured step towards her. And another. And—

“—heeeere’s *another* necktie—’n’ another—’n’ another—I feel like a magic act. Look, four-in-hand! (Cackle.) But hey—where the hell did you get *this*?”

She held up a single black nylon stocking, and Jim stood still.

“It sure can’t be yours. More *my* size, so where’s its pair ‘n’ why didn’t you wrap ‘em for me? Or *are* they for me? All that talk about ‘used to be bedposts’ —sounds like you been here before! Clerk says, ‘Oh it’s you again, Mr. Midge; be wanting your usual suite, sir?’—’n’ you say, ‘No I got me a new sweetie ‘n’ *she*’s out in the car!’”

“Put that down!” Jim ordered, meaning not the stocking but his fancy camera as Skeeter grabbed it with a scowl, ready to smash it to the floor. Jim made a lunge for her, tripped on the stripped-off bedclothes and fell headlong, all sangfroid gone: “Don’t! Please. Give it to me.”

“Oh I will,” said Skeeter, her scowl becoming impish. “‘N’ when I do, will you turn me into a pin-up? I promise not to be stuck-up about it.”

She laid the camera atop the pile of ties behind her and proceeded to undress, da-da-da-ing a “Pretty Sven-boys” accompaniment, striking her idea of centerfold poses. Finally down to just her specs, she took the black nylon and wrapped it scarflike round her neck.

“Now, isn’t this nicer than ‘bout-face? Though—” (with a pirouette) “this is my *other* best side.”

Turning back with tipsy grace, she unwound the stocking and used it to lasso Jim around his own neck. He laid heavy Nordic hands on her naked shoulders, as though for restraint; but Skeeter reached up and removed her glasses, that her bzzzz-blue eyes might transcend his black-and-whiteness.

Which they did.

And such was the power of shining cutiepiety that Jim Midge softened (so to speak) and his necktie quartet stayed unemployed that night.

*

At a very wee hour indeed Skeeter awoke from dreams of distant flushes. It was muggy and close in the motel room; bare-mattress buttons were digging into her flesh, and she became aware that Jim wasn't lying beside her or in the bed at all but was off crouching in a far corner. And the moment Skeeter realized this, the light snapped on.

"Ack! Turn that off!"

"Get up."

"Whassa matter?"

"Get up. Get dressed. We're getting out of here. Now."

"You been sick? Thought I heard the toilet—"

"Now, I said."

"Well Jeez what's your hurry, is the place on fire?" (Sleepy cackle.) "Oughta be, after what we—"

He reached for her and she reached acquiescently back, only to be hauled out of bed.

"Well *okay* already, I'm up!... what time is it? Feels like I've hardly been asleep..." She found her watch and squinted: "2 AM, are you inSANE? *I'm* going back to bed—"

"Get up! Doing this for your own good."

"Oh right. Getting up at 2 AM always does me good. (Yawn.) Well, you wanna leave, we'll leave. Lemme just hop in the shower—"

"*No!* No showers! Get dressed."

"I can't just get dressed, I hafta have a shower first."

"Do as I say!"

"Well hoopa hoopa hoopa. I'm *at least* gonna wash my face. Can't start the day off all sweaty 'n' messy, even (yawn) at 2 AM."

No response.

Groggily grumbling, she put on her glasses to find her poke and dig out bathroom gear; padded into the head, found a washcloth, took off her specs, laid them on the sink-rim,

ran water, unwrapped a bar of motel soap—and dropped it, as Jim loomed up in the doorway.

“Wanna have a seat?” she asked, indicating the open toilet.

Baleful silence.

Feeling creepy-crawl and goosey-bump, Skeeter scrubbed her face and throat and further south; rinsed, toweled, stretched to hang towel and washcloth over the shower rod, hoping vaguely that the sight of her other best side might warm the blood and thaw the atmosphere.

No response.

She rolled on Secret, tended to her teeth, brushed her hair a little, put her glasses back on—and found an ashen face staring back at her, immobile, from the mirror. *Heeeeere’s Jimmy*. No longer the Fairest Sven of All. He looked like a disappointed something-seeker who’d tripped over an unseen obstacle and, in doing so, had let the something he was seeking go astray.

Skeeter felt in no hurry to turn around.

She tried edging further away, squeaking aloud at the sudden touch of cold sink on her bare belly. *What is the MATTER?* she wanted to ask, but an amazing colossal stuPENdous yawn was taking possession of her mouth, and when it reached apogee—

—Jim sank a hand into her thick head of fizzy-frizzy saffron hair—

—*Hey!* Skeeter was thinking, and *Ow* and *This isn’t funny at all*—

—when Jim burst forth spitting fire like some forkchinned Viking god of old, bellowing “WAKE UP!!” from multiple heads according to Skeeter’s pain-blurred senses, “WAKE UP!!” as he twisted her bodily round with his right hand, raising the knotted-knuckled left on high—

*

...Back when Skeeter was eleven years old she’d managed to knock over an entire bookcase, trying to extract *Portnoy’s Complaint* from the top shelf where Sadie had wedge-hidden it. Portnoy, not yielding to tugs alone, had brought along his friends and neighbors and their mutual home; and Skeeter, making only a token attempt to stem this title wave, soon lay crushed like Salomé beneath the soldier’s shields.

Well, hardly.

Such fates never befell Skeeter Kitefly.

But she *had* been trapped for a few exciting minutes till the terrified Sadie could excavate her, apologizing for having tempted a preteen with the forbidden. Sadie hadn't even wreaked revenge till two whole weeks later, in a sneak attack that Skeeter still meant to get even with her for, one of these days...

*

Jim Midge struck her then (and again—and again—and again) in the here and now: not as one might slap a comatose, but with crosswise Thor-blows up side her head that knocked her glasses clattering off and gave her hair a fearsome yank as she fell floorwards, missing the sink-rim and tub-edge but bouncing off the wall, landing partly on the bathmat but mostly on the cold hard tiles.

A few shockwaved seconds later she went “**SHITFACED ASSHOLE**” and followed that up with an “*Mmmmmmm...*”

...only to be drowned out by Jim who, in trying to draw breath, experienced a noisy comeuppance of all his inner drains.

There was a crash and a thrash and a splurgling eruption.

Then, silence.

Skeeter, feeling distractedly around the tiles, found her glasses or rather her glass: one lens was gone, the right one, popped out of its sprung-open frameside. She put on what remained and discovered James James Morrison Morrison with his head in the head, not making vast movement or even a whole lot of bubbles.

*

Again and again she butt-sidled past the legs to get to the bathroom door, and out it, and up. Taking sharp notice for the first time, again and again, of several thudding headaches, and that it hurt to walk or move or even stand because of the bruises on her hip. Going by instinct she found and donned fresh underwear again and again, a pair of jeans, a tank top—one of his, she would later realize—and stuffed random items in her poke. Blinking blankly at the motel room, like that astronaut at the end of *2001*. Repeatedly she tiptoed out, sneakers in hand, taking innumerable dazed pains to close the door behind her without a telltale snick—only to find herself back on the bathroom floor once more, again

and again and again...

By the time she got onto the Interstate, the right side of her face had swollen up and turned an orangey-magenta shade she'd never seen before. Certainly had never squinted at in a rearview mirror with one eye through one lens. For many miles it was almost the only color *to* see, but not for many more did she chance another glance.

Wanting all the while to pull over; stepping on the gas instead. When precious little was left to step on, she stopped to fill Elmer up and buy some ice from an all-night service station, whose mummified attendant offered neither comment nor comfort.

Driving as best she could while pressing the ice to her puffed-shut eye, stricken temple, outraged scalp. No external ooze of blood to staunch, at least; no drop of tear or even sweat to wipe. But something was leaking, leaking away to the tune of her constant *mmm-mmm-mmm*—and it was NOT good, whatever the Campbell Soup Kids might say.

Keeping pedal pressed to metal as though ominous music was in pursuit; but out of the radio came only static. Few lights were on the freeway and scarcely any traffic, which was just as well as Elmer began wandering from lane to lane. The summer dawn seemed on indefinite back order, but as she neared home the shades of Nowhere Land gave way to a kind of blueish light, welling up as it were from the asphalt as she took the offramp and descended into dismal urban streets.

Once familiar, now silent and deserted except for a few furtive indigent creatures: shadowy blue Beelzebub streets, which yawned and gaped at Skeeter Kitefly from the heart of the city Demortuis.

Three

WINDOHWA

*Come up and be a kite
And fly a diamond night.*

—KATE BUSH

Chapter 16

Really Weird Dreams

For many nights afterward she would have a dream, this really weird dream of going to bed and almost to sleep before the bed rolled forward like a dresser drawer being opened, and a goddam spotlight came shining right in her eyes which wouldn't close or even blink—and there were her folks, staring down at her from either side, all aghast.

Jeez, quit it she'd try to say, *you're acting as though I'm DEAD—*

But this particular morning she was alive and awake and in pain, banging on Charles Wallace's door just as that Littlest Conehead was rinsing off and toweling dry his bumpety scalp.

He opened up, took one look and drew her in; attended to her outer wounds and contusions with practiced skill, keeping his Cheshire smile fixed tight despite the occasional lachrymose sniff. How could *anybody*, no matter how brutal or fiendish, do such-a-whatever to anyone as small and cute and frolicsome as Skeeter Kitefly?

How indeed?

No answer to offer.

Absolutely incomprehensible that one side of her comical doll-like face should be mottled the color of eggplant.

She shied at going upstairs to her own apartment, so Charles let her spend the day and following night at his place. He had to go to work but called a swingshift-bouncer friend named Bevan to come play bodyguard, leaving Skeeter bandaged and compressed and applying a porkchop to her eye in lieu of steak.

It'd come to this, had it?

So much for Wilbur and Napoleon and Miss Piggy...

She tried to rest, to catch some Zs, lulled by the other-room mumble of Bevan's TV gameshows; but caught instead the first of those really weird dreams with the drawer, the light, her folks *acting as though she were DEAD*—

Must not be an act 'cause look, here she was, back in Marble Orchard alongside Grampa and Gramma and Cousin Mickey Hungerford, who'd bought the farm in Cambodia, and William the guinea pig in his shoebox underneath the crab apple trees, and Whippy Ann-Margret who'd joined them only last winter—and by golly! Great-Great-Aunt Claudia Wunderlich! Gone these twenty years, yet hanging on as the family's perpetual star mourner. Umm umm umm...

Skeeter was trying to dig her way out of Rosewood when Charles got home and peeked in and woke her hastily up. Scolding her about making sudden movements; you never could tell with head injuries. He had Bevan bring her a cup of steaming hot chocolate, regardless of the summer afternoon; added a jigger of orange Curaçao ("good for what ails you ha ha ha") and made Skeeter drink it down every drop while she goggled bloodshottily at him, at them, her two protectors, her fogbound brain going *Wally and the Beave—Wally and the Beave*—

How COULD anybody lift a hand against Skeeter Kitefly?

Be annoyed at, certainly. Jealous of, to be sure. But blacken and bluefy? No way. Unreal. As a child she'd never once been spanked, though her mother had threatened it often enough. ARnold had seldom gone so far as to raise his voice.

Of course there'd always been Sadie B., exercising her big-sisterly right to deal out the occasional pummeling, being the older and larger and quicker to anger. Natural to a natural redhead: her sudden rages succeeded by bouts of eager affection, and vice versa.

Second door on the left—Sadie's old bedroom, the one Skeeter'd waited an entire fruitless decade to take over and move into. Half the time it had been accessible, its occupant bidding little siblings welcome, sharing juice-details after heavy dates. Giving the admiring young Skeeter her first practical lessons in makeup, menses, and manhandling.

But then would come Quite Contrariwise, again and again: Sadie placing her room off limits to "shrimps and squirts," if-I-catch-you-in-there-messing-with-my-things-just-once-more-I'll-knock-your-block-off-I-mean-it, etc. Pulling her Pippi Longstocking routine,

as though Sadie were the strongest girl in all the world and Skeeter her Mr. Nilsson monkey-slave.

In her *dreams!* Flout that ultimatum! Slip on your slyboots, your showercap, your borrowed wig over that, and tiptoe into the forbidden room at the ungodliest-possible hour. Shake Big Sissy half-awake:

“Sadie! Sadie!”

“Hjckrrh?”

“I think I’m losing my hair!—here, look—”

Yank off wig, stuff it in her hand, thrust showercapped baldpate in Big Sissy’s AWKing face, and scam while she tangles up in sheets and snarls, tripping on the stripped-off bedclothes, lunging...

Don’t. Please. Give it to me.

Hjckrrh?

Get up. Get dressed. Getting out of here. Now—

Skeeter could get away with things, pranks and tomfoolery and monkeyshines (nyaah to you, Mr. Nilsson) but Sadie could get away period. Flip her lid, fly the coop, run off to Aspen or Lisbon or Melbourne or—where the hell?—oh right, Rassiere Bay. Of course. Rassiere Bay, that’s the ticket: get up, get dressed and out of here, now; get a ticket on the first available rush-and-roarer, plane train or automobile, to Rassiere Bay! Get a move on, get the lead out, get your butt in gear, Wally and the Beave would help—

“Wally,” for his vexed part, tried to keep a level conehead and simmer Skeeter down, convince her it was the Curaçao talking.

He ended up doing most of the work to see her off. Packing bags, adopting plants, discharging utilities, concocting a plausible argument why Skeeter wouldn’t be returning to work at Nilnisi Mutual Savings (main branch) but still deserved a good reference. Out of this he got his choice of Skeeter’s weightier furniture, and first bid on Elmer the huh-huh-huh-ing Fudd Ford.

