

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Frenemy of the State

August 30, 1994

To: KirbyAndDitko4ever@hotmail.com

From: KAhearne@albany.edu

August 30, 1994, 2:00 p.m.

I can't believe the story you just told me about your first college party. You stayed about twenty minutes and left after one tiny plastic cup of beer? I told Salty about it. He spent all day yesterday telling all of SUNY Cortland about what you did. You're now famous in SUNY Cortland. No one can believe someone like you exists. Now they all want to meet you to see you with their own eyes. If you visit Salty, you'll definitely get some play out of this.

I just had an email from David Litvinov. It was terrible. It was all about how he lost his virginity, had sex with three different women in one weekend to get a hat trick, and how he thought that going down on a girl would taste bad, but it was surprisingly sweet. He called me up an hour after I read it and said the same thing to me, verbatim. I found out from Salty he told the same story to him, word-for-word. Here's the problem with David: he's nice, but he prepares his stories in advance and tells them over and over the same way. He also gives himself head.

SUNY Albany is okay. You shoulda come here. This place is like a small city. More students means more girls for you to chase. Geneseo is a damn sandbox next to Albany. You're gonna run out of dating options over there fast. I have lots to tell you, but I want to keep this short. Your email to me was way too long. I only read about half of it. No. I read a quarter of it.

Try going to another party and staying for more than five minutes, will you, psychopath?

Kyle

P.S.—I know you're watching *My So-Called Life*.

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To: KAhearne@albany.edu
 From: KirbyAndDitko4ever@hotmail.com
 August 30, 1994, 9:00 p.m.
 Hat trick? Must be tough to be David.
 What's *My So-Called Life*?
 Damien
 P.S.—That short enough for you?
 P.P.S.—You know, I just want someone to frickin' talk to!

To: KirbyAndDitko4ever@hotmail.com
 From: DLitvinov@humnet.ucla.edu
 August 30, 1994, 3:12 p.m.
 Damien—

This email business is great, isn't it? How did we survive so long in Staten Island without it? LA is overwhelming but great so far. I went to this bar in L.A. to see the Mighty Mighty Bosstones, and who did I see at the bar but Mark Hamill?!? I had to go up to him. I said, "I don't want to bother you, Mr. Hamill. I just wanted to say, you're my hero: The very best version of the Joker of all time in *Batman: The Animated Series*!" He smiled a little and he said to me, "That's not the one I usually get!" Get it? *Because he usually gets Luke Skywalker!*

I can't remember if I told you, but I'm a film production major and theater minor. I haven't had too many exciting developments in film yet, but I've already got a great theater gig going working for the Royal Shakespeare Company. I'm a personal assistant to these two PBS types you probably know well: Ian McKellen and Olivia Williams. (I think Ian was the villain in the *Scarlet Pimpernel* miniseries you like.) They're touring the states doing a fascist-themed production of Richard III. I just taught Olivia how to use Hotmail, a day or two after I mastered it myself. She's trying out for a role in a Bill Murray movie called *Rushmore*, and we are reading lines together. I've attached a photo of us here. I kinda wish you had come to UCLA and you could've been in the picture with us!

So, I've only been in L.A. a couple of weeks, and — crazy of crazies — I had sex with 3 different women in 1 weekend. Hat trick! I didn't just lose my virginity, I killed it! Get this: I was worried going down on women would taste bad, but it was surprisingly sweet each time.

Gotta run. Olivia wants me to pick up her dry cleaning and Ian wants to do his "Winter of discontent" monologue for me.

Peace Out,

David

P.S.—Have you seen *My So-Called Life*? I've caught a few episodes. I think you'd dig it.

P.P.S.—You need to read the comic book *Hellboy*. I'm getting a B.P.R.D. tattoo tomorrow.

To: DLitvinov@humnet.ucla.edu

From: KirbyAndDitko4ever@hotmail.com

August 30, 1994, 9:11 p.m.

Please give Olivia Williams my name, address, phone number, and this photo of me.

Grazie,

Damien

P.S.—When's *Rushmore* coming out?

P.P.S.—I'll check out *My So-Called Life* soon. There's a comic called *Hellboy*?

P.P.P.S.—That Mark Hamill encounter? The greatest story ever told!

To: KirbyAndDitko4ever@hotmail.com

From: DMargaritis@cortland.edu

August 30, 1994, 5:57 p.m.

Fag boy!

I heard about your first frat party at Geneseo. You're a madman! You need to go out, get drunk, get laid, and stop being a raving lunatic. . . . On the other hand, you're hilarious. Never stop being you.

But please, for the love of God, have some sex already.

Salty

P.S.—If you get an email from David, don't read it. Unless you want to hear his deep thoughts about how good muff-diving tastes and read him bragging about meeting Luke Skywalker and teaching some kinda/sorta hot British stage actress how to use email.

P.P.S.—Me and Kyle are both convinced you're watching *My So-Called Life*.

To: DMargaritis@cortland.edu

From: KirbyAndDitko4ever@hotmail.com

August 30, 1994, 9:26 p.m.

Salty—I'm still getting the hang of this email business. I see there's a feature to block certain people from emailing you. I think I figured out how it works, but I'm not sure.

Can you email me back? If the email bounces, I got it to work. If it doesn't, let's try again.

Hugs and kisses,

Damien

August 29, 1994

My first college lesson was an upper-level course on the complete works of all the Brontës (Branwell included), which I had no business taking as a freshman. Of course, that's why I took it. I was a creature of habit and loved accelerated learning and hanging out with folks a tad older than me. I found myself among fifteen sophisticated juniors three years my senior, sitting at wood-tablet arm-desk folding chairs organized into a large circle, facing one-another. None of these upperclassmen had the callow freshman look found on my fellow first-year residents of Nassau Hall, nor were they afraid of "not getting an A" or "not graduating" or "not being able to afford" Geneseo's dirt-cheap tuition. Instead, these were majors with a passion for British literature and

feminist empowerment that was a joy for me to behold. I'd seen this level of enthusiasm for learning among the STEM enthusiasts I was in ALEC grammar school classes with, but I had never seen so many humanists sitting in one room, driven to explore the same subject. I had finally found my tribe! I made it through the Green Door! Boom!

In fact, I felt so safe and at ease among fellow English majors that I missed the most glaringly obvious detail about the class.

