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The homeless in the station distinguish between “track people” and “mole people” by the level at which they live. Track people usually live under the train and subway platforms, a first stop for many who later move deeper into the tunnels. Mole people live at least a level deeper. At each deeper level, the communities are said to be more established and cohesive, and members go to the surface less frequently, living as well as sleeping underground. In the deeper tunnels, it is not uncommon to find homeless who have gone a week or more without seeing sunlight.

We enter the tunnels through the subway in Grand Central, passing first along a platform with a scattering of commuters and onto the subway tracks. We carry no flashlights and wear no reflective clothing. I wear black, as J.C. advised me, but I doubt than any color would be discernible in the darkness.

We snake along various tracks for what seems a frightening eternity as subway trains thunder out of the dark. As they approach with blazing white lights, J.C. moves agilely to the side and I quickly follow. We bow our heads to avoid the glare of the headlights and the motorman’s eyes and stand totally still. When the train has passed, we move on. Soon we leave the main track to pass through cavernous rooms, one after another, each with grated doors that are locked but easily circumvented.

Sleeping bags and a few mattresses, evidence of “track people,” remain from the night before and prepare for the night to come. Each room is slightly different and yet the same, but the signs of the “camps” at each level increase as we go farther.

Now we begin to go deeper, down a set of rusty stairs, to another level, still an operating subway tunnel, and move along tracks until finally J.C. stops and points to a wall of slate gray cement. “That’s the main entrance,” he announces. “Find it or I won’t take you down further.” I know he is teasing, but I touch the wall, which looks solid and impregnable, as if nothing could get through it.

I bend over to search more carefully, and find below waist level a hole, about as large as the entrance to a good-sized dog house. Nervous and unsteady, I stick my head through and see a light on the other side and about thirty feet below us. We crawl inside a broad ridge. A cable hangs close enough to reach. A train passes, and we turn our backs, waiting for darkness to return before J.C. clambers down the cable, hand over hand, feet against the rock wall. Once down, he scavenges for a long wooden plank, which he props against the side for me. Using the cable and the plank, I back down the steep incline and feel level ground once again.

The floor is covered with black garbage bags taken from Sanitation Department workers. Each is filled with clothes or balled up newspapers to disguise the place and hide various items, including the plank, stolen tool boxes, and other implements, from any intruder who might look through the entrance hole above.

On this level, at least three down from the subway platform, J.C. is more comfortable and relaxed. At higher levels, he is always on guard, eyes darting, movements quick. Now he walks more loosely, freer. He laughs more often. He still speaks in a hushed whisper, a lower register, and he never shouts to compete with tunnel noise. Yet his words carry distinctly over intrusive tunnel sounds, even those of distant trains.

Now, as we pick our way on planks and catwalks, worrying more about our footing than transit cops, he becomes almost talkative. “You can see now why no one wanders onto our community,” he says. “You have to be invited down.”

In fact, he admits that two homeless once did stumble into the area. “One of them never left,” he says. “The other we blindfolded and walked around all day so he couldn’t find his way back. We left him near the IRT subway track so a [maintenance] crew would find him. Or a train.”

We follow a narrow tunnel with steep steps down one more level, where it is much warmer. The hiss of escaping steam explains why. J.C. stops and taps on a thick pipe with a heavy stick lying nearby, and we wait for a moment until answering taps arrive before moving forward again.

The pipes begin to clatter with new tapping, and more tapping, until it sounds like a tin cavalry. “That’s Junior,” J.C. laughs. “He thinks he can bang out real messages on the pipes.”

The din stops before we arrive at the camp where a dozen people sit around a bright gas lantern. They watch silently as we approach. Two women interrupt hanging laundry to stare, while a boy and a girl who had been playing on the overhead pipes quiet their dangling feet to peer down on us.

J.C. touches my arm. “Wait here,” he says, and keeps walking into the camp. “If they try to eat you, run,” he calls back with a smile, and for a change, I welcome his sarcasm and even begin to feel less awkward. My watch says it has been an hour since we started out.

