

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*The Kindness of Strangers*

Four years later . . .

September 6, 1993

"By 2007, seventy-five percent of all Americans will have AIDS," beer-bellied health teacher Dirk Sabato intoned. "There are twenty-five students here. Look to your left. Look to your right. Three out of four of you will get AIDS before you die."

"My parents went to Woodstock," Arwen whispered to me. "What a difference twenty years makes!" We sat together in the back of the classroom, talking and flirting every day during health. This practice was made possible by Dirk Sabato not minding students jawing nonstop and Arwen's damn boyfriend Rolf not being in this class with us. In one lesson, Dirk slipped a condom onto a banana, and Arwen asked me if I wanted her to do that to me. When Dirk produced a female pelvis anatomical model with removable organs, I asked Arwen if that's what hers looked like. We said those kinds of subtle, deep things to one another all the time.

"Imagine having an outdoor rock orgy these days!" I said. "Shit. Our parents' generation gets sex, drugs, and 'All Along the Watchtower.' We get AIDS, 'Just Say No,' and 'Sussudio!'"

"Yeah, but you're the only one I know who actually *listened* to Nancy Reagan and SPECDA. Everyone else said 'yes' to drugs. And 'yes.' And 'YES!'"

*School Program to Educate and Control Drug Abuse. I listened credulously to their rep because he stood in front of a blackboard. I listen to everyone who stands before a blackboard.*

"I hear you," I said. "But drugs killed John Belushi and half the Woodstock performers. I can't help being not too pumped about drugs after that."

"Don't knock drugs until you tried them."

I shook my head. "I've seen *French Connection II* too many times."

Arwen rolled her eyes. "You are no fun. What can I do to convince you to try cocaine?"

"I dunno. Can I snort some off your breasts?"

Arwen ran her tongue over her upper teeth and smiled. "Maybe."

I arched an eyebrow. "Yeah? Cocaine is sounding better already."

Arwen leaned in closer to me and placed her hand on my shoulder. "It's better with two."

Dirk Sabato inclined his head to see us in the back. "Okay, that's enough! Stop talking! Every day with you two. Give it a rest."

*Sure. Now he interrupts. Good timing, buddy.*

*Goddamn motherfucker.*

In my senior year at Grace Coolidge High School, I may have been a little lame, but I was far cooler than I had been during my first year of middle school. I had fewer pimples, wore contact lenses, had gotten better at using gel to keep my thick, curly hair under control, and had grown a goatee with a slightly reddish tint that didn't quite match my dark brown hair. I'd also taken to dressing more like the Italian comic book hero Dylan Dog: blue jeans, a red dress shirt, and black jacket. Still, there was a limit to my coolness. I'll admit, it is difficult to be modish when tooling around in your mother's borrowed blue Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera. However, I had near constant access to the car from lunchtime to ten p.m. since Mom always woke at five a.m. and was done driving for the day by noon. To make the car seem more badass than it was, I referred to it as "Starscream," but that name only worked if I didn't look too closely at it.

I drove around Staten Island at nine p.m. a couple of nights each school week, when surprisingly few people were on the road. Pretending I was driving the Batmobile or K.I.T.T., I rolled down the windows and blasted my idea of awesome driving music: Danny Elfman's *Batman* theme, Bryan Adams' "Summer of '69," Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher," and Aerosmith's "Rag Doll." My personal favorite moment came when I pulled up to a stop light with the windows rolled down, blasting John Carpenter's love theme to *Starman* at 10 p.m. I was thinking of Arwen and really feeling the full power of the romantic keyboard music. I thought I was alone when an elderly couple pulled up in the lane beside me with their windows also rolled down. They gaped at me, angered by the volume and terrified I might be insane.

"Don't you just love *Starman*?" I yelled. "The most romantic movie music of all time! *E.T.* for grown-ups! *Starman*, baby! *Starman*!"

Wooooooo!” I raised the volume to maximum.

The elderly duo’s faces turned white. The light changed. They peeled away, doing seventy in a thirty-five-miles-per-hour-road.

“Ciao,” I said happily to myself, and resumed driving at the speed limit level.

