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Henry often jokes with the homeless he encounters, in an effort to neutralize their fear and hostility. His large, loose frame conveys an image of comfortable friendliness. Like his body, several homeless people describe his shiny brown eyes as “soft.”

When he and I come upon a group of homeless in the northeast corner of the station, Henry staggers backward in clowning disbelief, one hand to forehead, when he recognizes a man in a handsome trench coat over worn Reeboks.

“Man, oh, man, what happened to you?” he asks, grasping the man’s frail hand in a firm, warm handshake.

“He got himself a job,” explains another of the homeless group happily, still giggling at Henry’s surprise. The cop is pleased—sincerely so, it seems to me—that one of the homeless is getting up and out of the tunnel life.

Despite his easy way and rapport with most homeless on his beat, some tunnel people do not trust him. Borrowing from psychological jargon, some accuse him of being on an “ego trip.” One claims he likes his gun and black leather gloves “too much” and that he likes the credit and the publicity, including his picture in newspapers. Another broadly hints that Henry has taken part in beatings of homeless people, but he won’t say it outright.

On the other hand, Henry has helped many homeless like J.C. to escape the tunnels, to get into job training programs, and to find housing aboveground. He asked for the duty. When he found out the great size of the problem, he asked for more officers but was refused. He took pictures of the underground people and their communities to the mayor’s office and to the governor’s office, he says, but he got little additional help. It may be that he shows me his pictures and leads me to some tunnel people because of his frustration with the authorities.

Henry sometimes makes extra sandwiches at home, which he gives to the homeless he meets in the tunnels. His job is to wean people away from the tunnels, to accept help aboveground. If they refuse to leave voluntarily, he has to evict them, but he prefers not to.

He takes his work home with him, too. He has experienced more than one episode of profound depression because of his job and has had to take time off to recover. He blames it on the darkness, however, rather than on the sad condition of the people he works with.

“You don’t get enough light working down here,” he says. “You get depressed. One time I was getting desperate. I used to sit so close to a light bulb that it singed my papers. A doctor told me what I had was depression and that light helps, any kind of light, and I should try to get more of it.”

Another time, after some diligent work, he found a homeless community deep underground where one tunnel opened into a huge cavern. The scene was peaceful, with shacks and campfires, well protected and virtually hidden behind a thirty-foot-high cliff of rock between it and the tracks. The community called the site “the Condos,” because the living environment was so good. The cliff even drowned out the noise of passing trains, and an electric wire had been diverted to actually allow some of the cardboard and wooden shacks in the Condos to have light. Water was available from a convenient sprinkler system that leaked.

“It was the only environment where I thought that ‘Hey, once, maybe, these people are better off down here because what they get upstairs is a hell of a lot worse,’” he recalls pensively. “That’s when I knew it was time to take a vacation, so I went to Jamaica and started light therapy,” he smiles.

The Condos, where more than three hundred people once lived, have now been cleared of the homeless and most of their camps.

Some social workers also believe that at least some of the police brutality stories are exaggerated, or even fabricated, by the underground homeless. Harold Deamues is one of them. A worker for the outreach program of the Association for Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment (ADAPT), Deamues contends that the stories primarily reflect the hostility and tension between the tunnel people and the police.

"The problem is that the police go down there assuming all these people are crazy or bugged [drugged] out. There's no trust between them at all," he says.

"These people don't have any belief in themselves, and if you don't believe in them or trust them, they know, they sense it, so how are you going to help them? I always feel like if I can look them in the eye, they're not going to hurt me," explains Deamues, who holds ADAPT's best record for persuading tunnel people to go aboveground. "If they have a gun in their face, that's not helping."

This philosophy is built into ADAPT's outreach effort, which is funded by the Transit Authority. The program's director, Michael Bethea, said none of his team takes a weapon or wears protective gear when they work in the tunnels.

"We got to get through to them, and convince them that they're not untouchables, not animals. That they're people just like us, and we're people like them. I don't know how you can do that by pulling a gun all the time," Bethea says.

