

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Where's Caligula?

August 28, 1994

They called her Emmeline. The bronze bear clung to the light pole at the center of the circular water-fountain smack dab in the middle of Main Street in the village of Geneseo. The sandstone-and-granite fountain was installed in 1888 as a memorial to the bear's namesake — Emmeline Austin Wadsworth — by her children, in recognition of her lifelong love of animals. According to my self-appointed tour guide, Sergio Savini, much folklore has sprung up around the fountain over the generations. One legend held that, should the statue be removed, the land grant both the village and university had been built on would revert to the Wadsworth heirs.

Sergio added, "Another legend goes: 'Should ever a virgin graduate from Geneseo, the Bear shall descend from her perch and flee down Main Street, never to be seen again.'"

I snorted. "If I were you, I wouldn't get too attached to that bear."

Sergio looked surprised. "Didn't you—? Wait, who kissed you at graduation?"

"That was a 'goodbye' kiss. It was very nice, but it was a one-, um, two-time thing. She caused her rich parents some consternation, and they caused us some consternation."

"I see. I haven't done the deed yet, myself, but I have all the training I need. Six years of tuba playing in marching band. Double-tonguing. Flutter-tonguing. I'm ready."

"Kudos." *Is it too late to call Nancy and Christina and get put in touch with that virgin-loving nymphomaniac who looks like Marisa Tomei? Probably. Me and my stupid pride!*

Sergio had already shown me Main Street, which had been designated a National Historic Landmark by the United States Department of the Interior three years before. It had a classic, Main Street USA charm undercut only slightly by the surprising number of law offices and psychics located on the main drag. "They love their lawyers and psychics, huh?" I observed. There was a VHS movie rental store that would provide me hours of entertainment during my freshman year

— introducing me to cult classics like *Withnail and I*, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, *Candyman*, and *Get Carter* — before the FBI raided it and closed it down for peddling pirated films. There was also a local newspaper office that had been shuttered thanks to embezzlement, and another local restaurant shut down because of the owner's tax evasion. Still, my gothic-comic worldview was challenged by what was otherwise a thriving and culturally fulfilling mix of local businesses that provided non-chain restaurants, stores, and bed-and-breakfasts to all. Among these local fixtures were a handful of bars — quiet ones for the Townies and rave-like settings for the students — as well as a vintage movie theater called the Riviera, competing pizzerias Mama Mia's and Pizza Paul's, Aunt Cookie's Sub Shop, Main Moon takeout Chinese food, the Bronze Bear Restaurant, the Big Tree Inn, Sundance Books, and Sonny's Music. My favorite of all of these businesses was Sonny's, mainly because the eccentric Italian American owner, Sonny Verde, was the spitting image of Jerry Garcia and trapped patrons into the oddest imaginable conversations. Sergio and I had spent the afternoon touring Main Street's attractions, popping into the stores, poking around the parks, and taste-testing the Italian food at Pizza Paul's. Personally, I liked the Buffalo wings, French fries, and zeppole I ordered.

Afterwards, Sergio drove us out of town along the road leading into Letchworth State Park, "the Grand Canyon of the East," which was less than a half-hour away. The Village of Geneseo was in New York's Finger Lakes region thirty minutes south of Rochester. The land was once Iroquois Confederacy land, and the village's name was derived from the Iroquois for "beautiful valley": Gen-nis-he-yo. The gregarious Sergio explained all of this to me with gusto.

I met Sergio Joseph Savini a few hours before at freshman orientation. A short, barrel-chested Sicilian American boy with a well-manicured goatee and a blue-suit-and-tie, Sergio was a ringer for Mets catcher Mike Piazza. (Amusingly, Sergio saw me as a ringer for Giants quarterback Dave Brown, so he referred to me as "Dave Brown.") While I had fallen out of the practice of dressing in suits for school, I had picked Sergio out of the crowd because he was the only formally dressed freshman, and I presumed he was a fellow of taste and discrimination

that I could relate to. Straightaway, I appreciated him both for his love of opera — he played a 1953 recording of *Tosca* featuring Maria Callas on our drive to Letchworth — and in food — he made me a fantastic penne alla vodka.

Still, the upper-middle-class graduate of Chaminade Roman Catholic High School grew up in financial security with a lawyer father and a primary school teacher mother that was a financial cut above my own upbringing. Mom never did buy that second house in Pennsylvania for Dad, but Sergio's family boasted a main home in Nassau County they lived in throughout the year, and a summer beach house in Suffolk County. I had the impression that Sergio and his parents could buy and sell my family three times over, which was why he was an ardent capitalist and could not help but express deeply libertarian sentiments once every three minutes. I'll admit that it probably doesn't take long for people to figure out I have an anarcho-socialist worldview, but this fellow never changed the record. His speech was also peppered with businessman and lawyer lingo and clichés. At some point, he must have gotten advice from a marketing maven that people love to hear their own names spoken aloud, so he called people by their names unnaturally frequently. He was, overall, a bit too "Anthony Scaramucci" for my taste. It also didn't help that his Catholicism was textbook Opus Dei. Monsignor Tobin would have wanted to adopt him. After three hours in his presence, I went from loving Sergio to deciding I could take him or leave him. After the fourth hour, I never wanted to see him again, but wasn't sure how to jettison him from my presence without being overwhelmingly rude.