Since Mitchell had long since left my social orbit, I contented myself with hanging out with my coolest fellow 12th graders at Grace Coolidge High School. It was a three-star institution that represented a marked improvement over my zero-star middle school. I hung out with David Litvinov, Salty Margaritas, Kyle Ahearne, and their rotating batch of decorative, irritatingly taciturn girlfriends, all of whom were named Jennifer. Occasionally, Arwen and her too-cool-for-school boyfriend, Rolf Kaminsky, joined us. Nobody liked Rolf, but we invited them along because everybody wanted to fuck Arwen. (“I want to do terrible, terrible things to that bitch,” Salty liked to tell me, just to make me clench my teeth and glare at him.) Unclean thoughts aside, Arwen was hilarious and ridiculously fun to hang out with. Hope sprang eternal that she would switch out Rolf for one of us other guys, but that never seemed to happen.

The guys and I wore trenchcoats and fedoras as a shared affectation, inspiring the Jennifers to refer to us as “The Trenchcoat Mafia.” I could do without the nickname, myself, since I was never a fan of evoking the Mafia stereotype. When the same name was later applied to the social circle of the Columbine shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, I found the nickname particularly unfortunate and stopped wearing trenchcoats altogether. I discarded such coats a little late, though. When I bumped into one of my favorite high school history teachers in the supermarket years later, I was delighted to see him. He was less delighted to see me, because he had made the connection between our group and the Columbine shooters and was not sure what violence I was capable of unleashing upon the world. This would not be the last time I would have an awkward and disheartening reunion with an old teacher.

I had little in common with anyone in our local chapter of the national Trenchcoat Mafia organization beyond David and Arwen, but their “Joe Sixpack” mannerisms taught me to loosen up a bit. Also, if

it hadn't been for them, I may have never discovered more mainstream music, like Nirvana, Tom Petty, Green Day, Rush, Pearl Jam, Smashing Pumpkins, and R.E.M. Salty and Kyle were the leaders of our little entourage. When David was out with us, he was the bottom of our food chain and got teased the most. When he was not around, I was the one to be needled endlessly for being too sheltered, Catholic, allergy-prone, skittish around girls, and nerdy. I liked it when David was around to take the heat off me, but I never teased him, because I knew what it was like to be the "Jerry Gergich" of the group. On rare occasions, I spoke up in David's defense, but not often enough to brag about. The problem with being part of an entourage is it involved certain compromises, like having to see people you never wanted to hang out with on their best days all the time. The Jennifers were dull as dishwater, and painfully dainty. Spiders and small puddles on the road froze them in terror and indecision. The lameness of their, "Ooooh! A puddle!" drove me spare.

*A puddle? Seriously? I guess I prefer tomboys after all.*

Worst of all was Salty, who I avoided as much as I could. I tried to hang with the gang on days he wasn't around and stay home when he was. This meant I didn't see him as often as I might have, but I did see him far more often than I wanted to. One time, I asked Kyle if I could go over his house and play Nintendo with just him. We were both trying hard to defeat Soda Popinksi in *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out* and were eager to take turns facing off against our digital opponent. When I arrived at Kyle's house, Salty opened the door to let me in. "Howya doin', faggot?" he asked, then burped in my face. The three of us took turns and swapped partners while playing two-player games. When I got a moment alone with Kyle, I said, "What the hell?"

Kyle looked grave. "I had no choice. He arrived right before you did. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too."

Experiencing this kind of nonsense time and again in the hermetically sealed culture of a Staten Island high school's student body is one of the reasons Jane Austen's *Emma* wound up becoming one of my favorite novels. Just as poor Emma Woodhouse couldn't do anything social in Highbury with her beloved Harriet, Mrs. Weston,

and Mr. Knightley without being saddled with the company of Miss Bates, Mrs. Elton, and Jane Fairfax, I couldn't do anything fun with Kyle, David, or Arwen without being stuck with Salty, Rolf, or the Jennifers. Since there wasn't much to do on Staten Island, our little group most often hit Perkins for breakfast, hung out at the mall, smoked cigars at Clove Lakes Park, listened to Enya CDs laying on my basement floor with the lights out, visited chain restaurants like Applebee's for dinner, or went bowling and saw a movie on Friday at the UA Movies at Staten Island 14 on 145 E. Service Road, Travis-Chelsea. My favorite times out were when we played pool. Every time we did, I pretended I was Grandpa. I wasn't great at pool, but I wasn't abominable. Sadly, I didn't go whoring afterwards.

