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“Papa says this is best,” she explains earnestly. “We’re proving ourselves and how strong we are. When we get enough money, we’re going to move away from New York, and we’ll have our own little white house. I’m going to have my own room. Everything in it will be pink and pretty. Everything I wish for I’m going to have because I’ve been such a good girl. And I’ll grow up beautiful,” she says, her large brown eyes sparkling with that dream.

When she feels too alone and sad, she has an itch to tell her secret, but then she thinks how much she loves her parents and doesn’t want to be taken from them. She comes so close to telling, she says, drawing a deep breath, that she is ashamed. She thinks she’ll burst, just burst, but she keeps it in, she says and smiles.

Julie isn’t an American citizen. She and her family were born in Haiti and illegally entered the country in Miami. Paul, Julie’s father, brought the family to New York looking for his sister-in-law’s brother. When they arrived at his address, they learned he had just moved with his family to Minnesota. Neighbors allowed them to stay a few weeks, but then they moved to shelters and from there to the tunnels because of the constant fear they would be deported.

Paul does menial labor jobs while saving money to go to Minnesota. They do not seek welfare or other social services and go to soup kitchens only infrequently, to avoid drawing attention. For months Julie did not attend school, but her mother, who was once a teacher, insisted that she go. The family decided her education was worth the risk of exposure.

Julie’s world, to hear her tell it, is full of only good things. When she sees homeless people alone on the streets, she thinks how lucky she and her family are to have each other. When she hears children make cruel jokes about kids who live in shelters, she’s glad she has kept her secret. Someday, she says, her brother will be the president of the United States and will change things.

What things?

“The way people treat each other, and he’ll make sure everyone has a home, no matter where they come from. And,” she giggles, “he’ll make candy free.”

When next I seek out Julie and her family, I’m told they have moved to Minnesota.

CHILDREN ADAPT BETTER TO LIFE UNDERGROUND THAN ADULTS, ACcording to Harold Deamues of ADAPT (Association for Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment), who found numerous children living with parents in tunnel communities. “They were running around like, you know, ‘this is my house, this is my doormat,’ like any other kid in his house. They were jumping off the walls. They get used to the roaches and rats as if they are pets. So I guess they are normal children until they get old enough to say, ‘What am I doing here? There’s more to life than this.’”

Before that self-awareness sets in, young children can become so secure in the darkness and so comfortable in their communities that the world aboveground, particularly crowds of people, is frightening.

Teresa, a young mother, meets me in Grand Central with her two young children. Even at rush hour they are easy to spot. The first words from four-year-old Dara is, “Mama, I’m scared.” Her little hand clutches Teresa’s finger more tightly, and the mother draws her closer to her leg. Her three-month-old son, Dwane, is snug at her breast.

They look as destitute as they are. Teresa, who is twenty-five, wears a blue cardigan ripped at the sleeve and missing a button. Dara is outgrowing her thin cloth jumper and is obviously unwashed. The baby is wrapped only in a white blanket, enough for the warm spring evening in the station, but perhaps not in a dank tunnel.

Despite their ragged appearance, no one seems to notice them. Yet Teresa feels everyone is looking at her and the children as if, she says, they are “mole people.”

“We try to be neat,” she says later, “but they can smell us. They know,” she whispers with a nod toward the crowd. “They know we be tunnel people.”

Teresa has tied back her hair neatly in a navy blue kerchief. Her face is young and clean but tired, her eyes unsure. She moves like a colt, an angular body with loose skin over sharp bones. Some movements are unsteady, ungainly, as if she is trying out each move. Her daughter, full of spirit and curiosity, sometimes appears stronger and more self-assured.

Teresa stops under the domed center of the terminal, looking upward as orange sunlight reaches through the windows, revealing a spring sunset.

“Been a long time since I’ve seen that,” she smiles, but quickly looks down protectively on her child.