Awkwardly for me, Sergio took to me far more than I took to him. As we drove back to campus, he started praising me for being a good Italian: "You seem cool, Dave Brown. You like a good calzone that doesn't drip grease, Fellini, and *Il Trovatore*. I just don't understand why you'd waste your time majoring in the humanities when you grew up eating, drinking, and breathing it. You live the humanities. You don't need a degree in it."

"And why would I waste my time majoring in business?" I asked. "I've already seen *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and learned all of Quark's 'Rules of Acquisition.' That's the whole major right there. And I'm not

willing to take an oath swearing to dismantle the EPA. That's not my jam."

"I guess you're here to *find* yourself. I already know who I am. I don't need to find myself. I found out in high school. I'm here for a certificate to get a job. I'll be spending four years sleeping through the easiest classes in the world until they release me into the wilds."

"You sure you know who you are?" I asked. "I thought I knew what it meant to be Italian Catholic. Then my best friend died in a car accident. Now I'm not so sure how I feel about anything. Being an English major and a Medieval Studies minor will help me figure it all out."

"Be a business major! Italians are businessmen. The Medici invented capitalism."

"And Saint Francis invented anarcho-socialist Roman Catholicism. And Pasolini was some sort of iconoclastic Communist."

A freakishly wide rictus smile froze on Sergio's face. "Please, say it ain't so, Dave Brown! You're not a Liberation Theology Catholic, are you? That would be too much to bear. Do me a favor. Don't go to the Newman Community at Geneseo. They're all hippies there. I went to a mass there when I came to tour the place last spring. The priest talked about the importance of cutting funds to the military to underwrite better healthcare, education, and reparations for slavery. That's not a church I want any part of."

I frowned. "I remember that part of the Bible. Jesus considered paying for enough loaves and fishes to feed everyone who had come to hear him preach. Then he told Judas to keep the money in reserve so he could buy a bunch of intercontinental ballistic missiles instead."

Sergio took his eyes off the road to look at me. "You're a weird guy, Damien. Weird."

I arched my eyebrow at Sergio. "Seriously? You really think Jesus was a war hawk and social Darwinist who wanted to give gay people electro-shock therapy?"

Sergio sighed. "This isn't that complicated, Dave Brown. You should know all this by now. As Catholics, we should believe that the U.S. Constitution is not as important as the teachings of the Magisterium. What we need to do is, essentially, become politicians and judges and rewrite the laws of America to conform to Catholic doctrine. Our

end game is to make illegal all forms of sodomy and birth control. We should be doing everything in our power to transform America from a democracy into a Roman Catholic theocracy. That, or we should promote libertarianism and the incremental dismantling of the federal government. Those are our two big strategies. Either way, that means voting Republican up-and-down ballot. As Catholics, we cannot vote Democrat, ever. Catholics who vote Democrat should be excommunicated.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, whatever, crazy man! Go back to smoking peyote. Talk like that validates the stereotypical liberal view that religious Catholics are enemies of the state. I don’t want to see that kind of anti-Catholic bigotry validated.”

“I’m serious. I’m part of a concerned Catholic citizens brigade. You should join!”

Oh, fuck. The liberals are right about us, aren’t they? I grit my teeth as I spoke to keep myself from shouting at Sergio. “True religious people shouldn’t be schemers in secret societies. We should have faith in God’s plan for humanity, and not be creepy, cynical, and atheistic in our political maneuvering. Plotting a Christian takeover of America is, by nature, an unchristian enterprise. It makes no sense.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being practical and strategizing.”

“Maybe, but you’re assuming you’re backing the right horse and that justifies your being sleazy. I’m becoming increasingly convinced the best way to promote old-fashioned family values is to vote for liberal Democrat candidates who make sure we all get the living wages and clean drinking water we need to keep a traditional family afloat.”

“That’s really counter-intuitive.”

“Isn’t it? And yet, the best way to get people to read is ban books. People are weird. If you want a conservative society, you should always vote liberal. Strange, but true. Install an all right-wing government, and you’ll turn everyone — even my mom — into Huey P. Newton! Well, not everyone. My dad would probably love living in a totalitarian society.”

Sergio laughed. “I think I would, too!”

I frowned. I was the one who made the joke, yet I didn’t feel like laughing.

