

DON'T POKE THE BEAR

ROBIN D'AMATO

a novel

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PROLOGUE

JIM, 1987

A strange copper liquid dripped slowly onto Manhattan's East-28th-Street subway platform, rhythmically breaking the late-night silence of the mostly deserted station. Jim wouldn't normally think this was unusual, except that there hadn't been rain or snow in over a week. Then what was leaking? Something toxic, no doubt. He hurried over to the other side of the station.

It was never encouraging when there were no signs of a train in either direction. He leaned over the platform edge so far that he had to hold onto one of the iron beams to keep from tumbling onto the track-bed. Nothing. In the absence of train activity, huge rats were running all over the tracks, expertly avoiding the third rail. Jim pulled himself back from the ledge and lit a cigarette. He sucked long and hard on his freshly lit smoke and blew rings into the frigid air.

Since his best friend, Ephram, had chosen to stay home and catch up on some schoolwork, Jim had gone to their usual Saturday-night watering hole by himself. It was an old-school Irish bar in Murray Hill, the kind that opens around noon but is perpetual night inside. No one in this bar ever asked him, or anybody else, for ID, but it did help that Jim looked a lot older than his chronological age of 17. Could have been his prematurely receding hairline or his stocky build. It might also have

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been the three-packs-a-day.

Jim had had a few beers with a pair of retired cops, and the three became immersed in a heated political discussion about Watergate, Jim having just seen the hearings on the History Channel, the cops having seen them the first time around. When one of them asked Jim if he had voted for Richard Nixon, he didn't have the heart to tell them he wouldn't have been born yet. Although passing for older did amuse him, he left soon afterwards.

Not much was moving in the station, and Jim could still hear the rhythmic dripping and its echoes. Mayor Koch had announced that week that crime rates were down, but, as a native New Yorker, Jim knew that empty streets or stations were treacherous. His leather bomber jacket made him look tough and unapproachable though, should some untoward soul join him there.

Someone emerged from the far end of the platform and walked purposefully toward him.

"Shit," Jim muttered and quickly put out his cigarette.

The officer already had his book out and was writing a ticket.

"You know there's no smoking in the subways, including on the platforms?"

"Yes sir. Sorry sir."

"Can I see some ID?"

"I don't have any," he said. He had left his Stuyvesant High School ID at home. He motioned at his pockets but made no attempt to go into them. Then, hoping this worked as an explanation, he said, "I don't drive."

The officer frowned and continued writing.

"Name?"

"Jim Smith."

The officer glared at him.

"What, you think I'm stupid? Don't give me that 'Jim Smith' shit."

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Jim fought the urge to chuckle.

“That really is my name: Jim Smith.” Not his fault his mother had chosen the most common name in the United States for her only son. At least it wasn’t “John Doe.”

The cop grabbed him by the collar, lifted him off the ground, and slammed him into the tiled wall.

“What — is — your — name?”

He thought of telling him his name was Yitzhak, which was his Jewish name, and Stein, which was his mother’s last name, but since he didn’t want to poke the bear, he said the next thing that came to mind.

“Harold Callahan.” With any luck, this guy wasn’t an Eastwood fan.

The officer wrote the ticket to Harold Callahan.

The train arrived much later, depositing Jim in Forest Hills, Queens, well after two o’clock. The Continental Avenue strip mall was populated by a healthy assortment of shady characters, but the neon and fluorescent lighting from the storefronts made lurking in the shadows rather difficult. Instead, people lingered in doorways, hid in phone booths, and peered around corners from side streets. Jim hurried by all but unnoticed.

He crossed under the archway of Station Square into the wonderland that was Forest Hills Gardens. Tudor homes surrounded by an abundance of flowering plants and trees in perfectly manicured lots, it was an über-exurb, a gated community without the gates. There was a long period in its history when blacks and Jews were prohibited — okay, some say they were merely discouraged — from owning property there. Now, just over a decade after people had protested the policy, there were Jewish families everywhere. Even so, Jim felt more kinship with the lurkers on Continental Avenue.

