

C HAPTER ONE

“COPS AGAIN, THAT WHAT YOU WANT?” His wife was inside their apartment. Connie was outside. He was trying to get inside.

Key in hand, he attempted to enter for who knows how long. Intoxication sometimes induced a palsy, coordination slipped, while the minutes blended into weeks and months. A rest period seemed in order. He closed his eyes and paused for a moment, like an old draft horse on its legs.

“When are you going to get it?” she said.

Slowly, with drunken deliberation, Connie glided his face toward the lock’s cylinder, and the recognition of its gleaming new luster hit him where he lived. “Son of a.” He considered removing his jacket, to show somebody, anybody, he meant business, but he ultimately couldn’t be bothered.

“The cops, you hear me—”

Connie started his assault, but if closely studied, it was an assault tapered by self-consciousness. He witnessed his own behavior, watched himself attack the door like a second-rate actor of the presentational variety.

“Off the fucking hinges,” he roared, pounding the door with the flat of his hand. But just beneath the sur-

face of the scene he thought, *Look at me go. What a fake, what a phony. I don't even want to be in there.*

“Scaring the kids, you bastard. On their way the cops, think I’m kidding?”

Connie let the door have it. “Off the hinges.” He was still slapping and hammering with the flat of his hand when his neighbor Willie appeared with farce-like speed at the door of 3-B: tank top, gold cross, a stingy brim of straw at rest above a gentle Puerto Rican face.

“Connie, Con-Con, what’s happening?” Willie’s tone nothing if not a sweet attempt to distract and diffuse.

“Believe this, Will?”

The elevator’s outer door pushed open onto the landing to the sound of crackling walkie-talkies. Two New York City Housing Authority cops, Walsh and Pacheco, poised to dispose of one more midnight shift, joined Connie in front of 3-A, hitting their marks just so.

“Cornelius,” Walsh said.

“Déjà vu,” Pacheco said.

Through his stupor Connie felt a degree of mortification, not for the cops’ presence, which was in fact an encore performance, but the new element.

“Changed the lock,” Connie said.

“That’ll happen,” Pacheco said.

“Could be she’s trying to suggest something,” said Walsh, who then lit a beautiful Marlboro, because there was still time, back here in the spring of 1974, to excuse yourself from the world for a brief respite, just you and your best friend nicotine.

Connie produced his own crumpled pack of Camels. Walsh helped him pinch one out and fire it up. Pacheco glanced away with mild disdain.

They wandered into the shiny red interior of the elevator and Pacheco pressed a button on the panel. The inner door and its square foot of scratched, mesh-wired window slid closed, and they descended through a silo of graffiti.

“Connie,” Walsh said once outside the building, “let’s talk a minute. What’s this, the second—”

“Third,” Pacheco said.

“She gets the restraint order, we got no choice. You, this routine of yours, waking everybody up.”

“My home,” Connie bellowed. “I live here.”

“Not anymore,” Pacheco said. “You’re done. Get that through your head.”

“Remember now, Con,” Walsh said, “up to you.”

In the predawn stillness Connie looked like he’d strayed from a parade of damaged people, the doorman’s cap cocked at an angle on his head. He watched the cops return to their double-parked squad car on 25th Street.

The front yard with its playground artifacts looked so mournful at this hour. The miniature ceramic horse on a spring, its chipped paint and missing left eye. The tarnished aluminum sculpture of planet Saturn leaning precariously on its axis. Had he ever played with his kids in this yard? Did he love his children? He did love them, in a sentimental fashion, they were his boys, he loved them completely, his entire heart, he’d do anything, damn near very close to almost anything for them.

He found his way to a bench in the yard for forty-five minutes of something like sleep.

If a camera were pushed up close to Connie’s face where dry white saliva collected at the corners of his mouth and tiny bubbles burst on his lips, it would find

him mumbling indecipherably, a few phrases to unravel: —*shot his father's head clean off. The mother on all fours chasing chunks of skull across the chassis. Humpty Dumpty and such. Talk about a status reduction. Whereas my father put his head in the oven. Common style back then. Two dead fathers, two heads, one by suicide, one by—*

A bench slat's rivet grinding at his hip bullied him back to consciousness. He winced, uncurled himself, sat up. Night had broken. The birds in the trees of the projects cried out with abandonment. The overcast sky made sense, given his life, and Connie acknowledged the cloud cover as subtle tribute. Blue skies would have added to the campaign of mockery waged not just against him—he wasn't *that* solipsistic—but against all sentient beings, birds included. A tenderness welled up in Connie, his chest went soft, before he patted himself down for a smoke.

He looked up to the bedroom window of his children.

His older son, Arthur, a long-haired twelve-year-old fired by rage, stood framed by the building's burnished brick facade. The apparition pierced Connie's drunkenness and hangover, he felt the kid's hatred beaming down at him.

Or wait, could it be—not malice, but care and concern? Arthur kept vigil so Connie would not get rolled or otherwise beat to death, that was a thought.

It crossed his mind to offer a sign, some gesture, to let the boy know, *Yes, I see you, my son, you are recognized in my eyes*, when Arthur, as if sensing his father's intentions, reached in a sudden flurry for the window shade and vanished.