

CHAPTER THIRTY

Lost in Siena

January 5, 1997

As the Alitalia flight made its final descent towards Leonardo da Vinci International Airport, I gazed through the airplane window down on a green vista that presented the illusion of a country untouched by industrialization. I had taken in lovely rural landscapes before: on one of my epic commutes between Staten Island and Geneseo, I was astonished to see a perfect rainbow cresting over farmland and livestock off the side of the highway after a heavy rainfall. I had thought rainbows only existed in Lucky Charms commercials, not in real life! Still, this was the grandest green tableau I'd ever witnessed. The contrast with the bird's-eye-view from the puddle jumper that took me from Newark Airport to Boston Logan International Airport on the first leg of my journey overseas could not have been greater. I had seen the usual factory smokestacks belching greenhouse gases into the air off the New Jersey Turnpike.

I took a photo of the gorgeous Italian landscape through the plane window, but the layers of plexiglass and the cloud covering that had crept into view meant I would likely be disappointed in the quality of the photo after I had the film roll developed. I lowered the camera and looked again, deciding to photograph the view with my memory instead of on film. I was surprised how moved I was by the scene. Perhaps I was experiencing the real-life equivalent of the wonder humans experienced taking their first trip through time and space in the TARDIS on *Doctor Who*. As the Doctor asked Ian Chesterton, "If you could touch the alien sand and hear the cries of strange birds . . . and watch them wheel in another sky — would that satisfy you?" *Yes. It would.* This was the trip I had been waiting to take all my life. I had finally escaped from the grime and endless class wars and racial strife of the tri-state area to see my homeland, beloved the world around for its beauty, food, and hospitality. I was a world-traveler, like my mother.

The plane landed smoothly. The long line to disembark was as boring as you would expect. I was relieved when I was able to retrieve my one large roller suitcase from the baggage claim without incident,

and reunited it with my two carry-ons. The airport felt like any other airport I'd been in, but was granted an exotic quality by its liberal use of international languages on signage and the presence of machine-gun-toting uniformed security with bright red stripes running down their pants legs. I knew I was supposed to feel safer by their presence, but there's a reason pictures of these fellas tend not to make it onto "Italy is for Lovers" travel brochures. Somehow, without any of our passports being checked, the seven of us students and our two professor chaperones emerged from the airport onto a modern, urban-looking street that could have just as easily been in Baltimore or Boston. Where the lush greenery I'd seen from the sky went was anyone's guess.

"I'm not liking this," said my roommate, Byron Baldwin, who had never spent much time in cities of any kind, as he had grown up in the world's smallest village in western New York.

"Dr. Valancourt will get us all safely to Siena," I reassured him. "The man is as efficient as a well-oiled machine."

"The man looks like Admiral Ackbar," Byron grumbled. As I suspected, Valancourt had done something to annoy him when we had all met up at the departure gate of Boston Airport to take the same international flight together. Hopefully, it was nothing of consequence.

"Ha! Mean but funny. I always thought he looked like Don Knotts."

"Exactly. He looks like Don Knotts and Admiral Ackbar at the same time. Wait. Check that out." Byron pointed up at a ribbon-shaped flock of black birds soaring through the air in formation, cresting in the sky like a wave. An avid birder, Byron let enthusiasm creep into his deadpan voice. "Every October, a million starlings migrate from Northern Europe through Rome, in formations like this. That's an impressive sight, considering their droppings are a huge problem." I tapped my hair and shoulders, searching for bird poo I imagined feeling. Byron laughed and reassured me that I had not been strafed yet.

In many ways, Byron was my ideal fellow traveler. He was eager to see the world and expand his horizons well beyond the scope of his small-town childhood, and to cultivate a more polished and sophisticated taste. I may have been a suburban kid, but I had the same goals he did. Also, while he was a Business and Music Composition double-major in Air Force ROTC, he was a history buff who knew

and liked the two humanities teachers in charge of our trip.

Our guides were the grey-haired, manic history professor Dr. Leland Valancourt and his sandy-haired assistant with the winning smile, Taran Prine. Prine was a former student of Valancourt's and had taken undergraduate courses with the medievalist the year I was born. Now middle-aged, Prine worked simultaneously as an adjunct (teaching Italian, Latin, and humanities classes) and director of Geneseo's Study Abroad Office, as well as lay minister assigned to the Newman Community. It struck me that, with an M.A. from St. Bonaventure, Taran was able to cobble together a full-time position doing everything he loved most at the college he adored without earning a doctoral degree or securing a traditional tenure-track job. I found his life path inspiring. I also never failed to be impressed by his appetite for living life to the fullest. The man was always laughing and smiling and outgoing, even as he enjoyed taking the piss out of everyone and everything. His charisma would even lead him to becoming Geneseo's Town Coordinator, a mayor in all but name, a few years after I graduated. I knew Taran through all his roles, since he was my hippie minister, Italian professor, and guide through Italy all-in-one. We were as much friends as anything. Byron had an equally friendly rapport with Taran, which he had developed while taking Taran's literature course, Arthurian Romance. We saw Taran as that rare breed: an adult male worth emulating. He was the Renaissance man — husband, father, teacher, and flower child shaman — we both wanted to grow up to be like.

