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Isaacs graduated from the University of Maryland in 1975, he says, with a major in journalism and a minor in philosophy. He initially worked as an editorial assistant at CBS in New York for a short time, then went into modeling, and then into dealing drugs. He claims to be drug- and alcohol-free now, at least most of the time. Periodically, he admits, he slips back.

He stumbled into the tunnel one night after he broke up with a girl and has lived here for six years. “Found this place and never left, except to go back to my old place for a few things. But I never turned back. I don’t blame her that I’m down here. She’s a lawyer, beautiful girl, really beautiful. I definitely don’t want her feeling responsible. I’m down here for me. People don’t understand that.”

In February 1990, *New York Daily News* reporter Samme Chitthum wrote about Bernard and his camp. Several former friends recognized Bernard and sent the article to his family. His brother, a successful Chicago lawyer, flew to New York and pleaded with Bernard to return aboveground. “He offered me \$10,000,” Bernard recalls, shaking his head. “He just didn’t understand. This is where I want to be for now. Maybe not forever, but for now.”

Freight and passenger trains once raced along this tunnel, which stretches underground more than four miles from 72nd Street to 122nd Street. Early on, local kids would crawl through grates to ride the trains for kicks, hiding from patrolmen who carried shotguns filled with salt pellets to sting rather than kill. When Bernard came to this spot, which is roughly under 96th Street, the tracks had been abandoned for years, and a ragtag collection of homeless people found shelter along its length.

The best feature of this tunnel was the fresh water. The “Tears of Allah,” as Bernard named them, pulsed from a broken pipe twenty feet overhead and fell in one seamless curtain to the floor. The pipe went unrepaired for five years, during which time it provided an oasis for the tunnel dwellers.

Not long after he came, an incident occurred that made Bernard a legend among the underground and attracted the community that now surrounds him.

Hector, a thief and addict recently discharged from Riker’s Island, moved into the northern entrance of the tunnel and with other men began extorting a “tariff” from homeless who passed. They beat those who refused or could not pay; sometimes they even beat those who paid. They challenged Bernard, who became incensed.

“You? You demand money from me?” he bellowed angrily as others peered out from their camps and coves.

“Do you know who I am?” he shouted, his voice echoing down the walls. “I am Bernard, Lord of the Tunnels!”

Hector and his friends, nonplused, allowed Bernard to pass without charge. From then on, Bernard was known as the Lord of the Tunnels.

“When I went to ‘We Can’ [a redemption center where discarded cans and bottles are turned in for cash], people would say to me, ‘Yo, Lord of the Tunnels,’ or point to me and whisper to each other like ‘That’s the Lord of the Tunnels.’” At first Bernard didn’t like the title, but he has come to accept it as “them showing me respect.”

Hector’s bullying continued, but perhaps taking Bernard’s cue, several of the tunnel dwellers “showed him disrespect.” One night, to end the growing resistance, Hector and his friends attacked a camp about ten blocks north of Bernard’s bunker, burning cardboard box homes and the primitive bedding and scattering pots and pans. They beat and raped a homeless woman named Sheila, whose husband Willie had been absent for some weeks, while most of the tunnel dwellers cowered on overhead pipes and in cubbyholes.

Bernard heard Sheila's screams even though he was outside of the tunnels at the time. He found her bleeding and nearly unconscious. Furious, he rallied about twenty-five homeless men and bats, pipes, and burning planks, and descended on Hector and his gang, surrounding them while one man went to get the police.

"It was a wild scene down there," says Chris Pape, a graffiti artist who happened to be watching through a grate. "All these people running around underground, yelling and waving these torches underground in the dark. It was surreal. That's about the only word for it." The organized strike against Hector was particularly surprising because the homeless in the Riverside Park tunnel are a passive group who go out of their way to avoid attention. They usually hide from visitors, says Pape, who paints murals in tunnels.

The police were reluctant to come with Bernard's messenger, Stash. The first patrolmen he found didn't believe him, he says, and the second pair went with him to the tunnel's entrance but refused to enter, fearing some kind of trap. Sheila finally went out to them, told her story and persuaded them to enter and arrest Hector and some of his men. Many of the tunnel dwellers went every day to Hector's trial, panhandling money for the subway fare, to testify against him. Hector went back to jail.

