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Willie does not blame society. He accepts responsibility for his own fate. He does not delude himself, as many addicts do, by insisting he is not addicted and that come next month, he'll be clean. He only regrets Sheila, that she came into the tunnels with him but deserves better; he promises that one day he will get her out.

She moved in with him at Douglas, but he missed a few days of work, as she tells it, and got fired. One day they found their apartment padlocked against them, with their belongings on the roof. So they lived on the roof of the twenty-story apartment house for months before moving into the public bath and toilet facility at 104th Street in Riverside Park. When they were locked out of the bathroom, they moved into the tunnels.

As Willie's health worsens, Sheila seems to get stronger, as if responding to the increasing responsibility toward him. She has never held a job, and the idea of looking for work makes no sense to her. Willie spends any of the money she makes on drugs, she explains simply. Their dilemma is obvious: Willie does not want to give up drugs, and Sheila does not want to give up Willie. To the extent that an outsider can judge, they love each other.

One day in early spring Willie disappeared. Talk among the tunnel dwellers had it that he had been killed by a drug dealer he owed. Others believed he had been arrested. Sheila checked the hospitals and police stations and found out nothing. Sheila never gave up believing that Willie would come back, though other tunnel dwellers tried to convince her that he was gone for good.

**Fran and Shorty**

SHEILA AND WILLIE'S RELATIONSHIP WAS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM their tunnel neighbors, Fran and Shorty. Fran is a plump white woman in her mid-twenties, blond and small-boned, looking more a teenager than a woman. She is a Nebraska farm girl with blue eyes sometimes wide with innocence. Shorty is about forty, short, and black. He is barely able to walk because of all the needles that have been stuck behind his knees and into his knee caps to inject drugs.

Both live for drugs. Shorty sends Fran into Broadway to turn tricks to support their addiction while he does crossword puzzles in the park. She is afraid to refuse, even to talk much. He often beats her, mostly if he sees her speaking to another person in the tunnel. Twice he has fractured her jaw.

"Why do you take this shit from this man?" Bernard demands almost every time we meet her, whether Shorty is present or not. He detests Shorty and is furious that Fran shows no will to resist him. Fran only sits passively and stares at the ground, and the light from the campfire at the tunnel's mouth exaggerates the multitude of needle scars up and down the insides of her soft white arms.

**Cathy and Joe**

CATHY AND JOE LIVE IN A BUNKER IN THE SOUTH END OF THE WEST Side Amtrak tunnel. She is an attractive woman, shy but with a bright and easy smile. He is nervous at times, but understandable for anyone living underground. In fact, they seem out of place in the tunnels, clean and well dressed. Neither use alcohol or drugs, at least not obviously. Her mother, a homeless woman living on a park bench, introduced me to the couple. Joe was occupying a nearby bench, and Cathy was living with her father outside Manhattan. They married, and now both are homeless, a condition about which she is embarrassed. He is looking for work, but refuses to allow her to do the same.

For some time, tunnel dwellers have thought Cathy is pregnant, partly because of her appearance but also because of the way she has been behaving. Bernard doubts it, however. "I think she is just acting that way to try to get Joe to move them out of the tunnels," he says.

LIFE TURNS OUT UNPREDICTABLY AT TIMES. FRAN AND SHORTY, against high odds, have returned to her Nebraska farm. They leave a mess of syringes and human waste, but the community cleans it up almost without complaint, pleased they have gone away. Everyone hopes they make it, but doubts they will.

Life also turns out totally predictably, too.

Sheila never doubted that Willie would come back, although everyone else suspected he had been killed or just died elsewhere. Few believed he had left for another woman. "I love him," she would say. "I still do. I know he's gonna come back, so I'm just waiting. He used to tell me this was no place for me, that I deserve to be a queen somewhere."

Willie did return, and took Sheila to live in a Single Rent Occupancy (SRO) hotel near Riverside Park. He was drug-free and had a job. He refused to let her bring any old belongings from the tunnel. They were to build a new life, with fresh things. He bought her new clothes, and told her she should never go into tunnels again.

"They were doing great," Bernard remembers. "They were like new people. Sheila was really pretty," he says, surprised by the effect of the new environment.

Soon after, Willie collapsed and a few weeks later died of AIDS. The day after he died, which was shortly after her thirty-first birthday, the hotel threw Sheila out for nonpayment of rent. The rent had been overdue for months, it turned out.