His family’s house was dark and locked; his mother and sister must have been asleep. After a frantic search in his pockets, Jim realized he didn’t have his keys. He rang the bell,

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but that was futile because no one upstairs would hear it. The extra key wasn't under the mat, wasn't in the planter on the porch, wasn't on top of the door ledge, and the closest pay phone was back on the other side of Station Square. Jim shivered and blew on his hands. And where the hell did he leave his gloves? He squatted down and felt around the ground for something to throw at the bedroom windows. Grass and dirt, nothing that would make a good projectile. Defeated, he headed back to Continental Avenue to the phone.

His mother's line was busy. Since his father's death, she tended to leave the phone off the hook when she was alone in the house. It made her feel secure somehow. This meant his sister was with her boyfriend in Astoria. Jim hung up and dialed Ephram.

"Hey. You still awake?"

"Yeah. Still working on this paper. Where are you?" Ephram sounded like he had had way too much coffee.

"Continental. I can't find my keys, and Mom's phone is off the hook."

"Where's Julie?"

"Probably with her dopey boyfriend."

"Well come on over. Don't ring the bell, though; everyone's asleep. Call from the station."

They both knew that the minute Jim arrived would be the end of Ephram's attempts to further his education for the night. The two polished off the cocaine Jim had tucked away in his jacket and stayed up past dawn discussing politics and feeling smart.

A few weeks later, two beat cops found Jim doing the lurch-and-stumble down 3rd Avenue near the Murray Hill bar. Jim had no idea where he was, how he got there, or why he was without clothes. No one answered when the cops called his home, so he told them to call Ephram, who brought him something to wear and got him back to Forest Hills. Jim never did find his clothes, his wallet, or his shoes, and never

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remembered how he happened to lose those things in the first place.

A short time after that, his mother signed him into rehab.

SEPTEMBER 1994

Jim was sitting on the metal table without his shirt on, and he was shivering. The room was white and spotless, as was the lab coat the man with the instruments was wearing.

“Ready?” the man asked.

Jim knew better than to go to a piercer near his mother’s house. He also knew better than to go to a piercer near his girlfriend Allie’s apartment. His friend Laynie, whose idea this was, always went to the place in Allie’s building, but Jim asked her for another option, which is where he was sitting now.

“Uh... uh...” Not ready at all, it turned out.

The piercer grabbed hold of Jim’s nipple, stretched it out, and picked up a pair of scissors.

“What the —”

The piercer laughed.

“Relax. I’m kidding.”

The piercer applied something freezing to Jim’s nipple, supposedly so he “wouldn’t feel anything.” This didn’t work out as planned.

“YIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!!!!!!” People in apartments down the block could hear Jim bellowing.

“And we’re done.”

The piercer put in a small ring.

Jim chose that moment to have second thoughts about the piercing. Allie would hate it. His Jewish mother could never know about it. The only person who would be happy for him would be Laynie; she liked people who were pierced all over,

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like she was. Maybe he should have revisited his motivations before he had this done. But Jim never questioned his motivations.



The bell tower of the Ukrainian church on East 6th Street was chiming ten. Even though it was a weekday, this Manhattan neighborhood was barely awake. Stores here wouldn't open until the afternoon, and it would be hours before restaurants saw many patrons.

The Java Café was on the second floor of a residential building on St. Marks Place, making walk-in traffic rather rare. Jim, who was the manager, was sitting at the table nearest the cash register, uncontrollably yawning. Although there was a stack of college textbooks beside him, Jim was reading the New York Post. It was the fastest read of the four New York papers, and its apparently deliberate lack of journalistic integrity was always good for a few laughs. He'd move on to the Daily News next, and then settle in for some serious reading with the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. Maybe later he would open one of his textbooks.

Halfway through the Daily News and his third cigarette, his first customer arrived: one of St. Marks Place's resident homeless men. He was wearing tree branches on his head and torso, duct-taped in place.

Jim went behind the counter and got silverware, napkins, and a glass of water.

"Hello, sir. The usual?"

The man nodded and stood by the table nearest the door. Jim set the table and said, "Have a seat."

Jim filled a cup with coffee, added half-and-half and six spoons of sugar, and brought it over to the table.

"Here you go, sir. Your sandwich is coming up."

