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“Please, you go,” a cabdriver calls in a thick Russian accent through his unrolled window to the police cruiser. “You go. American wonderful. You wonderful. You make the streets of American wonderful,” he enthuses, waving his bare forearm through the rain, his shirtsleeve rolled up beyond his elbow as he yields the right-of-way at the intersection to the merging police car.

Sergeant Steve Riley nods and smiles, but Officer Neil Farrell behind the steering wheel looks suspiciously at the cabbie, seeking a trace of sarcasm. He finds none, and we move on.

“This is a crazy area,” says Farrell. “You can expect anything. It looks OK because it’s been done up, well lit now and all, but you got bad elements here.” He glances toward poorly dressed men and women with beaten or angry expressions peppering the sidewalks.

Off West Broadway, the police car turns onto Hudson Street, still paved with cobblestones and grooved with the silver tracks of a bygone era over a century ago, when the filigreed steel network of elevated subway trains dominated the scene. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Bowery had acquired the seedy reputation that still hangs over its name, with roaming prostitutes, flophouses, pawnshops, and “slave markets” where manual workers were hired off street corners. For decades the Bowery was the single acceptable place for New York’s outcasts, and the disaffiliated found outside of the Bowery were ushered back within its boundaries by the law enforcers. It was the most infamous of the nation’s skid rows through World War II.

“No other road in North America has been disreputable for so many decades,” historian Richard Beard wrote of Bowery Street in *On Being Homeless: Historical Perspectives*, the two-way street after which New York’s skid row was named. The street runs for sixteen blocks in lower Manhattan, but the actual skid row section encompasses a larger area of side streets and avenues.

In 1949 almost fourteen thousand homeless were counted in the Bowery. Through gentrification and cleanup efforts, the population was more than halved by the early sixties. In 1987 another census claimed fewer than a thousand homeless lived in the Bowery.

Not all of them left as the census would suggest. Some went underground.

By day, many can still be seen on the streets. Some beg for change, some scavenge in refuse bins on corners, some pick through garbage behind restaurants. Some are bolder, approaching cars stopped at red lights with muddy wet rags, to “wash” windshields before demanding money. At night, the streets are clear. Some have gone to homeless shelters. Many have gone into the subways system and its network of dark, protective, and yet dangerous tunnels.

“I was pushed from a hotel into the street,” Joe, a Bowery tunnel dweller says, trembling either from anger or alcohol a few days earlier, “and I was pushed from the streets into these tunnels.” Joe, who says he’s seventy-two years old, has a grizzly gray beard and angry eyes. His face is lined with a constant scowl.

“You ask me why I’m here?” he said earnestly. “You go ask them,” he pointed a crooked finger ingrained with dirt toward a police car. “Ask them where I should go. They’ll say to hell. They’ll put you in a death house they call a shelter if they don’t kill you themselves. They don’t know anything about who lives down in the tunnels, how many of us there are. You ask and they’ll say no one. Well, I ain’t no one down there,” he spit, “only up here. You go, you ask them.”

Inside, the local police precinct house looks bleak and functional, lit by cold fluorescent tubes, but the atmosphere is congenial and lively. Officers bat about friendly insults and exchange serious compliments. They also volunteer, once they learn my purpose, the casualty list of officers who go into the tunnels: one beaten to death with his own nightstick by a tunnel dweller; another left with an eight-year-old

mental capacity after a similar beating; and two officers killed with their own guns as they escorted tunnel people out of the Bowery tunnel. “The motherfuckers shot them dead,” an officer says, shaking his head. “You always got to be careful of those people.”

They show me mug shots of the most notorious graffiti writers—Smith, Reese, and Ghost—who mar subway cars and tunnel walls, and on particularly bold days, even walls next to the precinct or the bathroom of the precinct house with fingerprint ink left from a booking—Smith’s notorious trademark. Smart kids, they say kids that could go somewhere if they would clean up and shake this addiction of smearing paint to gain dubious fame.