"After that," Bernard complains, "my haven of harmony became a haven of headaches." More people began to settle in the tunnel and look to Bernard for protection as well as food and advice. Although he professes "disdain for humanity," including other homeless, he is always willing to share what he has. "Who am I to deny someone in need?" he asks.

Several tunnel dwellers credit Bernard with saving their lives. One is Leon who came to the tunnel "stone drunk," in his words, on a bitter February night. "Bernard saw me laying up there in the street and wakes me up. 'Man,' he says, 'you can't stay here. You'll freeze to death.' 'Okay,' I says, 'then just let me die.' He says, 'Fuck,' and dragged me out of the draft, carried me two blocks over his shoulder, cursing all the way. Turns out I got frostbite bad that night. If Bernard hadn't helped me—and he gave me a blanket, too—I'd be dead and that ain't no lie."

Bernard pines for the days when he was alone, but he also remembers how dangerous such a life could be. One icy day, he slipped while carrying firewood down the steep stairs at the tunnel's entrance and fell about twenty feet to the tunnel's floor, breaking his hip. He crawled to his camp and attempted to heal himself by resting, but he ran out of wood for his fire and food for himself, and he caught a bad cold. "I couldn't even make my way out of the bunker, let alone the tunnel for help. I thought my time had come," he says now, "and I thought, well, if this is it, it's no big deal."

Another homeless man who lived farther up the tunnel came to his aid. The two had passed often but never spoken. Even now Bernard doesn't know his name. The man was aware that he hadn't seen Bernard for days, suspecting he had left, and came in hopes of scavenging anything useful that might be left behind. Rather than stealing, which he could easily have done in view of Bernard's weakness, he nursed Bernard back to health. Bernard never saw him again, but he tries to repay that care to others.

TODAY AMTRAK USES THE RAILROAD TRACKS AGAIN, BUT THE HOME-less continue to squat here. Most of them live in two areas: One consists of the bunkerlike concrete workstations like Bernard's, which occupants furnish and even decorate with carpeting and artwork, either graffitied murals or posters. The other campsite is at the southern end of the tunnel and less secure, where homeless like Seville live in more fragile quarters, usually makeshift tents and packing-crate homes. Between the two camps, and in fact along the entire length of the tunnel, are the most reclusive of the homeless, usually mentally ill, who sleep individually in small cubbyholes that have been hollowed out naturally or by man high up on the sheer walls of the tunnels. Some can be reached only by climbing metal rungs embedded in the walls.

Bernard's camp is the hub for these tunnel dwellers. His campfire lies directly under a grate that opens to the surface and carries out most of the smoke. Six chairs surround the fire. Food is shared, but many people also have their own private cache. Chores such as cooking and collecting firewood are also shared. One of the most burdensome chores, which came when the "Tears of Allah" dried up, is carrying five-gallon buckets of water to camp from a gas station more than a mile away. Most of the group eat at the same time, and there is always coffee on the grill for anyone stopping by. Anyone can use the grill anytime, but they are responsible for making sure the fire is out and the ashes completely gray when they leave.

Bernard spends more time at the fire than the others. His main source of income is collecting discarded cans and bottles from the trash. He prefers to do most of the cooking for the community, waking early to prepare breakfasts for those tunnel dwellers who have jobs to go to.

"People think food's the greatest problem down here," he says one morning over the grill with the flames snapping warmly in the dank air. "It's not. It's pride. They throw away the cream of the cream in New York, which makes scavenging relatively productive. I expect to find the Hope Diamond out there in the street some day. It's dignity that's hard to get."

Most members of this Riverside Park community are tunnel veterans. They have established communication networks that quickly pass around new information on where and when hot meals are being handed out. They know when a grocery store is throwing out slightly wilted produce or damaged cartons of macaroni. They know which restaurants and delicatessens give the days' leftovers to the homeless. They also know which restaurants throw ammonia on their garbage to keep the homeless away.

"Sometimes they do worse than that," says a tunnel dweller named Jesus. "Sometimes they put poison on it that you can't smell, can't taste, but you get sick after you eat it. My buddy, he died from rat poison they put in garbage. The doctor said it was rat poison, and he was so mad, he went to the manager of the restaurant to complain." Jesus just shrugs when I ask what effect it had.