The boy of about seven climbs down from the pipes and walks curiously toward me before a man comes out of the darkness to pull him back. I smile but get no answering smiles. I wait.

A black man in his early forties comes from the tent J.C. had entered. An unkempt curly beard streaked with professorial gray surrounds his huge welcoming smile, which is full of large white teeth.

“Jennifer,” he says, extending his hand and whispering in the manner of the tunnel people, “I’m Ali M. I’m the elected mayor of this community. You can just call me Mayor. Everyone else does,” he adds confidently.

“I hope you enjoy visiting us. I’m sure you’ll find it interesting. You probably won’t be able to see things the way we see them because of your conditioning, but we’ll work on that. Take care to open your mind as much as possible and recognize that your eyes physically can’t see what we see. It takes weeks for eyes to adjust to the darkness.

“My eyes won’t take the light upstairs anymore. Most people’s down here won’t. Even the weakest light can be blinding when you’ve lived down here. A few months ago I went up just to see what things were like. Someone said a man needed help just inside the tunnel near the tracks, so I went to get him. I couldn’t stand the light there. I take it as a sign,” he says and winks, as if to ease his words, “a sign that I’m meant to be right here for the rest of my life.”

The camp begins to move and make small sounds. I hear sweeping with a broom but beyond six feet I can barely see shadows, fleeting and evasive figures like those I sometimes glimpsed in the higher tunnels but dismissed as imaginary. I struggle to focus on the shapes but it is a strain to see, and I begin to develop a sharp headache. I give up trying to take notes in the dark, particularly after the mayor threatens to confiscate my notebook.

“We don’t want you giving any names or too many details that might lead them to us,” he says. “What you remember will have to be enough.”

The boy and girl, each about five years old, come closer and I give them the fresh notebook and pen. They shriek and giggle over the gifts, and we play a variety of tag as I’m led around. They crawl into a hole and emerge on the pipes, waving at me. They get ahead unseen and surprise me from crevices and small tunnels.

“You see,” the mayor tells me, “this is a child’s dream. They run free and are not hindered by people who would hurt them.”

Who are they? I ask. Who are their parents?

“They are all of ours,” he replies. “We take all the children here as our own.”

How many children live here?

He refused to answer. “If I told you,” he says finally, “there’d be a witch hunt for us. Better leave that unanswered. We don’t lie down here.”

The mayor introduces me to a woman who he describes as the community’s school teacher. She says she is certified by the City of New York. Along with math, science, English, and some social sciences, she says, she teaches ethics, morals, and philosophy to children underground.

“That’s our greatest gift down here,” she claims, eyes wide in an effort to convey her convictions, “that I can teach what’s important. The best teachers do that, teach what’s important in their particular environment. Here it is ethics, the basis of our ‘human religion.’”

I look puzzled at the phrase, which other tunnel dwellers have used but never explained. “It’s based on caring and protecting our brothers and sisters, on communication and love,” she says, much as the others did. “It’s what sets this race above all others.” By race, she explains, she means all the homeless who live in underground communities like this, not black, brown, or white.

“Color?” she asks. “God, no! We have no color down here. Look, can you tell if I’m black or Hispanic?”

I guess a mixture of the two. She laughs. “I’m as white as you are. I think it’s the lack of sunlight and the soot in the tunnel that turns us all a shade of gray.”

Don’t the children need sunlight?

“We go to a little room two levels up, where there is bright warm sunlight coming through grates,” she says. “That’s where I do most of my teaching. One of the runners [who bring food and other necessities to the community from aboveground] brought us a blackboard to use. We hide it when we come back down so no one who might get into that room can break it.”

Next I meet the community’s nurse, who says she is registered in the State of New York. She is a large, older woman with thick black hair locked in a firm braid that hangs well down her back. A gray streak runs along each side of her head. She has a gentle smile. When the mayor leaves us for a moment, she admits that she often thinks of “going back up.”

"I have a daughter who maybe I could stay with. I write her often and she writes back. She sends my mail to an apartment complex and one of the runners is able to get into the mail room through a tunnel and look through the mail before they are distributed. Many of us have our mail and government checks sent to that address. Different communities use other addresses," she says, "but they get mail the same way."