Lieutenant John Romero stands tall with a mustache and unflagging warm brown eyes. He offers me a firm handshake and his beaten leather chair. His desk, sunk in the corner of the squad room and laden with papers and pictures of his young family, is separated by a thin, head-high divider from three other desks in the cramped room. Six officers stand around, waiting to take Romero and me on a night tour of the tunnels.

Romero is responsible for policing Bowery subway tunnels for the New York City Transit Authority. He explains the “tunnel situation” with a mixture of smooth public relations phrasing and sharp street-smart remarks.

“We first found people living in the tunnels in the seventies,” he begins, “and by 1989, when we believe the problem reached its highest peak, we estimate that there were five thousand homeless persons living in the subway system. That year, seventy-nine homeless persons died in the subways—some hit by trains, some electrocuted, some died of natural causes.”

By that time, much in the same way as graffiti-covered cars and seats had done, “the behavior of the homeless in the system contributed to public perception, commuter perception, that the subways were out of control,” he continues. As the problem grew, police officers began resisting efforts to oust the homeless. “Some cops felt it wasn’t police work. Other cops felt it was morally wrong to eject destitute people.”

Through special information sessions and videos, “we made our officers see that by enforcing the law [against trespassing], they were interrupting the behavior of these people that was causing them harm. And also by enforcing the rules, we were forcing these people to make a decision about their future. A lot of them chose to get out and accept the services for the homeless aboveground.”

Another program was needed to provide outreach services to the homeless in the tunnels, those who lived not in moving cars and on subway platforms but went into the tunnels, along the electrified tracks, to find some sort of sleeping place in the darkness underground.

“We’ve had a homeless outreach program since 1982,” Romero says, “but prior to 1990, it was only five officers and a sergeant. They worked with the New York City Human Resources Administration, which supplied two social workers, a driver, and a bus.” The officers and social workers would go into the tunnels only if a track worker had been seriously assaulted, or if a motorman driving a subway train spotted a person who was a threat to himself and the train. Then the team would search for the homeless, bring them up from the tunnels, and bus them off to shelters.

“That was a Band-Aid approach to a problem that was growing and growing. There was no regular patrolling into the tunnels, going in constantly to try to help these people,” Romero says. “We asked for more officers, but the city was in a financial crunch. Still, we managed to assign thirty officers to the job.”

That year, 1990, more than four thousand homeless were ejected from the tunnels, according to Romero. “It’s been cleaned up,” he says. “You’ll find pockets of one or two persons here and there, but a few years ago, in just a two-block stretch of tunnels under the Bowery, there were as many as two hundred people. It would take us six hours to clear them out because we’d constantly have to shut down the power [of the third rail]. Now we go in there with the power on.”

Throughout Manhattan, Romero claims, over seven thousand homeless were transferred from tunnels to aboveground shelters in 1990, and another four thousand in the first four months of 1991. “But it’s not enforcement,” he emphasizes, “it’s outreach.”

“Many homeless advocates saw this as a crackdown on the homeless,” he says. “It wasn’t. It was a crackdown on violators. We have a responsibility to our ridership to provide a safe environment in the subways. We see a lot of track fires set by people cooking down there in the tunnels. We know that debris they leave around causes fires when sparks from the trains hits it. So we target violations, not homeless.”

Officer Al Logan describes a typical encounter: “When you ask them if they want to go to a shelter, they say no, that’s not for me. You ask them three or four times, they say, maybe I’ll give it a shot. If they still say no, we eject them. Most of them won’t go to shelters; a lot are afraid of being beaten or robbed or raped there. But we never put our hands on them.”

How tunnel dwellers can be ejected without being manhandled is puzzling, but I let it go, just as I do Logan’s comment— which contradicts Romero’s—that most tunnel homeless do not go to shelters after being rousted.

“You’ll hear stories about the shelters,” Romero says, “and I’m not saying city shelters are the Ritz, but they’re a lot better than what you see in the tunnels. The real reason these people don’t want to go to shelters is that shelters have rules, and these people don’t want to abide by any rules.

“You see crack vials, hypodermic needles down there. You can’t shoot up in a shelter. You can’t drink in a shelter. The simple fact is these people choose this kind of environment because they don’t want to abide by any rules.

