

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Death by the Side of the Road

April 25, 1994

“As I see it,” Mom explained, “you have a choice here. You can attend a college where you will learn how to say ‘Jesus’ in three different languages — Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek — or you can go to a college where you will learn how to say ‘Jesus’ in three syllables: ‘Jee-yah-zuzz!’ I say you pick the school where you learn to say, ‘Jesus’ in three languages.”

Monsignor Tobin had given me a brochure for Christendom College. It read: “We’re not like other colleges. And that’s a good thing. Founded in 1977 in response to the devastating blow inflicted on Catholic higher education by the cultural revolution which swept across America in the 1960s, Christendom’s goal is to provide a truly Catholic education in fidelity to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church and thereby to prepare students for their role of restoring all things in Christ.” Believe it or not, the purity of this school’s mission spoke to me. I was still looking to be let inside a Green Door, and at least Tobin was promising to crack one open for me. It might have been a shitty Green Door, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. It wasn’t like anyone else was inviting me into their elite inner circle. I told Mom the upside of Christendom was it was not a Diet Catholic College for “Buffet Catholics” but a bona fide institution for “authentic” Catholics. Mom told me that under no circumstances would I be going there, especially since there were only forty or so undergraduates enrolled at the time. “What kind of college had such a small student body?” Mom asked. “I bet those people are pretty weird.”

“I’m pretty weird!”

“Not that kinda weird, you aren’t.”

Mom had a brochure of her own: SUNY Geneseo. In the 1990s, there were two jewels in the crown of the State University of New York system: SUNY Binghamton, an urban and politically radical school with an activist, intellectually gifted student body, and SUNY Geneseo, a rural college filled to bursting with brilliant students who were more focused on studying and maintaining a 4.0 average than

protesting injustice en masse. All the students I had spent K-12 with were going to Binghamton, and I'd had my fill of those people. I didn't want college to be High School II. I wanted to meet all new people and go somewhere unlike any place I'd ever been. A rural honors college seemed to fit the bill perfectly. I was sick of the blandness of the suburbs, felt a city might be too hectic and expensive for me, and had already learned to love rural areas from our frequent family trips to Pennsylvania. All this made Geneseo a no-brainer. Furthermore, sixty percent of the student body was female, and sixty percent of the students were Roman Catholic ethnic whites like me. As a bonus, there appeared to be an interdisciplinary history and English course in the catalogue called "Age of Dante" that would help me learn more about my Italian and Roman Catholic heritages. I could imagine both finding myself and meeting my future wife at Geneseo. I wasn't excited to go to any college, but this one seemed okay.

Mom read up on several campus cultures in a heavy tome filled to bursting with up-to-date student surveys and interviews. "They say Binghamton is where you go if you have a political ax to grind and an issue to fight for. I assume that's not you, right?"

I shook my head violently. "Hell no! How is it that everyone is so certain they have all the answers on politics and religion? Everybody's got the monopoly on truth!"

"You should go to Geneseo, I'm thinking," said Mom. "Oh! I hope there's good Italian food in western New York. I'm worried there won't be any Italians or Italian food anywhere near Geneseo. But Jerre Mangione's book *Mount Allegro* is about an Italian community in Rochester, and Rochester would only be a half-hour drive from Geneseo."

I shrugged. "I have no idea. I know nothing about upstate. Fingers crossed there's passably good gravy and tortellini." I knew what I really wanted. I wanted the ethnic and racial diversity of the city, the beautiful nature and wildlife of the rural area, the arts and food culture of the small college town, and the radically angry politics of none of the above. While I saw myself as a capital "R" Romantic, I had a confused political identity and could not imagine myself joining the far left or the far right. I was becoming a proudly militant moderate.

Dejected that I would be attending a public school as “liberal” as Geneseo, Tobin offered me, as a parting gift, a trilogy of science fiction books by C.S. Lewis that he described as being a jeremiad against secularist, morally relativist college education. I remember him pointing to the artwork on the cover of the third book, *That Hideous Strength* (1945), which featured a college academic building across the street from a laboratory. He said: “You see, the evil scientific ideas cooked up by the professors in the college lectures influence the students, who graduate and cross the street to work at the labs to make reality the dangerous thoughts that had been advanced by professors playing ‘devil’s advocate.’ So, you see, the college professors and the scientists collude, indirectly, to aid the devil in his campaign against God.” This was an instantly graspable allegory and pure propaganda, so I promised myself not to read the trilogy. I knew that not all college professors were evil. My Mom was a rather nice person, all told.

