

CHAPTER TWENTY

Neutered Pepé Le Pew and the Stench of Desperate Need

November 6, 1993

Party at David Litvinov's house, when his parents are out of town
10:22 p.m.

Me: Why am I not seeing cartoon characters, David? I was promised cartoon characters.

David: That's LSD, Damien. This is weed.

Me: It has no effect on me. What's supposed to happen?

David: You get mellow, silly, and hungry.

Me: I'm like that usually.

David: Are you kidding? You're always tightly wound.

Me: My clothes stink. Why is this stuff banned? Why not ban elevator music?

David: Why'd you try it? I thought you didn't like breaking laws.

Me: I found the girl with the hairy arms rolling these things strangely attractive.

David: Her arms were way too hairy for me.

Me: This is the most boring drug of all time, David. I get higher from the Busch Gardens rollercoaster, penne alla vodka, and my pinup of Gillian Anderson. People do this all the time? For smelly clothes and zero Ralph Bakshi character hallucinations?

David: Yeah.

Me: I'm taking a shower and having an amaretto. This is the worst.

David: You seem pretty high to me, Damien.

Me: If I have any more of this, it will only be to talk to She-Wolf of London.

November 8, 1993

Dunkin' Donuts, 9:03 p.m.

I went to Dunkin' Donuts for a Dunkaccino and didn't expect to find a pretty twenty-something girl in a T-shirt and jeans sitting alone, reading a book, being publicly literate on Staten Island. *Dear Blessed*

Virgin Mary: Please let her be reading Flatland, The Thin Man, The Code of the Woosters, The Crucible, The Big Sleep, Leaves of Grass, 1984, Time and Again, Mystery and Manners, Lilies of the Field, Gulliver's Travels, The Good Times, Angel of the Revolution, *or anything else I've ever heard of or enjoyed*. "Hey, there. What're you readin'?"

Unperturbed by my nosy question, she held the book aloft. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Her hand covered the author's name. *Well, shit. I have no idea what the hell this book is*. "Cool," I said, pretending to know it. I hoped her T-shirt might offer me an alternative conversational opening: A somber man in a black hat under the caption: "What Would Billy Jack Do?" *God damn it! Who the fuck is Billy Jack?* I had no idea what this woman was all about, but she gave off good vibes. I strongly suspected: a) she was way too cool for me and b) it would do me a world of good to date her. I was also sure that: c) it was time to run away.

"Enjoy," I said.

"Thanks." She resumed her reading.

I turned and fled the Dunkin' Donuts.

When I got home, Dad was relaxing in his blue plaid pajamas, emerald green bath robe, and brown slippers, sipping tea in the wood-paneled living room of our semi-attached home. He wore simple brown glasses, had straight greying brown hair parted on the side, and had long-since shaved his 1970s moustache. A friendly, subdued smile flitted across his face. Since his father's death, he had grown more religious, quiet, and reclusive, transforming from a Peter Pan figure, sulking because his toys had been taken away from him, into Mr. Woodhouse from Jane Austen's *Emma*: nervous, depressed, terrified of death, and craving quiet and seclusion above all else. On the one recent occasion I had asked him to drive me to the comic book store Jim Hanley's Universe on New Dorp Lane, he dented the rear bumper of the car backing into an old, gnarled oak tree hanging low over his chosen parking spot on a nearby residential street. Spying the damage done to the car, he observed gravely, "This is what happens when you leave the safety of home."

Dad's new persona was as far removed from the one he had when I was growing up as I could imagine. He was more anti-profanity than

ever, and championed humility and decorum as the most important character traits. He chided me for being flashy and profane, reminding me that quiet people are more emotionally authentic and loud people less sincere. He had a point that I could be a bit “extra” when nervous. Still, I’ve always tried to be emotionally authentic, even when engaging in showmanship, playing to my audience, or telling white lies.

