

**Below Grade**

**A Novel**

**By Josh Piven**

### **Author's Note**

On March 22, 1996, a double shooting occurred in a car in a downtown Philadelphia parking lot. A young man and an FBI agent, working under cover, fired their guns nearly simultaneously. Both were killed. The young man was my friend.

This is a work of fiction. However, some aspects of the story are based on that event, and others that occurred in and around Philadelphia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Though some are amalgamations of real people, all the characters portrayed in this book—and the details of the events surrounding them—are fictional.

## **Prologue**

I'm going to tell you, right here up front, that this story doesn't make me look very good.

I'm not a kid anymore. But this is a story about being a teenager. More specifically it's what happened to me when I was nearing the end of my youth. The events that follow, the ones that occurred back then, pretty much put an end to all that.

Did they “make a man” out of me? Possibly. But that's probably overstating it. Back in those days I thought I had it all figured out anyway. I was just walking on a treadmill, keeping pace. Waiting to finish high school and begin moving forward as an adult. What happened did destroy any semblance of youthful innocence I had—if there was much left by that point. Does that make a man out of a boy, that loss of innocence? Maybe. Maybe it does. Or perhaps it's learning that some mistakes can't be undone. And their costs don't fade over time.

We all make mistakes when we're young. Naturally. That's part of growing up. Taking the car without permission and crashing it. Cheating on a test and getting caught. The occasional—or regular—can of beer. The joints here and there. All that shit is pretty much expected. Or anyway it was in my case. I was a city kid in a fancy city school overflowing with drugged-out kids up to God-knows-what.

I'm not talking about those kinds of mistakes. My errors were larger and more damaging. The kind where poor judgment and bad choices twist together into an impossible knot. A noose, maybe. I was one of those teenagers who always thought I was—I don't know exactly how to put this—if not smarter than the adults around me, than at least smarter than *most* of them. I was sure I knew the angles.

But guess what? I didn't know shit. Like I said, it's all here on paper, the whole story. You'll make your own decision. Maybe you'll say I got caught up in things. The pressure got to me and I cracked. That would be good. Charitable. I'd accept that. But my suspicion is by the end you won't be feeling too charitable. Maybe you'll feel pity. Or sympathy. That would be OK, I guess. But at this point I've given up trying to guess what other people are going to think about my story. It's too hard to predict. Best to just get on with it. I'll tell you everything and not bother trying to figure out what you'll think. Or feel. About me, or anything I did.

Back then, those kinds of guessing games fucked everything up in the first place.

## One

“They shot each other in a car,” she told me.

“I know that.”

“Did you know he had a gun?”

“No. No, I didn’t.”

“But you knew his father owned guns.”

“Yeah. I knew.”

She paused. Was she scribbling something at the other end of the line?

I sighed, a long breath. “Listen, I can’t talk to you. I’m late. I have to go.”

She ignored me. “Did you know the man he shot was with the FBI?”

Another sigh. “Yeah. They said so on the news.”

She kept at it. “You know, I heard he was shot in the back.” Casual now.

“So what?”

“You don’t find that odd? Why was he shot in the back?” she said. “If it was just the two of them, wouldn’t he’ve been shot from the front? Or the side?” Casting, wanting me to bite.

“I really have no idea.” And I didn’t.

“I think I might,” she said.

Was she waiting for me to suggest something? “Uh huh.” Where was this going? I looked at my watch. “Listen, I have to go. I’m late already.”

“Off the record. I think there was someone else in the car with them.” She waited, letting it sink in.

Head pounding now, blood rushing through my ears, I couldn't think of anything to say. Nothing sufficient, anyway.

"Do you think it could've been someone from Shelby?" Dripping honey, all syrupy sweetness and light. My God, didn't this woman ever stop? Why did she and her fucking newspaper have it in for us?

"No. I really don't know. *Ma'am.*" I savored the mock formality, trying to make her feel old. Even though she was young and tall and blond. I'd had enough. "I really have to go. I'm late."

"Call me Karen. Sure, OK, no problem. We'll talk again soon." I was afraid we probably would. "Oh, and by the way, my guess is an Agent Vickers is going to want to talk to you." She'd saved that one for last. Tit for tat. Was I supposed to feel like a suspect?

"And your friends. Do you . . ."

"I have to go."