My last summer on Staten Island was dreadful, largely because

Mom, who had chosen my college and my major, was miserable that I would soon be leaving home and going to a school six hours drive away. To deal with the coming separation anxiety, Mom suppressed her exploding emotions and spent the entire summer cleaning the house in quiet, existential despair. Red-faced, breathing heavily, carrying large baskets of laundry and vacuum cleaners up and down the stairs of our three-story house, she spent the whole summer looking within an exhalation of following in her mother's footsteps killing herself with excess housework. I tried to yell her into resting. I hid the broom. I attempted to sabotage the vacuum cleaner. These efforts all failed. Surrendering, I hid in my bedroom all summer reading comic books like *Batman vs. Predator*, *Batman vs. Judge Dredd*, and *Calvin and Hobbes*. I read a lot of Alan Davis' *Excalibur* comic books because of my Kitty Pryde crush. (Kitty Pryde was basically Arwen as a member of the X-Men.) Thankfully, Dad was better at dealing with his emotions than Mom. One evening, he visited me in my hiding place. He hugged me, told me he would miss me when I was gone, and cried. As for Leo, we had a perfectly fun summer, playing video games, making fake radio shows, reading comics together, taking walks locally, and hiding from Mom. During our funniest interaction, Leo joked about his plan to take over my bedroom the moment I was gone.

I exaggerated a pained expression. "You'd do that to me?"

Laughing, Leo replied, "You know how younger brothers are! We're all a bit like Loki!"

To help me plan my dorm room décor in advance, Dad took me on a special trip to Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Material Store on West 30th Street in Manhattan, where we picked up some cheesecake art. I grabbed two inoffensive posters — *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *Silent Running* — and bought glossy glamour photos of the usual suspects: Emma Thompson, Gillian Anderson, Monica Bellucci, Gong Li, Veronica Carlson, and Ann-Margret. As a gift to me, Dad paid for all sexy artwork not featuring "washed-out blondes," which amounted to me paying \$38 for my ten photos of Veronica Carlson.

At the end of the summer, Dad helped me load up my car with materials for college. It wasn't much, so it all fit in the small trunk and back seat. My entire wardrobe made it into two large suitcases.

I packed up my desktop computer and printer, the usual toiletries, and bedsheets. I took a couple of boxes of comic books. I opted not to bring a television, VCR, or video game console. I would not have a cellphone (since regular people didn't have access to that kind of technology at the time). As a freshman, I would not be allowed a car on campus. On the day of our departure, Dad took out his huge road atlas, traced the driving route, and wrote the directions in blue pen on the back of a legal-sized envelope: I-278 W to I-80 W to I-380 N to I-81 N to NY-17 W to I-390 N. We would pass SUNY Binghamton at the halfway mark. As we drove by it, I planned to place my hand on the passenger side window, stare wistfully at the highway exit, and say, "Good luck in college, Arwen." Another three or four hours later, we would arrive. Dad would then help me unload the car, leave me in my unfurnished room, and depart. Leo and Mom would stay home so that there was enough room in the car for my belongings. That was the plan.

As I finished packing the car up, I saw my man Larry Birnbaum fiddling with his motorcycle on his driveway. I asked him how he was feeling. He looked up. "Much better. Thank you for getting me that medicine. I really appreciate it. Hope it wasn't too much trouble?"

"For you? You're the nicest dude on the block!" I was talking too loudly and waving my arms about too much, because this might be the last time I saw him for a while. If my over-the-top performance bothered Larry, he didn't show it. He waved his wrench vaguely at the houses up and down Kell Avenue. "I keep telling them they need to be friendlier to you guys. We all live on this block, right? I don't want to speak ill of my neighbors, but I do think they can be a little bit unfriendly to people who don't attend our synagogue. I try to do better than that."

"Some 'try.' You succeed." I meant what I said wholeheartedly but winced inwardly when I realized I had accidentally quoted Humphrey Bogart from *Casablanca*. Luckily, Larry hadn't noticed. Finished loading, I walked back inside to say my goodbyes to Mom and Leo. I found Leo waiting for me. "Did you just have another heartwarming talk with Larry?" he asked.

"I guess so," I said.

"Unbelievable," Leo muttered, exaggerating how upset he was for comic affect. "Some people have all the luck. All I get is woken up early by his motorcycle! Vroom vroom!"

Mom appeared, wearing her sunglasses indoors so I wouldn't see her tears.

"Sunglasses!" I exclaimed. "You're adorable! Little Mumu is adorable!" I threw my arms around her and gave her my anaconda hug.

"I promised myself I wouldn't cry," Mom whimpered.

"Too Cute for Words!" I bellowed, kissing Mom three times on each cheek. "TCFW!"

"You be good and have a great time in college," Mom said. "I think it is a good school."

"It should be good," I said softly. "If it isn't, don't worry. I MAKE MY OWN FUN!"

"That's good," said Mom. "I know you do."

"Because most people and places are BORING AND HOSTILE! HAHAAHA!"

Leo laughed. "Cheeseball."

"Uh-oh." I looked about as if some sort of alarm had gone off, distracting me from hugging Mom. "The Cuteness Detector is going off. A second source of cuteness has registered." I let go of Mom, rushed over to Leo, scooped him up in my anaconda grip, and gave him four kisses on each cheek. "TOO CUTE FOR WORDS! TCFW!"