“I guess Elmer and I were meant for each other ha ha ha,” said Charles. “Now remember,” he told Skeeter at the bus station, “it doesn’t matter where your body happens to be, or whether your brain’s still in its pan, so long as your heart keeps beating. So have a

little courage, and take this little bottle of yummy stuff—in case of snakebite, you know.”

She left him sitting on a gate, waving a handkerchief after her, his bulging brow agleam in the sunset. By the Great Greyhound she resolved to keep in touch with Charles forever; but even as the bus departed from Demortuis, crossed the Ipsissima, and hunkered down to a four-hour evening journey that stretched into a six-hour night trek—

—even then, Skeeter could guess that things would turn out otherwise.

She copped a window seat at Fort Verba and tried to rest her sore temple on the window’s not-very-coolness (or cleanness) but jolt bump shake, jerk back awake, again and again. Jerk Alert, in fact: sleazy-geezer moving in.

Hey li’l lady yuh sure are purty—

Turn gauzy compressed mottle towards him. Produce a Grand Guignol grimace. Choke geezer off.

Back to the growing darkness. Try to get some shuteye—no, rephrase that, try to catch forty winks—no, leave the winks with the sleazy-geezers. Simply try to rest. Make it to the next stop. Snarf another hidden dose of snakebite remedy, enough to help you sleep. Drain the bottle if necessary; turn it into a dead soldier. Like Grampa’d called his empty Falstaffs...

*Jeez quit it (jolt bump shake) you’re acting as though I’m AWAKE owwwwwww, fuh—*crying out loud! Just what she needed: another blow to the face. For a woozy moment she wondered if she’d actually shattered the bus window, or popped it out altogether like the lens gone missing from her broken glasses. Put back on what’s left and check. No, there it still was, blurrily mirroring the Monocled Avenger.

Who felt more like Scarlett O’Hara, escaping from the burning of Atlanta only to find Tara disemboweled...

Well not quite.

Don’t think we’re in Nilnisi anymore, though.

Altered states through the Great Greyhound Looking-Glass.

Skeeter in Windohwa-land: say hello out there, somewhere in the pitchy dark, to flour mills and dairy farms, butteries and cheesemongers. The Land of Milk and Cookies.

At Jalousie she had to get out and change buses, make the correct connection. Not that one, heading back the way she'd come. Nor that one, going to Oeil de Boeuf, though she'd sent many boxtops there to get loot from the Oxeye Biscuit Company. Nor that big bus to Elsew, a place Skeeter'd always been meaning to visit, along with Belgium and Bangkok and Van Nuys Boulevard. No, tonight she was elsewhere bound, and the rest of the planet would have to wait its turn, turn, turn...

*

...3 AM by a great grey lake. A Great Greyhound Lake. A busily grizzly *pooch* of a lake. So mother-goosey doctor-seussey, Horton hears The Who; meaty beaty big and bouncy, the dish ran away with the stew. (No wonder you didn't have any dinner. *If* you didn't. Vague memory of a pork chop back there somewhere.)

So this was Rassiére Bay: the Cap on the Pap, and things like that. You did not come here on a boat, you did not come here with a goat; you do have to deal with luggage retrieval, partaking of potty, dialing of phone.

Sadie AWK'd just like old times.

Bossy as ever, demanding to know exactly what had happened and when and where and to whom it'd been reported and inasmuch as which.

Mugged. Yeah, mugged by a stranger. Poke stolen, ears boxed, general jitters. Needing a change of scene. Of course she'd seen a doctor; of course she'd notified the police; no she hadn't told Carrie and ARnold, yet; and yes, she could have called before busing two hundred miles alone at night, but that would have involved forethought.

"Sadie," she added, "can you come get me? I'm tired..."

Which was so unheard-of a thing for Skeeter Kitefly to be that Sadie AWK'd no more but raced right over and picked her up, almost literally, in her long familiar freckly arms.

So Madgirl and Madwoman were together again, augmented by Madbaby Desirée aged two-and-a-half, who was Roo-excited at being allowed out of bed way the hell past midnight, and anxious to introduce her auntie to her horsies Rover, Fido, and Spot. These lived on sunflower seeds in a cage in the kitchenette and strongly resembled gerbils, but they *did* gallop on their exercise wheel when not asleep in a communal pile.

What a good idea. Skeeter followed suit that first night, sharing Sadie's bed with residual ow!-quit-kicking contention; and Desi squeezed in as well, asking whether Skeeter'd ever ridden a big horse? and if so had she ever fallen off? and had she been hurt and if so how much and had she been scared and if so how badly and—

“Go to *sleep*, Desirée,” said her mother, unable to hear herself think how improvisational this mugging-by-a-stranger story sounded. Ears boxed, certainly; jitters, to be sure; but poke stolen? That saddlebag on the bureau looked awfully recognizable and not “just another one just like the other one.”

Aloud, Sadie hoped the mugger would be caught and have his malefactory ass prosecuted to the law's full extent. Think how many other women he might have already victimized; how many more, should he remain at large—

“I'll think about that tomorrow,” said Skeeter, slipping off to really weird dreamworld: *Jeez quit it...*

*

On Sadie's insistence, she went to a women's clinic to have her bruises checked out. But in comparison to the raped and molested, and elderlies suffering from the killer summer's heat, Skeeter felt she was there on pretty small-potato pretenses. So too seemed to feel the harried MD or RN (somebody in a white labcoat, anyway) who examined her, and tried to act empathetic but fell rather short.

“What'd they say?” demanded Sadie in the waiting room.

“Told me to eat more yogurt. And maybe take piano lessons.”

“Piano lessons! In this weather? Aren't they going to *prescribe* you anything?” And Sadie would have given the clinic a piece of her coppertopped mind had Skeeter not dragged her away, spluttering that you might as well go to a medieval barber and get yourself *bled*.

What a good idea Part Two. Skeeter stopped by a budget salon and had her peachy fuzzy opulence of blonditude chopped off, cropped short as it hadn't been since her earliest Marine-brat days. Sadie took one look at her suddenly shrunken head and burst into tears.

Oh the vandalism!

Too hot to keep your hair on.

It shook Sadie up no end. She would creep into the kitchenette late at night to peer at Skeeter on her cot with her icepack sombrero, sleeping solo except for Timmy the ancient half-stuffed horse. Plus Rover, Fido, and Spot, galloping on their squeaky wheel to nowhere.

Skeeter could watch them do this by the hour. She often did, when insomnia set in.

Far more *raison* to a gerbil's *d'être* than, say, a guinea pig's.

Though not so much as, say, a squirrel's.

Where her own ranked in the Great Scheme of Things was anyone's guess. Hardly any savings to speak of; no income coming in; no college degree; job prospects existential.

Sadie communicated privately with their mystified folks, saying *Not to worry—leave her to me—can you lend us some bread?* Which Carrie and ARnold did, calling it Skeeter's birthday present, she opportunely turning twenty-one in July. As for employment, there was Sadie and Gwendolyn's daycare center out on Soutien Lane. They couldn't afford to pay but had plenty to occupy an extra pair of hands; Skeeter's being idle, she took them to the devil's playground.

Her eye and face healed sooner than expected and more or less unmarked, regaining a modicum of their respective brightness and freshness. But not their vitality, their unreflecting audacity; that merry-go-round had broken down.

And she had always been such a classic happy camper.

Better than well-adjusted. Cheerful as you please. Basically unfazable. Able to get along with even the totalbitchiest of snippy-drips, because—hey!—she was Skeeter Kitefly the One and Only, and the rest of the world but an oyster on her half-shell.

Now she belonged to the Ordinary People: lame, feckless, and lacking Robert Redford to direct her.

Who, then?

She loved Sadie, but would never cease to bridle at her Longstocking'd bossy nova. She adored Desirée, but at two-and-a-half Desi didn't quite qualify for mentorhood. She liked Gwendolyn, but come on—how seriously could you take anyone originally introduced to you as “Winky”?

Who else? Her folks were far away, and even up close could scarcely be conversed with on any kind of revelatory level. Uncle Buddy-Buzz was in British Columbia for the

summer, and would probably agree that she should take up piano lessons. Charles Wallace and her other just-as-distant friends would be too remote, by and by, even for memory.

What else, then? Could there be anything to the occult? Astrology, say: she was a Leo, loyal and honest and generous and romantic. (Right.) Consult a few horoscopes: *focus on insights guard against tendencies be aware act accordingly...* hell.

What about biorhythms? Calculate her peaks and troughs: twenty-one years old, plus three weeks, plus two days—add that up, let's see, 21 times 365, don't forget Leap Years, carry the seven, then divide... hell. Math had never been her strong point.

Consult a palmreader? A phrenologist? An oversized eightball? *Reply hazy, ask again later.* Like hell.

Sneak a peek at Sadie's Tarot cards, despite the likelihood of getting your block knocked off for messing with them. Sadie would insist on doing a proper reading with all the gypsy trappings; let's just take a random glance...

The Page of Wands: a Hamlet or Romeo-type, gazing soulfully at the top of his walking stick. The Four of Cups: a guy sitting under a tree, with a disembodied hand offering him a drink; very Omar Khayyámmy. The Five of Pentacles: a stained-glass window with a couple of beggars beneath it, outside in the snow. The Eight of Swords: *yuggh!* a woman tied up and blindfolded with a bunch of blades stuck in the ground around her. The Wheel of Fortune: gameshow time again. What next, Concentration or Jeopardy?

Oh GROHsss! The Hanged Man!—and hanging upside down too, with his *hair* on fire or something.

Well forget this! Nothing but a pack of cards, after all. Might as well get a regular deck and play goddam solitaire. Squat on the cot in your crimson underwear and deal deal deal 'em out out out on the kitchen table. Chainscarf caramel brownies all the while from Gramma Otto's heirloom legacy, the octagonal canister with "America the Beautiful" lyrics on its eight sides. Toss crumbs to Rover, Fido, and Spot: God shed some grace on thee. And me.

Brownies. She'd been one herself, back in Marble Orchard. Had grossed out an entire bake sale by speculating whether *their* brownies were in fact the remnants of troopers

lost in the woods.

Hee hee! Bacchanalian days! When she'd ad-libbed whole routines about the Tooth Brownie, who didn't bother waiting till kids put their teeth under pillows to haul them away [*demonstrate, with sound effects*]. Or the Brownie Brownout, which was something like a cookout but a lot less stomachable. Or singing "Brown brown brown is the color of my Dating Game Bachelor Number One's hair"—meaning Jeff Scolley, of course, the first boy she'd ever pounced on. And herself leading the other girls in a wicked chorus of:

*Skeeter 'n' Scolley, sittin' in a tree,
Making out like chimpanzees...*

But that was then and this was now and things had gotten really weird. A never-ending junkfood chainscarf. Once-trim waistline pooching out over panties-band; thighs gradually rising, doughlike, to meet it. She would end up looking like Gertrude Stein and have to dine on Alice B. Toklas brownies. (What a good idea Part Three.) Might as well scrap her petite crimsons and scarlets and fire-engine-reds; order up those white cotton size-forty boxer shorts without delay.

No: have to put that off till later, along with the brownies and the surviving ice cream and what was left in Mr. Potato Chip Bag. Time to get off your plumpening rump, get it dressed and in gear and down to Soutien Lane for the changing of the guard.

Another evening of another day; sit and watch the children play. Jubilant exuberance, skyrocket-high spirits, smiling faces all aglow. Doing things that Skeeter Kitefly used to do, before the dreams began.

Chapter 17

Near Dowels

The earliest Eighties were depression years, unless you happened to be a Republican, and Skeeter Kitefly was apolitical at the best of times.

Which these were not.

Third time's the charm (they say) and this was, let's see, yes: the third time in Skeeter's short life that her highfalutin derring-do had flamed out on her. Gone into a tailspin, a SHWEEEEEE-OOOOP nosedive, aiming to auger in at Mach 1+ and not with any whizbang but a stumblebummy whimper.

So where's the charm?

Where for that matter was Prince Charming? Stuck, maybe, but hardly in a rut. Stagnancy had overtaken Skeeter's nightlife too, thanks to the same loss of all ambition, aspiration, enterprise. And good old Projection Plus, with which you could kiss off every consequence. Lose this once (or thrice) and down you plummet, gluggity glug—to flounder in the deep end, engulfed by colorblindness.

But what else to do? where else to go? given the altered states of the earliest Eighties?

The answer came in a really weird dream. She would find out what-for and where-to at a school of some sort. (And ditch all her classes there till finals week, showing up to take the big test naked *and* weightless so she kept slipping out of her chair and floating around the exam room, bouncing nudely off the walls).

(Well, the basic dream impulse was probably sound.)

Back, then, to a School of Some Sort. Plenty to pick from, but which to choose? There were institutes devoted to business, real estate, acupuncture, dog grooming; technology, theology, cosmetology, bartending. (What a Good Idea Part Four—providing

they let you drink your homework.) There were agriculture colleges if she wanted to plant beanstalks; music conservatories if she wanted to pursue piano lessons; and the USMC if she wanted to return to her Marine-clean roots.

In the end, Skeeter applied for entry to good old homespun Windohwa University (i.e. “Double-You-You”) down in Mount Oriela. She anticipated a routine enrollment such as she’d always breezed through at Keening, with tuition around her accustomed level—\$400, say, for a full-load semester, plus another hundred or so for books and supplies, and of course a smidgen extra for food and shelter and so forth.

“You’re not a state resident,” the Admissions Office informed her.

“Am too! I live in Rassiere Bay.”

“And that is since when?”

“That is since June.” (So there nyaah.)

“June of last year?”

“No, June of this year.”

“You’re not considered a state resident till you’ve lived here not less than one year—”

“—not less than?”

“—immediately preceding registration. Tuition this fall for *non*-resident undergraduates enrolling in twelve or more hours of course work comes to \$1,151.”

