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“I taught my niece to read,” Tony tells me with a happy smile as we sit around the fire. “Now she’s going to be a doctor and has to read the big words to me.” However, he hasn’t seen any of his family for seventeen years, not since he murdered a man and went to prison for fifteen years. The last two years he has lived in Bernard’s tunnel with Joey.

South End
John

THE TUNNEL’S SOUTHERN END HOSTS A LOOSER AFFILIATION OF THE homeless. Individuals barely interact with each other. They behave more like silent, hostile neighbors who both envy and fear the person in the next bunker.

“We don’t talk much, but we won’t let anyone steal from anyone else’s stuff in the tunnel either,” says John, who was seriously injured four years ago by a roving gang of homeless. He rarely answers knocks on his door, which he keeps padlocked, and he keeps a bayonet and hatchet handy for protection.



John And Mama In A Tunnel Bunker. Photo By Margaret Morton



John's Home. Photo By Margaret Morton

At fifty years old, John is a four-year tunnel veteran. Small and thin, he says he was abandoned as a child and grew up in institutions. He has had menial, low-paying jobs, many working with animals. His small monthly welfare check goes for food for himself, his fifteen cats, and his dog, Mama. All of them were strays that he found while he and they vied for food in garbage bins. His bunker walls are decorated with posters of animals, and on the table and boxes stand small statues and artificial flowers from the trash. The room is lit with red candles. During the day he reads the Bible and drinks coffee and whiskey. He spends most of the time listening to the radio and talking to himself, he says.

He has no friends in the world, he volunteers. "I'm a little high-class for some of these people down here," he explains. "That's why I don't get along too well with everybody."

New York Times reporter John Tierney wrote two articles about John. As a result, he briefly had a woman pen pal and enrolled in a new program for the homeless consisting of work on an upstate farm for free board and meals and a modest wage. John was apprehensive about leaving the tunnel. He was particularly torn when he had to give away his cats and kittens, but he was allowed to take Mama and also eager to begin life again aboveground.

Bernard was happy for John, but sad, too. "He'll be back. You can't just leave the tunnel. This is his home now. He doesn't know how to live in the topside world." Bernard sounds plaintive, as if he is speaking for all of the underground people, including himself.

John soon rebelled against the discipline of regular work, however, and says that he longed for the privacy and freedom of the tunnels. Within six months he is back in his tunnel bunker.

Tom

TOM IS FROM NORTH CAROLINA, A SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD WHITE MAN who lives with a couple, Butch and Brenda, in a large green tent upon the slope of the Riverside Park tunnel. He came to Manhattan eight months earlier with his girlfriend and their child. His parents had died in a car accident, and his two sisters were taken by godparents, but he was too old to be cared for by relatives. His girlfriend wanted to live in New York, but they broke up soon after they arrived. She took the car and all his money. He lived for a time in the Fort Washington shelter until he caught a man stealing from his locker.

"I asked him what he was doing, and he just said he was taking my stuff," Tom says evenly, his blond hair shyly tumbling over his trusting eyes. "He had no right." They fought and the thief was thrown out the window several floors above the street.

"He just lay there on his face, so still," Tom recalls, his blue eyes soberingly open. "They said I killed him, but the police took me aside and told me not to worry about it. I would have done it all over again, though," Tom says with a shake of his head. "I mean I didn't want to kill him, but he was taking the only stuff I had left."

Tom decided he was safer on the streets, where he met Butch and Brenda. Butch is a large black man with an angry attitude and very protective toward both Brenda and Tom. Brenda, whose story will be told later (see chapter 22, "Women"), is completely subservient to him. Butch refuses to talk about himself but he prowls, almost lurches, around Tom as he talks, listening to his words carefully as if ready to heed any order to attack.

The couple took Tom to live in the tunnels with them, but he found a job bartending on Amsterdam Avenue and with his earnings, bought the tent. A temporary measure until he can afford an apartment, he says, where his sisters can also come to live. "They keep asking me if they can come here," he says, "but I don't want them until we can live properly. I don't know that New York is the right place for two girls."

Tom gets an apartment in a few months, and despite the roaches, one of which he woke to find crawling up his nose, he considers it a step above tunnels and tents. He gives the tent to Butch and Brenda.