Eight hours later, including a commute, some pit stops at gas stations, and a dinner stop-off at a Cracker Barrel, Dad helped me finish unloading all my belongings from the car into a vacant, white-walled, ground-floor dormitory room. The room was eleven-feet by twelve-feet, with one set of bunk beds, an army cot propped up on four vertical cinder blocks, a closet, and one dresser. There was no décor anywhere. Even the floor was white-tiled and carpet-free. The room was set off from a suite in which a common living room of twelve-by-twelve linked two more rooms, identical to this one, only those contained two army cots and no bunkbed, because my suite was the only temporary triple. I would be sharing it with two fellow non-smokers, Tomo Ogata, a Japanese American student, and Mike Zhōu, a Chinese American student. I had not met them yet and did

not know their majors or what part of New York they grew up in. Arriving first meant that I did not get the leftover drawers and closet space after the room had been picked over by the others. On the other hand, with no one else around, the room was sparse and lifeless and terrifyingly silent. I feared I had been imprisoned in an empty army barracks.

Dad stood by the entrance to the room. "I guess I should head off."

I stuck my hands in my pockets. "Yeah."

"Your roommates will be along soon." Dad started to turn to go. Then he realized I didn't want to be the only soul left in the suite after he'd gone. Dad patted my shoulder, reassuringly. "You know how I know you'll be fine? Nobody alive has conversations the way you have conversations. The stories you tell me. Crazy stuff, really. More like lost scenes from *Pulp Fiction* and *Clerks* than any conversations I've ever had. If even half of the stories you've told me are true, it really blows my mind."

I chuckled. "My stories are all true."

"I can't deal with them *all* being true. I'm having trouble enough dealing with *half*."

I laughed. "Well, my stories are all between eighty-three and ninety-eight percent true."

Dad smiled thinly. "Worst comes to worse, even if you don't enjoy being here, I'll expect you to have many, many outrageous conversations with people. I'll want you to report them all back to me, but only after I've taken my blood-pressure medicine."

"I have a feeling you're right."

"I'm trying to figure out if I'm jealous of your nutty encounters or glad I've led a much more boring life than you. Since leaving the Bronx and my gang of criminal friends, anyway."

"Yeah, I'm the same. I'm not sure if I'm jealous of your boring life." *Or happy I keep bumping into characters straight outta Richard Russo, Shirley Jackson, and John Kennedy Toole.* "I think I can do well in college with the homework part and the learning to do my own laundry part, but I'm worried I really won't make any friends at all. My record is spotty."

Dad stopped himself once more from going. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life. I’ve got a lot of demons. Still, I own my mistakes, and I’m on a first-name basis with all of my demons. I know I’m a screw-up. If I let someone I care about down, I’ll be the first to admit it. Of course, if you enjoy throwing my faults in my face, like Beatrice used to, maybe I’ll be in less of a hurry to own up to what I’ve done. As far as you’re concerned? I know you. You know your own flaws better than anyone else does. You don’t need them pointed out. You do the best you can. When you make a mistake, you apologize. Your record isn’t spotty. It’s good. You’ll be behaving the same way here, so you should be okay. Nobody can ask any more of you than that.”

After Dad left, I sat forlornly on the military cot, staring at the four blank, white walls. The room felt like a coffin. There was a window with white venetian blinds drawn down over it. I peered through the blinds onto an expansive parking lot. Did this window face the Genesee Valley, but I couldn’t see it well with this parking lot between me and it? “I was promised a room with a view,” I said out loud to myself, chuckling and pretending to be addressing Maggie Smith. “Perhaps we can switch rooms with Mr. Emerson and his son.”

No, this place did not feel like home. I needed to do something to make me feel safe and welcome here, without another soul in sight, or I was about to crack up. How did I make myself feel better back home in Staten Island? In a lonely bedroom, in the dead of night? My Wonder Woman statue was back home. My equivalent of a “good luck” gargoyle designed to keep the evil spirits away was my Kelly Bundy cheesecake poster. That was back home, too. Who could protect me from the existential dread of loneliness and death if those two weren’t here to save me? Then I remembered the manila envelope in my suitcase. I unzipped it, produced a glossy photo of Emma Thompson, and taped it up on the wall over my army cot.

“My dear, dear Emma. Oh, patron saint of English majors. I have come to university to study the great works of literature. Please give me your blessing and wish me luck for a happy and healthy four years of college. I want to do my best to become one of the greatest English majors in the history of New York State. I’m going to need your help to pull it off.”

Unfortunately, Emma Thompson did not reply to my supplication.

“Oh, well. I’ll assume you heard me, but you’re a bit busy just now.” Thinking I should at least unpack — but not manspread across a room I was sharing with two others — I emptied my suitcases on the army cot, singing Luis Bacalov’s theme to the Franco Nero film *Django*.

