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He enters the tunnels through emergency exits to the street, which by law cannot be sealed. One exit hatch that lifts a section of the Broadway sidewalk is part of the roof of his home, a duplex spanning two levels of the subway. The stairs to the lower floor are well swept, and the living quarters neat. His clothes drape neatly on hangars from a pipe. He shows me his working iron plugged into the tunnel’s electrical system, standing atop a full-size ironing board. To read, he detaches the exit sign over a naked bulb to get its strong light. To sleep, he unscrews the bulb for complete darkness. On the top level of his duplex, where he sleeps, a passing subway sounds like the distant rumble of a country train. The entrance off the tunnel is marked by crossed brooms and guarded by a trip wire that can bring down a five-gallon water bucket, which is sometimes full and sometimes empty but always warns of an intrusion. The police have dismantled his home many times, but each time he reconstitutes it the next day, he says.

On our trip this night, eight of the homeless sleeping in the tunnel choose to take their chances in the cold rain rather than a city shelter. Six agree to go to a shelter but only after some cajoling and promises that they will be taken to Bellevue rather than the Fort Washington shelter.

TOM AND HIS FRIEND DENISE (WHO IS ALSO MALE) CONSULT WITH one another about the Bellevue promise.

“That’s cool,” Tom says, “but when you leave us off at Bellevue, they drive us off to Fort Washington cuz Bellevue’s full. We ain’t gonna stay in that Murder House.” Farrell, a kind- and honorable-looking cop, convinces them that they can stay at Bellevue and promises that he will wait with them until they are admitted, so they finally agree to go.

Among the homeless in New York, the Fort Washington shelter shares with the Armory shelter the worst reputation of the city. Stories about the violence at Fort Washington, the “Murder House,” seem too numerous to be fiction.

“I’ll tell you about Fort Washington,” a homeless man later tells me. “First, all those stories about homosexuals there, well, they are all true. The shelter people, they always watch everyone in the showers, but still I know a few guys who got raped there. I only stayed two nights. After the first night I got lice and had to throw all my stuff out. The second night I was in bed and felt something spraying across my face,” he says, making a spurting motion. “I was mad, killin’ mad. I was sure some guy was jerking off on me. I jumped up and was gonna kill him, only I saw it was blood that was all over me. Some guy had come over, then stabbed the guy in the next bunk to steal his shoes, and his blood was spraying on me.”

THE FARTHER INTO THE TUNNELS, THE LESS EASY IT IS TO ROUSE those sleeping. Some are poked and shaken awake and are angry at being disturbed. Few run from police as they do in the Port Authority, Pennsylvania, and Grand Central tunnels. Most in the Bowery tunnel don’t seem surprised by the police officers. Their reflexes are slow and wary, fighting the effects of fatigue or drugs. An officer nudges a sleeping inhabitant who snarls and grunts, clawing at the officer’s hand.

“Sometimes it’s hard to see them as anything but animals,” the police officer confides after the incident, as we near the end of the tour. “They’re trying to survive, and that can be the most dangerous instinct an animal has. But one time I found this man in the tunnel crying over the body of his lover. He wouldn’t leave. The autopsy said the man had died of AIDS two days earlier, and the lover wouldn’t leave the body, even to go eat.”

He paused.

“That changes the way you think a bit. At least until the next one threatens you or your buddy.” He smiles briefly before putting his mask back on to resume combat with the stench.

## 7

### *Living With The Law*

“STOP! FREEZE!” YELLS SERGEANT BRYAN HENRY, HIS DEEP voice edged with fear.

Henry’s flashlight darts blindly at movement more heard and sensed than seen.

“Come forward! Slowly!” he orders. His hand has already unhooked the leather safety strap over his nine-millimeter revolver and is poised tensely above its handle.

There is hardly a sound in the tunnel, just the regular dripping of water from the streets and the whispered scurrying of rats. The silence is as overwhelming as the tunnel’s blackness.

“Shit,” he says finally, his voice firmer now as he comes down from the adrenaline rush of preparing for violent action and enters familiar frustration. His flashlight is steadier as it ranges across sections of wall that shield the tunnel’s farther passages from its prying beam.

“Fuck,” he shouts in exasperation, thrusting the gun more securely back into its holster. “They’re so fucking fast!”