Contributing to Dad’s new persona was his embracing of the gentle artistic universe of Bob Ross and wet-on-wet landscape painting. After Dad had spent two years listlessly haunting our house, grieving for his austere, chess-master father, he stumbled across my old Bob Ross paints and instructional books and videotapes. I couldn’t have been more surprised than when he used them. He hadn’t done anything creative in years. When had he made his last Super 8 film? Ages ago. Now, it was only a matter of weeks before he had produced dozens of Bob Ross painting duplicates. He also taught himself to paint a portrait of Saint Therese of Lisieux.

The most surprising thing about Dad, given his lecherous streak, was just how religious he became, praying for the soul of his father, reading biographies of Saint Therese, and volunteering with a local order of nuns. The Daughters of Saint Paul had a convent on the north shore a few miles uphill from the Staten Island Ferry Terminal. Dad had heard them singing at a Christmas concert hosted by Chazz Palminteri at Our Lady of Pity Church, purchased their CDs, and listened to “Hail Holy Queen” on repeat for a month. I have to admit, I didn’t give Dad the benefit of the doubt. I assumed that he had some sort of sleazy ulterior motive for hanging out with the nuns. Unlike the terrifying, stereotypical nuns of 1950s coming-of-age-stories, most of these sisters were young and attractive. Since the Daughters of Saint Paul were founded to bring Catholicism into the realm of the modern-day mass media, the order made a point of recruiting young novices. Consequently, when Dad volunteered to help them host a tag sale, decorate a concert venue, or cook a dinner, he was participating in his religion in honor of his deceased father, feeling selfless, and getting to hang out with a boatload of pretty celibate girls. It was this last part I found amusing. “Dad, you know that you can’t have sex with any of them, right?”

"Damien!" Dad chastised me. "That's shallow of you. The nuns are my friends. There's nothing wrong with being friends with women. What you really don't want to do is hang out with gangs of boys all the time. I ran with this circle of Irish guys when I was a kid, and we sniffed glue, stole cars, got into fist fights in bars, and were just a total disaster area. Listen, don't ever hang out with groups of guys. Don't join street gangs, fraternities, or men's clubs. There's always one maniac who starts something thinking doing something evil will be fun, and he causes a huge disaster and makes everyone an accomplice or an accessory-after-the-fact. He's self-destructive and he drags everyone else down with him. 'Hey, let's try this pyramid scheme and get rich.' 'Hey, let's go to a meeting of the John Birch Society.' 'Hey, let's go into a pool hall in a Black neighborhood and start a brawl.' These were all terrible ideas. Every time I was ever arrested, or almost arrested, or made a choice I regretted for the rest of my life, I was with a bunch of jackass guys. On the other hand, no girl ever got me into trouble. Hanging out with a girl, you get to eat out at cool ethnic food restaurants and eat more than just burgers and fries and steak and potatoes. If you spend time with girls, you get to listen to all kinds of new music you never knew existed. Girls would take me out to the theater, take me clog dancing, and teach me how to do quilting and scrapbooking. Here's the thing: you won't get arrested going clog dancing. And sometimes girls let you feel them up. No girl ever got pregnant on me, or falsely accused me of rape, or ratted me out to the cops, or got me into life-threatening danger. Girls were just nice to be around. Boys? The opposite. Spend time with guys, you get hit in the head with a glass beer bottle, get into a knife fight, or become addicted to morphine. Whether you're looking for friends or lovers, chase around after women and you'll live a happy, safe, cultured, well-educated life. Run around with boys, and you'll wind up traumatized, dead, or in jail."

"This is why you hang out with nuns, now?" I asked. "They won't make you sniff glue, or kill someone and bury them by the side of the road and swear not to speak of it?"

"Exactly."

"Well, I agree with you completely, but you gave me the exact opposite advice as a kid. I thought you were always worried that men

who were ‘just friends’ with women were all secretly gay. That’s why you threw out my Wonder Woman toys.”

Dad could not have looked more shocked and wounded. “I never said that! And I never threw out your toys! Why would you make those things up about me?”

