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When Sam lived aboveground, he was a social worker. In 1982 he began working with the tunnel homeless, and about the same time he divorced his wife—for adultery, he says—and she has custody of their only daughter. Not long afterward, he was fired for what he terms “eccentricities.”

“Tell her about the final hour,” George says with a mischievous laugh.

In the final hour of his working life, Sam stripped down to the nude in his office—to demonstrate, he says, “how vulnerable people are in communicating.” I ask him several times what that means but never understand his explanation.

He refused psychiatric counseling after the incident, dismissing it as “a societal brainwashing ploy where they impose on me their beliefs of who I should be,” he says intensely, “so I would just fit in and not disturb society, just like a robot.” Instead, he decided to come where he could be free, completely himself, he says, to the tunnels that he found while working with their inhabitants.

What drove him underground, he explains, was “red tape. All that fucking red tape,” he begins, with voice rising and face reddening. “How can you help anyone when there’s that red tape? Kids would get abused to death in foster care and you couldn’t get them out without that red tape. Two of them were killed before I got through the red tape. How can you live with that?” he demands, angrily waving his arms.

“How can you live in a society like that?” he asks, more quietly now. “The rules don’t make sense. They’re not based on human needs or caring. The laws and the rules, and what they call morals, are logical and warped. They are based on money, not right or wrong. They might as well have come from a computer. No one really cares up there. Down here this is basic survival. We make our own laws. Our laws are based on what we feel, not preconceived notions of morality. We call it the ‘human morality.’ That’s what we live by.”

“Human morality” is similar to the phrase “human religion,” which I have heard from the members of other underground communities. Neither has specific rules or ethics so far as I can learn. Adherents appear to equate the concept to honesty and caring.

I suppose, because he is white, I think I can understand Sam better, but he scares me with swings of mood that are extreme and change rapidly. At one moment we are discussing Woodstock, and suddenly he flares off on a tirade about where society is going wrong, so furious he seems close to violence. Beeper seems to be the only member of the community who attempts to calm Sam during these outbursts, and he pays for it. More than once Sam shows the strength of a man twice his size and actually throws the weaker man out of his way.

Why do you put up with it? I ask Beeper. Why does the community accept such behavior?

“He loves and he cares,” says Beeper. “More than anyone else here in this world, he cares. It’s not him who gets mad; it’s them drugs he used to take.”

Sam tells Dopey—so named because he is lazy and acts dumb—to get wood and water. Dopey refuses to get up from the floor. Sam pulls a knife and stands over him, threatening to throw him out and never let him back into the community. Beeper offers to do the chores in place of Dopey, but the mayor won’t hear of it. The community stands back, watching. Sam won’t back down. Eventually Dopey limps down the tunnel, disappearing from sight.

“Why’d you do that?” April asks. “Dopey wasn’t feeling well.”

“Because he’s depressed, April,” the mayor calmly explains. “Someone had to make him get up.”

The following day I half expect to find out that Dopey has returned and killed Sam in the night. Instead, the two are talking cheerfully, Dopey clean and smiling brightly.

Rex is another remarkable figure here. He says he is rarely underground and is not a member of the community, but they consider him part of the family.

He prefers to remain in Penn Station, begging, hustling, or running scams, including taking money from other homeless and promising to return with a radio or coat. He claims he makes a “good living” and that he recently was assigned an apartment by one of the homeless advocacy organizations.

“But other people need it more than me, so I gave it up,” he says. “Don’t regret it at all. I felt boxed in that place. No one around but me. I could hear myself thinking,” he laughs almost shyly. “I guess it was good. Didn’t have to worry about people sneaking up behind me when I was asleep. But it was weird, man. I couldn’t sleep in the bed. Had to sleep on the floor. And then I just felt like I was crazy. I brought people [from the station] up to stay with me, but that felt even lonelier. It just wasn’t natural, not like the tunnels where people come together.”

Yet he insists he isn’t a member of the tunnel community. He often comes down to meals, according to other members, although he says he rarely does. Whenever they need something from “up top,” as they say, “Rex will find a way to get it.” Sometimes it is medicine, sometimes blankets and coats, sometimes money.