SOCIAL WORKERS MUST COPE WITH LEGAL REGULATIONS IN ORDER TO help the tunnel homeless. Families found underground are often split up. The children are usually put in foster homes on the grounds that the parents cannot adequately care for them, which causes families to avoid seeking any welfare help.

For the past several years, welfare agencies across the country have warned that families—usually mothers with children—account for the fastest growing group among the homeless. This is a particularly severe problem in New York City where housing is very scarce and expensive. During July and August of 1992, a total of 13,994 families asked city officials for shelter, almost double the 7,526 families in the same months a year earlier.

"It's an explosion," according to Ken Murphy, deputy commissioner of the city's Human Resources Administration. "Two or three years ago we had to place maybe seventy-five families each night. Last night we placed 210 families and still had 143 left over in the offices at 8 A.M.," he told *The New York Times*.

The pattern is reflected underground. Shelters for families are usually full, so parents seeking help are sent to an adult shelter, and the children usually go to foster care or are even put up for adoption.

Sonya and Rodney had their two daughters taken from them when they were found in the tunnels.

"They's in foster care," says Sonya, a slim woman who ties her hair up neatly in a navy blue cotton cloth and away from her high cheekbones, accentuated by sunken cheeks, thin nose, and full lips. Even fatigue and hunger cannot take much away from her attractive face. "They [welfare officials] were supposed to put them together, in the same family. They promised they would," she complains, "but then they said they couldn't, so they's in different houses."

"We used to go see them a lot, but it hurt too much. The older one, she see I was crying and she says, 'Mama, don't come see me no more, because I just make you sad and crying.'"

She breaks off, weeping, and hides her face in Rodney's bony chest.

"We don't see them no more," he says, pain lining his face. "Not 'til we can get them back to ourselves completely."

"It's not easy," Sonya resumes. "They just don't give them back to you. The social worker says sometimes they never give them back to you. Maybe we have to start again," she says, sniffing. Rodney nods.

"It's a very hard call," explains a sympathetic social worker. "On the one hand you don't want to leave them without hope by telling them the facts—that most families pulled from the tunnels and split up never get back together. But at the same time, you want them to know it won't be easy; it's not just going to happen, getting back together. They have to work at it."

"The parents don't want to let go by putting the kids up for adoption," she continues, "so while the parents float around trying to pull themselves together, the child grows up in foster homes, pushed from one house to another. The parents don't want to let go, to cut the cord. So it's the worst of all worlds for the kids, who would be best off with loving parents who can provide for them. Or second best, adopted into a family that could provide for them."

"But this way they are worse off. And as they get older, by the time the parents realize they won't get them back, the kids are too old to get adopted. If they're black, it's even harder to get adopted," she sighs.

Overworked social workers—in New York City, the average caseload is almost ten times the size recommended by the National Association of Social Workers—are taxed with decisions that determine the fate of such underground families. Sometimes they see the choice as cut-and-dry where tunnel dwellers are concerned.

"No child can live a normal, healthy life in a tunnel," says one flatly. "If that's the best the parent can do, well, that's just not good enough."

Underground couples without children are also encouraged to separate sometimes.

Trey, a tall, slim man with a powerful frame, works in a soup kitchen with his girlfriend Lajoy, whom he calls his wife. The two live in a box shack at the mouth of a tunnel with several other people, mostly men.

He is a large, gentle man who speaks softly and smiles often, but he is usually too busy watching Lajoy to join in any laughter with the kitchen staff. Lajoy, who is twenty-five but looks forty, is an obvious addict. Her eyes are darkly ringed above heavy bags, and her dark skin looks chalky. Her movements are quick and jittery. Even to the untrained eye, she seems dangerously thin and fragile. Trey tries never to let

her out of his sight.

Even while talking and peeling potatoes, he watches her. She speaks loudly without warning, and his hand slips over the potato into the sharp peeler. Blood gushes from a deep gouge in his middle finger, but he ties a napkin around his fist and rinses his red blood from the potato, almost without noticing it, eyes still locked on Lajoy.