"I've thought about leaving," she continues after a while. "But then someone gets hurt, or I think someone might get hurt. These people need me. And frankly, that's what I want most, to be needed."

Her medical kit includes bandages, neck braces, codeine as well as aspirin, an antiseptic, needles and threads (which she calls sutures) for stitching cuts, and even a set of crutches. She insists that community members be taken to hospitals on the surface if they are too ill or injured for her to treat. "Often they refuse because they're hiding from the law," she says, "but I won't be responsible for killing someone by letting him stay if he's badly hurt. I just won't!" she insists as if the issue has arisen often in the past.

Chairs and a few tables are spotted around the chamber. Milk and other perishables are stored in a small refrigerator. The mayor directs me to put my hand inside to prove that it is cold but I can see no electric wire attachment. To cook food, the community uses a tunnel with the hottest steam pipes. Pans of water are rested on the pipes. In them are cooked rice, oatmeal, and Cream of Wheat, he says.

"You'll notice how none of us smell," the mayor says proudly and leads me to the "steam room." Clothes are spread out on the hot pipes outside to dry. Inside, men's voices, off-key and punctuated with laughter, are trying to sing. I see several figures showering with soap in the spray of hot water and steam from a leaking pipe.

"Shit, man!" yells a man inside, "you brought a woman here?" The singing stops.

"Brothers," says the mayor, "we are all human."

The figures recede deeper into the mist.

"Sorry, mayor," the complaining voice says, "I didn't know it was you."

The mayor smiles paternally. "This is men's time in the room," he explains. "Women have it earlier, in the morning with the children."

"We even have an exercise room," he says as we resume walking. We enter an area with many barlike pipes. A man is doing pull-ups from one, chinning himself at the top. Over another pipe hangs a wire, one end attached to weights and the other to an old set of bicycle handlebars.

Beyond is a laundry room where three women kneel over a basin of wet clothes, rubbing and chatting and laughing. Warm water sloshes from a pipe into the basin and out, running along a channel against the wall before it disappears.

We return to the mayor's tent, three walls of wood and cardboard and an overhead canopy made of a once-white sheet. Inside is a small round table, draped with a cloth. The mayor lights a fat blue candle sitting on it. I see two bookcases, filled mostly with sociology, psychology, and philosophy texts and a sprinkling of classics. A tightly made bed stands against one wall.

"It took me a long time to bring down everything I had," he says, indicating the room. "I did it over several months, but as you see, I set up a home. I built these bookshelves. I didn't expect any people to come with me to live here, but when I saw them suffering, up above, I invited them down."

J.C. had told me two hundred people live here, but I've seen only about fifty. I ask about the rest.

"Many of them are runners, either passing through or spending the day or even a week upstairs. Some are visiting other communities. It's hard to say," he offers vaguely.

He pours red wine into two tin cups.

"You see we are a clean and healthy community," he says expansively. "We don't allow drugs or hard liquor here. We're not crazy or insane. We're healthy individuals who have chose an alternative. We don't need their help."

Since my time with his people is so limited, the mayor "guides" me to members who will be the most helpful he says. He chooses the people to whom I speak. When I wonder if anyone in his community would prefer to return aboveground, he snaps, "No, of course not."

"That is another of those myths and undeserved rumors about us. Anyone is free to come and go as they please. If someone has his doubts, I don't encourage him to go because I firmly believe life is better here."

It is now mealtime and we watch the community eat. The staple is a bowl filled with oatmeal-like porridge. Several sandwiches are distributed. They resemble the sandwiches from Meals-on-Wheels, perhaps the leftovers.

"Sometimes they send dogs to find us," the mayor observes as we watch. "They don't go back."

You eat them? I ask, taken aback.

"Sometimes they're good meat," he answers with a little smile. I don't know if he is just trying to shock me. Either way, I'm upset as we return into his compartment where he tries to explain who he is and why he is so totally alienated from society.

THE MAYOR SAYS HE HAS STUDIED LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY, AND writing. He has been a member of the working class, and he has experienced poverty.

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