I got surprisingly angry with Dad when he couldn’t remember the incident with my Wonder Woman toys. His amnesia seemed a little too convenient. Then I remembered that, in my experience, very few people had the memory I did. Whenever I would say to my father or Mitchell or Kyle Ahearne: “Remember this hilarious thing you said to me three years ago?” they would invariably say, “No, I do not! How in the hell do you remember that so specifically? Anyway, the good news is, I guess I’m a funny guy if I said that!” People who could forget the past were fortunate. I often wish I could. If Dad was able to mentally block out his old parental misdeeds, more power to him. He could forgive himself and move on. Meanwhile, I still regretted failing to pass the salt to Aunt Beatrice one time in 1984, and always remembered the cutting remark she made afterwards. As much as a grudge-holder as Beatrice could be, I was certain she didn’t remember the incident to this day, while it was burned in my brain for all eternity. I wouldn’t wish that kind of memory on General Franco, let alone my father. Anyway, Dad was in the process of reinventing himself in the wake of his father’s death, so what did he need me bringing up the errors that “old” Dad had made, now of all times? Had I insisted on his memories subordinating themselves to the authority of my recollections, I would have held the living-breathing Dad of today hostage to my static remembrance of him. Making matters worse, it would be a remembrance he didn’t agree was legitimate. Anyway, I got along well with Dad during my high school years — aside from the time he read half a draft of my autobiography, declared it dull and profane, and suggested I burn it. The evening I returned home from my failed attempt to pick up a girl at a Dunkin Donuts, I plopped myself into the soft blue plush armchair facing Dad’s plush brown armchair. “Dad, have you heard of Billy Jack?”

Dad sighed. “I knew it was only a matter of time before you discovered Billy Jack.”

I spread my arms, gesturing animatedly, like a good Italian. “Who the hell is he?”

“He’s a half-Indian, half-Mexican kung fu master. He defends a hippie commune in the desert from racist cops and Klansmen. When his hat comes off, prepare for kung fu. He’s usually avenging the bullying of a midget or rape of a flower child. I think you’d like him. You’re becoming the sort of person who would like Billy Jack. I root for the bad guys in those movies.”

I laughed. “I think I just failed to meet my future wife. There was a woman in Dunkin’ Donuts wearing a Billy Jack T-shirt and reading *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.”

Dad shook his head. “Never heard of it. For all I know, it stars Billy Jack. But you need to go on a date or two before you start worrying about who your future wife is.”

“A date or two with who?” I asked, helplessly.

November 12, 1993

Salty, David, Kyle, and I sat in the food court of the Staten Island Mall, eating Burger King, watching women go by and rating their level of attractiveness from 1–10 on scratch paper. Kyle took pride in never assigning tens, David rated everyone exactly one point below me each time, and Salty rated two points below me. Salty teased me for my beauty contest grade inflation. “If you become a college teacher, don’t hand out As like candy, ya dirty Commie.”

David was more conciliatory. “There’s a part in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* about the two different kinds of love. You guys are looking for the one, perfect beauty to love, and Damien sees the beauty in all things and all people. Both are legitimate loves.”

Kyle rolled his eyes. “Whatever the fuck *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is.”

“Okay, Damien, who are the hottest James Bond women?” Salty asked mockingly, while removing the pickles from his Whopper. “Or are they all *equally* attractive?”

“I don’t watch those stupid movies,” Kyle scoffed. “Faggy British

guy in a tux kills four hundred Russians with a handgun while drinking a martini as he goes down a ski jump.”

I counted off my top three. “Tatiana Romanova, Fiona Volpe, and Doctor Goodhead.”

David Litvinov applauded silently. “I approve.”

“Just so you know, Kyle, he actually made surprisingly respectable choices,” Salty observed. “Even if he left out Jane Seymour and Caroline Munro.”

“Speaking of attractive older women . . .” I chose that moment to inform the boys I was about to begin a tireless quest to find a cougar of my own, as per my palm-reading instructions.

“No, you idiot!” Salty exclaimed. “We’re all going to the prom together at the end of the year. We’ll rent a limo together and go to Wildwood on a weekend getaway after. We *all* need to find senior girls to bring as dates! I don’t suppose it crossed your mind that you could totally screw up our plans by wasting all your time chasing after cougars and college graduates?”