Henry runs nimbly across four subway tracks, ignoring the third rail in pursuit of the underground homeless. When he was first assigned to tunnel work, he bought shoes with the thickest rubber soles he could find, he says, hoping they would insulate him from the high voltage if he stumbled onto the rail. Now the danger of electrocution is all but ignored as he seeks the elusive human moles.



*Sergeant Henry Scoping An Area Beneath Grand Central Station. Photo By Margaret Morton*

The movement that roused him may have been a ploy, what tunnel people call “running interference,” in which one or more individuals distract an intruder while a larger group escapes. But Henry doesn’t know about that.

A dozen steps beyond the walls, he finds a thin, rusty ladder climbing a sheer cement wall. Tracing it upward, his beam circles a dark region of the wall that begins to shimmer and stir. Winged, cockroach-size insects excited by the light buzz angrily and scurry about, climbing over one another. Grimacing, Henry shoves the flashlight into his belt, pulls on a pair of heavy black leather gloves, and starts cautiously up the ladder, his bulky shoes at severe angles to the shallow rungs.

On top is a recessed compartment the size of a small square room, perhaps nine feet by ten feet. Henry’s roving flashlight, out again, stops in a far corner, exposing several white plates resting on a small refrigerator. A clothesline with two pairs of jeans and three T-shirts stretches diagonally from one corner to an overhead pipe. On a makeshift table consisting of a crate supported by books stands a toaster oven, open and still warm to the touch. On another such table, this one with flowers, lies a book of poetry open to W. H. Auden’s “On This Island.” Layers of old clothes and paper-filled garbage bags carpet the floor, serve as insulation from the dank, underground cold.

Henry kicks at the clothes and plastic bags in frustration, and then shatters the silence by striking his nightstick repeatedly against the pipes. He overturns one table and knocks the books and plates from another, savaging the dwelling with his club and feet. He is following orders to roust these homeless, who are a danger to themselves as well as the transit system, but he seems to be acting out a larger anger, and perhaps even enjoying his strength.

"They were just here," he says, pointing to a bowl in which a few drops of milk remain.

A doll with a smudged face has been left behind. Her large eyes seem to stare at me. Books and plates litter the floor. I turn over a paperback, *Winnie the Pooh*.

Henry seems to feel the anxious eyes of hating witnesses. "They're probably still here, watching us," he says, looking about challengingly, and he attacks the pipes with renewed vigor.

This is a typical trip into the tunnels for Sergeant Henry and for other officers of the Metropolitan Transit Police, not according to them but to J.C., an underground dweller who has watched their regular forays.

"Actually, Henry ain't as bad as most of the others," says J.C, who describes himself as "spokesman" for a community of two hundred homeless who have settled under Grand Central Station.

"Some of them will kick people around when they find them sleeping, and break up their stuff," he explains. "No reason at all. They take out a lot of their aggression down there, I'll tell you that much, 'specially when they're having a bad day."

J.C, a small, lithe, and sneakered black man in his middle to late twenties, clearly remembers with lingering bitterness the first time he met Henry. Henry, a large muscular man over six feet tall in his early forties, also recalls the meeting, but he sees it as one of his more amusing tunnel experiences.

Henry had been after J.C for months, knowing he was living illegally in the tunnels but unable to catch and evict him. He would follow J.C. into a tunnel only to lose him in the dark underground mazes and back out before he got in too deeply. He'd wait at the entrance for J.C. to reemerge, but J.C. knew too many ways in and out of the tunnels for the cop.

One spring day, however, the sergeant saw his quarry step out of a tunnel and into an alleyway. Henry, shouting and drawing his revolver, began chasing J.C. up the alley at full run. J.C, after an initial sprint, realized that he was in a dead-end trap and, hearing the ominous hammer click on the policeman's gun, he stopped abruptly. He stopped faster than Henry could pull up, and, before each knew what happened, the big cop had his cocked revolver cold against the skin of J.C.'s face.

"I had him against the wall," Henry laughs. "It was so funny. We were both shaking. Neither of us knew what to do. He was so scared he wet his pants."

"Yeah, we were both shaking," J.C. grimly agrees later. "The difference was he had the gun. He's always been quick to grab his gun."

Henry didn't arrest J.C, he only made "contact" with the tunnel person.

