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Blade, who says he was once a tunnel dweller and now still frequents the tunnels as a graffiti writer, is walking the underground with me when we stumble across the gang. It is growing late in the afternoon, and the air, even in the tunnels, has cooled. Light through the grates is fading. We have come miles north of where we entered, and I am tired. Blade says I look pale, and begins to lead me on a “shortcut” to the surface.

We climb a few levels higher, but the air thickens with fumes and, feeling nauseated, I ask Blade for a quick exit to air. He knows of none.

“Besides,” he smiles, “we’re in the middle of Harlem. You’re safer down here.”

As we walk, the megaphone voices of the New Alliance Party carry down through the grates, pounding on about “white genocide,” “pigs,” “anarchy,” and “black nationalism.” So rather than going up, we go on.

The tunnel turns gently and Blade takes my hand in warning. We step over a rusted barbed wire at shin level, and I wonder what we are entering. Blade leans forward, also curious, and the blackness is suddenly shattered by a blinding flash of light. I recoil but resist the instinct to turn my back; “It’s easier for someone to ‘do you’ when your back’s turned,” Blade has told me.

Blade moves in front of me, protectively, and I bend around him to see a dark figure thinly outlined by the backscatter of his powerful flashlight.

“Yo, Moe!” he calls out. “That you, Moe?”

I begin to laugh at the alienlike figure who resembles E.T., but Blade sweeps his arm angrily back, hitting my ribs. I keep silent.

“Moe, that you man?” the figure calls again.

Blade moves us closer to the tunnel wall. “Go back to where we were,” he whispers. “Stay along the wall.”

I start to protest, but he shoves me hard. “Go!” he orders, in the breathy whisper of tunnel people. “I’ve had enough of you. Do what I say. Go!”

I stumble a few yards back and wait, still watching the bizarre scene in stark black-and-white.

“Stop messin’, Moe man,” the figure says loudly. “Ain’t funny no more.”

Another figure moves behind the voice. A mumbled exchange of words is followed by a metal click that echoes against the walls as the figure raises an arm.

“Come on out,” the figure orders. “I got a nine here, man. If that you, Moe, you better stop this shit!”

Blade remains silent. I realize that Blade can only be dimly seen, and I’m probably beyond the reach of their light.

“You ain’t Moe, and I’m comin’ for you, cause I ain’t gonna be made no fool!” the voice declares, rising in anger.

“Go!” Blade whispers to me again, louder and more urgently, and steps forward with his hands raised.

“Yo,” he says. “Don’t mean nothin’. Jus’ passin’ through, man. Didn’t know this was your tunnel.”

I stay put, and find a rock to wield as a weapon, feeling stupid.

“I should blow you right now,” the gunman says as he comes toward us. “What you mean, pretending to be Moe.”

“Look, man,” Blade says with a twinge of impatience, “I don’t know Moe, jus’ happened to be passin’ by, like I said. Don’t know your gig, and don’t care to know, neither. I’m gonna just turn around and be outta here. Right?”

“Hold it!” the gunman orders confidently. “Ain’t through with you yet.”

"Look, man," says Blade, angrily now. "I tol' you I don't mean nothin'. Let it be, man. I leavin'."

Blade turns his back on the light and walks past me.

"I'm going to tell him that I'm behind him when he passes," I whisper, "and that I'll shoot him if he shoots you." My voice sounds like thunder in my ears. I fear I've spoken too loudly.

"You say somethin'?" the gunman asks Blade.

"Jus' that I'm goin'," Blade recovers. In his throaty whisper aside, he tells me, "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard!" He shakes his head. "Don't you know he can hear where your voice come from? Fool!"

"You got someone down there with you?" demands the gunman."

"Yeah," I answer, trembling. "I'm a reporter."

Blade shakes his head again, exasperated. He twists his hands at his thighs as though wishing he had snapped my neck like a chicken. The two of us move back toward the light.

We must look cowed and helpless because the gunman laughs in relief. I introduce myself, explaining that I'm collecting material on tunnel people.

"Good thing," he says importantly. "Don' want to waste no lead. Don' have lead to waste."

His fear and hostility have largely disappeared. "How about me interviewing you?" I ask.

"Don' see it as no problem," he replies, "long as we know where to find you."

You won't know, I tell him, but soften it by offering to withhold names and descriptions. "I'm writing a book, and in a book you'll live forever," I say.

That seems persuasive. "I'll have to clear it with Doc," he says.