“It crossed my mind.” I took a bite out of my Whopper and drank some Coke. “It doesn’t matter who I ask to be my prom date, younger or older. It’s a foregone conclusion I’m going to fail. I know I’m not going to the prom. I’ve known from the first day of freshman year.”

“How can you be so certain?” asked David.

“I’ve seen it in my mind as if it has already happened. I’m not going.”

Kyle shook his head. “I do not understand.”

“I’ve always known...I’ll be alone on prom night.”

“So, you’re not a ‘the cup is half full’ kinda guy then?” Salty was somber and teasing.

Kyle broke in, “That’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. You shouldn’t ever take a break from being on the prowl. Look at today. We’re at the mall! Look at all these girls here! You should be doing everything in your power to get yourself some trim.”

I ran a hand through my hair to check it. “I guess I do need a haircut.”

Kyle crumpled up his burger wrapping and tossed it as trash in his Burger King paper bag. Then he pulled open the tab of his Hershey

pie carton to unpack his dessert. “Listen, Eeyore: If you tried more often, there’d be less at stake for you when you do try. Instead, you wait ‘til you’ve fallen head-over-heels in love with someone — not ‘like’ or ‘lust,’ freakin’ ‘love’ — and then you ask them out. By then, the stakes are too high. Either that or you go to the opposite extreme and corner a random MILF you’ve never seen before in your life in the freezer section of Waldbaum’s and are surprised when they’re scared of you and want to call security. Just ask some chick you kinda know and kinda like a little. Not a total stranger. Not the love of your life. A nice girl to take on a low-stakes date. Stop being a crazy person for once.”

“The real reason Damien scares the shit out of chicks he asks out to the movies is he gives off a stench of desperate neediness.” Salty turned to me. “Dude, you’re like a neutered Pepé Le Pew walking around looking for love, plaintively asking girls, ‘Will *you* love me? How about you? How about *you*?’ That’s a major turn-off. Nobody wants to be asked out in a mealy-mouthed way by some clingy, teary-eyed bastard with a bouquet of flowers in his hands. You need to have a strut when you walk. A confidence. You need to let women know you can take them or leave them. Then they’ll want you. The moment you look needy, all is lost.”

“I definitely don’t strut when I walk,” I admitted. “I hunch.”

“You shouldn’t,” advised Kyle.

David added way too much salt to his remaining French fries. “The problem is you need a girlfriend to get a girlfriend. It’s like the ads for ‘entry-level jobs’ that ‘require three-to-four-years of experience.’ It makes no sense, but that’s how it is. If you’re single, nobody wants you. Why would any girl want a guy no other girl has claimed? If you’re happily in a relationship, other girls see how nice you treat your girl, and they try to steal you away. You should ask out an ugly girl, get her, and see who shows up to swipe you away. Or buy a fake wedding ring and wear it. They’ll line up around the block for you.”

Kyle shook his head. “That’s not the real problem. There’s a woman for everybody, but Damien is stuck with a whole bunch of mouth-breathers on Staten Island. He’s a genius. He needs to date another genius. He’s Frasier Crane and he needs to find himself a Lilith.”

“More like Niles Crane,” Salty said, exasperated. “He’s tense and

sad and angry and humorless all the time. We need to get this guy laid or he'll have hypertension by twenty-two."

"No, he isn't always sad," Kyle said. "He's always calm and funny and easy to talk to."

"I never see Damien in a good mood!" Salty groused.

"That's because you show up and put him in a bad mood," Kyle laughed. "He's fine when you aren't around! Seriously, this guy only gets publicly angry once every two years, and it's always hilarious because he goes off like an atom bomb! Whoa, daddy! Stand back!"

"In case Kyle is right about me needing a smarter girl," I said, "I'm going to ask out someone who's already in college."

Kyle gestured to me as if I'd finally figured it all out. "Non-mouth-breathers! Find yourself a girl who is an honors student and a sophomore at Wagner College. They got an organization for English majors. Find a chick from that group."

Salty surprised everyone by banging his fist on the table. "For the love of God, just ask out a high school girl! One that might say, 'Yes!' Your problem is you ask out chicks would never go with you in a million years! Lesbians, virginity promise ring chicks, born-again Christians who think Catholics go to hell, Chinese Buddhists whose parents won't let them date white Christians, and feminists who are pissed off at you for having late-term abortion reservations. Why the fuck would you ask out any girls who fall into those categories?"