The sandwich was the same every day, too: ham and

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butter on darkly toasted white bread. Had to be practically burnt or he wouldn't eat it. When Jim placed it on the table, the man nodded at him.

The café door jingled open. Jim hoped it might be another customer, but it was Allie. Short and lean, she had over-dyed black hair that stood up like a hairbrush. Jim had to lean down to kiss her hello, which he loved, not being so tall himself. She was over a decade his senior, but her smaller stance and youthful features made people think Jim was older. He grabbed her, looked into her eyes, and said, full of innuendo, "Latte?"

"Can I get decaf? I've been working all night. I gotta crash soon."

"Hasn't your job heard of labor laws?"

"Labor laws? Uh... no," she said. "I freelance. Labor laws don't apply to me."

"I'm pretty sure they do."

"Yeah? Tell my employers that."

"Still, it's gotta be better than working in a café with no customers."

Allie tilted her head towards the tree-branched man and said, "Don't be silly. You have customers."

"Yeah. I have a feeling this place won't be around very much longer. My boss has not been very happy."

Allie saw the Post headline and read it aloud: "'Albany's Plan to Bilk the Rich.' I see Page 1 is still their Op Ed page."

"Appeals to their mostly working-class readership."

"How do you figure?"

"It's America's carrot-on-a-stick, the idea that anyone, at any time, can become rich. And you wouldn't want *your* millions taxed away."

Allie shook her head. "Did you see this thing Giuliani is doing? Something about 'Quality of Life' issues? What, is he going to hire more street cleaners?"

"More police, fewer homeless, no squeegee guys."

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"Fewer homeless? Where are they going to go? New Jersey?"

Jim set her coffee on the table and sat across from her.

"You know," he said, "you're one of the few people who orders decaf here... who gets decaf."

She raised her eyebrows at him and smiled behind her latte.

"So, I wonder," he said sotto voce, indicating Tree Man, "if you're going to wear dirty socks, shouldn't they at least match?"

"That's what you're wondering? Not, 'Why the tree branches?'"

"That's easy: camouflage."

That got a laugh.

"Actually," Allie said, "if he really wants to be camouflaged in the City, he should wear black."

Tree Man stood up and began rummaging through his pockets. Bits of change and buttons and lint poured onto the table.

"That's okay, man. That's okay." Jim headed over to him.

The man nodded and shuffled out.

Jim picked out the change from the table and cleared away everything else. When he sat back down with Allie, she said, "What's your take?"

"61 cents."

"See? What are you worried about? Business is booming."

He smirked at her and drew from his cigarette. "So, my sister... she's such a disaster. She told her stupid husband he doesn't have to work if he doesn't want to. He can just sit at home and get fatter and stupider."

"How would they live?"

"She's a nurse. I guess she thinks she can support them both."

"Doesn't she have a house? Aren't there, like, payments and stuff?"

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“My mother owns it. Like she owns my apartment. Except, I pay rent. Julie just lives there.”

“Ohhhhhh.”

“Yeah.”

The door opened again with another visitor. Jim saw Allie frown and roll her eyes. Laynie had entered the café.

“I’ll be right back,” he said. Allie took this opportunity to put out his neglected cigarette.

“Hey, Jimmy!” Then she mumbled the rest; she could barely talk.

“Laynie? You just back from the dentist?”

She stuck her tongue out. Jim wondered how it even fit in her mouth, it was so swollen. Her tongue was skewered by a small silver stud, hard to see beneath all the swelling.

“Ouch,” he said.

She said something that Jim interpreted to mean, “It’ll be fine by tomorrow,” and she stuck her tongue out again so he could admire it further.

“Was this the only place on your body left to pierce?”

“Jus’ bou’.” Then she mumbled something that sounded like, “Ooush geh wn.”

“I should get one? Ha. Allie hates what I already have. I don’t dare add more. Besides, you said it wouldn’t hurt.”

She laughed. “I lied.”

“Yes. You did.” Jim looked back toward Allie, who was pretending to read the Daily News. “Well, I guess you don’t want coffee. Can I get you some water or something?”

“Nah. I’ff gah tme chas.”

Okay. What was that now?

“What? Oh! You’re meeting Chaz. Got it.”

