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Do you feel you are sacrificing yourself for this vision? I ask. Aren't you missing out on life?

"Hell, no," he answers quickly and fiercely, as much because he seems prepared for the question as because of his certainty. "I am living my life to the fullest. 'Only those who suffer can understand what life is about.' Some guy wrote that—Patrick White, I think. He won a Nobel Prize. 'We are betrayers by nature. We disappoint high hopes. The healthy tear the sick apart. Only those who suffer can understand what life is about.'"

"That man knew the truth and wasn't afraid of it," Mac continues after a moment, toying again with the spit. "Happiness is for the weak. It's an escape from life." He mistakenly spears his thumb with the hot tip of the spit. His own deep red blood bubbles forth.

"Look, Miss," he says, suddenly louder and sharper. His eyes seem to flash with anger in the firelight. "I don't need your pity and I'm not asking for your help. Don't mess with my mind or my plans!"

He looks away sharply, into the blackness beyond the fire. After a second, I follow his stare but see nothing. I hear only the sizzling rat.

"It's alright," he says, not to me but to the darkness. "She's OK."

I stare even harder, trying to catch the momentary glow of eyes. They are gone, as if the lids were closed to extinguish them.

Why didn't he come forward? I ask.

Mac shrugs away any explanation. "It's Smidge. He's been guarding me."

All the time?

"Yeah. That's his job. He watches over me."

Can't he come and sit with us?

"He doesn't trust you," Mac says.

I can't understand why, I say. You've already searched me for guns and knives.

"He's afraid I might tell you some of our secrets. We have plans, you know. He wanted to watch you to see how you move. We tell everything by the way people move. We don't just let anyone come in. You could be a spy."

For whom?

"For another group that wants to start a war with us," he says evenly. "Here, let me show you something."

He rises, but seems to have second thoughts. He takes the rat from the fire, touching the browned meat with his fingers but quickly jerking them back. He soothes his fingers in his mouth.

"Mmmm," he licks his lips and places the cooked animal on a section of newspaper. For a moment, it looks like fish and chips bought from a London stand, but then my mind sees the headless rat twitch. I flinch.

Now Mac looks at me. "C'mon," he orders.

We walk farther along the tunnel, away from the direction we had come, and through a small arch into another recess. Mac begins pulling loose bricks from the wall. Inside, on a floor covered loosely by garbage bags, is a small arsenal of guns and ammunition. Some are pistols; others look like the semiautomatics used by street gangs.

Mac pulls me back after I get only a quick look and replaces the bricks.

How many guns are in there? I ask.

"That's not the point. The point is we're building our security. Not just Smidge and myself but a whole group of us. This is far more extensive than you'd believe."

Aren't you afraid of people up there knowing you have this stuff?

"No," he says firmly. "We'll move them when you're gone in case you try to find them again, which you wouldn't. Besides, they won't believe you. They're not the danger to us. It's the few other communities down here who are trying to destroy us, take what we've got. It's all a struggle for the future. They want to be the leaders of the future, but we are the ones destined for leadership."

It sounds like something out of a science fiction movie, maybe *Road Warrior*, I say, suddenly worried as the words escape me that he might become furious.

He hasn't seen the film, he says, and then adds with a smile that terrifies me, "You got a lot to learn, Miss, but at least you know where to come when the holocaust begins."

The air begins to stifle me and I feel I have to leave for fresh air. I silently promise myself I'll never return to this place, and never be tempted to visit Mac again.

Mac senses my discomfort and quickly begins to guide me up and out. I still can't see Smidge, I say.

"He doesn't like questions," Mac says. "But he must like you. You're the first outsider he hasn't thrown bottles and rocks at."

We climb two levels up, one by a wall ladder, the other along pipes, before he leaves me still one level from the surface. He never goes to the first level, he says apologetically. On the first level, he advises, it's only about one hundred feet until the exit to the street. I turn back to ask him which direction I should take, but I can no longer see him through the darkness, only the outline of two figures.

"Right or left?" I yell into the darkness, my fright verging on panic. "Right or left?"

"Right," a voice much deeper than Mac's says. I think it was Smidge, but I never saw him.

4

The Underground Population

HOMELESS PEOPLE HAVE BEEN CALLED MANY NAMES and described in many ways—unseen men, forgotten men, derelicts, hobos, vagrants, bums, beggars. They have lived in Hoovervilles, shantytowns, boxcars, and sewers. They are a problem in every modern industrialized country today. In Japan, homeless people are called "johatsu," meaning wandering spirit or one who has lost his identity. "They" are not only men, but also women and their children. And they live not only in the streets where you see them but also under the sidewalks where you don't.