Dr. Zachary McGovern, a white, Brillo-haired professor in tan dress pants and a powder blue, open-collared shirt walked into the room and sat at the empty silver chair in front of the blackboard, at the circle's twelve o'clock position. He looked me in the eyes. "Hi, Damien!"

"Um . . . hi?" I paused. "Have we met?"

Dr. McGovern chuckled. "No, but you're the only one here who could be Damien."

"Why?" The others had figured out what Dr. McGovern was getting at and all laughed. I didn't get the joke and was becoming frustrated. Was my fly unbuttoned? No. It was not.

Dr. McGovern's eyes widened. "You mean you really haven't noticed?"

I looked around again. "What?" There was some more laughter. I tried again. I saw a circle of female students sitting around me, with no other males in sight save for Dr. McGovern and myself. I slapped myself on the forehead. "Oh."

"You see it now?" the professor asked.

I blushed. "I honestly hadn't noticed." Looking again, I saw that the young women in the class were all roughly twenty, came in a wide variety of shapes, sizes, and ethnicities, and radiated intelligence and good humor. Of course, I felt safe and at home. These were my people.

"Do you feel overwhelmingly alone or overwhelmingly fortunate?" Dr. McGovern asked.

Great. Put the freshman and only dude on the spot, why don't you? This was the true no-win scenario. There was nothing I could say now that wouldn't come off as unnatural or immature. It would also determine my relationship with the rest of the English majors for the next three or four years. My best course of action was total honesty.

If I was gonna get in trouble, it should be for how I really felt. “Both. But I’m also disappointed in any male English major who wouldn’t take this class. After all, the Brontës are kind of a big deal, right?”

“I think so.” Dr. McGovern nodded. “Is this duty, or do you genuinely like the Brontës?”

“I grew up watching the Joan Fontaine and Orson Welles *Jane Eyre* film thirty times. I think that movie is awesome. I thought it was high time I read the book it was based on.”

“A very reasonable position,” the young woman sitting next to me chimed in. She had shoulder-length hair dyed royal purple and wore contact lenses and a matching dress the same color. She extended her hand. “I’m Sarah,” the purple girl said. “Thank you for being here.”

I shook Purple Sarah’s hand. The more I tried not to blush, the redder I got. “Well, you know . . . Charlotte, right? Charlotte is the bomb!”

Sarah smiled. “Of course. And Anne and Emily.”

Since all the literature courses were held in Welles Hall, I only had to walk two rooms down the hall to my next class, which was in a smaller room arranged in a more traditional rows-of-desks-facing-the-chalkboard style. The windows were all thrown open, letting in bright sunlight and the fresh air of the upper quadrangle, currently muddy and dotted with construction vehicles, as it was being renovated. The Beowulf and Old English course was taught by a bearded, frizzy-white-haired Italian man who had taken way too much LSD in the sixties. Dr. Russo introduced the class as being a study in the conflict between matriarchal and matrilineal cultures, represented by Grendel’s mother, and the patriarchal, imperial cultures championed by Beowulf. Most of our readings would be in anthropology and archaeology, reinforcing this interpretation of Beowulf, and in linguistics and Old English. Our first assignment would be to memorize the first page of Beowulf in Old English, beginning with, “Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum, þeod-cyninga þrym gefrunon, hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.” The wild-haired professor addressed a class of ten male students who enrolled expecting the readings to be macho, blood-and-thunder tales in the vein of *Conan the Barbarian*. They were disappointed the class was going to be more about Grendel’s mother than Shield Sheafson.

"Any questions?" asked Dr. Russo.

"Can we write a paper comparing Beowulf to Robert E. Howard's Conan mythos?" a portly young man asked.

"No," said Dr. Russo.

"Can we write a paper about Novalyne Price Ellis?" I joked.

"No," said Dr. Russo. "Though I appreciate your interest in female authors, even if they were associated with Robert E. Howard."

"That reminds me." I put my hands on my hips and regarded the class filled with only male students with mock disdain. "Why aren't you guys in the Brontës class? Too girly?"

"Real literature ended with Chaucer," one pallid-faced boy ventured.

"Why aren't the babes in the Brontë class *here*?" another boy asked, piqued.

"They should be!" I exclaimed. "This is *Beowulf*. How can you be an English major and not take *both* Beowulf and the Brontës? You need *both*, for the love of Dionysus. What is this 'girl literature' versus 'boy literature' baloney? Don't we all just like to read?"

"I don't like books written by women," the portly Conan fan said. "And most of us are history or linguistics majors or anthropologists, not English majors, so get off our backs."

Dr. Russo held a hand aloft and began reciting. "There is, hidden or flaunted, a sword between the sexes. It is an arrogance in men to call frankness, fairness, and chivalry 'masculine' when we see them in a woman, it is arrogance in them, to describe a man's sensitiveness or tact or tenderness as 'feminine.' But also what poor warped fragments of humanity most mere men and women must be to make the implications of that arrogance plausible.' When the sexes interact as equals and read one another's literature, the sword is withdrawn."

The pallid guy was impressed despite himself. "Is that from Beowulf?"

"C.S. Lewis," Dr. Russo said. "*A Grief Observed*."

"Lewis?" I asked. "I thought he was the ultimate conservative male."

"He's more complicated than that," Dr. Russo intoned.

After class ended, the pallid boy cornered me. He wasn't angry with me so much as miffed and amused. "Look at you, sounding all noble. I know the girls in that Victorian class you're taking. They're

all hot. Must be tough to be you.”

I shrugged. “I suppose that’s one of the main perks of being an English major.”

The pallid boy punched my shoulder. “Don’t expect any of them to sleep with you.”

“I suppose that’s one of the main drawbacks of being an English major.”

“Yes.” The pallid boy sighed and looked down at his shoes. “Yes, it is.”

I forced a smile. “That’s okay. I’ve decided to spend my college career reading the great works of the Harold Bloom Western Canon. That won’t leave time to waste chasing around chicks like a cat chases a flashlight. Down with dating! I’ve retired.”

“You make it sound so easy,” said the pallid boy. “Not trying to date. I don’t think it is.”

“Well, I don’t know what I’ve been missing, which means I won’t know what I’ll be missing. Makes it easier! Booyah!”