The seven American undergraduates abroad, Byron and I included, were in Italy as students in "Medieval Italian City States," a one-month-long course in January's Winterim Term, sandwiched between the four-month Fall and Spring semesters. We were quite a motley crew. In addition to Byron and myself, there was "Bongo Guy," who spent each snow-filled winter at Geneseo living in an igloo of his construction behind Monroe Hall, playing the bongo on the grass all day and smoking weed inside the igloo all evening. (Someone once told me his name was Reed Poncemby, but to me, he would always be Bongo Guy.) The others members of our group included three familiar faces — Purple Sarah, Bobby Mammolito, and Tuesday Phapant — and a

mysterious blonde super senior laden with luggage. Bobby, Tuesday, and I were the only three people from Grace Coolidge High School who had chosen to go to Geneseo instead of the obvious alternatives: an Ivy League, any other SUNY, Rutgers, Wagner College, or the College of Staten Island. When I caught sight of them in the Red Jacket Dining Hall my first week as a freshman, I had been upset to see them. Their presence made it clear that one never could escape one's past, no matter how many miles one fled from it. And yet, they were nothing but nice to me these days, so I didn't find that spending copious amounts of time with them in Italy triggered as many bad memories as I expected.

Once we were gathered in a circle of nine across the street from the airport entrance, Dr. Valancourt was poised to launch us into our long journey to Siena. Taran managed to stop him by offering his old mentor a friendly reminder that we were nervous kids in a foreign country. "Would you like to say a few words to the troops, Dr. Valancourt?"

"Ah, yes, of course, of course." The little man, who Byron saw as Admiral Ackbar and I thought of as Don Knotts, recovered quickly from embarrassment. "We are going to be moving through a number of steps, on foot, by train, and by bus or cab to get to Siena. It will be intense. Thankfully, the most beautiful city in Italy lies waiting for us at the end of our journey."

Taran grinned. "The most beautiful city *in the world*."

Byron and I exchanged glances. *Taran's usually right about things, but . . . really?*

Without looking again at Taran, Valancourt cleared his throat. "Okay, let's get a move on." He huffed past me and walked with purpose, since he'd taken this route dozens of times.

Dr. Leland Valancourt was an aging gay Indianapolis native who had a penchant for fluorescent cowboy clothes and was never seen in public without an open can of Diet Pepsi clutched in his left hand. A medievalist who often co-taught interdisciplinary courses such as "Age of Dante" with my favorite literature professor, Dr. Herzman, Valancourt idolized St. Francis of Assisi and regularly attended mass at the Newman Community with his elderly mother. The pair sat with

Dr. Herzman and his wife in the front row. Valancourt and Herzman were a reassuring presence at the Newman masses, proving that not all liberal college professors were “godless heathens filling young skulls with mush,” as Rush Limbaugh proclaimed. I also thought it was cool that Valancourt and Herzman took Communion each week from Taran.

During the 1996 election season, Valancourt ran for Congress as a moderate Democrat, hoping to champion funding for infrastructure, healthcare, and education if he won. Since he was pro-life and had no interest in guns one way or the other, Valancourt ran as an anti-abortion Democrat with a grudging NRA endorsement. These political positions, which did not endear him to his feminist colleagues, helped me further nuance my blinkered view of Democrats as being part of a monolithic hive-mind, as Limbaugh had falsely claimed they were. As a moderate, Valancourt won me over, as well as a noteworthy percentage of the rural Republicans he courted. My support was mostly moral support, as I was not registered to vote in Geneseo. Unfortunately, Valancourt’s awareness of my Republican Party affiliation was occasionally cause for friction between us. For example, when I took his Humanities course, I had a legitimate question about our homework that he was too skittish to answer because he didn’t quite trust me. Perhaps it was because, over-the-top as he was, Valancourt could not, for the life of him, get a handle on my sense of humor, which vacillated between dry wit and loud, unsubtle hyperbole.

“Hey, Dr. Valancourt!” I yelled, bursting into the classroom as if storming Atlanta. “I just finished reading Thomas More’s novel *Utopia* and I’m confused. Socialist science fiction? There’s a shock! Are we sure this is the same dude from *A Man for All Seasons*? I don’t remember him being a pinko in *A Man for All Seasons*!”

Valancourt’s poker face was hard to read. “Are you a spy for my Republican opponent?”

“Aw, come on, Dr. Valancourt! I’m asking a real question, here. I just don’t understand what he’s going for with this book. Is it all about his opposing the enclosure movement?”

“Because you *sound* like a spy.”

“Fine. Be too scared of me to teach me. I’m going back to my dorm room to watch *A Man for All Seasons*. Robert Shaw is in it as

Henry VIII. He was also Quint in *Jaws*.”

Ultimately, Valancourt lost by six points instead of the usual forty-point trouncing Democrats took in the very Republican district. He should have won. His opponent was a tool.

None of our other talks were as awkward as the one about *Utopia*, but we never had an entirely smooth or casual conversation. Our exchanges were all business and no chit-chat. I would ask him specific questions about the homework for the lesson at hand, or to provide me with a post-mortem of one of my papers, which he invariably gave a B+ to no matter how much research I did or how many times I rewrote it. However, I did succeed in talking one quiz grade up to one hundred. In *The Bible as History*, Valancourt assigned a quiz on the two Creation stories in Genesis, asking us to read them as historians and individualist student-scholars, not as ideologically motivated members of oppositional faith communities. In other words, we were supposed to answer the questions using what the Bible actually said and not what our priests, ministers, or atheist buddies told us it said. For example, we couldn't refer to the serpent as Lucifer, since it was only identified in the text proper as a talking snake. This was a Genesis quiz, after all, not an exam on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The first quiz question was: “According to Genesis, what part of Creation came first?” In a class of seventy-five, seventy-four students wrote “Light,” and got the question right. I was the only one who wrote “Water” and got the question wrong. After class, I walked down the flight of steps to Valancourt's lecture-hall podium, armed with my quiz and Revised Standard Version Bible. “Dr. Valancourt, water existed before light. The very first lines of the Bible are: ‘In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.’ Note the words ‘deep’ and ‘waters.’ God must have created the water *before* the first sentence of the Bible. Genesis begins with the work of Creation *in progress*. Ergo, my answer is correct.” Valancourt changed the grade to 100 on both my paper and in his gradebook, muttering, “Fine. Never do that again.” His tone somehow combined grudging respect, surprise, annoyance, and gentle teasing. I was proud

of my victory but concerned about what Valancourt really thought of me. More than anything, I wanted his approval and respect, but I would settle for him liking me a little. I wagered I was giving off a whiff of skunk-stench neediness.