“One *thousand*?—”

“—one hundred and fifty-one dollars. Plus a \$49 incidental activity fee. Now, there are certain exemptions from all or part of this tuition. Are you a veteran or active duty military, or child or spouse of active duty military, or child of a POW or MIA, or an immigrant holding a refugee classification who has been in the United States less than one year?”

Skeeter’s being the only child of retired military who’d served overseas (but not been taken prisoner or gone missing in action) after twice being considered for astronaut selection (and getting washed out both times) didn’t quite qualify her as an exemption.

So—short of enlisting herself, à la *Private Benjamin*—\$1,200 had to be raised. Unfortunately not to buy a pre-plumbed Hot Tub with hydromassage booster joints. And

after finding the pickings far from plentiful at Student Financial Aid, it was on to Ma Bell to swallow her pride. Yours, that is, not Ma's. Yours was no bigger at this point than the average aspirin; but just as apt to stick in your throat.

Ma, for her part, couldn't understand why Kelly RebecCA! couldn't simply go back to Keening and so avoid all this non-residential brouhaha.

A return to Keening, however, would entail crossing back into Nilnisi; and that, needless to say, Skeeter could not do. Just as she couldn't possibly have kept on driving T-Bird Elmer. Which, needless or not, was beyond Carrie's understanding.

But ARnold, God bless him, didn't have to be asked twice to ante up; and Uncle Buddy-Buzz sweetened the kitty with no dramatic strings attached. Aunt Ollie and Uncle Walt sent a crisp ten-dollar bill, and Gower Kitefly (working now for DisneyWorld—as a cropduster, Skeeter thought) made a contribution to atone for being a faulty exemption-provider. Thus laden with family spoil, Skeeter packed her poke and trucked on down to Double-You-You.

Where she was promptly thrown for a loop.

It was all so *different*.

Keening, Bonum, Whitman Junior High, Oswald Elementary—each new school had been a fresh continent to conquer, Skeeter charging down the gangplank to plant her banderole with choplicking relish. *Veni vidi vici ta-daa!* Yet here, after just one year away from college, she felt like an unclassified refugee in some foreign dimension, with only a tenuous grasp on the local language and manners.

Who could tell how many *faux* she'd *pas'd* already?

*

The heart of Mount Oriela appeared to be a drunken T. The town's main street, Oriela View, served as a respectable north/south upright; but at Corbel Square it ran into rakish diagonal Corbel Road, which made for an askew crossbar. (Given the number of taverns flanking Corbel Road, this slant was perhaps to be expected.)

Between Corbel and campus were block after block of non-dorm student housing, ranging in quality from the cheap to the bleak to the frankly inauspicious. Skeeter found an apartment here, and over the next couple of years would find five others (or maybe it was

seven) nearby: each the sort of place you lived at till you had no choice but to move on. Some had dripping faucets and some had bonking steampipes, or cracked tiles or blistered linoleum or peculiar scorchmarks or immortal mildew. Some needed to be described with adjectives Skeeter'd only come across in old English novels—"frowzy," "scabrous"—and she withstood one month in a hole she swore only *pretended* to have electricity but still in fact laid on gaslight.

Now your typical freshman college student, tasting independence for the first time, might find all this delightful—think of Sadie in Tearytown! But Skeeter, like Huck Finn, had been there before. She'd sucked back her share of so-called happy breaths, and drained the funkily-rundown cup dry. (Which wasn't to say that she would turn down a refill, supposing somebody else were standing rounds...)

To augment her meager resources she got a job at the campus answering service, working alongside a large woman named Belinda who wore muu-muus and occasionally shared her abundant packed lunches. No answers to spare, though. Nor even any articulate questions.

And in the meantime there was all that What-For to be found out.

Skeeter had twenty-two Theater credits to transfer from Nilnisi, but Double-You-You accepted only six: scuttling four of her A's and two of her B's and effectively ringing down the final curtain on Theater as a major. She latched onto Philosophy instead, in misguided hopes of learning how to unscramble and decipher; but it quickly got too much like algebra and nothing at all like "The Gold-Bug."

If you know you are dead, then you are dead.

If you know you are dead, then you are NOT dead.

Therefore, you do not know that you are dead.

*

If thirty white horses are upon a red hill,

Then they tramp, then they champ,

Therefore they stand still.

Goddam logic anyway. All it did was put frown lines in your forehead. Now and again Skeeter would nearly get a handle on some syllogism—"Hello Mrs. Premise!" "Hello

Mrs. Conclusion!”—only to feel it physically, tangibly slipping through her mental fingers.

Didn’t help that the GTA in charge of her survey class was none other than Bernie Farkas, the partial Marxist from that crocodile-rockin’ party at La Pad. He still resembled a rabbit in a snit, wore the same set of belligerent muttonchops, and would seize on any pretext to rail against the Moral Majority. Here at least was something still its recognizable self even in this alien dimension, unaffected by the intervening years.

“Hi! Remember me?”

“Errrr...” said Bernie Farkas. “—should I?”

“Well, I was only thirteen at the time.”

Flash of alarm, giving way to Bernie’s usual dialectic scowl as Skeeter explained about Sadie, Nilnisi, and New Year’s Eve.

“Oh. No. Sorry, don’t remember. Did you have any other question? I’ve got a rally to get to—” And pressing a Socialist Workers tract upon her, Bernie took off.

This was rather unnerving.

No memory of Skeeter in her blood-red Superclunky platforms, taking her very first hit off a real live bong?

How could she not be UNFORGETTABLE?

*If she hadn’t been then,
And presumably wasn’t now...
Therefore, what could the future hold?*

*

Slip-sliding away.

Skeeter tried to stick to her studies through thick and thin, but there was an illiberal lot of the latter. Even after living in Windohwa the requisite year and becoming a sure-nough state resident, things remained tighter than tight. All costs and fees were going up as the Reaganaut tide washed away financial aid.

So that summer, and again the following winter and spring, she had to plop out of school and make some dough to keep her transcript afloat. Doing a little of this and less of that: resuming her stint as a drugstore cashier; waiting on tables at a hideous preppie bistro; working in a vintage clothing store popular with outmoded transvestites. In between these

gigs she filled in for Belinda at the answering service, and had moonlight flings at valet parking, short-order cooking, karate lesson peddling, and magician-assisting.

One way or another she would get her head sufficiently above the tidemark to return to Double-You-You and change her major. Swapping goddam Philosophy for Political Science, and Political Science for Psychology, and Psychology for Sociology, and faring hardly better than the Duke and Dauphin had with temperance lectures or yellocution. Twice she turned to Academic Advising for help in finding out What-For; twice she bowed to their insistence that she *had* to take Biology 101, sooner or later; and twice she dropped Bio as soon as possible and took a different, less spookacious course.

(Skeeter might have lost her bearings, but still knew damn well where *that* road took you.)

*

Tentatively, she emerged from her isolation tank. Resumed the dating game. Became involved with men again.

And almost without exception (whatever her intentions) these men turned out to be Svens: part of the same old Lappish-minded smörgåsbord. By no means were they all Scandinavian-looking, though most had blank unfurnished bedroom eyes. Those who didn't tended to be "neerdowells"—and Skeeter pronounced it that way too, without apostrophe or hyphen: *near dowels*. Which was about as close as that type came at the best of times.

Which these were not.

The ultimate near dowel was probably Steve Martin's character in *Pennies from Heaven*: not the familiar Steve Martin of "King Tut" and "Cruel Shoes" but a darker-haired semistranger, who wouldn't tell lies "if he could help it." Perfectly willing, however, to seduce and abandon and have women support him, while he lip-sync'd songs of the Great Depression.

Skeeter went to see this movie not just once but again and again, despite being pretty much broke and about to plop out of Windohwa for the second time. Yet she kept going back to *Pennies from Heaven*, identifying more-more-more with the kewpie snookums played by Bernadette Peters: repeatedly used, and abused, and ending up peddling her flesh for Christopher Walken (yuggh).

But as Bernadette said: *We've only got one life.*

And as Bernadette sang: *Love is good for anything that ails you.*

So Skeeter floundered on through the monochrome deep end, through her own series of one-after-the-other-night stands; not that there was much standing involved. Or beaucoup charm to be found in going down for the third time. Just the same old offkey replay of “Norwegian Wood,” suitably geared to some Sven biding his time while she was drinking her wine, or gin, or Scotch, or Two Fingers Tequila Gold. Lacking the capacity to match him drink for drink for long without getting engulfed.

And in such altered state would Skeeter be escorted (bodily toted) to wherever happened to be home by the Sven of the moment, who seldom bided his time in closing ranks—or attempting to, if a near dowel.

Afterwards she'd always say, “Oh puhLEEZE! *Ages* ago I dumped that one!” when asked about her latest ex-boyfriend. But it was actually Skeeter, all too often, who got given the old heave-ho; and each time this happened she would shed her steppin'-out clothes, put on olive drabbery, and declare in a fraught voice—as a jilted Catholic girl might speak of taking the veil—that nothing was left for her now but Chinese Communism.

Red, of course, had always been her favorite color.

*

She adopted a stray cat and named him Mao, though nothing about him was red except his nose and (courtesy of B. Kliban) mousey tongue. The rest was black-and-white along Sylvestery lines, blending right in with Skeeter's colorblind world.

She took him to the vet to be fixed up and fixed period, leaving Mao a permanent partial Marksman baffled by the neighborhood's brazen young unspayeds, whom he would pursue and pounce upon, only to wonder what to do *next*.

Near dowel!

“People are like water” (quoth another Mao) “and the army is like fish.” Mao the cat liked fish too, and soon grew too fat to fit comfortably on the seated Skeeter's lap or the supine Skeeter's chest. So he took to curling himself over the sleeping Skeeter's ankles, which came in useful on chilly nights, and earned him the surname “Lumpenproletariat”—recollected from Skeeter's semester as an apolitical Political Science major.

That was Sven, this is Mao: an improvement over her previous bed partners, and a good excuse for staging her own Cultural Revolution. Tubbish and unbubbly, she spent most of those chilly nights in isolation with her cat and her Walkman, listening to Stevie Nicks demand that Tom Petty stop draggin' her heart around; and with her harmonica, trying to teach herself to play the blues (but only causing Mao to hide behind his litterbox); and with her Rubik's Cube, trying to get the frustifying little bugger to come out *right*—

Hell.

Had she lost her touch? Ever *had* a touch? And if she hadn't had it then, and presumably lacked one now... was she the one to blame?

Maybe her environment was at fault. Or her heredity: both paternal grandparents had been barnstorm stunt pilots, and both had been bodily toted away from crashes more than once (or thrice). Mix those genes with what Great-Aunt Emmy Wunderlich had called her Uncle Willie: a flighty lazybones, frittering and frivolling his way through life.

Well, Skeeter had no fear of frivolity or flightiness. But there *were* consequences to life's being just a bowl of cherries—such as its otherwise being a bitch-and-then-you-die. And even *that* would be a bit more acceptable if, beforehand, you could decipher and unscramble some worthwhile meaning and purpose to It All.

Like WHAT???

She started devouring fortune cookies by the carton, in search of an answer. Every YOU WILL HAVE A NICE DAY brought to mind the poster at Sadie's La Pad: the one where the old Chinese man asked *Where will you sleep?* and W. C. Fields replied *On my right side, with my mouth open.*

But which side was the right one?

Night after night she dreamed she was Superclunking up and down those empty dorm corridors at Nilnisi, knocking on every goddam door trying to drum up revelers, and getting next-to-no response...

Hell. Never *had* gotten much out of college. Not even what-for; not ever.

Chapter 18

Otherwise

Once upon a New Year's Eve-y, while you polished shoes... what? "With sleeve-y?" —"on TV?"—"believe me?"—no.

Hmmmm.

Bleak December, anyway.

Skeeter's stock of footgear consisted of one pair slippersocks, one pair boots, two pair dressy-up shoes (one light, one dark) and one pair exhausted Adidases coming apart at the seams. Leaky sneakers! The very thing you'd want for trudging through the winter streets. Bright new laces on them, though.

Nearly new, anyway.

Here we are on Corbel Terrace, on the top floor front of the Mark Twain, one of several rooming houses like old wrecked steamboats that overlook Corbel Square. (Which, thanks to the slant of Corbel Road, was actually a parallelogram. Coming home late at night from the Four Deuces, you could estimate just how many you'd had by how much the Square seemed to straighten out.)

Skeeter, flannel-jammied, was staying put tonight, having turned down all party invitations. ("All"—a couple, and both from near dowels.) The ceiling stain she'd dubbed "Santa's Little Mistake" had been spreading for a week now, and Skeeter wanted to be on hand for the final breakthrough in order to position her dripcatchers.

So here it was New Year's Eve: ten years after the one in Tearytown, and this time no Stonehenge Twin to keep her company. (Darn.) No wackyweed either, which left more of a void. (Double darn.) No confetti, no balloons, no noisemakers or funny hats, no lava lamp, no champagne. But there *was* a bottle of Two Fingers Gold within reach, still half full. Or half empty—"One Finger Go." Should we go ahead, then, and finish it off? Considering

that after paying the rent we'll have a whole eight dollars to last us till next payday?

Let's let the outside world decide. Check on the Square, see what shape it is by now: if it's still square, we drink on. Rhomboid, we rhumba. Circular, we hit the sack.

The front window showed her only darkness and, against it, her own indistinct self.

There I am—I think. Therefore, I...

Somebody in one of the old storybooks had gone so far in such circumstances as to pal around with her own reflection. Not looking-glass Alice, but Anne Frank or Annie Oakley or Orphan Annie or one of that gang. So was this one here (that one there) supposed to be Skeeter's kindred spirit? Blurred chin in blurred hand, chewing on a phantom fingernail?