There was little to do in the afternoons right after school ended, so we sometimes stole political signs we didn't understand, especially if they were an eyesore and blanketed the borough. Why were there green "Mark Green: Public Advocate" signs on every block in the borough? What the fuck was a 'public advocate'? After Election Day, we made a mission of taking all of them down. The sign "No Loop!" was particularly puzzling. We were bolder with those signs and stole them well before the referendum vote in question. What the heck did these signs mean? Whatever! Throw them in the trunk! Of course, articles started appearing in the local news accusing the Pro-Loop contingent of launching a conspiracy against the No-Loop contingent by stealing their signs. We laughed hysterically at those articles, because it was just us, fucking around. It was only months later when David discovered, too late, that he himself was anti-loop. We should have been taking down the signs for the other side! When David revealed this, I wondered, vaguely, if I would have supported Mark Green if I had taken the time to research his platform. Deciding we were being too destructive taking down political signage, we stole a yellow flag with a red circle on it from a Mobile gas station and drove around waving it out the passenger window, like the rebels in *Less Miserables* and its sequel, *More Miserables*.

Sometimes the boys drove around catcalling pretty women of all ages. David invited them into the car to ride on his magic lap, Salty asked them in to sit on his face, and Kyle cheered, "You're workin' it!

I'm lovin' it!" The girls would yell at us to fuck off and we'd drive away. I couldn't bring myself to join in, because I noticed the end result was never positive. Not one woman actually got in the car and sat on anyone's face. Not one. I may have tried out a "hey, baby!" one time and gotten a middle finger before I announced my early retirement from catcalling and started drawing on my 401(k) plan.

As equal opportunity public nuisances, we also liked to annoy angry-looking middle-aged men. We would usually inform them they were ugly or throw water balloons at them as we screeched past. One time, while menacing a residential neighborhood, we pulled up beside a man standing in his own driveway, leaning under the open hood of his car, muttering. Salty shot the man in the coin slot with a massive NERF Super Soaker water gun for five seconds before he felt it and chased after us. Later, we passed another man in sandals reading a paperback on a park bench. Kyle yelled, "He dies at the end!" The guy waved an impotent fist at us. We added, "Nice sandals!" as we drove away. Good times.

Once every couple of months, we bought a Denino's cheese pizza or a Goodfellas vodka pie, drove up to house of a friend who said he was too busy to hang out that night, rang his doorbell, left the high-end pizza on his doorstep, ran to the car, and drove away as he opened the door. Each time, one of us would lean out the window and yell either, "Enjoy the pizza!" or "Tell your mom she's hot!" One time, I was the one who was home sick from school, but it wasn't a pizza I found when I opened the front door to the prank doorbell ring at 3:45 p.m. Instead of the vodka pie I adored, I was the lucky recipient of a pornographic greeting card from Spencer's Gifts. The card had a picture of Velma and Daphne from Scooby Doo lifting up their skirts on the front. Stuffed inside the card were two pairs of black panties, presumably stolen from someone's sister's dresser, with the inscription: "Sorry you're sick. We came to fuck you. Some other time, then. XOXO, Arwen and Marina." I heard peals of laughter, a honking horn, and saw Salty's car drive away. It was a funny note, in a *Ghost World*-sorta way, but I was upset by how predictable I'd become. The guys knew exactly how to sign the card. They knew the two girls I liked because I'd been stuck on the same two girls for years

and had not moved on from either of them. It was beyond pathetic and boring. How was it, as a high-school student, that I still carried torches over two old junior high school crushes? Marina had even gone to a different high school: the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. I was surprised that Marina's complete absence from my day-to-day life didn't help me forget her, but it sure didn't. I remained fixated upon her. Of course, Arwen had wound up in the same public school as me, so at least my continued proximity to her justified my obsession. As far as both girls were concerned, I found myself being tempted, once a month, to drive past their homes, wondering if there were any evildoers lurking outside that I could rescue them and their families from. The good and bad news was I was never called upon by fate to rescue either of them from burglars or serial killers. I would like to reassure you that I did not sing "On the Street Where You Live" as I made these borderline mentally ill drive-by trips, because I was well aware I cut a more pathetic and creepy figure than Freddy Eynsford-Hill from *My Fair Lady*. Yes: Idle hands do the devil's work. I needed new girls to pursue. I just had no idea where to look.

A few days after Election Day, I planted six Mark Green: Public Advocate signs on Kyle's front lawn. As I drove the final stake into the grass, I felt raindrops in my hair. It was time to get home. I managed to close the car door and turn over the engine before the sky broke open. Torrential rain bombarded my windshield. I was worried about driving in this downpour, but my wipers and lights made the road just clear enough that I chose to risk the twenty-minute trip home. I put on *John Denver's Greatest Hits* on CD and sang along to "Wild Montana Skies." At a red light, I pulled up in front of a bus stop with no inclement weather shelter attached to it. Drenched to the bone and shivering, an underdressed blonde woman stood there without an umbrella. How far was she going? How long would the bus take to arrive? *I should offer her a ride.* I lowered my window. "Hi, there! Would you—"

The woman's face contorted with rage and she bellowed "NO!" from somewhere deep in the recesses of her soul. She pointed down the road with a quaking hand. "GO! GO!"