And that was it. I hung up the phone and ran upstairs, shrugging off the scolding at my back about being late. I closed my door and locked it. Then I went over and carefully removed the piece of loose baseboard behind my bed. Reaching into the small hole I'd knocked in the drywall, I pulled out the short strip of cellophane. I shoved it into my pocket. Then I grabbed my bag, tossed a goodbye over my shoulder, and left the house. On my way to Shelby, after checking twice to make sure no one was looking, I tossed the narrow strip to the ground and kicked it down a storm drain. It floated, a little plastic ship bobbing on a sea of oily grime. On the curb, I lit a cigarette, pondering the previous two

weeks and savoring the flavor like the last meal of a condemned man. When there was nothing left, I fired the butt sharply down into the sewer like a torpedo.

Then I went to school.

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That was the bad time.

Two weeks earlier, 1988 was running out and 1989 about to begin on the end, and the edge, of a subway platform. I wasn't planning on jumping. High school was a drag of course and it was all about to spiral way out of control. But at that moment things were still pretty good. It was before all the trouble began. Had I known, I might've appreciated it a little more.

My friend Chen and I stood at the spot where the "Danger! Do Not Enter Tracks!" sign is posted. It's a sign with little purpose. The danger's pretty obvious. And the only people who enter subway tunnels are track workers who belong there and people like me and my friends, who don't. But who go there anyway, precisely because it's dangerous and there's a sign telling us not to.

We stood next to the grimy tiled wall, waiting for the next train to pass so we could enter the tunnel. The air was heavy with that musty “subway” smell, the distinctive odor of dampness and staleness and dirt and vermin—and possibly electricity, if it has an odor. I felt like I usually did on these late-night tunnel excursions, like I needed to take a shit. Maybe it was the rank tunnel air. Or the buzz of third rail. Why had I let Chen drag me down here? On fucking New Year’s eve, no less. The tunnels were OK. Something to do. But we could’ve just as easily been at The Factory, cold forties clenched in our gloved fists. Ready to welcome in the new year with drinking and pissing off the fire escape. I started to complain about having to go to the bathroom. Chen silenced me with a sideways look and a hand slicing through the air. He peered around the corner and down the curving ribbon of dark track that disappeared into the tunnel.

Chen was frozen in place. Listening. Possibly for a train but more likely for hushed voices and the metallic clink of mixing balls inside spray cans. I couldn’t hear a thing. I peered behind us, more concerned with someone on the platform spotting two teenagers nosing around where they didn’t belong and calling the cops. But there were few people waiting for the subway at ten to midnight on New Year’s eve.

Back then, I was in my thirteenth and blessedly final year at Shelby. I’d started in kindergarten, at age five. People like me—that is, privileged kids with parents who’d already paid for the equivalent of a four-year college education by the time their kids began applying for college—were known as “lifers” in Shelbyspeak. The penitentiary reference wasn’t lost on anyone.



Up until that point, my high school years at Shelby had been stutter steps of decent grades, light drug use, moderate success at tennis, and public drunkenness on the weekends. One year, as a lark, I even tried running for student council on an innovative platform of reducing the course-load for teachers—and students. (I lost, even though my friends tried to rig the vote.) Mostly, I found the kids and the partying more diverting than my classes. But I worked hard enough and did well enough to avoid drawing undue attention. As long as you kept your grades up, parents, teachers, and the administration didn't really give a shit *what* you did, more or less. As long as you didn't get caught. And nobody died.

But I was nearly done.

Late December of that year had been a relaxed blur of handshakes and toasts to my future. A few weeks before that night I'd gotten my wonderfully fat envelope, my early acceptance to the University of Michigan. I was out of gear, coasting toward June. Doing the best I could to do as little as I could and still graduate. Getting arrested in a train tunnel wasn't high on my list of unaccomplished feats. And I was pretty sure Michigan wasn't looking for vandals with rap sheets to fill out the Class of '93. But I'd already seen all the new movies.

And Chen? Well, he certainly wasn't the poster child for the benefits of diversity. He'd picked up graffiti at public school. Though he never said as much, they probably didn't

take kindly to having their bathroom walls destroyed by his handiwork. It was Chen who'd first brought me into the tunnels that year. Had the kid devoted half as much energy to his homework as he did to stealing spray paint and sneaking out in the middle of the night he would've made his parents proud. But it just wasn't in him. He was a true addict of the danger and the excitement of wall writing. Text books were a place to practice while the sun shone.