The pallid boy decided I was a weirdo and didn’t speak to me again. I didn’t blame him. My father had joked around with me about all the unnatural conversations I’d had with people over the years. Today’s Beowulf conversation was weird, but I was pretty sure that this time I was the loopy, over-the-top presence. I still needed to learn how to talk to new people and not sound like I’m putting on a post-modern vaudeville performance.

The Beowulf class, like the Brontës class, was designed for third- and fourth-year students, but I had sauntered into them both on day one. While most freshmen took core curriculum classes their first semester, I came into the school with eighteen advanced placement credits — which amounted to a semester and change worth of credit hours — that tested me out of Freshman Composition, Introduction to Literature, Basic Italian, Western Civilization I, and Art History I. I had been warned that survey classes were watered down and held in auditoriums filled with seventy-five to one-hundred students, so I wanted to take courses for upper classmen. I took two core requirement classes: The Bible as History, which fulfilled a Critical Thinking Core, and Geology, which served as a Natural Science Core class. The rest

of my classes were for the English major. I enrolled in Age of Dante to fulfill a Major Author core requirement, Beowulf for my British Literature pre-Shakespeare requirement, and The Brontës to fulfill my British Literature post-Shakespeare requirement. My disinterest in general survey courses meant I had a deep, graduate school level of specific authors, but was not widely read in either British or American literature, and could be a bit stupid about not knowing basic English major texts like *As I Lay Dying* or *To the Lighthouse*. Geneseo education was also designed around teaching primary texts to education majors who were not likely to go on to get graduate degrees, so we did close readings of the traditional core texts of western literature. Thankfully, we were required to take a Multicultural course, and I chose African-American Drama, in which I read *Fences*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, “Happy Endings” and “Day of Absence”: Two Plays, *The Dutchman*, *The Colored Museum*, and *The River Niger*. One diversity course aside, the literature curriculum was somewhat old-fashioned in its privileging of New Criticism over both deconstruction and cultural studies, and its focus on the writings of dead, white, European males. I would have to wait for graduate school to catch up on literary theory, which I never mastered, and world and multicultural literature, which I embraced wholeheartedly. Strangest of all, I encountered cultural studies, my favorite approach to understanding narrative, for the first time several years after finishing my doctorate in literature in 2005 at Drew University.

My first day of classes wrapped by 3 p.m., but I felt sweaty and overdressed, so I stopped off in my dorm room to change into more comfortable clothing. On a lark, I put on a novelty t-shirt. Then I headed back to the center of campus to explore my new home more fully. I entered the atrium of the MacVittie College Union wearing a t-shirt that read “George ‘The Animal’ Steele Loves Miss Elizabeth” in flowery pink script. The lobby was encircled by information tables representing all the different student organizations, making me wish I had dressed differently for the occasion. Funny how these things always catch me flat-footed. I had no idea it was extracurricular group outreach day. I scanned the banners hanging from each table and approached the handful that spoke to me. I went to the Science

Fiction club table first because it seemed to be the one least fraught with ideological peril. “Any of the folks in this club like *Doctor Who*?” I asked. The fellow sitting at the table stared at me, without saying a word. His T-shirt read “Ask Me About Cthulhu.”

I asked. “I’ve always wanted to know: Is the ‘C’ silent, or do you say it?”

Dude kept staring at me, which I found irritating and disconcerting.

I tried again. “H.P. Lovecraft inspired *Ghostbusters*? Interdimensional rift opens and monsters invade our world? Good movie, but is it me, or is Lovecraft horror about the evils of immigrants, squid creatures, and vagina-shaped holes in the air? You know, I gotta say, as an immigrant who loves calamari and women, that stuff doesn’t move me. I’ll admit, I do like his evil, abandoned town stories, though. Very *Phantasm*. And Barbara Crampton is gorgeous.”

Dude kept staring at me. I placed my fists on the table and leaned forward, putting my face an inch from his. “Are you doing recruitment because you’re the club’s biggest extrovert?”

Dude kept staring at me. “Okay, then,” I said, and moved onto the Dungeons & Dragons table. That one was manned by a freckled fellow in a black suit and black goatee, reclining in a folding chair, sucking on the end of a sky-blue hookah. I greeted him cheerily and informed him that I always wanted to try the game, and maybe play a pretty, petite elf who is both an archer and uses a bola. He stopped smoking his hookah and sniffed. “I don’t allow my players to play women. Not without giving them huge strikes against them for being physically weak and having to manage a menstrual cycle in the woods.”

Taken aback, I placed my hands on my hips, angrily. “Why would I have to be weak? You ever hear of Bêlit, Boudica, Sadie the Goat, or Joan of Arc?”

“What are you gonna use to defeat a Beholder? Your ‘Women’s Intuition?’ Just try it. Roll a d20 and add the appropriate modifiers.” He returned to his Hookah.

“Wow.” I snorted. “That was obnoxious. Fine. Make me a fasting vampire, like Barnabas Collins. I’m not sure if that makes me ‘chaotic good,’ or some form of ‘neutral.’”

Mr. Goatee shook his head. “A self-denying vampire makes no

sense. It is unintelligible.”

“And *inconceivable!*” I joked.

“There’s no such thing as a ‘good vampire.’ It is an oxymoron. If there’s a Paladin in the band, he’ll spend each turn trying to kill you. You would sow discord amongst the party by your very presence. Don’t you want to play any useful characters?”

“Listen, I’m Italian and German. That’s two-thirds of the Axis Powers. I’m a straight, white, middle-class guy. People like me have been the villains in every novel ever written. I either want to play myself — a vegetarian Great White — transplanted to a fantasy setting, or one of the oppressed: a woman or a Black man. See how the other half lives. Is that okay with you?”

“Are you the sort of guy who would rather flirt with the barmaid at the tavern than begin the quest to fight monsters, thereby miring the campaign in the mud before it even gets started?”

I chuckled. “That’s a great idea! I’d love to try that. Think about it. Where is the real adventure? Killing an army of orcs is easy! Talking to the barmaid is hard!”

Mr. Goatee shook his head and resumed his hookah.

“Fine. I’ll reread my old *Endless Quest* and *Choose Your Own Adventure* books.”

I moved onto the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship table. Missy, a striking blonde, looked me over. “What are you, Jewish or Italian? With that nose, you have to be one of the two.”

I wasn’t sure where she was going with this but suspected it couldn’t be good. “Italian.”

