

CHAPTER I



DURING MY CHILDHOOD I had always trusted myself. In my head I was always righteous, and righteous-ness was the currency of the universe, and to-morrow was always ever brighter and merrier than to-day. I maintained this supercilious, majestic air throughout my youth, even despite the bullies who jeered back with supercilious mimicry. I had always thought it odd that these long-lost enemies had imitated the same hellish mannerisms they so condemned, and so I thought little of them. Only much later did I realize the true evil in my attitude—it was no simple childhood fun in my personality, but rather a heavy flask of poison for all those who loved me.

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My focus was on taking the most roundabout way to the apartment. The morning was spent meandering about the city and bathing in the unheard laughter from the couple at the corner, and in the men in stiff suits anxious to arrive promptly at work, and the cacophony of angry taxicabs and angry drivers. My family had lived in this vivacious city for many years, descending from my resourceful great-grandfather Irishman Aedan Moore who looked to escape the potato blight. Sixty-seven years later, potatoes were still the only staple my parents could muster to feed my seven living siblings and I. Two more siblings—one brother and one sister—had died in infancy. But my family survived because the currency of smiles kept our domicile economy prosperous with jubilation.

That was before the War. The draft had taken millions of brave young men to their gloriously miserable deaths, and my father was one of them. The day the soldier in uniform with the face that told of my father's demise approached the foyer in that winter of nineteen-fifteen, my world splintered apart and sank.

The world couldn't sleep with the intensity of my screams, and that night I was gone.

The plan to avoid a direct route was foiled by a mischievous thunderclap and the trillions of raindrops that followed its lead. The earth drank a long draft of water, and water raced down the roof tiles of the train station and plunged to the ground like boys at a ledge over a water-hole.

The locomotive halted. The indistinct chatter of those leaving the train was gravely felt against the cave-like silence when I entered. Some of the smokestack's exhaust rained down as soot onto the windows, but not enough to spare me from the electrifying reflection of myself. A gaunt face and tear-streaked eyes. The river of tears seemed to be surfacing from the pores lining my face, pouring out of everywhere and nowhere at once, draining the sentiment out of my body along with my strength. I retreated from this vicious image to the safety of closed eyelids, and sleep rescued me.

The train stopped at the Gun Hill Road station and I jolted awake at the sudden deceleration. Back in the rain, I lost my sense of urgency and stood motionless, letting the fine mist of the drying clouds soak my braided hair. Only when the rain from the sky ended and the rain from my saturated hair began did I begin to travel again.

But I paused again. The cartoonish characters detailed in chalk and blurred by the precipitation pierced my fragile body. This primitive graffiti was not at all uncommon in this area of the Bronx—in fact, I was a major proponent of the trend as a juvenile. Looking at that colorful face gnarled by concrete and trodden on by hundreds of unassuming pedestrians, I saw myself, trodden on and gnarled not by people, but by my own adolescent years.

My only home lay at 355 West Gun Hill Road, only two blocks from the station. I could call no other location of my wandering era so dear as this one. Even so, I couldn't bring myself to step through that doorway again and face my history, to regret that history of mine that had thrown everything away and received nothing back in return.