The train rumbled out of the darkness and clattered and clacked past us. As we stood on the platform and prepared to enter the tunnel, Chen's face was half hidden by the shadow of his large hood. His trademark cigarette dangled from one corner of his mouth. Then he turned to face me. The harsh platform light showed an intense sort of grin, anticipating excitement to come and concentrating on the task at hand. He nodded. Safe to go. More or less.

He walked down the short flight of steps to the track bed. I followed closely. Fine bits of dirt and train-compacted trash crunched underfoot as we began our trek into the gloom. Everything everywhere was coated with a thick layer of black soot, and a shallow puddle of stagnant, garbage-filled water pooled between the tracks. Cigarette butts were strewn like confetti. So were discarded empty paint cans. These clanged as we kicked them aside, the refuse of hundreds of bored kids who'd been here before us. Electricity buzzed as it surged through the third rail running along the track. It was covered with wood, at least on top, and not too much of a danger. Chen hopped up on it now and then, as if to demonstrate. It seemed idiotic, though he claimed it was perfectly safe. Over the years

there were stories, kids wearing long key chains or baggy pants with zippered pockets brushing up against the unprotected side of the rail and getting fried. Were they true? Nobody ever seemed to know the names of the kids or where they went to school. But I always wore jeans when I went down there. Risk was one thing. But I wasn't stupid.

Chen walked into the semi-darkness with assurance. Jerry, a homeless guy we'd befriended and whom we often paid to buy us beer, had mentioned something about living in the tunnels in the winter. Some out-of-the-way refuge somewhere. Perhaps that's how Chen had found this spot, wherever it was we were headed. I didn't ask. Graffiti had never really been my thing. It was something to do on the weekends in addition to drinking beer and getting high. I'd even chosen a tag, "Quest." My tagging was lame, though, a drippy scrawl. I had no idea what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. But being a graffiti artist was a long shot.

For me, the entire thing was a diversion, nothing more. Still, it was the tunnels. Shit happened. I imagined having to explain first to the police and then to Chen's grieving parents precisely how and why their beloved only child had been electrocuted on the third rail. Or crushed under the wheels of an El train. Or attacked and mauled by rats. "Mrs. Chen, allow me to be the first to tell you that your son, though an underperformer academically, was a gifted graffiti artist of some renown. He's sure to be memorialized in some huge mural with lots of crosses and images of spray paint cans. You'll be able to glimpse it momentarily as you speed by on a westbound El train. The best views are from the last car. Oh, and his graffiti tag was 'Weed.'"

Deeper into the tunnel we walked, far out of earshot of anyone waiting on the platform, and beyond its lights. Chen's back was sheathed in his usual camouflage jacket. He'd picked it up well worn at I. Goldberg Army & Navy. The store'd been keeping Chen and assorted older miscreants clothed in East German and Austrian military surplus since Armistice. The massive coat must've been made for an Aryan *überman*. It hung off his small, wiry frame like an enormous battlefield tarpaulin, something better suited to hiding a Panzer from dive bombers. His cavernous pockets bulged with cans of Krylon and Rustoleum. They pinged tinny when he moved.

Chen was a "tunnel rat," a kid who'd pretty much rather be in the subway tunnels than anywhere else. His first name was Dave, but we all called each another by our last names. We thought it sounded arch and ironic, like we went to Choate or Exeter. He began whistling out now and then, out of boredom, or pleasure, or as a signal to someone. A few steps behind, taking care not to place my foot near a switch that could crush my ankle should it be thrown, I followed.

"Hey Chen, where the fuck are we going?" I asked his retreating back. "It's too dark down here. Nobody's even going to see your shit."

Part of the point of doing graffiti was so people could see it when they rode the train. But the tunnel had only dust-coated yellow bulbs, spaced far apart. Any writing on the wall

would be lost from a few feet away. Still, tags were just about everywhere. The alcoves and pillars were covered in silver and white scribble. Chen kept whistling, ignoring me.

“I really have to take a crap,” I said.

“There’s some newspaper, Myers,” Chen said, pointing to a filthy pile of trash. “You want to squat?” Then he laughed, a brief exhalation. “Here, have a mah-bo-lo,” he said. He tossed me his hard pack, which I nearly missed in the darkness.