“Most people living in the tunnels under the Bowery are hard-core. Mostly male but some females, 95 percent are males between twenty and forty-five years old. At least 80 percent are mentally ill or chemically dependent,” Romero continues. “I’ve heard of families down there, but in seven years with this unit, the closest I’ve come to seeing one was a woman about sixty and her son about forty. Really, there are no families in the subways.

“We’re going to walk underground from Broadway-Lafayette to Second Avenue, about four blocks, and you’ll see firsthand. One guy described it as the closest thing to hell he’s ever seen. Really, it’s hard to describe. You have to see it to believe it.”

The officers making the patrol don fluorescent vests, cloth gloves, hard hats, flashlights, and masks to combat the stench and tuberculosis. “You don’t want to touch anything or anyone down there,” Logan warns me when I’m outfitted like them.

A few officers check their guns. “They are not all hostile,” Romero says. “We’ve never really had a problem. They know us down there.”

We enter the Broadway-Lafayette subway station, pass through the turnstiles, and walk down several flights of stairs to the lowest platform. We jump off the platform to the tracks, carefully crossing the third rail. There is no space, absolutely none, for a person to stand between the wall and a passing train without being struck.

“Don’t step on the third rail,” Sergeant Steve Klambatsen warns me. “I hate to see that happen. Sparks fly everywhere, but the worst part is that the electricity blows off the extremities. Hands, head, whatever, explode. It’s disgusting.”

“That’s enough,” says Romero. There used to be over two hundred individuals living in the few blocks of this Bowery tunnel, Romero says. “You can see how we’ve cleaned it out, but we still have to police it twice a day.” Many of the hard-core tunnel dwellers moved farther into the tunnels, especially into the Port Authority and Penn Station tunnels, where they are not yet disturbed by police.

The sound of rain pounding on the street can be heard, and wind whistles through the grates, but neither penetrates into the tunnel, which is noticeably warmer. Romero says that on average, tunnels are twenty-five degrees warmer than the street. I feel somehow more secure despite the danger.

The tracks are cleaner than I expected: a few crack vials with colored tops, as promised, as well as a few bottles of spilled pills, some needles, and an occasional piece of clothing. The air becomes fouler as we go farther. Against the wall, a flashlight beam picks up fresh feces that lie on a glass dish, and wet urine stains a spot on the cement wall nearby.

A mouse, its eyes squeezed shut and its paws curled tightly under its head, lies dead near the tracks.

“That’s good,” says Klambatsen, who normally leads the night patrol. “That means there are no rats. They spray powerful chemicals down here to kill the rats. We don’t come down for three days after that because it’s so strong. We clear the people out before they spray, of course.... Yes, I suppose some do come right back and live in the spray, but, as far as I know, there’ve been no fatalities from that.”

The officers search the tunnel as if for animals, stirring blankets and looking into cardboard boxes. Eight homeless men are roused, shielding their eyes from the flashlights. They are asked repeatedly if they want to go to shelters. They are angry at being awakened and refuse. Two prefer the rainy streets, while the rest agree to be shuttled by a white van to a shelter.

The Bowery tunnels once held some of the largest underground homeless groups, or communities. Now we find a couple of men share the night here and there, some singles, and a woman on her own, but rarely are there more than three people in one space. In the mid-eighties, several communities of forty or fifty people set up camps underground along the Lexington Line, but they remained essentially separate, even aloof, from each other.

“I think that was because there were no women there with them,” says Dale, a formidable and friendly homeless woman who lives aboveground in the Bowery. “They always expect someone to rob from them, even their friends. They didn’t have women to soften them. They didn’t live like a family or nothing. They lived like alcoholic men, sometimes angry, sometimes dangerous, but mostly depressed and asleep,” she says. “They didn’t trust each other, only people like social workers on the outside sometimes.” Few of the Bowery’s tunnel people say they have friends. In referring to someone they drink with or can be found hanging out with, they usually call them “an associate.”

Gary Bass is one of the more established tunnel dwellers of the Bowery. Bass is well known to the officers on the patrol. He is friendly to some; for others, he has bitter distaste. He is evicted almost every night, he says, but always refuses to go to a shelter.

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