

ELOHSSA DECAFTIHS

by

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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 unrufflable 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 COOwullest smile,” Skeeter sighed. “Where shall we go?”

“Leave that to me. Where do you live?”

Not trusting to memory, she scabbled 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 sappy-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 niiiight...

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. (Yugggh.)"

"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, snuggler 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 CHIropractor!" 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.

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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-evilous, 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. (Yugg.) 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 "Heeere'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.

*

“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 soir e,” 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 *skreeeek* 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—*yugg!* 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 lighterweight 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: gloooory hal-le-LOO-yah!
‘Cause I love the Lordy: gloooory 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 automative 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—

“—heeeeere’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, towed, 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. *Heeere’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 splurging 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