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Cher never told him about her illness. She coughed a lot toward the end, and he tried to get her into a hospital against her wishes.

“She said she didn’t want to die ignored,” he says. “The hospitals, see, when you’re on the street, they make you feel like dirt. But a couple of times she was so weak I carried her, and she cried all the way. When they weren’t looking, she’d sneak back. Even if they were nice to her, and some were, she wouldn’t have stayed. So she died with me, the way she wanted. I think she even picked the day.”

“You’re gonna ask, but I ain’t going to tell you Cher’s story. That’s her’s to keep in her grave. All I’ll say is she was a good person. She thought she was bad, but she was the best I ever known.”

Drink keeps him immune from pain, he says. If the cost of drink is dying, he’ll take the drink. He doesn’t care whether he’s believed or not about his life or anything else.

“When I walk them tunnels, I see things no one would believe,” he says. “I even met the devil down there. He got these fiery eyes, baby, you wouldn’t believe! He couldn’t get me, though, cuz Cher looks out for me.”

He’s visited the Dark Angel’s den, Jamall says, but more frightening is “Ghost’s Cliff,” which he found at the end of a natural tunnel, or a cave that opens midway up a sheer cliff. The cliff overlooks a river far below, he says, presumably the Harlem River on the Upper West Side.

Homeless people, according to him, make their homes in the cliffs. “They’re like little birds,” he says. “You can hardly see them. They don’t talk to each other with words. They use noise that sound like birds or maybe the wind.” He lets out a hollow screech to mimic the sounds he heard.

“It’s a weird place,” he adds, with tales of human sacrifice and cannibalism. “I didn’t hang around long enough to find out.”

Whether Jamall’s birdlike people are real, natural caves are likely to run through the Manhattan bedrock of schist. Geologists describe schist as crystalline rocklike granite that has a folded structure and cleaves along parallel planes or slabs like the layers of mica. The shifting earth leaves gaps between slabs, which rain and spring water widen into huge caverns. The schist almost reaches the surface under the grass of Central Park before dropping a hundred feet or more below the surface elsewhere on Manhattan. Workers digging the subway tunnels early in this century are said to have found a ten-thousand-year-old standing forest buried deep under the Upper West Side, presumably inundated in a mud slide and driven into a cavern by an Ice Age glacier.

More plausible than Ghost Cliff is the huge underground room “with a piano and tiled floor and mirrors all around” that Jamall says he found. An elderly homeless woman later described to me a similar room in which about fifty homeless people live. She added a fountain to the decor. “Fantastic,” she said. “It was just beautiful.” The two compartments could be the same, although Jamall and the woman placed them in different regions of the city, one in lower Manhattan and the other in Mid-Town on the West Side. These rooms are probably remnants of compartments dug and drilled out more than a century ago as part of the subway and rail systems and long abandoned and forgotten.

Jamall has come across communities in the tunnels that he has felt uncomfortable with, but he adamantly believes that no one in the tunnels should be evicted.

“They make a life for themselves,” says Jamall. “They take care of each other better than up here. They sleep in places everyone up here has forgotten, and that’s not stealing; that’s being resourceful and surviving. Why take them out of there? They’re not hurting no one. Give them some space and some time to heal.”

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Blade's Piece

"Be the inferior of no man, nor of any man be the superior. Remember that every man is a variation of yourself. No man's guilt is not yours, nor is any man's innocence a thing apart. Despise evil and ungodliness, but not men of ungodliness or evil. These, understand. Have no shame in being kindly and gentle, but if the time comes in the time of your life to kill, kill and have no regret."

—William Saroyan, *Epigraph*, *The Time of Your Life*

THERE WAS AN EXTRAORDINARY DEPTH TO BLADE'S CHARACTER that I never really understood. In his kindness and warmth, as well as in his cold cruelty, he taught me most about the extremes that tunnel life can bring out in a person. He also exposed a dark part of myself I had not believed existed.

By treating me as a tunnel dweller, Blade brought me down to the psychological level of tunnel life, a more dangerous and unpredictable level. Exploring the tunnels as an observer, an outsider, had its physical risks. However, when I became accepted as an insider, privy to the anger and violence that are almost hourly events underground, the tunnels exposed me to another dimension, beyond fear and danger, inside myself.