If so, she sure had a precious little face.

And never the twain shall meet.

Well *anyhoo*, there wasn't any Square out there right now. Neither rain nor snow nor sleet to see, but a helluva lotta gloom of night. So long then, Precious Littleface; the rest of us gotta turn back to our crowded shabby rented room. (Make that our crowded shabby "lodging," as in stick-in-my-throat.) At least our dressy-ups are properly polished for once, even if they have no place to go.

Whereupon Skeeter's heart gave a great gomez-pugsley LURCH as a shadow leaped out of nowhere and onto the bed. Settled itself down, stared obliquely at her, and began licking its foreleg with a long pink mousey tongue.

Yep—time to put away the tequila.

Among Skeeter's New Year's resolutions, expressed in several forms, was "Less liquor." Or, as one variant phrased it: "*Spend* less on liquor" (leaving her free to still have drinks bought for her). Make an honest effort, anyway, to keep out of the Four Deuces and the Siamese Tavern and Ditto's Lounge, all the haunts up and down Corbel Road. Otherwise she'd have precious little face left before long, getting it all raddled and callous. And before you knew it she'd be forty, fat and feeble-minded, turning tricks at some Ramada Inn.

They call me Ramada Rose

The one all the near dowels chose...

There was her liver to think about, too. Another bunch of resolutions promoted general upkeep—exercise, better diet, using Lemon Pledge and so on. Not to mention keeping up with people: Skeeter had an especially hard time doing that. And yet till now she'd always presumed this was because people weren't able to keep up with *her*. Their mail certainly couldn't, what with her moving so often this past couple of years. And when it did arrive, she half expected some old unanswered letter from Missy Trace to be among it.

Should auld acquaintance be forgot?

All those gone or going from her life; all the various very best friends she'd lost track of somehow along the way. Skeeter forever showing up late for classes and appointments and rendezvouseses, neglecting to notify or signify... especially to signify. Seldom did she write anyone so much as a note, relying instead on Ma Bell and greeting cards—from the Belated rack, too often. This Christmas Sadie and Desi had sent her a Ziggy address book; listed in it so far were a dozen or so phone numbers, but nary an address. Not even her own.

Nor that of her mother in Marble Orchard, bored silly and fidgeting around The House With All the Porches like some frustrated poltergeist, while ARnold went *Now Carrie*, *now Carrie*...

Nor that of her father Gower, who'd never gotten closer to outer space than DisneyWorld, and was still down south someplace (the last Skeeter'd heard) raising gamecocks for export to the Philippines.

And "Chicago" was all she wrote for Uncle Buddy-Buzz, who'd been sickly all fall with flu-like symptoms, and Lordy you knew what that implied nowadays.

"But never mind, darling, we're still onstage," he'd coughed at Skeeter last week, calling to wish her a Merry Noël. "*I* think it's nothing more nor less than green-apple indigestion—just deserts, I suppose, after all my eating 'not wisely but too well'—except that you can never eat *too* well, of course... You remember when you were little (cough) excuse me, and came to town (*cough cough cough*) and—oh, this is apropos—we got caught in the tear gas, and you said *This* is what you call 'being alive'—remember? Well (*hawwwwggh*—hem!) just keep in mind, darling, that into each life some slush must seep."

And that which we fail to keep in mind tends to seep right out again. (Where'd this fresh shot of tequila come from?) Out of sight, out of mind, slipping out of memories, away

from consciousness; being lost to oblivion like a blown-out candle or burned-out sparkler.

Dammit! Enough with the slushy punch-and-judy doubletalk. (Lick the salt, throw back the shot, bite the lime.) Take a good long look at your own short self, as though from somebody else's point of view.

See Kelly Rebecca as she must have been originally envisioned, conceived on a vast Amazonian scale, with proportionate appetites and capacities: a great big amazing colossal girl!

See her the child of scrunchdown by Jolly Dame Nature, abridged and condensed into a little ole bitty Skeeter-type doll: the *compact* version that could get high on an Eskimo pie, for awhile. (Lick, toss back, bite.)

Skeeter the Vital, Skeeter the Intensely Alive, Skeeter With Bells On—no, make that Castanets, clacking the ever-loving blue-eyed night away: everybody seguidilla! Skeeter the Insistent that she'll dance *rings* around the world at the age of ninety-four, so nyaah to you, Carmen! and nyaah to all you Svenny near dowels! and an amazing colossal NYAAH to Pamela Pillsbury for calling her "Mosquito Mouth," as if Skeeter were the sort to whine around crowded shabby rooms, starved for contact and impact and the stinging taste of blood (lick toss bite) and even if you *did* get a little dumbfounded now and then, a little deepseated, a little engorged for per-pe-tu-i-ty, your mainspring permanently all *wound* UP—

...why you could be happy as a loon.

But things last forever only in retrospect.

Real Life was more of a recessional.

(Well, *that* had to be the cactus juice talking.)

And to cope with that, to come to grips with it, *joie de goddam vivre* seemed hardly enough—or the wrong kind of *joie*—or not really *joie* at all but a rackety auto-da-fé, as your *vivre* stalled out and you tried to eject without much in the way of a parachute or safety net and therefore landed with a fracturing CRACK! as God took one final flash-in-the-pants picture of you at The End.

And this was very soppy-sad and heartrending, like something out of Hans Christian Andersen: steadfast tin soldiers flung into ovens, barefoot match girls left out to freeze in the snow. Just what you might expect from a Sven-boy's storybook. Any wonder that it makes

you want to drink like a fish?

*Carry moonshine home in a dish?
Gargle like you're Lillian Gish?
Or would you rather be a pig—*

A sooey cider, in fact.

(Oh that's clever. Artfully antic. Lick toss bite—oops, outta lime. Yuggh.)

So what if she wasn't as tall as other people, or as on-time as other people, or distinctive and significant like other people. So what if she didn't pack parachutes or safety nets or attention spans like everybody else in the wide bright world. So maybe she did get bored and restless, pudgy despite being so petite and that was probably due to all the lime and salt and per-pe-tu-i-ty she couldn't hold as well as other people, since she lacked the capacity of other people—because she didn't have their precious little mincy-pincy dainty-baby bitch-of-the-world-type Otherwisdom.

Well, she had a message for all those Otherwiseguys.

Sophie Tucker'd said it first, Bette Midler'd said it best. Skeeter Kitefly echoed them both in the here and now: THEY CAN KISS MY TATTOOED *TUCHIS* AND PLANT A TREE FOR ISRAEL!

Yeah.

Right.

Makes no diff to me.

And to prove it she crawled into bed, curled up in a ball and let the diff come pouring out, partly into her pillowcase but mostly onto Mao, who heaved an audible sigh.

*

Ploop.

...whuh?

Ploop.

Tears. Weird tears. Forcing their way back inside her eyelids. Must be a dream.

Ker-ploop.

She managed, after several eons, to winch one eye open—and have it squarely spat into by the ceiling's leakthrough loophole.

Bull's eye for Santa's Little Mistake.

Bullsomething, anyway, as light from the left-on overhead came pouring down and through her eyeball, to sear and scald her unblinkable brain with a YAAAAA yah-yah-yah-yah-yah—

“Hangover” was such a mild word, too. Like nothing more amiss than, say, your shirttail sticking out. Nothing to suggest this sort of *Clockwork Orange*-style eye-opener, these spasmodic rivulets of throbbing molten OOG. The third degree: Chinese Communism followed by Chinese water torture and then a peppery Szechwan fire drill.

Still and all: if it hurts this much, we must still be alive.

And that which doesn't kill us, makes us live longer. Or sing stronger. Or something.

(Get a grip now. And not the flu nor a suitcase either.)

Over the course of January 1st she got her eye closed and wiped; herself off the bed (attagirl) and Mao off the bed, which was more difficult (attacat). Handling herself very carefully throughout, carefully as a newborn babe—as the forgotten invisible one she'd borne at La Pad and who, come to think of it, would be ten years old today. And probably up to no good.

She put a bucket on the bed to catch the *ploops*, and a bromo in her stomach to quell the OOG. Moved gingerly into the tiny kitchen, fixing herself a cup of Swiss Miss, adding the habitual jigger for clarity's sake, filling Mao's food bowl to keep him momentarily out from underfoot. Returning then to the front room, to the front window, where Precious Littleface had been replaced by a fat black crow on the windowsill. (No omen: simply one of the neighbors. Corbel Square was a regular rookery.)

The crow turned to glance at Skeeter through the glass. Sized up her situation, Swiss Miss and all; and took off into the morning mist without so much as a caw.

Somewhere the sun is shining, so honey don't you cry.

Then again: why keep waiting for your ship to come in, when you can go meet it halfway?

Chapter 19

Taking Avail

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

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

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

“Oh, I’m not picky or choosy—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey! That *all* for us?” Earl demanded.

“Guess so.”

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

“You got me,” said the forklift driver.

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

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

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

Nor was Earl far off the mark. The new Governor, Hugh “Hacker” Halvers, had just taken office in the state capital at Jalousie; and among his first acts was to have the previous administration’s files boxed up in loosely-labeled cartons and shipped thirty miles down the turnpike to the Mount Oriela Pit. Once there, dispatched hither and yon by Vern on the loading dock, it suddenly became imperative that “a number of records” (read: umpteen) be located and retrieved without delay. Skeeter, assigned to do this, spent the next three months burrowing up and down through the dank grey concrete labyrinth, while the labels on the

cartons grew ever looser.

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

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

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

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

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

And all, *and* all.

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

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

Accordingly she slept till noon the following Sunday, which doubled as the first day of spring; then went out and bought a big fat Sunday paper, the statewide Windohwa

Observer. Ignoring comics and coupons, Skeeter turned to the classifieds and had her eye snagged at once by

OVERSEAS OP AVAIL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fare-thee-well then to Mt. Oriela, to The Pit and the Four Deuces, the Mark Twain and Corbel Square. Mao she hugged and kissed goodbye and boarded with Belinda of the muu-muus, until such time (if any) that Skeeter might return. For she was heading over the ocean and through the sea, to find where My Bonnie lies: this bird has flown! just like the white-winged dove! (or the black-plumed crow!)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—she began to see colors again.

Not all of them blues, either.

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

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

—but it *did* get easier, further on.

So Skeeter decided en route across the Bosphorus.

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

Chapter 20

Ring Around with RoBynne

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

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

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

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

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

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

There's no place like home.

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

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

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

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

No place like it.

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

Where powerful pungent public reminders kept needing greeting.

SMECK encouraged its clerical staff to wear dressy-up clothes, but didn't pay entry-level nearly enough to buy new; so Skeeter had to make the petite rounds of thrift stores and garage sales, always on the lookout for an Everything You Can Stuff in a Sack for Five Dollars bonanza. The outfits she found were kind of mid-Seventies, but hey! Skeeter had no

problem with the pre-preppie look. No more Dressing for Success for *her*. And to accessorize, what better than her resurrected collection of Mork-from-Ork lapel pins? Little plastic ice cream cones and question marks and Betty Boops, enlivening the stodge of these Annie Hall-type vests. For extra measure she added a big red ASAP sticker to her photo ID nametag: ASAP standing for “Ah, Such a Picture” on good mornings, and “[what] a sap” on bad.

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

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

“She got the beat!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Who indeed?

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

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

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

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

"HAS THIS HAPPENED TO YOU?" Skeeter demanded.

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

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

"LOOK," she was directed.

"Awright already... oh m'Gahd. It's fulla *shoes*."

"Tell me about it."

"Well okay—there's like five shoes in here. Only two of 'em match."

"Exactly," Skeeter sighed. Restoring her leg to the floor with a martyred heave, she unleashed a shaggy-doggy shoe story about how much she disliked wearing heels ("I'm

proud to be short”) but felt obliged to do so as far as the clinic timeclock, after which she’d kick them off and pad around in No-Nonsense hosiery, grinning at all the younger male employees’s commendable butts.

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

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

*

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

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

Down at the waterfront, for instance, at Liquid Skyjack or SyntheSizes, you could pick up a pair of T-strap slingbacks that’d look megawicked with white cotton anklets—worn over fishnet stockings, of course. At Turbo’s Heads & Tails (where performance hair stylists did blindfold mohawks) you could buy cut-rate jewelry for any part of the body you cared to encircle or pierce. Navels Ahoy! had a complete trousseau for the bare midriff, including special belly-button liner and shadow. And at Wretched Wrefuse you could find the dress Skeeter was wearing today, made of chopped-up-and-stitched-together Izod alligator tops.

Wherever they went, RoBynne would check out her protégée through those hoodah/thawtit X-ray eyes and suggest ever more radical enhancements. If Skeeter hesitated, RoBynne would lead by example or rather by ensemble: today’s being a tuxedo T-shirt, cummerbund, and plaid skirt that might have been primly kneelength had its hem not been clipped to the opposite hip in order to display RoBynne’s striped tights (and see how many

agitated middle-aged women might take her aside to hiss, “*Honey!* You stuck your skirt in your pantyhose!!”).

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

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

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

“And a drink.”

“And a bite to eat. I’m starving.”

“So’m I.”

“Sushi?”

“Sumi’s?”

“*Si, señorita.*”

“Say *sayonara.*”

“So you say—”

“So you see—”

“So sue me!”

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

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

“Yer so full of it, Skeeter! Aay, y’wanna do yer hair before we go?”

“Oog! In this place?”

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

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

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

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

O-B—G-Y-N

O-B—G-Y-N

O-B—G-Y-N

And Obgyn was her name-oh—

calculated to make the stoutest pacemaker skip a beat.

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

“Yuggh! Talk about your shish kebab—”

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

“Eye’s surprised—”

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

“Gag you out the window—”

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

STAT STAT NOW NOW POT HERE!!!

like they were advertising Panama Red eyedrops or something—”

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

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

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

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

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

hints of the spires of the city of Elsew.

