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Felicia, who looks so young she couldn’t lie about her age, works at a Mister Donut on after-school hours. “Soon enough we’ll be able to get an apartment and I’ll be able to go back to school,” she says brightly. “We love the kids down here. They’ve helped us tons. But we’ve got plans.”

“Whatever happens,” Felicia smiles at her sister, “we’ll always be together.”

Carlos

CARLOS, THE ELDEST OF NINE CHILDREN, HAS HAD “A DRINKING problem,” as he puts it, since he was thirteen. “There was a lot of violence in our family,” he says matter-of-factly as he picks the bark off a twig. “My parents were always fighting each other and beating us up. They did lots of drugs and drank a lot. My father went to jail and we had no money for the apartment, so we had to sleep outside. My mother went to jail, too, for dealing [drugs]. When they came for her, the government took the little ones into foster care or something. They were all crying, but I was hiding behind boxes.”

He found odd jobs like sweeping storefronts, cleaning windows, and sorting fruit for grocers, and when his mother returned from prison, she and Carlos lived with another family. “One night I come back with some wine for her and our room was empty. There was a note that says she went back to Puerto Rico and I should come as soon as I make enough money. But I’m going to find the little ones first and bring them with me,” he says. “I hope she’s OK,” he adds quietly, looking up with gentle, brown eyes.

Carlos continues to work at the margins, sometimes at jobs that are illegal. He’s had enough money at times to find a cheap apartment, but he says he can’t leave “until the rest of the kids here are OK.”

“Shit, man,” interjects Frank, who has been listening. “You gotta do things for yourself, not for nobody else. We don’t want you around here anyway,” he says, trying to push Carlos up out of the hole.

“Carlos is the greatest guy in the world,” Frank says. “He’d give you every cent in his pocket. That’s the way he is. But he isn’t gonna make it long, because he don’t look out for himself over all the others, like the rest of us.”

Carlos doesn’t answer, but as he walks me out of the park, he admits that moving back aboveground would be difficult. “I’m afraid of being lonely, not having somewhere to go, scared to find no one there. I know I’m living down there partly because I’m afraid of going to an empty room and being by myself.”

Frank

CARLOS AND FRANK MET IN A POOL HALL WHERE FRANK, WHO IS A large eighteen-year-old from New Jersey, was hustling. He lost more money than he had, and Carlos helped him escape out the bathroom window. Since he had no place to sleep, Carlos took him to the hole. Frank has lived there three weeks, and each day announces that he does not intend to “live in this shit hole for another fucking day.”

He is filled with violent anger and prone to fits of rage. Once he broke his hand when he slammed his fist into a concrete wall. He refuses to speak much about his family except that as often as the subject comes up, he declares with bravado that “I couldn’t give a damn whether they all die and go to hell.” His father had a nasty temper and knocked the children around. “That toughened me up for the real world,” he says. His bottom line is “Everything has always been bad for me.”

He hated school, where he was a slow learner and rebellious. "I liked to keep my hair long and greasy," he says, peering out from behind the scraggly hanks that he wears over his face. "My school, see, was Catholic. They didn't go for the hair or the leather jacket. I don't do well with authority."

In fact, he got into trouble well before he grew his hair long, he admits. At five, he tried to choke another boy. At seven, he was in reform school for having beaten up several boys. By the time he was eight years old, he had learned how to break and enter. "I was also into arson and petty theft," he says casually, throwing out the criminal charges precisely. The Catholic school took him in, long hair and all, until a boy called his brother ugly and Frank broke the boy's jaw with a baseball bat. The baseball coach who tried to interfere was knocked unconscious in the melee.

Back in reform school, Frank learned how to pick locks, rob stores, and make and use various drugs. He was freed at fourteen to attend public school where he was more comfortable, he says, "because everyone carried knives." He quit at sixteen though, and his father kicked him out as a bad influence on his younger brother and sister. His mother and sister sneaked him into the basement to sleep during the cold months, however.

"She's a pistol," he says of his nine-year-old sister, smiling at the recollection. "A real beautiful little girl. Always was. She wanted me to take her wherever I go, but I had to stop going there because she would start crying every time I saw her." That's when he took a bus to New York City, but without any experience, the best work he could find was pumping gas.