In a last-ditch effort to recruit me into Opus Dei — or whatever secret society he was working for — Monsignor Tobin took me to visit the Legionaries of Christ seminary in Thornwood, N.Y. When I looked about the seminary and saw all those men in black, playing pool in the rec room, walking across expansive lawns in prayer, and talking about Church politics in the cafeteria, I became aware of two things: 1) the complete absence of women and 2) that I was not that into sausage. After all, I spent my junior high and high school years loathing being an involuntary celibate, so why would I become a *voluntary* one?

As I wrestled with these questions during my senior year in high school, I suspected that Tobin was not necessarily a good influence on me — or the rest of the congregation. The alarm claxon finally rang when I heard his homily decrying the Church’s decision to allow girls to be “altar boys.” I was deeply offended by his wistful invocation of his childhood clubhouse with its harmless, charming “no girls allowed” sign. When I finally saw Tobin serve mass a year later with an adorable altar girl at his side, I remembered his words and fumed for the entire mass, not because there was an altar girl, but because I knew she was only there because his side had lost the debate. And she looked freakin’ adorable in her little hood! What was the goddamn

problem with her and her *adorable* hood?

The issue of gay rights rarely came up during homilies at St. Luke's in the early 1990s, so I was not often confronted by Catholic homophobia. This lack of discussion of homosexuality made me complacent and enabled me to pretend that the Church had no problem with gay people. Then there came the deeply troubling St. Patrick's Day Parade controversy. Irish gays petitioned to be allowed to march in the parade, but the Catholics involved in organizing banned their participation. In protest, the gays held their own parade, and Mayor David Dinkins joined the gays in solidarity instead of participating in the main parade. Conservative Catholic Staten Islander voters later had their revenge on Dinkins for choosing the side of the gays by being instrumental in sending Rudolph Giuliani to Gracie Mansion, thereby ensuring that New York City's first African American mayor served only one term. (Ironically, Mayor Giuliani ultimately choose to march with the gays, too.) I didn't follow the news closely and didn't know all the arguments, but the parade struck me as being more about the ethnic quality of "Irishness" than about Catholicism and homosexuality. Consequently, *all* Irish people should be allowed to march. Tobin did not agree. He told me that the Catholic Church could not be called anti-gay for not allowing gays to march in New York City's Saint Patrick's Day Parade because there was one gay group that the Church would approve of marching: Courage. Courage would pass muster because it promoted gay celibacy; its mission statement did not contravene Church teaching.

"Hmmm," I said. "If I were gay, I wouldn't think much of that argument. The members of Courage sound like gay people in denial."

"They aren't in denial," Tobin said. "They just aren't sexually active."

"That just doesn't sound right to me."

"It is a perfectly reasonable position."

"Does Jesus even care about sex?" I asked. "He seems more like he cares about feeding the hungry and healing the sick and not using violence against fellow men. He couldn't have had sex hang-ups. Many of his disciples were women. He was kind to prostitutes. And he opposed the stoning of the adulteress. He says not one word about homosexuality anywhere."

"But he told the adulteress to 'go and sin no more.' He did not give her license to continue to commit adultery. Jesus has rules about sexuality. He's against divorce and against lustful thoughts. He's quite clear on these points. You can't pin all the rules concerning sexuality on St. Paul the male-chauvinist pig and make Jesus a proponent of free love in the process."

"But I like pinning things on Paul," I muttered, clearly sulking now.

"Paul is misunderstood."

"Well . . . I don't know. You make some good points."

"Exactly."

"We sure spend a lot of time talking about what we're *against*. *Against* abortion. *Against* gays in the frickin' parade. Can we talk about what we're *for*? Be more positive? I don't want to be that guy who says 'no' to everything and is against everything."