Chen was Taiwanese, though he was first gen and spoke no Chinese. At least none I’d ever heard. He occasionally found it funny to ask questions of store owners and waitresses in horribly broken and heavily accented English. Just to savor their quizzical reactions. He always pronounced his cigarettes “mah-bo-lo.” He thought it was amusing. I was pretty sure Chen had never been kissed by a girl, despite his vague and somewhat fanciful references to a “Taiwanese chick” he’d dated over the summer.

I lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply, holding the smoke in my lungs a few moments before blowing it out in a long, dramatic stream. It wasn’t likely to be much worse than the polluted tunnel air I was breathing. The snot in my nose would be streaked with black soot in the morning. I glanced at my watch. Two minutes to midnight.

“Hey,” I yelled. “Check it out!” An enormously bloated rat scurried next to us, headed in the opposite direction, toward the station. Then it stopped to sniff at whatever we were up to. “Looks pregnant,” I said.

Chen nodded lazily but said nothing, a rat in the subway about as surprising as a SEPTA train. Then the rails began to vibrate and sing, a second later a rush of cool air, and Chen yelled “Train!” We quickly leapt to the side of the tracks as the train flashed around a bend. Standing straight behind two pillars, we slowly rotated our bodies around the steel as the train went by, so nobody looking out a window could see us. If anyone was watching, or cared. It was all part of the game, we pretend someone’s looking so we have an excuse to run and hide. Perhaps there was the off chance of a cop on the train, peering into black subway tunnels in search of vandals. Doubtful. But who knows? So we hid. Because that’s what everyone else did.

The rumbling passed and the air settled and again we began walking, deeper into the tunnel. We were in virtual isolation, only the sound of our crunching rubber soles for company. A meager breeze came in from the surface, somewhere way ahead and out of sight. A minute passed, then two. I glanced at my watch, but the numbers were losing their glow. I was about to break into *Auld Lyng Syne* when Chen produced a folded piece of paper. He consulted it, by lighter flame.

“Jesus *Christ*, you need a fucking *map*?”

He pointed. “Over there,” he said quietly. He tucked the paper back into his jacket.

He directed us across both sets of tracks, toward an alcove. It appeared solid from a distance. But up close, a three foot opening had been knocked out, near ground level.

“Where’s it go?” I said.

He grinned but said nothing. We ducked and passed through it, black grime from the wall streaking our jackets. On the other side, Chen paused and I did too, allowing our eyes to adjust to the darkness. Dead air. The stillness and perpetual gloom of abandonment.

Wherever we were, the walls didn't hold even the dirt-caked yellow bulbs track men used when their lamps burned out. There was all sorts of trash and junk strewn on the tracks, crates and loose ties, even a shopping cart. Clearly it hadn't seen train traffic in a while. It had to be some sort of disused line or spur. There'd been talk of such places, secret tunnels sealed long ago and forgotten, but I'd always thought it was bullshit.

"You going to fire up a torch?" I teased. But a flashlight wouldn't have been a bad idea. Here, being attacked and eaten by rats didn't seem so far-fetched.

Chen grunted. Then he pointed to a very faint glow, coming from far down the track bed. Something was down there, anyway. We began walking next to the tracks, toward the light. As we got closer I heard the tell-tale rattle and hiss of spray paint. Then the smell of pot. Chen smelled it too, because he turned around and grinned. The cigarette altered its angle as his lips curled up.

"Subway smell," he announced with a chuckle.

Moments later we rounded a bend and came upon what appeared to be the platform of an old subway station, long abandoned. Now it served as a canvas for every graffiti writer in Philadelphia—and the graveyard where rusted paint cans went to die.

“Happy New Year, *motherfuckers!*”

Oh *shit*.

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Drone, Chen’s boy, stood on the platform. He held a skinny lit joint in one hand and an extra large can of bright silver spray paint, a “tall boy,” in the other. Judging by his dozens of freshly painted tags he’d beaten us there by some time. Maybe he had a better map.

Drone.

For the second time that night, I wished I’d had something better to do. I glanced around, half-heartedly hoping that what looked like a 1950s-era subway station still had a working toilet.

“Yooooooooo! Holy fucking *shiiiiittttt!* This is *it!* What up Drone!” Chen yelled in greeting as we scrambled up onto the platform.



Some enterprising graffiti artist, probably missing out on a lucrative career as an electrician, had tapped a power line somewhere. Now a long yellow cord of construction bulbs suspended from the ceiling bathed the platform in half light, like a makeshift Christmas tree stand along Washington Avenue. I gazed up and down the platform in stunned silence. The huge tiled wall—it must have been at least two hundred feet long—was coated with layer upon layer of graffiti of every imaginable color, style, and level of prowess.