Willie's family refused to allow Sheila to attend the funeral. They believe she gave Willie AIDS. The strength she had before seems gone. She panhandles now, usually drunk. Bernard has sought her out several times, but she refuses to return to the tunnels.

"As bad as it is down here," says Bob, "it's a hell of a lot worse out there. She can't take care of herself. Down here at least she has somewhere to belong."

She refuses. "I promised Willie I'd never go back," she says while devouring a hamburger. She puts it back on the plate carefully and dabs her trembling mouth with a flimsy paper napkin. "He said I was better than the tunnel, that he was sorry he brought me down."

"But he took me higher than anyone ever did," she says after a pause.

Even in the tunnel? I ask.

"Even in the tunnel, or on the roof, or in the park. Everywhere," she says, picking at her glistening french fries. "He loved me, and that doesn't happen much in this world. I would never have known what it's like to be happy without Willie."

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### *Jamall's Story*

WHEN CHER DIED, THE SKY CRIED ALL DAY. IT CRIED DUSTY tears, sometimes full and heavy, other times as light as mist coming from the clouds. She said she was glad the sky wasn't bright and laughing at her, sparkling at her with its freshness. That always made her feel like she was missing out on some great wonder that was right before her but beyond her reach. But the day she died, the sky was sad for her. She told Jamall that she felt like just another tear from the sky, and that when the sun came up, it would pick her way up into the sky. That was her funeral, Jamall says. She delivered her own eulogy as he held her hand. He watched her smile when she took her last breath. That night her cat howled something fierce. It upset Jamall so much that he had to leave. He wandered through the night, trying to decide which authority to tell of her death and what to do with her body. He believed he was having a nightmare. He couldn't feel the rain or the cold, so he was sure it was only a nightmare. He hoped he would awaken in the decayed and decrepit but cozy house in the Bronx where he and Cher and about a dozen others had been squatters, diverting a bit of electricity from other lines until a spark lit a fire, which caved in part of the roof. City workers boarded up the house for good and they were back on the street.

When morning came, Jamall turned his back to the sun and returned to the tunnel. He half-expected Cher's body to have been picked up by the sun, but it was still there, like a shell with a strong shaft of sunlight falling a few feet away. He thought it was giggling. It had taken her to the sky.

Jamall left that tunnel and never went back.

"At first I wanted to jump that sunbeam and kill it for taking her. Then I begged it to take me too. Then, now you ain't gonna believe this, I know, but I'll tell you anyway because it's the only thing in this whole fucking world that makes sense. There was something in that sunbeam smiling at me and saying 'Man, it's gonna be alright now. Just ride life the rest of the way, you're halfway there, ride all the way through. Cher's OK now. You got no more responsibility.' and I thought, yeah, you got nothin' more to lose; it's gone already. Just ride life through. I got my ticket right here," he says, slapping the bottle sandwiched precariously between his shaking thighs.

Jamall is thirty-nine but looks about fifty. "I'm just watching now. I done my living. I'm just watching and it's a funny shit scene. All these people, shit. They do dumb-ass things. It's hilarious, it really is."

Jamall talks louder and more aggressively as he gets midway through the bottle. Toward the last few sips he looks straight and forward, strangely sober.

"Sure I'll tell you my story," he said. "But let me tell you one thing first: If that sunbeam come by, I'm jumping on that ride, girl. I've been waiting for it to take me for a long time now. So just so's you understand me, I make no commitments," not even for a couple of hours to tell his story.

“If that beam comes for me, I’m gone lickety-split,” he repeats. He leans back for a moment and takes a long drag out of a tired cigarette crusting with gray ash. Within a few minutes his thoughts glaze into a mumbling sleep. Pulling an old blanket over him, he smiles a childlike smile, dreaming, I think, of the sunbeam and Cher. He’s saving his story for another day.

BUT JAMALL IS NOT EASY TO TRACK DOWN ANOTHER DAY. HE WANDERS the tunnels searching for his sunbeam, but refuses to settle into one of them again.

“He’s a man who tried to make it up there,” says Sam, the former social worker turned underground mayor. “He went through rehab several times, and he beat it all until Cher died. Then he reached for the bottle and never let go.