"You *do* do that," David agreed. "I guess you're worried you wouldn't know what to do with ass if you caught it, so you only chase unattainable ass? This way you never face the problem of not knowing what to do with an ass when it lands in your lap?"

"Who are you gonna ask out next week?" asked Salty. "A nun? A chick in a coma? A woman in a seventeenth-century painting?"

Oh, no. I hope that isn't true. Is that true? I blushed and laughed at myself. "I see. Okay. Look, I'm not sure if I'm sabotaging myself or not. I mean, it could be true. I don't think it is. But, you know, I'll admit, if I ever got a girl, I wouldn't have the first clue what to do with her."

David raised a dramatic finger. "If you want it, Damien, I have an instructional video called, 'How to Make Love to a Woman and Please Her Every Time.' I found it very useful."

Kyle and Salty collapsed into laughter.

"Can you give me the CliffsNotes version?" I asked.

David geared himself up to spend a great deal of time summarizing the video. "The most important thing to know is that women don't generally climax off of vaginal penetration."

Salty scoffed. "That's not true! I'm the living proof it's not true! You should see me in action, bitches!" Kyle laughed and they began a side conversation while I listened to David.

David added, "You need to pleasure the breasts, labia, and clitoris with your finger and tongue for as long as you can until they cum. The penis doesn't do it for women at all. Just pretend you don't have one. Penises are functionally useless in sex."

Salty and Kyle stopped talking to each other to turn and look at David. "Surprisingly," Salty said, "I find my penis useful. Maybe that's just me."

"Yeah," Kyle said. "What do you use when you clap cheeks, David?"

Defensive, David talked quickly. "Hey, I'm just repeating what the husband and wife doctors said on the video. Evolution is responsible. Humans had to mate fast in the prehistoric forests and grasslands, or they'd get eaten by a saber-toothed tiger in mid-coitus. That's why we men all turn on as fast as microwaves and cum fast. It is also why men evolved to dump their goo and run away as fast as possible — before they're eaten by apex predators. Women never liked hit-and-run sex to begin with, but now that humans are the apex predators and men *still* behave like they have to fuck-and-run or die, women *really, really* resent it. The saber-toothed tigers are gone and we *still* cum fast after all these centuries? Talk about slow adaptation! Meanwhile, women are ovens, not microwaves. They see the penis as a cyclopean sausage-knife that slaps at them and stabs into them unexpectedly, pulls out a second later, and then runs away and hides, never to be seen again. They really, really prefer gently lapping tongues and magic fingers to the cyclopean sausage-knife. If men can't adapt to that, they won't be allowed to have sex anymore. All sex will be lesbian sex because only women understand what pleasures women. And women hate how penises are tiny, limp chickens that peck at them."

"Cyclopean sausage-knives?" I felt goosebumps rise on my arm.

“‘Tiny, limp chickens that peck at them?’ I think someone just walked over my grave.”

“We’ve all read *The Bell Jar*’s penis scene,” Kyle said. “Vaginas ain’t beautiful, either.”

David shook his head. “That’s the wrong attitude, especially since women worry about what we think of how everything in their panties looks. We gotta reassure them it’s wonderful.”

“David may have a point,” I said. “I’ve been wondering if the fact that women hate men for excellent reasons has negatively affected my success rate getting them to go out for coffee.”

“Remember three rules:” — David ticked them off on three fingers — “*respect* the FUPA, *pleasure* the FUPA, and *love* the FUPA.”

Kyle sighed. “I’m almost scared to ask. What the fuck is a FUPA?”

“Fat Upper Pussy Area,” David declared. “The mons pubis or the mons Veneris.”

“I think I may have to announce my retirement from dating.” I removed the white handkerchief from my pocket and waived it in surrender. “Game over, man! Game over.”

“How can you retire from something you’ve never done?” asked Salty.

“I’m just worried about premature ejaculation,” David said. “The video helped me.”