We sit at McDonald’s as Dara eats, first her own food and then Teresa’s. Only after Dara insists she can’t take another bite does Teresa pick hungrily at the leftovers. Dwane won’t drink the milk. He’s not used to it, she explains, letting him gum and drool a French fry. Teresa normally chews his food. Baby food is as scarce as money in the tunnels, she says.

Teresa refuses to go to any outreach program for fear they will take her children, or worse, call her boyfriend who is the father of the children.

“I know what they say, and I know how it happens,” she says fiercely. “They would say they take the kids for only a day or two but really, you never get them back. I seen it before. I don’t trust no one with my babies.”

Teresa came to the tunnels after a month on the streets. She ran from her abusive boyfriend. “He hit Dara, flung her across the room. He hit me a lot. I love him so much that when he hit me, I think at least he cares. But when I saw the marks on my baby,” she shudders, “I had to leave.”

He came after her to her friends’ home, and not only beat her up but threatened to kill the friends as well. They asked her to leave, and she went on the streets. A tunnel dweller found her and the children in a cardboard box in freezing weather last winter and led her underground. She has been there ever since, living off the generosity of other tunnel people.

She wants to get out of the tunnels before Dara is old enough to remember them. “I don’t want her to remember this,” she looks down at her clothes. “I want her to know I always loved her and took good care of my children.”

But Dara knows things are different. “My mama used to be like a teddy bear,” she says, “all round and always laughing. Now she be all skinny,” she feigns disgust.

Teresa says she is saving money for bus fare to her sister-in-law’s home in the Midwest. I’m skeptical, but a week later I see her off at the bus station, en route to her mother, she says. A drug dealer worked a deal with the bus driver to get her free passage, and tunnel people gave her pocket money, she tells me.

10

Roots

“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.... A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of the community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.”

—Simone Weil, *The Need of Roots*

MOST TUNNEL DWELLERS PREFER TO BE CALLED “HOUSELESS” rather than “homeless.” More important than a warm apartment and cleaner life aboveground, many say, is belonging to a community, even if it is underground. I found most tunnel dwellers say they are members of communities of one kind or another, some with a barely recognized structure but others quite well-defined, including two types of “families.” In one, members refer to each other in terms of kinship—as nephews and nieces, papas and mamas, brothers and sisters, and cousins. They use these familiar terms as nominal evidence of affection and closeness. In the other, members claim to “adopt” each other to form a “true family” among whom ties are stronger than among their biological (and usually estranged) relatives. Most members of underground communities have lost or abandoned their ties aboveground and welcome a new life below. Their community provides them with a sense of physical and psychological security and in their eyes also sets them apart, and above, the mass of homeless wandering the streets aboveground.

“I’m a better father to my family down here than I ever was up there,” one man maintains. “I was never good enough up there. This gives me another chance.”

Many of the underground communities simply evolve as people settle in. “You go down there, play with the wires, and get some light,” says Dee Edwards, who lived underground but is now employed by the Coalition for the Homeless. “Before you know it, you got twelve or fifteen people gathering round you. They become like neighborhoods: you know the girls at the end, the family in the middle. Everyone

watches out for each other. One person goes on line [for food] and brings it down for the rest. When someone gets sick, we put our money together for medicine. People team up. You can just about make it that way.”

Even those tunnel dwellers who seem to live alone often belong to a loose community that resembles the tepid, nodding familiarity of urban neighbors who don’t know each other’s names. These loners prefer solitude and consider any affiliation an imposition. More often they are wary of others as a result of past experiences and choose not to make contact with those they live near though they may see each other everyday. It usually takes a crisis to form trust, but even they eventually need some relationship.

Bob, who lives under Riverside Park, would pass Bernard Isaacs in the tunnel several times a day before they spoke.

“I didn’t want to get taken again,” Bob explains. “You can’t trust someone unless you look into their eyes, and in the tunnels, it’s dangerous to look closely. I’ve gotten in trouble too many times. Being alone is better than being dead.” Yet after a time— Bernard says it was a year—Bob warmed up and now describes Bernard as his “best friend.”