Hours after meeting my roommates, decorating our room together, hitting freshman orientation, and touring Main Street with Sergio, I went to a TKE “Welcome to Geneseo” party with Tomo Ogata and Mike Zhōu. We stood in the backyard of the TKE house — an imposing Victorian home with red curtains covering each window and red floodlights bathing the lawns, making the building look like rural New York’s answer to Castle Dracula. “Come on, Eileen” by Dexys Midnight Runners played on huge speakers behind me, blasting out my ear drums. The yard was filled to bursting with students — a testament to TKE’s monopoly on partying at an isolated liberal arts college surrounded by farmland for at least twenty-minutes-drive in each direction. A couple of dozen junior and senior rubberheads and meat bags in sweat suits, t-shirts, and baseball caps bearing Greek letters and logos from a variety of sports franchises stood by a row of ten tapped beer kegs. They poured foamy beer into plastic cups and distributed them to a long line of freshman girls they hoped to get drunk enough to bring inside the house.

“Where’s Caligula?” I asked.

“I don’t hate this party,” Mike said, adjusting his Lenny Kravitz t-shirt.

“I give this party two-and-a-half stars,” I declared.

Tomo looked around in silent disapproval. Tomo was tall, slim, wore his long, straight black hair in a ponytail, and sported jeans and a *Final Fantasy IV* t-shirt. Despite my existential angst around quiet people, I already knew I felt more in sync with the quiet Tomo than I did the overly talkative Mike and his extensive 90s dance music CD collection.

I looked around again at the upperclassmen boys and the freshmen girls. “I feel like the frat guys are here for an orgy and the freshman girls are here for a party and that is a recipe for disaster. The girls didn’t get the memo that this is a ‘Save the Bear’ party. I want to get out of here. And I don’t think I want to come to any more of these parties.”

"I agree," nodded Tomo.

"I'm stayin'," said Mike. "And you're being alarmist, and no fun. These girls can take care of themselves. They don't need you biting your nails on their behalf."

I shrugged. "Maybe these frat guys are fun and I'm just not. This isn't my scene."

Obviously, if the Greek organizations had a near monopoly on event planning in this college, choosing to boycott all their future shindigs would do incalculable damage to my social life. Still, I was never going to go for any gathering of this type. I had moral objections to fraternities. I didn't like hazing. After spending my entire sixth grade being bullied and tortured, I wasn't about to bring more torture upon myself for the glory and honor of joining an all-male organization of mostly athletes and business majors. And I would never eat an ookie cookie to earn the right to join any organization, no matter what it was. Fuck that! Besides, what would I have in common with the average fraternity boy? Probably less than nothing.

Tomo and I downed our one beer, tossed our plastic cups in the garbage, and walked back to our suite on the south side of campus in Nassau Hall, twenty-minutes away on foot. We returned to the suite we shared with Mike and four other freshmen. My desktop computer, a futon, a rocking chair, and a coffee table had materialized in the common room over the course of the several hours since my father's departure. In each corner of the suite was an adjoining room designed to accommodate two students. In addition to the room I was tripled in with Tomo and Mike, there was the room that housed Hernan Vallejo and Eladio Salazar and the room that held Hans Richter and Mike Gustafson. Tomo, Mike, and I joked that there was the White Room, the Hispanic Room, and the Asian Room, and I was the odd one out: the Italian shoehorned into the Asian room by mistake. I reassured them that it didn't bother me in the slightest, and it didn't. I took to them both quickly, even if I preferred Tomo's company. As Tomo and I entered the common room, Hans Richter and Mike Gustafson passed us, heading out into the hall, smelling of way too much Drakker Noir. "I'll be seeing you guys at the TKE party later, right?" Hans Richter asked, as he closed the door behind him.

"SEE YOU AT THE PAH-TY, RICHTER!" I yelled, doing my best Schwarzenegger.

"*Total Recall*," Tomo observed, stone-faced.

"I'm not really going back to the party, but that was too perfect a set-up to pass up."

"It was pretty funny," Tomo said, looking as if he didn't find it funny at all. Then the widest smile spread across his face. I loved it whenever he would do that: go from looking impassive to busting out the world's biggest grin. His smile-reveal made me happy to be alive.

Crossing the common room, we passed the wide-open door to Eladio and Hernan's room. Inside, Hernan and Eladio danced in front of a full-length mirror to Barry White's "You're the First, the Last, My Everything." The scene was so infectiously joyous that none of the four of us minded that the dancing men were combing their hair dressed only in their boxer shorts, tank tops, and gold neck chains. "Hey, guys!" Hernan yelled. "Me and Eladio are jazzing ourselves up to talk to the hot babes at TKE. You guys wanna come in and dance, too?" I was too shy to take him up on the offer. In retrospect, I wish I had. A few years after seeing this wonderful dance routine, I would do a spit-take watching an episode of *Ally McBeal* in which Peter MacNicol's lawyer character John Cage danced to the same song in front of a unisex bathroom mirror to get jazzed up to argue a tough case. Had Hernan become friends with the series creator, or what?