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

“Oh m’Gahd,” went RoBynne.

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

Elsew after dark: a Krypton Metropolis.

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

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

...you can feel...

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

Chapter 21

Kitefly in the Ointment

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

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

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

Ah, Such a Picture.

If you do say so your whuddababe self.

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

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

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

“Oh you do not.”

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

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

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

“Jeez, RoBynne! Don’t you like guys?”

“Whaddaya mean, ‘don’t I like guys?’”

“Well, they sure like you...”

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

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

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

“Of hot water?”

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

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

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

And they had a rowdy hoyden water fight that brought down the shower rod, curtain and all. Which would have made a lot better mess at RoBynne’s loft than it did here at Skeeter’s place in “Wheeville.”

Where they were now out in such back yard as had survived the summer heatwave. Washed clean of SMECKable stickum, ready to work up a fresh honest sweat: Skeeter on the

cheap deck chair, RoBynne prone on a gaudy beach towel. And already wriggling (the big show-off) halfway out of her suspenders and thong.

“Aay, Skee. Where’s yer peepers?”

“In my head, behind my shades—”

“No-ew! I mean, don’t you have any like VOYeurs around here?”

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

“I haven’t seen any.”

RoBynne seemed disappointed. “TurGID. Club Med this ain’t.”

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

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

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

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

Till the happenstantial day she stumbled across Patti Smith’s outré album *Horses* at an otherwise respectable flea market. A listen or two later, and Robin Joan was writing “rully bad punk poetry” in imitation thereof. Adopting the Blank Generation attitude of Talking Heads and The Ramones, she became Robbin Shoplift (alias Gloria Klepto) who wore lots of black on her gaunt body and lots of mascara on her spectral face. Striking lots of sneaky-creepy poses with both: *gimme gimme shock treatment, I wanna sniff some glue!*

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

"What'd you do? Cross your fingers and wish upon an implant?"

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

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

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

*she's so ready to be robbing
with her red breasts ripe
she's a stickyfingered baby
guess you know she's my type
she's unerring as a ringer
for a thief in the night
that makes her my type
and now my heart's swiped
she's a snatcher of affection
takes it as she likes
she never pays for her pleasure
no matter what the price
she's unerring when she pinches
and she does it just right
that makes her my type
and now my heart's swiped*

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

“A smutnovel?”

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

Then too: despite her cackling response to NOW POT HERE, she had in fact given up fighting glaucoma at the start of her aerobic program, and hadn’t taken a toke since—

since—well, not for a long time anyway. Only the occasional cigarette, for entertainment's sake.

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

“Y’mean the Monty Python movie?”

“Hunh?”

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

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

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

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

(Always a day away.)

(And the same old thing as yesterday.)

The sun was setting now, right in her eyes, like that goddam spotlight in the dresser-drawer nightmare. Seen through Skeeter’s wraparound shades it began to strobe and whirligig—to flashdance, in fact. “What a feeling!” “A girl’s gotta keep believing.” How conveniently easy that would be if you too could weld by day and BoogaBloo by night, *and* have a wealthy (yet handsome) steel-mill owner waiting for you at The End with a bunch of goddam flowers.

Sweet dreams are made of this.

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

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

“Beats me,” she said aloud.

“Ew kinky,” responded RoBynne.

“So there you are,” said a tallish wiry woman, coming out the back door in an oyster-colored dress and contrary temper: Sister Sadie Benison, looking more drawn than usual.

“How the two of you can lie around out here in this godawful heat, I can’t imagine.”

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

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

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

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

“Aaay, natural redhead!”

“Hello Robin.”

“Ro-BYNNE.”

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

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

“Toxic,” RoBynne agreed.

“What’ve you done with Desi?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hunh? When?" said Skeeter.

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

"You're taking Desi?"

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

As per usual with Sadie B., any request couched as a favor-plea left no doubt what was expected. "Oh well—it's my turn to call in sick on Friday anyway. Ro can tell 'em how I got sunspot-stroke in spite of all the Coppertone."

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

—which RoBynne countered with a boildown of the tempestuous relationships being undergone by Ululu, the antiheroine of her smutnovel *Grunts of Passion*. Clean Ululu

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

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

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

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

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

Mumbo and jumbo.

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

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

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

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

Oh-um-well.

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

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

Chapter 22

Merely SAD

Desirée Benison, at five-and-a-half, could deliver sophisticated disquisitions on the nature of art; and did so—“Why is Papa Smurf the only *old* Smurf? and why is Smurfette the only *girl* Smurf?”—while she and her auntie made their beds. Smooth those sheets, *smoooooth* them out and double-fold with a tuck tuck tuck (last one for luck). Sing the Wheeville version of “Barbara Allen”:

*O Mother Mother make my bed
'cause Mother I am lazy;
I cannot make it by myself
my friends would think I'm crazy.*

The heatwave this morning was bad as ever. Good Old Heartland USA: managing, in true Middle Western fashion, to combine high humidity with extreme drought. Going to hit a hundred again today too, after getting barely below eighty last night.

Comfort dictated hang-loose outfits, but Sadie for some occult Tarot reason wanted the three of them to coordinate. Which was a good guffaw, given a trio of tallish-wiry redhead, compact blonde shorty, and not-quite-kindergartener whose dark wavy face already had young Leland upstairs in thrall.

So they all donned off-one-shoulder T-shirts with splattery neon designs, as were all the rage that *Flashdance* summer. Skeeter's sported a hot-pink-on-bright-blue DELIRIOUS, Desi's said AWESOME, and Sadie's PUT IT IN WRITING as she repackaged her portfolio with brainbusting exactitude. Until, at the last minute:

“Aagh! Look at that!”

“What?”

“My toenail polish! It’s chipped all to hell! And I spent *so* much time—well that’s it, I give up. Forget it. We’re not going. It’s hopeless.”

“They judge you on the state of your toenails?”

“Oh you wouldn’t understand, you never went to art school! For me to go in there with *these* looking like *this*, in open sandals—I might just as well paint them a bullfighter-by- number on black velvet!”

“Can’t you just wear socks?”

Well, if Sadie B.’s feet could swelter in socks on this, the most critical turning-pointy day of her life, then by God so could Skeeter’s and Desi’s too. This decided and all reshod, there was next the feat of getting Floyd out of Wheeville and into unyielding rush hour traffic.

“We seem to just be SITting here,” Sadie remarked, far too calmly.

Screeeeeeee as Skeeter laid rubber, grappling with the wheel as though she were piloting a windjammer through a sudden squall. “*That’s* the way you learn to drive when you run away to sea,” she said; and ten minutes on the expressway later they were a dozen miles northwest.

“There—turn there,” Sadie hissed at the 144th Street exit. Which took them to Glazier Street; which led them steeply up Dee Ridge; which brought them to the Merely School of Art & Design.

What was it—seven years now?—since Sadie’d first come here, back in antediluvian Bicentennial times. Telling Skeeter and their folks by picture postcard that everything was beautiful in Elsew and she loved it here (but then that was Sadie’s standard reaction wherever she went, at first).

Skeeter had been scheduled to visit her at Easter that first year, but *The Big Noise* had intervened and she hadn’t made it. And then there’d been high school to finish and college to embark on and the Nothingbutt Theater to aspire to; and before you knew it Sadie was pregnant and all a-fret whether to have the baby or not, whether to put it up for adoption or not—this embryonic predicament resolving itself into the Michael Jackson mimic in Floyd’s back seat.

“Just beat it!” Desi sang, “beat it beat it beat it—nobody here, let’s go home!” as Skeeter drove them into a nearly deserted parking lot. Fortunately for Desi, her mother was too far gone by this point to get further aggravated.

“Let’s go this way,” was all Sadie said (meaning *her* way, of course) as she led them along a bypath to an ivy-throttled building like a stately manor house. A cautionary sign out front read BRECKNOCK HALL, as though your neck might easily get broken here, so better watch your step.

“Okay okay all right all right I could really use a hug!” Sadie was croaking, clutching first Desi to her, then Skeeter; then leaving them in the stately vestibule with a parting command to not for God’s sake get lost.

“Do they have Space Invaders?” Desi asked, the moment her mother was out of sight.

See if a stately game room was on the premises. All colleges have a game room, with Foosball and pool tables and pinball machines; it stood to reason that even art students had to relax their aesthetic selves sometime. But initial exploration disclosed only a few empty offices, a vacant conference room, hardly a soul to be seen. Between semesters, after all.

“It smells in here,” said Desirée.

“That’s art for you,” said Skeeter, snuffing the mingled aromas of oil paint and India ink and airborne charcoal and unsettled chalkdust and “...floor wax! I smell floor wax! Somebody’s waxing the floors! Come on—”

Down the hall they ran, and there—around the corner and beyond a yellow

CAUTION
WET FLOOR

sign—they goggled at a wide-open corridor, buffed and pomaded to a glossy sheen! The sort of passageway every true slider-on-wax waits her life to find, and gloat over, and toss yanked-off sneakers to the side of, and prepare to launch herself into—

“Do me Skeeter do meeee!” yelled Desi, her laces one big snarl. In a trice Skeeter had her sockfooted and putting on an improv Wax Capades act, hand in hand: “We *whoop* and we *whoop* and we *wheweee...*” Twist, twirl, catch hold of the antique water fountain at the hall’s far end and push off again, sailing back through this unoccupied hooky-playing school building—

—till a door opened and out came a tall bald man with a double armload of catalogs that got scattered all the hell over as their carrier was barreled into WHUMP and bowled over WHUMP and sent skidding a good three feet WHOAAAA with an even better hundred-and-one pounds of Skeeter Kitefly atop him.

And there matters sprawled for a brief stunned while.

The man on the floor took in a breath through a sizable nose that began to bleed at its edges. And he said:

“Scheiss de la merde!”

“Oh my God are you okay?” demanded Skeeter. “Are you broken anywhere? Your NOSE is bleeding! Oh Jeez your poor nose! Did you bust it? I’ll nurse it back to health. Be calm now; don’t panic. Tilt your head back so the blood’ll run down your throat. Ice! We need ice and a washcloth—I think there’s some bandaids in my poke—I’ll pinch your nose shut till you start to clot—can you hear me? Hello? Are you a foreigner? *Sprechen sie Deutsch? ¿Habla Español? Parlez—*”

“Young woman,” said the man on the floor in a deep Midwestern wheeze, further nasalized by Skeeter’s pinchgrip. “If you want me to blow, you might provide a handkerchief.”

Up Skeeter zooped to where she’d left her saddlebag, grabbing from it a couple of bandaids (always keep your sticking plaster handy) and a wad of kleenex. Another bound and she was back atop Mr. Nosebleeder, out of whom all the breath again went *whoosh*.

“Oops sorry!” said Skeeter, climbing off his chest. “Force of habit, I guess. Here—bleed into this till I get these unwrapped. And hey! what were you talking about just now, when you said you-know-what if you said what I think you were talking about just now?”

A tiny set of venetian blinds went up inside each of the man on the floor’s eyes.

“Ah... that was me being crude, in a polite sort of way.”

Skeeter, wrestling with the bandaid packaging, kept looking at the bald man’s nose. Not that it was grotesque or elephant-manly or anything; it was simply—unmistakable. Even obscured by kleenex, you could tell that it was what it was. Broad. Blunt. Banked. Below it a meager smudge of moustache, such as can be found in photos of Orwell or Thurber or Edgar Allan Poe. And above it, on either side, behind those heavylidded venetians...

At twenty-four, Skeeter was quite used to being ogled and leered at and mentally undressed; but never before—except maybe once—had she felt this sort of sense of shrouded observation: measuring up and reckoning down. *Weird*. And faintly creepy. Or so at least it ought to feel.

“Are you a priest?” she heard herself asking.

The venetians inched higher.

“Ah... what am I? Am I a what?”

And maybe Skeeter would have told him never-mind-forget-it, had Desirée not broken her unaccustomed silence. “How can he have a nosebleed when he got knocked on his butt?”

“Good question, little girl,” said the man on the floor. “Many thanks,” he added as Skeeter applied the bandaids. “Let’s hope I have no need to sneeze.”

“*There* you two are!” said Sadie, appearing just then at the end of the hall.

“Hey Mommy! how’d it go?” asked AWESOME.

“Hey Sadie! how’d it go?” asked DELIRIOUS.

“Hay is for horses,” PUT IT IN WRITING informed them. “God what happened here??—God I don’t believe it!!—well, I was wondering when I’d run into somebody I know!”

“In this case,” said the man still on the floor, “mine was the body and *she* did the running into.”

“So what happened?”

“We were only skating and *he* got in the way,” explained Desirée.

“And having a stack of catalogs jammed up one’s nose can result in paper cuts,” added the man. “I take it these two belong to you, Mercedes? All makes perfect sense now.”

“You haven’t changed a bit!” laughed Sadie.

“You say that after your friends did me the favor of tearing me a spare nostril.”

“Well, I said I was sorry,” Skeeter mumped. “Or did I? Well, I was—I mean I am—sorry, that is—so—”

“You’re not still taking classes, are you?” Sadie asked the man on the floor.

“No. I teach them now.”

“You’re kidding! You’re on the faculty?”

“No kidding matter. And where I really am is here on the floor. Ladies, if you will—”

Together they hauled him to his substantial feet. Sadie began to give him her old-acquaintance half-hug but pulled back, saying she was wrong, he *had* changed and more than just a bit; she didn’t remember him as ever being *thin*.

“Dropped some weight awhile back,” said the man. “Broke it, what’s more.”

“...well anyway, this is my old pal Peyton Derente. He’s from Demortuis too, so that makes all of us ‘paisans’ except for my baby here.”