There were scribbled, ugly tags in “fat boy” marker, shoe polish, and paint; expertly sprayed and stunning “pieces” with giant 3-D letters of perfectly blended colors; single-color, quickly painted bubble-letter “throw ups”; and innumerable “tall prints,” complicated graffiti cursive, essentially undecipherable. Empty spray cans littered the platform, with an equal helping of beer cans and forty ounce bottles keeping them company. Here and there the tag of a well-known “old head” stood out. A random “Cornbread” and “MB” and “Credit.” These had been carefully painted around by young writers. But I was certain most of their handiwork from the late ’70s lay on the bottom layer, never to be excavated. Respect was fine, but not when it took up too many feet of prime wall space. Scattered here and there were milk crates and fast food wrappers and crushed paper cups. In spots, writers had emptied and stacked the crates to reach high up the wall. Their contents, no doubt valued by someone, had been kicked down to the track bed. Or trampled. An old transistor radio lay on the ground, its innards trailing out like a rat mauled by a train. Piles of filthy blankets and stained clothing sat on flattened

refrigerator boxes. The homeless had staked their claims. Aside from Drone, though, the place was empty.

For all the color, the place was strangely depressing. Not to Chen, though. He couldn't contain himself. He was jumping up and down, pulling his hood off, running up the platform to hug his boy, and spilling paint cans out of his pockets all at once. Ready to attack the wall. The two of them were all a-twitter, back-slapping and high-fiving on finding the place.

“Yo Drone,” I said, taking his proffered joint and shaking his hand.

“What up, Quest?” It tumbled out loudly, more as a statement or an order than a question, like “can I get a large fry with that?” Drone called everybody by their graffiti name.

I took a drag off his poorly rolled spliff, holding the harsh smoke in my lungs and listening to the seeds pop. Couldn't this guy *ever* clean his pot? A few seconds later I blew it up toward the ceiling arches. That, too, was covered in tags. Some were freshly painted silver “Drone”s. How'd he get up there? A six-foot ladder leaned against the wall. He must've carried it down here. Jesus.

Drone's real name was Hakim, but you simply couldn't imagine anyone calling him that, ever. His grandmother probably called him Drone, too. He didn't know his dad and his mom had moved to North Carolina in search of a better job. So he claimed. He was a few

years older than we were, and had gone to Central High for a year with Chen. He'd subsequently flunked out. Now he simply wrote graffiti and tried to get by.

For the time, Drone was an unusual mix of geek, graffiti writer, small-game con man, and wannabe dealer, forever working an angle. He sported huge thick glasses with too-big plastic frames. Though he believed they were like Gazelles or some other Run DMC brand, these were surely from the Salvation Army. They'd probably belonged to an 85 year-old geezer gone blind. His hair was medium-short but with long sideburns. In the winter, he wore an ugly, once-puffy Mack jacket with an angled yellow and red stripe that reminded me of Mork's vest. Drone had a crushing grip, with palms like wax paper, crinkly and dry from the mineral spirits he was constantly applying to remove telltale paint stains. His arms were huge, not muscled but weirdly elongated for his height.

I found out later the place where we were that night was called, simply and in hushed and reverential tones, "The Platform." It'd been part of the Ridge Avenue spur off the Broad Street line but been sealed from the surface side since 1979. It was a hidden wall of fame, and Chen was prepared. He pulled out a small spiral-bound "piece book" from the folds of his camou tent. Then he gazed at the wall, calculating whom he could safely paint over and who might take offense at the disrespect and "x" his shit out. Or give him a beating. I tried to locate a clean space for my own sloppy tag. Finding none, I sat down on a crate to drink the last beer in my pocket.

“Yo Quest, what do you think of this spot? Dope, huh?” Yet another Drone question with only one conceivable answer.

“It’s pretty cool,” I said. “Lights down here and everything,” I added, sticking to stating the obvious.

“Weed, hook me up with that Ultra-Flat,” Drone said. Chen tossed him the can. Drone began spraying his tag over a white section of someone else’s piece. Disrespect.

We put up with Drone because he was our last-ditch pot connection. Also because he and Chen were especially tight. I’d always figured there was some sort of public school bond. Something we knew nothing about and wouldn’t understand in any case. The two of them constantly went “bombing” on the weekends so he was usually hanging around anyway.