“You’ll think he’s over the edge, and up there, most people would say he is. He talks to himself, to the sunbeam like it’s Cher. But you gotta remember that sanity down here is different from sanity up there. If someone doesn’t cry and scream down here, they’re insane. If they do it up there, they’re insane.

“But he knows the tunnels better than most, and he’ll tell you stories. I doubt you’ll be able to verify many of them, but I vouch for him because I know people down here, those who lie and those who don’t,” Sam says.

I find Jamall sitting on a crate watching the scene in Times Square with a couple of drinking “associates.” He stands out in the signature green knit cap he wears even on hot days. It’s well before noon and his friends are well on their way to being drunk.

“You ain’t going to rob us are you?” one of them asks. “You white girls are dangerous in this neighborhood,” he laughs, a gold tooth flashing.

We chat for a while until Jamall stands, ready for the promised cup of coffee. He’s fully sober, not a hint of whiskey on his breath. “I try not to start drinking until the afternoon,” he explains.

His personal story, like so many other homeless men I know, centers on his mother.

“I was maybe eight and my mama brought us up north to get away from Alabama and the bigotry. My papa disappeared from the farm in 1962,” when the civil rights marches were breaking segregation barriers. “They say the KKK got him, but they never found his body.”

Jamall’s mother came to New York first. “My mama was a beauty and she had the voice. She used to talk about having a shot at the Apollo Theatre [in Harlem] and she left to become a star,” he smiles sadly. After a year she returned, told her family she was a secretary, and brought Jamall and his older sister to New York. “We loved New York before we even see it,” he remembers. “It was a freeman’s land. Everyone was supposed to be free and equal under the law. Course it wasn’t like that.”

His mama was not a secretary either. “I remember coming home from school one day and I was crying. Mama asked what was wrong. Kids told me she was a hooker, I said, and she got mad and slapped me. She weren’t no hooker or no prostitute, she said, she was a call girl. Then she slapped me and said I was too old to cry. That’s when she started drinking.”

Yes, he says with lowered head, he still feels responsible for his mother’s drinking.

Soon his mother began bringing men home and his sister, then fifteen years old and “almost as pretty as my mama,” decided to run away. “The last time I saw her, she was standing at the fire escape window with a pillow case of clothes, begging me to come with her. I told her I had to stay and take care of Mama,” he says.

For all her problems, Jamall’s mother insisted that he finish high school. He worked at odd jobs, never getting into trouble. He never took any money from her hands, he says. “I told her it was dirty money,” he tells me, “and that made her drink more.”

Jamall enlisted in the army, where he learned to drink, he says. When he was discharged, he got into drugs. “No, I don’t do drugs anymore—unless you got some,” he smiles eagerly. “I don’t have the money for it anymore.”

On the promise of a job if he broke the drug habit, an army friend got him a job as a garbage collector, but, with the money, he went back to drugs. He met a girl who sent him to rehab. “We did great, best time in my life. I took good care of her and my mother. Thing was,” he laughs, “she looked better when I was stoned than when I was sober.” He got fired, reentered rehab a fourth time, and landed a post office job. He got married and had two children, whom he refuses to discuss.

“And I started drugging again. My woman wanted no part of me. This time I landed on the street,” living in cardboard boxes on the streets. “I was tired and I just wanted peace, but I didn’t want to be on the streets where my kids’ friends would see me and make fun of them. That’s why I went into the tunnels.”

There he met Cher, who was six years his elder. “The first thing she told me was she was dying,” he remembers. “I didn’t believe her because she didn’t look that bad. I mean she looked like she’d been on the streets, a bit beaten up, but she didn’t look like dying.”

They spent two years together. “At first it was for company,” he says. “She didn’t bug me about my habits and I didn’t bug her. But she was a lady,” he adds quickly. “She didn’t do drugs or nothing. Drank some, when the pain got bad. We didn’t plan to stay together, just worked out that way. She was like a mother, a sister, a friend, and then a girlfriend. I stopped doing drugs and laid low on the drink because she needed me. She’d make me go get baths and she’d sew my clothes. She didn’t ask about my past, but I told her anyway. She didn’t say anything, but last year she bought a Christmas card for me to send to my kids. I wouldn’t. They’re better off thinking I’m dead, I told her. They should know you love them, she said. I told her I’d kill myself before I signed that card. That was the only fight we ever had,” Jamall says.