Despite my reservations about Tobin and my faith, I still considered myself Catholic. I did not want to be a Catholic like Tobin or Miss O'Sullivan, but I did want to be a Catholic like Great-Aunt-Bianca and Father Jack Stańczyk. Mitchell had once described Liberation Theology to me. He told me of the heroism of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, and of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. I could be that kind of Catholic. I recalled how Tobin tried to turn me on those very figures and ideas during my first real conversation with him. Opus Dei was good, and Dorothy Day was bad. He had it backwards.

Was I still Catholic? Probably? I knew that, at the very least, I had no trouble praying to St. Nicholas of Myra, the inspiration for Santa Claus. A bishop who lived in fourth-century Turkey, St. Nicholas was a secret gift-giver who would bestow money upon the poor. He was especially known for dropping bags of gold through the windows of poor women to help mitigate their suffering. Sometimes the gold was used to pay their dowries. He made these anonymous gifts, not because he expected romance from grateful women in return, but because he was a generous, holy man, and a proto-Marxist hoping to balance the scales a little in an unjust world. I didn't really have any wealth on hand to speak of that would enable me to leave secret, generous donations to the poor, but I loved the idea of gift giving, unexpected

gift giving, secret gift giving, and making any kind gesture, however small, to add to a person's joy. Until the day I became rich enough to do the modern-day equivalent of dropping bags of gold through women's windows — without scaring the living shit out of them and getting arrested — I would confine myself to regifting items in good condition that I no longer valued, buying Whitman's samplers and leaving them in the mailboxes of friends of mine having an awful week at work, and generally striving to be as much like Santa Claus as I could without freaking people out with my behavior. Here again, was an attitude inspired in part by Mitchell's generous spirit, as well as by my mother's bursts of generosity, buying lots and lots of gifts for Leo and me on our birthdays and Christmas. Yes: if part of being Catholic meant mimicking Santa Claus, then that would not be hard for me. (This was my next step towards becoming a male Amélie Poulain.)

Still interested in attending a Catholic college, I applied for scholarships at Notre Dame, the University of Scranton, Loyola University Maryland, Fordham University, and St. Joseph College. Thanks in part to my underwhelming 1170 SAT score, whatever scholarships I did earn were between ten percent and seventy. Even with them, the tuitions were so high that Mom said the family couldn't afford to send me. She had raised similar objections when I had wanted to go to a private high school in Manhattan to study art. I resented her keeping me out of such specialty schools until the time I bumped into Marina Dazzo as a high school senior. Marina told me that taking the ferry into the city to attend LaGuardia every day made her grow up too fast and beat her love of music out of her. Marina had also put a lot of financial pressure on her parents to pay for private school. She told me Mom had been right to make me go to public high school and had saved me from her miserable fate. Was the debate about whether I should attend a private Catholic college essentially a retread of my School of Visual Arts clash with Mom? I didn't know. Maybe the prestige of a private college would be worth more than the prestige of a private high school? And yet, Geneseo was far more affordable and had prestige of its own. Mom did not want me to graduate college saddled with mountains of debt. She herself had gotten a full-ride scholarship with money left over to take her

across Europe. She couldn't stomach the idea of going from that to my being burdened with thousands of dollars in debt that I might never pay off. Fortunately, Democrat Governor Mario Cuomo had kept the public college tuition low in New York State. SUNY Geneseo would only cost the family a few thousand per year, room and board included. Cuomo's successor, Republican Governor Pataki, would begin a years-long process of defunding SUNY, cutting its budget to ribbons, so that fantastic financial and educational deal was not long for this world. I made it in just under the wire before costs soared.

I'd wanted to go to a Catholic school, but I was okay with Geneseo. After all, with a sixty percent female student body, I was bound to meet *someone* to date, right? Supposedly, it was a great school that provided a first-rate education. Whatever. I was much more interested in the girls. I was already too smart for my own good. I wanted a chick of my very own. But what if I didn't find one? What if I went to school looking for a relationship with a strong, funny, independent woman and she had gone to school with one goal in mind: not getting saddled with a guy until her career was well on track and she had achieved financial independence? I suspected that I was going to college to date, and the women I'd be most interested in dating would be there exclusively to study and prepare for their careers.