“Hey Quest, you need any herb?” he said. “I got dimes and nicks. I can do three nicks for twelve, three dimes for twenty-five.”

Drone was always gaming or scheming, forever in search of the big score. He hustled to make a buck selling stolen cigarettes, batteries, or art supplies. Or drugs, when he had money to buy them. Typically, his deals left the buyer with dead batteries, dried-up markers, or shitty weed. Along with a vow never to do business with him again.

“I’m good,” I said. I pictured him sitting at home with a finger scale, making sure that each little plastic bag was just light enough to account for his generous “discount.” That, or removing what he passed off as bud and replacing it with stems and seeds.

“You sure man?” He kept pushing. “What about your girl? Mel? She need any herb? I know she *loves* to smoke! Man, that chick has a *nice* ass!” He prodded my arm with an elbow. “Yo, you ever suck on those titties? Holy cow!” It was one of his favorite geeky expressions. Somehow, with those huge glasses and that silly jacket, he pulled it off.

“You know I’d hit those, Quest! Yo, Weed!” He got Chen’s attention. Then he lifted his hands and waved them side to side, “like wipers on a car, man. First one, then the other. Then one, then the other!” Chen laughed as he painted. I did too. It was a good line.

As much of a pain in the ass as he was, Drone had a refreshing candor that was easy to enjoy. Or maybe I confused a lack of boundaries for candor. He was giving me an opening to boast about having hooked up with Melissa, and he knew I knew it. He also knew she and I had some history. I was always purposely oblique about the details, though. Better to let their imaginations do the job for me.

Drone was an idiot, but he was no fool. He simply wanted to get me high and in a good mood so I’d buy some of his dirt weed. It wasn’t a bad strategy. Maybe I *would* take some. If I got wasted enough. Shit, it was new year’s eve. I took a huge gulp of my beer. Drone helped us feel that we were at once slumming and “genuine.” Streetwise, and not too good to hang with a kid from West Philly. But just well off enough to feel superior in the things that really mattered. Drone had been in my house a few times. After each visit, I always checked to see if something was missing.

“Naw, man,” I said. “Mel and I are just good friends. You know, like you and your right hand.”

Chen laughed. Drone shot me a narrow look. But he said nothing, just kept painting. We all listened to a train rumble past somewhere on the main track, out of sight. His silence let me know I was out of line. Among my other friends, making casual and frequent reference to one another’s masturbation was a daily activity. Like sleeping or eating. Or beating it, for that matter. But Drone knew he’d never be part of our inner circle, “the fellas.” And I knew he knew. I instantly regretted it, but I couldn’t apologize. It was already out there so I let it stand.

“Did someone say *Rosy Palm*?”

The voice floated in from the darkness of the tunnel, the body it belonged to still around the bend, beyond the construction lights. But it was unmistakable Campbell, smooth as silk sheets. Seconds later he emerged from the darkness, wearing his trademark “hippie hoody.” And topsiders. He swerved and swayed up to the platform, clearly several beers into a six. How’d he manage to avoid being splattered by a train? Campbell hated the tunnels.

“Now *what* are you delinquents up to, I wonder?” he asked. Even though it was obvious. “I’m drinking. They’re drawing,” I said. “You finally made it. What’s up dude? You have any more beers?”

“Hmmm, well, I believe I do, sir. Would you care for one?”

Campbell never said anything in one word that he could just as reasonably say using five, with feigned formality. I shook his hand. From his backpack he pulled a Miller—the champagne of beers, he noted—and handed it to me. We clinked cans and exchanged “happy new years.” Chen greeted him with a cursory “what up,” too caught up in his piece to be bothered with conversation. It was actually starting to look like something. “Weed,” probably. For the life of me I couldn’t see how. Campbell glanced at the piece but had nothing to offer.

“What do you say, Drone? How progresses the vandalism?” Campbell couldn’t have cared less about graffiti. He put up with Drone as one tolerated a girlfriend’s dog: accepting his presence as part of the package but regretting that he couldn’t serve up a swift kick now and then.

“Yo.” That was it.

Drone concentrated on climbing the ladder and putting his tags as high as possible. With that thirty-seven-inch reach he barely needed the ladder. Campbell surveyed the littered platform, nodding his head in mock approval.