Our final, major disagreement over close readings of religious studies texts again came in *The Bible as Literature*, where I found myself objecting to Dr. Valancourt's embracing of "the historical Jesus." Valancourt told the class about the Jesus Seminar's conclusion that the sentence in the Bible that most epitomized the real Jesus' worldview was, of all things, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's." He appeared to endorse the analysis. While taxes and tithes had far greater significance than I wanted to admit, the middle-class American male's never-ending whining about paying taxes had put me so off the subject that I never wanted to hear anyone talk about taxes ever again, even if Jesus himself supported my view that paying taxes was good for society. I was also irritated that members of the Jesus Seminar seemed keen to dismiss my favorite Jesus teachings — his protofeminist lessons and actions — as ahistorical myth-making by the author of John's Gospel. The Jesus Seminar scholars seemed united in the view that "John" was a less historically reliable writer than the crafters of the synoptic gospels, "Matthew," "Mark," and "Luke." These ideas were undeniably interesting, but they pushed my buttons. I expressed my displeasure in my paper on *Jesus: A New Vision*, and my immoderate tone earned me my usual B+ from Valancourt. After getting the grade back, I asked to talk to Valancourt about what I needed to do to finally get an A from him. His said I needed to adopt a more serious tone and a writing style fit for college. I should use less flowery English-major language, eschew humorous asides, and employ greater, more fastidious attention to historical detail. He was correct on all these counts, of course. Still, I wanted to reassure him that my slightly emotional reaction to the text was justified.

"I just don't get what Marcus Borg is going for, Dr. Valancourt!" I said too loudly, not out of anger, but a general Italian American loudness that didn't sit well with Valancourt's Midwestern temperament. "I'm used to people believing in *all* the miracles in the Bible or in *none* of them, or in the historical truth of *all* the Bible stories, or *none* of

them. Why does Borg only believe the healing miracles and not the cooler ones, like the water into wine? Why does he only believe in the stories from the synoptic gospels? He's splitting hairs. What if John had access to sources or witnesses the others didn't?"

"You know, Damien, I think you're being a little hard on poor Marcus Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* is a very respected text."

I nodded. "Sure. I'm taking to heart a lot of what he writes, even though it upsets me. I'm still processing the idea that Jesus is a hippie who would find me too stodgy if he met me. Still, I'm willing to go with that and do some serious self-reflection about my being kinda a Pharisee. Here's my problem: Borg says the scene in John's Gospel between Jesus and the woman by the well isn't factually true. Neither is the scene when Jesus prevents the stoning of the adulteress."

"Correct."

"But those are the two best Jesus stories, bar none!" I recalled the lines I liked so much in "the woman by the well" story: "Just then, Jesus' disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'Why are you speaking with her?'" I did not remember the words verbatim, or that they appeared in John 4:27, but I recalled the gist of the passage accurately, and related it to Valancourt. "That is not an isolated passage or incident, Dr. Valancourt. In the Bible, Jesus exhorts his followers not to objectify women. From his words and deeds, readers learn that we should listen to women when they bring us news, even if we find that news hard to believe. Easter is an obvious example of that moral lesson. The woman-by-the-well conversation implicitly demonstrates that men should be able to talk to women in public without it being scandalous because she 'belongs' to another man, or because it is always assumed that the only reason a man would talk to a woman is to seduce her. What subversive, compassionate messaging! I want to treat women like that. As Jesus would treat them. But a historical reading of the Bible throws all that out the window. I guess I am a literature major after all, because I don't need a story to be *literally* true for it to be '*true*.' Jane Eyre doesn't need to be a historical figure for me to love her. I feel the same about magical, proto-feminist Jesus. Both of them will always be more real to me than President James K. Polk. Lisa Simpson is more real to me

than Polk, too, for that matter.”

Valancourt had tuned out some of what I said because I spoke for too long and with too much emotion. He chose his words carefully, striving to be patient. “Borg didn’t cast doubt on the historicity of John’s Gospel merely to annoy you, Damien.”

“That may be true, but it sure feels like he put his finger in my eye, going after my favorite Bible passages like that with his red magic marker.”

“I still think you are being too hard on poor Marcus Borg.”

I chuckled, finally developing the verbal irony I needed to hear myself and how ridiculously emotional I probably sounded. College textbooks were not assigned to students just to massage their egos and confirm all their pre-existing notions of life, the universe, and everything. Just the opposite. Valancourt assigned me a thoughtful, provocative book that would make the familiar strange and push me to consider seeing things in a new light. He assigned me the book to make me think. It made me emotional as well as made me think, proving how wise his choice of assigned text was. The paper I wrote condemning Borg’s book wound up being, indirectly, its greatest vindication. “I *know* I’m being too hard on Borg. I’m sure I’ll forgive him after I stew about this for a day. Don’t worry. He’s still on my Christmas card list.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“By the way, have you ever seen *Star Trek: The Next Generation*?” I asked.

“No. Why?”

“Never mind.”

