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We eventually settle on grass off the path. “No pictures,” she insists, meaning no details of her relatives or past that would identify her to her family.

“I stay with men so they can supply me, not because they protect me,” she volunteers. “I don’t care what happens to me. The worst has happened. It can happen again and I won’t care.”

You’ve given up trying to be happy?

“No,” she replies, “just given up fighting. It’s not so bad being unhappy. It even becomes comforting. It’s like that’s the real me. I’m not afraid of anything, not even of fear. I’m not afraid to be afraid.”

I’m about to suggest that she sounds like she wants to convince herself of that.

“Now, you, you’re afraid,” she says. “That’s why some of the people laugh at you. They can see in your eyes that you’re afraid to be like us, not because you might be cold or hurt but because you’re afraid how you’d feel.”

Well, people do talk to me anyway, I say defensively.

“Yeah, they know you’re trying to be brave and they appreciate that,” she says in a softer tone. “They also feel sorry for you.”

I laugh, but I’m still stung. “Well, being afraid to feel something is better than feeling nothing at all,” I insist.

“No matter what anyone says, you can’t stop having feelings,” she goes on. “Sometimes I’ll sit there reading,” she points toward a park bench on which two men lie bundled in sleep, “like the other day, I was reading a copy of the *Post* about Liz Taylor’s wedding and suddenly my face was wet. I think I was crying, I don’t know.” She pauses and looks away, then asks, almost plaintively, “Why can’t they just leave her alone?”

Why don’t you leave the tunnels? You’re smarter and could be more attractive than most women and could do very well, I say.

“Because I don’t want that life, I don’t want that pressure,” she says. “I don’t want to be fighting all the time, struggling to be someone. I’m sick of pretending I’m white, or that I’m a man. I hate pretending to be an insider in an insider’s world when everything about me says ‘outsider.’” Angry now, she pauses for a long minute, and I think she is moving to another subject when she turns toward me in almost slow motion.

“Furthermore,” she declares firmly to emphasize an important point about herself, “I can’t see past my next hit. That’s all that matters to me. There’s no greater pleasure or need. I can’t imagine anything up here that can compete with my next high. I don’t even want it to be different.”

I peer at her, wondering if her revelation was only to prevent me from pitying her, but she meets my eyes without wavering. The moment has been too emotional, and we stand up.

“Now you can write anything you want about me,” she says as we leave the park, “but I told you the truth. I don’t want you to feel sorry for me, and you should not think you should have done something to help me. You can’t. If I wind up face down one of these days, you should know you couldn’t have done anything to prevent it. Don’t think you’re God.”

Our mood lightens as she walks me to a subway. She wants me to take a cab home.

“You’re such a kid,” she laughs. “It’s late, and it’s dangerous for you.”

She comes down onto the subway platform with me, easing her thin hips past a turnstile, and she hugs me and urges me to be careful as I enter the last car of the train. Out of the back window I watch as she first waves, then looks both ways before slipping off the platform and into the darkness along the tracks.

I see Brenda several times more, but we never talk again. Each time she is with a large man, never the same one. Usually she does not even say hello, although we always manage to share a small smile. Every one of her men makes it clear they distrust me, and she defers to them, even to asking permission with a glance before speaking.

This behavior is common among homeless women, particularly younger ones. Despite what Brenda said about herself, the women usually seek the man for protection, and in exchange, they allow the man to be totally dominant. The bargain is somewhat paradoxical because the women sacrifice the same autonomy and independence in the tunnels that they would relinquish in a homeless shelter, yet they refuse to enter a shelter program, they often say, in order to keep their freedom.

Homeless women also often allow themselves to be physically abused by their men. Again they compare the treatment in tunnels to what occurs in shelters. Brenda said the risks are the same, that women are as dangerous as men in this respect.

Still, Brenda may well have been addicted not only to crack but also to such men. “Maybe it’s my punishment,” she said halfseriously one time. “Maybe I’m meant to be with men like this because they’re as bad as I am.”

Brenda disappeared abruptly from the West Side tunnels. No one has seen her for a while. Many stories are offered: A boyfriend killed her when he suspected she was cheating on him. Her father found her and took her home. She killed herself. She just decided on her own to go aboveground and try to make it there after all. Or, one person told me, she has gone deeper underground, to live with a community that will not allow her to return.