“I *love* what you guys’ve done with the place! Will we be passing out on the wet cardboard or the infested blankets?” Campbell was a bright kid but a cut-up, with an ironic pretentiousness that I, for one, found hilarious. He wrinkled his long nose and gave

a dramatic sniff. “And what’s that *unusual* odor?” Pause for effect. “Ah yes, ‘Eau de Homeless,’ my favorite scent.” I started laughing, but noticed Drone walking away from us, toward the end of the platform. He climbed down to the tracks.

“I’m gonna hit the main line. I’ll be back,” Drone announced. “Yo Quest, I’ll put you up too!”

“Cool.” He was offering to spray my tag next to his own, saving me the trouble.

When Drone was out of sight, Campbell turned over a cracked milk crate and sat down next to me, long legs sticking out to the sides. His tattered pants dragged on the ground, khakis with faded let-out marks encircling the bottoms like growth rings in a tree trunk. Tyler Smith Campbell III wore his hair long and shaggy, too. At six-foot-three and well over two hundred pounds, he was big and physically strong. But he loped rather than lumbered and was more familiar with Led Zeppelin than, say, a lacrosse stick. His topsiders practically screamed “suburbs.” Campbell was the only person I knew who wore them. His parents had a large piece of property in Swarthmore, with a huge stone house, a pool, and a gazebo. Whatever his father did, he had someone drive him to do it. Campbell got us the really good pot.

“I hate these tunnels,” he said. “Rats all over the fucking place.”

“They eat the roaches,” I said.

He motioned to the junk around us. “And the homeless eat the rats.”



Campbell had arrived at Shelby a junior, yet another reject. But this time one from Strath Haven. Strath Haven was a suburban high school in Swarthmore that liked to scatter its various undesirables on us like U.N. air drops. At least those whose parents could swing the tuition. Shelby, where “last chance” was part of the mission statement, snatched them up hungrily.

“Goddamn graffiti. It’s you city kids,” he admonished, wagging a big finger. “You’re a bad fucking influence.” Then he pulled out an eighth and began rolling a joint.

We drank and watched as Chen began outlining his piece in black paint. The final step. Campbell nudged me and then pulled something out of his backpack. A quick flash, a strip of small white disks, about the size of dimes, encased in clear cellophane. Then just as quickly he shoved the object back in.

And so it began.

His green eyes twinkled. He smiled mischievously and threw me a wink. But I had no idea what I’d seen. And he knew it. I offered an eyebrow raise but he kept quiet. He’d get around to it, when he was good and ready. Campbell relished his little dramas.

“Hey Chen-san,” he shouted, “your map sucked, pal. I was wandering in that damn tunnel for like a half hour. Almost got run over.” Chen must’ve drawn Campbell a copy of our map. A copy of the copy he’d probably made from homeless Jerry’s unreadable scrawl.

“Plus, no treasure,” I added helpfully.

“Whatd’you mean?” Chen said. “This shit right here is gold!” He gestured to his completed piece. In addition to his graffiti name it featured a cartoon character holding a two-foot joint—his trademark. The smoke curled up and around the entire mural, giving it the appearance of floating on a cloud. Chen stood in front of us, beaming in his colossal Austrian greatcoat. Red paint stains covered his hands and his face was streaked with grime. He looked like some victorious infantryman who’d miraculously survived his first skirmish.

“Niiiiice,” I said. “I like the spliff.”

“Yeah, me too,” Campbell said. “And speaking of which . . .”

He sealed the joint and fired it up. We passed it around. Chen’s wracking cough struggled miserably to clear his lungs. He spat down onto the old track bed. The three of us sat in silence for some minutes smoking, enjoying Campbell’s primo bud and the quiet. Then, as one, we all turned toward the end of the platform. We heard two voices, first raised in alarm and then quickly progressing to screams and shouts. One voice was undecipherable, at least to me. The other wasn’t. It was Drone. And he wasn’t scared. He was angry. Campbell and I exchanged looks. Chen was already up and racing toward the tunnel.

“Chen’s boy,” I said.

Campbell sighed in agreement and we stood. He tossed the roach onto the tracks and we began walking along the wall, following the voices. Ten seconds later, as we neared the steps leading down to the track bed, the argument, still out of sight, included Chen’s

panicked shouts. Campbell and I broke into a sprint. Leaving the platform and the lights behind, we tripped and stumbled as we weaved down the stairs and ran wildly back into the darkness.