“I’m not a baby!”

“No,” said Peyton, “I expect you must be Desirée.”

“How’d he know my name?” asked the indignant child.

“I was on hand at the Mercury Theater the night your mother commenced being your mother.”

“Hunh?”

“Went into labor,” Sadie interpreted. “Right in the middle of that horrible movie they made of *A Little Night Music*—God do I remember. Elizabeth Taylor sang ‘Send in the Clowns’ and, bang! there came Desirée... And this is my sister Skeeter.”

“Hi! We’ve met,” said Skeeter. “So do you forgive me so far?”

Again that dark proportionate glance.

“Absolutely. Sisters, did you say?”

“*Stepsisters*,” she demonstrated, dancing a little cakewalk.

“Ah... yes. Your name is Skeeter, then? I presume you sing country-western music?”

“Yuggh! no way!... So Sadie, how *did* it go?”

“God I almost forgot—I’m back in! Yes! *At* senior level, *with* all my studio credits in good standing, and did I ever have to beat the Dean’s Office over the head about that too. Six months I was after them—you’d think motherhood wasn’t—”

“—reason enough to take a few years off,” Skeeter harmonized.

“Don’t feel too put upon,” said Peyton. “We go through much the same routine whenever the Liberal Studies copy machine breaks down. I take it you’ve been readmitted, Mercedes?”

“You betcha! I’m finally going to complete my Graphic Design degree, so I can finally get myself a worthwhile job.”

“Congratulations. Which reminds me.” He looked down at the mess of scattered catalogs. “So much for my trying to act useful. Increasingly less-likely that we’ll be shipshape in time for registration. But them’s the breaks.” He opened the same door he’d come out of and began to toe the catalogs back over its threshold. “I’ll help!” said Skeeter, and slid around scooping up debris.

So center stage was cleared and relinquished to Sadie, while Skeeter got resneakered and helped Desi with her snarls. Sadie meanwhile turned a critical eye on Peyton, saying the least they could do after bloodying his nose was fatten him up again. “I’m starving anyway, I was too tense to eat breakfast, what say we go for burgers and beer? Is Marr’s Bar still on the Milky Way?”

You could hardly take minors there, Peyton pointed out (“Is he talking about me?” bridled Desi) and it was rather early for lunch anywhere, being barely ten o’clock. But if they were truly hungry there was always the Student Union. Its cafeteria wouldn’t reopen till next week, but vending machine victuals were available if you didn’t mind your food tasting like saranwrap.

Before they took a dozen steps down the gleaming corridor, Sadie brought them to a sudden halt. “Wait a minute... what do they think they’re doing, waxing the floors at this time of day anyway?”

“For the same reason They bulldoze enormous holes in the middle of campus right before classes start,” said Peyton. “Go take a look at the West Quad; there’s one there now. A few semesters back They closed off half the Glazier Street parking lot just in time for finals. I don’t doubt this is the first time They’ve laundered this linoleum for five years or more.”

“Not since I pooped off,” said Sadie.

“Not since then, or before.”

So they bade cheerio to ivy-throttled Brecknock Hall and ventured out into swoggling August swelter. “God!” went Sadie. “If I didn’t feel so good right now, I don’t think I could stand it. I’ve spent half the summer burning and the other half peeling.”

Peyton on the other hand had this weird pallor about him. His complexion reminded Skeeter of... of grilled cheese; *yuggh*. Gross and creepy. (Or so at least it ought to be.)

“This place!” Sadie was carrying on. “It was just a blur to me, coming in. But aw reeeet—*it* hasn’t changed a bit.”

If so, the Merely School of Art & Design must have always had burnt-out brown patches and a barricaded hole in its West Quad. And yet, despite the horrendous climate, the campus retained some semblance of greenery. There were lots of shrubs and bushes and shady trees; it was probably a really pretty place when it wasn’t like it was now. And out of everything came the same whiff of mingled arty odors.

Now Sadie was blowing kisses at an odd black-magical sort of building: HALLER HALL read its sign. “There’s the Design Studios, *my* studios—they’re mine again,” she crowed, and went on to greet the more ordinary-looking structures opposite: the Amphitheater, the New Library, the Book & Supply Store.

“Isn’t this a beautiful place, Desi?”

“It sucks!”

“Desi! You were practically born here!”

“I don’t care...”

Now Peyton was mopping his brow with a black bandanna, dabbing the bandaid-bound tip of his decisive nose. Skeeter wondered if that little moustache tickled. She pegged him as being past youth, in his middle thirties perhaps, and maybe he’d been portly or rotund before but now his britches were too big for him.

They passed an outdoor sculpture-thing like soundless amplifiers, then one like unwound windchimes. Skeeter briefly envied artists (or was it artistes?) their ability to create things that would last, although these weren’t exactly examples of what she might have had in mind.

“What happened to the fountain?” asked Sadie, nodding at a pile of rocks.

“They shut it off. To save water, They said.”

“Because of the drought?”

“I shouldn’t think so. They make us save string, too.”

“Mommy...”

“What, Desi?”

“...Mommy...”

“*What*, Desi?”

“...carry me...”

“You’re too big.”

“...I’m so hotttt...”

“We’re all so hot, Desirée.”

Desi dropped back and trailed behind, letting out an occasional *hunnnnnhh*. Skeeter dropped back too and tried to take the child’s hand; when Desi wouldn’t let her, she began cutting ninety-degree capers. Jump, skip, hop. Pop, crackle, snap. And after awhile the *hunnnnnhhs* ceased and Desi allowed Skeeter to give her a pinky-finger tickle-squeeze.

Up ahead Sadie was asking about Merely students from the Seventies, and Peyton was filling her in:

“Gone.”

“Gone.”

“Gone crazy.”

And don’t forget that kid who’d gone so far with his Van Gogh emulation as to commit botched-but-terminal suicide by shooting himself in the stomach. Quickest way to a man’s heart, after all.

“You serious?” said Sadie. “That one I don’t remember.”

“Mmph. I think you were away that semester. In Italy was it? Or Australia?”

“God don’t ask me. I’ve been all the hell over. I suppose you’re still living in that place with the colonnade, on Saturn Street?”

“No.”

“No? I thought you swore they’d have to carry you out of there feet first.”

(Silence.)

“So where then?”

“The Cheval,” said Peyton. One of the gone-condo apartment buildings on Dee Ridge: conveniently near campus, but far out of the student-housing league.

They reached a pond, shrunken by the summer dry spell. Peyton paused to pick up a stone and skip it across what remained of the water. Skeeter heard him mention the Megrims, whom she took to be a family of his and Sadie’s old acquaintance, till Peyton added that sometimes a body just gets into the dumps, that’s all. And Sadie, God love her, was starting in with one of her slate-smashing Anne-of-Green-Gables pep-type-talks, when Skeeter dropped Desi’s hand and came running up.

“When you’re depressed you know the best thing you ought to do?” she asked.

His venetians twitched, and turned to her.

“Go see a scary movie.”

*

When I was first at Merely SAD—

(said Sadie Benison two hours later, riding home in Floyd)

—everybody hung out at Marr’s Bar on the Milky Way. There was one particular group that took over the place whenever they were there: had all-night arguments and poker games and so on. They called themselves the “Dilated Nostrils,” and none of them was at Marr’s more often—or had a more dilated nose, for that matter—than Peyton Derente.

Back then he was a big burly guy, like a bald W. C. Fields and Orson Welles and Charles Boyer rolled into one. He’d always sit at the corner table under the Michelob sign, in a chair like a throne that I think he brought from Demortuis and donated to the bar. He’d drink from this genuine pewter tankard too, that held what must have been an entire quart. “Anybody can play the highbrow,” he’d say, “but it takes *flair* and *scope* and *depth* to be a Dilated Nostril!”

You didn’t see him much on campus *except* at Marr’s, but he was supposed to be this brilliant Art History student doing this brilliant thesis on—what was it?—the Ash Can School, I think. But he could do art too, he was a wizard with pen and ink; in fact that’s what he said they used to call him in Demortuis: “the Wizard of Schnoz.” We had this tabloid paper back then, the Elsew *No-Nazz*, and Peyton did line drawings for it—a logo of a cracked egg spilling its yolk, “brought to you by all the folks at A.K.A. Enterprises.” He never *would*

pay enough attention to his layout, though; kept cramming detail on top of detail...

Why the Kojak haircut? He said he'd shaved his head in high school to settle a bet, then stayed bald on purpose. If you asked whether he'd gone prematurely bald, he'd say, "*Nothing* about me is premature. Seventeen days overdue at birth I was, and I've been taking my own sweet time ever since."

God you never heard such a laugh—I bet Rabelais laughed like that, making the walls rattle. Every couple of months he'd throw what he called "raspburials" at his place on Saturn Street: these special parties where he'd lampoon all the instructors and famous art critics. God it's all coming back to me—"Post-painterly-abstracter-than-*thou*, eh?" Oh and he'd make us make up these elaborate impromptu drinking toasts and chants, on the spot like Cyrano de Bergerac; except I always thought Peyton made his up weeks ahead of time. I remember one of his that went like this:

*Curious the way life takes
You by the throat and soundly shakes;
Apropos then is death's touch—
It loosens and lets out the clutch!*

Absolutely larger than life... What do you mean, "did I ever sleep with him?" I didn't exactly spend *all* my time at school in the sack, kiddo! No, of course not... I don't think... well, how'm I supposed to remember now? That was years and years ago.

You know, Peyton and I weren't *especially* close—he could be irritating, lots of times, and full of himself. Pompous and bombastic. When it came to women he could get so damned *French*—he'd take your hand and raise it almost to his lips, and say, "You have nine days, my dear, to prove yourself a wonder." Then after the nine days were up he'd pay no more attention to you. He'd go out of his way to look down another girl's front, saying as an art historian it was his duty to "penetrate to the heart of things." What gall! Of course, that's typical of every straight male art student I've ever known... like who'd you say? Like João? *God!* I'd forgotten about *him*...

Still, to be fair, Peyton could be—what's the right word?—*chivalrous*, I guess you'd have to say. It was Peyton who took me to the Mercury that night I thought I was about to lose my mind because Desi wouldn't be born and *wouldn't* be born (yes, I'm talking about

you, baby) and it was Peyton who kept his head and called the ambulance when I *did* go into labor and everyone else panicked. In fact that was the last time I saw him, till today...

I'd've thought it'd be great, him still being here. But he *isn't* the same. He used to be such a barrel of laughs, and now he's so awfully quiet—and not just quiet: *silent*. Like a ghost of his former self. The way he brushed us off at the Union, saying he had to get back to the office—the old Peyton would NEVER have turned down an offer of free food. Even from a vending machine—he'd've made you buy him one of everything. I don't know—I'm almost surprised he agreed to that scary-movie suggestion of yours...

What do you mean, “how'd I like to *not* come along tonight?”

*

So here we are once again—

(said Skeeter to herself later that day, back on the expressway)—preparing to keep our rendezvous with destiny. Not going to be late for *this* rendezvous, except in the sense that we've been avoiding it for years.

All this backing and forthing. All these doubts and conjectures.

She twiddled with Floyd's radio, in search of something reassuringly acceptable. No, not Donovan's “Epistle to Dippy.” But out came Blue Öyster Cult's “Don't Fear the Reaper,” which tune took Skeeter back to Bonum High—to Demortuis as it'd been before the yawning and the gaping.

There the Derente family had been rich and prominent, cutlery kings, their name on scissors and knives and razor blades. The Derentes of her own generation hadn't gone to Bonum High, of course, but attended Cornwall like Sally Whistletoe. Who'd presumably gone on to do great things, sure of her place in the world; not letting life just happen to her.

How would Sally interpret the tug renewed at Skeeter's tattooed ankle (ΛΛ from this angle) causing her to stomp on the gas at every red light? “*Carpe the diem*, go girl go?”

Was this It, then?

A silent wraith, a ghost of a former self—a barrow-wight with grilled-cheese pallor—come to claim her at last?

Fragments flashing before Skeeter's eyes and ears. 1-2-3 Red Light. Going to the Halloween dance as a vampire. A drawer full of bobbins and safety pins. The telltale snick

of a motel door. Watching *The Third Man* on TV just the other night, and Orson Welles not being in his coffin where he belonged.

Well, one thing was for goddam certain: she wasn't going to run away this time, no matter what. She'd stand her ground with both feet firmly planted; if Fate wanted a confrontation, Skeeter Kitefly would give It the showdown of a lifetime. She'd already knocked It down, sat on Its chest, proven It could bleed—and if she were able to do things like that, how could she possibly be something soppy-sad out of Hans Christian Andersen?

Jeez that wasn't her! Not Skeeter Kitefly, born to do nothing but laugh—unless it was to emulate Bruno You Know by getting into all kinds of escapades, trying to do EVERYthing before you die!

So count your blessings if you want to count *on* them. Maybe you are just a pingpong fluke of the apathetic universe, after all; but you're still Skeeter With Castanets On, and getta loada you now!—'cause you can take your clackin' and MAKE it happen... somehow.

She took the 144th Street exit over to Glazier, stopped at a Safeway, and bought a basket of raspberries.

*

The Cheval was flanked by ordered rows of trees. These, though tall, grew only half as high as the building; so that its upper stories seemed to peer out and over and down at you.

Not exactly Castle Dracula. Imposing, yes, but not gigantic, though you'd doubtless have plenty of room inside to swing a—never mind, forget it. Nor was it a ritzy glass palace like the Gold Coast highrises Uncle Buddy-Buzz had aspired to. Still, if you lived high enough above the treetops, you'd probably have lights at your feet even so. Definitely here on the Brecknock Boulevard side, where even from the parking lot there was a spectacular view across the Dee Valley.