The more I worried about this, the more I became convinced that my problem wasn't that I was a bad fit for Staten Island. My problem was I was a bad fit for America. Would I have to move to Italy to find love? Or maybe, the problem was just me. I was my own worst enemy, a nut-job who was a prisoner of his own God-awful personality. No matter where I went, no matter what I did, I would always be Ernest Borgnine in *Marty*: an eternally single *mammone*. I had hit on a terrible truth. College would not be a fresh start for me. It would be *Groundhog Day*. The setting and characters would change, yet my life would feel the same. I'd have all of the same problems. Nothing would ever fundamentally change for me. The Green Door would always be bolted shut with a chair leaned up against the doorknob on the other side. A taped-up note would always read, in a red ink scrawl: "Members only. Keep Out. This means you, Damien!"

I will never get in.

I will never play “Heart and Soul” on the piano with Marina Dazzo.

I will go through life as neutered Pepé Le Pew, giving off the stench of desperate need.

College was going to be more of the same, and a total waste of my time.

There was only one course of action left for me to take.

It was long past time I killed myself.

On the evening of April 25, 1994, I embarked on a quest to find “The Good Samaritan Killer” (a.k.a. the poorly named “Black Widow,” a.k.a. the aptly named “Roadside Seductress”). Since I didn’t have the guts to take my own life, I hoped that she would take my life for me. I would play the fool, pretend to fall for her trick, pull over, and let her do what she would. I froze. *My God! What if she spares me? What if the number of female serial killers who consider me worth murdering fill up an empty set?* No. I couldn’t allow such fears to deter me. I had to be brave. I had to have faith that, if she did catch me, she would kill me. I could finally get some rest. I had earned a nice, peaceful dirt nap a thousand times over. Fingers crossed.

I do hope she’s super hot. I wouldn’t want to be murdered by a four out of ten. Just my luck, that’s exactly what will happen. Nah. Be positive. I decided that she looked and dressed like Carmen Sandiego and started humming the song “Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?”

According to the latest issue of *The Staten Island Chronicle*, the Good Samaritan Killer was still at large, and on her twentieth victim. It boggled my mind that a murderess who confined herself to the tristate area and focused on Staten Island was uncatchable. In any event, I was increasingly interested in meeting her in person. Of course, I had no idea *where* the Good Samaritan Killer would be tonight. How would my dad’s father solve this mystery? Did I have enough of Grandpa’s Mycroft Holmes intelligence to crack this case? Find the femme fatale!

I looked up where the bodies of all the Good Samaritan Killer’s victims were found. I fished Mom’s map of Staten Island out of the desk and marked it up, hoping to predict where the killer’s next hunting ground would be. When I’d finished, I stared at the markings, disappointed that they didn’t form some sort of obvious pentagram, like in police procedural television shows and in satires of police

procedural television shows. *I have to use the Force.* I meditated like Yumi taught me. I reached out with my mind. *Where in Staten Island is “Carmen Sandiego?”*

Aha!

She’s going to be near the Travis movie theater tonight at midnight. I can see her there in my mind’s eye, as if she’s there now. I’m going to join her. Because, if you’ve gotta go, there’s no better way to go than be taken out by a hot vampire woman.

April 26, 1994

I woke up the next morning disgusted with my own impotence. I failed. I missed my hot date with Death. My appointment in Samarra. I couldn’t find the fucking Good Samaritan Killer even after driving around the island for most of last night. I had hoped she would kill me, and I wouldn’t have to take my own life. Sadly, if I really wanted to stop living, I was going to have to do the deed myself. I couldn’t rely on someone else to save me the messy effort. The problem was, given how badly Mom’s world had been rocked by her parent’s deaths, I assumed my death might be something of a blow to her. I wasn’t sure if there was a solution to that particular problem, because I really had had it up to here with being alive.

I went downstairs, in my robe and pajamas, too depressed to dress. Today’s paper was waiting for me on the kitchen table. GOOD SAMARITAN KILLER ARRESTED IN TRAVIS: ROADSIDE SEDUCTRESS IN CUFFS. *What? She was in Travis last night!* I snatched up the paper, scanning the article. The police had caught her two hours before I set out to find her and half-a-mile away from the street I’d pinpointed to stakeout.

Well, shit.

I walked down the stairs to the basement and went to the back room with the LEGO, video games, action figures, posters of *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, the framed picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the statue of the Virgin Mary stepping on a snake. I stood before the statue of Mary with my

hands clasped behind my back. “You had to save my life, didn’t you? Like it was any of your business? If I can’t even get intimate with the Roadside Seductress, then what hope is left for me?”