“*You’re* worried?” Salty asked. “*He* should be worried! You’re so screwed, Damien. You better start whoring ASAP so you can learn to keep from blowing your load too soon. Otherwise, you’ll meet this true love you’ve been waiting for and she’ll say, ‘Your place or mine,’ and you’ll get so excited that you’re about to feel a woman’s touch for the first time that you’ll cream your pants. Then she’ll scream and vomit, and that will be the end of *that* relationship.”

“I know! You think I don’t? And I have no idea how to prevent that from happening!”

“Get thee to a brothel,” Salty commanded. “I’ve got a phone number for a call girl service. The passphrase is, ‘I’m a friend of a doctor.’ Let me know if you want the number.”

“Grandpa’s cathouse addiction put my grandma in a mental hospital,” I said. “That’ll be a hard ‘No’ from me.”

"Listen," Salty said, "Women are looking for men who project strength. Men who've been laid have a confidence. They have a swagger. You, my friend, have no swagger. You slouch your way through life, looking scared of other people. Once you get laid, you'll have a swagger. In the meantime, every girl who meets you for the first time will sense your nervousness, smell your virginity on you, and suspect you're the Son of Sam."

I cleared my throat loudly. "By the way, feel free to move onto a new topic any time."

Salty placed his hand over his heart. "Personally, I have a swagger. I come into a room, I have a sexual aura, like Casanova."

"Casanova?" I stared with disapproval at Salty. "Listen here: I knew Giacomo Casanova. Giacomo Casanova was a friend of mine. Salty . . . you're no Giacomo Casanova."

Kyle laughed and applauded. "Lloyd Bentsen!"

Salty nodded. "Very clever. I'll give you that one. I like political jokes."

"Anyway," David said, "I have the video if you want it, Damien. I found it empowering."

I returned the handkerchief to my pocket. "Okay, this conversation is going on too long. I promise I'll be more strategic about who I ask out, if you all promise to change the record."

"Just try to have a good attitude about it," Kyle said.

"Does hearing the *Mission: Impossible* theme in my head constitute a good attitude?"

"No!" said Salty.

"If you're shy, we can all go out as a group cruising for chicks," Kyle suggested.

"Nah," I said. "He who travels fastest travels alone." The last few times we went out cruising for girls together, I successfully struck up a conversation with someone cute, and one of these three humps swooped in, took over the conversation, and plucked the girl right out of my hands. If that's what a "wingman" is, I needed one like I needed irritable bowel syndrome.

"Fine, but you better find someone in time for the prom," said Salty.

"I still think I should skew older to get someone mature enough

for me,” I said. “Is a college sophomore old enough? Should I shoot for twenty? Twenty-five?”

Salty moaned. “Great plan! Why not cruise the nursing homes while you’re at it? You ask out a twenty-five-year-old and she’ll just say, ‘Awwwww’ and squeeze both your cheeks. Mature or not, you’ll only ever be a kid in a propeller beanie to a college graduate.”

“You think so?” Kyle asked. “I’m pretty sure Damien is secretly forty-five.”

“Don’t help,” Salty hushed. “Okay, you’re just old enough she won’t be prosecuted for statutory rape, but you’re not gonna be able to do anything with some chick over twenty-five.”

I massaged my jaw thoughtfully. “Be hard for her to respect me living with my parents.”

“Go younger than you. Get a girl who’s in awe of you that you can train, like a dog.”

My anger flared. “I don’t want a dog!”

“I’m just sayin’ older women are less attractive and can’t stand men. Too many years of too many shit boyfriends. Skew young. If she’s old enough to bleed, she’s old enough to breed.”

I made a promise to myself not to react to anything Salty said, no matter how outrageous. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

“If she’s old enough to pee, she’s old enough to me,” he added.

“Jesus H. Christ,” I muttered.

Salty grinned. “Ha! You’re so easy to bait.”

“I want a woman,” I shot back. “A grown-up with a mind of her own. Someone who’s enjoyed arthouse films and written bleak death poetry. Who knows how to fucking spell!”

“I’ve met Salty’s girlfriend,” Kyle said. “I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know how to spell.”