Park Floyd, then. Get out. Go on up to the not-gigantic door. Find DERENTE P. 809 among the formidable bank of security buttons, and press it. No response. Press it again. Nothing.

Mustn't dilly, mustn't dally, don't be silly—but be *good and damned* if we're going to be stood up at this stage of the game! THUMB that button—thumb a whole *BUNCH* of

buttons—

—*click*.

The Cheval lobby was like a deserted country club. Or not entirely deserted: there on a settee off to the side sat a wispy white-haired old lady. (Great-Great-Aunt Livy? here?) Then again, it might be a carved mannequin—not a peep out of it. Skeeter resisted the temptation to go over and touch the thing, to see if it was (or at least had once been) a live person.

With every tiptoed step her tennies sank into a deep-pile carpet of rich charcoal-grey. Noiselessly: nothing to disturb the heavy unmoving stillness. Silent as a tomb (aha!) until a big old grandfather clock bonged seven times.

There was a pair of bas-relief horse's heads on the elevator doors; and three more inside, one on each wall. These might have been heartening had they not put Skeeter in mind of how many equestrians were associated with the Apocalypse. Not to mention New Junebug, Supertimmy, and Desi's gerbils, all since gone to their horsie maker.

Two wings on the eighth floor: even numbers to the right, odds to the left. Skeeter started down the left-hand corridor—and, yes!—all she needed was a set of Superclunks to re-enact that night in Keening! Especially when her knock-knock on number 809 produced the same old echoless hush.

"Peyton?" she called out. *C'mon, don't prolong this; let's have it over once and for all.* Knock knock knock knock knock—

"Jussa minute!" from within.

About time too, the turk! And just in case he was measuring you up and reckoning you down through the security peephole, make a few goggle-moues and grimace-mugs up at it. So there *nyaah*—

Sound as of bolts being drawn back.

The door was opened.

Heat rolled out—were those flames in the background?—I AM THE GREAT AND POWERFUL SCHNOZ!! WHOOOO ARE YOOOOU??

Well, not really.

Skeeter waited for the tall bald man in the doorway to unveil a scythe or whatever, but he just stood there staring grimly down at her. Wiping his face with the black bandanna.

Okay! She was an old trouser; she could play along (on her guard, of course). “Hi! Remember me? I’m the one who swept you off your feet this morning. Are you ready to go? Here, these are for you—Sadie said you used to throw raspberries at your parties, or was it bury them? ANYway, I thought you could use some tonight. Whoooo it’s like an oven in here, how can you stand it? Is your air conditioner busted?... You don’t *have* one?”

“Not since I was involved in an air conditioner à trois,” said Peyton Derente.

“A what?”

“Where’s Mercedes?”

“She and Desi went to see our neighbor’s new puppy litter. Ten itty-bitty basset hounds worth a hundred bucks each; I sure wish I was them. The neighbors, I mean. So Peyton, it’s just you and me tonight (nudge nudge wink wink).”

On his feet, he looked rather like Egghead from the *Batman* TV show. It was a massive egghead too, shaved clean on top, with a cropped fringe left around the back to match the smudge-moustache. Squared-off brow, squared-off chin; sallow waxen face; that unmistakable nose; and those dark saturnine eyes, which if you boldly stared back at, didn’t look grim—

—so much as they looked *sad*. Bewildered, even. (Maybe by the basket of raspberries.)

“I thought you were delirious,” he said.

“I was what?” asked Skeeter, and found him looking down her perky upper deck. Almost as firm as it was at fifteen; upheld by a strapless lace unmentionabubble and clad in a fresh neon splattershirt, this one hot-pink-on-lavender (to go with her shrinking-violet short-shorts) and saying MANIAC. From its flustered contents rose a cloud of spice.

“Opium,” Skeeter explained.

“Pardon me?”

“I got a bottle for my birthday. Actually it’s Imitation Opium; I have cheap friends. *Perfume*, not the puffy stuff—I don’t do drugs, I don’t need ‘em. I can get high on an Eskimo Pie.”

She chugged on past him into the hushed red gloom created, in part, by wine-colored curtains drawn against the sunset. Muting and diluting what Buddy-Buzz would've called a suite, for sure: lofty cathedral ceiling, walnut-panelled walls. Three large rooms sparsely furnished, except for rattly electric fans (bringing small relief) and a bookcase against every available surface. The living room (if you could call it that) was dominated by an immense sofa and a highbacked swivel chair, each of which had a great **D** embroidered upon it.

Dust lay on everything in various degrees of filminess. Skeeter idly fingerwrote *K.R.K.* on one shelf, rounding off the R with feeling, that it might not be taken for a middle K. *Wash me. Clean me.* “You’ve sure got a lot of books. Nice apartment—or should I say nice condo? Even if you don’t have air conditioning—oh cuuuute little staircase! Where’s it lead?”

“Up, if you’re facing that direc—be careful up there! Don’t go touching anything!”

“Jeez I’m not about to trash the place; calm down.” Kind of an indoor balcony, projecting over the living room; a “miniloft.” Drafting table, clamp-on lamp, cushioned stool, heap of pens and pencils and brushes, jars of different-colored ink. Floor covered with stack upon stack upon stack—“What’re all these dusty papers for?”

“I’m a cartoonist,” Peyton said from below.

“A cartoonist! You told Sadie you’re a teacher.”

“Same thing. You draw out the history of art for college-level students, and when you get back *their* papers the result, often as not, is laughably grotesque... I draw on the side.”

“Really? I sleep on my back,” said Skeeter. “What a coincidence. So why teach at all?”

“It pays the bills. Art adds to them.”

“A cartoonist! That is so cool. Come up here and draw me a squirrel.”

“A what? Not right now.”

“Aw please! Just a squirrel, and then a duck and a parrot and maybe a penguin.”

He demurred, unfazed by her “Well *when* then?” and “Oh you meanie, you sadist,” so Skeeter came galloping back down. Between the many bookcases hung a variety of framed prints, some fine-arty—Goya, Grosz, Daumier—and some of old-time comic strip characters.

Skeeter romped through the rooms exclaiming at these—the Yellow Kid, Happy Hooligan, Little Nemo, Krazy Kat—and paused alongside a tubby little man in a fedora and overcoat, sporting what looked like moth wings: *Cushlamochree!* read his speech balloon.

“Who’s this?”

“Mr. O’Malley,” said Peyton, coming up behind her. “Barnaby’s Fairy Godfather.”

“Oh yes?”

“Not like that. *Barnaby* was perhaps the finest comic strip of the Forties. It had—”

“Was Mr. O’Malley that good a Fairy Godfather?”

“No, he was something of a humbug.”

“Like the Wizard of Oz!”

“To a certain extent, yes. He kept having to refer to his *Fairy Godfather’s Handy Pocket Guide*... See that mushroom in the corner? There’s an invisible leprechaun sitting on it. His name is McSnoyd.”

“Riiiiiight,” said Skeeter, and flung her headlong self onto the living room sofa. ““He layudd me down upon his bayudd ‘n’ mayudd this girl a WOEmunn.””

“Pardon me?”

“Pardon *me*. Country-western music. Actually I haven’t seen a bed anywhere in this place. Is *this* your bed? Is this where you sleep? Oh, you’ve got me in your bed, you rascal! And here I lie all bashful and defenseless—”

“You,” Peyton told her, “are about as bashful as an earthquake.”

Which caused a horizontal fissure to spread across Skeeter’s face; and out of that, turning cartwheels like a zootsuited rugcutter gone high on an Eskimo Pie, came a stuPENdous cacklelaugh such as she hadn’t cacklelaughed in what felt like years upon years. (Even without a maraschino cherry up her nose.)

“Are you okay?” she asked Peyton afterwards. “You look awful pale.”

“My snoot has stopped bleeding, if that’s what you mean.”

“Your *snoot*? I noticed you took off the bandaids. No, I mean you’ve been acting kind of quiet and Sadie said you always used to be full of—”

Peyton informed her that things had changed since Mercedes had left Merely SAD, “and I’m not exactly institutionalized—you needn’t order me a straitjacket yet!”

“Well,” said Skeeter, “we don’t have to go out if you’re not feeling well—”

“I expect I shall do, thank you.”

“...shall you? That’s good. I’m glad. And like I say, there’s no better cure for the blues than to see a scary movie.”

She suggested *Jaws 3-D* (The Third Dimension is Terror) but Peyton said if they were going to do this they might as well do it properly, and the Mercury Theater—“Where Desi was born!” “To a certain extent, yes”—was showing Zanzara’s latest aberration: *Si Comporti da Essere Umano*.

“Say what?”

“*Act Like a Human Being.*”

“I thought you’d never ask. May I use your potty?”

“Ah... are you referring to my fixings, or my facilities? The one’s through there; I don’t have any of the other.”

Off she went cackling, saddlebag in hand; and, once safely inside with the door closed, took a moment to catch her breath.

This isn’t developing at ALL like you expected.

Dusty in here too, but not foully so. Washcloth on the floor: dropped there, or fallen? Old-fashioned bathtub with clawed feet, like back in Marble Orchard, but much grander—you could have a proper wallow in a tub this size. Hanging up inside the door was a huge brown hooded robe, thick as a bearskin; a fine thing to climb into on a chilly morning. Inside the medicine cabinet (okay, you’re a snoop) was nothing more remarkable than a Derente™ brand safety razor—and an extra-large can of shaving cream, presumably to accommodate the scalp. Outside the medicine chest was the customary mirror, and in that was a familiar face. With all the gloss chewed off its lower lip.

Open the poke, break out the Maybelline, put yourself to rights. Give that wand a whirl, O BoogaBloo Angel.

What’ve we got here? Small round face, winsomely pink: add a touch of blush. Pointed chin, pointed buttony nose: *there I am—there I am*. Eyes like baby-blue M&M’s set afire by some confectionery pyrotechnic: not even RoBynne O’Ring could boast of that! Still “rather diminutive altogether” (despite the boobies out to here) and all of it made littler

still by the glasses wide as coffee mugmouths. *And* the great big whomp of hair the color and fuzziness of a prime-time peach.

A face, like Scarlett O'Hara's, that might not be beautiful, but could seldom fail to impress. Certainly not after you apply this cross-your-heart kissable lipgloss. Mmmm-wah.

She emerged, trailing a fresh wave of Imitation Opium, to find Peyton putting stuff in his pockets, including a big fat wallet.

"Excuse my asking," he said, "but why 'Skeeter'?"

"It's short for Kelly Rebecca. 'Cause *I'm* short for Kelly Rebecca. Are we ready to go?"

"You are old enough to see this film, aren't you?"

"Hey! I turned twenty-four last month! Three weeks and two days ago, to be precise, and yes I am still accepting birthday presents—"

"No offense. You don't look twenty-four."

"Tell me about it. I've been carded all my life. Exactly how old are you?... Twenty-seven? Jeez, I'd've said thirty-five at least. Maybe everybody'll think you're my dad. Where is this Mercury Theater, anyway? I can drive us, my car's downstairs."

"No need. It's just across campus. We can walk there in fifteen minutes."

"What! Walk? On my li'l flat feet? Well, whatever fries your bacon. Oh wait a sec—"

She dug through her humongous poke, produced a hairbrush, flopped her whomp bodily over, and vigorously assaulted it. In the process a fair number of fair hairs sprang loose to drift downward.

"Look at that! Winkle winkle winkle. *I'm* going to be bald too, by the time I'm an old lady." With a bright blue ribbon she tied her remaining opulence into a quasiponytail. "How do I look?"

"Very nice," Peyton said.

"Well of course. But sometimes my 'appearance' puts people off. I've actually had people tell me I'm funny-looking, just because I make faces at 'em like this—"

She ran through her grimace repertoire: mock horror, faux rapture, coy astonishment, hammy dismay.

“But when I want to,” she assured him, “I can look like an angel.”

*

In the elevator Skeeter extracted a pack of Pall Mall Lights from her bottomless bag.

“Oh—you mind if I smoke?”

“I thought you said you didn’t ‘do’ drugs.”

“This isn’t a drug, this is recreation.”

“Go on then.”

She dangled a cigarette from her lower lip, then detached it. “You’re sure it won’t bother you?”

“Go on, I said.”

She replaced the Pall Mall, got out a Bic lighter, but didn’t flick it. “No, I can see you’re just being polite—”

“Smoke the damn cigarette if you freaking well please!”

“Oh you’re so *insistent*,” said Skeeter, striking up in earnest. “Stay that way, too. You can’t be gloomy when you’re with *me*. I won’t let you. I don’t allow it. Being with me’s got to be a nonstop all-night belly laugh.”

On the way to the parking lot she went *cuuuute* at all the Cheval’s horsehead embellishments.

“What a neat building. There ought to be an awning, though, over this door, and a big fat doorman in a long red coat with a lot of brass buttons instead of those security buzzers, standing right about here.”

“I don’t remember buzzing you in.”

“You didn’t. I had to buzz the whole bunch.”

“My apologies. I was—napping.”

“‘Truly my forgiveness you implore, but the fact is you were napping, and so gently I came rapping’—*damn!* I’m clever... That’s my car. Sure you don’t want me to drive us?”

“Good God, not in that circus wagon.”

“Hey! You’ll hurt Floyd’s feelings!”

“‘Floyd’?”

“That’s right. Now I’ve got to insult your car. Which one is it?”

“I don’t own one anymore.”

“What? No car, no air conditioner—aren’t you rich?”

“Not from teaching at Merely I’m not.”

“You must be sort of rich if you’re one of the Derentes. Everybody in Demortuis knows how sort of rich the Derentes are. Did your parents disown you for being a cartoonist?”

“No.”