Blade had warned me. Early in one of his guided tunnel tours for me, he said, "The people down here are just like people topside, only tunnels bring out a different part in them. A part of them that topside people in fancy suits don't think they got. But they got it all right. It's inside everyone. Everyone's got the power to kill."

Blade never analyzed a situation or weighed the consequences of an action before he acted, whether on instinct or whim or some other irrational emotion. He never doubted himself. If strange sounds came from a tunnel, we would enter it. If hostile men seemed to bar a tunnel's entrance, we would go in if Blade felt "comfortable." However, if a tunnel, no matter how peaceful it appeared to me, "felt bad" to Blade, we would quickly turn and walk out. That was our basic understanding. He showed me tunnels as he chose. I listened, and followed. Our friendship grew from there.

He once scaled a thirty-foot tunnel wall to rescue a crying kitten, shivering on a high beam. Two hours later, he kicked an old man lying on the street because he hadn't moved quickly enough out of Blade's path. One night he carried a bleeding stranger, a victim of a robbery, fourteen blocks to a hospital because cabs refused to take an obviously nonpaying fare. (One cab did stop, but sped off when the driver spotted blood.) The next day Blade pulled a knife on a thirteen-year-old boy who was talking with friends, because Blade didn't like the youth's "attitude."

I SHOULD NOT BE EXPLORING TUNNELS, OR ANYTHING ELSE, WITH such a dangerously unstable person, but I still do not believe him dangerous. He explains events in tunnels and relationships between homeless underground communities with clarity and incisiveness.

"Anger does strange things to me," Blade says after I witness his confrontation with the teenager. "Feels like the pot of gumbo Mama used to make," he says, "simmering and maybe gonna boil over, but not sure it will drop down the side to the flame and sizzle or explode." Most tunnel people feel the same way, he suggests. Everyone here is suicidal, not fearing death and almost welcoming it, but with a primeval instinct for survival. On the surface, a bad day may lead to angry words, even violent outbursts, he says, but underground, it could mean someone's life, perhaps your own.

Perhaps my own, as it turned out.

BLADE IS IN HIS EARLY THIRTIES. HE ISN'T SURE EXACTLY WHERE IN his early thirties, but thirty-three sounds like a good number, he says. He is very large, six foot four and about two hundred hard pounds. He lost the sight in his left eye in a fight; it is milky white rather than brown, like his right eye. He creates an imposing presence with a street smart aura, a frightening effect that he turns up or down as needed.

His past is sketchy. He remembers only the bright red lipstick of his biological mother. He lived with a grandmother, his father's mother, and considers her his mother. She died when he was nine. He grew up quickly after that, he says. Though he always minded his manners, he says, because his grandma told him to always be polite, he got into trouble, first with kids in the same housing project in the Bronx. He was passed from relative to relative, then foster home to foster home. He never uses his name, Wilson. "I was Wilson when I was seven, but I'm Blade now." Blade became his name when he was part of a Brooklyn gang. "They call me that cuz I'm sharp and quick with the blade," he says proudly.

He tried to join the Marine Corps several times, he says, but was rejected. He claims to have been a Guardian Angel briefly, although the Angels have no record of him as a member.^[8] (/read-267812/?page=32#n_8) He tells me at first that he is a graffiti artist, and as we pass graffiti in the tunnels, he points out his tag, or signature logo. Sometimes as we go he pauses to spray his tag on someone else's work. He has many stories: Now he is just a hustler who spent his money on crack and lived in the tunnels. Now he has cleaned himself up and works at several odd jobs, and lives aboveground with lovers and friends.

I MET BLADE AT ST. AGNES' SOUP KITCHEN NEAR GRAND CENTRAL Station. Blade is friendly and laughs often and openly, with a happy-go-lucky air. He is a gentle and familiar face at the basement kitchen, which serves soup and maybe a little hope to the homeless. He is remembered because he always thanks the servers.

The tables are emptier than usual this late afternoon, probably because the weather has turned warm and clear with springtime, as I pour green Kool-Aid into cups. I bend down to get another cup for a pregnant woman.