THE SURPRISING WONDER OF BERNARD’S TUNNEL IS LESS THAT PEOPLE can survive in such an environment than that they can work together and even care, sometimes intensely, for each other. Many would expect love and care to be the first emotions sacrificed in such a desolate environment, but Bernard would argue that emotions are more sincere underground. Unlike our society, the underground dwellers do not judge each other on their pasts or any element of how they live, except how they treat one another. Respect for privacy and property is critical. They lie to each other at times, usually about their pretunnel existences, but, even when these sound unlikely at best, no one challenges them. They can invent a past with which they can live while they get on with surviving the present.

The most important truth about underground people, Bernard also advises, is that there is no single truth about them. “They tell many stories and there is truth in all their stories. You just have to find it.”

“We had one guy down here who was sometimes an ex—Navy Seal, sometimes a Green Beret, sometimes the king of an island, sometimes a pastry chef,” one homeless man recalls. “All I know he was a decent man who used to share everything. When the police asked if I knew this guy, and showed me his picture and told me a name, I didn’t have to lie. I said no, I don’t know that guy. I don’t care what he done. He’s a good guy and if he wants to start over down here, he can. That’s the beauty of the tunnels.”



Bernard. Photo By Margaret Morton

12 *Tunnel Art*

“THESE PIECES, THEY’RE NOT JUST GRAFFITI,” BERNARD EXPLAINS as his arm sweeps toward the mural covering the outside wall of his tunnel bunker. “They’re works of art, and they mean a lot to us. We got food down here, some warmth, and we got art. What more could we ask for?”

“Pieces” to the tunnel homeless and to those who paint them is short for “masterpieces,” works that are sometimes especially done for them by graffiti writers (sometimes called “artists”). Chris Pape, who “tags” or signs his work “Freedom”; Roger Smith, who is known as “Smith”; and David Smith, his brother, whose tag was “Sane”; are all graffiti writers who paint the tunnels.

“David and Roger did some of these for me and for my people down here. Chris was first to start doing them in this tunnel, but he didn’t know he was doing them just for me,” Bernard laughs.

“This piece makes me smile every time I look at it,” says Bernard as he surveys the jagged, zany mural by Sane that decorates his fifteen-by-ten-foot wall. Sane got the idea for it one night sitting by the fire, sharing herbal tea with Bernard who was framed by the huge concrete wall. He returned late that night to spray-paint the piece before Bernard woke the next morning.

In a sharp-edged technique, chaotic lines and bright colors intersect and complement each other to create what Bernard considers to be a mural that best captures life below the ground—a mysterious truth amid complete craziness. The clothes, stone and metal rubble, and rubbish piled before it add to the sense of disorder it conveys.



Self-Portrait By Chris Pape (Freedom). Photo By Margaret Morton

“It’s for me and it’s all about me,” says Bernard. “It’s about the chaos in the topside world and the peace down here.”

Above the piece are scrawled Bernard’s words the night before; sharing herbal tea by the campfire, Sane scrawled in jaunty black letters: “Freedom, aw. Modern society is guilty of intellectual terrorism.” It was Sane’s last piece, which enhances its meaning and value for Bernard and others. Sane died two years after completing it, either in an accident, which often befalls graffiti artists because of the dangerous places in which they work, or by suicide. He was eighteen years old.

Sane was found drowned in the calm waters of Flushing Bay. Because he was a good swimmer, some believe he took his own life. Others say he fell into the water from a bridge while graffitiing on it, perhaps while being chased by cops.

“Sane was the best,” several of his fellow graffiti artists say, and after his death several pieces appeared in the tunnels spray-painted in his honor by mourning colleagues. Some are tribute pieces, with Sane’s name highly stylized by the writers’ own techniques. Others are messages in dark colors among spray-painted tears: “Sane Ruled” and “Sane never forgotten.” Smith keeps his brother’s legacy alive by painting Sane’s tag as well as his own on his works.

“When we started, we always put our tags together: SANE SMITH. The ‘word’ was that we were some big black writer from Brooklyn,” Smith smiles briefly through his neat, short beard under gentle eyes.

Speaking of Sane, one sixteen-year-old graffiti writer tells me, “Everything he touched burned. He was the greatest. Why would he want to kill himself?”

An older writer suggests Sane “burned out.”