I can see him more clearly now as we move forward—a tall, slim man, perhaps in his twenties, but looking much older. We turn a sharp corner that seems flooded with grate light to find Doc, their leader, a short, heavysset man with dark glasses.

He likes the idea of being part of a book. He also trusts my guide.

"She's with Blade," he says, "it's cool."

Surprised, I look questioningly at Blade. He just nods to Doc and ignores me.

New arrivals entering the tunnel also appear to know Blade. I ask him directly where he met them. "Can't remember," he shrugs, brushing me off.

The new arrivals have slipped down through a manhole on one of Harlem's less trafficked streets, I'm told. Children playing there have grown accustomed to men struggling to remove the heavy manhole cover and disappearing.

"Yeah," says Bingo, young and eager to talk about his exploits, "sometimes kids see us. But the kids don't count. No one watches cuz they know it ain't good for them. The young ones think we're workers, I guess, and the bigger ones know not to follow.

"We got it good down here; we know the place. Anyone who comes down here be lost and bingo." His face lights up. "We get them before they see what's coming at them."

Doc leans back on a wobbly metal chair, eyes drooping coolly, while Bingo talks. Like the others, I'm invited to call him Doc but perhaps for a different reason. "You call me Doc for doctor, because I'm gonna teach you," he says.

"The group, it ain't like those gangs like Bloods and Crips or the kid gangs out here," he begins. "We's small, mostly just brothers. We hang together. If we see someone doing something we don't like, if someone 'disses' [shows disrespect to] us, we take him out. That's how we operate. Either we do it, or someone asks us to do it."

The gang hires itself out for money, threatening and assaulting in the pay and at the direction of others, usually adult criminals. They will kill for a price, Doc says, sometimes for as little as \$20. "It depends on how much they got on them, and how much we want cash."

The last man to slip into the tunnel is smaller than the others, and quieter. He leans against a wall, arms folded, distrustful.

"What are you gonna call him?" Doc asks, pointing the silver tip of his switchblade at the newcomer.

"Depend on what he says," Blade answers for me with a touch of pride. The book seems almost as much his project as mine.

"He don't say much," Doc laughs. "Do you X?" he asks. "Don't say much at all."

"Don't like talk," the man replies, mouth curling importantly with the attention. "I like action."

"Small Talk," I say, "that will be your name."

Everyone waited in an uneasy pause to learn the response.

"That's cool," he says in a low voice and comes forward with a pleased smile. Doc breaks into loud laughter. Others join in.

"We's all like action," says Dart, another new arrival. "That's why we're with these brothers. It ain't that we got nothin' better to do. We talk mostly about who to take out next. It's our work.

"We's respected for our work," he continues hurriedly. "We's not afraid of nothin' and up there, see," he points to the surface, "they know it. Look at this, see." He pulls his shirt open to expose a well-muscled shoulder. An almost circular scar shines smoothly. "That's from a bullet these punks ..."

Dart explains the knife scar that runs the width of his forehead, which came from a fight with a Chinatown gang, and he is starting on a scar on his calf when Blade turns to me.

"You better call this one Diarrhea Mouth," Blade says in an aside, "cuz he's got it bad." I smile.

Dart stops, sensing the unkind interruption.

“You say somethin’, man?” he asks.

“Naw, ain’t nothin’. Jus’ sort of a joke,” Blade says.

“What was it? We want to hear it,” Dart stands provocatively, shaking down the leg of his jeans where the scar was exposed.

“It was nothin’,” Blade says, raising his voice to meet the anger in Dart’s move. “Nothin’ you want to hear.”

The two men gravitate slowly toward each other until they are face-to-face, Blade towering over the younger man. A fight seems just one word away, but Doc intervenes.

“He was talkin’ to the girl, Dart,” Doc says, barely looking up. “Sit down.” He adds politely to me, “Excuse me, Jennifer.”

Blade raises his hands to his shoulders, palms forward, to indicate an end to the confrontation, but Dart remains poised to strike, his chest inflated and tense.

Doc glares at Dart. “Blade would remove your ass,” he says sharply. “Give it up, man.”

“You’ll have to excuse Dart, Jennifer,” Doc continues, more easily now. “He don’ know how to turn it off.”

Dart sits down, pouting. However, within seconds, he is showing me more scars.

When he finishes, he shouts to another man. “Slim, show her the one on your neck,” he says. Slim complies, and then exposes a fresh welt, red and raised, just above his ankle.

“Fucking Chinks,” he says, “they use chains to fight.”

“Naw,” laughs Dart, “that’s from that pussy you took.”

“The bitch in leather,” Bingo throws in. Slim just shakes his head.