### **Teddy**

AT A SOUP KITCHEN ONE NIGHT, FRANK MET TEDDY, A SOFT-LOOKING young man of seventeen with glasses and sad eyes, and took him to the hole. Teddy is quiet and articulate, with clean-cut, almost preppy features. His father was killed in a car accident on Christmas Day when he was three years old, and his mother, he says, died "a violent death" two years ago.

"He's never told us how she died exactly," Frank says. "But I think it had to do with some boyfriend. I think Teddy saw it all, too."

During the day, Teddy walks the streets, sometimes selling books and magazines for homeless entrepreneurs who use the operation as a front for dealing drugs. Teddy, himself, is very honest. "The only scam he'll run is telling a storeowner that the soda machine took his money," says Frank.

"I usually get something for that," Teddy admits with a shy smile. "It's an advantage I have, being white and looking the way I do. People tend to believe me. But I don't want to abuse that too often, only when I really need some money. Once I went up to a lady on the street and told her I was new to the city and someone had stolen my money, and I was trying to get enough together to get back home. She gave me fifty bucks. She wanted to give me more, but I couldn't let her. I spent most of the money on myself and felt rotten to the core, so I gave the rest away. I just couldn't do that again," he says contritely.

Teddy did well in school. "I was what they called a 'gifted child,' which of course means worthless on the streets. What makes you smart in school has nothing to do with the outside. I never realized how dumb I was until I met these guys," he nods meekly toward the other boys in the hole. "Someday I'd like to go to college, though. I've been trying, but I can't seem to save money. I need someone to keep it for me, not give it to me."

Most of the community are undisciplined in keeping schedules. After waking with the others, Teddy leaves to buy coffee and, if he has enough money, a piece of pizza as well. He wanders for the rest of the day, looking for odd jobs and each day foraging a bit farther out, but by dusk, at least so far, he's back in the hole.

"We have to stick together at night," he says, clearly frightened at the prospect of not returning in time. "Anything can happen when you're alone."

The veterans in the hole community are protective of Teddy. "He wouldn't leave for days when he first got here," Felicia remembers. "We had to bring him food, but he wouldn't eat. He'd just sit there," she points to a corner, "and he'd cry. He'd stare at the wall and the light coming down and just stare and stare. It was the saddest thing I ever saw. Frank finally just carried him out, took him for pizza. I remember he said: 'You haven't lived until you've had New York pizza.'

"I didn't think he should do that, pick him up and all. I mean he's fully grown. After that, Teddy goes out most every day. He's always back about sunset. But every so often he still stares at the walls for hours, like before."

Teddy is upstairs in the park, staring vacantly at autumn's changing leaves. "I dream a lot," he says. "It's like thinking for me."

### **Jimmy**

"TEDDY WILL TOUGHEN UP," JIMMY ASSURES FRANK. JIMMY'S A TRUE street kid and proud of it. He frequently spends the night in the runaway hole, but will often disappear for weeks.

"I know everything there is to know about this city," he boasts, hands on hips.

Which is the Empire State Building and which is the Chrysler Building?

"Everything important," he amends, undeterred. "Everything important about surviving in the city. All the scams, drugs, people. You wouldn't believe the people I know. I won't tell you, but they're big stars," he smiles as if excited at the thought of really knowing the rich and famous.

Whatever his contacts, he has more energy than any two or three other homeless kids here. He wakes early, buys a cup of coffee and some candy bars, and leaves the area to "visit friends," as he puts it, on the streets in other areas of the city. When he runs low on cash, he says, he visits tourist spots where he can pick pockets. Times Square was once his favorite. "It's no good there now," he says, "too many plain clothes cops." So he prowls Penn Station.

“I like to steal, too,” he volunteers boldly. “It makes me feel productive.”

Jimmy’s story is a poignant variation of the others. At fourteen, he “took off” from a home where there were six children “and more on the way,” he says. “My father drinks more than he works. Comes home just to lay my mother. I was another mouth to feed, and there wasn’t much money, so I left. I still go home sometimes to visit, you know. I usually bring a turkey home for Thanksgiving.” He gives a bright, lively laugh. “Now that’s hard, stealing a turkey, and one big enough to feed all of us.”