“He had reached the top and he knew it,” he suggests. “He couldn’t go any further. I think he felt that and didn’t know what to do next. Maybe he felt empty like I did when I realized how many years of my life I’ve lost to graffiti, to the tunnels.” He pauses for a minute, remembering Sane. “He was a pest back then when he was twelve and starting. He would run up to me all the time to ask for my autograph and I’d tell him to go away. I didn’t associate with ‘toys.’ He was just a toy back then. But there was always something different about him, a real nice kid, eyes always friendly and laughing.”

Sane and Smith were being sued for \$3 million by the City of New York for graffitiing the top level of the Brooklyn Bridge—the largest suit ever brought against graffiti writers anywhere. The city pressed the suit as a lesson to writers, to punish them for what many consider vandalizing public property and to discourage younger writers from the particularly dangerous locales like the heights of bridges. The police also wanted help in identifying other graffiti writers, which Sane and Smith refused to provide. The city dropped the case after Sane’s death, but no one believes the suit could have caused Sane’s suicide.

He did suffer from depression occasionally. If there was a flaw in Sane, it was that he cared too much, as another writer says. Just a week before his death, he did a piece in the tunnel to commemorate a four-year-old boy who had been struck and killed by a subway train. “He used to bring things to the homeless kids in tunnels and sit by the fires and have coffee and when he’d talk about them later to me, he’d sometimes get real sad about them. I mean real sad,” the man recalls.

Sane did not go to college but his older brother, Smith, received a computer science degree from Fordham University. After Sane’s death, Smith quit his job and spends most of his time in the tunnels now. Older writers encourage him to get out and find a job, but Smith refuses to consider becoming a conventional artist. That, to him, would be “selling out,” he says. He recently spoke of training to become a subway train conductor.

“I’ve always liked the tunnels,” Smith says. He particularly likes a huge, open underground cavern called the “playground” that is carved out of Manhattan’s rock foundations about a half-hour walk from Grand Central Station along narrow tunnel ledges that parallel the tracks. Graffiti writers often congregate there, running about on catwalks and pipes, scribbling messages, and even, on occasion, playing baseball. “It’s a nice open space,” Smith says. “You don’t get space like this up here, miles of space with no people.”

While Sane and Smith retain the tragic mystique of tunnel graffiti writers, Freedom—Chris Pape—made the tunnels into his own personal studio. Now thirty years old, Chris has virtually left the underground graffiti scene but not before he almost made it to the Museum of Modern Art. He still ventures into the tunnels to do murals for Bernard and other tunnel dwellers.

My favorite image of Chris is his huge self-portrait sprayed on a tunnel wall, standing with the head of a spray-paint can tilted down inquiringly at a white rabbit sitting near Chris’s Reeboked feet. His shoulders slouch inside a leather bomber jacket, Holden Caulfield-like; his hands are shoved deep into the front pockets of his well-worn jeans. His stance is typical of many street kids who want to proclaim that nothing can surprise or frighten them, and that any attack will be absorbed rather than avoided, shrugged off rather than replied to in kind. The autumn’s dusty sunlight falls into the tunnel through overhead grates and with it comes a leaf about to alight near the rabbit, who prepares to scamper off as the spray-can head watches. The scene remains frozen on the soot-blackened wall; the only movement in the mural is Chris’s sharp, scrawling tag, *Freedom*, beside his untied shoelace.

Chris’s larger-than-life portrait suspended on the tunnel wall invites curiosity, but a specific blend of it very much like his own—subtle, unaggressive, and always accepting. Like the portrait, Chris invites curiosity. He was a runaway teenager, he says, a high school dropout from the West Side of Manhattan who lived for a time in a pool hall on the Upper West Side, eating poorly and occasionally. He is both intrigued by the tunnels and frightened of them.

“I used to look into subway tunnels on my way home from school and imagine dragons,” he says. “Sometimes I’d see faces in them, wizards and monsters. I had to explore them, but I had this horror of them. I still hate the tunnels.

“When I go down there, I can’t wait to come back up. I keep promising myself that the next mural will be my last. I hate the danger, I hate risking my life each time for something so stupid. But I get an idea in my head for a piece and I can’t get rid of it, and I have to do it because, if I don’t, no one else will.”

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