Missy clasped her hands behind her back. She wore a white sweater, blue skirt, and a plain gold cross dangling over her chest. “I assumed you had to be either Jewish or Catholic. It made me wonder why you would be interested in IVCF.”

Wow. So racist I want to kiss her, violently. “The sign says you’re ecumenical.”

“Members of all the Christian faiths are welcome,” said Missy.

“Positively badass!” I gave Missy two enthusiastic thumbs up.

“Catholics aren’t Christians,” she said in clipped tones.

“Um . . . that’s news to me! What are Catholics? Scientologists?”

"Have you taken Jesus into your heart and soul and mind? Have you been saved?"

"Who can know that? I won't know if I'm worthy of Heaven until I face judgement."

"But you *can* know that." She pointed at her heart. "Here. What's your go-to scripture?"

"*The Great Divorce*. Or *The Screwtape Letters*."

Missy chuckled. "Those don't count. They aren't in the Bible. Pick a Bible book."

"I haven't read much of the Bible. Job? Matthew? Corinthians, Isaiah, and Exodus?"

Missy was still smirking at me, like I was some sort of talking monkey. "What do you think of all those fake branches of Christianity that elevate mythology, ritual, and holy relics, thereby deemphasizing the importance of true faith? Should fake Christian sects be abolished so they don't tempt people into following their sinful example?"

I spread my hands, confused. "I have no idea. I'm Catholic and we don't do that."

Missy laughed uproariously and slapped her knee. Yep. She's religiously intolerant. Probably racist, too. I was so enraged by her dogmatic beliefs that I was becoming insanelly horny. I tried not to picture all kinds of angry sex with her. I needed to leave soon. "Are you sure you want to chase away a potential convert like this?" I asked, trying one last time to reach her.

"Goodbye," Missy said cheerfully, waving farewell in my face.

"Don't say 'Goodbye.' Say 'Good Journey.'" It is an old Eternian saying. Live the journey, for every destination is but a doorway to another."

Missy was confused. "Is that from the *Masters of the Universe* movie?"

"Yes!" I declared. "And that's *my* religion."

Missy rolled her eyes.

I bowed. "It has been a genuine pleasure, milady."

I went to the men's room to wash my face, then slap myself across the cheek three times. "Calm down, crazy man. Let go. Stop with the Miss O'Sullivan fetish bullshit. Stupid moron." I slapped myself

a fourth time. “Stop wanting to nail sexy Nazi ladies.” To finish up, I gave myself the sharpest slap across the face I could muster — just as another student walked into the restroom. He stopped at the entrance, half in and half out of the lavatory, his hand still on the door. He couldn’t have looked more frightened and disgusted by the tableau if he had walked in on a naked Charles Manson singing “Jeepers Creepers” to himself. “Sorry to interrupt.” He left.

I looked at myself in the mirror. “Well, that was embarrassing.”

After five minutes of pacing around the men’s room, I was sufficiently recovered to go back to the courtyard and see if any of the other organizations seemed any less god-awful than the first few I’d given a peak. The next table had a huge banner hanging over it that read: “SEX! Now that we have your attention, please join the GENESEO COLLEGE REPUBLICANS.” The skinny fellow standing by the banner had an ineptly tended blonde beard and teeth pointing in every direction. He was the stereotype every liberal had of the nerdy right-winger who was conservative because he couldn’t get any action. If he were in a movie, I wouldn’t believe he was a realistically depicted character. It occurred to me that my two former art class compatriots probably saw me as a slightly handsomer version of this walking stereotype, and the realization made me angry. These days, I was six feet tall, wore contact lenses, had filled out to two-hundred pounds, and was well-tanned from all the walking I did for exercise that summer. Next to this dude, I was Franco Nero — even with the braces I found myself compelled to get two weeks before moving here. “What do Republicans actually stand for?” I asked him. “I’ve read two Rush Limbaugh books and listened to his show for a year, and I’m still not sure. He talks a lot about values and patriotism, which I dig. Still, it is poetic-but-empty rhetoric. He also talks a lot of smack about Black people, which I don’t dig.” The kid with the crooked teeth gave me a brochure that laid out the GOP platform surprisingly honestly and shamelessly: no taxes, strong military, pro-death penalty, anti-gun control, anti-environmentalist, anti-gay rights, anti-sexual harassment legislation, anti-immigration, anti-birth control, pro-ending public education, pro-selling off public lands to big oil, anti-affirmative action, anti-welfare, anti-healthcare, pro-NAFTA, anti-union. *Seeing*

it all written out here like this, without the distracting word 'abortion' included, and my parish priest breathing down my neck . . . I agree with . . . how many of these? I started counting how many of the items on the list I instinctively agreed with.

"What do you think?" asked the snaggle-toothed fellow.

"Um . . . I'm not sure why my family votes Republican. We don't agree with too many of these. We like nature and education. We're pro-union, except we think they take us for granted a little. I guess we like low taxes and a strong defense. But some of these other stands . . . anti-immigration? We're Italians, so, we don't hold with anti-immigration laws." I looked up at the fellow. "And you guys want to defund public education while attending a public college?"

"That is correct."

"How's that work, exactly?"

"It isn't as counter-intuitive as it sounds."

"It isn't?" *There's no internal logic to these positions. This platform is as coherent as the plot to Suspiria. There's no thematic connective tissue between pro-death, pro-death, pro-death, pro-death, pro-life. At least the Catholic "consistent life ethic" is consistent . . . Wait. I got it.* "Aha! This is the 'What Would John Wayne Do?' platform."

"Correct," said the blonde fellow.

"I liked *Rio Bravo* and *The Cowboys*, but I've always preferred Jimmy Stewart and Robert Ryan. And Burt and Kirk and the Hepburns."

The blonde man gave me a pitying look. "You prefer the apron-wearing Jimmy Stewart to the man who actually shot Liberty Valance?"

"I never saw that movie, so I don't know what you're getting at."

"You're on the wrong side of history. In the end, Jimmy Stewart's womanish values will fall, and John Wayne's will return."

I considered this. "Since I'm Jimmy Stewart, that all sounds pretty awful to me. But thank you for your time." I returned the brochure and took a few steps back to take in the other tables. I didn't know what Amnesty International was. I wasn't the target audience for Habitat for Humanity, Bacchus, women's lacrosse, or the Womyn's Action Coalition. I was an environmentalist at heart but found environmental activism depressing and impossible to conceive of ever getting anywhere, so the Green Environmental Organization was out. Were there other

options? I stopped briefly at the College Democrats table. Then I remembered Bill Clinton was president of the United States and how much I hated him. I never wanted to be a part of any organization he was a part of. So...no.