“I try not to let her do it [both shoot up and smoke crack]” he said as he resumes talking, hardly letting his eyes fall from Lajoy. “But I can’t watch her all the time. Sometimes she does drugs right when I’m there, and I don’t even know it, don’t know how she did it.” He tries to explain.

“They say people can be like cancer. When it’s in your arm or leg, you amputate it to get well. It hurts like hell, but you got to do it to live. But you see, it don’t work for me with Lajoy. My wife is my life. What’s the point of living if she ain’t around. I don’t want to live without her. She can’t stop doing drugs, even for me. So I got to be with her while I can.”

Trey has his problems, too. Alcohol. Most times, he gets drunk every night, which he feels is an improvement from the past when he was oblivious all day long. He tries not to drink, at least not too much, he says, so he can take care of Lajoy.

Some of his friends believe Lajoy encourages Trey to drink, maybe because she has more freedom to take drugs when he is drunk. She insists they live in the box where drugs and drink are very common. The pattern reinforces their addiction. Some couples overcome their addiction together, but usually one brings the other down with her or him.

“When it comes to choosing between a person whom they love, or their own health and life, they pick the person,” according to Yolanda Serrano, the executive director of ADAPT. “So how do you help people like that? When it comes to aiding the addict, our system says they got to do it alone. There are no provisions for family and loved ones to do it together.

“What it comes down to is we don’t see them as persons with feelings. We may lack the experience. The police see them as threats. The system pulls them apart, their family, their friends. It’s all sink or swim, and a lot aren’t strong enough to swim. A lot of them don’t understand that we’re trying to help. For that matter, a lot on our side, our people, don’t seem to know they’re supposed to help.

“When it comes down to it,” she says sadly, “you can’t really blame either side. Neither side really understands the other. We need to have that understanding. But we don’t have the time or the compassion to see where they’re coming from. And they don’t have the trust.”

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Hell’s Kitchen

SMITH, A GRAFFITI WRITER WHO OFTEN PAINTS UNDERGROUND, takes me into Seville’s tunnel, which begins on West 48th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues, near an almost unnoticed bridge over two railroad tracks thirty feet below street level. It is the spot where Seville fell and broke his wrist.

We climb a chain link fence from the top of a dumpster, slide halfway down a rock-faced wall, and then drop about eight feet onto the gravel roadbed of the tracks where they run briefly in the open before disappearing underground. There are several such places on the West Side where the tracks are in a gully, not a tunnel, and can be seen by those who know what to look for. The path for the tracks was blasted out of the Manhattan rock perhaps a century ago and the tracks were abandoned for some years because of declining rail traffic through New York City. Trains now run through them again, largely carrying freight.

Clothes, mostly women’s miniskirts, litter the tracks, along with glass bottles and aluminum drink cans. We pass a pair of corduroy pants, one leg crumbled and the other almost straight, that has been soaked with blood and is stiffening and turning brown in the sun.

Then comes the first underground passageway. Once inside, as the light is disappearing behind the last turn, a woman’s voice calls out shrilly: “Who’s there? Who’s in the tunnel?”

Smith ignores the voice, stepping like a cat over the rubble despite the blinding darkness. Searching for a body to go with the questions, I seem to turn an ankle with each footfall.

“Answer me!” the woman’s voice demands. Almost at the same moment, a bottle flies past Smith, crashing against the far wall. We pick up our pace until well away. We’ve been lucky, Smith says. Often as many as fifteen bottles have been hurled at him from different directions in that same short passage of tunnel.

These people just don’t like visitors, he observes unnecessarily. “Trains are a lot safer,” he says dryly.

The tracks seemed particularly dark in contrast to several places where bright shafts of sunlight splash down through gratings to create stark, disorienting shadows. After the last warming bright beam from above, we come upon a huge boulder on which is scrawled a warning sign in the orange spray paint of track workers: “CHUDS.”

Track maintenance crews call tunnel homeless “CHUD people,” for “Cannibalistic Human Underground Dwellers.”