“They took care of me once,” he explains. “This guy knifed me in the station once because I sold him fake drugs. I couldn’t go to the hospital because I was on probation and I would go back to jail.” Somehow he found the tunnel’s entrance, where he passed out. The next thing he remembered was Fay standing over him, laughing. The community nursed him back to health, and he repays them by helping when they need him.

Rex is not alone among the community for having had trouble with the law. Most of the members of the camp have been in jail. Beeper was in for hustling drugs, for example. “But I ain’t dealt since joining the community,” he says, “‘cept of course the occasional vie.” A “vie” is a person who is easily taken advantage of or victimized. The camp boasts it is drug- and alcohol-free.

After a while I stop visiting the camp. Sam is uncomfortable with me. He complains I’m too busy taking notes to listen.

“Truth isn’t in words; it’s in listening,” he says. “If you listen to us, you can make the rest up and tell more of the truth than if you write down the cold facts.

“I’m doing what’s best for each and every one of these people,” he contends. “I know what these people need. I treat each of them differently, as I assume you’ve noticed. I treat April according to her needs, Rex according to his, Beeper for his, and so on. I am a trained counselor and I know each and every member of our community distinctly. Our little community down here is immune from the cruelty and horror of the topside world. We are growing into a city down here, and we are all friends, the definition of which you cannot learn without living with us, under my wing.”

They tell me not to come down alone again, warning me that there are more Vietnam traps. If I wish to come again, I am to leave a note under a brick by the door and someone will come up for me. Several times I do this, but, after a month, I stop asking to visit. A couple of times I bring supplies and leave them at the brick.

I meet George on the street and when he asks why I haven’t visited, I’m embarrassed. I say that my last conversation with Sam was very disturbing, but George believes I’m repelled by the physical environment.

“It got too much for you, didn’t it?” he asks gently. “I know. It’s OK though, kid. I wish you could understand how it is. I would be easier for you. See, no matter how ugly the camp seems to you, it don’t matter to us, we don’t see it that way because we’re friends, and that matters more. For most of us, it’s the first time we ever had a real friend.”

He smiles brightly at the thought. “We’re a city of friends. That’s what Sam says.” He winks at me and walks away without saying good-bye.

The phrase sounds familiar and I find it in Walt Whitman:

“I dream’d in a dream, I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole rest of the earth;
I dream’d that was the new City of Friends.”

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Women

“I LOVE THE LONELINESS OF THE TUNNELS,” BRENDA SAYS SOFTLY. “It seeps through your ears and your skin. It’s like a hug with nothing to hold you. It’s an understanding.”

Her mouth does not smile, but the frown lines in her young face smooth away.

“I guess it comforts me,” she says, looking up from Central Park into the January sky. “Do you understand? It’s like when the stars fill your eyes with their light, and they fill your emptiness. It’s the same understanding, in a way. The same connection. That’s what matters.”

She speaks so softly that her words are almost lost to the night. She is mesmerized by the secure image of herself she has created with her words, living that idealization, almost forgetting that I am listening.

I have to strain to hear, and strain, too, to understand. I have questions, but I don’t want to interrupt her. For the few hours we are together here, we could be old college roommates who have lost touch, and she is telling me about the few years since graduation.

Brenda is my age, twenty-four. She is a slight, light-complexioned black woman. She went to Dartmouth and majored in English literature, but she never finished. She stumbled into the tunnels four years ago with a man who was supplying her with drugs, and now she doesn’t want to leave, because the tunnels comfort her.

What else comforts you? I ask.

"I'll tell you what doesn't comfort me," she says. She pulls her knees to her chest for warmth and then gives a rueful smile, exposing a missing tooth, which one of her boyfriends recently knocked out. "Touch doesn't comfort me. Men's touches don't comfort me anymore; they repulse me. When a man gets on top of me, I go completely numb, like I'm water miles away from shore.

"Talk doesn't comfort me, either. The tunnels comfort me, I guess, because they're mine. They know what's inside me and they feel the way I do. Always. Like, you know, when you bomb a test but it's sunny outside? Well, that doesn't happen in the tunnels," she laughs. "They're always dark inside, like me, but inside, I'm like the tunnel—dark, winding, and twisting."