I found myself at the Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and Friends table, wondering why I was there. Other than my awareness of the general handsomeness of Franco Nero, I wasn't gay. I guess, as a "friend," I could make myself useful as an ally? If the homophobes caused any kind of dustup, I could jump in and help these folks out in a fistfight? And they could hide out in my room if they ever felt threatened? I wasn't sure what else I could do to make myself useful. I was eager to help, especially given my affiliation with a church that had an organization like Courage built into it. A pleasantly plump junior with a cherubic face led outreach. He stood from his folding chair, shook my hand, and greeted me with far more genuine warmth and charm than anyone else had. "Hi! How are you, today? Are you interested in coming to a meeting?"

"I'm good. And, yes, I am. I would be a 'Friend,' if that's okay."

"Of course! You'd be very welcome! We're always looking for friends. I'm Victor."

Wow. Is this the nicest person I've ever met? I'm not worth such enthusiasm.

I cleared my throat and avoided Victor's friendly face. "I guess I'm not sure if this club is about dating, or . . . ? Because I'm not really dating *at all*, currently. Or ever, really . . . so I'm a bit of a stick-in-the-mud and not a lot of fun, in many ways. Bit of a downer, really."

Victor placed one hand over his heart, held another up to silence my self-deprecating comments. He nodded sagely with his eyes closed. "Listen, listen. A lot of us feel lonely and unloved. There are two things to remember. Firstly, this is a support group for anyone who feels lost and alone, no matter their sexual orientation. Secondly, there's something you should know: Even people who are not currently sexually active have sex lives. In fact, some of the most erotic people and the most erotic relationships are celibate. As Oscar Wilde said, 'Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power.'"

"No shit?" I looked back up at Victor, who was astonishingly

empathetic with me, a total stranger. “Oscar Wilde said that?”

“He sure did.”

“I guess I need to do more Oscar Wilde homework. A lot of the jokes in *Importance of Being Earnest* just soared over my head. Anyway, the thing you said about celibacy sure is a nice sentiment. I’m not sure if I want it to be true in my case, or if I hope it isn’t. I’m going to wind up living my life like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. I think he had an interesting lady friend situation going.” I caught sight of a sign on the table that asked: “How androgynous are YOU? Take our TEST!” I pointed at it. “What’s all that about?”

Victor picked a pink triangle pen and a pre-printed sheet up off the table. “You’re in luck, then.” He asked me a series of introvert/extrovert questions, not unlike the sort I’d encountered taking the MBTI test. I answered instinctively. When we were done, Victor did some rapid calculations. “What do you think you are?” he asked me.

“I have a funny feeling I’m more female than male,” I confessed. “I’m expecting 51% female and 49% male, or some such breakdown. I don’t know what normal results look like?”

“Normal?” Victor winced. “Worst curse word of all time.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll try to remember to shelve it.”

“Aha!” Victor smiled. “You think you might be *slightly* more female than male?”

“Yes.”

He pointed to a graph paper chart divided up into four gender quadrants, and my dot appeared halfway up the sheet and pushed over to the extreme east. “This says you are 51% masculine and 90% female.”

I didn’t understand how the two numbers added up to more than 100%, but I was too embarrassed to ask why they did or exactly what they both signified. Once again, I was finding myself confused by math. “51% masculine and 90% female?” I asked.

“That’s what I got for you.”

I chuckled. “I wonder if those percentages explain everything about my life to me.”

After having a nice conversation with Victor and promising to attend next week’s bus trip to Rochester’s Little Theater to see *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, I headed back to my room.

My triple was empty. Tomo had given me permission to play his video games when he was out, so I spent the afternoon playing *Road Rash 3* on the Sega Genesis. The easy level was too easy for me. I could win the races on my motorcycle with ease. I dialed the difficulty level up to medium and found that no matter how hard I tried, I could not win a single race. *Damn it. This happens when I play computer chess, too. I win one game, the computer figures me out, and I never win again.* I decided the best way to enjoy the game was to ride my motorcycle off road, draw my chain weapon, and kill random cows on the farmland I blasted through. Laughing like a hyaena, I spent the entire race driving on the grass, killing cows. Of course, since I wasn't even trying to win, I lost the race. I never had so much fun playing a video game. I must have murdered a dozen cows. I wiped tears of joy from my face and started a new race.

Sergio appeared at my door. "Yo! Dave Brown! What's all this laughing?"

I glanced up and nodded at him. It occurred to me that Sergio's calculated use of the direct address to curry favor with people didn't quite work when he deliberately got their names wrong as a joke. "Hey, Sergio. Take a seat on the lower bunk. I don't really know who Dave Brown is, so maybe we can lose that nickname?"

"I like it!" declared Sergio.

"Let's make a deal," I said. "You can call me Dave Brown if I can call you Ivo Shandor."

Sergio paused. "Okay, Damien. I won't call you Dave Brown anymore."

I grinned. "Thanks, Ivo."

"*Road Rash 3!*" Sergio exclaimed. "I have the top score in my family. Point of pride for me. I beat my dad, and I never beat him at anything." On screen, my biker avatar whipped his chain through the air and smacked a cow across the face. "What are you doing?" asked Sergio.

"Killing cows," I said gleefully.

"Yes, but that's not how the game is played."

"If the programmers let you do it, then you can do it," I said. I killed another cow.

"Maybe *once*," he complained. "The point of the game is to win races, not kill cows."

"Says you," I giggled. "For me, murdering innocent bovines is the *point* of this game."

A terrified smile spread across Sergio's face. "You're going to at least try to win, right?"

I killed another cow. "Where's the fun in trying to win and losing? More fun to *not* try to win and *kill me some motherfucking cows*."

"But Damien, why would you play a game if you're not going to try to win?" Sergio's terrified smile grew wider, faker, and more desperate.

"Why do anything?" I asked. "I'm convinced I'm never going to get anywhere in this game of life. No wife, no kids, no home, no career, no retirement. The writing is on the wall. I will lose every time. That being the case, I might as well be myself, play the game the way I want to, have as much fun as possible, and kill me some cows!" I killed another cow.

"Are you planning on being a loser and a drag on society?" Sergio asked.