"Cool song," I said. "We just came back from TKE. There are a lot of pretty girls there."

"What are you doing back?" Eladio yelled.

"Not my scene. Reminded me of what Yogi Berra said: 'That place is so crowded, nobody goes there anymore.' It was also a real meat market."

"Sounds horrible!" Hernan laughed. "Let's get over there, fast, Eladio!"

The next song on Hernan's power mix came on: "Stayin' Alive" by the Bee Gees.

"So, seventies music, huh?" I asked. I was glad I wasn't the only one who liked oldies.

"You should talk!" Eladio yelled. "I heard you singing 'Blow the Man Down' three times today, while you were unpacking!"

"I'm not insulting you!" I said quickly. "I swear! I love *Saturday Night Fever*!" My taste in music would become a sticking point with the macho Eladio, who was in Geneseo's ROTC and was frequently offended by what he considered my feminine traits. Any time I listened to sad love songs by Roxette, he would slide a piece of paper under my door that read: "Roxette Sucks." That was when I knew it was time to lower the volume or change the CD. When he wasn't listening to seventies music with Hernan, Eladio was more of a New Age and World Music fan. He converted me to Deep Forest, Adiemus, and Enigma, but I never won him over to liking Marie Fredriksson and Per Gessle. "I came to college to chew gum and sing sea shanties, and 'Blow the Man Down' is the only sea shanty I know," I yelled over the music.

Eladio frowned. "Is this how you really talk, or is that your Deadpool impersonation?"

"Naw! Deadpool is a *murderer*! In my heart, I'm Spider-Man, with Doctor Who seasoning! Also, this is how I really talk."

In keeping with the day's nautical theme, Sergio called out, "Ahoy, there, Tomo Ogata and Dave Brown!" Sergio must have looked me up in the freshman directory because he didn't live in our suite or our building. We were supposed to meet at the TKE party I had only cameoed at, but he came here first. The dapper freshman strode into our suite holding his stomach in to appear slimmer. His posture and military gait gave him a Robocop-like appearance. *Clarence Boddicker, dead or alive, you're coming with me*, I thought. Then I recalled my Shakespeare. Sergio "*doth bestride the narrow world like Colossus, and we petty men walk under his huge legs and peep about.*" Sergio flashed a perfect white smile and shook my hand and Tomo's. "I brought my roommate with me, Lance Faust."

Sergio's reptilian roommate slinked into our common room after him. The lanky Lance stood his ground behind Sergio, inclining his head at us. Sergio introduced me to Lance as a big movie fan, so Lance thought he'd gauge my taste: "You gotta just love *Top Gun*, *Animal House*, *Tango & Cash*, and *Road House*! You gotta! If you love movies, you gotta love *Top Gun*!"

I shuffled from one foot to the other, embarrassed. “I’m more of a *Quiz Show* and *Enchanted April* kinda guy, but the Berlin song from *Top Gun* is a favorite.”

Lance laughed. “Are those movies even real? I’ve never heard of them!”

Sergio said to Tomo and me: “Tomo Ogata and Damien Cavalieri, you guys should rush TKE with us. Come to their Red Zone Party tonight and talk with the gentlemen in charge about the possibility of joining their esteemed organization.”

Tomo laughed. “We just came from there. Didn’t seem that cool.”

Sergio raised both eyebrows. His perfect white teeth and perfect smile froze unnaturally on his face. “You went early? Gave up before ten? Things are probably just getting started now.”

I exhaled sharply through my nose. “Bunch a guys in sweat pants and sports memorabilia? Blaring music. Beer. It all seems a little uncouth to me.”

Lance scoffed. “What did you expect?”

I closed my eyes and pictured something more romantic. “I want a college party with four couples in a room listening to Dave Brubeck’s ‘Take Five,’ drinking Bailey’s Irish Crème, reading Andrew Marvell and Adrienne Rich poems to each other before making love until dawn. In the morning, we have waffles Florentine together and watch the sunrise over Conesus Lake. Then, we switch partners, go back to the bedroom, and fuck until noon. Now, *that’s* a party.”

Sergio frowned. “Is that a classier version of *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*?”

“I know I’m just a freshman, but I would really prefer visiting some nice senior or super senior girls in their homes, where they have home field advantage, and let them set the scene with incense, wine, and candles. And none of the guys go there with roofies, and the sex is consensual, and epic, and beautiful. That’s what I want out of college.”

Lance sucked his teeth. “You want ‘nice’ girls? Never met any ‘nice’ girls.”

I pulled the key to the room I shared with Tomo and the absent Mike Zhōu out of my pocket. “I tell you what, Sergio. I’ll definitely hang out when you go to Main Moon or Pizza Paul’s for dinner. Play

pool in the student center. Have a game of Texas Hold ‘Em. Go see a movie at Cinema 4. But you can count me out of any Greek events from now on. Nothing against TKE per se. I’m sure I’ll find all of them Greeks equally dull, stupid, and morally reprehensible.”

