

Prologue

October 1981

He wanted to take the subway, even with its graffiti and variety of shady characters, Number 7 train to the end of the line. Then the bus. The Q-12. Just like the old days.

James Devlin stood on the platform at the lowest level of Grand Central Station. There was a loud magnetic click, announcing that his wait was almost over. The whisper from the dark tunnel escalated to a roar as the defaced train entered the station, trailing the procession of litter it blew down the tracks.

He left his seat as the train pulled out of Vernon Jackson station. Back to the other passengers, he pressed his shoulder against the door as the train left the tunnel, then snaked on the elevated track over Queensboro Plaza and the dreary railroad yards, up Queens Boulevard, then down Roosevelt Avenue.

Even from high above, he could identify the old neighborhoods of Queens. Sunnyside. Woodside. Jackson Heights. Corona. It looked as though the neighborhoods had not changed, but how could that be? People move on. Loved ones die. Families dissolve. Newcomers replace them, again huddling around the el, as if trying to draw power from the subway's third rail.

The doors opened at Main Street in Flushing, and he waded into the crowd of passengers waiting to get on board and go in the opposite direction.

Once on the street, he traced his old path to the Q-12. Nothing looked the same, but at least the bus stop hadn't moved. When the bus's brakes alerted him to its arrival, the doors swooshed open and he rooted through his change to pay the full, astronomical fare, not the nickel he once paid as a student with a pass.

He gazed out the window, except for a few glances past the other scattered passengers, never at them. While the bus lurched out of Flushing, bits and pieces of James's past confronted him. Nothing important, silly things. The time he fell asleep and almost missed his stop. Another time when he tried to study for a Latin quiz, attempting to keep the book balanced on his knees while the bus jerked to a halt every few blocks. His mind kept filling with thoughts, mundane ones appearing while more consequential memories stayed hidden. Maybe that was why he felt so overgrown, so swollen as he kept shifting in the seat that had once fit well.

He purposely let the bus pass Douglaston Parkway without ringing the bell. It then rocked past St. Aidan's Church and School. *You'll like St. Aidan's just fine. I'll bet they've got a lot of great kids there, just like you.* He pushed this memory away as the bus gathered speed heading into Little Neck. When he snapped the string for the warning bell, the driver pulled over at Marathon Parkway. James staggered into the stairwell, pushed open the door and went out onto the curb. The bus continued on its journey while James stood there noticing the fast food restaurants now dotting Northern Boulevard. But some of the old haunts across the Boulevard were still there. Mary's Delicatessen. The auto body shop. He turned and headed back toward 248th Street, making a left toward the playground.

He tugged at his tie, feeling odd walking this route in a business suit instead of blue jeans and sneakers. So much had changed, in the neighborhood, in his life. The aroma of autumn,

from dead flowers and decaying leaves, wafted around him. Breathing in, he recalled the season vividly. How he'd refused to bounce the basketball home until the last ray of daylight deserted him. Those familiar odors convinced him the important things would be as he remembered, but once he reached the entrance of the park he realized he'd been mistaken. Deceived.

He stopped. The once imposing wrought iron gate lay on the ground, ripped off its hinges. Not because it had ever succeeded in keeping anyone out. Something told him to turn around, but instead he stepped over the gate, walking past peeling chain link fences, going further into a place he remembered more clearly than anywhere he'd ever lived.

Time for you skins to take the suckers' walk. Other echoes of the past bombarded him. "The Eve of Destruction" blasting from scratchy portable radios sitting on giant stone checkerboard tables that were now smashed to pieces. He couldn't help but shake his head that the song's prophecy had been fulfilled.

Hey, guys, this is Jimmy Devlin, the Gonzaga Flash. Maddest dog in this park and the brightest son of a bitch you'll ever meet.

The park benches where girls sat on their infrequent visits had also been destroyed. All the slats were gone, along with the heavy, scoop-shaped concrete supports. Weeds that had managed to break through the blacktop brushed at the cuffs of his pants as he headed toward the park house. His mouth was dry, but when he reached the brick fountain, he saw that the spigot had been knocked out. That's when he noticed the entire park house was charred. Who knew how to set a brick building on fire? Sheet-metal windows stared back at him. He forced himself to keep going.

He trudged up the ramp, avoiding the edge where a railing had once been, keeping his gaze downward. This was supposed to be the past, but he couldn't recognize it at all. Once he reached the top, he looked up to see what was left of the place where he once felt most at home.

All the other guys are going out for the team. I played a couple of times down the schoolyard with the big kids and...I, well, I like it.

The basketball court was covered with shattered glass from broken beer bottles. The basket on one side was gone. The rim on the other was bent downward. LIFE SUCKS was spray painted across the perforated backboard.

He had never come back to the park since that March night when he had also been alone. He should not have returned today. Some things are better left alone. His memories had been vandalized too. He could no longer deny it. Everything he remembered had been torn apart.

He turned, heading back to Northern Boulevard, wishing he could leave his regrets behind as well. The detour had been a disaster. Hopefully things would go better when he reached his real destination.