Before the gang completes showing me their battle scars, Small Talk begins cleaning a gun with a cloth.

I ignore him, but Bingo plays along. “Whatcha got?” he asks.

“A mac,” Small Talk replies, not looking up.

“Lemme see,” Bingo says. “Nice piece.”

“It got lead,” Small Talk warns.

Bingo handles the weapon roughly to show disdain for the danger. “How much did you give for it?” he asks.

“It was a present,” Small Talk says, head tilted to look up, slowly chewing gum. He tongues the gum into his front teeth as Bingo smiles, knowingly.

“Nice,” Bingo says. He points the gun at Dart and various other targets. “Nice,” he says again.

Slim pulls out some crack.

“Ah man,” says Jamaica, a skinny little newcomer with dreadlocks and a strong lilting accent, “I thought you were going to bring ecstasy [a hallucinogenic].”

“We gotta do the Frog first,” Slim says, passing the crack.

“I gonna do it, man, you be backup,” Jamaica says.

“Naw, I’m gonna do it,” Dart interrupts. “I was backup last time. I wanna be the trigger man,” he pleads.

“I done nine,” boasts Slim. “You only done four.”

“Yeah, but mine were clean [kills],” Dart says. Slim seems not to care.

“Aw, man,” whines Dart, sucking air through his teeth.

“Yeah, but we only seen the three,” says Jamaica, exhaling thin blue smoke.

“I tol’ you, they took him away before the police got there,” Dart insists to defend his claim. Status is evidently based on the number of murders.

“It’s our thing,” Doc explains when he sees me puzzling it out. “That’s what we do. We do it to survive, to live, to succeed. It’s what we know how to do. We know how to do it well,” he emphasizes, leaning forward with hard eyes.

He is boasting, I know, but only a little. He is trying to frighten me, I know, and he succeeds.

“We gonna talk about Frog?” Doc is asked.

“Not until she leaves,” Doc nods at me. “You understand,” he says, again politely. “We don’t want your involvement.”

I don’t understand his words precisely, but I do get the meaning.

“Time to leave,” I say brightly to Blade.

“It was time to leave ten minutes ago,” he hisses at me when we are safely out of earshot. “Those are fucking bad men. You don’t want them saying hi to you on the street. You don’t want them to remember ever seeing you. They ain’t messin’ with you. They kill for fun.”

And so do you, Blade, as I later discover.

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J.C.’S Community

J.C. HAS AN UNIMPOSING BUILD. HE STANDS FIVE foot seven or eight and is slim. He usually wears. jeans, a T-shirt, and sneakers, and carries a boom box. He is neater than most of the station’s homeless and blends easily into the Grand Central scene, except for his very angry eyes. He is a paradox, living now aboveground and working as a janitor and as a volunteer with the Parks Department’s street kids program, but passionately defending those who choose to live where he once did, underground. He defends underground life fiercely,

sometimes belligerently, in part as a vehicle for attacking society that lives on the surface, but in part also because of his strong attachment and protectiveness toward his “multicultural community” of about two hundred men, women, and children who live under Grand Central Station. He is, he says, their “spokesman.”

He initially refuses to take me down to visit the community unless I promise to remain underground for a week and wear my hair in braids. All women in the community have braids, he says, to keep their hair clean. I refuse. A month later, he offers a visit on the condition that I not write about it. Again I refuse. Later still, he tells me that against his advice, the leader of the community—its elected “mayor,” he says—has ordered him to bring me down.

“I wanted someone from the outside to see us,” the mayor explains to me later. “I want you to write that we’re better off down here without the perversions of the world upstairs. I need no man to validate me or my existence. I did this only to let you know how sick the upstairs is.”

J.C. wants to impose a final condition, that I wear a blindfold. I refuse, but agree to use no description that will precisely locate the community. So we finally set off.

We descend through Grand Central Station, which is spread over forty-eight acres, making it the largest train station in the world. It also goes down six levels beneath the subway tracks. There is no complete blueprint of the tunnels and tracks under the station. Many tunnels were begun but abandoned. Some were built but forgotten. Some were sealed off, but underground homeless people have broken through, either directly by hacking a hole through the wall or by circuitous routes, to inhabit them now.

One of the largest disused tunnels starts out in a northwest direction, taking it under Central Park, before turning southwest toward Penn Station across town. This tunnel can be entered from either station, as well as at various places in the park itself. “There are hundreds, maybe even a thousand people living in that tunnel,” I was told by Zack, a member of J.C.’s community. “The utilities are still working there and everything.”

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