As often as Valancourt and I disagreed, I found these exchanges intellectually stimulating and transformative. They are among the most important conversations of my life. And yet, I always feared that Dr. Valancourt found my manner and word-choice hyperbolic and off-putting, and misread my opinions as entrenched and immovable. In fact, Valancourt had done more than anyone to deepen and enrich my thinking on every political issue and religious teaching, from the most innocuous to the most controversial. Did he worry that I saw him as a leftist, secularist brainwasher of the American youth? I didn’t,

but since the Republican-owned-and-operated mass media depicted professors as Satanic traitors undermining America, it was no wonder he was scared. I was, after all, a loud, six-foot New Yorker who waved his arms about as he talked.

Eager to make my admiration for him clear, I dressed in fluorescent cowboy clothes one day. I thought my meaning was clear: imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. I may be Republican, but I dig Valancourt. Valancourt was mystified. “Why are you dressed like me?”

No! I got ‘The Recoil’ from Valancourt! “I want you to love me, Dr. Valancourt.”

Valancourt looked even more confused and frightened.

This was the person I was going to Italy with instead of my mother.

Byron and I had been overwhelmed by our first sighting of Rome, but Valancourt knew exactly where he was going. He led our tour group across the street, into a building, down some stairs, and through a few large chambers filled with fellow travelers. I lost all track of time but couldn’t stop wincing at the sound of my rolling suitcase’s wheels screeching along cobblestone walkways. Next time, no wheeled luggage. It was loud, hard to steer, and was probably damaging the cobblestone. And where in hell were we? Valancourt wasn’t about to update everyone. We just had to keep moving. Don Knotts’ twin brother had worked things out with such speed, efficiency, and precision that all we had to do was keep the back of his head in our line of sight and chase after it. Still, the aging historian was fast and had little luggage, so it was tough keeping up. Staying within sight of Valancourt got still more difficult each time we hit the odd staircase, and I had to carry one suitcase and two carry-on bags up or down the stairs. This didn’t bother me too much because it meant I dropped back to where the pretty Germanic blonde student was. She had the second most luggage of us all, and Byron and I would take turns helping her carry her stuff up and down those staircases. Byron had noticed her before I did, which was no surprise. He was always on the lookout. I had only recently begun “looking” again because I had not only outgrown my need for braces but my retainer as well. (I was no longer Trap Jaw from *Masters of the Universe*.) This was one of the rare instances where both Byron and I singled out the same girl. I usually went for women in sensible shoes

and Byron tended to gravitate towards the more kittenish types who took some little time putting their faces on in the morning. This young woman carried herself with a regal air and had long, straight, blonde hair, sapphire blue eyes, skin as pale as Snow White's, a lightly freckled face, and a downturned mouth. She was dressed in a football Jersey, faded denim jeans, and a pair of brown cowboy boots under a long tan trench coat, and had not one stitch of make-up on. There was enough in this young woman's ensemble to attract both of us. Byron liked the football jersey. I liked the lack of makeup. We both appreciated her hair and eyes. In retrospect, she looked remarkably like both Claudia Schiffer and Lena Headey's Cersei Lannister from *Game of Thrones*, except she was "regular person" pretty, not model or superstar pretty. I worried about what would happen if Byron and I both decided to throw down over who got to ask her out to dinner first.

Somehow, through some magic spell of Valancourt's, we all wound up on a train. We were shoved into the corridor of one of the train's cars, alternatively sitting on the floor or standing pressed against a wall or door, because the ticket seller had booked more passengers on the train than they had seats and standing room. I was confused. "Should we have waited for the next train? Why did they sell us tickets if there was no room for us?"

Taran flashed his infectious smile and began genially carpet-bombing his favorite country and people. "That's Italy for you. Beautiful countryside, majestic castles, delicious food, and the most stupidly, inefficiently operated government and public services in the world."

"That's exactly what America would be like if I ever became president," I said.

"However bad you would be as president, you couldn't be a worse choice for leader of a country than Silvio Berlusconi."

"Who's he when he's at home?" I asked.

"Knowing you? You would hate him with every fiber of your being. You'd be right to."

Aside from a handful of brief exchanges like this, no one packed into the train corridor was in much of a talking mood. We merely gazed at one another with bleary eyes. Bobby Mammolito caught sight of me looking down with half-closed eyes, on the verge of falling asleep

on my feet. “Don’t fall asleep, Egon!” he yelled.

Purple Sarah giggled. “Damien, you look like you’ve been bitten by a tsetse fly!”

I opened my eyes unnaturally wide to wake myself up.

“Dude!” Bobby yelled, startling the whole train. “Gotta ax you a question! You gonna be the world’s biggest babe magnet here in Italy like you are in the States?”

I felt the eyes of Taran, Valancourt, Bobby, Byron, Purple Sarah, Tuesday, Bongo Guy, and the blonde girl on me. “I think you have me mistaken for someone else.”

“No! You are a total babe magnet, Egon! Every time I see you, you’ve got like one, two, or six stone cold foxes sitting with you talkin’ bout the meaning of life. I don’t know how the hell you do it. You’re amazing! Like James Bond!” This was a surprising sentiment coming from a guy who was, by all accounts, putting a sock over his dorm-room doorknob every night when Tuesday came to visit him. For my part, I had put a sock on my doorknob exactly zero times during my college career. I blushed. “Right. I’m exactly like James Bond, the most famous pacifist, Marxist-feminist celibate in film history!”

Byron laughed raucously and clapped his hands together.

Bobby nodded vigorously. “That’s what I’m saying! Teach me, Egon! Tell me your secret! How do you get these groupies?”

Everyone was still watching my face for tell-tale signs of disconnect between what I was saying and what I was really thinking and feeling. “I don’t know what to tell you. They’re not groupies. They’re my friends. We just talk.”