New York's underground homeless are only the latest in a long history of people living below the surface of the earth. In ancient times, men were forced to live underground. Slaves of Egypt and Rome lived, worked, and died in their mines. Other peoples have chosen for one reason or another to make their homes underground voluntarily, such as the Cimmerian priests who attended the subterranean oracles of the classical world.

"They [the priests] live in underground dwellings which they call argillae and it is through tunnels that they visit each other back and forth," Nigel Pennick writes in *The Subterranean Kingdom: A Survey of Man-Made Structures Beneath the Earth*, quoting Ephorus, who wrote around 500 B.C. Like many monastic orders before and since, the Cimmerians lived in cells cut from rock and emerged only to minister to pilgrims visiting their shrines. They had a rule that they should never see daylight, and so they left their burrows for the surface only at night, returning before the break of dawn. "Pits with vertical entrances were once a popular form of dwelling," Pennick writes. "The indigenous inhabitants of the Crimea lived in them."

During the Tatar invasions in the Middle Ages, Crimean peoples hid in these old holes. Early Armenians lived in well-like homes, too, as did the people of prehistoric Britain. A series of cylindrical pits near Highfield, one mile south of Salisbury, England were found on a high chalk ridge. More than 100 such pits have been studied. They vary in depth from seven to fifteen feet, with widths from six to twelve feet. Some experts date them to the Neolithic period; others put them in the Bronze Age. They were probably used mainly in the winter, according to archeologists. Similar structures for winter use are still found today in remote parts of the Himalayas.

In more modern times, subterranean houses were built in Scotland and Ireland, the Souterrains of France, and the Erdstalle of Germany. In some cases the underground dwellings were inhabited by poverty-stricken workers of the nineteenth and even early twentieth centuries. They were often viewed as subhuman. "Modern Troglodytes" was the title of an article by Robert Garner in *The Reliquary* in 1865 about his discovery that "whole communities live in subterranean villages, and in our own times, and in mid-England. The New Red Sandstone is particularly tempting for the formation of such dwellings, and was thereto excavated very largely in former times, for instance in Sneinton, and on the Lene in Notts, Nottinghamshire. Also the lime debris near Buxton has been burrowed for the same object," he writes.

The largest remaining village at the time, Garner found, was at Dunsley Rock, known locally as Gibraltar, where seventeen separate underground dwellings housed forty-two people. Other nearby cells cut out of the rock were used as byres or styes for animals.

He reports asking one "troglodyte woman" how many people lived in one cavelike dwelling. "Nine of we," she replied, with rent three shillings a week. In a pretentious aside, Garner wrote, "We were satisfied with what we had seen of the troglodytes without feeling any strong desire to become a member or any class of them ourselves."

Probably the last underground village in England were the "lime houses" at Buxton in Derbyshire. Lime workers, who were paid pittance and treated much like slaves, burrowed their homes into the spoil heaps from the lime-burning industry. French geologist Faugas de Sant-Fond left this account of a 1784 visit to Buxton: "I looked in vain for the habitations of so many laborers and their numerous

families without being able to see so much as one cottage, when at length I discerned that the whole tribe, like so many moles, had formed their residences underground.... Not one of them lived in a house.”

“Wretched and disgusting are these caves in the extreme,” according to an unnamed correspondent Pennick quotes in *The Subterranean Kingdom*. “And but for having their entrances closed by a door, [they] might be more easily taken for the dens of wolves or bears than the abodes of humanized beings.”

Secondhand reports suggest these subhuman conditions existed as late as 1928. “Fortunately,” Pennick concludes, “they have now been relegated to the annals of the Industrial Revolution.”

Unfortunately, however, they still exist and even flourish—in a different form—in the tunnels and caverns under today’s biggest cities. Few are as inhabited as in New York, but many have the potential for the same kind of derelict population to find and settle in them.

Paris, for example, is honeycombed with a network of tunnels beyond those of its famed Metro subway system. Some date from the Gaulist period in prehistoric times. Most are the abandoned workings of mines from which much of the city’s building stone was quarried. During the eighteenth century a series of collapses on the surface led to the rediscovery of the abandoned tunnels, which were then used as charnel houses—repositories for the bones of Parisians who had been taken from the graves of overcrowded cemeteries to make more land available for development in the city. The skeletal remains of over three million individuals are said to be deposited in these tunnels known as the “Catacombs.”

