CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Elwood?"

He grunted in response from the living room, where the window kept a sliver of Broadway below: Sammy's Shoe Repair, the closed-down travel agency, and the median that ran up the avenue. The angle of his vision made a trapezoid, his personal snow globe of the city. It was a good place to smoke and he'd found a way to perch on the sill that didn't aggravate his back.

"I'm going out for a bag of ice, I can't take it anymore," Denise said, and locked the front door behind her. He had given her a set of keys last week.

He didn't mind the heat. This city knew how to concoct a miserable summer, sure, but it had nothing on the South on those hot days. The way New Yorkers complained about summer heat, on the subway, in the bodega, made him snicker ever since he got here. There was a garbage strike then, too, his first day in the city, but it had been February. It didn't smell as bad. This time whenever he left the vestibule downstairs, the stench was a thicket—he wanted a machete to hack through it. It was only the second day of the strike.

The wildcat strike of '68: an introduction to the city so wretched that he had to interpret it as a hazing. Steel trash cans mobbed the pavement—overflowing and untouched for days—and the newer garbage in bundled bags and cardboard boxes huddled against them. He avoided public transportation in a new place until he got the lay of it and he'd never been on a subway before. He walked all the way uptown from the Port Authority. Walking in a straight line was impossible. He weaved around the mounds of refuse. When he got to the Statler, the SRO on Ninety-Ninth Street, the residents had kicked open a path to the front door between two monstrous

piles of garbage. Rats zipped back and forth. If you wanted to break into one of the second-floor rooms, all you had to do was scale the trash.

The manager gave him a key to a place in the back, four flights up. Hot plate, with a bathroom down the hall. One of the guys he worked with in Baltimore told him about the flophouse and painted a terrible picture. It wasn't as bad as the guy made it out. He'd stayed in worse places. After a couple of days, he bought cleanser at the A&P and took it on himself to clean the toilet and shower. No one else bothered—that kind of joint. He'd scrubbed dirty johns plenty of times, plenty of places.

On his knees in the stink. Welcome to New York.

Down on Broadway, Denise crossed his perch view. Seen from street level, the median was clean most days. From the third floor you peered over the benches and trees and saw the trash crowding the subway ventilation grates and paving stones. Paper bags and beer bottles and tabloids. Now the crap was everywhere, in drifts. With the latest strike under way, everybody saw what he saw all the time: The city was a mess.

He stubbed out his smoke in the teacup and made it to the couch without hitting one of those gongs. Ever since he put his back out, he'd feel all right and forget and move too fast and then *gong*—a detonation in his spine. *Gong* while sitting on the toilet, *gong* while picking up his pants. He yelped like a dog and then curled on the floor for a few minutes. The bathroom tile cool on his skin. It was his own fault. You never knew what was in those drawers and boxes. One time when they were moving this old Ukrainian guy—a cop who got his pension and picked up stakes to Philadelphia where he had a niece—he bent down to lift a night table and his spine popped. Larry said he heard it from the hallway. The cop kept his free weights in there. Three hundred pounds of weights, in case he got the urge to lift in the middle of the night. What put his back out last week was a big wooden bureau, harmless-looking, but he'd been working extra shifts for money. Sleepy and sloppy. "You got to watch it with that Danish modern shit," Larry told him. When Denise returned he'd ask her to fill another hot-water bottle, long as she was going to be in the kitchen fixing more rum and Cokes.

The block was loud most nights with salsa music and it was louder this evening, what with everyone keeping their windows open because of the

heat, plus tomorrow was July Fourth. Everyone had off. If his back wasn't too troublesome, they were going to Coney Island for the fireworks, but tonight they would stay in and watch *The Defiant Ones* on channel 4. Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis, two convicts chained together on the run through the swamp, dodging hunting dogs and dumb-faced deputies with shotguns. Phony Hollywood crap, but he always watched the movie when it came on, usually on *The Late Late Show*, and Denise liked Sidney Poitier.

His rooms were furnished with castoffs from work. A kind of showroom for the furniture of New Yorkers from all over the city, in rotation, new stuff coming in and old stuff going out. His queen-size bed with the type of super-stiff mattress he liked, the dresser with the fancy brass studs, all the lamps and rugs. People get rid of plenty when they move—sometimes they're changing not just places but personalities. Up or down "the economic ladder." Maybe the bed won't fit in the new place, or the sofa's too boxy, or they're newlyweds and put a new living-room set on their registry. A lot of these white-flight families splitting for the suburbs, Long Island and Westchester, they're making a whole new start—shaking the city off, and that means getting rid of how they used to see themselves. Him and the rest of the crew from Horizon Moving had dibs before the junkman got his hands on it. The couch he lay on now was his twelfth in seven years. Constantly upgrading. One of the perks of working for a moving company, though it was hell on your back sometimes.

Even if he scavenged furniture like a transient, he put down roots. After his childhood home, this was the place he'd lived the longest. He started this New York stint at the SRO, stayed there a few months until he got the job at 4 Brothers washing dishes. He moved around a bunch—uptown, Spanish Harlem—until he got a line on the job at Horizon, steady work, and humped it down here to Eighty-Second Street off Broadway. He knew he was going to take the apartment when the landlord threw the door wide: here. Four years and counting. "I'm middle class now," he joked to himself. Even the roaches were of a noble sort, scurrying when he turned on the bathroom light instead of ignoring his presence. He took their modesty as a touch of class.

Denise returned. "Did you hear me outside?" She went into the kitchen and stabbed the bag of ice with a butter knife.

“What?”

“This rat ran across my feet and I screamed. That was me,” she said.