Bobby mulled this over. “Let me get this straight. You control yourself? Never put a hand on their thighs?”

“I don’t.”

“That’s a big part of it, I bet.”

I cleared my throat, uncomfortably. “Possibly. I haven’t given it any thought in years.”

“That makes so much sense! No wonder I don’t have as many groupies as you! I always go right for the thigh, and they bolt! I’m gonna try not grabbing me some thigh and see what happens, because the company you keep is mad impressive. I bow to your manly charisma!”

Tuesday smacked Bobby upside the head. “What are you going on and on about other girls for?”

Bobby cast a sheepish look at me. “Uh-oh. You got me in trouble, Egon.”

“I got *you* in trouble?” I looked around again. *Yep. Everyone is still looking at me.*

I smiled sheepishly. “I have no idea who this guy is. Never seen him before in my life.”

The Geneseo entourage took one train for about twenty minutes before getting a transfer. On the ride, Byron sat next to the blonde — whose name turned out to be Evelyn Krueger — and talked to her about music. He asked her if she liked Billy Joel and she said as far as she was concerned, the Beatles made the only rock music worth listening to. Byron’s eyes grimaced when his mouth didn’t. *Excellent. She’s annoyed him with her elitist music taste. He takes his music personally. He may not pursue her now. If he stops chasing her, that leaves an opening for me. Assuming she would respond to my advances. But . . . no. That’s absurd.*

Evelyn looked up at me unexpectedly. “You have a favorite band or song?”

I thought about it. “A tie, I guess. My favorite songs are ‘Working-Class Hero’ by John Lennon and ‘Seven Spanish Angels’ by Ray Charles and Willie Nelson.”

Byron smirked. “You picked the Lennon song because she said she likes the Beatles.”

“He’s eager to please, is he?” Evelyn asked Byron.

“No! I picked the Lennon song because I’m an anarcho-socialist. I picked ‘Seven Spanish Angels’ because I’m incurably romantic. Meanwhile, the religious part of me likes Madonna’s ‘Like a Prayer.’ And I suppose the evil side of my personality likes Alice Cooper’s ‘Poison.’”

Evelyn looked arch. “A favorite song for each side of your complicated personality?”

“They don’t come more complicated than me, man!”

Byron laughed. “You’re so cheesy.”

It isn’t fair to Byron, but I enjoy mentally associating him with beloved television sitcom character Ron Swanson. Aside from his gradual evolution into a Bernie Sanders supporter and Eurosoci-
 alist,

my now lifelong friend Byron reminds me of the quiet, misanthropic, nature-loving jazz musician from *Parks and Recreation*. I first noticed the resemblance between Byron and Ron when Byron proudly declared that his athletic prowess and participation in multiple high school varsity sports won him six girlfriends named Tammy.

"You had *six* girlfriends named 'Tammy'?" I asked. "I don't even think of that as a common name. I only know Tammy Wynette and Tammy Faye Bakker."

"You don't think it's a common name? I do."

"Of course, *you* do! Where I come from, the only likely way to date six girls with the same name is if they're all named Jennifer."

Byron would refer to "the Tammys" by number, and I heard their names in the form of Roman numerals when he would say, "Tammy II loved hockey," or "I got Tammy V to like Barry Manilow." When I discovered that Ron Swanson's mother was named Tammy and he married three women named Tammy, I became convinced that Byron Baldwin and Ron Swanson were one and the same person. Ron even added the Roman numerals to Tammy I and Tammy II.

Byron disagreed quietly but firmly. "Ron Swanson's defining trait is he's a libertarian. Libertarians have laid waste to this country."

"Yeah, sure. But everything else about you is the same. If Ron Swanson was a socialist, he'd be you."

Byron scrunched his eyebrows together. "If Ron Swanson were nothing like Ron Swanson, he'd be exactly the same as me?"

"Fine, fine. You're nothing alike."

Byron laughed loudly. "I tell you what, if any of us is in *Parks and Recreation*, it's you! If you were any good at math and were a fiscal conservative, you'd be Ben Wyatt!"

"Oh, I noticed that once he stopped being a villain and fell in love with Leslie. Early Ben? Not me. Season Three and Four Ben? Me. Leslie Knope is my dream woman."

Of course, I made the connection between Byron and Ron in more recent years. While we were in college, I understood Byron Baldwin a different way: he had the romantic temperament of Lord Byron and the looks of Billy Baldwin, so his name was absurdly apt. My first sighting of him had been his playing moody Frédéric Chopin

pieces at the upright piano in the student center. He played every day during the lunch hour specifically to attract the attention of admiring women. Frustratingly, when they flocked to listen to him, he would remain so engrossed in his music that they would eventually give up and move away. The first time I dared speak to this somber fellow, I joked, “What’s with you, Schroeder? You have the looks and the piano playing. You could be more outgoing. I wish I had your looks and talent, and you had my verve. Together, we’d be almost as sexy as Franco Nero.”

“He was great in *Camelot*.” Byron gave me a small smile that seemed like a frown. “Sir Lancelot is my favorite. You sure you don’t want my verve? Maybe I should take your looks?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ, no! What monstrous abominations would we become!”

Byron looked me up and down. “Are you always this big a wise-ass? I have to warn you, I prefer to make friends with serious-minded people.”

I swept the mirth from my features. “I am the most serious-minded person who ever lived! My biggest secret of all? I have no sense of humor and I’m grumpy all the time.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Byron said, dispassionately.

“Can you teach me to play one sexy piano song so I can trick chicks into talking to me?”

“You want to ‘vamp till she’s ready?’ No, I can’t teach you that. I never advise lying to women. Just be yourself. I used to play ‘Cristofori’s Dream’ by David Lanz — a song nobody really knows but me. I told one girl I composed it. That turned out to be a mistake.”