Rome, London, and Moscow are just a few of the cities where the digging of long subway lines uncovered long-abandoned tunnels. In Rome, workers found cellars, caves, galleries, catacombs, and underground chapels. In Moscow, a warren of tunnels was unearthed that was said to be the semilegendary Secret City of Ivan the Terrible. Moscow’s subways are already said to be home for tens of thousands of postcommunist homeless. In Japan, the homeless frequent Tokyo’s subways.

TODAY, NEW YORK CITY’S UNDERGROUND HOMELESS LIVE IN THE secluded tunnels that run beneath the busy streets in an interconnected lattice of subway and railroad train tunnels, often unused now, that in some areas reach seven levels below the streets. Often shunned by the street homeless, the underground homeless are outcasts in a world of outcasts. They go underground for many objective reasons. The housing shortage and inadequate welfare budgets are only two. Some go down for safety, to escape thieves, rapists, and common cruelty. They go down to escape the law, to find and use drugs and alcohol unhassled by their families, friends, and society. Some families go into the tunnels to avoid giving up their children to foster homes. Some, ashamed of their poverty and apparent “failure” in society and impoverished appearance, go to escape seeing their own reflections in passing shop windows. Some fall into the tunnels to deteriorate slowly, out of the way of people aboveground and in a place they can call their own home.

Underground, they live often in groups, as if huddled like prehistoric men against the elements—as well as against the rats, human predators, and the dark. One community has a formal hierarchy, with a “mayor” and “spokesman” who are elected, and “runners” who are appointed; it seems to desire some semblance of societal structure from aboveground. There are communities of families, runaways, homosexuals, and diverse independent individuals. Some are loose-knit associations of individuals. Some are gentle and welcoming; others are violent and hostile. The largest single category is substance (drug or alcohol) abusers. The next largest category is the mentally ill.

“THEY CALL US THE ‘MOLE PEOPLE.’ IT GIVES US AN AIR OF MYSTERY wouldn’t you say?” laughed Squeeze, a thirty-two-year-old man who earned his nickname squeezing through pick-axed holes and between the forest of pipes that have been the burrows and trees of his world on and off for eight years. “Sure, they think we’re animals. We use our instincts down here. Outcasts? Well, we is. We don’t belong up there no more,” he shrugged. “If they scared of us, more power to us. We know what we are, most of us anyway. We human too, more human than most I would say. More human than most. But you, let them call us the mole people, cuz that ‘bout sums it up, how they view us and how they treat us. We are the mole people.”

The population of the underground homeless is not known precisely, and estimates are controversial. Transit and welfare authorities prefer to give sanguine estimates, in part to reduce fear among commuters about the potential threat of these tunnel people, in part to mute criticism of their efforts and their budgets to attack the problem. No census of the underground population has been taken, but a 1986 study for the mayor’s office estimated that five thousand people lived in the subway system alone. This was a rough estimate at best, according to Marsha Martin who authored the study, because homeless people are often evasive. Her figure did not count the homeless in the railroad tunnels, both those still in use and those long abandoned. A 1991 survey by the New York Health Department counted 6,031 homeless in the Grand Central and Penn stations alone.^[1] (/read-267812/?page=32#n_1) One transit official dealing with the problem privately contended that the total underground population was about twenty-five thousand at that time, but my research leads me to conclude that the number is closer to five thousand.

MANY AUTHORITIES SEE TODAY’S UNDERGROUND HOMELESS as essentially irretrievable. The executive director of New York’s Mental Health Association has compared the difficulty of rehabilitating the underground homeless to “taking a wild animal and attempting to domesticate it.” The issue appears to center on whether a significant portion of homeless people, wherever they live, can hold jobs. Sociologists Alice Baum and Donald Burnes concluded that 85 percent of the homeless are “too crippled by mental illness or substance addiction to benefit” from the various programs and services. In a letter to *The Washington Post*, Suellen L. Stokes, the director of the Eleanor Kennedy shelter in Fairfax, Virginia, says she once believed most of the homeless were “employed or employable,” but after

almost two years at the shelter, she reversed that view. “Denying or minimizing the extent of mental illness and substance abuse suffered by the homeless does them a great disservice,” Stokes says, “and prevents the channeling of limited resources toward programs that may make a difference for some (i.e., other) people.”

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