“Dave Brown, this is our first night on campus as freshmen!” Sergio yelled. “Are you crazy? You give up on TKE, you give up on partying for the next four years.”

“What are they, Ma Bell? I hate monopolies.”

Sergio was like a dog with a bone. “I met a lot of cool TKE guys today, Damien. Did you see Chet Gorka at the party? He’s damn cool. Damn cool! I talked to him for an hour today.”

I couldn’t recall what Chet Gorka looked like. I pictured sweatpants, a sweatshirt, and a baseball cap, and a nondescript Caucasian face. All these frat boys looked the same to me. “I talked to him for a minute. He was the one greeting people at the entrance. I think.”

“Yes! Wasn’t he awesome? Wouldn’t you want to be in the same frat as him, Damien?”

“I suppose he’d make as good a fraternity brother as the next guy . . . if the next guy was a chimpanzee’s asshole,” I joked. Sergio was so shocked by what I said that his smile remained frozen, but his eyes moved back and forth between Tomo and I. I imagined Sergio spying through eyeholes poked out of an oil painting portrait concealing a mansion’s secret passageway in a locked-door murder mystery.

Tomo pointed at me. “He’s not going to join any Greek organization no matter what. I’m open to it. I’m just not joining TKE. Those guys were louts.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s the operative word. ‘Lout.’”

Lance frowned. “Dude, you seem to be making the girls at the party out to be innocent little lambs and the TKE guys are wolves feeding on them. But the girls should know what the guys are after. They’ve heard all their lives, ‘Guys only want one thing.’ So, they know! I’d argue the opposite, dude. The guys are the innocent ones. The girls are freakin’ devious. They’re laying traps for the guys. Don’t you hate it whenever a girl goes home with you, you do the nasty, and then she just . . . *decides* . . . the next day that she was raped? So immature and crazy and dangerous. Destroying innocent guys’ lives like that!”

I placed the key in my doorknob lock and was about to turn it when I stopped. I looked back over at Lance with undisguised revulsion. “If six was nine and up was down, what you just said might make sense.”

Confused, Lance looked to Sergio for help. “You know what I’m saying, right?”

Sergio looked nervously back at me. “Yeah, girls do that all the time.”

“Y’all sure ‘bout dat?” I asked. “Cuz I ain’t.”

Lance patted Sergio on the shoulder. “I’m gonna wait outside for you.” He huffed out.

Sergio pointed an accusing finger at me. “Listen up, Dave Brown. You weren’t friendly to Lance just then.”

I avoided Sergio’s gaze. “Please don’t bring that rapist fellow over here anymore. I’d rather not be subjected to his presence.”

Sergio flinched. “You just met him! What makes you think the worst of him?”

“He’s got the stench of brimstone about him. It offends my nostrils.”

The part of Sergio that was the son of a lawyer came to the fore. “You’re using your woman’s intuition? In America, we’re innocent until proven guilty.”

“Last I checked, you’re not Matlock and I’m not on the Ron Goldman-Nicole Brown Simpson murder trial jury. I’m an empath. I can sense evil. He’s evil. And he paused around the word ‘decides.’ Dead giveaway. Might as well get a tattoo on his head that says, ‘RAPIST.’”

Tomo spoke up. “His body language *was* all wrong. I’m with Damien on this.”

“Don’t trust Damien’s instincts, Tomo Ogata! His taste and judgment are in question. Did you know, his favorite Pink Floyd album is *Momentary Lapse of Reason*!” Sergio sighed and put his hands in his pants pockets. “Besides, we men should stick together.”

“Why?” I asked. “Most men blow dead moose. In my experience, if bad shit goes down, it’s always the dude’s fault, and the girl always gets the blame.”

“Wow. Just the opposite is true. Women are wicked.”

“Behind every wicked woman is a male oppressor who took away all her better options.”

"Tomo Ogata and Damien Cavalieri. Two traitors to their gender." Sergio waved dismissively at me and Tomo and left the suite.

"And what a magnificent gender it is," I muttered. Once the interlopers had left, Tomo and I walked into our tiny dorm room, still cramped but at least decorated by the three of us to reflect our complimentary tastes and interests. After playing paper, scissor, rock, I was saddled with the top bunk, but that wouldn't last more than a week. I got up too often in the night to pee and kept waking the other two up by leaping off the top bunk and taking too long to scramble back up when I was done. In the end, I got the bottom bunk. This meant that my Emma Thompson pin-up had to be moved three times before she found her a permanent spot above my head to guard me as I slept. In our three-way conversation about where to store all our clothes, Mike and I settled on splitting the closet space. Tomo claimed the dresser, primarily because he needed the top of it to place his TV, VCR, SEGA Genesis, and Super Nintendo on. He had a ton of video games for both stations I'd never played and an extensive collection of anime films on VHS I'd never seen. In another bonus, Tomo had sprung for cable television, which I'd never had growing up. It took me less than a week to determine that cable television was mostly rubbish except for MTV (I loved the *Oddities* and Beavis and Butthead and Daria), Comedy Central (which broadcasted *Heathers* thrice daily), Turner Classic Movies, and the SCI-FI Channel (which showed repeats of *Dark Shadows* and a lot of Full Moon movies). For broadcast television, I liked NBC for *Seinfeld*, *SNL*, and *NewsRadio* and local networks for syndicated shows like *Babylon 5* and, in a year or so, *Buffy* and *Xena*.