I draped my arm over the top of the upright and leaned forward. “Oh! What happened?”

“It turned out to be a mistake.”

As grim-faced as Byron was during this conversation, it was less than an hour before I saw him laugh until tears ran down his face. It happened when I discovered, much to my chagrin, that Byron was friends with Sergio Joseph Savini. This revelation convinced me that, if I were to start palling around with Byron, I would inevitably remain at least somewhat in Sergio’s decaying orbit. When Byron and I bumped into Sergio in the courtyard outside the student center, the

Mike Piazza clone made no reference to my picking him up bodily and hurling him out of my room a week before. *Oh, the joys of going to a small college. You're never rid of any nuisance for long.* Byron considered Sergio annoying, too, but he also found Sergio as hysterically funny as I found Sergio infuriating. They had a painfully unhealthy dynamic where Sergio looked up to Byron and tried breathlessly to impress him with witty anecdotes and factoids about weapons and military history, none of which ever impressed Byron. The witty anecdotes were never actually witty but felt like jokes that petered out before the punchline. Also, Byron, who read a lot, soon cottoned on to the fact that Sergio didn't read at all, but had a photographic memory and gleaned all of his knowledge of science and society from cable television infotainment sources. Consequently, Byron found all sorts of errors in the information Sergio presented to impress him. The effect was excruciatingly embarrassing to witness, but oddly gratifying. Byron could twist Sergio into knots far more effectively than Sergio could push my buttons. On the day we bumped into Sergio in the student center courtyard, Sergio monologued non-stop for thirty minutes about the Chernobyl disaster. It was a topic that neither Byron nor I had broached with him, and one that I, at least, was utterly uninterested in. Large scale disasters bore and depress me because they are so epic in scope and fatalistic in outcome that all individual human agency of consequence is stripped from the narrative. The moral almost always boils down to either "shit happens" or "there is no God." At minute thirty of Sergio's monologue, Byron silenced the barrel-chested Italian and bellowed, "Sergio! I need to show you my impression of Gary Busey!"

"Gary Busey?" Sergio asked. "What a non sequitur! We were discussing Chernobyl."

Byron started preforming sections of Gary Busey's dialogue from the action movie *Under Siege*, beginning with, "You *think* you know Damien Cavalieri. 'You don't know Damien Cavalieri! He is an extreme psychopath. He hates officers. He hates America!...No one is to speak to him. No one is to let him out. If he tries to escape, shoot him right *here!*'" Byron pressed his thumb against Sergio's forehead.

"What's happening?" Sergio asked with his teeth clamped shut, a

newbie ventriloquist not yet able to speak through a dummy without his lips moving. The grotesque expression proved too much for Byron and me. We collapsed onto the concrete floor, howling with laughter, and crying until Sergio walked away. For a split second, I felt bad for Sergio. Then, I went back to laughing uproariously, grabbing Byron's shoulder to steady myself.

"That guy *always* talks out of his ass!" Byron roared. "Always!"

Byron was a complicated fellow. That's why I could relate to him. His background fascinated me. Byron's parents practiced both Roman Catholicism and Buddhism simultaneously and lived in the village of South Stoddard, a rural community of twelve hundred residents that was a forty-minute drive south of Buffalo and known in the region for its annual strawberry festival. Members of his family gravitated towards military service, factory work, health care, and the service industries. His paternal grandfather, the village's first sheriff, was credited with brokering a peace between warring Italian and Irish immigrant communities. Byron was the smartest student in his very small grammar school and nobody knew what to do with him, because the curriculum was far too easy for him. In the end, he watched countless hours of nature videos, giving him an encyclopedic knowledge of animals and a keen environmentalist and animal rights sense. He saw his love of animals and nature as compatible with his hunting. He did not love good old boys who shot animals on snowbikes, whooped like drunken morons, and drove away, leaving the meat to rot in the snow. Byron was also not, in any way, a future militia member, survivalist, or white supremacist, though he knew some people from the region like that. Three months after we met, Byron took me back home and introduced me to his warm and welcoming family. He also introduced his mother to the twelve weeks of laundry he had been accumulating all semester and had no idea how to wash.

The next morning, he and his father took me out shooting. I still remember his father's safety lecture: "Rule number one: Act as if every gun is loaded. Don't point it at anything you don't want to shoot, and never point it at a human. It isn't a toy. It's a weapon. Rule number two: Since every gun is loaded, you better darn remember rule number one." We drove to their friend Clive Cussler's house to use his shooting

range for the morning. As we drove up a dirt road to Clive Cussler's targets, I kept reminding myself that this Clive Cussler was not the famous novelist, but another person with the same name. At the range, I drew upon my vast knowledge of marksmanship culled from my archery lessons at various Pocono Mountain hotels and playing *Duck Hunt* and *Hogan's Alley* with the Nintendo Zapper Light Gun. I shot very well with the Ranch rifle and the double-barreled shotgun, but my aim was high and to the right when I fired Dirty Harry's handgun, the .45 Magnum, one-handed, against the advice of the Baldwins. During the time I held the weapons and fired them, I felt their raw power course through me. As each bullet struck its target, I felt with absolute certainty that my penis was eighteen inches long. When we were done, I surrendered my red, hearing-protecting earmuffs, and helped the men load the weapons back into the trunk of their car. As we drove up to Clive Cussler's house to thank him, the high of the shooting session wore off, and I remembered that my penis was below-average-size when erect, and nearly impossible to find when limp.