Salty shook his head at the three of us. “I don’t know why I’m wastin’ my time with you people. I should be over at her place, givin’ her the high hard one.”

David wiped an invisible tear from his eye. “That was freakin’ beautiful, man. Poetic.”

“Who cares that she isn’t a genius?” Salty yelled. “If I want to talk to someone in Greek, I’ll talk to my barber. If I want to learn about

science, I'll read my Carl Sagan."

I started opening my own Hershey pie. "Ever since I met you, Salty, you've been playing cool Jack Nicholson from *The Last Detail* to my simple-minded Randy Quaid. I'm sick of it."

"The truth hurts," declared Salty. "We're high-school seniors: I've fucked twenty girls and you haven't had pussy since pussy had you."

The whole table fell silent. We ate our food without speaking for the next three minutes.

"I might have crossed the line there," Salty finally acknowledged. I grunted and ate another French fry.

David leaned forward and whispered to me. "Do you want to borrow my training video?"

"No, I don't want to borrow your fucking training video!" I bellowed.

David held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. Just asking." We ate another five minutes in silence.

I murmured, "You better bring it in tomorrow."

November 13, 1993

Kyle called me at seven p.m. on Saturday and asked me if I want to go bowling with the boys. I was tired of "the boys" and wracked my brains to come up with a plausible excuse for refusing. "You ever have cabin fever but don't really feel like going out?"

"Ha! No! What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm gonna have a night-in."

I didn't have a night-in. Even though my family had an-old-but-working-1970s-era washer-and-dryer pair in our basement, I took a load of dirty clothes to a public laundromat on Victory Boulevard, roll of quarters in tow, looking for an attractive woman to ask out. Recent magazine articles had made a lot of hay about coin-op laundry places being ideal locales for girlfriend hunting, so I thought I'd test the theory. I would come to this laundromat every other day for a month and see if I managed to accidentally meet a potential date for my senior prom. Thanks to being a compulsive collector of books and

comic books, I had plenty of as-yet-unread reading material to ease me through a month of stakeouts.

A motley crew had assembled inside the claustrophobic laundromat interior under the flickering and burnt-out ceiling-mounted fluorescent tubes: a frumpy thirtysomething woman with four kids climbing all over her while waiting for a dryer load to finish, a dazed and elderly homeless man in a red plaid hunting cap and green Gore-Tex coat sitting in the corner on the wooden bench, and a twenty-year-old woman with a tasteful diamond nostril piercing angrily doing a crossword puzzle with the most closed body language in all of recorded Western history. Somehow, I didn't want to ask any of these folks out. Not wanting to give up immediately, I began my first-ever load of laundry, hoping I'd avoid staining all my white underclothes pink.

I sat down on the wooden bench and opened a copy of *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole, fastidiously trying not to crack the spine or add wear to the pristine cover. As I re-immersed myself in the story, I once again found myself relating too strongly to the protagonist, Ignatius Reilly. I was well into chapter seven — in which Ignatius landed a job selling hot dogs and wound up eating them all himself — when Annie Hall's identical twin sister entered the laundromat. She even had the hat. Annie chose an empty top-loading washer a yard away and set about transferring clothes into it from a military surplus olive drab laundry bag.

Excellent! She's the one. Wait a minute. Now what? How can I possibly speak to her without coming off as a creeper? Could I ask her if she needs any change? Show her my roll quarters? Be helpful? People respond to helpful, right? But what if she grunts 'thanks' or 'no thanks' and then stops talking? Do I take that as a firm 'no' and stop, or say one more thing?

Now finished loading her soiled clothes and adding detergent, Annie straightened. She shot me a sidelong glance. "I just want to do my laundry in peace."

I blushed. "I wasn't gonna say anything."

"Sure, you weren't." Annie produced quarters of her own, slotted them into the washer, and turned it on. She cast a second glance at me. "What are you? *Twelve*? Because I'm *thirty*."

I smiled pleasantly. "I'm *fine* with thirty!"

She rolled her eyes. “Mannaggia la miseria!”