"I'm not planning on it, but nobody is buying what I'm selling," I said. "They're too busy being mean. Have you noticed how *mean* people are? Everyone is convinced they're the only ones who work for a living. *Only they* deserve a cookie. They're so mad that other people expect cookies, too, that they're just assholes 24/7. Me? I know I work hard, but I know other people work hard, too. Frankly, I think we all deserve a cookie! Sadly, none of us will get any cookies, because Bill Gates, Sam Walton, and Donald Trump have eaten them all!" I killed a cow.

Sergio's smile melted away. "Listen, Damien, play the game right or turn it off."

"You're in a guest in my room. You don't get to call the shots here."

Sergio stood up to turn off the system just as the race ended. "Okay, it's over. Don't you dare play another race."

"Okay," I said, only because the game was now, mysteriously, no longer fun. "But I have to save my record." I saved my losses under my new character: *Prince Mamuwalde*. "Guess what my new email handle is? KirbyAndDitko4ever@hotmail.com. I love inventing stupid

code names for myself. But what's the deal with the internet? Is it any good? Every time I look at it, all I find is the Internet Movie Database, Hotmail, Amazon, *Star Trek* fan sites censored by Paramount, and fake pictures of Gillian Anderson's head badly photoshopped on random nudes. Is that all there is to this internet business?"

"It's a work in progress," Sergio said. "There's plenty of porn to look up."

"Porn seems violent to me. I saw this website called *The Bang Bus*. It gave me nightmares. I don't want to spend all my time so worried about the women that I can't enjoy the sex, or I won't look up porn anymore. Though I do like being able to look up terms like 'cock ring' on the internet now. Before, I'd have to ask Salty what a cock ring was, and he wouldn't tell me." I spun around and straddled my chair to look at Sergio, who had returned to sitting on the lower bunk. "Now that you've spoiled all my fun, what do you want from my life?"

"Are you serious about not expecting to succeed?" Sergio asked. "Because I have a plan."

"Uh-oh," I chuckled. "I'm so not interested in your plan."

Sergio pressed on. "Our problem is we are middle-class. Women do not go for middle-class guys. Can we agree on that? Women are drawn to power. They like physically powerful working-class guys and financially powerful upper-class guys. Middle-class guys lack either physical or financial power, so they lack sexiness on any level."

"You're saying we're both Mr. Collins from *Pride and Prejudice*? Sounds plausible."

Sergio shrugged because he had no idea who Mr. Collins was. "We'd be better, more virile Italians if we were bricklayers like our grandparents, or if we became cool Italian investment bankers, like the Medici. We need to pick one of those."

"Or both, like Eric Indelicato plans to," I interjected. "He's a friend from grade school."

"Okay. Or both. But your stupid-ass plan is to choose a girl's major and adopt a girl's political and artistic values. For what? To condemn yourself to an unsexy middle-class intellectual life. Why? In the hopes of making yourself agreeable enough that some borderline cute English major might pity fuck you? Or maybe you can get yourself a pliant

mail-order bride from Russia who will be your consort in exchange for a green card? This is your fantastic plan?"

I raised a hand. "Excuse me. No. I do not want a sex slave. I'm not Thomas Jefferson. And I do not want to turn some poor woman's life into a *Madame Butterfly* hellscape."

"But your options in life will be limited because of your awful plan to be some sort of underpaid teacher or artist! First off, you're surrendering yourself to liberal indoctrination, giving up on your conservative principals, for what? Unattractive feminists? I've seen the English majors here. Six out of ten, tops. And, since you started out Republican, you will never become liberal enough for these leftist English majors. Liberals eat each other, like piranha. They police each other and pick off the moderates. That's you, my friend: you're morphing into a moderate Democrat! Is there anything less respected or more hated than a centrist? Nobody likes John McCain and Joe Biden! Nobody! And yet, becoming them is your life's ambition!"

"Never heard of them." I snapped my fingers. "Hey! Can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot."

"If you killed someone with a handbag, would it be an accessory to murder?"

Ignoring my attempt to derail the conversation, Sergio looked about the room I shared with Tomo and Mike. Sergio instantly intuited which books and CDs were mine. "Women are your Achilles heel, aren't they? They'll be the cause of your downfall."

I laughed. "Thanks for the warning. You're a little late. They've caused my downfall five times already, yet here I stand. I'm a resilient sonofabitch, and harder to crush than a cockroach."

"Just so you know, these feminists you lust after will never respect you for liking John Denver more than Melissa Etheridge, preferring Dante to Alice Walker, or being a Paul VI Catholic instead of an atheist. That's the beginning and the end of the story. I don't care how many 'correct' opinions you allow these English professors and majors to force down your throat. No feminist you are hot for will ever fantasize about being tied up and raped by you."

"What?!?! I don't know what to be most offended by or complain

about first. That—”

Sergio stomped his foot. “Let me finish!”

“Please don’t.”

“Guess what? You know who would hate you most of all if she ever met you? You know who would think you are just the biggest loser of all time?”

“I don’t want to hear it,” I warned.

“Emma Thompson.” Sergio jerked a finger over his shoulder at the glossy photo on my wall. “I know she’s your ideal. Your fantasy girlfriend. Guess what? If she ever meets you, she will have nothing but contempt for you and everything you stand for.”

For all his years of teasing me for being square, berating me for being cowardly, and laughing at my eccentricities, Salty never made me so furious so quickly. For all the relentless bullying Tony Nocerino threw my way, there was a “comic book villain,” ethnic-stereotype-street-tough quality to him that cracked me up, undercutting my ability to hate him. Also, in some ways, Tony and Salty never really saw into my soul. After knowing me for one day, Sergio had intuited exactly what to say to me to make me want to throttle him. I had never known such rage before. I was so angry, I frightened myself.

I did not know why I became so angry, so quickly. I’ve talked about this moment with friends since that day, trying to understand it. I like James Sheridan’s theory best: “Sergio is like your evil double. He’s to you what René Belloq is to Indiana Jones. He’s ‘but a shadowy reflection of you. It would take only a nudge to make you like’ Sergio. ‘To push you out of the light.’” I saw in Sergio what I hated in myself. I feared that, deep down, I agreed with all his most reprehensible opinions. If that sort of evil existed inside me, I needed to root it out. On top of that, I really, really, really wanted Emma Thompson to like me. Telling me that Emma Thompson would loathe me was one step removed from telling a six-year-old girl that she will never get another Christmas present because she was the one child Santa despised most. Sergio couldn’t have come up with a meaner thing to say to me if he thought about it for a year.