From the dangerous encounter, the two men developed a wary relationship. They remained merely nodding acquaintances for a long time before Henry persuaded J.C. to enroll in a vocational school and live in an apartment aboveground. J.C. says he appreciates the sergeant's help but does not trust him enough to guide him to the underground community in which he then lived.

"He could lock me up for the rest of my life and I wouldn't tell him where it is," J.C. insists. "That's just the way it is, and he knows that, too."

J.C. now lives aboveground much of the time, working as a janitor. In his spare time, he is a volunteer in the Parks Department's youth program. He still visits his community, however, and speaks for them to outsiders. When he lived in the tunnels, he could be contacted only by leaving notes under a certain brick at a certain tunnel entrance. In order to talk to him about the tunnels, he insists on the same system again.

"I don't like to confuse the upstairs with the downstairs," he explains. "And I don't want any of my people up here to know about my people down there. It's safer for them that way, and better for me, too," he says. "Because people don't believe me, anyway, about my community."<sup>[2]</sup> ([/read-267812/?page=32#n\\_2](#))

THE BEHAVIOR OF POLICE UNDERGROUND IS AS CONTROVERSIAL AS on the streets. Brutality stories are so common that rarely a conversation occurs among tunnel people without some new incident being brought up, sometimes marginally but often seriously. Violence is part of the way of life in the darkness under the streets, perhaps even more than aboveground.

Its victim one day was Peppin, an illegal Latino immigrant who lived under Platform 100 in Grand Central Station. He was a familiar figure to the police, and usually ignored. On this day, they began beating him, apparently because he couldn't stand up and move on as they ordered.

"I saw it all happen," says Seville. "Me and others—four of us—was standing down there, a ways back. No one saw us but we saw them.

"He was a nice guy, Peppin, didn't bother nobody, kept to himself pretty much," Seville recalls. "He didn't do no drugs or nothing, but he was crazy because he wouldn't take much food. Didn't speak much English. Sometimes he'd take something to eat when he was desperate, but he was depressed all the time. I think he was embarrassed to eat food from garbage bins. He could barely walk because he was so weak from not eating.

"And that day he couldn't even stand up. One of the officers kept yelling, 'Get up! Get up!' But he couldn't.

"So they picked him up and threw him around. His head hit the third rail and sparks flew everywhere. His body just bounced up like you never seen, like a big dummy bouncing up, like he was on strings or rubber bands. There was blood all over the place. We thought they killed him. They thought they killed him, too, cuz they got scared; they talked about what to do with the body and what to say happened, what their story was gonna be.

“They were gonna say they chased off a gang of punks who were beating him up and when they got there, that the punks threw him on the rail and ran. That’s what they were going to say,” Seville shakes his head incredulously.

“We wanted to do something, watching all that, but we were afraid to go forward. I don’t know. We should have. But we just stood there.

“Then the medics came, and they took him to a hospital and he lived. Peppin’s still alive, but he’s not the same. He can’t even take care of himself no more. He just wanders around. I guess those officers were having a real bad day, but they shouldn’t have been doing that shit.”

Not all police are brutal, of course. Even those who brutalized Peppin are not always nasty, the homeless say. Also, many of the police are repelled by such behavior by fellow officers.

“It’s no wonder these tunnel people don’t come to us for help,” says one cop. “If I heard those stories, I’d be hiding, too. But they’re not true, or, if they are, they’re exaggerated.

“I mean, people get scared down there. Policemen, too. And they act in unacceptable ways at times. No one’s perfect. But if anyone has the advantage, they do, those people in the tunnels, not us. The people who live down there, they can see in the dark, and they can hide, and they throw things—steel bars and bottles and chunks of concrete. And they come right up behind us without us knowing. All we got is a gun. It doesn’t do us much good if we can’t see them.”

Sergeant Henry bleeds, too, in his own way, although it doesn’t always show.

In 1988 he became the first officer ever assigned to deal exclusively with the tunnel people, and he was told to keep them a secret. His task was described vaguely as “homeless outreach,” without admitting these homeless lived underground. For sometime he told those who asked, including reporters, that no one lived in the tunnels, that the stories of “mole people” were a kind of underground folklore concocted by homeless people for their own amusement. Yet now he admits that he and his officers had cleared about four hundred peoples from the tunnels under Grand Central Station.

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