"Up for TV?" I asked. "Maybe the Science Fiction Channel is showing *Bloodstone: Subspecies II*! Oh, and I'm sorry if I'm already proving myself boring and militant."

Tomo shook his head. "Nah. There's got to be more to partying around here than the Greek organizations. We'll figure it out. But we can't spend four years watching the Science Fiction channel together instead of going out on the weekends."

"We can't? I was going to really lean in on the Science Fiction channel plan. Maybe I could play your copy of Super Mario World. I

need to see what Mario has been up to since the last time I saw him, back in Super Mario Brothers 2.”

Tomo pursed his lips. “Mike says he’s addicted to MUDs.”

“Say what?”

“Multi-User Dungeons. Text-based games. Watch out you don’t get addicted to video games and watching TV,” Tomo warned. “Don’t be like Mike.”

I sighed. “It’s an alternative to frat parties.”

Tomo turned his television on to the Science Fiction channel. The picture came into focus halfway into the opening credits of an Italian horror film I’d neither seen before nor heard of. We had just missed the title but were in time for the names of Italian cast and crew members written in bone white letters in an elegant font, punctuated by a minimalist, music-box score. The ominous opening scene that followed involved a wholesome-looking ingénue walking out of a European airport into the driving rain and hailing a cab. “An Italian film *and* horror? If I watch this, I’ll honor my mother *and* father,” I said.

“I’m getting us a snack.” Tomo went off to find the student study lounge down the hallway to cook us up some popcorn. The lounge in question included couches to loaf out in, a television, table-and-chairs, public microwave, toaster, vending machines, water fountain, and an empty fish tank with a bag of Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Crackers stuck inside it as a sight gag. While Tomo was off making the popcorn, it took me all of three minutes to become engrossed in the oddball foreign film. I was equally repulsed, terrified, and fascinated by its decadent beauty and claustrophobic atmosphere. “What is this? The greatest horror movie ever made?”

Tomo came back with the popcorn in time to see a blonde woman’s head smashed through a bedroom window. A hairy, demonic hand clawed and stabbed her chest open, exposing her still-beating heart. The creature knifed her in the heart, wrapped her neck in a telephone-wire noose, and tossed her corpse through a brilliantly colored, stained-glass skylight. I covered my face, watching the violence through fanned fingers that obscured my view of the butchery.

Tomo laughed gleefully. “Those special effects aren’t convincing at all!”

"Jesus!" I was scandalized. "That killing was sadistic! I'm good at willing suspension of disbelief, so the last thing I need is a *more* convincing still-beating heart getting stabbed."

Tomo sat down on his army cot, placing a ceramic bowl with his share of the popcorn in his lap. Once he was settled, he reached over and handed me the half-portion of popcorn remaining in the microwaveable bag. An equitable split. "Don't make yourself believe what you're seeing if it freaks you out. Keep yourself at a distance from it and pick it apart, like I do."

"Whoever made this movie is a maniac, a misogynist, and a genius."

"Aha!" Tomo declared. "This is *Suspiria*."

"Is this late Mario Bava?"

Tomo shook his head. "Dario Argento. I heard a crazy rumor that his mother ran off with her boyfriend on Christmas Eve when he was just a kid and he never forgave her. That's why he's got these violent murders of women who take forever to die."

"Damn," I said. "And I thought *my* mom ruined Christmas one time! If that's true, it sounds like Dario could use some *serious* therapy."

"I might be wrong. It might just be a plot point in the movie he made with Jennifer Connelly, *Creepers*. Or maybe it was another movie? *Deep Red* opens with an evil Christmas."

"Jennifer Connelly? Cool." *I wonder if Mitchell ever saw that one.* "Sounds to me like Argento hates Christmas more than Tim Burton does. And that's saying something!"

"Fair warning: Since this is an Italian horror movie, we are in for lots of gore and a plot that makes no sense whatsoever," said Tomo. "Still, I can stick with this film tonight."

"Cool. But here's hoping not too many more women get tortured slowly to death."

Tomo laughed. "I think you may be in for a rough movie night, Damien."

Less than an hour later, a ballet student fell into a pit of razor wire.

I covered my eyes again. "Mother of God! That poor girl! This is appalling!"

Tomo laughed and gave me some more popcorn to calm me.