Bernard complains about his loss of privacy, but he takes some pride in his particular community. “Everyone down here is settled. We have a base, and we function together. We don’t have to deal with all the despair that goes on in the topside world,” he says, sitting back on a discarded, purple recliner near his warm fire.

Near 79th Street off the West Side Highway, he says, is a homeless campsite aboveground composed of cardboard and other boxes covered with plastic sheets. “People are sleeping in there,” Bernard says, wide-eyed. “I look at that and I say, ‘Wow! That’s incredible!’ I mean, the weather so far this year has been unbelievably bad and I said to myself ‘Man, you don’t know how blessed you are.’ I really think that’s roughing it. My body has gone through a lot of changes; I’m beginning to feel my age based on the environment I’m living in. I wonder about some of these people. Down here, man, I’m lucky.”

Still, he admits, his body has suffered physically from living underground, and he hints that his attitude has also changed. “Down here, man becomes an animal. Down here, the true animal in man comes out, evolves. His first instinct is to survive, and although he values his independence, he forms a community for support.” He feels more sense of community now than he ever felt aboveground.

“I never voted in my life,” he says, “never even registered to vote. I feel sure that everything up there is designed to work for those who have money. The politicians can talk about reforms, how they’ll do this or that, but it’s all bull.” While he distrusts politicians in general, he distrusts homeless advocacy groups in particular.

“This Coalition for the Homeless is just bullshit,” he says. “Red tape and litigation. They are procrastinators. They thrive on the homeless. Without us, they wouldn’t have jobs, and they know it.” Bernard is particularly affronted by the suspicious and condescending attitude of many employees of the Coalition and other such groups.

“A while ago, we were sitting up topside having some beers when this van from Project Reachout comes by,” he recalls. “They ask if we want sandwiches and stuff. We weren’t hungry, but we said, sure, why not? Then they said, Hey, you guys don’t look homeless.’ I said, ‘What does a homeless person look like? We have to be in a certain attire and look dirty?’ I said, ‘Oh, man, keep your sandwiches.’

“Sure enough, two days later, same crew comes out giving out thermals [warm underwear]. Sure, I could use some thermals, but some guy sneaks around the back of the van with his camera to snap my picture taking the handout. They wanted pictures for their ads saying, ‘Here are the poor homeless, aid the homeless.’”

A homeless agency offered Bernard an apartment, but after visiting it, he declined. “They lied about it. No one could have lived in that rat hole, not even a rat,” he says, looking deeply into the fire as if revisiting the scene.

“It’s all bullshit! These people can’t play straight with God. And the way they talk about how the homeless problem should be solved, hell, they got it all wrong. A lot of work has to be done, sure—counseling, schooling, but most of all, treating us like the equals we are. I don’t pity us and they shouldn’t either. Everyone is responsible for his own life.”

Bernard prefers the railroad tunnels to subway tunnels because they are safer. “The whole subway scene is dangerous now because all these gangs of hoodlums marauding around and preying on the homeless.” Otherwise he doesn’t fear the underground. “You draw vibrations to you by being afraid. Down here people are more afraid of the dark than anything else. I’ve seen real tough men freak out over rats they hear in the darkness, these big men carrying big pieces [guns] and knives and they shit, they freak over rats and ghosts.”

If you aren’t scared, he points out, you notice that it is never totally black in his tunnel during daylight hours. Grates allow light through, always enough to see something, as I now realize.

“And there’s peace in the dark,” he says. “I sit here at night at the fire with a pot of tea and just the solitude of the tunnel. I think what I’ve discovered down here is that what one really seeks in life is peace of mind.”

You’re happy down here, then? I ask.

“Sure,” he says. “Whatever happy is. I understand that I can’t change anything from the way it is, except for my mind. I accept things as they are and hey, that means I got to cover my necessities like food and shelter and that’s it. And I have to keep some sort of sanity down here.”

Bob

BERNARD AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY HAVE MADE IT clear that overt drug users are unwelcome in their tunnel, but they appear to make an exception for Bob. A fifty-one-year-old white man from Chicago, Bob brags that he was once New York’s fastest short-order cook.

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