FEW TUNNEL WOMEN ARE LIKE BRENDA. DEMOGRAPHICALLY, THE tunnels reflect the homeless population aboveground, except for fewer elderly people underground. An estimated 40 percent of the underground homeless are females, with the number having risen rapidly in recent years. An increasing number are white.

Most women go underground initially with a man and occasionally, with a woman. Many are addicted, or were at one time. Many have families who would care for them, they say, but they refuse to give up their drugs or their autonomy.

Michelle

MICHELLE HAD LIVED WITH TWO MEN ON A CATWALK IN THE TUNNELS under Grand Central, “but that was when I was pretty messed up,” she explains. Now she lives in a rehabilitation center for women. She is one of Sergeant Henry’s success stories. He persuaded her to enter the rehabilitation center where she is waiting for an apartment whose rent, she says, her father will provide.

She is more than petite, she is tiny, barely four foot four inches and fine as a bird. She could pass as a teenager with her Walkman wired into her ears, bobbed hair, jeans, a soft brown leather coat, and white sneakers. She defines her brown Italian eyes with thick, steady lines of an eye pencil. But when she speaks, her mouth sinks without teeth, and suddenly she looks far older than her thirty-five years. She has been clean of drugs for almost a year, she says.

Michelle is eager to tell her story, though she rambles, frequently repeating herself, and trails off into silence in mid-sentence at times.

“I was stupid,” she says. Through a numb smile, she tells how she gave birth to a baby in the tunnels, when she first settled there. That was five years ago she thinks, or longer—she’s not sure; the drugs have thinned her memory. She went into the tunnels with a man she no longer remembers to escape confessing to her family that she was pregnant, she says.

She believes the baby was born alive, a boy, but she doesn’t know what happened to him.

“I’d like to know what I did with him,” she says matter-of-factly, without a hint of emotion. “Who took him?”

Some tunnel homeless found Michelle underground, severely overdosing, and carried her up to Sergeant Henry. In rehab, she had to learn everything again, including her name and how to tie her shoes.

“I thank God every day I wake up and I’m alive,” she says dimly, as if in a dream.

Then she wanders off, talking to herself and saying hello to every passerby. Some men raise their eyebrows speculatively, but after a few words, they pass on. She meanders down the broad marble halls of the station waving her hands at strangers. It’s difficult to see how she, who remembers very little of her past and seems to have virtually no future, is a success story. But then, she once roamed the tunnels in bare feet, eating roaches and garbage to survive and turning tricks for the drugs that have almost destroyed her.

Gwen

UNLIKE MICHELLE, GWEN HAS CONTROL. SHE VISITS HER MOTHER at an Amsterdam Avenue apartment on the Upper West Side twice a week and stays overnight there. She chooses not to live there, however, because of “the stress” in relations between the women. Her mother does not know Gwen lives on the streets and below them most of the week.

Gwen, who says her full name is Gwendolyn Scott, is twenty-nine years old, a healthy-looking black woman with a ready smile. She has lived on the streets or in tunnels for five years, at first in the 72nd Street tunnel with two men, Jess and Stone, who kept her safe. There is less hassle underground than on park benches, she says, and no one robs you. As more and more people came into that underground area, garbage and makeshift sleeping quarters accumulated and police moved in regularly to clear out the homeless. Gwen gave up on tunnel life, she says, when she realized she did not want to go aboveground anymore. “I didn’t want to become like the mole people,” she says.

Now she is part of the Rotunda Gang of about forty homeless who sleep in the Rotunda in the park at 79th Street. They are docile, but park workers have orders to disperse any cluster of homeless people that might frighten citizens using the park in the daytime. Several public toilets stand near the stone structure, their gagging smells of urine and feces at times drifting up into the vault areas.

It's early on a rainy November morning when I hurry to the Rotunda to meet Gwen and her current man, Rick, whose full name is Roderick van Hollar, she says. Everything is a shade of gray, including the calm, slate-hued Hudson. A mist across the river blurs the tops of some buildings. Most of the homeless have left or are packing up for a day of trudging the city, before returning at night, but a number still remain. Papa, so named because he is the community's eldest, is still asleep, snug within cardboard walls and surrounded by garbage bags full of clothes and other possessions. His coat hangs on an outside hook in the stone wall as I pass quietly.