In the meantime, I had no idea what to do with all this anger. It bubbled inside me like lava. The room swam. I knew if I jumped

Sergio, I'd unleash something on him I could not control. I closed my eyes. I imagined myself in the dojo with Master Yumi Park. I was safe.

"Are you meditating?" Sergio asked incredulously.

I stayed with Yumi, in my mind, for an entire minute. I opened my eyes. "Women respond positively to men who don't treat them like brood mares. That's my cunning plan from now on. I suspect it will work. And that is why Emma Thompson would not hate me."

Sergio chuckled. "I say you are afraid of life and you are hiding from yourself."

I smiled. "Americans fear new experiences more than they fear anything. They are the world's greatest dodgers because they dodge their own very selves.' D.H. Lawrence."

"Literature." Sergio chuckled. "You knowing that quote and having two dollars will get you a Häagen-Dazs ice cream cone. Let's face it: what are you even gonna read this year? What even passes for literature these days? *The Color Purple*? Some book written in Ebonics?"

I cleared my throat. "I haven't read Alice Walker, so I can't vouch for her skill-level as a writer, but that last thing you said was way too snooty about Black people, for my taste."

Sergio flashed an evil smile. "Maybe you'll at least read one legitimately great book before you graduate. I hope they assign you *American Psycho*."

"No thanks." I shuddered. "I read the decapitated head scene once by accident."

Sergio clapped his hands together, relishing the graphic memory. "Ha! I *love* that part!"

"You *would*. You may actually *be* Patrick Bateman." I paused. "In other news, if you're interested, I have a response to your question about why I like killing cows more than winning."

"Really?" Sergio leaned forward. "Do you? I just assumed you were defeatist."

"Oh, I *am* defeatist, but I have elevated defeatism to an art form. When society's definition of success is sick and diseased, being a loser becomes a sort of heroism, don't you think? I've never come across a successful person who looks truly happy. I rarely want what they have, if ever. It is just as well, because I never will get what they have,

no matter how smart I am. What if I grow up to be funny, kind, religious, selfless, and brilliant? None of those traits translates into success in America because America is an evil country. I will never be successful. I've wanted very few things in life, and the answer has always been 'no.'"

I was only just warming up. Now I was going to unleash upon Sergio. He had asked for it, after all. "This 'no' is usually the result of some borderline arbitrary rule or regulation that has nothing to do with me, personally, but that seems designed by an evil wizard specifically to prevent me from getting what I want. 'Would you like to be in the gifted class and study Italian? Oh, I'm sorry, that's not allowed. If you want to take Italian, you have to leave the gifted program!' What a bizarre rule! What a massive impact it had on my life! What genius came up with that hot one? 'Would you like to go to art school? Sorry, it is only for rich people, and you're working class.' 'Do you like your martial arts instructor? Too bad, her father won't let her teach you anymore.' 'Is this your favorite priest? Would you like to be mentored by him? Sorry, he's only at this parish part-time for one hour a week.' 'Do you like your best friend Mitchell? Too bad. He's dead. God took him.' 'Do you like your father's aunt and cousin? So sorry, they're going into witness protection to hide from your crazy grandmother.' 'Would you like your fellow Italians to treat you as an equal? Sorry, they think you're a bit faggy and a bit intellectual, and they don't understand why you aren't more macho than you are. *Real* Italians are macho.' 'Would you like to date Arwen? Sorry! You can't! Because Hitler. And leukemia.' 'Are you trying to use vaudeville comedy routines to cheer up your clinically depressed family members? That might have worked if they weren't *clinically depressed*, you moron!' I'm always defeated before I even begin by circumstances completely out of my control."

Sergio's frozen smile looked even less natural and his eyes more panicked. "You're referencing events in your life you haven't told me about, but some of those things sound like problems everyone has. I don't think you've gone through anything particularly difficult. Maybe life isn't tough. Maybe you're just soft."

"Just so you know, I'm not crushed. I've never had more fun playing

video games than when I killed cows. I was enjoying not playing to win. You're the one who spoiled my fun by asking me why I wasn't trying to 'win, win, win' like the athlete's dad from *The Breakfast Club*. I don't want to try to 'win, win, win.' Why bother? Knowing that the deck is stacked against me and I cannot win no matter what I do is, in fact, very liberating. Until society becomes more human — maybe more socialist, like in the Netherlands — I will fail. It is inevitable. I'm an INFP. Did you know the business community considers my Meyer's Briggs personality type unemployable? *Unemployable!* Why? Because I'm a fucking human being and not a cipher or a cog in the great capitalist machine. You'd think I'd be the *first* one hired by a boss with a real brain in his skull, not the *last*.

"Here's the problem. I'm only a kindhearted, religious, artistic genius in a world that rewards Philistines, warmongers and pirates. I'm Saint Francis of Assisi stationed in the trenches of World War I. On the one hand, I'm exactly where I'm needed most, if anyone needs me to comfort the frightened soldiers or help broker peace. On the other hand, I'm totally useless in the eyes of the generals who just want to press on with the lunatic plan of going over the top. Well, fuck the trenches and fuck going over the top. I'm gonna take a bath, light some candles, and listen to Enya. While America goes to hell in a handbasket, I'm gonna sit back, relax, and have a good conversation with a nice, smart, funny, beautiful woman. That's my goal in life. And I'm not going to treat her as a prize to be won: a bit of No Man's Land to take. I'll treat her as a human being it is my pleasure to spend time with. For an hour or so, I can be her Brother Son, and she can be my Sister Moon. Sitting with her, having cappuccino at an outdoor café discussing Leslie Marmon Silko, I can glean a few moments peace. My platonic friend and Sister Moon will help me steal a few precious seconds of happiness. And then, some asshole corporate suit will barge in on us. He'll berate me for not helping him steal the last remaining American Indian lands for his oil company to drill on. Why? Because that's what life is all about: stealing lands from Natives to drill on. Anything else is a waste of resources."