"I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I just wanted to—"

"GET OUT OF HERE!" She reached into her purse for a concealed weapon.

The light turned green. My car hydroplaned. I floored the gas. The tires caught the ground. I sped away before she could produce the handgun, switchblade, or mace in her purse.

I broke into a cold sweat. My emotions were a tornado of guilt, fear, confusion, and moral outrage. I vented these bleak feelings by screaming at myself nonstop as I sped home. "That's what I get for trying to be a good Samaritan. Who the hell did she think I was? Buffalo Bill?" I glance at myself in the rearview mirror. "It rubs the lotion on its skin or else it gets the hose again!" I couldn't bring myself to laugh at my own joke. "That was totally uncalled for. What could possibly make her *that* angry? She looked ready to shoot me!"

I stopped talking to myself but kept thinking furiously. *Okay, fine. Fine! I get it! I'm on the lookout for a girlfriend. She was pretty. That means my motives were suspect. But once she got in my car, I wasn't about to put my hand on her thigh. If she wanted to grab my thigh, I'd welcome it, but I would not squeeze hers! She's a guest in my car, and vulnerable. That means I owe her my restraint and my protection. Guest-friendship demands I be a gentleman. Read your Homer. Read your Bible. Never violate the rules of hospitality. Ever. If, after I drop her off — and she is out of my power — she decides to volunteer her phone number, unasked? Fantastic! And if she doesn't offer up her digits? I've still done someone a good turn getting them out of the rain. Win-win. So why did she just assume, right off the bat that I'm some kind of sex predator and—*

*Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Was I the fiftieth guy to pull up in front of her to offer her a ride in the past ten minutes?* I looked at myself in the rearview mirror again. I said to myself, "Jesus H. Christ. I probably *was* the fiftieth guy to pull up and offer her a ride in the past ten minutes! Well, shit. If that's the world we all live in, then I guess I never will be able to pull a superhero and help a pretty stranger in need. It is just . . . not gonna happen. Ever."

I stopped speaking to my reflection and returned to raving via inner monologue.



*Under what circumstances would a female stranger accept help from me? They would have to be extraordinary. After all, I'm a six-foot-tall dago. Nothing scarier than a big WOP. I need to live in a small town where everyone knows everyone so I can live my life like I live in an actual, functioning society with people who interact. Once the population gets too big, nobody trusts nobody. We all suspect one another of being secret members of the Red-Headed League.*

The rain's deafening attack on my windshield built to a crescendo. Somehow, I found my way home despite the visibility growing exponentially worse. I pulled into our driveway, turned off the car, and sat inside. I watched the rain, listening to it fall against the car.

*I'm never getting a girlfriend.*

*And what the hell is it like to be a woman these days? If a friendly offer causes a primal scream like that? What in hell is it like to be a woman? Wasn't it supposed to be better now?*

*I guess me and the guys need to stop catcalling chicks, at least. The shit those morons yell out is too gross and nobody thinks it's funny. But I'm not the one who catcalls. And I wasn't catcalling just now. I was just trying to be nice . . . I dunno . . . I give up...*

As I entered the house, I found Mom waiting for me with a copy of today's *Chronicle*. "Listen, don't pull over to help any strange women on the side of the road with a flat tire."

*Yeah, I'm retired. I ain't helping nobody no more. I'm done. Fuck that noise. "Why?"*

"I've just read a terrifying local news story. There's a black widow running around loose on Staten Island."

"A black widow? Theresa Russell or the Russian chick who leads the Avengers?"

"She's lured three men to their deaths. They pull over to help her, she shoots them in the heads, and takes all their money. I'm reading this and I'm thinking, 'This is how my son is going to die. He's exactly the sort of person who'd pull my car over to help some strange woman he's never met before and get himself killed.'"

I gave Mom a wide-eyed innocent look and pointed to myself. "Do I look like the sort of person who'd pull over to offer help to a strange woman I don't know?"

“It seems like classic you, yes,” Mom said. “Don’t do it. Never, ever.”

*A black widow sounds pretty hot, though. If you gotta go . . .*

Singing Billy Ocean’s “Get Outta My Dreams, Get into My Car,” I headed up to my room to put on some dry clothes.