Denise was tall and Harlem-tough and could’ve played basketball in one of the lady leagues. One of these city girls who wasn’t afraid of anything. He’d seen her curse out this muscle-bound turkey who whispered something untoward as she passed on the street, she got up in the dude’s face, but a rat made her squeal like a little girl. Denise was most definitely not a little girl, so when she let out that part of her it was always a surprise. She lived on 126th next to a vacant lot and the heat and now the garbage made the empty lot livelier than usual. The bastards were everywhere, bursting out of their underground hidey-holes. She said she saw a rat as big as a dog last night. “Barked like one, too.” He opined that maybe it was a dog, but she wasn’t going back today and he was glad to have her.

Her Wednesday-night classes were canceled because of the Fourth. He was off, too, that afternoon, sleeping when she came over and got into bed with him. Her big silver earrings on the bedside table—courtesy of the Atkinson family, Turtle Bay to York Avenue, three kids and a dog and a Gimbels dining-room set—woke him up. By now she knew the spot on his back where it hurt and kneaded it and then told him to roll over and got on top. The room was ten degrees hotter when they were done and well tangled up in each other. Warm rum and Cokes worked for a while and then they didn’t and an ice run was in order.

They met at the high school up on 131st Street. At night there were adult classes. He was working on his GED and she taught ESL to Dominicans and Poles in the classroom next door. He waited to finish the course before he asked her out. Earned his certificate and feeling proud and it was one of those moments that makes you realize you have no one in your life who cares about the occasional triumph. He’d had the thought of getting his GED in the back of his mind for a while. Tended to it like it was a candle flame cupped in his hand out of the wind. He kept seeing the ads on the subway—Complete Your Studies at Night on Your Own Terms—and was so happy to get that piece of paper that he said, Fuck it, and walked right up to her. Big brown eyes and a bridge of freckles over her nose. *On His Own Terms.* He hardly ever did it any other way.

Asked her out and she said no. She was seeing someone. Then a month later she called him up and they went out for Cuban Chinese.

Denise brought over the rum and Cokes with ice. “And I got us some sandwiches,” she said.

He set up the TV tray, which had been left behind by Mr. Waters when he picked up stakes from Amsterdam Avenue to Arthur Avenue in the Bronx. It folded up so that it fit neat between the couch and the end table, like that. Nobel Prize in Physics to the guy who invented it.

“They need to get off their asses and pick it all up,” Denise said from the kitchen. “Beame has to pick up the phone and talk to these people.”

She thought the mayor was a bum and relished the strike for its opportunity of complaint. She listed her gripes as he wrangled the rabbit ears to the best place for channel 4. The smell, she said, for one—of the rotting food and the bleach the supers sprayed on top of it. The bleach was for the flies that swarmed over the piles of trash in a gross haze and for the maggots twisting on the pavement. Then there was the smoke. People lit the garbage on fire to get rid of it—he didn’t understand this, and he considered himself a student of the human animal—and the limp breezes between the buildings carried the smoke all over. The fire engines screamed as they scattered across the city on the avenues and side streets.

That, plus the rats.

He sighed. In every argument he took whatever side stuck it to the Man, rule one. Cops and politicians, fat-cat businessmen and judges, the assorted motherfuckers working levers. “They got ’em by the balls, they should twist,” he said. “They’re working men.” Mayor Beame, Nixon and his bullshit, it was almost enough to make him want to vote. But he avoided the government whenever possible so as not to push his little bit of luck.

“Why don’t you sit down, baby,” he said. “I’ll get it together.”

“I already did it all.” Even put the kettle on for his hot-water bottle. It whistled.

Trash-fire smoke snuck in through the window so he opened the one in the bedroom for cross ventilation. She was right. It’d be a true hassle if this strike went as long as the last one. It was terrible out there. But it was good for the rest of the city to see what kind of place they were really living in.

Try his perspective for a change. See how they liked it.

The news anchor offered the holiday weather and gave a brief update on the strike—“talks continue”—and told the viewers to stay tuned for the *Nine O’Clock Movie.*

He tapped her glass with his. “You’re married to me, now—here’s the ring.”

“What?”

“From the movie. Sidney Poitier says it.” Holding up the chains that bind him to the redneck.

“You should watch what you say.”

Sure, the dialogue changed depending on who was saying it and who you said it to. Like the ending of the movie. On the one hand, neither convict made it out. Or you look at it the other way and each of them could’ve made it to freedom if they’d let the other one die. Maybe it didn’t matter—they were fucked either way. He stopped watching the movie a few years later when he realized he didn’t watch it because it was sort of corny, or they got the facts wrong, or it marked how far he had come, but because watching it made him sad, and a nutjob part of him sought out that sadness. At a certain point he learned the smarter play was to avoid the things that brought you low.

That night, though, he didn’t see the end of the movie because Denise wore a denim skirt and her big thighs sticking out distracted him too much. He reached over when that antacid commercial came on.

The Defiant Ones, then sex, then sleep. Fire engines in the night. Tomorrow morning he had to get up and out, back pain or no, because at ten he was going to meet the man and buy the van. He had a roll of bills tucked in his boot under his bed and he’d miss the satisfaction of adding twenty bucks to it on payday. Tore down the flier in the laundromat so no one else could beat him to it: a ’67 Ford Econoline. Needed a new finish, glossy, but the guys on 125th owed him one. And then he’d supplement his Horizon shifts with his own jobs. Weekends, too, bring on Larry so he can pay off his old lady. You couldn’t count on the Department of Sanitation, but Larry bellyaching about his child support was as dependable as U.S. Steel.

He decided to call his company Ace Moving. AAA was taken and he wanted to be at the top of the phone book. It was six months before he realized he picked the name from his time at Nickel. Ace: out in the free world to make your zigzag way.