Sergio had not listened to a word I said but sat waiting for his turn to talk. He had been on a debate team in school, and he did not

want to understand me so much as defeat me in an argument. He was appalled that I could speak so quickly and so passionately, because it meant he had to wait longer before it was his turn to speak. The longer I talked, the more red-faced he got. When I finally said my peace, he leaped on the silence like a panther. “You want me to subsidize your laziness with my tax money? There’s socialism for you. I’m not paying for your bath time and your Enya and your flirting with other men’s women. Some of us work for a living.”

“Oh, that’s right,” I said. “I forgot. I don’t deserve a cookie. You’re the only one who works hard, so you’re the only one who deserves a cookie.”

Sergio slapped his own knee. “Exactly!”

I snorted. “You want me to switch to your major, and you don’t even like your major. You *know* its indoctrination with no real learning. You’re just gonna mark time and waste four years of your life and thousands of dollars on bullshit. In fact, I guarantee you, the business major is so trivial, you could probably get all the information you learn here in four years in one four-hour human resources orientation on the first day at work. College is going to be transformative for me. You’re gonna walk out of this school no different than you do walking in, except maybe you’ll get even more conservative. I’m not the one telling you what to major in. You’re making a stupid-ass decision and you’re trying to get me to make the same one. The business major is a Ponzie scheme. Pick a real major or shut up about mine.”

“My fake major is going to make me rich. Your real one will put you in the poorhouse.”

I exhaled a long, slow breath. “Will no one rid me of this troublesome libertarian?”

“I’m operating in reality. You’re trying to be the change that you wish to see in the world. I’m going to have a far happier life than you will.”

I closed my eyes. “Dear God, send me a woman to talk to who understands me.”

There was a light knock on my door. I heard the voice of Purple Sarah, my new friend from the Brontës class. “Damien! Me and the girls are going to dinner if you wanna come?”

I snapped my eyes open and looked at Sergio. “This is my friend, Sarah. She’s a guest in my room. *My* guest, not yours.”

Sarah stood in the doorway between the common area and my room, waving to Sergio.

Sergio stood and walked up to Sarah, examining her like a scientist scrutinizing a fungus. “Aha! Is this one of your new pro-choice, baby-killing English major friends? The ones you’d rather be with than cool business majors, who respect the unborn?” This was only the second day I’d known Sergio, and he was constantly offending my sensibilities, but the sledgehammer subtlety at work here seemed extreme, even for him. Was he speaking in radio-show villain dialogue now? Real people didn’t talk like this. If I repeated what he’d just said to my dad, Dad wouldn’t believe it. “Nobody actually talks like that,” Dad would insist. Incredibly, he would be wrong. I jumped out of my seat and pointed an accusing finger at Sergio. “How dare you talk to my friend like that? Apologize!”

Sarah stepped back. “It’s okay. I can go.”

Sergio crossed his arms. “Apologize to a baby-killer? Never.”

In one, swift, motion, I took three steps to close the gap between myself and Sergio, wrapped my arms about his waist, and lifted him up into the air. “Okay, that’s it.” I walked him to the suite exit and deposited him in the hallway. I pointed down the passage to the fire exit. “GET OUT! DON’T SPEAK! GET THE FUCK OUT, OR I’LL KILL YOU!”

Sergio was proud of himself for maintaining his cool as I raged. “You’re just playing white knight to some purple chick.”

“You’re god damn right! This woman is under my protection! Get out!”

“You have no conviction and no credibility.”

The same insult Tobin used? Weird. These lunatic, right-wing Catholics must have all had the same training in the Rhetoric of Tomás de Torquemada. “You want conviction?” I slammed the door in his face. I turned to Sarah. “He’s just some asshole I met yesterday.”

Sarah gestured towards the closed door. “I get shit like that from men at least once a day. I’m so used to that kind of treatment I convince myself I should expect it. Worse. I deserve it.”

"You shouldn't expect it, and you sure as shit don't deserve it."

"The fact that you reacted that way, makes me realize how unacceptable that kind of treatment is. Also, I'm not used to men speaking up on my behalf. So . . . wow. Thank you, sir."

"I'm just upset I subjected you to him," I growled. "It was an accident. He had a nice suit on yesterday. I didn't think it would lead to this horseshit."

Sarah patted me reassuringly on the arm. "You look like you could use a drink. Let's skip the dining hall and go back to the apartment I share with some more friends from our *Jane Eyre* class. We have a big-ass liquor cabinet. Fun fact: My aunt owns her own bar and she taught me everything I know about mixing drinks."

I smiled with my lips closed to avoid revealing my braces. "Now that sounds like an excellent plan."

Purple Sarah turned thoughtful, which worried me.

I asked, "What is it?"

Sarah touched a finger to her lower lip and grinned mischievously. "Say it again."

I scratched the back of my neck, absently. "Say what again?"

"You know. Say it again." She attempted to imitate my baritone but couldn't pull it off. "'This woman is under my protection.' Say that!"

I blushed. "Oh, I can't. I'd feel weird. Did I really say that just now?"

Sarah laughed heartily. "You sure did. Say it again!"

"Please don't make me—"

She clasped her hands together and blinked Bambi eyes at me. "Please, please, please!"

I harrumphed. "Well . . . okay."

"Yay!" she pumped her fists in the air and jumped up and down once. Then she froze and waited for it, her eyes expectant.

I brought my baritone back out of hiding. "'This woman is under my protection.'"

Sarah laughed and clapped. "Whoo! There it is! Stupendous! I can't wait to tell the others you did this! Let's go have some booze with them."

"Yes, let's! I'm starving and I need alcohol."

Sarah smacked her hand to her forehead. "Oh, no! You're a freshman! Are you under twenty-one? You can't have booze! We should forgo the booze."

"I won't tell anyone if you won't," I said.

Sarah sighed. "I better not get you drunk. I'd wind up cradle-robbing a freshman."

I held my arms out to her, a baby waiting to be picked up. "Please, cradle-rob me!"

Sarah laughed. "Okay, let's go. Assuming that nut isn't lurking in the hallway."

"Now I'm scared to open the door." I poked her shoulder playfully. "Age before beauty."

"Ha! No, please. I insist. I'd like you to have the honor of meeting him first."

It was time to cast a Doctor Strange spell of protection. I formed the "hang loose" symbol with both hands and waved them in circles before the closed suite door. "In the name of Riall, scourge of demons, I command you to be gone!"

I opened the door.

The hallway was deserted.

"Thank Christ," I said, deliberately quoting Chief Brody.