"Don't look at her that way, man," says a voice in a low and threatening tone. I recognize the voice as Blade's and stand up smiling, but instead of the woman a man stands in front of me, lips slightly pursed and jaw askew, in a leering pose that makes me uncomfortable, then immediately angry. He looks me up and down, then reaches out to touch my arm as I hand him Kool-Aid.

"Don't touch her, man," Blade orders loudly, but the man, who is probably drugged out, hasn't heard or ignores the warning.

A tray of tinny utensils clatters suddenly to the floor and Blade is standing before me, too, his powerful hand gripping the man's shoulder in what looks like a very painful squeeze.

"I said, don't do that!" he hisses. The man just turns and walks away in a daze. Blade picks up his tray and continues in the line as if nothing has occurred. The kitchen staff, which had rushed forward anticipating a fight, drifts back to the pots and pans.

Later, as I leave St. Agnes' that night, Blade is hanging out at the corner with a group. The few pedestrians make wide detours around them. I can barely identify his face behind a cigar as I thank him.

"No problem," he says carelessly. "My mama raised me right," he adds. "Nothin' to do with you."

The following week when he comes to St. Agnes', Blade advises me coldly not to bend over with my back to the line, rear in the air, but rather always keep my face forward.

"And don't smile at people in line," he says. I thank him.

I next encounter Blade while walking home one night. I have an uneasy feeling about a man following me, and I hold my can of mace tightly. Abruptly, Blade is beside me, and we stop. The man hastily crosses the street.

This was to be the first of many times Blade became angry at me. "You shouldn't be walking the streets this late," he says. "That man was after you. Just cuz he's white don't mean he ain't gonna hurt you."

I'm angry and tell him so, first because he thinks I'm racist and second because he thinks I'm stupid.

"If I thought that way, I wouldn't be standing here with you at night. I've been in a lot more dangerous situations," I blurt out, "and I've been just fine."

"I know you done stupid things getting stuff for that book, but you been lucky. Someone must be watchin' over you, girl," he shakes his head. "You better believe, because you have no business in those tunnels. You don't know the rules down there."

"By rights you should be dead by now. Better believe it. You're lucky you made so many friends, but one day you won't be so lucky," he warns.

After that, he begins to instruct me about tunnel life, telling me of tunnel communities he knows. I ask him to take me to them, but he refuses. "A girl shouldn't go down there," he says. I intend to go down with or without him, I say, and he concedes. We are to meet at an entrance to Central Park.

Blade doesn't keep the date. I wait two hours that day, and the same on the next day. When next I see him at St. Agnes', I tell him he's unreliable. He laughs and says he showed up both days but just watched me to decide if he trusted me. I challenge him to tell me what clothes I wore, what color shoes, how I fixed my hair. He does, correctly.

Over the next several weeks he calls me "kid sis" and often pats my head. He takes me into the tunnels, where we visit many communities. He is usually cold and aloof to the people there, and I asked him why.

"They'll kill if they want, don't forget that," he says.

No one has ever come close to threatening me, I retort. Maybe you just don't want to see good in them.

"Maybe you're afraid to see the bad. You don't live with them. You don't have to. It don't matter how much time you spend with those people, you will never understand them because you're not one of them. You don't know. I do. I know how to kill people. You don't," he says intensely, as if willing me to understand.

"I know how easy it is to kill people, and I know that it don't usually bother you after you do it. You just go get something to eat and forget it. You can kill for a cigarette, for five dollars, for anything you want. You don't think that way up on the street, but down there, it don't make any difference if you kill or you don't. You don't think twice about it," he explains earnestly.

I offer to pay Blade for escorting me the first time. He is insulted.

"Never do that again," he says flatly.

Why are you spending so much time showing me the tunnels? I ask.

"Because I'm crazy," he replies. "And you remind me of a girl I sat next to in the first grade."

"I always thought if she was black, she'd be cute. But she was white, transparent like," he cringes. "White skin just looks bad to me. Anyway, she was a weak little kid. But one day this kid came over and ripped up a picture I was drawing for my mama, and she bit him. There was blood on her teeth and everything."

"Besides," he goes on after a pause, "you're funny and I like to keep an eye on you. You do stupid things."

Blade likes the responsibility of guiding me, I decide. He sometimes walks me in a huge circle underground and claims we are in a new tunnel, just to make me confused and more dependent.