Jim sat back down with Allie, and she said, “You gotta be kidding me,” and when he laughed, she said, “Seriously. That girl is ridiculous.”



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By Saturday, the café was shuttered. Jim and his boss, Arun, moved all the chairs and tables into the truck. Soon they were down to the appliances. Arun had hired two huge men with belts to do the heavy lifting, which left Jim to do the heavy cleaning. Behind the refrigeration and the sinks and cabinets was black, inky soot. Arun paid Jim quite generously for the day, more than double; the guy was a mensch.

A gloved and masked Jim with his mop set down his bucket filled with industrial cleaner. His boom box and CDs were on the floor against the wall, and, as the Pet Shop Boys began to sing at full volume, he dove into his task. Allie was sick of this CD, but it was Jim's favorite. He bellowed along at the top of his lungs, occasionally breaking into a dance with the mop.

As the CD came to an end, Jim decided to grab a smoke. The cleaner was so toxic he didn't dare light a cigarette inside, even with the windows open. He put down the mop, took off his gloves and mask, and when he turned toward the door, he saw a smirking Chaz and Laynie standing in the doorway.

"Holy fuck, you wanna give me a heart attack?"

"Watcha doin', Jim?" Laynie's tongue was once again working properly.

"Cleaning up."

"Can we hang a bit?"

Jim looked around the completely empty café space.

"Uh, yeah, okay. Sit near the windows; the cleaner fumes will kill you."

"We'll watch you dance," Laynie said, and Jim did a little rumba.

They sat on one of the window ledges, and Jim went out to smoke.

Someone somewhere was blasting the oldies station (WCBS), and Aretha Franklin began serenading the St. Marks Place people parade with "Chain of Fools." Jim watched a cluster of giggling coeds wearing NYU sweatshirts stroll by, and he nodded hello from his perch on the top stair. He was

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sharing the stoop with three stoned headbangers, who surely would have hidden the joint they were smoking if they had noticed the pair of cops crossing over from the other side of the street. A few doors down at the old Electric Circus building, a stream of recovering alcoholics poured out of their AA meeting. One of the participants walked by with a white rat perched on his shoulder as a silver Ferrari that looked a lot like a spaceship pulled up to the stoplight. This street was rarely boring. Jim was going to miss working here, not just because it was down the block from Allie.

He went back inside to find Chaz and Laynie hunched over a mirror.

“Is that coke?” Jim sounded angrier than he had intended.

They looked up. Something weird was going on with their eyes, like they weren’t focusing or were focusing on something far away. “No, man. It’s dope.”

“Oh...” He could just hear what Allie would have to say about that.

“Wanna try it?”

“Uh... no thanks, man. I’m working.”

“Next time, then. You’ll dig it.”

That’s what made him worried.



In a dimly lit room, in a Tudor-style house in Forest Hills Gardens, three figures were gathered around a huge dining table, immersed in an action-packed, nail-biting, fight-to-the-death game of gin. The oldest, a heavy-set woman in her late 60s, was contemplating her next move, while the younger, male version of her and his friend waited impatiently.

“You know, it doesn’t matter how long you stare at the cards. They aren’t going to change,” Ephram said.

Jim’s mother looked at him through her fish-eye-lens glasses.

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“Don’t think you can rush me into making a mistake, now,” she said in her deep, husky voice. She took a long drag on her menthol cigarette and changed the order of cards in her hand again.

“Seriously. It’s a card game, not surgery,” Jim said.

His mother, a retired doctor, raised her eyebrows and glared at him. She took a last puff from her cigarette, ground it out in the ashtray, put down her cards, and said, “Gin.”

“What – You – Hey!”

His mother’s laugh was hearty and congested.

Jim shook his head, then looked at the clock.

“We should get going.”

“Ask Allie if she’d like to have lunch with us next week. I’d like to meet this girl before you two start having children.”

His mother’s sarcasm aside, Jim knew children were not in Allie’s plans. He kept that to himself. “I’ll ask her. Her schedule keeps changing. Maybe she can make it this time.”

The traffic crawled along Queens Boulevard until it stopped altogether. Jim opened his window. He couldn’t see much up ahead. Car horns were starting to blow, and some of the drivers were yelling. The longer the wait, the louder this would get. Jim closed the window.