Bernard is a generous and self-confident black man who once, half-joking, proclaimed himself “Lord of the Tunnels.” He shares the meals he cooks at his campfire with anyone who asks, and more than a few of those who live around him credit him with saving their lives on cold nights by urging them to come to warmer spots and even bringing them food. Without advocating it, he is proud of life underground. He says the independence and self-sufficiency of the underground dwellers sets them above the street homeless.

“I would say we’re the elite of New York’s homeless,” he declares. “We chose to settle down here, and we have made homes down here. We’ve made a life for ourselves.”

As little as a regular chore done for the community, like going for water, provides a sense of belonging. Dwayne, who lives under Fifth Avenue, takes pleasure in having been missed by members of his community. He recalls that Mary, its oldest member, chased him with a rolled up newspaper for disappearing for more than a week without notifying anyone that he’d be gone. Some communities say they admit new members only after watching them for a time and discussing their suitability, a process that also contributes to a sense of self-worth.

For these reasons, the traditional definitions of the homeless may not be adequate to describe the underground dwellers. The *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* describes homelessness as “a condition of detachment from society, characterized by absence or attenuation of the affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures.” Whether it is because of limited space or a primitive need to huddle against the dark, most of the underground homeless have created communities that may be detached from most of the social structures aboveground but nevertheless strive to maintain substitute or alternative structures below the surface.

Many communities even maintain contacts with each other. J.C., the “spokesman” for a community under Grand Central, speaks about a “loose federation” of more than twenty communities in the network of tunnels within about a mile of the station, and he claims that perhaps fifty other communities farther afield also keep in touch. Designated “runners” shuttle medicine, old clothing, and information about welfare services—new drop-in centers or changes in soup kitchen schedules—among communities, he says. Often staff workers at new drop-in centers are shocked by the numbers of homeless who ask for their services.

“It’s not at all uncommon for a new drop-in center to expect maybe fifty people the first day and when they open, have two hundred waiting. The network of communication among the homeless is amazing,” says Beverly Israely, the director of Volunteer Services for the Grand Central Partnership Social Services Corporation.

“They’ve formed an alternative community down there,” according to Rob Buckley, the director of All Saints’ Soup Kitchen on the Upper West Side. “What would make them want to come back up when they feel they have no place in the world up here?”

Soup kitchens, churches and synagogues, and other small nonprofit groups are the primary institutions aboveground with which the tunnel homeless have contact, and Buckley’s program—small, but warm and not patronizing—is among the most highly regarded. Many homeless men and women volunteer here as cooks (like Bob) and servers. All Saints’ serves eighty to a hundred lunches each day, and while the church must turn away some of the hungry when the demand is particularly high—usually toward the end of the month when welfare checks have been exhausted—it serves as many as two hundred dinners each Sunday with no one turned away.

Buckley, a twenty-something young man from a white, middle-class suburb in New Jersey, personifies the conflicting pulls that come from different religious denominations seeking to help the homeless. “The more liberal churches are doing good deeds by giving food, but there’s a firm line between the donors and the recipients—we have and you don’t. Then there’s the evangelical side, which says don’t worry so much about their material needs; work on their souls. A middle ground between the two is forming, or at least we’re trying to find it,” he says optimistically. He is himself evangelical, but focuses less on the spiritual than the earthly needs of his visitors.

“My personal belief,” he explains, “is that someone’s life is not going to get entirely fixed unless he or she finds Christ, but I’m not going to make them accept it. I can’t go on my preconceived ideas of what a fixed life is. I’ve learned that here. I can’t tell a homeless, fifty-year-old black man what his life needs. I have to ask what he’s looking for, what he wants out of life. Some of these guys don’t want a nine-to-five job and a home and wife and two children, and being a good, prosperous, productive member of society. That may be my idea of a productive life, but it’s definitely a cultural thing out of my upbringing. I can’t say you have to fit into my kind of mold, but I believe you have to be responsible and productive, and there’s the catch. You don’t need to fit my plan, but you need to find something that fits you in life.”