The Baldwins had talked Clive up and seemed happy to see him, but he struck me as a bit ornery, slouching about his house, unshaven, wearing a baseball cap indoors, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. Byron was excited to tell him how well I had done. "Clive, Damien's aim was really good, even though this was his first-time shooting."

Clive reacted as if he'd been stung in the neck by a yellowjacket. "What? You never been shooting before?" He had a gravelly, Tom Waits voice.

"No," I said.

I didn't appreciate it when he muttered, "Where'd you grow up? A septic tank?" Clive's posture suggested that: a) he knew at once that my dad didn't serve in Vietnam, and was not in a profession that involved the handling of guns, and b) that I had been raised to be a book-educated pacifist instead of a manly man who worked with his hands and knew how to defend himself with a gun. As a Vietnam vet, Clive took an instant dislike to me and my Letters to Cleo t-shirt. This dislike grew more intense when he offered to sell me a gun a few minutes later, and I refused. "That was fun, but I'm going to retire from my career as a marksman."

"Don't you want to protect yourself and your family?"

"From what? The Red Dawn?"

"Or crime. Or societal collapse." Clive held some sort of handgun out to me.

I held my hand up. "No thanks. I don't want to leave here with a gun. Still, if you happen to have any cannoli, I'll be happy to take them off your hands."

"You should really buy a gun."

"Maybe if I inherit a farm, I'll grab a rifle sometime to protect my chickens and pigs and cows from coyotes and rattlesnakes, or whatever. I don't think I'll ever want a handgun."

Byron guffawed. "I'm trying to picture you owning a farm!"

"Alright, alright," I said. "That's enough out of you."

"You're not going to want to be caught without this when the looting starts," Clive said.

"Nah. I'm just not that scared of Black people. I kinda like them." I didn't see any Confederate flags around, and South Stoddard was in New York, but I was becoming more and more convinced that Clive thought the wrong side had won the Civil War.

"Who said anything about Black people? Dangerous people come in all forms."

"I like Hispanics, too. And I'm too Catholic to own a gun."

Clive put the gun down on the table. "Whatever you say. I'm Catholic, too, you know."

"Anyway, thank you for your hospitality, and thank you for all the years of pleasure you gave me reading your Dirk Pitt novels. *Raise the Titanic* is a personal favorite."

When we left that day, I saw two different Byron Baldwin's assessing my behavior in Clive's house. One Byron was the Byron of South Stoddard, who thought Clive was cool, that his joke at my expense was funny, and that I wasn't a grateful guest. The other Byron was the Byron of SUNY Geneseo, who understood why I felt out of place in his home town, why I was offended by the septic tank joke, and why I was wary of the ideological sentiments responsible for Clive's gun collection, which was so massive it was stored in a second building.

Somewhere in Italy, our Geneseo entourage arrived at the next

train station too late to catch the transfer Valancourt had planned for us to take. Delays we had hit during our flight were disrupting his finely tuned travel schedule. We stored our luggage in a large, dusty room, and went off in search of food. It would be my first time buying something in another language. I tried to prepare what to say as I scouted out a glass counter filled with cookies, pastries, and cold cuts. I was distracted in my efforts by my American comrades' orders, which all involved pointing a clumsy finger through the glass at the morsel they wanted, saying "uno," and adding "grazie" when the server handed them the item in question. Seeing that this worked, and not wanting to do anything to show up my friends, I fell back on "uno" and "grazie" myself. As I began eating my Napoleon, noting that Staten Island pastries did a respectable job measuring up to the real thing, I reflected on how disappointing it was that my first conversation with a local in Italy had been in Tarzan. I used the bathroom because I had been holding in pee for as long as I could remember. The dirty stall walls had Italian graffiti written on them. I knew enough of the language to recognize "for a good time call Tipi," "Death to fags," "AIDS is God's judgment," and "Dante was right." It was disappointing to see that Italy was a lot like America after all. A general shout from outside told me I better hustle because the train was here.

Several stopovers later, we reached the outskirts of Siena. We couldn't all fit in one cab, and the buses were just crowded enough that we couldn't smush into one, so we split up into one cab group and one bus group. Byron, Evelyn, and Valancourt opted to wait for a cab. I raced with Taran, Tuesday, Bobby, Purple Sarah, and Bongo Guy onto a bus. As I ran across the street to reach the bus, dodging speeding, careening cars, I heard Valancourt's voice in my head, warning us to pack light. I had ignored the warnings, hoping I wouldn't have to carry three bags for quite as long as this. The bus was crowded before I climbed aboard. My baggage didn't help.

"Remember to validate your ticket, or they'll behead you!" Taran called out.

We slid our tickets into a validating machine, which whirled and marked them. The bus tore away from the street corner, tossing me like a salad. I wrapped my arm around a support pole just in time to

prevent myself bowling over enough passengers to get a spare. The bus made its way through the medieval walls of Siena while I was trying not to faceplant, so I missed what was probably a very nice view. A lot of careening about later, the bus slid to a stop, and Taran told us to jump off in front of the Basilica Cateriniana di San Domenico, an enormous, earth-tone building illuminated at dusk by bright yellow lights from the ground. It looked more like a castle than a church. Taran counted heads and saw we were all there. “Stay together. It’s passeggiata, so the streets are bustling. The Piazza del Campo is a nine-minute walk away. Our hotel, the Locanda Garibaldi is in the Onda neighborhood, on a street that winds downhill behind the tower.”