### **Dolly**

DOLLY CAME TO THE COMMUNITY WITH MONICA. MONICA HAD JUST finished work and found Dolly on the streets at 2 A.M., wandering around, a disoriented fourteen-year-old. She still becomes disoriented, and sometimes Monica wishes she’d leave.

“She’s full of herself sometimes,” Monica says. “Always talks about how men can’t stop touching her, and how she hates men. Then you see her on a park bench all over some guy. I told her if she doesn’t talk to them, they won’t come after her. She just says she’s too pretty; they’d come after her anyway.”

Dolly paints her huge, doll-like eyes with heavy black eyeliner and mascara. Her face is round, as if she still has baby fat, but her small body is shapely, and she wears tight jeans and a too-small T-shirt that accentuates her figure. She worries almost as much about her hair and makeup as she does about men.

“I tried to kill myself when I was ten,” she says, showing her scarred wrists. “I fell in love with my stepfather and he raped me. I’ve been drugged, raped, molested, and abused so many times by men at parties that I want a sex change operation so men will leave me alone.” She hates sex, she says. “But men love me for it. That’s what I got.”

Dolly was the only member of the community who agreed to go with me to Covenant House. Others encouraged her, and we set a date and place to meet, but she never showed up. She hasn’t returned to the community.<sup>[5]</sup> ([/read-267812/?page=32#n\\_5](/read-267812/?page=32#n_5))

EACH UNDERGROUND COMMUNITY IS DIFFERENT, BUT ANGER, SADness, and often hopelessness pervade most of them. The runaway community is unique, with its mutual caring and the atmosphere of hope that the future will be better. Like any family, they fight among themselves, but they also protect each other. When a regular customer at the Mister Donut began to harass Felicia, Frank and Jimmy showed up for a few words with him.

“I could have lost my job!” Felicia remembers, wide-eyed. “They took him out behind the restaurant and threatened him. They said they didn’t care if I got fired, at least I wouldn’t get hurt.” Carlos or Frank also usually meet Monica on her way back from work late at night so she will avoid trouble on the way to the hole.

Being runaways themselves, the community is particularly sympathetic to younger kids on the run. “The best people to help runaways are those like us,” says Freddy, “and the best way to help is to be yourself. We know the emotions and we know how to make our way. We have the independence we couldn’t have at Covenant House or in a group home, and we’ve got real support from each other, not for just an hour from some social worker, but from people who really care and understand.”

These teenagers, for all their experiences, are frighteningly vulnerable. Hardly ever do I suspect they are exaggerating their histories, and their emotions are always ready to break the surface. Like the children they are, they cry one moment and laugh the next. Their wounds are still raw, and the pain is still fresh. They want more than to just survive. They aren’t living to die, and they don’t want pity. They aren’t looking for understanding, but they aren’t afraid to be understood.

“You ask me if it bothers me to talk about all this,” says Jeff, a seventeen-year-old recent arrival after he described his family and his own route to this place. “I dunno. I don’t think so, because I don’t see how anything you write could hurt me. They’re just words. My parents and I hurt each other pretty bad, far worse than any words. So, no, it doesn’t bother me if you write about me, because maybe it will help someone sometime. I dunno how, though, because we’re all so different. We all left home for different reasons. Me, because of the authority thing. I hate my stepmother. But maybe some kid out there won’t make the same mistake, won’t be so quick to take off, if you write about me. I hope so. Who knows, maybe one day I’ll pick up what you write and understand what’s going on here with me now.”

With encouragement from others, Jeff subsequently returned home after “patching things up” with his father and stepmother, I’m told.

Depression is a malady that hits all of the members of the community at one time or another, and shows up in different ways. Some cry; others are silently despondent. “The best way to deal with it is to help others,” says Felicia over a breakfast of Coca-Cola and last night’s leftover donuts from her job.

“Or to just keep busy,” adds Jimmy through the remnants of two chocolate-covered cream donuts he has just snarfed down.

“It’s my fear of death that pulls me out and keeps me going,” says Teddy, staring at a glazed donut that Felicia has just placed in his hand.

“I don’t know,” Jimmy muses, almost to himself. “I never let myself get that far down. I just gotta laugh when they hit me. I laugh all the time.”

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