“...I’m sorry. I’m just a curious person. Don’t be mad... but you must have a trust fund or something, right? To live in that nice condo?”

Perhaps half a guffaw burbled out of him, with all the embarrassment of unrehearsal. “Or something. Yes.”

Crossing Frise Street, they cut through Brecknock Park and the deserted campus. Down and up as the landscape rolled, past the Union and skirting the pond—that body of water that had been sketched and painted by entire student generations, and into which those same generations had individually jumped or been thrown. Here Peyton again stopped, stooped, and threw in a ritual pebble. On down, on up, past the New Library and the Amphitheater, Haller Hall and Brecknock Hall; on through the semibarricaded West Quad, empty even of frisbee-tossers.

“Three months I’ve lived around here,” said Skeeter between smoke rings, “but I never saw this place till today. With Sadie readmitted I might come visit all the time. How’d you like that? I could knock you down every Tuesday and Thursday.”

On up to Merely Way, the “Milky Way” to those pond-doused student generations, with its lights and sights and shops and stops and coffeehouses and then-and-nowses, not to mention Marr’s Bar; and there too was the Mercury Theater of song and subtitled legend.

With a regular appetite-ruining snack display, to Skeeter’s relief. She had Peyton play packmule to a large Dr. Pepper, a box of Milk Duds, roll of SweetTarts, and family-size popcorn with double-extra butter; and thus provisioned went in to *Act Like a Human Being*.

Whose concubine heroine earned Skeeter’s immediate dislike (“What a bitch, I hate her”) despite her sinister fancy man’s losing his mind during a thunderstorm, and their remote-to-begin-with bagnio’s getting cut off from civilization by floods and mudslides.

Unless it was all a dream; you never could be sure in a Zanzara film.

Skeeter kept up a constant yakkety gabble, pausing only to clutch Peyton's arm and shriek on dutiful cue. "What happened to the old butler guy? Did he get killed or just disappear? They never keep the subtitles on long enough to *yeeeeeeek!*... well, so much for the butler. My friend RoBynne would just love this; she's writing a smutnovel—oh my God!—don't go in there, fool! She could've climbed out the window and escaped. *What a bitch. Oh I hate her.* Now he's got her trapped and—wait a minute—where'd the butler's body go?"

"Quando l'hanno lasciato uscire dalla gabbia?"

"What'd he say?"

"When did they let you out of your cage?" Peyton translated. He watched the picture unmoving, hardly blinking, nose motionless as he gave Skeeter a sidelong once-over.

"That doesn't make sense. What cage? How'd she get back in the boudoir? *Jeez* what a weird movie. Pass me the Milk Duds."

"Please."

"Please'... you turk." (Munch.)

"French Huguenot, actually."

"Not 'turk' as from Turkey! You know, 'turk' as in *turkey*."

"Ah yes," he said, and getting out a pocket notebook, began to write something in the minimal cinema light.

"What are you doing? Are you taking notes, or what? I wanna see!"

"Sssshhhh!" from the row behind.

"Oh shhhh yourself and watch the movie," the row behind got told.

Peyton continued his covert penmanship while Skeeter chafed and the concubine heroine sent her predator to an implausible death—tricked into impaling himself on a broken balustrade. The audience cheered, the Mercury's lights went up, and Skeeter was handed a little cartoon squirrel drawn in red and black, its paws full of popcorn and a babblement-balloon coming out of its mouth.

"CHECK THIS OUT! THIS IS SOOOO COO-WULL!"

All the way back to the Cheval she frisked squirrelly about.

“You’ll have to come see our place. We’ll have to have you over, once we get it cleaned up. *If* we get it cleaned up—I bet you anything Desi’s talked Sadie into buying one of those hundred-dollar basset pups.”

It was dark now if not noticeably cooler. In the lamplight Merely SAD lost its burnt-out browns, looked almost sylvan; the campus pond seemed replenished, and this time Skeeter ran ahead to throw in the requisite pebble.

Close your eyes, my child, be in tune with the infinite.

So this is reality—improve on it, then.

You gotta be a Hype if you don’t wanna be a Ciphe.

Life is short; live it up.

And Jeez thought Skeeter. *I was acting as though he were DEATH.*

Peyton came up alongside; there was another spectacular view from the pondbrink, looking out across the East Quad and Dee Ridge to a starry haze on the horizon, ten or twelve miles distant, that was the city of Elsew.

Skeeter stirred. “Got any good booze? We could have a nightcap. I can make a mean Freddie Fudpucker if you’ve got Galliano.”

They reached the Cheval, the lobby, the elevator, the top floor, and apartment #809—where Skeeter pushed in first, shutting the door in Peyton’s face, locking it with a snickersnack. (Sound the Improv battle cry!) And by the time he got the door reopened she had flipped on every light in every room, turned on all the fans and was busy spreading paper towels over the carpet.

“No telling if you might have to barf after seeing a movie like that. After I saw *The Shining* this guy I was with dreamed these bugs were crawling all over him all night long. (Yugggh.) Do you moan in your sleep? My Grampa Otto used to have these moaning nightmares and go *Oooohhhh* in the middle of the night. One time he did it when I’d snuck out of bed to watch a scary movie on TV. I bet that ceiling still has popcorn-butterstains on it.”

She flung wide his wine-colored curtains, yanked up the shades, let in—what? No poetic sweetbreezes anyway, welcome as cool air would have been. Nothing entered other

than the sound of cicadas going rikki-tikki-tavi, out in the trees or the shrubs or the bushes or wherever it was cicadas broadcast from. Small matter; Skeeter had discovered some incense, and Gonesh Spring Mist was wafting through the living room.

“You can see the whole Milky Way from up here,” she observed in the kitchen. “Look, there’s the Mercury; I can see its sign... You must not do a lot of home cooking, that’s for sure. Oog! cobwebs! and there’s the spider. Want me to knock it down for you?”

“Leave it be,” called Peyton from his ~~D~~-embossed swivel chair. “Dead already.”

“GROHsss!”

“Not at all. It’s up there serving as a kind of scarecrow.”

“A shoofly, you mean. Where do you keep your yummy stuff?” He directed her to a cabinet above the sink, and Skeeter fell momentarily silent among the bottlenecks. Perhaps more here than was strictly necessary; but life in the old soldiers yet. “No tequila? Oh Peyton, *what* you are missing! But here’s Gilbey’s, that’s good—okay! I’ll make you a genuine Pink Gin. Slosh a dash of bitters in, then you slosh it out again, then pour in your Gilbey’s.”

She brought forth two vaguely rosy mixtures, one at low ebb for Peyton and a heftier pouring for herself, together with the basket of raspberries. “Looky what I found! Someone with a kind warm loving heart and a really dynamite bod must’ve got you these. (Cackle.) Well, she won’t mind if I have just a few.”

Back onto the sofa she hopped, basket and badly-balanced drink in hand. Out reached her glass; Peyton looked at it, then allowed it to be clinked against his own. Out reached the raspberry basket; Peyton waved it off.

“You’re being gloomy again,” Skeeter told her host, hitching up her MANIAC top and doing something extraordinary with her trim little midriff.

Again he burbled a half-guffaw.

“That’s better. Now stay that way. It’s not just anybody, you know, who can make their belly button wink.”

“Learned that in the Orient, did you?”

“I’m an Occidental woman in an O-ree-ent-al mood for lovvvve,” Skeeter sang. “Actually I learned how to do that when I was in the Brownies back in Marble Orchard. Our

troop leader became a professional belly dancer and taught us all how to bump ‘n’ grind. I learned *other* things in the Orient. (Cackle.) Hey I really did, that’s where I learned how to make Pink Gins: from a steward on a steamer with a Chinese head chef. You’re not married, are you? Or engaged, or ‘involved,’ or gay?”

“No.”

“Well don’t have a spaz, I was only making sure. It’s fine by me; you know what they say about men with big noses. And men with big Adam’s apples, and men who grow cucumbers—”

“Which I don’t,” Peyton informed her, that grating note still in his voice. “So finish your drink and—”

“Yeah I noticed you don’t have any plants or flowers around here or a cat or a bird or goldfish or anything.” (Swallow.) “I mean you’re straight and single and kind of rich and not bad looking and have these really Byzantine eyes and that really smooth scalp and obviously adore being ridden down waxed floors by knockdown-gorgeous women—”

“You’re right about the knockdown part, anyway.”

“Well then,” said Skeeter, “wouldn’t you love to be my sugardaddy?”

(Silence.)

“My own personal Last Tycoon?”

(Silence.)

“Um—you could feed me and dress me and take me for drinks, and since you’re going to dress me ANYway you might as well know I always wear bright red underwear, summer and winter, so lay in a good stock of it, and if you’re the sort of nasty-nasty man who goes wild over black undies I’m sorry but black just isn’t my color at *all*, or brown either so forget about leather too, but red? ooh la LA, believe me, I’d give you a sample glimpse but you might faint from lust and crack your nose wide open this time, so whaddaya say? Is it a deal?”

(Silence.)

“...don’t you know how many men would kill themselves to get such an offer?”

“Why aren’t you making it to them, then?” said Peyton.

She looked down at the raspberries being rolled between her thumbs and index

fingers: red in the left hand, black in the right.

“Well... ‘cause you—listen, you—pay attention, you—I bet if I said ‘What did I say just now?’ you could tell me exACTly. I mean, Sadie and Desi and my friend RoBynne—I talk to them, and they talk to me, but they don’t listen either. You see?”

“Do you listen to them?”

“That’s not the point,” Skeeter said with dignity. “Look: I love Sadie, but she’s so busy putting on her goddam Pippi Longstocking act, and Desi’s a sweetie but she’s only five and wants to watch *I Love Lucy* all the time ‘cause she’s got this thing for Ricky Ricardo, Junior and Senior. Me, I prefer the Fred Mertz type. (Cackle.) Actually what happens is I keep falling for these strange-eyed Sven-types and I’m sick to death of it. Them. Yeah. I mean, Jeez: I’ve got more ex-boyfriends than Sadie and she’s five years older than me.”

Peyton’s venetians twitched a bit at that and with a trace of impatience Skeeter added, “This isn’t *Educating Rita*, you know—I don’t want a ‘tutor,’ I don’t need a ‘tutor,’ I’ve been going to college for the last six years off and on. And I don’t want to learn how to talk like a lady so I can work in a flower shop, either. Understand? I don’t expect you to *teach* me anything—”

“Mmph. You and a hundred others each semester.”

“What I want is, is, is—like a *confessor*. Yeah! What a shame your name’s not Edward—see, that’s an educated kind of joke, right? An ignoramus wouldn’t have made a joke like that. And before you say what I really need is a minister-priest-or-rabbi you should know I’m not that kind of girl, I mean I was a Chinese Communist for awhile but other than that I’m not that religious. What I really need—”

“Is for me to be your own personal sugardaddy confessor.”

“ExACTly! You got it, Peyton! Ooh I can’t wait to spill my guts and tell you all about my hard, hard life, and we can stuff cottonballs in your mouth and you can make like Brando and put Cheval horseheads in my enemies’s beds—”

“And what enemies might you have, may I ask?”

“Well, do creditors count? There’s a couple of department stores I’m not on too friendly terms with at the moment—”

She stopped then, put down what was left of the rolled-around raspberries, smoothed herself visibly out.

For a moment Peyton seemed to fear this would be the prelude to some unguessable paroxysm—speaking in tongues or spontaneous combustion.

But no, her face remained tranquil, all gapes and grimaces set aside; shining with the power of cutiepiety. O angelface! With eyes not squintsome but perfectly round, perfectly clear, gleamily piercing as a pair of China-blue javelins—

“So,” she said, “is it a deal?”

Peyton sat back and picked up his tumbler. “Good question, little girl.”

Take on Skeeter Kitefly, be her Padre Warbucks for better or for worse, a blessing or a curse? And all he’d have to do, no matter what she did or said or thought or felt, was...

And in return...

Mmph.

That’s artful of her.

The man in the chair took in a breath through his unbandaged nose, inhaling the mingled aromas of gin and bitters, incense and raspberries, Imitation Opium and the outer August evening.

Then he cleared his throat and said, “Go on.”

“Where?” asked Skeeter.

“Not where,” said Peyton.

“But I don’t want to go yet.”

“Not yet,” he sighed, and finished his drink.

“What then? What? *Wha*-utt? TELLLL me!”

He put down his glass and folded his hands. “You tell me,” he clarified. “Your hard, hard life. All nine thousand and one nights of it. From sperm-and-egg conception to this very day, in this very room. I’m all ears. Except for the rest of me.”

WHEEEEE went the fissure across Skeeter’s face in a flashdancy way you could never forget—as if there were anything about Kelly Rebecca Kitefly, of course, that you were ever *likely* to forget.

“I jump around a lot,” she warned him.

“I’ll take that into consideration,” he replied.

“All right! Get comfy now.” She plumped down onto the papertoweled carpet and stuck out one wellshaped wellshaven leg. “Pretty nice, right? Well, there ought to be this terrible scar here. Picture me about Desi’s age. When I was *little*. Okay! Now we are not-quite-six, and if you think hiding Christmas presents from a six-year-old is hard you should try hiding Fourth of July fireworks from the same six-year-old, especially one who’s already a natural-born *arsonist*....”

To be continued in *Skeeter Kitefly's SUGARDADDY CONFESSOR*

P. S. (Paul Stephen) Ehrlich was born, raised, and educated in Kansas City, Missouri. After enduring thirty-one summers and winters there, he exchanged Middle Western climate for Puget Sound's in 1988. Employed by the University of Washington (not necessarily as an instructor) he lives with himself outside Seattle. As the author of *The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly* and *Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor*, he has since 2002 administered the Skeeter Kitefly Website and its Split Infinitive Productions at www.SkeeterKitefly.com.