He spoke quickly enough that I only half-heard the final, most important sentence. With that, Taran charged down the cobblestone streets into what looked like the fastest flowing river of people I had ever seen. Our group rushed against the grain, barely dodging locals and fellow tourists whose only concern was remaining on their own courses. Everyone in the student group was able to negotiate the crowd more skillfully than me because I had the most luggage. I cursed myself for not taking the cab with Evelyn of the Mammoth Luggage. How was I to know that passeggiata — whatever the heck that was — would be going on? Or that the hilly, cobblestone streets would keep bouncing my luggage wheels, tipping my suitcase over every few yards if I moved too quickly? The people of Siena sailed past, not waiting for me to make way, laden as I was. None minded jostling my bags or smacking them to the ground. The fifth time my bag fell, I bent over to right it. Even before I straightened, I sensed I had lost my group. I was right. I stood at a busy intersection of steeply inclined roads, unable to see Taran or the others amidst the throng, and completely unsure which route they had taken. Tired and sweaty, I was still not yet ready to panic. I wanted to get to the hotel and go to bed. What was the hotel called? Lontano Garibaldi?

I stopped Ed Koch, or a bald man who resembled the former mayor of New York. “Mi scusi! Sono Americano. Dove Lontano Garibaldi?” Ed Koch gave me “The Recoil” and kept moving. A woman in a grey winter coat heard the question and gestured towards what looked like the way I had come. That couldn’t be the right way, could

it? Still, I was so disoriented by the waves of people that I assumed I had gotten myself more turned around than I realized. I trusted the advice enough to walk several blocks in that direction until I spotted a familiar statue. I had passed it not two minutes ago. Should I wait by the statue for rescue? That is what the Boy Scouts are taught: Stay in one place if you get lost. On the other hand, I wasn't a Boy Scout, I was tired of being a poor thing, and I wanted to find my own way to the Lontano Garibaldi.

I asked a teenage girl where the Lontano Garibaldi was. She didn't know. Two other people I stopped were German tourists. They didn't know. One man was visiting from Rome and didn't know Siena. Yet another directed me further along my present course, which was surely the wrong way. I asked another person, who again pointed back towards the bus depot. What the hell? Well, if three people in a row pointed me back towards the bus depot, maybe I had gotten separated from them earlier than I realized? Should I trust the advice of the three natives over my own instincts, which screamed not to proceed past the statue? I tried a follow-up sentence. "Lontano Garibaldi è il piccolo hotel." The man's eyes lit up. "Il Piccolo Hotel!" He again pointed past the statue, towards the bus depot, only more urgently. *But that's the wrong fucking way! Oh, fuck it. I must be wrong.* The man began to move away from me, but I called after him, "Cammina con me, per favore?" The man nodded and walked with me for fifteen minutes until we reached the correct street. The man pointed down the street, gesturing towards a small, white hotel, and went off, leaving me alone in an unexpectedly quiet and deserted area. Was passeggiata over? Had I been led to Siena's equivalent of the middle of nowhere?

As I walked towards the hotel, I noticed with increasing alarm that it was called the Piccolo Hotel, and it was on Garibaldi Street. I moaned. What had I said to this fellow? "Lontano Garibaldi è il Piccolo Hotel." Did that mean something like, "Take me to The Small Hotel on Garibaldi Street?" I bolted into the reception area of the incorrect hotel and attempted to tell my sob story to the slightly round, grey-haired Italian woman at reception. This was not the time to be bashful about my command of the language, even if I mangled most of the sentences and peppered them with English words and

botched cognates: “Buona sera. Sono studente. Ho andare a Italia con il professore. Desidero camminare a Lontano Garibaldi. Il professore in l’hotel e io sono ecco. Dove Lontano Garibaldi hotel? O posso telefono l’hotel Lontano Garibaldi? Il mio professore posso aiutarmi?”

The woman reached under the desk and withdrew a phone book. She leafed through it and found the hotel pages. She pointed to an ad for the Locanda Garibaldi and asked me if that was the hotel I meant. I nodded, not realizing until she put the phone book down to dial its number that I had gotten the hotel’s name wrong. *Great Caesar’s Ghost! There’s no “Lontano” Garibaldi. There’s only the “Locanda” Garibaldi!* The owner of the Piccolo Hotel spoke on the phone with the owner of the Locanda Garibaldi and related my situation. She was left waiting until another voice addressed her. After a few words, she handed me the phone. Taran’s voice came through the receiver. “Ciao, Damien. Where are you?” I told Taran what happened and explained that I was too hopelessly lost to find my way back alone.

“I don’t know where that hotel is,” said Taran. “Can you put the lady back on?”

I gave the phone back to the receptionist and she offered Taran directions. After she hung up, she invited me to wait in the lobby. She had been so helpful that I felt guilty that I wasn’t staying at this hotel after all. Naturally, from my perspective, it took Taran forever to arrive. I whistled the entire Henry Mancini theme to *The Pink Panther* and sang all of Paul Williams’ “The Hell of It” from *Phantom of the Paradise* to myself, and still had twenty minutes to kill. (I would have kept whistling and singing, but I didn’t want to drive the receptionist insane.) At last, Taran appeared in the lobby, unable to conceal his astonishment at how badly I had gotten lost.

“Valancourt, of course, is ready to give you a big speech when you get back.”

“Cool.”

“How in God’s name did you wind up all the way out here? The last time I saw you, we were less than a block from the Campo!”

I smiled sheepishly. We thanked the receptionist and left. Since passeggiata was over, we could walk at a reasonable pace. The wheels on my luggage were better able to roll over the cobblestone without

bouncing up into the air and tipping the bag over. As we walked, I related everything that happened from when my bag fell over and I lost the group.

“If you hadn’t misremembered the name of the hotel or if you’d waited by the statue, the evening would have gone better for you,” Taran concluded.

“Yes,” I said. “I did keep my head. I guess I don’t know enough Italian to prevent myself from getting lost, but I know enough to get myself found.”