I didn’t know what that phrase meant, but her tone suggested I shouldn’t get too excited.

Another half hour passed without incident. This laundromat scheme was a bust. Too bad, I was stuck waiting until the dryer cycle finished. Afterwards, I discovered the joys of walking home in the cool fall evening with a giant bag of clothes slung over my shoulder. My path home took me past my church, its façade illuminated by floodlights positioned over the name St. Luke’s Roman Catholic Church. As I walked towards the entrance, I felt the weight of the laundry bag grow still more oppressive. I bucked myself up by starting to sing my current favorite song, Madonna’s “Like a Prayer.” I’d only gotten a few bars in when Miss O’Sullivan emerged from the rectory, slipping on a light brown coat as she walked. It had been six years since we first met and five-and-a-half years since we’d last seen one another. She’d known me as a pre-pubescent sixth grader. I was now a high school senior. I’d also worn glasses and was clean-shaven then. Now I wore contact lenses and a goatee. I didn’t expect her to recognize me right away — or remember me *well* — but I was hopeful that I could jog her memory fairly quickly once she got a good look at me. “Is that you, Miss O’Sullivan?”

She stopped, half in and half out of her coat, eyes wide. “Who are you?”

I pitched my voice up half an octave and assumed a reassuring tone. “I’m Damien. You were my Confirmation teacher here a few years back.”

The longer she looked me over, the less she believed I was who I said I was. “You’re too old to have been one of my students.”

“Not all that much time has passed, but blink and teenagers double in size.”

Miss O’Sullivan finished putting her coat on. “You were in that class? If you were, I must be getting old. Very old. Am I getting that old?”

Sure, she looked older, but she still looked gorgeous. “Of course not! You look great!”

She swatted the compliment away. “Who are you supposed

to be again?"

Ouch. This must be how Arwen felt when I didn't recognize her my first day in the library. "You taught us the importance of never doing anything evil, because our souls are pristine handkerchiefs that must remain spotless if we are to have a chance attaining paradise."

She stared at me. "I don't remember sharing those thoughts with the class."

"I have an unusually good memory." I assumed a comic heroic stance and placed my free hand on my hip. It was difficult flirting with an old teacher while holding a giant bag of laundry.

"I can see that." She sounded like she was beginning to remember some of the truth, but her posture remained defensive. Her eyes kept darting to the laundry bag slung over my shoulder, as if I were on the verge of scooping her up, forcing her inside, and carrying her off.

"I'm glad we bumped into each other." I smiled and stepped closer. "I don't suppose I could talk you into grabbing a coffee with me now, so we could catch up?"

Miss O'Sullivan clutched her coat to her neck and stepped backward. "What? No!"

"Okay! No worries!" I whirled around and walked briskly away from her. I trotted across the street so I could resume my path home while still giving her the widest berth possible. "Well, it was great to see you again, Miss O'Sullivan. God be with you!" Not listening for her reply, I broke into a sprint and fled home.

I returned home to find my mother asleep and father in his robe and pajamas, making tea, and preparing to watch an old movie on VHS. "Dad! Guess who I bumped into? My hot religion teacher. Remember her?"

"Who could forget her? Nice looking bitch. Is it too much to hope you made a pass?"

"You'll be proud of me. I did! But I got 'The Recoil.'"

Dad closed his eyes and frowned. "Oh. 'The Recoil.' That's rough."

I shrugged. "Whatever. I always get 'The Recoil.' I guess the moral of this story is don't ask out a mousey woman you've bumped into in the street in the dark of the night. This is true even if she's an old hero of yours. Still, I'm pretty mad she was scared of me."

“Why wouldn’t she be scared? You’re six-foot and larger than life. I’m scared of you!”

“Ha! Okay, I guess that’s fair. What are you watching?”

“I can’t decide between *The Body Snatcher* or Jeremy Brett in ‘The Naval Treaty.’”

“I have a radical idea,” I said. “I’ll make myself some tea and we can watch both!”

“Good plan. And don’t worry about finding a girl. The Virgin Mary will push the right one in your direction soon enough.”

“Well, she better get cracking! The prom is coming up fast.”