Gwen calls out a welcome from a balcony overlooking the river, which stops the hostile looks and clicking teeth of a group of men. Her man is still in bed, watching me skeptically as I approach, and she pulls her house robe together more tightly. A gray Yankee baseball cap, its peak turned backward, holds her hair until she exchanges it for a black turban. She pulls on hefty hiking boots and proudly shows me a Ziplock bag of Elizabeth Arden jewelry that Rick found in a trash can.

She is on the street because of alcohol and drugs, she says. She is trying to change, but she has been to most of the city-run detoxification centers. Her last detox visit was six months ago, which was where she met Rick. Detox only works for seven days, she explains, and you are out on the street. Not enough time to kick the habit. She and Rick have applied for admission to another center, one that would keep them from drugs for six to eight weeks, but the waiting list is long. Meanwhile they live in the Rotunda community where no overt use of drugs or alcohol is permitted. In part this is because the Parks Department would close the camp if it saw such abuse, but in part, too, because most of the homeless here are trying to stay straight, says Gwen.

According to her, breaking the drug habit is more difficult underground. "You get afraid to go up and be seen by people," she says, "but then you get more depressed and lonely in the tunnels, so you do drugs again."

Both she and Rick want to work. She has had many jobs, including home care for elderly couples, which she wants to do again. Rick has just passed the sanitation workers exam and is waiting to be called at a drop-in center. Until something comes up, the two visit museums and libraries, Gwen says, to stay away from temptation. The Egyptian room at the Museum of Natural History is their favorite.

"I'm just a rookie," Rick says, out of bed now and willing to talk as Gwen feeds some regular pigeon visitors. "I've only been without housing for two and a half years, but Gwen, she's a veteran. Right, hon?" he calls out.

She laughs. "Yeah, veteran of the homeless life. Seen it all and lived just about everywhere, and the worst is the tunnels. They trick you. You think you're safe because no one can see you and you can't see yourself in the darkness. But you can't see beyond yourself, either," she says.

Dericka

DERICKA IS THE OPPOSITE OF GWEN. RATHER THAN STRONG AND self-possessed, she is so shy that she often hides her face in her hands, sitting for hours at a time, rocking back and forth. She doesn't cry; she withdraws and seeks to erase her memories.

She was physically abused by her boyfriend of four years, who whipped her with a belt. The relationship was born of sorrow after her brother died of a drug overdose. She had cared for her brother, six years her junior, as if he were her son, and she feels overwhelming guilt that she did not insist that he get help to end his addiction.

Another underground homeless woman, Sheila, found Dericka sleeping on a park bench and brought her into the tunnels. Now the tunnels are an effort to mask the shame she has built around herself.

"I live down here because there are no mirrors," she says. "I can't look at myself anymore." She believes she deserves the dirt and darkness. "I hope my children never know me. I hope they never know the scars I carry inside my heart."

The fear of seeing their reflections, perhaps when passing a store window aboveground or in some other way, runs through the comments of many homeless women who live or have lived underground. Men often admit they hide in the tunnels in shame that they cannot provide for their families, but none of the men ever told me they wanted to avoid seeing their physical image. Women, aside from being more aware of appearances, sometimes hint that they can even see their inner selves in the reflections that strike them unaware when they are on the streets.

Sheila and Willie

SHEILA HELPS HERSELF BY HELPING DERICKA. SHE IS A MOTHER FIGURE, in her early thirties, who thrives on responsibility for weaker sisters and brothers, children and parents. In Bernard's tunnel, she is the den mother, making rounds on colder winter days with blankets and coaxing food down men who are barely conscious after exhausting their drugs and whiskey. She has a natural energy that is paced, not frenetic.

Sheila seldom uses drugs, but sometimes drinks herself into oblivion. She is only sober and clean when I visit, a blue bandanna tying back her hair and a generous smile of welcome. Her smile warms the entire tunnel, one man says.

She came into the tunnel with Willie, her common-law husband fifteen years her senior. They met in the Douglas Housing Project, which rises tens of stories between 100th and 105th streets, between Amsterdam and Manhattan avenues on the Upper West Side. Sheila had moved into the project with her family. At the time, Willie worked for the city, but he is a drug addict who recognizes that he will die soon.