I sensed someone standing behind me and turned. Mom stood there, holding the same newspaper. She hadn’t heard anything I said but looked shaken. “Did you see the news?”

“Yeah, I saw.”

Mom was relieved that she didn’t have to be the one to tell me. “I can’t believe it.”

“I know,” I sighed, looking at the floor.

“Mitchell’s dead.”

I snapped my head back up. “What?”

“You didn’t see?” Mom looked confused. “Mitchell died in a car accident in Texas.”

I snatched the newspaper out of her hand. It was a front-page story, but below the fold, under the arrest of the Good Samaritan Killer: ISLAND YOUTHS KILLED IN TEXAS. I scanned the article, not quite taking in what I read. Mitchell and three friends were in a car that fishtailed on a highway and flipped over because of a freak accident involving a utility trailer and a tow hitch. They were returning from a spring break Grand Canyon trip, sight-seeing along the way back to the East Coast. He and one other had been killed. Two survived, including his girlfriend. There was a grayscale photo of a slim, handsome young man who must have been Mitchell. I kept looking at the picture. When we had played the *Honeymooners*, he was the chubby kid who played Ralph and I was the gawky kid who played Norton. The boy in this photo would never be cast as Ralph. Meanwhile, I’d gotten rounder since quitting Tae Kwon Do. These days, I only needed a little more padding to make a passable Ralph. How long had it been since we’d last seen each other? Long enough for him to look so different?

In the photo, Mitchell was with the girlfriend who had survived. Even in this still image, he seemed like a good person, as did she. I didn’t know her at all. I was sad I didn’t know her. But did I know him? I tried to remember all the times we spent together over the years. Why didn’t I remember more about Mitchell? Wasn’t my memory

supposed to be great? Did I only remember bad things that happened to me? Maybe I didn't remember Mitchell well because he was the best part of my life? I forced myself to remember. I saw in my head: Both of us getting in trouble for forgetting to do homework; taking Tae Kwon Do together; buying issues of *Silent Invasion*, *Elfquest*, and *Saga of the Swamp Thing* at the comic book store next to the dojo; going to a sleepover party at William's house — me walking into the bathroom on Will's dad buck naked — telling Mitchell — Mitchell laughing 'til he cried; me spilling milk all over Mitchell's carpet as we watched the Hammer *Mummy*, his mom cleaning it up, getting me a new glass, and me spilling the second glass; playing duck-duck-goose in third grade and picking each other time and again just to mess with everyone else, and Mitchell reciting the comedy routine "My name is Friday, I work on Tuesday; Tuesday is my secretary." Was "You Got It" by Roy Orbison Mitchell's favorite song? I knew his celebrity crush was Jennifer Connelly — he called her "the most beautiful woman in the world." We went to see *The Rocketeer* four times in the theater just for her. Was that all I remembered? Was that enough? How was it possible he was dead?

Mom wasn't sure how much of the article I'd absorbed, so she said, "From what I can tell, they were in a car with a U-haul-type attachment. Two couples. One of his friends was driving. Mitchell was in the passenger seat. The driver fell asleep at the wheel and the car started drifting off the highway. Mitchell saw what was happening, grabbed the wheel, and tried to steer the car back into the middle of the lane. The sudden tug on the wheel caused the attachment to fishtail. The attachment flipped over and flipped the car after it. The driver was killed. Mitchell was thrown from the car and landed on the side of the road. His girlfriend was with him. She held him when he died."

Was I angry? Was I sad? Was I in shock? Why wasn't I crying? Why was I numb?

My only emotion was shame; shame that I had allowed us to grow apart.

I closed my eyes and handed the newspaper back. "That doesn't even look like him. Unreal. Newspapers will print anything these days. Damn liberal reporters, making things up."

Mom tucked the newspaper under her arm. "I'll keep this for you in case you want to look at it again." She saw I wasn't ready to talk and went back upstairs.

I returned my eyes to the statue of the Virgin Mary. I wanted to seize the statue in both hands and bring it smashing down on the table it rested on. "I was the one who was supposed to die on the side of the road yesterday. You took the good one and left the dud."