Tonight Brenda has come back aboveground to the world she left almost four years ago. For several hours she is lucid and talkative, completely different from the evasive, almost shrunken young woman who, while not hostile, moved away whenever I approached her in the tunnels.

I FIRST SAW HER IN A TUNNEL ON THE UPPER WEST SIDE OF MANhattan. She was sitting on a small stool, wearing black stretch pants, as she scraped carrots and cut them into a large blackened iron pot on the grate over a campfire. An opened bag of potatoes waited their turn to go in with the pasta and tomato sauce and melting cheese. The odor, carried with the smoke from the fire toward the entrance of the tunnel, was sharp but pleasant, more appetizing than the sight. She smiled but when I neared, she looked down at her work. She said, please to excuse her, because she had to get lunch ready.

As she spoke, a large black man came to her side and scowled at me, hands on hips.

"She's a reporter doing a book," Brenda told him. "She wants to ask me some questions."

He looked me up and down scowling.

"She paying you?" he demanded, as if I weren't there, though he looked straight at me. Had she not been there, I would have felt in danger.

I waited for Brenda's reply. Instead, she looked nervously up at me from bowed head.

"No," I answered for her.

"Then you ain't gonna talk," he said flatly, still watching me.

She shrugged and bent back for another potato.

I began to speak to him, but he waved away my words. "Ain't gonna talk without money," he said. Brenda busied herself even more, as if increasingly uneasy at what could become a confrontation. So I said good-bye and turned to leave.

"Bring some money and I'll tell you stories you won't believe," he called to my back.

When I looked back, Brenda seemed embarrassed. "Hey," she said, "bring me some cigarettes next time."

"You get out of here now!" her man yelled at me. "And you shut up, bitch!" he shouted at Brenda.

She did, and I left quickly.

I bought cigarettes the next time I was near her tunnel, and was talking to a group of homeless in the Rotunda at West 79th Street in Riverside Park when she appeared. Most of the people greeted her, and one woman gave her a hug.

"Hey," she asked me loudly, "did you get my cigarettes?"

I tossed the pack to her over the heads of the group.

She seemed surprised as she caught it. "Thanks," she said as people rushed to share her gift. She gave all of the cigarettes away except for one, which she lit. Then she walked off.

TONIGHT IN CENTRAL PARK OCCURS BY ACCIDENT. WE HAPPEN INTO each other outside a movie theater, and on the spur of the moment decide to go inside to see the feature, *The Fisher King*. Brenda wants to see Robin Williams. I am interested in seeing a popular film that deals with homeless people.

Brenda immediately feels threatened, unused to a crowd in close quarters.

"Don't let anyone touch me," she almost pleads, her voice tight. "I can't stand it in here if anyone touches me." Brenda is generous with her hugs in the tunnels, but here her eyes dart and her body jumps at any movement close by. Half of the movie passes before I feel her relax. She even laughs at one point.

Afterwards, she invites me to go to the park and lie nude like Robin Williams and Jeff Bridges in the movie. Even if she could get me into the park at night, I say, I'm not much for lying in the buff, particularly in cold weather. She invites me to what she calls her "secret place" anyway. I often have nightmares of being in the tunnels at night, of glaring eyes and desperate faces, but I go with Brenda.

She leads me into a tunnel. It has a surreal calmness to it as we walk. White moonlight falling through grates lends a pale and glowing purity to the tunnel. Water drips from pipes soothingly. We could be walking through a nature trail. We seem to have gone miles.

Brenda has been silent for so long that I wonder if she has forgotten me. My old fears return as I worry about getting lost if she suddenly disappears. We emerge finally, next to Central Park, and we compromise: I will go into the park if she promises to get me out safely. And the clothes stay on. She laughs, but I am still very anxious. I covered the Central Park jogger trial several months earlier, and the graphic testimony of the gang rape and brutalization of the young woman victim are fresh in my mind.

"Look," Brenda says abruptly, "you don't have to do this."

I say I'll go on.

“Well then, get a grip, girl! Man!” she orders in an unexpectedly strong voice. I do, or at least I pretend to, and if you pretend long enough, it becomes real. That is one of the first lessons Brenda teaches me.

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