“So...” Jim said. He hesitated. Did he want to discuss this with Ephram? “Laynie and Chaz stopped by the cafe yesterday afternoon.”

“Laynie and...?” Ephram said. “Oh, those guys. They get something else pierced?”

“Nah. What’s left? Maybe Laynie’s uvula. Anyway, I was helping Arun clean out the cafe, and they came by.”

“And...?”

“I stepped out for a second, and when I came back, they were snorting H.”

Ephram grimaced and rolled his eyes. “Jim, those lowlifes are not your friends.”

Jim tried not to get mad. He inched the car forward and stopped.

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“Did you try it?” Ephram said.

“No, I didn’t try it.”

“But you’re thinking about it.”

Jim’s silence answered the question for him.

“Seriously, Jim...”

“I didn’t try it. You know, I’m not going to become an addict or something. I’m just thinking of doing it once. Just to see.”

“See what? How fucked up you can get?”

Jim wasn’t going to acknowledge it out loud, but Ephram did have a point.

“What did Allie say about this?”

“Haven’t told her. I’m not sure I’m even going to try it. Just thinking about it.”

“Well, it’s stupid that you’re even thinking about it.”

Jim tried to think of a good comeback. This was not the kind of subject he and Ephram were used to debating. Usually they stuck to something safe, like religion or politics.

“It’s not like it’s coke or something. I’m not going back to doing that.”

Ephram threw him a side-glance. Okay, that was lame.

“Besides, Chaz said you can’t get addicted when you snort it.”

“The hell you can’t.” Ephram became very interested in something outside of his window. When the silence between them got too weird, Jim turned on the radio.

By the time Jim dropped Ephram off at his apartment in Chelsea, it was after 10 o’clock. Allie would be wondering where he was, but he had one more stop to make; he was out of cigarettes. He double-parked in front of a tiny store on Avenue A that sold candy, cigarettes, and ice cream. He’d leave the car idling. He’d only be a minute.



Allie's apartment was three flights up, and while a person on the ground would have trouble seeing into Allie's window, a person standing in a window across the street would have a nice view of the bedroom if Allie's lights were on. Jim pulled the chain of her overhead light to turn it off.

They flopped onto the bed. Jim began to chew on her neck, which she loved, and after he had the area covered, he started to plant small kisses down her arm.

"Wait. Wait. That tickles."

"Should I go back to chewing?" He kissed her some more.

"Yeah. Really. You gotta stop that." She pushed him away from her arm.

"Well, okay."

But when he moved, he was suddenly in pain.

"Oh my god. Ow ow ow ow ow!"

"What? What?"

"Ow! Don't move your arm. Your watch is attached to my nipple ring."

Allie burst out laughing.

"It's not funny."

"Oh, yes, it is."

She held up her wrist so he could detach himself.

"Stop laughing. If I didn't know better, I'd think you did that on purpose."

Once freed, Allie took off her watch and put it on her nightstand.

"The health hazards of piercings," she said.

She was still laughing when he grabbed her and said, "C'mere, you."

He knew he shouldn't feel unnerved — they'd been together almost two years now — but he couldn't help wondering if she ever compared him to other, older men. In fact, their first time, he envisioned her laughing at him. She didn't. Tonight, he forced those insecure thoughts out of his mind and tried not to be tentative. Fondle her breasts, kiss her

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all over, get her worked up. Allie always made it seem easy.

As Allie fell asleep next to him, Jim thought about wrapping his arm around her, but she'd likely wake up and punch him. She wasn't a sleep cuddler. It was some time before she'd even let him stay over; he shouldn't push it.

He was in a dead sleep when Allie shook him awake.

"Jim. Hey. I'm heading out."

He opened his eyes and saw her bending over him.

"C'mon. You gotta move the car."

He squinted to see her more clearly.

Oh, no.

He fought the urge to laugh. "Uh... think you better wear a scarf today."

"Why? It's not that cold."

"No. Go look in the mirror."

He waited. Then he heard the shriek.

"Jim! My neck is totally bruised! I look like I've been strangled!"

Now he could laugh freely.

"It's not funny," she said.

"Oh, yes, it is."